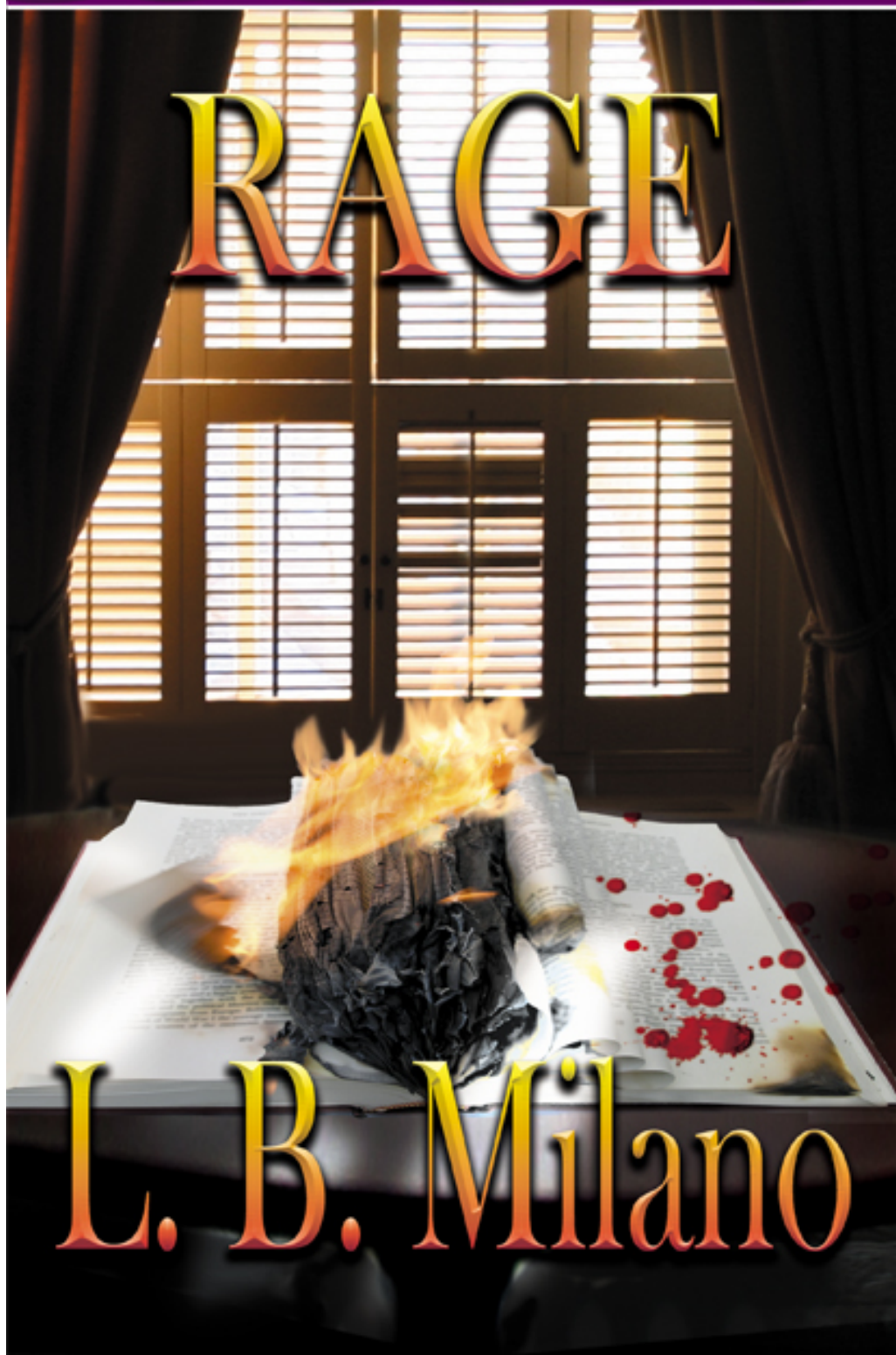


Cerrídwen Press

# RAGE



L.B. Milano

A Cerridwen Press Publication



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Rage

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# ***RAGE***

L.B. Milano

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## Prologue

*An excerpt from The Play, by Algernon Pierce, page 32.*

*On nights such as this, when the cradle moon hangs like a smirk in the sky, the black dog roams the highways seeking its next victim. Razor-sharp nails scraping along gravel, its breath is a soft chuff of dragon mist, its eyes glow with demon fire. Searching. Searching.*

*In smoky bars and truck stops, men speak of the black dog in hushed voices. They know it's out there, waiting for the long-distance hauler trying to push his way to the next stop, hoping to eat up another mile of highway on the long journey home. Hypnotized by the glitter of moonlight on macadam, all it takes is one wrong move – a nod of the head, a jerking snap awake before sleep rolls over into death – to summon the demon hound of the highways.*

*Some truckers swear they've seen the dog rushing toward them, blending into the black-on-black of night and never-ending road. Only its eyes give it away – eyes that can blind you for life and scorch a hole through the soft tissue of your brain.*

*Not everyone believes. It's easy to scoff when the lights are bright and the coffee strong and hot. But oh, when the night is lonely and the road an endless ribbon of emptiness, they all – each and every one – watch the road, searching for signs of the black dog around every deadly curve.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Death came disguised as GOD. Blaize Donovan knew it was GOD, because the letters were painted in blood-red on the side of the Gateway Overnight Delivery truck barreling toward her. What she couldn't figure out was why God had it in for her.

Wasn't it bad enough that she'd just caught her fiancé relieving his pre-wedding jitters in the arms of his secretary? If she hadn't been replaying the sordid scene over and over in her mind, Blaize wouldn't have been distracted, but all she could see was Richard, the way she'd left him, mid-coitus interruptus, with his pants pooled around his ankles and his face a wide-eyed caricature of shocked surprise.

She'd stormed out before he could recover or make excuses, hit the interstate and headed north, driving fast and furious, with no destination other than escape in mind. She turned the radio up full blast and opened the windows. The wind whipped her hair around her face and dried a tight trail of tears along her cheeks.

She would have been fine. She was an excellent driver, even at high speeds. But suddenly the GOD truck came out of nowhere and swerved in front of her. Her reaction was instinctive and immediate. She slammed on the brakes, jamming the pedal flat to the floor, pressing, straining, holding. But it wasn't enough. There wasn't room to stop. They were going to hit and they were going to hit hard. She gripped the steering wheel, clutching it toward her chest like a lover, her knuckles tight white knots of tension.

There was nothing she could do. With that realization, she sank to a level of numb acceptance, slumping in resignation. Her grip loosened on the wheel, letting go and watching as if in slow motion as the inevitable happened. A peaceful calm settled over her. She was lulled by a wave of acceptance so complete it was almost serenity. *So this is it*, she thought. *This is what dying feels like.*

Time stretched as the truck jackknifed, coming at her with the screech of locked tires in a long, slow slide that seemed to go on forever. She focused on the words emblazoned on the side of the trailer. Gateway Overnight Delivery. They seemed important somehow. A crescent moon logo on the side of the truck grew larger as it slid toward inevitable collision.

Out of the corner of her eye, Blaize glimpsed a black dog rushing toward them, snarling and leaping at the truck's cab. Its eyes glowed impossibly red in the headlight's glare.

Then she saw the driver's face through the window of the cab perched high above her—his eyes wide, one hand reaching for the air horn and giving it three sharp pulls. The angry blasts split the night, sounding like a question—*Why? Why? Why?*

If there was an answer, it was swallowed in an explosion of shattered glass and crushed metal. In that suspended moment before impact, her only thought was that she never imagined her life would end like this.

But it wasn't the end. It was only the beginning.

## Part One: Visions and Voices

## Chapter One

Blaize glanced around the hospital room one last time. Part of her couldn't wait to wake up to the soft pastels of her own bedroom instead of the institutional green of the hospital. Another part wondered if she was ready yet.

She'd endured weeks of searing pain, her body held together with metal pins while she hung suspended like a rotisserie chicken encased in pounds of plaster. Then came weeks of therapy as her bones tried to remember how strong they once were, endless days of pushing herself beyond the pain when her mind and body screamed for relief.

Even that she could have handled. It was the injury to her head that terrified her. The doctors called it post-concussion syndrome and assured her there were no signs of permanent damage. The blackouts had nearly stopped, although bouts of dizziness still sent her reeling and reaching for something to steady herself.

But there was more—things she couldn't explain without sounding insane. Late at night the thought haunted her that perhaps she *was* crazy. Maybe she'd lost her mind even before the accident had sent the tender membranes of her brain slamming against the hard walls of her skull.

Voices.

Visions.

And worse. Sometimes she felt a blind rage wash over her, a hate so deep and encompassing she wanted to drill holes in her skull to drain the abscess from her mind. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, the rage would be gone. Vanished. She'd try to recapture the feeling, to understand and describe it, but it drifted out of reach, almost but not quite forgotten—until the next wave hit.

All in all, though, she considered it a small price to pay in exchange for her life.

"You ready to go, sweetie?"

Blaize looked up and smiled at her friend in the doorway. Joyce looked impeccable. She wore a tailored suit and her dark hair was pulled into a smooth, efficient twist at the nape of her neck. She must have come straight from work, Blaize realized, feeling a pang of longing. She missed having a job to go to every day. She missed her old life. She missed being in control.

Blaize forced herself to put on a brave front. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Joyce bustled into the room, checking the closet for any items Blaize might have left behind. A hospital orderly followed Joyce into the room with a wheelchair.

Blaize waved her hand. "I don't need a wheelchair."

"Hospital policy," the orderly replied, helping her into the chair.



Joyce leaned down and whispered in Blaize's ear, "More like anti-litigation policy."

Blaize grinned and settled into the wheelchair without argument. It didn't matter whether she was wheeled out of the hospital or walking under her own power. The important thing was that she was finally going home.

Joyce hefted Blaize's satchel and swung it over her shoulder, leading the procession down the hall, into the cramped elevator and outside to her waiting car. Blaize took a deep breath, wondering if she'd ever really appreciated fresh air as much as she did at that moment. Freedom had its own smell, its own taste and texture, and she swore she'd never take life for granted again.

When Joyce opened the passenger-side door, the orderly locked the wheels of the chair and Blaize stood up, surprised by how weak she felt. Suddenly this didn't seem like such a good idea. Her knees felt as if they'd buckle and she was suddenly very aware of her heartbeat, holding her breath as if each beat might be her last. She closed her eyes for a moment, hearing again the sound of shattering glass, the squeal of metal along metal.

She hadn't been able to remember anything about the accident, no matter how hard she'd tried. But she hadn't had to get into a car before now either, and faced with the challenge, all the sensations and emotions of that moment came rushing to the surface, as if they'd been hiding, lurking just beneath her conscious mind and waiting to attack.

"I...can't..."

Joyce gestured to the orderly, who took the wheelchair and left. She put her arm around Blaize's shoulders. "Take your time. We won't get in the car until you're ready."

Blaize felt clammy. The blood seemed to drain from her head to her toes, leaving only a shivering husk behind. Her voice trembled. "What if I'm never ready?"

"Then we'll walk home," Joyce said.

For a moment Blaize felt a brief flare of relief. Then she realized that Joyce was only humoring her. Walking wasn't an option. Blaize would have to get in a car eventually, especially if she planned to start teaching again in the fall. How could she get her life back to normal if she suffered a panic attack every time she had to drive? She needed to do this, and she suspected the first time would be the worst.

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and climbed into the passenger seat.

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Joyce asked. But she didn't move or close the door. She just stood there letting Blaize get her bearings.

"I feel silly," Blaize admitted.

"Don't." Joyce's voice was the calm, cool voice of reason. "Under the circumstances, I'd say a little panic attack is perfectly normal."

*Normal.* Blaize wondered if she'd ever feel normal again. After several deep breaths, she reached around for the seat belt and buckled herself in. "I'm ready."

"You sure?" Joyce asked.

"Positive." But she couldn't disguise the tremble in her voice. When Joyce closed the door, Blaize clutched her purse in her lap, trying not to feel claustrophobic and trapped. She focused on little things—the vanilla air freshener hanging from the mirror, a crumpled cigarette wrapper peeking out from beneath the driver's seat, the way the sun dappled the surface of the dashboard.

Joyce climbed in beside her, but didn't start the car right away. Blaize knew her friend was giving her a cushion of time to adjust. Joyce could sometimes be abrupt and maybe even a little abrasive, but she was the kind of friend you could count on through good times and bad. She'd been a godsend while Blaize had recovered in the hospital. Joyce had paid her rent, picked up her mail, watered the plants and canceled all the wedding arrangements.

Blaize cleared her throat as Joyce started the car, hoping to distract herself with small talk. "Thank you so much for taking care of the apartment while I was in the hospital."

"Don't thank me yet," Joyce laughed. "All your plants are dead."

"Plants can be replaced." Blaize swallowed hard as the car inched forward. They pulled out of the hospital parking lot and onto the road. Blaize played with the clasp of her purse, opening and closing it, the sound a rhythmic clicking in the closed car...

*...like the scrabbling of sharp claws over blacktop.*

Blaize jerked upright. Where had that thought come from? She leaned forward, her breathing shallow. Her eyes darted back and forth, searching for...something. A quick, sly movement beside the road caught her attention. She jerked her head around, but it was just the fluttering of bushes. She realized she'd been expecting something else.

*A dog?*

In her mind she could see it leaping through the air, black as a murderer's soul, its mouth widened in a silent howl, razor-sharp teeth dripping with venom. A shudder rippled through her entire body as she realized this was more than a vision. It was a memory.

She cleared her throat, afraid to ask but needing to know. "Joyce, you read the accident report, right?"

Joyce nodded, not taking her eyes from the road.

"Did anyone see a dog? A black dog?"

Joyce spoke carefully. "There was no report of a dog at the scene of the accident." She shot a quick, worried glance at Blaize. "Why? Are you remembering something?"

"No...maybe." Blaize shook her head. Nerves, just nerves.

But the vision remained with her all the way home.

\* \* \* \* \*

*An excerpt from The Play, by Algernon Pierce, page 52.*

*The room smelled of warm breath and nightmares, dirty somehow, as if fouled by the musk of soiled dreams. Soon there would be a cleansing fire, but for now there was only silence.*

*Like a new love, fire creeps on silent feet – unseen, unheard and unexpected. It begins with a flickering spark, its blue heart pulsing as it grows, ravenous tendrils expanding and spreading and reaching toward the object of its desire. But soon it rages out of control, becoming a voracious, greedy lover that consumes everything in sight. Possessively, it licks and devours in a passionate heat, leaving nothing behind but ash and memories and blackened bone.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize twisted and turned, whimpering in her sleep. The nightmare started out the same each time. One moment she was planning her wedding, then rushing to Richard's office to surprise him. Only *she* had been the one surprised. Richard and his new secretary were working late all right – assuming having sex on the desk was considered work.

Then the dream rushed forward, always ending just before her collision with the GOD truck, jerking her awake before the moment of impact, her body covered in cold, clammy sweat, the sheets twisted around her like a shroud. She couldn't remember anything after that.

Caught between wake and sleep, she could still hear Richard's voice in her mind, the muffled words she'd caught just before opening the door and seeing the evidence of his faithlessness with her own eyes. "You can't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse," he'd said. "But if you marry the sow, the purse is yours."

*Bastard.*

She climbed out of bed, determined to put the whole episode behind her and get on with her life. Richard couldn't hurt her anymore. She wasn't that naïve girl who'd rushed into traffic all those months ago. She was stronger. She'd faced death and pain. She could deal with anything now. The past few weeks of resting at home, along with daily physical therapy sessions, had healed most of her physical injuries.

*If only the emotional wounds were as easy to remedy.*

Since the accident, she'd been walking around in a closed bubble of anguish, protected from the rest of the world by an invisible barrier. Other people could see in. They could see her moving around in their everyday world looking normal, maybe a little distracted, a little pensive, but still visible. She could have told them it was all an illusion. There, inside her safe little bubble, she was unaware of everything else. She didn't see the world or other people. She didn't hear the birds or smell the flowers or feel the sunshine on her cheeks. All she saw were reflections of her own grief looking back at her. Nothing else existed.

But that was all behind her now. She was ready to step out of the bubble, ready to move on to her own peaceful, uneventful life. It was time to take control of her life.

When the phone rang her throat tightened, all her newfound peace of mind shattered. A sharp pain of premonition blossomed at the base of her skull. She knew it was Richard. There was no question in her mind.

She reached out, her hand hovering above the receiver through one, two, three rings. Then finally closing around the cool plastic and bringing it to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Blaize, can we talk?"

She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the memories his voice triggered, but they tumbled over her in waves, each one overlapping the last until she thought she'd choke. Even more hurtful than Richard's brazen infidelity was finding out that he'd only intended to marry her to share in the substantial insurance benefits she'd inherited after her parents' untimely deaths.

She fought her way to the surface, reminding herself that every time Richard had taken her to bed, he'd been making love to her bank account. She remembered the mocking tone of his voice just before she'd interrupted his little after-hours tryst.

*Sow's ear, indeed!*

She hung up the phone, refusing to give him the satisfaction of hearing it slam. During the long months of recuperation she'd memorized a thousand bitter, vindictive things to say to Richard if and when he called. Now it didn't matter. He wasn't worth drawing the breath to speak them.

She lowered her head into her hands and took a deep breath, hoping to ward off the pounding in her head. Too late. The headache had claimed squatter's rights and wouldn't be dislodged. It sent spikes of pain to her temples and tendrils of agony along nerves already strung taut.

When the phone rang again she didn't answer it. Richard couldn't hurt her anymore. She'd been to hell and back. She was stronger now. Smarter.

That's when it hit again. Not all at once, but oozing up slowly, like a black, poisonous muck.

*The rage.*

She closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths, willing herself to remain calm, but the pressure increased, pounding and pulsating against her temples. It drove her beyond thinking, beyond feeling, beyond pain, until there was nothing left but darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Blaize regained consciousness she was sprawled on the kitchen floor, her dress torn, wrinkled and smelling of smoke—as if she'd spent the night huddled around a campfire. Flecks of dried mud flaked from her bare feet. Sitting up, she reached down and picked a blade of grass from between her toes, wondering when

she'd walked barefoot through wet grass. *Yesterday? The day before?* She shivered, her chest tight with panic.

Oh God, how much had she forgotten? How much of her life had she lost this time?

She sat up, trembling and disoriented. It wasn't the first blackout she'd experienced since the accident, and she suspected it wouldn't be the last. But this one felt different. This one left her feeling dirty and ashamed, with the suspicion that she'd done something terrible that could never be undone.

The phone rang, triggering her memories. Richard. Richard had called. She'd been fine...she thought. She waited for the rage to wash over her again, but nothing competed with the jangle of the phone in the quiet room.

*Answer it.*

A shiver rippled along her spine. Who said that? She looked around the empty room. No one was there. But she'd heard a voice just the same. A voice that burrowed into her mind. Not one of her own thoughts, but coming from a different place – further back.

Visions and voices.

*Answer it, Blaize,* the sly voice coaxed again, coming from inside her, but beyond at the same time.

She did, holding her breath until a warm, familiar voice broke through her frozen trance. It wasn't Richard this time, but Joyce. Blaize trembled with relief at the sound of her friend's voice.

"Blaize, are you all right?" Joyce asked. "I've been calling for hours. I thought we were meeting for lunch today?"

Blaize stared at the dark flecks under her fingernails, wondering why they reminded her of blood. *Lunch?* That meant it was Tuesday. She shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs of disorientation. Richard had called Monday morning – she glanced at the wall clock – more than twenty-four hours ago. What had she done during that time? She didn't even remember getting dressed, let alone leaving the house.

When she found her voice it came out frail and trembling. "Joyce, I had another blackout."

Concern sharpened Joyce's voice. "When?"

"Yesterday...today. I don't know."

"I'll be right over," Joyce said.

"No. Just let me pull myself together. I'll be fine."

But Joyce didn't let her finish. "I'll be there in twenty minutes," she said in a tone that left no room for argument.

"Really, I'm okay. Just a little disoriented." As she spoke, Blaize checked herself over again. Other than the grass, the mud on her feet and the stains beneath her nails, there were no clues to where she'd been or what she'd done during this latest episode.

*Grass and mud.* A dry, humorless chuckle escaped her throat. Maybe she'd done some gardening during her blackout. But the way her hands trembled made her suspect it was something worse. Far worse.

"Blaize?" Joyce's voice was hesitant. "There's something I have to tell you. It's about Richard."

Blaize waited, but she already knew what Joyce was going to say. It was more than a premonition...more like a memory. She closed her eyes, hearing the words as if from the end of a long, dark tunnel while half-formed visions teased her memory.

*...a red lighter...rasping, flicking, then finding the safety latch...pressing it in...the grooved metal wheel rolling against her thumb...a spark...a flame...gauzy yellow curtains flaring up...catching...burning...fire, fire, cleansing fire...*

She shook her head to clear the vision, focusing on her friend's voice.

"He's dead, Blaize. Richard is dead."

Understanding settled like a cold stone in her belly. She stared at the mahogany flecks under her nails, which looked so much like dried blood, and gave a slow nod.

"I know," she said. "I know."

## Chapter Two

Spyder Raines woke in a haze. His hands shook. He hadn't felt this bad since kicking drugs three years, two months and sixteen days ago. He reached for the bottle of vodka he kept on the nightstand. Booze didn't count. He was still clean as long as he kept away from the drugs.

He poured himself a double and downed it in one long gulp, grimacing as it burned a trail from his throat to his stomach. His hands were steadier now. Barely. He shook his head to clear it and tore the clammy sheets from his sweat-soaked body.

God, he hadn't had dreams like these since he was sixteen. Erotic beyond anything he'd ever experienced in real life. He'd been having them for weeks now. It was always the same woman. Not one of those picture-perfect models who were a dime a dozen, but a refreshingly sweet and innocent woman. A *real* woman.

When he closed his eyes, her face stood out sharply in his mind – head thrown back in ecstasy, long, chestnut curls like tangled ribbons across his pillow, eyes gleaming with lust as they rode each other beyond ecstasy, their orgasms going on and on forever, wilder and deeper than anything he'd ever known before. He remembered the way it felt to slide into her, the way her body responded, wrapping around him, how they moved in perfect, exquisite harmony.

He could still feel her warm, satin-soft skin – her neck supple and warm beneath his hands as his fingers tightened and curled, squeezing until her eyes shot open with alarm and her whimpers turned to gasps as she tried to suck air into her lungs. Squeezing. Strangling. Smothering. Harder and harder and harder, his whole body shaking with rage as he gripped her delicate neck so tight, shaking and trembling, then exploding into her with a final mind-numbing cry as he came like he'd never come before, his hands relaxing around her limp and broken neck.

He shook his head and poured another shot. *What the fuck was that all about?* Flashbacks? Maybe. Although he couldn't remember having dreams like that even in his wildest drug-crazed days. He caught himself stroking his erection and shuddered. He wasn't a psycho, despite the crap they wrote in those tabloids, making him out to be some deranged, Satan-worshipping rocker.

Okay, maybe the parts about the women and booze were true. And he'd been in a few fights in a few bars. But he wasn't a freak. And he certainly didn't get his rocks off fantasizing about murdering women.

It was the erotic, sexual nature of the dream that turned him on. Not the violence. And the sex was great. Had been, in fact, for the past few weeks. The same dream, the same bed, the same woman. Only the positions had changed as he'd taken her night

after night in every way possible, each encounter more fulfilling, more erotic and more satisfying than the last.

Except tonight. Tonight was the first time he'd fucked her *to death*.

He shook his head, trying to erase the image from his mind. He'd been on the road too long, that was the problem. Friggin' tour was driving him insane. Everywhere he went, the same groupies, the same tiresome hotel rooms, the same songs over and over. He'd had enough.

His hair hung in damp tendrils along his neck and his skin was clammy with perspiration. Feeling dirty, both inside and out, he walked naked to the bathroom, his erection pointing the way. Tight and hard...still. He still wanted her. Instead of fading, the dream remained vivid, clinging to him like a gauzy shroud.

He couldn't shake the feeling that if he looked back he'd see her there, sprawled on the bed, luscious and naked and *dead*, the imprint of his fingers branded across her throat. It took every ounce of strength he had not to take the bottle of vodka into the shower with him.

He turned the cold water on and stepped under the shower, letting the stinging spray pound his skin. When he closed his eyes to let the water run over his head and shoulders, he imagined her face—eyes shimmering, lips full and pouting, fingernails raking down his spine. His hips jerked forward, his erection hard and rigid despite the cold needle-spray of the shower.

He reached down and curled his hand around himself. There were probably a dozen groupies hanging around who'd jump at the chance to offer him the release he needed, and he'd never been one to turn down a good offer. But sometimes it was easier just to deal with it himself. Less messy that way and he didn't have to see the hurt in their eyes when he sent them home.

Spyder closed his eyes and stroked himself, groaning as images of his dream lover flashed through his memory. He didn't know her. Even out of the thousands of women he must have slept with, he'd remember that face, those gypsy eyes. No, he didn't know her, yet she was more real than anyone he could remember. He recalled every curve of her body, the way she felt wrapped around him, the pressure of her long legs gripping his waist.

But there were tiny details he remembered too, like the beauty mark at the edge of her throat where it dipped into the hollow of her neck, the golden splash of freckles across her shoulder. He remembered a chicken pox scar just above her right cheekbone, and the tiny chip in an incisor, not noticeable until she threw her head back and moaned in the throes of orgasm.

He groaned. Since when had his dreams been so vivid, so real? When was the last time he'd noticed such minute details of a woman's body in a dream—or for that matter, had he ever paid that much attention in real life? He called all of his sexual partners "babe" to avoid having to remember their names.



But not her. Her image consumed him. The thought of her body supple and warm beneath his set him on fire, a fire that flowed like molten lava through his veins, begging for release.

Drawing a quick, shuddering breath, he arched his hips and threw back his head, his hand tightening around his base. And when he was past the point of no return, a name came bursting from his lips as the first hot wave erupted from his body.

He screamed out the name of his dream lover, squeezing tight, his fingers locked around his shaft the same way they'd locked around her throat as he'd squeezed the breath from her lungs. Harder and harder and harder, as his body shook with a long, quivering climax and he cried out in a ragged voice he didn't recognize.

"Blaize. Oh God, Blaize. Blaize!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize rubbed her eyes. They felt hot and gritty, as if she hadn't slept all night. But then, she had no idea what she'd done last night, did she? Ever since Joyce's phone call, all she could think about was the missing time. Time that just happened to coincide with Richard's death. Where had she gone? What had she done? If she were to believe the vision, she was right there with Richard last night when he died. But maybe that was just wishful thinking on her part. Hadn't she wished him dead a thousand times? That didn't mean she'd actually gone off and killed him in a rage-induced blackout. *Did it?*

She shivered, not wanting to believe it was possible, but fearing it was. She found herself in the kitchen with no idea what she was doing there. She looked around, as if the answer could be found scrawled across the lemon yellow tiles.

Yesterday's newspaper was still rolled up on the counter. She went to the porch to find today's paper, frantically flipping through the pages for any reference to Richard's death. Finally she found the article. "Overnight Blaze Claims One Life".

Damn. Did they have to say "blaze"? Couldn't they have said fire? It felt too much like an accusation.

She scanned the article searching for any clues, but the fire was attributed to careless smoking and there was no mention of an ongoing investigation. She closed her eyes as the vision played over again in her mind.

*...holding the lighter to the cigarette end...choking at the sharp, acrid smoke...touching the amber tip to the gauzy yellow curtains...leaving the cigarette tottering on the edge of the table...watching the curtains burn and melt in a blackening eclipse...*

She shook her head to clear the vision. *Stop it! You're imagining the whole thing. I couldn't...wouldn't...* She wasn't a murderer, and wishing someone dead didn't make her one.

She read the article a second time, paying closer attention.

“Smoking in bed is being blamed for sparking a fire Wednesday that killed a local Great Falls man. When fire crews arrived at the burning apartment at 1408 Central Avenue, they found the body of thirty-six-year-old Richard Cadwell. Investigators believe he died of smoke inhalation.”

There was more, but nothing that eased the tight knot of guilt in her chest. Blaize reached for her coupon clipper and traced the edges of the newspaper article with the razor, cutting it out and carefully lifting it from the page.

That’s when her name jumped out at her. She gasped in shock—a sharp, quick intake of air. The article she’d cut out had left a framed opening, exposing her name on the page beneath. It glared at her like an accusation. She blinked, but when she opened her eyes the words were still there, peeking up from the severed edge in all caps—BLAIZE DONOVAN.

The rest was hidden. Blaize couldn’t bring herself to turn the page and find out what else was printed there. Perhaps she was being sought as a suspect. She glanced at the door, expecting the pounding of police officers with questions and handcuffs and Miranda rights.

She closed her eyes, willing this new vision away, but the message remained. It was real, not a vision. Steeling herself, she turned the page slowly, revealing the rest of the message.

What she saw was an ad in the personals section of the newspaper. It had nothing to do with Richard or the fire. The bizarre juxtaposition was simply coincidence. That’s all. But her heart beat wildly and her hands shook as she read the strange message.

BLAIZE DONOVAN

\*YOU\* have been chosen

Welcome to “THE PLAY”

Act I: Visions and Voices

That was all it said. Blaize had no idea what the cryptic message meant. She blinked and read it again, as if it would make more sense the second time. The ad seemed innocent enough, but for some reason the words sent a chill trickling down her spine. Maybe the newspaper was running a promotional campaign. Had she won tickets to a play? Or maybe it was a coded message meant for someone else.

She was so relieved not to see the words “suspected arsonist” below her name that she didn’t stop to wonder why there were no further clues.

She clipped the ad and stuck it to the refrigerator with an “I Love New York” magnet. She’d worry about it later. The other clipping she hid in her desk. She didn’t want to think about Richard’s death right now. What she wanted was a shower to clear the cobwebs and fear from her brain. Her hair felt greasy, and she was wearing the

same sweatpants she'd put on after changing out of her torn dress—which was now balled up at the bottom of the kitchen trash can. There were laws against destroying evidence, but Blaize didn't care. She knew she could never look at that dress again.

When the doorbell rang, she just stood there staring at the closed door, afraid to move. It sounded again, sharper and more insistent, as if whoever was there had no intention of leaving until she answered. Resigned, Blaize moved to the door and cracked it open a sliver, relief flooding through her when she saw who was on the other side.

Joyce stood on the porch, tapped her foot with impatience and puffing on one of her ever-present cigarettes. As the door opened, she gave Blaize a long, head-to-toe scrutiny then shook her head. "You look like hell, girl."

"Thanks." Blaize ushered her friend inside and closed the door behind them. She gave Joyce an impulsive hug, feeling her control begin to slip now that there was someone to share the burden. For once she didn't complain about Joyce's cigarette habit, hoping it would mask the smell of smoke that still clung to her own hair and clothes.

Joyce tightened the hug before releasing her. "I'm sorry about Richard. I mean..." Her voice trailed off. "Do you want to talk about it? How do you feel?"

Blaize wasn't sure how she felt, other than scared and confused, but that wasn't the right answer. "I don't know," she said. "I just want it to go away."

"I know," Joyce said, squeezing her hand.

*No, you don't know*, Blaize wanted to scream. It wasn't just a matter of regaining her strength and getting back to work. It wasn't just the shock of Richard's death. She wondered if she should tell Joyce everything—her fear that she was to blame, her guilt and suspicion. She imagined the look on her friend's face when she confessed that she thought she had killed Richard.

"Listen," Joyce said. "We're going to get you out of this house. The worst thing you can do is sit here all alone." Releasing her hand, Joyce strode across the room and perched on the edge of the sofa, ticking off enough activities to last a month.

Blaize felt exhausted just listening. She shook her head, but Joyce ignored her. "Oh, and I managed to get us tickets to one of the hottest rock concerts in town this weekend."

"I don't feel like—"

"No arguments," Joyce interrupted. "In the meantime I want you to get cleaned up. Today we're going shopping."

Blaize knew Joyce meant well, but her friend's concern was misplaced. Blaize needed answers, not sympathy. But how could she find answers when she couldn't even voice the questions? If she couldn't talk to Joyce, who could she talk to? They'd been friends since childhood, sharing everything. Now she had this secret and it felt like a wall between them.

"Joyce, I need..."

Joyce waited, one eyebrow arched. "What is it?"

Blaize shook her head. She couldn't do it. It was one thing to harbor her own dark suspicions, but she couldn't bear to see that concern in Joyce's eyes. "Nothing. I need a shower, that's all. Then we'll go shopping."

"Good girl." Joyce smiled. "When was the last time you ate?"

Blaize shook her head. She couldn't remember.

"That's what I thought. You hop into the shower while I whip something up, okay?"

Blaize smiled and escaped to the bathroom, grateful to have someone else making decisions for her. She didn't think she had the energy to choose between toast and a muffin.

She stripped out of her sweats and showered, then wrapped a towel turban style around her wet hair, surprised to realize she did feel better. One glance in the mirror convinced her the feeling didn't extend to her appearance.

She looked like a corpse. Her fair skin was nearly translucent, stretched thin over a curved terrain of bones. Her eyes rested in bruised hollows, her lids swollen and red.

Joyce was right. She looked like hell.

The welcome aroma of coffee drifted from the kitchen as she applied makeup, artfully masking as much evidence of her sleeplessness as the cosmetic industry allowed. Again she wondered if she should confide in Joyce. Maybe what she needed was the voice of reason to convince her that all of this was just the result of an overactive imagination. Joyce was cool, levelheaded and logical—the very qualities that made her an award-winning investigative reporter. If there was an explanation for all of this, Joyce would find it.

Blaize dried her hair and slipped on a pair of jeans and a sweater, then returned to the kitchen just as Joyce slid an omelet onto a dish and placed it on the table beside a glass of orange juice and a plate of toast.

"Just in time," Joyce said with a smile.

Blaize nodded gratefully. "Smells wonderful." She sat and sipped the juice. She had no appetite, but didn't want to hurt Joyce's feelings, considering all the trouble she'd gone through.

Joyce sat down and pushed a piece of paper across the table. "What's this? It fell off the refrigerator."

Blaize looked at the mysterious personal ad she'd clipped from the paper and shrugged. "I have no idea. It was in the personals section of this morning's paper. I wouldn't even have seen it if..." Her voice trailed off as the memory of searching through the paper for news of Richard's death came back to her.

"Odd," Joyce said, reading the ad. "There's no address or number to call. I'd say you won tickets to something, but you'd think they'd tell you where to pick them up."

She frowned, concentrating as she read it aloud. "Welcome to 'The Play'." Joyce's brow furrowed in concentration. "There's something familiar about that phrase, but I can't put my finger on it."

"I'm sure it's just some promotional gimmick," Blaize mumbled, nibbling on a triangle of toast.

"Well," Joyce said, folding the slip of paper and tucking it into her pocket. "That will be our first stop, then. We'll go to the newspaper office and see if they have any record of who placed this ad."

Just like that. With her typical take-charge attitude, Joyce had seen a problem and presented her with a solution. Blaize wondered why she hadn't thought of tracking the ad down at its source.

Maybe because deep down inside, she really didn't want to know.

## Chapter Three

Blaize leaned against the edge of the gray metal desk in the newspaper office, trying to ignore the impatient thrumming of Joyce's fingers on the surface of the desk. Joyce was in her element. Since this was where she worked, she knew just who to go to with the mysterious clipping, and it was obvious she wasn't leaving without answers.

The woman frowning at the computer screen had introduced herself as Connie Ferguson. She shook her head and swiveled in her chair. "I don't see any record of it."

Joyce snorted. "Come on, Connie. There must be a record. *Someone* had to place the ad." Her voice bristled. "Keep looking."

Connie glared at Joyce. "I've looked everywhere. And you don't understand...it's not as if I can't find the name of the person who placed the ad. There's no evidence of the ad, period." She glanced at Blaize, her expression softening. "You said it was in today's paper?"

Blaize nodded.

"Show me," Connie said, handing Blaize a copy of the morning edition.

Blaize leafed through the newspaper until she reached the personals section and scanned the page twice for the ad. There was no sign of it. She turned to the preceding page. There was the notice of Richard's death, just as she'd seen it this morning. She flipped back and put her finger on the spot where her ad *should* have been.

"It was right here," she said, her voice quivering. Despite Joyce's assurance that they'd get to the bottom of the mystery, Blaize felt her sanity hanging by a thread.

Connie glanced from where Blaize's finger rested on the page to the snipped ad she held in her hand. She looked up and shrugged. "It's not here." She ran her hand down the column, comparing them both. When she spoke again, her voice was sympathetic and directed at Blaize. "You can see it's not here."

"So," Joyce said. "You're suggesting that this was only in *her* copy of this morning's paper? That's ridiculous. Check again. We'll wait."

Blaize shook her head, fighting back tears. "No. Let's go. Please."

"We're not leaving until we get to the bottom of this," Joyce said.

While Connie went back to her files, Joyce paced, her forehead creased in concentration. Blaize felt caught in the middle. Before she could attempt an escape, Joyce snapped her fingers. "I've got it! I knew there was something familiar about that ad."

She motioned Blaize to a chair beside the desk, then swiveled the phone on Connie's desk. She cradled the receiver to her shoulder and punched a three-digit extension. Blaize sat and listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Gate? This is Joyce. I'm down in classifieds. Can you come down here for a minute? Something...um, unusual has come up and I think it might involve that creepy guy you're researching." She chuckled into the receiver and nodded. "Okay, that's Mister Creepy Guy to me. Yeah, okay, see you in a bit."

She hung up the receiver and turned back to Blaize, explaining, "That was Gate Wayne."

*Gate Wayne.* The name sounded familiar, triggering a quick flood of adrenaline. Then, just as quickly, the strange sense of déjà vu faded, leaving Blaize feeling there was something important she'd missed.

"He's a reporter who's been doing some research on Algernon Pierce," Joyce continued. "The horror writer. Have you heard of him?"

Blaize nodded as snippets of memory attached themselves to the name like metal shavings to a magnet. "The guy they call the 'Master of the Macabre', right?" There was more, flickering at the edges of her memory. Something "creepy," to use Joyce's word.

Joyce nodded. "That's the guy. He has a new book out."

Blaize shook her head. "I heard he was a recluse. Didn't he go into hiding after some scandal a while back?"

"He did. That's why it's big news that he's come out of seclusion after all these years. He swore he'd never write again."

At Blaize's sigh of impatience, Joyce explained. "His new project is called *The Play*. That's why your ad sounded familiar to me, but I couldn't put my finger on it until now."

Blaize perked up. A clue...maybe she wasn't losing her mind after all.

"That's the connection," Joyce explained, holding up the ad. "Anyway," she continued, "Gate's writing an unauthorized biography of the guy and he's an authority on anything having to do with 'the poison pen of Algernon Pierce'." She chuckled at the gory title the papers had used after the scandal. "That's why I called him. If there are any unusual promotions going on having to do with the book, Gate will know."

Joyce turned toward the open doorway. "Speaking of the devil..."

Blaize followed her gaze and watched the reporter stride into the room. He had a swimmer's athletic build—lean, hard and controlled. A golden tan and sun-streaked hair gave the impression that he spent his free time outdoors, away from the windowless newspaper office.

Blaize stood up as he covered the distance between them. When Joyce made the introductions, he took Blaize's hand in a firm grip, staring directly into her eyes. "Gate Wayne," he said. "How can I help you?"

She stammered, saved from having to reply when Joyce handed him the personal ad and quickly recapped their story. Blaize looked from Joyce to the reporter. She knew her friend well enough to recognize the spark of interest in her eyes, the way she seemed to soften and lean toward him.

Gate didn't seem to notice. He frowned as he read the ad. "This definitely refers to Pierce's new book," he said. "*The Play* is a four-book serialization, each book set to come out three months apart. The first volume is titled *Visions and Voices*. There's no question in my mind this has something to do with him." He turned to Blaize. "Do you have the paper this came from?"

Joyce spoke up. "Why? Don't you believe her?"

Gate smiled, obviously accustomed to Joyce's bluntness. "Of course I believe her. I was hoping to see if there were any other discrepancies between her copy and the one we printed. There might be clues she overlooked."

Joyce grunted in agreement and Gate turned back to Blaize. "Would you mind if I took a look at it?"

"No, not at all," she replied. "I'll bring it by your office tomorrow."

"That would be great." He glanced at his watch, then back at the slip of paper in his hand. "Do you mind if I take this with me? Maybe I can track down an answer in the meantime."

Blaize nodded, watching Gate tuck the slip of paper into his wallet. He pulled out a business card and handed it to her. "Call me if anything unusual happens in the meantime."

*Unusual?* She wanted to laugh. Did murdering your ex-lover during a blackout count? How about seeing visions and hearing voices in your head? Just what constitutes unusual these days?

"I will," she said as his hand closed around hers.

When he turned to Joyce, Blaize was surprised at the softness in her friend's voice. "Thanks for helping, Gate," she said.

"I'll see what I can find out." Then he turned and strode away.

Blaize gave Joyce a gentle nudge. She leaned close and whispered, "What's the deal with the Brad Pitt look-alike?"

Joyce blushed. "Nothing. He's just a coworker, that's all."

"That's all, huh?"

"Oh shut up," Joyce sputtered, her voice taking on the gruffness it always did when she was embarrassed. She gripped Blaize's arm and pulled her to the door. "We've got shopping to do, remember?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder scribbled lyrics on a sheet of hotel stationery. The only sound in the room was the rough scratch of lead across paper as the music flowing through his head. The vodka bottle sat forgotten as words rushed from him in a loose scrawl. He felt detached, as if he was transcribing rather than creating. He knew he hadn't written anything as inspired as this since he first sprang on the music scene a thousand years ago, before the



downward spiral of drugs and alcohol had dimmed the spark of inspiration. His tours now consisted of a series of leftover hits that the audience knew better than he did. He hadn't written a new song in...how long?

Too damn long to remember.

But this! This was going to be the song that would strike "has-been" from his name. He could feel it. It sang to his soul even before he put music to the lyrics.

He read over the chorus, pleased with himself.

*...a presence sweet invades my soul  
and makes what once was severed whole  
blaze marks the trail of fate begun  
with pages turning one by one...*

The tune slipped into place and he found himself humming softly, letting the words decide their place in the melody. It was dreamy, ethereal, a haunting tune that soothed, stirred and roused the spirit.

He reached past his electric guitar for the acoustic, fitting the curve of polished wood over his thigh. He strummed slowly at first, then with more confidence as the music came to life.

Suddenly his voice, raspy and harsh from too much drinking and smoking, was lifted and transformed. Years of cynicism and disappointment fell away, leaving only the raw honesty he was once known for. As he lost himself in the music, he imagined his solitary voice joined by a heavenly chorus.

The final lyrics slipped into place. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the chorus died out and only his rough voice was left to accompany the soft strumming of the guitar. But there was beauty even in that, he realized. A beauty born of passion.

As the haunting echoes settled around him, he sat up and stretched as if waking from a dream. *A dream.* He chuckled at the irony. It was escape from the persistent dreams he'd been having that had led him here. It had been nearly forty-six hours since he'd crawled out of bed, unable to shake the visions and afraid to go back to sleep. He'd read somewhere that sleep deprivation boosted creativity—or caused hallucinations, one or the other. Maybe he should go without sleep more often. If it meant writing music like this, he might never sleep again.

The melody played in his memory as he paced the room. Damn, it was good. He knew he wasn't fooling himself this time. There were times in the past he'd written songs in a drunken haze only to realize that sobriety dimmed the glowing flush of enthusiasm. Most of what he'd written lately was shit. Not this time, though. This time he had a winner on his hands. There was no doubt in his mind.

Unable to resist, he strode back to the chair and reached for his guitar. His fingers found their place automatically, becoming one with the instrument. He closed his eyes

and sang the song from the beginning, this time with a strength and passion he hadn't heard in his own voice in so long he'd almost forgotten what it sounded like. His heart thrummed and his chest swelled and expanded. His body moved like liquid, rocking back and forth as he strummed, every nerve, muscle and tendon throbbing with the music. When the last chord faded away, he opened his eyes and took a deep breath, tears streaming down his face.

He turned his head at the sound of a sharp, indrawn breath from the doorway. "Jesus Christ, Spyder."

Dan Stone, his tour manager and best friend since kindergarten, stood in the open doorway, a look of awe on his face that would have seemed like a caricature if Spyder wasn't feeling the same sense of wonder himself.

Dan walked into the room. There was something about the way he entered that Spyder couldn't put his finger on. Then it hit him. It was that same hushed, reverent way he'd seen people enter the church back when he was an altar boy at St. Anthony's. Those days seemed like a lifetime ago.

Dan pulled up a chair across from Spyder, swiveled it around and straddled it, resting his arm across the wooden backrest. "Did you just write that?"

Spyder nodded. He didn't miss Dan's quick glance at the bottle of vodka standing untouched on the dresser. He knew what that look meant. He'd had the very same thoughts himself. How much time had he wasted, draining his creativity in a bottle, losing himself shot by shot? How many songs had gone unwritten while he'd numbed himself with booze?

Spyder chuckled, breaking the ice. "Don't go thinking this means I'm ready for some friggin' twelve-step program or something."

Dan laughed, but nervousness rippled around the edges. Then he shook his head, staring at the guitar as if it were a magician's trick he needed to figure out. "I haven't heard anything like that in...hell—I don't think I've ever heard a song as powerful in my life, man."

Spyder couldn't deny the relief he felt. He wasn't the only one who sensed it. Dan did too. There was something magical about this song. Something primal that reached inside and cradled your soul before lifting it and giving it wings, then fading away to ghostly echoes that left you drained and satisfied. It was more than a song. It was a psychic rush, an emotional orgasm.

Dan stood and paced the room. "How soon can you get the music to the band? I think we should introduce it at the concert this weekend and see how the crowd reacts before recording it. There's plenty of time to get the band together on this—"

"No." Spyder's voice didn't rise, but it sounded like a shout just the same.

Dan stared, waiting for him to continue.

"Just the guitar," Spyder said. "No backup, no band. Just the guitar and a single voice. That's the way it was meant to be sung." He hadn't realized it before now, but he

knew he was right about this. He glanced at Dan. "I'll play it just the way you heard it tonight."

Dan nodded in hasty agreement. "Right. Yes. You're right. Whatever you say." He ran his fingers through his hair. "God, where did this come from? When did you start writing again? I thought..." His voice trailed off.

"You thought I was a washed-up has-been who probably didn't have enough functioning brain cells left to write again, and even less stamina to continue cashing in on his past success, right?" At Dan's embarrassed flush, Spyder laughed. "Don't worry about it. I've thought the same things myself—at least when I was sober enough to put two thoughts together."

"Sober?"

Spyder shrugged. "Yeah. For now, anyway."

Suddenly the days without sleep caught up with him. He felt heavy and drained, too weak to even rub his swollen eyes. "I gotta get some sleep, Dan." It was as if putting the song to paper had sapped him of what little energy he had left.

"Sure Spyder." Dan looked at him, his brow creased with concern. "You all right?"

"Yeah. I haven't been sleeping well. It just caught up with me all of a sudden." He stood and leaned his guitar against the wall, not afraid of the dream anymore. Something told him he'd sleep peacefully that night, as if giving birth to music had exorcised his demons.

"There'll be plenty of time to catch up on your sleep," Dan said. "The tour's almost over."

Spyder let out a deep sigh. "It'll be good to be home."

"Yeah. How's Pops?"

"You know Pops," Spyder said with a chuckle. "Seventy-two going on thirty. He'll run me ragged, bitch about my hair and ask me when I'm getting a real job."

"Gotta love the old guy. Tell him to save me some of his fried chicken."

"You got it." Spyder held out his hand. "He'll be glad to see you. Bring your work gloves."

Dan took his hand, gripping it tight for a moment before letting go. He turned and looked back when he reached the door. "Hey Spyder?"

"Yeah?"

"What's the name of the song?"

Spyder started to shake his head, then all at once the words spilled out of his mouth and it was as if he was hearing them for the first time. "The Vision," he said.

It felt exactly right.

## Chapter Four

Blaize returned to the newspaper office the next day. Gate wasn't around, so she went looking for Joyce. She peeked in the doorway at the clutter Joyce called an office. It always amazed her how Joyce, who was the most organized person she knew, could function in utter chaos.

Joyce waved her in, took the newspaper and placed it on top of a precariously stacked pile of folders on one edge of her desk. "I'll get this to Gate as soon as he comes back," she promised.

"How do you find anything in this mess?" Blaize asked, gesturing at the piles covering every spare inch of the desk.

Joyce laughed. "Honey, I know where everything is at all times. The minute I file something, it's gone forever."

"Should I wait for Gate?" Blaize asked.

Joyce shook her head. "Nah. He'll be awhile. Seems the mysterious Algernon Pierce has granted his first interview in over a decade. Gate's jaw nearly hit the floor when he got the call. He left treadmarks on his way out the door."

"Do you think he'll find out something about this ad while he's there?"

"If there's something to find, Gate'll find it. He's the best reporter there is—other than me, that is."

"Admit it," Blaize said. "You're crazy about him."

Joyce didn't answer, brushing the question off with an impatient shrug. Then she smiled. "All right, I'll admit it. I'm interested." Then her eyes narrowed. "What about you?"

Blaize couldn't help laughing. "I'm interested too. But not in *that* way. You can put those daggers away." She'd have to be an idiot not to see that Joyce had already staked out her claim where Gate was concerned. But still, there was something about the man. Something strange had happened when she'd looked into his eyes yesterday. It was as if a series of cogs and gears had slipped into place, locking into a preordained pattern. She knew it was more than serendipity. She was meant to meet Gate Wayne for some reason she didn't yet understand. Even his name sounded familiar. Something or someone had led her to this place, but the connection eluded her.

She tried to explain it to Joyce without sounding paranoid. "Something strange is happening, and I get the feeling Gate is involved. We're all involved. Me and you and Gate and that Pierce guy and...someone else." In her mind she saw a dark, faceless figure of a man. A man that she knew was also a part of this somehow. "I don't know how to explain it."

Joyce leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "And you got all this from one little ad in the newspaper?"

"No. There's more. Things I haven't told you about." She'd have to tell Joyce everything. But before she could explain, she found herself blurting out words she'd had no intention of saying. "Turn the page."

