

The Cards Call Themselves

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Part One

Working for Merlin Bloodstone is kind of like being owned by a cat. Actually, it's worse. With a cat you have a faint chance of doping things out. If a cat leaves a dead mouse on your desk, you pretty much have a fifty-fifty shot at figuring that the cat's generosity-neuron randomly fired, or the lord of the manor wants you take out his trash.

It's never that simple with Bloodstone. I come in to my desk and find all sorts of things left there for me. It can be a crumbling bit of papyrus with Sumerian writing on it, or some faded newspaper clipping about a rain of frogs in New West Podunk, Arkansas. And the bits of animals he leaves, well, a thoroughly-masticated mouse would be something I had a chance of recognizing.

And, yes, I can now identify eye of newt, but I don't recommend it after too much tequila or before enough caffeine.

Worst of all, though, have to be the tarot card spreads. That Thursday I came in to find one there, which surprised me, because we'd had a two week moratorium on them after the FBI blow-up. The problem with the tarot layouts is that figuring out what the cards mean isn't always clear cut. For example, if the artist added extra details to the card's image, do I figure they add nuances that the same spread from another deck wouldn't have? And if I were to try figure it out while concentrating on such details, would I miss the more subtle message that harkened back to some obscure interpretation of a card's meaning as detailed in a book written by an insane, defrocked Hungarian priest in 1783?

The particular spread on my desk that morning had been laid out with a deck called *The Black Tarot*. It featured the art of Luis Royo, and was long on gorgeous women in fantasy settings—at least as far as the court cards and major arcana were concerned. Most of the art was stuff Royo had done for book covers or *Heavy Metal*, and the suit cards just picked up on an element from the Aces to be repeated throughout the minor arcana. In other words, there was minimal artistic correlation with traditional Tarot designs here. Being a fan of his work, I was left hoping that someday Royo might just sit down and paint all seventy-eight of the cards in a deck.

The spread, which seemed to be a truly random selection of cards, didn't mean anything to me. Of course, Bloodstone is the one who does all the interpretation of cards here, but I'd learned to do a bit in self-defense. In a larger sense, though, the spread meant nothing because it didn't represent one of the layouts we'd been asked to work on. The Black Tarot hadn't been used for one of the case spreads. More importantly, we were no longer working on the Deathdealer thing anyway.

Why those cards were sitting there I couldn't fathom. The idea that Bloodstone would dismiss my questions about them with a casual, "Just a feeling I had," sent a shiver through me. The feeling I had was not good, and I started mentally drafting my resignation letter.

Which is about when the doorbell rang. That surprised me because anyone coming to consult Bloodstone calls ahead for an appointment, then I talk to them over the intercom when they get to the gate and I open it for them. Very few folks have the code for the gate and, at eight on a Thursday morning, none of them were likely to be around. I *had* heard the gate open, but that was for a grocery delivery and the driver knew he had to take the food around to the back.

I left the office, cut through the round foyer to the front door and swung it open. The woman standing

there wore her auburn hair long enough to just barely brush the shoulders of her black jacket. The top button on her white blouse stood open, displaying her long neck and a triangle of tanned flesh at her throat. Black slacks with a razor crease ended in a hint of a flare that all but hid some very practical shoes. Dark sunglasses concealed her eyes, but I knew, behind the aviators, they were an ice blue.

A smile had come to my face when I saw her, but it quickly died. “I’d love to say I’m happy to see you, Agent Jensen, but you have to nuts to be here.”

“So far, seeing your face is about the highlight of my morning, Moran, so don’t give me attitude.” She slipped into the foyer and pressed the door closed behind her. “I need to talk to Dr. Bloodstone.”

“See, wearing a jacket like that in Phoenix in the August heat has clearly got you delirious.” I frowned, then had to look up at her, both because I was a step down on the foyer floor and she would have been easily two inches taller than I am if we were on the same level. “First, you know that I have no idea *when* Bloodstone will come down from his third floor sanctum. Second, if I send him a note to tell him you’re here, he *won’t* be coming down. Third, he’s not got a lot of love lost on you or the Bureau right now. He doesn’t nurse a grudge, he gets it a nanny and enrolls it in boarding school.”

“I know, I know, but he’s got to get over that.” She stepped down to my level and onto the middle of the stone heart inlaid on the foyer floor. The grey stone had a sword driven through it and single drop of blood welled up around the wound. A Latin motto decorated a scrolled ribbon below the design. “Bloodstone can’t be that petty, can he?”

“Indeed, I can, Agent Jensen, and I even rather enjoy it.” Bloodstone’s voice filled the cylindrical room from the second story landing, where the twin stairways spiraling up around the foyer meet. The chill threading through his words guaranteed the air conditioning wouldn’t be cutting-in any time soon.

His voice made him seem far bigger than the tiny man really is—were the three of us lined up by height, he’d be in front and my view would be unobstructed. His head was a bit too large for his body, and his violet eyes a bit too big for his delicate and sharply featured face, though the way he’d narrowed them kind of hid that. His black hair had been slicked back, emphasizing his widow’s-peak.

To make matters worse—Bloodstone being in a snit being quite bad enough—my boss was looking very *necropolitan*. He had dressed the way a well-dressed Goth would dress, if Goths ever dressed well. He wore a long black coat over black slacks and shiny black shoes with silver buckles. His white shirt had no collar and the jacket revealed a silver gorget resting against his chest. He had his fire opal and platinum ring on his right hand, but the fire in the gemstone couldn’t melt the ice in his voice.

Jensen had turned and looked up at him, her sunglasses slipping down her slender nose an inch or two. She opened her hands and even started to look a bit penitent. “Doctor Bloodstone....”

Bloodstone gave her no chance to finish. “There is nothing on this Earth that could cause you to believe I would speak with anyone from your agency. *You* invited me to consult on the Deathdealer case. You prevailed upon me to consult despite my personal reluctance. You provided me some materials to work with, but not *all* I wanted and needed to work with. You agreed that my work on the case would be kept strictly confidential. And *then*, when a local paper published a history of the Deathdealer serial murders, using confidential information that had been hacked from a local police database, and the local Sheriff put the blame for the security breach on my shoulders and those of Mr. Moran here, *you* did nothing to defend us. You let us twist in the wind, evidently embarrassed at having it revealed that you hired an occultist to consult about a murderer who tags his victims with tarot card spreads.”

“I know, Dr. Bloodstone, I know.” Pure pain poured through Jensen’s voice. A lot of sincerity came with it. “I tried to get permission to make a statement but my superiors....”

“I had a deal with *you*, Agent Jensen, not your superiors.” Bloodstone’s nostrils flared. “You gave me your *word*. You broke it. I told you never to appear here again. There is nothing you could say that would make me change my mind.”

“I hope to God there is.” She nodded once, solemnly. “The Deathdealer racked up another victim. Last night, right here in Phoenix. If you’d had a window open, you could have heard her scream.”

Part Two

I rode in the front of the Taurus beside Agent Theresa Jensen, leaving Bloodstone alone in the back seat. I kidded myself that I’d chosen the front seat because the air conditioning is always better up front, but the fact was that Bloodstone’s cold fury was sucking enough heat out of the air that I’d have been frozen stiff if I’d ridden back there. I didn’t even try to talk to him, and Agent Jensen stopped after a couple of monosyllabic answers that I translated into a “just drive” hand signal.

Bloodstone had every right to be angry, with this latest serial murder performing the rough equivalent of crossing high power lines. When the FBI had originally come to him to ask him to consult on the serial killing, he’d been very reluctant to do so. One condition of his agreeing to work with them was complete anonymity. He’d said that if the Deathdealer were to learn he was on the case, things would change, and for the worst, and he did not want to bear responsibility for that.

The FBI had acquiesced to his conditions and had given us copies of all their files, which we agreed to keep confidential. What they gave us, while exhaustive, was not enough for Bloodstone. He wanted to be able to touch the actual cards the Deathdealer had left behind to see if he could pick up any sensations from them. While I don’t believe in any of that psychic stuff, Bloodstone clearly thought psychometric examination of the evidence would be helpful. The Feds refused that request, claiming they didn’t want evidence contaminated, which frustrated Bloodstone no end.

What the Feds wanted from him was interpretation and analysis of the tarot card spreads left behind with the victims. Each of the victims had been a blonde Caucasian woman with blue eyes in her mid-20s, well educated, fit, successful in business. Their trades varied from exotic dancer to Realtors, account executives to business entrepreneurs. The killings had taken place all over the country, at roughly six month intervals.

The Feds couldn’t find any connection between the women, but that was no real surprise. Serial killers tend to fixate on a particular prey model and go after it. The FBI was hoping the card spreads, comprised of eleven cards, would provide some sort of clue as to the killer’s background or his interaction with the women.

Something.

Anything.

Bloodstone got nothing. The killer always used a new deck with each killing, and none of them were unique or special enough that their purchase would have attracted attention. He never used the same style of deck twice. The spreads, while laid out rather haphazardly, were clearly positioned post mortem. The card selection, with the exception of the signifier—a card used in readings to represent the subject of the reading—appeared to be completely random and utterly without value.

This drove Bloodstone up a wall, which made my life a living hell. Normally I function as Bloodstone’s aide, but while he was working with the Feds, I was his *amanuensis*, and heavy on the *slave* part of the word’s origin. I took down more dictation that dead-ended, building his frustration and mine. I got to

hoping someone else caught the Deathdealer because if I got my hands on him, he'd be shuffled, cut and dealt in short order.

