

This eBook is published by

Fictionwise Publications  
[www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com)

*Excellence in eBooks*

Visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to find more titles by this and other top authors in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, and other genres.

This eBook copyrighted. See the first page of this book for full copyright information.

---

Renaissance E Books  
[www.renebooks.com](http://www.renebooks.com)

Copyright ©

---

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment.

---

Raven Lenore, Psychic Investigator  
THE CASE OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOTTLE

By

JOE VADALMA

ISBN 978-1-60089-148-9

All rights reserved

Copyright © 2007 Joe Vadalma

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission.

For information contact:

[PageTurnerEditions.com](http://PageTurnerEditions.com)

PageTurner Editions/Futures-Past Fantasy

A Renaissance E Books publication

## CHAPTER 1. ABDUL-AZIM MUJIB

Before coming to the place where he was to receive the final rites that would make him an Adept in The Society of the Thirteen, Abdul-Azim Mujib went to his knees and bowed in prayer at his mosque. He felt he needed all of Allah's help to see him through the ordeal. The first twelve steps to achieve this singular

honor were difficult, painful and frightening, each higher rite being worse than the last. The first few were not all that bad; he was only required to memorize and repeat long passages from a book, swear to never reveal any of the societies secrets, swear to absolute loyalty and obedience even unto death, endure long stretches in awkward positions and fast for days. After the fifth rite, excruciating pain was also involved. In addition, he needed to solve puzzles within a given time period; failure to do meant expulsion from the cult and perhaps execution. More disturbing than the pain and the possibility of death were the frightening occult images during the initiations. Whether they were real or induced by a drug that had been given to him in the wine he was always given to drink, he was not absolutely certain. They included visions of phantoms, demons, jinn and unthinkable horrors. Nonetheless, the final result would be worth the pain and terror. Once he proved himself by doing whatever the thirteenth step required, he would be one of the elect, would learn all the society's occult secrets and be assured a place in Paradise.

The building where he reported for the thirteenth step was daunting in itself. It was an ancient mansion overlooking the Hudson River and surrounded by woods. He arrived just past midnight. Before entering, he gazed up at the sky. The planet Jupiter was directly overhead. Hence, he knew he had arrived at exactly the correct moment as he was ordered to do. He gave the secret knock. A figure in a long dark robe whose face was hidden behind a cowl, like a representation of death, opened the door and silently waved him in.

The foyer's walls were of dark wood paneling. Since the only lighting was from a few candles, the gloom prevented Mujib from seeing much and added to his nervousness. Although the house was chilly, sweat rolled down his back. He made a fist to keep his hands from trembling. In his mind, he said, *Courage. This is what you've been waiting for. Blessed be Allah. Allah will protect.*

He was taken to a room at the end of the hall. The figure in the dark robe opened the door and indicated that Mujib should enter. He stepped through into absolute blackness and silence, as though he were entering a tomb. The door quietly closed behind him. He waited impatiently and fearfully for something more to happen. Sweat ran in rivulets down the small of his back and dripped from his forehead into his eyes. He stiffened his knees to keep them from buckling. He prayed to Allah to give him courage.

After several minutes, a hollow voice, as though from one of the dead, said, "Abdul-Azim Mujib, remove your garments. Strip everything until you appear before us as naked as the moment of your birth." The voice did not come from a single source, but seemed to surround him.

*This is going to be very bad*, he thought as he removed his clothing. He envisioned torture involved with his private parts.

When he finished undressing, someone touched his arm and handed him a goblet. The strange sounding voice said, "Drink the bitter brew. As an Adept you will need to swallow many bitter things."

He drank from the vessel. As promised, it was extremely bitter. It took him a while to get the goblets contents down without gagging. When he was finished, the cup was taken from him. Suddenly the room was ablaze with light. Acrid smoke came from braziers on stanchions in each corner. Mujib thought that it smelled of hashish.

Otherwise the room was empty except for a small altar upon which rested a crystal. The walls were covered with murals that depicted scenes of torture and of debauchery involving humans and unspeakable creatures. No person other than himself was in the room. The only exit was the one from which he had entered.

The strange disembodied voice said, "Yes, look around at the scenes painted on the walls, Abdul. That

will be your fate should you reveal our secrets, disobey the thirteen masters, or fail in the tasks we assign you. On the other hand, if you are loyal servant of The Thirteen, you will be rewarded handsomely, not only in this short life, but in the afterlife. Do you understand and swear your loyalty and fealty, even unto death, should we ask it of you?"

"I do. I swear on all that is sacred to me."

"Very well. Go to the altar and pick up the crystal."

He did as he was told, wiping his sweating palms on thighs before taking the object in his hands.

"If you look closely, you will see that the crystal has many five sided facets. Bring the crystal up to your eyes and gaze into one of the facets. What do you see?"

Mujib stared into the crystal as ordered. Within its interior was a scene, a beautiful garden with stone paths, many different flowering plants, and trees. Scattered about were intricately designed sculptures. To his utter amazement, tiny people moved about the garden, specifically, three naked women. "I-I see a beautiful garden with naked women strolling along its pathways."

"You are viewing the paradise that await you when you have finished the thirteenth step of your initiation. Once you have completed the task we will assign, we will teach you how to enter Paradise at will. At your demise, the Paradise you see will be yours forever. On this night, we will allow you a small sample of the good fortune that awaits you. When you return from Paradise, you will be given a mission to complete. That is the thirteenth and final step of your initiation into our order. Do you understand what is required?"

Mujib nodded. "You will allow me to sample Paradise." He assumed that it meant that he would be given a psychedelic drug. "Afterwards, I am to perform a mission which will be given me before I leave this house."

"That is correct. Now enjoy Paradise. May Allah be with you."

The next moment, Mujib found himself in the garden he had viewed through crystal. It was not at all dreamlike. Everything about him seemed solid and real at though he had been teleported there. As he stood on one of the paths, the three naked women approached him. They were young and beautiful with heavenly bodies. One had long flowing blonde hair and carried an ud (a stringed instrument something like a mandolin). The second had red hair and played a mizmar (a double-reed wind instrument), while the third, who had olive skin and dark hair danced in an erotic manner.

They came up to him and laid down their instruments on the path. The blonde said, "I am Sheila. These are my friends Lucinda..." She pointed to the one with red hair. "...and Esmeralda." She indicated the darker woman. "We are here to serve you. Would you like us to sing and dance for you?"

"Or perhaps you would like something to eat," said Esmeralda. She plucked a fruit from a nearby tree and put it to Mujib's lips. He took a bite into his mouth. It was the most delicious fruit he had ever tasted. "Do you like it?" she asked.

"Very much." He smiled at her.

"Perhaps it is wine you crave," said Lucinda. Somehow she had a goblet in her hand. Like Esmeralda, she place the cup to his mouth. He took a sip. It was ambrosia.

Not to be outdone, Sheila trust herself forward, took his hand and placed it on her naked breast. "It may be love that you want."

Mujib was dumb struck by the attention of these beautiful women. This was indeed Paradise. "I-I would enjoy all those things."

"Very well. Then you shall have them."

She took up her instrument and began to play. Lucinda sang a heart-rending love song. Esmeralda danced an erotic belly dance. When the song was finished, they had Mujib lay in the grass where they fed him various fruits of the garden, gave him more of the tasty wine to drink and one at a time each of them lay with him. The sex with these women was like being in heaven with Allah. To his own amazement, he was able to perform with all three, one right after the other, with no rest and was randy again afterwards.

Nonetheless, as he was about to have sex with Esmeralda a second time, a voice said, "Your time in Paradise is over for now. You must leave Paradise to complete your thirteenth and final step of your initiation as an Adept of The Thirteen."

As swiftly as he had arrived, he was no longer in the garden, but again in the strange room staring at the crystal. Although he peered into it, he no longer saw the garden or the women. Upon the altar lay an envelope. He realized that it must contain his orders and whatever information he needed to fulfill them.

He replaced the crystal on the altar, picked up his clothes, dressed, placed the envelope in his jacket pocket and left the house. He felt pleased, not only did he not have to endure torture but had a wonderful experience. He wondered what his orders were. He knew that whatever it was he would complete it quickly in order to return to the lovely garden and the three gorgeous women.

## CHAPTER 2. RAVEN LENORE

The weather in Chicago was torrid. The sidewalks baked, and the air shimmered. Coming out of an air-conditioned flat was like stepping into a broiler. The beaches along the lake front were mobbed with almost naked people. Even there, no cooling breeze blew off the lake. Despite the heat and humidity, Raven Lenore ran along the lake from North Avenue beach to Oak Street. As she ran, her tears mingled with perspiration.

Running in the awful heat was her way of getting over her breakup with Michael Ellul, the love of her life.

In recent years this had been her third failed serious relationship with a man. She began to wonder whether she would ever find someone to which she could have a life long commitment. For the last two months of bliss, she believed that Michael was the one. She and he had much in common. They were both psychics and into the occult. They had gone through several intense adventures together. They laughed at and were angered by the same things. Nonetheless, there was a fly in the ointment. Michael was married. Although he and Melody had been split up and were on the verge of divorce when Raven and Michael had become more than friends, Michael was still obsessed with his ex. Raven knew this. Nonetheless, she hoped it would pass, that her love would make him forget his wife.

Just when she was sure the split was permanent, Michael suddenly begged Melody to take him back.

When Melody gave in to his pleas for a reconciliation, he broke up with Raven. It was a friendly breakup—from his point of view. Raven was too proud to let him know how angry and hurt she felt.

*Well*, Raven thought as she began the long jog back to the North Avenue bridge across Lake Shore

Drive and through Lincoln Park to her apartment on Clark Street, *so it goes. I'll probably end up a lonely old maid. At least I have my business to keep my mind occupied. By the goddess Hecate, I'm swearing off men. They give you nothing but heartaches.* Even as she had this thought, she knew she was lying to herself. She enjoyed the game of love too much to remain celibate long.

Her breakup with Michael was not the first time Raven's heart had been broken. Her first serious relationship with a man was in the army with Sergeant Keith Borganson, an athletic type with great pecks but not much brains. When their enlistments were up, Raven joined the NYPD, and Keith opened a Karate school. After a couple of years, Raven quit the police force. She and Keith opened a private investigation business which did not do well until Melody Ellul hired them to find Michael, who had been a missing person at the time.

After the case of the missing Michael Ellul was solved, Keith cheated on her, so she broke up with him. She did more investigative work for Michael, which included spying on The Omega Church cult. During this time, she had an affair with Jack Westcott, a former computer scientist and friend of Michael's. She and he lived together until Westcott proved as faithless as Borganson. Soon afterward she hooked up with Michael whom she had a crush on from the first day she set eyes on him. When Michael assured her that he intended to divorce Melody, Raven and he moved to Chicago supposedly to expedite his divorce. Instead he broke Raven's heart and returned to the arms of his wife.

As Raven entered her apartment, she sighed with gratitude as cool air from the air conditioner washed over her. She was exhausted. It had been a good run, even though she spent it thinking about Michael. Something rubbed against her leg. It was Mephistopheles, the cat she inherited from her friend Morgaine.

After she fed the cat, she checked her Voice Mail for messages. There was only one, from someone named Martin Kopinski. Although she did not recognize the name as anyone she knew, somehow it sounded familiar. She hoped it was a client for her combination private and psychic investigation business. She had decided that being a simple private investigator was not enough. Looking into hauntings and alien abductions might give her additional income when her regular PI business was slow. She decided to call Kopinski back right after she showered. She felt too icky to talk to anyone at the moment.

She went into the bathroom, stripped off her sweaty clothes and underwear and stood under the cool spray, sighing with pleasure at the tingling of the water on her skin. As she soaped up, she examined her body and was satisfied. Her stomach muscles were tight, her thighs and calves shapely. Although she had passed her thirtieth birthday, her breasts were round, firm and full. It paid to exercise and eat right.

Raven was a Wiccan. In addition to her psychic abilities, she had a tough tomboy nature. She was thirty-three years old, with dark hair, olive skin and a good figure. She often turned the heads of the men as she passed by them. She had joined The Craft because the popular religions, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism seemed to her to be more about death than life. Witchcraft in her mind was an earth religion, a linking of the human soul with the life force of nature, both on this planet and in the stars and space beyond. She met with her coven periodically to raise her energy and commune with nature and paranormal forces. She would certainly do so now when her breakup with Ellul had her down.

She was born in a tough Italian-American neighborhood in Brooklyn and was the only girl in a family of six. As a result, she learned how to deal with her brothers and neighborhood bullies. Except for occasionally being disciplined for fighting, she did well in school. Her roommate in college, Morgaine Fabiano, got her interested in witchcraft and the occult. After joining Morgaine's coven, she learned that she had psychic talent and an ability to perform spells.

Years later, she learned that Morgaine, whom she had not seen since she quit college, had committed suicide under strange circumstances. Some said that black magic had been involved, which turned out to be true. As a result, Morgaine had become a demon. Nonetheless, even as the spawn of the evil one, she remained Raven's friend. Raven thought of her as her guardian angel, a fallen guardian angel, however, not a heavenly one. Having a fallen angel as a guardian angel suited Raven, who always had to be different from everyone else.

While she lathered up, it came to her. She recalled where she had heard the name Martin Kopinski. He had been in police school with her when she joined the NYPD. They were rookies in the same precinct.

After her shower, she donned jeans and T-shirt. When it came to clothes, she preferred comfort to style. She dialed the number Kopinski had left on her Voice Mail.

"Agent Kopinski."

*Agent?* thought Raven. *Is he with the Feds now?* "Martin, this is Raven Lenore. You left a message on my Voice Mail."

"Oh great. I'd hoped you'd call. We were in the F\*\*\*th Precinct in Brooklyn together. Do you remember me?"

"Yeah. A little bit. You were always telling lawyer jokes."

"Good. You do remember. I'm with the FBI now, in the downtown office, here in Chicago."

"That's great. I've heard that FBI agents do pretty well. Uh, is there anything in particular I can do for you?"

"Absolutely. You see, I need help from someone who knows her stuff about the occult business. It was in the local papers, how your investigation into that famous astrologer's disappearance turned out. When I saw your name in the Chicago Yellow Pages, I said to myself, 'I'll bet she would be someone to help me with this case.' It involves things that may be construed as having to do with the occult. Since you're into that stuff and familiar with police work, I figured you'd be the perfect person to help me."

"I don't quite get it. I'm a psychic and a private investigator. Why would an FBI man need my help?"

"Well, it's like this. I've been assigned to head this important case. And well, although I don't really believe in the stuff much, there are some ... well ... supernatural ... or I guess paranormal is the word you people use ... aspects to the case. I can't go into details over the phone. Could you meet me for coffee tomorrow?"

Raven scratched her head. She was suspicious. Was this guy using her occupation as an excuse to hit on her? It did not seem reasonable that an FBI agent would be calling a PI for help, paranormal aspects or not. As she recalled, he was always trying to make conversation. She often caught him gazing at her like a lovesick puppy.

On the other hand, her funds had become low. She hadn't had a decent case in weeks and was living on savings and credit cards. "Okay. There's a coffee shop on the first floor of my building." She gave him the address. "Say ten in the A.M."

"Great. See you tomorrow then. Bye, Raven."

"Bye."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning at quarter to ten, she went down to the coffee shop and ordered her usual breakfast, two eggs over easy, bacon, toast and black coffee. She had just finished the bacon and eggs and starting in on the toast and coffee when Kopinski walked in. He had gained weight and was going bald. Otherwise, he looked about the way she remembered him, tall, with broad shoulders. He wore an FBI charcoal black suit.

He was not alone. A tall red headed guy with a beard and a ponytail was with him. The red head wore a sport shirt, open at the collar and light slacks. She recognized him and snorted. He was a stage magician who called himself, The Great Mephisto. He was also a debunker, someone who did not believe in the paranormal and went around trying to prove that those who claimed occult talents were hoodwinking the public. She realized that there were many sham psychics and scam artists who claimed supernatural powers, but she disliked people like Mephisto, who insisted that everything to do with the occult or the paranormal was bogus.

The two men came over to her booth. Kopinski shook her hand. "Hi Raven. This is John O'Brien, otherwise known as..."

"The Great Mephisto," Raven interrupted. "I've seen your act, O'Brien. It's quite spectacular. I also know that you don't believe in the paranormal. You're a debunker."

O'Brien said, "I'm glad you like my act. However, when it comes to the paranormal, it's not a matter of belief. It's a matter of science. Many people make claims that their powers defy the laws of physics or biology. Yet, when you pin them down, they lack any credible evidence for their claims."

"Fair enough. I suppose you think that I'm just another scam artist when I tell you that I've seen and heard many things that science cannot explain."

"Not necessarily. You may be simply deluded."

Kopinski broke in. "Come on, you two. This is not the time to debate whether that paranormal stuff is real or not. For now, let's just say that you each have your own point of view and leave it at that. The fact that you're coming at things from opposite points of view is good. It'll be more likely to uncover the real truth of the matter. If you help me out, one or the other of you may be able to prove his or her case."

Raven chuckled. "Okay by me. Sit down. Let's discuss what sort of help you need from a psychic and an illusionist."

The two men slid into the booth.

O'Brien said, "Yes. What's this all about?"

"Let's order breakfast first. Then I'll tell you everything."

Raven said, "I've already had mine, but I'll take another cup of joe."

After the waitress took the men's orders and poured Raven's coffee, Kopinski said, "Okay. First, I need you two to swear that you'll keep anything I say to you here in the strictest confidence. Actually, I'm

sticking my neck out by even talking to you about this particular case."

"I'll promise not to say a word to anyone," Raven said. "But I could be lying. How can you be sure that you can trust me?"

"Because of the way you were when we were in the NYPD. You were the most honest cop, I knew. You never bought that 'one of our own' crap. If another cop was dishonest or screwing up on the job, you reported it immediately."

"That's why I quit. Some people didn't like that. I was told to keep my mouth shut a few times. Finally, I got disgusted and resigned. Okay. So you've got reason to trust me." She pointed her thumb at O'Brien. "What about him?"

"The fact that he is a debunker, as you called him, ought to tell you something about his personality. I've known Johnny for a while and know he's someone who is not only honest, but goes out of his way to help people who've been scammed or about to be scammed."

The waitress showed up with their orders. After she left, Kopinski said, "Okay, here's the deal. A couple of days ago, a dealer in antiquities was murdered. You may have read about it in the Sun-Times."

"Yeah. So?"

"Well there's a lot of details concerning that crime that did not appear in the papers. Things that have Chicago's finest and us baffled. In addition, we have suspicions that the perp or perps may have ties to a terrorist organization."

### CHAPTER 3. THE HEADLESS CORPSE

"Okay, here's the story. About a month ago, Theodorus Athenopoulos, an importer of antiquities, was murdered in a basement storage area of his business. The reason the FBI is handling the case is that we have information that the antiquities business was a front, that Mr. Athenopoulos real business was smuggling."

"Smuggling what?" asked O'Brien.

"We're not exactly sure. It might be drugs, arms, technology or secret information. Or maybe all of these. So far, we haven't been able to catch him at anything."

"So, how do you know that he was smuggling anything?"

"Through a reliable informant. Also, great sums of money moved in and out of his accounts which we've been monitoring. More money than should be changing hands according to his inventories."

"Maybe his business is money laundering," remarked Raven.

"That's another possibility. Anyway we know that he has a connection to a secret organization called The Thirteen. So far we haven't been able to find out much about it. We suspect that it has ties to al-Queda. Some of the money came from Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia."

"Now, about the murder. On July thirtieth, Athenopoulos' clerk notified the police that his boss was

missing and perhaps had a heart attack after locking himself into a storeroom. The clerk was the last person to see Athenopoulos alive. Here's what he told us. The day before the police found Athenopoulos' body, Athenopoulos received a delivery from an unmarked black van. About a week later, a van fitting that description was found abandoned in an alley. It had been stolen some time ago.

"The clerk gave us a vague description of the delivery driver, who he described as either Arabic or Indian. He said that Athenopoulos became nervous and on edge that day the package came and took it immediately to the storeroom. At quitting time, when the clerk left for home, Athenopoulos told him that was staying to catch up on paperwork. The next day when the clerk arrived for work, the business was locked up. This surprised him, because Athenopoulos usually arrived before the clerk. The clerk opened up using his own key. Around ten in the morning, he began to worry. When he noticed that the storeroom was locked from the inside, he called the cops.

"Since the clerk did not have a key for the storeroom, Chicago's finest broke down the door. They found Athenopoulos brutally murdered. The cops knew we had been keeping tabs on Athenopoulos, so they notified us. Most of what I've told you so far has been in the papers."

Raven drank down the dregs of her coffee and asked, "What's the occult element in this murder? So far it seems like a business deal with the wrong kind of people went bad or something similar. What about the clerk? Maybe he was pissed at this boss for some reason."

"Nah. The clerk was home with his wife at the time the murder was committed. Besides, I don't think he would be capable of doing what was done to Athenopoulos. I believe your first hypothesis is probably closer to the truth. As far as the occult part, I'm getting to that. But first I want to show you guys the victim's body. Do you have strong stomachs?"

Raven laughed. "Believe me, no matter what the killer or killers did to this guy, I've probably seen worse. Bring it on."

"I can take it," O'Brien said in a low voice. Raven was sure from his expression that he really did not want to view the photos but was afraid of being thought a sissy in front of her. *Typical male*, she thought.

Kopinski pulled a folder from his attaché case. Inside the folder were several photographs. He passed them over to Raven. The first one was a front view shot of the victim. He was tied to a chair by his arms and ankles. His head had been stricken from his shoulders and sat in his lap. The head's eyes were open and staring. The front of the victim's shirt was covered with blood. After Raven looked at it, she slid it over to O'Brien. As he took a quick glance at it, his pale skin turned even paler. He quickly passed it back to Kopinski. The second was a close-up of the victim's head. It was obvious that he had been tortured before he was murdered. There were cigarette burns on his cheeks. Carved or burned on his forehead was a pentagram and other alchemy symbols.

Raven studied the order of the symbols for a while. She held the photo up. "Is this why you say the occult is involved? The marks on the victims forehead?"

Kopinski replied, "It's one of the reasons."

When O'Brien saw this picture, he looked quite ill. "Excuse me." He slid out of the booth and headed toward the rest rooms.

Raven winked at Kopinski. "Looks like our friend has a weak stomach. He'd probably faint if he saw a

real murdered corpse."

"Well, hopefully he won't have to look at any."

Raven examined the rest of the photos. There were several more of the deceased from different angles. The rest were of the crime scene. The storeroom had been ransacked. Boxes and other objects were strewn around the room, many of the boxes had been torn open and valuable antiques had been smashed. Drawers were pulled out of the desk, their contents spilled over the floor. A painting was slashed. One wall contained a safe. The killer must have used nitro on it, because it hung open, the locking mechanism busted up. Money and papers were left in the safe. The killer had been after something other than cash.

"It looks to me that whoever murdered Athenopoulos was after something in particular, maybe whatever was in the package delivered that day."

"Our conclusion also."

When O'Brien returned from the bathroom, Kopinski showed him the views of the crime scene that did not include the corpse.

"Okay," said Raven. "You've showed us the victim and the crime scene. Now, for the sixty-four dollar question. What makes you think the occult was involved other than the marks on Athenopoulos' forehead?"

"That was one reason. Do you know what they mean?"

"Sure. The five pointed star is called a pentagram and is ancient symbol associated with magic and witchcraft. We Wiccans usually show it in a circle with the single point upward. We call that a pentacle. Some Satanists show the star with the two points upward in the manner that it was on the victim's forehead. The other four symbols are from alchemy. They represent the four elements, earth, water, air and fire. They are also associated with certain planets and Greek and Roman gods."

"Wow. I'm really glad that I contacted you. You really know all about that stuff."

"All of what I've told you is common knowledge. You could've easily found that info on the Internet or in a book on the paranormal or alchemy. The killer could've branded Athenopoulos with those symbols for any number of reasons. Perhaps, he simply wanted to send you on a wild goose chase."

"I don't think so. For one thing, The Thirteen often uses occult symbols such as these."

O'Brien said, "So what. Most secret societies have a psuedo-occult side to them. It's another way of brainwashing their flock. They tell the initiate that they are going to teach him or her occult secrets that will give the initiate magical powers. Like Raven, I've still haven't heard anything that would be a reason to bring her or me in on the case. What's the occult connection?"

"Well, for one thing, the locked basement room. It was locked from the inside. There was no way for the killer to escape that room and relock the door. The room has no windows or other exits. How did our killer get away except by magic?"

O'Brien chuckled. "Okay. I'm beginning to get it. Well, as an illusionist, I can tell you there might be any number of ways for the killer to escape that room. I'd have to see the room before I offered a

hypothesis."

"I definitely will bring you to the crime scene. Perhaps, I should do that as soon as possible so that you two can decide for yourself about some other things associated with the paranormal. Are you both free this afternoon?"

"Fair enough. I am. My next show isn't until Friday evening."

Kopinski told the waitress that he wanted to pay the check. She ripped it off her pad and pointed to the cashier's desk. As she walked away, he left a ten dollar tip. He and O'Brien started to rise.

"One damn minute," cried Raven. "You know, I'm not in the investigative business for my health. We need to discuss terms before I visit any crime scene."

Kopinski sat back down. "I'm sorry. Okay, I can authorize you two as expert consultants. Thirty dollars an hour plus expenses. But you'll have to account for every minute of your time and every penny spent. If you feel that any unusually high expenses are necessary, you'll have to get prior approval. I have our standard contracts for such services. Do you want to sign them now?"

"No. Just give me a copy, and I'll read it over. I'll go with you to the crime scene this afternoon. However, if I decide to sign up, I'm on the clock starting now." She took out a small notebook from her purse, glanced at her watch and wrote down the time. "You know, I usually get fifty an hour plus expenses." That was a lie, but Raven felt that it wouldn't hurt to try to jack up the price at some point. "I'm only doing this for so little because you're an old friend, and I have to admit that I'm a little intrigued about the occult aspects of the case."

O'Brien said, "I'll second that. Our time starts now, and I'll sign the contract after I look it over. Oh, Raven, if sign up for this gig, we'll be probably be working closely together, so let's try not to argue too much about the merits of the paranormal." He held out his hand to her.

She took it and smiled at him as she shook it. "Sounds good to me. If we debate, I'll try not to get too worked up."

Kopinski patted them on their backs. "I think we're going to make a good team." He reached into his attaché case and handed each of them a contract. "You guys ready to visit the crime scene?"

They nodded their assent.

## CHAPTER 4. CRIME SCENE

The building where Athenopoulos had his business was in an area of factories and warehouses. It's likely that in the nineteenth century it had been a residence. It was an old frame building with a front porch. A Crime Scene tape blocked the entrance. Kopinski removed one end until Raven, O'Brien and himself had entered. Just inside the entrance, a bored uniform policeman saluted Kopinski.

The interior had been converted to offices and showrooms. Raven looked around the front room, which displayed various antiquities from France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, the Mideastern countries, China and Japan. She would have liked to spend some time examining the urns, swords, drinking vessels, casks, talismans and other collector items. Several of the items would certainly be of interest to anyone interested in the occult, for example, items used in ancient ceremonies. But Kopinski strode quickly

toward the back rooms which were divided into offices and a one-room apartment.

Kopinski opened a cellar door and switched on a light. Stairs led into a storeroom with more antiques and unopened crates on the floor and metal shelves. A brick wall divided the back half from the front. A heavy metal open door led to the back section. Kopinski stopped Raven and O'Brien from entering. "In there is where Athenopoulos was murdered. The CSI boys and the coroner have already done their thing. Nonetheless, be careful in case there's something they may have missed. Try not to touch anything.

If you want to examine an item, ask me first. Okay? Are we straight?"

"Absolutely," replied Raven.

"Yeah," said O'Brien. "I'd like to examine the door and the lock if I may."

"Okay, but wear these." Kopinski handed him a pair of latex gloves. "Raven, you may as well put on a pair too."

Raven donned the gloves and entered the room. It was a mess. It was obvious that the killer was searching for something. She wondered whether he had found it. The chair where the victim had been sitting was in the middle of the room. It and the floor beneath it were covered with dried blood. Raven said, "Athenopoulos was beheaded. Where's the murder weapon?"

Kopinski said, "It was an antique sword. CSI took it as evidence. As far as I know, there were no prints on it."

"Do you have a picture of it? I'd like to see what type it was."

Kopinski looked through his file. He found two photos and a description. "It had a curved blade."

Raven examined the photos and the descriptions. "It's an Arabic saif. Here in the West we usually call such swords scimitars. You know, in Saudi Arabia such swords are still used to behead felons convicted of certain crimes." She examined the close-up of the handle. "Ah, here's your occult symbols again." She pointed at two carvings in the handle. One was another upside-down pentagram. The other was a skull.

"I'm surprised that the perp left it. Swords can be traced back to where they were purchased."

Kopinski shrugged. "Perhaps he left it as a message. I'm sure CSI is finding out where it was bought. And thanks for the heads up about it being Arabic and the occult symbols. That stuff could be important."

O'Brien came over. "There's no way that the killer could've gone through that door and locked it. I checked the hinges and they're on the inside. The lock has a heavy bolt into steel and must be manually worked from the inside. Also, the door was alarmed. The killer got out of this room by some other method."

"Does that mean the occult or magic was involved?"

"Of course not. There are many ways to get out of a locked room without disturbing the lock. I know. I've used them myself while performing escape illusions. For example, the ventilation system. Or the killer could have hid in or among these boxes and still been here when the police arrived."

"That's not likely. The Chicago Police and our folks searched the place thoroughly."

"Means nothing. I imagine that while the search was being executed, several persons were in this room."

Not all of them knew each other. Some were from the Chicago cops, some were from CSI, maybe the coroner was here, you FBI boys were here. If the killer was smart, he could have disguised himself as one of you and simply walked out. Can you say for sure that everyone who was in this room at any one time belonged here?"

Kopinski scratched his head. "Well, I didn't recognize everybody. In fact, now that I think of it, a couple of the guys from CSI had beards, but that's not unusual these days."

Raven said, "How the perp got away isn't important. Apparently he had. What I'd like to know is what he was after. Apparently he did not find it right away, because he had to torture Athenopoulos."

O'Brien said, "Unless he simply got his kicks by torturing people."

Kopinski shook his head. "I don't think that was the case here. Look how he tore the place apart. I think Raven is right."

Raven examined the labels on boxes and crates that either were unopened or had been opened by the perpetrator. "I wonder what was in the package delivered the day before the murder. You said that the clerk told you that Athenopoulos became very nervous and immediately brought the package down here. What size did he say the package was?"

"About so," Kopinski illustrated with his hands.

Meanwhile, O'Brien wandered away to check the cover of the air vent.

Raven asked, "Exactly where was the sword found?"

"Over on that shelf." He pointed. "The perp must've placed it there after he lopped off the victim's head."

Raven went over by the shelf. There were three items on it. "Tell me, Martin, was the sword found between the chalice and this large coin?"

"Yes. Is that significant?"

"These are the tools of magic. We use similar items in witchcraft when doing spells. They represent the four elements. The chalice is for water. The sword—we use a ceremonial dagger called an athame—represents air. The coin is for earth. And the scepter is for fire. Notice the inscriptions. They are all similar and contain words of power in Arabic."

"You read Arabic?"

"A little. I believe the perp brought these with him and used them to perform a magic ritual."

At that point O'Brien walked up. "Although that vent probably leads outside, the screws on the cover are rusted. Some of the rust would've flaked off if the killer had removed it. I believe my other theory is correct. The killer was in hiding and posed as one of the police personnel to make his escape."

Raven said, "Or he actually did use magic to teleport himself elsewhere."

"Sure. Sure. And I can make you disappear right in front of Martin here without any props."

The cop who had been guarding the front door came into the room. "Hey Kopinski, Athenopoulos' clerk is on the phone. He wants to talk to you."

Kopinski went into the next room. Raven and O'Brien continued examining items in the room. Raven picked up an empty box which had been opened. "Say John, look at this. Isn't this about the size of the box that Martin said was delivered by the black van?"

O'Brien came over by her. "Yes. Is there a label on it?"

"No shipping label, but the box was manufactured in Albany, New York. "I've got a hunch that it's the one."

O'Brien grinned. "A hunch? Not a psychic vision?"

"Laugh all you want, but I'm getting some strange vibes from this room. Perhaps, Athenopoulos' spirit is still hanging around."

"Should we have a seance?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

O'Brien shook his head in disgust.

Kopinski returned to the room. "That was the clerk. He remembered that Athenopoulos had told him that he had been expecting an item from a company called "Near East Importers," whose home office is in Albany, New York. He said that this particular company often delivered goods in a van similar to the one he had described. Athenopoulos was usually secretive about anything that arrived from that importer."