Joyce looked up, her head tilted. "What?"

"Um..." What had she said? "Turn the page"? What the hell did that mean? Blaize shivered and locked her arms around herself, trying to find warmth. Great, now she had Tourette's syndrome on top of everything else. Saying things that made no sense—visions, voices, strange recurrent dreams. Now this.

She shook her head. "I don't know."

Joyce stood up and came around the desk. She placed her hand on Blaize's shoulder. "Are you all right? This is really getting to you, isn't it?"

Touched by the genuine concern in her friend's voice, Blaize felt the hot sting of tears blur her vision. She couldn't keep it all bottled up inside any longer. She needed to talk to someone she could trust.

"Come on," Joyce said, leading Blaize out of the office and down a short hallway. "Break room," she explained. "We could both use some coffee." The small area had a lumpy plaid sofa along one wall, a snack machine in one corner and a bare table in the center surrounded by folding metal chairs. In another corner, coffee simmered beside an open box of donuts.

Blaize sank into one of the chairs while Joyce poured coffee into Styrofoam cups. She came back and handed one to Blaize, pulling up a chair to face her. Blaize held the cup to her face with trembling hands, breathing in the hot, strong aroma.

"Now," Joyce said. "There's more to this than just the personal ad, right?"

Blaize nodded and before she could stop herself the whole story came spilling out. Joyce already knew about the blackouts, but not the visions or voices that plagued her. As Blaize explained, Joyce clasped her hand tight, giving her the strength to continue. Joyce listened without flinching, even when Blaize told her about the visions that followed Richard's death.

"It's my fault," she sobbed. "I did it. I killed him."

"Stop that." Joyce slammed the side of her hand onto the table. "You don't know that for sure."

"But I can see it so clearly in my mind." Emotion shook her voice. "I knew Richard was dead before you told me. I could remember doing it."

"That doesn't prove anything. You imagined it. Or maybe you heard a news broadcast while you were unconscious. It worked its way into your dreams and only felt like a memory when you woke up. You know...like déjà vu."

Blaize nodded. It made sense. Except for one thing. "I didn't have the radio or television on."

Joyce sat back in her seat and rolled her eyes. "Oh, so you believe you can get up and commit murder during a blackout episode, but you can't switch the television on and off again?" She turned her palms upward in a gesture that said, *does that make sense?*

Blaize took a deep breath. She wanted to feel relieved, but even Joyce couldn't convince her she was blameless.

Joyce bustled off to refill their coffee cups. "You said something about dreams," she called over her shoulder. "Tell me about them."

Blaize blushed. "Sexy dreams."

"Hell, that's not so strange," Joyce snorted.

"No, but these dreams are. It's always the same man. Someone I don't know. God, he's not even my type. And he says something—I don't remember what and it doesn't even make any sense, but when he says it, I suddenly remember having heard it before and it seems so important."

Blaize frowned, trying to capture the wisps of memory from a dream that faded with daylight. "He has long, dark hair and intense eyes. He seems dangerous. I don't know how to explain it—like a wild animal trapped in a man's body waiting for a chance to escape."

Joyce smiled. "Wild animal? Sex? You don't have to be a psych major to figure this out."

Blaize chewed on her lip. "We do things I've never done before. Dark, dangerous, exciting things. Things I've never dreamed about or considered doing before." She squirmed in her chair, embarrassed by the pleasure the memory brought.

"That's easy," Joyce said. "You're sexually repressed, which is something I've been telling you for years. You can't just sublimate your sexual urges or they overflow and drown you."

Joyce went into a convoluted Freudian discourse. Her voice was like a lifeline, the calm monotone a counterpoint to the rising hysteria Blaize felt bubbling inside. There was something important simmering at the edges of her memory. The more she tried to focus on it, the more it scurried out of her reach. Something...

Joyce's voice filtered through the shadows. "That would explain your preoccupation with fire too. It symbolizes the sexual heat you're feeling."

"Huh? Fire?" Blaize blinked. And that's when it happened. The moment she stopped trying to remember, there it was. A vision. *Pages...fire...burning...flecks of charred paper floating to the sky.* "Oh my God," she gasped. "It's wrong."

"What's wrong?"

"The words are wrong. They have to be fixed." Blaize didn't know where the words had come from, or how to go about fixing them. All she knew was that it was vitally important that they be changed. That's all the vision had shown her. But she didn't know where to start.

Suddenly the room was too small and stifling, thick with the cloying scent of bitter coffee and stale air. She felt trapped, closed in. Even Joyce's concern was smothering.

Panic attack. She knew that's what it was. The way her heart fluttered, as if gasping for oxygen, the way the blood drained from her head, making her pale and dizzy, the impending feeling of death looming over her. Panic attack. That's all it was.

She jerked to her feet and the chair tipped then fell with a metallic clatter to the floor. The sound echoed in the small room, vibrating along her nerves and resonating through her brain. She had to get out. Had to get away from here.

She pushed Joyce away. "I need some fresh air. I'm fine, really."

"Let me drive you home."

"No," she argued. "I'm fine. I just want to be alone for a little while." She turned and ran before Joyce could stop her, trying not to be swayed by the worried look on her friend's face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joyce watched Blaize rush from the room, her eyes wild, her hair flying behind her. She was afraid Blaize was heading for a nervous breakdown. Either that or she really *had* killed Richard, and Joyce refused to believe that. Not Blaize. She'd never hurt anyone. *Unlike me*, she thought. *I'd have killed the bastard in a heartbeat.* But that was a moot point. Richard was dead and the world was a better place for it. Blaize was her only concern.

Blaize was the closest thing Joyce had to a sister. They'd been best friends, neighbors and classmates since kindergarten. Even then, they were an odd pair. Outwardly they couldn't be more different. Blaize, whose baby softness had turned into Sophia Loren curves, sometimes made Joyce feel like a lumbering ostrich. While she was more comfortable with facts and figures, Blaize was a nurturer, sensitive to the needs of people and animals alike.

Everyone thought Joyce was the stronger of the two because she was all bluster and attitude. But she knew the truth. While others might see Blaize as something of a flutterbrain, Joyce knew that her softness was deceiving, hiding a core of steel that kept Blaize upright when others might have crumpled. These past few months had proven as much. Her biggest flaw was the fact that she didn't recognize her own strengths.

Joyce frowned. There'd been something new in Blaize's voice today, something she hadn't heard even during the worst of her physical recovery—desperation. She sounded like someone hanging on to a ledge by her fingertips and slipping fast. Fighting the urge to go after Blaize, Joyce cleared their cups off the table. She'd call her later and make sure everything was all right. Right now she had to get back to work.

When she walked past the sofa, something fell to the floor with a rustle and a thump. A book. She bent over to pick it up, straightening the creased pages. As soon as

she turned the book over and saw the cover, she recognized it. Her skin prickled, as if it were an omen.

It was one of Pierce's books, and at first Joyce was struck by the coincidence of finding it here. But then she realized that wasn't so strange. The book was everywhere. Everyone seemed to be reading it—on the subway, at the park, in the beauty parlor. She read the back flap, "*The Play* will take you to a world too horrible to imagine and too real for comfort. The long-awaited novel of the Apocalypse from the poison pen of Algernon Pierce is a chilling tale that could only come to you from the Master of the Macabre himself."

A shiver rippled along her spine. How could people read this stuff? The cover alone would give her nightmares for a week—a montage of ghastly silhouettes howled silent screams against a blood-red background. Smokey wisps hinted at screaming deformities hidden in the background—faces that seemed to peer at her from the corners of her vision, then disappeared when she tried to focus on them. The images touched on her most primal fears. She looked from the book to the doorway through which Blaize had left, and back to the book. Somehow the two were connected. But how?

Joyce had listened to Blaize's story more out of compassion than belief—until Blaize had come to the part about the dreams. *Those* she could relate to. She'd been waking up lately with the strangest dreams. Unfortunately hers weren't erotic. She wasn't that lucky. No, these were strange, troubling dreams that had escalated to horrible nightmares—nightmares shattered only by the sound of her own screaming.

Gate was in them. And there was a fire. She frowned, remembering bits and pieces. He was trapped in the fire and she couldn't reach him. She could see his hands held out, imploring her for help, the skin bubbling and sizzling. His mouth gaped open in a silent scream. The only sounds were the roaring of flames and the cannon fire of explosions all around her as Gate burned in a fiery blaze.

*Blaize.*

Joyce shook her head, trying to force the vision out of her mind. She thought about Blaize and the fire that had taken Richard's life, a fire Blaize herself suspected she played some part in. Fire and Blaize. Blaize and Gate. Gate and fire. It had to be a coincidence.

Joyce took a deep breath and put the book back on the couch. It felt dirty somehow, and she didn't want to touch it any longer. Determined to get to the source of the mystery, Joyce strode back to her office. She had plenty of resources at her fingertips, and her gut told her that both Gate and Blaize were in danger. That was more than enough reason to put this case ahead of her workload until it was solved.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize wiggled the key in the door. She'd calmed down some on the ride home. God only knows she'd learned her lesson about driving when she was upset. She had too



much on her mind and it was confusing her, so she decided to do what she always did when she felt overwhelmed. She'd make a list.

She went to the rolltop desk and sat down, then pulled out a pristine, college-ruled pad and centered it squarely on the desktop. She sharpened three pencils and lined them up beside the tablet. Neat and orderly. The very act made her feel more in control.

The gritty gray smell of lead pencil shavings made her yearn to be back in the classroom. Having to take a medical leave of absence was the hardest part of her recovery. She missed her job. She missed her students—the charmers, the dreamers, the sweet and shy ones who shuffled and mumbled, as well as the ones whose eyes were bright with mischief. Each child was unique in his or her own special way, and she missed each and every one of them.

She loved teaching the younger kids—eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds who were still innocent enough to be guided. She remembered her first year of student teaching at an inner-city high school. It had been a nightmare. Students coming to school with weapons, fights in the schoolyard serious enough to call the police and sometimes an ambulance. The final straw had come when she'd witnessed two heartbreaking events in the very same bathroom the final week of the semester. The first had been an overdose, and by the time she'd realized what the commotion was, a ring of students surrounded their lifeless classmate slumped on the checkerboard tiles of the bathroom floor. That time the ambulance arrived too late.

The second incident she'd had to handle alone. She'd found a girl bleeding in the cramped and dirty bathroom stall. Only a few years younger than herself, the student was in the final stages of childbirth, a pregnancy she'd managed to keep hidden from everyone. There hadn't been time to call for help. The child's head had already crowned and if Blaize hadn't been there, the baby would have been delivered headfirst into the filthy toilet.

Blaize shuddered at the memory. Life and death in the same dirty, smoke-filled bathroom. She had looked into the eyes of those kids who'd seen too much and realized it was too late to make a difference there. She couldn't save them, even if they'd wanted to be saved.

She might have given up teaching after that, but then a permanent opening had come up closer to home teaching fifth grade. She'd jumped at the opportunity. Every student she could save from ending up on a cold bathroom floor was a victory. And she did make a difference here. She knew she did.

Blaize shook herself free of the memories. All the more reason to get to the bottom of this. She'd need to be back in control if she wanted to return to teaching in September when school started. She fiddled with a pencil for a minute, tapping the tip of the eraser on the desk. Where to begin?

After a few moments of fumbling around, she started scribbling. Soon the ideas flowed freely, one question sparking another. She felt a surge of satisfaction. At least

she was doing something positive, instead of running away from her problems. No more running away. From now on she'd face things head-on.

When she was done, she sat back and studied her notes, pleased with herself.

1. What is it about Gate that I feel I should remember? Why does he seem so familiar?
2. What does any of this have to do with Algernon Pierce? Get a copy of his book and look for clues.
3. What do the dreams mean? (Could mean I'm just horny.)
4. What did I do during the blackout? (Make this number one.)
5. Could "The Play" mean anything other than that book? Broadway play, double play, foreplay? (Definitely horny!)
6. Call Dr. Allen about headaches and blackouts.
7. "Turn the page"? What does that mean? Why would I blurt that out? Are those the words that are wrong and have to be fixed?
8. Who could print a version of the newspaper meant only for me? (Ask Joyce.)

Blaize sat back and chewed on the end of her pencil, staring at her list. She felt calmer already having it all laid out in front of her. Now she could figure out where to start if she wanted to get to the bottom of this strange mystery.

She pulled the phone close and called her doctor to make an appointment. That done, she crossed off number six. The act gave her an incredible sense of satisfaction. At least now she was doing *something*. She looked over the list and realized there was something else she could do right now. She could go to the bookstore and pick up a copy of Algernon Pierce's book. Reading it could answer some of these other questions. If not, at least she could eliminate one more item from her list. Maybe Joyce was right and it was a promotional gimmick. She'd ask at the bookstore if they'd heard of any contests or giveaways, or whether they knew of anyone else who'd received similar ads.

Blaize tore the list off the pad, folded it and tucked it into her purse. She was halfway to the door when the phone rang. *Now what?* Her heart pounded and her mouth went dry as she stared at the ringing telephone. She held her breath and waited, but the voices in her head remained silent.

"Snap out of it," she chided herself. What was she expecting? A phone call from hell? Richard was gone. He wouldn't be calling ever again. She laughed at herself for being spooked and picked up the phone on the fourth ring.

It was Joyce. "Where were you?"

"On my way out the door."

"You sound better. I was worried about you."

Blaize laughed, surprised to find the edge of hysteria gone. "Join the club." When there was no response, Blaize realized just how concerned Joyce really was. "Seriously," she said. "I'm feeling better. I even made a list."

A soft chuckle came over the line. "Okay, I'm convinced. So, where are you headed?"

"To the bookstore. I want to pick up a copy of that new Algernon Pierce book that Gate told us about."

"I heard it's scary," Joyce said. "It'll probably give you nightmares."

"Oh gosh. I wouldn't want to have nightmares now, would I?"

"Funny."

"You think that's funny? I had myself half convinced you were Richard calling from the grave. The way my life's going, a few normal nightmares would be a pleasant break."

"Speaking of Richard," Joyce said, a solemn note to her voice, "the funeral is today. Are you planning on—"

"No. Absolutely not!" Blaize felt her voice rising but couldn't stop herself. "Why would I? You don't think I should, do you?"

"No, calm down. I was just wondering, that's all. Nobody said you should go to the funeral."

Blaize felt every nerve in her body strumming. Maybe she should ask Dr. Allen for some tranquilizers while she was at it. She was definitely riding the edge these days.

"Listen," Joyce said, "I'll let you go. I just wanted to remind you that we have concert tickets for Saturday night."

"I don't know, Joyce—"

"Hey, no excuses. It'll be fun. Take your mind off things."

Blaize sighed. She wasn't looking forward to ear-splitting rock music in a crowded, smoke-filled room. Maybe she'd have those tranquilizers by then.

## Chapter Five

If ever a house looked like it belonged to a horror writer, it was this one. Gate stared up at the dark silhouette crouching in the shadows, all hidden nooks and jutting gables. It reminded him of every haunted house from every horror movie he'd ever seen — *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Psycho*, *The Legend of Hell House*. He shivered, ghost fingers creeping along his spine.

If Algernon Pierce had wanted to trade on the stereotype of a mad writer spinning tales of horror from the bowels of a haunted house, this place would have been famous by now. But the brooding Victorian was too well hidden to be a showcase. None of Gate's extensive research had turned up the address. It wasn't until Pierce had personally agreed to the interview that Gate had been given directions to the winding back road that led him deeper and deeper into the shadowed woods, twisting and turning until revealing the private drive leading to this hulking stone monstrosity.

Gate's heartbeat tripped in a measured staccato. He couldn't believe he was finally going to meet the notorious Algernon Pierce. He'd worked his butt off to set up this interview, but there was more to it than a professional coup. Gate was starstruck. He'd grown up on the horror novels of Algernon Pierce, devouring each and every book as soon as it hit the stands, and rereading some five or six times. It was Pierce's books that had inspired in him a love of reading. He knew other kids who would never have voluntarily opened the pages of a book if not for first finding the thrill of fiction in one of Pierce's horror novels. As much as the critics crucified writers like Pierce, claiming they polluted young minds, those same writers opened doors to young readers that might have remained forever closed — a world of imagination.

But none of those writers could compare to Algernon Pierce, as far as Gate was concerned. He'd read every word Pierce had ever written, from short stories in men's magazines to the massive commercial novels that continuously climbed the bestseller lists the moment they were released. Gate had been working on an unauthorized biography of Algernon Pierce for the past few years. And now, for the first time, he was going to meet his idol. His hands shook and nerves twisted his stomach muscles into cramps.

A timid knock on the massive oak door brought no response. He looked around and waited. There was no movement or sound either outside or in. No birds, no crickets, no frogs. He knocked again, sure that the muffled sound would go unnoticed from within the brooding structure. He frowned and checked his watch. It was the right day, the right time, the right place. *Where the hell was Pierce?*

He was just about to turn away and search for another entrance when the door slowly opened. At an even six feet, Gate rarely had to look up to anyone, but as the

door opened, his gaze was drawn upward. Algernon Pierce loomed in the doorway, a dark shadow that seemed to suck up and blot out all the light around him.

Neither man spoke. Gate barely recognized the author. Was this the same man he'd seen on talk shows, interviews and book jackets over the years? In every picture he'd ever seen, Algernon Pierce was casually posed, dark hair framing leading-man good looks and ice-blue eyes staring into the camera with haughty disdain. One interviewer had described him with the often-quoted phrase, "Eyes that gaze through windows of night." When Gate had first read the quote it had seemed pretentious, but now he saw just how appropriate it was.

Although the eyes were the same as he'd seen in all those photographs—compelling, arresting, hypnotic, with only a hint of madness—the lion's mane of hair had gone completely white since those familiar book jacket photos had been snapped, as if the author had succeeded in frightening even himself. He looked like a cross between a cool-eyed outlaw and a wild-maned mad scientist.

Algernon Pierce towered over Gate, casting an intimidating shadow. He looked at Gate with a combination of curiosity and revulsion, as if inspecting a cockroach that had ambled across his dinner dish. Gate fully expected to be flicked away just as easily.

"Mr. Wayne, is it?"

"Yes." Gate stammered, finally breaking out of his awe-struck stupor. "Mr. Pierce. It's truly a pleasure to meet you."

"Of course it is." Pierce avoided the outstretched hand and gestured Gate inside. His voice was gravel-rough, with a hint of British accent that emphasized the undisguised condescension. It seemed to echo from some damp, dark cavern.

Gate followed Algernon Pierce inside. The sound of the door closing behind him sent a shiver down his spine. He fought the urge to reach around and rattle the doorknob to be sure it wasn't locked, trapping him inside. He looked around, surprised to see that the inner sanctum was nothing like he'd expected, shattering his earlier illusion of a haunted house.

The interior was masculine without feeling heavy. Gate knew enough about antiques to recognize the value of the furnishings as he followed Pierce through the ornate rooms. Yet the furniture looked comfortable and well used, not simply there for display. And everything was spotless, from the gleaming hardwood floors to the curved banisters polished to a soft luster by generations of hands skimming over the rails. Not a cobweb or dust mote hid in the shadows anywhere. It was a damn sorry excuse for a haunted house.

Sliding pocket doors opened to a room lined with bookshelves on each wall. Pierce settled behind the massive oak desk and gestured Gate to a chair across from him. The only sign of the twentieth century in the entire room was a computer shoved toward the back corner of the desk.

Of course Pierce would use a computer. Everyone did these days. What had Gate expected?

Pierce gave him a silent, brooding stare, his ice-blue eyes pinning Gate to his chair, driving all his carefully prepared questions from his mind.

Gate opened his mouth. Closed it. Tried to speak, but only stammered. With a tremendous force of will, he tore his gaze away and fumbled for his notebook and tape recorder.

Pierce held up his hand. "No recorder."

"But —"

"I said no recorder." The tone of the author's voice left no room for argument.

Gate returned the recorder to his briefcase. "All right." He reached for his notebook. "I have all the background I need from your official press release, but what I'd like is some personal thoughts." He cleared his throat. "Let's start with the reason you stopped writing all those years ago."

"No," Pierce said. "Let's start with the book I've written now. No one cares about old history."

"But they do," Gate argued. "And the story really begins with the murders copied from the pages of your book."

Pierce's open palm slammed down on the desk with a sharp crack. His voice was deceptively quiet when he leaned forward. "Need I remind you who begged for this interview? You'll do it my way or not at all."

Gate swallowed, feeling like a schoolboy who'd been sent to the corner. "Yes, sir."

Pierce stood and paced across the room. "I've seen reporters like you before. Young and hungry. Trying to climb the ladder of success on someone else's back."

Gate was too stunned to interrupt the tirade.

"You don't care about the truth unless it's your own version of it," Pierce growled. "You've got the article already written in your mind, haven't you? Slanted to suit your own purposes. You'll slip in a few quotes of mine and call it an in-depth interview, but it will have nothing to do with me. All you care about is digging up old dirt. Sensationalism."

Gate found the courage to disagree. "No, that's not true. I want to hear your side. And I'm not the only one who wants to know how you felt when the critics crucified you."

Pierce spun around, poised to argue. But Gate forged ahead, determined to get it all out before he lost his nerve. "This is your chance to tell your side of it. How did it feel to have your work stolen and twisted? How did it feel to be blamed for someone else's crime? How did it feel to turn your back on your life's work rather than take a chance something as horrible as that could happen again?"

Pierce stared off into the distance. Had he even heard? Gate held his breath and waited, watching the author's internal struggle. Pierce crossed the room, too cunningly quiet for a man of his size. With a deep sigh, he lowered himself back into his chair, running his hands through the already wild mane of white hair. "I swore I'd never

write another word." His booming voice lowered to a rumble. "I never wanted to feel the stain of blood on my hands again. There were times I was tempted, yes. But the thought of those brutal murders born in my imagination then carried out in real life..."

His voice trailed off and Gate waited, afraid to even take notes for fear that the muffled scratch of his pen across the paper would stop the flow of words. This is what he'd come for—to find out what the public bombardment of the media had done to this private man.

The minutes stretched in uncomfortable silence before Pierce continued. "It wasn't the accusations of the critics that stopped me from writing. It wasn't having my books burned by wild-eyed zealots. It wasn't being banned by churches and libraries." He lifted his head and stared thoughtfully at Gate. "Do you know what finally stopped me?"

Gate shook his head.

"I stopped writing when I began to believe they were right about me. They were right." The author's voice was tortured. "It was my fault. I didn't kill anyone, but it was my ideas that planted the seed. My imagination that sent energy into the mass consciousness, seeding the psychic clouds that rained blood on parched minds. My fault. After that I couldn't write another word."

"You can't believe that."

"Yes. I do." The author ran his hands from forehead to chin, dragging tired, downward creases through his face. "Don't look at me as if I'm crazy. I've given this a lot of thought. I know how I felt when I wrote those scenes. It was as if something was speaking through me. I'd read them over the next day and not even recognize the words as my own. They seemed to come to me from somewhere else. I was simply the tool that transcribed them."

He leaned close, his voice a deadly whisper. "I'll tell you a secret."

Gate felt a tremor of fear inch down his spine. Without realizing it, his head swayed back and forth in unconscious denial. *Don't tell me any of your secrets*, he wanted to shout. *Knowing them might make me just as mad as you are.*

"It's happening again," Pierce said. "Only this time they're coming for *me*. I can feel them. They're going to kill me."

"Who?" Gate felt the hairs prickle along the back of his neck. He forced himself not to turn around to check behind him. Doing so would only make him become part of the author's delusions.

"The characters in my book. They're coming to life and they're getting closer." Pierce's eyes flicked around the room. With a bolt of energy he strode to the window, pulling back a heavy drape and peering outside, paranoia evident in the watchful crouch of his body. "They're coming. They're coming for me."

Gate put his pen down. He couldn't write this article. The man was raving, a wild-eyed megalomaniac who believed he could create reality from his own fevered imagination. Gate had only one more question, but it was to satisfy his own curiosity.

"If you truly believe you were to blame," he asked, "what made you start writing again?"

"I had no choice." Pierce's voice rose higher. "I was driven. Compelled. The story came to me in a white-hot rage and demanded I write it."

"Even if the same thing happens all over again?"

"Yes. Even that couldn't have stopped me." He took a deep breath, then exhaled, seeming to shrink as the breath left his body. Shoulders slumped, he walked back to the desk. "I've changed my mind. We're through here."

"One more question —"

"No!" The word was like a shotgun blast. Pierce strode to the office door and pointed the way out. "It's time for you to leave now."

With a resigned shrug, Gate stood and collected his papers. He turned and followed Pierce, taking one last look around as he made his way through the house. It was said that you could learn a lot about a man by the condition of his home. Pierce's home felt like a corpse — cold, lifeless and on the brink of decay.

Pierce held the front door open and Gate was surprised to see sunlight on the other side. From within the dim, cavernous room, the world outside seemed brighter, the colors more vivid. It was a different world out there. A world of sanity. Something that was sadly lacking in here.

When he reached the doorway, Gate held out his hand. Regardless of how far Pierce had fallen from his pedestal, he was still Gate's idol. "It was a pleasure meeting you. I've enjoyed reading your books over the years."

A spark seemed to flare in the depths of those ice-blue eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Wayne."

"Call me Gate. Please."

"Gate." There was a pause. "Wayne." Pierce squeezed Gate's hand in an iron-vise grip, repeating the two names. Once. Twice. Then running them together. "Gate Wayne, GateWayneGateWayne." He seemed to savor them, run them around his tongue, tasting, absorbing and exploring. "GATEWAY!" he shouted, his eyes narrowed to accusing slits. "You're in on it, aren't you? You're a part of it."

Gate tried to free his hand, alarmed by the madness swirling beneath the surface of those eyes. "Part of what? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't." The laughter was brittle, bordering on hysteria and dripping with sarcasm. "You have no idea, do you? None whatsoever." He shook his head, not waiting for an answer. "I can't believe I led you right to my door." His voice hardened and his grip tightened, practically crushing the bones in Gate's hand. "Get out! Get out and don't come back. Tell the others not to come looking for me either. Tell them they can't outsmart me. I know them too well. I created them, after all!"

With a wrenching tug he pulled Gate through the doorway. "Get out before I delete you!"



Gate brushed off his clothes, the sound of the slamming door echoing in his mind, along with Pierce's parting words. *Delete me?* What an odd thing to say. But the man was nuts. It was a hell of a disappointment considering the trouble he'd gone through to snag this interview. A disappointment and a colossal waste of time.

Fishtailing on the dirt road and spitting gravel from his rear tires, Gate tried to put the author out of his mind. But he couldn't. Algernon Pierce was certifiable, no question about it. And possibly dangerous.

Gate frowned. Maybe he'd been too hasty giving up on the article. He could still do it. *Algernon Pierce – Madman or Genius?* The slant would be a little different than he'd originally planned, but he'd get the story down on paper and let people draw their own conclusions.

\* \* \* \* \*

*An excerpt from The Play, by Algernon Pierce, page 101.*

*Silence haunts the graveyard. Shrouded in shame, a murderer hides among the mourners, creeping between ancient tombstones and newly dug graves. Ghostly echoes of guilt creep among the catacombs in shadowed disgrace, and even the sun refuses to shine on this travesty of grief.*

*"Murderer," whispers the wind. Denial is useless. There's no absolution in this necropolis, only the soft sigh of condemnation floating on a swift breeze. "Murderer."*

*But nearby another watches, a sly smile on his face. With animal cunning he waits to leap out at just the right moment. "Murderer," he murmurs, adding his own accusation to the wind's chorus.*

*Saying it was enough to make it so.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize sighed. Even if the clerk hadn't been snapping gum and bouncing to some music that only she heard, Blaize would have been annoyed. All she wanted to do was buy a book, not open up a damn literary discussion. But the clerk was, by her own admission, Algernon Pierce's biggest fan. She seemed determined to convert Blaize too.

"I can't believe you didn't read any of his other books," she said between gum snaps. "My favorite is...oh shoot, what's the name of it? He is *so* awesome a writer. God! I mean, I feel like I'm really there, you know? I'll say I'm only gonna read to the end of the chapter and next thing you know it's the middle of the night and I've read half the book!"

Blaize nodded, biting back a sarcastic retort. She gestured to the computer screen and the clerk went back to checking the back orders. "This is like the third time we've had to reorder," she said. "It sells out like, um...like..."

"Hotcakes?" Blaize offered, hoping to speed up the process since the girl had come to a complete stop while she dragged her mental sludge for the proper analogy.

"No, that's not it," the clerk said with a shake of her head.

Blaize sighed, losing patience. "Just tell me when the book will be in, okay?"

The clerk ran her finger down the computer screen, her brow furrowed in concentration. Then she tapped the screen and looked up with a smile of success. "Next week. The new shipment will be in next Tuesday. And the second book in the series comes out in April. Want me to hold a copy of that for you too?"

Blaize gave a distracted nod, which didn't discourage the clerk's chattering.

"Then the third installment in the series comes out in August and the final book in December. You might as well put in an advance order for each one. Save yourself some trouble."

"That's fine. Thanks." Blaize turned to leave but the clerk stopped her.

"Are you sure you don't want to read some of his old books while you're waiting? I mean, you have almost a whole 'nother week to wait. You would love *The Gatekeeper*. Oh my God, it is so good!"

"No," Blaize said, turning to leave. "I'm only interested in the new book. Thank you anyway."

"Oh," the clerk shouted after her. "I just remembered the title of my favorite. It was called *Blood Rage*."

Blaize stopped, a shiver coursing along her spine. All she heard was the word "rage" and it hit too close to home. "*Blood Rage*?"

"Yeah, that was one of the last books he wrote. The one everyone said caused all those murders. You must remember that. Let's see, I was about twelve or thirteen, but even I remember. Everyone was talking about it. Something like three hundred people died before it was all over."

Blaize reconsidered. "Maybe I'll pick that one up after all."

"Oh, you're gonna love it," the clerk said, scampering to a display at the front of the store. We have it in hardcover or paperback."

"Paperback is fine." Blaize glanced briefly at the cover while the clerk rang up the book. She couldn't imagine what had possessed her to buy it and already regretted her hasty decision. One look at the cover and she knew she'd never be able to read the whole book. And since this book obviously had nothing to do with the invitation she'd received, it wouldn't shed any light on the mystery.

She tossed the book on the backseat of her car and checked her watch, just as she'd been doing every five or ten minutes all afternoon. The funeral procession would just be reaching the gates of the cemetery now, snaking its way up the rolling hills toward Richard's family plot.

Blaize knew exactly where Richard would be buried. Shortly after their engagement he'd packed a picnic lunch and brought her to the cemetery, pointing with morbid

pride to the plots set aside for himself and his future wife. His unhealthy fascination with their final resting place had given Blaize the creeps. But Richard took great pleasure in the fact that their plots were positioned at the top of the highest hill, overlooking the rest of the cemetery. The best plots in the cemetery, he'd assured her. Even in death he'd craved a position of power. Little did he know how soon he'd occupy that prized piece of real estate.

She turned the key in the ignition. Despite her denial to Joyce, she'd known all along she'd go to the funeral. She couldn't stay away. Part of her wanted to be sure he was really dead, and part of her hoped to uncover a clue that might point to her innocence.

She drove past the funeral cars and parked on the other side of the rise, hoping to remain as inconspicuous as possible. She climbed to the edge of the hill and stared at the backs of the mourners, recognizing both Richard's mother and brother at the foot of the casket. Blaize thought the woman swathed in black might be Richard's secretary, but it was impossible to tell since she'd never seen the woman with her clothes on.

Blaize pulled her coat tight around herself. A brisk March wind sent fingers of ice along her exposed skin. The minister's words floated back to her, drifting eerily along currents of wind. Muffled sobs wove a mournful harmony through the prayers. Someone reached out and draped a comforting arm around Richard's weeping mother. As if the touch was too much to bear, the crying rose in volume, a mournful wail that sent goose bumps skittering along Blaize's skin. She closed her eyes, willing the trembling to stop.

*I shouldn't have come here,* Blaize thought, turning to leave. There was no absolution among these mournful monuments. If anything the guilt rose even stronger. Richard was dead, and no matter how she tried to deny it, Blaize suspected he would be alive today if not for her.

A familiar sound froze her to the spot, shutting out all other noise around her. She heard the unmistakable rasp of a cigarette lighter being struck. Once. Twice. Three times.

She shivered, waiting for the vision to assault her—the vision that accused her of killing Richard, lighting the curtains and watching them burn, leaving him to die in a searing haze of smoke and fire. Her knees went weak and she leaned against a tree for support. She squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to see it all again.

But there was no vision, no voices in her head. Hesitantly, she opened her eyes, relieved to see sunlight and smell the fresh scent of pine. A few feet away, a man stood hunched over a cigarette. He lit it, then straightened and blew a puff of smoke into the air. She stared at the glowing tip of the cigarette, then at the lighter. It wasn't red like the one in her vision, but an old-fashioned silver Zippo that winked in the sunlight. She could make out something that looked like a crescent moon engraved on the smooth, flat, silvery surface.

She tore her gaze away and exhaled a sigh of relief. That's what she'd heard. Just someone lighting a cigarette. It wasn't a vision or a memory. It wasn't proof that she'd murdered Richard in his sleep.

The man took another deep drag, then looked up and caught her staring. Although his face was in shadow, Blaize found herself mesmerized by the intensity of his gaze. There was something about his eyes that seemed to see deep into her soul, uncovering her most secret fears. He shrugged as if to apologize then snapped the silver lid of the lighter closed. The sound broke her from her trance and she turned away from those accusing eyes.

*I'm getting paranoid*, she thought. *I should never have come here.* She turned and scrambled back down the hill, tripping in her rush to leave the funeral behind her. She had to get away. Away from accusing eyes and empty graves and cigarette lighters that triggered visions of guilt.

Out of breath and blinded by frightened tears, she nearly stumbled into a mountain of a man at the bottom of the hill. She felt engulfed, swallowed by his presence. A shock of white, wild hair surrounded his face like a halo.

"It's happening again," he mumbled to himself, staring up at the people gathered around Richard's grave. "It's all happening again."

Again? What did he mean by *again*? Was he a friend of Richard's? She steadied herself and tried to edge around him.

The man blinked, as if waking from a dream, then turned a crazed look in her direction. "You!" he rasped, his ice-blue eyes widening in recognition.

She didn't know him. Surely she'd recognize that mane of wild, snow-white hair. But he seemed to know *her*. What's more, his voice rang with accusation. What did he know? What did he suspect? She shook her head. "No."

"It's you," he shouted, gripping her shoulders. "Don't deny it."

"No. I didn't do it. I didn't!" She tried to squirm out of his grasp, but he held her in a viselike grip, his eyes boring into hers. It was all too much. Everything was closing in on her. She felt trapped. "I didn't," she whimpered.

Her teeth rattled as he shook her harder, muttering incoherent accusations. His breath blew hot and sour in her face. Blaize was sure he was going to lift her right off her feet and toss her down the hill like a rag doll. There was so much rage in his eyes. Rage and something else. Fear. In fact, he seemed more afraid of her than she was of him—and she was scared to death.

Before the madman could inflict further harm, Blaize heard the voice of the man with the cigarette. "Let her go," he commanded, prying the madman's fingers from her shoulders. "Let her go right now."

The wild-haired lunatic seemed to get control of himself. His arms fell to his sides and he stared from Blaize to the man with the cigarette, his eyes narrowed. Then he threw back his head and laughed, the sound as sharp and piercing as ground glass.

"We're all here. All the characters are in place." He threw up his hands and shouted, "Welcome to The Play!"

Blaize felt the air whoosh out of her lungs. The Play? What did he mean? Had the whole world gone mad? She backed away, staring from one man to the other, wanting only to escape.

"It's too late," the lion-haired man called after her. "It's already too late. We're all doomed."

"Yes," the other man echoed in a voice that sounded almost smug. "It's far too late to change things now, Algernon."

Blaize didn't wait around to hear more. She turned and ran the rest of the way down the hill. When she reached the safety of her car, her hands trembled as she fumbled with the door, finally jerking it open and locking it behind her. She took a ragged breath. The man at the base of the hill—assuming he truly was Algernon Pierce—stared back at her with haunted eyes.

*Eyes that gaze through windows of night*, she thought, then shook her head, wondering where the odd phrase had come from.

She drove away from the cemetery wishing she'd listened to Joyce and stayed away. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to calm down and concentrate on her driving. But no matter how far she drove, she couldn't escape the jagged voice that echoed over and over through her mind—*Welcome to The Play*.

## Chapter Six

Spyder stretched long legs, crossing his snakeskin boots at the ankles. He took a deep breath. So much had changed. It had been over a week since the last time he'd crawled into a bottle to die. But what a difference a week made. Colors were brighter, sounds clearer, his mind sharper than it had been in years. Sharp enough to dislike the man he'd been before being blindsided by sobriety.

He had a show tomorrow night, but the thought didn't bother him. Even the music was new again. He'd rediscovered the enjoyment of singing for an audience, the thrill he'd once felt before doing what he loved most had become a mind-numbing chore. Now he couldn't wait to step onstage.

This was the last stop on the tour—his hometown. After this concert there'd be time to rest and write some new songs, put together an album that wasn't simply a rehash of old hits and remakes. For once Spyder had a reason to get up in the morning, something to look forward to that didn't slosh at the bottom of a bottle. A smile curled the edges of his lips, testing muscles long unused.

God, it felt good to be home again. Home was the family farm in upstate New York where he'd grown up. Although there were no dairy cows left, and most of the hay fields had been sold off to a housing development that had sprouted a series of nondescript townhouses for upper-middle-class suburbanites, his father still kept a scaled-down portion of the farm running. Pops got up at five o'clock every morning to feed the few remaining animals—a goat, some chickens and a potbellied pig—and tend to the garden. In the summer he sold fruits and vegetables from a clapboard stand in the front yard. No amount of reasoning on Spyder's part could convince Pops that he didn't have to work so hard in his so-called golden years.

"This is what I do," Pops had argued, punctuating his statement with an upward jerk of his suspenders. "What I've always done. The day I can't take care of my own damn farm, you might as well put me in a pine box, 'cuz I'll already be dead."

Still, Spyder could tell his father was glad to have him home and relieved to have an extra pair of hands around the old place. Spyder had noted a number of repairs that needed to be done, things that Pops would never admit had become too much for him to handle on his own.

A soft breeze from the open window carried with it the aromas of home—the sweet, clean smell of fresh grass laced with the husky scent of wood smoke drifting across the field from the farmhouse where Pops still lived. Years ago Spyder had converted an old barn at the back of the property. It was private, with a separate entrance and enough room for the band to practice late into the night. From his upstairs bedroom loft he watched the lights of the farmhouse wink out one by one.

"Night Pops," he whispered into the darkness. "Sweet dreams."

He laced his hands behind his head, tipped his chair back and sighed with contentment. He felt poised on the edge of something exciting and new. It felt like a rebirth, a rejuvenation—and this time there was no bad karma to drag him down. He didn't even jump when the phone rang, interrupting the peace and quiet.

"Raines here," he growled into the receiver.

"Thpyder," an oily voice replied, the slight lisp identifying the caller immediately. "Dr. York here. Just checking in. Need anything?"

Spyder felt a twinge of guilt. Dr. York was the band's personal physician. He was the kind of underground professional who catered to the needs of clients who often had more money than good sense—whether it was providing illegal drugs, performing quick and quiet abortions or, God forbid, treating gunshot wounds without filing the required police reports. Just talking to Dr. York made Spyder feel dirty, but it was an association he couldn't afford to break. You never knew when you'd need a silent doctor in your pocket.

"Everything's cool, Doc," Spyder said, forcing a camaraderie he didn't feel.

"Aren't your supplies running a little low about now?"

Doc knew exactly how much Spyder kept on hand and when his supply needed to be refilled. "Set me up with the usual," Spyder said. Although vodka had been his drug of choice for the last three years, Spyder had always kept the regular supply of happy pills coming in. There were plenty of people willing to take them off his hands, and for some reason he'd never wanted Doc to know he was clean. Maybe he was afraid saying it out loud would jinx his fragile grasp on abstinence, or maybe he just didn't want to burn bridges he might need to cross again.

Regardless, Spyder felt tainted by the conversation even after he hung up, disgusted by the fact that he'd surrounded himself with people like York who carried their scruples in their wallets. He ran a hand through dark, unruly waves—too short for a rock star, too long for a cowboy, the only two things he'd ever wanted to be when he was young.

Spyder knew he wouldn't be completely clean until he severed all ties to his former lifestyle, building a new life free of dependencies. He never stopped to wonder why it should be so important. It was just one more unanswered question on an ever-growing list.

Like the song that had come to him from nowhere. And the woman in his dreams. What was it about her that enticed him so? Why was he convinced she was the one woman in the world who could either destroy him or save him?

He sighed. So what if he'd only conjured her up in his imagination. Obviously his dreams were telling him something. Maybe he was just tired of the bimbos. Hell, maybe it was all a sign that he was finally growing up. He wanted to do something with his life again. Get back on track. He wanted a woman he could talk to in the morning. A real woman. His dream woman.

And he knew exactly where to find her. All he had to do was close his eyes and she'd be there waiting for him. Warm and willing, she haunted his dreams—silken whispers tickling his ear, ghost lips trailing down his neck, the warm hint of her perfume teasing his nostrils.

He crawled into bed and focused on a sharp sliver-moon that seemed to smirk at him from beyond the open window. "Relax," he whispered into the darkness. "Relax and sleep." He took deep, even breaths, willing himself to sleep, knowing she'd come to him in his dreams.

\* \* \* \* \*

Algernon ignored the ringing telephone. He didn't care who it was. Nothing mattered anymore. He had his proof. With a fierce growl, he twisted the telephone cord around his fingers and ripped it from the wall. The ringing stopped, and silence closed around the darkened room. Only the silvery moonlight guided his frantic pacing.

He'd been suspicious that it might be happening all over again. Now he was sure. That reporter's name was the key that had unlocked the floodgates of memory, confirming his belief that history was repeating itself. Gate Wayne. He snorted his disgust. Did they think he was an idiot? Did they think he wouldn't recognize his own creations?

Frantic, he ran his fingers through his hair. *Think, think*. How far had it gone? How much time did he have? He didn't want to believe it was happening all over again. But then he'd seen *her* at the cemetery, gloating over her lover's death...just the way he'd written that very scene. Oh, she'd tried to deny it was her, but he knew. He knew. You can't hide from your creator. He paced, pounding his fist against his thigh. They were ganging up on him now. They were coming after him. He had to stop them before it was too late.

With a furious stride, he crossed the room to the bookshelf. Books flew in every direction until he found the one he wanted—*The Gateway*. This had been the book that had started it all.

He flipped through the pages, remembering the events that led to his downfall. No one had made the connection at first. Not right away. While the book climbed the bestseller lists, the country sat stunned in front of their television screens watching federal agents surround a barricaded camp of armed survivalists. When the standoff ended in an explosion of gas and gunshots, there were no survivors. Men, women and children alike were reduced to ashes.

He remembered it all, and the memory was a clutched fist in his heart. In the days following the wholesale destruction, someone noticed the strange coincidence between the actual event and a fictional scene in *The Gateway*. The name of the survivalist leader in his book was Preston Gate—the real-life leader was named Wayne Preston. And now another—Gate Wayne—twisting the names once again into a tight knot of coincidence. How much more proof did he need?



Oh, but there were other odd similarities too. More than even he had realized at first. Still, the whole furor might have died a natural death if not for a segment in the television program *Unexplainable Phenomenon*. The host, his voice serious and sincere, pointed out even more parallels. Some were a stretch, others just plain spooky. Like the Lincoln-Kennedy similarities, they piled one atop the other, giving the staggering illusion of empirical proof.

He might have sued the producers of that program, except the publicity wasn't hurting his book sales. If only he'd known. He should have stopped then. His next book, *Blood Rage*, had competed with *The Gateway* for spots one and two on the bestseller lists. Neither was in any danger of being dethroned. It seemed whatever he touched turned to gold. Until it all began to run with blood.

Algernon flipped through yellowed newspaper clippings spread across his desk. The similarities didn't stop with the new novel. If anything they increased as each horrific scene in *Blood Rage* sprang to life. This time Algernon kept score, watching the first murder, the second, each progressively worse, culminating in a scene he vividly remembered writing—a brutal, bloody mass murder.

It had been a key scene and had come to him like a vision. So real. So violent. Putting it to paper had felt like committing a sin somehow. He'd watched it unfold from the killer's vantage point, felt the splatter of warm blood, the weight of the knife, heard the victims begging and pleading to no avail.

And then he read it again, word for word. Only this time it was a newspaper account rather than a piece of fiction. That final scene realized in life was the copycat murder that had made a believer out of him. When he'd looked into the killer's eyes on the news, he'd seen himself, the same haunted look he'd worn after writing that scene, as if he'd lived it and wore the blood on his hands.

He shook himself. That's why he'd ultimately stopped writing. He was as guilty as the actual murderer, although he could never be brought to trial. A jury may not believe it, but he knew. He knew that the force of his imagination had somehow triggered each and every gruesome murder, ending in the final slaughter that followed nearly word for word the bloody climax of his novel. In the end, hundreds lay dead and the reporters had had a field day.

Maybe a judge wouldn't convict him, but he'd been tried and hung by the press. Algernon skimmed through the articles with headlines shocking even by yellow journalism standards. "The Poison Pen of Algernon Pierce Strikes Again", "Master of the Macabre Leaves Trail of Death", "Life Imitates Art in Bloody Massacre". There were more, each one more damning than the last.

He let the yellowed clippings slip from his fingers and flutter to the floor. Coincidence couldn't explain it all. Copycat murders couldn't explain it all. Algernon knew the critics were right. He'd done it. He'd written the future and transformed it into bloody history.

And with that belief, the most crippling case of writer's block had hit him. Despite the encouragement of his editor and agent, he couldn't write another word after that. He didn't dare. With the blood of hundreds on his hands, he'd vowed never to write again.

Until now.

It had been his dirty little secret at first, like a reformed smoker hiding in the bathroom to sneak a drag. He'd had no intention of telling his agent he was writing again after all these years. But the story had gripped him and wouldn't let go. He'd known immediately that the idea was too big for one book. It would be a series of three, possibly four books. Since he'd had no intention of publishing it, the logistics hadn't mattered at the time. He just wrote, losing himself in the fictional world of his own creation. Losing himself in *The Play*.

Algernon swept the remaining articles into a pile and pushed himself away from his desk. He truly hadn't planned for *The Play* to see the light of day. He couldn't put himself or the world through that again. Never, never, never again.

But then his sister had found the manuscript. He'd come home and found her turning the last few pages, her golden hair shimmering around her face. When she'd looked up at him her eyes were bright with wonder.

Celeste. Sweet, soft, little Celeste. Hair as pale as moonbeams and eyes of shadowed twilight. Just the thought of her brought a smile to his face. His precious little sister. Only she wasn't little anymore. She was a full-grown woman with her own mission in life. But that day she'd looked up at him with adoring eyes once again.

"This is incredible!" Celeste had said. "You didn't tell me you were writing again."

"I'm not," he'd growled, trying to snatch the pages out of her hands. "Give them to me, Celeste."

But she'd clung tight. "No. This is what you were born to do. Don't throw your gift away."

Pretty little Celeste, his baby sister, his golden angel. He could never deny her anything. Not as a little girl and not as a woman. He broke down and told her his fears. He'd argued, swore he'd never send another killer out into the world. "You don't understand. They take my work and twist it, they use it for destruction."

But she'd soothed him with gentle words and soft, fluttery caresses. "It's not your fault," she'd whispered. "You can't be blamed for what others do." She'd rocked him then, the way he'd rocked and held her so many times as she was growing up. "You're too talented to let a few vicious rumors destroy your career," she'd said. "You have to get this published."

Sweet Celeste. How could he get angry with her? Even when she'd gone behind his back and passed the manuscript to his editor? Before he knew it, the wheels were turning and everything was out of his control. He'd had no choice but to continue.

Suddenly the first book of *The Play* was on the stands and once again he was combing the newspapers and surfing the internet and watching television news

broadcasts for any eerie parallels. He'd just begun to relax and convince himself it had all been a fluke when the similarities started again. Right here in his hometown. First the tractor trailer accident that claimed one life, then the fire, and today that girl in the cemetery. Generic proof, but with echoes only their creator would recognize. No one else had caught on yet, but *he* knew. He knew the cycle had begun. And this time the ending was too horrible to imagine.

This time he'd penned the Apocalypse.

Too late. Too late. Now that the signs were showing up, it was too late for him to take it back. The second book would be on the stands in April, the third was already in galley, and the final book was due to the publisher by the end of the month. He was locked into this. No way out.

Not unless...

He shook his head. When was the last time he'd slept? He felt dizzy, disoriented. He could feel the slumbering headache lying in wait. With a deep sigh he packed up the rest of the articles and grabbed the relaxation tapes Celeste had made to ease the relentless migraines that plagued him. He needed to calm down. He was making mountains out of molehills. *Just calm down, relax, get a grip.* Stretching out on the couch, he put the headphones on and closed his eyes.

"Relax," he chanted in a gravel whisper as the black velvet night closed around him. "Just relax."

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize jerked awake, struggling through layers of nightmares. Her heart pounded and her skin felt clammy. It took a few moments to orient herself. She'd fallen asleep on the couch. Beside her was the open book she'd been reading – Algernon Pierce's book. She shivered, afraid to touch it, as if it were alive.

There were no clues to her current problems in this book, only nightmares on top of nightmares. She wondered how any sane person could come up with such brutal, depraved scenarios. She felt dirty just reading it, as if the pages had absorbed traces of splattered blood and gore.

She picked the book up with two fingers and carried it to the trash, holding it away from her body like a dead mouse. There was no need to read any further. She knew there weren't any answers in this book. Unfortunately she'd still have to read *The Play* when it came in. She hoped she wouldn't have to read very far to see whether or not there was any connection between her life spiraling out of control and Algernon Pierce's newest novel.

She stared into the night. The moon was a sickle-slash in the velvet sky. She shivered and turned away from the window. Even after burying the book in the trash, she still couldn't shake the flashes of nightmare visions that had awakened her. She'd inherited Pierce's nightmares, only she had no outlet to exorcise them.

She needed to talk to someone, and dialed Joyce's number automatically. A voice, husky with sleep, answered on the first ring.

