

**A SAM HARPER CRIME MYSTERY**

# **THE DEVIL CAN WAIT**



**MARTA STEPHENS**

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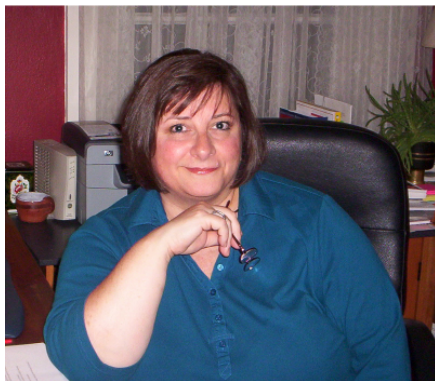
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# **Dedication**

In loving memory of my mother, Carmen C Ruggiero,  
who taught me to believe in my dreams and to always  
follow them.



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Marta Stephens is a native of Argentina who has made Indiana her home since the age of four. This mild-manner lady turned to crime with the publication of the first in her Sam Harper Crime Mystery series, *SILENCED CRY* (2007) which went on to receive honorable mention at the 2008 New York Book Festival and top ten in the 2007 Preditors & Editors Reader Poll.

Stephens holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism/ Public Relations from Ball State University (IN) where she is employed in human resources. She is a member of Sisters in Crime International, Sisters in Crime Speed City Indiana Chapter, and the Midwest Writer's Workshop.

Stephens lives with her husband, two children and mother-in-law. Aside from her writing, Stephens administers the authors' blog, *MURDER BY 4*, enjoys oil paintings, gardening, the family's pet dogs and shared moments with family and friends.

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“... There is a neat new group of mystery authors emerging, and Marta Stephens is smack dab in the middle of them. Do yourself a favor and get on board this train. This is an amazing debut from a rising mystery star.”

*Thomas Fortenberry*

“... Tight suspense, perfectly chosen verbs, natural and innovative beats, and authentic dialog propel this work to a level far beyond those works commonly found on the best sellers list. Stephens’ writing soars with focused intensity ...”

*Aaron Paul Lazar, author of LeGarde Mystery Series  
for Midwest Book Reviews*

“... First in a planned series, let’s hope those plans materialize. Recommended.”

*Jack Quick, Bookbitch Review*

“Marta Stephens is a master crime novelist. She knows how to spin a complex, credible, action-packed and gripping story with plot, subplot and more subplot. Every page crackles with intrigue, questions, and clues! ... a superb crime novel!”

*Viviane Crystal, Crystal Reviews*

“Silenced Cry is an intense, fast-paced read that you will quickly devour.”

*Jennifer Luzader, Muncie Public Library*

“Silenced Cry is a convoluted and complex story that demonstrates a vivid imaginative gift on the part of author Marta Stephens. It is common to speak of a mystery as being complex and possessing numerous plot twists and turns; but rare to find a novel quite as complex as this one. Truly, Stephens delivers a winner

of high promise in *Silenced Cry*, a story whose truths will linger long in the mind.”

*Euro-Reviews*

“If you are looking for a novel ripe with twists and turns and intricate interweaving of plots, *Silenced Cry* is a novel for you. This is a classic detective story that is detailed, intricate, and full of surprises.”

*Nicole M Boals, Armchair Interviews*

“... Fast paced and full of more twists and turns than a new rollercoaster ... I now have a new favorite ride.”

*Jake George, author of Grandfather's Song and A New Dawn*



**The Devil Can Wait**

# 1

## ***Chandler, MA***

“Fogerdyl!”

The old man cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled for his dog over the howl of the North Atlantic wind. The shepherd’s muted bark came to him from the distance.

At three in the morning, the stretch of beach between Williams Landing and pier twenty-eight was cloaked in impenetrable darkness. The wind raged with particular vengeance on the pre-dawn hours of November 12. It churned the waters of Chandler Bay and spewed a biting mist off the swells before the waves slammed onto the shore. Still, the cold snap that swept across the isolated section of beach was as expected as Thanksgiving turkey and pumpkin pie.

Moist sand sunk under the weight of the old man’s steps. He staggered and leaned into the gusts to keep his balance. He aimed the flashlight beam deep into the night and yelled for his dog again. Tiny pellets of snow spat at an angle past the shaft of light before disappearing into the darkness.

“There you are, you stinker.”

Ten yards ahead, the dog stood poised like a pointer barking incessantly at the incoming waves.

“Crazy mutt.”

The dog lowered his head and eased toward the water’s edge.

"Fogerdry. Here, boy." He clapped his hands to get the pet's attention. "Get over here."

The dog remained fixed; his hackles on end.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked as he bent to leash him. "You're never this ...". The man swept the light in the direction of whatever had caught the dog's attention. He squinted, leaned in for a closer look, and recoiled. Disgust hit as hard as the stench that rose from the decomposed body.

The Homicide unit of the Chandler Police Department expected the annual hike in crime that seemed to always usher in the holiday season. But the floater cases and a recent outbreak of the flu among the officers had crimped the department's roster. Three of the eleven detectives were out on sick leave; two were recuperating from injuries sustained during a high-speed chase. Those left to serve double duty were on the short end of a fuse with no apparent escape from the madness.

Sam Harper stirred and moaned at the high-pitched ring of his cell. He frowned at the phone's intrusive shrill. A familiar sound that no longer jolted him out of bed as it once had. He pried his eyes open, tempted to throw the phone against the wall. Instead, he remained face down with the pillow wrapped tight around his head. Unable to block the irritating disturbance, he grunted and snatched it off the nightstand.

The congested voice on the other end of the line belonged to Dave Mann, Harper's partner of just over a year. Mann had a hell of a cold and his usual laid-back demeanor had given way to irritability. His patience had vanished six murders ago.

"Didn't you hear me call? Twice. I let the damned phone ring forever."

Harper winced as the red alarm clock numbers

came into focus. "It's four in the morn—"

"Got another floater."

"Jesus." Harper didn't have to see the body to know the victim was another teenage boy. This was the third case in a matter of weeks. He knew what they'd find — nothing. They'd have a corpse and a cause of death, but no motive or weapon, no time of death, no trace evidence and no suspect.

"Where?"

"Beached a quarter mile south of Williams Landing. Are you coming?"

"Yeah. I'm up."

"Sam?"

"I said I'm up. Just give me a minute!"

"It's colder than hell out here. Come on, Jack's already done with the preliminary. We're waiting on you."

Harper wiped the corners of his mouth as he tried to block out Mann's rant. "I'm on my way." He tossed the cell onto the bed, rubbed his eyes and glanced at Kay's empty pillow. His fiery six-month affair with the city's assistant prosecuting attorney ended abruptly with a single phone call she received from the New York D A and his offer to give her a shot at a high profile case. The first teen's body surfaced days after she left. Harper convinced himself that was the only reason he was thinking of her now. He slammed a fist into her pillow, swung his legs out of bed, and forced her from his mind again.

Harper parked his Jeep along the shoulder of the road. Jack Fowler's medical examiner's van, three marked units, and Mann's Nissan were parked a few yards ahead. Beams of portable spotlights shone like beacons on the beach below while the usual gathering of city personnel crowded the scene.

Mann, an ex-college quarterback, was a head taller than the two techs on duty tonight and a hard target to miss from any distance. When the first tech raised his camera for a shot, Mann leaned in, and pointed at the angle he wanted. By the time Harper reached the beach, Mann had moved on to inspect the other tech's initial crime-scene sketches. Jack also stood out among them like a smudge on a page. He was the middle-aged guy with a '60s crew cut sporting his trademark red sneakers. At his feet, the black body bag stretched across the wet sand.

Harper and Mann had chased after a faceless killer since the end of October when the first teenage boy bobbed up like an apple in Chandler Bay. The corpse in the body bag gave Harper reason to suspect they were dealing with a serial killer. He held that thought and jerked his collar snug around his neck as he made his way down the snow-covered embankment.

"Hold it, Doc." Harper shoved his hands into a pair of latex gloves.

"About damn time. What took you so long?"

"Got here as fast as I could."

"I've got more bodies than hours in a day to do them." Jack did nothing to disguise his irritation. "I don't have time—"

"Give me a break, will you? You're not the only one pulling double shifts. What do we have?" Harper reached for the tab on the body bag's zipper and pulled it open while Jack described the obvious.

"Another male, looks to be in his mid-teens. Has a trace of a tattoo left on his chest, just like the others." Jack paused and gave his watch a quick glance. "The killer's playing with you, Harp. Look at the throat – slit this one wide open."

Harper frowned and leaned forward for a closer look at the three-inch gash. "Okay, so he beats the crap out

of vic number one, strangles the second, and slices up the third. What the hell's pushing this guy's buttons?"

He swept a glance over his shoulder toward the bay. Every officer on the force knew the water temperatures dropped by early September; the colder the water, the slower the putrefaction process. That single fact meant the murders were weeks old when the bodies rose from the bottom. To Harper, it meant only one thing – a snag.

"What difference do motives make when we don't have a suspect?" Mann asked. "The guy's probably three states away by now."

"Or right in our backyard watching every move we make." Anything was possible. Harper understood Mann's frustration, but the worse thing they could do was second guess the killer.

"Then how do we find him? We have no prints and no trace. Any viable DNA got flushed off the bodies the minute they hit the water. If you've got a new theory, let's hear it."

"We follow the trail."

"What trail? We've got nothing."

"He'll make a mistake. They all do."

"Not this guy. He's thorough. Empties their pockets, doesn't leave anything behind," Mann said. "Damn near a perfect crime."

"But not quite." Jack pointed a gloved finger at the caps on the victim's two front teeth. "This one's had some fine dental work done, and where there's a cap, there's a dentist with records."

"So we'll ID the vic and the doc who drilled him. He'll have an old address and phone for the kid, landing us right back where we started. Nowhere." Mann turned away.

"He can't hide forever," Harper said. "If he left the state, the shortest way out is north, to New Hampshire."

We'll send out another BOLO."

"And tell them what? What are they supposed to be *on the look out* for?" Mann asked.

"The killer's calling card is his choice of victims and location. If he's moved on, you can bet some other detective unit is scratching their heads or worse, not making a connection between murders."

A frown rippled across Mann's brow as he studied the victim's face. "I say we're looking at this all wrong. Somewhere there's a kid trying to make a name for himself. That's what this is all about."

"I don't think so," Jack said.

"Sure it is. It's a territorial thing. No different than a drive-by shooting only this one is up close and personal."

"We would have heard something by now, someone would have talked. These are anything but random murders." Harper turned his back to the wind and shifted his weight from one foot to another. "The killer chose his victims – street-smart kids without loyalties. Hundreds of kids to choose from, why these three?"

"It's gang related. Nothing else ties them together." Mann pressed his point.

"I don't buy it. If that's what the killer wants us to think, he just made his first mistake."

Mann and Jack seemed to hang on those words.

"The murders were premeditated – thought out, and that tells me one thing. There was a connection among his victims. Figure that out," Harper said, "and maybe we'll find him before he kills again."

"We're out of leads, Sam. We have no suspects."

"Sure we do."

"Who, damn it? Face it, we've got a thumb up our ass on this one."

Harper studied his partner for a moment. The case had gotten to the entire detective unit. But now wasn't

the time to let tempers blow like pistons.

"We'll go back and re-examine each of the cases. We've missed something. The kids on the streets don't get tight-jawed for nothing."

"You think they're protecting the killer?" Mann asked.

"No, their skin. They're scared, you can bet one of them knows who did this and why."

"That puts us back on the serial killer theory." Mann shook his head. "It doesn't fit the profile."

Harper knew the FBI's description of a serial killer concluded offenders were usually white males between the ages of 18 and 32. He also knew there were as many exceptions to the profile rules as there were offenders. No one, including the FBI, wanted to risk misidentifying a serial killer based on a minor point like not fitting a typical profile.

"The best lead we had was the tattoo artist down by the docks," Mann said, "and you know where that led us – zilchville." He paused to raise his hand to his temple. "This reminds me of the Cromwell case."

Harper shook his head. Cromwell had worked as a cabby for twenty-three years when he lost his job. He systematically killed every person he blamed, including the doorman at the Hyatt Regency for giving his fares to the other cabs. He knew each of his victims well enough to use a different method to kill them according to their fears.

"Cromwell snapped; he lashed out," Harper said. "Whoever killed these boys was precise and deliberate."

"I agree," Jack said. "No seventeen-year-old I know is sophisticated enough to plan an elaborate scheme like this. Kids act on impulse. They leave their victims where they drop." He nodded at the corpse. "This isn't your classic gang killing." Jack stooped next to the



body and carefully lifted the boy's arm. "Look at his skin; same rough, pimple-like texture as the others. It's a normal change of decomposition. It happened in cold water – out there – in the deep and you can't dump a body in the middle of the bay without a boat. How many boys have access to the type of vessel needed to maneuver these waters?"

Mann looked away and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I'll call the port authorities again. See if anyone reported any unusual activities at the docks since the last murder."