Raven showed him the cardboard container. "I'll bet anything that whatever it was came in this box."

"Possible. Let me dust it for prints." He took out his kit and checked the box for fingerprints. "No such luck."

"In that case, would you mind if I took it home with me?"

"I don't see why not. It's no use to us."

The trio went around the room looking for additional clues, but nothing of significance showed up. Before they left, Kopinski said, "I'll call you two tomorrow."

"Sure," replied Raven. She still had no clear idea of why he wanted her and the illusionist in on this case, but as long as the FBI was willing to pay, she was not going to argue.

She dumped the box in the trunk of her car. O'Brien said, "What are you doing for dinner? I know a nice Italian restaurant on Rush Street."

Raven wondered why he was inviting her to dinner, considering their tendency to argue about the reality of the paranormal. Nonetheless, a dinner with conversation seemed better than returning to her lonely apartment. "Okay. Give me the address. I'll meet you there."

"Actually, I took a cab to get here. Mind if I ride with you."

"Not all. Whereabouts on Rush?"

He told her as they entered her Camry.

\* \* \* \*

After their drinks arrived, O'Brien said, "I really don't understand why Martin wants us on this case."

"I don't either. But I'm not going to argue him out of it. My PI business hasn't been doing too well lately. If I don't make some bread, I may have to get an honest job."

"Hey. I can almost understand why he hired you. You're experienced in police work, and you know a lot about the kind of arcane symbolism that these secret societies might use. But, why he wants me is beyond me. The only investigative work I've done is to expose phony psychics."

Raven shrugged. "There must be things he hasn't told us about yet. Tell me, John, are you such a skeptic that you think all psychics, such as myself, are scam artists."

"No. I don't think you're a scam artist at all. But, from what I've observed about you and certain other psychics who seem to have a gift is that what you do have a talent for noticing details and a good sense of human psychology. Like today, the way you picked up on manufacturing label on the box. Not many people would think of noticing something like that. By the way, why did you want to take the box home? Packing up some old clothes to donate to the Salvation Army?"

Raven blushed. "If I told you, you'd probably laugh and think I'm just another nut into paranormal crap.

So, I'm not going to tell you. Anyway, thanks for not believing that I'm a scam artist. There may be something to what you say. Nonetheless, I've seen things and done things that you wouldn't believe in a thousand years. But, as you say, I don't have any credible proof of any of it except what I've seen with my own eyes. Maybe some day, I'll find a piece of proof that would convince you."

"Hey, even if I'm a skeptic, I have an open mind. Show me the proof, and I'll become a believer. In fact, I think it would be great if what you think is true was really. For one thing, it would show that there really is a life after death."

"Be careful what you wish for. There are some things in the world of the occult that are nasty and dangerous." At that moment, the waiter arrived with their meal. "Ah, here's our dinner. How about a pact? For the rest of the evening, we don't talk about the occult nor Martin's case. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

All through dinner the spoke of trivialities, books they had read and movie and TV shows. O'Brien demonstrated a couple of sleight-of-hand tricks for Raven, which amazed her since she could not figure out how he had done them.

O'Brien insisted on paying the check. "I'll simply put it on the expense account that I hand Martin at the end of the week."

Raven drove him home. Like her, he lived in an apartment complex. Before exiting the car, he said, "Thanks for the ride. And I enjoyed our conversation at dinner. Perhaps we have more in common than it would first appear."

"I enjoyed it too. And thank you for dinner. Let's hope the FBI reimburses you. Goodnight."

"I don't suppose you'd like to come up for a nightcap."

Raven chuckled. "I think it's a little early in our relationship for that."

"Can't fault I guy for trying. You're a lovely woman." He kissed her on the cheek. "Goodnight."

On the way back to her apartment, Raven thought, *I kind of like that guy. He seems honest and forthright. And not bad looking either.* She had to laugh at herself. *What was it that you told yourself yesterday? That you were swearing off men for a while. Well, what the hell. The best way of getting over one man is with another.*

## CHAPTER 5. THE BOX

Raven took the empty box out of her trunk, brought it up to her apartment and placed it on the coffee table in front of the sofa. It was only eleven o'clock, and she did not feel sleepy. She went to the fridge and opened a Sam Adams. Curious as to where the case was leading and the outcome of her meeting John O'Brien, she withdrew her Tarot cards from the highboy, sat on the sofa, moved the box to the floor, shuffled the deck and laid out the cards face down on the table in the form of a pentacle, a five-pointed star surrounded by an approximate circle. One-by-one she turned the cards over and noted their relationship to each other. She smiled as the cards indicated that she would be forming a close relationship with someone associated with magic, sorcery or the occult. The love card was present as a possibility. She felt that the person alluded to must be The Great Mephisto, John O'Brien.

For a few moments she allowed herself to fantasize what it would be like living with O'Brien. She imagined him showing off his illusions for her coven, but of course she would have to cure him of his skepticism and convince him that there was really something to the craft. Again, she chided herself, *Don't be a fool. Women who think that they're going to change a man after the relationship blossoms are in for nothing but misery. Either you take a man as he is or not at all.*

She turned a card over. The hanged man. She examined the cards around it. The story they told was not good. There was deadly danger in her future. She wondered whether it had something to do with the case. She recalled the strange feeling she had at the crime scene. Although she had not said anything to Kopinski or O'Brien, she felt a presence that was twisted and evil, something that did not belong in the world of the living. She shuddered. Turning over that card had given her the same feeling, that a powerful malevolent presence was nearby.

*Stop scaring yourself, Raven,* she thought.

Mephistopheles walked into the room at that moment. The cat started toward the sofa to leap into Raven's lap. Suddenly, it turned its head and glared at the cardboard box. It hunched its back and screeched. At first, it seemed as though Mephistopheles was going to attack the container, but it turned tail and ran from the room.

"It's the box," she cried. "Whatever it held was so terrible that it left a residual presence of itself. I must find out what that box had in it."

She reached for the container with the intention of placing it back on the coffee table. It moved along the

carpet just out of reach. "What the hell."

She leaned forward and made a grab for it. She almost fell when the box slid a couple feet more. *Hecate. I wish John were here to see this. He'd change his tune about the paranormal being bunk. Of course, he'd think that I was moving the box by some trick, like with a thread the same color as the carpet.*

Although she was a little frightened of the presence in the box, she went after it with a vengeance. When she leaped up and made a two-handed grab for it, it leaped upward and spun in the air with nothing supporting it. *I must've brought a poltergeist home .*

She realized that it would do no good to chase it around the apartment. Whatever moved the container knew her own moves before she made them. She had to work a spell to keep it motionless. She went to the drawer where she kept her Wiccan book of shadows, a journal where she wrote her thoughts and the words and ingredients of spells she had learned. The drawer stuck. No matter how hard she yanked on it, it refused to budge. She realized that the presence was preventing her from opening the drawer.

This made her angry and a bit terrified. So far, the presence's action had been purely defensive. Suppose it became aggressive and attacked her. She needed a defense. She unbuttoned the top two buttons on her blouse and took out the pentacle she always wore from between her breasts, so that it was in view. It had kept her safe from evil spirits before. She hoped it would work against this one.

The box dropped to the floor. She approached it slowly. It did not move. She came within a foot of it, folded into the lotus position, closed her eyes and said a calming aphorism. She allowed her breathing to become shallow and relaxed one chakra at a time, starting with her base, her groin, her stomach muscles, her chest, her throat, her brow and finally the crown of her head. Once full relaxed, she said an incantation to protect herself from evil spirits, opened her eyes and stared at the box, concentrating on the inside bottom.

After a long time, something began to happen. Her surroundings grew fuzzy except for the container, which became the center of her universe, the only solid thing in it. Everything else faded away into a kind of chaotic mist.

Eventually the mist faded, and the exterior environment returned, but it was not her apartment. She was in the storeroom where Athenopoulos was murdered. However, he was very much alive. He stood by a table where the cardboard container rested. He had a box knife in his hand and was carefully slicing open the package. When he had it open, he removed packing material which he placed in a trash barrel. He pulled out an odd looking clay bottle sealed at the top. It was painted with a colorful and artful design that consisted of occult symbols woven intricately within a geometric pattern.

Athenopoulos admired the object for a few minutes and peered around the room as though ensuring himself that no one else was present. He stared for a moment directly at Raven but turned away again. If he felt the presence of her aura, he did not give any indication. He went to the stone block basement wall, carefully laid the bottle down and pried out a loose stone. He gathered rags to make a bed in the cavity behind the stone he had removed. Gingerly, he placed the artifact on the bed of rags and replaced the stone. He swept up cement dust from the floor, rubbed it around the cracks, stepped back to look at his handiwork and nodded. It was difficult to tell that a stone had been removed.

He left the room. Time passed at a fast pace in Raven's vision. She watched clock hands whirl around to five o'clock, the normal closing time for the shop. She heard Athenopoulos bid his clerk goodnight. He entered the storeroom again and carefully locked it from the inside. As he headed towards where the

artifact was hidden, a man dressed in black with a full beard came out of the shadows. He had a scimitar in his hand. Raven was sure that it was the one she had seen in the photo of the crime scene.

Athenopoulos looked frightened and backed away. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

The intruder had a thick Arabic accent. "I'm not here to answer questions. Where is the clay bottle that you received today?"

"I don't know what you are talking about. I received no clay bottle. If you're here to rob me, there's plenty of money in that safe over there. I'll give you the combination."

The intruder scowled and raised the sword. "You know damn well that I'm not after money. It is you who are the thief. Or rather the people who sold the sacred bottle to you. It belongs to us" He smiled in a friendly fashion. "I do not wish to hurt you, but I will if necessary. Simply give me what I want, and I'll be on my way. Otherwise, I will cause you considerable pain." He put his hand out palm up as though to receive something. "Which is it to be?"

Athenopoulos blanched, but kept stonewalling. "Okay. I did receive an ancient clay bottle, but I've already sold it. It's not here."

"You lie." The intruder pulled the desk chair into the middle of the room. "Sit here." He reached down into a gym bag he had with him and took out duct tape. He tied Athenopoulos' wrists and ankles to the chair. He put down the sword and slapped his prisoner hard across the face. "Where is it?"

Athenopoulos said nothing.

"You're a fool. I'm going to get the information out of you sooner or later. Make it easy on yourself."

"You're from The Thirteen, aren't you?"

The intruder smirked. "That would be telling." He took out a package of cigarettes and lit one with a lighter. He took a deep puff and blew smoke into Athenopoulos' face.

"You know, it was The Thirteen who murdered my wife and children. You seem to want that clay bottle very much. It must contain something your people value very highly. It gives me great pleasure to deny them."

"I see. In that case, it's going to come down to how much pain you can endure." He touched the lit end of the cigarette to the antiques dealer's cheek. Athenopoulos winced but was silent.

The man with the beard went about methodically torturing his victim. Raven turned away. There was nothing she could do to stop it. She was watching events that had already occurred. Athenopoulos screamed a few times but did not relent.

Raven heard the intruder say, "I'm going to give you one more chance. Either you tell me where the sacred vessel is located or die."

Although Raven would have liked to keep looking away, she felt it was her duty to watch the actual murder. Athenopoulos spit at the intruder. The bearded man became enraged. He picked up the scimitar and with two hands on the blade swung it at Athenopoulos' neck. Athenopoulos' head flew from his body, fell with a thump like a melon dropping on the cement floor and rolled for several feet. Blood

spurted from neck wound like a fountain.

The intruder picked the head up by its hair and placed it on Athenopoulos' torso's lap. Cursing in Arabic and English, he tore open boxes, threw items around and searched every nook and cranny of the storeroom. He did not discover the bottle's actual hiding place behind the loose stone. Finally he gave up. He said a prayer to Allah and removed the cup, coin and scepter from his gym bag. He placed these items in the order that Raven would find them later in the week and placed the bloody sword between the cup and the coin. He stood in front of the items, placed his hands above them and recited an incantation in a language Raven did not know.

To Raven's utter amazement, he vanished.

At that point, the storeroom grew fuzzy. A moment later, Raven came out of her trance. She reached out touched the box. It did not move. She no longer felt the presence of any spirit. She regained her feet, but swayed. She was exhausted. She thought about calling Kopinski with the new information, but decided that it would keep until morning. She turned off the lights and went to bed.

## CHAPTER 6. THE CLAY BOTTLE

The telephone woke Raven out of a dream where she was The Great Mephisto's assistant. In her dream, she was stretched out in a box, and the illusionist was about to saw her into two with a chain saw. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. She could not decide whether the dream was a good omen or a bad one. The phone kept ringing.

"I'm coming. I'm coming." She picked up the receiver, noting that her alarm clock showed that it was a little past ten o'clock. This was later than she had intended to sleep. "Hello."

"Agent Kopinski, here. Good morning, Raven."

"Oh hi, Martin. I'm glad you called. I have something to tell you." She wondered exactly how she would explain her vision without coming across as a kook. She decided to leave out the part about the box moving around her living room.

Before she could say anything, Kopinski said, "I want to see you too. We may have a handle on the killer. O'Brien and I are down in the coffee shop on the ground floor of your building having breakfast. Join us?"

"Yeah. Give me fifteen minutes."

"Ok, doky. See you in fifteen." It pleased her that she would be seeing O'Brien although her dream about him had not been exactly pleasant. She leaped out of bed, stripped off her nightgown on the way to bathroom, urinated and took a five-minute shower. She put on pantyhose, a push-up bra, and a dress she seldom wore because in her estimation it was too girly and showed cleavage. She took her time with makeup and her hair. She was pleased with the image in the mirror. Instead of the usual tough Tomboyish image she usually presented, it was one that a man might find interesting. She glanced at her watch. It was going on eleven. Her fifteen minutes had become forty five. She quickly slipped into a pair of high heels and left the apartment.

When she got down to the coffee shop, the men had finished their breakfasts and were conversing low over their coffees. She squeezed in next to O'Brien. "Sorry I took so long, but .."

"No apologies necessary," said Kopinski. "I knew as soon as I called that I woke you up. Sorry about that. The thing is we think we know who the perp is. He left a partial print, and he's in the system."

"Good. As I said when you called, I have something to tell you too. I had a psychic vision last night about the murder."

O'Brien groaned. "And I thought you were straight. Quite a coincidence."

Raven seethed. "It was no coincidence. I used a Wiccan technique to induce a vision."

"Of course. C'mon Raven. You probably figured something out and thought it would be more dramatic to present it as a vision."

"Fuck you." She narrowed her eyes at him. *And I had an idea that I was falling for this jerk. What an ass.*

"Whoa," cried Kopinski. "John, I know you're skeptical of the paranormal. Well, I am too in a way. But, I asked Raven to help with this investigation because of her familiarity with the occult. I believe that she really did go into a trance and had a vision. Let her have her say. Then we'll judge whether it's pertinent to the case."

"Thanks Martin. At least *you* don't go around calling people liars."

O'Brien looked contrite. "I'm sorry, Raven. Martin and you are right. I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions. Tell us about your vision."

Raven glared at him, not sure whether she should accept his apology. As she related her tale, she kept her eyes deliberately on Kopinski. When she finished, she said, "So, I can describe the perp, and I know where Athenopoulos hid the clay bottle that he wanted."

"Okay," said Kopinski. "Describe him. In detail."

At that point, the waitress came over, and Raven ordered breakfast. When she left, Raven described the murderer. She recalled that he had a tattoo on his forearm of a pyramid with an eye above it, similar to the one on a dollar bill.

Kopinski reached into his briefcase and pulled out a photo. He showed it to Raven and O'Brien. "Pretty accurate resemblance to the man you just described. Note the tattoo." He pointed to the forearm of the man in the photo. It had a picture of a pyramid with an eye on top of it.

O'Brien cried, "Are you two pulling my leg? You had this all set up. Am I supposed to believe now that Raven is clairvoyant?"

"You idiot," Raven said. "Why would Martin and I do such a thing? This is a murder investigation. Do you think Martin would jeopardize it simply to fool you?"

"I don't know. Why did he ask for my help in the first place?"

Kopinski said, "For this very reason. To keep my feet planted firmly on the ground. I need both your views. I'm neutral. I neither believe nor disbelieve. I only go where the evidence leads, regardless of the

source. Look. I knew you two are coming from opposite viewpoints, but let's keep the disagreements at a debate level. No accusations. No angry bursts. No name calling. Keep to the facts. Offer hypothesis, but don't insist that your idea is the only possible way something could've happened. Okay?"

Raven felt sheepish. Apparently O'Brien did too, because his cheeks were ruddy. He stared into his coffee cup. She had to laugh. "Okay, Dad. We'll be good."

O'Brien looked up and smiled at her. "I'm afraid I've got to apologize again. I'm too opinionated I guess."

Raven wanted to say, you sure are, but held her peace. For Kopinski's sake she decided not to argue with O'Brien anymore. By then, her breakfast had arrived. She concentrated on that. As she wiped grease from her lips, she said, "Do you have a name for the perp?"

"Yes. His real name is Abdul-Azim Mujib, but goes by various aliases. We know definitely that he has ties to a group called The Thirteen. He has another tattoo over his heart with thirteen stars in a circle. This symbol we've found on other members of cult. Although we're sure he's in this country illegally, he has authentic looking identification for each of his aliases. There are warrants out for him, but none that originate in this country."

"What are the warrants for?"

"Smuggling mostly, a couple of murders, kidnapping, narcotics. This guy is a bad apple. But you could tell that from the brutal way that Athenopoulos was killed."

"Anything else?"

"Not much. We can't seem to get a handle on where to find him. He changes addresses often and leaves without giving notice or a forwarding addresses. He probably gets his mail sent to a P.O. box. So far we haven't been able to find out which post office he uses. The guy is very cautious. He knows we're after him."

"We have one way of finding him."

"What's that?"

"If my vision was a true one, the item he was looking for is still hidden at the crime scene. Let's go there. If we can retrieve it and let him know we have it, he's sure to come after it. It must be pretty important to him, considering what he did to try to retrieve it."

After Raven finished her breakfast, she said, "Okay boys, the proof is in the pudding as they say. If my vision was a true one, we should have the object in her hands this afternoon."

Kopinski said, "You want to return to the crime scene?"

"Of course. You sound reluctant."

He hesitated. "Well. It's like this. Because this is such a high profile case, my boss is a little edgy about having two civilians involved. Smith, the cop guarding the crime scene complained that you two contaminated the crime scene. I was told that you were not to go back in there."

Raven rolled her eyes and shrugged. "I see. Well, if I tell you exactly where the object this Abdul-Azim is after, you can retrieve it yourself."

"All right. Let's go." He left money for the waitress and went to pay the bill.

"I'm going to have a smoke," Raven said to O'Brien and went toward the door.

"I don't smoke, but I could use some fresh air. I'll join you."

As they passed Kopinski, Raven said, "Give me a call when you get the object. We can work out a plan to trap Abdul. I'll be in my apartment for the rest of the day."

After they left the coffee shop, she lit a cigarette. "So John. This whole thing should be wrapped up in a couple days. We can say *adios* and stop getting our dander up arguing whether the paranormal is real."

He smiled at her. "I hope not. I'd like to see more of you."

"Really? Even though we'd probably spend all the time arguing about the occult?"

"Hey. I know a couple where the guy is a staunch Bush Republican and his wife is a Perozi Democrat. They've been married going on twenty years and seem perfectly happy—at least in public."

Raven laughed. "But you don't know what goes on behind closed doors."

"All I'm saying is, why not give it a try? I'm sure there are other subjects we could talk about besides the paranormal."

She gave him a seductive look. "Is this your obtuse way of asking my out on a date?"

He grinned. "Tonight's my last performance here in Chicago. I've been thinking about taking a month or so off. How about celebrating with me after the show? It ends around nine. We could have a late supper at a nightclub that has dancing and celebrate."

"Okay. Will you pick me up? Or should we meet somewhere?"

"Why don't you catch my act? I'll have the box office hold a ticket for you. I go on at seven. Wait for me in the lobby."

Raven ground her cigarette butt out with her heel. "I'd like that. I always had a thing about magic ever since I was a kid. It disappointed me when I found out it was all sleight of hand and props. See you tonight. I want to get back to my apartment in case Martin calls. I'm anxious to hear whether there really is a clay bottle hidden in that wall."

"I am too. If he really finds exactly what you said, perhaps it'll convince me that you do have psychic powers. Let me know tonight."

"Will do. See you later."

Raven hummed one of her favorite tunes as she rode the elevator up to her apartment. Her heart was light and happy. As she put her key in the lock, the door opened. It had been only partially closed.

"What the hell."

She realized that someone had been in her apartment. She backed away from the entrance. *Damn it. My piece is in there.* She wondered whether the trespasser was still there. *Maybe I can fool him .*

She kicked the door all the way open with her foot, being careful not to stand in front of the doorway, and yelled, "I'm coming in, and I'm armed." She ducked down into a combat crouch and dove behind the sofa. Nothing happened. Either the trespasser was playing possum, or he was already gone. Raven bet it was the latter. She peeked over the back of the sofa. "Crap," she cried. Her apartment was an awful mess. The invader had thrashed the place. Nonetheless, although the entertainment center had been moved out of place, the TV and the video and DVD players were still intact.

*This was no burglary,* Raven thought. *Somebody was looking for something. I wonder whether it was our boy, Abdul-Asim. He must think we already have the bottle.* She shuddered at she recalled what he had done to poor Athenopoulas. She scratched her head. *How did he know about me?* The thought came to her. Abdul was into the occult. Perhaps he had produced a vision about Kopinski, O'Brien and her in a manner similar to the one she had about him. It was a troubling thought. He was a very dangerous man.

She went into her bedroom. Her gun and holster were hanging in their usual place in the closet. She withdrew the pistol and checked that it was loaded. She laid it on the bed, took off her dress and changed into jeans and a T-shirt. She strapped on the holster and put the pistol into it. She went to the window. It was locked from the inside. The intruder could not have come up the fire escape. She examined the door. There were no marks on the lock. Either the perpetrator had picked the lock or got in using magic as he did in the locked room in the antiques store. He left, however, through the front door in a hurried fashion, since he failed to close it tightly.

*I need to warn John and Martin,* she thought. *Since he didn't find the bottle here, he'll be after them.* She picked up the phone and started to dial O'Brien's cell phone. Suddenly someone grabbed her from behind and placed a cloth over her mouth and nose. She smelled chloroform. Before she could use Judo on her attacker, the room began to spin. Moments later, blackness overwhelmed her.

## CHAPTER 7. WITHOUT A TRACE

As The Great Mephisto performed his illusions, he kept his eye on the seat he had reserved for Raven. It remained empty throughout his performance. *Looks like she's not coming ,* he thought. He wondered whether she decided to back out of their date at the last minute or had another reason for being a no-show. After he took his last bow, he hurried to his dressing room and called Raven. Her phone rang for a while. Finally, her Voice Mail picked up. He said, "This is John O'Brien. Did you forget about our date? Call me." He left his cell phone number.

After he got back to his hotel room and had changed into his pajamas, his cell phone rang. To his disappointment, it was Martin Kopinski.

"Hi John. Say, have you heard anything from Raven. I've been trying to reach her all evening."

"No. Actually I reserved tickets for her for this evening's performance. She never showed."

"That's strange. I wonder where she went."

O'Brien rubbed his chin. "I haven't a clue. You probably know her better than I do."

"Not really. Well anyway, if you hear from her, tell her that she was right. There was an antique clay bottle hidden behind a loose stone in the basement wall."

"I guess that proves that she has psychic abilities. Or that she hid it there herself."

"There you go with your skepticism. If Raven was in on this conversation, I'll bet she'd defend herself. You and I were in that room the entire time. There is no way she could've pried loose a large stone and hid a vase the size of the one I found."

"All right, you've got me. Perhaps she does have paranormal abilities. If she has, she's the first genuine article I've ever met."

"Who knows. Before this case is over, we'll probably prove it one way or other. I'd really like to get a hold of her so we can discuss how to trap this Abdul character."

"If I hear from her, I'll tell her to call you."

"Thanks. Goodnight, John. Sorry to disturb you."

"No problem. Goodnight."

O'Brien poured himself a glass of wine. He thought about Raven. She did not seem like the kind of person who would opt out of a date without calling. He checked his Voice Mail. There were no messages from Raven. He began to worry. He hoped nothing had happened to her, an accident or sudden illness. He decided to wait a while to see whether she would eventually phone. He turned on The Tonight Show and slowly sipped wine.

After a while, he began to doze. Some sound woke him. The TV was still on. He turned it off. He had a strange feeling as though someone besides himself was in the room. He laughed at himself. *Don't you start going paranormal, O'Brien*, he told himself. He decided that all the talk about the occult, his concern about Raven and his sleepy condition was causing his mind to manufacture phantoms. He glanced at his watch. It was past midnight. He had an impulse to call Raven, but decided not to. Either she was still out or had gone to bed. Perhaps her not calling was her way of brushing him off.

As he started to get out the chair, a woman walked out of the shadows of his living room. She was a red-haired beauty dressed in a black robe with a pentacle design on the front.

"Who the hell are you? How did you get in here?"

She smiled at him. "My name is Morgaine. How I got in here is my secret. I'm a friend of Raven's. She's in terrible trouble. Go to eighteen forty five North Clybourne. Bring Martin Kopinski. Hurry." And she vanished.

O'Brien rubbed his eyes. "For Christ's sake, I'm having hallucinations. Maybe I'm dreaming." He pinched himself. It hurt. *All this talk about the paranormal is getting to me. Okay, suppose what I just saw was some kind of ghost or spirit or something trying to tell me something. It was so real, I can't just rule it out.*

He dialed Raven's number. It rang several times and her Voice Mail picked up again. *Either she's an awful sound sleeper or she's not there.* He took a pad and pen out of the night stand drawer and wrote

down the address that the phantom had given him. He dressed and called Kopinski.

"Sorry to disturb you so late at night, but I'm worried about Raven. Like you, I've been trying to call her and haven't got an answer. Could you meet me in front of her building?"

"Yeah, sure. Actually I've had a premonition that something was wrong for a while now. I'll be there in a half hour."

\* \* \* \*

O'Brien paced in front of Raven's apartment building until Kopinski showed up. The security lock on the door from the lobby to the apartments was locked. Kopinski rang Raven's bell several times. There was no answer.

"We'll have to buzz the manager," Kopinski said.

"No. Wait. I'm an expert at picking locks."

"I don't know. That could be construed as breaking and entering."

"So. Turn around. As far as you know, she buzzed us in."

Kopinski frowned but turned his back while O'Brien worked on the lock. He had it open in ten seconds.

"Enter." With a flourish he waved Kopinski into the door which he held.

"I hope that this wasn't alarmed to alert the cops or a security outfit."

"I doubt it. Most of those systems have a code box. This opens with a key or by a buzzer."

They took the elevator to the tenth floor. Raven's door was ajar.

"Oh, oh," said Kopinski. "Something's not right. Stand out of the way." He withdrew his pistol and pushed the door open all the way. He went in and pointed his pistol around as he moved through the apartment. "Shit," he cried when he saw the mess. "Anybody here?" he asked loudly. "John, stay in the hall. I'll let you know when it's safe."

He crept slowly around the apartment until he checked each room.

"You can come in, John."

O'Brien entered the apartment. "Oh my God. Someone's kidnapped her."

"It looks that way. I'm afraid that it might be the man who murdered Athenopoulos. He might've thought that Raven had the clay bottle he wanted."

"How could he know about Raven and me?"

"He might've been watching Athenopoulos' place of business. He probably figured that one of us had the object. Raven was the easiest target. Damn it, I should've had someone keeping an eye on you two."

O'Brien stroked his chin for a few moments. "I may know where Abdul might've taken Raven." *You*

*fool*, he told himself. *You're betting Raven's life on a hallucination.* Nonetheless, in his heart he felt that the phantom he had seen was an actual clairvoyant happening.

"You do? How?"

"Let's say I had a vision." He flushed in embarrassment after all his skepticism.

Kopinski raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. "Well, we have no other clue as to where he had taken her. According to your vision, where is she?"

O'Brien sheepishly handed him the sheet of paper with the address on it.

"Okay. Let's go. I'll call headquarters from my car and have them send someone over here to check Raven's apartment out."

\* \* \* \*

When Raven woke up from being chloroformed, her head ached. In addition, she felt nauseous. She was bound to a chair with duct tape in the same manner as Athenopoulos had been. Her arms and legs were cramped and all pins-and-needles. As the fuzz in her brain cleared, she realized that she had been kidnapped by Athenopoulos' killer. Her stomach turned over even more, and a chill of absolute terror went up her spine. Nonetheless, she tried to hold herself together.

She glanced around at her surroundings. She was in a warehouse, but from the looks of the place, it was abandoned, empty except for the chair she was in, a beat-up table, a sofa that looked as though it had been rescued from the dump, and various bits of trash scattered about. The table contained various items, including another scimitar.

Abdul-Azim Mujib was on the sofa. His head was down in sleep, prayer or meditation. He must have heard Raven's slight movements as she tested her bindings for he looked up. When his eyes met hers, she shuddered. His expression was one of pure menace. This was the type of man who would kill without hesitation and never have a qualm about it.

"Ah, you're awake. Good." He rose from his seat.

"If you intend on torturing me like you did Athenopoulos, I wouldn't bother."

He glared at her. "What do you mean?"

"You're too late, Abdul-Azim. The clay bottle you're looking for is on its way to the evidence room of the local FBI headquarters."

"You lie. I have a means of watching everything that went on in..." He paused. "How do you know my name?"

Raven decided that he was going to kill her. She just hoped she forestall any torture. The best way to do that would be to tell him the truth and talk as much as possible. "It's a long story. You see, I'm a Wiccan, and a psychic. The box that contained the clay bottle that you're after..."

"Ah ha, you know what I was assigned to obtain. You know where it is hidden. But what does the fact that you're a witch and working for the evil one have to do with you knowing my name?"

"I was getting to that. I sensed that something strange had been in that box recently. I used it to generate a vision of everything that went on the day of the murder. I saw Athenopoulos hide the clay bottle, and I saw you torture and murder him. By the way, how did you escape that room? Or enter my apartment?"

Mujib laughed. "I may as tell you since you will not be leaving this room alive." He puffed out his chest. "Like you, I have occult powers. Because I have only this mission to complete before I become an Adept, the Masters have granted them to me. I can teleport to anywhere I wish."

"By the Masters, you mean The Thirteen."

He cursed and clenched his fists. Raven feared that he was going to strike her and flinched. Instead he put his face close to hers. "What do you know of The Thirteen?"

"Only what the FBI agent I'm working for told me. And that wasn't much more than they exist and are involved with the paranormal somehow. He thinks that they have links to al-Qaeda."

He chuckled again. "You're right. He doesn't know very much. The Thirteen are not interested in the aims of fundamentalist Islam. We have much bigger fish to fry."

"So you're not all Muslims then?"

"Not at all. Our members are recruited from every religion and sect. There are even atheists among us. We are loyal to the masters before loyalty to organized religion. What is it that you Americans say? Ah yes. We are an equal opportunity employer." He laughed again in his evil way. "But what of the relic? In your vision, you said you saw where Athenopoulos hid it."

"Yes. There is a loose stone in the back wall. It was hidden behind that."

The color drained from Mujib's face. "The Evil One has cursed me. I was a fool not to check the walls. I need to kill you now. Then I will retrieve the relic. Pray to whatever god or goddesses you believe will save your soul." He reached for the scimitar.

"Wait!" Raven took a deep breath to keep her voice from cracking. "It's no longer there."

Mujib took the sword, but held it loosely in one hand. "How can it not be?"

"I told Agent Kopinski where it was hidden. As I said before, he's probably brought it back to FBI headquarters by now."

He went as white as new snow and looked as though he would be sick. He mumbled, "This is bad. I must have it to bring to Riverlook."

"Riverlook? Where's that?"

"In a place far from here. The Hudson Valley in New York."

Raven had an idea. "Look. If you let me live, I can help you."

"Help me? How?" Although he looked suspicious, he brightened a little.

"I can talk Kopinski into letting me examine it. I'll find a way to get it to you."

His eyes narrowed. "How could I trust you?"

"You needn't. How could I do you any harm? Except for the location of this place, which you'll soon abandon, what else could I tell the FBI about you that they don't already know? Since you can teleport, if I don't produce the bottle, you can kill me whenever you wish. How could I escape you?"

He stroked his beard. "I don't know. You could set a trap."

"Which you could evade if you're as smart as I think you are. You have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. I know the bottle is very important to you."

He stroked his beard for a while as he thought it over. Raven prayed to Hecate that he would accept her offer. Once she was away from him, she would find a way to foil his plan. The important thing now was to convince him that she would do what he wanted.