"Joyce, this is Blaize. Did I wake you up?"

"No."

"Liar."

"Okay, you woke me up. Happy?" Then the gruffness softened. "Are you okay?"

Blaize's voice cracked. "Nightmares."

"I told you not to go to Richard's funeral."

Pacing, twisting the phone cord around her finger, Paige said, "You were right. Happy?"

"Infinitely." Joyce chuckled. "You can wake me up anytime to tell me I'm right."

"I just needed to hear your voice." Blaize tried to sound brave, but the quiver in her words gave her away.

"Want me to come over and keep you company?" Joyce asked.

Blaize wanted to say yes, but couldn't. "No, just talk to me for a little while. Then I'll go to sleep," she said, although she was pretty sure she wouldn't sleep again tonight.

It didn't take long before Joyce's bad jokes and rambling discourse on life and politics and the state of the economy had Blaize yawning. She settled on the couch and turned off the lamp, her eyes adjusting to the soft glow of moonlight. Her eyelids drooped and she leaned back against the cushions, cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder.

Joyce's voice softened to hushed tones, soothing, comforting, reassuring. Soon Blaize's breathing deepened and her eyes stayed closed as Joyce whispered, "Shhh...just relax. Relax and sleep now."

## Chapter Seven

Blaize checked the clock, hurrying to get ready. Joyce would be here any minute, and Lord help anyone who made Joyce Klavan late for anything. There were people to this day who claimed to have actually seen flames shooting from Joyce's nostrils when she was angry.

Blaize thought she might just be the only person in the world who saw through that tough exterior. When she woke this morning the phone line had still been open. She'd smiled hearing Joyce's soft snoring on the other end. Then a snort and a cough and Joyce's sleepy voice, as if sensing that her charge had made it safely through the night.

"Morning." The word was wrapped around a cigarette as Joyce lit, inhaled, coughed and exhaled with a long sigh.

"Do you know you snore?" Blaize had asked, not wanting to let go of the connection yet. She'd needed the comfort of another person and as usual, Joyce had been there for her.

"You are such a liar. I don't snore. I just breathe loud."

"Do you always light your first cigarette before you get out of bed?" Blaize sank deeper beneath the blanket, luxuriating in the warmth. Last night's anxiety had eased somewhat, and Joyce's sleepy conversation scattered what was left.

"Honey, sometimes I light my first cigarette before I open my eyes. And you might want to be nicer to me or I won't hold your hand next time you have nightmares from reading too many scary stories."

Blaize chuckled. "Thanks." That didn't come close to what she wanted to say. She wanted to tell Joyce that she was the best friend anyone had ever had, that she loved her as much as it was possible to love another person. But she knew Joyce would never let her finish such sappy sentimentalities. At least that's what she'd call it. It didn't matter. They both knew what they felt and words would only fall short.

"So," Joyce had growled. "You gonna get that lazy butt of yours out of bed or what? You only have all day to get ready."

"Get ready?"

"For tonight. The concert."

"Oh," Blaize began. "I'm not sure I'm feeling up to—"

Joyce cut her off. "Don't even start making excuses. I've been telling you about this concert all week and you're going if I have to come over and dress you and drag you there myself."

Blaize knew when arguing was useless. "Who are we seeing again?"

"Spyder Raines."

"Spyder Raines? I thought he was dead."

"No he's not dead, but *you* will be if you're not ready when I get there." Joyce grumbled. "You know how much I hate to be late."

Blaize knew all right. But there was still plenty of time to get used to the idea. She'd hung up the phone, promising Joyce she'd be ready by seven o'clock. Then she'd spent the day doing routine chores that kept her from thinking about the improbable events of the last few days.

Now, with Joyce's warning still echoing in her ears, Blaize hustled to get ready for their night out. By the time she put the finishing touches on her makeup, outlining her eyes with kohl and sweeping blush across her high cheekbones, she'd even begun to look forward to the concert. She inspected her reflection in the mirror. She was still too thin, but she looked better than she had a few weeks ago.

"Near-death becomes you," she told her reflection.

Just then the doorbell rang. Blaize grabbed her purse and met Joyce at the door, rolling her eyes with exaggerated exasperation. "God, I thought you'd never get here. Come on, we're gonna be late."

"Cute," Joyce grinned, following her to the car.

Their lighthearted bantering continued all the way to the concert. Blaize started to feel like her old self again. She made a pact with herself to forget everything else tonight and simply concentrate on having a great time.

As they made their way through the jostling crowd at the outdoor amphitheater, Blaize felt young and carefree again. Joyce elbowed her. "Remember when we got caught sneaking in here?"

"Which time?" Blaize asked. As teenagers, Joyce had gotten her into more trouble than she cared to remember, but they were priceless memories.

"I believe it was the Grateful Dead concert," Joyce said, stepping around blankets and coolers that staked out lawn space. "You were so cool. Stared the guard straight in the eye and told him that no, you *weren't* sneaking in, you were trying to find the way out."

"Like he hadn't heard that one before," Blaize snickered. Then with a pointed look, she said, "We would have gotten away with it too, if you hadn't punched the guy."

"He was pulling on me! Besides he wasn't even a real cop."

"Yeah, but unfortunately those were real cans of beer stuffed into your backpack." She shook her head. "I was grounded for a whole month."

Joyce took a deep breath. "Smells just like old times," she said with a mischievous grin.

Blaize agreed. The air was thick with anticipation, hormones and excitement, laced with an underlying wisp of marijuana.

"Guess what I've got in here?" Joyce asked, patting her purse.

"Oh shit, don't even tell me —"

"Don't worry," Joyce said with a laugh. "You're way too old to be grounded."

"Not too old to be arrested, though," Blaize acknowledged, making her way to their seats. Unlike the lawn crowd, they had seats close to the stage. With age and money came privileges, but she couldn't help feeling you lost something wondrous on the way to adulthood.

When the band started and the music thundered through her, it was like a blast of adrenaline. The pounding rhythms, strobe lights and screaming fans carried her away. When the opening act finished its set, the crowd was on its feet, screaming and hollering.

Then Spyder Raines made his entrance and nothing else existed. He was hot, sexy, charismatic. Cocky male sexuality in skintight leather. Long and lean, with hair as black and glossy as a raven's wings — dark, wavy, sexy. Had she said sexy already?

A sleeveless black cotton shirt revealed muscles that came from lifting something heavier than a guitar. He strutted across the stage, a hip-grinding, crotch-thrusting supernova. Her gaze followed the teasing play of light across supple black leather. Her response was immediate. She wanted him right then and there. Any time, any place, any way.

She turned to Joyce, her breath ragged. "God, he's gorgeous."

"He's gay," Joyce deadpanned.

Blaize blinked.

"Kidding," Joyce said. "But he might as well be for all the chance either one of us has with him."

Blaize watched him perform. Her pulse pounded to the music, blood dancing, nerves sizzling. Each song drove her higher and higher until she could barely stand it. Finally the set ended in a breathless, orgasmic crescendo. She shivered and fell back into her seat, wondering if it was as good for him as it was for her.

Her breath came in short, ragged gasps. When she closed her eyes she saw Spyder Raines as if in a vision, standing over her naked, his skin glowing golden in the candlelight, his eyes burning into her with lust. It was more than a fantasy. It felt like a memory. She'd seen him poised above her just like that, ready to enter her, fill her, possess her. She gasped and her eyes flew open.

*The dream!*

"Joyce. It's him! I've been dreaming of him."

"Yeah, so have I," Joyce laughed. "You, me and a thousand other horny women."

"No, I..."

Blaize knew without looking that he was watching her. She could feel the heat of his gaze raking over her body, making her skin tingle with the illusive caress. She lifted her head slowly, meeting his gaze. They stared at each other across a dozen rows of bodies, and as their gazes locked something clicked into place with the sound of

destiny. It was similar to the way she'd felt meeting Gate, but stronger, deep within her belly, lighting up her mind and piercing her soul. She tipped her head back, baring her throat. In that one, instinctive gesture, she surrendered to him.

She moaned as if his hands were already moving along her skin, marking her, possessing her. Her entire body trembled and, with an embarrassed shiver, she realized she was hot for him, wet for him, ready for him.

The air sizzled between them. A voice murmured at the edges of her consciousness, emphasizing what Blaize instinctively knew was true. *"He wants you...he wants you...he wants you too."*

Then the lights dimmed, and he was walking across the stage with that hip-swaying, groin-thrusting strut that drove the audience crazy. He reached for a guitar and balanced on a stool, one boot heel hooked in the bottom rung, the other flat on the floor. He laid the guitar across his lap and, as the lights dimmed, introduced a new song. A single spotlight illuminated him in a soft, ethereal glow.

And suddenly it was quiet. Too quiet for a concert packed with bodies. The air rippled with expectancy. Blaize waited. Waited for something to happen as if she'd been waiting for this moment all of her life and just hadn't realized it until now.

Blaize watched his hands as they caressed the strings of the guitar. She was mesmerized by the movements of his long, graceful fingers as they made love to his instrument. She wanted to live in those hands.

A hush fell over the room as man and guitar joined to become something more, something bigger than both of them. As he sang, the words seemed to open a doorway in her memory and slip inside, coming home. She knew that song. She knew those words. She knew the crooning of that voice in the deepest velvet of the night, whispering along the valleys of her skin in a blending marriage of lyrics and melody. It was pure poetry lifted on the wings of music.

With each verse his voice became stronger, clearer. His chest expanded and lifted, powerful bellows sent pure waves of sound into the world. No. Not just a song. This transcended music, becoming something primal, more spiritual.

She drifted, carried along on the current of music, her spirit afloat, when suddenly she jerked, a shout of recognition blasting through her mind. *"No! Don't listen."*

She blinked. What was it? She concentrated on the singer onstage, on the words he sang. The words. The words were wrong. They were the words she'd known were wrong before she'd even heard them.

Not *turn* the page. It should be *burn* the page!

She remembered those words coming to her a few days ago. How she'd insisted to Joyce that the words were wrong—words she hadn't even heard yet. But now she knew, and every time Spyder sang the wrong words it was like a knife twisting inside her belly. She had to fix it. She had to tell him.

The ghostly voice in her head taunted her in a mocking parody, *"Pages turning, pages burning, burn the, turn the, burn the, burn the...BURN THE PAGE!"*



She knew she was screaming, but it was swallowed in the roar of the crowd as the song came to an end and the audience was up—thunderous applause and whistles, hooting and hollering—but his gaze locked on hers, as if needing only her approval.

And then the lights went out and he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Backstage, Spyder slumped on the couch of his dressing room. He was drained, exhausted. Something had happened to him out there, but it was all a blur. He recalled walking on stage and the next thing he remembered was walking off again. He must have put on a show somewhere in between because no one was clamoring for their money back. But for the life of him he couldn't remember singing a single note.

A shaft of light winked off the bottle of vodka on the coffee table. So clear, cool and inviting. Fire and ice. The inside of his mouth expanded. His tongue curled back as if preparing to swallow. A bubble of anticipation sent waves of pleasure along his throat. He leaned forward, never taking his gaze off the familiar bottle that had been his best friend for so long.

A knock on the door stopped him from giving in to the temptation.

"Yeah?"

Buck Angelo, his unofficial bodyguard, door watcher and general gofer, popped his head in. "Spyder, got a chick outside wants ta see ya."

"Yeah?"

"Says it's important."

"Don't they all?" Spyder sneered, glancing back at the bottle waiting patiently for him.

"Want I should send her in?"

"Sure, why not?" Spyder said. There was enough to share. *It's a good night for a threesome*, he thought. *Me, a sweet little groupie and an even sweeter bottle of vodka.*

Although, now that he thought about it, he hadn't been with a woman since the dreams started. Weeks ago. Hell, he was practically a virgin again. Well, now was as good a time as any to put an end to that sorry state of affairs.

"Gotta warn ya, Spyder," Buck said. "This one's older than the usual."

Spyder uncoiled himself from the chair, his boot heels hitting the floor as he muttered, "So am I, Buck. So am I."

The door closed behind him as he made his way across the room and lifted the bottle of vodka off the dresser, holding it to the light and gazing into the clear, swirling liquid as if it were a crystal ball.

There were visions aplenty swirling behind the glass. Visions for the taking. All he had to do was lift and swallow. Lift. And swallow.

While he was debating, the door opened again. "Mr. Raines?"

*Mister? What the fuck?* He turned, his sullen gaze sweeping over the twit who'd had the nerve to call him 'mister' as if he were some old fart. Then he stopped, a surprised gasp caught in his throat.

He wanted to believe she was just another fan, but he knew differently. It was *her*—the woman from his dreams. But it couldn't be. This was crazy.

Crazy maybe, but it *was* her. She'd stepped out of his dreams, sending a fist to his gut—a jolt of lust and recognition and need.

She stopped, as if pinned by the force of his inspection. The same hair, the same voice, the same full, pouty lips. The same mole at the hollow of her throat that he'd flicked his tongue over a thousand times in lust-driven dreams, closing his lips against her sensitive skin and sucking, pulling, dragging moans from her as he marked her.

*Oh God.*

There was more. More than just a physical resemblance. His body knew and responded to her as quickly and intensely as Pavlov's dogs salivated. It knew. He knew.

She cleared her throat with a nervous shrug, as if throwing off the weight of his intense stare. "I have to talk to you," she said, and her voice was as familiar as if he'd heard it every morning when he opened his eyes.

*That's it*, he thought, desperately grasping at straws. He must have slept with her before—one of the nameless, faceless bodies he rolled off of in his scramble to reach the bottle. But even as the thought struck, he knew it was a lie. He'd have remembered this one.

When he didn't speak, she tried again. "I need to talk to you about the song you played tonight."

*Her.* He wanted to reach out and touch her. He wanted to make love to her. He wanted to run away and never see her face again. "My song?"

She stared at him, then blinked as if remembering what she'd come to say. "It's wrong," she said. "The words should be *burn the page*, not *turn the page*. You have to fix it."

"Huh?" For a moment Spyder wondered if he'd already finished off the bottle of vodka. She wasn't making sense. Neither were these feelings he had for her. Nothing about tonight made sense.

"Are you a songwriter?" he asked.

She shook her head and bit down on her lower lip. Obviously his sarcasm wasn't lost on her.

"It doesn't even make sense," he argued. "Pages burning one by one?" He tried to force a laugh, but a dull conviction blossomed deep within his belly.

She was right. It didn't make a damn bit of sense, but he knew she was right. And she knew that *he* knew she was right. He could see it in her eyes. That and something more.

She was still talking, but he didn't hear a word she said. Her neck. He couldn't take his eyes off her neck. He'd always fancied himself an ass man.

And a tit man.

And a leg man.

But he'd never been turned on by a woman's neck. Until now. And hers was exceptional. The creamy porcelain blush, the satiny smooth texture of her skin, the delicate curve that he knew would fit perfectly within the circumference of his curled hands.

He stared at the pounding, beating pulse tucked into the hollow of her throat. He knew how that pulse would throb against the sensitive inner curve of skin spanning thumb and index finger, the gentle resistance as his fingers tightened and the throbbing slowed to a trickling gasp.

His fingers clenched and unclenched. His heart pounded until it was the only sound he heard. Pounding, pulsing, beating, throbbing. Fingers tightening and straining, knuckles white and stiff.

He didn't want to kill her. He *had* to.

He moved forward in three quick strides, bearing down on her. Her eyes widened like those of a startled deer. She flinched and drew away from him. Did she sense the danger in him? Did she know how easily he could snuff her life out, snapping her neck like a brittle twig? Did she know he'd already killed her a thousand times in his dreams?

He opened the door and pushed her into the hallway. "Get out," he growled. "Just get the hell out of here."

He gave her a final shove and slammed the door closed. With a strangled moan, he slid down the closed door, slumping to the floor and lowering his head into his hands.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joyce snuffed out her cigarette. "That's it," she mumbled, "I'm going to find her."

Blaize had begged her to wait, promising to be back in a few minutes. It had been twenty minutes already and there was no sign of her. She shouldn't have let her go off alone. Not the way she'd been acting lately. Blaize had her spooked, looking for meaning where there shouldn't be any. And then there were the dreams. She didn't want to think of them.

But something had happened today. She'd felt it too. Another piece of the puzzle had snapped into place and a picture was beginning to form in her mind. It still didn't make any sense. She juggled the pieces she knew—fire, Richard's mysterious death, those odd words that had burst from Blaize's mouth a few days ago, the same phrase she'd heard Spyder sing tonight. The words had seemed hauntingly familiar, despite the fact that he'd announced it was the first time he'd sung it in public. Spyder Raines and his song, Algernon Pierce and his book. All connected somehow.

Before she could make any sense of it, she spotted Blaize and ran to her. "Where've you been? I was about to snag a security guard to go searching for you."

Blaize seemed dazed. "I went to talk to Spyder."

"You didn't!" But the look in Blaize's eyes confirmed that she had. "How did you get to him? Doesn't he have security or anything?"

Blaize shrugged. "I just asked and some thug let me in. It seemed like standard procedure to me."

Joyce rolled her eyes, knowing exactly what kind of procedure it was. For all her sophistication, Blaize could be so naïve sometimes. "What's he like?" she asked, curiosity overcoming her concern.

"Oh God," Blaize sighed. How could she even begin to describe him? He was a study in contradictions, rough and sensual at the same time. A poet in chains. But she knew Joyce would laugh if she said that. "He's even more gorgeous and sexy in person." She frowned. *And somehow more dangerous.* She shook the thought from her head then glanced back at Joyce. "He's everything I dreamed of."

"You're serious about him being the guy in your dreams?"

"Yes," Blaize admitted. "As crazy as it sounds, there's no doubt in my mind. And somehow we're tied together in this...mystery or whatever it is. These dreams are more vivid, more real, than anything I've ever had before. I can't explain..." Then she remembered that Joyce had hinted at having unusual dreams too. Were they tied into this somehow? "Joyce, you said something about having dreams about Gate. What kinds of dreams?"

"Not sexy ones like yours, otherwise I wouldn't mind them coming true." Joyce frowned, the teasing tone leaving her voice. "He's in danger," she said, a tremor in her voice. "I see him trapped in a fire. Burning." Joyce shuddered. "It's horrible. I can't save him."

At that moment Blaize realized the depth of Joyce's concern for Gate. There was more there. Feelings perhaps even Joyce wasn't fully aware of. She squeezed her friend's hand. "We're going to get to the bottom of this. I'll do whatever I can."

At the moment that was all the promise she was capable of giving, either to Joyce or herself.

## Chapter Eight

It had been several days, but Blaize still shivered when she remembered the way Spyder Raines had looked at her in those final moments before the door had slammed shut between them. She'd seen lust and fear and a murderous rage all fighting for control on his face. The image was both frightening and compelling.

A week ago Spyder Raines had simply been a name on a record label—a strand of let's-pretend fringe along the borders of reality. Today she couldn't think of anything else. From the moment he'd stepped onto the stage she'd felt connected to him. She knew he felt the same way. When his gaze had burned into hers, she'd felt heat and desire. No man had ever looked at her that way. He wanted her. But there was something more. Something darker. When he'd chased her out she'd been both frightened and relieved. Suddenly she hadn't felt safe alone with him. And yet, there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

She couldn't stop thinking of him. Over these past few days, she'd found out as much as she could about Spyder Raines. She knew the concert had been the final stop on his tour and that he lived somewhere here in town. She even had an address, although she'd had to listen to a lecture before Joyce would dig up that information. More than once she'd had to stop herself from driving out to the address in her hand and knocking on his door. There was no question in her mind he'd let her in. He'd be waiting for her too.

She was sure of it.

She'd even gone out and found some of his old records, hearing things in the lyrics she'd never heard before. Each song seemed to bring him closer to her, two separate paths converging in the same time and place. She knew they were meant to be together, for better or worse. *'Til death*—

She stopped, a cold shiver running down her spine. Death. Suddenly it wasn't just a word. It had weight and depth and reality. She shook her head, trying to dislodge her obsession with Spyder Raines.

She searched for something to take her mind off the razor's edge memory of his eyes. Her gaze fell on the book she'd picked up yesterday when the clerk at the bookstore had called to say her order was in. *The Play*, by Algernon Pierce. *Book One – Visions and Voices*.

The cover was a bottomless black with shades of darkness that seemed to draw the eye forward toward a golden, open gate in the distance. In the upper right corner, a hologram formed a crescent moon shimmering with half-hidden ghost images.

Blaize had picked it up earlier to search for clues. When she read the opening line, her breath caught in her throat. "Welcome to The Play." No wonder Joyce and Gate had

thought there might be a connection between this book and the message she'd found in the newspaper that morning. God, it seemed so long ago. And she was no closer today to figuring out exactly why that invitation had been sent to her.

She'd forced herself to read further, and gasped in shock when she came across a scene in the first chapter so similar to her own car accident that she had to stop reading. Adrenaline rushed through her body, causing her heart to hammer in her chest. It was like living through the horror all over again. When she read about the black dog, the memory was so vivid a shiver rippled along her spine. She *had* seen a dog. She remembered now. Just like the one in the book. It had to be a coincidence. With trembling hands, she'd put the book down and hadn't picked it up since.

Something told her there were answers in those pages, but she wasn't sure she wanted to find them. She just wanted her life back, but she was afraid opening the book would raise more questions than it answered.

She picked up the phone and dialed Joyce's number. No answer. She paced, trying not to look at the book waiting on the coffee table. She paced and worried and chewed her lower lip. Where the hell was Joyce? Why couldn't she get her mind off Spyder and those eyes, those hands, that smoldering sexual magnetism?

She looked at the clock. Three o'clock. Too early to distract herself with dinner. Once again her thoughts went back to Spyder, as if she was a compass needle and he was true north. What was his involvement in this? How were their lives tied together? Maybe the answer was in the book. The book. Damn! She didn't want to open it again, didn't even want to touch it, but she had no choice.

She only skimmed at first, flipping through pages as she searched for anything that touched a chord in her memory of the past few months. Then the words mesmerized her, sucking her in. She started reading, and soon she was lost. Lost in a world so real that her own life paled in comparison. Time danced a jig, stretching and speeding up to the rhythms of the story.

Without realizing it she became totally immersed in Pierce's storytelling, focused on the fictional reality spinning out around her, finding comparisons from the obscure to the frighteningly familiar. She started flagging scenes with sticky notes until the book looked like a strange butterfly torture device. But even that stopped as she became engrossed in the story, transported through the printed page from one world to another, darker one.

When she finally shook herself free, it was like waking from a dream. Hours had passed. She looked around. Her apartment seemed composed of shadows, the chair beneath her no more substantial than a cloud, the walls of the room formed of transparent mist.

She shook her head and wrenched herself out of Pierce's world and suddenly her room became solid again. What had happened? She'd never lost herself so totally in a book before. What kind of power did this man have to capture and captivate her so completely with only the written word? She felt exhausted, as if she'd run a marathon.

Her temples throbbed from the force of her concentration. Throughout it all, she knew she was reading her own past, present and future in the pages of that cursed book.

"That's it," she hissed through clenched teeth. No more sitting around letting someone else determine the course of her life. She'd lost her future, her job and her health. Her life was all she had left now and she wasn't about to let someone else manipulate it. Anger sent waves of adrenaline pumping through her body. She'd fight him, damn it! She was bruised but not broken, and if Pierce thought he could mess with Blaize Donovan, who had nothing left to lose, he was in for one hell of a shock.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder stood outside the crumbling brownstone, trying to justify being there. Ever since seeing that woman after his last concert—the one from his dreams—he'd been struggling with dark thoughts he couldn't control. And the nightmares. The nightmares had only gotten worse, following him into the daylight hours until he didn't know where the nightmare ended and his own twisted desires began.

*No!* Not his own desires. If those demented visions came from his own mind then he was going crazy. He might as well go back to being a junkie. At least when he was drunk or strung out he didn't fantasize about killing people. Or if he did, he didn't remember afterward.

He strode up to the brownstone and climbed the steps, the twisted wrought iron rail wobbling under his touch. He knocked on the door and waited. He didn't have to wait long.

"Thpyder. Come on in."

Dr. York's offices were on the ground floor. This door opened into his upstairs living quarters. Spyder followed him inside to an apartment as sterile as the offices below.

"Can I get you a drink?" the doctor asked.

Spyder shook his head. "No, I really don't have much time. I have to get back and..."

"No problem." The doctor nodded, acknowledging their relationship as business rather than social. "I'll be right back."

Spyder watched him walk away, half tempted to get up and leave, half wishing the Doc would hurry back with his supply. His leg bounced with impatience, fingers drumming on the table. He couldn't believe he was back here. He'd sworn never to set foot inside this place again. It was just a precaution, he reminded himself. Just in case something came up and he really needed them.

Dr. York came back carrying a prescription bottle and his medical bag. He set the bottle on the table and pulled out a blood-pressure gauge.

"That's not necessary, Doc," Spyder said. He knew the cursory examination made the doctor feel better, but he wasn't in the mood.

"It'll only take a minute," Dr. York said, ignoring Spyder's arguments to the contrary. "Take your shirt off for me."

Spyder stared at the bottle, which seemed a thousand miles away across the table. He just wanted to get out of there and it would take less time to suffer through the examination than to argue about it. He unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off, gasping when the cool stethoscope touched his skin as they both pretended this was simply a normal examination.

The doctor checked his blood pressure and pulse rate, then stared into his pupils. "You look good, Thpyder. Any problems?"

"Nothing at all, Doc." Spyder put on a false smile. There was no sense telling the doctor about his nightmares. All he needed was to relax and he knew that prescription bottle on the table held a whole world of relaxation. He imagined the little red pills nestled inside the bottle waiting for him. So pretty. So shiny and bright. Each tiny, round pill perfectly formed and full of dreams. He felt himself leaning toward the bottle, wanting to dive inside and lose himself in oblivion.

"Well, everything looks fine," Dr. York said, handing him the bottle.

Spyder's hand closed around it, feeling the subtle shift of pills inside the plastic container. He gave the bottle a little shake, listening to the sweet, clattering music. He slipped the bottle in his pocket and stood. Dr. York held out his hand and, after a moment's hesitation, Spyder shook it.

After a minimum of small talk, Spyder was out the door, taking a deep breath of fresh air which did little to cleanse his soul. The container in his pocket whispered to him.

"Just in case," he whispered back. "Just in case."

He walked across the street and sat on his motorcycle, taking slow, deep breaths before reaching for his helmet hanging from the handlebar. There was a piece of paper tucked inside. He unfolded it and frowned. *What the hell?*

The note was addressed to "Thomas Jefferson Raines." He hadn't used that name in years. He'd had his name legally changed back in the eighties. Everyone, except for Pops, called him Spyder.

He waited, scanning the dark and empty streets with the patience of a hunter, senses alert and watchful. Nothing moved. No sounds broke the stillness of the night. Whoever had left the note was long gone.

He shook his head and tucked the note into his pocket to worry about later. Right now he just wanted to get home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize couldn't believe what she'd just read. As proof, it wouldn't hold up in a court of law. But this wasn't a trial. This was every instinct inside her screaming that she was on the right track. There was no question in her mind that her life was truly imitating



art. And if this passage meant what she thought it did, it wasn't simply her own reality that was in danger of slipping away. She went back to the beginning and read the scene from Algernon's book again.

*He swaggers and struts in rippling black leather, gazing seductively through a curtain of silken hair. Each person in the audience is pinned by his stare, as if reading secret messages meant only for them.*

*Every woman falls in love, the young with the first taste of danger and the old with a final remembrance of youth. Tonight he will live in a thousand fantasies, eternally sensuous and frozen in time.*

*They will capture and take home a piece of him, his voice, his smile, his glistening sweat. But they can't take his energy. They can't own his magic.*

*His charisma belongs to the stage, where the music and lights and love from the audience roll over him and through him like waves on the ocean, making him feel, for that moment in time at least, truly and wonderfully alive.*

It was Spyder Raines. There was no doubt in her mind. Whatever this book had to do with the changes in her life, Spyder was involved too. This one scene alone wasn't proof, but there were hundreds of similarities between her life and the fictional world of Pierce's book. It was enough to convince her that her life was no longer her own. She was being manipulated.

With that realization came a sense of relief. She wasn't in control. She couldn't be blamed. Even if she had killed Richard, it hadn't been her choice, hadn't been her will. She'd been manipulated all the way.

And it was only just beginning.

She had to talk to someone. She had to prove this wasn't just her own paranoid delusions. Her first thought was to run to Spyder, but she shook it off. That was ridiculous. She didn't even know him, and the first and only time she'd seen him he'd thrown her out of his room. She dialed Joyce's number again, but there was still no answer. She stood and paced, trying to think.

It was after seven o'clock. Where had the time gone? She hadn't eaten, hadn't slept. The newspaper office was closed and she couldn't talk to Gate about this. *Where the hell was Joyce?* She had to talk to someone. She had to get her life back.

And again, with sudden clarity, the thought came to her. *Go to Spyder.* But it wasn't that disembodied voice she'd come to recognize. This was her own choice, her own conviction. Silly, stupid, unreasonable—but her choice alone. And she couldn't ignore it any longer.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed her car keys and the slip of paper with his address on it. With a little luck, she could be there in half an hour.

\* \* \* \* \*

*An excerpt from The Play, by Algernon Pierce, page 146.*

*Addiction would be his undoing. Addiction to drugs, sex, music and death – all knotted together in a tangled snarl of dependence. The cravings feed on him, like a hot and greedy monster gnawing at his bowels, beckoning with a siren song's promise and sharp, mean teeth. Want turns to need, need leads to obsession, and obsession becomes voracious craving.*

*It is a foolish man who thinks he can fight this compulsion alone. It is a vain and arrogant soul who challenges that ravenous beast whose appetite, once kindled, can never be fully satisfied.*

*Feed the beast, little man. Let it nibble on your soul, devouring you one mouthful at a time, until all that you once were is but a faded memory too quickly forgotten.*

Spyder sat at the table. He reached into his pocket and unfolded the slip of paper. He'd forgotten all about the mysterious note, but didn't want to be bothered with it right now. He threw it on his dresser and reached for the pills. Not that he was going to take one. He just wanted to look at them.

He dumped the pills on the table, watching the pile slide and tumble. Then he started counting. Slowly. Moving each pill from one side of the table to the other as he counted them out. *One. Two. Three.* Mentally naming each little pill with its own unique number. *Thirty-six. Thirty-seven. Thirty-eight.* He silently mouthed the numbers, feeling a sense of relief as they mounted up, climbing higher and higher. *Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred.*

Slowly, methodically, he separated them into twenty little groups of five spread across the table. Then he rearranged them into ten groups of ten splayed out in a semicircle. Then with a sweep of his hands, he pushed them all together again into a single pile in the center of the table. He sat back and looked at the pills dotting the table like suspended drops of blood. Each tiny red oasis seemed to beckon him, calling his name.

He picked up one pill and held it to the light, rolling it between his fingers. His hand trembled. His breath came in short, shallow rasps. He dropped the single pill back into the container. It bounced and rolled, then came to a stop, staring up at him like the eye of a demon.

"Just in case," he repeated like a mantra, sweeping the rest of the pills into the bottle. "Just in case," he whispered as he twisted the lid tight.

"Just in case."

\* \* \* \* \*

Joyce sat back and rubbed her eyes. The words on the computer screen continued scrolling, but she'd stopped reading. She knew enough now. Maybe not enough to

convince anyone else, but enough to assure herself that there was more to this than any of them suspected. And if she was right, the danger was real and immediate, not just for Blaize, but for all of them.

She cued the printer and saved the rest of her research to a disk. It would be safe until she got back. She stood and stretched the kinks out of her back. She'd been hunched over the computer all day following tenuous leads and dead ends, one thread leading to another until a bigger picture began to form. Now she was running on instinct alone – an instinct that had never failed her before.

And her instincts said she had to follow the rest of this trail alone. She couldn't even tell Blaize where she was going. It was too dangerous and Blaize would insist on being involved. That would ruin everything. She'd have to immerse herself in a different world if she wanted to succeed and couldn't chance anyone blowing her cover until it was over. Not even Gate. She'd have to disappear without a trace. And she had to do it now, before she lost her nerve.

She stuffed the papers and computer disk into her briefcase and checked her watch. It was too late to run to the bank and the security of her safe-deposit box. She'd have to trust them in her safe at home until she returned.

*If* she returned.

## Chapter Nine

Blaize wasn't sure what she'd expected. Certainly not this Norman Rockwell farmhouse nestled among rolling green pastures. She must have the wrong address, or the wrong street. She certainly couldn't imagine Spyder Raines living in these bucolic surroundings.

She pulled onto the dirt driveway and double-checked the number on the rusted metal mailbox with the one on the slip of paper she'd clutched all the way there. Maybe Joyce had made a mistake. But as long as she'd come this far, it wouldn't hurt to ask.

She parked and stepped out of the car, just as an elderly gentleman pushed the screen door open and ambled onto the porch. He ran a hand through iron-gray tufts of hair, tugged on the straps of his work suspenders and gave her a howdy-neighbor smile.

"Can I help you?" he called over the porch rail.

Blaize stepped closer. "I'm not sure. This is 82 Old State Road, right?"

"Has been long as I can remember."

Blaize glanced around, frowning. "I, um..." It seemed silly to ask, but she had no other options, so she just blurted it out. "I'm looking for Spyder Raines."

She expected a snort of laughter, but the old man studied her thoughtfully then seemed to come to a decision. "He's out tuning up the tractor," he said, gesturing toward the porch. "I've just squeezed some fresh lemonade. Why don't you sit a spell and wait for him."

*Tuning the tractor?* Now Blaize was *sure* she had the wrong place. But how many people named Spyder Raines could there be? Unless the old guy was pulling her leg. She climbed the porch steps and took a seat on a cushioned wicker chair while he poured lemonade from a frost-laced pitcher.

"So, you're looking for Spyder?" he asked, handing her the glass.

She nodded, raising the glass to her lips. The lemonade was cold, sweet and refreshing. She took a deep sip then nearly choked at his next comment.

"You don't look like the type of woman who usually comes around looking for Spyder." He gave her a long, head to toe scrutiny. "For one thing, I'd guess you're over eighteen."

Blaize found his elfin grin infectious. "Slightly," she agreed.

"So, how do you know my son?"

"Your son? Oh. Mr. Raines...I didn't know."

"Call me Pops," he interrupted with a wave. "Everyone does."

She smiled and held out her hand. "Blaize Donovan. And I don't really know your son. I mean..." How in the world was she going to explain this?

"You're not a reporter, are you? I can usually sniff them out pretty quick. I pegged you more for the schoolteacher type."

"Got me again," she chuckled. "I am a schoolteacher. So," she said, changing the subject. "Spyder lives here when he's not touring?"

Pops cocked his head beyond the house. "Has his own place back there. He thinks the noise doesn't keep me up all night being so far away. He's wrong."

Blaize followed the direction of his gaze, noting what looked like a barn toward the back of the lot. A motorcycle leaned lazily against a fence post. It was probably the last place anyone would imagine finding Spyder Raines.

And then she saw him walking across the field and knew there'd been no mistake. The cocky swagger was still there in his strut, but the air of arrogance was gone. Maybe it was the softening light, but all of the hard angles had smoothed somehow. His hair was pulled back with a leather cord, making him look less wild and unrestrained. But that aura still clung to him—a sexual magnetism she couldn't resist or deny, even when he recognized her and his smile turned to a hard-lipped line of annoyance.

When he reached the front yard, he propped one foot up on the porch step and stared at her, a mocking grin curling his lips. "Hello again. Have you come to rewrite more of my songs?"

"No." Her voice was a squeak. Now that she was here, she didn't know where to start. She was so aware of him, his sexual magnetism and husky-voiced sensuality. She couldn't think straight.

"Well?" he sneered.

"Mind your manners, son," Pops barked. "I don't know what the problem is here, but this nice young lady doesn't deserve to be spoken to that way. We were just having a glass of lemonade and I suggest you tuck that scowl into your back pocket and join us."

Spyder straightened, looking from one to the other. Then, with a reluctant sigh, he climbed onto the porch, poured himself a glass of lemonade and sat across from Blaize.

"Ms. Donovan here tells me she's a schoolteacher," Pops said, acting as a buffer between the two of them. He turned to Blaize. "You'll have to excuse my son's manners. He was the youngest of five and his mother spoiled him."

Blaize tried to reconcile the image of a spoiled child with the dangerous man sitting across from her. He glared, as if daring her to come up with a good reason to be sipping lemonade on his father's porch. If only she could come up with one.

"I saw your concert the other night," she began hesitantly. "It was...wonderful."

He snorted. "It might have helped if you'd said that first, instead of telling me that my lyrics sucked."

"I didn't say that! I just...when you were singing..." Her voice trailed off. How in the world could she explain the way she'd felt, the insistent feeling that the words had to be changed.

He waved away her arguments. "I know, I know. You thought the words were wrong."

She nodded, cheeks burning. "I heard those words so clearly. And I can't explain why I knew they had to be changed. So many strange things have been happening lately."

He seemed to perk up at that. "Strange? How?"

"Just...strange." She was aware of Pops rocking between them and couldn't say more. She had a feeling that, without his father's protective presence, Spyder would send her away, just as he had the other night. She scrambled for something to say to keep that from happening until she had a chance to speak with him privately. "But I thought the song was beautiful. The best thing you've ever done."

He seemed to relax again. "I just wrote that song. It has a special meaning for me. I guess that's why I got so defensive when you attacked it."

She didn't correct him this time. Maybe it had seemed like an attack. She should have eased into it better. She would next time, if he'd give her half a chance.

"Never attack the thing a man loves," Pops said. "Makes him defensive and mean."

"I'm sorry," she said, leaning toward Spyder and holding his gaze. And she meant it. She was sorry they'd gotten off on the wrong foot. Sorry that her words had seemed like an attack.

"So all this," Pops said, waving his hands as if he could fan away the tension in the air between them, "is over a few words in a song?"

Blaize nodded and Spyder grumbled under his breath.

"Well, I think I'd like to hear this song," Pops said, standing up and opening the screen door. He disappeared inside then came back a few minutes later with a battered guitar. "Nice night for some music," he said, handing the guitar to Spyder."

"Pops—"

"Now, don't be shy, son. You've always had a way with a tune. Not that I think playing the guitar is an honest way for a grown man to earn a living—"

"Okay, okay," Spyder interrupted, as if this was an old and familiar argument. But a note of affection had crept into his voice. He ran his hands over the curved wood. "My first guitar," he said with a smile.

"Your mother bartered a month's worth of chicken eggs for that guitar," Pops said softly. "Spoiled you rotten, she did." But there was a smile on his face, and Blaize recognized it as a long-standing endearment rather than criticism.

Spyder bent over the guitar, tuning the strings. "This one's for you, Pops," he said, then settled the guitar onto his thigh and began strumming.

The air grew still as he sang a slow, haunting ballad of lost love and whispering pines. His voice was softer than she remembered, more tender. Blaize didn't recognize the song, but knew it was something mellowed with time and memories. It tugged at her emotions, filling her with a sense of longing. When the song came to an end, they sat quietly for a moment, still feeling it throb in the air around them.

"Johnny Horton," his father said, breaking the silence. "Now *there* was a singer. None of this rockabilly stuff you kids listen to today."

*Rockabilly?* Blaize stole a glance at Spyder, who shrugged and rolled his eyes. One corner of his lips curled up in an indulgent smile as his fingers continued strumming softly over the guitar strings. Blaize felt more relaxed than she had in ages.

"Now," Pops said. "Let's hear that song you wrote that has Ms. Donovan here so upset."

"I'm no Johnny Horton," Spyder chuckled.

"Who is?" Pops agreed. "But let's hear it anyway."

Spyder cocked an eyebrow at her. "Ms. Donovan?"

She knew he was teasing, but it seemed very courtly instead. Playing along, she nodded. "Please?"

Spyder played the opening chords and Blaize felt her breath catch in her throat. She felt that pull again, as if her soul was being drawn through a tunnel. A shimmering wave flowed up her arms, through her shoulders and down her spine. Every cell in her body seemed to lean inward, shrinking to a single point in her center.

And then he reached the chorus and she jerked upright.

*...a presence sweet invades my soul  
and makes what once was severed whole  
blaze marks the trail of fate begun  
with pages turning one by one...*

"There," she whispered, not even realizing she'd said it aloud.

Spyder stopped and looked at her. The music faded around them.

"Right there...pages turning one by one. Every time you sing that part something clenches inside me and I hear *burning*, not *turning*. Pages burning one by one."

Spyder sighed and shrugged his shoulders. He turned to his father. "See what I mean?"

"Well, hold on here," Pops said. "It's only one word. Let's hear it her way."

"I don't care how many words it is," he insisted. "This is the way I wrote it. It's *my* song. Who the hell is she to tell me the words are wrong?"

A sharp glance from his father was all that was needed stop the flow of angry words. "Fine," he said with a resigned sigh. "We'll try it her way."

He began again, and this time when he made the change to the chorus, Blaize felt something physically click into place. It was right. He had to see that. He had to feel it. The lyrics that followed gained strength, becoming deeper and building gradually to a delicious tension that resonated through each chorus.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, yes."

She leaned forward, gently touching his knee, unaware of anyone or anything between them. "See?"

He didn't want to see anything. And he didn't want to admit what her touch did to him. As if sensing it, she pulled away, a delicate blush coloring her cheeks. She lowered her gaze, her eyelashes fluttering, and he was struck with a vivid sensory memory of her naked in his arms.

He tried to shake it off. Here on the porch, with the sun setting in the distance, the sweet tang of lemons in the air and his father nodding off in the rocker between them, Spyder was protected from the dark urges that shadowed his dreams. He could be close to Blaize without fear that he'd do something unforgivable. Something unthinkable.

He studied her thoughtfully. The clothes she wore seemed designed to hide, rather than accentuate her curves. Her hair was full and thick, with a natural wave, as if she just shook it out and combed her fingers through it in the morning without benefit of gels or sprays or whatever women did to torture their hair into submission. Her skin glowed with a natural beauty no makeup could duplicate. And those eyes, those gypsy eyes. No matter how hard she tried to hide it, she was beautiful. Just as he'd imagined.

He knew her, even if it was only through his dreams. He knew her intimately, every curve of her body, he knew how she'd respond to his touch, the soft little whimpers she'd make. If he were alone with her right now...he didn't want to think about that. He couldn't trust himself to be alone with her.

As if he'd heard Spyder's thoughts and decided to be obstinate, Pops got up and stretched. "Getting late. I think I'll leave you kids alone and hit the hay." He gestured to the side table. "You'll pick up here when you and the lady are finished talking, right?"

"The lady and I are finished now, Pops."

Ignoring him, Pops held his hand out to Blaize. "It was nice meeting you, Ms. Donovan." With his back to Spyder, he gave her a conspiratorial wink. "Don't be a stranger."

Blaize stood and took his hand, resisting the urge to hug him goodnight. Her smile was genuine. "Thank you."

He nodded, seeming to realize it was meant for more than the lemonade and hospitality, turned, and went inside. When the door closed, Blaize waited for Spyder to invite her to stay, but apparently he hadn't inherited his father's good manners.

Well, despite what he'd said, she wasn't about to let him chase her away again. She knew civility would be more difficult without Pop's calming presence. Difficult, but not impossible.



Not letting his continued silence intimidate her, Blaize took a deep breath of the fresh, clean air. It was the last place she'd have ever expected to find Spyder Raines. And yet, he seemed perfectly at home on the wide front porch, chugging lemonade instead of beer, as comfortable in denim as body-hugging leather.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. Her voice was no more than a whisper.

He leaned back, one boot heel hooked over the lower rung of the chair, staring up at the darkening sky as if the answer would suddenly appear across the surface.

She almost missed his reply, so soft was his voice. "Trying to save my life," he said. She had the feeling he was talking more to himself than to her.

And then the quiet was broken. He jerked forward. The front legs of his chair cracked against the wooden planks with the sharp finality of a butcher's knife cutting through bone. He uncoiled and shot out of the chair, inches from her.

She drew back from the heat of his stare, a look so intense it could set her on fire and melt her at the same time. Either way she'd lose herself.

"The question is," he snapped, "what are *you* doing here?"

She stammered, not finding an answer. Hadn't she asked herself that very same question? Finally she said the only thing that made sense. "I couldn't *not* come."

She felt small under the intense scrutiny of his stare. What was he thinking? His gaze flicked back and forth over the points of her face, from her lips to her nose to her eyes and back again. He seemed to be searching, as if he needed something from her. But what?

"Spyder?"

He jerked back. For some reason the name jarred him coming from her lips. It felt wrong. Had she called him Spyder in his dreams? Or had she called him something more intimate? He had to bite his tongue to stop himself from telling her to call him Tommy. No, that was too personal. Tommy was the boy who'd grown up on this farm. Tom was a man she didn't know, a man no one knew anymore. Not even him.

Spyder turned away before he could lose himself in the still depths of her eyes. He had to send Blaize away now, before it was too late. And he couldn't do that and look at her at the same time. Already he was losing his resolve as the part of him that wanted her took control. He was aware of the way he responded to her. He was as hard as a rock.

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak there was the softest touch, her hand on his shoulder. He turned and there she was, inches away. He could smell her hair, see the moonlight reflected in her eyes, the faintest glimmer of moisture across her bottom lip, as if she'd just wet it with the tip of her tongue. His entire body throbbed and pulsed.

She reached up and laid her palm against the side of his jaw, as if she'd touched him like that a thousand times before. There was nothing sensual about it. It was just

the barest of touches, not even a caress, more comforting than sexual. But it was enough to make him realize he was losing the struggle.

With his last ounce of resolve, he pushed her away before his mind could justify what his body ached to do. He circled her wrist, pulling her hand away from his face and hardening his voice.

"You have to go now."

"I don't have to," she said.

He ignored the promise in her eyes, a promise neither one of them was ready to acknowledge. "Yes, you do." He gave her a purposely suggestive smile that she couldn't possibly misinterpret. "I have other plans for tonight, darlin', and you're not part of them. Not unless you're into group sex, that is."

That did the trick. She drew back with a curt little shake of her head, looking more hurt than shocked. He pretended not to be affected by the disappointment in her eyes.

With an efficient movement, she slipped the strap of her purse over her shoulder and steered past him, putting as much distance between them as the porch would allow.

Her voice was clipped. "Sorry to have bothered you," she said. From someone else it might have sounded bitter or sarcastic. From her, it sounded like honest regret.

"No bother," he said. She didn't acknowledge his response, probably didn't even hear him. She was already walking with a purposeful stride to her car. "No bother at all," he whispered, knowing it was a lie. She bothered him in ways even he didn't understand. Had he been dead inside for so long that he didn't recognize genuine emotions when he felt them?

He watched the road long after the taillights of her car had disappeared. He thought for sure his dreams tonight would be more vivid, more powerful. Now that he knew she was real, could his dream image of her be any less so?

But surprisingly, for the first time in weeks, he didn't dream of her at all. And that scared him even more.

\* \* \* \* \*

*An excerpt from The Play, by Algernon Pierce, page 208.*

*A wolf in sheep's clothing enters the secret labyrinth, leaving one life behind in search of another. Too blinded by ambition to see that her presence is not only expected but required, she struts through the gate in her transparent disguise. Soon others will follow, but for now one sheep to slaughter is enough.*

*And so it begins. The actors take their places, lining up on the stage, like one season following another, to take part in the final curtain call of the play.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize was having a restless night. Her mind spun off in a thousand directions, trying to find answers where there were none. She finally gave up trying to sleep and got dressed. There was still no answer at Joyce's house and she was getting worried.

*This is stupid*, she chided herself. Joyce was a big girl and didn't have to report her comings and goings to anyone. Maybe she simply wasn't answering the phone. Even as she thought it, Blaize realized that wasn't like Joyce. And why wasn't her machine picking up? It just didn't feel right.

Her concern escalating by the moment, Blaize grabbed her purse and car keys.

"If she's not there, I'll camp out on her doorstep until she gets back," she muttered.

She felt better once she made the decision to check on Joyce herself. Joyce would probably be home when she got there. They'd have a good laugh and sit up late with a gallon of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream and life would return to normal. Blaize desperately needed to believe that.

But when she reached Joyce's house, it was dark. She sat in the car staring at the house, a squat, one-story bungalow with a wide front porch. The street was deserted, pools of light from the street lamps making the darkness in between seem even more sinister by comparison. Blaize shivered. The crescent moon slicing across the starless sky reminded her of the cover of Pierce's book.

She reached for the door handle, then stopped. Footsteps warned of someone's approach before she could make out the figure in the darkness. She waited, barely breathing, as a dark silhouette walked toward her, hunched into the shadows. Blaize was sure she was hidden in the dark interior of the parked car, but still she held her breath.

The figure stopped in front of Joyce's house and looked toward the doorway. For a moment Blaize felt there was something familiar about the stranger. But that was silly. He was no more than a silhouette, a dark shadow against an even darker night sky. How could she recognize a shadow? Still, there was something about him...

The stranger stopped to light a cigarette. A glint of silver triggered her memory, but just as quickly it was gone. Then, in the sudden flare of light, Blaize saw his face and again was struck with a sense of recognition. The stranger seemed to stare straight at her. The light faded to a glowing tip as he dragged on the cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke. Before she could grasp the elusive memory, he walked away, continuing along the dark sidewalk until he was gone.

Blaize released the breath she'd been holding in an explosive gasp. She waited ten more minutes then stepped out of the car, rushing across the sidewalk and up the porch steps. She knocked, her mind racing with fear. When there was no answer, she tried the door, surprised to find it open. She stepped inside, calling softly. "Joyce. You here?"

No answer. She closed the door behind her, locked it then reached for the light switch beside the door. "Joyce?" Still nothing. The house was ominously quiet. Half-

empty Chinese takeout containers littered the coffee table. With growing concern, Blaize checked every room, calling out before entering. But there was no sign of her friend.

She hadn't thought there would be.

She sat on the couch, determined to wait for Joyce to return, despite her growing fear that Joyce would never return here again. She folded her legs under herself and pulled an afghan from the back of the couch, curling up in a little ball to wait.

Her gaze swept across the table. It wasn't like Joyce to leave food out like this. Again Blaize felt warning signals prickling her mind. There were too many red flags. Too many things not quite right.