"I found traces of drug use on the other two kids," Jack said. "If I were you, I'd keep looking for a high-end dealer."

"That's not all those two had in common. They both had rap sheets; this one probably does too. We need to look at their records again." Harper methodically examined the victim's face and hands. "Bloated, fingertips are puckered. Aside from the missing flesh around the face, there's not much sign of decay."

"Like I said, twenty-degree water temp acts like a preserving agent. The body fat turns into that soap-like consistency he's covered in. A shot of saline into those fingertips will pop them right up. If not, we have his teeth imprints."

"How long do you think he's been dead?" Harper asked.

"You know the process."

"Right, Jack, would you cut me some slack here? Just answer the question."

"Can't even come close. You know that. Too many variables."

"Then damn it, toss me your best guess."

"Hypothetically, same as the others – weeks. Look at his skin, Harp. He's not the first floater you've looked at. Soft tissue of the nose and ear lobes are gone,

adipocere – that soap like substance is over eighty percent of the body. It takes weeks for that to happen.”

Another strong gust of wind cut in from the bay. It threatened to topple the portable spotlights and sent a ripple of snow flurries across the beach.

“What about those?” Harper stooped down to examine the laceration across the top of the victim’s head.

“This kid floated in face down, head hanging; got rammed against the rocks,” Jack said. “In floaters, the blood flows down to the head. If it wasn’t for the obvious cut across the throat, I’d say those would be a toss-up between ante- or post-mortem injuries. As it is, I’ll wager post-mortem. Want to bet another steak dinner I’m right?”

“I quit betting against you, remember?” Harper tilted his head and continued to study the corpse.

Jack looked at his watch again and stifled a yawn. “All right. You guys done here? I have five others to do before I cut him open. Which one of you wants to watch?”

“I’ll do it. Call when you’re ready.” Harper peeled off his gloves and shoved them into his pockets.

A moment later, Jack and his assistant struggled to carry the body up the snowy embankment to the city van. While the techs took care of the lights, Harper turned his attention to Mann. His partner’s hacking cough sounded worse than it did the day before.

“Who found him?”

Mann tried to suppress another cough as he thumbed over his shoulder at the squad car where the dog and his owner were waiting. “Last name, Zirmack, Gene Zirmack. Lives up the road. Retired. Works part-time as caretaker at St Paul’s Church. Said his dog got loose. He was chasing after him when he found the vic.”

"Did he notice anything unusual?"

"Besides the stiff? No. He said if it hadn't been for his dog running off, he wouldn't have been down this far."

"Must be his lucky day."

"Yeah, well, we're taking him in for a statement."

Harper reached for the door handle of his Jeep when the sound of the waves lapping against the rocks below made him shift his attention. The sun wouldn't crest for another half hour. Chandler Bay and the distant horizon were indistinguishable from the black of night.

"You think Jack's right?" Mann asked.

"About what?"

"That the killer's playing with us. You believe that?"

"These kids weren't killed to impress us. Whoever did this made damned sure the murders couldn't be traced back to him."

"Then why toss the bodies in the bay? He had to know they'd wash back to shore."

"Yeah he did. The question is, did he do it because he wanted them to be found or is he cocky enough to think we'll never catch him?" Harper asked himself the same question a number of times. He swung open the car door and again looked over his shoulder toward the bay.

"Three bodies in eighteen days. Assuming they all decayed at the same rate, he's killed one kid every week. If he's still at it, we're already too late to prevent ... Jesus, who knows how many more."

## 2

### ***Mitu, Republic of Colombia. November 14***

On the map, Mitu is located in the southeastern section of Colombia, South America, approximately two degrees north of the equator. Physically, it is several miles north from the direct hit of the sun. Rain or not, every month in this remote region is as steamy as the previous with only the local festivities to mark a change in seasons. The Catholic priests make sure each has a Christian overtone.

The rainy season, four months of daily precipitation, began in September. It was now November. The back roads, as remote and coarse as the men who traveled them, grew washed out and impassible. The muddy channels that remained were pocked with holes like the one the driver of the black SUV had just plowed through. The upward motion jolted the back end of the car and Alejandro Salas into consciousness.

Alejandro slumped to one side in the back seat of the SUV and strained to raise his head. The only distinguishable sound was the steady back and forth swish of the wipers across the windshield. A glance through swollen slits allowed him to catch a glimpse of the vegetation that blurred past the passenger window. He was not sure of the time. It seemed like early morning, but deep in the interior the sun could not penetrate through the canopy of leaves, making it seem

much later in the day than it really was. He lifted a hand to the sharp ache that raced up the bridge of his broken nose and cringed with pain; involuntary tears streamed down his cheeks. The metallic taste of blood in the back of his throat and the sum of his other injuries were the price for getting caught stealing a kilo. Alejandro was desperate for cash, but his carelessness had cost him a three-hour beating by Lorenzo's thugs.

He forced himself into a sitting position. Unable to make out who was driving the SUV he glanced at Lorenzo's man sitting beside him. Pain ripped up his back with each jolt from the vehicle's movement. Alejandro pressed the heels of his palms to his head as another throbbing ache shot up the jaws to his temples.

*This is good*, he thought. He was still alive, but for how long? "Where are we going?" Alejandro heard of men being left in the jungle to die without provisions. Neither man in the car responded.

"I was set up. I would never ... Lorenzo has to know that."

The man sitting next to him shifted his weight and gave him a sideward glance. "Quiet."

"You know the military has been looking for me. They set me up. Can you not see that?"

"You think I am stupid?" The man swung a fist into Alejandro's face. "No one forced your hand. Be glad you are still alive."

Alejandro clutched his hands to his face; tears welled in his eyes again. His nose bled profusely. He knew his fate. The military intended to arrest him on drug smuggling charges and the cartel would make him an example to others who disobeyed. Men stole from the warehouses all the time. He was being used, placed in the middle of a battle between the military of a liberal government that tried and failed to oust the cartel and the rebel factions that fought to keep it. It

was a money game; he who had it, won.

He glanced out the window again. Nothing but dense green foliage in all directions. If he could just get out, he would flee deep into the jungle. That is what he was thinking when the SUV slowed down. His captor reached over him, opened his door, and threw him out. Alejandro plunged then rolled and landed in a pool of mud off the side of the road. Pellets of rain beat down on him. Mud-covered strands of hair fell into his eyes.

"Know this, Alejandro. I would have gladly killed you three hours ago," Lorenzo's man said. "But in there," he nodded toward the thick forest teeming with poisonous snakes, "you will be in a race to a slow death."

Alejandro wiped mud from his eyes. He blinked and watched the black SUV speed out of sight. Lorenzo was not a merciful man, but was known to have ulterior motives. Alejandro thought of his mother's precious black pearl ring and the price on her head and knew Lorenzo's men would go looking for her next.

Alejandro managed his way onto the road uncertain how long he had lain unconscious before opening his eyes again. He was miles away from any inhabited area. He glanced at his surroundings, began to walk, then stumbled and fell. At times, his injuries forced him into a crawl. He stopped to rest several times then tried again. Exhausted, he reached a ridge, looked out beyond its edge and immediately knew where he was. A mile to the east, beyond the trees and thickets, near the foothills, was his mother's cabin. Alejandro lowered his head, drew in a breath, then willed his body the strength to continue.

"Mamá!" He swung open the door to the small wooden frame bungalow. "Mamá." The word spilled from his lips with droplets of blood. He struggled to catch his breath,

able only to speak above a whisper before he collapsed.

Anita Salas's bungalow sat nestled within the thick underbrush and was well hidden from the unsuspecting traveler. She managed to help her son onto one of her kitchen chairs, examined his injuries, and washed him off. Anita was agitated, as usual, by her son's failings and every argument ended on the same bitter note.

"No! I will not allow it!" Anita jerked her head to one side and glared down at her son. "You are not ready, Alejandro. Look at you. You could not even manage the simple task of delivering the goods for Lorenzo without temptation." A look of disgust washed over her stone-like features. "Fail him again and we will *both* wish he would have killed you last night."

Alejandro raised his hand to his head as if that would keep it from spinning.

"There," she said as she bandaged the last of his injuries. "The rest will be up to the spirits." She reached for the small clay bowl from the kitchen table containing a mix of local herbs and other untold ingredients she had crushed into a near-powder consistency.

He had seen her perform this ritual all his life. She was a healer to some, a witch to others. It all depended on the person's perspective. Now the military had placed her at the top of their most wanted list for the murder of the three priests from San Pablo's Church.

A month before, a woman from their village had suspected her husband of having an affair with a younger woman. Rumors spread that she had consulted with Anita about his infidelity when, within a week of her visit, an explosion blinded the lady's husband at the warehouse where he worked. His blindness was easily explained as an accident. But there was no cause or reason for the seizure that left

his young lover paralyzed from the waist down the following morning.

It was the villagers' perception of Anita's evilness that had forced the priests' hands to accuse her of Satanism. Alejandro didn't want to believe it, but when by month's end, each one of the priests systematically died an agonizingly painful death, even he felt a tinge of fear run through his veins.

When he was young, he overheard his mother talking about the origin of her wide silver band with a black pearl encased in its center and the inside inscription. But his mother had never taken it off her finger in his presence nor had she revealed its secrets.

"He wants the ring," he said. "I know Lorenzo. He will stop at nothing."

Alejandro thought of the immense power he associated with the black pearl ring and the prophecy that told of the hell force that would fall on anyone who opposed the ring's bearer.

"Sh-h-h. Hush now." Anita touched the flame from one of the candles to the herbs and quickly blew it out, allowing the mix to smolder. She closed her eyes and began to sway from side to side. A low rhythmic hum grew into a wail then a throaty cry formed into words of an ancient chant. She repeated the chant several times as she walked around Alejandro, sweeping the smoke into his face.

He fixed his eyes on the ring.

"Put it out of your mind, *querido*."

"How long can we live like this? Give me the ring, Mamá."

"No."

"How many times have you talked of the prophecy? You told me yourself, the time for change will be when the planets align themselves with the sun. The eight



planets, Mamá. They will be perfectly aligned with the sun in a matter of weeks.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Signs in the sky and from the water.”

“The ring will bring us power, Mamá. I was destined for this. You know that.”

“You are destined to die, nothing more.”

“And you?”

“Enough!”

He raised a hand to the tender swell on his face. “I can do this for both of us. No one will ever be able to oppress us again.”

Anita tossed the bowl onto the table sending shattered fragments of pottery across its surface. She paced back and forth on the bare wood floor and combed fingers through her jet-black hair. Tight, short ringlets clung to the back of her neck from the humid tropical air.

“Power, riches, strength? Is that what you think this ring is about?” Anita glared into her son’s eyes. “*It* does the possessing, not me and it certainly will not be you. Some day, if you live long enough, you will understand that there is more to this existence than the few pesos or drugs you manage to steal every day. This ring was passed down to me from my mother and her mother before her and as long as I live, it stays here.” The crook of her finger shook inches away from his face.

“The prophecy says the moment the planets align, the powers will transfer to the first male born.”

“And not a minute before. Remember this, Alejandro, it also says that the ring *must* follow the lineage through natural death. Once the lineage is broken, a dangerous alliance will form with Lucifer himself. See to it that I die peacefully, my son. You are not yet prepared to deal with the likes of him.” Anita

glared at him with eyes as black and empty as a great white shark's.

"You do not really ... " He turned his head to one of the windows and raised a hand to his lips as a signal to silence her. Cautiously, he made his way to the door and swung it open with a swift, abrupt pull.

"Juan Carlos."

Juan, a drug dealer who covered his tracks by running the local auto repair, was the last person Alejandro expected to see this far into the jungle. He was an expert mechanic with little experience in the art of subtlety. Alejandro did not trust the man's motives, nor did he like his indiscretions. The only thing he and Juan Carlos had in common was a mutual distrust of Lorenzo. Alejandro grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him close to his face. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard what happened. I saw you, back there on the road. Are you all right?"

Alejandro glanced over his shoulder. He wondered how much Juan Carlos had heard through the thin construction of the tiny bungalow. He shoved him back away from the door. "Who told you I was here?"

"No one. I was just on my way—"

"This road goes nowhere. What did you think you would find here?"

"I promise I only thought you needed help." He bobbed his head to look around Alejandro. "What is this place?"

"Nothing. Understand?" Alejandro, still holding on to Juan Carlos's shirt, clenched his teeth, and shoved him to the ground.

"I ... I only wanted to check on you. But you are all right?" Juan Carlos's eyes glanced past Alejandro again into the darkened room. He looked up and grinned. "I am glad."

Alejandro's injuries from the night before kept him

from securing Juan Carlos's permanent silence. Instead of killing the man, Alejandro waited until he disappeared down the path, past the intrusive vegetation that had overgrown along the road. Inside, his mother was busying herself with the preparation of the noon meal.

"It is not safe for you to stay here any more. Juan followed me. Others will come for you."

"Do not worry yourself."

"We must leave – now. I will find a safe place for you. I promise they will not find you."