Finally, he grimaced and said, "No. There are too many ways you could fool me." He took the scimitar in both hands, touched it lightly to the side of her throat to adjust his aim and swung his arm back preparatory to lopping off her head.

Raven took one last look at the world. Her eyes filled with tears. *I'm too young to die*, she thought as she waited for the blow to fall.

## CHAPTER 8. THE ILLUSIONIST

A man's voice behind Raven shouted in a rough manner, "Drop that sword." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Abdul turn in surprise. "Drop it, I say." She recognized it as Kopinski's. *Thank the elder gods*, she thought. *Somehow Martin found me*. She hoped that he would shoot the son-of-a-bitching Abdul before he killed her.

Abdul raised the scimitar again, but did not swing toward her. Instead he disappeared from Raven's view. A shot rang out, and there was a thump. The next thing that happened was that O'Brien rushed to her and began to remove the duct tape that held her to the chair.

"Are you all right?"

"Since my head is still on my shoulders, I guess so. I couldn't see. Did Martin kill the bastard?"

"Yes. Abdul charged him with the sword. He had no choice."

As soon as Raven's bonds were loose, she rose and hugged O'Brien. She began to weep. "Oh John, I was damned scared. I thought for sure I was going to die."

He put his arms around her. "I'm so glad that you didn't."

She enjoyed the comfort of placing her head on his chest for a few moments. Then she regained her usual tough manner. She straightened and said, "Sorry about acting like a girl, but of all the awful things that ever happened to me, this was the worst."

He smiled at her. "I didn't mind at all. You can act like a girl with me any time you want."

She punched him lightly on the arm. "I'll bet you would." She looked around. Abdul was lying on the floor, his life blood leaking from under him. He still had the scimitar in his hand. Kopinski was on his cell phone, calling headquarters. She turned back to O'Brien. "How did you guys find me?"

He flushed. "I had a dream or hallucination or something. A woman appeared to me and told me where you are. I know what you're going to say. That proves that there's something to the paranormal business." He shrugged. "Maybe you're right. I don't see any other explanation."

"What did the woman look like?"

"She seemed to be about your age, had dark red hair and wore a robe with a pentagram on it."

"Did she tell you her name? Was it Morgaine?"

O'Brien's eyebrows went up. "How did you know that?"

Raven chuckled. "She's my guardian angel."

"You're kidding." He looked puzzled as though he was not sure whether she was putting him on or not.

She merely smiled and placed her hand on his cheek. "Don't worry about it. Stay skeptical."

Kopinski came over by them. "Well, I guess that's that. Case closed. I'm sorry you had to be put through all of this, Raven. With Mujib dead, I guess we'll never find out who he was working for or why they wanted that clay bottle."

"Not necessarily. He told me a couple of things while I was his prisoner. One was that the secret society he belonged to was definitely not associated with al-Qaeda. In fact he said that they had members from many different religions, although their first loyalty was to The Thirteen. Also, he told me where he was to bring the clay bottle."

"Really? Where?"

"Somewhere in the Hudson Valley in New York. He called it Riverlook."

O'Brien said, "I'm familiar with the Hudson Valley. I never heard of a village called Riverlook."

"Maybe it's unincorporated and so small that it's not on the usual maps."

Kopinski said, "Well, it makes no difference now. I know my bosses. With Mujib dead, they'll mark this case closed and reassign me."

"That doesn't mean that O'Brien and I can't continue the investigation. My curiosity is piqued. I'm wondering what was so important about that bottle."

O'Brien said, "Y'know, my next gig is in Albany. We could go there together."

That was just what Raven had in mind. "Great. I have another idea, too."

Kopinski said, "You won't get any more money from the FBI. I'll see that you get paid for the days you

worked on the case, but that's all."

"That's all right," O'Brien said. "I'll take care of our expenses in New York. What's your idea, Raven?"

"Well, I know you guys are going to laugh at this and probably don't want to do it, but my experience is that the auras of the recent dead, especially of those who die violently, stay near the place where they died. We should conduct a seance."

O'Brien made a face, but did not object openly. Kopinski said, "I'm not a believer in seances, but if you want to try, we can come back here later when the CSI boys are done."

As they left the building, Raven asked O'Brien, "Do you have your car here?"

"It's right over there." He pointed at a silver BMW.

"Wow. You like to travel in style."

He grinned. "An illusionist has to give the illusion that he can magically become wealthy. Besides, I don't have anything else to spend my money on."

She fluttered her eyelashes in a flirtatious manner. "What you need is a woman to help you spend it."

When they pulled up to her building, Raven said, "Please come up with me. I'm still pretty shaken up."

"Of course. That killer made quite a mess of your place. I'll help you clean up."

She took his hand. "Thanks, John. I appreciate everything you did to save my life too."

"You can thank Martin for that. All I did was tell him where to find you."

"That's what I mean. For an unbeliever like you to listen to what you thought was a hallucination was brave in my estimation. It must've gone against your every instinct."

"Well ... I almost did nothing, but I was so worried about you when you didn't answer the phone at two in the morning."

"That was sweet." She kissed him on the cheek.

\* \* \* \*

They spent a couple of hours straightening Raven's apartment. When they finished, Raven collapsed on the sofa. "I'm still shaky from the experience. Would you mind pouring me a half a glass of bourbon? The liquor cabinet's over there. Have something yourself."

He took a glass, filled it halfway with the whiskey and handed it to her.

"Aren't you having anything?"

"I've been up all night. If I drank anything now, I'd go right to sleep."

"Want coffee." She took a large swallow from the glass and started to rise.

He patted her on the shoulder. "Take it easy. I'm fine."

She gazed at him with pleading eyes. "You will stay a while and talk. As I said, I haven't quite got over what happened to me."

"Sure." He sat next to her on the sofa with one arm resting on its back. "So, you've got a guardian angel."

Raven took another sip of her bourbon and put her head back. The crown touched O'Brien's sleeve. "Yep. And not an ordinary one. She's really a demon."

He chuckled. "I would expect nothing less from a witch."

"Like most people, you've got the wrong idea about The Craft."

He shook his head. "I was kidding. I know several Wiccans and know that it's simply religious propaganda that you worship the devil. You're more into the occult and think of the ancient deities as either benevolent or evil spirits, sometimes both, like people. Right?"

"Yes. And as symbols. For example, Gaia is a symbol for the whole earth. Some of us can also do spells, but we must be careful not to do harm when performing a spell. That's what happened to Morgaine. She placed an evil spell on someone. It harmed her threefold, as we say. That's why she's a demon today."

"Sounds like quite a story."

She turned her head to look at him. "Maybe some day I'll tell it to you." She was surprised to see that he was staring at her with a loving look. "John, if you want to kiss me, I really wouldn't mind."

He did not hesitate. He put his arms around her and pressed his lips against hers. She put her own arms around his neck and parted her lips, allowing his tongue to enter her mouth. His manly chest was pressed against her. Her heart beat rapidly. His mouth was sweet. She felt aroused. They stayed that way for several minutes until both were out of breath.

"Come into the bedroom," she whispered.

"Are you sure? We've only known each other a couple of days."

"I knew I wanted you from the moment I saw you."

He chuckled. "You know, skeptic that I am, I never believed in love at first sight. But, with you, I felt something move within me. What is it that you New Age people call it? Karma. Perhaps we knew each other in a past life. Something like that."

She laughed. "Or that we're two horny, lonely people in our thirties."

"Now who's the skeptic?"

Laughing together, they staggered toward the bedroom still in each other's arms and stripped off their garments as they went. By the time they fell into Raven's bed, she was down to her thong and brassiere, and he had on boxers and socks.

He kissed her neck and moved down to her belly with his mouth. The wetness on her skin felt lovely.  
"Turn over," he said.

She turned over so that she was on her stomach. He undid her bra and pulled off her thong. He must have removed his shorts too, because she felt his organ between her buttocks. His hands grasped her breasts, his rough palms against her nipples. He kissed her neck and back. He turned her over and put his lips on her right nipple which he began to suck while he played with the left one. His mouth moved down. He licked her tummy again. His mouth went further down into the hair down below and lower still. When she felt his tongue in her, she thought she would burst.

"Oh Johnny," she cried. "Johnny, Johnny, Johnny."

He moved up again until his manhood was pressed against her vagina. She reached down and guided it into her. Her legs went around him and pulled his body against her. She felt as though they merging into one person. His pecks and chest were hard and muscular. He squeezed her breasts as he slowly and moved in and out, producing friction that felt as though heaven was opening up inside her. She dug her nails into his back and kissed and bit his neck. She groaned with the pleasure that increased with each passing moment. Finally, she climaxed in a tidal wave of ecstatic pleasure.

Afterwards, O'Brien held her in his arms and they snuggled and petted for a while. Finally Raven said,  
"That was awesome. I think I'm falling for you."

In a sleepy voice, he said, "I love you too." He closed his eyes then and fell asleep.

Raven gazed down at him. He was quite a handsome man and looked almost boyish in his sleep. *He may be the one*, she thought. *He really knows how to make love to a woman. The poor guy was up all last night worrying about me too. This is too good not to last.*

She reached over and took out a cigarette from the pack on the night stand. As she smoked, she fantasized again what it would like to be the wife of an illusionist.

## CHAPTER 9. NECROMANCY

A simultaneous crash of thunder and a flash of lightning woke Raven. She stretched out her hand and felt warm flesh that was not her own. She recalled what had taken place before she went to sleep and smiled. She looked over at O'Brien. He had thrown the sheet off and lay there in the nude. She noticed that his pale back was covered with freckles, especially around his broad shoulders. *What a gorgeous hunk he is*, she thought. There was another lightning strike somewhere, and raindrops beat against the window. She glanced at her alarm clock. It was quarter past six. She recalled that she was supposed to call Martin Kopinsky to see whether they could go back to warehouse where she had been a prisoner to hold a seance.

She padded to the bathroom in the nude and peed. She returned to the bed and lit a cigarette from the pack on the night stand. As she smoked, she sat up in bed with the pillow propped up against the headboard and watched the crackling lightning over the city's towers. The storm put on quite a show. When she finished her cigarette, she shook O'Brien awake. He yawned and turned toward her with a smile. "Hi Babe. Is it morning already?" He placed a hand on her bare thigh.

"Hardly. It's six in the evening. Remember, we made a date with Martin to go to the warehouse and

conduct a seance."

"Oh that."

"I know, you don't believe in seances. But I'd like you to cooperate. Do it for me."

He grinned at her. "So that's why you seduced me. To get me to go along with that nonsense."

"Seduced you? Crap. You got me drunk on my own bourbon. As far as a seance being nonsense, having one will prove to you that people can talk to the dead."

"C'mon. When someone is dead, that's it. I don't believe in souls, spirits or auras."

"So what's that thing that you call your inner being or id? The thing that told me he loved me last night?"

"Simply a lot of electrons firing inside my brain like a computer program running in a desktop."

"Okay, Johnny Robot. Nonetheless, you're going to get out this bed and get dressed. We're going to the warehouse to conduct a seance, whether you approve or not."

He gave her mock salute. "Aye, aye, Captain." He slid the hand that had been on her thigh around to the inner side and higher up.

She slapped it away. "Not now. When we come back. Do you need to use the toilet? I'm going to take a shower and get dressed."

"I can wait."

She hopped out of bed and went into the shower. As she lathered up, the shower curtain opened, and a grinning O'Brien got in behind her. "No sense in wasting a lot of water," he said.

"Humph." She handed him the soap. "Since you're in here. You can do my back."

"Happy to milady." He soaped up her back including her buttocks. His hand on a bare bottom felt so fine that she decided that there was no sense fighting the inevitable. She faced him.

"Now do the front."

He soaped up her breasts, under her arms, her stomach and lower region, lingering on each part. She closed her eyes and sighed with pleasure as the soap and his fingers slid over her body. When he was done, she said, "Now it's my turn."

She took the soap from him and lathered up his body as he had done to her, ending up with his tool, which had become engorged in her hand. She dropped the soap, put her arms around his neck and rubbed her slippery body against him. He maneuvered her against the wall and lifted up her leg by her thigh. His organ slid into her easily. Slippery as eels, they made love with her pressed up against the bathroom wall, one leg curled around his thighs.

*Oh my, this man presses all my button just right,* she thought as wave after wave of ecstasy throbbed through her.

Afterwards they rinsed off and dried each other. Raven had him help with her bra and slipped on a pair of lace high-cut panties. She combed her hair, applied makeup and donned her Wiccan robe.

O'Brien looked at her and said, "That's what you're wearing? I see we're in for real spell casting tonight."

"We sure are. And you'd better get used to seeing me like this. I always wear my craft robe when I'm working with the occult or go to a meeting of my coven."

"Oh, you belong to a coven too. Well, well. Actually I kind of like the outfit. Black suits you."

"Thanks." She kissed him on the cheek. "Well, I'd better call Martin." Before she reached the phone, it rang. "Raven Lenore."

"Hi. It's me, Martin. The coroner finally took the body away. Did you still want to have that seance?"

"Yes. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"We? Is John there with you?"

"Uh ... yeah. I was nervous after what happened and asked him to keep me company."

"I see." There was a note of disappointment in Kopinski's voice. Raven wondered whether he'd had a thing for her but had been too shy to ask her out. "Bring an umbrella. It's raining cats and dogs."

"I know. See you in a bit, Martin."

\* \* \* \*

When they arrived, Kopinski was alone in the warehouse. Since it was old, the walls were cracked and seamed, the ceiling stained and worn. The roof leaked and water dripped in several spots. Outdoors, dark clouds boiled and flashed with occasional lightning while wind-driven rain hammered on the flat metal roof like a machine gun. Otherwise, except for a dark spot on the floor where Mujib's body had been, the room looked the same as it had when Raven had been held prisoner. She carefully avoided stepping anywhere near that area. The thunder outside echoed loudly in the empty cavernous building. Intermittent flashes of lightning came through the high narrow windows.

"No uniformed guard, no crime scene tape?" Raven said.

"Nope. As far as the FBI and the Chicago Police are concerned, the murder case is solved. A dangerous murderer was shot while attacking the arresting agent." Kopinski made brushing motions with his hands. "That's that. Nobody ever found evidence of any connection between Mujib and any terrorist group. The assumption is that the motive was robbery and that Mujib was schitzo."

"What about The Thirteen?"

Kopinski shrugged. "My boss and the other agents won't admit they exist. They implied that the secret society was one of Mujib's delusions. They're putting the case on a back burner."

O'Brien said, "Perhaps they're right. How do you know that The Thirteen wasn't a delusion or a hoax?"

"I don't really, except for what Mujib told Raven. Nevertheless, my boss's change of mind was sort of sudden. You'd think we would be looking a little further into the possibility of its existence. Of course,

with Mujib dead, there's not much to go on."

Raven said, "That's why we're here tonight. The dead don't lie nor have delusions. If we can contact Mujib, you can believe whatever he says."

"Okay. What do we do?" asked Kopinski.

Raven took a black candle and a candleholder out of her bag of magical tools, set it on the table and lit it. "Since there aren't enough chairs, we'll have to do this standing up. John, please turn off the overhead lights."

With the fluorescent lights off, darkness enfolded them. Except for the occasional bright flash of lightning, only the small circle of flickering candlelight on the table broke the gloom.

"Now each of you take one of my hands, and hold each other's hand to form a circle around the table." When the men had joined hands with her and themselves, Raven said, "Please concentrate as hard as you can on contacting the dimension beyond the grave." She paused and turned her eyes upward. "Oh spirit of Abdul-Ahim Mujib, who has crossed over into the great unknown, please hear us now and answer our questions." She repeated the call to the spirit several times in a chanting voice as though praying. Meanwhile the thunder faded to low rumbles, the wind died, and the rain changed to a steady downpour. The flickering candle flame threw up looming moving shadows. Inexplicably, the room grew darker.

After a few moments O'Brien groaned. Raven glanced over at him. His eyes had rolled up. She whispered to Kopinski. "Johnny's in a trance. Mujib's spirit must be going to speak through him."

O'Brien spoke, but the voice was Mujib's. "Why have you brought me back from the land of the dead?"

"We need to know where you were going to take relic."

"I told you. To Riverlook."

"But where is Riverlook, exactly?"

"Near the village known as Rhinecliff, on River Road. I am glad you are going to complete my mission. Perhaps, if you bring the relic to the master, I will attain Paradise instead of this cold dead place."

"Who is your master?"

"The man in the painting. But there is deadly danger."

"What danger? From your master?"

"From the relic."

"Tell me about the painting of your master."

"I cannot. I must return." O'Brien groaned and opened his eyes. "Holy crap. I really need to catch up on my sleep. I must've dozed off."

Raven said, "Mujib is gone." She dropped the men's hands.

O'Brien said, "What's going on? I thought we were going to hold a seance."

Raven and Kopinski laughed. "It's over. You missed the whole thing."

"Did you really contact the ghost of Mujib?"

"Yep. He told us exactly where he was going to take the clay bottle."

Kopinski said, "One thing I don't understand. What was that business about the bottle posing some kind of deadly danger?"

"I don't know. I'd have to examine the thing. I suppose you've already turned it over to Evidence."

"Actually no. It's still in the trunk of my car. I'll tell you what; I'll bring it by your place tomorrow. You can take a look at it before I turn it in."

"Sure."

At that moment, Raven had a feeling that something terrible was going to happen. Since she did not know what it could be, she did not mention her premonition.

When Raven and O'Brien were ready to leave the warehouse, Kopinski said, "I'm going to look around a bit. Maybe, Mujib left something we missed before. Goodnight."

When the couple returned to her apartment, they made love that was hot but over quickly. Immediately afterwards, O'Brien fell asleep. Raven, however, tossed and turned for a long time. She could not shake the feeling that some terrible event was about to occur.

\* \* \* \*

The next day Raven and O'Brien slept until almost noon. Around three P.M., Jacobs, another FBI agent and a close friend of Kopinski, called.

"I've got terrible news, Ms. Lenore. I know you've been working on a case with him, so I thought you should know. Martin is dead."

"Oh my goddess. We were with him last night until ten. What happened?"

"A car accident. Must've happened right after he left you. It was awful. He was on the way home, and I don't know..." Jacobs voice cracked with emotion. "Either his brakes failed, or his tires slid in a deep puddle. He ran into the back of a semi. His ... head was ripped from his body."

Raven could not speak for several moments. "That's awful. Is there anything we can do?"

"I don't think so. He had no family to speak of. One thing though. He must've had a premonition that something was going to happen. He called me from the warehouse where he shot that murderer. He told me that if anything happened to him, I was to give you that clay bottle in the trunk of his car. He said that you'd know what to do with it."

"Okay. Thanks for the information. You can drop it off anytime."

She hung up the phone with tears in her eyes. From the other room, O'Brien asked, "Who was that?"

"Jacobs, another FBI agent. Martin's dead. Killed in a traffic accident." She began to sob.

O'Brien rushed in and took her into his arms. "That's awful. He seemed like such a nice guy. And only in his forties."

## CHAPTER 10. THE INSCRIPTION

Actually, Jacobs did not bring the clay bottle to Raven's apartment. He was shot during an arrest of a dope dealer and was sent to the hospital in critical condition. His wife had the relic delivered to Raven by way of Federal Express. The building super told Raven that the driver had complained of chest pains and had him call an ambulance.

Jacobs' wife included a note with the package:

*Ms. Lenore, I'm not usually superstitious, but I believe that bad luck is associated with this thing, whatever it is. If I were you, I throw it in the nearest dumpster. Babs Jacobs*

Raven handed the note to O'Brien. "I think she may have a point considering what has happened to the last four people who had their hands on it."

"Oh c'mon. Merely a series of coincidences. There's a theory about that. If you flip a coin enough times, it will eventually come up heads fifty percent of the time and tails fifty percent of the time. Agreed? Nonetheless, there may be long strings of tosses where the coin will come up heads every time. Can you guess what are the odds of the coin coming up tails after a string of say twenty heads?"

"Sure. Fifty-fifty. In a pure chance situation, statistically what happened in the past has no bearing on the future. I was a wiz at math in high school."

"Exactly. The same hold true for this bottle. Just because the last four people had bad things happen to them, doesn't mean the string of bad luck will or will not continue."

"Not the same thing. I believe there's something evil about that bottle. I felt it with my sixth sense. I feel it now."

O'Brien shrugged. "There's no arguing with your psychic vibes. So. Are you going to take Mrs. Jacobs' advice and toss the thing?"

Raven grinned at him. "That's one thing you got to learn about me. I've got the curiosity of a cat and laugh in the face of danger. No. I'm going to find out what makes it tick."

He shook his head. "You're even nuttier than I thought you were. You don't even follow your own perverted logic. Y'know, I've been thinking about that seance. Speaking of coincidences, it seems to me that it was a strange coincidence that I fell asleep while you and Martin spoke to the ghost. I bet you hypnotized me."

"Heaven forbid. I wouldn't even know how to hypnotize someone. But, as you surmised, there are no coincidences. You probably won't believe this, but you were possessed by the spirit of Mujib. We talked to him through you."

He laughed. "I'm supposed to buy that? That you channeled the dead man through me?"

She raised her hands palm up. "I don't care whether you believe it or not. It's the truth."

"Okay babe, you win. No sense arguing what can't be proved."

"Now you're catching on how to please me. Just agree with whatever I say."

"Like most women," he muttered.

Raven ignored that last statement and tore open the package that contained the bottle. She removed it from the foam popcorn and held it up to the light. There were hieroglyphics in some ancient language hidden among the designs. As Raven held the object, she shivered because of the aura of evil that emanated from it.

O'Brien said, "Shall we uncork it to see what's inside?"

She stared at him. "I don't think you'd like what came out. Before I do anything like that, I want to know what the warning label says." She pointed to the ancient writing.

"How are you going to do that?"

"I know a professor of ancient languages at Northwestern. I'm going to take it to him and see whether he can decipher it."

She went to the phone and called Saul Fleischman. "Hi Doctor Fleischman, my name is Raven Lenore. My friend, Michael Ellul, introduced us at cocktail party at the university a few months ago."

"Vaguely. I meet so many people at those affairs. I know Michael very well though. He's a bit of an expert in certain Medieval languages himself. How may I help you?"

"An ancient relic has come into my possession. It has some sort of writing on it. I was wondering whether I could prevail upon you to decipher it."

"Oh yes, I remember you now. You're quite an attractive woman as I recall."

"Thank you, Doctor. I'm quite flattered. What about the relic?"

"Bring it to me by all means. I'll try my best to interpret it if I can."

"Thank you. When can we meet?"

"I'm free this afternoon, young lady. Come to my office. It's in the Oriental Institute. Do you know where that's at?"

"Not exactly. On the University of Chicago campus I assume."

"That's correct. On the corner of University Avenue and Fifty-eighth Street. The entrance is on Fifty-eighth Street. There's a parking lot for visitors on the side of the building."

"Thank you very much. Depending on traffic, I should be there inside of an hour."

"See you then. Au revoir."

"Au revoir, Doctor." She chuckled as she hung up the phone.

O'Brien asked, "What's so funny?"

"I'm glad you're coming along to chaperone. The professor agreed to a meeting only after he remembered what I looked like."

She placed the relic back in the box and slipped on her leather jacket. "Let's go."

She took the Kennedy and Dan Ryan expressways to the south side. Everybody seemed to be driving completely crazy that day. It was only Raven's skilled driving that saved them from having several disastrous accidents. As they pulled into the parking lot at Oriental Institute, O'Brien wiped imaginary sweat from his brow.

"I'm beginning to believe there really is a curse on that bottle. Every driver in the expressway aimed for your car as soon as they spotted it."

"What can I tell you."

Raven carried the box with the relic into the building and asked the middle-aged receptionist where to find Doctor Fleischman's office.

"Is he expecting you?" With a snobbish expression on her face, she gave Raven the once over.

"Yes. My name is Raven Lenore."

"I'll tell him you're here." She picked up the phone and dialed. "A Raven Lenore to see you, Doctor Fleischman. I see." She hung up and said, "His office is off the corridor on my right. Five doors down."

Fleischman's office was like a museum. It had shelves filled with ancient bric-a-brac. Other shelves held several notebooks and tattered old books with titles in foreign languages. Fleischman looked to be in his sixties, balding and bearded. Nonetheless, his suit was expensive, and except for small paunch, he was athletic with a glowing tan. As Raven entered, he stood and smiled broadly. His grin faded when he saw that she was not alone.

He put out his hand. "Raven Lenore, I believe."

Raven shook his hand. He held it a while before releasing it. "That's right. This is my friend, John O'Brien. You may have heard of him by his stage name, The Great Mephisto."

Fleischman finally let go of Raven to take O'Brien's extended hand. "Yes. I've seen your act. You're quite an accomplished illusionist."

"Thank you."

Fleischman returned his attention to Raven. "Over the phone, you said you had a relic with some ancient script on it."

Raven laid the box on his desk and carefully removed the bottle so as not to get popcorn on the professor's desk. "This is it."

He picked up the object. "Please be seated while I look at this." He took out a large magnifying glass and closely examined the clay bottle. "I've seen things like this before. In Israel. This could be of ancient Caanite origin. May I ask where it came from?"

"Perhaps you've read about the antiquities dealer that was murdered. He had it in his possession before he died."

"Ah yes, Mister Athenopoulos. A tragedy. I met him once, but I'm afraid that he was considered to be on the shady side—if you know what I mean. Not all of his so-called antiquities were genuine, and those that were he had obtained by nefarious means. This relic, however, seems genuine enough. I assume that you do not know its source."

Raven shook her head. "We would like to know that ourselves."

Fleischman took out a notebook and copied the hieroglyphs. He looked at what he had written and said, "Yes. This is definitely in the Caanite language. I need to consult my notes." He rose and searched through his notebooks until he found the one he wanted. He returned to the desk and wrote a translation beneath the glyphs he had copied, consulting the notebook often. Finally he wrote another version of the translation beneath the first.

"Okay. Roughly, it claims that a djinn is imprisoned inside the bottle."

O'Brien said, "You mean a genie, like the old TV show 'I Dream of Genie.'" He turned to Raven. "We're in luck. Maybe it'll grant us three wishes."

Fleischman said, "I believe the modern conception of the djinn or genie as you call them is quite off the mark. According Persian mythology, djinn are evil creatures similar to demons. And although they have magical powers, they were not about to grant any wishes. They were more likely to kill any human they encountered."

"Too bad. I was going to wish for tickets to the World Series."

Raven said, "Ignore him, Doctor. What does the rest of the inscription say?"

"It goes on to warn anyone that possesses the bottle that they are in deadly danger unless they return it to ... and I cannot translate the next word."

"So, the relic has a curse connected with it."

"You might say that. It goes on to say that the bottle has been sealed with a magical spell so that it may only be opened by ... and here is that same word again."

"What if the bottle is broken, either accidentally or deliberately?"

"It doesn't say." Fleischman chuckled. "If you believe what the curse says, you would be advised to either deliver it to whatever or whoever that word I could not translate meant or get rid of it."

"Thank you very much, Doctor Fleischman. We've taken up too much of your time, so we'll be leaving now." Raven rose from her seat.

Fleischman glanced at his watch. "It's nearing five, the cocktail hour. Would you like to join me at a nice intimate bar and grill I know of for drinks and dinner? It's within walking distance."

Raven said, "We'd love to, but we've got another engagement. Maybe another time."

"Certainly." He handed her a business card. "Call me anytime, or E-mail me." He shook their hands again. As he walked them to the office door, he put his hand on Raven's shoulder. "You're a very lovely girl," he said.

"Thank you. Au revoir, Doctor."

"Au revoir, Raven. And you may call me Saul."

"Okay. See you soon, Saul."

His eyes lit up. "Yes. Soon."

As they entered Raven's car, O'Brien said, "You naughty girl. Why were you flirting with the old pervert?"

"You never know. We may need him again."

"So, what are you going to do with the bottle now?"

"Bring it to The Master."

"And where's this master?"

"Ah yes. You weren't awake during the seance. To Riverlook in Rhinecliff, New York."

"Well that fits in with my plans as well. Next week I've got a gig in Albany."

## CHAPTER 11. MIRROR IMAGE

When Raven and O'Brien returned to Raven's apartment, she stored the package that contained the relic in her closet. After placing it on a shelf, she used the mirror on the inside of the closet door to repair her lipstick. As she looked at herself, she had the feeling that whatever was in the bottle was trying to escape by sending out telepathic signals. They were giving her a headache. She glared at the box.

O'Brien came up behind her and put his hands around her waist. "What's up, Hon? You were staring daggers at that package."

"The djinn in the bottle is giving me bad vibes."

"You really believe that nonsense, don't you?" He put his arms around her waist and kissed her on the nape of her neck. She leaned against his broad chest and did not protest as his hands moved up to her breasts. "Forget the djinn," he whispered in her ear, as he nibbled the lobe. "Let's make love."

Raven allowed herself to relax and enjoy his petting. As she kicked the closet door closed, however, she had the strange idea that the mirror was not simply showing her image but that the reflection had a life of its own. Nonetheless, she soon became lost in O'Brien's love making and dismissed the idea as a delusion brought on by her worry about the thing in the bottle.

Later that night she was awakened by a sound. It seemed to her that she had heard soft footsteps. She listened carefully, but did not hear anything except the patter of raindrops. *The rain must've wakened me*, she thought. She slipped out from under the sheet and went to the bathroom. When she returned, she snuggled against O'Brien's warm body and fell asleep again.

\* \* \* \*

A week later, she had everything packed for their trip to Albany, when the phone rang. A woman's voice replied to her hello with, "Raven Lenore?"

The voice was familiar, but Raven could not quite place it. "Speaking. May I help you?" She wondered whether it was a telemarketer.

"You're a private investigator. I need help." The woman sounded as though she was on the verge of tears. Raven thought, *Oh, oh. Probably a straying husband case*.

"Gee. I'd like to take you on, but I'm going to be out of town for a while."

"For how long?"

"I'm not sure. It may be quite a while."

"Are you going to Rhinecliff, New York, by any chance?"

This puzzled Raven. Why would this person bring up that place? Coincidence, or something more sinister? Did this have something to do with The Thirteen? She decided to play along and see whether she could find out what this person was up to.

"Are you from that town?"

"Never been there, but I have every intention of going. Maybe we can meet somewhere."

"Actually I'm going to Albany, New York which is not that far from Rhinecliff. I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't give it to you. You may call me ... uh, Susan."

*Not giving me a last name, if even Susan is her real name*, Raven thought, but this was not the first time that she had a client who acted in a mysterious manner. Some people seemed to feel as though hiring a private investigator was the next thing to committing a crime.

"What is it that you want to hire me to do?"

"I don't wish to discuss it on the phone. I'll tell you when we meet."

"Wait a minute. I haven't agreed to a meeting yet."

"Nonetheless, we will meet." The woman's tone of voice became ominous. Raven wondered whether the statement was meant as a threat.

"Before I agree to..." There was a click, and the dial tone started. The woman had hung up.

"That was strange," Raven muttered.

O'Brien came into the room. "Who was that?"

"I'm not sure. Someone named Susan. She didn't give a last name. At first I thought she was a prospective client, but she knew about Rhinecliff. I think she might have something to do with whoever was supposed to receive the bottle."

O'Brien's forehead wrinkled with concern. "Should we notify someone?"

"Who, now that Martin's gone? Those other FBI guys would be wondering why I'd be calling them about something like strange phone call. This Susan didn't make any overt threats or anything. We'll have to play it by ear."

"You didn't tell her where we were staying in Albany, did you?"

"No. Besides, I can take care of myself." She opened the suitcase that would be checked at the airport and pointed to her holstered automatic.

"I see. I keep forgetting that you're a tough PI. Are you ready to leave?" He kissed her lightly.

They went to the airport by taxi. O'Brien's stage equipment was being shipped by private carrier directly to the Pepsi Arena, where he was appearing. Raven had the package with the relic shipped by Federal Express to their hotel. She did not want to take the cursed thing on the jet with her. For all she knew, it would make the plane crash. O'Brien's gig was for the weekend. Monday they would drive down to Rhinecliff.

\* \* \* \*

During their first night in Albany, Raven had a strange dream. She was back in her Chicago apartment brushing her hair in front of the mirror on her closet door. As she brushed, she noticed that her image had stopped and was smiling at her. It winked at her and said, "Why don't you step through the mirror and join me?"

Raven laughed. "Are you kidding? I'd break the glass."

"Try it."

She put her hand out, and it went through the glass as though it did not exist. This surprised her, but she was not overly amazed. "Is this one of O'Brien's illusions?" she asked.

Her image said, "Maybe. Come on. Come over to my side."

Raven stepped through the mirror. "Okay. Now where am I? In Wonderland?"