That, of course, was bad enough, but things quickly got worse. The *New Times*, a local entertainment weekly with Pulitzer pretensions, had obtained computer files that included autopsy photos from victims, and full reports that contained facts the Bureau had withheld to be able to sort copy-cats from the genuine article. What they published was contained in the files we'd been sent and, while they admitted the files were transmitted to them electronically, we got a call from Agent Jensen almost immediately to see if the files were ours.

I took it and reminded her that because Merlin Bloodstone—occultist and reluctant immigrant from the 19th century—doesn't like computers, she gave us hard copy of everything. We didn't have it in electronic form. She started investigating where any leaks might have occurred, but the damage was already done.

Sheriff Doug Hastings, who has found press conferences to be a prime tool in crime fighting, ripped into Bloodstone as the source of the leak. In an orgy of self-congratulations, he accused Bloodstone of being a publicity-seeking, opportunistic mountebank. Hastings added that he'd say Bloodstone was in league with the devil, but he didn't want Satan calling up to protest the association. *That* remark really hacked me off, mainly because I'd said it about Sheriff Doug during one of his visits to Bloodstone's office.

So, in the center ring of a media circus, Bloodstone's involvement in the Deathdealer case was exposed. The fact that he couldn't offer any help underscored the mountebank remark, which angered him, *and* fed back into his sense of dread concerning the Deathdealer. Bloodstone lives in a reality that doesn't always interface well with the real world, but I knew that in his world, he was feeling that this latest death was somehow his fault.

The fact that it occurred only four months after the last killing, which pointed to an escalation of the killer's cycle time, left me wondering if the Deathdealer weren't throwing down a gauntlet. It wouldn't quite be in keeping with the accepted psychology of a serial killer, but the rules governing their behavior are somewhat loose, and exceptions to them are bound to crop up. The Deathdealer had been exceptional through his spree so far, which sent a chill coursing down my spine.

It didn't help matters that Jensen took us to a house on the north side of Camelback Mountain. From the front door I could see Casa Chaos. Bloodstone looked back at his home as he alighted from the car, and I was fairly certain he was wondering how his nemesis could have been so close and yet he felt nothing.

Wordlessly we followed Agent Jensen. At the doorway we donned booties over our shoes and pulled on latex gloves. Mine hung on my hands like a senior citizen's skin—my hands are small—but Bloodstone's just layered a corpse-like pallor onto his slender, long-fingered hands. He flexed his hands down into claws, then uncurled them again slowly and deliberately.

Jensen opened the door to the faux-adobe mansion and a blast of cold air slammed into me. "Private security found her when they responded to a silent alarm at 3 AM. The killer had cranked the AC down, making sure the body cooled off faster. It makes time of death analysis tougher, though I hope the coroner will be able to peg it from stomach contents." She hesitated. "If we find the stomach, that is."

Even with that sort of preparatory remark, and despite having seen autopsy photos of previous victims, there was no way to be ready for what I saw. It pretty much boiled down to a sunken living room, carpeted in white, with a red ocean in the center of it. What once had been a woman rose like an gray island out of that ocean. Blood splatters trailed over the walls, furnishings and ceiling like a galaxy of red stars swirling in a white sky.

The woman, who, as nearly as I could make out, was naked, lay on her back, with her hands up above her shoulders, arms bent at the elbow. Her legs were bent, too, with heels together. The arrangement of her limbs reminded me of the position of those frogs we dissected in high school, and she'd been laid open about as effectively. The only things missing were the little paper labels attached to the organs that had been removed.

Instead of those labels, though, I could see tarot cards. One on her forehead, one in each palm, one over her pubic hair, and a trio crisscrossed on her exposed sternum. In addition we had one each on her heart, liver, lungs and womb as they were laid out to the right of her body, in a line paralleling the edge of the couch.

It surprised me that I didn't immediately turn and vomit, because I knew I should have. There was something about her, though, the way she lay there, that removed her from humanity. She'd gone from being a person to a victim and even a piece of evidence. It gave me some distance, and that was a distance I was happy to maintain.

The three of us were not alone in the house. Paradise Valley PD was there, with their forensic team photographing, measuring, taking samples, dusting for prints and all the other things they do. Bloodstone drifted forward as if we *were* alone, however, approaching the body slowly and reverently. He stepped down into the living room, to the edge of the crimson sea, and squatted. He closed his eyes for a second, then shook his head.

My boss slowly rose, turned and stripped off his gloves. "This isn't a Deathdealer murder. You know that."

A little bit of color drained from Jensen's face. "I suspected."

"You *knew*. You arrived at my house at eight, which was eleven back at Quantico. The agents there told you this was not a Deathdealer case before their first cups of coffee had gotten cold."

"They weren't on-site." Her arctic eyes tightened as she stared down at him. "I needed to be sure."

I frowned. "What am I missing here?"

Bloodstone glanced at me momentarily. "He utilized the Halloween Tarot."

"Oh." So far, the Deathdealer had never repeated use of a deck of cards. He'd used the Halloween Tarot in the fourth murder, two years ago, in October. His employment of the Halloween Tarot at that time had been taken as a clue, but no seasonal factors matched up with any of the other killings. "The significance of his utilization of that deck," Bloodstone had concluded in a dead-end memo, "is that it was easy to find, especially at that time of year."

Bloodstone looked up at Jensen. "Had you told me the name of the deck, I could have dismissed the connection in my office. Connor could have done it over the phone. Now, if you have no further need for me..."

"Look, Dr. Bloodstone, I feel bad about not being able to help you out through this whole thing. I want to make amends, and I will. Right now, though, I need your help." She pointed past him to the body. "That was Syndi Rooker. She's dead, and whoever killed her wanted to make it look like the Deathdealer did it. You know, as well as I do, that the moment the press and Sheriff Doug get wind of this, there's no chance of conducting anything even approaching a good investigation. We finger a suspect and his lawyer will be protesting that we're looking for a scapegoat because we can't stop a monster. There's already reasonable doubt built in and with juries made up of folks who aren't smart

enough to get out of jury duty, chances are justice won't be served here."

"You want me to help you solve her murder, then."

"I need you to, yes." She nodded. "You saw the cards. There's a message there this time, isn't there?"

Bloodstone gave her a curt nod. "There is. Misdirection, certainly."

"That's why this one is going to be tough, and we have to move fast. Longer we take, the better the chances he has of covering up any mistake he made."

Bloodstone tapped a finger against his lips. "If I am to help you, we will have to do this *my* way. You will interview her close associates, of course, and I will want to be a part of that process. At my home. In my office."

The FBI agent stiffened. "That would be highly irregular. I don't know if my superiors...."

"Tell them you'll clear the murder in time for national headlines on Sunday."

She blinked. "What did you see that I didn't?"

"Many things, but whether or not they are relevant remains to be determined." The diminutive occultist shrugged. "It is very clear to me, however, that solving this murder quickly is vital. If we don't catch the murderer swiftly, the press will tally this body up to the Deathdealer. The Deathdealer won't like that. With his cycle being so close, I don't want to see what he will do to vent his ire, do you? We will prevail, we have no choice."

Part Three

Serial killings are referred to as *ritual crimes* by law enforcement because the killers tend to repeat the same behavior over and over again. Sure, they refine it, learning from their mistakes, but once they develop a pattern, it becomes as individual as fingerprints. The murders have a signature to them, and the Deathdealer's John Hancock was big, red and tough to miss.

As splashy as it was, though, it was also easy to imitate.

The files that had been hacked from local law enforcement computers gave detailed descriptions of how the Deathdealer operated. Read in chronological order, the files even showed how he was adapting and evolving. The first victim was an exotic dancer and, while she was in college studying to enter medical school, law enforcement generally listed her occupation as high risk for sex-related crimes. None of her acquaintances even hinted at the idea that she might have been turning tricks—in fact, they all said she was very kind-hearted and a bit naive. The police quickly assumed she might have fallen for a helplessness ploy—such as when Ted Bundy would put a fake cast on his arm to get coeds to help him carry his books to his car.

A couple of the Deathdealer attacks had occurred in the victims' homes, and there were no signs of forced entry, so this murder certainly fit the pattern that had been reported. Since Jensen didn't think this was a Deathdealer murder, but someone trying to make it look like it was, and since most murderers know their victims, the immediate task would be to rule out close acquaintances. With any luck at all, the killer would be someone with access to the home, and a motive for wanting Syndi Rooker dead.

If we were not lucky, the killer would be some demented copycat, which meant more blood was likely to

spill. Face it, anyone nuts enough to copy a serial killer's method of operation is nuts enough to want to rack up more kills and become something more than the person he started out imitating.

Agent Jensen was able to get us a lot of information on Syndi Rooker, including the sort of headshot publicity photos that the papers run. They weren't hard to look at in the least. She'd been a very pretty woman, with a softness to her features and big doe eyes. She wore her blonde hair short and there was something familiar about her. I knew I'd seen her before in Phoenix, but it could have been just seeing the picture in the paper or watching her be interviewed on TV.

She had done a fair amount of local media. Her company, Thothsoft.com, had developed an integrated internet browser that allowed users to chat over it while surfing the web. Acquaintances would show up as icons running down the left side of the display—and the icons could be customized with their own picture, or, more often, the image of some movie star or supermodel. Click on the icon and you send instant private messages. Type into a dialog box and everyone gets your message. And if everyone has slaved their software to yours, you get to drive them on a tour around the web—allowing for virtual shopping junkets or student field trips. The software was called Voyager, though plenty called it Voyeur, since using it for tours of sex-sites was popular.

Rumors abounded about the company and what it was going to do. Rooker was reported to be in negotiations with Microsoft to acquire the Thothsoft, though AOL-Time-Warner was said to be coming up with another offer. Everyone else, from AT&T to Oracle, likewise was interested, and shares of Thothsoft.com had been bucking the trend of dot-coms crashing and burning.