"Some things, Alejandro, cannot be controlled. They are already in motion."

"What things?" Lines rippled across his brow at his mother's silence. He wiped the sweat from his face and watched as she chopped onions and threw them into a pot. "Mamá, what things?"

Anita's indifference to his plea was unsettling. "Answer me."

"Life, Alejandro. We cannot stop fate." Anita wiped her hands on her apron then took a step toward him. "I will be fine, but do not think that Lorenzo is done with you. Do what you must, but leave me out of it."

It would be hours before the meal would be ready; he pinched off a piece of bread and took a bite.

"What are you thinking, Alejandro?"

"Perhaps you are right. I should leave. Just until things quiet down."

She nodded her approval then continued to stir what was in the pot. "The sooner the better. Where will you go?"

"I do not know. Across the border into Brazil or maybe north to Venezuela. I know a man who can arrange a flight out of here. I need to find him." He paused, waiting for his mother to look up from her cooking. "Lock the door, Mamá. I will be back soon."

The ancient prophecy his mother had spoken of would come to pass. Once fulfilled, no one, not even Lorenzo, would dare touch him again. Alejandro left her to her chopping and stirring. He assured himself she would be safe for a few hours until he returned. He looked at her for a moment, turned to leave, then shut the door.

Anita raised her glance and stared at the bare stucco wall directly in front of her. She stood perfectly still for a second or two then whispered: "*Adios mi hijo.*"

It took longer than Alejandro anticipated to find the pilot. The sun had set several hours before and the path to his mother's cottage was a treacherous rutted lane to maneuver at night. When Alejandro returned to her home, he was not surprised that the house was nestled in complete darkness. Even the glow of a candle would have been seen from a distance. But she would have never left the front door ajar. Alejandro cautiously pushed it open. Cold fingers of dread pricked at his chest like a million sharp needles.

"Mamá?" He reached for the matches and candles his mother kept on a nearby table. He struck the match once. The flame sputtered at first; its glow quickly swallowed the shadows. "Mamá!"

Anita lay face up in a pool of blood. It had drenched the front of her cotton dress and matted into her hair. Her lifeless black eyes, clouded by death, stared back at him. Her mouth hung open above the gash that had nearly separated her head from her neck. Gnarled, naked fingers curled either in fear or self-defense.

Alejandro's eyes shot first to her hands then swept over her body. "No!" He raised his fists to his head as he scanned the floor around her. "No!" His stomach snapped. Chills raced after the hot flash that rippled up

his thighs. Rage blurred his vision and the beating inside his chest bashed at a painful pace.

*Gone!*

### 3

When had cynicism poisoned his mind? The job had a way of changing a man, but Harper never thought it would happen to him. He wasn't sure what he believed any more. What god would allow the carnage he had seen in Homicide the past couple of months? His life was immersed in death, but it never made sense to see kids stretched out in the morgue.

Harper had witnessed the last victim's autopsy two hours before. Just as Jack had predicted, the primary cause of death was the gash across the teenager's throat. Jack's terse words still rang in his ears. *Dead when he hit the water.*

As far as Harper knew, the body hadn't given up any new evidence. *So why the call, Jack?* he wondered.

The noticeable drop in temperature brushed past his face as he stepped out of the elevator onto the basement of Community Hospital. Harper lost count of how many times he had walked down this hall in the past few weeks. Empty gurneys, shoved against the wall, lined the passage to the medical examiner's office and were silent testaments to Jack Fowler's day.

After hours, the lower level was unnervingly still, but the irksome nagging voice in the back of Harper's head screamed for answers.

Inside the autopsy room, the boy's corpse was lying face up on the stainless steel table. A sheet covered

him from his feet to the middle of his chest. Jack had already sutured the Y incision that ran down from the boy's shoulders to his sternum, then straight down to the pubis.

Harper's sight zoomed in on the missing front section of skull and the brain Jack had placed in one of the small metal trays.

Jack looked up from his work with a half-hearted smile.

"You know, Harp. This is just about the time I wish you would have bet me that steak dinner."

"Why. Did he hemorrhage?"

"Nope. I skipped lunch. It's after six and I could sure use a decent Porterhouse." Jack dropped his reading glasses from his head onto the bridge of his nose and made another notation. "The brain tissue is normal. That's not why I called though."

"What's up?"

"We got lucky this time."

"How so?"

"Look at this." Jack pulled back the sheet to expose the victim's forearm. He lifted the boy's left hand and aimed the light onto it.

A crease furrowed Harper's brow as he eyed the surface of skin where fingernails had once grown. "So what? His nails are at the bottom of the bay. It happens."

"Glad to know you've been paying attention, but that's not it either." Jack pointed at a small mark on the boy's middle finger just above the second knuckle and to the side, between the middle and ring fingers.

"What am I looking at?" Harper narrowed his eyes, trying to understand the significance of the small bruise.

"Your answer."

"Which one?"

"The vic was grabbed from behind. Didn't go without a fight."

"You got all that from this little mark?"

"Not just a mark, detective, a tooth imprint – seven millimeters, to be exact." Jack arched his brows. "The cut on his throat isn't exactly clean either. Edges are jagged. They struggled, the laceration gets deeper, here along the right side of his neck. Sliced right through the jugular."

"We went over all of that this morning. How's the mark fit in?"

"It's a possible lead to the killer's identity."

"A possible? You called me down for a possible?"

"It's a lead, Harp. What's the matter, forget what those look like?"

He didn't need one of Jack's lectures on viable evidence. Not now. What he wanted was a neon sign pointing straight to the killer. As it was, there were as many possibilities for how that tiny bruise got on the boy's finger as there were reasons to keep digging for answers. "It's not conclusive and you know it. He could have hit anything."

"Only one thing I know of makes teeth marks."

"Kids like this get in fights all the time. Can you prove your theory?"

"Sure, as soon as you find a suspect. But look, face to face, the injury would have been across the front of his hand not between his fingers." Jack shook his head and motioned for Harper to pay attention again. He turned his back to Harper, raised his hands, and placed them behind his head. "Check out the position of my hands and fingers. If I were waving my hands while someone had a strangle hold on me, the sides of my fingers would be exposed and vulnerable to injury. I'd end up with my attacker's teeth marks in the same place this kid did – between the middle and ring finger."



Jack was starting to make sense.

"You're sure?" Harper asked.

"Twenty years in the business sure. Tissue discoloration happens in stages. This bruise is still dark blue which means your vic got this baby within hours before he died."

"It's a long shot."

"It may be on the outside, but it's all we have. You know I'm right."

"What else do you have?"

"The victim measures five feet ten and three quarter inches." Jack drummed his fingers on the slab. "He and the killer were probably around the same height."

Harper leaned in for a closer look. "Can you get a useable print from it?"

"I've worked with less. What's the news on how he ended up in the bay?"

"The port authorities finally gave us a list of vessels that sailed in and out of the area in September," Harper said. "We were able to locate all the boats except one, *The Lucky Draw*."

"Lucky, huh? For who?"

"Not the owner. Claims someone stole it from its slip on September 13. That puts the boat's disappearance at around the same time you estimated the first boy was killed. The owner filed a report the next day. It's probably at the bottom of the bay by now."

There was a sudden pause as if each man mulled over the next possible scenario.

"If it is out there, the damned thing's probably been scrubbed down by now," Harper said.

"You can scrub blood from a surface until your hands are raw and you won't be able to get rid of all the trace. Find the boat, forensics will find the evidence. Trust me, you'll have all the trace you'll need to convict this guy."

"Assuming, of course, the killer is the one who took the boat. A lot of good the evidence will do us without a suspect."

"Harp, haven't you learned anything from me?"

"Right, Jack. Learned it all from you."

"Teeth marks are as individual as fingerprints. We have ways of tracking these things down, you know."

"Assumptions aren't admissible in court. Let me know when you have the fingerprints ready. See you around, Doc."

"Not so fast, there's more." Jack peeled off his gloves and tossed them in the trash. "I found minute traces of dust in the upper region of his lungs – shouldn't be there."

"What kind of dust?"

"Couldn't tell you." Jack pushed his glasses back to their place on the top of his head. "I sent a sample of it to the lab. Don't have the results back yet."

"Light enough to inhale?"

"Extremely fine."

"Where would he have gotten that?"

"Wherever he took his last breath."

## 4

He was shorter than the other boys in his senior class; narrow from shoulders to hips and the butt end of jokes in the showers. Kenny Teal didn't care. He'd been somebody's gag since the age of ten and on the receiving end of the bullying every day for the past several years. But certain things never change. He'd always be black, he'd always be short, and he'd out-score any kid in his Algebra class – black or white – any day of the week. Those were the facts and numbers don't lie. The latter, his above average smarts, made him stand out like snow in July at Harrison High.

*Nerd.* Whispers floated through the hall as he walked past the lockers. He pretended not to hear and kept walking.

"Kenny. Wait up."

He chose to ignore that familiar voice too. He aimed for the front doors and started to run when Brenna Smith called out to him again.

"Kenny! Where's the fire?"

Brenna was his only friend and the last person he wanted to see right now. He sprang over the front step railing onto the snow-covered ground, darted across the lawn to the sidewalk, then turned north to go home.

Brenna had managed to keep up with him. "Slow down will you? What's your hurry?" She drew in quick

gulps of air and locked her arm around his. "I'll walk with you."

He stopped, turned on his heels, and pulled from her grip. "Stay away, Bren."

"Kenny?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want you around any more, that's what."

"Why? What did I do?"

He made a fist as he cut a glance over his shoulder. The gathering of kids on the school's front lawn was watching. Indignation flooded his mind. "Nothing. Go home." He managed to take a few more steps before she grabbed him again.

"What's the matter with you? Talk to me."

"You don't know? You want me to spell it out for you?" He held his hand against the paleness of hers. "There. You see that?"

"Color never mat—"

"Look at them. Tell them color doesn't matter. See if Vinny Woods'll listen. He's not going to slap you around because of me any more."

"Let them think what they want." She wove her fingers through his. "Besides, he didn't hit me; we bumped and I fell into the lockers."

"Right."

"He's nothing. You're ten times better than Vinny or any other kid in this school."

"Like that makes any difference."

"He's just looking for trouble. Don't let him get to you."

A soft blush washed over her cheeks while shoulder-length strands of red and gold, blew around her face. Brenna brushed her hair from her face then turned into the wind. Hazel eyes searched his for answers.

"It's too late." He nudged her aside again, gave her a final look, and ran. Kenny ran until he couldn't hear

her calling his name any more, until the wind numbed his face and the hatred that welled inside gave way to exhaustion.

A sharp needle-like pain pierced his lungs with every cold breath he inhaled. Kenny rubbed his chest; he tried to relax as he walked up the front steps of his house and went in.

“Kenny? Is that you?”

He locked the door behind him. “Yeah, Mom.” He started up the stairs.

“How was school?”

He turned when he heard his mother walk into the living room. It didn’t matter that she had five hours before she’d have to leave for work. Kenny smelled the faint scent of her shower splash the minute she entered the room. Her hair was pulled back away from her face and her jeans and green sweatshirt were clean and pressed as usual.

“Well?” She asked as she wiped her hands on a kitchen towel.

He could feel her eyes scrutinizing his moves.

“Got a mess of homework tonight.”

“You always *got a mess of homework*. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“You sure, baby? Nothing you want to talk about?”

“Nothing.” He stopped half-way up the stairs, turned again, and patted his book bag and tried to smile. “Just want to get started, that’s all.”

“All right.” She paused. “Dinner will be ready soon. Your favorite, chili. Thought it’d be a good night for some nice hot chili.”

Kenny left her standing at the bottom of the stairs, rubbing her arms, glancing out the living room window;

a distant look glazed over her eyes. He rushed into his room and closed the door.

The weekend before, Woods's father had dropped off his son's computer at the Cyberserve Shop where Kenny worked.

"The unit is running slow," he had said to the store manager. "Must be a virus."

"Won't be able to look at it until Monday. Should be ready in two or three days." The manager prepared the work order and took the computer to the back room of the shop.

Payback for all the bullying had crossed Kenny's mind, but he had left those destructive thoughts tucked away in the murky corners of his psyche. He hadn't expected the desire for revenge to crawl out and demand attention until Woods's father walked through the shop door with Vinny's computer in his arms. Kenny recognized it for the answered prayer that it was. Access to Vinny's computer didn't come every day. That Saturday morning, he waited until his manager, Mr J, left for the post office. Mr J's daily routine was as predictable as the tides. At ten-thirty sharp he'd leave the store and head straight down to the Dunkin' Donuts shop on Eighth Street. There he'd nurse a cup or two of coffee, read the paper, and shoot the breeze with one of the other customers. He'd eventually stop to pick up the mail, but wouldn't return to the shop before lunch.

Kenny scrambled to connect the unit to one of their extra monitors. He knew all about registries, cookies, and information recovery. He also knew how to get into files most users didn't even know they had.