"Paradise. Where all your fantasies come true." Her duplicate slid Raven's nightgown straps down her

arms so that most of her breasts were bare.

Raven pulled the straps back up. "What're you doing? I don't swing that way. I'm strictly hetro."

"Oh c'mon, Raven. I'm you. I know that you've often had fantasies about doing it with women. What about that girl friend of yours in college, Morgaine?"

"That was the only time, and it was part of magical ritual we were performing."

The second Raven put her hand on Raven's breast. "I know I enjoyed it though."

Raven recalled the incident and had to admit that the experience was not unpleasant. When she and Morgaine were in college, she did have a kind of crush on her friend. Her duplicate's hand rubbing her nipple brought back all the loving, lustful emotions that she had at the time. She allowed the nightgown to fall to the floor. Her double kissed her full on the mouth and crushed her forward so that their breasts were squeezed against each other.

*Oh my, Raven thought. I'm enjoying this. Why not? This is me. It's no worse than masturbating.*

Moments later she was on the bed with her duplicate. She felt the mirror image's probing fingers enter her. Raven kissed her duplicate's breast, holding the nipple in her mouth and sucking hard on it. She moved around the bed so that her head was between the other's legs. She felt the second Raven's tongue touch her secret pleasure spot and groaned with ecstasy.

Suddenly there was an earthquake. No. Someone was shaking her. The other Raven was gone, and she was in a hotel room bed. O'Brien's face was looking down at her full of concern.

"Raven, are you all right? You were groaning in your sleep. Were you having a nightmare?"

She grinned at him. "Not a nightmare." She drew him close, and they made hot passionate love. As she smoked a cigarette after the loving, she thought about her dream. Although she never admitted it to herself, she had gotten pleasure from that one encounter with Morgaine. Despite all the terrible things that Morgaine had done since, she still had a certain fondness for her. *Maybe that's why she's my guardian angel*, she thought. *I guess I could swing the other way, depending upon the woman. What the hell, I know several Wiccan women who are Lesbians. As far as I'm concerned, it's no sin in my religion.*

To the accompaniment of O'Brien's quiet snoring, she thought more about her wet dream. There seemed to be a darker side to it than any repressed lesbian impulses. There was the fact that the woman in the dream was herself and that she had to walk into a mirror to enter her double's world. It reminded her of something that had happened the previous week. She recalled standing by her closet after she put the package there and feeling that whatever was in the bottle had sent a blast of psychic energy toward her. Something else happened. It had to do with the mirror. Because of O'Brien's caresses, she had ignored it and forgotten what she had seen out of the corner of her eye. Was it an illusion? A false memory? Or was there powerful magic involved? But, thinking back, she was sure that her image was still in the mirror after she moved away from it.

In addition, she wondered why she had the powerful impulse to bring the bottle to Rhinecliff. It was as though a psychic force was drawing her there. She was sure that something evil and powerful was in that bottle. She should get rid of it as Babs Jacobs had suggested. But, she knew she could not. It had some kind of terrible hold on her and was probably responsible for her dream.

\* \* \* \*

Saturday evening, Raven decided to take a walk instead of watching O'Brien's act. When she told him, he said, "I understand perfectly. I often get bored myself doing the same illusions over and over. That's why periodically, I think up new ones or different ways to present the old ones." He kissed her lightly.

"I'll see you back here after the show."

After he left, she took a cab to Lark Street, often referred to as the "Greenwich Village" of Albany. She strolled past the nineteenth century brownstones that lined the streets and cobblestone intersection contained cafes, bars, boutiques and other types of stores, many of whom were at basement level. She window shopped in art galleries, antique shops, jewelry stores, boutiques that sold vintage clothing and gazed at the window displays of flower shops, used bookstores, wine sellers and tattoo parlors. About nine, when the stores began to close and the bars and clubs began to fill, she stopped at a small outdoor cafe for a cappuccino before returning to the hotel.

As she sat there sipping her drink, she noticed a woman standing across the street. Although the woman had her head turned—she was staring at a window display—Raven thought that she had a remarkable resemblance to herself. She even wore black jeans and a leather jacket. Her lesbian dream came back to her. *Nonsense*, she told herself. Nonetheless, her curiosity made her get up, leave ten bucks on the table for the waiter and quickly jaywalked across the heavily trafficked boulevard. She kept losing sight of the woman as she wove between cars whose drivers cursed her as they applied their brakes. When she finally got to the opposite sidewalk, the woman was gone. Raven peered up and down the street. She walked to the corner and looked down the cross street. The woman was not there. She strolled back the way she had come and peeked in a tavern. Not there either. The shops were closed, so the woman could not have gone in any of them. At the other corner Raven again peered down the street. No one resembling the person she had seen was on that street either.

"I'll be damned," she muttered. "Am I going crazy or what? Where could the woman have gone. Either I was seeing things, or she vanished into thin air."

She hailed a cab and returned to their hotel suite. To her surprise, she heard sounds from the bedroom. She glanced at her watch. O'Brien's show had been over for some time. She wondered why he had not come out to greet her. She heard a woman's voice. She opened the bedroom door and looked in to see what O'Brien was doing. To her utter dismay, he was going at it with a naked woman. He was flat on his back, and the woman had her back to the door. They were crotch to crotch, and she was pumping up and down.

Raven became so furious she could not speak. Finally she cried, "Who the hell is this bitch you're fucking, you bastard?" She ran up to the couple, grabbed the woman's long dark hair and yanked her head back. She let go as soon as she saw the woman's face. The face was her own. "What the hell?" she cried.

Her double laughed. "Hi Raven."

O'Brien cried, "Holy Christ. I thought she was you. You never told me that you had a twin."

"I don't," Raven said. "This is some kind of doppelganger. It's not a person at all."

## CHAPTER 12. RHINECLIFF

O'Brien gaped from one woman to the other. "I thought she was you, Raven. I truly did."

The doppelganger said, "I am Raven. This woman is an impostor."

Raven still had her duplicate by the shoulders. As she eyed her nude body, she recalled the dream she had and wondered what it would be like to have a *menage a trois* with her and O'Brien. Then she thought, *For Hecate's sake, Raven, she's not even human, but some kind of phantom or demon.*

She said, "I thought you might claim that. Why don't you get dressed, and we can talk it over."

The doppelganger smiled at her and winked. "Why should I get dressed? Why don't you get undressed?  
It's what you want, isn't it?"

*Damn it, this thing can read my mind,* Raven thought.

O'Brien said, "This is insane. I must be dreaming, or you two are twins and playing a crazy joke on me."

The doppelganger got out of the bed and put on her clothes, which were identical to the one's Raven had on.

"Okay. Tell me the truth. Which one of you is the real Raven Lenore," asked O'Brien.

"I am," said the doppelganger and Raven together.

Raven took her double by the arm and started to pull her out of the bedroom. She said to O'Brien, "John, just stay here. I need to speak to this person alone."

"You're not going to hurt her?"

"No. But since you don't believe in magical things, it would be better if this creature and I discuss her status outside your hearing. Go to sleep."

"Okay. But if I hear anything that sounds like violence, I'm coming out there."

Raven dragged the doppelganger into the living room and closed the bedroom door. She said, "Okay. Who or what are you?"

"I'm you. Can't you see?"

"Yeah. So you seem. But I'm a unique individual. There can't be another me in this world. Where did you come from?"

"The mirror. We look at each other almost every day."

"I see. And how did you get out of the mirror?"

"The spirit in the bottle used your image to create me."

Raven rubbed her chin in thought. "Why?"

"It wants you to take it to Riverlook. Once you are there, you will know what to do."

"I understand. If I promise to bring it to Riverlook, will you go back to wherever you came from?"

The doppelganger pursed her lips into a pout. "I don't want to go back there. It's dark, and it's cold. I want to stay here and be you."

Raven rolled her eyes and thought, *What can I do to get rid of this creature?*

"I wish you would quit referring to me as a 'creature,' like I was an animal or a monster."

"Shit. I keep forgetting you can read my mind. Well, Susie Doppelganger, as I said, there can't be two of us in this world." She removed the bottle from the package in her suitcase, set it on the floor and curled up into the lotus position in front of it.

"What are you doing?" cried the doppelganger.

"I'm going to speak to your creator. Hush now." Raven closed her eyes. Ignoring the sounds made by her double, she went into her relaxation routine. Once she felt calm and quiet in her mind and body, she concentrated on the relic until she was in a light trance. She said, "I wish to contact the spirit imprisoned within this object. Spirit appear to me in whatever form pleases you. Spirit, please speak to me."

A thin vapor rose from the bottle. When it was the height of a person, it took the form of an extremely handsome and muscular bearded man, although slightly translucent and shifting, like a person made of smoke. *Oh my, you're a hotty*, she thought.

"'Tis similar to my true shape," the vapor said in a weird hollow voice.

"I wish to bargain with you."

"I know what you want. You want the unreal phantom that resembles you to return to its own place. And for this you will swear, on pain of death, to deliver me to Riverlook?"

"If at all possible. What will I find at this place called Riverlook?"

"You will know when you get there. You must enter the door."

Raven frowned in puzzlement. "What door? The entrance to Riverlook?"

"No. One that can be gone through easily.

"Can you tell me more?"

"Someone will guide you. Is the bargain sealed? Return me to Riverlook. Otherwise, the doppelganger will continue to exist and cause you much trouble." The smoke cloud became thinner, the voice weaker. "I cannot maintain this form any longer. I will speak through your alter ego. "The vaporous man vanished.

Raven rose. The doppelganger stared at her. "Why are you still here?" Raven asked.

"The spirit in the bottle wants me to tell you to beware Cassandra. Also, that the door comes and goes. Will you do as the spirit asks?"

"I agree to the terms it set."

Her double opened her mouth wide as though to scream. Flames appeared around her, and she vanished.

Raven shook her head. "Well, that takes care of her. I wonder who Cassandra is, and what all that business about the door means. I hope I find the right one. I'd better. I don't want that doppelganger to come back to cause me trouble."

She returned to the bedroom. O'Brien was in his boxers gazing out the window. He turned to her with questioning gaze.

"She's gone," Raven said.

"Who was she?"

Raven shook her head. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You know Raven, I don't know whether I can take much more of this mystery stuff. I'm pretty much of a straightforward guy. I believe in science, what can be proven. I don't know how far I can go along with you on all this strange paranormal stuff. I need to know how these tricks or illusions are done."

Raven shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sorry, but I don't know how the things you witnessed are done. I could say magick, but that does not explain anything, and I know that you people of a scientific bent like explanations. Or at least causes. But the truth is I have psychic abilities as part of my genetic makeup, not necessarily by choice. As someone once said, some people seek the paranormal, but others have the paranormal thrust upon them. I'm afraid I'm one of the second type."

O'Brien chuckled. "You just made that up didn't you?"

"Yes."

He took her in his arms. "What am I going to do about you?"

"What are you going to do about *me* ?! I'm the one who found you going at it two-forty with another woman."

"I swear I was sure it was you. In fact, you could be your double now for all I know. Where did the other Raven go?"

"To a place where she will never return from—I hope."

"You didn't kill her, did you?"

"Not exactly. She was never really alive. She was like one of your illusions, all smoke and mirrors. Forget her. You'll never see her again. Let's finish what you started with her."

"I'm for that."

He slowly undressed Raven, which made her happy..

\* \* \* \*

Monday they left for Rhinecliff in a rented car. They were given directions by the desk clerk at the hotel.  
"Not much of a place," he said. "Hardly a wide spot in the road."

It was a pleasant drive. The oppressive heat and humidity were gone. The temperature was in the low eighties, and there was a slight breeze. After crossing the Kingston-Rhinecliff bridge, they turned down River Road, which ran past an area of woods and small farms. In some sections the Hudson River was visible; in others, there were views of the Catskills across it. The clerk had been right. Rhinecliff seemed to consist of a railroad station and a couple of old houses. Raven turned into the parking lot of the railroad station. "I'll ask the stationmaster where we can find Riverlook."

To reach the railroad station from the parking lot meant climbing a steep set of iron stairs. The station itself was ancient. Raven wondered whether it was built when the railroad first came through the area. She approached the clerk's window. "Excuse me. We're unfamiliar with the area. Is there someplace around here called Riverlook?"

"Never heard of it. Sounds like some rich bastard's mansion."

"You're probably right. Is there anyone around here who might know?"

"Can't think of anybody. Unless ... You might try Sam Ryan. He's a real estate agent in Rhinebeck. He knows about all the big houses around here, y'know, in case one of those plutocrats wants to sell one."

"Rhinebeck?"

"Yeah. It's just to the east a couple of miles. Go back north on River Road toward the bridge and take the fork to the right. You'll see the sign. Sam's office is on Main Street past the traffic light. You can't miss it. He's got his name plastered all over the window."

"Okay. Thanks for the help."

The clerk went back to his comic book.

Raven drove into Rhinebeck, which was larger than Rhinecliff, but still only a small village. It had one traffic light. Sam Ryan's office was in a mini mall.

Ryan was a portly little man with a comb-over to hide his bald spot and a fake grin. As soon as Raven and O'Brien walked in, he popped out his desk and rushed to greet them. "Howdy folks, looking for a nice two bedroom to start your marriage off right? Something reasonable but cozy."

Raven said, "I'm sorry, but we're not in the market for a house at the moment. We're looking for a place, probably a mansion, that we were told about. The clerk at the railroad station told us you might be able to help us find it."

Although Ryan's smile faded, he said, "I might. I know most of the big places in the area. Do you know the owner's name?"

"No. But the mansion is called Riverlook."

"Riverlook? Off of River Road?"

"Probably. We were told that it's in Rhinecliff."

Ryan's mood became more cheerful again. "That's one of my listings. Are you people representing someone who might be interested in purchasing it?"

"No. Actually we wanted to contact the owner."

"You're looking at him." He pointed his thumbs at himself. "The previous owner died some time ago. There was a court battle over the estate. Finally, all sides gave up and abandoned the place. It was sold for the taxes owed. I picked it up for a song."

"How long has it been empty?"

"About five years. People don't want big places like it anymore. Hey, I'm willing to let it go for a song—well, any reasonable offer. It's in good shape. I've tried to keep it up." He seemed to smell Raven's interest. "Would you like to see the place? Things have been slow here today. I could take you up there."

"Yes. That would be nice. We'll drive in my car and follow you." Raven wondered who The Master was if the previous owner had been dead for five years, the place abandoned and in the hands of a real estate agent.

\* \* \* \*

It was lucky that Ryan knew where the mansion was. Raven knew that she would never have found it by herself. They returned to River Road, drove past the railroad station and turned down an unmarked road. They followed the twists and turns of this road for about five miles and entered an estate bordered by a tall stone wall. The entrance once had a gate, but this lay broken on the ground and was disappearing in tall grass. The driveway was a rutted dirt road that wound up a hill. After they passed a private graveyard, the mansion came into view. It was a magnificent structure with many rooms, several tall chimneys and two towers. Except that it was half stone and half frame, it resembled a medieval castle.

Ryan drove up the curved driveway and stopped in front of the front porch. Raven parked the rented Toyota in back of him. After they exited their respective cars, Ryan made an expansive gesture as he pointed toward the house. He said, "Welcome to Riverlook."

## CHAPTER 13. RIVERLOOK

Before they entered the house, Ryan wanted to show Raven and O'Brien the view. They walked around to the back. The house stood on bluff overlooking the Hudson River. There was a bend in the river at this point. On that fine summer day, the panoramic vista before them was magnificent. Below was the enormous expanse of river, sparkling with sunlight, as it flowed relentlessly to the sea. A small sail boat plied the water. Across the river, gentle green slopes of meadow and forest rose from the river's edge. A few homes scattered among the trees appeared to be the size of Monopoly houses. Beyond the sloping valley were the hazy blue Catskill Mountains. To the right, spanning the river was the Kingston-Rhinecliff bridge, a marvel of engineering almost a mile and half long and two hundred and fifty feet above the river at its highest point. Where the Roundout Creek flowed into the Hudson stood an ancient lighthouse. The only sound was the whisper of a cooling breeze.

Raven shielded her eyes from the sun's glare with her hand and marveled at the awesome view. She gaped at it for a few minutes, taking it all in. O'Brien put his arm around her, making the moment perfect. He said, "It's really something, isn't it." The emotional impact of that scenery on such a lovely day brought

a lump to Raven's throat. It was one of those moments that she wished could last forever. There had not been many like that in her life. She believed that the last time she felt such happiness and pure joy of being alive was when she was twelve.

Her contemplation of the view was broken by Sam Ryan. "Now you see why the original owner called the place Riverlook. I believe he chose the loveliest spot on the Hudson. Well, shall we go inside now." There was obvious impatience in his voice.

As they walked back around to the front, Raven whispered, "I wonder how much Ryan is asking. The view alone is worth a million bucks."

"More than you and I could afford, I'm sure."

They climbed up on the porch with its large columns, and Ryan put his key into the lock. Beyond the small foyer was a large room, which might have been a ballroom for entertaining guests. Three walls were covered with light gray wallpaper with an intricate blue abstract design. A large marble fireplace of blue and white tile stood in the middle of one wall. Above it was an enormous mirror with a gilded frame. The floor was covered with an Oriental rug. Walnut chairs with high backs and leather seats were scattered about.

On the dark paneled wall across from the fireplace was an enormous painting of a man in eighteenth century garb. Raven was immediately struck by it. The man was tall and well built, wore a neatly trimmed beard, and had his long dark hair tied back with a ribbon in the eighteenth century fashion. He posed with one hand on a desk and gazed straight out as though enjoying the wonderful panoramic view out the rear windows. His expression was haughty and cruel, his lips thin. But what Raven found most fascinating were his eyes. They were dark blue, almost black, and slightly sunken under bushy brows. Something about them made the man have a commanding presence, as though the world was his oyster.

"Who was he?" she asked.

"The original owner of the house. His name was Peter Magbertius. There's quite a legend about him. Briefly, he was born in an eastern European country. I'm not sure which one. He made his fortune in the import business. However, there were rumors that his money came from a more nefarious source. In fact he was accused of witchcraft, tried and convicted for performing necromancy. His was hanged and beheaded. His body, less his head, is buried in the graveyard on the property."

O'Brien said, "Why less his head? I've never heard of official beheadings in America before."

"His head was remove post-mortem."

"Why?"

"Because as a warlock, the authorities feared that he might call on the devil to bring him back to life. Removing his head would prevent that."

"So what did they do with the head? Burn it?"

Ryan shrugged. "Nobody knows. According to one legend, it disappeared shortly after it was removed from the body."

"Enough of the gruesome stuff," said Raven. "Tell us about his life. Was he married?"

"Yes. To a beautiful woman named Cassandra. She was supposed to be a seeress, who could see the future. It was said that she went mad after Peter was executed."

"Cassandra?" *Holy smoke*, Raven thought. *That's the woman who is supposed to be a danger to me. But these people have been dead for three centuries.*

"Not an unusual name for those times. Oh, one other thing. During his trial, it was alleged that he was a leader of a coven with thirteen members. He was known to him as The Master."

Raven looked at O'Brien and raised her eyebrows. O'Brien laughed.

"What was funny about that?" asked Ryan.

"Oh nothing. I just thought about something ironic. Sort of a private joke between Raven and myself."

"Let me show you the rest of the house."

He led them into the parlor, dining and sitting rooms which were on the first floor in another wing. The dining room was dark-panelled. The drawing-room, in contrast, was light, with walls hung with patterned fabric.

Ryan said, "In the era when the mansion was built, the drawing room was where the women retired after dinner to make tea. The men remained in the dining-room to drink alcohol and talk politics. Blinds, shutters and curtains were used to safeguard privacy. The principal means of lighting rooms was by candles. First gas fixtures and later electric lights replaced the candles. Did you notice the original chandelier with candleholders replaced by light bulb sockets in the dining room?"

The final room downstairs was the kitchen. It contained dressers, shelves, an oven, an open fire with an iron fire-back, an iron crane for the suspension of cooking pots, trivets and spits, a tripod to support a pot or kettle over the range, a large deal table, and a sink of stone and timber lined with lead. A modern range, microwave, refrigerator and dishwasher were also present. Raven thought it a strange combination of past and present.

Ryan led them upstairs where the bedrooms were located. Except for size, they were pretty much the same. Each one contained a four-poster bed equipped with linen curtains. Sheets and thick wool blankets were folded neatly in the center of each bed and covered with a plastic sheet. The bedrooms had wood floors covered by Oriental rugs. Each bed chamber included a clothes chest, a mahogany clothes press and a washstand and had its own fireplace. Ryan pointed out that the house was outfitted with hot water central heating. The heating elements ran along the baseboard.

Surprisingly indoor plumbing had been installed when the house was built, mainly for the kitchen. In a later period, portions of the bedrooms had been cordoned off for bathrooms. These had old fashioned tubs that stood on stubby legs and no shower. The main bedrooms contained modern toilets and sinks. The others had toilets and fixtures that were installed in the nineteen-thirties, with pull-chain flushes from a water box close to the ceiling..

Ryan told them that the water came from a well and that the toilets and sinks emptied into a septic tank.

"There are a couple of smaller rooms upstairs and in the tower. These are empty or used for storage now. Originally they were for the domestic help. Well folks, that's about it. Interested?"

Raven said, "I'm afraid a house like this would be way out of our price range. Besides that, who could keep such a big place up?"

Ryan sighed. "I get the same reaction from everyone I show it to. Shall we go? I need to get back to the office in case a client calls or drops in."

"Wait. Although I wouldn't want to live here permanently, we're on a kind of premarital honeymoon, if you know what I mean." She winked at Ryan. "I think Riverlook is quite charming, and I love the view. Would you consider renting it for a couple of weeks?"

O'Brien gave her a strange look, but said nothing.

"Are you kidding?" said Ryan. "I'd do anything to make a little money off of this white elephant."

"Okay. Let's go back to your office where we can dicker about the price and sign a lease."

"Great. I think you'll love your time here."

On the way back to Rhinebeck, O'Brien said, "Why are you going to rent that old mansion? It appears we've been chasing the wild goose. That Abdul fellow must've been completely cuckoo. The Master he was working for has been dead for three hundred years."

"Maybe, and maybe not. What I need to do is find out what to do with the bottle now."

"I said Abdul was crazy. Well, you're just as nuts. So am I, for going along with your nonsense."

"Hey. You don't have to move down to Rhinecliff. I can stay there alone. I know you have performances to do."

O'Brien thought it over for a while. Finally, he said, "I'll need to stay up in Albany over the weekends. But, I'll come down during the week."

She let go of the wheel with her right hand and patted him on the back. "Now you're talking. As Mick Jagger said in a song, 'I may be crazy, but it may just be a lunatic you're looking for.'"

\* \* \* \*

The lease was signed, and Raven and O'Brien returned to Albany. The next day, which was Thursday, they returned to Riverlook with Raven's bags and supplies she would need such as groceries, cooking equipment and toiletries. O'Brien carried in her suitcases, and Raven brought in a carryon and her notebook computer. They returned for the rest of the supplies and dumped everything on the floor in the grand ballroom.

"Well, here we are," said O'Brien. "Are you sure want to stay the whole weekend in this spooky old house?"

Raven grinned at him. "Don't mind at all." She pointed at the large painting. "Besides, I'll have Mr. Magbertius to keep me company."

"You mean his ghost, which I'm sure you'll tell me all about how you and he had a chat when I get back here Monday."

"Well, he was a warlock. Perhaps his spirit will appear."

"You hope."

Raven removed the package with the clay bottle from her carryon. She took out the relic

"What are you going to do with that thing?"

"Put it on the mantle. It wanted to come back here. It's home." She set it on the shelf above the fireplace. "The portrait of Magbertius is right across the room from it. They can stare at each other. Y'know, there's a bit of a chill in the air. How about rounding up firewood? I saw a pile on the side of the house by an old shed. I'll take my stuff upstairs"

"I'll carry your suitcase. It weighs a ton."

"You think can handle it, sissy boy."

He waved his fist at her in mock threat. "One of these days..."

They went upstairs. Raven chose the master bedroom since it was the largest and its adjoining bathroom the most modern. "Help me make the bed before you get that firewood."

After they made the bed, Raven went into the bathroom to unload her shampoo, soap, toothbrush, towels and toiletries. The tub was quite large, and she thought how relaxing a hot bath would feel. She put her arms around O'Brien. "Forget the firewood. Let's take a bath together."

"Great idea."

Raven filled the tub with steaming water and poured in bubble bath. They undressed and climbed in. They soaped each other and made love.. After their bath, O'Brien fetched a bottle of wine from downstairs. They put on pajamas and robes and sipped wine and conversed on many subjects. O'Brien also did a few card tricks to amuse Raven. Soon they became sleepy and crawled under the covers in the canopy covered bed.

Before Raven fell asleep, a voice in her head seemed to say, *Don't forget. You must find the door and go through.*

"I will. I'll find it," she muttered.

"What did you say?" O'Brien asked sleepily.

"Nothing. Go to sleep."

## CHAPTER 14. THE GRAVEYARD

Friday morning, O'Brien returned to Albany. After he entered the rental car, Raven leaned through the window. He said for the tenth time, "Are you sure you'll be all right here all by yourself?"

She smiled at his concern. "I'll be fine. I've got a cell phone and my Glock. What could happen? Don't

worry.” She kissed him. “See you Monday.”

"Bye, love."

She backed away from the car a couple of steps and waved. He waved back, put the car in gear and drove away. Before Raven returned to the house, she watched until it was out of sight as he maneuvered the Toyota down the snaky driveway.

She went back inside and stood in the middle of the ballroom. For a long time she stared into the cruel eyes of the portrait of Peter Magbertius. They held a strange fascination for her. He certainly was a handsome and manly guy. He would not have been the sort to take any crap from a woman, unlike that wimp O'Brien. Raven shook her head. *No. He probably ruled Cassandra with an iron hand.* She wondered what it would be like being dominated by a man like that and shivered. Her thoughts were too close to certain fantasies she had. Although most of the time she was passionate about being her own person and free, every once in a while she fantasized being a sex slave. The more she stared at the portrait, the more these sorts of daydreams came to mind, and the more attractive Peter Magbertius became.

*Cut it out, she told herself. This is not the time to indulge in sex fantasies. You've got to find that door. But why? Do I really believe that the doppelganger will return if I don't go through some weird door? Or that the spirit will curse me so that I will die? Isn't bringing it here enough?* Her thoughts became confused. She turned around to look at the bottle. *Have you or haven't you killed at least four people somehow? Or were all those deaths coincidences as Johnny believes.*

She glanced at her watch and shook it. *That can't be right. It says quarter to twelve. Could I have been staring at that portrait for two hours?* She shuddered again at the presence of evil. *Was it only the spirit that nudged her psychic instincts or were other dark paranormal entities haunting the mansion?*

Although the day was warm, she felt chilled. She needed to get out of that room. She retreated to the kitchen where she made herself a salami sandwich and opened a cold bottle of beer. While eating lunch, she gathered her thoughts and analyzed what the spirit had said. She had not told O'Brien about any of it. She was sure that he would've dismissed it out of hand as a hallucination. He might even have nagged her to see a psychiatrist.

About the door though, her doppelganger had said it comes and goes. This seemed to indicate that it was some sort of secret door. Either it was in a hidden place or was a secret panel. It was a big house. If she was going to find a hidden doorway this weekend, she needed to get started.

First she looked in obvious places, behind the portrait, which she studiously avoided looking at directly, and in and around the fireplace. She pounded on the walls. They all sounded the same. She went into all the rooms on the first and second floors and found nothing. She explored the rooms on the third floor and in the towers. As Ryan had said, they were either empty or contained old furniture and boxes of discarded items such as clothing from bygone eras. As far as she could determine no secret panels were in the walls or anywhere else in those rooms.

By this time, her hunger had returned, and she went down to the kitchen, where she warmed up a TV dinner in the microwave. While she was eating, she noticed that there was a door to the cellar. After her meal, she obtained a flashlight from her room and carefully made her way down rotten wooden steps to the pitch-black basement. At the bottom, she found a light switch. It turned on single incandescent bulb hanging by its cord whose harsh light cast looming shadows that moved with each stray air current. The

cellar was large since it had been dug under the greater part of the house. In one corner was the gas fired furnace that provided heat for the mansion. It was quite modern. The floor was cement and in good condition. Shelves contained odds and ends such as maintenance and cleaning supplies and tools.

An unpainted wooden wall divided the basement into two sections. She opened the door to the other section and shined her light around. It seemed to be an ancient laboratory, possibly an alchemist's or sorcerer's workshop. When she examined work tables with alchemy and occult items on them, she became sure that it had been used for magical operations. Embedded in the floor was a large iron ring with a pentagram within it. This could be used in a demon summoning ceremony. A deteriorated human skull lay on a workbench. *I hope that's not Magbertius' head*, she thought. She doubted it. It was more likely something he used for his necromancy. She did not dare touch it lest it crumble to bone meal. Everything was covered with layers of dust, which indicated to Raven that the room had not been used in decades, perhaps longer. Centuries? She decided that this room had been where Peter Magbertius performed his sorcery.

Rave inspected every inch of the wall and found no hidden doorways or loose stones. She went back upstairs. By this time, the sun had set and twilight was fast turning into night. She scratched her head.

*What do I do now?* She recalled that the spirit had said that she would receive guidance. *I need to speak to Peter Magbertius*, she thought. Ryan had said the his torso was buried in the graveyard they passed on the way to the main house.

She left the mansion and walked down the driveway. About a hundred yards downhill was the cemetery.

A full moon cast silver light on ghostly angels, crosses and monoliths that marked the graves. *This is a good night to talk to dead*, she thought. *Hecate is at her most powerful aspect*. She went into the oldest section of the cemetery. The markers there were dark, faded and overgrown with weeds. The soft, muddy ground sucked at her feet. As she stepped on a grave, her foot sunk into the mud, and she tripped, almost falling. Although she was fearless in the face of the paranormal, there was something daunting about graveyards at night.

Raven headed for the largest marker, a six-foot by three-foot pyramidal monolith capped by a pentacle. Using her flashlight, she read the names carved into the granite. First was *Peter Magbertius Died 1727*. No birth date was given, so she had no idea how old he had been when he had been executed. Beneath Peter's name was written *Cassandra Magbertius Born 1692 Died 1738*. Beneath this it read, "Let he who does the devil's work suffer the torments of the damned. The body of one such lies here forever yearning for its upper part." The stone was worn and eroded so that the names and words were almost obliterated.

Raven laid down her flashlight and sat facing the stone with her ankles crossed. Just as she had when she had invoked the spirit in the bottle, she prepared herself and called to the dead. "One whose bones lie in the ground beneath, hear my call. Speak to me if you will." She repeated this several times.

After a while there came a low moan, and a woman's voice said, "Who disturbs my rest?"

"I am called Raven Lenore. Who are you?"

"Yes. I know you. You brought his spirit. I am Cassandra."

"Cassandra, wife of Peter Magbertius, I seek knowledge. How do you know me?"

"You came through the door. You are in terrible danger."

Raven shivered. "What danger?"

"From Peter. He will enslave you."

"How do I find the door?"

The phantom laughed crazily. "No need. It will find you."

"What do you mean? What about the spirit in the bottle?"

There was no reply. The wind picked up, which caused the tree leaves to rustle. A raven cawed and flew into the sky. Raven tried again to contact Peter Magbertius. This time she called him by name. If his spirit was present, he did not answer. Raven felt no presence from beyond the grave. She rose to her feet. There would be no more speaking to the dead tonight.

She returned to the house. She had learned nothing. The ghost of Cassandra had spoken as though her delivery of the bottle that contained the spirit was a forgone conclusion. She had warned of danger from her husband. But, how could he be a danger? He had been dead three centuries. Apparently, even his spirit could not be contacted, at least not in the area around his grave. Was that because his head was somewhere else? Perhaps that is what she should be looking for, Magbertius' head.

She returned to the ballroom and looked from the portrait to the bottle. "I wish one of you would clear up this mystery for me. Where in hell is this mysterious door? And what am I supposed to do with the bottle?"

The house was quiet. Apparently she was not going to receive an answer that night. She looked at her watch. It was past midnight. She went to the kitchen and poured a glass of wine, which she sipped for a while until she began to yawn. She rinsed the glass in the sink and went upstairs to bed.

\* \* \* \*

She was standing in front of the portrait of Peter Magbertius wearing an eighteenth century nightgown that covered her from neck to ankle. She held a candle as she gazed at the portrait. It seemed much brighter and less faded than she recalled, as though it had been freshly painted. As she stared at it, it seemed three dimensional and real, as though Magbertius stood there in the flesh. His image moved. It smiled at her and stepped out of the painting. The next moment, the impressive man stood not two feet in front of her, so close he only need to stretch out his arm to touch her.