I read over the data on Rooker and made tea—Ti Kuan Yin for Bloodstone, a black tea blend flavored with feijoa for Agent Jensen and Pu-erh for me to settle my stomach—while Bloodstone went up to the third floor and returned with a deck of tarot cards in hand. He had quite a collection of them up in his sanctuary and not a month went by that a new deck or other didn't show up in the office. Bloodstone had two or three favorites, including a very ornate Russian deck, that he used to impress high-paying clients.

Bloodstone quickly stripped out of the deck the cards that had been deposited on Syndi Rooker's body. He placed them carefully on his mahogany desk—which was a control tower shy of being able to have planes land on it—recreating the spread. He pondered over it, the size of his desk making him look a lot like a child chess-prodigy studying a board. His concentration did not waver as I slid his tea onto the desk.

The rectangular office really deserves describing. The north wall and the longer east wall are floor to ceiling with bookshelves. The ceiling actually goes up to the height of the second floor rooms, and there is a doorway to a second story corridor in the middle of the east wall. A cast-iron spiral staircase in the room's southeast corner provides access to the catwalk serving the upper section of the shelves. The west wall is pretty much all window, looking out toward the north side of Camelback Mountain. From the catwalk it would have been just barely possible to see the Rooker house. The south wall runs from the staircase to the wetbar by the windows. It's mostly a brag wall, with plaques and photos of Bloodstone with the rich and famous adorning it. The doorway to the foyer is set in the middle of the photo forest.

Bloodstone's desk is centered against the backdrop of the north wall. My desk, which is much smaller, sits in the southwest corner, so I can attend the wet bar and make tea as needed. In the middle of the room a tan leather couch faces Bloodstone's desk at a slight angle, and a phalanx of three rust-colored leather chairs defend the desk. Little end-tables sit between the chairs and one long coffee table fronts the couch. All the furnishings, including the black bust of Edgar Allen Poe in the northeast corner, have been positioned according to the dictates of Feng Shui. I'm not sure that really makes a difference in how

the office functions, but when some folks are told about it, they smile and seem to calm down.

Bloodstone tapped a finger against the desktop. “Our killer is quite clever. I will use male pronouns to describe him, though I am not convinced of his gender. I am aware, of course, that the crime scene would indicate a crime of rage, but since our killer is aping the Deathdealer, that passion could be simulated. I suspect it was not feigned, though, not entirely. The killer did a good job. He followed the formula save in one area. These cards tell a tale.”

Agent Jensen set her mug on the corner of Bloodstone’s desk and came around to stand beside him. “I don’t see it.”

“Perhaps not, though not because of any lack of intellect. The Halloween Tarot swaps symbols on the cards. Pentacles or coins become pumpkins, swords become bats, cups become ghosts and wands become imps.”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “That doesn’t help much.”

“No, I suppose it does not.” He looked up at me. “Connor?”

I shook my head. “From my perspective everything’s inverted, so I’d just read it wrong anyway.”

“It’s fairly simple, and obviously constructed. Rooker is represented by the Queen of Bats. This is a woman who is solitary, usually seen as smart and creative. She’s not averse to confrontation and can even be aggressive.”

I nodded. “Fits Rooker.”

“Seemingly, yes. The rest of the cards illuminate her circumstance and possibly even identify the killer.” Bloodstone pointed to each card in turn of the trio crisscrossed at the heart of the spread. “She is covered by the Knight of Imps inverted, taking a blond, blue-eye man from being a generous and energized friend and lover to a jealous creature who is disruptive and frustrating. The crossing card is the two of pumpkins, indicating she was juggling things, looking for a balance. The fact that the Knight is covering her—and the killer chose to use the term *covering* in one of its more earthy connotations—would suggest she was part of a love triangle.”

He shifted his attention to the four cards arrayed around the trio. He started with the card above, then moved counter clockwise. “She was hoping for the four of Imps, which indicates prosperity and possible romance. Of recent import is the three of Bats, suggesting betrayal and grief. In the foundation position we have The Lovers, one of the major arcana that can be interpreted literally, or as a card of temptation and seduction. And for the near future we have the card Death. It is a harbinger of change. These cards taken together would paint a picture of a woman leaving a treacherous lover and moving into a new and prosperous era with romantic prospects.”

Jensen pointed at the four cards arrayed on the side. “These four are read as a unit, correct?”

“Very good, Agent Jensen. The five of Pumpkins shows the victim was at a turning point and in some distress. The six of Imps tells us that her friends thought she would be making the correct decision and would win out. The Moon is in a position to represent what she feared, and it is a card of deception. The werewolf image on this card may be descriptive of someone she knew changing fearfully, becoming violent. And then the last card, the Haunted Tower, this is a card of disaster. Inverted, as it is, just makes it worse.”

The FBI agent sipped her tea. “That makes for quite a story. Basically she ditches the Knight of Imps

because he's a weasel and he kills her. Now we just have to figure out who the Knight of Imps is."

"And then we would figure out who the killer wants to frame for her killing." Bloodstone frowned. "Or, is he the killer and frames himself so he can claim he was framed if caught? As I said, he is clever."

I smiled. "You'll just have to be more clever."

"Oh, I am, much more." Bloodstone steeped his fingers and perched his chin on them. "Once we know if Syndi Rooker dyed her hair, and who knew it, we will have our killer."

Part Four

I hate when he does that. He takes this little factoid that might not even exist—whether or not she dyed her hair—and makes everything hinge on it. Granted, Bloodstone lives in his own universe, which gives him a tourist's perspective on ours, but how her being worth L'Oreal would point us to the murderer completely escaped me.

Jensen didn't seem terribly impressed, either, though she did stare at him awaiting an explanation that never did come.

Before she could ask him to elucidate, Paradise Valley detective Barry Kent entered the office. Barry had been here a couple of times before—his tea preference was Darjeeling, which I set to making right away. He had consulted Bloodstone on cases where psychics were offering advice. He used Bloodstone as a psychic bullshit meter, sorting wheat from chaff. Kent had sent people to Bloodstone when the detective felt they were vulnerable to psychic scams. The one case I remember best was that of a family whose twelve-year old daughter had gone missing. Bloodstone made sure they were sharp enough that no fraud would con them out of money while promising more than could ever be delivered.

Kent, who is about a third again as tall as Bloodstone, and very lean, nodded a greeting. "I've cleared interviewing folks here with the Chief, provided I'm present and all the formalities are met with. Having a call from your people, Terri, helped a great deal in making his mind up. I'm set to go. Can we do video?"

Bloodstone scrunched his face up. "Audio only, please. Connor, is the system working?"

I turned away from the makings of tea, punched up a program on the G4 Cube at my desk, and put the recording system online. "Pick-ups are live from the couch and chairs."

Agent Jensen smiled. "Audio will have to do, I guess. I think the best approach is to establish alibis and motives. We know the knife used was from the kitchen, so anyone who had access to the house had the means to commit the murder. We need to know who had keys."

The detective came over and took a mug of first-flush Darjeeling from me and appropriated the nearest of the leather chairs. "Dot-coms are risky, so I think the money angle to this is going to be important. I want it covered."

Bloodstone picked up his cup and saucer, then moved to the centermost of the leather chairs. That was a relief because, given the snit he'd started the day in, I was afraid he was going to have everyone turn the chairs around while he remained behind his desk. As it was, he did manage to nudge his chair out of line and back several inches, so both Agent Jensen and Detective Kent would have to turn a bit to see him.

Kent sipped his mug, then lowered it. "My people are bringing her close associates in. One is here now, the chief programmer at Thothsoft. His name is Raymond Exner. The others are on their way. I'll have

them held in your front room and dining room when they get here.”

Bloodstone nodded. “That will do. Connor, if you would summon Mr. Exner.”

I went to the office door and signaled one of the Paradise Valley cops to send the programmer in. When Exner looked up I was pretty sure I recognized him, but I was having a devil of a time placing him. Then it came to me. I’d missed it because he had long pants on, and oxford shoes, a bit more paunch and a bit less hair, and not just from having had it cut. His hairline wasn’t receding, his scalp had lost the war and was being occupied by the People’s Republic of Baldness.

Bloodstone waved Exner to the couch. “Please, be seated. My condolences on the death of your employer.”

“Thank you.” He looked around the room. He seemed unimpressed with what he saw, but brightened up considerably when he saw the G4 Cube on my desk. “Sweet machine.”

This admission brought a scowl to Bloodstone’s face, since he resented the intrusions of the twentieth century in his life—tolerating the phone only because it was a nineteenth century invention. He would have said something, but Jensen leaned forward and spoke first. What she ended up saying was pretty much boilerplate and repeated to the others, so I’ll put it down once, then only record the variances hereafter.

“Mr. Exner, I’m Special Agent Theresa Jensen of the FBI. We’re looking into the death of Syndi Rooker. You knew her and undoubtedly have information we’ll find useful in figuring out who did it. You are not under arrest. This is a preliminary investigation and we are taping our conversation. We’re holding the interview here because Dr. Bloodstone has been consulting with us on a case that may be related.”

“That Deathdealer thing?”

“Yes.”

“Do I need a lawyer?”

Kent stretched. “If you want to call one, you can, but if you have nothing to hide, there’s really no reason to bring one in on this, is there? If you want to stop at any point, we can do that.”

Exner nodded and frowned. His face still had that pinched expression I recognized from disappointment or suspicion. He pointed at Bloodstone. “You two are cops, but what about him? Do I have to answer his questions?”

Bloodstone set his cup and saucer down on the table at his left. “I believe you will find mine less onerous than those asked by either Agent Jensen or Detective Kent, but you are under no obligation to answer me.”

“Okay, well, let’s go. I want to help you catch the guy who did this to Syndi.”