The minute the monitor flickered to life, Kenny was in. No codes or passwords to bypass. Nothing but a straight shot into Vinny's system; the hard drive, his files, his website search history. One sweep of the

mouse revealed the search engine activity. Every website he'd looked at over the past several weeks was there, lined up by date like rungs on a ladder. Kenny studied the varied list; only one made a daily appearance. The site, *After Dark*, was the gold nugget Kenny had hoped for. He clicked on the link; Vinny's user name and password were still logged in to the site. He felt instant arousal. Seductive images splashed across the screen and for a moment distracted him from his purpose.

Except for the occasional customer who might stop by, Kenny knew he'd be alone for at least the next couple of hours. He started to click on the next x-rated video when he grasped the significance of his actions. Vinny had downloaded the proprietary video player needed to watch the homemade movies. A smile eased across Kenny's face. He continued to watch and hatch the plan that would set him free from Vinny Woods's bullying.

Kenny glanced over his shoulder, remembering the virus files Mr J had saved on disks and kept in a box on the top shelf behind the counter. He reached for the box and fingered through the plastic cases. In the process of teaching Kenny how to eliminate viruses, Mr J had also taught him how the experts installed them. How to edit the files and make them look like legitimate links – customize them to fit their needs, such as the one he had in mind for Vinny.

It was no secret the guy liked girls, and that's exactly what Vinny would think he was getting when he opened the phony e-mail. Vinny would click on the link at the bottom of the page without hesitation, unaware the Trojan, the keystroke logger, would start tracking his Internet activity the minute he opened the link that promised to send him on a sensual joy ride.

Kenny's plan had to wait until Mr Woods picked up the unit this afternoon. That's all Kenny had thought of today and every day since the morning he brought it into the shop.

Now Kenny was consumed with thoughts of revenge. Physically, he was no match for Vinny, but he was going to make this bully's life a virtual hell. Frustration faded into empowerment. All Kenny wanted to do was get into the guy's twisted world, to know who he e-mailed and why. He'd find something – anything to hang over his head and stop his infernal harassment.

It was after ten. Kenny's mother left for her third shift job at the plant an hour before. He clicked on the draft e-mail folder and again read the note intended for Vinny Woods. It included an innocent looking link and a request for Vinny to upgrade his video player. It looked perfect and could easily pass for a request that might have come from the *After Dark* site.

"Not bad," Kenny said above a whisper, certain there was nothing in it to give him away. "And you don't have sense enough to figure it out, do you?"

He envisioned Woods sitting in the dark hunched forward in front of his computer on the other side of town, making up for lost time, surfing the net for forbidden pleasures. He could almost see the glint in Woods's eyes the minute the fake upgrade notice popped up. How he'd mindlessly click on the download button that would release the virus and jump start the keylogger. That's all it would take. A Vinny Woods hormone-triggered response.

Kenny slid the curser to the top of the screen, suspended the arrow over the send button, and clicked.

"Time to cough up your secrets."

Midnight and still no sign of activity. Kenny glanced at his watch. "Come on, open it," he said under his breath.



Frustrated, he shoved back his chair and threw himself onto the bed. He stared at the ceiling feeling a tinge of regret over the way he had talked to Brenna. He looked at the monitor again and questioned his sanity.

“This is stupid. Seven months away from graduation.” He thought of the scholarship he received from Yale. By this time next year, he’d be in college, in a different world from what he knew. “Won’t have to deal with him where I’m going.” He drew in a breath, closed his eyes and swore he’d walk away from it. He was almost asleep when the ping sound announcing the logger had captured a file made him jump.

Vinny took the bait. His key strokes were streaming across Kenny’s screen.

“Yes!” Kenny rolled out of bed and clapped his hands. He watched encrypted codes tap across the screen in quick succession. In his excitement, he forgot about Brenna and his promise to leave this alone. Familiar URLs, social networks, chats rooms, and video links zipped across his screen. It didn’t take long before Vinny surfed on to the more forbidden.

Kenny grinned. According to the cookies, Vinny’s Yahoo login would expire in twelve hours – that was the window of opportunity – now it was only a matter of waiting until Vinny entered his e-mail password again.

## 5

Dominick Ray jammed the receiver into the cradle and sat back in his chair. The folds of skin between his brows pinched together. He clenched his teeth and stared at the phone for a second or two. Maybe it was more like three. The punk's threat rumbled inside his head louder than the howl of the wind that heaved against the metal roof of his body shop. He wasn't worried. Disgust had triggered his fury. *No respect.* That's what Dominick Ray thought. *No fucking respect.*

"You little shit. Who the hell do you think you are? Slice *me* up." He curled his lip. His anger billowed into rage. "Like to see you try."

Dominick jumped to his feet letting his chair slam into the wall. He raised his shirt sleeve to the beads of sweat that dotted his upper lip, and dashed toward the nearest window. With a yank of the drawstring, he snapped the blinds open. From where he stood, he could see the main drag. It ripped through the center of town straight to the docks that were a good quarter mile down the road. He hung no sign on his door, above the shop, or out by the street. Never had to. His customers, including the punk on the phone, knew where to find him.

The morning light was as murky and gray as his mood and as dull as the concrete block surface of his shop's exterior. It too, over time, had been pocked with

street-fight shrapnel. The branch of an overgrown seedling thrashed against the window. It drummed an erratic beat against the glass like a bony finger tapping out a persistent SOS. Dominick pressed his face to the pane. The small community of Avondale looked as worn and tattered as driftwood. The little creep's warning and the boarded windows of the adjacent buildings were a daily reminder of the way things had regressed.

"Yeah, right. Like hell you will."

Dominick waved the bothersome threat from his thoughts like a pesky fly. Instead, he made a mental tally of the cars he kept locked in the warehouse behind the shop. If his meeting across town went according to plan, the new Maserati would look nice parked next to the Jags. He knew just the fool who would buy it too – no questions asked.

He glanced at his watch. Nine-twenty. It was time, but leaving a half-wit alone in the place put him on edge. Who knew what the guy was thinking? He scrutinized every move forty-five-year-old Travis Stoebe made as he pushed the old bristle broom over the shop floor. He wondered how much the simpleton understood of what went on in the place.

Hiring Stoebe wasn't his doing. Dominick made a note to never take favors from mobsters or little old ladies again. How was he supposed to know Janet Stoebe was dying when she bailed him out of jail ten months before? What did he care if he was her only cousin three times removed? All he wanted was out, and she was the fool holding the gold nugget. Of course he snatched it, but Dominick hadn't bothered to look beyond his ticket to freedom and the strings attached to her offer. Her grown kid was a certified nut case. Feeding the homeless wasn't Dominick's problem and he sure as hell didn't need another reason to watch

his back. But the old broad made the offer hard to refuse by making everything nice and legal. As long as he kept Stoebe alive, the trust checks would continue to show up in his mailbox by the third of every month. The old girl never said anything about having to like her kid. Dominick dug into his pocket and pulled out his car keys.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Stoebe didn't look up.

"You think you can handle it?" Dominick waited a moment longer. "Hey, I'm talking to you." He paused again. "Goddamn it. I know you can hear me. Answer my ..." Disgust swelled over him. "Ah, forget it. Stupid freak." He mumbled under his breath and left.

Stoebe closed his eyes and nodded. "Right, couple of hours." He continued to sweep without breaking stride. He brushed away the metal shavings off the floor and onto a dustpan then methodically dumped them into the big green trash bin next to the workbench. The workbench reminded him to gather the empty motor oil cans and throw them away as well.

"That's how the boss wants things done. Nice and neat – no trace of nothing." Stoebe stepped to one side, ready to do the next task when he frowned. "One, two ..." He counted on the digits of his right hand. There were always three things he needed to do. He glanced around. His mind was as empty as those greasy oil cans at the bottom of the bin. Thoughts refused to emerge. He shrugged and returned to his sweeping and for a while, the shop was quiet until he heard the bell on the front door clank.

A cold gust of air ushered in one of Dominick's young regulars.

"Dom!" Rocky stumbled in to Dominick's office, leaned into the room then turned away. "Where the hell

are you, man?" He walked behind the counter and reached for a matchbook. The crackling phosphorous burst into flame before lighting the tip of his Marlboro. He inhaled, blew out the smoke, and darted a glance around the shop. "You son of a bitch. You can't hide forever."

Stoebe let Rocky call out two more times before offering an answer. "Out." He tightened his grip on the broom handle, lowered his head, and pushed the brush forward.

"You say something?"

"Boss is out," he whispered.

"Out? Out where?"

"Don't know."

"Why the hell not?"

"Didn't ask."

"You're worthless, you know that? Why the hell does Dom keep a freak like you hanging around? Huh? So when's he coming back?"

Stoebe remained silent.

"I asked you a question, freak. When the hell is he coming back?" Rocky's words were noticeably slurred. His body weaved to one side. He took an unsteady step to secure his footing. Bloodshot, watery eyes narrowed as cigarette smoke billowed around his face.

Stoebe shrugged. He hated the way the kid talked through his teeth. He wasn't surprised the kid had a mouth full of silver. Six months before he had pushed the wrong guy to the edge; that silver-capped tooth in front was all he could show for his cockiness.

"Stupid freak."

"Not a freak," Stoebe whispered.

"You say something, freak?"

"Not a freak." He tightened his grip on the broom handle again.

"The hell you're not." A pocketknife came out of

nowhere. "You're old and stupid and *that* makes you a fucking freak. Freak! Freak! Freak!"

A flame in the pit of Stoebe's gut smoldered and rose to his face. He didn't dare take his eyes from the blade Rocky waved in front of his face.

"What's the matter freak? Scared of getting cut up?" Rocky's stare was cold and numb. "Then talk man."

Stoebe had eyes and ears, but the goings-on inside the shop were none of his business. If Dominick were here, he'd take this rude kid to the back room and exchange the wad of dough that bulged in his pocket for an ounce of crack or whatever the kid was craving this time then kick him out. Now inches away, Rocky's foul stench of cheap cologne brushed past him, covering up what a bath should have eliminated.

"So where is he?" Rocky kicked the broom handle out of Stoebe's hands. "Hey, freak! I'm talking to you."

The kid's blond hair was as pale as his pimply skin. It spiked back revealing a set of narrow green eyes. Two small silver rings pierced his brow; a black plug stretched each ear lobe into two perfectly round holes.

Stoebe's eye settled on the portion of a tattoo on Rocky's neck. He had seen the whole thing last summer. Middle of July, hottest day of the year when the kid walked into the shop without a shirt. Stoebe remembered the dove on Rocky's shoulder and the straight lines that beamed from it onto the kid's upper chest.

*Blaspheme.*

Rocky shoved him into the workbench. Evil burned in the kid's eyes. Narrow lips pulled at the corners to form a menacing smirk then Rocky inched toward him again.

Stoebe was ready. He lunged forward, arms straight out, hands extended. The full force of his weight rammed into Rocky's chest and he heaved him to the

other side of the room. That was the ten-second window Stoebe needed to reach down and grab the broom handle. When Rocky came at him again, Stoebe swung hard to his right and rammed the round wooden end into the kid's throat.

Rocky's eyes bulged. The knife dropped to the floor when he reached for his throat and gasped for air. His lily-white skin turned a new shade of red to match his eyes before fading to blue. The kid rolled on the floor, gasped, kicked like a pig at the slaughterhouse, tried to crawl, then dropped.

*Dead.*

Stoebe sucked in hard gulps of air and slowly backed away; one, two, three steps until a loud rumble startled and made him turn. The green trash bin had tipped and spilled its contents. Metal shavings covered in motor oil, used paper towels, and wrappers from yesterday's lunch were scattered across the floor.

Panic struck. *Boss will be mad.* As he started to clean up the mess he remembered that *thing* that he had to do, number three.

He swept the debris again, dumped it back into the plastic trash bag inside the bin and mopped up the oil. It was all so clear in his mind now.

*Just like Father taught me.*

He picked up Rocky's knife from the floor and slipped it into his pocket then grabbed the bag with one hand. With the other hand, he dragged the kid across the floor toward the back door. The wind was still spewing its fury. He stopped, careful not to let the wind catch the door, and looked around.

"Okay. Everything will be okay. Father would say this is good."

Dom's red pick-up was parked near the door. He effortlessly tossed the bag into the truck bed. Next, he heaved the kid over his shoulder and lowered him onto

the bed as well. Stoebe covered the body with an old stained blanket and slammed shut the tailgate. He looked around, saw no one was coming and wiped his hands on his jeans.

Stoebe swallowed hard, then smiled, knowing exactly what he had almost forgotten to do.

*Haul out the trash.*



## 6

This morning marked the fifth day since the last floater's body drifted to shore. The gash across the victim's throat was indicative of the vicious criminal mind behind the murders. Harper had a name to go with the face, still no suspects. He raised his foot to the windowsill, leaned back in his chair and rocked to a slow, steady beat. Resting his chin on his fist, he stared out the window at nothing. He was unaware Mann had entered the room.

"I hear the wheels churning. What's wrong?" Mann asked.