She noticed a broken fortune cookie at the corner of the table, a curled slip of paper beside it. She reached forward. Something told her not to read it, but she couldn't stop herself. She knew what it would say even before she read the words.

JOYCE KLAVAN

\*YOU\* have been chosen

Welcome to "THE PLAY"

Act II: Questions and Quests

As she read the note, Blaize was struck with the terrible premonition that she'd never see her friend again.

## Part Two: Questions and Quests

## Chapter Ten

In a remote conclave nestled deep within the Adirondack Mountains, Celeste Pierce opened the door to her son's room. As always, just the sight of him made her heart expand with a love so intense it threatened to consume her. Celeste realized that every mother thought her baby was the most special child ever to grace the earth. However in her case, it happened to be true.

Joey sat at his desk, one leg curled beneath him, the other swinging inches from the floor. The light from his desk lamp turned his hair into a golden halo. Blessed with charismatic beauty and unrivaled intelligence, Joey was her gift, her only child and her reason for living. His eyes were a clear, true blue unrivaled by either sea or sky, and there wasn't a man, woman or child who could resist his smile.

Celeste hated to disturb him. He looked so childlike, concentrating on his notebook with his tongue sweeping back and forth across his lips. At twelve, he was still more child than man. But soon the age of innocence would end, and the time would come for him to take his place in the world. Although he lived a sheltered life here in the compound, Celeste had prepared him well. Her handpicked family of mentors and guardians provided all of the boy's physical, educational and emotional needs. Blessed with a photographic memory and genius-level intelligence, Joey was already far better educated than the average college graduate.

He looked up and smiled, and her heart skipped a beat as she smiled back.

"Is it time for bed?" he asked.

She nodded. Although Joey was privately tutored, they kept a rigid schedule, rising early to study eight hours a day, six days a week. He spent long hours learning medicine, philosophy, religion and politics. Greatness must be earned, and Joey was destined for unimaginable greatness.

Already in his pajamas, he walked across the room and climbed into bed. He patted the mattress and Celeste joined him for their nightly ritual of bedtime stories and songs before sleep.

Joey smiled. "I made up a song today," he said. "Would you like to hear it?"

Celeste ran her fingers through his fine, flaxen hair. "Yes," she whispered. "Sing me a dream, angel mine."

Joey began singing, his voice crystal clear in the quiet room. Celeste listened to the song, her spirit lifting to the heavens. She wasn't surprised that this too was a skill he had mastered.

Suddenly his voice faltered. Just as quickly he recovered and finished singing the final verse.

*...a presence sweet invades my soul  
and makes what once was severed whole  
blaze marks the trail of fate begun  
with pages turning one by one...*

He frowned.

"What is it, baby?"

"Nothing, Mom. It's just...well, for a minute it sounded wrong to me. But that's silly. I wrote it myself. How could it be wrong?"

"Of course there's nothing wrong about it. It's perfect. A perfectly beautiful song." She brushed a wayward lock of hair from his forehead. "It's sleepy night-night time."

Joey settled on his pillow and Celeste tucked the blankets under his chin. She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly. "Babynight, angel."

"Babynight, Mom," he replied, closing eyes grown heavy with sleep.

Celeste sat by the bed watching over him, guarding him as she had from the moment of conception. He'd been her private secret at first. She thought of the months spent hiding her pregnancy from everyone. Not that anyone cared. Her parents were dead, her brother off in another world somewhere with that glazed look in his eyes. He didn't notice her — most of the time. But she wouldn't think about that. It didn't matter.

All that mattered was this miracle, her gift to the future. She'd known from the first moment of quickening that this child she carried inside her had a destiny to fulfill. After all, his was a virgin birth. Yes, as impossible as it seemed, she'd been a virgin of only sixteen when Joey had been given to her.

She frowned for a moment then forced her mind away from dangerous, quicksand thoughts. A *virgin*, she reminded herself forcefully. A virgin who carried within her a gift to the world. The new Messiah.

Celeste stayed by her son's side until his breathing deepened and she was sure he was asleep. Only then did she leave his side, closing the door soundlessly behind her.

A woman in neophyte robes sat outside Joey's door. She bowed her head when Celeste walked by and uttered a reverent, "Mother Moon." Celeste nodded and continued walking. Joey was never alone. Someone was always watching over him, keeping him safe, guarding their future.

Whenever she faltered she reminded herself that it was all for Joey. There would be dark days ahead, but it would all be worth it in the end. There was no sacrifice she wouldn't make to ensure that her son fulfilled his destiny.

She stepped outside and breathed in the crisp mountain air, taking it deep into her lungs. Presiding over the field of stars, a crescent moon reclined in the sky. As children, she and her brother Algernon had called that lunar sliver a cradle moon. She'd loved it

then too. Her fingers found the silver pendant hanging from her neck, the twin image of the cradle moon in the sky above.

"Celeste?"

She turned and met the reptilian stare of her assistant, Oswald Gaderian. Despite his long lanky frame, he moved with a stealth that made his robes seem to float around him. If possible, his gaze seemed even colder in the moonlight. Cold, hard and unflinching. Gaderian's watchful eyes missed nothing. She trusted him with her life.

She had to.

His lips curled slightly into a smile made more chilling by its rare appearance. "The boy is all tucked in?" he asked, taking her hand and folding it into the crook of his elbow.

"The boy has a name," she replied. It irked her when he refused to show the proper respect Joey deserved. She swallowed her annoyance, blaming it on nerves. All of their plans were finally coming to fruition. Although they'd covered every contingency, something could still go wrong. But that was no reason to take it out on the one person she could trust. If not for Gaderian, she might never have come this far.

They walked together in silence along a twisted cobblestone path lit only by moonlight. "It's so peaceful here, isn't it?" she said. The Community—she refused to use the word commune, which had grown tainted over the years—was made up of twenty-three communal living quarters secluded deep in the mountains. In addition to living quarters, there was a central courtyard surrounded by classrooms, workshops, meeting rooms and prayer centers for the congregation.

Oswald nodded and they continued walking side by side under the watchful moon. After a few more steps he cleared his throat. "Everything is in place."

"Good. And the new tapes?"

"They're all ready. I finished them tonight." He stopped and took her hand, turning her to face him. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, drawing strength from his touch, silently acknowledging the risk involved. "I'm very sure."

He squeezed her hand before releasing it. "Then I'll do everything I can to ensure the plan is successful."

She reached up and ran the back of her fingers down his face. "I know I can count on you," she said, then turned and walked back the way she'd come.

He lit a cigarette and watched her until she was safely inside. He rolled the silver lighter in his palm like a magician performing a card trick, watching the moon's glow wash over the logo engraved on its polished surface.

\* \* \* \* \*



Miles away, under the very same stars, Algernon Pierce sat hunched over his desk, eyes glazed and unfocused as if recovering from a hypnotic trance. His hands trembled at the keyboard. It was happening all over again. Sometime over the last few hours, he'd finished the manuscript. He stared at the computer screen, studying words he couldn't remember typing, staring at them until his eyes watered and he had to blink and look away.

He hadn't simply written the finale, he'd lived it. It was a part of him now, and the words on the screen taunted him. He checked his hands. They were pale and clean, at least on the surface. But guilt kept him wiping obsessively, his clammy palms rustling over the paisley silk of his dressing gown, trying to clear any trace of blood from his hands. Blood on his hands, blame in his heart. Again.

Just like the last time.

He ran gnarled fingers through his hair, letting his mind wander back in time. *When had everything gone wrong?* He'd worked hard and it had finally paid off with success. At the peak of his popularity, he'd entertained some of the most powerful, brilliant minds in literary circles, rubbed elbows with Hollywood stars and traveled the world, enchanting fans and critics alike. And then everything had changed and his world had become a nightmare, with television crews circling him like hungry sharks, reporters camping outside his apartment day and night. His friends and fans had turned on him, and everywhere he went, people watched him with suspicious eyes. That's what finally sent him into seclusion, because he couldn't meet those questioning stares. He was too busy struggling with his own guilt.

The guilt came later, though. At first he'd treated it more as an annoyance than a concern. "Don't these reporters have anything better to do?" he'd asked his editor. Mark Sanders was the one who'd broken the news about the series of copycat murders that echoed his book, scene for scene, word for word. The papers had even dubbed the killer "The Gateway Strangler."

"It'll die down," his editor had assured him. "It's just some kook looking for publicity."

"Yeah, well why did he have to pick my book as his primer?"

Mark had assured him there was nothing to worry about. But Mark had been wrong. Instead of dying down, the episodes of bloodshed had escalated. Soon the similarities became more than could be explained as just coincidence or an isolated incident, and even serious newspapers and magazines began to question his connection. They ran articles pointing out each instance where life imitated art. He could no longer show his face in public. He tried to convince himself it wasn't his fault. As hard as he tried to grasp that tenuous thread of innocence, something inside him denied it, and the guilt and fear haunted him until finally he'd given up the one thing he loved most.

He couldn't write. Not a word. Headaches pounded him into submission during the day and nightmares kept him awake at night.

It had been the relaxation tapes his sister Celeste sent each week that had finally loosened the nightmare's grip and helped him break through the dark, cold years when writer's block held him in its possessive clutch. The tapes had given him some measure of peace, allowing him to sleep while keeping the headaches at bay.

Then one morning he'd awakened with an idea so compelling he couldn't resist it. He'd outlined the series from beginning to end, writing for hours without eating or sleeping, letting the story pour out as if it had a mind of its own. That spark of inspiration had turned into *The Play*, and it was his best work yet—classic Pierce prose. His style. The voice that had made him the premier horror writer of this generation. But now...

He hit the print button then saved his manuscript to a backup disk. It was done. He dialed his editor to tell him the final book was on its way. His eyes burned and his shoulders slumped. He felt limp and drained and his robe hung around him like a shroud, as if he'd shrunk over the last few hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

One hundred and forty-six miles away in a corner office in Manhattan, Mark Sanders, Senior Editor of Red Tag Publishing, took the call himself.

He let out a sigh of relief when Pierce told him the fourth and final book of the series was finished. He'd had concerns about this deal from the beginning. Pierce wouldn't budge on his demand that each book be released on a strict three-month schedule beginning with January of this year. Mark would have felt more comfortable with all four manuscripts completed and on his desk before signing the contract, but they might have lost the deal if he'd insisted. Pierce was a big enough author to sell on proposal to any publishing house in New York, despite industry-wide rumors that he'd grown unstable over the years. Algernon Pierce coming out of seclusion with the penultimate apocalyptic novel was too sweet a deal to resist. And once committed, Mark fed a full-grown ulcer worrying that Pierce wouldn't fulfill the terms of his contract.

So far his gamble had paid off. *Visions and Voices* had rocketed up the *New York Times* bestseller list within days of its release. *Questions and Quests* would go on sale in a couple weeks, and the pre-orders alone had it climbing the bestseller lists already. *Death and Destruction* was in galleys, and he had only the final book in the series, *The Coming*, to worry about now. Then he could relax and hand Pierce over to someone else.

But something was still bothering him. He balanced the phone between his shoulder and ear, drumming his fingertips on the only four inches of desk space not covered in paperwork. He had a sixth sense where his authors were concerned and something in Pierce's voice troubled him.

"Why don't I send a courier out to pick it up," he suggested.

Pierce's voice sounded as if all of the volume had been wrung out. "No. I'm going to bed while it prints out. Then I'm heading out to my sister's place in the mountains. I need a rest."

"Sure," Mark said. "Just leave me a number where I can reach you."

"I don't want to be reached. I need to get away. The manuscript will be in the mail in the morning." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Just leave me alone. Tell everyone to leave me alone."

"Everyone?" Mark didn't like the sound of that. "Anyone in particular I should watch out for?"

"Oh, you'll recognize them when you see them." Something that could have been either a cough or a chuckle followed. The sound reminded Mark of dry, dead leaves crushed beneath furtive footsteps.

"But what if..."

Mark's voice trailed off as he realized Algernon had already hung up. His initial doubt blossomed into full-blown paranoid panic. He knew he wouldn't relax until that manuscript was in his hands.

## Chapter Eleven

Blaize shouldered the door open and crashed into Gate's office. Too late, she remembered what had happened the last time she'd barged into someone's office unannounced. Although it felt like a lifetime ago, the phrase "sow's ear" still resonated through her like a childhood taunt.

She tried to stop herself and tripped, wobbled, then caught her balance just in time to save herself from sprawling face-first on the floor. Pierce's book fell from her hands, fluttering and landing upside down like a wounded bird.

Gate looked up. "Walk much?"

"Give me a break," Blaize said. She stooped over to pick up the book, then straightened and walked over to his desk. "I haven't slept all night."

Gate noted the book cover and raised an eyebrow. "That good, huh?"

She tossed the book onto his desk and slumped into a chair. "It's not the book. I'm worried about Joyce."

"Joyce?" He sat up straight, all traces of teasing gone from his voice. "What's wrong with Joyce?"

"She's missing. She didn't come home all night." Blaize studied Gate, seeing genuine concern in his eyes. "You know that's not like her," she said.

"How long has she been gone?"

"Not gone," she argued. "She didn't step out for a quart of milk. She's *missing*."

Gate broke in, interrupting her. "Let's not jump to conclusions here. Joyce is a big girl and doesn't have to report to anyone if she needs a night out."

"I know, but the cat's dish was empty and there was food out on the table. She wouldn't just leave like that. Besides," she said, handing him the slip of paper she'd taken from Joyce's house. "I found this on her coffee table. It came out of a fortune cookie."

Gate looked at the paper and gave a low whistle. "Just like the note you found in the paper."

Blaize nodded. "Did you talk to Pierce?"

"Yeah. He's nuts." Gate snorted then held up his hand, stopping Blaize before she could comment. "That doesn't mean I think he has anything to do with these notes. He's too busy with his own paranoid delusions to set up anything this elaborate." Gate shook his head. "No. Pierce didn't have anything to do with this."

"You're wrong and I can prove it." She flipped the book open, swiveled it around to face him and stabbed her finger into the open pages. "It's all here in his book."

"What is?"

"Everything. Right from my accident to Joyce's disappearance. Here, I'll show you."

Gate stopped her and picked up the phone. "Wait a second," he said, punching in a three-digit extension. Blaize listened to his end of the conversation. "Did Joyce come in today?" he asked, a frown creasing his forehead. "No? Did she call?" He hung up the phone and turned to Blaize. "Nothing."

"What do you think happened to her?"

"We don't know that anything happened to her, yet."

Blaize shivered. *Yet*. The word hovered in the air, sounding more ominous than she wanted to admit.

"If you're so sure Joyce is missing, why didn't you call the police?" Gate asked.

Blaize shook her head. "This isn't a police matter. Joyce's first instincts were right. This has to do with Algernon Pierce."

"I don't know how." Gate cleared his throat. "I've done some checking," he said. "I called the publishers. There are no publicity gimmicks or marketing promotions having to do with Pierce's book. No print ads, no radio spots, no giveaways. Nothing." He shrugged and gave her a distracted grin. "This is Algernon Pierce we're talking about. They don't need gimmicks to promote him. Pierce could sell his grocery list on his name alone."

"What about this?" she asked, reaching for the note she'd found beside the fortune cookie.

He didn't have an answer, which only confirmed her fears. She couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to Joyce, but at least she didn't have to shoulder the fear alone. She could see the worry on Gate's face. Maybe it was his concern for Joyce that finally convinced him to listen to her.

He pulled his chair around the desk beside hers and angled the book between them. "Okay, show me what you've got here."

Blaize let out a sigh of relief. Either he was going to listen now or he was only humoring her. It didn't matter which. She knew what she had to tell him would sound irrational. Maybe she *was* going crazy. That made more sense than what she was about to tell him.

She flipped through the book, finding the passages she'd marked, pointing out eerie similarities to her own life. Taken separately they seemed inconsequential, but piled one atop the other like this pointed to a pattern that coincidence alone couldn't explain.

"Look at this," she said, flipping frantically through the book and running her finger down the page. "Here. This character's name is Fyrenza."

Gate gave her a blank look.

"Don't you see?" she asked. "They call her Fyre."

Still no reaction.

"Fyre. *Blaize*. Get it?" Blaize flipped further. "Never mind. Look at this. Fyre has a car accident after a fight with her fiancé. Just like I did. Every detail, right down to the logo on the truck is right here in this book." She jabbed her finger at the page. "This dog. This black dog. I *saw* that dog. Even the name on the truck. Gateway. And doesn't that seem a little coincidental? Gateway...Gate Wayne."

Gate straightened. "Oh, so I'm in the book too?"

"I don't know. It all seems to tie together somehow. And look at the date on this chapter heading. It's the exact same date as my accident."

More pages fluttered. "She killed him. Oh God." Blaize felt a blade of tension crease her forehead and reached up to massage the tender spot between her eyebrows. She clenched and unclenched her fists, not wanting to admit what that passage meant. If the book mirrored her life, then maybe she really had killed Richard. Her shoulders sagged and the rest came out in a strangled whisper. "She set the curtains on fire with a cigarette lighter."

Gate reached out and took her hand. "Calm down. Are you saying Pierce somehow copied your life in his book?"

Blaize shook her head, knowing how crazy it sounded. "No. This book came out two days *before* my accident. He couldn't have known."

"Then what are you saying? Besides all of it being a horrible coincidence —"

"Not a coincidence," Blaize interrupted. "That's what I thought at first too. But there's more." She turned more pages. "Spyder Raines is in here."

"The rock star?" Gate asked.

Blaize nodded her head. "Yes. Although in the book, the character's name is Scorpion. But it's Spyder just the same. I met him the other night. I knew there was something...some connection. It was as if we were meant to meet. I can't explain it. But he's involved too."

She could hear her voice rising and was afraid Gate would think she was becoming hysterical, but she couldn't stop herself. She had to convince him somehow. "We're all a part of this book. Even Joyce's disappearance is foreshadowed here. Everything that's happened to me, from the time of my accident right up to getting the invitation to The Play. Don't you see? My life is being orchestrated by Algernon Pierce. Everything he writes about happens to me and the people around me."

Gate's eyes narrowed, his face pinched into a frown. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"I do. I really do. And you have to believe me too, because it's only going to get worse."

Blaize stood up and paced around the office, trying to make sense of her thoughts. "At first I was relieved. If someone else was manipulating the events in my life, that meant I wasn't a murderer. It wasn't my fault. See? I didn't kill Richard. *She* did!"

"The character in Pierce's book," Gate said quietly.

*Too quietly*, Blaize thought. What was he thinking? “No! I mean, yes. I don’t know.” She shook her head, realizing how ridiculous it sounded. “Somehow my life is following a script Pierce is writing. I don’t know how or why. I just know I need to get control of my life back before it gets any worse. This is only the first book of four. What’s going to happen next? We’re dealing with a *horror* writer here. Whatever happens will be bad. Real bad. We have to stop him. We have to make him stop writing about us.”

“Calm down,” Gate said. “You’ve been under a lot of stress lately.”

“It’s not stress,” she argued. “Please, you have to believe me. Have you read the book?”

“Yes, but —”

“Then just promise me you’ll read it again before dismissing the idea, okay? Read it and then decide if I’m crazy or not. I need your help. I have to find Joyce. I have to get my life back.”

She turned her back and started to walk away, mumbling under her breath, “With or without your help.”

Her footsteps could be heard moving along the corridor, then clicking down the marble steps. Gate frowned. Blaize’s conspiracy theory was ridiculous. *Or was it?* He shook his head. As much as he would have liked to brush the whole thing off with some rational explanation, it all sounded familiar. He rubbed his jaw, muttering out loud. “Too familiar.”

It sounded just like the rumors that had gotten blown out of proportion all those years ago and sent Pierce into seclusion in the first place. He hadn’t believed it then and he didn’t believe it now. There had to be some other explanation.

Whether there was or not, he knew it would make one hell of an opening hook for his article. He pursed his lips then came to a decision. “I think it’s time to have another talk with my friend Algernon Pierce,” he muttered, grabbing his jacket and heading out of the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize sat in her car, drumming her fingertips on the steering wheel. She slid the keys in the ignition but didn’t start the engine. Where would she go, anyway? She sat, feeling safe and secure in the small, enclosed space. Even with the windows open, she felt cut off from the world going by. No one seemed to notice her or care. She could stay here forever and not have to make a decision.

She wasn’t sure whether Gate really believed her or not. Who else could she talk to? Joyce was gone. Going to the police was out of the question. What would she say? “Hello, my name is Blaize Donovan and I thought I murdered my lover after he cheated on me, only it turns out it wasn’t me who killed him but a character from a novel.” She might just as well grab the keys to the cell and lock herself up.

*Spyder.*

Blaize heard the voice but tried to ignore it, focusing instead on the building she'd just left and trying to decide which office belonged to Gate. It was an old, brick building with architectural details that included scowling cement gargoyles hunched beneath pitched eaves. Something about the gargoyles bothered her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She tried to concentrate, but phantom voices kept intruding.

*Spyder.*

Suddenly the air inside the car felt thick and claustrophobic. She couldn't breathe. The voices became more insistent, crowding her out.

*Spyder, Spyder, Spyder...*

"Shut up!" she hissed, covering her ears and rocking forward and back in the seat. But the voices wouldn't be silenced. They were trapped inside her head, and now she knew whose voice it was. It was Algernon Pierce prodding her, pushing her, sending her places she wouldn't have gone on her own. She lowered her face into her hands and sobbed. "Leave me alone. Just leave me alone."

A hand on her shoulder startled her. She swiped the tears from her cheeks and stared into Gate's concerned face.

"Blaize," he said, leaning into the car. "Let me take you home."

"No, I'm all right."

"You're not. You're exhausted and your nerves are shot. Please, let me take you home."

Home. She slumped back in the seat. The thought of having someone take care of her was seductive. Someone who would take her home, hold her, see that she got some rest. Someone to keep her safe and protected.

With sudden clarity she saw herself in Gate's arms as he carried her to bed, undressed her slowly and gently, and tucked the blankets around her. She imagined him slipping into bed beside her, warm and naked and hard, his body stretched out, skin against skin. She saw his eyes darken with desire, felt his weight settling across her body, heard him whisper, "This will take your mind off Algernon Pierce."

"No!" she screamed, pulling away. Where had that image come from? She didn't feel that way about Gate. Even if she did, she would never betray Joyce, knowing how her friend felt about him. It was Pierce getting into her head again, trying to control her thoughts and actions.

Gate jerked, pulling back from the open window as if she was a caged tiger and he'd gotten too close to the bars.

"This is just what Pierce wants," she said, muttering more to herself than him. "This is what we're supposed to do. Well, I won't. From now on I decide what I'm going to do. It's my choice."



She twisted the key in the ignition, making the engine grind in her haste to escape. With a desperate sob she shifted into drive, jammed her foot on the gas pedal and peeled away, leaving Gate shaking his head on the sidewalk behind her.

## Chapter Twelve

There was really only one place she could go. One place she needed to be. It didn't matter how she got there or who sent her. Blaize had known from the beginning that this was where she'd end up—at Spyder's doorstep.

She wiped tears from her eyes as she drove. If her suspicions were right, Pierce intended to shove her into Gate's arms. But it wouldn't work. He couldn't control her emotions or manipulate her feelings. And those feelings drew her to Spyder, regardless of what Pierce wrote.

There was no sign of Pops as she pulled into the driveway and drove past the farmhouse to Spyder's door. She sat in the car for a moment, feeling as shy and awkward as a teenager. Her throat was dry, her palms clammy. Her heart hammered triple time in her chest. She almost changed her mind. Almost turned away. Then she took a deep breath and left the safety of the car, taking her first conscious step toward the future.

He opened the door before she could knock. It was as if he'd known she was coming. As if he'd sensed her standing there on the other side of the door. They stared at each other for a moment, neither speaking. The only sound was the soft in and out rush of their combined breathing.

The voices were gone now, leaving room for the babble of her confused thoughts. She was aware of him in a way she'd never been before, conscious of the space he took up in the world, the air they shared. She realized she'd been holding her breath and released it with a sigh.

"Please," she murmured. "Please don't send me away again."

He leaned against the door, holding her gaze. There was a challenge in his eyes. Without saying a word, he turned his body, making room for her to step past. She walked through the doorway, brushing against him. Had he purposely angled his hips that way, making it impossible for her to walk by without touching him?

*Cocky bastard*, she thought. *I'll show him.*

She squeezed past him, rolling her hips and giving him exactly what he wanted, brushing against him with the barest whisper of a touch. She heard a soft chuckle as he turned and closed the door behind them.

Cocky, *arrogant* bastard, she amended. But a smile escaped and her pulse pounded in places it had no right to pound. When he closed the door, she felt as if the two of them were cut off forever from the rest of the world. It wasn't a bad feeling.

She looked around, aware of him standing behind her, waiting for an explanation. She could see stairs directly ahead that led to a loft area, and knew without asking that

he slept up there. A shiver ran along her spine and she forced her attention away from the loft, looking around. From outside, the place looked like an old barn, but inside it was open and airy, with high ceilings and warm paneling. Keyboards and guitars leaned against black leather furniture, and amplifiers served as end tables. She glanced up at the loft again and blushed, then turned to him when he cleared his throat.

"I don't serve lemonade here, if that's what you're looking for," he said.

"I'm not here for lemonade." She gave him a haughty scowl, but the look, which thoroughly intimidated rowdy schoolboys, had no effect on him.

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow. "Then just what *are* you here for?" He inched closer, filling her vision with imposing masculinity. She stood her ground, refusing to be intimidated. But damn, he wasn't making it easy.

"I need to talk to you about something." She waited for him to offer her a chair, but he didn't budge. "It's a long story," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "Schoolteacher, songwriter and now storyteller. There's just no end to your talents, is there?"

The old Blaize would have risen to the bait, giving back as good as she got. But the old Blaize had been lost somewhere, and the new Blaize was feeling too overwhelmed to muster up any sass. Her shoulders slumped and her eyes flickered around the room, as if trying to find a place to start.

Finally, without any planning or preparation, the words tumbled out. "Someone has stolen my life." She rushed forward before he could decide she was crazy after all and throw her out. "Silly, huh? It wasn't all that great a life. Pretty ordinary by most standards and probably painfully dull by yours." She looked at him imploringly, begging him to understand. "But it was mine." She thumped her fist against her chest twice for emphasis. "Mine. Good or bad, better or worse, *I* was in control. And now..." Her shoulders slumped even further and her body sagged. "Now, I'm not."

That's what finally got him. He knew what it felt like to be out of control. He could empathize totally. But that wasn't the only reason he didn't send her away. There were the dreams.

Last night he'd dreamed of her again. But this time when his hands had closed around her pale, delicate neck, a glimmer of awareness had broken through. He'd struggled, the lucid part of his consciousness fighting the unconscious, both dreamer and onlooker. He'd finally broken free, tearing himself away from her and overcoming the murderous urges that ruled his sleeping mind.

And he'd done it. He'd broken the pattern, waking in a cold sweat. In a haze he'd reached for his old friend, Mr. Vodka, then stopped himself. He didn't rely on alcohol or drugs anymore, he reminded himself. But the urge had been so strong, so intense. At that moment he would have given his soul for a drink. And that would have been the end of him, because something was coming. Something big. He felt it. And he knew he wouldn't be able to fight if his mind was dulled by alcohol or drugs.

Blaize was the key, and he couldn't avoid her if he wanted to find out what he needed to fight, and discover why she was haunting his nights. The very least he could do was hear her out.

But not here. He knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything she said in the intimacy of his living room. Not after all those dreams and the way his body responded to her nearness. He couldn't trust himself alone with her. Maybe he couldn't trust himself in her presence outside either, but it was the lesser of two evils.

"Come on," he said, gripping her elbow and leading her toward the door. "Let's go for a walk. I'll show you the pond."

He had a feeling that whatever she had to say would be easier to take in full sunlight. She trembled and he was surprised by a rush of tenderness. He took her hand, feeling it flutter like a trapped dove in his own. He couldn't remember the last time he'd held someone's hand. Fifth grade, maybe?

But she didn't pull away and he held tight, leading her outside and across the meadow. Her eyes widened when she saw the man-made pond. Wild ducks glided across the glassy surface, leaving V-shaped ripples in their wake.

"A pond?" she asked. "It looks more like a small lake."

He nodded. This was his favorite spot in the whole world. "See that tree over there?" he asked, pointing to an ancient weeping willow. "That's 'Old Willer'. When I was a boy I'd come and sit here for hours whenever I wanted to be alone. Sometimes just to think, or play my guitar and dream about becoming a famous musician someday."

He snorted. "Some dream that turned out to be."

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "You're a wonderful musician."

He could feel her beginning to relax, and helped her sit under the tree. She didn't complain or fuss about the dirt, but sat down and looked over the pond with her legs tucked beneath her. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all. He sat beside her and talked softly, giving her time to collect her thoughts.

"Pops keeps the pond stocked with rainbow trout. If you want we can take the boat out and go fishing."

She giggled—a girlishly carefree sound that brought a grin to his face—then patted his knee. "Maybe some other time."

"Yeah." He cupped his hands behind his head and leaned back against the tree, remembering all the great times he'd had growing up here. "In the winter the pond freezes over," he told her. "We'd ice-skate and go sledding down the back hill. Sometimes we'd have bonfires and stay outside playing until our fingers and toes tingled with the cold and our mittens were stiff with icy little clumps of snow."

When she leaned under his arm and rested her head against his shoulder, it felt right and natural. He draped one arm around her and told her stories about growing up, surprised at the memories he'd tucked away for so long. It was like getting in touch

with a part of himself he'd forgotten long ago. He realized that coming home had been the smartest thing he could have done. Maybe it wasn't too late for him, after all.

After a while they both fell silent, lost in their thoughts, but it was a relaxed quiet that joined rather than separated them. When Blaize broke the silence, Spyder realized that the note of desperation had left her voice. But that didn't make the story she told any less fantastic.

"I guess it all started with the invitation in the newspaper," she began then shook her head. "No, it all started with Richard."

He listened, spellbound, as she related a series of events that led her, eventually, to his doorstep. She told him about her vision correcting the words to his song, a song she'd never heard before, and brought him right up through her friend Joyce's disappearance and the note she'd found at her house. She told the story quickly, with little embellishment, as if afraid he'd lose patience and stop her before she was done.

When she finished, he didn't say a word. It was a lot to digest, but who was he to judge? There were troubling parallels here, although he still didn't know how his dreams related to the events she'd recounted.

"Let's go back to my place," he said, taking her hand and pulling her to her feet. "There's something I want to show you."

Her hand no longer trembled, but he held it just the same. He gave it a reassuring squeeze and she squeezed back. Blaize hadn't realized how much she'd needed him to believe her. He hadn't said he did, but he hadn't called her crazy, either.

She knew she hadn't imagined the comfortable bond she'd felt forming between them. It was the kind of closeness that came from years of familiarity, not just hours. If she'd been inclined to believe in such things, she'd swear they'd spent other lifetimes together and were now simply picking up where they'd left off.

But a part of her worried that this bond she felt had a more sinister origin. Perhaps it was only one more illusion conceived by the raving mind of Algernon Pierce. Maybe even here, in Spyder's home, she was simply Pierce's puppet—following a path he'd already outlined for her.

At the doorway, Spyder released her hand and strode across the room. She followed him into a small kitchen area where he bent over a table, pushing papers and cups aside until he finally found what he was looking for. "Here," he said, then turned to her with a troubled frown and placed a slip of paper in her hands.

When their fingers touched, the air pulsed between them. She knew without a doubt that, right or wrong, she'd make love with Spyder Raines before the night was over. She saw the same realization in his eyes and looked away.

Then she glanced at the note he'd placed in her hand and everything changed. Her breath locked in her throat and her field of vision shrunk to focus on the slip of paper and the four neatly typed lines.

She knew immediately what the note would say, but read it anyway. Then read it again.

THOMAS JEFFERSON RAINES

\*YOU\* have been chosen

Welcome to "THE PLAY"

Act III: Death and Destruction

"Thomas Jefferson?" she asked, focusing on the trivial as if that would deny the obvious.

"My real name," he explained. "Not too many people know that. I found this note tucked into my motorcycle helmet the other night."

"Oh God, oh God," Blaize moaned. "See? We're all tied together."

"Wait just a second," he said. "I'm not buying into this little fantasy just yet. Anyone could have slipped that note into my helmet while I was away from my bike." She heard the implied accusation — *even you*.

Suddenly everything crashed down on her. Too little sleep, too much stress. She felt lightheaded. The room started to spin and Spyder caught her before she realized she was falling. He led her to a chair and she leaned forward, cradling her head and resting her arms on the table. He brought her a glass of water and knelt on one knee in front of her.

Her eyes widened and she smiled, feeling hysteria bubbling up inside her.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"You look like a man about to propose."

He leaned forward and ran his fingertips down the side of her face. His breath was warm where it caressed her cheek. She sighed.

"And you look like a woman about to say yes," he replied.

"Yes," she whispered, leaning closer, drawn to him, all traces of dizziness forgotten. Nothing else mattered. Maybe she was using him to avoid thinking about what this note meant. She didn't care. This was meant to be. As she moved closer, her elbow hit the glass, which crashed off the edge of the table. They both jumped, the spell broken.

While Spyder picked up broken glass from the floor, Blaize reached for a napkin and knocked over a prescription bottle, spilling little red pills across the table.

Suddenly everything she'd ever heard about the wild exploits of the infamous Spyder Raines came flooding back to her. What was she thinking? He wasn't anyone's idea of a knight in shining armor.

Her shoulders slumped and she looked at the pills with disgust. "Oh, you'll be a big help."

He followed her gaze. "I'm not..." he started to argue, then seemed to think twice about it. "Oh forget it," he said, sitting in a chair opposite her. He didn't meet her gaze, confirming her suspicions. "And what do you mean by 'help'?"

She shook her head. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this, and you won't be any help to me if you're getting high half the time."

"Who said I was gonna help you?" There was a defensive note to his voice now. She could hardly believe this was the same man who had charmed her with childhood memories. "Besides, I don't get high anymore," he said. "I don't need these. They're just here."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Just in case."

She folded her arms across her chest like a shield. "Well if you don't need them, then get rid of them. I need you clearheaded."

"You're assuming an awful lot here, little darlin'."

*Assuming?* Hadn't he listened to a word she'd said? "You know there's a connection, don't you? You feel it too."

He looked away. His back was stiff, his eyes guarded.

"There's more," she said.

"Go on." His voice was cold and emotionless.

Although he seemed angry, Blaize knew he was fighting. He didn't want to believe what she was saying. She'd gone through the same denial, but this piece of paper confirmed her suspicions that Spyder was just as much a part of this mystery as she was.

She told him about Algernon Pierce's book and the connections she'd found there. She explained how all the dates lined up—the accident, the murder, Spyder's song. "See?" she asked, as if she'd just explained long division to him.

"All I see is that you're freakin' nuts," he snarled, getting to his feet.

If he'd said that earlier, when she'd first recounted her story, she might have believed he meant it. But there was too much bravado behind the words, the way a child might shout, "You can't make me," and knowing all along you could and would.

"Wait here," she said, and before he could stop her she ran out to her car and got the book she'd brought along. When she came back in, he was once again sitting at the table. She pulled up a chair beside him and flipped through the book, finding the passage Pierce had written describing the fictional "Scorpion."

"That's supposed to be me?" he asked. "That pansy-ass singer? Come on, if this is the best you've got..."

"I can show you more," she insisted. "Page after page, scene after scene, enough proof to convince even you. But that still wouldn't be enough, would it?" She closed the book with a soft thud, reached out and touched his cheek, forcing him to face her. "Spyder. Have you been having dreams?"

He stopped, an indrawn breath caught in his throat. His eyes narrowed. "What kind of dreams?"

"Erotic dreams," she said. "Sensual, sexy and wild. Have you, Spyder? Have you dreamed of me?"

He pinned her with a burning look that was all the answer she needed. Breaking his gaze, he leaned across the table and scooped a handful of pills into his palm.

Then he turned his back on her and walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was no answer at Pierce's door. Gate wasn't surprised, but he was prepared to wait. The heavy brass doorknocker, a snarling lion with a full mane, reminded Gate of Pierce himself. He pounded it again and the lion seemed to growl back at him.

A window opened above him and Pierce leaned out. "Go away," he shouted. His voice was like boot heels crunching over gravel. "I told you to leave me alone."

Gate looked up, shielding his eyes. "I have to talk to you." Quickly, before Pierce could slam the window shut, he cupped his hand around his mouth and yelled, "It's happening all over again."

Pierce glared down at him, a long, cold, unflinching stare. With his wild, flowing hair and intense eyes, he seemed more dangerous than the snarling lion's head that guarded the front door. With a grunt, Pierce slammed the window closed and Gate waited.

A few moments later the door opened. Pierce filled the doorway, dressed in a black silk bathrobe that blended into the dark shadows of the room, making him look like a disembodied head floating out of the darkness. He tightened the sash of his robe and stared at Gate. "I was resting," he growled. "What do you want?"

Gate shoved his foot in the door, just in case Pierce changed his mind. "It's happening again," he said. He knew that if he wanted to get any information from Pierce, he'd have to use whatever means he could, even if it meant feeding into the author's paranoid delusions.

"I heard you the first time," Pierce growled. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Let me run the interview. Let me tell your side of the story this time."

Pierce threw back his head and roared with laughter. "I see. So, once again it's all about you and your precious article."

"No, listen," Gate insisted, stepping a little closer into the doorway. "It's about protecting yourself. When the events start to unravel, they won't be able to blame you. I can see to that."

Pierce leaned forward and barked into his face. "You can see nothing. Nothing!"

Gate took a step backward, resisting the urge to wipe the spray of spit from his cheek. "I—"

"You're a fool," Pierce screamed, advancing on him. "A silly young fool with big dreams. You think you can change the world, don't you? Well you're wrong. If you



knew what was out there you'd lock yourself away in your bedroom and never come out again."

"What..." Gate stammered. "What's out there?"

"Pain. That's what's out there." Pierce's hands flew in every direction, punctuating each word with jerky flourishes. "It may be spelled differently. Marriage. Career. Parenthood." He snorted. "But believe me, it's all the same word. Pain. Raw pain, dull pain, searing pain, chronic pain, beating-you-into-the-ground pain. Pain, pain, pain."

His voice rose on each word. His eyes seemed to glow with a reddish cast. A maniacal giggle escaped his lips. "Do I sound crazy to you? Perhaps I am. Or perhaps I've simply learned what you and your colleagues are too blind with aspiration to see—that nothing you do will make one iota of difference in this world. All you can do is add to the general miasma of pain."

As Pierce crowded him, Gate became aware of the room beyond. He smelled mustiness, age and decay. The air inside was stale, the shadows deeper, as if the house was in a rapidly advancing state of decomposition that mirrored Pierce's deteriorating mental condition. He stared into the yawning chasm of Pierce's mouth, once again reminded of the lion's maw, as the delirious babbling stream continued.

Pierce was on a roll, seemingly unaware of Gate's existence, speaking more to himself than anyone else. "For a long time I blamed myself for sending more pain out there into the world. I stopped doing what I loved most. Did it make a difference? I don't think so. Those people who would have deluded themselves into thinking they were characters from my book only turned around and imagined themselves in a different scenario. Perhaps they saw themselves as villains from a favorite movie, or maybe they heard voices in records played backwards. One way or another, they found a way to wreak havoc on society. They didn't need my words to inspire them."

Gate stopped retreating and held his ground. The glitter of madness was even more apparent in Pierce's eyes, and for the first time Gate began to feel afraid. His hopes of getting any answers from the author were shattered. The only answers to be found here simply raised more questions.

Pierce blinked and focused, as if finally remembering Gate was there. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?" he hissed. "I can see it in your eyes. That only proves how far you have to go to see the truth in what I say." His voice rose, seeming to bounce and echo back at him. "Don't you see what I've become? I am the creator. I am God!"

The darkness behind Pierce seemed to creep forward, enveloping them both in the open doorway. Gate thought he could see shadows separating from the darkness, swirling and coalescing. He took a step back.

Pierce straightened, becoming even more imposing, more threatening. "There will be no article," he said, his voice booming. His eyes narrowed, his gaze becoming more intense. "There will be no interview. I will neither explain nor justify my work. There will be no blame accepted and no forgiveness asked." He stepped back and began closing the door.

Gate reached out, slamming the flat of his palm against the swinging door. "Wait!"

"No," Pierce said, resignation thick in his voice. His body seemed to fold in on itself, shoulders slumping so slowly he looked as if he were melting into the darkness, becoming one with it. "Go home now. I need my rest."

A sudden, sharp pain stabbed into Gate's hand and he jerked it back. *Jesus Christ!* He tore his hand away from the door, convinced that the lion had come to life and bitten him. But that was crazy. He inspected his hand, surprised to find all his fingers intact. An incisor-shaped sliver of wood protruded from his palm, blood rising lazily around the entrance wound. Where the hell had that come from? Before he could recover, the door slammed shut in his face.

Gate stared at the door a moment, working the sliver from his hand. The lion seemed to be gloating now. "Screw you," Gate said, not sure whether he meant it for Pierce or the lion or both. He turned and walked back to his car, surprised to see that it was still light outside. It had felt dark in the doorway, as if he'd been standing at the mouth of a cave that sucked all the color and light from the world.

Outside the sun was shining, but inside there was only shadows of madness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder poured the rest of the pills into the toilet. That was all of them now. Every last one. One hundred tiny red pillows of pleasure, each with the ability to tune out the madness, if only for a little while. He pushed the knob again, flushing away the last few stragglers. He'd been meaning to do this for days. The look of disappointment in Blaize's eyes when she'd seen the pills on the table had been the final push he'd needed to let go once and for all.

It didn't make sense. Why should he care what she thought? He didn't even know her. There was a good chance she was certifiable. But for some reason he did care. He wanted to be the best man he could be for her. Fuck. Since when did it matter what a woman thought about him? And this one was trouble with a capital T.

He reached down and adjusted himself. He'd been hard since she'd walked in the door. But that didn't mean she wasn't freakin' nuts. Maybe she was a stalker who'd concocted this whole story just to get close to him.

But he knew he was grasping at straws. For one thing, she knew about the dreams. He hadn't told anyone about the dreams. When she'd asked if he'd dreamed of her, it had been like a fist to his gut. How could she know that? But she was right. He'd known since the moment he'd seen her that she was the one. She was the woman he'd been dreaming about.

What he couldn't figure out is why he'd even let her in. It hadn't been a conscious decision. One minute he was standing there blocking her path and the next she was walking past him, brushing her body intimately against him in that teasing, seductive

way that belied the cool schoolteacher image. Oh, she was a temptress all right. Maybe he should just give her what she wanted. Just like he always did in the dream.

His hands clenched and tightened. She didn't seem to understand the rest of it, though. If what she said was true, then he was destined to kill her, strangle the life from her in the throes of orgasm. If for no other reason than that alone, he had to prove her wrong. He had to help her get to the truth.

He knew she was there before she spoke. He felt her presence before she touched him. With a tenderness that made him moan, she wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned against his back, resting her head in the hollow between his shoulder blades.

"Thank you," she said, her voice a mere whisper. Then softer, "I need you." He knew it wasn't what it sounded like. Or was it?

He felt every curve of her pressed against his body, her wrists crossed over his belly, the soft in and out of her breath along the nape of his neck. He grew even harder, straining against the tight denim. He wanted to rock her, he wanted to fuck her, he wanted to hold her and never let her go. His whole body trembled with the need to possess her and become a part of her finally, after all this time, after all those many dreams.

Her hand snaked downward, stroking across the front of his jeans, whispering along strained denim. He moaned and rocked his hips forward against her palm, feeling a loosening in his belly, a trembling in his legs. He turned and pulled her tight against him, letting her feel how much he needed her.

She made a soft whimpering sound he found impossible to resist, and looked at him with the same longing he felt inside. "Blaize," he moaned, crushing her mouth with his. He lifted her and carried her up to the loft, holding her tight to his chest. He wasn't sure if he could hold off even that long. He'd never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her right this moment.

As he laid her across his bed, Spyder realized there was more to this attraction than just sex. Compared to the teeny-boppers, groupies and models, she was a breath of *normal*. He wanted her. He wanted to rock her each night and wake up with her each morning. He wanted her in ways that sex alone could never satisfy. But sex was as good a place as any to start.

They tore at each other's clothes and he reached for her, finding her warm and wet and ready for him. Without preamble or apology, he lowered himself and moved in a long, slow slide of possession into her, feeling her close around him. He needed her fast and deep and hard and her body responded with the same sense of urgency.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, meeting each thrust with her own, urging him beyond the limits of his self-control.

"Now," she cried out, and there was no more holding back. He thrust and drove deeply into her at the same moment she arched and bucked, gripping him in an explosive climax that turned the world inside out and made him feel as if everything

that came before this had simply been child's play. There was only her. He poured himself into her, over and over and over again, giving himself to her body and soul.

They rode the crest for an eternity then held each other tight, coming down in slow, cascading waves. When neither of them could come anymore, he rolled over, cradling her to his chest. He held her even tighter, afraid to let her go for fear she'd drift back into the dream world she'd appeared from.

She sighed and tucked her face beneath his chin and he was flooded with a feeling of tenderness unlike anything he'd ever known. With the basic primal need satisfied now, the only thing he wanted was to protect and cherish her, forever and always. In one broad stroke, he'd relinquished his heart as well as his body. At that moment he knew he'd willingly die for her.

## Chapter Thirteen

At the mountainside retreat of Mother Moon, Oswald Gaderian strode across the stage. He adjusted the microphone, set a glass of water on the podium and made sure everything was in place. When Mother Moon stepped up to the dais, he stood in the wings, alert to her every move, ready if she needed anything.

His gaze swept across the assembly, taking in a sea of upturned faces raised like flowers toward the sun. The chairs were arranged in a series of semicircles, with aisles fanning out from the stage like rays of sunlight. His gaze swept back along the congregation, rainbow-colored robes flowed like variegated waves, from his own ninth-level saffron to the pale lavender of the neophyte. Only young Joey and Mother Moon herself wore robes of pure, virginal white.

At Oswald's signal the lights dimmed and the music swelled. A dozen new recruits filed down the aisles, converging at the foot of the stage.

Behind Mother Moon, sunlight glimmered through the stained glass window, turning her hair to gold, glowing around her like an aura of flowing colors. She raised her hand, silencing the crowd. It was both a greeting and a benediction.

She smiled at the new recruits, gesturing them to take their seats. "Welcome, and blessings to you all. Today we celebrate your first step on the path of a new life." Her smile broadened, encompassing the rest of the audience, lighting every upturned face and feeding each hungry soul. Her voice rang clear and resonant through the hushed auditorium. "We stand on the brink of a New Age. Each one of you is a vital link, a warrior on the battle front of the New Order."

Oswald felt it happening. He always knew the moment the connection began. It started as a tingling beneath the soles of his feet, like a surge of low-voltage electricity humming along the floor. Then the hairs on his arm would lift and the air around him became heavier, dense with the combined weight of a thousand unified thoughts. He could almost, but not quite, see the psychic threads linking Celeste to each person in the room.

The pure power he felt being drawn to the stage always caught him by surprise. If it was this intense for him, he wondered what it felt like to Celeste, the focus of all that energy. It must have a force equivalent to a psychic sledgehammer. But she never faltered. If anything, it seemed to nourish her. Her stature expanded, the timbre of her voice increased. She fed on their energy, adding her own and sending it back to them in flowing waves, completing the psychic bond.

Oswald knew she always gave back more than she received, even though it took so much out of her. When she left the stage tonight she'd be drained. On rare occasions she'd let herself lean on him, and he'd practically have to carry her back to her room. At

those times she looked less like the leader she was on stage now, and more like the child she was when he'd first met her. Those were his favorite moments.

A small, nudging movement drew his attention. He curled his hand around Joey's and smiled down at the boy. Joey squeezed and smiled back. As always, Oswald was struck by the boy's beauty and charisma. Clear blue eyes that seemed both innocent and wise at the same time were framed by smoky lashes in a face that could have been painted by the master himself.

Joey was as beautiful and innocent now as he was the day Celeste had placed the swaddled babe into Oswald's arms with claims of a divine prophecy fulfilled. Her belief then had been as steadfast as it was to this day. Oswald knew then that the strength of her belief, coupled with his management skills, would be a rewarding and lucrative partnership. He'd been right.

At first it had been simply a business enterprise, but over the years he'd grown fond of Celeste. Together they'd orchestrated every aspect of Joey's life. The boy had been raised from infancy here in the compound, hand-fed his own system of beliefs. But for all his private education, Joey knew little of the real world outside the commune.

Oswald placed a hand on Joey's shoulder. Such frail young shoulders to carry the weight of the world. "Are you ready, son?"

Joey took a deep breath and nodded. The timing was perfect. Celeste turned and held out her hand. Oswald released his grip and Joey walked across the stage to a surge of applause, joining his mother at the podium.

Standing together on the stage, Oswald was struck again by how much the boy looked like his mother. Too much, perhaps – as if her genes alone had created this child. You could almost believe her claim that Joey's birth was the result of the second Immaculate Conception in the history of the world.

Unless you looked closer, deeper. Oswald had no proof, but he'd developed his own theories over the years. He was sure that Joey's genetic structure was indeed pure, distilled, multiplied – not by Immaculate Conception, but something more ominous.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He suspected there was nothing at all miraculous about Joey's conception. There were clues that only someone as close to Celeste as he might decipher. Oswald had looked deeply into Joey's eyes and seen the boy's father staring back. No wonder Celeste chose to believe an angel had given her this child. She'd either consciously or unconsciously blocked everything else out, choosing to believe in divine intervention rather than the more sinister truth – that her own brother Algernon was Joey's biological father.

Mother and child gazed out from the stage, bathed in adoration and combined in a singular cause.

"It's all coming together," Oswald murmured. This was what they'd planned for. It would be their crowning moment of glory.

Yet he couldn't help feeling sad. At the core of each beginning was an ending, and for some the end was already at hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder watched Blaize sleep. She looked so peaceful, her hand curled into a loose fist beneath her chin, her hair spread across his pillow in a silky tangle. Once their initial hunger had been satisfied, they'd made love again, tender and slow the second time. He wanted to touch her, but he knew if he did he'd want her again. And again. He'd never grow tired of wanting her.