Jensen began. “How long have you known the victim?”

“Six years. I was at Microsoft for four years before I met her, then she came aboard as a manager in our group. She had some ideas about the net, but no one wanted to listen. She bolted after a year and, um, convinced me to come down here with her to work on projects. It was just the two of us for a while, working on special business applications. That gave us the initial money for Thothsoft.

“About two years ago we started working on Voyager.” His voice picked up a bit and he smiled, holding

his hands before him as if he were hefting an invisible capsule slightly larger than a football. “It has everything, you know. Browser that’s better than Explorer or Netscape, and chat and instant messaging that beats the snot out of ICQ or their clones. We’re set up to add Napster and Gnutella modules to let folks provide a soundtrack to their webwanderings. It will smoke everything out there.

“And the best thing about it was that because folks would be hooked into our servers so they could chat and tour their friends around the web, we’d know what they were doing. We’ll be getting all the data on where they go and what they see, then we’ll be able to send them package tours of sites they’ll like.”

Kent nodded. “Like the casinos bundling gamblers on a bus and taking them to Laughlin.”

“No, man, you’re thinking too small. Not an e-mall thing, better. You want sites of prehistoric cave paintings, we’ve got them. Cutting edge science, we’ve got them.”

Agent Jensen arched an eyebrow. “Tours of kiddie-porn sites.”

Exner straightened up as if she’d slapped him with a transcript of the Microsoft anti-trust suit. “The net’s about freedom, you know. I don’t like those kinda creeps anymore than you do. Think of it this way, Agent Jensen, the pervos will be lining up to join you on some tour to Stingland and you’ll have them all wrapped up.”

Kent held a hand up. “So, if this Voyager goes big, you’ll make a ton of money, right?”

The programmer shrugged. “I suppose so. Doesn’t matter, though, I had stock options from way back at Microsoft. I’ve got more money than I can use in a lifetime. I own a lot of Thothsoft, too. Stock’s already dropping with news of Syndi’s death, but it will be back. Voyager will see to that.”

Kent sat back, so the Fed asked a question. “You can account for your whereabouts last evening?”

Exner nodded and yawned. “I left work about 9:30. Syndi had called and told me to knock off for the day. I got home about 10.”

“Were you alone?”

“Sort of.”

“Meaning?”

The programmer smiled slyly. “I was alone at the house, but logged into an IRC chat with Timothy Zahn about his Star Wars novels. There’s a transcript at Jedinet.com. I logged in at 10:10, stayed to midnight, asked some questions. Then I played Everquest until four—plenty of folks saw me there and will verify I was online with them. After that I got some sleep and hit the office by nine. That’s where you found me halfway through my first can of Jolt.”

Jensen nodded. “Did you have access to the Rooker house? Did you have keys or know the security code?”

“I have keys and the security code numbers both.” Exner shrugged. “Syndi headed up a software company, but she wasn’t really conversant with software and hardware. I mean, she knew our stuff inside and out, and was great convincing clients to buy it, but installing stuff, recovering from a disk crash, all those sorts of things were beyond her. I’d get calls at all hours go to over and fix things, or install new software.”

“You didn’t mind getting called-on that way?”

“Nope. Part of the job.”

Something in that answer prompted the barest flicker of a response from Bloodstone. “What do you know of the Tarot, Mr. Exner?”

The programmer shook his head. “Nothing much. In school I programmed a card randomizing routine and used Tarot cards because seventy-eight is more impressive than fifty-two. I wanted to do an interp module for the thing, but never got around to it.”

“I see.” Bloodstone sipped more Ti Kuan Yin. “There is some indication that Ms. Rooker was moving into a romantic relationship with someone. Would you know who that might be?”

Exner glanced down at his shoes. “Um, I guess that would be me.”

This brought Jensen’s head up. “You ‘guess?’ Were you dating?”

“Not exactly.” He sighed. “Look, when Syndi left the Great Satan she came down here. She wanted me to join her to work on stuff, so I came down for a visit. One thing led to another and we had a thing, okay? So I came down and we saw each other for a while, then she got busy and I got busy and we drifted apart. With Voyager coming close to release, we were working closely again and things looked good for starting up again. We’d have time and all the money we needed.”

Bloodstone lifted his chin. “Do you know if Ms. Rooker dyed her hair and, if so, what the original color was?”

Exner’s grin broadened and he giggled a little. “She was a natural blonde.”

The answer did not appear to impress Bloodstone. He finished his tea and then held his cup up to me. “More, please. Agent Jensen? Detective Kent?”

Bloodstone’s inquiry broke any flow of the questions being asked of Exner. The other two continued with a few cursory questions about any enemies Rooker had, anyone she owed money to, and the like; but the responses amounted to very little. Basically, for someone who had dated her four years ago, and had worked for her since, Exner really knew little or nothing of Syndi Rooker’s private life.

Then again, if he was spending time on the net chatting and playing Everquest—an online game addictive enough to be known as *Evercrack*—he had a private life about as exciting as a meal of saltine crackers—without the salt. The law enforcement officers said they would be checking on things and then, at Bloodstone’s suggestion, asked Exner to stick around in case they had more questions.

The PV cop escorted Exner from the room while I was brewing Bloodstone some more tea.

“Connor,” he began.

I turned my head and scowled at him. “Yes, I recognized him. I knew him for several years. Not his full name, just as Ray. And I saw her with him a couple of times, probably when he first came to the valley.”

Kent sat up in his chair. “Details, Moran, sooner rather than later.”

I turned all the way around, folding my arms across my chest, and leaned back against the wetbar.

“Okay, I play indoor soccer on Sundays on the west side of town. Ray played for about three years, up to two years ago. I mostly played against him and he was a pain in the butt. Rooker came to some early games, and he was playing to her—saluting her when he’d score, that sort of thing. He wasn’t bad, but wasn’t great. Still, he usually got at least one goal a game off me.”

Agent Jensen came walking over for a refill of tea. With the fluidity in her gait, I'd have loved to have gotten her out on the field playing on our team. Heck, just the way she'd look in shorts would have been inspiring. The fact that she carried a gun, that would count for a lot, too.

"You ever play on the same team?"

"Pick-up games, sometimes. I played for a team he was on for one season, when my team took the summer off. Everything had to be just so for him. His water bottle had to be in one place. He had to start, or his game would be off. He ironed his game shirts. He *always* was telling me how to do my job. It's a game, you know? We go to work on Monday. Winning is nice, but, gosh. We all pay the same fees to play—though if I knew he was a Gates Welfare child, I'd have talked him into sponsoring us."

The Federal agent smiled. "He never got Thothsoft to sponsor a team?"

I thought back. "Actually, there was one, just for a season, his last season."

"What happened?"

I took the teaball out of Bloodstone's cup. "My team played against Thothsoft. They beat us, Exner got a hat trick—scored three."

The FBI agent nodded. "I know what that is."

"Okay, so after the game my friend Darius and I are sitting there having a soda, watching the game after ours. Exner comes over, gives me static about his scoring spurt. I give him crap back, telling him that anyone could beat a goalie at point blank range. He said, 'You couldn't.' Insert macho posturing here. Anyway, a new game comes up and the teams are short, so Exner goes into the goal for one team, Darius and I play on the other. Darius feeds me, I pump four in on Exner."

"And he quits playing in disgust?"

"Nope, after the fourth goal he's still giving me grief, slides on another shot and takes me down. Hard. I limp off. Darius gets the ball, delivers a wicked shot, snaps two of Exner's fingers. So much for typing code. I heard his boss dissolved the team. That would have been Rooker, I guess."

Bloodstone smiled. "Stopping someone from playing soccer—there's a motive for murder."

"Yeah, we call it 'justifiable homicide,' boss." I shrugged and brought him his tea. "Ray's got money, was looking at getting back together with the vic, so the two big motives are out. I don't think soccer is it, at least not after two years."

"Alas, you are probably correct." Bloodstone set his tea beside him, then adjusted his coat. "Perhaps, Detective Kent, our next guest will provide with more useful information

Part Five

There was no question in my mind that I had never seen Virginia Okamoto before, at soccer or anywhere. I'd have remembered. I'd have remembered very well.

Of average height and an athletic build, Jini Okamoto entered the room somewhere between strolling and

gliding. She wore a sleeveless sundress with a dark floral design. The dress buttoned down the front and had a tie at the back of the waist to help fit it to her body. Her fleshtone—a cafe-au-lait brown—came from genetics, not sunlight, and the red-streaks in her black hair were artificially added. I assumed her heritage was pretty much equal parts African and Asian, with my assumption being aided and abetted by big, brown, almond-shaped eyes and black hair that had been straightened before being pulled back into a short ponytail.

“I’m Jini Okamoto, that’s jay-eye-en-eye; short for Virginia. I was named after the state.” She flashed a smile and seated herself on the couch while Agent Jensen went through the formalities. Jini listened to it all, didn’t voice any problem with Bloodstone or me being there, and snorted when it was suggested she could call on a lawyer if she wanted one.

“I have nothing to hide.” She crossed her legs then smoothed her dress. “Last night I was out with girlfriends at a Mercury game. We did some clubbing after that, I got home around midnight alone, and was alone until I reached work. Except that a half-hour before work I did get coffee at Starbucks.”

She had Bloodstone with her until she mentioned Starbucks. Bloodstone felt Starbucks’s line of tea-flavored drinks in some way cheapened the noble leaf. Had she said she’d ordered iced chai, he would have scowled at her. If she’d actually used the term “Venti” to describe her selection—Bloodstone hates Starbucks’s drink-size euphemisms—he’d have had her bodily removed from the building.

Kent smiled at her. “You’ve worked how long for Thothsoft?”