"Good evening, Raven," he said in his deep, resonant voice with a trace of East European accent.

"Good evening, Peter." She smiled at him and thought that he was even more handsome in person than in the portrait.

"I understand that you brought a present for me besides your lovely self."

She felt flustered at the flirtatious remark. "Yes. It's locked in that bottle on the mantle."

He stepped closer and placed his hands on her arms. "But you must hand it to me in person."

"But how am I to do that?"

"Tomorrow, the door will appear. Enter it, but do not forget the bottle."

"How will I know whether it's the right door?" She was enchanted by his eyes and wondered whether he would kiss her.

"You will know." He took her into his arms and pressed his lips against hers. She knew that she would be his, would do anything he asked. His warm body against hers stirred something deep inside. She had never felt like this toward a man before, not even O'Brien or Michael. She could worship this Peter.

The next morning she lingered in bed savoring her dream. The ghost of Cassandra's warning had been warranted. Peter Magbertius was a danger to her. She had become obsessed with a man she knew nothing about and who had died three centuries previously. Perhaps O'Brien was right; she was insane. She thought, *If the dream was a message from the spirit of Magbertius, I've got nothing to worry about. He said the door will come to me. I wonder what that means.*

She dressed and walked towards the main stairway when she noticed a closed door between her bedroom and the next room down the hall. She swore that it had not been there the day before.

\* \* \* \*

O'Brien sang along with the radio as he drove south. It was another fine late summer day. He was free for four days. He really looked forward to the time he would be spending with Raven. He had to admit it to himself. He was a man in love. Although they argued often, there was something about her that set him on fire. Perhaps it was true that opposites attract. For they were certainly opposites. She was tough; he was gentle. She believed in all sorts of paranormal nonsense; he believed only in science. Yet, all in all they got along well enough and were compatible as far as sense of humor, sexual appetite and optimistic outlook on life.

When he parked in front of the mansion's porch, he was disappointed that she was not out there waiting for him. He went through the front door and shouted, "Raven. It's O'Brien."

He was greeted only by silence. He went through the ballroom to the kitchen. Everything was cleaned up so he could not tell whether she ate breakfast yet or not. He went upstairs. She was not in her bedroom or any of the other rooms up there. He noticed that her pistol and shoulder holster were hung on the bedpost in their usual place. Her cell phone and purse lay on the bed, so it was no use trying to call her.

"She must've gone out for a stroll or jog."

He went outside. As he walked around the building, he peered around. If Raven was out there, she was not anywhere in sight. He went back inside and made breakfast. When, after two hours, she did not return, he became worried. He searched the house, top to bottom, including the cellar. All her clothes were in place as far as he could tell.

Four hours had passed since his arrival. He did not think she would be gone that long knowing that he was coming that day. He worried that she might have gotten hurt somehow, twisted an ankle, fallen over a cliff, or had some other type of accident. He should search for her, but where? The property was enormous. She could have gone in any direction. He paced up and down in the ballroom trying to decide what to do. For some reason he glanced at the mantle. The clay bottle was gone.

*Raven must have taken it somewhere*, he thought. *But where?* It occurred to him that she kept talking about giving it to Peter Magbertius. Perhaps she had the crazy idea of leaving it by his grave.

He hiked to the graveyard and looked around until he found Magbertius' grave marker. He noticed fresh

footprints in the soft soil. They were small and made by sneakers such as Raven usually wore. She had been there. Nonetheless, the bottle was not.

It was mid afternoon by this time. He decided to drive into Rhinebeck and report her disappearance to the police. He was sure that she was on the property somewhere, but hurt. After he returned, he would search for her as well. She would not have gone far without her purse.

## CHAPTER 15. THROUGH THE DOOR

As Raven stared at the door, she thought, *This must be it, the mysterious door that comes and goes.* She put her hand on the knob to enter it, but then thought better of it. *Wherever it leads, I must take the bottle there.* She went downstairs and removed the bottle from the mantle. As she headed back upstairs, she wondered whether she would need anything else. She could not think of anything except possibly the Glock, but decided against it. After all, whatever was behind that door had to do with the paranormal. What good would a pistol do her? A better idea was to take her Book of Shadows. She retrieved it from her suitcase.

To her relief, when she returned, the mysterious door was still there. With her Book of Shadows tucked under her arm and the bottle in her left hand, she turned the knob and pushed the door open. Behind it was a room full of trunks, shelves, boxes, odd pieces of furniture and bric-a-brac. *Why it's just a storeroom,* thought Raven. She stepped inside and closed the door. The morning light came through a window. There was not a lot of dust as she had seen in the storerooms on the third floor. In fact, the room looked as though it had been cleaned recently. She went to the window and gazed out. Below was the scene she had admired so much the first day she had come to Riverlook.

She held the bottle up so that it was before her eyes. "Now what? Is there something I need to do?"

A voice in her head said, *Put on one of the pretty dresses in that trunk .*

She opened the trunk. It was full of women's garments. She took one out and held it up. It was a striped silk taffeta full-length gown with a checked pattern created by an extra warp float. The bodice and sleeves were lined with linen. It was the sort of thing a woman would wear in the time when Magbertius lived. She said, "Why?"

Her attention was diverted by someone opening the door. At first she thought it was O'Brien arriving early from Albany. The voice in Raven's head said, *Too late.*

A woman entered. She had long dark red hair curled into ringlets and held in place by ribbons. Her dress was an eighteenth century full skirt and square cut bodice lined with lace. Raven estimated her age as in her forties. Nonetheless, she was quite an attractive woman, one who had always been beautiful and had aged well.

"Who are you?" the woman cried. "What are you doing here?"

Raven recognized the voice. She had heard it in the graveyard yesterday. It was that of Cassandra Magbertius. But this was no ghost, but a living woman. The implications made Raven dizzy. Either Cassandra had somehow returned from the dead or came forward in time, or Raven had been transported to the eighteenth century. She suspected the latter.

"I'm sorry, but I was looking for Peter Magbertius. The front door was open so I took the liberty of

entering the house and became lost."

"Hogwash. In the first place, Peter has been with his maker for these past ten years. You're a thief."

*Dead ten years. This must be the year 1737. What good did coming here do?*

"I didn't know. Sorry for your loss. I have something that belongs to your husband."

Cassandra eyed her suspiciously. "What? And why are you wearing those odd garments? Are those pantaloons such as Arabian women wear on your legs? And what is that book under your arm?" Too quickly for Raven to react, she reached out and snatched the Book of Shadows from her. She opened it and turned pages at random. "It's a grimoire. You're a witch. You must be one of the thirteen that were in Peter's coven."

Raven realized that witchcraft was a capital offense in that era. She was in bad trouble. "I ... uh..."

"What is that in your hand?"

"Just an old clay bottle."

"It's the one that contains his spirit, is it not? Of course, it is. It is what you brought here to help Peter. Thank The Dark Gods, we can bring him back now. Give it to me." She made to take it from Raven.

Raven became confused. Nonetheless, she held the relic away from Cassandra. "Wait. I don't understand. I was told to bring this to Riverlook and give it to Peter Magbertius. I know nothing about witchcraft."

"You are a poor liar ... whatever your name is. If you are not a witch, why was a Book of Shadows in your possession?"

"My name is Raven Lenore."

"Odd name. But you witches all have odd names. Do not worry, I know all about your coven. I was part of it when Peter was alive. I certainly would not turn you over to the authorities. They already have an eye on me. Consorting with witches is all they would need to make an arrest."

Raven felt relieved, but still did not know whether to trust Cassandra. The spirit had warned her that Cassandra posed a danger to her. Nonetheless, she did not have much choice. She decided to play along. "Yes, I am one of The Thirteen. Peter told me to hide this when we had to escape from the witch hunters. I went to a distance land. That's why I'm dressed this manner. This is the first chance I've had to return with the relic."

"In ten years? Oh well, the important thing is that it's back here. My, you are pretty and were young when Peter was alive." She eyed Raven suspiciously. "I suppose you participated in the witch's Sabbath ceremonies."

Raven was sure her glare was one of terrible jealousy. That was where the danger from her arose. Cassandra probably was jealous of the women who had associated with her dead husband, likely with reason. As Raven recalled the look of the man in the portrait, she was sure that he was not the monogamous type.

Cassandra held her chin in her hand as though in thought. "You say your name is Raven?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Of course, you are the fulfillment of the prophesy. Just before Peter's death, he placed me in a trance for divination. He said that during my clairvoyant state I had foreseen that after his death, a black bird would deliver a vessel that would allow his return from the grave. That black bird is you, Raven." She pointed her finger. "We must get you into presentable clothes. And teach you to speak correctly. From where do you hail that you have such an atrocious accent and manner of speaking?"

"Brooklyn." Raven did not know whether to be angry or laugh at this criticism. She recalled that she was in the eighteenth century, and people spoke much differently than in the twenty-first. She must try to try to speak in the same way as Cassandra.

"I will present you as a visiting cousin. Come with me."

She took Raven by the arm and led her into an unoccupied bedroom. Raven realized that although Cassandra had been under Peter's thumb, she was no slouch when it came to giving orders to those she considered her inferiors. She had that superior air of a person born and bred into old wealth, a natural aristocrat.

"First we need to hide the container from prying eyes." She twisted slowly around, her eyes taking in possible hiding places. "I know, put it in on top of the wardrobe. Few people bother to look up."

Raven had to stand on a chair. Once the bottle was set in place, it was partially hidden by scrollwork. Cassandra was right. It was a good hiding place. Although it was right in view, it was in a place one would not easily notice.

Cassandra rang for a maid. A fifteen-year-old African-American girl in servants' dress quickly appeared. The girl curtsied. "How may I be of service, Mistress Cassandra?"

"Fetch the trunk with my Aunt Matilda's garments, Jane. I believe she was about my cousin, uh ... Miss Agnes' size."

"Yes, ma'am." Jane curtsied again and quickly left the room. Ten minutes later she returned with a porter who hefted a large trunk on his shoulder. He placed the trunk on the floor and stood at attention without speaking. The maid said, "Will there be anything else, ma'am?"

"Yes, Jane. You must help my cousin dress." She turned to the porter. "You may leave now."

After the porter left, Cassandra said to Raven. "Please remove those strange clothes. I'll have them burned. Jane, give her whatever help she may need. I will return shortly." She left the room.

Raven removed her blouse and jeans. The maid's eyes went wide when she saw the scanty twenty-first century underwear. Raven wondered whether she should take off her bra and panties, as well. *I'd better, she thought. I need to fit in with these people completely until I find out what's going on and a way back to my own time.*

She threw her undergarments into a pile with the other clothes she had removed. The maid handed her a shift, a stiff shirt-like garment that covered her body to just below her hips. It had a plain square cut neckline and lace trimmed cuffs at the elbows. Next the maid strapped on an instrument of torture which

she called a “stay.” It fit around her body, covering and uplifting her breasts and tied tightly in the back.

"Ouch," cried Raven as Jane yanked on the laces. "Does it have to be that tight?"

"It is the fashion, Mistress Agnes."

"I don't care. Loosen it up a bit."

Next Jane handed her a petticoat. Once this was on, Jane helped Raven into a dark green gown, which consisted of a bodice and skirt joined together. The skirt was open in front to reveal the petticoat. Next the maid attached a triangular shaped piece of fabric to the bodice lining by pins and tabs to hold the gown together. Raven felt extremely uncomfortable under so many layers of clothes, especially since it was summer and quite warm.

"Am I done?" she asked.

In reply, Jane handed her elbow-length, fingerless gloves.

"Why do I have to wear these? It's summer."

"For protection against the sun."

Jane had her sit on a stool in front of a vanity, brushed her hair out and pinned it up in an elaborate manner. She was fitted with a cap, a bonnet-like lace edged cloth that was tied with a bow under her chin. Raven felt as though she was gift wrapped, with all the garments and trim. She gazed at herself in the mirror and let out a giggle. Was that Raven, someone who had been a Tomboy and wore jeans most of her life, dressed up like her great-great-grandmother?

At that point Cassandra entered the room. "Stand up," she ordered Raven. "Turn around. Hmm. 'Tis a little baggy, and 'twill have to be taken in, but 'twill do for the nonce."

She ordered Jane to hang the rest of the garments in the trunk in the wardrobe. When she was done, Cassandra told her to fetch the porter to take the trunk away.

After Jane left, Cassandra pulled up a chair next to the stool. "I am have invited friends for dinner tonight. I will introduce you as my cousin, Agnes Lenore. Speak as little as possible, and only when spoken to. After my guests leave, I'll show it to you."

"Show what to me?"

"Peter's head, of course."

## CHAPTER 16. DINNER PARTY

Raven was nervous about the dinner party. She hoped that she did not appear as a total klutz among these eighteenth century gentry. She felt awkward and foolish enough wearing clothing she would not see dead in during her own century. Most of her day had been spent with a seamstress who required her to put on and take off every dress that had been in Aunt Matilda's trunk and had her stand for hours while she pinned and marked the dresses for renovation.

While the seamstress took measurements, Raven mulled over her situation. First, she wondered how in the world she was going to return to her own century. All day, every chance she had, she went in and out of the storeroom. There had to be some trick associated with that room or door that would allow her to return to the twenty-first century. She should probably ask the spirit in the bottle. Whether the evil thing would help her or not was another question.

Raven wondered about Cassandra. In many ways she seemed rather strange, but that may have to do with Raven's not understanding the culture. She especially questioned Cassandra's statement about Peter Magbertius' head. Did she really have it hidden somewhere the past ten years? If she did, there must not be much left except a rotting skull. And why did she want to show it to Raven? So many questions to be answered. *Well, you're a private eye*, she told herself. *Find the answers*.

A rap came to her door. Jane's voice said, "Madam Cassandra's guests have arrived. She requests your presence in the main hall."

*Show time*, Raven thought. She took another look into the mirror and shook her head. *Hope I can pull this off*. She felt completely out of her element.

She walked slowly down the main staircase and tried to appear calm and composed. All the while she worried that she would trip over the long dress which she held up as she had seen Cassandra do. As she stepped off the stairway into the main hall, which she thought of as "the ballroom," she glanced up at the portrait of Peter Magbertius. He looked back at her with that stern expression that seemed to say "don't fuck-up."

The odor of cigars and heady perfume assailed her nostrils. Cassandra took her by the arm and led her toward the group of chatting guests. The cigar smell brought out her own addiction. She craved a cigarette, but she did not know whether they were even invented. She supposed it would be most unladylike for her to smoke a cigar. Maybe she could steal one and smoke it in private somewhere.

Cassandra introduced her as Cousin Agnes, who had been living in South America for several years doing missionary work. Raven supposed that she said that to account for Raven's accent and way of talking. The men kissed her knuckles gallantly, and the women, her cheeks. Raven replied to each greeting by saying, "Pleased to meet you," carefully articulating each syllable so as not to pronounce the phrase in her usual manner, "Pleased ta meetcha."

The first guests she was introduced to was Colonel Downing, a retired English officer, who had fought in what was known locally as Queen Anne's War, which was part of the French-Indian wars. Next she was kissed on the cheek by his wife, Clarissa, a dowdy overweight woman heavily doused with perfume and showing a lot of cleavage. Alice Downing, their daughter was a sweet shy girl of about nineteen. Samuel Brookfield, Alice's beau, was in his late twenties and put on an air of roguishness. Doctor VanKleek was a handsome bearded physician with Dutch ancestors who were the original settlers in the region.

Elizabeth Caulfield. was introduced as his friend but probably was his mistress. Elizabeth was quite striking in appearance, tall and leggy. She was the chatty type and flirted outrageously with all three men.

Drinks were served, whisky for the men, white wine for the ladies. They mingled and conversed for a long time. At first, Raven, along with Alice Downing, simply stood around quietly answering people's questions, but not contributing much. At one point, however, Elizabeth Caulfield maneuvered Raven away from the others for a few minutes in an obvious attempt to extract gossip.

"Are you staying here at Riverlook?"

"Temporarily ... until I can find a position." Raven hoped this would explain her presence. "Cousin Cassandra has been generous about taking me in."

"Yes. That surprises me. She is not usually one for dispensing charity." Elizabeth drew closely to Raven and whispered in her ear, "She's quite mad, you know. Been that way since they executed Peter. She often speaks of him as though he was not really deceased."

"I've found her quite generous and rational."

Elizabeth smiled in a wry manner. "That is because you have not been here long." She changed the subject, pumping Raven for details about her own life. Raven winged it, making things up as they chatted. She made one mistake, however. Recalling that the clothes she wore were hand-me-downs from an Aunt Matilda, she claimed to be her daughter.

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "Really? I did not know she had any children. After all, she died at an early age and was unmarried at the time as far as I know."

At that point, the butler announced dinner. Elizabeth smiled triumphantly as she joined Doctor VanKleek. She had learned a juicy bit of gossip about Aunt Matilda. Raven would have to apologize to Cassandra for that indiscretion.

It was Colonel Downing who escorted her into the dining room. She and he spoke of the warm weather until he took to her assigned place next to Cassandra where he politely held her chair until she was seated. Dinner was a long drawn out affair of several courses. Raven watched the others to determine which spoon or fork to use and how to hold it properly. The wine was plentiful and her glass was not allowed to empty. She sipped enough to take away her nervousness, but not so much that she got a buzz on.

Conversation was light and consisted mostly of gossip about people Raven could not know and minor events of each household. Heeding Cassandra's advise, she said little unless directly questioned and kept her answers short and evasive.

After desert, the men started to talk politics. Doctor VanKleek made a remark about King George and parliament adding new taxes on the colonies.

Downing said, "The new taxes are a necessary evil. For security against raids by Redskins and the Frogs, 'tis necessary to pay for a standing army."

Raven started to open her mouth. She was about to say that the taxes without representation would eventually lead to a revolution against England. However, Cassandra gave her a stern look and placed a finger to her lips. She said, "Tis time for us ladies to acquit ourselves to the drawing room. The men wish to discuss politics and smoke their cigars." She turned to the butler. "Have brandy and cigars served to these gentlemen, and tea to we ladies in the drawing room."

All the women rose from the table, assisted with their chairs by the men, and headed to the parlor. Raven realized that she had almost made another *faux pas*. Women in this era did not discuss politics. In the parlor, they sipped tea and spoke of domestic matters, which of course Raven knew little about.

Elizabeth Caulfield hinted at some scandal concerning Aunt Matilda and she sent meaningful glances toward Raven. Nonetheless, Cassandra, who knew nothing about what Raven had told her, did not take the bait. Raven became more and more uncomfortable.

Finally the guests, two-by-two, said their good-byes and left. Afterwards, Cassandra said to Raven, "What in the world did you tell Elizabeth Caulfield about Aunt Matilda?"

Raven blushed in embarrassment. "I'm afraid that I told her that I was Aunt Matilda's daughter."

Cassandra's mouth gaped open. "Matilda's daughter?" Then she burst into laughter. "Oh my dear, Aunt Matilda never married. She was a spinster, who lived with my grandparents. She probably thought you were born out of wedlock. How ironic for a fallen woman such as her to suspect my straight laced aunt of having a love child. You realize that Elizabeth is VanKleek's mistress?"

"I suspected as much."

"Very well, we must go to our rooms now and pretend to sleep. I'll come for you later."

Raven returned to her assigned room. With the aid of Jane she removed her garments except the chemise and was given a negligee to wear over it. Raven was relieved to have the tight corset off. Since Cassandra said that she would be up to see her later, she went to the bookshelf to find a book to read. She leafed through the first few pages of several before she found a romance novel. She sat in a chair by the open window and began to read. The author worked into the story slowly and used many three and four syllable words. The style of the novel along with the effects of the wine she had drank and the heavy food she had eaten caused her to doze off.

She was awakened by a large boom. A wild wind blew light rain into the room. She looked out. The sky was overcast. Lightning flashed across it, and thunder drum rolled in the distance. A thunderstorm approached from the northwest. As the wind whipped up and the rain became a deluge, she closed and latched the windows.

Since the only light that came into the room was from the occasional lightning, she lit the candle on the night stand. The only clock in the house was a grandfather clock in the downstairs hallway. Thus, she had no idea what time it was. She felt that it must be at least midnight and wondered when Cassandra would show up or whether she would.

She waited a long while before removing the negligee and crawling into bed. Nonetheless, the storm kept her awake as it grew more fierce. The wind rattled the shutters, and the rain on the tin roof was like machine gun.

Finally a knock came to her door. "Who's there?" she cried, although she was sure it was Cassandra.

"Cassandra. Quickly now, while the servants are asleep, you must come with me." She burst into the door and almost pulled Raven out of bed. "Just don your negligee, and we will be off." She put a finger to her lips. "And be as silent as you can."

She handed Raven a hatbox, took the candle from the night stand and led Raven out in the hall and down the main staircase. As they passed through the main hall, the candlelight fell on the portrait of Peter Magbertius, which caused him to appear even more stern and malignant. The sharp crack of simultaneous thunder and lightning made the room light up for a few seconds. Peter seemed to leap at them from the painting. Raven shuddered. She was having a bad feeling about what Cassandra was going to show her.

Cassandra took her through the kitchen and down the cellar stairs. The basement was quite different from when Raven had explored it in the twenty-first century. There was no electric light, no furnace, and

the floor consisted of damp earth. Because of the rain, water dripped off the stone walls in rivulets from every crack or opening it could find. The dampness made the candle flicker and flutter so that it cast looming shadows on the walls. A stench of mold and mildew pervaded the basement. There was no central wall that divided the alchemy laboratory from the front section of the cellar. The items in it were the same as Raven as seen before, even the skull that rested on one of the work benches.

She pointed at it and asked, "Is that Peter's head?"

Cassandra turned her head toward the object and laughed. "That old dead thing? That is simply something that Peter used in his necromancy. What we are looking for is over here by the wall. Open up the hatbox."

Raven did as she was told and followed Cassandra to a blank section of wall.

"Take the candle."

Raven took it from her and held it up while Cassandra worked a stone block out of the wall. The stone fell to the dirt floor with a thump. A dark niche was behind it.

"Hold the light up higher."

She raised the candle and brought it closer to the wall. She let out a little screech when she saw what was in the niche. It was Peter's head, perfectly preserved. His eyes were closed, and he seemed asleep. After a moment, however, his eyelids flicked open. As his dead eyes stared at her, she felt a malignant power emanating from them.

## CHAPTER 17. THE CRYSTAL

Cassandra reached into the niche, removed Peter's head and placed it in the hatbox. She replaced the stone in the wall. "Let us go now."

Raven put the hatbox cover back in place. "What are we going to do with this?"

"You will take Peter to your room for now. We must wait until the dark moon, which is three weeks from today, to finish the task."

The thunder, lightning, wind and rain continued throughout the night. Cassandra had Raven put the hatbox in her highboy on a shelf and returned to her own room. Raven tried to sleep, but it gave her the willies having the bottle with evil spirit setting on her wardrobe and Peter's head in the highboy. It was though she was surrounded by malignant wraiths.

She pulled the comforter over head as she had done when she was a child and felt threatened by imaginary monsters. This only slightly deadened the sounds of the storm and the rattling of the shutters.

She tossed and turned. The look of Peter's eyes as they stared at her from that niche remained in her mind. His voice, as she had heard it in her dream, whispered in her thoughts, "Raven, take me out of the dark box. I need to see you."

She resisted this telepathic plea for as long as she could. But it grew stronger and more demanding until she thought it would drive her mad. She lit the candle, went to the highboy and opened the doors. She stared at the hatbox for a few moments and fought the compulsion to remove the head. Finally, she took

off the lid, reached in, removed the loathsome object and placed it on the shelf.

The horrid eyes stared at her in a way that made Raven feel violated. The mouth was turned up at the corners in a slight smile that sent distressing shivers up and down Raven's spine. The voice in her head said, "Yes. You are beautiful. When I return from the place where I now reside, I will make you mine."

Raven wanted to turn away, but the head had a strange power over her. Finally, by sheer force of will, she slammed the cabinet doors shut. The voice in her head, "Now your will to resist me is strong. When I live again, I will overpower your feeble mind and own you."

"No," she cried. "Never. I won't be anyone's slave." Nonetheless, she had her doubts. She knew she was dealing with a powerful entity.

\* \* \* \*

Long after the police had gave up their search, which included dogs and volunteers, O'Brien continued to comb the woods. He canceled his engagement in Albany, pleading exhaustion. He told the management to take any advance ticket sales that they had to refund out of what they owed him for the nights he had played to a full house. He told his agent that he was going to take a long break and not to get him anymore gigs until he notified him. He told him that the pressure was getting to him, that he needed a rest.

The police decided that either Raven had gone away on her own or that she was lying dead in an inaccessible location. They said that they could not spend anymore resources on the search. They told him that they would post her picture on the Internet and place her name in their missing persons data base. This was all they could unless they obtained more information.

O'Brien was sure that Raven had to be somewhere nearby. He had the strongest feeling that she was alive. But where could she have gone without any belonging, not even her purse with money, credit cards and cigarettes in it? Even if she had gone on a hike, it would make sense that someone so street smart would at least take her cell phone. Something was out of whack. He also wondered why was that ancient bottle missing from the mantle. Wherever Raven had gone, that relic had something to do with it. Perhaps someone kidnapped her and the bottle, someone like Abdul, someone who worked for The Thirteen.

He sat down on a dead log and tried to gather his thoughts together. He tried to think like a detective, as Raven would if she was working the case. *If there's a clue, it must be in the mansion somewhere. Neither I nor the police have looked hard enough.*

He returned to the house and did a thorough search, examining everything, even the trash. He started with the upstairs bedrooms and went through the storerooms on the third floor and towers. He came up empty handed. He returned to the downstairs rooms. The ball room contained nothing pertinent. While he was there, however, he recalled the day that he caught Raven staring at the portrait in a daze. What was it about that picture that fascinated her so much? Was it simply that Peter Magbertius was a handsome man? No, that could not be it. He concentrated on the painting, allowing his eyes to scan it. He recalled her asking the real estate agent about the subject. And that he had told her that he was known as The Master, the same designation used by Abdul. It was after she received that bit of information that she decided to rent the mansion. Did any of that have anything to do with her disappearance?

It occurred to O'Brien that one of the upper echelon of The Thirteen might have brought Abdul to the mansion and told him that the portrait was of The Master. Maybe one of The Thirteen returned and kidnapped Raven. But how did they take her away? There were no tire tracks of a vehicle other than those of the real estate agent and of their rented Toyota. Could the real estate agent have something to do with Raven's disappearance? He wondered whether the police had questioned him.

Another thought came to O'Brien. He recalled that the first night that they stayed in the mansion, they had made love in the bathtub. After they went to bed, Raven had mumbled something like, "I'll find it," as though she was talking to someone other than O'Brien. He wondered, *Find what?* Whose voice had she heard in her head?

None of his thoughts seem to fit with any particular pattern that gave any clue of how she had disappeared or where she was. It was like a giant jigsaw puzzle with key pieces missing.

He continued his search of the house. While he searched through the kitchen, he noticed something sparkly lying in the ashes of the fireplace. He reached in and picked it up. It was a glass globe. He brought it over by the sink and washed off the ashes. Beneath the grime was a solid crystal with a multitude of pentagon shaped facets. He brought it under the fluorescent lights to examine it closely. The way it glowed fascinated him. It was as though the light came from within.

After he stared at a while, he began to see moving shadows within its interior. *What sort of illusion is this*, he thought. He brought it up to his eye and stared through one of the facets. To his amazement, he was staring into a bedroom, very similar to the bedrooms in Riverlook, except that the room was fully furnished, the bed was made, and it had an occupied look. The door to the room opened, and someone entered. Because of the minute size, he could not tell what the person looked like except that she was a woman in an old-fashioned dress, *circa* seventeen hundreds.

Suddenly he was no longer in the mansion kitchen, but in that room.

\* \* \* \*

A boring week had dragged on for Raven. Most of her time had been spent with Cassandra doing eighteenth century activities, such as crocheting, playing silly card games, and going for long walks. All the while she was troubled by many things. First was the awful hold that Magbertius' head had on her. She dreaded each night when she returned to her room. Yet, she would be forced by the thing's will to open the cabinet door and stand before it. Once her hands, as though they were not subject to her will but to the will of the head, began to remove her only garment, the thin shift. When she balked, concentrating all her mental energy until her hands were forced down to her side, evil laughter rang through her mind.

Another troubling thought was whether to actually go through with whatever plan Cassandra had. Would they really be able to raise Peter Magbertius from the grave? The idea filled her with horror and terror. If the head by itself could make her do things, how much more powerful would the animated corpse of the warlock be. He might be able to do what he threatened, make her his abject slave.

She wished she could escape, but she did not know how. Every spell she tried would not make the door lead back to the twenty-first century. She tried to communicate with the spirit in the bottle, but it no longer responded to her.

Another troubling aspect of her position was the enigma of Cassandra. Elizabeth Caulfield had been right. Cassandra showed symptoms of schizophrenia. She often mumbled to herself as though she was speaking to someone not present. She had paranoid delusions and great mood swings over relatively short periods of time, varying from deep depression to fits of anger to silly laughter. Sometimes at night, Raven heard Cassandra pacing the halls. Once when she peeked out, she saw the woman striding down the hallway carrying a large kitchen knife in her hand.

One night, as Raven opened the door to her room, she felt the presence of another person. It did not

feel malignant such as when she sensed the spirit in the bottle or Magbertius' head. She knew the evil feeling of those two and had become accustomed to them. No. This was someone or something else.

She strained her eyes to see into the gloom. Although she held up her chamberstick (a small candleholder), she could not see the person. The shadows were too dark. She called out, "Who is there?"

A familiar voice answered. "Raven. I've found you."

Raven closed the door and advanced toward the figure who stepped out of the shadows into the circle of light from her candle. She became so excited she almost dropped the chamberstick. "Johnny. How did you get here?"

"I've been here all along, except I'm not too sure how I arrived in this bedroom from the kitchen. I must've had a blackout. The real question is where have you been?"

"Here in the eighteenth century. Did you come through the time door?"

"Eighteenth century? Time door? And why are you dressed like that? Is this another one of your practical jokes to try to convince me that the paranormal is real? Jesus Christ, Raven, I thought you had been kidnapped or killed." O'Brien's voice shook with emotion.

"Don't you understand? We're not in the twenty-first century any more. We've gone back in time. This is the year 1737."

O'Brien got one of his disgusted looks on his face. "Oh, come off it, Raven." He reached for her. His hand passed right through her body. "Holy shit. You're a ghost."

Raven chuckled. "Not me. You. You're the ghost. Have you ever heard of an out-of-body experience? Only your aura or spirit is here. Your body is still in the twenty-first century."

"More of your paranormal nonsense."

"I'll prove it. Try picking up that chair."

O'Brien tried to put his hands on the back of the chair. They went right through as they had when he tried to touch Raven. "Jesus. You're right. I must be dreaming. This can't be real."

"Tell me what you were doing just before you arrived in this room."

"Well ... I found a strange looking crystal in the fireplace. When I looked into it, I could see this room. Suddenly I was here."

"Ah ha. My former boyfriend, Michael Ellul, had a crystal like that. It would transport a person's aura to another time and place. Were you alone in the mansion at the time?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"You're in a heap of trouble, my friend. Your physical body is in a deep trance. Unless something happens to bring you out of it, you'll die of thirst."

"Oh come off it, Raven. You say the damndest things. All of this is madness."

"Okay. I see that you don't believe a word I'm saying. But just in case you do come out of that trance, I want you to listen very carefully to what I have to say. And please, although you don't believe in the occult, do exactly as I say. Will you do that for me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, but sure I'll go along with your nonsense if I can."

"Good. Stay in the mansion for a few days. At some point, you will see a door on the second floor that you won't recall seeing before. When you do, open the door, but don't go through. If you do, you'll be stuck here as I am. Instead, wait until late evening. Shit, I wish I had access to a clock or a watch. Stay out in the hall until you see me in the room behind the door. I'll try to be there as close to midnight as I can determine. When you see me, call to me. Also, get a rope from somewhere. Throw part of it into the room, but keep the other part by you. I'll try to follow the rope out. Have you got all that?"

O'Brien shook his head. "Yeah. It sounds crazy, but I'll do exactly as you say."

Raven stood close to him and put her lips to his. Of course, she did not feel anything since he was a phantom. A moment later, he vanished. *Thank the goddess*, she thought. *Maybe I have a hope of returning to the twenty-first century.*

Peter Magbertius' voice in her head said, "Don't be too sure of that."