At this moment he'd give anything to curl up beside her and sleep, cupping her within the warm, protective curve of his body. But he was afraid to sleep. Afraid to dream. Afraid the dream would become reality and he'd wake up to find her corpse growing cold beneath him, his shriveled penis locked in the death grip of her ice-cold womb.

As if feeling his thoughts, she stirred. "Shhh..." he whispered, brushing the hair back from her forehead. "Sleep, little love."

And she did—her breath soft and steady. He tucked the blankets around her and pulled a chair alongside the bed. Although he didn't trust himself to sleep, he didn't want to be too far away either. He wanted to be there if she called out in her sleep, ready to chase her nightmares away. He wanted to be the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes.

Something told him he'd just traded one addiction for another. But it didn't matter. Any other physical cravings paled in comparison, and this was one addiction he wouldn't fight.

Unable to resist the urge to touch her, he reached out. His hand moved down the side of her face, marveling at the softness of her skin. He traced the line of her jaw, his finger moving down until he reached the pulsing hollow of her throat. His breathing quickened and his heartbeat raced. His fingers spanned the curve of her neck. A delicate blue vein throbbed beneath the surface of her pale skin. He followed the trail with his fingertip, a dim part of his mind noting that he was hard again, harder than he'd ever been, though they'd already made love twice tonight.

He wanted her again. He wanted to pour himself into her and hear her cry out his name in the darkness. His fingers tightened. She squirmed and whimpered in her sleep, a frown creasing her forehead. He watched in horror as the pressure increased and his fingertips began to sink slowly into the softness of her skin.

With a strangled moan he tore himself away, his chair scraping across the wooden floor. It was another ten minutes before his breathing returned to normal. By then his erection was gone, and so was his conviction that he could keep Blaize Donovan safe from whatever demons chased her.

He had his own demons to fight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Algernon shot straight up in bed. His skin was clammy and his heart hammered in his chest. They'd almost caught him this time. They were getting closer.

He didn't need a psychiatrist to interpret the dream symbols. The stinging scorpion at his heels, dogging his every step, the gates that seemed to open onto safety but only led to more dead ends, the fires that sprung up, blocking his path. They were all there. All the characters from his novel—Scorpion, Gate, Fyre—pursuing him even in his dreams.

"What do you want from me?" he screamed. But there was no answer. His voice bounced off the bare walls and echoed back to him with taunting echoes. He had to get away. There was only one place where he knew he'd be safe. Maybe, just maybe, he could outrun them.

He threw a few essentials into a suitcase—enough clothes for a week or so, his toothbrush and razor. He moved around the house, taking only what he absolutely needed. In the bedroom he swept the relaxation tapes and headphones from his dresser into his suitcase. In his office, he ejected the disk with the finished draft of the final manuscript—his only copy—then switched the computer off. In the kitchen he grabbed an apple and put it in his pocket for the drive to his sister's place.

When he reached the door, he turned and looked back once more, suddenly sure that he'd never see his home again.



## Chapter Fourteen

Blaize yawned and stretched, coming awake slow and lazy. She heard the soft strumming of a guitar and knew where she was even before opening her eyes. Her body tingled and a spontaneous smile welled up from somewhere deep in her center. It would be real easy to get used to waking up to morning serenades, especially after long nights of wild, mind-numbing lovemaking.

Spyder looked up from his guitar, as if sensing she was awake. His fingers still moved casually back and forth along the strings.

"Hi," she said, rolling onto her side and propping herself up on her elbow.

He grinned. "Hi yourself."

"Don't stop," she said. She watched him play. He had wide, strong hands, with perfectly tapered fingers that caressed the strings with graceful, almost sensual strokes. She remembered those hands on her body, strumming her, stroking her, soothing her. She tore her gaze away, aware of a smoldering excitement building inside her.

These feelings were new and exciting. What had happened to her? Well, she knew *what* had happened, the question was how? Spyder made her feel things she'd never felt before. She alternated between amused and confused, furious and curious, frustrated and satisfied. He brought out a side of her she'd never known existed—a wanton, brazen, impulsive, devil-be-damned side. She liked that side of herself.

And here she was in his bed. Two people who, by all rights, shouldn't have anything in common, discovering they were a perfect match. *But why me?* she wondered. It didn't make any sense at all.

She pushed the thought away. It didn't matter. Right now, for the first time in longer than she could remember, she felt wonderful. Who would have guessed all she needed was a little sleep, a little rest, a little...mmmmm...maybe "little" didn't apply in this instance.

Spyder leaned his guitar against the wall. "That was an interesting smile," he said, unfolding his long limbs and sauntering across the room toward her. "Want to tell me what you were thinking?"

"Come a little bit closer and you'll find out firsthand," she said, sliding one bare arm from beneath the blanket he'd wrapped around her.

"You're insatiable," he drawled. "And I love that about you." He reached the edge of the bed and took her hand, pulling her to a sitting position.

She didn't stop the covers from sliding down to her waist. She felt completely at ease as his gaze swept downward. The look in his eyes made her feel sensual and beautiful and desirable—things she'd never in her wildest fantasies believed.

He gave a low whistle. "Mmmm-mmmm. You could tempt a saint, woman."

"That's a moot point," she replied. "Since there are no saints here."

"Moot," he repeated, tapping his chin. "You sound like a schoolteacher."

"I am a schoolteacher, remember?"

"That's right. Schoolteacher, songwriter and storyteller." His voice was low and husky, and his eyes twinkled as he teased her. "Am I going to have to start bringing a dictionary to bed with us?"

Us. The word sent a shiver rippling through her body. "A dictionary and a thesaurus," she shot back.

He cocked his head and gave her a wicked smile. "Darlin'," he said, "I don't think I'll need a dictionary to understand the words you use in bed with me."

She felt a flush of warmth rise to her cheeks as she remembered the sexy words he'd coaxed from her. Like her nakedness, the bawdy pillow talk had felt completely natural. Everything they'd said and done felt comfortable and right.

His voice dropped to a low, husky murmur. "Where did you come from?" he asked. "How did you find me?"

"Is that one of those Zen questions?" she asked. "Like, what is the meaning of life?"

The bed dipped when he sat on the edge beside her. "Maybe. Or maybe it's the question every man asks when he finds the woman who makes him feel complete."

Her cheeks warmed and she looked away to hide the emotion she felt. It sounded like the stuff of romance novels, but he was right. She knew without a doubt that he was her destiny. The sexual attraction they felt was simply frosting on the cake. In the short time they'd been together she'd felt the connection, the bonding of yin and yang into a complete whole.

But there was more than lust involved. There was the way he looked at her. He made her feel beautiful and desired. And when she saw herself through his eyes, she was no longer plain and unappealing. She could actually believe she was as beautiful as he said. She knew she was wanted. Not for her money. God knows Spyder didn't need her money. He had money to burn. And unlike Richard, there was no subterfuge. He couldn't hide the emotions he felt – whether it was disbelief or annoyance or lust. It was all there on his face. She knew Spyder could have any woman he wanted. But he'd chosen her.

*Or had he?* The thought wormed its way into her brain. Maybe it was all too pat. Hadn't she herself said they came from two different worlds? Maybe they were simply being manipulated, like everything else in her life right now. She pushed the thought away, not wanting anything to spoil the mood. If this was a fantasy, she didn't want it to end.

He tossed the sheet aside, uncovering her. She was completely at ease naked in front of him, something she'd never felt before. With Richard she'd always worn

something to bed and pulled the sheets up after they made love. But even in the full light of day, she was comfortable being naked under Spyder's adoring gaze.

"What's today?" she asked. She wouldn't have been surprised to discover a lifetime had passed since she'd entered this sanctuary.

His hand trailed between her breasts downward to her tummy. "Sunday."

"You didn't sleep at all last night?"

"I'm a vampire," he said, baring his teeth and lunging toward her neck with a mocking growl.

She giggled and fell back onto the bed, pulling him on top of her. The weight of his body was comforting. It made her feel anchored, as if she might float away if he weren't there to hold her down.

Their playfulness became tender, nibbling love bites turning to gentle kisses. He rolled over and pulled her onto his chest, cradling her head against his heart. She felt safe and protected in his arms.

If only she could just stay here and forget about everything else. But she couldn't. She had to get her life back, whatever the cost. It wasn't simply her own life now. She didn't know how, but she was convinced that Spyder was in danger too. And Joyce was still missing.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. "I can't stay."

"Why not?"

"I have to get to the bottom of this. I have to find my friend. I have to save us."

"But you don't know where to start." He held her tighter. "You have no clues, only suspicions."

He was right. She had no idea where to start or who she could count on.

"It doesn't matter. Joyce is in danger because of me. I have to do something, with or without your help."

He tipped her chin up. "I love that fire in your eyes when you set your mind to something," he drawled.

Fire? No one had ever accused her of that before. She'd always been so wishy-washy. If there was any fire inside her, she had Spyder to thank for it. She was no longer content to be a doormat and let life trample her. She'd learned from her experience with Richard and would never let another man walk all over her, not even one as sexy as Spyder with his incredibly skillful hands.

"Will you help me?" she asked. He didn't have to believe her to help, did he? *Say yes*, she pleaded silently. There had to be someone she could trust. Someone she could turn to. Someone who would listen without thinking she was crazy.

She held her breath and waited. She wouldn't ask again. She wouldn't beg.

The silence stretched, pulled and twisted like warm taffy between them. She couldn't look at his face, afraid of what she'd see there. Instead she focused on the center of his chest, hope draining from her on a long, soulful sigh.

He curled his finger beneath her chin and tipped her face until their eyes met. "I think it's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard in my life," he said, a half smile taking the sting out of his words. "And I don't know which one of us is crazier. But yes. Yes, I'll help you. Just tell me what to do because I'm totally clueless here."

She frowned and chewed her lower lip, her excitement tempered by the realization that she had no idea what to do now that he'd agreed to help.

"I've got to warn you," he said. "I'm not very good hero material."

She shrugged. "Who is?"

He pulled her to his chest and she could feel the strong, steady thrumming of his heartbeat. "Let's start with the song," he said. "Since that's what brought you to me in the first place."

"The song. Yes," she agreed.

He hummed the chorus, stopping to let her comment on each phrase. "Blaze marks the trail of fate begun..."

"Destiny," she said. "Could it be any clearer? You wrote the words yourself. You even named me in it."

"With pages turning one by one..."

"Pages," she mumbled. "Pages of a book. Algernon's book. We're on the right track."

"But you said those words were wrong. You said it should be pages *burning*, not turning."

Her brow furrowed. "I think that means we have to destroy the book."

"What good would that do?" he asked, running his hands up and down her back in a slow, soothing caress. "It's too late to change things now."

"No," she argued. "That's just it. This is only the first book of four."

He pinned her with a thoughtful gaze. "So, this is just the beginning."

"Act One," she nodded. "Act One of The Play. We all got an invitation. You did. I did. Joyce did." She shivered. "Welcome to The Play."

He held her tighter. "So we start with this Pierce guy...the author."

"Yes. He's a recluse, but Gate knows how to find him."

"Gate?"

"From the newspaper," she said. "I told you about him."

He stiffened. "Oh yeah, the pretty-boy reporter."

She pulled back and looked into Spyder's eyes, trying to decide whether his sarcasm masked a hint of jealousy. "I never said —"

He rolled over and sat up. "You didn't have to." He gave her bottom a gentle pat, then got up and walked across the room. When he came back he was holding the book she'd brought in last night. "Mind if I go through this myself?"

She shook her head and sat up, pulling the sheet around her. Suddenly she didn't feel so comfortable being naked, as if Pierce had slipped into the room with them and was crouched in a dark corner watching.

"When do the next three books come out?" Spyder asked, leaning back against the headboard and balancing the book open on his lap.

"I saw it somewhere." She leaned over, flipped to the back of the book and pointed. "Here are the scheduled release dates. *Book One – Visions and Voices* came out on the 1st of January."

"That was just before your accident, right?"

She nodded. "I thought you weren't listening."

"I said I didn't buy it, not that I wasn't listening."

"And now?"

"I'm still not convinced. But I said I'd help and I will."

That, she figured, was more than she could hope for. She ran her finger down the dates. "Okay. Here's the rest of the schedule. They come out every three months. *Book Two – Questions and Quests* comes out in April."

"April is only a couple weeks away. We can wait and see what's in that book."

"No," she said. "I can't wait that long. Joyce is in danger right now. And don't ask me why, but I have a feeling that things will only get worse when the next book comes out."

"Just out of curiosity," he asked, "what are the titles of the other two books?"

"*Book Three – Death and Destruction*, and *Book Four – The Coming*. Does that help?"

"Not at all. Unless..." His eyes held a mischievous twinkle.

"I don't think he means *that* kind of coming," she said.

"Don't rule it out. It's no more ridiculous than anything else we can come up with."

Blaize's shoulders slumped. Spyder was right. They had nothing at all to go on. And maybe he was right about waiting for the next book to be released, but Joyce might be in danger right now. There had to be something she could do. Something *they* could do.

"Spyder?" She looked up and caught his head nodding forward. He jerked at the sound of her voice.

"Hey," she said. "You really haven't slept at all, have you?"

"I caught a few winks here and there."

"How many is a few?"

"Enough. I'm a musician. I don't need a lot of sleep." The yawn he tried to hide made a mockery of his words.

Blaize climbed out of bed, bent over and kissed him while she pulled the blankets up around his chin. He tried to fight it, but she could see that he was exhausted. Maybe he was one of those guys who couldn't sleep with someone else around. She'd have to break him of that. In the meantime, she had things to do.

"You catch up on your sleep," she whispered. I have to run home and throw a few things together."

He sighed and sank into the pillow. "You'll be back, right?" He sounded so vulnerable. It clashed with the public image she had of him, but fit perfectly the man she'd come to know in private.

"I'll be back," she promised, fighting the urge to climb right back into bed with him.

By the time she was dressed, his breathing was deep and rhythmic. His eyes were open, but his eyelids were heavy and drooping. He looked like a little boy trying to stay awake on Christmas Eve.

That was the image she carried with her all the way back to her apartment. She wondered whether the sun was brighter, the flowers more vibrant, the sky bluer than it had ever been, or whether they just seemed that way. She caught herself saying his name out loud and smiling like a teenager with a last-minute date for the prom. She drove on autopilot, arriving home with no idea how she got there.

She parked the car and was halfway up the walk before she realized there was someone standing at her door. *Joyce?*

"Joyce!" she called out, starting to run. The woman turned and Blaize's heart sank. It wasn't Joyce.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, shifting a paper bag from one hand to the other. "Joyce is still missing?"

Blaize recognized the woman from the newspaper who'd tried to find the ad for them. It seemed like a hundred years ago. *Connie*, she suddenly remembered. Connie Ferguson.

Blaize nodded and slid her key in the lock, holding the door open for Connie, who followed her inside.

"I'm convinced her disappearance has something to do with this whole mystery," Blaize said.

"I think so too," Connie agreed. She cleared her throat and looked down at her feet.

Blaize blinked in surprise. "You do?" She could hardly believe it. Someone finally believed her."

"Yes. That's why I brought you this." Connie held out the bag she was carrying. "It's an advance reading copy of Pierce's next book in the series – *Questions and Quests*."

Blaize tore open the bag and stared at the book. It wasn't supposed to be available yet. "How...?"

Connie shrugged. "I know someone who reviews books. It wasn't that difficult to get an advance reading copy."

"This is just what I needed," Blaize said with mounting excitement. At least now she had a place to start. Blaize looked from the book to Connie. "What made you believe me?"

Connie turned toward the door. "I'm not sure how much I believe. I know that Joyce was worried about you and Gate. If Joyce was worried, well...she was a tough cookie sometimes, but she wasn't stupid."

Blaize felt a stab of loss hearing Joyce's name used in the past tense like that. Before Connie could leave, Blaize gave her an impulsive hug. "Thank you," she said.

"I just hope it helps."

Blaize closed the door and went inside, murmuring to herself, "So do I."

## Chapter Fifteen

Fire. Spyder said he could see it in her eyes and for the first time she felt it, deep in her belly. Maybe it had been there all along. Unnoticed. Unneeded. It was like the punch line to an old joke about a boy who hadn't spoken all his life. When he finally made a request and everyone asked him why he hadn't spoken before, he replied, "Up until now, everything's been fine."

Well, up until now everything had been fine as far as Blaize was concerned too. Then things had heated up. The fire was kindled with Richard's betrayal, ignited by his death, stoked by her guilt and flared with Joyce's disappearance into a roaring blaze. Blaze – after all this time, she was finally living up to her name.

The bathroom was clouded with steam from her shower and a pot of fresh coffee simmered on the burner. As anxious as she was to delve into the book Connie had brought over, Blaize wanted a clear mind. She didn't want to miss any vital clues. Now, refreshed by the shower and fortified with caffeine, she was ready to dig into the new book.

She set a fresh pad of lined paper on the table to the right of the closed book, an extra-fine ballpoint pen lay diagonally across the snow-white tablet. Tweety Bird smiled from the front of her ceramic coffee mug and two chocolate chip cookies stared back at her.

She was stalling. What if she was wrong? What if she couldn't find a single thing in this book to prove her theory? Worse yet, what if she was right? Who knew what escalating horrors might spring from the imagination of Algernon Pierce.

She knew that no one *really* believed her. Connie was only hedging her bets, and Gate and Spyder might both be simply humoring her. She needed proof. Real proof. Not just speculation.

With a deep sigh she pulled her chair up to the table. It scraped across the tile with a screech that set her teeth vibrating. The last thing she wanted to do was open this book. She'd much rather be snuggled in Spyder's bed instead of lifting the lid of her own private Pandora's box.

She turned the book over. On the back cover was the warning, "ADVANCE READING COPY – NOT FOR SALE."

That was as far as she got before something came crashing through the kitchen window. She jerked and spun as the blast, which sounded louder than it should have in the quiet room, was followed by a rolling thump and a shower of broken glass. Her heart pounded and a clammy sweat broke out on her forehead. Tires screeched outside. A horn blared. An invasion of sounds burst through the shattered window. A sliver of



broken glass, caught in the lacy web of the fluttering curtain, glittered and winked at her.

"Oh, God," she muttered, holding her palm tight to her rolling stomach.

Kids, she tried to tell herself. Just kids. But one look at the rock on the floor told her differently. It was round, smooth and flattened like a sugar cookie. A deep line cut into the slightly curved surface, carving a sharp-edged crescent moon into the face of the rock. Diamonds of shattered glass formed a background of stars, completing the surreal sculpture.

This wasn't an accident and it wasn't a warning. It was a message. Someone knew she was on the right track, and they were thumbing their nose at her, letting her know that it didn't matter at all.

She marched to the window, sure there would be no one there. She was right. Whoever had thrown the rock through the window was long gone.

Blaize carefully lifted the broken window, reached up between the two sets of panes, and lowered the still-intact storm window. It locked into place on each side with satisfying twin clicks. Then she closed the inside window again, picked out the loose and broken shards of glass from the wooden frame, and stapled a plastic garbage bag over the opening. That would hold until she could get it fixed. After sweeping broken glass from the floor and closing the drapes across the shattered window, she went back to her cold coffee and unopened book.

She read for two hours straight, forgetting the coffee and cookies, forgetting the rock and the broken window, forgetting she'd promised Spyder she'd be back as soon as she grabbed a few things. She was too engrossed in the story to stop. The book lay open in front of her. Pages and pages of scribbled notes covered the tablet, crossed with connecting lines, circled dates and highlighted names.

She was right. But there was no satisfaction in that. It was worse than even she had imagined. They were all on a collision course—herself, Gate, Spyder and Joyce—with bodies of innocent victims broken and strewn along the way. And this was only the second book of four, each escalating in mayhem. This book, more than the last, chronicled Algernon Pierce's descent into madness, and he was dragging Blaize and everyone she knew down with him. Even his writing, formerly linear and clear, had become reckless, tangled with flashbacks and rambling narrative. She had all she could do to build the time line of events that she would need to convince Gate and Spyder and anyone else who might listen.

She stood and stretched the kinks from her back. She was only halfway through the book, but her rumbling stomach insisted on a break. Avoiding looking at the shattered window, she moved briskly around the kitchen. She threw together a tuna salad sandwich and sat down again, giving her undivided attention back to the open book.

Five pages later she gasped, nearly choking on the last bite of her sandwich. Her pulse pounded a staccato beat against the hollow of her throat as she read.

*Good strong hands, without even a tremor of regret as they wrap around her fragile neck, feeling each tight cord and pulsing vein. Crushing slowly, enjoying the exquisite dance of death, he grips her. How like sex, he thinks. The first rising flush of excitement, the caress of skin on skin, tension building, breath deepening to grunts, toes curling and long fingers clutching possessively.*

*His hips arch forward as he squeezes tighter, tighter. His body jerks and thrusts as her eyes glaze over, her mouth gasping silently in disbelief. Then one final convulsive shudder and it's over, both bodies sagging to the floor in a tangled heap.*

*How sweet his release, how final her death.*

The violently graphic scene she'd just read showcased the real power of Pierce's writing skill. The imagery was so intense, she felt as if she'd lived through it herself. Worse yet, she recognized the hands of the killer all too well as she'd read it. She could feel those hands closing around her own neck, her frantic lungs gulping for air. She could see her killer's face as shadows crept around the edges of her shrinking vision. She heard herself scream and beg for mercy, clawing at the hands that dug into her throat and choked the last breath from her lungs.

"No. Spyder, no!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder jerked awake, fighting his way out of the nightmare. It had happened again. Blaize trapped beneath his hands, her life ebbed away beneath his crushing grip.

Even if he hadn't looked into those eyes and watched the life drain away, he would have known it was her. His heart knew. His body knew. His soul knew.

He lay there a moment, drenched in his own sweat, wondering which had come first—the woman or the dream? His mind said the dream came first, but that was impossible. You don't conjure real women from dreams. So the woman had to have come first somehow. Maybe he'd spotted Blaize somewhere in town, on the street, in the mall or at a concert. He'd tucked her image into his memory and his subconscious had then reproduced her in a dream.

He mentally shrugged. Like the question of the chicken or the egg, it didn't really matter which came first. The important question was why the dream always ended the same way. Why did he end up destroying the one woman he could feel himself falling in love with?

He stripped the sheets from the bed, which were damp with the sweat of his nightmares. He undressed, adding his clothes to the pile of clammy sheets. Scooping the bundle under one arm, he walked naked to the bathroom, dropped the laundry into a hamper and turned hot water on to fill the tub. Steam rose in a thick, hot cloud. He'd sweat it out, he decided. Like a fever.

The phone rang just as he stepped into the bathtub. He hesitated, then climbed all the way in. Screw it. Whoever it was would call back.

His hands shook. His heart raced. The nightmare was winning. One or two he might be able to explain away, but not these regular nightly visitations. Recurrent dreams indicated emotional distress—or worse. He caught himself wringing the washcloth, squeezing and twisting and rolling it between his clenched fists.

Shit, shit...SHIT!

He couldn't let Blaize come back here. She was in danger as long as she was near him. There was no way he could stay awake forever, and there was no telling what might happen if he fell asleep and confused the dream with reality. No. He cared about her too much to risk her life. He had to let her go.

But the thought of never seeing Blaize again left him feeling empty and hollow inside. How could someone he didn't even know existed a few weeks ago suddenly be so important that he couldn't imagine a life without her? It didn't make any sense. He'd built a reputation writing songs about love, but he'd never really believed the words. Now all the lyrics made sense. Now he understood.

He leaned back and sank into the hot water. Things were changing. His life was taking turns he hadn't anticipated. Maybe Blaize was right. Maybe their free will had been hijacked and manipulated by a master plotter with a macabre sense of humor.

Yeah, right. His laughter sounded forced as it bounced off the tile walls of the bathroom. Even the hot bath, which usually drained the tension from his muscles, did little to ease him today. With a defeated sigh he stepped out of the tub and dried off, pulled on a pair of Levi's and finger combed his damp hair. On the way to the closet for a clean denim shirt, he noticed the light flashing on the answering machine. He hit the play button, unprepared for the rush of emotion he felt hearing Blaize's voice.

"Spyder, I won't be back over tonight. I, um...I've come across some new facts. I'll tell you about it later. I don't know when. I'll call you."

He waited through the electronic buzz, but that was it. No number. No explanation. He frowned and stared at the machine, as if it held an answer. There was something in her voice. Something guarded and afraid. He clenched his fists, a gut-wrenching ache in his belly. She was afraid and he couldn't help her. He couldn't comfort her.

Damn, he should have picked up the phone. He should have been there when she needed him. For a moment he forgot that he'd already come to the decision that he couldn't see her anymore for her own safety.

He rewound the tape and played back the message, content to simply hear her voice again.

## Chapter Sixteen

Blaize woke up hunched over the table, her face buried in the open book. Her back complained when she sat up, sending stabbing pains along her spine. A sharp red indentation from the page's edge creased her cheek. She had a sudden urge to wash her face, as if Pierce's words had left a vile tattoo across her skin, seeping toxins into her soul.

Damn, how could she have fallen asleep? It was almost as if Pierce had reached out from beyond the pages of the book and hypnotized her into sleep with his singsong, stream of consciousness passages.

There was a niggling at the edges of her memory, blurred with sleep but demanding her attention. Something she should know. Some connection she wasn't making. She felt the weight of urgency and the pressure of time slipping away.

She blinked sleep from her eyes. What time was it? She checked her watch. Ten o'clock. Sunlight streamed in the window. She couldn't believe she'd slept so long. She had to finish the book and get it back to Connie. And there was that strange sense of urgency pulling her. She tried to focus on the book, but the words blurred together. She rubbed her eyes and concentrated all her attention on reading.

*...fierce creatures cast their stony gazes below on streets of fire. First one, then two, then three explosions rock the foundations, crumbling mortar sprays north, east, west and south. A noxious rain of ashes settles on upturned faces, turning skin the gray of moonlit mist hovering over a graveyard.*

She didn't get it the first time. She had to go back and read the passage over again. And then it hit her. *Fierce creatures. Stony gaze.* The gargoyles she'd seen outside the newspaper offices. Another clue was in Pierce's odd configuration of directions. *North, East, West, South.* The first letter of each word spelled out NEWS. It couldn't be any clearer. Pierce had literally spelled it out. This scene would take place at the very same building—Joyce and Gate's offices.

With frantic urgency, Blaize flipped pages, reading more carefully. An explosion. No. *Three* explosions. Oh my God! When? She flipped back to the beginning of the chapter searching for a clue, a date. Nothing. It could be anytime in the future, but for some reason she felt it was close. Too close.

She read through the passage again and finally realized that the scene was out of order. A flashback. She remembered reading the original passage in the first book, but it hadn't clicked until now. Pierce had used the explosive scene as a cliffhanger at the end

of *Visions and Voices*. If only she hadn't left that book with Spyder she could cross reference the two scenes. Then she found what she was looking for. A date. Today's date!

Not only was there a date, but a time too. Eleven o'clock. She checked her watch again. It was almost ten-thirty. She only had thirty minutes to do something.

She grabbed the phone and dialed Gate's number. No answer. Of course not, she chided herself. It was Monday. He'd be at work. She called his office extension, but there was no answer there either. Finally the switchboard operator cut in and asked if she'd like to leave a message.

Blaize groaned in frustration. There wasn't time for that. There had to be someone...

"Connect me with Connie Ferguson," she blurted out. At least there was someone who might help. Blaize sent up a silent prayer of thanks when Connie answered her phone.

"Connie, this is Blaize Donovan."

"Blaize, hi." Connie said. "Did the book —"

"Listen Connie," Blaize interrupted. "This is going to sound crazy, but just do as I say." She hadn't meant to shout, but it came out that way just the same. "Get everyone out of the building. I think there's a bomb —"

"What? You *think* there's a bomb?"

"Please. There isn't time to explain. Just trust me. Get everyone out as quick as you can. Have you seen Gate?"

"No, but I thought I saw Joyce a little while ago in his office. Maybe I was wrong. There's no one there now."

"Joyce?" Hope flared in Blaize for a moment, blotting out all else. Then came a quick rush of fear. Joyce was there? Where had she been all this time? Realizing that Joyce might be in the building galvanized her. There wasn't time to waste.

Before Connie could reply, Blaize hung up and called 911. Her fingers shook as she punched in the number. Desperation made her voice sound foreign to her own ears. The operator at the other end asked too many questions, wasted too much time. Blaize knew she wasn't making sense. Most likely they thought it was a crank call.

"Just send a bomb squad," she screamed into the receiver. "And ambulances. Lots of ambulances."

She hung up and grabbed her car keys. The building was only ten minutes away. It would take her longer than that to convince anyone to listen to her. She checked her watch. Twenty minutes. She could make it.

Driving at breakneck speed, she got to the building in less than ten minutes. A few people straggled outside, but there was no sign of fire trucks or emergency vehicles. Dammit, where was everyone? There had to be more people than this inside the building.

One wheel jumped the curb as she screeched to a halt in front of the building. She glared up at the gargoyles. They seemed to taunt her with their concrete stares. "Up yours," she hissed to the silent sentinels. It was a useless gesture, but satisfying nonetheless.

She jumped out of the car and charged into the building. For a moment she stood frozen in the lobby, unsure what to do. She looked around, not sure what she was looking for until she saw it. Near the exit was a red fire alarm pull station. Without a second thought she reached up and jerked the handle, sounding the alarm.

Horns blared throughout the building. Strobe lights flashed. She heard the whine of elevators descending. People stepped out of offices, blinking.

"Get out," she shouted over the alarm's shriek, waving her arms toward the exits. "Fire! Evacuate!"

Soon a swarm of people surrounded her, jostling toward the doors. She grabbed someone's arm and asked if they'd seen either Connie or Gate. No one had.

*Five minutes...*

Outside on the sidewalk she screamed for people to get as far away from the building as they could. When she mentioned a bomb, they scrambled. A few looked at her as if she was crazy, but they hustled. Sirens could be heard in the distance, but Blaize realized they wouldn't arrive in time.

*Four minutes...*

Connie and Gate might still be inside. She hadn't seen either of them in the crowd leaving the building. They could have taken another exit, but something told her they hadn't. And if Connie was right, Joyce might be inside too. Blaize ran back into the lobby. She screamed up the stairway, calling first for Connie, then Gate. Her voice echoed and bounced off the concrete stairwell, mocking her.

*Three minutes...*

Then someone tugged on her arm, pulling and screaming to be heard over the alarm. It was Gate. Thank God. She could barely hear him over the alarms and sirens. "What are you doing in here?" he yelled.

"Is Connie with you? Did you see Joyce?"

He shook his head. "No. Why?"

Blaize felt her blood run cold. "They might still be inside."

"Come on," he screamed, pulling her arm. "There's a fire, for Christ's sake, we have to get out."

She let him lead her outside. "No," she said. "Not a fire. A bomb. I pulled the alarm to get people out of the building. There's a bomb set to go off in," she checked her watch, "two minutes."

He frowned. "*You* did this?"

"Yes." She gripped his shoulders, shaking him hard to get him to listen. "Connie brought me an advance reading copy of Pierce's next book. I fell asleep." She knew she

was rambling, but couldn't help herself. "The gargoyles. I knew it was this building and I called you but you weren't in your office, so I talked to Connie."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he snorted. "I can't believe you evacuated a whole building because of something you read in a book. Blaize, this obsession of yours is getting out of control."

"Please," she begged. "Please, you have to believe me. This building is going to explode and Joyce may be inside."

"Yeah, and I'm..."

He didn't get to finish. There was a muffled roar. Then they were thrown, slammed by a blast of hot air. Two more blasts followed in quick succession. She could feel Gate's weight on top of her, shielding her from the worst of the explosion. Her ears rang. Her eyes stung. Concrete and gravel bit her cheek. But all she could think of was Joyce. What if she was still inside?

Time, which had been hurtling forward at breakneck speed, suddenly slowed with a hushed stillness. Blaize was aware of her own breathing, the trip-hammer beat of her heart. All around people were running and screaming, sirens were howling. But within her all Blaize felt was a deadly calm.

Gate helped her to her feet, wiping dirt and debris from her hair. She heard someone calling her name far away.

"Blaize! Gate! Are you all right?" It was Connie, looking pale and rumped. A smudge of dirt creased her cheek and there was a run in her stockings, but other than that she seemed fine.

Blaize gripped her arms. "Did you see Joyce? Did you see her?"

Connie shook her head. "No. But I'm not even sure it was her. Maybe she wasn't inside after all."

"What if she was?"

"That doesn't mean she's still inside," Connie said. "When I went back into Gate's office, it was empty. If it was Joyce, she's probably long gone by now."

If not, Blaize realized, it was her own fault. She blamed herself for not saving Joyce. She should have read further. She should have finished the passage. She'd put two and two together, but hadn't read beyond four. Guilt ripped through her. If she hadn't spent the night with Spyder, if she hadn't fallen asleep, there might have been more time. If she'd only figured it out sooner. Maybe she could have done more. Maybe she could have warned Joyce before it was too late.

But she'd only been looking for proof in the first book, not premonitions. If she hadn't read the second book until it hit the stands, she'd have been too late. By giving her an advanced reading copy, Connie had actually saved her own life and the lives of her co-workers. They might not be so lucky next time.

"Are you all right?" Gate asked, his face ashen.

The acrid sting of smoke burned her lungs. She had to force herself to look at the devastation behind her. It was too much to comprehend. Joyce might be somewhere back there, buried under the crushing weight of shattered concrete.

Without warning, Blaize turned her guilt and anger toward Gate. She pushed her palms against his chest, tears streaming down her face. "I told you! Why wouldn't you believe me? Joyce believed me. Connie believed me."

"I'm sorry. Oh God, I'm so sorry." He held her, letting her cry and rail against him, taking the full weight of her blame and anger. "What can I do?"

Blaize looked up into his face. "Take me to him."

"What? Who?"

"Take me to Pierce. He's at the bottom of all of this. Joyce suspected that from the beginning. She was right."

Gate nodded. "Okay. I'll take you to him. First—"

"No." Blaize shook her head, desperation making her voice shrill. "Now. We have to go *now*. The police will be looking for me to find out why I called in this alarm, how I knew about the bombs. There'll be questions that I don't have any believable answers for."

"Don't worry," Gate said. "I'll take care of that. We'll just tell them someone called in a bomb threat and—"

"Okay," Blaize said. "But not now. It will only slow us down. We have to get to Pierce right now."

For once, Gate had the good sense not to argue.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder must have listened to Blaize's recorded message a thousand times. It was the desperation in her voice that had made him reconsider. Whatever she believed, whatever she was fighting, he couldn't let her do it alone. He'd spent the whole morning researching on the internet, following links that led him deeper and deeper into inescapable conclusions.

He'd started with mass hysteria then read through Jungian theories of collective unconscious. The more he read, the less outrageous it all seemed.

He'd printed out pages and pages of evidence that seemed to endorse Blaize's theory, including theological papers on the power of prayer, and scientific studies detailing the positive effect of focused thoughts on plant growth.

Somehow that was the one that had made it all seem plausible. According to the article, scientists had placed two groups of plants within two circles of volunteers. One circle was told to send encouraging thoughts to the plants, urging them to grow. Unbelievably, there was nothing unusual about the control group, while the



experimental group, which was silently encouraged to grow, actually did grow bigger, fuller and taller over the course of the study.

He whistled. Imagine that. If just a room full of people could make a plant grow twice its size, imagine what a whole world full of people focusing their thoughts on the same belief could do?

He thought of the millions of people who read Algernon Pierce's books, losing themselves completely in his fictional reality and investing it with the weight of their belief. Imagine the power of that combined thought and energy. Could it actually change reality?

Maybe it could.

The more Spyder read, the more he became convinced that Blaize was on the right track. He only hoped he'd have the chance to tell her.

## Chapter Seventeen

By the time they arrived at the faded Victorian mansion, Blaize had channeled all her anger toward one person – Algernon Pierce. “He did this,” she told Gate. She didn’t mention Joyce again. Connie wasn’t even sure she’d seen Joyce in Gate’s office. But the fact remained that Joyce was still missing. In light of everything else, Pierce might be the only person who knew where to find her. “He did this to us. But why?”

“I don’t know,” Gate replied, his jaw clenched, “but we’re not leaving until we find out.”

Blaize took one look at the looming structure and shuddered. “Creepy.”

“Only on the outside,” Gate said. “The inside is a big letdown as far as creepiness is concerned. He even works on a computer, which surprised me.” He snorted. “I’m not sure what I expected. Maybe a feathered quill dipped in blood.”

“Don’t even joke about it,” Blaize said. “From what I can see, that’s not all that far from the truth.”

They reached the entrance and Gate banged the lion’s head door knocker three times. The muffled sound echoed from inside, but that was all they heard. He knocked again, brisk and impatient. Still no answer. He stepped back and surveyed the windows, cupped his hand around his mouth and yelled. “Pierce! Open up. We’re not leaving until you talk to us.”

While Gate was busy yelling, Blaize reached forward and jiggled the door knob. It turned and the door opened smoothly, with nary a creak. “Gate?”

He looked from her to the door, raised an eyebrow and nodded. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll do it your way.” He stepped over the threshold and called out into the empty room. “Pierce! If you’re here, answer me. We’re coming in.” His voice bounced back to him.

“There’s no one here,” Blaize said. She walked straight into the foyer, making no attempt to be quiet. Her shoes clicked on the slate floor. “Geez, Gate. I thought you said the creepiness stopped outside.”

She looked around. The house felt like a tomb—dark and dank, with dust and mold everywhere. It looked as if it had been deserted for thousands of years. She ran her finger over a tabletop, cutting a dark streak through the gray coating. “Looks like his housekeeper went on strike.” She waited a beat, but Gate didn’t crack a smile. “Are you sure this is the right house?”

He shook his head, his voice weak. “I’m sure. But I swear it didn’t look like this when I was here last week.” He paused for a moment then murmured, “At least not the first time.”

Blaize wasn't sure what to make of the odd statement. But she was pretty sure the answer would be found in Pierce's writing. "Which way is his office?" she asked, pulling Gate from his troubled thoughts. "You said that's where you interviewed him, right?"

Gate nodded. "This way."

The deeper they went into the bowels of the house, the more chilled Blaize felt. Goose bumps prickled her arms. The impression of entering a tomb was even stronger as they moved into the shadowed interior, away from what little light seeped through the windows. She stopped and took a deep breath.

Gate turned to her. "Are you okay?"

She couldn't explain what she was feeling. It was as if she was standing on the edge of a precipice. She could turn around and go back right now, or step over the edge. Either way, once she decided which direction to go there would be no turning back. But retreating was out of the question. If she did that, she'd be turning her life over to Pierce. Going forward was another step in taking back control of her life.

She straightened her shoulders and nodded. "I'm ready. Let's go."

"Okay." Gate opened a door and they stood there for a moment, letting their eyes grow accustomed to the darkness.

It was an office all right. Like the foyer, everything was covered in a layer of dust. Cobweb hammocks swung in the corners. Yellowed papers scattered the desk. When they walked into the room, dust motes swirled around them like a swarm of furry fleas.

Incongruously, the computer screen glowed in the middle of all that decay. Blaize moved around the desk and stared at the screen. "It's on," she said. An animated screen saver displayed a crescent moon that moved across the screen, winking out over a desolate horizon on the right before reappearing on the left.

"That's the same design that was carved into the rock someone hurled through my window," she told Gate. "The same design is on the cover of Pierce's books."

Gate looked up from the papers he was shuffling through. "What are we looking for?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "Manuscript pages would be a good start. If we know what's coming up in the next two books maybe we can head him off."

Gate opened a file cabinet. It was empty. He turned to see Blaize reaching toward the keyboard. "Stop!" he called out.

Blaize jerked her hand back. "What?"

"I don't know. I just...be careful."

She reached forward again. "It makes sense that his files would be on his computer, right?"

"I know," Gate said, frowning. "I just got a strange feeling when I saw you reaching for the keyboard." He looked around the room. "It's this place. It gives me the heebie-jeebies."

"I agree. Let's just find what we're looking for and get out of here." As soon as she touched the keyboard, the screen saver deactivated.

"Gate," she called out. "Look at this." There was typing on the screen. "I guess Pierce left in a hurry. He was in the middle of writing a scene."

Blaize started reading, her finger on the scroll button, soon becoming engrossed in the scene as it played out on the screen.

*Mother Moon steps onto the stage. A hush settles over the auditorium. She absorbs their adoration like a flower drinks in sunlight – unquestioning, accepting, taking what is her due.*

*"My children," she says, lifting her arms.*

*Her voice carries, settling on each and every head. She looks over the crowd at her loyal disciples. The air hums, vibrating and pulsing with the combined power of their belief that everything and all things are possible.*

*She opens her arms in a welcoming embrace. "My loyal, loving children."*

*The crowd erupts with applause. She waits for it to subside. Her robes glow, seeming to absorb the moonlight streaming through the stained glass windows behind the stage.*

*"YOU are the new order...the new wave of the future."*

*There is a sudden shift in the texture of the room, the sound of the silence around the assembly. A sense of expectancy hovers in the air. Mother Moon's arms encircle the gathering, like a mother hen scooping her chicks under her feathered breast. In a world that had stripped them of hope, desperate faces lift to hear her message of divine power and cosmic destiny.*

*Her eyes flicker across the bowed heads, searching for the messenger of death, then she nods, as if confirming a secret message only she can hear. Her eyes widen, but other than that she never moves, never flinches, giving herself gladly to destiny's decree. A head lifts, as if in slow motion. Moonlight streaming through the window reflects off the cold blue barrel of a gun.*

*Someone screams. Heads turn. Mother Moon looks deeply into the eyes of her killer and smiles the divine smile of a willing martyr. A blast splits the night. People scurry to protect her in a futile effort to outrun the bullet. Still she doesn't move, taking the blast with open, welcoming arms, her body thrown backward in mock crucifixion, new blood stark against her virgin robes.*

Blaize was so engrossed in the passage she didn't hear the intruder until he spoke.

"Who the hell are you people?"

Blaize wheeled backward, rolling the chair over Gate's foot. He jerked his foot away and grabbed the back of her chair, nearly tipping her over. They both gawked at the man standing in the doorway.

The intruder stomped into the room. "And where's Pierce?"

Gate was the first to regain his equilibrium. He limped forward holding out his hand and introducing himself. "Gate Wayne," he said. "I've been interviewing Pierce

for an article. We came here to ask him some follow-up questions today and found the place abandoned like this.”

Blaize realized that was close enough to the real truth to keep them out of jail—for now.

The man introduced himself to Gate. “Mark Sanders. Pierce’s editor. You say he’s not here?”

“No sign of him,” Gate said.

“Damn, I was afraid of that.” The editor ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation.

Gate cleared his throat. “Pierce promised me some quotes from his upcoming books. Since you’re his editor, maybe you can help us.”

“I wish. I’m looking for the same thing.” The editor threw a manila envelope on the desktop, raising a cloud of dust. “Take a look at that. It’s the final manuscript for the fourth book, which is supposed to go to the copy editor tomorrow.”

Blaize twisted the metal clasp on the envelope and slid out the pages. The top page was covered in gibberish.

frtpOVp2o6AbvabOVG3oBGNwxdglF6pOg5k7+nUS1Y0maL+l2dQUYzlu+jPMctb  
ER1kMJhVn+RKqbvmbRqLaGDDNsTFx41lOCNbWc5Z8YaODewYG8GxycR69E/wVs  
9HosHmGqzPQHWJh82mO/uIPI+tZem+5nvP9piUxys9VuoEbsPeunVYg7VIcb2HGA  
O1g+1ViWJA0r24I6jCvtmK0+kFqw1HDLqiZLfO5uE0SY12nreYY93Yv6Xc7dbdMRCSn  
pclZPNOFVCiV6k2lzshSzV1KPS79oIlt/eRmkYMNXSW7C2/CX3e7IVYKL2I9bJ1cCdyL  
N2YC5XFDOSWiMJCp96jtHeHGGshzdEBHS/A96k+8g27ANfQZFovksqdrkZ+/aPeE1  
vPeRXK/ufKfYpS5Vbtg4VI3S3eX/V1iFhLJmC8oxcxaqM75UVN7uij5IUlsm/5k6SYaulT  
ZAOvzLSnOao2tSrZkJcHVwt7+/AaR0ctdK60afyMQ6OWB4RTZLJUzMuSCP9JY00r1  
O7gTpJ2tIPyrX578IO2aU3mp2PwrgWotiOLf1zDgOi2B4uR8Rz2h0beOh6iU6Ox+uJjvV  
mt706xhAwqLns0jwqzpbcbxeuDA7S5Qw84dsHbAypUXltTqSJ4XSneKkUg3hPSRbfoTc  
Oc5pQw+1CLHuJXYy916DZPibaQf9JtaruQ6txtdnUp1UW3CZT4X3WXH9z/v

She looked up at Mark Sanders.

“They’re all like that,” he said. “Four hundred and eight-seven pages of indecipherable crap. And I’ve got a freakin’ deadline to meet.” Mark suddenly noticed the screen behind her. “Hey, what’s that?”

Blaize shrugged. “I think it might be a scene from the next book. I’m not sure.”

“Well maybe there’s more there,” Mark said with growing excitement. “Maybe it’s all there and I can just print it out and go back to the city a happy man.”

He edged past Blaize and touched the keyboard. With a muffled whoosh, the screen imploded. Blaize gasped and Mark jerked back from the desk. The screen flared bright white, then eclipsed to black. Sparks flew and sizzled from the back of the monitor and thin white smoke carried the smell of burning plastic and melting hardware.

"Holy shit," Mark said in a hushed voice.

Gate looked around. "I think we'd better get out of here. One near-death experience a day is enough for me."

Blaize didn't argue. She followed him outside into sunshine that felt like a benediction after the dim interior of Pierce's estate. The editor followed right on their heels.

Blaize turned and grasped his hand. "Do you have any idea where we can find Pierce? It's important that we speak with him."

Mark shrugged. "He said something about going to his sister's place for a vacation."

"You wouldn't happen to know where his sister lives, would you?"

"Someplace in the Adirondacks. Lake Something-or-Other. I'm not sure." Mark looked back at the house, his face pulled into a troubled frown, then back at Blaize. "She shouldn't be too hard to find, though. From what I hear, she's a local celebrity. She runs one of those alternative spiritual movements, some pseudo-religious cult. Not dangerous, just weird. Mother Moon, I think they call her."

Blaize felt her stomach drop. Mother Moon was Pierce's sister? If her theory was correct, he'd just written her death sentence. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, pretty sure," Mark said. He reached into his pocket and handed her his card. "Listen, if you find him give me a call, okay? And tell him to get in touch with me ASAP. I need a copy of that manuscript before the end of the week or I'll have a thousand lawyers on my ass."

She nodded. "We'll tell him."

Gate cocked an eyebrow at the "we," but didn't contradict her.

They left the front door unlocked the way they'd found it and walked to their cars. Before leaving, Blaize turned again to Mark. "By the way," she said. "You've seen the outline for all four books, right?"

Mark nodded.

"What are they about," she asked.

Mark frowned. "Why, it's about the end of the world, of course."

A chill went through her. She squeezed Gate's hand and turned back down the path. Mark waited for them to get in their car, as if afraid to leave them alone with the unlocked house.

"You think he's going back inside?" Blaize asked as they drove away.

"Maybe. I don't think he'll find anything, though. Do you?"

"No. We found what we were meant to find."

"The passage about Mother Moon, right? You think he's leading us there."

Blaize didn't respond. She just stared at him.

He sighed. "And you think *we* should go trekking off to the Adirondacks to find them, right?"

"It can't be more than three hours from here," Blaize said in a hushed voice. She looked pointedly at him. "We have to do this for Joyce's sake."

"I didn't say I wouldn't," he argued. "I just don't like you assuming I'm automatically included in the plan."

"You don't have to raise your voice."

"I'm not raising my voice," he shouted. Then he sighed in resignation. "Do you think I could have a couple of days first? I need to take care of some things..."

Blaize didn't argue, despite the growing urgency she felt to get moving. She knew he wouldn't leave until he was sure there were no bodies found in the wreckage of the collapsed building. Only then could they be sure Joyce hadn't been trapped inside. She suspected they had a cushion of time, since Pierce's second book hadn't even hit the stands yet.

"Oh," Gate said, breaking the silence. "I shoved these in my pocket before that editor crashed our little party." He reached into his pocket and handed Blaize some audio tapes. "You can spend your free time researching what's on here while we're getting ready for our trip to the mountains."

She turned the tapes over. There were no labels, no markings of any kind. What clues could they hold to help her see into the mind of Algernon Pierce? She tucked them into her purse. It was a start, if nothing else, and they needed all the ammunition they could get.

"Uh oh," Gate said as they turned the corner onto Blaize's street. A police car was parked outside her house. "Looks like you're wanted for questioning."

How many times since Richard's death had she envisioned just this scenario? She knew they weren't here to accuse her of murder. Obviously her phone number had been recorded when she'd called 911 to report the bomb. Still her heart raced.

"I can't deal with this right now," she said. "Keep going."

Gate drove past her house and turned the corner. When they were away from her neighborhood, he turned to her. "Now what?"

"I'll stay with a friend," she said, and gave him directions to Spyder's place.

## Chapter Eighteen

Spyder leaned against the doorframe, arms folded across his chest. "So," he drawled. "You came back." His practiced attitude was all cocky self-assurance, but when he opened his arms, clasped her to his chest and buried his face against her neck, his body language said something different—*I was afraid you wouldn't*.

Whatever strength had held her together up until now suddenly drained when she felt his arms around her. She didn't have to be strong anymore. She didn't have to deal with things alone. For just a little while she could rely on someone else's strength.

"Spyder?" Her voice cracked.

"Shhh..." He drew her inside. "I know. I know. Just let me hold you."

She did. She let him hold her until it no longer felt like the whole world was falling apart around her. She was still afraid and unsure of what to do next. But whatever it was, she wouldn't be doing it alone. There were strong arms to hold her and keep her safe.

He lifted her as if she were a child, held her close to his chest and carried her to a rocking chair. The wood was smooth and worn and comforting, and she wondered how many generations of Raines babies had been rocked to sleep with its creaky lullaby. Perhaps Spyder himself. The thought wrapped her in contentment. She wanted to know everything about him, from the baby who'd been rocked in this very chair, to the little boy who'd played and worked and dreamed right here on this farm, to the man hidden behind the microphone. But there would be lots of time to discover the bits and pieces that made up the private life of Spyder Raines. Right now all she needed to know was right here, in the steady pulsing of his heart where her cheek rested.