“I started two years ago, came in as an intern for the summer. I worked for Syndi as an aide, then pretty much became her Xray buffer.”

Bloodstone cocked his head to the side. “Her what?”

“Xray buffer. Xray was our pet name for Ray Exner. They’d had a thing—that was how she got him to leave Microsoft. He worked hard, kept hoping they’d get together again. She kept him on a string. She was good at that.” Jini shook her head. “Ray never saw he didn’t have a chance. He was back in the pack and wasn’t moving up.”

My boss raised his teacup toward his mouth. “You suggest she had another lover, then?”

“Only one? Syndi always needed a way to hook people. She was very pretty, pretty powerful and had charisma. Folks want a piece of that. She found a way to get to them and often enough that way was by letting *them* get to *her*.”

The PV detective narrowed his eyes. “That how she got to you?”

Jini’s head came up. “Just because I go to a Mercury game with female friends you figure I’m a lesbian?”

Bloodstone set his cup down, then peered at her over steepled fingertips. “Your answer is hardly responsive and makes a linkage where perhaps none was intended.”

“Sure, we’ll pretend he didn’t mean it that way. Look, I like basketball, the Suns aren’t playing right now and I can’t afford tickets to them anyway.”

“Very good, Ms. Okamoto.” Bloodstone smiled. “And last evening’s game against Indiana was a good one. I quite enjoyed it.”

“So did I. We started slow, but won going away.” Jini nodded and grinned broadly. “As for the original

question, yeah, she made a pass at me—she was kinda omniamorous that way, I guess. I said thanks but no thanks. Look, the truth is, she treated me like shit, worked me long hours and underpaid me. Since she's dead, I guess I shouldn't say that, but it's the truth."

Kent gave her half grin. "What were your duties, aside from being her Xray buffer?"

"All sorts of things. I did her scheduling, checked cell phone bills, figured out who got the corporate seats at sporting events, did shopping for her. I was her mom, her banker and, on the few times she chose to invoke it, her conscience."

"That sounds rough." Agent Jensen frowned. "Why did you stay?"

"Two reasons. While I was working there as an intern, I realized that if I stuck in school and got my degree, I'd be on the outside looking in when Voyager hit. School will always be there, but the chance to learn from Syndi as she took an idea, created a team, got the project rolling and delivered, that wouldn't always be there. I decided I could be useful to her. I showed her I was willing to take one for the team, and she rewarded me with the second reason I stay: stock options. At the end of two years with the company, which is another six weeks off, I earn enough stock options to make tuition something I can take out of petty cash."

Bloodstone gave her a gentle, approving smile. "You'll also be able to afford Sun's tickets."

"Voyager hits the way it should, I can afford to buy the Suns."

My boss nodded slowly. "You said you offered to take one for the team. What did you mean?"

Jini shrugged her shoulders. "Xray was hoping to work more closely with Syndi on the Voyager project, back when it started. I stepped in and made a play for him. We dated some, for a couple of months, which left her free to pursue others. Pretty soon, though, Xray forgot all about me."

Kent snorted. "Back to Syndi?"

"Nope, he's a programmer. His mistress was Voyager. He was up all hours coding things, working on problems and stuff. He was no fun." She fiddled with the band holding her ponytail together. "I found other things to do, and Xray just worked on the program."

Questioning of Jini Okamoto tailed off after that. They did establish that she had keys to the Rooker place and knew the alarm codes because she house sat when Syndi was out of town. She didn't think Syndi had enemies, though she had a younger brother, Bill, who would bounce into her life, mooch for a month, then disappear. Jini had met him once when she was housesitting and didn't think he was that bad a sort. They established that she knew virtually nothing of the tarot—and her describing having a reading done by a psychic all but made Bloodstone ill. They also learned that she was pretty sure Syndi didn't color her hair, since Bill had similar coloration.

Bloodstone followed up with one final question. "Mr. Exner is of the impression that Ms. Rooker was warming to him again. Was she returning to Xray? Would it have been possible without your knowing it?"

"No on both counts." Jini shook her head. "Syndi had been sleeping with Martin Jost, the head of our marketing division. She wanted Marty to join Thothsoft because of his skills *and* because his wife came from money. Jost secured a first round of funding from her for the company. About a year ago things cooled there, but recently Syndi went back to him for a second round. We got a second round of funding from his wife."

“You’re suggesting they became lovers again?”

Jini shrugged. “She didn’t say, I didn’t ask, but I started seeing the same pattern of cell phone calls to the Jost household that I’d seen when they were hot and heavy. I thought the new funding might have been a payoff for Syndi to leave Marty alone—his wife’s family would be death on scandal. If so, it didn’t take, because the calls are still going on.”

“Thank you, Ms. Okamoto, you have been most helpful.” Bloodstone stood and nodded his head to her. “We may have some other questions for you later.”

Jini left the room moving as fluidly as she had when entering it.

Kent stood and stretched. “You get the feeling that Xray was in denial about Rooker?”

“So it would seem.” Bloodstone nodded. “Definitely a multidimensional image we are getting of her. Still, neither Exner nor Ms. Okamoto have financial reasons for killing her. No evident passion there, either.”

The detective smiled. “Well, we might get that with the next set. Marty Jost is up, and has his wife, Helen, with him. She’s a lawyer and well connected locally. She’s from the Maltby family. We’ll have to be careful, or he’ll clam up, she’ll complain to the powers in the state and we’re in trouble.”

“If we want to solve this, we have to take that chance.” Jensen shrugged. “Okamoto gave us a good place to begin prying Jost open. Let’s get started, shall we?”

Part Six

I was pretty much prepared not to like Marty Jost on general principles, seeing as how he was a marketing puke. Despite the fact that his conduct could be described as Presidential, I also was uneasy with his sleeping around on his wife. I was willing to allow as how they might have had some sort of an arrangement, but that kind of thing was outside my experience and pretty much beyond my understanding.

Marty let his wife enter the office before he did, sharpening the contrast between them. While she was tall and slender, wearing her black hair pulled back into tight bun, her skin tone was closer to cadaverous than it was the rich gold of his. She wore a black business suit over a white blouse and a strand of pearls that had mates in her earrings. She looked every inch a lawyer, right down to the narrowed slits of her brown eyes.

The only unlawyerly thing about her, in fact, was the redness in her eyes. I wasn’t sure if tears cried because you’d learned your husband’s lover had been killed would make eyes red like that. That she wasn’t offering high-fives over the situation spoke well of her.

Marty was pretty much the anti-lawyer; but that’s kind of the definition of marketing folks anyway. He had dressed in lime-green slacks and golf shirt—and should have been shot on sight for wearing those clothes anywhere besides a golf course. His left hand didn’t seem as dark as his right. Using my deductive reasoning skills I assumed he spent a lot of time playing golf, with a glove on that hand. I took the golf resort logo on his shirt as a confirmation of my surmise. Marty smiled once his wife had swept past him, with his blue eyes bright and his medium-length blond hair perfectly in place.

Helen waited at the edge of the couch, then nodded to Marty to sit before she began speaking. “I’ll be representing my husband here, and I’ll terminate this interview whenever I see fit.” Her voice came tight with upset. It was easy to assume she was outraged that her husband would be considered a suspect.

Bloodstone, who had risen as she entered, smiled and waved her to a seat on the couch. “Your willingness to participate is appreciated. Perhaps you would like some tea? Ti Kuan Yin for Mrs. Jost, Connor.”

That surprised me, as Bloodstone had offered no one else refreshment. Ti Kuan Yin was supposed to be good for strengthening the spirit and calming folks, so I could see why he wanted her to have some. I rose and started making it as Agent Jensen went through the formalities. The occasional glance I shot toward the couch showed Marty leaning forward, elbows on knees, nodding positively. Helen sat back, her legs crossed, her left arm across her belly, her right hand covering her mouth.

I brought Mrs. Jost her tea and she accepted the mug with a silent nod.

Bloodstone let her take a sip, then began speaking in a low voice. “We have some questions, and we know this is difficult for you. As Agent Jensen and Detective Kent will tell you, a murder investigation often centers on the people around the victim. Mr. Jost, it has been suggested that you and Syndi Rooker had an ongoing and intimate relationship.”

Marty hesitated for a moment, then hung his head, nodding. “When Syndi first approached me, Helen and I were having some difficulties in our marriage. A variety of things were weighing us down, and my affair with Syndi could have shattered what we had. We worked through it.”

“So, the affair was over? When did it end?”

“My relationship with Syndi ended over a year ago.” He glanced at his wife with no hint of shame on his face for telling such a bald lie. When the subject of the recent cellular phone calls came up, he’d not be a happy camper.

Kent put an edge on his voice. “So, were you jealous that she and Exner were getting back together?”

The marketing man laughed. “Jealous of Ray? Not if he was on his best day and I was on my worst. Look, guys like Ray, they might be geniuses. He might, in Voyager, have created something that could fundamentally change the world as we know it; revolutionize everything, but what difference does that make? Without Lenin, where was Marx? Without St. Peter, where would Jesus have been? The innovators always hold someone like me in contempt, but I’m the guy who makes sure the world realizes it needs what they have to offer. Without me creating desire—informing people that they have a need—the inventors are nowhere.

“As for his relationship with Syndi, past, present or future, it didn’t matter to me. She and I were history. I’d accepted that, especially because of what we were able to do with Voyager. It was taking Thothsoft to the top. The money from the stock options and stock we own would buy a lot of happiness.”