"No one missed him. The kid's been dead for weeks and no one filed a missing person's report, no calls – nothing."

"The guys are still sifting through records."

"That's fine. So where's his family?"

"I don't know," Mann said. "Maybe he doesn't have one. Half the kids on the streets are runaways. No one's looking for them – no one's missed them in years."

"And what? We quit? Everyone needs at least one person who cares."

"Come on, Sam, what's gotten into you? No one's quitting. We don't even know if the kid's from around here. We've sent his picture to the other counties. We can only go as far as the information takes us. In the

meantime, we have other homicides on the books.”

It was too late in the case to sit through one of Mann’s sermons. Yeah, they had a stack of homicides to investigate, witnesses to interview, evidence to examine, and at least a suspect or two in each case. But they had nothing on the floaters, their assailant or the killer’s motive. Every minute off the case was a step further from the truth. Mann was a good cop with a critical flaw; a willingness to give up when a case seemed hopeless. In that respect they’d never agree, but this time, Mann had a point. They had nothing on the third floater and all the brooding in the world wouldn’t change things.

“What do we know about the Teal kid they found last night on the docks? Any connection to the floaters?” Mann asked.

Harper swiveled his chair around, watched Mann pour himself a fresh cup of coffee, and then reached for his own. Kenny Teal’s folder containing an initial report and photographs of the previous night’s murder was sitting square in the center of his desk. “No reason to think so.”

The eighteen-year-old had been beaten to death with a blunt object and left to die on dock twenty-one. Jack’s comment about kids killing kids and leaving them where they dropped flashed through Harper’s mind. He scanned the report written by the third shift detective who took the call. “It says here that according to the mother, the victim left the house without her permission. She claims he couldn’t have had more than five dollars on him.”

“Robbery? Is that what the guys on third shift think?”

Harper thumbed through the notes and scanned the pages. “It doesn’t say. No mention of it – his wallet and ID were still on him when they found his body.” Harper took a set of three scene photographs from the folder

and set the file aside. "People have been killed for less."

"Ran into O'Brian as he got off his shift. He said they didn't find anything else in Kenny's pockets except his house keys and a scrap of paper," Mann said.

"What's with that? The paper I mean."

"Had the upper portion of an e-mail addressed to a Vinny Woods."

"Who's that?"

"Not sure yet," Mann said as he popped a cough drop into his mouth and then blew his nose. "Don't know who originated it either. Nearly all of sender's address was torn off. Everything went to the lab. Need to stop there first before we talk with Teal's mother."

Harper was willing to bet Mann had a fever to go with his red, watery eyes. "Go home, will you? You look like crap."

"I'm fine."

"Like hell you are. I don't want it." Harper studied the crime scene photos. The body was lying in a fetal position. The victim's face was swollen and unrecognizable. Pungent bile raced to Harper's throat – he puckered his brow, coughed, and washed the bitterness down with more coffee. "Who ID'd him?"

"His mother."

"Where was she at the time of the murder?"

"She works third shift. This wasn't a runaway like the others," Mann said. "The kid had a good home and you can bet the mother will want justice."

"Justice? Should have kept him home. What the hell's wrong with people? Don't they pay attention to the news? We pulled three teens out of the bay in eighteen days. What kind of trouble was this kid looking for at the docks at two in the morning? On a week night." Harper raised his hand to his mouth and rubbed it across his lips. "If we're lucky, we'll find his killer and

work our asses off collecting evidence just so some hotshot lawyer can find a loophole and weasel the killer a deal. Can't guarantee her a damned thing." Again, he glanced at the growing stack of case files on his desk. They were all nonsensical crimes that had recently flooded the Chandler Police Department.

"Everyone's gone crazy."

Mann leaned back in his chair and scanned the morning newspaper. "Here's a piece on the floaters, bylined by J T Blake. Never heard of him. Must be a new guy at the paper."

"I wouldn't know," Harper said. "What's he say?"

"The usual. Claims we're not doing enough." Mann seemed engrossed in the article, then cursed under his breath. "He's trying to turn these hoods into choir boys. Victims of the streets, he calls them."

"Let me see that." Harper snatched the paper, read the article, and tossed it down on his desk. "Shit, that's what we need, more bad publicity. Thought the press was supposed to be unbiased. Did he ask you for a quote?"

"No."

"Blake, huh?" Harper rummaged through a stack of unanswered phone messages he had on his desk. Held three up he found from *The Chandler Times* dated two weeks before, wadded them up and tossed them out. "Me neither."

Mann wiped his nose again, and then glanced at his watch. "You ready?"

"I'm ready for you to go home."

"We're short six guys. The captain will throw a fit."

"Holloway's not the one who has to work with you. Go on. I'll cover for you."

Mann shook his head, winced, and pressed the tips of his fingers to each temple. His eyes watered again. "After this next call. Come on."

Deloris Teal lived on Second Street, five blocks from Harrison High and ten blocks south of what most folks in Chandler considered the good side of town. The home was a modest two-story clapboard structure in dire need of some paint. Harper stepped onto the porch and knocked.

A slender woman dressed in jeans, a gray sweatshirt and a pair of faded pink house slippers answered on the second rap.

"Detectives Harper and Mann, Chandler P D, Homicide. Are you Deloris Teal?" Harper asked, holding his badge for her to see.

She shifted her weight onto one hip and pursed her lips. After a second or two she motioned for the men to come in. "No, I'm her sister. Deloris is on the couch." She shuffled back from the door and pointed to her left. Beyond a small foyer was a room large enough for a brown rough textured couch, a recliner, two end tables and a 27-inch TV. The walls were a dark shade of beige and the single narrow window did little to brighten the room. A middle-aged woman sat on the couch in silence, clutching a tissue.

"Deloris, honey. It's the police – again," the woman said.

Deloris Teal gazed up with swollen red eyes, shook her head, and buried her face in her hands.

"Mrs Teal? I'm Detective Harper. This is my partner, Detective Mann. We're sorry for your loss, ma'am." He threw a glance over to Mann before directing his next statement. "We need to talk with you about your son."

"I don't know any more now than I did last night."

"I understand, but we may have a lead."

Mrs Teal shot a glance straight into Harper's eyes. She didn't have to open her mouth. Her expression begged for answers.

"The officers found a portion of an e-mail print-out in Kenny's pocket last night."

"I don't understand."

"It was addressed to someone by the name of Vinny Woods. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"No," she said above a whisper. "Kenny never mentioned anyone by that name."

"Are you sure?"

She looked up, bewildered. "Yes. Positive. Why? What did Kenny write?"

Harper shook his head. "The message was torn off. We're not even sure that Kenny is the person who wrote it."

"Then what was he doing with it?" she asked.

"That's what we're trying to find out."

Harper flipped through the notes he had copied from Kenny's file. "You work third shift at Cannon Inventories and Supplies – is that right?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"When do you normally leave for work?"

"I have to catch the nine-thirty bus to get there by midnight. You think this Vinny had something to do with my son's murder?"

"We can't say. It's possible Woods was the last person to communicate with your son. If he was, your son may have confided in him. We won't know without checking Kenny's computer."

"If that's true, why didn't the police take it last night?"

Harper threw Mann a glance. "Certain things only came to light this morning. The technicians need to examine the hard drive."

She frowned then turned away. "Kenny knew all about that kind of thing," she said. "He worked weekends at one of the shops near here, you know."

"Which one was that?"

"Cyberserve on Hale Street. He could tear one of

those contraptions apart and put it back together in no time." She paused for a moment. "Do you think he knew his killer?"

"It's possible."

Her eyes welled again as she pointed toward the stairs leading up to Kenny's bedroom. "It's in his bedroom, last door to the right at the top of the stairs."

While Mann took the computer to the car, Harper handed Mrs Teal a receipt and his business card.

"Did you notice anything peculiar – different about your son's behavior last night?"

She sobbed into a tissue. "I've already talked with the police about that."

"Is this really necessary?" The other woman stepped close to her sister's side. She tilted her head to one side and crossed her arms. "She's answered the same questions a million times. Don't you people—"

"Francine, please!" Mrs Teal waved her away. "Go put on a pot of coffee or something."

"I'm sorry," Harper said. "We need to go over it again."

She met Harper's glance. "No. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Was your son home when you left for work last night?"

"Yes, he said he had a test this morning. I told him not to stay up late; said he was going straight to bed." She reached for another tissue. "This wasn't like him at all. Kenny was a good boy, Detective. Always made good grades. He was going to Yale in the fall. Got himself a scholarship to Yale, can you believe that? Wanted to be someone." She shook her head; tears streamed down her cheeks. "Talk with his school principal if you don't believe me. Kenny was never in trouble."

Harper glanced over his shoulder at the sound of

Mann's footsteps lumbering into the room. He returned his attention to Deloris Teal.

"The school may know who Vinny is. What about your neighbors? Anyone see Kenny leave?"

"No," she replied.

Harper took a seat across from her. Resting his elbows on his knees, he leaned in. "I need for you to think back. Did he say anything to you about meeting with someone last night?"

"He knew better than to ask. I wouldn't have allowed it."

"He was eighteen," Harper said. "Boys that age—"

"My Kenny wasn't like the rest of the low lives in these parts. We were all we had. He knew that, Detective. I taught him obedience. I trusted him to stay at home. What else can I say? Yes, he was eighteen, but he never took off before. I had no reason to think he'd do anything like this now. If I had, do you really think I would have left him alone?"

The silence that followed sliced through the air and sucked the life out of the room. Harper cleared his throat and returned to his line of questions.

"So, when you left for work last night, everything appeared to be normal. Is that right?"

"Yes, well ... he seemed a little agitated, but he hadn't been himself for several days."

"How so?"

"More quiet than usual." She paused for a second and looked past Harper toward the front window. "Then again this being his senior year, Kenny worried about his grades more than usual. Always studying. To be honest, I didn't think anything of it; thought he was worried about the test, that's all."

Harper scanned over his notes then nodded as if content he had covered all that he needed from her at the moment. "One more thing, Mrs Teal, I need to look



through your son's personal belongings."

She got up and led him up the stairs and down the hallway toward the bedroom door at the far end to the right. A large poster of the Martian landscape adorned the door. As she opened the door and let him in, Harper slipped on a pair of gloves and began to look through the teen's possessions. He plucked a sheet of paper from between the pages of a textbook the victim had left on the desk. He glanced at the large red A at the top of the chemistry test paper.

"Chemistry was always over my head." Seconds after speaking the words he sensed it was a meager attempt to ease her pain. He glanced up and tapped one of the pieces of the solar system mobile. As he watched it twirl slowly around, it became clear to Harper that Kenny was everything his mother said he was. Mrs Teal's neat appearance and the content of his room told Harper a different story than he had initially assumed.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" She leaned against the doorframe and watched him sift through her son's dresser drawers.

"Anything that might tell us who he was meeting and why. What about his friends? What were they like?" Harper moved to look through the teen's nightstand drawers. Content there was nothing there, he returned to the desk and fanned through the pages of Kenny's other schoolbooks.

"He didn't have many. His best friend was Brenna Smith, nice girl, lives down the street. Most of the other kids at school made fun of him. Kenny wasn't part of their crowd."

"Their crowd?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Tough kids, always in trouble. My Kenny wasn't like that. He kept his nose clean."

"Did he ever have any problems with the other boys in his class? Fights, that kind of thing?"

"He wasn't afraid to stand up for himself, but he took a lot of crap from those kids and kept his mouth shut. Still, he said he was helping one of them study for his chemistry test."

"Do you know who it was?"

"No. That's the first I ever heard him mention helping anyone in his class." She wiped a tear and lowered her gaze. "That's the kind of young man he was; kind-hearted. To tell you the truth though, I thought it was odd that any of them would ask Kenny for help. Didn't want to discourage him. I was hoping the other kids at the school were starting to accept him. You know, hoping things had finally turned around for him." She shook her head. "Mothers always want ..."

"When he told you about helping the classmate, did he mention if it was a boy or a girl?"

"No. What difference does that make?"

"I need a logical place to start looking."

"Maybe it was this Vinny Woods. Maybe he was e-mailing him about homework."

Harper nodded and continued the search.

She lowered her gaze again. "I should have asked for a name. Didn't want to intrude though. You know how private boys are at that age."

Harper studied her for a moment then threw one more glance around the room. "I think we're done here. I appreciate your time. We'll be in touch. If you think of anything else, please call." Harper removed his gloves and tucked them back into his pocket.

Outside, the wind had picked up again; it was difficult to tell if it was snowing or if the wind was tossing around the frozen pellets of sleet that had fallen just hours before. Harper pulled up his collar and braced himself

against the bitter wind when he heard Mrs Teal call out to him.

She was standing on the porch, arms crossed, back hunched, clutching her unbuttoned cardigan close to her chest.

"Detective, what about the autopsy? When can I have my boy back?"

Mrs Teal had the same devastated look in her eyes Harper had seen in the faces of several other parents in recent months. A sinking feeling came over him. He offered the only thing he could. "I'll have someone from the medical examiner's office call you."