Cradling her tenderly, he pushed off with his foot and rocked back and forth. He brushed her hair from her face and whispered soft endearments. When his fingers lingered for a moment on her neck, she held her breath, Pierce's scene still fresh in her mind.

Should she tell him? Before she could decide his hands moved on, finding and loosening knots of tension, until finally she relaxed in his arms.

The decision was taken out of her hands when he began talking in low tones. "I don't want there to be any secrets between us," he murmured. She didn't speak, only nodded against his chest. In a hesitant voice, he told her about the dreams he'd had before he met her, leaving nothing out. Increasingly erotic, horrifyingly real dreams.

"It's not your fault," she said. "Pierce planted those dreams in your mind somehow." Then she told him how she'd read the same scene in the advance reading copy Connie had brought.



He frowned. "And this book is coming out in a couple weeks."

She nodded again, wondering if he was thinking the same thing she was.

"We don't have much time then." He told her what he'd discovered while she was gone.

She was so amazed that he'd taken her seriously enough to do research, that she didn't actually hear what he was saying at first. Then it started to make sense.

"So what you're saying is that the more people who read what Pierce wrote, the closer it comes to altering reality?"

"That's what I figure," he said. "It's the only explanation that makes sense."

She let the concept take hold. "Mass consciousness harnessed to a single belief. Which means if your theory is right, we're safe until the book comes out, right?"

He took a deep breath and released it with a whoosh. "Maybe. Maybe not. Already thousands of people are awaiting the sequel. In a few weeks they'll all be reading and believing in Pierce's fictional world. The effect is cumulative, which means..."

She sat up so she could look in his eyes. "What?"

"It means you won't be safe with me."

"That's ridiculous. Now that we know what's happening, we can fight it."

He rested one hand on her shoulder, his fingers brushing against her neck. "The urge is already stronger," he told her. "How many advance reading copies went out? How many of those were passed on to friends and relatives?" His fingers traced a path along her neck, stopping at the hollow where her pulse fluttered. "Do you believe I'm strong enough to resist?" he asked. His fingers curled and tightened. "Would you bet your life on it?"

She looked away, avoiding his eyes as well as his question. "What can we do?"

He shrugged. "Any chance we can convince them to stop publication of the rest of the books?"

Her answer was a quick snort. "No, but..." She pulled out the business card from her pocket and fingered the edges. "Maybe we can stop them from *getting* the final book."

She told Spyder about their run-in with the editor at Pierce's house, including Mark Sanders' reply when they'd asked what the four-book series was about. "It's about the end of the world," she repeated to Spyder, suddenly realizing that she had an obligation to stop Pierce that went far beyond her own self-involvement.

"Anyway," she continued, "this Sanders guy was frantic because his copy of the manuscript was garbled. He was looking for either Pierce's original draft or a file on the computer. There was nothing at the house. Maybe Pierce has something with him, but according to his editor, he's hidden away somewhere in the Adirondacks."

"So, if we get Pierce's copy and keep it from the publisher..."

"Yes," she nodded, not missing the way he'd included himself in the quest for Algernon Pierce. "I'd be on my way now, except Gate stopped me. He didn't want us going off without a game plan."

"Gate? That reporter, huh?"

She nodded.

"He's going with you?"

Again she caught a tinge of jealousy in his voice. It wasn't her imagination. "Yes, he's going with us," she said.

*Us.* She wondered how much of this feeling of "us" was Pierce's doing. Was this immediate connection she'd felt with Spyder simply a result of Pierce pushing them together? Was it love at first sight or love at first draft?

Spyder certainly wasn't her type. But she felt as if she'd known him all her life, as if they were two halves of the same whole. She felt as if they were destined to find each other and she knew he felt the same way.

From what she'd read so far, Pierce had intended her to be with Gate, not Spyder. Spyder was supposed to be her murderer. So already they'd defied him once, rewritten part of their destiny. Now if only they could rewrite the rest before it was too late. Like it or not, they were thrown together now, whether arranged by fate or the lunatic ravings of a best-selling author.

Spyder interrupted her thoughts. "So, you said if Gate hadn't stopped you, you'd be halfway to the Adirondacks by now. What's in the Adirondacks?"

As Blaize told Spyder about the scene she'd read on the computer screen, followed by the unusual explosion that followed, he held her tighter. "We should have left right from Pierce's place," she said. "I hate doing nothing. I can't shake the feeling that Joyce needs me, and I know we'll find the answers we're looking for at that commune where Pierce's sister preaches."

"Mother Moon," Spyder said, seeming to chew on the name. "Mother Moon." His brow furrowed. "Where the hell have I heard that name before?"

"Supposedly she's a minor celebrity up there," Blaize said.

Spyder shook his head. "No, that's not it. I read it somewhere. Recently." He looked around the room, as if the answer would jump out at him.

"Originally I was worried about his sister," Blaize continued. "But if you're right, she's not in any danger yet. The assassination scene isn't in the advance reading copy, so it must be in one of the later books."

Spyder only nodded. "Damn, it's right at the tip—" Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Oh shit, I know!"

He lifted Blaize off his lap and set her gently back into the rocking chair, crossing the room in just a few long strides. "That scene," he called over his shoulder. "It's not part of the book."

"What?"

Spyder came back with a magazine folded in his hand. "I knew it sounded familiar."

He handed the magazine to Blaize. She tried to ignore the conspicuously naked women draped provocatively across the pages inside.

"Here," he said, flipping toward the back. "That scene you read isn't part of the book. It's a short story in last month's *PlayToy Magazine*. A story written by our friend Pierce."

Blaize's heart sank as she read the very same words she'd seen on the screen at Pierce's house. Spyder was right. It was a scene from this short story. Mother Moon wasn't safe after all.

Grasping at straws, she asked, "People who buy these magazines don't really read the stories, do they?"

"Would they bother printing them if people didn't?" he scoffed. "Besides, this is Algernon Pierce. Everyone reads his stories. Hell, even I read it and I'm not a big fan of his."

"Then we have to get out there. That poor woman, Mother Moon, is in danger and she doesn't even realize it."

"Hold on," Spyder said. "I agree with Gate. You can do more harm than good running off without a plan. You don't even know *where* in the Adirondacks to find her. You'll end up wasting more time searching than if you do some research now."

She hated to admit that he was right. "Okay," she said. "We took some tapes from Pierce's house. They're out in my car. We'll start with those."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mother Moon barely made a sound as she stepped into the dimly lit room. She reached the bed and laid her hand on her brother's forehead. "How are you feeling?"

He moaned. "Headaches. They're worse. The light's too bright."

There was no light in the room, but she didn't argue. She brushed the hair back from his forehead, her fingertips gently massaging his temples. "I've made you a new set of tapes," she said. "These will help with the headaches."

His moans were a rumbled roar deep in his chest. "I can't listen. The voices will hurt my head."

"I promise they won't," she said with a smile. "You trust me, don't you?"

"You're the only person I do trust," he admitted. "No one else understands me. They're out to get me. Even the characters in the books have turned against me."

"Shhh," she said. "Everything's all right. You're safe here. No one can find you. No one can hurt you. Sleep now."

Under her soothing touch, he finally did fall asleep, her name like a prayer on his lips. "Celeste...my sweet angel, my baby girl..."

Joey was waiting outside the room when Celeste finally left his side. "Is Uncle Algernon all right?" he asked.

Celeste smiled and squeezed her son's shoulder. "He'll be fine. He's just exhausted. But he can rest here. We'll take good care of him, won't we?"

"Yes," Joey agreed. "We'll take extra special care of Uncle Algernon."

They walked side by side, the top of Joey's head barely reaching her shoulder. He was growing so fast, she realized. Part of her mourned the loss of his childhood, but she realized he would need broad, strong shoulders to carry the weight of his destiny—a destiny that was waiting for him just around the corner.

"Were you looking for me?" Celeste asked her son. It was unusual for him to be wandering at this time of the afternoon. "Don't you have classes?"

"I finished my work early and Oswald said I could come find you to ask you something."

Celeste tipped her head, waiting.

"Mother, could I sing with the choir at prayer meeting Friday night?"

A slow smile crossed Celeste's face. "You miss singing with the choir, don't you?"

The boy nodded then blushed apologetically. "It's not that I don't like being on stage with you. But I love singing too. It makes me feel so joyful inside." He tapped his heart. "In here."

"You could sing from the stage with the choir, couldn't you?"

"Yes," he nodded. "But it doesn't feel the same. I can't feel the voices lifting me up like I can when I'm with the choir."

Celeste seemed to consider it for a few minutes. Then, squeezing her son's hand and smiling, she agreed. "This time. But I need you with me in the future. It won't be that much longer before you'll be taking over for me." She lifted her arms in a sweeping gesture. "Soon this will all be yours."

Celeste knew she didn't have to elaborate. Joey had been trained for his role in the world since the day of his birth. He knew where his destiny lay. Before she even laid eyes on him, before her body had shown signs of his impending birth, Celeste had been given visions in her dreams that foretold the coming of a new Messiah.

Joey had been groomed from birth. He knew he was chosen. Every day brought him closer to fulfilling his destiny.

And Algernon would help them. He just didn't know it yet.

## Chapter Nineteen

Even after they'd realized that the tapes were simply basic hypnosis-relaxation tapes, Blaize and Spyder listened to each and every one from beginning to end. Apparently Algernon Pierce was troubled with insomnia. Blaize nearly laughed at the irony. The horror writer who kept millions of readers awake at night couldn't sleep himself. The stereo hissed with white noise as the last tape came to an end.

Spyder stabbed a finger at the "off" button and turned to Blaize. "What do you make of it?"

"Another dead end." She stood, ran her fingers through her hair and tried to pace her frustration away. It wasn't working. Her hands clenched into fists. "I can't just stand here and do nothing."

"Why do we have to wait for Gate?" Spyder asked. He'd already printed all the information he could find on Mother Moon and her followers, including directions to their spiritual community – The Gateway to Spiritual Enlightenment.

Blaize hadn't missed the similarity between the names Gate Wayne and Gateway. Another clue. Her instincts told her that Gate would be an important part of the solution. But considering the way Spyder reacted to him, she needed more than a premonition to convince him.

"Mainly because he knows Pierce," she said. "Not only can he recognize him, but he might have some influence on the guy."

Spyder nodded. "Okay, there must be something else we can do in the meantime. What about Pierce's house? You said you searched the whole place, right?"

"Well, no. Just the office. We were interrupted by Pierce's editor, remember?"

"So...want to go back there and see if we can find something other than hypnosis tapes?"

Blaize chewed her bottom lip and frowned. "It's getting dark out."

"Are you scared?"

"No!" Of course she was. "It's just...well, that place is pretty creepy."

"Most likely the power still works. If not, I've got flashlights in the Jeep."

"Jeep?" She tilted her head and gave him a deliberate stare. "You don't look like a Jeep kinda guy."

"And you don't look like a scaredy-cat."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Scaredy-cat?" His daring tone was all the encouragement she needed. She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the door. "Come on. I'll show you the way."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was dark by the time they turned onto the deserted private road leading to Pierce's estate. Not just dark. Without the competition of streetlights or neon signs, the night had a depth and scope to it that made Blaize feel dwarfed by gloom. There seemed to be more stars in the sky than normal. And the hulking mass of Pierce's estate loomed over them like a silent predator. The house watched them with blind eyes.

They made their way to the door, which was now locked. Blaize wasn't surprised. She figured Pierce's editor would lock up after they left. She wondered if he'd taken the time to search the house too. He'd probably taken whatever evidence they hoped to find here.

"Spyder!" she called, stopping him from smashing his flashlight through the window.

"What?"

"What are you doing?" Her voice sounded abnormally loud in the stillness.

He straightened and folded his arms across his chest. "We're breaking in. Then we're going to tromp through the mountains to hunt down a man you say holds the fate of the world in his hands. Now...are you really going to worry about breaking a little window?"

She huffed. That was exactly what she'd been worried about, but when he put it that way, it sounded silly. "Okay," she said. "Just be careful."

The darkness hid his face, but a low chuckle drifted back to her on the breeze. *Blaize Donovan, she thought, you're breaking and entering a haunted house with a rock and roll legend who also happens to be the sexiest man you've ever met. What are you doing for an encore?*

The sound of glass breaking shattered the moment. She saw Spyder climbing through the window, his body half in and half out of the dark opening, looking as if he was being swallowed alive by blackness. She stood frozen to the spot, afraid to follow him and afraid to be left behind. Suddenly she imagined shadows moving among the trees, felt eyes on her. Her skin rippled with goose bumps.

"Spyder?" It was little more than a squeak.

Nothing.

She started toward the broken window then stopped when she heard a loud thump from inside. She stared at the door and took a step back. The Jeep seemed a thousand miles away. She'd never make it there if someone—or something—came after her.

"Spyder," she called out. "Answer me."

The door creaked open. She distinctly remembered that it hadn't made a sound when she and Gate had been there earlier. The house was dying, deteriorating moment by moment. The creak was like a long, low moan as the door opened slowly to infinite midnight inside.

"Spyder?" Her voice was barely a whisper now. "Please."

The whisper turned to a shriek as a demonic phantom head floated toward her from the darkness. She screamed, even though she realized almost immediately that it was Spyder holding a flashlight beneath his chin and grinning like a schoolboy. He laughed and apologized, but her heart still pounded in her chest, threatening to burst right through her rib cage.

She came at him, fists flailing, connecting with hard muscles. "I hate you, you big jerk."

He lifted her up and held her trembling body against his own. His breath rippled along her cheek, warm and sensuous when he whispered, "You do not. You love me." He gripped her bottom and tugged her tight against him, pinning her against the heat of his body. "And you want me."

She squirmed in his arms, but there was no fight in her halfhearted struggle. He was right. She wanted him like she'd never wanted a man before. Just the sound of his voice made her weak. His breath tickling her cheek was a heady aphrodisiac.

He nudged his hips forward and held her tighter. She felt him press against her, hard and needy. "Spyder," she moaned and this time there was only desire in her voice.

He pressed her against the doorframe, pinning her there with the force of his body as he cupped her face between his hands, then brushed his thumbs along her jaw, back and forth, back and forth. His tongue parted her lips and he invaded her mouth in a hungry dive, grinding against her until she gasped.

The weight of his hands became heavy on her neck. The pressure increased for a moment, cutting off her airway. She choked and tore herself away, turning her face.

"Spyder," and this time his name was torn from her throat as a plaintive sob.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, sliding her slowly down his body but not letting go. He clutched her possessively. Neither of them spoke for a moment.

The night felt menacing, encroaching all around her. "Can we go inside?" she asked.

He nodded and took her hand, leading her into the dark interior. Then the lights came on, nearly blinding her. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the brightness. When they did, she saw Spyder, his hand still resting on the light switch.

"I told you the lights probably still worked," he said.

She looked at him. His eyes were dark with desire—and something else too. Shame? Guilt?

"Spyder?"

"I would never hurt you." He said it with such force that she wondered which one of them he was trying harder to convince. A vein throbbed at his temple. "You believe me, don't you?"

She couldn't resist the plea. "Yes, of course."

"I swear, Blaize. I'd cut off my own hand before I'd hurt you."

The words hung in the air, laden with import. His eyes implored her to believe him. "I swear," he repeated.

He looked so vulnerable. She wanted to hold him, comfort him, tell him everything would be all right. "I know," she said, needing to believe it as much as he did. "I know." She squeezed his hand. "It's okay." She didn't want to think about the fact that she *had* been afraid of him for a moment. She didn't want to think about what his temporary loss of control meant. They were running out of time.

He looked around and gave a low whistle. "Wow, you weren't kidding about this place, were you? Creepy to the max."

Blaize was relieved to have something else to talk about. She nodded. "If anything, it looks even worse now." It was true. The shadows were deeper, the dust thicker. Ghostly currents of cool air wrapped around their ankles like hungry cats, and pools of darkness swallowed the light.

"Want to split up and search?" he asked.

"No," she blurted, knowing that saying yes would damage the fragile trust between them. The truth was, she was more afraid of being alone than she was of him, despite what had just happened. Already she was blaming her fear on nerves, the darkness and her own apprehension. She'd overreacted, that's all.

She'd simply overreacted.

\* \* \* \* \*

A hundred and eighty-four miles to the north, a woman moved through the darkness, enjoying the solitude of the quiet summer night. From the time she'd arrived at the secluded community there'd always been someone by her side, watching her, guiding her, teaching her, telling her what to think, what to eat, what to feel. It was nice to hear her own thoughts for a change.

"Hello."

She jumped, startled by the voice. A young boy peeked around the corner of the gazebo.

"You frightened me," she said with a nervous laugh. "I thought I was all alone out here."

"So did I," he said. His smile lit up the night. He extended his hand. "I'm Joey."

She shook his hand, smiling at the very adult gesture.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Joy—" she started, then quickly corrected herself. "Season," she said. All neophytes were given a new name when they were accepted into the community. It symbolized letting go of your old life and starting anew. Since she'd come here undercover, the new name served her purpose well.



"Joy-Season," he repeated. "Very nice. I know a poem about the seasons. Wanna hear it?"

She nodded.

"January gray is here, like a sexton by her grave," he recited dramatically. "February bears the bier, March with grief doth howl and rave, and April weeps—but, O ye hours! Follow with May's fairest flowers."

"Shelley?" she asked.

Joey smiled and it was like sunshine breaking through the clouds. "Yes, one of my favorite poets. What's your old name?"

She looked around, making sure they were alone before she answered. "Joyce," she replied.

He nodded. "Both our names start with the letter J." He closed his hand with his pinkie extended and made a little dipping-swirling motion. "This is how you make a J in sign language," he told her. "In Spanish a J is pronounced like an H. In Madagascar the letter J sounds like dz."

He took a quick breath and continued, "In the English language, the letter J is the third least likely letter to be used, the letter Q the second least likely, and the letter Z the most unlikely. And since J is a Roman alphabet character, it doesn't exist in non-Roman alphabet-based languages such as Latin, Cyrillic and Kanji."

"That's a lot of information about one little letter," Joyce said.

"What's your birthday?" Joey asked without pausing a beat, obviously enjoying himself.

"April 19th."

"Year?"

"1971."

"April 19th, 1971," he recited, "Charles Manson is sentenced to life in prison and Sierra Leone becomes a republic. April 20th, 1971 the U.S. Supreme Court upholds a ruling to allow busing for the purpose of racial desegregation and Barbra Streisand records 'We've Only Just Begun'. April 21st—"

Joyce laughed and held up her hand. "Okay, okay. I'm impressed."

He smiled then leaned forward with a conspiratorial nod. "I have a photographic memory."

"I have a cat," she said, just as seriously.

"Cool!" He was all little boy again, eyes wide with delight. "What's your cat's name?"

"Joey," she said.

He giggled. "Is not!"

"Is too!"

"I know you're fooling."

"Oh? Are you psychic?" She was hoping to make him laugh again. Young boys should laugh a lot and she got the impression Joey didn't laugh very often.

"Sometimes." He frowned. "Sometimes I see things. Usually bad things. I don't much like it." Then he smiled, dispelling the negative energy with a wave and a cleansing breath. "But I like you, Joy-Season."

"I like you too, Joey. Would you walk me back to the compound?"

"I'd be honored," he said, standing and extending his arm with a courtly bow.

They walked in companionable silence through the meadows leading to the communal buildings. "How old are you, Joey," she asked.

"Twelve. I'll be thirteen on December 25th."

"Oh, I don't even have a photographic memory and I know who shares your birthday."

"Really?" he asked. "Who?"

"Someone else whose name begins with J?" she prodded.

He turned and tipped his head at her, a mischievous smile on his face. "That's not my real, *real* birthday," he said. "But that's our secret." He placed one finger over his lips. "Don't tell, okay?"

"I won't, but —"

"We're here," Joey said, quickly changing the subject.

"So we are. Thank you for walking me home."

"Season?" He used her spiritual name within the compound where they might be overheard. "I'm in need of a new evening assistant. I'll need to clear it with Mother, but would you be interested in the position?"

"Yes, I would." She'd only met Joey and already she felt very protective of him. He had a way of bringing out the nurturing side of her, which was strange considering she'd never been one to gush over kittens and babies and cute little things. Not like Blaize.

She shook her head. Blaize was the reason she'd come here in the first place. But somehow that all seemed so far away, overshadowed by the routine she'd fallen into here. It was comforting in a strange kind of way. Especially now that she'd met Joey. She felt drawn to him, as if there was something missing in his sterile life here that she could provide.

"I'll be in touch," he said, sounding very adult and businesslike. With a nod of his head, he turned and walked away.

Joyce watched him go, a frown on her face. Her instincts told her there was more to the young boy than met the eye.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize and Spyder stood at the upper landing of the staircase. They'd searched the entire house to no avail. It looked as if Pierce had left in a hurry, but he'd left nothing personal behind. No notes, no journals, no computer disks. Nothing.

"Damn," Spyder muttered. "I was sure we'd find *something*."

They were halfway down the steps when a muffled thump made them both stop and hold their breath. Blaize's eyes widened. "What—"

"Shhh..." Spyder put one finger to his lips and motioned for her to stay where she was. He left her side and moved furtively down the rest of the stairs, reached behind his back to pull the flashlight out of his waistband and hold it up like a bludgeon.

Blaize stood motionless, one hand gripping the stair rail, one clasped to her neck, feeling her pulse race in the hollow of her throat. Why had she ever agreed to come here? It had been one scare after another, and all for nothing. Her poor heart wasn't up to it. She felt vulnerable standing on the stairs. Danger could come from above or below and she couldn't protect herself. Why hadn't they brought something to use as weapons?

The thought was ludicrous. She wouldn't know what to do with a gun to save her life. And the thought of slashing at someone with a knife...

Spyder came back into view. He walked to the foot of the staircase, tucking the flashlight back into his waistband. "Nothing there," he grinned up at her. "There were some books on the floor that might have fallen off a shelf. Maybe that's what we heard."

She nodded and started downstairs, trying to calm her frazzled nerves. The sooner they got out of here, the better.

He took a step upward to meet her. "Ever do it on steps?" he asked. A sexy smile curled his lips, but there was something about the way the light was absorbed by his eyes, the way the shadows played across the sharp angles of his face, something about the intensity of his gaze, the tight line of his lips. She watched his hands. His fingers clenched and released rhythmically.

His hands. They suddenly seemed less erotic than before. More threatening. Deadly.

She knew she was letting her imagination get away from her again. This was Spyder. They'd made love in his bed just two nights ago. He'd offered to help her find Pierce. He'd sworn he'd cut off his own hand rather than hurt her...right here in this very room. How could she be afraid of him?

She moved slower, one small step at a time, as if slogging through oatmeal. There were only three steps separating them. She could still turn and run.

He reached out and closed the distance between them. "Hey," he said. "You're shaking."

There was no denying the apprehension she felt. She gave a nervous laugh, trying to edge around him. "I'll be better once we're out of here."

His grip tightened around her, bands of steel pinning her arms to her side. "Calm down," he said, his voice an emotionless monotone. "Just calm down."

She saw something flicker just beyond the edges of her vision, a quick spark that was there and then gone. She tried to step backward, but he held her tight. Another flash, this time from beyond the office doorway.

"I want to go," she said, her voice quivering. "Please. I just want to go." Her heartbeat was pounding now, pulsing and pumping all through her body. Adrenaline surged through her, sending flight signals to every nerve of her body.

"Not yet, baby," he murmured. "Just relax. Let me hold you. Let me touch you." He gripped a handful of hair at the nape of her neck and tugged, pulling her head back and baring her throat. His lips moved along her neck, leaving a hot trail of sizzling flesh in their wake. "Beautiful," he murmured. "Just beautiful."

*No, she thought. Not here. Not now. Not like this.*

He eased her back against the steps, leaning his weight over her. His lips captured her protests, filling her with heat. Her body betrayed her, responding with equal passion, meeting each thrust of his tongue with her own. Rumbling moans vibrated from his chest, sparking answering whimpers from her. She barely registered the flickers of light dancing at the periphery of her vision.

She was trapped beneath him. His hardness pressing into her, slamming her into the sharp edge of the stairs. He fumbled at his pants and she found the strength to tear her mouth from his. "No, Spyder. Please."

But it was too late. His hands closed around her neck, cutting off her air. *Tighter.* Pressure thrummed behind her eyes, beating at her temples, turning the world blood-red. She gasped for breath.

*Tighter.*

*Tighter.*

*Tighter.*

Her vision dimmed and she began to lose consciousness as her life drained away. The universe swirled to a single point of stillness in the distance. He was killing her. Just like in the book.

*Killing her...God!*

He threw his head back and roared and she saw firelight reflected in his eyes. Then, with a tremendous effort, he heaved himself off her and pushed her away. Her lungs screamed for air as she was thrown, half falling, half stumbling down the few remaining steps.

"Run," he yelled. "Get out of here. Get away from me!"

That's when she saw the fires springing up, dotting the stairs, the hallway, sneaking around the corners of each room.

"Get out NOW!" Spyder screamed, scrabbling down the steps toward her. She could see him fighting for control, coming after her with one breath and warning her

away with the next. He screamed for her to leave and threw the keys to the Jeep. They bounced off the wall and slid, landing at her feet.

“Go!”

She bent and grabbed the keys, then turned and ran, leaving Spyder behind to fight both the erupting fires and the rage that burned within his tortured soul.

## Part Three: Death and Destruction

## Chapter Twenty

Algernon had no idea how long his nephew had been standing in the doorway. The boy was quiet, watchful, his eyes taking in everything around him. Algernon had the feeling that Joey didn't miss anything. For some reason that terrified him. But lately everything frightened him. He was turning into a damn pansy.

He put his notebook aside and waved to the boy. "Come on in, Joey."

Joey hesitated, cocked his head to the side, then smiled and entered the room. He stopped in front of Algernon and glanced at the notebook. "What are you working on?"

Algernon's voice cracked. "The last book," he said. "The very last book." A dry chuckle rasped from his throat. "But I don't have to tell you that do I?"

He studied his nephew. Dressed in a navy blue and red striped polo shirt and jeans, golden hair tousled over his forehead, Joey looked like any other twelve year old. But Algernon knew that looks could be deceiving. His eyes were the eyes of an old soul and Algernon could gaze to their very depths and see what no one else knew.

Joey wasn't like other boys.

Algernon's palms grew clammy and his heartbeat quickened. Joey was a part of this, but only a small part. He had other things to worry about. Events were moving fast now. They were closing in on him, all of them. He could feel them coming, nipping at his heels, breathing down his neck. He knew there wasn't much time left. He clasped his curled fist over his heart, as if to keep it from galloping straight through his chest.

His mind tangled and turned in on itself. One moment everything was all so clear, and the next, nothing seemed to make sense. Sometimes his thoughts were dripping crimson, other times they were razor-edged slashes of India ink. He tried to remember what sanity felt like. Did it have a taste? How did it smell? Had he recognized it when he'd had it, or had he never really possessed it to begin with?

Joey sat on his lap. He didn't remember picking the child up or cradling him against his chest. He had no idea how much time had passed, or when he'd started talking, or what story he recited. It didn't really matter. The words tumbled out, one after the other, and Joey listened with wide-eyed attention.

Algernon did what he did best, spun filaments of dream, reality and imagination into gossamer stories – and when he was finished it broke his heart to realize he'd come to the end so soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gate glanced across the car at Blaize. She seemed distracted, her forehead creased with worry, eyes glancing back and forth. Her hands twisted in her lap, as if with a will of their own.

Last night she'd looked as if demons had chased her to his doorstep and he'd barely been able to convince her to get some rest. She'd wanted to leave for the commune right then and there, but he'd insisted she spend the night on his couch. Since he was driving, she didn't have much choice. Despite what little rest she may have gotten, she still looked exhausted.

He cleared his throat and gestured to the mottled bruises around her neck. "You want to talk about those?" he asked.

"No." She crossed her arms and rubbed them briskly, as if she were chilled straight to the bone. She stared off into the distance. Her lips moved, but no sound came out.

"Blaize, we need to talk."

She turned to him. Her eyes seemed older than they had yesterday. Whatever had happened to her had stripped her of a certain amount of innocence. "First I have to know something," she said. "Do you believe me now?"

He glanced over, but didn't quite meet her eyes. "I don't know."

"How can you say that? What about the explosion?"

He shrugged. "Could be a coincidence. It's like those predictions made by Nostradamus. You can translate them to mean almost anything you want, after the fact."

"You think that's what I'm doing? You think I'm twisting things around?"

"I didn't say that." He forced himself to remain calm. One of them had to, and he sensed that Blaize was tottering on the edge of hysteria. It's not that he didn't believe her. He was simply reserving judgment. Right now all they had was speculation. As a reporter he needed facts. But he knew better than to discount instinct. Some of his best scoops started out as a hunch.

"If you don't believe me," she said, her voice so low he had to strain to hear her, "then why are you here?"

"Good question," he said, wondering himself. "I guess it's for the same reason I choose to believe in life after death."

"Which is?"

"Because it's the smart choice." He rambled, hoping to take her mind off her worries. "If you're right and there's a hereafter, you can thumb your nose at the nonbelievers and gloat. But if they're right and there's no life after death, who'll know? Why place your bets on something that can't be proven?"

She gave a slow, deliberate nod. "So, you're hedging your bets. Have you thought about what we'll do if we're proven right?"



The way she looked at him made him wish he had a plan, any plan. "I have no idea," he admitted. He pointed to the glove compartment. "Why don't you dig out the map and we'll worry about what we're going to do when we get there."

They were quiet after that, both lost in their own thoughts. Despite their reasons for making this trip, Gate couldn't help but admire the scenery as they wound their way through the mountains.

"This view is incredible in autumn," he said.

Blaize didn't respond at first and Gate thought she hadn't heard him, but then she mumbled, "If we don't stop Pierce, the world may never see another autumn."

The conviction in her voice sent a chill down his spine. It didn't matter whether he believed or not. Blaize believed enough for both of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder moaned, twisting in and out of delirium. Memories came and went like brief flashes, before his mind found blessed numbness again. Briefly he'd resurface and hear his father's voice, feel the touch of a cool cloth on his forehead. But then he'd sink back into his own private nightmares again—nightmares of his escape from the inferno that had been Algernon Pierce's estate.

He'd barely gotten out alive. Small pools of fire had sprung up around him like a swarm of locusts from hell, circling and threatening and biting his ankles. He'd waited until he'd heard the Jeep tear away, kicking up gravel and dirt. He'd waited until he was sure Blaize was safe. It didn't matter where she went as long as she ran as far away from him as possible.

Somehow he'd made it out of the house. There was darkness and pain in between, but his mind refused to acknowledge what had happened inside, jumping forward to the moment he'd awakened on the lawn. It could have been seconds or hours or days. Long enough for the building to burn completely, folding in on itself with a roar. It burned fierce and hot and furious, and then the fire was snuffed, as if it had finally run out of energy. When he came to, nothing had been left behind but ashes and destruction.

As the night closed around him like a shroud, he tried to remember, tried to make sense of those last few hours. Somehow he'd staggered back to the main road, stumbling through the pain and haze with only one thought on his mind. *Blaize is safe. Blaize is safe. Thank God, Blaize is safe.*

Another jolt of pain sent him spinning forward through nightmare memories. He remembered coming to twice, not sure where he was or how long he'd lain there on the dirt road. Somehow he'd made his way to a deserted gas station. He remembered leaning against the crumbling cinder-block walls, fumbling in his pocket for a quarter to feed the pay phone, then standing there picking at the crumbling brick while he worked

up the strength to dial Dr. York's number. His first impulse had been to call his father, but he needed a doctor for what he had to do.

He'd felt powerless. Impotent. Finally he found the strength to lift his arm and punch in the numbers, grunting with each jab of his finger. The phone rang and rang and rang and he was sure the pain would take him down again if Dr. York didn't answer soon. When he finally did, Spyder nearly fainted with relief at the distinctive lisp that meant help was coming.

Dr. York came for him, just as he'd known he would. No questions asked. But when he pulled into the parking lot, he took one look at Spyder and his eyes widened in horror. "Oh my God, what happened?" The doctor jumped out of the car just in time to stop Spyder's downward slide along the wall. "Let me help you," he said, gripping Spyder beneath the arms.

Spyder leaned on the smaller man, gritting through the pain. "You may be the only one who can, Doc," he moaned.

And again, his mind refused to show him what came next, drawing away from the horror with protective fierceness. Don't look, don't think about it. Don't remember.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize absently rubbed the bruises on her neck. She didn't want to think about what could have happened. She didn't want to admit that she'd ignored all the warning signs and put herself in danger. She'd played right into Pierce's hands.

She didn't blame Spyder. She knew it wasn't his choice. This was all Pierce's doing. If anything, Spyder had shown superhuman strength by pushing her away when he had. The act might have cost him his own life.

A tremor of worry shot through her. Was he safe? She'd seen the glow of fire in her rearview mirror as she drove away from Pierce's estate. Had Spyder escaped? She'd felt like a coward running away, but there was nothing she could have done to save him without putting her own life in danger. Pierce's influence was too strong, too overpowering. The only thing she could do to save them both, if it wasn't already too late, was to find Pierce and stop the final book from being published.

"I think this is it," Gate said, interrupting her thoughts.

She looked up. For the past few hours they'd been traveling along an unmarked back road that snaked through the mountains. Although they seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, the turnoff that Gate indicated was marked by a rustic, hand-carved wooden sign. It said simply, "Gateway – Welcome Friends."

Blaize read the sign aloud then turned to Gate. "Are we friends?" she asked.

"Absolutely."

"Okay," she said. "Then let's go."

They turned onto the dirt road that wound deeper into the mountains, seeming to leave civilization far behind. There were no armed guards or sentries. No one stopped

them from entering. No one searched their car or asked for identification. There didn't seem to be anyone around for miles.

Eventually the road led them to a clearing. They slowed down and drove deeper into the glade, passing gardens, rock terraces and orchards of dwarf fruit trees. Clusters of people worked together. Some smiled and waved, then went back to their gardening. *Peaceful innocents*, Blaize thought. Little did they know they were harboring a maniac who threatened their very existence.

"It's like the Garden of Eden, isn't it?" Gate said.

Blaize pointed upward. "Assuming the Garden of Eden had security cameras, I guess you could say that."

"Kinda blows the element of surprise, huh?"

"Where Algernon Pierce is concerned," Blaize said, "there is no element of surprise."

Suddenly the road ended. There was a dirt turnoff beside it.

"Looks like we go on foot from here on in," Gate said, parking the car and releasing his seat belt.

Blaize pointed to a robed figure approaching. "And here comes the welcoming committee to greet us."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Gate and Blaize stepped out of the car and watched the figure approach. He wore a simple saffron-colored robe belted over jeans. As he drew closer he raised his hand in greeting and smiled. The smile stopped at the corners of his lips, never reaching his eyes or softening his sharp features. Blaize studied him, her eyes narrowed. His hair was the color of dried blood and his unblinking copper eyes looked like pennies that had settled too long at the bottom of a scum-coated pond. And yet...there was something so familiar about him.

She frowned in concentration. Where had she seen him before? The harder she tried to place the memory, the more it eluded her, slipping in and out of her grasp like a darting minnow.

He stopped and held out his hand to them. "Greetings friends," he said.

Blaize only nodded. She balked at the thought of his hand closing around hers. She was afraid she wouldn't be able to escape from his clutches if that happened.

Gate, however, seemed to have no such qualms. He shook the man's hand and introduced the two of them. "We're here to speak with Algernon Pierce," he said, getting right to the point.

The man, who'd introduced himself as Oswald Gaderian, frowned and made a regretful sound. "I'm so sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "Mr. Pierce is in seclusion here recovering from a, um...nervous episode. He's asked that we keep all visitors away, and of course we'll do all we can to honor his request."

"This is an emergency," Gate insisted. "It's imperative that we speak with Mr. Pierce as soon as possible." Gate handed Gaderian his card. "I'm sure if you tell him I'm here, he'll agree to speak with us."

The card disappeared inside the man's hand and Blaize knew he had no intention of showing it to Pierce. She could see the frustration on Gate's face and decided to try another tactic. "Perhaps we could speak with Mother Moon?" she asked.

Gaderian swept his gaze from Gate to her. The cold copper caress made her skin crawl. "Again, I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said. "Mother Moon is fasting and meditating in preparation for Friday's sermon," he smiled that chilling smile, "which of course you're welcome to attend if you're interested in learning more about our spiritual community."

She could see Gate start to protest and spoke up before he got them thrown out. "Of course we'd love to know more about your community. We've come a long way to speak with Mother Moon."

"Then I insist you spend the night here," Gaderian said. "Let me show you to the guest quarters. If you'd like you can clean up after your long trip before I arrange a tour of the compound."

"That sounds wonderful," Blaize said, ignoring Gate's stunned expression.

Gaderian led them to the center of the community housing quarters. They followed a winding pathway before the woods opened up to reveal a small, private lake set like a sparkling jewel before them. Three-story, wood-framed houses with wraparound porches all faced the lake.

"This was a private nursing facility for tuberculosis patients many years ago," Gaderian explained. "They were called 'cure cottages', because the clean mountain air and spring water were thought to have curative effects on the patients." He pointed to rows of wooden Adirondack chairs along the decks overlooking the lake. "Now our students find those same natural elements beneficial to their meditation and enlightenment studies."

Despite her concerns, Blaize could feel herself relaxing. The combination of soft breezes, whispering pines and the murmuring hush of the water along the shore sent answering vibrations through her body, soothing and calming her.

Gaderian showed them each to a simple room furnished with little more than a cot and a desk. An arched doorway led to a small deck with wrought iron railings and an incredible view of the lake.

"You're free to join us for dinner downstairs in an hour," Gaderian told them. "Someone will see to your immediate needs. After dinner I'll be happy to show you around and answer any questions you might have."

When he left, Gate turned to Blaize. "What are we doing here?"

She shrugged. "It was obvious he wasn't going to let us talk to Pierce *or* his sister. I figured we might as well join them since he extended an invitation."

"This place gives me the creeps," Gate said with a shudder.

Blaize went out onto the deck and looked around. "Where do you think Pierce is?" she asked.

There were another dozen or so buildings just like this one lined up along the lake, connected by a winding path. Blaize figured each one could hold at least twenty-five or thirty people. That would make the population of Gateway somewhere between three and five hundred strong. She gathered from the size of the gardens they'd passed that the community was self-sufficient, although they'd seen other vehicles that could be used to travel between here and the nearest town for other supplies.

"It really is peaceful here," she said, leaning against the railing and lifting her face to the gentle breeze.

"Yeah, a real utopia," Gate said. "So why do I feel like we've just walked into a trap?"

A soft voice interrupted. "You're free to leave at any time, just like everyone here."

They turned and saw a woman standing in the doorway. The smile on her face softened the statement. Her caramel-colored hair was pulled into twin braids that draped over her chest. A wicker basket hanging from one arm held towels and bath supplies. Matching robes were draped over the other. She placed the robes on a chair and the basket on the desk.

She looked at them, her face a study of innocence. "My name is Clover. Is there anything I can help you with while you're here?"

"Do you know where we can find Algernon Pierce?" Blaize asked.

"I'm afraid not," Clover replied, still practicing her Mona Lisa smile.

Blaize tried to draw Clover into conversation. "How long have you lived here?" she asked.

Clover busied herself, laying out the personal items she'd brought along as she answered. "I've lived here all my life."

"Really?"

A nod. "My life began when Mother Moon found me."

"But what about your home? Your family?" Blaize asked.

When Clover moved to the doorway, Blaize thought she'd leave without answering. But the woman turned and replied, "This is the only family I need. They take care of all my needs."

She seemed to be reciting a school lesson. But her eyes lit up each time she mentioned Mother Moon and always there was that condescending smile on her face.

By the time they were done with dinner, Blaize had seen more pearly-white smiles than in all the toothpaste ads ever printed. It seemed as much a part of their uniforms as the identical robes everyone wore.

"What the hell do they have to be so damned happy about?" Gate asked when they returned to their rooms.

"Maybe they're naked under those robes."

He didn't laugh. "You know what I hate even more than those smug smiles plastered on their faces?" he asked.

Blaize moved back to the deck, drawn by the view. The sun seemed to be hovering inches above the lake's surface, as if admiring its own reflection.

Without waiting for her reply, Gate answered his own question. "I hate their intolerance, their belief that theirs is the one true path, the only noble cause. Anyone who can't be converted is excluded."

"So," she replied. "We pretend to let them convert us. Meanwhile we find a way to get to Pierce."

Gate grunted. "How? We didn't learn anything new from the happy-happy joy-joys downstairs."

"Maybe you didn't," she said with a victorious grin. "But I did."

"Oh?"

"I learned which house Mother Moon lives in. And I bet we'll find her brother there too."

"What are we waiting for?"

Gate started to strip off his robe, but Blaize stopped him. "No, don't take it off. We'll blend in better this way."

"Yeah, you're right," he said. "But I still feel stupid."

"Did that Guadalajara guy say he was coming back to give us a tour of the place?"

"Gaderian," Gate corrected her. "Oswald Gaderian. And yeah, he said he would meet us back here after dinner."

Blaize grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the door. "Then let's get out of here before he does. He gives me the creeps something fierce."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thpyder, let me give you something."

"No. No pain pills," Spyder gasped, insisting on the one requirement he'd made the doctor swear to uphold.

"God, why? How —"

"Just do it," Spyder cried. "Do it NOW!"

He did.

And then there was pain. Unbelievable, unbearable pain. Biting, screaming, gnawing pain. Pain like nothing Spyder had ever felt before. Pain that shifted from razor-blade fire to ice-cold steel, from sharp to sharper to *oh God I can't take another second of it* sharpest. It teased and twisted a thousand nerve endings and made death seem like an angel of mercy. He drifted through layers of consciousness, jerking up and down through shifting thresholds of pain, never quite reaching full lucidity before the pain brought him home to hell again.

When he floated into semi-awareness, there was one name that kept him from losing it completely, one name that gave him the strength to hold on despite the mind-numbing agony. One name that kept him from taking the pills that would ease the pain.

"Blaize!" he screamed, the sound raw and harsh with anguish.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Dr. York wiped his brow with the back of his wrist. "It's done," he said, his voice breaking.

But Spyder didn't hear. He was blessedly unconscious again and couldn't answer any of Dr. York's muttered questions. He wouldn't have anyway. The doctor wouldn't understand. No one could possibly understand.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was twilight as Gate and Blaize made their way through the compound. The sky was slipping from blue to gray and shadows dogged their footsteps. Maybe it was all the smiling faces over dinner or the bubbling hush of water lapping the shore, or maybe she just had no adrenaline left to spare, but Blaize felt as if they were playacting rather than sneaking through the woods in search of Algernon Pierce. It was hard to believe anything bad could happen in such a tranquil setting.

Blaize shivered, then stopped and drew a sharp breath. She could have sworn she'd heard her name, but it sounded like a death cry. A chill crawled up and down her spine.

"What is it?" Gate asked.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her head cocked as if listening. "Something...something's different," she said. "Do you feel it?"

He shook his head. "I don't feel anything. What do you mean?"

"It's like..." She stuttered, trying to explain what she was feeling. "It's as if I've been pulling on a rope when suddenly one strand snaps and breaks. Just one. Not enough to break the rope, but suddenly its hold isn't quite as strong anymore. The pressure eases just a tiny bit."

She stared at Gate, her eyes glowing with conviction in the moonlight. "Something's changed," she said with a nod. "Something has definitely changed."

"What? What's changed?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I just know that the good guys scored a direct hit. We broke through one strand of the rope Pierce has been binding us with and weakened his hold somehow."

What she didn't say was that she was sure Spyder had something to do with it. It was his voice she'd heard calling her name, his pain she'd felt. And something more. Something horrible and irrevocable.

She reached out to Spyder with her mind, trying to find him again, but whatever consciousness had connected them for a brief moment was broken. He was nowhere to be found.

"Blaize?" Gate squeezed her shoulder. "Hey, are you okay?"

She shook her head to clear away the voices. "Yeah." How could she be so sure it was Spyder? She'd been hearing voices and seeing visions ever since the accident. It could just be another episode of bruised-brain syndrome.

Suddenly the darkness lost its tranquility. The night felt ripe with danger, swirling like toxic mist around her ankles. She felt exposed, as if unseen watchers measured her every move. And she wanted, more than anything, to be anyplace but here.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Gate was impressed. He could see how much Blaize wanted to turn back. But she didn't. She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders and walked straight ahead, taking the lead. They wound their way along the perimeter of the lake, past four of the communal housing quarters. Between the fourth and fifth was a path that moved away from the lake toward a cleft in the woods. The buildings here were different. Gate had the impression that this was the core of the commune, where social events and business activities were held. There were buildings that looked like meeting halls, classrooms and a chapel.

He watched Blaize walk purposefully down the path. If she was afraid, she didn't show it. Her back was straight, her face determined. He thought again of those bruises around her neck. She never did say what happened, but it was obvious someone had tried to strangle her. Who was she protecting?

He'd like to get his hands on the bastard who'd done it. He may not believe her theories, but he admired her guts and he'd be damned if he'd let anyone hurt her. He wouldn't tell her that, though. She'd probably slap him silly for even assuming she needed his protection.

She strode into the open courtyard, as if daring anyone to stop her. In the center of the courtyard, water trickled from a stone fountain. Clusters of wildflowers surrounded the base, and a granite statue rose from the center of the stone pool, upraised arms lifted toward the moon.

Gate stared at the statue, mesmerized by the flowing dance of moonlight on water. Shadows shifted, holding him in a trance as darkness blotted the moon from the sky. His eyes glazed over and for a moment he seemed to see the ghostly images of phantom children sitting around the edge of the fountain, splashing and laughing and raising their arms in worship. Then, just as quickly, the moon slid from behind the clouds, dispersing the vision and bathing the statue in gossamer moonlight.

He shook his head. Damn. Blaize's visions were rubbing off on him, now.

They stopped. Blaize cocked her head, a frown creasing her forehead. The only sound Gate heard was the whispering harmony of water and wind. She was right. It was peaceful and calm here. It was hard to believe they could be in any danger.

"What—"

"Shhh." She held her finger to her lips, listening.

Then he heard it too, nearly hidden beneath the babble of water tripping over stone—a voice that was almost, but not quite, human.

Blaize jumped at the sound. Gate looked at her. She was trembling, her eyes wide and watchful. She looked tired to the bone. The moonlight emphasized pale blue smudges beneath her eyes.

"Who's there," he called, realizing he'd slipped into his high school John Wayne impersonation. If Blaize noticed, she didn't comment.

Then the voice again. Two words.

He concentrated, but couldn't make out the command. *Don't move?* Maybe. But it didn't sound like a threat.

Gate had no intention of moving. He reached out and found Blaize's hand and gave it a squeeze. He didn't know whether the gesture comforted her, but it sure made him feel better.

He tried to concentrate. There was something about that voice. It sounded cocky, sure of itself, a little challenging. And it sounded vaguely familiar.

Blaize pointed to the porch of the house farthest from them where a bluish glow flickered. That was the direction from which the voice had come. And then Gate figured it out. He'd spent enough hours being taunted by that very same voice.

Gate released the breath he'd been holding and tugged on Blaize's hand, pulling her toward the porch. A smile curved the corners of his lips. "Checkmate," he said.

A tousled blond head of curls lifted and turned toward them. Blue eyes reflected the glow of the laptop computer screen. "Hi!" the boy called out.

"Who's winning," Gate asked, "you or the computer?"

"It doesn't matter," the boy said, his face lighting up with an irrepressible smile. "The computer is too predictable. There's no challenge."

The boy cocked his head, charming them both with a crooked grin. "Do you play chess?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder sat straight up in bed, screaming, his skin slick with perspiration. How long had he been delirious with pain? How many days since he'd chased Blaize away, out of the burning building and away from him? How many times had he relived the same nightmare?

It was the nightmare that had awakened him again. The same one every time. He was back at Pierce's house, his hands around Blaize's neck, unable to control the urge to strangle her. Then pushing her away, throwing the keys, watching her scramble for them. Then she stopped and looked at him, holding the keys but not moving.

"Run," he'd screamed. "Get out."

But she'd stood there for another moment as his hands clenched and unclenched, wanting nothing more than to wrap themselves around that soft, white neck and squeeze the life out of her. He'd turned and punched his fist through the wall in a

howling fit of rage, trying to jolt himself out of a desire that was growing stronger by the moment, a desire he might not be able to fight as more people read the book and turned fiction into reality. Finally Blaize turned and ran.

Still his hands clenched and squeezed and he crawled, making his way toward the door, knowing she'd come back if he called her and if she did, he might not be able to stop himself this time. Another pit of fire sprang to life beside him and in a fit of rage so intense it threatened to consume him, he screamed and jammed his hand deep into the fire, holding it there until it stopped clenching and squeezing, and he held it and held it and screamed until he passed out from the pain and shock.

When he'd regained consciousness, Blaize was gone. She was safe from him. He lay sprawled outside on the lawn of Pierce's house, choking on the thick black smoke and ash rising from the ruins. His left hand was a charred and melted claw of agony, mutilated and burned beyond recognition.

He remembered calling Dr. York, finding his way through a haze of shock and pain to the only place he could go without having to answer questions. There'd been no doubt about what had to be done, no fight left. It hadn't been easy, but he'd convinced Dr. York to perform the surgery. The pain had been worth it. It meant Blaize was safe now – safe from him, at least.

The last thing he remembered before losing consciousness was making the sign of the cross with his right hand.

His good hand.

*His only remaining hand.*

A concerned voice broke through his reverie. "You awake, Tommy?"

The name sounded like an endearment. Spyder smiled and waved. "Come on in, Pops," he said. His voice was raw and hoarse, as if he hadn't used it in decades.

Pops sat beside the bed, looking everywhere but at Spyder's bandaged hand. Spyder noticed that his father's face seemed older, with sharp, downward lines newly carved into the skin. The pain on the older man's face tugged at Spyder's heart and he swore that once this was over he'd never put his father through that kind of anxiety again. He'd settle down here on the farm, put his heart into writing some new music, maybe raise a family. He'd make Pops proud.