Jost’s reply kicked the money motive in the teeth, and did collateral damage to the idea that he’d killed her because of Exner or his wife had killed her over the affair. Theresa Jensen tried to salvage something from the interview by asking if Syndi had colored her hair. Jost said he didn’t think so. In response to Kent’s alibi question, Jost reported that he and his wife had enjoyed dinner at the Chart House, had seen a late showing of *The Patriot*, then had gone home and gone to bed. Helen had little more than a passing knowledge of tarot cards. Marty said he’d done readings in college for friends, as a gag, but said he used to just wing it and couldn’t remember much anyway.

Jensen frowned. “Something I want to get clear: Mrs. Jost, you provided Thothsoft with an initial round of funding, presumably at Mr. Jost’s urging, while he was having an affair with Syndi Rooker.”

Helen Jost nodded. “I have a trust fund that allows me to finance businesses.”

“Then you learned of the affair, and you still provided a second round of financing? It was suggested you did that to pay Syndi off so she’d leave your husband alone.”

Marty and his wife both laughed, he more easily than she. Helen shook her head. “Whoever said that isn’t privy to the financing agreement. It is quite favorable to us, not at all how it would be if Syndi were being paid off. Providing the financing was a sound business decision.”

Helen sipped a bit more tea, then set the mug down on the coffee table. “If there are no more questions, this is a horrid day.”

Kent was about to dismiss them, but Bloodstone held a hand up. “I appreciate your emotional turmoil, Mrs. Jost. I know how you feel.”

“I don’t think, Dr. Bloodstone, you have any idea how I feel.”

My boss’ amethyst eyes tightened over steeped fingers. “I made a misstatement. My apologies. You are correct. Unlike you, I’ve never had a lover butchered.”

Were the tea still in her hand, the jolt that shook Helen Jost would have sprayed it everywhere. Her right hand rose to cover her mouth, then the left joined it and her face sank behind a flesh and bone curtain. Marty leaned toward her and slung his left arm over her hunched shoulders. I don’t know what he murmured to her, but she gave no sign that she had heard him above the silent sobs wracking her.

Bloodstone’s voice remained low and quiet, yet was not difficult to hear. “A year ago, in the paper, when you were made a partner in Cooper, James and Feldsen; it was noted you were one of Theodore Maltby’s grandchildren. Detective Kent reminded me of your family ties moments ago. Your grandfather’s conservative leanings are not unknown—rare is the man who considered Barry Goldwater a liberal. He believed in family and provided for you all, very well. And the trusts he left for you are well protected, as the news stories about the litigation in your cousin’s divorce pointed out several years ago.

“My hope is that your marriage to Mr. Jost here was not purely a mercenary union. Discovering that you loved the woman he’d had an affair with, well, it might have come as a shock—but greater would have been your family’s shock at discovering you were a lesbian. I suspect that would have revoked your trust. You invested trust money in Thothsoft because if the company paid off, your wealth would be independent of your grandfather’s conservative strictures on it. You would be free to live your life as you wished, with Syndi Rooker as your partner.”

Helen sniffed and took a tissue from the box I carried from my desk. “How could you possibly think...?”

Bloodstone’s voice sharpened. “Helen, you are not a stupid woman, so playing stupid will not do. You cannot convince us that your tears are for a friend, a woman who had seduced your husband and used her relationship with him to con you out of money. Your husband’s says he ended the affair with Syndi a year ago. Cell phone records indicated calls to your home in a similar pattern to when the affair was ongoing. Surmises about the nature of the second round of funding and the purpose of your investing so much in Thothsoft have combined with that call data and knowledge of Ms. Rooker’s sexual appetites, leading to my conclusion. I would have suspected a *menage a trois* save that her death clearly affects you more than it has your husband. Rumors and public knowledge about your family’s financial affairs made drawing the complete picture rather inescapable.”

Helen looked at him for a moment, then closed her hands over her face again.

Kent shook his head. “Wait a minute. If *she* was having an affair with Rooker, then Jost here has a motive, since she’s got the money.”

Marty frowned. “Wrong. Neither of us wanted her dead. The thing about the trust is right. If she comes out as a lesbian, her trust fund evaporates. If Helen and I divorced, because of the nature of the trust and a prenup, I’d get nothing from her family. The only thing I’d walk away with is my share of assets acquired during our marriage, which includes the options and stock we got during the second round of funding. If anyone was getting paid off, it was me—but that’s not how it was.”

The detective raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, tell me how it was.”

Marty started to speak, but Helen brought her head up and wiped away her tears. “It was like this, Detective. My family is very conservative and I spent years denying what I knew to be true inside me. I wanted to be straight. I hid my attractions. Marty and I met and I loved him, I really did. I didn’t tell him about what I felt inside because I wanted to be his wife and for everything to be all right.

“That trouble he said we were having, well, I’d had an affair with a woman. The idea that your wife wants women is a gutshot to a lot of guys. They think they aren’t much of a man. So he had an affair with Syndi, to get back at me, to prove he was a man, whatever. But he also said he still loved me, and I loved him. We worked things out and realized I had to be true to me. We knew my family would cut me off, so we figured out how to make sure I didn’t need them anymore.”

She sniffed, but as she spoke strength flooded her words. “Marty, he kept me sane during all of this. He’s been very accepting and has helped me. The money we’ll make when Thothsoft is sold to Microsoft is a fraction of what I owe him for being understanding. We’re still friends, very close friends.” She reached out and grabbed his left hand, holding it very tightly.

Bloodstone glanced sidelong at Kent. “They have no reason to want her dead, and every reason to want her alive.”

Kent snarled. “No one does. We have a body and no reason at all for anyone to want her dead.”

A new voice that I recognized all too easily, boomed from the doorway. “There’s a damned good reason to want her dead,” announced Maricopa County Sheriff Douglas Hastings. “I know what it is and, better than that, I’ve got the killer being booked downtown, even as you dumbasses sit there gawking at me.”

Part Seven

There may be some of you who are not yet acquainted with Douglas Hastings, our county Sheriff. He’s the sort of man who would think of Jesse Helms as being a leftist pinko, and has serious suspicions about anybody who doesn’t have an ironclad alibi for a fateful November day in Dallas, 1963. (My having been several years shy of birth at that date has put me into the secondary ring of suspects.) He’s become famous for serving county inmates surplus corn dogs and threatening to make the TV in the jail broadcast Teletubbies all the time.

He once had the build of a linebacker, but that was in the day when linebackers weren’t giants, and his shoulders were wider than his waist. His hawk-nose clearly took one too many forearm shivers in his younger days. He’d had his iron-grey hair chopped short, then combed it forward to cover his balding scalp. I’d call his dark eyes piggish, but pigs have feelings, right?

Sheriff Doug stood there in the doorway, fists planted on hips, glaring triumphantly. The Josts rose and turned to face him, then Hastings dismissed them with a jerk of his head. He graciously took a step forward so they could slip past, then he nodded at the deputy behind him to close the doors.

“You see, while you’ve been here listening to Merlin the Meddler, I’ve been working hard.” He strode into the room with his fists still on his hips, moving one foot forward and then the other, as if someone had

made a giant croquet wicket out of rebar and had stuffed it down his pants. His suit, which had been woven of the finest khaki polyester and tailored in a western style, didn't quite squeak as he moved, but I could tell it really wanted to.

The rebar evaporated as he seated himself on the left arm of the leather couch. That arm did creak and I saw Bloodstone's lips get thinner. "We swept Rooker's brother Billy up after a citizen reported finding a vagrant behind the pool house. He was strung out, talking about blood and his sister. He had some of her stuff in his pockets, including a key to the house."

Bloodstone stood, filling his hands with his cup and saucer. "And you suppose, Sheriff, that Billy Rooker killed his sister?"

"Don't have any psychic vibes about him, do you, Bloodstone? You should, there are plenty. Drunk and disorderly, burglary, assault, possession of a deadly weapon, possession of cocaine. He's got a rap-sheet taller than you. Well, hell, babies born yesterday got a rap-sheet taller than you, Bloodstone. Fact is, Rooker had cut Billy off, wasn't going to pay for him to go to rehab any more. He told us the key was one he'd made when they were still talking and she let him crash there."

Kent sighed. "Means and motive. More than we have on any of the others."

"Exactly." Hastings thrust his chin at Bloodstone. "Not going to offer me a cup of victory tea? Where are your manners?"

"Connor, oblige the Sheriff." Bloodstone smiled coldly. "We need to show him some kindness, since we will show his theory none of it."

"What are you talking about?"

I got up and started making the Sheriff a cup of Earl Grey tea. It's the only thing we have that he'll drink, since he's suspicious of foreign teas. Somewhere he's gotten the impression that Earl Grey is named after Zane Grey's brother, and what could be more American than that?

Bloodstone sipped, letting Hastings wait, which made the Sheriff hotter than Bloodstone's tea. Determined that Hastings had fumed long enough, Bloodstone lowered his cup. "Is there any indication Billy knows anything about the Tarot? Did he have cards on him? Were discarded cards found nearby? Was he wearing gloves to prevent leaving fingerprints?"

His lip curling into a sneer, Bloodstone offered a final salvo. "Perhaps, in his possession, you found his sister's stomach."

The Sheriff's chin came back. "No, but he described the scene. He said he must have cut her. He said he was mad at her."

"Of this I have no doubt, Sheriff. Please, sit down on the *seat*." Bloodstone walked past Kent and toward his desk. "It is blatantly obvious her brother came to the house, found her dead, then fled, terrified. He undoubtedly set off the alarm that led to her discovery."

"Obvious to you, maybe, Bloodstone."

"Obvious enough for even you, Sheriff." Bloodstone's upper lip almost twitched its way to another sneer. "The person who killed Syndi Rooker did so with passion, as well as calculation. Threaten her, tie her up, hit her, steal from her, all of these things her stoned brother could have done. Imitate the Deathdealer down to placing cards on the corpse, not possible."