By the time Harper stepped off the front porch, Mann had started to warm the car and was looking through his notes.

"Doesn't sound like your typical thug."

"No thug I know of gets a scholarship to Yale."

"What do you suppose a kid like him was doing on the docks at that hour?"

"Maybe it's what he wouldn't do," Harper said.

"What do you mean?"

"Whoever Kenny met on that pier last night wanted more than a passing grade."

## 7

Alejandro tried to wipe his mother's blood from his hands.

The tiny bungalow had trapped the day's heat. It seethed and spread like a fever from hell and bellowed around him. His face soured from the stench of odors that had sweltered together. Pungent disgust caught in his throat and forced him to lunge out the door. He leaned against a post on the porch and gasped for the breath of fresh air that seemed to escape him.

He heaved and did what he could to spit out the taste. Ribbons of sweat streamed from his brow. He raised a blood-stained hand to his mouth and frowned.

*Juan Carlos.*

Juan Carlos knew where his mother lived. He had overheard their argument and now Juan Carlos knew about the ring. One lie from the man's lips would seal Alejandro's fate with the authorities. He looked back at the tiny wood structure. Sickened by the thought of going back in, he drew in a deep gulp of air before entering the home again. Alejandro torched the curtains with the flame from the candle he had lit moments before. The fire roared to the ceiling and threatened to engulf the house in a matter of minutes. He gazed upon his mother's face one last time then held the candle's flame to her thin cotton dress and left.

Mitu was too small a pueblo to hide from the truth; Juan Carlos wasn't smart enough to understand it. Alejandro had known him since childhood and knew Juan would have needed a drink to settle his nerves. If anyone saw him, it would have been the old man who tends bar down at *El Punto*.

"Sí. Earlier today, late afternoon around five," the bartender said. "He was sitting right there, at that table with the American."

"What American?"

"The art dealer – antiquities. He told me he sold antiquities."

"You talked with this man?"

"Sí. While he waited. He looked nervous so naturally I was curious."

"What else did he say?"

"That it is too hot in Mitu for his taste."

"And the nervousness? Why would an art dealer be nervous?"

"Who knows? Then again, what would he want with Juan Carlos? ¿*Eh amigo?*"

"You did not ask?" It was a question that needed no answer. It made perfect sense to Alejandro that Juan Carlos was looking to sell his mother's ring and to an American no less. The minute the art dealer left the country there would be no way to trace the transaction.

"What do I care what those two were up to? It is none of my business." The old man slapped a fly out of his way and yawned. "He paid for their drinks. That is all I cared about. Odd looking sort though, that American. I thought they were all tall." He shrugged his shoulders. "And from the look of things, the man has not been out in the sun for a while. Scorched bright red that one is."

Alejandro frowned. "What did they talk about?"

"I am a busy man. I did not pay attention."

"Of course, how stupid of me."

"Look. They were only here a few minutes and left."

"Together?"

"Sí. In Juan's car." The bartender reached for a cloth he kept under the counter. He dabbed the sweat from his lip then wiped off the spill on the bar. "Try the hotel. I heard the American say he is staying there until the weekend."

Alejandro did not need to hear any more. There was only one hotel in Mitu along the same stretch of road with the only market, the only school, and the only gas station.

Inside the hotel, a familiar mildew odor hung in the air. It was past midnight and the lobby was naturally empty. To his right, he found the hotel clerk asleep with his feet propped up on the desk; a head of thick jet-black hair hung back, his mouth partly opened. Alejandro reached for the guest registry. He ran his fingers down the page and searched for an American name.

*Randal Gould, Room 217.*

Alejandro took the stairs two steps at a time. He envisioned the American asleep in his bed and the look that would flash across the man's face when he realized death was about to pay him a visit. His and Juan Carlos's lives were insignificant losses in comparison to the gains that would be Alejandro's after he reclaimed the black pearl ring. He had less than an hour to find the ring and leave Mitu forever.

Alejandro eased down the second floor corridor checking the numbers next to the doors on the left hand side. He stopped in front of room 217. The door to the American's room was unlocked. Alejandro cocked his gun and held it close to his chest. Adrenalin maxed as he shoved the door open and stepped into the shadows. He waited a couple of seconds to let his

vision adjust. The room was as quiet as it was dark; no breathing sounds, no snoring or rustling of the bed sheets. He inched toward the bed and aimed.

*Empty.*

The man's luggage was gone and the balcony doors were locked. Alejandro cursed under his breath, held the hammer back with his thumb, then slowly released the trigger.

He did not remember touching the steps on his way back down to the lobby. He grabbed the clerk by his crumpled, faded striped shirt and shook him out of his slumber.

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The American? He is not in his room. When did he leave?"

"I ... I do not know! I do not keep track of the guests."

"This is one time you will wish you had." Alejandro pressed the mouth of his gun to the clerk's head.

"When did you see him last?"

"Please! Do not shoot!"

"When?"

"Earlier this evening. Around eight."

"Where? Was he alone?"

"No. Juan Carlos was with him. You know how Juan is always trying to swindle the tourist out of an extra peso. They were here, earlier this evening."

Alejandro cocked his weapon again.

"I swear. The last time I saw them they were arguing about something. They headed in that direction." The manager pointed toward a hall that led to the back of the building. "I never saw either of them again."

Alejandro was familiar with the layout of the hotel from the many times he had used the facilities or needed to sleep one off. There was nothing down that

hallway other than an ice machine and a small laundry/supply room. The maids would not come back for another eight hours and the minutes to his flight were counting down.

"If you lie, old man—"

"I swear. That was the last time I saw them. Please!"

Alejandro made his way toward the narrow corridor that led nowhere. There was no exit and nothing but the supply room that was situated halfway between the lobby and the back wall of the building. He stood in front of the supply room door and allowed his hand to hover over the doorknob for only a second. With a quick look over his shoulder he was certain no one would notice, he had turned on the light in the small room. He did not know what, if anything, he would find inside.

Sheets and towels that had once been folded and placed neatly on the shelves were crumpled and scattered on the floor. One bed linen was spread to cover a human form. Alejandro tightened the grip on his gun and flung the sheet back with his free hand. The slash mark across Juan Carlos's throat was more than a just punishment. Whoever had killed him had saved Alejandro the trouble. He looked at Juan Carlos's hands. He examined his fingers. He searched his pockets then shoved the body aside.

*Hijo de puta.*

Now Alejandro was certain Juan Carlos had made the exchange. The ring was gone and there was only one person who could possibly have it.

He aimed his gun at the hotel clerk's head again and watched him flip through his records.

"Here ... here it is," the clerk said. "The art dealer, he lives in Chandler, Massachusetts."



"Thank you. You see how easy that was? Now you can go back to sleep," he said with a squeeze of the trigger.

A small bullet sliced through the middle of the man's forehead. Wide open eyes stared back at him as the clerk's body crumpled to the floor. A piercing blast reverberated inside Alejandro's head rendering him temporarily deaf and alerting the guests to his presence.

Alejandro ripped the page from the registry and ran.

News spread quickly in a small pueblo like Mitu. It would not take long for the clerk's and Juan Carlos's bodies to be found. The police's investigation would undoubtedly include a talk with the old bartender at *El Punto*. Alejandro wanted to kick himself for leaving him behind as a witness. The Colombian authorities wanted him on charges of drug smuggling, he was certain they would not think twice about blaming him for his mother's murder as well as those of the two men.

The only way out of Mitu, Colombia, was by air and if Alejandro missed the plane he had rented, he was as good as dead. He leaned forward in the Jeep and tried his best to control the steering wheel as he bounced along the rugged terrain. Ahead, he saw nothing but black; only the lush impenetrable jungle foliage. The old Jeep's headlights did little to cut through the darkness. He shot a look into his rear view mirror. Headlights flickered in and out of the dark along the twisting road behind him. He pressed the accelerator to the floor. Gaping ruts in the road bounced him mercilessly and made the trip to the airstrip nearly impassable. Each bump reminded him of the injuries Lorenzo's man had inflicted on him the night before.

He had no idea how much longer it would be before he reached the airstrip. "*¿Cuánto más va a llevar?*" He

muttered under his breath. Minutes later, the vegetation ceased. The road swept out onto a clearing. Several yards away, the red and white Cessna waited. Its single propeller hummed above the stillness.

"*Vámonos, vámonos!*" yelled the pilot. "We need to leave now!"

Alejandro quickly threw his single duffle bag into the back of the plane and strapped himself in while the pilot secured the door and prepared for take off.

In the distance, the familiar ra-ta-ta-ta sound of an automatic rifle broke out. Two other Jeeps sped onto the airstrip.

"Hurry! Go, go, go," Alejandro yelled at the sight of the two military vehicles and the guards who gave chase to their plane.

The engine sputtered, the plane rolled across the grassy field and then, in a final desperate moment, it took off and left the guards aiming their weapons into the air.

Minutes into the flight, his heart continued to pound. Mitu was a few miles from the Brazilian border on the banks of the Vaupez River. As the plane ascended, Alejandro glanced out the window. He saw nothing but black. He had flown over this area before during the day. The red muddy waters of the Vaupez were undistinguishable tonight. He recalled how it twisted and turned like a ribbon. Eventually it would merge with *el Rio Negro* and dump into the Amazon. Tonight, it was nestled in the pitch-black cover of night. Every bit as dark and dangerous as his thoughts.

## 8

"How much longer?" Mann paused. He coughed and shouted again. "We don't have four or five days!"

Harper could hear Mann's yell from the outer office on the fourth floor of police headquarters. Emma, the detective unit's secretary, was standing in front of Harper trying to make her point about the calls from the press.

"Sam, are you listening to me?"

"Always. You said someone from *The Chandler Times* wants more information about the floaters." He leaned an ear in the direction of Mann's voice. Four or five days for what, he wondered.

"And?"

"And what?" he mimicked her impatient tone.

"It's almost noon and this reporter," she said, waving the slip of paper, "has already called four times this morning. What am I supposed to say to these people?"

"Our standard reply."

"'No comment' isn't going to cut it this time. It's not just this reporter, there's one from *The Chronicle* too, and the radio stations and that woman from Channel Six. They won't quit calling. Everyone wants first dibs at breaking news."

"It's a media game, but we're the ones in control, right?" Emma was wound tighter than a timekeeper's

watch, but he couldn't respond to every reporter who called for answers.

"Do you want to see the number of messages I've taken this week alone about your floater cases?"

Harper cut a glance toward his office door again. Mann was saying something about the prosecuting attorney. He drew in a breath then returned his attention to Emma.

"Repeat after me, Em, we don't – have anything – to release."

"Like that will stop them."

"This isn't like you. You taught *me* how to play the game, remember? Be nice, but firm. Treat that pack of journalists the way you do us. They'll back off in a heartbeat."

"Aren't you amusing."

Emma had been at police headquarters longer than most. She was the only woman he knew with a face like an angel and a voice like a harp who could tell a guy to go to hell without raising her voice or his suspicions. Later, after the guy had a chance to think about it, he'd see what a fool she'd made of him, but by then, it was too late to retaliate. She'd done it to him more than once.

"Tell the press we'll let them know the minute we have something. We always do. What's their problem?"

"This J T Blake is persistent. Wants to hear it directly from you."

"Screw him."

"Her, Sam. This one's a she."

"Whatever. Next time she calls, tell her we'll call a press conference when we're ready. Not a minute before."

Harper looked at her for an extra second then shook his head. "You're going to have to do this. I have

enough problems without having to deal with the press too.”

He left Emma standing in the hall holding the phone message limp at her side. Mann was getting ready to make another call when Harper walked in.

“What’s going on?”

“The computer geeks,” Mann said. “They’ve had Kenny Teal’s computer for two days. They claim the kid’s computer has more securities than Fort Knox.”

“Which they’re paid to break. So what’s the problem?”

“Claims they have a back-log. Said to give them four to five days.”

“Right. Like I feel for them. Keep pressuring them till they cave. So what’s a bookworm like Teal doing with—”

“Harper,” Emma’s tone was as sharp as her rap on the door, “got another call.”

Emma calling him Harper was reminiscent of when his mother called him by his full name after he pitched his baseball through the living room window when he was ten. He counted to five before turning. “I thought I made it clear that—”

“As clear as a mud fence. Spit-comb your hair and polish those pearly whites, dear. Beach patrol just found another body at Taylor Cove. Media’s going to eat this one raw.” She glanced at her watch. “And I’m going to lunch.”

“Almost missed him,” the officer said. “I was on patrol, driving down this stretch of the beach when I saw a couple of dogs sniffing and raking around in that general area.” He pointed to a grassy incline in the terrain just beyond the breakers. “They were going nuts like hounds after a fox, you know? Scurrying, digging. Thought I better check it out. That’s when I saw a foot sticking out from under the snow.”

“It hasn’t snowed in four days.”