## CHAPTER 18. DIGGING UP PETER

Something brushed up against O'Brien's leg, taking him out of his trance. He shook his head to get the cobwebs out. "Holy shit. I must've hypnotized myself with this damn crystal." He glanced down. It was Raven's cat, Mephistopheles, that had rubbed his calf. "Where did you come from? I don't remember that Raven brought you along. In fact, I distinctly recall that she had given you to a friend in Chicago to take care of." O'Brien tugged at his beard. "I'm supposed to be the illusionist, but ever since I met Raven, all sorts of weird things seem to be happen around her."

The cat meowed.

"You must be awfully hungry ... and thirsty. Raven's been gone for a week now."

He put the crystal on the mantle where the old bottle had been, picked the cat up and brought her into the kitchen. He found a bowl and filled it with water, which he put down for Mephistopheles. The only thing he could find to feed her was a frozen steak. "That Raven. She brings her cat and doesn't even bring cat food." He thawed the steak out on in the microwave, cut it in half and chopped one half into small pieces for the feline. The other half he placed in the broiler for own dinner.

While Mephistopheles ate and drank and he made a salad, he thought, *A strange coincidence. Raven mysteriously vanishes. At the same time, her cat just as mysteriously appears. Raven always claimed to be a witch. Could she really do spells, and one went awry so that she turned herself in a cat?*

He seemed to hear tinkling laughter in his mind. *Right. It's insane to think that way*. This train of thought started him thinking about the dream or vision he had while gazing into the crystal. *It all seemed so real*, he thought.

He seemed to hear a voice in his head that was not his own. "It was real," it said.

"Oh shit, I really am going mad. Now I'm hearing voices."

"No. You're not crazy. It's me. Look down at your feet."

O'Brien lowered his eyes. Mephistopheles was staring at him. O'Brien put his hands to his head. "Oh no. I am nuts. I think the cat's talking to me."

"Don't be a fool. After all that has happened, can't you believe in a telepathic cat? I'm no ordinary feline. I'm Raven's familiar. You know, what you would call a demon in animal form."

O'Brien was stunned. He had only two choices, either believe the cat was talking to him or that he was insane. His thoughts did not seem muddled or crazed. He decided to take a leap of faith and believe in the occult. He recalled all the strange events that had occurred since he was introduced to Raven. For some of them, the only explanation was that the paranormal was real.

"Okay Mephistopheles. Since you're a demon, tell me where Raven is."

"You already know. You were there."

"Are you talking about that strange dream or vision I hypnotized myself into having?"

"Yes. Your aura traveled back to the eighteenth century."

O'Brien stroked his beard. "So, what you're saying is that she's time traveled to the past. But how could she do that?"

"She told you that too. Through the door."

He thought a bit, recalling the conversation he had with Raven while under the spell of the crystal. He remembered that she told him to wait until he saw a door on the second floor that had not been there previously and what to do if it appeared.

By this time his steak was done. He ate dinner and drank a bottle of Budweiser. Mephistopheles and he had no more telepathic conversations. After dinner, he went up to the second floor and counted doors. *If an extra door turns up, I'll know by the count.*

The next day he drove into town and bought a clothesline and cat food.

\* \* \* \*

Moments after O'Brien vanished, Cassandra came storming into the room. "I heard a man's voice in here." She waved a butcher knife in the air in a threatening manner. "Are you having a dalliance with my husband?"

Raven's eyes went wide, sure that the mad woman was about stab her. "Wait Cassandra. How could I be talking to Peter? He's dead." To prove her point, she threw open the highboy doors. Magbertius' head stared out at them.

Cassandra lowered the knife. "Of course. I do not know what I was thinking of." She gazed into Peter's dead eyes. "Yes, my dear. The night of your arising is almost here." She closed the cabinet. To Raven,

she said, "Who were you talking to then? I distinctly heard a man's voice."

Raven made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "There's no man here, as you can see."

Cassandra held her candle up high and peered around.

"Perhaps it was one of the servants in a nearby room."

"Yes. I suppose so." Nonetheless, Cassandra appeared doubtful and suspicious. "Well, that's neither here nor there. Tomorrow night is the night of the dark moon. I will come for you as the witching hour is nigh."

Raven shuddered. The following evening she and Cassandra would perform the necromancy necessary to bring Peter Magbertius back from the dead. She hoped that the time travel door would appear to O'Brien before that awful event and that what she told him to do would work. She did not know what would happen if Magbertius was brought back to life and did not want to find out.

After Cassandra left and the sound of her door closing reached Raven's ears, Raven went down the hall to the storeroom, sat in there and waited. When hours went by and nothing happened, she became too sleepy to stay up any longer and returned to her room. Before she went to bed, she felt the tug of the malignant head. She opened the cabinet doors and fell under Peter's awful gaze.

His voice came into her head. "Do you think that little trick of yours will save you from me?" Evil laughter filled her mind. "I heard the whole conversation between you and that man from the future. I will have you long before that happens."

Those dead eyes bored into her. It became more and more difficult to resist his demands. She reached out to close the cabinet door, but could not. She removed her shift and stood naked in front of the thing. The eyes roved over her body making her feel violated. Finally, he allowed her to dress, close the cabinet and go to bed. She lay there shivering with horror. Never in her whole life had she ever been so afraid of anyone or anything as she was of Peter Magbertius.

\* \* \* \*

The next night, Cassandra came to her room late as promised. She told Raven to throw on her negligee and follow her. She carried a lantern and led Raven down the stairs to the first floor and out a rear door.

Because the moon was new, the night sky was filled with stars. Nonetheless, to Raven's mind, their sparkling beauty, the chirping and croaking of insects and toads only made the night seem malignant, as though Nature frowned upon the profane desecration they were about. The humidity was oppressive. An earthy slightly decayed odor rose from the wet ground. Not a breeze stirred as they walked in silence.

An owl hooted, answered by a raven's caw, the sounds of midnight in a graveyard.

Cassandra opened the gravediggers shack. She retrieved two shovels and a two wheeled cart. She placed the shovels on the cart. "Help me pull this thing."

Although Raven knew what awful task lay before them, she asked, "What're we going to do?"

"You shall see. Come on, we do not wish any person to see what we are about."

They pulled the cart to Peter's grave. Cassandra took the shovels off the cart and handed one to Raven. "Dig."

Perspiration dripped down Raven's back. This was exactly what she feared. They were going to dig up Peter's body. But why? Was this unspeakable task being done because of Cassandra's deranged mind? Did she believe that she could simply place Peter's head with his body, and it would come to life?

They dug. The work was hard, and Raven's shift was soaked through with perspiration. Her heart pumped fearlessly not only from the exertion, but the dread of what they were digging up. With each shovel full, the earth became ripe with the odor of mold and decay. Raven's hair, garments and fingernails became filthy as they stood inside the deepening hole. After a couple of hours, Cassandra's shovel hit something hard with a loud thud that broke the awful stillness. She handed Raven the lantern while she brushed the top layer of dirt off the rotting pine coffin. To Raven's disgust, worms and bugs crawled from it.

"Help me lift it up on end."

Raven placed the lantern on the edge of deep pit. In the gloom, she and Cassandra lifted one end of the coffin so that it rested against one dirt wall. "Cousin Agnes, climb up and pull it up. I'll push from below."

Raven scrambled up the dirt wall. This was not an easy task. Loose soil broke under her hands and her feet as she tried to find purchase, causing her to slide down six inches for each foot of progress. With a massive effort she got her elbows over the top and crawled out. Her shift and negligee was torn and filthy. She brushed herself off as well as she could and reached down to grasp the handle on the top end of the coffin.

Cassandra said, "On the count of three, you pull, and I will shove from below. One ... two ... three ... heave."

Raven yanked with all her might. Although it was quite heavy, the coffin came up and with a little maneuvering, slid along the ground.

"Help me up."

Raven reached down into the hole again and helped Cassandra out of it. Together they loaded the casket onto the cart. Afterwards they filled the hole. A strange thought came to Raven. When she visited the grave site in the twenty-first century, she had felt no presence of Peter Magbertius, only that of Cassandra. Is this why? Had Peter's coffin been removed by her and Cassandra in 1732?

With difficulty they pulled the cart up the hill to the house and carried the coffin inside and laid it down on the kitchen floor. After a short rest, Cassandra ordered, "Down to the cellar."

Maneuvering the heavy object down the narrow stairs was difficult. Finally, they got it into the basement and laid it on a work bench. Cassandra found a cat's paw which she used to break the seals. When she opened the coffin, the stench of death was released into the room. Raven peered into the box curiously. Inside was a moldy headless skeleton with chunks of decayed flesh and bits of cloth clinging to it.

"Now we must fetch his head and the vessel."

They went up to Raven's room. Cassandra placed the head back in the hat box and told Raven to get the old bottle off the wardrobe. She handed Raven the lamp, and they returned to cellar.

*How can I stop this?* thought Raven.

Peter Magbertius' voice in her head said, "You cannot. Soon I will live again."

Raven realized that she was powerless to disobey.

Cassandra said, "Come over here. I need help to move Peter's body." She stood next to the rotted coffin with her hands on her hips.

With dread, Raven came over. Cassandra said, "Take the legs. I'll take the shoulders."

"Wh-where are we going with it."

"Over there." She pointed to the iron pentacle imbedded in the floor. "We are to place it in the middle of the star."

Although Raven disliked even touching the decayed awful thing, she obeyed. She grasped an ankle with each hand. When Cassandra was ready, she said, "Lift now. Slowly and carefully. Peter's body has become fragile over its ten year rest."

Raven nodded. They carefully lifted the skeleton from the coffin and laid it on the pentagram. On the way, a hand fell off. Cassandra retrieved it, dusted the dirt from the earth floor from it and placed it by the bony wrist. She took the head out of the box and put it above the skeletal shoulders. She arranged the body so that the head, the arms and the legs each pointed toward a point of the star. She positioned the clay bottle above Magbertius' head. She proceeded to remove the seal from the bottle.

Raven cried out, "You're not going to release the djinn, are you? It's an evil thing."

"Djinn? What are you talking about? This vessel contains the essence of Peter, his spirit, his soul."

## CHAPTER 19. INTRUDERS

For several nights in a row at midnight, O'Brien counted doors in the second floor hallway. He kept telling himself that he was acting crazy, that he should be seeing a shrink, instead hanging around Riverlook and listening to voices in his head. Sometimes Mephistopheles would rub up against him. As a result, he grew fond of the cat. Nonetheless, she stopped sending him telepathic messages.

On the night of the new moon he decided to give up. It had been two weeks since Raven disappeared.

He decided that the next day he would check in with the state police to see whether they had heard anything new concerning Raven and call his agent to get him a new gig. He went to bed at ten o'clock. After he had been asleep for some time, Mephistopheles, leaped on his bed and meowed loudly. O'Brien yawned and rubbed the cat under the chin. "What's the matter, Meph? Miss your mistress? I do too."

Mephistopheles' voice in head said, "Danger. Danger."

"Danger? From what?"

Then he heard footsteps. He quickly slipped out of bed, pulled on his trousers and peeked out the door. He saw no one in the hall, but he heard people downstairs. There were at least two and could be more.

They did not make any attempt to be quiet. Apparently they thought the house was empty. He crept down to the room that Raven had used when she had been alone in the house. He removed her pistol from her holster and slapped in a full clip that he retrieved from the night stand drawer.

He returned to the hall and crept downstairs as far as the landing. He heard people chanting. By peeking around the corner, he could see into the ballroom. Several men and women, dressed in black robes with hoods covering their faces, stood with arms raised toward the portrait of Peter Magbertius. They sang his praises as though he were a messiah. Perhaps he was of their religion. He counted them. There were exactly thirteen. *The Thirteen*, he thought. *These are the people that Abdul Mujib was working for. They must be the ones who kidnapped Raven.*

At first he thought about calling the police, but decided that the cops would merely arrest them for trespassing, might even let them go if they left peacefully. Apparently they were there for some sort of meeting or religious service. If he listened awhile, they might reveal where they had taken Raven and what they did with her.

After they finished chanting and making mysterious signs with their fingers and hands, one of their number got up and faced toward O'Brien. He pulled back. After the man began to speak, O'Brien chanced a peek. Because of the man's hood, it was difficult to determine which way he was looking. Since he did not seem aware of O'Brien's presence, O'Brien assumed that he had not been spotted. The man was concentrating on his flock and what he was about to say.

He said, "Our leader, the great sorcerer, Peter Magbertius, will not be pleased. We have failed him. The fool, Abdul-Azim Mujib, who we planned to make one of us, did not complete the task we assigned him as the final step of his initiation, a mission preordained by Peter Magbertius himself in the holy grimoire he left as legacy. Not only did Mujib fail to retrieve the relic, but it has been lost."

O'Brien thought, *The relic he's referring to must be that old bottle that Raven and Abdul were so concerned about. But, if they have Raven, the bottle must not be with her. He says that it's lost. Apparently they don't know where it is.* This puzzled him. He had assumed that Raven and the bottle were taken together.

The intruder went on with his speech. "We believe the federal agent, Martin Kopinski, gave the relic to a private investigator by the name of Raven Lenore. We have traced her movements. She went to Albany with the illusionist, The Great Mephisto. Later they were known to come here. Mephisto returned to Albany for his performance. After he left, Sister X entered the house. The Lenore woman was not here. She searched the house, but could not find the relic. Since that time, The Great Mephisto has reported her missing to the police."

One of the hooded figures in his audience said, "Where is the illusionist now?"

The spokesman stretched out his arm and pointed to the place where O'Brien was hiding. "Right there, on the staircase landing."

*Oh shit*, thought O'Brien, *busted*. He came out of hiding and pointed the gun at the group of hooded people gaping at him. "That's right. It's me, The Great Mephisto. Now, who are you people, and what did you do with Raven?" He stepped down to the bottom of the stairs.

The man who did most of the talking said, "If you're talking about Ms. Lenore, we had nothing to do with her disappearance. She absconded with our property, and somehow escaped our surveillance of Riverlook."

"Your property? That clay bottle. That's a laugh. Your pawn, Abdul murdered a man to steal that thing."

"It was ours originally. And it is unfortunate that Mister Mujib was not only an incompetent, but a psychopath. We must be more careful about the type of people we recruit from now on."

"So you claim you did not kidnap Raven, nor take the bottle."

"We are guilty of neither."

"Who are you then? The Thirteen?"

"We sometimes go by that name. We're a religious organization, although ignorant people have accused us of being a cult. We're witches."

"Wiccans?"

"No. Wiccans worship old pagan gods. We know those deities never existed. We study the paranormal and have learned many occult secrets by doing so, but we're not criminals."

"What about your ties to al-Qaeda?"

"I think you got that idea because Mujib was a Muslim. None of the thirteen belong to any other organized religious organization than our own. None of us are from the Mideast, nor have ancestors from that region. It's absurd to think we have such ties."

"Okay, I see. You're just a new age religious bunch who have lost your clay bottle. You hired Abdul to steal it for you, not knowing that he was a psychotic murderer. You know nothing about Raven's disappearance. Suppose I believe all that. Why are you trespassing on this property?"

"It's not us who are trespassing. *It is* you. Peter Magbertius still owns this house and the grounds around it. We're members of his coven."

"What? Magbertius has been dead for three hundred years. The owner of this property is a real estate agent by the name of Sam Ryan. Raven and I rented this house from him."

"Ryan lied to you. He does not have a clear deed to this property. Our lawyers have him in probate court. According to Peter Magbertius' will, this property is to remain in his name for perpetuity, and the ancestors of his coven, us, The Thirteen, have the right to use it in any manner we please until the day that he returns to claim it."

"Which will be never."

"That's not what we believe. We've studied the history of Peter Magbertius and his grimoire. He has a plan to return from the dead."

O'Brien noticed that several of the group had circled around. A couple of them were approaching him from the sides. He backed up until his heels rubbed up against the riser on the bottom step. "Well, unless you have proof of that, I'm going to regard you people as the trespassers. Now, please leave."

"I don't think so. It strikes me that you might know something about where Ms. Lenore has taken our property. We must have it back."

He slowly approached O'Brien. The others too crowded the illusionist.

O'Brien waved the pistol. "Stay back, or I'll shoot one of you. As far as I'm concerned you're not only trespassers, but involved in the murder of Theodorus Athenopoulos. For all I know, you came here to kill me. It would be self defense."

"Quite the jailhouse lawyer, aren't you?"

"I'm calling the police." O'Brien reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

While he fumbled with it with one hand, his attention was distracted from the intruders. Something struck his head, and the room spun. He fell into an abyss of nothingness.

\* \* \* \*

O'Brien groaned. Not only did he have pain where he had been hit, but his arms and legs were pins and needles. He tried to move. He could not. He realized that he was lying in a bed with his ankles and wrists tied to the bed posts. He opened his eyes. The room was gloomy with only a small amount of light coming from a source he could not see.

A voice that he recognized as belonging to the man who had spoken at the meeting of The Thirteen said, "Ah, I see that you're awake. I'm sorry that we had to treat you in such a rough manner, but we are determined to get the relic back. In fact, it is imperative that we do so."

"Unless you kill me, as soon as I get loose, I'll report you to the police. You'll be charged with kidnapping and unlawful imprisonment."

The man chuckled. "And who will you say committed these crimes. You will say The Thirteen, but the police and the FBI already have us listed as suspected terrorists. You have not seen our faces. You do not know our names."

"But they'll know that you use this mansion as a headquarters. They'll be watching it."

The man nodded his head. "That could be a problem."

There was cold menace in his voice. O'Brien realized that he might've signed his own death warrant. He felt a chill of terror cool his blood.

"I see that you're trembling. Don't worry. I won't kill you unless you refuse to cooperate."

"Cooperate? How?"

"First, you must answer my questions. Truthfully. Otherwise, not only will you die, but in an extremely painful manner. Do you understand?"

O'Brien nodded, too daunted to speak. His stomach felt as though someone had placed a cold stone into it.

"Where is Ms. Lenore?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. She was here when I left for Albany two weeks ago on a Friday. The following Monday, when I returned, she was gone. There was no note or anything indicating where she was gone. She took nothing with her, no clothes, not even underwear, other than what she was wearing,

no purse, not her gun, nothing. I waited for a couple of hours for her to return and finally notified the police."

The man put his hooded face close to O'Brien's so that they were eye to eye. O'Brien could smell the man's garlicky breath. "Are sure that her disappearance was not simply a scheme cooked up between you and her so that we would be fooled into thinking she had been kidnapped?"

"That's ridiculous. We didn't even know you people would come here. In fact, I did not even believe in your existence until today. I thought that you were a figment of Abdul's imagination."

The man slapped him hard. His face stung. "You lie. You said she took nothing with. What of the relic?"

"I know it's not where Raven put it when we arrived here. But she could've hidden somewhere while I was gone. Have you searched the house for it?"

"Not a thorough search, but we will. So far, Mr. Mephisto, you have not been cooperative. I'm afraid we need to use more extreme measures on you."

"But I've told you all I know."

"Again you lie. I'm sure there is something you're holding back. I can see it in your eyes."

O'Brien realized the truth of that. He had not told him about his vision, the telepathic cat and the extra door that was supposed to appear.

## CHAPTER 20. THE RAISING OF PETER

"Blood is required," Cassandra said. She took the carving knife from her belt where she had stowed it and grabbed Raven. Raven turned pale expecting that the mad woman was going to stab her in the heart. Instead she made a slit in Raven's wrist and allowed her blood to flow over the skeleton. She handed Raven a strip of cloth to bind the wound. She slit her own wrist and again allowed blood to flow over the corpse. She replaced the knife in her belt and bandaged her own wrist..

She said a incantation in Latin of which Raven only understood the words *liberato*, *spiritus*, and *corpus*. When she was finished, she broke the seal on the bottle, twisted in a corkscrew, held the bottle with one hand and slowly pulled out a cork. It came loose with a pop. Raven looked on with horror and terror. The feeling that ancient evil had been set free so overwhelmed her that she became weak and dizzy. A gray mist flowed out of the vessel and settled on the corpse of Peter Magbertius, covering every part of his skeleton and head. Dimly through the mist, Raven could see that the moldy corpse was changing. Over several minutes, muscular tissue and organs appeared, followed by blood vessels and nerves. The head became attached to the body and let out a deep sob as though it were in excruciating pain. Skin spread over the corpse like a creeping pink amoebae. After several minutes passed, the mist was gone, and Peter Magbertius was whole.

His eyes opened and stared at Cassandra. With a deep sigh, he took a breath and sat up. "Cassandra, fetch my clothes." He said it as though he had not been dead for ten years, but had only dozed off for an afternoon nap. Obviously, he was used to ordering his wife around as though she were a servant.

She immediately turned and hurried up the cellar stairs. Magbertius' eyes swiveled toward Raven, who had been standing frozen in shock by the sight of a corpse ten years in its grave turn into a living man. He

covered his genitals with his hands.

"I am sorry you had to see me in this manner, Milady," he said. He had her transfixed with his eyes.

"You're not the first man that I've seen naked," Raven replied.

"I see that as I look into your mind. You are not from this time, but from the far future, where morals and mores are quite different than at the present. I believe I would enjoy living in your world"

"I'm surprised that you didn't know that right off. It was you who brought me here."

"Ah yes, I remember now. I sent you a dream that caused you to take the vessel that held my spirit through the time door."

He stood and reached out a hand to Raven's cheek. She flinched at his touch, which she expected to cold and clammy. To her relief and surprise, it was warm and alive. His touch caused her to have mixed emotions that she was not able to sort out. On the one hand, she cringed with horror as she recalled the moldy corpse he had been minutes before and with fear of his great occult power. On the other hand, he was a handsome viral man which she felt as attracted to as she had the first time she had seen his portrait.

Also, his mention of the time door gave her hope that he could return her to her own time.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "Although you are under my power, I will not harm you. I need your aid to go to your world."

"You wish to time travel to the twenty-first century."

He sighed. "I'm afraid I must. As you most likely know, these days they execute witches and sorcerers. Despite the fact that I have been dead for ten years, I am sure that were the authorities to discover that I live again, they would not hesitate to execute my sentence again. Like you, they fear my power."

Soon Cassandra returned with his garments which she handed to him. He said, "Please ladies, turn your backs toward me."

Raven and Cassandra turned away. A few moments later, Magbertius said, "You may look my way again."

Raven gasped. The clothing Cassandra had brought was the same ones he had worn when his portrait had been painted. He stood before her, proud and arrogant, looking as he had in the painting and her dream. "Let us quit this cellar. I am famished after not eating for ten years."

They went up to the dining room, and Magbertius rang for the servants. A few minutes later, the gray-haired butler appeared. His eyes went wide when he saw Magbertius. "Master Peter, you're alive."

"Yes, Alfred. And famished. Wake the cook and have her make something which can be prepared quickly. And bring wine, some of my best claret."

The butler hustled back out. In a few moments he returned with one of the young maids, and they set the table. He also had brought the wine and poured a small amount in Magbertius' glass. Magbertius swirled it around and took a sip. "Ah yes. Once again I am able to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh." He winked at Raven. To Alfred, he said, "This will do."

Alfred finished filling his glass, poured for Raven and Cassandra and headed back to the kitchen. After he was gone, Raven said, "Aren't you afraid that Alfred or one of the other servants will turn you in?"

Magbertius smiled wickedly. "Alfred knows too well my power. Besides, he is as loyal a slave as they come. As for the others, I believe they have been purchased recently and have no idea that I am the man who was executed for witchcraft in 1727. Come let us drink." He raised his glass. The two women followed suite. "To life."

Raven and Cassandra repeated, "To life," and sipped the wine.

Magbertius said to Cassandra, "My dear, you are quiet. Are you not happy to see me alive and well?"

Cassandra smiled sheepishly. "Of course, my husband. It simply seems so strange seeing you sitting there as you had so often in the past."

"Tell me," Raven said, "are you really alive or some sort of undead monster?"

Magbertius burst out in laughter. When he subsided, he said, "You are a blunt creature. I am really alive. 'Tis sorcery that I learned from an ancient Persian source. I am immortal in a way. However, I will take charge of that bottle. For if I something happens to my physical body again, I must hide my soul in it, so that Satan cannot claim it."

"What happens if your material body is completely destroyed, say by fire?"

"It makes no difference. I would rise from my ashes. Although I do need help, to perform the ceremony, contribute blood and so forth. But that is no problem either, for even within the bottle, I can use my powers to control someone, as I did you, my dear."

The meal was served, and conversation almost ceased altogether as the servants were continuously present, serving and removing dishes.

After tea and desert, Cassandra said, "Tis late. We should go to our beds."

Magbertius said, "I have been sleeping for ten years. You go. I will remain awake this night."

Cassandra said, "Goodnight then, my husband." She kissed him on the forehead and glanced over at Raven. "Are you coming to bed, Agnes?"

Raven saw the smoldering jealousy behind her eyes. It was obvious that she did not want him to be alone with Raven. "Of course, Cassandra. It's been a long and tiring evening. Goodnight, Sir."

"Sir? No need to be so formal. 'Tis it not customary in your time to refer to friends and acquaintances by their given names?"

"Uh, yes. Goodnight, Peter."

Cassandra glared at her.

\* \* \* \*

The intruder held a knife close to O'Brien's face. "You have a notion of where your girl friend and the relic are, don't you? I will start skinning you alive until you tell me everything." He pressed the point

against O'Brien's chest until it drew a drop of blood.

Cold sweat broke out on O'Brien's forehead. "Don't. I'll tell you what I know, or think I know, but you won't believe it. It's too fantastic."

"That's better. Try me. I'm good at believing the unbelievable." He withdrew the knife, but kept it in O'Brien's sight.

"I have reason to think that Raven took the relic into the past, to the time when Peter Magbertius was alive."

"She went back in time? How did she do that?"

"I'm not sure. It has something to do with a mysterious door that appears and disappears."

The intruder stroked his chin. "A door into a past time. I have read about such things, but was skeptical. However, if The Master created it, it may exist. It would explain a lot about how Ms. Lenore seemed to have vanished into thin air without a trace. Where and when is this door supposed to appear?"

"I don't know when. All I know is that there are twelve doors in the hallway. I counted them. Should there be thirteen, the extra one would be the door through time."

"Okay. Now tell me how you know all this."

"I found a crystal in the fireplace downstairs. When I stared into it, I became hypnotized. In my hypnotic state, it seemed as though my soul or aura, as you people call it, went to where Raven is. She spoke to me and told me about the door."

"And you were to join her in the eighteenth century?"

O'Brien hesitated. He did not want to tell this person about the scheme to rescue Raven. "Yes."

Even through the mask, O'Brien noticed a wide grin. "I will go in your place."

*Oh my God, O'Brien thought. I've put Raven in further danger. I must find a way to warn her .*

The intruder left the room. As soon as he left, O'Brien, who, as part of his act, made many escapes after being tied up, slipped his hands out the loops. He reached into the drawer of the night stand and found pencil and paper. He wrote a note to Raven. He concentrated on the cat, Mephistopheles. Moments later, she leaped on the bed. He stuffed the note under her collar. He whispered into the cat's ear, "If the magic door appears, go to Raven."

Mephistopheles' voice in his said, "I will deliver your message." She leaped off the bed and went out the door. O'Brien slipped his hands back into the loops which he was tied with.

The intruder returned a few minutes later. "I counted the doors on this floor. There are thirteen, but they all look the same. I opened a few but they all led to bedrooms or storage rooms. You must show me which one is the time travel door." He untied O'Brien. One of his men stood in the doorway with and AK-47 pointed at him.

O'Brien rubbed his wrists. "If I can. You see I've never seen it myself."

They went up and down the hall. One door was slightly ajar, enough for a cat to squeeze through. O'Brien said, "I don't recall this door being here before."

"It must be the one." But as he reached toward the latch, pink sunlight poured through a skylight. Morning had broken. As the light fell on the door, it disappeared to be replaced by a blank wall.

The intruder cursed. He turned angrily toward O'Brien. "Is this one of your illusions, Great Mephisto? Have you concocted a story to throw me off the track of where Ms. Lenore is really hiding?"

O'Brien sighed. "I only wish. I'm good, but I can't do the impossible. As improbable as it seems, whatever makes this door come and go is real magic."

## CHAPTER 21. A MESSAGE FROM O'BRIEN

Something scratching at Raven's door woke her from a sound sleep. She had been exhausted from the labor and emotional turmoil of the awakening of Magbertius from the dead. Because she was terrified by him, she had locked her door before retiring. As she came awake, her fears returned in force. Was the mad Cassandra trying to enter to kill her? Or was the resurrected Peter Magbertius out there wanting to claim and subjugate her? *Don't be paranoid*, she told herself. *It's probably one of the servants.*

Nonetheless, she wished she had brought the Glock through the time door.

"Who's there?"

There was no reply, simply the incessant scratching, as though someone was trying pick the lock. Raven got up and lit a candle. She went to door and listened. Damned if it didn't sound like an animal. Since she had come through the mysterious door, she had not seen any pets. She held the candleholder ready to use as a weapon, unlocked the door, opened it a crack and peered into the dark hallway. Something pushed the door further ajar and rubbed against her leg. Startled, she leaped back, almost dropping the candle. She looked down. It was a cat. *Damned if it didn't resemble Mephistopheles*, she thought.

As she reached down to pet the animal, a voice in her head said, "It is me. Check my collar."

She picked up the cat and held the candle close. It was Mephistopheles all right. A note was under her collar. She put the cat on the bed and retrieved the message. Before opening up the scrap of paper, she whispered, "How did you get here?"

"Through a door," it answered her telepathically.

"The time door. Then it's open to the twentieth-first century." She started toward the door to the hall.

"Don't be hasty," said Mephistopheles. "Read the note first."

Raven stopped and unfolded the note. She held a candle over it. It read: "Darling Raven, The Thirteen have broken into Riverlook. They have me prisoner. I fear they may force me to tell them about the time door. Be careful. Love, John."

Raven grew thoughtful. What would she do if she met one of Magbertius' followers? And what were they doing in the twenty-first century anyway? Nonetheless, she had to chance it. She needed to get away from Magbertius before he enslaved her completely, which she was sure would happen soon. With

Mephistopheles tucked under one arm and the candle in her other hand, she tiptoed down the hall toward the room through whose door she had arrived from the twenty-first century. Before she reached it, however, Magbertius' deep commanding voice came from somewhere nearby. "Miss Lenore, where are you going at this late hour?"

She turned toward the sound of his voice. He was at the head of the stairs, looking by the light of the candle as handsome and manly as ever.

"This cat must've wandered into the house and my bedroom. I was about to put it out."

He let out a hardy laugh. "You forget, milady, that I read minds. The time door is open, and you intended to return to your own world. Very well, we shall go together."

The idea of bringing Magbertius to the twenty-first century did not appeal to her. Nonetheless, she had no choice. He grabbed her arm and propelled her toward the storeroom. "Hurry," he said. "Twill not stay open forever."

As they approached the door, the dawn's early light came through the skylight, taking away the gloom of the hallway. "Curses," he cried. "'Tis too late. 'Tis open only during the dark of the night. 'Twill not open again for at least two weeks."

Raven was aghast at having to remain in the eighteenth century another two weeks. "Is that how often it opens? Every two weeks?"

"More or less. It does not keep a regular schedule. It may be even longer before it opens again. Believe me, I am as impatience as you. I must leave here before the authorities learn that I live again." He eyed the cat and smiled. "This cat also knows the way. She came from the future, did she not? I see it in your mind. You think of yourself as a witch since you have a smidgen of psychic power, and this is your familiar."

"Actually she belongs to a powerful demon."

His eyes went wide. "I see that you do not lie. Can you call this Morgaine from the abyss at will?"

Raven sighed. "I'm afraid not. Sometimes she helps me out of trouble, but like the time door, she's not reliable."

He noticed O'Brien's note in her hand. "A message from the future. That is why your cat is here. Give it to me."

Raven gripped it tightly. "No. It's personal."

"Again you forget my telepathic power. Who is this O'Brien?" He paused, staring hard at Raven. "Ah. He is your lover. And he is in trouble. But I do not understand who the intruders are which he refers to. The thirteen in my coven will be long dead by the twenty-first century. Some, if not most, have gone to their maker already."

"So, you did not reveal your secret of immortality to your cohorts. Perhaps they have gone through the time door."

"It matters not. I will deal with them after you and I go to the future."

"If they don't deal with you first. By my time, there have been great improvements in weaponry. They could put a hundred holes through you before you could raise your hand to cast a spell."

"I see that you speak the truth. When we go, I needs be cautious."

By then, the servants were coming down from the third floor to start their duties. In addition, Cassandra came stalking out of her room. She frowned deeply when she saw Magbertius with his hand on Raven's arm, and the couple in deep discussion.

"Husband, and Cousin Agnes. You two have arisen early."

Magbertius turned to her and returned her glare. "I have not slept this night. I spent the entire time downstairs in my den. The cat that your cousin holds wandered into the house somehow. Now she wishes to keep it as a pet. Shall we allow it?"