Bloodstone set his cup and saucer down on his desk, then scooped the spread tarot cards into a pile and returned them to the deck. "The killer here was highly motivated and intelligent. The exposé of the Deathdealer's methods created an opportunity to murder Syndi Rooker. The only thing we know about the Deathdealer that the killer did not was this: my analysis of the tarot card spreads left on the victims."

Agent Jensen shook her head. "But you said those spreads were inconclusive and meaningless."

"Exactly." Bloodstone smiled. "Our killer learned enough about the tarot to manufacture a spread, but his knowledge of the cards stops there. I believe this is something we can exploit."

"Exploit it all you want, Bloodstone." Hastings raised the mug of tea I handed him in a salute. "I've got my man and I'm keeping him."

"Very good, Sheriff, you are welcome to him." Bloodstone nodded to me. "Connor, if you would be so good as to fetch Mr. Exner, Ms. Okamoto and the Josts. Detective Kent, if you would move your chair around for Ms. Okamoto."

Hastings blew on his tea to cool it. "What are you pulling here?"

"What concern is it of yours, Sheriff? You have your man." Bloodstone shrugged and his voice softened. "I will have the murderer."

Agent Jensen looked up. "Did you hear something I didn't?"

"Undoubtedly, but that's not important at the moment." Bloodstone fanned the cards out in his left hand, then swept them together again, and began to shuffle. "We all agree that everyone had means, no one had a motive and, given the lengths the killer went to in creating the impression that the Deathdealer killed Syndi Rooker, I will suppose any physical evidence of his presence will be minimal or accounted for by his acquaintance with Ms. Rooker. The chances of a conviction here are minimal. Unless..."

Hastings snorted as he moved away from the couch. "If you've got nothing, you're not going to get a confession."

"Oh, I think a confession could be in the cards."

I opened the doors into the foyer and nodded to the cops stationed by the doors to the front room and the dining room. "We need them all."

I noticed Hastings had only brought one deputy with him, the man who had stayed at the door. The deputy squared up as the other cops sent the suspects back to the office. His eyes tightened as each suspect walked past, with Exner in the lead and Okamoto last, having put the Josts between her and Xray.

I pulled the doors shut behind us all. Bloodstone, standing on the far side of the coffee table, smiled and pointed the visitors to their seats. "Mr. Exner, Mr. And Mrs. Jost, the couch, please. Ms. Okamoto, the chair is for you."

"Being told I'm getting the chair isn't what I wanted to hear."

Hastings snorted at her remark. "It's the needle in this state, missy."

Bloodstone's dark glance at the Sheriff suggested one person would be getting the needle, and it would go deep. Hastings had come around to stand with his back to the windows, near the chair, putting himself at right angles to Bloodstone and the guests. Kent and Agent Jensen both stood back and away from

Bloodstone, Kent with his hands clasped at the small of his back, she with her arms crossed.

I returned to my desk and sat, able to see around most of Sheriff Doug to watch Bloodstone at work. I wasn't quite sure what Bloodstone was going to do, but I'd watched his theatrics enough to recognize when he was setting up for a major display. I considered, briefly, calling the bomb squad because I knew, no matter how it turned out, Hastings would explode. I decided to live dangerously and just watch him boil.

If enough of him evaporated, my line of sight would be totally unobstructed.

Bloodstone fanned the tarot cards out as a magician might at the start of a trick, drawing the attention of the visitors. "There are some things I must explain to you so you understand what I am going to do. Ms. Rooker's murder was made to look like the work of the serial killer known as the Deathdealer. He brutally butchers his victims, then leaves tarot cards scattered over their bodies. You would know this unless you had the good luck or good taste to avoid last month's newspaper coverage of his predations."

Hastings smiled slowly, but said nothing.

"In that coverage, I was mentioned. At various points I was called a shaman, a psychic, a warlock and, by our esteemed sheriff, a 'fakir, fraud and mountebank.' I hope I quoted you accurately, Sheriff, though I fear I may have dropped some of your more colorful adjectives."

"You caught my drift."

"Indeed." Bloodstone graced him with a vaguely courteous nod. "In fact, I am none of those things. I am an occultist. I study that which is hidden in order to find truth. The FBI had asked me to look into the Deathdealer case because of the tarot angle. This is why I was asked to consult on the Rooker murder. Already, in speaking with you, a great deal of information has been revealed, but I need more, and simply talking will not get it for me."

Bloodstone thumbed through the deck of tarot cards and pulled a pack of five cards aside. He laid them face down on the coffee table. He continued on through the rest of the cards, grunted, cut and squared them, then slipped them into the left hand pocket of his coat. He picked up the five cards he'd dealt out, studied their faces, then closed his hands around them.

"Before I proceed, I need you to understand a couple of concepts in the realm of magick. The first is the Law of Similarity. It suggests that two items that are similar have some sort of a mystical bond. Iconography is a simple offshoot of this: the idea is that having a picture of a saint or wearing a medallion of some god somehow links you to that being, presumably for your benefit. Burning someone in effigy is likewise something that utilizes this same idea, but in a more malevolent form."

He brandished the cards, fanning them before the visitors who strained to look at the faces when he flashed them. "These cards come from a deck that is of the same design as that used by Syndi's killer, and used by the real Deathdealer in one of his murders. Being from the same print run, on the same stock, with the same images and ink, they are all but identical. Twins, if you will, or triplets, and we all know the sort of tight bonds such children have with each other."

The visitors nodded, spellbound by Bloodstone's low and rich voice. Even Hastings nodded for a moment before he caught himself. Verdict: guilty. Punishment: a blush that made his face as pink as the underwear he makes inmates wear.

If Bloodstone noticed his discomfort, he gave no sign of it. "A companion law of magick is Contagion. It holds that anything that has been in contact with another thing has a bond with it. Pieces of the True

Cross, the relics of saints, a vial of Elvis' sweat: all of these things are seen to have power because of their connections. Memorabilia, hidden behind a thin veil of collectibility, has its popularity based in the direct connection between an item and the person who once owned or touched it. We all fall prey to this.

"Contagion, though, plays a more important part here. By studying and imitating the Deathdealer's methods, the killer absorbed some of the Deathdealer's essence. His evil, if you will, was catching. His taint could spread. The murder, I'm certain, shocked the killer when he saw what he had done." Bloodstone flicked a finger out to silence Hastings. "That evil has power, and by that evil the killer shall be revealed."

Bloodstone flipped one of the cards face up on the table. "This is the Queen of Bats. It was used to represent Syndi Rooker in the spread on her body. What is odd is that Ms. Rooker was blonde and had blue eyes, so she should have been represented by the Queen of Imps. This is why I asked if she dyed her hair, for this card would have been appropriate to a dark-haired woman. Our killer, though, in reading through the guide that accompanied the Halloween Tarot, chose this card because the description fit her, though the image did not. The law of Similarity in play again."

He passed one card to each of the visitors, emptying his hands. "Ms. Okamoto, you are represented by the Page of Pumpkins, a card reserved for a young woman of your coloration. Mrs. Jost, you are found in Pumpkins, again based on your coloration, and made Queen because of your maturity. Your husband is the King of Imps, which is perfect for a man with blond hair and blue eyes. And you, Mr. Exner, are the Knight of Bats."

They all studied their cards for a moment. Jini tapped hers against her chin while the others set theirs on the table again. Bloodstone drew the deck from his pocket and squared it in his left hand.

"The fact that you have each touched your card has now connected you with it. I want each of you to turn your card face down and reinsert it into the deck. Anywhere will do." He held the deck toward Jini and she inserted her card near the center. It quivered there for a moment, then Bloodstone tucked it away neatly.

"Thank you. Mrs. Jost?"

Helen Jost's card trembled, but slid into the deck a third of the way from the top. Marty Jost's followed, near the center, but more toward the bottom of the deck. Ray Exner had his card up and began to slide it toward the deck.

"Make sure it is head first, Mr. Exner."

The programmer flipped his card over, saw it was going in correctly, flipped it back and inserted it. Bloodstone squared the deck, then turned to Agent Jensen. He pointed to the Queen of Bats.

"If you would be so kind."

Jensen picked the card up, made sure it was going in properly, and tapped it home.

Bloodstone smiled. "Thank you. Now that we have the victim and her known associates in the deck..."

"Wait just one minute." Hastings snorted and posted his fists on his hips again. "You're forgetting her brother, the killer."

My boss sighed and snapped a card off the bottom of the deck. "The Fool, how appropriate. If you don't mind, Sheriff?"

Hastings took the card, studied it closely, then knife-edged it into the deck. “This is as far as I’m going with your game.”

“Your sportsman-like attitude is refreshing, Sheriff, but this is no game.” Bloodstone placed the deck on the coffee table, the bright orange and black backs easily visible. “Tarot cards have magick in them. They have been used for centuries to predict the future and even to reveal the truth of past events. In this deck, Syndi Rooker has found her killer.”

Squatting down, he gently slid cards to the right and a third of the way down, the Queen of Bats lay face up. Bloodstone nudged it out of the pack. He kept going, sliding cards to the right, stopping when he revealed the only other face-up card.

“She found her killer.” Bloodstone glanced at the murderer. “The Knight of Bats. That would be you, Mr. Exner.”

Ray Exner sprang to his feet and cut around the edge of the couch, making a direct line for the doors. He seemed to have forgotten that two cops and a deputy waited in the foyer. He was on a mad dash for freedom, and had a look on his face that I’d seen before.

On the field, when he hoped to score.