It was clear from the looks on everyone’s faces that neither the three-inch layer of snow that covered the corpse nor the significance of Harper’s statement had escaped them. Forensics took the standard snapshots of the scene from every angle and collected what little evidence they could gather from the soil beneath the body. Jack Fowler took special precautions to bag the cadaver without disturbing the crucial trace evidence they hoped to find beneath the snow.

Two hours later. The body was on a slab in the morgue. Forensics was processing the sheet the corpse had been wrapped in as well as the inside of the body bag. Now it was Homicide’s turn to probe for answers.

“What the hell is that?” Mann pointed to the round bruise on the victim’s throat.

Jack adjusted his glasses and frowned as he angled his light onto the mark. “I thought you’d find that interesting. Perfectly symmetrical. Made with a hard object, could be a pipe of some sort.” Jack felt the victim’s throat. “His trachea’s crushed. No sign of multiple markings. One hard blow did the trick. Damn good aim, must have been pissed as hell.”

“The killer is repeating a pattern – going for the throat again,” Mann said.

“No, it’s wrong.” Harper thought about the bay. The waters were still passable. Ice wouldn’t keep vessels from crossing the bay for another two months.

Mann and the medical examiner turned to face him.

“What is?” Mann asked.

“The scene, the vic, everything. Throwing his victims into the bay is his pattern. It’s the one thing the killer did consistently. This body was never near the water.”

“No one said he was.” Jack examined the victim’s

eyes and the inside of his mouth. "Okay, Harp, let's hear it."

"Someone went to a lot of trouble to pass him off as one of the floaters." Harper observed the way the boy's hands were folded, fingers laced in a praying posture across his abdomen.

"Did you move him?"

"I see you noticed the hands. No, I didn't. I brought him in, took him out of the bag, and left him on the slab to thaw just as I said I would. That's the position he was in when we found him."

"Eyes open? Staring straight up?"

"Yup."

"I need to see the photographs of the scene."

"Lab still has them. What are you thinking?"

"We've got another killer on our hands. This one positioned the body and left it in clear view for someone to find. That's not our killer's style," Harper said.

"He's changed his method of disposing the body, but there're too many similarities with the other three boys." Mann walked around to the other side of the table never taking his eyes off the corpse. "He was working against the weather, that's all. It takes weeks for a body to rise from the sea floor. The bay will freeze in another two months. By spring, there wouldn't have been anything left of the body." He paused for a moment and met Harper's glance. "So why didn't he toss him in?"

"Exactly." Harper studied the way the boy's hair was shaped into ten perfect little spikes on top of his head.

"See, it's working already."

"What is?" Harper asked.

"His plan is to throw us off, make us think someone else did this one."

"That makes as much sense as tits on a bull."

"You're expecting logic?" Mann asked. "Point A

doesn't lead to point *B* so why not throw a wrench into the works just for the hell of it. Watch the cops scatter like ants. That's what I'd be thinking if I were him. He knows he's got us by the balls and is probably having a damned good laugh about it."

This type of bantering between the partners was nothing new. Eventually one of them would hit upon something that made perfect sense and the other would follow.

Harper was still waiting for that moment of clarity to shine. He paused for a moment searching for the next logical question. "So what's he trying to tell us?"

"That it's too damned cold to launch a goddamned boat in this shitty weather," Jack said. "Come on, guys. Christ, be grateful this one isn't as decomposed as the others. Might find some trace – imagine if you actually got a break this time." Jack kept to his analysis. "The killer placed the body where we found him not long after death. Hasn't been moved. Lividity is fixed along his back side."

"How long?" Harper's request for an approximate time of death didn't send Jack into a rage this time.

"The body is out of rigor. He's been dead between forty-two to forty-eight hours."

The autopsy instruments were assembled and ready. Jack was dressed in his scrubs; he slipped on his rubber apron and mask. First he weighed the body and measured its height.

"Male Caucasian, blond hair, green eyes, approximately seventeen-years-old." Jack recorded the date, time and snapped his first few pictures. Next, he checked the boy's hands and systematically clipped and bagged his fingernails. Jack then removed the boy's jacket and shirt.

The three men stared at the image tattooed across the victim's chest.



“Still think this case is a coincidence?” Jack asked as he examined the clothing he had removed from the corpse and reached into the side pockets of the jacket. He held up a matchbook from Dominick Ray’s Garage. “Here you go, Harp. You finally got your wish. He left you a little present.”

A smile rippled across Mann’s face. “God how I love it when they get sloppy.”

Details of the other cases tore through Harper’s mind. He looked at the tattoo again and wondered if Mann was right about their serial killer. Was he playing them for a couple of patsies? No. His gut was still saying ‘no.’ Whoever killed the floaters hadn’t left anything behind that could identify him. Why would he slip-up now?

“Sam, I know what’s going through your mind,” Mann said, “but think about it. This guy’s been committing murder for a couple of months, maybe more. He’s been too thorough – didn’t leave anything behind for us to link him to the crimes, now he’s frustrated. He sees the stir this case has made in the media and he wants the credit. Leaving this kid in plain view is exactly how he planned to get our attention.”

“Well, he’s got mine.” Harper couldn’t take his eyes from the corpse. “Four victims, four different methods of killing. Give me proof, Jack. Convince me this case is connected to the floaters.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You’ll have to do better. We’re going to nail the bastard.”

## 9

A gust of wind caught Travis Stoebe's slender body off guard as he stood on the porch of his one-bedroom home. His outstretched hand reached for the doorframe and a sense of balance.

Beyond the dry grasses and dunes, twenty yards down the road, was pier forty-eight. The bright yellow dinghy he kept tied beneath its rafters from spring through early fall was now stored in the shed behind his house. Soon, the northerly winds would bring more snow. It would cover the coastline from mid December through to late March and freeze the waters of the bay into mountains of ice. Travis's excursions into the inlets and tiny islands offshore had ended several weeks before.

Parts of the bay were deep enough to swallow a cargo ship whole. Dozens of boats had been lost over the years. Storms and rough waters were blamed for some, other disasters continued to be unexplained. Whatever the cause, Travis knew no one survived the waters. He was captivated by the white caps of Chandler Bay. Their rhythmic back and forth movement was as entrancing as the feeling he got as a young boy when he leaned back on a park swing and closed his eyes. *That's what it would be like*, he thought, *to jump into the bay and drop to the bottom*. He imagined looking up toward the sun from beneath the water and

watching it fade into obscurity. To float along with the current would surely be better than his meager existence – waiting inside his four empty walls for the next set of instructions.

Travis rubbed the shiver that ran up his arms. This time of year, the bay was as cold and inviting as the images that faded in and out of his mind. But he didn't want to go there, into his thoughts. Not now. He preferred to listen to the gentle sounds of the waves lapping against the jagged rocks. He took a deep breath and indulged in his tranquility. The moment was soon broken by the siren that wailed in the distance. He turned his head toward the sound and listened as it faded further away through the city streets. "Another sinner, Lord," he whispered. "Another sinner on his way."

He had lost hours at a time sitting on the porch watching the waves roll to shore – wishing he could glide to the bottom. One day he would, one day when he worked up the nerve to do it. But for now, Travis resigned himself to the solitude of his home. He threw himself on the bed, rolled onto his back, and closed his eyes. An involuntary rage began to smolder again, curling up from the depths of his soul. He clenched the stained yellow pillow and wrapped it around his head. "It" was back. That woeful moan beckoned him to surrender his will.

Travis propped himself on one elbow and stared at the snowy reception on the nineteen-inch screen of his black and white set. He hadn't be able to pick up a channel in years – didn't need eyes to hear voices.

## 10

Twenty-nine days, a month more or less since the first body washed onto the sandy shores of Chandler Bay. Still no leads or suspects. A familiar, unwelcome doubt vied for Harper's attention. The kind that usually kept him up at night pacing the floor in hope for an answer. He wanted to believe Mann's instincts were right so he could shove the copycat scenario out of his mind, but his gut never lied and right now it was saying that something was wrong.

The gold lettering on the frosted glass door panel read: Dr Jack Fowler, Chief Medical Examiner. Its grooved glass window distorted the figure sitting behind the desk. From the sound of his voice, he seemed undisturbed by Harper's tapping at his door.

"Come in."

Jack was still in his scrubs, flipping through an autopsy report with one hand and eating a hoagie sandwich with the other.

"Ah, I see you got my message."

"Came as soon as I could." Harper never understood how Jack could eat in his office with a roomful of cadavers a few yards away. "Good news?"

"For starters, you have four bodies, one killer."

"You're sure?"

Jack threw a scolding glance at him over his reading glasses. "Remember the dust particles I found in the

third victim's lungs? This one had it too. The lab narrowed the components down to automotive steel and paint particles," he said, holding up a small plastic evidence bag that contained the matchbook found in the victim's pocket. "I believe you'll find your killer here."

"Dominick Ray's Garage."

The small entrance and counter area in the body shop were large enough to accommodate the three metal chairs Dominick had positioned against the front window leaving room for little else in the narrow entryway. Across the back wall was a bulletin board with pinned business cards and greasy work orders. Next to it hung a calendar featuring Miss November – a bronzed, voluptuous blonde in nothing more than a pair of holiday red stilettos. She lay on her belly, legs bent back, glancing over one shoulder across a table set for a feast. Beneath her picture were the words: "Share your blessings."

"What the fuck's going on?" Dominick leaned, palms down, on the counter. He stared narrowed-eyed at Harper's badge then jerked his head up when the team from Forensics stormed into the garage area of the body shop. A group of four techs stayed in the garage while three others forged through the shop and out the back door that led to the warehouse behind the building. "You can't do this!"

"I just did." Harper handed him a warrant and watched Dominick's hands. "Step away from the counter."

Dominick Ray did as instructed. He appeared to be in his early to mid sixties, stood six foot three and from the size of his gut, had an appetite to match his stature. The peppering in his mustache proved his hair wasn't really jet black and the only thing that set him apart

from the hoodlums that roamed the streets of Avondale was his age.

"Sit down." Mann pointed to one of the metal folding chairs in the lobby.

"Business been slow?" Harper glanced around the empty garage.

"It's okay."

"Not a tool out of place, no oil spots."

"What? It's a crime to keep the place clean?"

"When's the last time you did a repair?"

"What is this? You can't—"

"I've been reading up on you," Harper said. "Some record you've got there; assault with a deadly weapon, robbery, two counts of breaking and entering, possession."

"That was years ago. I served my time."

"What about the DUI arrest ten months ago? You make it a habit to drive under the influence? Twenty-six grand worth of damage. That was one hell of a joy ride."

"What of it? Paid for that too," Ray said.

"No actually, the records show someone by the name of Janet Stoebe paid your legal fees and bailed you out."

"So what?"

"Seems funny how you always land on your feet, that's all. So what are we going to find in here to charge you with today?" Harper asked.

"Nothing. Not a damned thing!"

Mann produced the medical examiner's headshot of the fourth victim and held it in front of Dominick's face. "Ever see this kid before?"

"Ah, shit. What the hell happened to him?"

"Do you know him or not?" Harper asked.

"Yeah. That's Rocky, one of the punks from around here."

"Rocky who?"

"I don't know. Kid used to come in once in a while, got whatever stuff he needed, and left – what did I care what his name was so long as he had the dough?"

"What type of things?" Harper asked.

"Stuff for his car, what else? Belts, oil, shit like that."

"When did you see him last?"

"I don't know. Maybe a week or two ago. Why?"

"You said he was from around here," Mann said.  
"Where'd he live?"

"Beats me."

"You work alone?" Harper asked.

"Yeah. Is there a law against that too?"

Harper glanced up at the sound of an opening door to a room inside the shop. "Who's this?"

"Travis Stoebe."

"Stoebe? Any relation to Janet?"

"Her son, my distant cousin. Hired him part-time after his old lady croaked. Cleans the place up. Tell 'em Travis. Tell 'em how you clean things up for me." Dominick glanced back at Mann and tapped his temple. "Ain't all there half the time."

"Does he work here everyday?"

"Yeah. Like clockwork. Everyday from nine to three."

Travis was of medium height and gaunt; thin to the point of emaciation yet managed the strength to haul in a box full of tools under one arm and make it look easy. Harper couldn't recall off the top of his head ever seeing a man who looked to be in his forties with dreadlocks. The man's dreads hung down to his shoulders. Dark, sunken eyes were as lifeless as the expression on his creased face.

"Do you know this kid?" Harper held Rocky's autopsy picture for Stoebe to see.

Stoebe frowned. "He's been here."

"When was that? When was the last time you saw him?"

"I don't know. A while."

"What's a while?" Harper asked.

"You're wasting your time," Dominick said. "He's not right in the head."

Stoebe seemed incoherent, unable to connect his thoughts or answer Harper's questions. After pulling a few more bits of basic information from Stoebe, like where he lived, and how he spent his time outside of work, Harper let him return to his chores. He reached for his ringing cell and glanced at the number that flashed across his LCD screen. It was Carter Graves, head of Forensics calling from the warehouse behind the shop.

"Harper, you better get back here and see this yourself."