Then he remembered that if he didn't help Blaize fight Pierce, there would be no future to plan at all – for any of them. He had to get out of this bed. He had to help Blaize. Spyder propped himself up, wincing at the pain and fighting a wave of dizziness. "How long –"

Pops put a gentle, restraining hand on his shoulder. "Less than twenty-four hours," he said. "You're not ready to get out of bed yet."

"I have to get to Blaize." Even those few words were an effort.

"Blaize is all right," Pops assured him, digging into his pocket. "The Jeep's parked outside. I found the keys and this note on the seat." He handed a slip of paper to Spyder.

It took a moment for Spyder to make his eyes focus on the note.

Spyder,

I don't blame you. It wasn't your fault. I'm going with Gate to find Pierce and Mother Moon. We'll stop this somehow. I promise. And you were right—I do love you.

Blaize

Those few words tore at his heart. He ran his fingertips over the handwriting. It was so much like Blaize herself—feminine but strong, rising with a strong sense of purpose, then flowing forward again.

Tears of frustration burned his eyes. She needed him and he couldn't help her.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm a darn good chess player," Gate told the boy, who'd introduced himself as Joey. "And I'd love to challenge you to a game of chess, but right now we're looking for someone. Do you know where we can find Algernon Pierce?"

"Uncle Algernon?" the boy said. "He's not a very good chess player."

*Uncle Algernon?* So this must be Mother Moon's son, Blaize realized. She reached back in her memory for the scene she'd read on Pierce's computer. Was there any mention of a child? Was the boy in danger? She had a sudden urge to snatch him away, to grab him and run to the car and drive as fast and as far away as they could. But that wouldn't solve the problem. They had to get to Pierce and destroy every last trace of the final book. Running wouldn't do any good.

"Could you take us to see your uncle?" Blaize asked. The boy turned his attention to her and she gasped at the power of his gaze. She'd run across people with that irresistible kind of magnetism before, but never one so young.

Joey made a tent of his fingers and pretended to consider the request before answering. "Only if you promise to come back and talk to me when you're done." He held Blaize in place with the hypnotic pull of sapphire eyes, then released her just as quickly with a blink. "I know lots of secrets," he said, sounding older than his years. A mischievous smile curled his lips before bubbling over into laughter. The illusion shattered and he was just a little boy again.

Joey stood and held out his hand. Blaize took it and a wave of tenderness washed over her. She closed her hand around his and held tight. *I'll protect you*, she vowed, then wondered where that thought had come from.

Joey opened the door and they stepped inside. Once her eyes adjusted to the brightness, Blaize saw they were in a kitchen. It was bright and airy, thick with the warm scent of apples and cinnamon. It felt like coming home.

Maybe she'd overreacted. Maybe everything would be all right after all. Maybe...

Oswald Gaderian pushed through the door in the kitchen, filling it with menacing bulk. "Ah, there you are," he said, staring straight through her with that cold, unblinking gaze.

She tightened her grip on Joey's hand, taking an involuntary step backward.

"I thought we'd lost you," Gaderian said. But his eyes held a warning—*You can't escape.*

Joey piped up. "I'm taking them to see Uncle Algernon."

Gaderian smiled down at the boy. "I'm afraid your uncle isn't feeling up to company tonight," he said, turning his gaze back to Blaize and Gate, as if daring them to contradict him. "Perhaps another time."

Then he addressed Joey again. "I believe Season is looking for you. She said something about having found some Egyptian hieroglyphic translations?"

"Oh!" Joey bounced with excitement. He turned to Blaize. "Did you know that the Egyptians covered the walls of their tombs and caskets with magic spells? They believed that the word was the deed and that writing it made it become real."

Blaize shivered. The boy's statement struck too close for comfort. She looked at Gate, who was staring at Gaderian.

"Why don't I walk you back to your rooms?" Gaderian suggested. There was the hint of a threat beneath his words.

"That won't be necessary," Gate replied with a challenging glare. "We know the way." With that parting shot he led Blaize back onto the porch before Gaderian could insist on coming with them.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

Gate kept walking, pulling her with him and speaking out of the side of his mouth like an extra in a Mafia film. "We keep walking," he said. "It's obvious we're not going to see Pierce tonight."

"But—"

"No buts, Nancy Drew. Gaderian has his eyes on us tonight. Maybe tomorrow he'll be too busy to follow us around and we can track down Pierce. Tonight, I suggest we lay low and plan our next move."

They made their way toward the lake in silence, walking past the moon-worshipping statue and into the shelter of pines. Blaize fumed, frustrated that Gaderian had stopped them. And Gate's "Nancy Drew" comment stung. If he thought she enjoyed trekking all over the mountains in search of some elusive author who may or may not hold the fate of the worlds in his hands, well he just had another —

"I'm sorry," Gate said. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

His apology took the edge off her annoyance. "Well," she hemmed, "considering what we've been through these past few days, a little snapping is understandable." She couldn't really blame him. "Gate? What do you make of that boy?"

He shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"Just a feeling I have," she said. "I get the impression he's in some kind of danger and needs our help."

"Tell him to get in line. First we have to save the world, remember?"

"Funny."

"I'm a funny guy. I get invited to every Apocalypse for comic relief." He grinned. "Wouldn't hurt you to crack a smile, you know."

"Sorry, it's my first Apocalypse. I'm not an old pro like you are."

"Rookie," he snickered.

She started to laugh. And it was like opening a dam and letting the water flow, first with a trickle, then with a gush as the laughter bordered on hysteria. Then, without missing a beat, she crossed some invisible emotional line and began crying, great gulping sobs that shook her entire body.

Gate pulled her to his chest and held her until the emotional storm subsided into short, strangled gasps. He murmured comforting sounds and stroked her back until she wrestled her emotions under control again.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice sounding bruised even to her own ears.

"It's okay. You've been under a lot of stress. Feel better now?"

She gave a deep, shuddering sigh. He was right. She had been through a lot. And she did feel better. Cleansed, somehow.

"You ready to talk about those bruises now?"

She brought her hand to her throat, caressing the still-tender skin. "It's part of all this. It was written, and like the Egyptians say, once written the deed becomes real."

"You really believe that, don't you." It wasn't a question.

"I do."

He gestured to her neck. "And the person who did this to you?"

"He didn't believe me at first either. Not until the deed became real and he couldn't stop his hands from doing what Pierce had written. Now he believes."

Thinking about Spyder helped her. She'd be damned if she'd let Pierce destroy them. She had a sudden urge to talk to him, to see if he was all right. She'd seen a telephone in the community room.

When they reached the guest house, Blaize hesitated. "I'll meet you upstairs," she told Gate. "I need to make a call."

He frowned, looking pointedly at the bruises on her neck. She didn't budge and he finally nodded and turned to go upstairs. When he was gone, she dialed Spyder's number and waited.

After three rings, his answering machine picked up. Her heart fluttered at the sound of his voice. She stammered, unsure of herself, then left a message. She was just hanging up the telephone when Gate came back downstairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Season placed an injured kitten on Joey's lap. The kitten's pitiful mewl tore at Joey's heart. He stroked the soft fur, feeling his hands tingle along the silky coat, over the kitten's head, down its back...*there!* He gasped. It was like encountering a razor's edge beneath a mound of silk. A spike of pain emanated from the kitten's leg, guiding Joey to the injury.

"It's okay," he murmured, soothing the kitten's cries as he focused his attention on the wounded leg, his hand hovering inches above the injury, finding the edges and probing its depth. It was dark and deep and stretched to meet him, a howling shadow, gripping him, eclipsing him.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, gathering strength. From deep within him a surge of energy grew. It started from the center of his belly and rose upward, expanding into his chest and following the pathways from his arms to his hands. They seemed to glow with a heavenly aura. With each breath he took the power grew, rippling outward until finally a wave of light flowed through him.

He battled the darkness with light, instinctively finding the weakness and healing it, feeling it shrink beneath his will until it was no more than a weak throb, then a pinpoint, then nothing. The kitten's fur bristled and a throaty purr vibrated beneath Joey's fingertips.

As quickly as it had begun, the power ebbed. Joey sank back in his chair, drained. A tiny pink tongue swiped a rough trail across the back of his hand. The kitten wobbled once, then hopped off his lap and scampered away.

Season nodded and gave him a smile of approval. Although Joey wasn't sure what had just happened, he knew he'd done exactly what was expected of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gate had heard Blaize on the phone. *Spyder, huh? He must be the one.* It didn't surprise Gate, considering the paparazzi shots he remembered of the street-brawling musician who stared into the camera with hostile, booze-bloody eyes.

What *did* surprise him was that Blaize could get sucked into that. Despite her crazy suspicions about Pierce, she seemed far too levelheaded to get caught up in that parade. But if the telephone message he'd overheard was any indication, she apparently had every intention of going back for more.

*Not on my shift,* he thought. If they got out of here alive she could do whatever she wanted, but he wouldn't let anyone put their hands around her neck while he was around. Not even some rock legend who thinks he can get away with murder.

He cleared his throat, getting Blaize's attention. "Well," he said. "If I wasn't fully involved before, I sure am now." He handed her a creased slip of paper. "I found this lying on my cot."

She stared for a moment, almost as if she knew what the note said before she unfolded it. He watched her eyes widen when she read the words, saw a shudder ripple through her body. Her lips moved and he mouthed the words along with her.

GATE WAYNE

\*YOU\* have been chosen

Welcome to "THE PLAY"

Act IV: The Coming



## Chapter Twenty-Three

Celeste sat beside Joey's bed. No matter what their daily routine, their evenings were special. These were her most cherished times. During the day Joey was in training, one of Mother Moon's special disciples, but at night he was still her little boy.

She tucked the blankets around her son's chin and ran her fingers through his hair, ruffling the silky strands. He was still her baby, far too young to be burdened with so much responsibility. But there was nothing she could do about it now. The time had come and there was no turning back.

"Are you singing your new song at the prayer meeting tomorrow night?" she asked.

A flush of excitement colored his cheeks. "Yes. I've been practicing with the choir." He sat up, bubbling with anticipation. "I can't wait. Do you really like it?"

"I love it," she assured him. "And so will everyone else. It's a beautiful song and you have a lovely voice."

Although Joey's eyes drooped, she couldn't bear to leave him yet. Not tonight. There were so many things she wanted to say. But there wasn't time. She had dedicated her life to his training and had to trust that he was ready. He was strong, responsible and dedicated. And now it was time for him to accept his duty.

He frowned. "Are you sure it's okay?" he asked. "If you'd rather I preach with you..."

She smiled. "No, I have a special sermon planned for tomorrow. You can serve me better in song." *Besides, she thought, there would be plenty of time for him to preach alone after tomorrow night.*

She almost reconsidered. She'd spent the last twelve years of her life preparing for this moment and it was too late to turn back now. Celeste had known from the moment of conception that Joey was special. She'd had dreams throughout her pregnancy foretelling his eventual rise to power as the religious and political leader of the world. She'd formed this community as his training ground and surrounded him with dedicated followers. His whole existence had prepared him for his destiny. Now his time had come and her job was nearly finished. She knew he was strong enough to accept his place in the world, with or without her.

They talked longer than usual, and before she left she held him tight, not wanting to let go. Instead of her usual goodnight, she whispered softly, "Goodbye, son."

But he was already asleep and didn't hear her leave.

She stood outside his room for a moment, leaning against the closed door. The tears in her eyes were not for herself. They were for the son she could no longer protect from

his fate. He'd have many trials ahead, trials that would make him a stronger person and ensure his future leadership of the world. The next few days were pivotal. Although he'd be surrounded by followers, he'd have to make crucial decisions on his own.

She barely registered the hand on her shoulder, the gentle voice at her ear. "Are you all right, Mother Moon?"

She studied the face of one of Joey's newest advisors. Season was devoted to Joey and he trusted her completely. This was a woman with steel beneath the softness of her face, a woman of fierce loyalties. She would do well.

"I need to speak with you privately, Season," Celeste said.

"Of course, Mother Moon. But I shouldn't leave my post."

Celeste smiled. Very good. She would do fine. "We can talk here." She took Season's hand. "You're very loyal to my son."

"I'd guard him with my life," Season assured her.

"That may be necessary."

Celeste watched the emotions cross the woman's face, from fear to concern to steely determination. "No one will hurt him," Season assured her. "I promise you."

"You realize that Joey is the new Messiah. There will be people who will try to destroy him. Already there are spies here in the community, intruders whose presence puts him in danger."

"Who?" The question was sharp and probing. "Who are they?"

"You'll know them when you see them. And when the time comes, you may be the only one standing between them and Joey."

Season squeezed Celeste's hand. "No one will hurt him. Not as long as there's breath in my body."

Celeste stared into the woman's eyes. There was no doubt she meant what she said. She nodded. "Very good."

"There's something else," Season said. "Something you're not telling me."

She was very observant, Celeste realized. But as much as she would have liked to confide in someone, on this night of all nights, she couldn't. Events were set in place that couldn't be tampered with. And time was running out.

She needed to speak with her brother before this night was over. She had to bring him the final set of tapes.

Tomorrow would be here soon enough.

Season watched Mother Moon walk away. Her main concern was the boy and his safety, but there was something else too. Something she should remember...but it was eclipsed by her concern for the boy she'd quickly come to love.

She couldn't remember how long she'd been at the compound. Days had passed, each one like the other in a lulling sameness of regular routines, smiling robed figures and hours spent training Joey.

She'd heard rumors that Pierce had arrived a week ago, but the desire to find him became less urgent with each day that passed. She couldn't remember why it had been important to begin with, or why she'd come here in the first place.

The more she tried to focus, the heavier her head became. She finally gave up and shook the dullness away. It didn't matter. Joey was all that mattered now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gate was wrong. They didn't make any progress the next day. They were never alone and Blaize wondered whether there were direct orders from Oswald Gaderian to keep them under strict watch at all times.

Everywhere they went they were shadowed by disciples who bubbled with spiritual enlightenment and passion for Mother Moon and her teachings. In bits and pieces they learned more about the Gateway spiritual community. They were ushered from classrooms where sweet-faced children were given one-on-one mentoring, to organic gardens and orchards that provided all the vegetables, herbs and fruit for the community, and cottages where artisans crafted everything from jewelry to furniture.

Everywhere they went there was excitement about the upcoming prayer meeting and novitiate ceremony being held that evening. And everywhere they went they were met by the same knowing smiles.

Blaize had a bad feeling about that evening's prayer meeting, remembering the scene she'd read on Pierce's computer screen.

"That's when it'll happen," she told Gate. "Tonight. Unless we can stop it."

She made no attempt to interpret the look he gave her and he didn't voice whatever concerns he felt. He must have seen the determination on her face. There was more at stake now. She couldn't shake the feeling that the child needed her protection. The events that had pulled them all together were now rushing toward a climax, and she was convinced the boy was in the center of it all.

The feeling grew as the day wore on. By dinnertime she gave up all pretense and found Gaderian. She pleaded with him to take her to Mother Moon. Barring that, she begged him to send a message to Mother Moon not to go on stage tonight. "Her life is in danger," she insisted.

Gaderian didn't ask the questions she expected. He didn't ask why she thought Mother Moon was in danger, or what danger she was in.

"Whatever will be, will be," he assured her.

Blaize wanted to shove his spiritual mumbo jumbo down his throat. Frustrated, she stormed out, away from his knowing looks and condescending smile.

Gate wasn't much better, asking just what Blaize intended to do in the event someone aimed a gun at Mother Moon, since they'd left their bulletproof vests at home. She didn't tell him he was funny this time.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time they were ushered into the full auditorium, Blaize was a strumming mass of nerves. She kept her eyes peeled for Joey, but there was no sign of him.

The room was a sea of robes in every color of the rainbow. She knew that each color signified the person's level of enlightenment and their order within the community. Wearing the muddy brown robes of the uninitiated and spiritually unenlightened, Blaize and Gate were seated in the far back. But even all the way back there, Blaize could feel the buzz of excitement around her. It reminded her of the night she and Joyce had gone to the concert and seen Spyder perform. Her heart gave a little lurch remembering her first glimpse of him, and how she'd known even then that they were destined to meet. That conviction was still strong inside her.

Shaking her head, she focused on the people around her. She could feel their combined concentration, see the look of hopeful expectation on their faces, as if they were expecting a miracle in their midst. She caught glimpses of Oswald Gaderian moving through the crowd like a Master of Ceremonies. Candlelit votives shimmered in carved niches evenly spaced along the walls.

Hushed tones filled the room—shuffling feet, whispered voices and rustling robes. When hymn booklets were passed out, she folded hers in half and was about to tuck it into the deep pocket of her robes when a familiar message jumped out at her. Her gasp cut sharply through the low murmur of the auditorium. She opened and folded the booklet again, watching the simple message transform into something more sinister. She grabbed Gate's arm and pointed to the booklet's headline—WELCOME FRIENDS TO THE GATEWAY. Below that greeting were four simple words.

PRAYER  
LOVE  
AND  
YOU

Blaize folded the page in half again, the sharp edge of the paper cutting down the center of the hymnal's greeting. She held it up for Gate to read, running her finger down the message.

WELCOME  
TO THE

P  
L  
A

## Y

An icy shiver crept along her spine. "This is it," she whispered. "This is the place where it all comes together."

They both scanned the auditorium. It was hard to imagine danger lurking among such blissfully serene faces, but Blaize knew without a doubt that a killer had entered the room—a killer who was at this very moment hiding among them.

"Do you see Pierce?" she asked Gate.

He shook his head. "No, but that doesn't mean anything. Why would he kill his own sister?"

"Who knows why? I don't think he's the man with the gun. But he wrote the scene and so far everything he's written has come true. So, even if he doesn't pull the trigger himself, he's guilty of murder just the same."

Gate looked unconvinced, but alert. Before either of them could get up, the crowd erupted in applause as Mother Moon and Joey walked across the stage. Blaize was surprised at how young the religious leader was. She'd expected an older woman, for some reason. But, although Mother Moon's eyes were those of an old soul, she barely looked old enough to have a twelve-year-old son. There was something bruised and vulnerable and almost childlike beneath the leader's powerful presence.

As Mother Moon took her place on stage, the energy in the room was electric. Waves of love and devotion passed from the crowded auditorium to the stage and back again. Blaize was almost swept up in the euphoric rush, but her thoughts were focused on where danger lay coiled in wait. She barely heard Mother Moon on stage preaching to the masses.

Mother Moon's voice rolled strong and clear over the room. "We know that thoughts are energy," she intoned. "Energy seeks out *like* energy, collecting and forming a mass." She lifted her arms outward. "Think of a cloud growing, expanding and building until it overflows in the form of rain. Imagine your prayers attached to the thoughts of hundreds of other people, building and multiplying and then falling in a glowing, healing shower going out in the world a thousand times over."

The speech was all a blur to Blaize, until one word caught her attention. *Messiah?*

"The time has come to go out into the world and spread our word," Mother Moon said, pinning the crowd with a solemn gaze. She paused for a beat. "I won't be with you in this next phase of our growth, but I give you my son, the new Messiah who will lead us into the future."

The crowd rose as one. A roar of applause nearly deafening in its intensity echoed through the room. Joey didn't bat an eye. He merely stood there, seeming to absorb the energy around him. Whatever delusion Mother Moon was under, she'd infected both the boy and her followers with her beliefs.

On the stage, Mother Moon waited for the applause to die down then gestured toward her son. "Throughout the ages our religious leaders have been persecuted. There will be people who will try to destroy him, just as they have destroyed others before him. I trust you to protect him." Her voice rose. "Protect him with your lives, as I have. I entrust his care to each and every one of you."

*She's crazy*, Blaize thought. She searched the faces around her, raised in love and adoration toward their leader. She wondered what was missing in their lives to bring them here, mindless followers of a fanatic. She watched Mother Moon on stage. Her white robes seemed to absorb the soft glow from the stained-glass window behind the podium.

Then Mother Moon's gaze caught and held hers. "Angels are among us tonight," she said, as if speaking only to Blaize. A smile of ecstasy transformed her face.

Blaize was mesmerized, caught in the web of Mother Moon's hypnotic charisma. She could see why people were drawn to the woman. Her conviction was so strong that it pulled you along with it.

Mother Moon continued, her voice rising. "One angel in particular has come to help us usher in the New Order. The very same angel who delivered the Messiah child into my care."

Blaize went deathly still. Her heart pounded in her chest, as if trying to escape. Mother Moon's gaze locked on hers, held her, bringing with it a sudden flash of memory so vivid it could have happened yesterday instead of a dozen years ago. She remembered a scared teenager, only a few years younger than Blaize herself was at the time, but seeming so much younger, so much smaller. On stage the woman's eyes were cool and self-assured, but in Blaize's memory they fluttered with painful panic. The voice was the same, but she remembered it as that of a frightened young girl, pleading with Blaize, begging her to save her baby. Screaming and pleading and...something else. At the very moment of birth she'd thrown back her head and howled, a mournful cry that only now did Blaize realize had been a name – "Algernon!"

It couldn't be! Blaize cupped her hand over her mouth to hold back a scream. Her stomach churned with remembered panic and, with a rush, she was back in that dingy high-school lavatory her first year of student teaching. She could see it all so clearly – the cramped stall, the bright overhead fluorescent light that cast them both in shadows, the blood spilling onto the cracked tiles, the stale cigarette smoke hovering around them both.

She could hear the screams echoing off the cool walls, feel the weight of the baby sliding into her arms, squalling and slippery and warm. Then finally, thankfully, the wail of sirens in the distance as she handed the child over, still attached to its young mother by a pulsing, twisted rope of umbilical cord.

A boy, she remembered. This boy? Was it Joey she'd delivered that day? Yes, she knew it was. The timing was right, the memory too clear.

But she was no angel. She'd simply been a nervous student teacher who'd managed to help a frightened girl give birth to her illegitimate child in a dirty bathroom. That girl had grown up to become Mother Moon, and somehow, in her twisted delusions, the coincidence became prophecy. And Blaize, through a twist of fate, had become an integral part of that prophecy.

As suddenly as it began, the spell was broken and Mother Moon looked away, freeing her from the force of memories. Only now did Blaize understand her role in The Play. This was why she was here, to complete the circle, to fulfill Mother Moon's demented prophecy.

"And now," Mother Moon said, a beatific smile on her face. "Joey will lead the choir in song."

She bent down and Joey kissed first one, then the other of his mother's cheeks before gliding toward the choir. Blaize's heart went out to him. She realized he'd been brainwashed from the moment of his birth, bred and trained for one purpose only, a purpose that he seemed to accept without question.

But there was more to worry about at the moment, and Blaize was relieved to see him leave the stage. That's where the danger was centered, she knew. He'd be safe across the room in the choir.

Her sense of déjà vu only intensified as Joey lifted his voice in song. Her chin dropped at the first familiar words.

It couldn't be! But it was. She held her breath as Spyder's lyrics filled the room.

*"...a presence sweet invades my soul  
and makes what once was severed whole  
blaze marks the trail of fate begun  
with pages turning one by one..."*

Blaize couldn't believe it. Joey was singing Spyder's song, the song whose words had led her to his place. It seemed like a thousand years ago.

At first Joey's voice lifted in a singular, bell-like clarity, then the choir joined in harmony and the music swelled, becoming more prayer than song, taking on a life of its own. It was beautiful and deadly and prophetic, and again Blaize found herself convinced that the words were wrong. Not "turn the page," but "*BURN* the page."

She wanted to shout to the boy to change the words now, before it was too late. But she was rooted to the spot, caught up in events that made no sense at all.

The song ended, absorbed by silence, as if everyone held their breath waiting. *Now*, she thought. Now it will happen.

But it didn't. No gun was raised, no shot rang out. Could she have been wrong all along?

She turned to Gate, but he was gone. Her head spun around, searching. Where was he? She hadn't seen him leave her side. She was alone and suddenly the room seemed to close around her, suffocating her. She felt trapped in a sea of bodies. Her heart pounded. She felt it now. Death had entered the room, corrupting everything in its wake.

There was a sudden shift in the texture of the silence—a sense of expectancy filled the room. Blaize recognized the feeling of having missed a question while her mind wandered. She checked the stage. Mother Moon's arms were held out in a gesture that seemed to encircle the gathering.

"...whatever it is you're here for," she said, "I promise we will provide you. And you in turn will give back what your brothers and sisters need. We are one family, joined in a greater cause."

Blaize realized that Mother Moon's appeal was her gentle reassurance, the voice of a loving mother in a world gone mad. For those who wanted to return to the safety of childhood, Mother Moon was a haven, the family they craved. She appealed to a society held hostage by crime and federal dictates, a society powerless and impotent, which yearns for the gentle reassurance of a mother's touch.

Mother Moon offered hope and salvation. But at what expense? She fed the dreams of desperate followers with talk of fate and cosmic destiny. She made them believe they had a divine mission in a world that had stripped them of control.

On stage, Mother Moon's sermon was building toward a climax as she whipped her followers into a fanatical frenzy. "We will CHANGE the WORLD. The time is NOW." Her eyes flickered momentarily to the left.

Blaize followed Mother Moon's gaze, searching for the Judas in their midst. Then she saw it. Flickering candlelight reflected off the steel blue barrel of a gun. Rising. Aiming.

Mother Moon glanced up and raised her hands in a gesture of blessing, but she made no effort to escape. She never even flinched.

"Noooo!" Blaize screamed. Heads turned. Bodies shifted. Mother Moon caught her gaze, looked deep into her eyes and smiled, as if confirming a secret only the two of them shared. Then she shook her head from side to side, silently warning Blaize not to interfere.

Blaize jumped to her feet, pushing through a barricade of bodies. Running, even though she knew she couldn't reach the stage on time.

"Look out," she yelled. But Mother Moon didn't move and Blaize realized with horror that she knew what was about to happen. She knew and she welcomed becoming a martyr to the cause. This was the scene Algernon had predicted.

But still Blaize ran. And she continued running even when she heard the blast and saw Mother Moon's arms flung outward in mock crucifixion. New blood formed a lopsided star, stark against the pristine robes of the dying woman.



From the choir, a young voice cried out in horror. "Mother!" Joey screamed, his arms outstretched in imitation of his mother's death throes. On his forehead, in stark crimson against his pale skin, burned bloody stigmata shaped exactly like the lopsided death stain on his mother's breast.

There was movement behind him. A face she recognized. *Oh my God, Joyce!*

Ignoring the carnage on stage, Blaize reversed her direction and ran toward the choir. Toward Joyce, her missing friend, who cradled the grieving child in her arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gate had almost reached the stage in time. Almost, but not quite. The shot cleaved the night in two, a hushed silence on one side of it, hysterical frenzy on the other as the crowd screamed with one voice. People jumped and scattered. Someone grabbed the assassin and threw him to the ground just as Gate reached Mother Moon on stage. All he could think was that there should be more blood. A direct shot to her heart and the only blood was a small, scarlet star over her breast painted in blood.

Her breath came in short, quick inhalations that reminded Gate of Lamaze breathing. Up close, he was surprised at how young she seemed. "Hang on," he said. "Help will be here soon."

"No," she gasped. She smiled again, that same all-knowing, all-forgiving smile, and patted his hand as if he was the one in need of reassurance. "It was ordained. Now my children can move forward."

Gate felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Oswald Gaderian, pushing him aside to cradle Mother Moon in his arms. "You couldn't have stopped it," he whispered. Gate stared in amazement. Gaderian had a faint mark on his forehead identical to the bloodstain on Mother Moon's robes.

He looked around. All of Mother Moon's followers stood in solemn attendance, as if the shock had rooted them to the spot in mournful silence. Each and every one of them wore the stigmata of Mother Moon's death wound – a strawberry-red star on their forehead.

Mother Moon's disciples had been born.

Gate watched the procession with dawning understanding. Where before they were simply followers, now each was a leader who would recruit a hundred more. And each of those would gather a hundred more followers, multiplying and spreading Mother Moon's message until it circled the globe. No bullets would stop them, for violence would only make them stronger. All they'd needed was a sacrificial lamb, a martyr to give meaning to their conviction.

He looked at Mother Moon draped across Gaderian's lap in a pose strikingly similar to Michelangelo's *Pietà*. She'd known. She'd known all along that the only way to give them her strength was to die for them.

Suddenly Mother Moon shuddered and gasped with a quick intake of breath. Her eyes flew open and a smile lit up her face. She turned her head and stared across the room. Gate followed her gaze and saw Joey standing with the choir, his arms outstretched, the stigmata of his mother's death wound bleeding on his forehead. "The Messiah," she murmured. "A child will lead us." With a final gasp, Mother Moon died.

As the full meaning of her dying words sunk in, Gate stared across the auditorium at Joey. There'd be no more carefree days for the boy. His childhood was over. Baptized by blood, he was now his mother's successor.

Then Gate saw movement and realized Blaize was running toward the choir—toward Joey. "No," he whispered, watching Blaize make her way through the crowd toward the boy. They wouldn't let her near him. There was no telling what these religious zealots would do to protect their new leader. Blaize was in danger. He had to get her out of there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite the horror that had just taken place, Blaize was overcome with relief to find her friend alive and safe. "Joyce! Oh Joyce, I was so worried about you."

She pushed through the crowd and reached out toward her friend and the boy, but Joyce slapped her hand away. "Don't touch him," she said. "Stay away from him."

Joey turned, his voice full of anguish. "Season! Oh, Season, she's dead. Mother's dead." Joyce wrapped him in her arms, soothing him with a hushed voice.

Season? Who the hell was Season? Did Joyce have amnesia or something? "Joyce," Blaize cried, grabbing her arm. "It's me. I wouldn't hurt—"

"Just stay away." Joyce's voice held an ominous warning. She shielded the boy with her body. Then there was a glimmer of recognition in her eyes that came and fled in an instant as she pushed Blaize aside.

"Joyce, I've been looking all over for you. Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

"You have to get out of here," Joyce hissed. "It's not safe."

That was when Blaize noticed people closing in on her, their eyes dark with suspicion.

"Go!" Joyce hissed. "There isn't time to talk now. Meet me at the fountain at midnight and I'll explain everything."

"But—"

Then Gate was beside her, tugging her arm and leading her away. She looked back to see people following them, their movements slow but purposeful. Without further urging she walked faster, matching Gate's step. Then they were running, running through the open doors, running beneath the moonlit night.

Running for their very lives.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Spyder couldn't wait any longer. Despite his father's protests, he had to get moving. Blaize needed him and it might already be too late.

He'd refused the painkillers Dr. York had offered, determined to get by with only nonaddictive pain relievers. He'd allowed Pops to take care of him, feed and bathe him as if he were a child again. But in the end he'd had to go, despite his father's arguments that he wasn't fit to be out of bed yet.

"What's so important it can't wait a few days?" Pops had asked, following him down the porch to the Jeep.

There was no way he could explain it all to his father, so he'd kept it simple. "Blaize is in danger," he'd said, climbing into the Jeep and trying not to look as shaky as he felt. "She needs me, Pops. And I need her. I need her if I'm ever going to find myself again."

"I don't know what the two of you have gotten yourselves into," Pops said. "But was it worth losing your hand for?"

"Yes," Spyder had assured him, reaching around to pull the door closed with his good hand before turning the key in the ignition. "She's worth it."

Pops hadn't argued after that, but he'd stood on the edge of the driveway staring after the Jeep as Spyder drove away, looking smaller and older than he'd ever looked before. Spyder vowed that once Blaize was safe he'd take better care of his father. He'd be a good son, the kind of man Pops could be proud of.

He swallowed six Motrin and headed north. The pills only dulled the pain, softening some of the sharp edges without easing the torment. But even worse than the pain was the constant flexing of phantom fingers on a hand that no longer existed. Squeezing and releasing, squeezing and clenching, squeezing and grasping.

*Squeeze all you want, he grimaced. You'll never hurt her now. Never.*

He'd lost all sense of time after the amputation, but there was no doubt in his mind that Pierce's second book had been released ahead of time. He wasn't sure how or why, but they'd lost even that small cushion of time. The book was out now. His hand told him so. That meant Blaize was in even greater danger. Despite the brave voice that had played back on his answering machine, he'd heard the tremor of fear lurking below the surface and it had tugged at his heart.

He used his bandaged left forearm to steady the steering wheel while he shifted with his right hand, wincing with the pain. He didn't need pain medication. He was fueled by adrenaline and fear. He had to get to Blaize and he had to get to her now. But at least he no longer posed a danger to her. He couldn't strangle her with only one hand. No matter how many people read Algernon Pierce's new book, no matter how

fiercely his phantom digits flexed, there was no way he could duplicate the prophesy of this particular written word. He would need two hands to do that—and he only had one.

He merged onto the Northway. Twisting in his seat to check traffic, he accidentally slammed the bandaged stump of his left arm against the door. A shock of pain shot through him. "Oh shit, oh fuck, God-DAMMIT all to hell," he screamed. He bit his bottom lip to keep from blacking out while the Jeep jerked and wove between lanes, trailed by blaring horns, flashing lights and screeching tires. He pulled over to the shoulder, making little whimpering sounds he couldn't control until finally the pain eased to a blistering throb.

"Some fuckin' hero I am," he gasped, hot tears stinging his eyes. Bandaged and crying and fighting to keep from passing out. *Yeah, I'll be a real big help*, he thought grimly. He took several deep breaths, fighting for control.

Grinding gears and gritting his teeth, he pulled out onto the highway again. "I may not be much," he snarled, resolve hardening his voice. "But I'm all she's got."

\* \* \* \* \*

There was no sign of life or movement in the darkness, but Blaize felt as if there were a thousand eyes focused on them as they waited by the fountain.

"It's after midnight," she said. "Where's Joyce?"

Gate didn't seem to hear her. He paced, raking his fingers through his hair.

"She knew," he muttered. "Son of a bitch, she knew all along."

Blaize nodded. She knew he was talking about Mother Moon. They'd gone over and over this since they'd escaped the auditorium, but it was as if Gate needed to say it again, hear it again.

"She was their sacrificial lamb," he said. "A martyr for the movement. It was the only way to ensure Joey's succession to the throne. It wasn't Pierce, but his sister who planned the whole thing. Pierce was just her pawn."

"Yes."

"You were right about the books," Gate admitted. "You were right about Pierce. But he's not the villain here. It wasn't his vision. Somehow she planted the seed in his mind. He was only writing what his sister fed him."

"The tapes," Blaize whispered.

"What?"

"The tapes we found," she said with sudden insight. "They seemed innocent, just relaxation tapes. But there must have been subliminal messages on them." It all started to fall into place. "She fed the ideas directly into his subconscious. All he had to do was write them down."

Gate stopped pacing and stared at her thoughtfully. "She must have realized the power his books had long before she set this plan into motion."

"Yes. After the first murders spawned by his book ten years ago. Joey would have been just a baby then. Maybe she'd already planned his future and saw this as the perfect opportunity to ensure its success."

"But then Pierce stopped writing and swore he'd never write another word."

Blaize nodded. "There was no one else she could manipulate," she said. "No one else whose work was popular enough to be read by the sheer number of people necessary to trigger a universal belief. That's the key here. It was the collective force of millions of minds reading and believing at the same moment that brought his words to life."

"So she needed Pierce to write again. And you think she used those tapes to feed him the script?"

"I'm sure of it," Blaize said. "What did Pierce say when you interviewed him? Did he say why he started writing again after all this time?"

Gate frowned. "Yes. He said he was compelled to write. Driven. As if he had no choice."

"That makes sense, then."

Gate shook his head. "Okay, we know the who and the how, but why? Why us, and why you in particular?"

"I think I know the answer to that," Blaize replied. She told Gate what she remembered about delivering the baby in the school lavatory. "She was raving at the time. I thought it was due to the pain and fear, but I guess it was more than that. She was already going over the edge. And whatever delusions she had then, have only grown stronger over the years. All this..." she waved her arm, the gesture taking in the commune and including Pierce and everything that had happened to them up to this point. "All this can be traced back to that moment when she convinced herself she was giving birth to the Messiah."

"And she thinks you're some kind of guardian angel? That's why she made sure Pierce got you here?"

Blaize nodded. "My being here closes the circle."

Gate shook his head. "All these years she's been planning, waiting, collecting followers and training her son to take over the world." He stopped and frowned. "One thing still puzzles me," he said. "Who shot Mother Moon?"

Blaize shrugged. "I guess it doesn't really matter. Pierce signed her death warrant the moment he put pen to paper. Everyone who read and believed his writing had a hand in killing her too. And if we're right and she fed Pierce the idea in the first place, then you could argue that she herself committed suicide. Whoever pulled the trigger was the last person in line as far as Mother Moon's death was concerned."

Then another thought struck her. "Gate? Pierce hasn't delivered the final book. The editor's copy was garbled, remember? And we couldn't find anything on Pierce's computer or anywhere in his house. It must be here."

He sat beside her on the edge of the fountain. "Most likely Pierce has the backup disk here with him. We have to find it and stop him from publishing the final book. The question is, how do we get to Pierce?"

"Maybe Joyce will help us find him."

"I'm afraid not." The gravelly voice startled them both. Neither had heard Gaderian arrive. "You see," he said. "Joyce sent me here in her place."

For the second time tonight, thoughts of Judas crossed Blaize's mind.

Gaderian crossed his arms over his chest. "Joyce is one of us now. See, you should have figured out on your own to come here long before now. Since you didn't, we had to use Joyce as bait. It was the only way we could get you here."

He gave a dry, mirthless chuckle. "So, you seem to have put everything together. Not that it matters. I'm happy to say that, due to popular demand, the second book of *The Play* went on the shelves today. A bit sooner than expected, but that works out for everyone involved...except the two of you, of course."

He smirked at their shocked expressions. "Pierce has already signed your death sentence." He pointed at Gate, mocking him with false sympathy. "You died in a fire at Pierce's house. Something about a faulty computer, I believe."

He turned to Blaize. "And you, my dear, were strangled to death by your lover. You'll be pleased to know he found it intensely stimulating. He screamed when he came." Gaderian made a tsk-tsking sound and shook his head. "You didn't, however. You had no breath left to scream."

Blaize shivered, thinking of Spyder's hands around her neck. It was too close to the truth.

"So you see," Gaderian continued. "You're both dead already. You just don't realize it since the book hasn't been read yet."

Blaize struggled to take it all in. There was no satisfaction in knowing she had been right about her theory.

"What about Mother Moon?" Gate asked. "You both knew what Pierce had written. How could you let her die?"

A shadow crossed Gaderian's face, making him seem almost human. "It was a necessary gamble," he said. Then his face brightened. "But again, it doesn't matter. You see, in the final book of *The Play*, young Joey will raise his mother from the dead and there will be no doubt in the eyes of the world who he is, who he has become. So you see, we've covered all the bases."

Blaize shook her head. *They were all mad!*

Gaderian smiled, as if reading her thoughts. "You still have doubts? But don't you see? You're our proof, our guinea pig, so to speak. Granted you were a little harder to

control than we expected, and there were some surprises along the way. But all in all, things went according to plan."

He pursed his lips and looked off into the distance, frowning. "Spyder was a little bit of a disappointment, however. Either he was stronger than we realized, or all those years of pickling his brain cells made him...um, let's just say a little less susceptible to the focused power of mass consciousness."

*Spyder.* She'd been right. They were using him too. Then she remembered the feeling she had the other night. She was convinced that somehow Spyder had found a way to break the spell Pierce had spun around them. What had he done? And why did Gaderian seem unsure of himself when he mentioned Spyder's name?

Gaderian shrugged. "No matter. We simply had to change our plans a little. When Spyder didn't get you here, we had to go with our backup plan – your friend Joyce."

"What have you done to her?" Blaize screamed. She lunged for Gaderian, but Gate stopped her, grabbing her arm and pulling her back.

Gaderian never even flinched. "Nothing we haven't done to everyone else. A little mental persuasion, shall we say?"

He stopped and lit a cigarette, flicking open a silver lighter with a crescent moon engraved on the surface. The brief flare of his lighter sent ghostly shadows dancing across his face.

And that's when Blaize recognized him. "You!" she screamed, struggling against Gate's restraining arms. Now she remembered where she'd seen Gaderian before. He'd been at the cemetery the day of Richard's funeral. He was the dark figure she'd seen lurking in the shadows outside Joyce's house the night she'd disappeared. "You've been following us all along, haven't you?"

"Of course I have," he said with a smug smile. "Simply checking our progress, that's all." Then his smile turned venomous. "Welcome to The Play."

*How long?* she wondered. How long had she been their puppet? Had they killed Richard? Maybe it went back even before that. Were they responsible for the accident that had sent her life spinning out of control in the first place?

"You can't get away," Gaderian said, taking a long, hissing drag that made the end of the cigarette flare with an orange glow. "Just to be safe, though," he informed them, "the members of the community are being told of the danger you pose as we speak. They're being informed that you're here to abduct their savior. They've just lost their spiritual leader and will die before they allow you to take her successor too," he sneered. "Your pictures are being passed out to each of them. In less than an hour every member will be out searching for you, fueled by religious fervor and murderous conviction."

A commotion on the porch where they'd first met Joey caused the three of them to look up. A man was running toward them, a shock of wild white hair streaming around his shoulders and a maniacal gleam in his eyes. He was screaming, "YOU! Leave me alone. Get back in the book!"

Blaize recognized him too.

"Pierce," Gate whispered.

Blaize saw the gleam of madness in the author's eyes, remembered the warning he'd shouted to her at the cemetery. It would be so easy to see this madman as the villain, but sadly she realized that Pierce was a victim too. He'd been manipulated by both Gaderian and his own sister.

Then she noticed the gun in his hand and the final piece of the puzzle fell into place. Pierce had been the one to fire the shot that had killed his sister. It all made sense now that she knew Mother Moon's twisted mind had written her own destiny. She'd ensured that her own brother would become her murderer.

And with sudden clarity, she understood why. There was really only one reason a pregnant girl would believe she was still a virgin, and that was if the truth was too horrible to face.

Blaize went back in time to that day in the bathroom stall. She remembered the moment the child had been born, how the young girl had let out a strangled scream. She'd called one name. Her brother's name. And that cry had held a pain greater than the tearing of her body. It was the cry of a betrayed child, a bruised soul.

No wonder the girl had blocked it all out, convincing herself she was still a virgin. And it was only a small step from there to imagine that her child's birth was the result of Immaculate Conception. It was easier than admitting the awful truth.

But the knowledge must have lurked somewhere in the shadows of her subconscious and this, her final act, had been one of retribution against her brother, her rapist. She'd made him her murderer, had him write the scene and then pull the trigger. That act had been the final nudge that had sent him over the brink of madness.

Pierce waved the gun overhead. Lines of guilt and grief carved his face. A shot went wild, hitting the upraised arms of the statue in the fountain and sending stone splinters skittering into the water.

Gate grabbed Blaize and pulled her down behind the concrete wall of the fountain's base.

Gaderian held out his arms, as if coaxing a small child out of the road. "Algernon. Go back to your room. This isn't your concern."

But the madman kept coming, brandishing the gun as he screamed at them. "I wrote you and I can delete you, dammit! Do you think you can come to life and destroy me? No! I won't allow it!"

More shots. One hit close enough to send a spray of water over them both. Blaize ducked lower, hoping the low fountain wall would be enough to protect them. Then a scream cut the night as Pierce blindly hit his mark and Oswald Gaderian fell to the ground. His still glowing cigarette rolled toward Blaize's knee, released from curled and lifeless fingers.

"Oh my God," she whimpered, clutching Gate's hand. "He's crazy. He's crazy."



Another shot shattered the night, drowning out the author's ranting. He was closer. She could hear him just on the other side of the fountain now.

"I'll show you," he cried out. "I'll show you who decides what you can and cannot do. You're *my* creations. MINE!"

Then the night went deathly quiet. Blaize fought the urge to pop her head up and see what was happening. What was Pierce doing? And that's when she heard another voice.

"Uncle Algernon? Stop. Please stop. I need you."

"But Joey, you don't understand —"

"I need you," the boy said again, heartbreak making his voice quiver. "You're all I have left."

This time Blaize couldn't resist lifting her head above the stone shield of the fountain's rim. Gaderian was dead, surrounded by a pool of his own blood. She saw Joey standing on the top step of the porch, holding out his mother's bloody robes. His face was a study in tragedy and loss. The light from the open doorway surrounded him like a golden halo.

Pierce had his back to them, facing the boy. His shoulders slumped and he dropped the gun to the ground. Holding out his arms, he walked toward the porch, toward his nephew — his son — who in one short evening had seen two people he loved gunned down and murdered.

Blaize wanted to scoop him up and wipe the tears from his eyes. She wanted to take him away from all this blood and insanity. She started to rise, to go to the boy, but Gate gripped her arm and pulled her in the other direction.

"Come on," he whispered. "We have to get out of here. They'll be searching for us."

Blaize let him lead her away from the fountain, running away from the compound, away from Gaderian's body sprawled beside the fountain, his cigarette burning out only feet away from his lifeless body.

## Part Four: The Coming

## Chapter Twenty-Five

They made it to Gate's car—or what was left of it. All the fight drained out of Blaize when she saw the smoking black husk standing alone at the entrance to the commune. The air was heavy with the smell of blistered metal and melted rubber.

For someone so sure of their demise, Gaderian had taken no chance that they would escape. Behind her, Blaize saw lights and commotion. By now Gaderian's body would have been discovered. The members would be spreading out, combing the area for any sign of them. Without the car they couldn't go for help, so they'd have to find a place to hide while they planned their next move.

She remembered what Gaderian had said. Pierce's book came out today. They didn't have much time. Right now, even as they stood there trying to decide what to do, people all over the world were sitting up in bed absorbing every word of the book and changing the fabric of reality.

If what Gaderian said was true, this combined belief not only affected the future, but the past too. He'd said Spyder had already strangled her and Gate had died when the computer exploded. Just thinking about it made her head spin. But there wasn't time to try to figure out the paradox right now. They had to destroy the final copy of the book before it could be read.

Suddenly they were both pinned by oncoming headlights. They couldn't move forward and they couldn't go back to the commune. A horn blared, jerking them out of their paralysis. Spurred by the twin headlights growing bigger in the distance, they tore off to the right, into the mountains. Soon the woods closed around them, cloaking them in darkness.

Blaize followed Gate through the woods. Sharp evergreens with needled limbs slashed her skin and she stumbled more than once over rocks and exposed tree roots. The sharp intake of her own breath masked any sounds of chase, but she was afraid to look back, afraid to see pursuers at their heels.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder lay on the horn, convinced that he'd seen Blaize outlined in the glare of his headlights.

The drive had been long and arduous. More than once he'd been tempted to pull off the road and rest, but he knew that if he stopped and gave in to the pain, he'd lose his momentum. He had to keep going. Although pain had been his constant companion, his one source of comfort was the realization that the dreams had stopped the moment Dr. York had amputated his hand. He no longer woke feeling like a murderer. That

alone convinced him he'd saved Blaize, at least from himself, in one swift and savage act.

He'd missed the turnoff to the commune twice in the darkness and had to circle back, finally finding the dirt road leading to the Gateway community. And it looked as if he wasn't a moment too soon. Blaize was running and there was someone with her. He realized it must be that pretty-boy reporter she'd said she was coming up here with. They stared directly into his headlights, as if pinned to the spot, then turned and ran off into the woods.

Damn, he'd have to chase her down. He hoped he didn't hit his arm on anything in the darkness and pass out like a baby. That would totally ruin his image.

He braked, spitting up gravel and dirt, bringing the Jeep to a lazy skid as he slammed it into park. He reached around with his right hand to open the door, fumbling for a minute and wasting precious time. Already Blaize and her friend were out of sight, swallowed up by the darkness of the wooded mountainside.

He reached across the front seat for his flashlight, intent on following them into the woods and calling out to Blaize. Before he'd even closed the Jeep door behind him, he saw robed figures running in his direction. He knew they were chasing Blaize and her friend. If he yelled out to her he'd give their position away. He glanced in the direction Blaize had run, frustrated that he couldn't follow her. He didn't know what had happened here, but he knew the only way he could help her now was by distracting her pursuers and giving her time to escape.

He did the first thing that came to mind. He slammed his wounded wrist against the side of the jeep. Hard. The pain was immediate, raw and searing, dropping him to his knees and bringing scalding tears to his eyes. He gulped hard, swallowing the scream lodged in his throat. There was no need to fake the agony he was in.

He waved the flashlight and called out. "Help. Help me, please."

Within moments the two robed figures were at his side, a blonde woman and dark-haired man. Spyder held up his arm. Fresh blood soaked through the bandages from the abuse he'd given it.

"My God, what happened to you?" the robed woman cried. The man with her put his hands beneath Spyder's armpits and lifted him to his feet. Together they supported him as he held his bleeding arm out. He could feel his heartbeat pulsing fire deep into the wound.

"Help," he stammered, fighting waves of dizziness. He could feel his companions struggle between their desire to find Blaize and the knowledge that it would take both of them to help Spyder walk to the commune.

The woman raised her eyes, pleading briefly with the man. He nodded and together they led Spyder toward the commune, one on each side. Relief overshadowed the agony thrumming along his entire left side. He'd bought Blaize some time.

It was worth the pain.

\* \* \* \* \*

They almost missed the opening to the cave. If Blaize hadn't stumbled across the uprooted tree whose branches nearly covered the cave's opening, they would have run right past it.

"This area is full of caves and old Indian trails," Gate told her as he pushed the branches aside and tried to peer into the darkness. "We used to camp in the Adirondacks when I was younger. My brother and I would wander for hours exploring caves."

"What about wild animals?" Blaize asked, unwilling to enter the dark mouth of the cave, but knowing it was their best – and possibly only – option.

"Well, I'm no expert," Gate replied. "But I don't think there are a lot of wild animals around. Certainly no lions or tigers or anything."

She pretended not to notice he'd left bears off the list.

"Maybe some deer, a moose or two. Nothing that would use a cave for a den."

"You're just trying to make me feel better."

"Hell, I'm trying to make myself feel better." He burrowed into his pocket and pulled out a book of matches. Bending, he lit one and held it out, looking into the cave. "All clear," he announced. "Come on. We can hide out in here until morning."

"Yeah, but then what?" She followed him into the cave, which was surprisingly deep. As they moved further, they were able to stand. The smell was earthy and moist, but not unpleasant. It reminded her of the scent of mud pies she'd made as a little girl and decorated with seed pods stripped from weeds.