The fact was that I put the cops and deputy out of my mind, too, when I saw the expression he wore. I was up and out of my chair, at speed in a step or two, then down and sliding. Carpet isn’t quite astroturf, and I regretted almost instantly my lack of shin-guards, but my slide-tackle scythed through Xray’s legs real easy. He went flying and smashed into the doors hard enough to get me a six-game suspension. The door didn’t give much, so Xray rebounded all jellyboned, went down and stayed down.

The deputy opened the door, found Exner twitching and me rubbing my shins.

Hastings snarled. “Take him downtown.”

Kent waved the two PV cops forward. “He’s ours.”

“Just a minute, Kent, if you think...”

“I *am* thinking, Hastings, which is why he goes with my...”

“Gentlemen!” Bloodstone’s voice cut through the rising din. “If you have jurisdictional battles to wage, do so outside my home. Having had a murderer here is disturbing enough. I will not have bickering.”

I got to my feet by the time the two of them headed out of the office. A cop had one of Exner’s ankles, the deputy had the other, and they were dragging him into the foyer. I wondered what their wishes would be before they started tugging him to their separate cars. I closed the doors behind them.

In the center of the office our visitors and Agent Jensen all stared agog at Bloodstone. He’d slipped onto his face a mask of serenity, but I knew he was loving every minute of their astonishment. For my part, I raised my hands and gave him a polite but silent opera-clap. His amethyst eyes flicked up and caught it, then he bent and gathered the cards.

Jini Okamoto broke the silence. “How did...?”

“The cards know?” Bloodstone finished her question, then pondered it for a moment—a pause for drama, nothing more. “Things were rather obvious, once all was considered. We knew everyone had the means to commit the murder, since you all had access to the house, and the knife was from the kitchen.

Unfortunately, this was far too parochial a view of the means to the murder.”

The FBI agent shook her head. “Access and tools are pretty much how means are defined.”

“I understand this, Agent Jensen, but Exner’s planning extended far beyond that. Look, if you will, at the frame he fashioned for the murderer.” Bloodstone placed the cards in his jacket pocket. “He set things up so this murder would be dismissed as one of the Deathdealer murders. His only error in the *modus operandi* was in using a deck the Deathdealer had used before. Oddly enough, though, the files never explicitly noted that the real killer had never reused a deck. The decks were talked about in depth, and more was written about the Halloween Tarot than any other, so he lit on that as the one to use.”

Jensen shook her head. “But that information was available to everyone once it was leaked.”

“Precisely, and Exner was the only person here who had the skills needed to hack into the database and release that information. I have no doubt *he* was the one who leaked the Deathdealer data—recall, he said the net was about the freedom of information. I think he plotted to kill Syndi Rooker for a while, and secretly studied the files of serial killers to find someone who had a victim profile that matched her. Once he had chosen the Deathdealer, he sent the data to the *New Times*, manufacturing a furor that would attract national attention. He sought to create a plausible reason why the serial killer might come to Phoenix to harvest a victim. Here the Deathdealer’s methods had been exposed, here law enforcement was waiting for him, here they had consulted with a psychic to find him. It was a challenge we might believe the Deathdealer could not ignore. Exner built a frame that would have fit the Deathdealer perfectly. There would be no question that he alone could be guilty of the murder.”

Helen Jost shivered. “I can accept that Ray killed Syndi—I’ve never liked him. Still, it makes no sense. Why would he do it?”

Bloodstone smiled ever so slightly. “The most common motive, money, was not a consideration for any of you. Your financial stakes in Thothsoft would pay off well. Jealousy was not a motive. Ms. Rooker’s affections were well and truly engaged. Exner knew she would never be his again, and his plays for her were merely to eliminate this motive. He didn’t care for her at all. He loved another, and to protect his lover, he plotted to kill, and killed with passion.”

Marty Jost shook his head. “Who? What? Xray was a virtual hermit. Who did he love?”

“You don’t see it, Mr. Jost? Not who, *what*.” Bloodstone half-closed his violet eyes as he shook his head. “Ms. Okamoto said that Voyager had become Exner’s mistress. Mr. Exner talked about the freedom his program would provide people, all the good it would do for them. You suggested he did not know Voyager’s true worth, but you were talking dollars, and he was seeing it in a sense of empowerment for the masses. He was Pygmalion, having created a work of art from nothing, imbued it with life, only to find that Syndi Rooker was going to sell it and the company to Microsoft. His vision, his gift to intellectual freedom, would be dominated by a company he hated. That drove him to plot her death.”

Agent Jensen cleared her throat. “It is hard to believe he killed someone for a lot of ones and zeroes.”

“Perhaps, but his passion for Voyager was truly the passion of an artist for his masterpiece. It would shock none of us to know an artist had killed to save his Mona Lisa.” Bloodstone shrugged easily. “In interrogating him, suggest the program will be abandoned, as the code will be locked away as evidence and not revealed until there is a conviction in the case. He’ll confess to save Voyager. He will gladly go to prison to set Voyager free.”

The Federal agent frowned. “What about his alibi?”

I raised a hand. “Online chats can be pretty banal and are often moderated to prevent chaos. The questions he said he asked were probably sent to the chat moderator who asked them of the guest. The chat runs two hours and he set the program to log him off after that long. The logs would show he was there.

“As for the online game, folks write programs all the time to train characters up—that way they can sell them on Ebay for serious long green. The programs take input from the game and go to a database to send back the right answer. For a programmer of Exner’s skill, putting together something that did that, and even answered simple questions politely, would have been easy. That program won’t have been a masterpiece, but I bet there’s a copy of it on his machine at home.”

Jensen nodded. “I’ll have our techs look for that.”

Helen Jost shivered. “Dr. Bloodstone, what about the thing with the cards? We know there is no such thing as magick. How could you have thought a card trick would make him expose himself?”

“My dear woman, despite your belief that there is no such thing as magick, can you deny feeling a bit of terror and dread as you put your card in the deck?”

“No, but...”

Bloodstone kept his voice warm, and only let it get a little patronizing. “We are raised to be rational people, but we all accept and revel in stories of magick, in talismans and omens. We might scoff at superstitions, but we claim weird things happen under a full moon. Would you get on a flight numbered 1313? Have you seen a hotel with a thirteenth floor? If someone told you the sweater they just loaned you had been worn by Hitler, would your skin crawl?”

Helen nodded and Bloodstone smiled. “From Connor I knew a bit about Exner’s behavior at athletics. Like most athletes, he engaged in superstitious rituals. Many do. Connor is positively rigid in his, aren’t you? You wrap the left ankle first, then the right?”

I coughed into my hand and hoped I at least partially hid my blush. “Yes, except on game days that have a prime number, then it’s both at the same time.”

My boss snorted. “You see, even a skeptic has these little behaviors. In that solitary moment of irrational fear, Ray Exner knew he’d been caught. His knowledge of his own guilt exploded through the door unlocked by that card, and he ran.”

That seemed to cover enough of the situation that our guests asked no more questions. After a round of good-byes, I escorted them from the office. I returned to see Agent Jensen sipping her tea. “So you refuse to tell me how you pulled that trick?”

Bloodstone shook his head. “I don’t know why you persist in assuming it was a trick, Agent Jensen. You’re an intelligent woman, you watched me and saw no trickery. Either you’re not as smart as you think you are, or you witnessed the true magick of the cards.”

She frowned for a moment, then drained her cup. “I’ll figure it out, you know.”

“It’s nice you’ll have a hobby.” Bloodstone accepted her mug from her. “It pleases me to have been able to help you in this matter, but that should not be taken as meaning all is forgiven. You will communicate that to your superiors.”

“Good day, Dr. Bloodstone, and thank you.” She nodded to him, then shook my hand. “I’ll see myself out.”

I followed her to the office door, then returned and began to gather up the cups and mugs. Bloodstone sat behind his desk, with the cards spread out before him. He picked up one and tossed it aside, and then another.

“Nice trick, that one, with the cards.”

He looked up. “Ah, you’re about to suggest some prosaic explanation to salve your skeptic’s sensibilities?”

“I could work on the ‘how’ and get it, but you’d deny it.” I smiled easily. “I’ve got the ‘why’ pegged solid, though.”

“Oh?” He let a card idly drop from his hand. “Please.”

“Since you used magick to expose him, there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell of them ever calling you as a prosecution witness. And since you could always turn around and say it *was* sleight of hand, the defense won’t call you either. No swearing an oath, no having to go to the courthouse, no disagreeable lawyers cross-examining you, no one making you adhere to a schedule somehow connected to *this* world instead of the one where you live.”

The little man chuckled lightly. “If this is what you choose to believe, Connor, good for you. I think the alternative would be less to your liking.”

I set the mugs down at the wetbar, then glanced at the deck of Black Tarot cards on my desk. “Are you going to tell me you had some sort of a vision? You had a feeling the Deathdealer is going to strike?”

“That deck, that layout, will be on his next victim.”

A shiver ran up my spine. “No, sir, I’m not buying it. And you’re not going to tell me that this Contagion nonsense is reflective. You said Exner had the Deathdealer’s taint because he used his methods. You want me to believe you did this so you could get Exner to touch a card that would link back to the Deathdealer?”

“That would certainly make things easier, wouldn’t it?” Bloodstone fingered a single card. “What I think will happen is this. The Deathdealer has done all he can to proof himself against modern forensic science. He knows of no law enforcement method that can catch him. He’ll learn, however, that an imitator was caught through a new means, an arcane means. He will have to change how he works, learn new ways of acting, and in making those changes, he will make mistakes. He makes mistakes, and he can be caught.”

“Oh yeah?” I folded my arms across my chest. “And what if the change he decides to make is to come after you and kill you?”

“That’s possible, Connor.” Bloodstone walked the card The Magician through the fingers of his right hand. “We’ll have to make sure, if he chooses that strategy, it’s the biggest mistake of all.”