"You are lord and master here. 'Tis not for me to say whether our guest may keep a pet."

"Very well then. I allow it. Let us go downstairs and have the servants serve breakfast. The cat may also be hungry."

He let go of Raven's arm and stalked away. Cassandra gave Raven a nasty glance and followed him. Raven wondered when Cassandra's jealousy would cause Cassandra to do something rash, such as murder her. She shivered. She would have to keep a sharp eye out for an ambush. She recalled the evening when she saw Cassandra prowling the hallway with a butcher knife in her hand.

As she strolled down the stair behind the Magbertiuses, she tried to think of some way she could return to her own time without Magbertius tagging along.

Mephistopheles, who was contentedly cleaning herself in Raven's arms, said telepathically, "Return another way. Don't go through the door."

"How can I do that?" she whispered in the cat's ear.

"There must be fifty ways to travel through time. My former mistress did it all the time."

\* \* \* \*

The leader of the thirteen yawned. "I and the others of our coven have been awake all night. I think we should all have breakfast and then sleep. Tonight we will see whether the door to the eighteenth century returns."

One of the intruders cooked a fine breakfast. O'Brien kept waiting for a chance to make a break, but the coven was well armed with shotguns, pistols and automatic rifles. They watched him like a hawk.

While they ate, he tried to engage the leader in conversation in the hope that he would talk about himself. "I realize that you don't want to reveal your real names, but do you have monikers? Something I can call you."

"You may call me One. You need not speak to any of the others."

"Okay One. I don't get what you people are about. Why do you heap such praise upon a man dead for

three centuries? When I first heard you guys, you sounded like a church choir praising The Lord."

"Christians worship a man dead two thousand years. Muslims, a man dead almost as long. All religions worship dead or mythical people. But our coven is not exactly a religion. We do not believe Peter Magbertius to be a god or a prophet. But he was the greatest sorcerer who ever lived. He will awaken soon. It has been prophesied."

O'Brien thought, *Just a bunch of kooks. The thing for me to do is get away from here and notify the FBI. Someone there might want to prosecute these guys for conspiracy or something since they sent that Abdul to steal that old bottle. They're also guilty of kidnapping me and unlawful imprisonment.* "So. When Magbertius rises from the dead, what will he do for you?"

"Teach us sorcery and the secret of immortality."

One by one the other intruders left. Apparently, they were returning to their ordinary activities. O'Brien suspected that for some of them this whole deal added adventure and excitement to their otherwise boring lives. Finally, only One and a man who One called Brutus were the only members of The Thirteen left.

One said, "Now you and I shall go upstairs and sleep. Tonight we will see if the time door returns."

He led the way, with Brutus following close behind, his AK-47 trained on O'Brien's back. One made O'Brien stretch out his arms and legs and tied him to the bed posts as before. "Must you tie me up," he protested. "It's very uncomfortable. How am I supposed to sleep?"

"That's your problem. Brutus is not the smartest man alive. I'm afraid you will pull off one of your illusions on him." He turned to his cohort. "Watch him carefully. If he escapes, it will be on you. Goodnight you two. I will return after a well-earned rest."

Brutus merely grunted and plopped down in a chair near the door with his weapon across his lap. O'Brien said nothing as One stalked from the room.

After he left, O'Brien tried to start a conversation, but Brutus would not respond to his questions and statements. He did, however, yawn. This gave O'Brien hope. He watched as the intruder began to nod, and suddenly lift his chin as he woke up again. Like his leader, he had probably been awake many hours. O'Brien felt that One was a fool for posting only one sleepy guard. After a couple of hours went by, the jerking upright ceased, and Brutus began to snore.

O'Brien quickly used his magician knowledge to release himself from his bonds. He slipped out of the bed and found his shoes, but did not put them on. He tiptoed past Brutus and as quietly as possible opened the door. He peeked into the hallway. One was not out there. He left the bedroom and made his way down the stairs and out the front door. Once he was out on the porch, he slipped on his shoes. He looked around for his car. It was where he parked it. He got behind the steering wheel, started the engine and peeled rubber down the driveway. As he had figured, he saw One and Brutus run out of the house through his rearview mirror. Brutus aimed the automatic rifle at him, but One put his hand on it, forcing it down.

He drove down the rutted driveway and out on the narrow access road as fast as he dared. He checked his mirror often. Soon he saw the SUV that had been parked by the mansion behind him and rapidly gaining. He increased his speed on the curved road as much as he dared, whipping around corners so fast that his car skidded, and he almost lost control. Finally, he reached the main highway. He raced

along this at thirty-miles-an-hour above the speed limit. Nonetheless, the SUV remained on his tail.

He decided that the best way to hide from his pursuers was to drive into a public area where he could mingle with other people. He drove into the parking lot of a mall. As quickly as possible, he left the car and ran into the mall. Since it was Monday morning, the mall was almost empty. He ran into Victoria's

Secret and pretended to be check out sexy nightgowns in rack far back in the store. Although hidden from the entrance, he could watch anyone coming into the store. When a clerk came up to him, he waved her away. "Just browsing," he said.

One and Brutus walk rapidly past the store. They had their masks off, but he could tell who they were by their clothes. He had to laugh. They looked ordinary as hell. No one would take them for conspirators, kidnappers, murderers and cult members. After they passed the store entrance, he ran out, hopped back in his car and drove toward the nearest New York Thruway entrance.

## CHAPTER 22. THE POWER OF PETER

For the next few days, Raven's life settled into a pattern dictated by playing the visiting cousin. Since Magbertius spent most of his days either in his laboratory or the library, Cassandra introduced her to the usual activities of women of privilege in eighteenth century New York, which was supervising the servants, cooking pastries, mulling wine, spinning and weaving and other domestic pursuits. One day she asked Raven whether she played a musical instrument.

"The guitar, a little."

"Good. We can amuse Peter this evening."

She found their guitar, handed it to Raven and sat down at the spinet. She taught Raven a few songs popular at the time. They sang a duet accompanying themselves on the instruments. Cassandra had a beautiful voice. Raven's was lower in timbre, but not bad. They actually sounded well together.

After dinner that evening, they gave a little concert for the benefit of Magbertius. He was quite pleased with the performance and even joined in with his deep baritone voice. Raven found the time spent quite enjoyable. She did not mind that Magbertius often glanced at her with unusual interest and an admiring smile.

After the performance, the servants brought brandy, and the three conversed about a number of topics, such as art, philosophy and ancient history. Magbertius had read all the classic authors and had a good grasp of history and politics. His scholarship gave Raven something to admire about the handsome man besides his looks and physique. Despite his sometimes gruff manner and controlling nature, he spoke to her and Cassandra with respect and genteel politeness. She became comfortable around him. The fact that he was a sorcerer who had been raised from the dead no longer seemed to matter. In many ways, he reminded her of her father when he was alive.

For a woman of these times, Cassandra held up her part of the conversation well. As a woman of breeding and a lot of schooling by Magbertius, she had become more educated than most women of her class in the American colonies.

When, out of curiosity, Raven brought up the colonies' relationship with England, Magbertius said, "No doubt, some day in the future, there may be split between the British colonies in America and the crown. Many people here in the English colonies have no love for royalty. In fact the more educated among us,

believe that self-rule is inevitable.” He smiled. “I see in your mind that the split will definitely come about. There will be a revolution, and our poor colonies will grow to become an empire as great as that of ancient Rome. Your twenty-first century sounds like an interesting time.”

Cassandra said, “So it is true. You came from the far future.”

Raven nodded. “I'd like to go back.

"No wonder you speak and act so strange. What is the future like?"

"Filled with wonders that you would not believe."

"How strange."

About that time, thunder began to rumble and the wind whistled around the house. Magbertius said, “I would best look after the servants to make sure that they latch the doors and shutters properly. It seems we are in for a blow.”

Cassandra yawned. “And I shall go up to my bed. Are you coming, Cousin Agnes?” She insisted on using that name even though there were only the three of them and the servants present.

Raven knew better than refuse. Besides, the brandy had made her sleepy. “Yes, Cassandra. I'm ready for sleep. Goodnight, Cousin Peter.”

The familiar tone earned Raven a sour look from Cassandra. Raven had enough brandy in her not to care. If Cassandra had not been present, she would have been tempted to kiss Magbertius on the cheek.

After bidding Cassandra goodnight, she entered her room and carefully locked it from the inside. She looked around for Mephistopheles. She was curled up before the fireplace. Outdoors, the storm vented its fury. Lightning crashed, and the house rattled with the moaning wind. Rain drum rolled against the pane. For a while she stood in front of the window watching nature's fireworks. She could not get thoughts of Magbertius out of her mind. He was like the men she dreamed up in her fantasies, manly and virile, yet well-educated and a true gentleman. She tried to turn her thoughts toward O'Brien and escape to her own time. But, her life before coming to the seventeen thirties had become to seem vague and unreal, more like something she had read about rather than lived through. It was as though she belonged in this time and place.

After a while she abandoned her storm watching and removed her several layers of garments, everything except for the thin shift, and crawled under the bed clothes. As the wind whistled outside, she hugged herself and wondered what it would be like to be held by Magbertius. That was her last thought before she slipped into a deep sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Something woke her. She was not sure whether it was a sound or something else. She listened carefully. Since the storm had ceased, the room was silent. She glanced at the fireplace. Although it had gone out, the glowing embers showed Mephistopheles still curled up on the hearth. Suddenly the cat leaped to its feet and stared toward the door.

The cat telepathed, “Danger approaches.”

"What danger?" she whispered.

"He comes for you."

That was all the answer Mephistopheles would give her. Raven knew she meant Magbertius. She was of two minds. One part of her was terrified of the sorcerer. The other part welcomed the man as a man.

The sound of the door opening and closing reached her ears. He must have had another key.

"Who is it?" she said in a shaky voice.

"Do not be fearful, My Dear. 'Tis only I, Peter."

His footsteps approached.

"It-it is very late, Peter. What do you want?"

He lit the candle by the side of her bed and sat down on the bed. He was wearing a men's nightgown of the period. "I think you know." He put his hands on her shoulders and gazed into her eyes. Her ability to resist melted away.

"But, you're a married man."

He smiled at her in a gentle way. "Do you believe that someone like me cares about such things as the Christian sacrament of marriage? Jesus is not my master. Nor is the Holy Bible, my book of ethics. I serve no master other than myself. From time to time, I may call on certain gods or demons for aid, but they do not control me, nor do I worship them."

"I understand. You're a sorcerer. But Cassandra is a jealous woman. What will she do if she finds out that you've come to my bedchamber?"

He chuckled. "Do you think that you are the first woman, I have had a dalliance with since I married Cassandra? My marriage to her was one of convenience, and she is well aware of the fact."

"Nonetheless, she loves you and is very jealous of any woman you even look at."

He scowled. "That is her problem. Forget her. You know that I lusted after you from the time I laid eyes on you."

"I believe it. And I felt an attraction to you when I first saw your portrait in the twenty-first century."

His closeness and manly scent made Raven shiver with anticipation of reluctant surrender. She knew that if she allowed him to make love to her, she would be lost forever. He had such a great power over women that she feared the consequences. Her breath became labored with a growing desire that was like an electrical current racing through her body. She no longer could control the temptation that he offered.

She put her arms around his neck and closed her eyes. His warm lips were on hers, his mustache and beard rough against her skin. She held him tightly, digging her nails into his back. His lips moved off her lips to her throat. His hand slipped under her shift, rested momentarily on her hip and moved up pulling the garment with it until her breasts were exposed. His mouth moved down until she felt his tongue on her breast.

She moaned with pleasure as his teeth bit lightly on her nipple. His other hand cupped the other breast and played with its nipple. In a swift movement, he whipped the garment completely away so that she

was naked. Next he took off his own gown. By candlelight, she saw his muscular chest, which was lightly covered with dark hair and thought, *This is a real man* .

She wrapped her legs around him. Ecstasy soon followed. To her amazement and delight, they had multiple orgasms together. He was not only a great lover, but an unflagging one. This was sorcery that beat Viagra by a mile.

Afterwards, as Raven rested her head on his chest, she realized she had feelings toward him that were more than lust. She was in love in a manner she could recall feeling towards any man before, not even Michael. She knew she would do anything he asked, would not stop loving him regardless of how he treated her or betrayed her. Now she knew why Cassandra put up with him. For the first time in her life she felt a passion that was beyond understanding or reason.

After a while, however, Magbertius said, "I must return to my own room now. For the time being, we will keep this little rendezvous secret from Cassandra."

Although she hated to see him leave, she understood the necessity of that.

From that night on he came to her each evening late, and each time was better than the last. If they could keep their secret affair from his wife until the time door appeared again, they could leave without bringing down her mad rage upon themselves.

\* \* \* \*

O'Brien drove all night to Chicago. After checking into a hotel, he went directly to FBI headquarters and asked for Stephen Jacobs. Jacobs was a big man with friendly, jolly manner. O'Brien introduced himself and said that he had important information about the case Martin Kopinski was working on. After they went to Jacob's office, he said, "Do you recall the murder of the importer Athenopoulos?"

"How could I forget it? Martin Kopinski showed me pictures of that psychopath did to the victim."

"Then you know that Martin thought that Mujib belonged to a secret society called The Thirteen."

"Yeah. But he could never find any solid evidence to that effect. If Mujib had lived, perhaps we could've sweated out of him."

"Well, The Thirteen are using an empty house in Rheinbeck, New York for meetings. Raven Lenore—who you know—and I went down there. While I was away for a while, she vanished. After she vanished I stayed there alone. One evening they showed up and held me prisoner. I managed to escape and came right here. I also believe they may have had something to do with Martin's death."

"Wait. Start from the beginning. Why were you and the PI in that empty house?"

O'Brien told him the whole story, how Kopinski recruited them, how Raven wanted to pursue the case even though Kopinski was dead, about Raven vanishing and what happened when The Thirteen showed up. He left out the parts that smacked of the supernatural.

When he finished, Jacobs said, "You say you did not see their faces or hear any real names mentioned?"

"No. They wore masks and used monikers. But they have some kind of obsession about that portrait of Peter Magbertius. I'm sure they'll return to Riverlook."

Jacob rubbed his chin. "Y'know, I suspected that Martin's death was no accident, but we could not prove anything. Let me talk to my boss. Maybe I can get him to reopen the case and let me go to New York with you. Wait here."

He left the office and was gone about a half hour. When he returned, he said, "Okay. It's all set. However, I can't leave for New York until next week. I have to appear in court this week. When we go down there, we'll stake out the mansion—see who comes and goes."

"Great. That'll give me time for me to catch up on a few things."

## CHAPTER 23. THE CRYSTAL FOUND

"Damn it," cried the leader of The Thirteen, whose real name was Paul Martin and who owned an automobile dealership in Rhinebeck. "We lost him. Might as well turn around and go back to Rhinecliff."

"Do you still need me?" said the one called Brutus, which was not his real name.

"No. You may as well go home. Drop me off at my lot. I'll drive a preowned over to Riverlook."

After Brutus drove Martin to his dealership, Martin went in and asked the assistant manager how things were going. He was told that they sold two new cars and four used cars so far that morning, and the repair shop had been busy.

"Great. A better than average day. Has that 2006 Buick that was in such good shape been sold yet?"

"No."

"Good. I'm going to borrow it for a while."

"Sure thing, Boss. I'll have one of the boys fill the tank and bring it around front for you."

Martin drove the Buick to Riverlook and parked it out of sight in back of the house in case O'Brien had talked some law enforcement into checking the mansion out. As he stepped into the house, he yawned. The sun was high in the sky, and he had only a couple of hours sleep the night before. He decided to take a nap.

For the next week, several times a day he climbed up to the tower and peeked out the window to see whether anyone came up the driveway. Each evening, he checked the hallway for the appearance of the magic door. A week went by, and no extra door came into being. After a week went by, he began to wonder whether O'Brien had lied to him about the Lenore woman going to the past through the mysterious door. Although he had seen it himself, he knew that the magician was the master of illusion. Perhaps he had used mirrors or something to give the impression that a door existed. It was strange the way it disappeared the moment they started to go through it. He recalled that O'Brien had said something about a crystal. Maybe the crystal was the real portal to the past.

When he searched O'Brien's room, he could not find the crystal, although he looked high and low, and into every possible hiding place. The next day he systematically searched the entire house. Finally he went down to the main hall and gazed up at Peter Magbertius' portrait. "Where could he have hid it, Master?" he asked.

The eyes of Magbertius seemed to staring directly across the room. Martin turned. The crystal was in plain sight on top of the mantle. He turned back to the portrait and bowed. "Thank you, Master."

He examined the crystal. "Now, how do you work?" It seemed to glow from an inner light. To check whether this was caused by reflected light from the chandelier, he turned off the lights in the room. Sure enough, a soft glow emanated from the glass object although the room was dark. As he stared at it, he noticed that there was motion inside it. He put it to his eye and saw a tiny cat walk through a room very like the bedrooms on the second floor. Although the room was in darkness, moonlight shining through a window allowed him to trace the cat's movements as it sashayed over to the fireplace and curled up on the hearth.

\* \* \* \*

After O'Brien and Agent Jacobs passed the gate to the Riverlook driveway, Jacobs parked O'Brien's car around a curve in the road. He said, "This is going to be difficult. If The Thirteen are in the building now, they would see us as soon as we drove up the driveway. I'm afraid we'll have to sneak up to the mansion on foot. There must be wooded areas on the property. Unless you know another way."

O'Brien shook his head. "As far as I know, this is the only entrance. But there's lots of wooded land."

The hiked back to the gate and went into a wooded area that more or less paralleled the driveway. At the top of the hill, they kept on going until they reached the back of the house.

"Look," O'Brien said. "A car's parked back here. It must belong to one of The Thirteen."

"Maybe." Jacobs brought out binoculars. "It's got dealer's plates." He wrote the number down.

O'Brien said, "What should we do now?"

"I think we should confront whoever is in there. They're obviously trespassing. Stay behind me." He drew his pistol, and they headed for the back door. It was locked, but O'Brien still had the key Sam Ryan had given him.

\* \* \* \*

Raven waited with anticipation for the arrival of Magbertius. She was still of two minds regarding him. She knew that she was obsessed with him and definitely in his power. Nonetheless, she hated herself for such emotional weakness. Many years ago she had told herself that she would be slave to no man. Yet, here she was craving his strong arms around her, willing to do anything for him, even to taking him to the future, her present, which could be disastrous..

From the height of the full moon she figured that it was near midnight. This was the time of night when he usually came to her. She heard a sound, but not the door opening. It was more like someone let out a small cry as though in surprise.

"Peter? Is that you?" She was surprised that he did not carry a candle.

There was no answer. This frightened her. Could it be Cassandra come to murder her in her sleep? Did she find out about the affair between her and Magbertius? She sat up straight in bed and lit the candle on the night stand. A tall dark shadow approached stealthily. It hesitated when the light flared, and then came over quickly.

It was neither Cassandra nor Magbertius, but a man she did not recognize. It was balding man in his

fifties with a mustache, but no beard. To her surprise, he was wearing twenty-first century clothing.

"Who are you?" she cried.

He put a finger to his lips. "Sh. Shut up, or I'll hurt you."

He was by the bed, and she could see his face. It looked ordinary enough. Although a little frightened, she did not see a weapon in his hands. She felt she could handle him with her martial arts training.

"You're from the twenty-first century, aren't you?" she whispered.

"Yes. And you must be that woman who stole the relic, Raven Lenore."

"That's right. Did you come through the time door? Is it open?" Raven's heart leaped with joy. Perhaps if she escaped to her own century, she would forget her obsession with Magbertius.

"No. I used the crystal. Give me the relic."

When Raven heard that, she laughed. "You fool. You can't harm me. You're a ghost."

"What're you talking about?" He reached out to grab her. His eyes went wide when his hands went right her. "What the hell!"

"Only your aura has traveled here. That crystal has put your body in a trance. It's very dangerous. Unless someone wakes you out of the trance, you might die of dehydration. You're one of The Thirteen, aren't you?"

The man was obviously shaken by what she had told him. "Yes."

"I hope one of your friends was with you to bring you out of the trance."

His lips began to tremble. "I was alone when I looked into the crystal. Isn't there some way I can return to my body by myself?"

Raven shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe Peter knows a way."

"Peter. You mean Peter Magbertius? Is he alive?"

"Very much so. And standing right in back of you."

Unknown to Martin, Magbertius had entered the room. He said in an angry voice, "Raven, why is this man in your room?"

Martin turned. When he saw Magbertius, he went to his knees and bowed his head to the floor. "Oh Master, you're alive."

Raven said, "He's not really here. Only his aura is. He's a disciple of yours from my time."

Magbertius contemplated this information. "Yes. I can see from your mind that you tell the truth. I recall that crystal. I created it. But I seldom use it. But this buffoon. I see that he worships me. How can that be if he is from the future where I do not exist?"

"You'll have to ask him that."

"Since he is here only in spirit, I cannot read his mind. Stand up, idiot. Tell me about yourself."

Shivering violently, Martin stood. "I-I and twelve others have traced our ancestry back to persons in your original coven. We formed a society with the purpose of returning you to life, as was foretold by your grimoire."

"I see. And just how were you intending to raise me from the dead."

"We learned that your spirit was locked in an ancient clay bottle. We sent a man to obtain it for us, but he bungled the job. It fell into the hands of Ms. Lenore here. But she vanished."

"It is good she had. It is she and my wife who brought me back to life. You and your cohorts would have released my spirit without the proper preparation and ceremony. I would be wandering the earth as a ghost. That would be fate worse than death."

"I am truly sorry, Master. We did not know."

"Nonetheless, you can still be of service to me. Once the trance is broken, you will return to the future. The time door can be opened only from the future. I will tell you how." He gave Martin a complicated evocation to perform. "Will you remember that?"

"I think so." He sounded doubtful.

"Never mind. I will write those instructions down and hide them in a desk drawer with a secret compartment. I will scratch my initials on the desk so you will know which one."

Martin bowed. "I will faithfully carry out your wishes. Now, break the spell so that I come out of the trance."

"I am afraid I cannot do that. Someone in your own time must wake you."

Martin groaned. He looked absolutely ill. "But I am alone in that abandoned house."

Raven said, "Maybe Sam Ryan will come by to check on the house."

At that moment, Martin disappeared.

"Soon my love, we will go to your time."

Peter sat on the bed and caressed Raven's hair. She forgot about her thoughts of returning to the twenty-first century alone. She knew she could not live without him. She put her arms around his neck and pulled his face down to hers.

\* \* \* \*

O'Brien followed behind Jacobs as they walked slowly through the kitchen. Jacobs checked every place anyone could hide before going ahead, whispering, "Clear," each time. They proceed through the dining room and into the main hall. When they spotted Martin lying on the floor, the crystal held before his eyes, Jacobs stooped down and felt his pulse.

"He's alive, and his pulse is strong. Do you recognize him?"

"Yes. He's the leader of The Thirteen. He's the one who had me tied up and was questioning me."

"What do you think is wrong with him? Should I call an ambulance?"

"No. It's that crystal he's holding. It has some kind of hypnotic quality. He's in a trance. The same thing happened to me. Take it out his hands. He'll wake up."

"You take it. I'll keep him covered."

O'Brien knelt down and removed the crystal from Martin's hands. Martin opened his eyes, shook his head and grinned when he discovered that he was back in the twenty-first century. He looked up at Jacobs and O'Brien standing over him. "Who are you? And why are you pointing a gun at me?"

"FBI," Jacobs replied. He whipped out his badge. "Stand up slowly."

As Martin slowly rose to his feet, he said, "What's this all about? Why would an FBI agent be pointing a gun at me? I'm a prominent citizen in this area. I own the Buick Dealership in Rhinebeck."

"Oh yeah. How come you're kidnapping people and holding them prisoner."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He kept his face turned from O'Brien.

O'Brien said, "I saw your face. Plus I recognize your voice."

"You must be mistaking me for someone else."

Jacobs said, "And what are you doing in this house?"

"I was thinking of buying it. My good friend, Sam Ryan, would not care if I came up here to look around."

"But you never told him. We could hold you for trespassing if nothing else."

"That would never stick."

"What about Abdul-Azim Mujib? What is your relationship to him?"

"Never heard of him."

"Well, okay. I guess we don't really have anything really to hold you on. It's simply a case of your word against O'Brien's. You can leave."

Martin frowned. "I haven't finished looking at the house."

"Nonetheless, if you know what's good for you, you'll leave."

Martin plodded toward the back door.

After they heard his car pull away, O'Brien asked, "How come you let him go like that?"

"We really don't have any substantial evidence against him. Like I told him, it's pretty much your word against his. Also, I'd like to catch the rest of his gang. Did you see how reluctant he was to leave? He'll be back. I'll plant some bugs, and we'll see what he's up to."

## CHAPTER 24. CASSANDRA'S MADNESS

When Magbertius came into Raven's room the night after Martin's aura had intruded, Raven asked him, "How will you know when your disciple opens the gate?"

"Your cat, Mephistopheles, will tell me. She contains part of a damned soul and has the ability to detect magic. I am in constant communication with her."

"Oh. I knew she had that ability, but I thought she only talked to me."

"The problem is, I do not know how reliable that man, Martin, is. He seems like a bungler to me."

"Did you write him a note as you said you would?"

"Yes. But that represents another problem. I cannot be sure that the desk will remain in this house for three hundred years. When you were in Riverlook in the future, did you see a desk with my initials carved into it?"

"Can't say that I did. But since I was not looking for such a thing, I might not have noticed. There were several old desks in the house in various rooms."

"Well, we shall see. I will give this Martin two weeks to prove his worth. Otherwise, I shall have to make other plans. My intuition tells me that I cannot wait too long before I need to escape from danger."

"What danger? The authorities?"

He shrugged. "I do not know. I only know that a bad omen approaches. Something terrible is going to happen unless we escape to the future soon."

\* \* \* \*

Paul Martin drove past Riverlook each day in a different used automobile from his lot. He kept this up until he saw that the sedan that belonged to the FBI agent and that magician fellow was gone. One day short of two weeks after his encounter with them, it was not parked in its usual place. *They've finally given up*, he thought and drove onto the estate, parking in back of the mansion out of sight as he did before.

He crept into the house and checked around in case the men were hiding somewhere. At the same time, he searched each room for a desk with the letters PM carved into it. On the first and second floors, he found a few old desks, but none with those initials on them. Down in the cellar was an ancient beat-up desk in the laboratory area. Although it had plenty of gouges and scratches, none resembled Peter Magbertius' initials. Finally he went up to the third floor, the old servant's quarters. One room contained several pieces of piled up furniture. One old desk was shoved into a corner with chairs and lamps covering it. He removed these items and cried, "Magbertius bless. This is it."

Carved in old English script on the desk top were his mentor's initials. He opened the drawer with the

secret panel and carefully removed the paper under the false bottom. He had to be extremely careful, as the vellum was yellowed and so brittle that it threatened to crumple into tiny pieces. To keep from handling it too much, he laid it on the desk, took his date book from his jacket pocket and copied the words that Magbertius had written three hundred years previously. He had to be cautious. The script was difficult to read due to several factors such as the fading of the ink, eighteenth century spelling, script and grammar, and deterioration of the paper. He went over the instructions several times, both as he had written them in his date book and as they appeared on the Magbertius handwritten note, checking and double checking that he had written everything correctly.

Finally he decided that knew exactly what to do. Luck was with him, because one of the requirements was a new moon, which was to occur that very night. If he had read the note one night later, he would have had to wait a month to perform the ceremony to cause the time door to appear. He set out to get all the items he would need, which included chalk, string, hammer and nail, black candles, and a timepiece.

Again, Karma was with Martin. Most of these items were in the mansion. They had been used for ceremonies performed by The Thirteen. He decided to use his thousand dollar Rolex for the timepiece.

He brought all these item to the area where the time door was to appear. With the chalk and string, he marked the floor with the symbols Magbertius described and placed the candles into position. When all was in readiness, he paced up and down the hallway. Magbertius had indicated that the incantation must be performed exactly at midnight. As the witching hour approached, he lit the candles and laid his expensive watch in the center of the diagram.

He knelt down before it in order to watch the second hand closely. At precisely thirty seconds before the midnight, he spoke the incantation. When the second hand on his watch touched the mark at twelve o'clock, it began to move counterclockwise, slowly at first and then faster and faster, until it became a blur. The minute and hour hands also turned backwards and spun rapidly until they were also moving too fast to observe. Martin gasped as the watch he had paid so dearly for vanished. He looked up. The door he seen the one time before had reappeared.

\* \* \* \*

"I told you he would come back," said Agent Steve Jacobs to O'Brien. They were on a hillock that overlooked the mansion and were watching it through binoculars. These binoculars had an infrared adjustment for night vision. They also had equipment for listening to sounds made throughout the house through the bugs Jacob had planted. They tracked Martin's movements as his footsteps moved from room to room. They heard his cry of triumph when he found the desk with the note.

"He's found what he came here for," O'Brien whispered.

"Let's see if he leaves with it."

However, he did not leave the mansion, but continued to walk about the house. After ten P.M., he stayed in the hallway. They heard him breathing and pacing up and down. Just before midnight most of the lights in the house went off. Through the hallway window they saw a faint flickering glow. Martin began to chant in what sounded like Latin.

"Sounds like he's performing some kind of ritual," said Jacobs.

"Bringing the time door out of Hell," O'Brien muttered.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. I think we should go in. Whatever he's up to, it's what he came here for."

"I suppose you're right. Maybe you'd better stay here. This fellow may be dangerous."

"No. I must go. Maybe he had Raven hidden somewhere and is doing something to her."

"That's not possible. He hasn't been near this place for two weeks."

The two men trotted down the hill. When they reached the mansion, Jacobs took out his weapon. They cautiously and quietly went in through the backdoor and made their way to the staircase.

\* \* \* \*

Raven lay naked in her bed waiting for the moment that she both dreaded and longed for, the moment her lover and master, Peter Magbertius, would walk into her room and make scorching hot love to her. As the time neared, she tingled with anticipation. Cold perspiration dripped from her forehead and ran down the gully between her breasts. Her heart beat rapidly. Finally, her door creaked open. She had gotten into the habit of leaving it unlocked for Magbertius to enter. Footsteps approached her bed.

"Peter?"

There was no reply, but the footsteps quickened their pace. Raven sat up straight. This did not sound like Magbertius. He was as light footed as a ballet dancer. The thought occurred to her that it was Cassandra come to kill her. Before she could cry out, a hand covered her mouth and the blade of a knife was pressed against her throat.

A harsh voice that she recognized as belonging to the man whose aura had been in her room several days earlier said, "Don't make a sound, or I'll slit your throat."

Raven nodded to show that she understood. Martin took his hand away from her mouth and shined the beam of a penlight in her face.

"Miss Lenore, I believe. And naked."

"How did you get here?" she whispered as she pulled the cover up over her breasts. This time she knew he was present in both body and mind.

"Never mind, Missy. Where's The Master?"

Before she could reply, Martin cried out in pain and dropped the flashlight. Raven heard Cassandra cry, "You monster. You unfaithful retch. I have known for a while that you have been coming here late at night to be with that harlot from the future. After I waited ten years to bring you back to life, you would betray me. Take that." Martin cried out again in agony. "And that. And that."

While the man struggled with Cassandra, Raven slipped out of the other side of the bed, threw on her chemise and headed toward the door. Before she reached it, she bumped into someone coming into the room. Strong arms grabbed her.

"What in the name of the evil one is going here?" It was Magbertius.

"Cassandra is killing your disciple," gasped Raven.

Magbertius flung Raven to the side, strode toward the struggling pair and grabbed Cassandra. Martin's body fell to the floor with thump.

"Cassandra! Have you gone mad? You've just murdered a man."

"I thought it was you. Your precious Cousin Agnes has had a man in her room. This is the second time I caught her out."

"And you are insane."

He dragged her screaming out of the room. While they were gone, Raven dressed and lit enough candles to light up the room well. She knelt down by Martin and felt for pulse. There was none. He lay in a pool of his own blood. Suddenly she realized that he must have come through the time door. It should still be open. She rushed out in the hall to check the little storeroom. Its door was closed. As she reached for the knob, Magbertius came thumping down the stairs. She waited until he approached her.

"Wh-what did you do with Cassandra?"

"I locked her in the tower room. I told Alfred that she was mad and had murdered a man. He would find the man's body in your room. I instructed him to wait until morning to report the murder to the local constable. That was that fellow Martin, was it not?"

"Yes. He must've been successful in opening the time door and came through it."

"Then there is no time to lose. It will stay open only until dawn."

\* \* \* \*

O'Brien and Jacobs stood in the gloomy hallway. The only light was from candles in front of a door which O'Brien knew was the way to the past.