One day she'd fed her brother a spoonful of one of her creations. Her mother had freaked out and asked, "How could you feed your baby brother dirt?" She'd only shrugged and said, "Well, he ate it," outraged that she should be blamed for his stupidity. The memory brought a smile to her face. She wondered if she'd ever see her brother again to laugh over old memories.

Gate lit another match and cleared a spot near the cave's wall where they could sit and talk in the darkness. "Tomorrow we'll have the benefit of daylight. In the darkness we're at a disadvantage. They know these woods and we don't."

"Not to mention there's eight zillion of them and only two of us."

He chuckled, the sound echoing in the cave. "Yeah, but they've lost two of their leaders. They're accustomed to being told what to think and there's no one left to lead them."

"There's still Pierce," she said. Instead of being the main player, as they'd suspected, he was only the third and weakest point of this unholy triad. But he was still a threat.

"He's deteriorating fast," Gate admitted. "But he's deluded, not devious. Besides, we don't have to go head-to-head with Pierce. All we have to do is find those tapes and the copy of his book. We know there was nothing at his home and the publisher doesn't

have it. That means he has the only copy here with him. All we have to do is find it and destroy it."

"No. That's not all we have to do," she said. "We have to get Joey away from here. It's not too late to save him if we get him out of the clutches of the cult. Without Pierce's book we can deprogram him and maybe he can go on to lead a normal life, play football and make mud pies."

"Mud pies?"

She shrugged. "You know. He's just a child. He should be doing the things twelve-year-old boys do."

"What makes you think he wants to be saved? He may be a child, but he's convinced that his mission is to lead the world."

Blaize set her shoulders. "He's young. There's still time to undo whatever damage his mother and Gaderian have done." Her voice left no room for argument. "I'm not leaving here without him."

Gate cleared his throat. "I hate to say this —"

"What?"

"Well, it's just that, from what I've seen," he hedged, then sighed and got to the point. "You might have to fight Joyce to get the boy out of here. She seems to be his fiercest guardian."

"Joyce," Blaize whispered, her voice cracking. "What have they done to her?"

"I once did research on cults for an article." Gate leaned back and got comfortable as he explained. "They use techniques on recruits that numb the mind and suppress doubts about the group and its leaders, like long work routines, denunciation sessions, meditating and chanting."

He counted off points on his fingers as he explained to Blaize. "They encourage members to become subservient to the group, which usually revolves around a single spiritual leader who they believe to be the Messiah."

"Like Mother Moon."

Gate nodded. "And now Joey. They see themselves as special in their mission to save the world."

"But I can't believe they could brainwash Joyce."

"It's not really brainwashing," he said. "They embrace new recruits, surrounding them with love and acceptance. The commune becomes their entire existence. Members are kept busy and encouraged to live and socialize only with each other, cutting off all ties to family and friends, careers and prior activities. As a symbol of the beginning of their new life, they often take on new names within the community."

"Yes," Blaize said. "Joey called her 'Season'. I didn't understand at the time."

Gate nodded.

Gate's explanation made sense. But there hadn't been enough time to use those techniques on Joyce. It would have taken much longer. Pierce had to have written her into the cult. That's the only way she could have been converted so quickly.

Blaize still found it hard to believe Joyce could be involved in a cult, and even harder to believe she and her best friend could be on opposite sides of a life-and-death struggle. Considering they were all being guided by Pierce's words, it made sense. He'd put them all in place, pitted them against each other. But he wouldn't win, not while there was still fight left in her.

They were quiet for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts. Gate's arm tightened around her. "Get some sleep," he coaxed. "You'll need all your strength tomorrow."

But she knew sleep wouldn't come this night. Her mind was spinning. There was too much to comprehend and despite the relative safety of the dark cave, her entire body was still on alert.

Besides, she was still more than a little worried that a bear might lumber into the cave while she slept, and she had no intention of becoming some smelly animal's dinner.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Supported on either side by the man and woman from the commune, Spyder had to bite his lip to keep from screaming. Each step jarred the throbbing in his battered arm. They led him into a well-lit courtyard surrounding a central fountain. A statue rose from the center of the fountain, stone arms lifted toward the sky, and Spyder choked back a gasp when he saw that the statue was missing a hand. Where the left hand should have been, the sculpture was sheared off, the cut clean and sharp and new—like his own. The sight sent an icy shiver racing down his spine.

Beneath the mutilated arms of the statue, Spyder saw a dark stain on the ground. It might have been blood, but he couldn't be sure. The sting of gunpowder hung in the air, leaving no doubt in his mind that violence had taken place here. Blaize must have been running from this very spot when he'd arrived. His instincts had been right. She was in danger. Deadly danger.

His fingers flexed in silent agreement.

But there was no time to search for further clues as he was led to one of the buildings facing the fountain. "Take me to your leader," he mumbled, but the words were lost in a haze of pain, and he realized it wasn't funny anyway. He should have listened to Pops. He wasn't ready for this.

They went through a kitchen, a dining room, up a staircase and into a long hallway. Spyder leaned more heavily against the man supporting him, as his knees threatened to buckle with each step. They passed one room where a man paced and mumbled to himself, running his hands through a lion's mane of snow-white hair. Spyder caught a few words.

"...coming to get me...have to be stopped..."

*Pierce, he thought. They're taking me right to the man I'm looking for.*

But they passed that room and went on to another door where two more robed sentries stood. After a whispered exchange, one of the guards checked him for weapons, searching through his wallet and taking his flashlight. Convinced he was unarmed, the guard opened the door and let him inside.

Spyder wasn't sure what he'd expected, but certainly not this young boy in powder blue pajamas staring mournfully out the window into the night. The boy turned and looked into Spyder's eyes, then his gaze shifted down to the bandaged and bloody arm. He made a dismissive gesture and everyone else left the room, closing the door behind them. Spyder was alone with the child.

The room belonged to a boy, but the eyes were those of an old soul. Spyder looked beneath the sadness there and found intelligence and wisdom—and something else.



The child seemed to exude a composed acceptance of his lot in life that reminded Spyder of a painting he'd once seen of Joan of Arc burning at the stake. As they appraised each other, Spyder was overcome with the belief that the boy could see straight into his soul.

He smiled and the boy smiled back. It was brief, flickering across his young face then disappearing, but the power in that smile made Spyder gasp. The boy walked toward him. His head barely reached the center of Spyder's chest, but he seemed taller. He had what was known in the business as "presence".

When he reached out, Spyder half expected a handshake, but instead the boy reached for the bandaged arm. "How did this happen?" he asked. As he spoke, his fingers brushed over the wound. Spyder flinched and prepared himself for the pain as the boy touched him. But it never came.

"Blame the Bible," Spyder said.

"The Bible?"

"Yes. It says 'If thy right eye offends thee, pluck it out', doesn't it?"

The boy nodded, his eyes focused on the gentle movements of his hands. "You missed," he said.

Spyder chuckled. "I thought I was shorter." He was rewarded with another smile. At that moment he knew he'd do anything to bring a smile back to that tortured face and keep it there.

He prepared himself for more questions, but the boy was focused on the wounded arm clasped between his hands. A warmth emanated from the boy's hands, enveloping Spyder's entire wrist. Something seemed to flow between them, a mixture of warmth and light and love.

"What's your name?" he asked the boy.

"Joey."

"I'm Spyder."

Joey began unwinding the soiled bandages. Spyder looked away. He'd yet to see the ravages done to his body and wasn't prepared for the sight of it. The cool air whispered across his skin, making him wince, but was quickly replaced by the warmth of Joey's hands. The warmth spread upward along his arm. Spyder almost expected to see it glow, but when he turned back, it looked no different.

The pain subsided slowly, like the retreat of gentle waves along the shore. It wasn't until the pain was gone completely that Spyder realized how accustomed he'd become to it and how glorious it felt to finally be free.

Joey removed his hands and Spyder stared in disbelief. His wounds were completely healed, leaving only a delicate filigree of scars crisscrossing the blunt end of his wrist. There was no blood. And blessedly, no more pain.

Spyder dropped to his knees. "Oh my God," he whispered.

Joey took a deep breath and slumped into a chair, as if every ounce of energy had been drained from his body.

"Thank you," Spyder said. He felt tears welling in his eyes, summoned not by pain, but gratitude. "Thank you." It was all he could say, all he could think.

Joey raised his eyes, looking as surprised as Spyder felt. "I wasn't sure I could do that. It just happened."

Spyder rose and pulled a chair across from the boy. He felt incredibly close to this child he'd just met. The feeling surprised him. He'd never been particularly empathetic of other people, particularly children. But there was something about this boy that made him feel almost paternal, yet humbled in his presence.

"What happened here today?" Spyder asked.

The boy's eyes focused on a distant point. His voice seemed to come from far away. "My mother was," a shudder, followed by a quivering intake of air and a deep, mournful sigh, "murdered."

"Oh my God!" Spyder reached out and took the boy's hand. "Where's your father?"

"I have no father." The boy's lower lip trembled. "Oswald was like a father to me, but Uncle Algernon shot him."

The boy's eyes flickered to the window and Spyder remembered the stain he'd seen beside the fountain. His heart went out to this pitiful, orphaned child.

*Did he say "Uncle Algernon"?* Spyder didn't want to think that this poor boy's only remaining relative was the man he'd come here to stop, no matter what it took. And with a flash of insight he realized that the boy's mother must be the woman in the passage Blaize had shown him—Mother Moon.

"Your uncle is not well, Joey."

"I know."

"Joey, listen to me." He didn't know why, but he felt it was important to explain to the boy the cause of the events surrounding him. "Your uncle is writing a book."

Joey nodded. "He's writing four of them. The last book will be published on my thirteenth birthday. It's my gift, he told me."

"It's not a gift, Joey. It's a terrible, terrible prophecy that must be stopped. Those books are the reason I lost my hand, the reason your mother is dead. We can't let the final book be published."

"You can't stop it." There was a quiet conviction on his face.

"I have to try. There's too much at stake and someone I love is in danger."

There was more suffering in the boy's sigh than any child his age should ever have to endure. His eyes were heavy, lines of exhaustion marking his face.

"So tired," he whispered, fighting the urge to sleep.

Spyder stood and lifted the boy against his chest. He was lighter than he looked. His eyes drifted shut, making his face seem younger and more innocent than before.

Spyder carried him to his bed and pulled the covers back, smiling at the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles blanket beneath the bedspread. Despite everything, Joey was just a boy. Spyder pulled the blankets up around Joey's chin and sat at the edge of the bed, brushing the hair back from his forehead and humming softly. Within a few moments the boy's breathing became regular as sleep won the battle for control of his body.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Spyder watched Joey sleep. Instead of peace, nightmares furrowed the boy's brow and tossed his head from side to side.

"Shhh..." When he brushed the hair back, Spyder was surprised to see a faint mark on Joey's forehead. It looked like a pale pink star. Joey moaned. As he struggled in the grip of a nightmare, the mark darkened, seeming to pulse and throb.

Spyder shook the boy, calling his name. "Joey. Wake up. You're having a bad dream."

Joey blinked, dragging himself out of the nightmare. He gripped Spyder's hand tight, taking deep, rasping breaths. There was a trapped look in his eyes.

"It's okay," Spyder soothed.

"Will you stay with me," he asked, big blue eyes pleading.

Spyder knew what it was like to sink into nightmare territory and he wouldn't wish it on anyone, especially this magical child. "I'll stay with you," he said, holding the boy's hand. "I'll stay here and keep the nightmares away."

And he did, watching over the boy until the early morning hours, Joey's small hand clasped tight in his own. Eventually his head slumped onto his arm beside Joey's pillow and he too, slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize couldn't believe she'd actually slept. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. The cool wall of the cave seemed to have sucked all the warmth from her body during the night. She was chilled and stiff and scared. She remembered dreaming, a crazy patchwork of dreams, one layered atop the other. But when she tried to recall them, they slipped from her grasp. Although she couldn't remember the specifics of the dreams, they'd left her feeling vulnerable.

Gate stirred beside her. "My arm is numb," he said, stretching.

Blaize stood up and rubbed her bottom, but didn't mention which part of her own anatomy prickled with returning sensation. Fingers of sunlight slanted through the cave entrance, almost but not quite reaching the nook they'd huddled in overnight. She looked around their temporary refuge, noticing features in the dim light she hadn't seen in the darkness. She was grateful there were no signs of hibernating bears or hidden bodies or bats. God, bats...why hadn't she thought about bats last night? She shivered.

"I can't wait to get out of here." She realized she was whispering. "Do you think they've stopped searching for us?"

"No." Gate's voice was lowered too. "I doubt they've given up. But I think most of them will go back to their regular duties today. They won't expect us to show up in broad daylight. We'll have the element of surprise, plus the advantage of being able to see where we're going."

"A big plus."

"The problem is that Pierce could be anywhere in the commune. That's a lot of ground to cover."

"I know," Blaize said. "But we know he has a room in the same quarters as Joey and his mother. That's as good a place to start as any."

Gate nodded.

"Besides," Blaize said, "that's where we'll find Joey."

"And that's where there'll be the most guards."

Blaize chewed her lip. "You know, we should have tackled Pierce last night and taken his gun."

Gate stared at her then gave a dry chuckle. "Yeah, that's what we should have done. That's the first thing they teach us in journalism class. Get the gun, then get the story."

She shot an exasperated look in his direction.

"Let me ask you something," he said. "Do you know how to shoot a gun? Have you ever even held a gun?"

"Well no, but —"

"Oh, I'd feel real safe with you shooting bullets wildly all over the place. And do you really think you could shoot someone? C'mon, Blaize. This isn't some TV show where the good guys always win so they can come back for next week's episode. I'm a journalist and you're a schoolteacher. We don't have a lot of experience in shoot-outs."

"Okay," she admitted. "So what do you suggest?"

"I think you're right about where we'll find Pierce. I say we circle around to the back of the house and wait for an opening. Maybe we can create a diversion. I'll try to get to Pierce and you separate Joey from the commune. If we can get out without alerting any of the cult members, we can make it to the highway and hitch a ride to the nearest town."

"What kind of diversion?" Blaize asked.

"I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead." He reached out and took her hand. "Listen. The most important thing is that we destroy any copies of the manuscript Pierce has with him. If we can't get Joey out —"

"No," she cried, pulling her hand away with a defiant jerk. "I'm not leaving without him."

"We may have to. Once the book is destroyed we can always come back and rescue the boy."

"No." She was adamant. "We can't leave without him." She stared directly into Gate's eyes. There was no room for argument. "I won't leave him here."

For a moment the two of them faced off, both equally determined. Then Gate looked away. "All right. But it's your job to get the boy. I'll take care of Pierce."

With that decided, they stepped out, blinking, into the daylight.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Spyder woke, the boy was gone. Before he'd left, Joey had draped his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles blanket around Spyder's shoulders. The gesture touched Spyder and brought a smile to his face. He stood and stretched, already bracing himself for the shooting pains that never came. He stared with disbelief at his arm. It hadn't been a dream. The boy had actually healed him.

He shook his head. There wasn't time to think of that now. He had to get to Pierce. He walked to the closed door and listened. There was no sound on the other side. He inched the door open, putting his face to the widening crack. The hallway was empty. No guards were posted outside the door. It felt like an ambush, but he had no choice other than to go out into the hallway.

Opening the door wider, he became aware of voices coming from the far end of the hallway. One young and sweet, the other gravel-rough. He inched toward Algernon's room, making as little noise as possible. The closer he got, the clearer it became that the author was telling the boy a story.

He felt time closing in on him. Someone was sure to come upstairs soon. But he didn't want to spook the boy. He stood just outside the doorway listening. There was a pause and the sound of paper crumpling. Then the monotone of Algernon Pierce reciting again. Every now and then Joey would ask a question.

Spyder leaned to the side and peeked into the room, jerking his head back before either of them spotted him. What he saw made his skin crawl.

Joey sat on his uncle's lap, staring up at him with rapt attention as Pierce read. Pierce was draped in blood-stained white robes, his eyes glistening with equal parts purpose and insanity. Crumpled manuscript pages littered the floor. As Spyder watched, the author crushed another sheet in his fist and tossed it into the fireplace where it burned, sending black ashes drifting upward.

Spyder frowned, trying to make sense of what he'd seen. Pierce was destroying each page as he read it. He was doing their work for them. As if she was standing right beside him, Spyder heard Blaize's voice. "Not turn the page, but BURN the page." In his mind he saw those pages reduced to ashes fluttering in the fireplace. She was right. It *was* "burn the page".

Pierce was burning his own book. But not before reading it to Joey. Was it an author's vanity? Did he have to make sure that at least one other person heard the words before they were gone forever?

He heard the soft shuffling of footsteps too late to hide. Assuming an innocent expression he faced the woman walking toward him carrying a tray between her hands. She frowned, staring warily at him. Then recognition lit up her face.

"You!" she cried. "Blaize's musician friend."

He heard Joey call out from Algernon's room. "Season?"

His head swiveled between the doorway and the woman blocking his path.

"You're one of them," she screamed.

He knew her screams would bring others and without thinking he knocked the tray from her hands, spilling tea and sending triangles of toast skittering across the floor. He pushed her aside and rushed by before she had time to recover. Racing down the stairs, he shouldered past a robed figure coming in the opposite direction. Her screams followed on his heels.

"Get him! Someone stop him!"

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Here," Gate called, leading Blaize toward a darkened building large enough to be called a barn rather than a shed. A heavy-duty padlock hung open, swinging from a rusted clasp. Whoever was here last hadn't bothered to lock up behind them.

Gate put his shoulder to the door and pushed it across the hard-packed dirt floor. They scrambled inside and pulled the door closed behind them. Inside the air was thick with the smell of gasoline and grease. Snowmobiles and sleds filled the spaces—obviously the cult's primary means of transportation in the harsh mountain winters. There were skis and snowshoes stored in the rafters and shovels hanging from pegs on the walls.

Gate swiped at the dust-and-grime-covered window. They could see Joey's house in the distance, swarming with activity.

"This'll be a perfect lookout point," Gate said. He moved along the wall, checking shelves covered with rubber fan belts and engine parts. "There must be something we can use here," he muttered. He waved a hand at her. "See what you can find."

Blaize wasn't convinced. Despite what Gate had said, she'd feel a whole lot safer with a real weapon. She searched anyway, moving between rows of big, bulky machinery. In a pinch, a wrench would be better than nothing. She made her way between rows of equipment, moving deeper into the dark, cavernous shed.

Suddenly someone leaped out of the darkness. Blaize jumped, but before she could scream, a hand covered her mouth and an arm snaked around her middle, holding her tight. Her heart leapt and she squirmed, trying to escape. She kicked out at one of the snowmobiles beside her, trying to get Gate's attention.

Then a voice hissed in her ear. "Shhh...Blaize it's me. Don't scream."

She recognized his voice before she saw his face. His hold loosened and she turned into Spyder's arms, relief flooding her body. And warmth. Despite the danger they were in, she responded to his closeness.

"Oh Spyder, I was so worried about you." She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him tight and covering his face with kisses.

A jumble of questions poured from her mouth. "Where have you been? I've been so worried. I tried calling. I didn't know if you made it back from Pierce's house. Are you all right?"

He kissed her, cutting off the stream of questions. "I'm fine. I'll explain everything but right now I just need to hold you."

And he did, clasping her tight against his body. She relaxed in his arms, feeling whole again. Her questions could wait. Being back in his arms was bliss. And suddenly

the danger seemed less oppressive. Despite every warning to the contrary and everything they'd learned about the power of Pierce's words, she trusted herself completely in Spyder's hands.

Behind them Gate cleared his throat. "I hate to interrupt, but..."

Still holding her close in the circle of his left arm, Spyder held out his right hand. "Fence, right?"

"Gate."

"Yeah, whatever."

Gate ignored the offered hand. "And you must be The Strangler."

Blaize could feel Spyder bristle beside her. The men glared at each other, animosity flowing between them. She could let them waste valuable time bickering, or she could shock them out of their showdown.

"You guys done?" she asked. "Or are you going to have a pissing contest next?"

She laughed at their identical stunned impressions, relief making her giddy.

"Nice mouth," Gate quipped.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Just because I don't have a gun doesn't mean I'm not armed."

"Oh that's a relief," he said dryly. "When we're being chased by nine zillion crazed religious zealots, you can turn around and sass them to death."

Gate sized Spyder up with a slow, sweeping glance and a male cockfighting attitude. She almost expected them to start circling each other for a round of fisticuffs.

Then Gate frowned and narrowed his eyes. "What happened to your hand?" he asked.

*Hand?* Blaize looked at Spyder's hand. She didn't see anything unusual about it. Then she stepped away from the arm encircling her waist and blinked in shock. His leather jacket ended at the cuff. There was no hand there. No...*oh God!*

She looked into his eyes.

He shrugged. "An accident." Then he tipped her face up with his right hand. "Look at me. It can't hurt you. *I* can't hurt you. You're safe."

"An accident," she repeated, shaking her head. Slowly, with stunned disbelief, the truth sank in. "No, it wasn't an accident. You did this. You did this to save me." And she knew when too. She remembered the moment she'd felt the hold on them slip and her conviction that Spyder had somehow shifted the tide of Pierce's prophesy. But this! "Spyder—"

"Shhh," he said, placing a finger over her lips.

She remembered Spyder saying at Pierce's house that he'd cut off his own hand rather than hurt her. Who knew he'd meant it? She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was all too much to take in. So she resorted to what she knew best.

She arched an eyebrow at Spyder, forcing a lightness in her voice. "You're right handed, aren't you?"



"Yes."

"Well, if you really loved me..."

He stared at her, a short bark of laughter erupting from his lips. "Oh God, you're a wicked, wicked woman."

Gate tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile. "Tell me about it. I've been stuck with her for days." He made a hand-wiping gesture and grinned. "Now she's your problem."

That was all they'd say about it for now. *There'd be time*, she thought. If they got out of here alive, she'd have plenty of opportunities to show him just how much his act of sacrifice meant to her. She'd have a lifetime to show him that same love and devotion. But if they failed here, nothing else mattered and a hand would be the least of their losses.

"Listen," Gate said. "I have an idea for that diversion we discussed."

Blaize was relieved to change the subject. Apparently the men were willing to put their hostility aside for now and work together. She looked from one man to the other. Each of them held a special place in her heart. Maybe before Algernon Pierce had sent her life in his own bizarre direction, she would have met and fallen in love with Gate. He was safe, responsible and everything she thought she'd always wanted in a man.

But that was before Spyder. Spyder who was dark and moody, with that hint of danger dancing behind his eyes. Spyder who swore he'd cut off his hand rather than hurt her and actually meant it. Whether it was Pierce's doing or not, she could never go back now. Spyder was the man she loved.

"A diversion?" Spyder asked.

"Yeah." Gate replied. "We figure if we cause a diversion we can find Pierce's room and destroy the manuscript."

"And save Joey," Blaize added. "I'm not leaving here without him."

"I know where they are," Spyder said.

Blaize and Gate both looked at him in surprise.

"Joey's in Pierce's room," he continued. "Top floor, first door on your left. I saw them there this morning. Then someone recognized me." He turned to Blaize, apology in his eyes. "I think it was your missing friend."

Blaize nodded. Joyce. Yes. She knew how fiercely loyal Joyce was. If Joyce was protecting Joey, she'd protect him with her life.

"That Pierce guy has gone completely over the edge," Spyder continued. "He's reading to the boy, wearing bloody robes."

"White robes?" Blaize asked.

Spyder nodded.

"His sister's robes. He's wearing the robes she died in as some form of atonement." She explained what they'd seen and discovered to Spyder, condensing the last few days quickly. Then she told him the theory that Oswald Gaderian had confirmed.

Spyder didn't seem surprised or shocked by anything she said. When he told Blaize about his encounter with Joey, she understood why. It was unbelievable. But everything that had happened since Richard's death was unbelievable.

Richard. It all seemed so long ago. She wasn't the same person now that she was then. She was stronger, she realized. In her quest to regain control of her own life, she'd become the kind of person who would never allow anyone to control her again.

Spyder interrupted her thoughts. "You were right," he said. "About the song. The words should have been 'burn the page'. Pierce was burning every page as he read it. He's already destroyed the manuscript."

Before she even had a chance to feel relieved, Gate spoke up.

"What about the disk?" he asked.

Spyder gave him a blank look. "Disk?"

"He may have destroyed the hard copy," Gate explained, "but we're pretty sure he still has the manuscript on a computer disk somewhere. He can still send that to the publisher." Gate paced, running his hands through his hair. "And don't forget those subliminal tapes his sister used to control him. We have to destroy those too or Pierce will simply be compelled to write the book all over again. We're not out of the woods yet—"

Blaize interrupted, "Spyder knows which room is theirs. He can lead us to Pierce."

Gate pointed toward the window. "Half the commune is gathered outside their house guarding him. There's no way we're getting through."

"He's right," Spyder said, aiming his next question at Gate. "So, what's this about a diversion?"

Gate gestured to the shelves. "Gasoline."

Spyder nodded, understanding on his face. "We set a fire..."

"...and everyone goes running to put it out, leaving only a few people guarding Joey and Pierce," Gate said, finishing the thought with a nod. "It'll even the odds a little."

"Where do we start?" Spyder asked.

"We don't start anywhere," Gate replied. "No offense, but lighting matches is a two-handed job."

Before they could start butting heads again, Blaize interrupted. "Don't burn Joey's house. I don't want him in any danger."

"No," Gate said. "I won't touch any of the living quarters. This is a diversion, not mass murder I'm talking about. I was thinking of circling around and starting at the chapel. If I'm not discovered I can set fire to any empty buildings along the way. Just enough to get people moving away from Joey's house so you two can rush in and get the boy away and find the disk. With any luck I'll have time to meet you back there. If not, get him away and don't worry about me. Just get the hell out of here."

Blaize took a step toward him, a sudden shiver of premonition sending a chill down her spine. "We're not leaving without you," she insisted.

But Spyder laid his hand on her arm, stopping her. He nodded to Gate and something passed between them. "We'll do whatever we have to," he said. "You create the diversion we need and I'll see to the rest."

The men were in agreement and it didn't seem to matter what Blaize thought. "We'll see," she said, and left it at that.

Gate gathered some half-empty gas cans and combined the fuel in them until he had two full containers. "This should be enough for a decent diversion," he said.

Spyder reached into his pocket and tossed Gate a lighter. "Just in case you run out of those two-handed matches," he said.

Gate shoved the lighter in his pocket without a word then hefted the filled gasoline cans. "I'm going to backtrack and circle through the woods. It might take some time until the coast is clear enough for me to get to the chapel. An hour. Maybe more." He reached the door, then turned and called over his shoulder. "I'm sure you two can find *something* to do to fill the time."

With that parting shot and a conspiratorial wink, he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize and Spyder were left alone in the dim snowmobile shed with nothing to do but wait. They sat on the cold dirt floor, huddled behind a yellow Ski-Doo.

Spyder again recounted his night in Joey's room. When he told Blaize about the healing, he only hinted at the pain he'd been in, but it broke her heart to realize just how much he'd endured. She couldn't believe how he'd suffered for her, but knew he wouldn't want her sympathy. It would only embarrass him.

She thought of those hands she loved, how they'd moved along her body with expert skill, bringing her to incredible heights. And his music. A musician's hands were his instruments. Spyder had given up more than just a hand. He'd given up his love, his art, his livelihood.

She curled into the warmth of his embrace, her head resting on his shoulder. She loved him. She'd loved him even before he'd sacrificed so much for her. She felt as if she'd been searching her whole life for him and knew they'd have found each other somehow, even if they hadn't been thrown together by Algernon Pierce's script.

"Joey is special," Spyder said, finishing his story.

"Yes, he's special. But he's not the Messiah. And what Pierce and his sister have planned for him is a reign of terror, not salvation. It would be the end of the world as we know it."

Spyder agreed. "Is it too late for him, do you think? I mean, even if we manage to get him away from here, what kind of damage has been done to him in the name of salvation?"

"I don't know," Blaize replied. "He's smart. He can be deprogrammed, right? With enough time maybe he'll be able to put all this behind him and forget."

But even as she said it, she had doubts. His whole life had led him along one path and one path only. This was the only family he knew, the only life he'd ever experienced. But she had to believe that freeing him was the right course. They couldn't leave him here.

Spyder got up to check the window. She missed his arms around her, missed his warmth. He paced, as if trying to walk off his frustration and clear his head.

He turned to Blaize. "Then what? What happens once we get him out of here? He's lost his entire family, his whole purpose in life. What can we give him in return?"

"Love," Blaize said. "A new family. A normal life."

She stood and walked into his arms. "We can give him those things. You and I."

She felt his assent before she heard the words. "Yes," he said. "We can."

This felt right, she realized. Right in a way she hadn't felt in a long, long time. Pierce hadn't anticipated or engineered this turn of events. She had. And Spyder.

For the first time in months she felt as if she was the only one in charge of her own destiny.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Gate could have made it to the chapel in half the time if he'd taken the direct path through the compound instead of winding his way along the perimeter. His progress was hampered by the dense forest that surrounded the commune. It was just as well. He never wanted to see that grim statue rising from the courtyard fountain again, especially after what had happened there last night.

Finding his way through the woods was no problem. He'd always been a country boy. He loved hiking and camping, and there was no more beautiful spot on earth than the Adirondack Mountains. *If I get out of here alive*, he thought, *I might just write an article about the beauty of this region*. Each season boasted its own unique charm. In the summer the woods were layered with color, from red maple to blue spruce and every shade of green in between. In the fall they were a riotous, patchwork quilt of orange and gold and crimson. Overnight, the bare browns of fall were replaced by the crystal confection of winter, with creamy mounds of snowbanks and marzipan trees dusted with powdered sugar snow.

Today the woods were quiet. Perhaps too quiet. The rustling of his footsteps moving through a bed of pine needles was too loud in the stillness of the woods. He might as well blow a whistle to announce his passage.

But no one stopped him and soon he was within sight of the chapel. He put the gasoline cans down and stretched his arms, then hunkered down to watch for any signs of activity in the area. While he scouted the compound, he made a slight change of plans. He figured if he was going to create a diversion, he might as well make it a big one.

He recognized two buildings to the right of the chapel. One, he remembered from their tour, was a pottery shed and the other a glass-enclosed greenhouse that looked as if it would make a nice big boom when all that glass blew. He decided to take all three buildings out. If that didn't bring the whole damn commune running, nothing would.

He started at the greenhouse first, soaking the long tables made of wooden planks until the fumes made his eyes water. He trailed gasoline from the greenhouse to the pottery shed, then splashed it along the walls and around the kilns. He emptied one can then went back for the other, intending to use the entire second can of gasoline on the chapel.

But when he turned back toward the chapel, he saw a flash of movement inside. The flutter of robes, a dark silhouette moving among even darker shadows. Or was it only his imagination? He couldn't take a chance on burning the building if there was someone inside. But he couldn't stop now. Blaize and her arachnid friend were counting on him. He'd have to go inside and make sure the chapel was empty.

He circled the building with the second gasoline can, the cold liquid gurgling from the spout as he poured the remaining gasoline onto the grass and the outer walls of the building. Now all it would take is the flick of a match to set all three buildings burning and his diversion would go off.

But first he had to check inside the chapel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder felt the explosion before he heard it. He didn't move, and for a few minutes neither did anyone else. Then the area around Joey's house became a flurry of activity as people spun in every direction and robed figures rushed from the front door. At first no one seemed to know what to do or where to go. Then another explosion went off, followed by a billowing plume of smoke. The Klaxon call of alarms finally set them in motion. The members moved purposefully in the direction of Gate's diversion.

Then something happened that Blaize and Spyder hadn't counted on. Joey came outside. But he wasn't alone. Joyce hovered over him like a mother hen, never leaving his side. The two of them stood alone for a moment, then started moving in the same direction the rest had. Soon Joey would be lost in the crowd of bodies moving toward the fire.

Blaize grabbed Spyder's hand and pulled him out of the shed. She was shouting something, but he couldn't be sure he heard her right. His ears were still ringing from the explosion.

"What?"

"Your song," she shouted. "Sing it."

"I don't—"

Her voice ringing with conviction, she screamed at him. "Just sing it NOW!"

And he did, feeling uncomfortable at first, then more secure in the knowledge that her instincts were right.

Joey stopped and tipped his head, listening. Joyce tried to bustle him forward, but he didn't move. He turned with a slow smile of recognition and started walking toward Spyder and Blaize. Joyce reached for him, but he brushed her aside and opened his mouth to join Spyder in song.

\* \* \* \* \*

Blaize watched Joey approach. He had the voice of an angel and it blended with Spyder's in perfect harmony. She wasn't sure how she'd known the song was the key. She just did. Listening, she realized that Spyder had instinctively changed the lyrics, substituting the words "burn the page". Yes, she thought. That's exactly the way it was meant to be.

The very air seemed to crystallize around them, becoming pure and clear. Something truly magical happened. Blaize felt her body tingle as Spyder and Joey's voices harmonized, rising with the gentle whisper of a breeze, swirling and twining, then falling like the cascade of a waterfall as two became one. Their combined voice was the singular most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

She moved toward Joey, but his eyes stayed focused on Spyder as they sang together. He passed her and she kept moving forward, blocking Joyce's path. She held up her hands, trying to stop Joyce from dragging Joey back.

"Joyce," she cried, struggling with her friend. "Let him go."

The others were too far away, intent on getting to the fire. Joyce was the only one standing in their way. But Joyce fought like a tiger, clawing and scratching and pummeling Blaize's chest.

"Joyce, look at me!" She tried to catch her eye, but Joyce's gaze was distant and cold. She gripped her friend's shoulders tight and shook. "Joyce, please."

Behind her she could hear the singing rise to a crescendo, now joined by an unseen choir. The song rippled outward in translucent waves, bringing harmony to every living thing it came in contact with.

And suddenly Joyce stopped struggling. Her grip loosened and recognition came into her eyes. She blinked and ran her fingers through her hair. "Blaize?" she asked, as if seeing her for the first time.

"Yes," Blaize said, relief flooding through her. "It's me." She reached out and hugged her friend, hugged her so tight she felt the air leave her lungs.

But their reunion was short-lived as a wraithlike image appeared in an upper window, screaming and gesturing madly. "Stop them," he screamed to Joyce. As the face took substance, Blaize recognized Pierce. His voyage of madness was now complete—eyes red rimmed, hair wild, gun waving madly and punctuating his bellowing voice.

For a moment Joyce seemed to waver. She looked from Pierce to Blaize and back, her loyalties divided. Blaize saw her struggle. But she also saw the cobalt blue steel of the gun. Pierce might not shoot at Spyder with Joey beside him, but she had no such protection. She was right out in the open and Pierce had a clear shot at her.

The next series of events happened in such rapid succession she barely had time to react or comprehend.

Joyce took a step back and turned to face Pierce, shielding Blaize with her body. "No," she shouted up at him. "It's over."

But Pierce wasn't giving up. Joyce yelped. She grabbed her shoulder, spun and stumbled backward even before Blaize heard the crack of gunfire and knew her friend had been hit. Joyce fell, nearly toppling them both before Blaize caught her.

Joyce slid from her grasp, blood spreading like a tropical bloom across her shoulder. Her fingers clutched Blaize's forearms. "Joey," she gasped. "Take care of him." Then she crumpled to the ground unconscious.

"I told you to stop them," Pierce screamed, still brandishing the gun.

Blaize was a sitting target. She had no doubt that bullet had been meant for her and only Pierce's incompetence had saved her life. But she couldn't count on his bad aim a third time. Leaving her friend's side, she started running toward the building.

She called out to Spyder behind her. "Take Joey away from here. Quick, before someone else comes."

She was relieved to see Spyder scoop the boy up and turn in the other direction without an argument. Whatever happened, at least Joey would be safe. Spyder would take care of him.

Blaize ran, expecting to dodge bullets along the way, but the window was ominously dark now. She pushed through the doorway, trying to remember the layout of the building. One wrong turn brought her into a living room area. She turned, trying to get her bearings. Before she could decide which direction to head, the back door off the kitchen crashed open.

She spun, choking with relief to see Gate running toward her. He was covered with soot and the smell of gasoline shimmered around him, as if he'd doused himself in it.

"You're a mess," she said.

"I had to drag one of the cult members out of the chapel kicking and screaming before I could set off the diversion."

"Some diversion," she said. "Did you have to set the whole damned place on fire?"

"It worked, didn't it?" he shot back, turning her in the right direction and racing her up the stairs.

As they reached the upper landing, she warned, "Spyder said it was the first door on the left. Be careful, though. Pierce has a gun."

"I saw," Gate replied, grunting as he forced the door to Pierce's room open.

At first Blaize thought the room was empty. The only things moving were the licking flames from the fireplace on the opposite wall, littered with half-consumed manuscript pages. More sheets lay on the desk just to the right of the fireplace. She ran into the room and scooped them up, whispering, "Burn...burn the page," as she fed them into the fire.

Then there was a whoop as Pierce jumped out from behind the door where he'd been lurking. He grabbed Gate, trapping his arms at his side in a bear hug, the gun pressed against Gate's ribs. "I've got you now," Pierce screamed. "I'm sending you back into the book!" Maniacal laughter was cut off midstream as Gate threw himself forward, sending both of them tumbling.



Locked together, they hit the floor. The impact jarred the gun loose from Pierce's hand and sent it skittering across the floor, out of her reach. Blaize backed against the desk as the men wrestled in the opposite corner.

Gate twisted, trapping Pierce beneath him. "The disk," Gate yelled at her, his hands clamped around Pierce's wrists. "Find the disk."

Adrenaline pumping through her body, Blaize turned and tore the desk apart, opening drawers and dumping them upside down as the two men struggled.

Nothing.

With a roar, Pierce threw Gate off and jumped to his feet, pointing at Blaize. "Get back in the book!" His nostrils flared and his eyes burned with a fierce glow. "Get back in the book so I can delete you!" His eyes flicked to the right and that quick, sly glance gave him away. She knew where to look for the disk now.

Gate kicked the back of Pierce's knees, knocking him off his feet. Pierce's jaw hit the floor with a sickening crack, and Blaize turned to see where Pierce's glance had landed before he'd gone down. She knew she'd found it the moment she spotted the slim black laptop computer on a chair beside the doorway. She reached it in three quick strides and hit the eject button on the side of the machine.

"I've got it," she yelled, when the disk slid out into her hand. But Pierce was back on his feet, coming at her again. Blood poured from his split lip and his laughter formed crimson bubbles that burst with a wet, bloody splatter. The open doorway was to her left, escape inches from her fingers.

Gate came up behind Pierce, grabbing him and pulling him away from Blaize. The two danced together, their bodies silhouetted by the roaring flames of the fire.

Blaize's eyes widened. The gun. Their struggling had sent it skittering inches away from the fireplace. "Gate, the gun!" she yelled, knowing she couldn't get to it in time. He turned, but not fast enough.

Without stopping to think, she threw the disk. It spun in the air, arcing over Pierce's shoulder and landing in the fireplace. The room filled with the smell of melting plastic and buckling metal.

The fire hissed and flared, then seemed to leap forward, reaching out with hungry tongues of flame toward the gun. Blaize screamed, but her scream was drowned out in an explosion that pushed a wall of hot air into her chest.

There was a whoosh as the flames reached Gate's flammable clothes and ignited. For a moment Gate and Pierce seemed to dance in a column of fire. She tried to fight her way toward them, but Gate's gasoline-soaked clothing seemed to pull the flames from the fireplace. He held tightly, trapping Pierce in his grip, the two of them forming a human pyre.

Then another explosion rocked the room, throwing her back against the wall and into deep, black oblivion.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Joyce struggled upward through a shadowy curtain of consciousness. It felt as if something was gnawing on her shoulder, ripping chunks of flesh and bone, but when she waved her arms, there was nothing there. Only pain. Then she remembered Pierce framed in the upper window waving a gun. She remembered being shot, spinning down, down, down. And Blaize... *Oh God, was Blaize all right?*

She tried to sit up, but her head spun dizzily. Where was Joey? She tried again, propping herself on her elbow and biting the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming. She had to find Joey. It was important. These last few weeks felt like a dream. Everything but her need to keep Joey safe.

She rolled onto her knees, taking deep breaths in an effort to push herself up. But an explosion ripped through the air and nearly sent her sprawling again. She lifted her head and saw smoke pouring from the window where Pierce had been. Smoke and fire and...*Gate?* She sucked in a breath and focused. It couldn't be. Gate burning, screaming, his arms reaching out to her as his face melted and blistered.

No! That had been a dream. It wasn't real. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head to clear the vision, chanting over and over, "It's not real, it was just a dream. Gate's not here." When she looked back the vision was gone, but the smoke was darker, the fire hotter. What if he was here? She couldn't just sit there and do nothing.

With a grunt, she dragged herself to her feet. Her shoulder throbbed, sending spikes of pain through her with each movement she made. But that was nothing compared to the anguish in her heart as she realized that her worst nightmare was coming true.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spyder had no intention of leaving Blaize to face Pierce alone. The guy was a freaking maniac. He'd taken Joey as far as the shed and asked him to wait there. He knew he was taking a chance, but when Joey promised to wait for him, the trust and sincerity in his eyes assured Spyder the boy would be there when he returned. He'd left Joey perched on a sleek black and neon green Arctic Cat and ran to help Blaize.

Four hundred feet from the building the first explosion hit, sending shock waves rippling through his body.

Two hundred feet and fire blew out the upstairs windows, showering him with glittering shards of glass. Tendrils of flame scorched the sides of the building as they licked upward from the shattered window.

One hundred feet and he saw movement at the front door as something or someone separated itself from the billowing smoke.

Fifty feet and he recognized Joyce, hunched over and bleeding, favoring her bloody shoulder as she dragged an unconscious Blaize from the building.

"Let her be alive," he prayed. "God, please let her be alive." And he kept praying until he reached her and found the steady heartbeat, felt the sweet and soft rush of her breath.

"Thank you," he breathed to whatever power had answered his prayers. He scooped Blaize up, carrying her away from the burning building.

She was all right. Dazed and bruised, but she was all right. Her eyes fluttered as he held her against his chest and carried her to the shed where Joey was waiting, as he'd promised. He laid her down and went back for Joyce, who'd passed out a few yards behind him. She was in much worse shape than Blaize.

As desperate as he was to escape, he'd waited while Joey placed his hands on Joyce's shoulder, healing her shoulder in the same way he'd healed Spyder's ragged wounds.

But Joyce had lost a lot of blood and remained unconscious.

"We can go," Blaize said, her voice trembling. "It's destroyed."

"What about Gate?" he asked, even though he knew no one could have survived inside that inferno.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, tears streaking her cheeks. He didn't ask her to elaborate. Not now.

Spyder carried Joyce's limp form to the Jeep. Blaize insisted she could walk and held tight to Joey's hand. No one tried to stop them. The few cult members left nearby shuffled around in a blank-eyed daze.

With Joyce lying unconscious in the backseat and Joey curled on Blaize's lap, Spyder drove away, watching the compound burn in his rearview mirror. He couldn't shake the feeling there was something they'd missed. Something they still had to fight. Something. *Just nerves*, he told himself. Just nerves.

When they were a safe distance from the compound, Spyder pulled off to the side of the road. He turned to Blaize on the seat beside him and ran his curled fingers along her jaw, knowing he'd never have to fear closing his hands around that fragile neck again. He'd never have to worry that someone else would control his actions like a crazed puppeteer, making him murder the woman he loved.

He could feel a trembling deep within her, something he suspected would take a long time to heal. When she was ready to speak, it all came out in a torrent. In a dazed voice she told him what had happened upstairs and how Gate and Pierce had died.

"So the gun exploded when it hit the fire?" he asked.

She hesitated, then turned, a thoughtful frown on her face. "I wanted to think that. I wanted to believe it. But..."

He waited, letting her find her own way through the maze of haunting memories.

Finally she took a deep, quivering breath. "But the explosion came before the fire touched the gun," she admitted. "I saw it. I saw it happen the moment the disk went into the flames. It happened when I destroyed the final copy of Pierce's book."

He shook his head. Why not? It was no more incredible than anything else they'd encountered. Pierce's final book had died screaming in a fit of rage.

Spyder pulled onto the road again, knowing that the best comfort he could give Blaize at this point was to take her as far away from Pierce's nightmare as possible. They were quiet for another few miles as they wound their way down the mountainside. When Blaize spoke again, the defeat in her voice tugged at his heart.

"I'll never know the truth," she said. "I'll never know if I was responsible for Richard's death."

"Not you," Joyce murmured from the backseat.

Spyder glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Joyce struggling to sit up. He tried to stop her, but she was determined.

Joyce reached forward and clasped Blaize's hand between the bucket seats. "It wasn't you," she repeated. "Gaderian did it." Her voice was weak and trembling, but firm with conviction. "I heard him telling Mother Moon. He killed Richard. They only needed you to believe you'd done it."

Blaize slumped, half turned in the seat, still gripping her friend's hand. "Thank God," she whispered, her voice muffled as she pressed her face against the headrest. Her shoulders heaved with silent sobs.

Spyder wanted to hold her, rock her, wipe all her fears away. It would be a long time before they put all the pieces together, but at least she wouldn't have to live with that question unanswered. "You weren't responsible," he said, echoing Joyce's words. "None of us were. We were all unwilling actors in Pierce's Play."

After a long silence, she turned to him. "What about us?" she asked, the emotion still hitching her voice. "We're only here...only together because of his book."

It broke his heart to hear the resignation in her voice. "I don't buy that," he said. "Maybe Pierce could throw us into each other's paths. Maybe he could push us together. Maybe. But he can't control my feelings. He can't take my breath away when you walk into the room. He can't force my heart to thunder in my chest when you smile at me. He can't make me want to be a better man for you, when God knows I've been a failure at it up until now. He can't make me love you. You did that."

How could he convince her? He wanted to reach out and smooth away the worry lines from her forehead. "Don't you see?" he asked. "Maybe we'd never have met if not for that book. But now that we have, I can't live without you. I won't. I don't care what's written in that damn book."

She nodded, but he could see it was more to ease his worries than to absolve herself. Maybe she didn't believe him now, but he'd have a lifetime to convince her, a

lifetime he intended to spend at her side. For now all he could do was reassure her that they were safe. The book was destroyed.

The curtain had come down on The Play.

## Final Curtain Call

Blaize watched snowflakes flutter outside the window of her classroom, turning the world soft and clean. It looked as if they'd have a white Christmas after all.

Her students were restless, but teens were always restless. The fact that today was the last day before Christmas break only added to their hyperactivity. She gave up the pretense and sent them to the computer labs to work off some of their energy with a few games of *Doom* or solitaire. She sat at her desk and made a note to herself to pick up the cake she'd ordered for Joey's birthday.

Thinking of Joey brought a smile to her face. The last eight months had brought both trials and incredible joys into her life. She and Spyder had petitioned the courts to adopt the orphaned boy. No one else had come forward to claim to him.

It was no surprise. With the key players dead, the rest of the commune members had scattered. Not a single one had come forward, even after Joyce published a series of award-winning articles about the dangers of subversive cults in modern society. Joyce's articles had cast blame on Mother Moon's cult for both the destruction of the newspaper offices and the death of Gate Wayne, who was praised for his heroic actions after the cult leader's murder.

Blaize and Spyder had corroborated Joyce's claims to have been working undercover at the commune. They'd also gotten married, not only to better their chances for adoption, but because they couldn't bear to be apart. They'd had a brief honeymoon while waiting for their petition to be granted.

Spyder had been fitted with a prosthetic hand that performed ordinary tasks surprisingly well. Although he couldn't play the guitar, he'd turned his talents to writing music on the computer, using a program that transformed the written keystrokes into a symphony orchestra and filled their home with music.

They'd had some tense moments when Pierce's third book was released. Even though they'd unraveled the plot of the books by destroying the commune and rescuing Joey from his mother's planned destiny, Blaize had been shocked to read a scene eerily recreating most of the events of that night. She'd had nightmares for weeks afterward. Her only consolation was knowing that the final, climactic end to the series was lost to the world forever. There was no way Pierce could reach out from beyond the grave to rewrite their ending.

Finally they were allowed to take Joey into their home and begin the long, slow process of undoing the effects of Mother Moon's brainwashing. The biggest obstacle remaining was Joey's conviction. He truly believed with all his heart that his mission in life was to save the world. It bordered on a fanaticism that frightened Blaize. In all other respects he'd acclimated well to the normal life of a twelve-year-old boy.

Except that he still believed he was the new Messiah.

Blaize heard shouting in the hallway. With a sigh, she pushed her notes aside and went to see what the commotion in the computer room was about. Instead of dying down when she entered the room, the noise increased as she found students scrolling through documents at the terminals.

The boy closest to her whistled. "Oh cool, it's the missing book!"

"You're shittin' me?" another said. "I thought the last book was never coming out because the author died."

"Yeah, well I heard in a chat room last night that you can download a copy free from this website. Everyone's talking about it."

The words sank in slowly as Blaize stared at the rows of computers, each displaying the same message.

*"Welcome to The Play. Book Four – The Coming."*

"Oh no," she whispered. "Oh no, how could this happen?"

No one answered as they stared with rapt attention, eyes scanning back and forth across the screens in front of them.

"Don't read it," she screamed. But no one listened. "I said don't read it!" She tore through the room, pulling cords from their outlets and turning all the screens black.

"Mrs. Raines, what are you doing?"

"You're dismissed," she told them. "You're all dismissed."

She ran to the teacher's lounge to call Spyder. She had to warn him, had to tell him what she'd seen.

\* \* \* \* \*

But Spyder had his own concerns at the moment. The prosthesis was giving him problems, artificial fingers clenching and flexing without his control. "Damned electronics," he swore beneath his breath, reaching for the ringing phone that had finally broken through his distraction.

Blaize's voice was hysterical on the other end. "Spyder, turn on your computer."

"What?"

"Turn it on now... Oh God..." Then she was sobbing and he ran, taking the phone with him into his office, where Joey sat in front of the computer screen. With a shock of recognition he saw the words on the screen, the words they'd destroyed. "How...?"

Joey looked up at him, a secretive smile on his face. "I remembered," he said. "I remembered it all."

The boy smiled eerily, staring at the monitor as Algernon Pierce's final words scrolled up the screen to be read by anxious fans all over the world.



## About the Author

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