Jacobs called out, "Paul Martin. Come out wherever you are. It's Agent Steve Jacobs of the FBI. I want to talk to you." There was no answer. The house was quiet.

Jacobs turned to O'Brien and whispered, "He must be hiding somewhere." He took out a flashlight and played the beam over the area. "Mystical symbols. He was definitely trying to perform some kind of supernatural magic. I wonder what." He put his hand on the doorknob.

"Don't go in there," cried O'Brien.

"Why not? He could be hiding in that room."

"It ... uh ... could be a trap."

"I'll just open it and stand away. Stand by the wall here in case he starts shooting when the door opens." Jacob himself stood with his back to the wall and started to reach for the knob again, when the door burst open. A tall bearded man in eighteenth century dress stepped through. O'Brien gasped. He recognized him immediately. It was Peter Magbertius, looking exactly as he did in the portrait. And just behind him, holding his hand, was Raven.

Jacobs cried out, "Who the hell are you two?"

Magbertius came him a haughty look. "Who am I? I am Peter Magbertius and own this house. The question should be who are you and why are trespassing on my property."

Raven whispered in his ear, "Be careful. That object in his hand is a pistol, and one that can fire more than once without reloading." She noticed O'Brien standing behind Jacobs and blushed. "John."

Since the man had made no threatening gesture, Jacobs lowered his pistol. O'Brien said, "The woman is Raven Lenore."

"Your girl friend who has been missing? Yeah, I kind of remember her. I met her once."

Jacobs turned his attention back to Magbertius. "I'm Agent Steve Jacobs with the FBI. You say that you're the owner, but to my knowledge, this house belongs to Sam Ryan."

"FBI? I do not know what that is."

Raven said, "It stands for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He's a policeman."

"So. Have you come to arrest me for witchcraft?"

Jacobs scratched his head with the flashlight. He appeared confused. "Witchcraft? Hardly. We're trailing a man named Paul Martin. He came into this house and performed some kind of ritual. We think he went into that door."

Raven said, "You saw us come out of that room. I assure you, Agent, he's not in there."

O'Brien stared at her. "Raven. You're back. Come to me."

Magbertius glared at him. "Is this your former lover, the illusionist?"

Raven hung her head. "Yes."

"Former? What is this?"

"I'm sorry, John, but I'm in love with Peter."

Jacobs broke in. "So you haven't been kidnapped or held against your will?"

"No. I've been with Peter."

"Okay. That solves one mystery, but where did that guy Martin go?"

Magbertius said, "I'm sure that I do not know. If he should return here, I will tell him that the authorities—the FBI you call yourself—are looking for him. Now I would appreciate it if you two gentlemen would leave my house."

Jacobs rubbed his chin. "Whether this is your house or not is not settled."

"I will prove it. Come downstairs with me."

As the two men started down the stairs, O'Brien said, "What's come over you, Raven? How could you fall for that ghost from the past?" His eyes showed pain.

"I'm sorry, John. After I went back in time, I fell for him. Although I like you a lot, I don't think I was ever in love with you. I-I'm the sort of woman who likes danger and excitement. You were too bland for me. I could never be more than a friend."

"Goddamnit Raven, I've done everything you asked. I came on this wild goose chase. I..."

"That's just the trouble. I preferred the way you were when we first met such as when you told me I was nuts for believing in the paranormal. You had strong opinions and expressed them. After we became lovers you went all wishy washy on me."

O'Brien's face became red with fury. He stalked away from her, rushed down the steps and out the front door, which he slammed.

Raven shook her head. "He's probably out there crying his little boy heart out," she murmured. Nonetheless, she felt regret for the cruel way she had treated him, but it was the only way to break it off clean.

When she reached the bottom of the steps, Magbertius was showing Jacobs the painting in the great room. He pointed at the portrait and said, "Agent Jacobs, is that me or not?"

Jacobs looked from the picture to Magbertius and back again. "It looks like you all right." He scratched his head. "But it doesn't prove ownership."

"So. Do you intend to evict me from my own house?"

"Nope. Not my job, although I will inform Mr. Ryan that you're here if you intend on taking up residence. It'll be up to him to get a court order if he actually owns the house and wishes you out of it."

Magbertius smiled and nodded. "Thank you. I am sure I can handle him."

They shook hands. Afterward, Jacobs said, "If Mr. Martin or one of his cohorts shows up, call me. Be careful what you say to them. They may be dangerous." He handed Magbertius his card.

"Of course."

Jacobs left then. Raven went out on the porch. She saw him trot up the hill to catch up with O'Brien. She figured that they had a vehicle parked somewhere in the woods. Magbertius joined her.

He said, "One last look at your former lover?"

"I suppose." She looked him over and started to giggle.

"What is so funny?" he snarled.

"The way we're dressed. Jacobs probably thought we came from a costume ball. Come on in the house. I'll change into my normal clothes, and then we'll have to take you into town and get some twenty-first

century duds."

"Ah yes. I suppose that over three hundred years styles change quite a bit."

"Yep."

They went upstairs, and Raven went to the bedroom she had occupied before she went to the past. Everything was as she left it. "Okay Peter. Please go out in the hall or in another room while I change."

He cocked one eyebrow. "I would enjoy watching."

She grinned at him and winked. "Normally I wouldn't mind that. But I want to see the shocked look on your face when you see how I usually dress."

He shrugged. "Very well. Have your little surprise for me."

After he left the room, with pleasure Raven unbuttoned and stepped out of the long skirt, and removed the layers of undergarments. She stripped down to her birthday suit, and dressed in her usual thong, bra, blue jeans, and T-shirt with a V neck. She put on white socks and her scuffed up sneakers. She let out a happy sigh. It felt good to be in comfortable clothes again. She struck a pose and called out, "Peter, you may come in now."

He entered and gaped at her. "This is the way women dress in the twenty-first century? You look like a stable boy."

She chuckled. "It's something you'll have to get used to. I have other clothes for dress-up occasions, but this is what I prefer to wear."

He scowled. "We'll see about that. What about men? What do they normally wear? Women's clothes?"

"That depends on the man and the occasion. In this century there's a great variety of choices. I'll show you when we go into town." She stopped and thought a moment. "That may present a problem. We don't have any transportation. John probably turned in the rental car by now."

"Are there no horses in the stable?"

"Boy, you've got a lot to get used to. People do not normally use horses to get around anymore. We ride in horseless carriages run by machinery. We call them cars or automobiles. Right now, the only car around is the one Martin drove up here in. I saw it in the back of the house."

"Can we not borrow it? Martin has been dead three centuries now. I am sure he will not mind."

"Great idea. I hope he left the key in though. Otherwise I'll need to hot wire it."

"Hot wire? I do not understand."

"I can't explain. You'll see if I do."

Raven checked that her credit cards and cash were still in her purse and slung it over her shoulder. They left the house through the backdoor. Raven tried the driver side door. It opened, and the key was in the ignition. Meanwhile, Magbertius examined the exterior of the vehicle. "Tis a strange carriage indeed."

What makes it move—magic?"

"Something like that. Get in."

Magbertius entered on the passenger's side.

Raven said, "You'll have to put on the seat belt. It's the law." She showed him how it was done.

"Why are these restraints needed?"

"These horseless carriages go at a high rate of speed. The seat belt keep you from flying through the windshield should an accident occur."

He looked puzzled, but made no comment. She turned on the car. Magbertius' head snapped back at the sudden eruption of noise. "Is there some sort of terrible animal under the front section? Is that what makes it move?"

"Not an animal. It's called an internal combustion engine. It works by causing small explosions of a combustible liquid, gasoline."

Magbertius shook his head in amazement or puzzlement. Raven put the car in gear and drove it down the driveway.

"Amazing. But you said that this century was full of marvels."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."

Raven drove to the Town of Ulster shopping mall. When she speeded up to fifty on the highway, Magbertius blanched and grabbed the door handle. "I see now why we are in restraints."

After they left the car and went into the mall, Magbertius gazed with wonder around the mall. "Will wonders never cease? This is like an indoor city street."

"And this a relatively small mall."

They entered a men's shop. Magbertius allowed Raven to select the garments for him to wear. He said, "You know what is appropriate for this century."

She selected jeans, slacks, a suit, several shirts, underwear, and stockings. After she paid with a credit card, Magbertius said, "You did not give the clerk money, only that card which is made of a substance that I have never seen before."

"It's like credit. The cards are issued by a bank. After the clerk runs the card through his machine, the bank verifies that my credit is good and credits the store. Later they will send me a bill."

"I see. Interesting concept. How can I obtain one of those credit cards?"

"Hmm. Good question. Somehow we'll have to establish a false identity for you. I know some shady characters in Chicago who could do it for a price."

"Chicago? Where is that?"

She laughed. "Oh, you've got so much catching up to do. Chicago is a large city on the shores of Lake Michigan."

"In French territory?"

"Probably was in your time. Nowadays, a third of this vast continent is one nation, The United States of America. The colonies that you knew are only a small part of it. After we get you some footwear, we'll go into Walden's and buy a United States history book. When we get back home, you can catch up on the happenings of the past three hundred years."

After purchasing clothing, they went into a shoe store and bought a pair each of loafers, sneakers and dress shoes. Next Raven bought a couple of history books and atlases. While they were in the bookstore, Magbertius started browsing through the magazine. He picked up a men's magazine and opened it. His eyes almost popped out. He whispered to Raven, "They sell pornography openly?"

"Fraid so. Say Peter, I don't think it's good idea to keep using Martin's car. It has dealer plates on it. Sooner or later, someone is going to report it stolen. Right down the road from the mall there is a car rental. We'll go in there and get a different car."

They divided the packages between themselves and went to the car rental. When they returned to Riverlook, they made love. Afterwards, Raven showed Magbertius the TV.

He was astounded. "This must most certainly work by sorcery."

"Nope. Read that book I bought called "Inventions of the Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First Century. Television is one that changed civilization profoundly. Some others are the steam engine, radio, the automobile, heavy-than-air aircraft..."

"Heavy than air aircraft? What is that?"

"Flying machines. Soon, you and I will be taking one to Chicago."

"Machines that fly and show pictures from a distance and machines that move without being pulled by animals. This is truly an amazing century."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."

Magbertius shook his head. "It's almost overwhelming. I feel as though I were a fish out of water."

She patted him on the back. "You're a smart man, close to genius, I suspect. You'll catch on. Why don't you read those books? I'll take my computer into the other room and make hotel and airline reservations."

"Computer? In that little case? What does it do?"

She smiled. "The most magical things of all. I'll show you sometime. But I don't believe that you're ready for it yet."

She took her laptop into what used to be Magbertius' den, while he settled down in the sitting room with the books she had bought for him. As she was leaving, she gazed in wonder at him, wonder at herself for

falling in love with such a man, and wonder how he would fair in a civilization with three hundred years of technology ahead of what he was used to.

## CHAPTER 26. THE SHOCKING TRUTH

When Raven and Magbertius arrived back at Riverlook, two cars were parked in front of the porch, one was a county sheriff's patrol car. Raven pulled the rental in back of the other car. "This doesn't look good," she said. "That's a county sheriff's vehicle."

"Do you think they have come to arrest me for witchcraft?"

"In this century, you can perform all the sorcery you wish, and no one will arrest you for it. Besides, the warrant for your arrest expired three hundred years ago. No. I think this has something to do with the house. I recognize the real estate agent's car."

As they strolled up the front porch steps, Sam Ryan and a sheriff's deputy came out to greet them. The deputy spoke first. "I understand that you two people have been trespassing on this property."

Magbertius said in an outraged manner, "How could we be trespassing? I am the owner of this domicile."

Ryan said, "I noticed that you have an uncanny resemblance to the original owner, Peter Magbertius. Perhaps you're a blood relative. Nonetheless, the deed has long since past through several hands. As a result, at the present I'm the lawful owner of this property. Now, I did rent the mansion to Ms. Lenore for the period of one week. But she has exceeded that limit and owes me back rent in the amount of two thousand dollars. Now if you wish to stay here longer, you may pay what you owe me and sign a new lease."

Magbertius scowled and balled his fist. Raven was afraid that he was about to strike the real estate agent. She said, "We'll have to talk it over. Peter, please don't do anything you'll regret." She tugged at his arm. "Let's go over there, and thrash this out."

She pulled Magbertius over to the other end of the porch. "This man, Ryan, has us over a barrel. The law is all on his side."

"My will said that the property would remain in my name in perpetuity. The lawyer who drew it up told me that it was unbreakable."

"First, no one will believe that you are the original Peter Magbertius. At best, you can pass yourself as a descendent. Secondly, there have been many changes in this country in three hundred years. For one thing, New York is no longer an independent commonwealth. It is a state within the nation of The United States. Laws have changed. The ones current in your time regarding property rights may have changed. It most likely that after Cassandra died, the taxes went into arrears, and it was sold to pay them."

He growled, but said, "I understand. Apparently I have lost my rights to Riverlook. What do we do now?"

"We planned to go to Chicago. I'll pay Ryan what I owe him, and then we'll leave."

"I will miss the old place."

"Perhaps some day you can buy it back if we can accumulate enough money."

"I will do that."

They returned to where the deputy and Ryan were standing.

Raven said, "Okay. I'll pay what I owe. We need to get our things out of the house."

Ryan replied, "Be my guest. Are you sure you don't want to rent it on a more permanent basis. I'll knock off a hundred dollars a month if you'll sign a long term lease."

"Sorry. I can't afford it. I've got to get back to Chicago and my business in order to earn some bread."

They entered the house, and Raven packed her stuff into her suitcase. She included Magbertius' things as well, all except the clothes they brought from the past.

He picked up his eighteenth century knickers. He asked, "What are we to do with these?"

"Leave them here. Perhaps, someday we may want to return to the seventeen hundreds."

After they left the house, they went to Ryan's office so that Raven could use her credit card to pay the back rent. Next they drove to JFK. As they past through Manhattan, Magbertius remarked, "I cannot believe the height of these buildings. If God destroyed the Tower of Babel, why does He leave such monstrous monoliths whole."

Raven said, "Such fables are one reason that I am an unbeliever in the Christian God."

"I agree. I have read the Bible many times and have found many contradictions. What do you believe, My Darling?"

"In the paranormal and the spirits that live in all things. I know that there are demons and angels and gods, but what their true nature is, I'm not sure. Perhaps they are visitors from another dimension."

"Yes. That makes sense. I have used such entities in my sorcery."

Raven loved him all the more because they had similar viewpoints. Except for Michael, all her other lovers were of a skeptical nature.

\* \* \* \*

After they arrived in Chicago, Raven and Magbertius moved into her old apartment. He complained about its small size. "I feel as though I were a mouse in a hole in this place."

Raven shrugged. "For the time being it's all I can afford. Once I get a few cases and some money roles in, maybe we can afford a bigger place, even a house in the suburbs."

"That is another thing. I refuse to be a kept man. You must quit this business of PI, or whatever you call it. I will be the bread winner in this family. 'Tis unseemly for a woman of substance to work outside the home."

"Whoa. In the first place, I like what I'm doing. I'd do it even if we didn't need the money. Secondly,

what in the world could you do to earn a living? You know nothing about our civilization. What would you do?"

"I am an educated man and a sorcerer. I will find suitable employment. Perhaps, I will start a business of my own. That is how I became wealthy in the eighteenth century."

Raven shrugged. "Perhaps so. But right now, you could not earn a penny. You're a nonperson. You have no valid identity. No one would hire you. No bank would loan you money."

He scowled at her. "You told me that you had underworld contacts who would create false credentials."

She placed her hand on his cheek. "I'll work on that starting tomorrow. But it'll take time. You must be patient."

His scowl turned into a grin. "You know that I am not a patient man. Nevertheless, I will wait a while until your criminal friends create an identity for me. But not too long."

He grabbed her roughly and kissed her. He picked her up and threw her on the bed. He tore her clothes off and made love to her in a savage manner. Afterwards, she wondered why she allowed him to treat her in that manner. Yet, in some perverse way, she enjoyed sex in that way, almost as much as when he was tender.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next weeks, as they waited for Raven's forger acquaintance to do his work, Magbertius was like a caged lion. He had problems learning to use twenty-first technology such as the TV remote and the microwave. He even burned himself on the electric stove. When Raven took him into the city, he loathed the crowds and the noise. After a short time he would want to return to the apartment. It was obvious that he was having a terrible time adjusting to the modern times.

He became abusive and surly. They quarreled often, many times over minor things. Once he struck Raven with his open palm. This was something that she vowed never to allow any man do to her. Nonetheless, because he apologized immediately afterwards, she did not make an issue of it.

He began to insist that she wear more feminine clothing. They got into especially fearsome quarrels over her way of dressing.

Finally, Raven felt she had enough. She could not imagine how she had fallen so head over heels in love with someone as controlling as him. For most of her life she had been independent. She wondered though how she could break it off with him. He would be lost in the present century without her. It was a dilemma.

One day he was pleasant at breakfast. He remarked, "Raven dearest, I have come to decision."

"What's that?" she replied.

"I have pondered the truth of what you have said. You were right. I am not suited for much of anything in this twenty-first century of yours, except for my paranormal abilities. I have decided to become a seer, a reader of people's futures."

"In other words, a fortune teller. Well, you're well suited for that profession. And some people make scads of money at it. Good luck."

In an angry manner, he said, "I do not like your tone, Woman. I do not appreciate being patronized."

Raven merely sighed. How often had he patronized her and never apologized for it.

The smell of burnt toast reached their nostrils.

"Beelzebub," cried Magbertius. "Another invention of the devil, this thing you call a toaster." He rose from his chair so quickly it fell over. He rushed over to the appliance. The bread had become stuck in it. He grabbed a fork and stuck it through the slot.

Raven yelled at him. "Don't do that. You could..."

She was too late. He cried, "Agh," and dropped to the floor. She rushed over to him. His breathing was shallow, and his heart was thumping. She grabbed her cell phone off the counter and started to dial 911. Then she noticed that his chest stopped moving at all. She dropped to her knees, thumped his chest hard and started artificial respiration. After a couple of minutes, his lips grew cold. Suddenly his head felt strange, as though it was no longer attached to his body. She removed her hands from it, and it rolled away. At the same time, his body slowly deteriorated in the same manner that it had when she and Cassandra had brought him to life, only in the opposite way.

Raven screamed in horror as she watched her lover turn into a moldy skeleton. She brought her hands to her face and sobbed. After a while, however, she felt different. It was as though a cloud had been lifted from her mind. She realized that she had not really been in love with him, but had been under a spell. She felt nothing toward him except relief that he was gone from her life.

For several hours she sat in the kitchen nursing a bottle of brandy. Finally the shock of Magbertius' tragic death wore off. She looked at what was left of him. She would have to dispose of the remains. She placed the clothes he had been wearing into a paper bag, stuffed the moldy bones into the same bag and finally picked what was now a rotting skull and placed in with the rest of his remains. She took the bag down to the basement, put it in a waste can, poured gasoline over it and cremated him. She carefully poured his ashes into a vase.

She wrapped the vase up and walked to Graceland Cemetery, which was about ten blocks from her apartment building. She went to the statue of The Grim Reaper and poured his ashes beneath it. She bowed her head.

"Good bye, Peter. It has been quite a ride with you. Although I know my love for you was not real, but due to sorcery, I'm not sorry it happened. I've gained insights into my own relationships with men. If you exist in some other dimension, perhaps we'll meet again. May your spirit rest easy."

She made a pentagram in the air with two fingers and walked away. As she strolled back to the gate, she heard his deep laughter in her mind. She did not know whether he laughing at her from another dimension, or whether she simply imagined it.

The End

SF/F/H FROM PAGETURNER EDITIONS

**CAMPBELL AWARD WINNER ALEXIS A. GILLILAND'S ROSINANTE TRILOGY**

Revolution from Rosinante

Long Shot for Rosinante

Pirates of Rosinante

THE CLASSIC SCIENCE FICTION OF STUART J. BYRNE

Music of the Spheres & Other Classic SF Stories

Star Quest

Power Metal

Hoaxbreaker

The Alpha Trap (1976)

The Land Beyond the Lens: The Michael Flannigan Trilogy (writing as John Bloodstone)

The Metamorphs & The Naked Goddess: Two Classic Pulp Novels

Children of the Chronotron & The Ultimate Death: Two Classic Pulp Novels

Beyond the Darkness & Potential Zero: Two Classic Pulp Novels

The Agartha Series #1. Prometheus II

The Agartha Series #2. Colossus

The Agartha Series #3: The Golden Gardsmen

Godman (writing as John Bloodstone)

Thundar, Man of Two Worlds The Land Beyond the Lens: The Michael Flannigan Trilogy (writing as John Bloodstone)

Last Days of Thronas (writing as John Bloodstone)

The First Star Man Omnibus: #1 Supermen of Alpha & Star Man #2 Time Window

The Second Star Man Omnibus: #3 Interstellar Mutineers & #4 The Cosmium Raiders

The Third Star Man Omnibus: #5 The World Changer & #6 The Slaves of Venus

The Fourth Star Man Omnibus: #7 Lost in the Milky Way & #8. Time Trap

The Fifth Star Man Omnibus: #9 The Centaurians & #10 The Emperor

The Sixth Star Man Omnibus: #11 The Return of Star Man & #12 Death Screen

STEFAN VUCAK'S EPPIE NOMINEE SPACE SAGA "THE SHADOW GODS"

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

A Whisper From Shadow

Immortal in Shadow

With Shadow and Thunder

Through the Valley of Shadow

JANRAE FRANK'S #1 BESTSELLING FANTASY SAGAS

Dark Brothers of the Light Book I. Blood Rites

Dark Brothers of the Light Book II. Blood Heresy

Dark Brothers of the Light Book III. Blood Dawn

Dark Brothers of the Light Book IV: Blood Wraiths

Dark Brothers of the Light Book V: Blood Paladin

In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk

Journey of the Sacred King I: My Sister's Keeper

Journey of the Sacred King II: Sins of the Mothers

Journey of the Sacred King III: My Father's House

THE COSMIC KALEVALA

The Saga of Lost Earths—Emil Petaja (Nebula nominee author)

The Star Mill—Emil Petaja

The Stolen Sun—Emil Petaja

Tramontane—Emil Petaja

JACK JARDINE'S HUMOROUS SF AND MYSTERY

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #1 The Flying Saucer Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #2 The Emerald Elephant Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #3 The Golden Goddess Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #4 The Time Trap Gambit

The Mind Monsters

Unaccustomed As I Am To Public Dying & Other Humorous and Ironic Mystery Stories

The Nymph and the Satyr

ARDATH MAYHAR'S AWARD-WINNING SF & F

The Crystal Skull & Other Tales of the Terrifying and Twisted

The World Ends in Hickory Hollow, or After Armageddon

The Tupla: A Nover of Horror

The Twilight Dancer & Other Tales of Magic, Mystery and the Supernatural

The Black Tower: A Novel of Dark Fantasy

Forbidden Geometries: A Novel Alien Worlds

HAL ANNAS' COSMIC RECKONING TRILOGY

**I. The Woman from Eternity**

II. Daughter of Doom

III. Witch of the Dark Star

THE HILARIOUS ADVENTURES OF TOFFEE

1. The Dream Girl—Charles F. Myers

2. Toffee Haunts a Ghost—Charles F. Myers

3. Toffee Turns the Trick—Charles F. Myers

OTHER AWARD WINNING & NOMINEE STORIES AND AUTHORS

Moonworm's Dance & Other SF Classics—Stanley Mullen (includes The Day the Earth Stood Still & Other SF Classics—Harry Bates (Balrog Award winning story)

Hugo nominee story Space to Swing a Cat)

People of the Darkness-Ross Rocklyne (Nebulas nominee author)

When They Come From Space-Mark Clifton (Hugo winning author)

What Thin Partitions-Mark Clifton (Hugo winning author)

Star Bright & Other SF Classics—Mark Clifton

Eight Keys to Eden-Mark Clifton (Hugo winning author)

Rat in the Skull & Other Off-Trail Science Fiction-Rog Phillips (Hugo nominee author)

The Involuntary Immortals-Rog Phillips (Hugo nominee author)

Inside Man & Other Science Fictions-H. L. Gold (Hugo winner, Nebula nominee)

Women of the Wood and Other Stories-A. Merritt (Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame award)

A Martian Odyssey & Other SF Classics—Stanley G. Weinbaum (SFWA Hall of Fame author)

Dawn of Flame & Other Stories—Stanley G. Weinbaum (SFWA Hall of Fame author)

The Black Flame—Stanley G. Weinbaum

Scout-Octavio Ramos, Jr. (Best Original Fiction)

Smoke Signals-Octavio Ramos, Jr. (Best Original Fiction winning author)

The City at World's End-Edmond Hamilton

The Star Kings-Edmond Hamilton (Sense of Wonder Award winning author)

A Yank at Valhalla-Edmond Hamilton (Sense of Wonder Award winning author)

Dawn of the Demigods, or People Minus X—Raymond Z. Gallun (Nebula Nominee Author)

#### THE BESTSELLING SF/F/H OF J. D. CRAYNE

Tetragravitron (Captain Spycer #1)

Monster Lake

Invisible Encounter & Other Stories

The Cosmic Circle

#### PLANETS OF ADVENTURE

Colorful Space Opera from the Legendary Pulp Planet Stories

#1. "The Sword of Fire"—A Novel of an Enslaved World". & "The Rocketeers Have Shaggy Ears"—A Novel of Peril on Alien Worlds.

#2. "The Seven Jewels of Chamar"—A Novel of Future Centuries. & "Flame Jewel of the Ancients"—A Novel of Outlaw Worlds .

- #3. "Captives of the Weir-Wind"—A Novel of the Void by Nebula Nominee Ross Rocklynne. & "Black Priestess of Varda"—A Novel of a Magic World.

#### NEMESIS: THE NEW MAGAZINE OF PULP THRILLS

#1. Featuring Gun Moll, the 1920s Undercover Nemesis of Crime in "Tentacles of Evil," an all-new, complete book-length novel; plus a Nick Bancroft mystery by Bob Liter, "The Greensox Murders" by Jean Marie Stine, and a classic mystery short reprinted from the heyday of the pulps.

#2 Featuring Rachel Rocket, the 1930s Winged Nemesis of Foreign Terror in "Hell Wings Over Manhattan," an all-new, complete book-length novel, plus spine-tingling science fiction stories, including EPPIE nominee Stefan Vucak's "Hunger," author J. D. Crayne's disturbing "Point of View," Hugo Award winner Larry Niven's "No Exit," written with Jean Marie Stine, and a classic novelette of space ship mystery by the king of space opera, Edmond Hamilton. Illustrated. (Illustrations not available in Palm).

#3 Featuring Victory Rose, the 1940s Nemesis of Axis Tyranny, in Hitler's Final Trumpet," an all-new, complete book-length novel, plus classic jungle pulp tales, including a complete Ki-Gor novel.

# 4 Featuring Femme Noir, the 1950s Nemesis of Hell's Restless Spirits, in an all new, book length novel, plus all new and classic pulp shudder tales, including "The Summons from Beyond" the legendary round-robin novelette of cosmic horror by H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, C.L. Moore, A. Merritt, and Frank Belknap Long.

#### OTHER FINE CONTEMPORARY & CLASSIC SF/F/H

A Million Years to Conquer—Henry Kuttner

After the Polothas—Stephen Brown

Arcadia—Tabitha Bradley

Backdoor to Heaven—Vicki McElfresh

Buck Rogers #1: Armageddon 2419 A.D.—Philip Francis Nowlan

Buck Rogers #2. The Airlords of Han—Philip Francis Nowlan

Chaka: Zulu King—Book I. The Curse of Baleka—H. R. Haggard

Chaka: Zulu King—Book II. Umpslopogass' Revenge—H. R. Haggard

Claimed!—Francis Stevens

Darby O'Gill: The Classic Irish Fantasy—Hermine Templeton

Diranda: Tales of the Fifth Quadrant—Tabitha Bradley

Dracula's Daughters—Ed. Jean Marie Stine

Dwellers in the Mirage—A. Merritt

From Beyond & 16 Other Macabre Masterpieces-H. P. Lovecraft

Future Eves: Classic Science Fiction about Women by Women-(ed) Jean Marie Stine

Ghost Hunters and Psychic Detectives: 8 Classic Tales of Sleuthing and the Supernatural-(ed.) J. M. Stine

Horrors!: Rarely Reprinted Classic Terror Tales-(ed.) J. M. Stine. J.L. Hill

House on the Borderland-William Hope Hodgson

House of Many Worlds [Elspeth Marriner #1]—Sam Merwin Jr.

Invisible Encounter and Other SF Stories—J. D. Crayne

Murcheson Inc., Space Salvage—Cleve Cartmill

Ki-Gor, Lord of the Jungle-John Peter Drummond

Lost Stars: Forgotten SF from the “Best of Anthologies”-(ed.) J. M. Stine

Metropolis-Thea von Harbou

Mission to Misenum [Elspeth Marriner #2]—Sam Merwin Jr.

Mistress of the Djinn-Geoff St. Reynard

Chronicles of the Sorceress Morgaine I-V—Joe Vadalma

Nightmare!-Francis Stevens

Pete Manx, Time Troubler—Arthur K. Barnes

Possessed!-Francis Stevens

Ralph 124C 41+—Hugo Gernsback

Seven Out of Time—Arthur Leo Zagut

Star Tower—Joe Vadalma

The Cosmic Wheel-J. D. Crayne

The Forbidden Garden-John Taine

The City at World's End-Edmond Hamilton

The Ghost Pirates-W. H. Hodgson

The Girl in the Golden Atom—Ray Cummings

The Heads of Cerberus—Francis Stevens

The House on the Borderland-William Hope Hodgson

The Insidious Fu Manchu-Sax Rohmer

The Interplanetary Huntress-Arthur K. Barnes

The Interplanetary Huntress Returns-Arthur K. Barnes

The Interplanetary Huntress Last Case-Arthur K. Barnes

The Lightning Witch, or The Metal Monster-A. Merritt

The Price He Paid: A Novel of the Stellar Republic—Matt Kirkby

The Thief of Bagdad-Achmed Abdullah

Women of the Wood and Other Stories-A. Merritt

BARGAIN SF/F EBOOKS IN OMNIBUS EDITIONS

(Complete & Unabridged)

The Andre Norton Omnibus: Three complete novels

The H. Beam Piper Omnibus: Three complete books

The E. E. Smith, Ph.D. Omnibus: Three complete novels

The First Lord Dunsany Omnibus: 5 Complete Books—Lord Dunsany

The First William Morris Omnibus: 4 Complete Classic Fantasy Books

The Barsoom Omnibus: A Princess of Mars; The Gods of Mars; The Warlord of Mars-Burroughs

The Second Barsoom Omnibus: Thuvia, Maid of Mars; The Chessmen of Mars-Burroughs

The Third Barsoom Omnibus: The Mastermind of Mars; A Fighting Man of Mars-Burroughs

The First Tarzan Omnibus: Tarzan of the Apes; The Return of Tarzan; Jungle Tales of Tarzan-Burroughs

The Second Tarzan Omnibus: The Beasts of Tarzan; The Son of Tarzan; Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar-Burroughs

The Third Tarzan Omnibus: Tarzan the Untamed; Tarzan the Terrible; Tarzan and the Golden Lion-Burroughs

The Pellucidar Omnibus: At the Earth's Core; Pellucidar-Burroughs

The Caspak Omnibus: The Land that Time Forgot; The People that Time Forgot; Out of Time's Abyss-Burroughs

The First H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Invisible Man; War of the Worlds; The Island of Dr. Moreau

The Second H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Time Machine; The First Men in the Moon; When the Sleeper Wakes

The Third H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Food of the Gods; Shape of Things to Come; In the Days of the Comet

The First Jules Verne Omnibus: Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea; The Mysterious Island; From the Earth to the Moon

The Homer Eon Flint: All 4 of the Classic "Dr. Kenney" Novels: The Lord of Death; The Queen of Life; The Devolutionist; The Emancipatrix

The Second Jules Verne Omnibus: Around the World in 80 Days; A Journey to the Center of the Earth; Off on a Comet

Three Great Horror Novels: Dracula; Frankenstein; Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

The Darkness and Dawn Omnibus: The Classic Science Fiction Trilogy-George Allan England

The Garrett P. Serviss Omnibus: The Second Deluge; The Moon Metal; A Columbus of Space

The Robert E. Howard Omnibus: Three complete books

The Edward E. "Doc" Smith Omnibus: Skylark of Space, Skylark of Valeron, Triplanetary

ADDITIONAL TITLES IN PREPARATION  
[pageturnereditions.com](http://pageturnereditions.com)

---

Visit [www.renebooks.com](http://www.renebooks.com) for information on additional titles by this and other authors.