Ray leaned forward, bringing the heels of his hands to his eyes. Harper motioned to Mann and left Ray to his thoughts and a couple of uniformed officers.

Out in the parking lot behind the shop, one of the techs from Forensics watched as the old red pick-up was being hoisted onto a tow truck for the trip to the lab. Tire tracks crisscrossed the snow-covered lot. Ahead, a well-trampled path led straight to the warehouse twenty feet away.

Harper looked at the collection of foreign cars and the stash of cocaine Carter had found on the premises.

"This guy has more going on to line his pockets than a few repairs."

"Good. We'll haul him in on suspicion of auto theft and possession. That ought to hold him long enough to get his teeth imprint. Did we get what we came for?"

"Got it." Carter held up a small vacuum cleaner bag. "The place is a dust magnet. The guys are processing the floor of the service bay in the shop too. These



particles are so fine, they'll stick to anything they come in contact with."

While Ray sat handcuffed in the back of a squad car, officers placed the confiscated kilos of grass and cocaine into the trunk of one of the other city vehicles. Harper reached for his seat belt and caught a glimpse of Travis Stoebe standing behind the plate glass window. Expressionless eyes stared back. His hands hung limp at his sides.

# 11

Five weeks until Christmas. The gray sky and the bite in the air were precursors to the snow predicted to fall by early evening. The weatherman missed the mark on his forecast again. At two in the afternoon, the streets and sidewalks were sparkling with a fresh dusting of snow.

"You wrote it all down?" The head of the medical clinic sat forward in his chair, cocked his head to one side, and flipped his pencil from end to end on his desk. The Board of Health had predicted the flu bug would hit harder than usual this year. The doctor himself had issued several warnings to vaccinate against the epidemic.

"Yes. Every word." Jennie Blake forced a smile at the sixty or so year-old man sitting behind the desk. The doctor had controlled the interview from the minute she entered his office. He allowed her a question or two, but for the most part, Jennie felt as if she were back in a lecture hall at Crompton College. A few wispy dark hairs graced the front of an otherwise bald area on top of his head. He had a pleasant enough face and the green shirt and tie beneath his white lab coat seemed a perfect match to his eyes. The whole of his appearance had deceived her into thinking their talk would be amiable.

"You have the number of predicted cases?" he asked.

"Over three hundred in this county alone in the first two months."

"And the precautions?"

"Trust me. I have it."

"I expect to see it on the front page."

"I'll do my best." Jennie's assurances didn't seem to carry much weight with the doctor.

"It has to be."

"The decision is up to my editor."

"People are going to die, Ms Blake."

"I assure you my editor and I are equally concerned about the flu. This piece will receive the utmost attention." She hoped he wouldn't see through her bluff.

Brian Taylor, her editor-in-chief had bigger, more pressing things on his mind than a virus. He wanted answers to the teenagers' bodies floating up from the bay and why the police force couldn't find their killer. Her next move would be to sit in Harper's office and force him to talk. But right now, she had to get back to the *Chandler Times* building.

Jennie stepped out into the hallway a few feet from the elevator and looked at her hands. After listening to the head of the clinic talk about germs for fifty minutes, she had an immediate urge to disinfect them. She jabbed the down button of the elevator with her pen, then removed a bottle of anti-bacterial gel from her purse. Jennie rubbed a generous amount on her hands then slipped on her gloves. She had exactly an hour and ten minutes to get back to her office and finish typing her article before the three o'clock press deadline.

Jennie wrapped her burgundy scarf snugly around her neck and braced herself against the harsh November wind. The *Chandler Times* building was five

blocks to the south of the elegant dress shops and other swanky department stores. In good weather, she loved strolling past the windows for a glimpse at their displays. The merchandise sold at the Stanton Department Store was beyond her budget, but it was just up ahead and in spite of her time restraint, she couldn't resist a quick glance in the window.

As she hurried by the display, she looked over her shoulder at the woman in a tattered coat standing in front of the storefront window. Her ashen skin and the downward pull at the corner of her mouth told Jennie all she needed to know. Jennie had covered the news of two major employers who had shut down their businesses since last summer. They had left hundreds of families without incomes or health insurance. Most of those people would be lucky to get a meal this holiday season; they would more than likely get the flu.

Brass bells pealed from street corners and storefronts urging the passersby to help feed the needy. Jennie squeezed a couple of dollars into the kettle outside the newspaper building then dashed straight up to the fourth floor.

The pressroom was in its usual state of panic before the three o'clock deadline. Every reporter had the same chance to crack the next big story; only trick was to crack it first. The phones hadn't quit ringing since the first teenage boy washed ashore nearly five weeks before. The sound of determined fingertips pounding away on keyboards resonated like drops of rain battering against a metal roof. Somewhere in the room a radio blared out the tune to Frosty the Snow Man.

Jennie stopped briefly in front of the television nearest her desk. The Channel Six crime reporter had just concluded her interview with Homicide Detective

Sam Harper of the CPD; the reporter seemed less than impressed.

"Damn it. I can't even get him to return a phone call," Jennie mumbled and vowed to catch the entire interview on the six o'clock news.

"Hey Blake," Marc Dillings called out to her from two desks away. He leaned back and rested his head in the cup of his hands. "Did you hear? Rumor has it the police found evidence that can ID the floaters' killer?"

"Did Harper finally cut loose with the information?" she asked, nodding toward the television set.

"Not exactly. He was evasive again."

"Do they have an arrest?"

"No word yet."

"Well what did Harper have to say about it?"

"Not much. Just that they had some initial evidence."

"Channel Six needs to replace that reporter. She could use a lesson or two on making men talk." Jennie gave him a smug smile as she threw her coat onto an empty chair. She pulled out the notes from her interview, and opened the vaccination article on her laptop.

"You have to get him to answer your calls first," he said.

"No more phone calls. I'm going down to police headquarters as soon as I'm done here."

"You really think that'll work?" He smiled and shook his head.

"It's going to have to. People are ready to move on, but they can't, they won't until they hear from Harper that he has this lunatic behind bars."

"Bit of advice, Blake. Keep the police on your good side. Piss them off and you can sit on their desk but it won't get you a story."

"All I want to do is get him to tell me what they're doing to find a suspect."

"Jennie, the police just now got their first break with whatever evidence they found."

"I don't care. People want guarantees."

"Like what?" Marc leaned forward.

"Guarantees that they'll be safe in their own homes. They want to know they can walk outside at night without worrying if they're going to get mugged or killed."

"There aren't any guarantees. The cops can't make any more promises than we can."

"Thanksgiving is two days away and Christmas will be here before we know it. People want to believe everything they've grown up hearing about the season. We need some holiday cheer and the police could help restore the people's confidence if they'd just—"

"These things take time. All we can do is report the news, not make it up."

"Marc you're my friend, but don't lecture me on this," she said. "Last summer's drive-by shooter killed seven people. That fear is still fresh in everyone's mind and folks are seeing parallels."

"The cops got that guy. They'll get this one too."

"What's with you and the sympathy for the police all of a sudden? It's November twentieth. Damn near five weeks since they found the first victim. Big deal, Harper got a break. What's he been doing in the meantime? He's no closer to solving the case now than he was on day one."

"You don't know that."

"You can bet if he was, he'd be bragging to us. The whole thing is starting to stink like day-old fish." She shoved some folders out of her way and settled down to her work. "What's Brian got you working on?"

"Wants me to cover the story on the alignment of the planets. Several of the major networks are planning special programs about it. He wants a jump on it."

"Sounds fascinating."

"It is. The last time this happened was back in 1997. It included the moon and the eight planets. They dubbed that one the string of pearls. This time all eight planets and little old Pluto will line up in a row."

"Christ, Marc. He expects you to make a story out of that? You just rattled it off to me in two seconds flat. What more can you possibly say about it?"

"Some people are fascinated by it."

"Like you?"

"Ever read about the Mayan calendar?"

"No, but I have the distinct feeling I'm going to hear about it."

"According to the Mayans, the center of the universe will line up with the center of the Milky Way between it and the sun. Then the gravitational pull of the galaxy will pull our solar system into the center of the universe and implode on December twenty-first—"

"Oh please, every generation has had their doomsday hoaxes."

"All right, so the Mayan prediction is a few years away, but Jennie, this alignment isn't a hoax, it's happening right now and it's a scientific wonder. Won't happen again for another hundred years or so."

"A real event, huh?"

"Exactly. According to the astronomers, the planets will be perfectly aligned on the morning of December twenty-fourth."

"Cute. The sign in the sky, huh? Star of Bethlehem and all of that?"

"Something like that." He gathered the handful of loose pages and stacked them neatly on one corner of his desk. "One of the priests at St Paul knows all about it. Thought I'd talk to him, see what he can add to what I already have."

"A priest? Why? Because of the Christmas Eve thing?"

He paused then broke into a smile. "Sure why not? Catchy connection, don't you think? So, gorgeous, what's your big news this week on the rise to fame and fortune?"

"Germs."

Jennie glanced at her watch again and began her frantic attempt to finish her article within the next forty minutes. She was nearly done when her desk phone rang. She let it ring until she couldn't stand its shrill any longer.

"City desk. J T Blake."

"Jennifer? Jennifer Blake?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"It's Professor Mittendorf, Anthropology Department at Crompton."

"Who?" She held the receiver in the crook of her neck, glanced at her watch again, and continued to type.

"Dr Gaylord Mittendorf, Crompton College."

She paused for a moment then frowned. "Yes. I remember. History of Method and Theory. What can I do for you?" She had hated that class. The sound of his voice brought back a vivid recollection of the mind-numbing hours she spent in his lecture hall.

"I need to see you right away. May we meet – say in a half hour?"

"Sorry. I'm on a deadline. Maybe—"

"Tonight, then. Please. It's important."

The urgency in his voice piqued her curiosity, if for no other reason than she couldn't imagine how he remembered her out of all the students he had taught since she graduated five years before. Aside from the roundness of his face and the shiny bald spot near the back of his head, the only outstanding features that



came to mind were his bushy eyebrows and his nerdy bow ties. *What in the world*, she wondered, *could he possibly want?*

"All right," she said. "At five-thirty then. There's a little coffee shop around the corner from my building."

Jennie didn't know what to expect when she entered the café. She brushed the snow from her coat and glanced around the room. Dr Mittendorf sat waiting at a table near the back next to the windows. He hadn't changed a bit – still wearing the nerdy bow ties.

He stood and held out his hand.

"Ms Blake."

"Jennie, please," she said, studying him for a moment. "You have me at a loss for words. I was certainly surprised—"

"Please, sit down. I took the liberty to order an espresso for you. It should be ready any minute now."

"Thanks." Jennie never cared for espresso, but it was hot and free so she gladly accepted the gesture. "What's on your mind?"

Mittendorf opened his mouth as if to speak then shut it. She followed his glance across the room. The only person in the shop was the attendant and he wasn't paying any attention to them.

"You see. It's like this," he said.

She watched him twirl his spoon around several times on the table. After a few seconds of his infernal fidgeting, she placed her hand on his, gave it a pat, and made him stop. "Professor, I'd really like to go home before the weather gets any worse. Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind?"

"Yes. Of course." His smile seemed strained and nervous. "I read the piece you wrote last month about the Colombian artifact exhibit on display in the museum. I was quite impressed."

"Thank you." Surely, he hadn't asked her here to talk about an old article her editor had forced her to write.

"What I have to tell you, however, is of far more importance than anything you have ever written about that culture."

She wanted to say that it was an assignment, not a vocation. Instead, she replied: "Really?"

The professor paused when the waiter arrived with their espressos and waited until he left before telling Jennie his story.

"A gentleman by the name of Randal Gould called me two days ago after returning to the States from a business trip to the Republic of Colombia. He was quite excited about a meeting he had with a young man there."

Jennie listened and waited to hear something of interest.

"The fellow had in his possession a piece of jewelry, a ring, he claimed had been in his family for generations. Mr Gould, being a pawnbroker, was very interested but became alarmed by the young man's refusal to accept payment for it. He was most insistent that Mr Gould take it out of the country as quickly as possible."

"Seems odd," she said, warming her hands around the small cup.

"Yes. Gould immediately suspected the ring was stolen. But in the middle of their discussion, the young man became violently ill. Gould said the man clutched his throat like a mad man and collapsed right before his eyes."

"Was he mad?"

"Who knows? At any rate, he died."

"Died?"

"Dropped dead to be precise; that's what Gould told me."

"I bet. What did he do?"

"The only thing he could. Gould took the ring and fled the country. He was in a panic when he called me. Asked me to take it off his hands."

"I see, so he killed the guy for the ring and now wants to pass the hot goods on to you. Is that it?"

"No. It's not like that. The young man was willing to give it to him. It was all quite ... bizarre."

"You seem pretty certain this Gould character was straight with you."

Mittendorf tapped a finger on the table and looked away.

"Professor? Was he?"

"He had no reason not to be honest with me. Gould isn't a risk taker, but a client offered him a hefty fee to go to Columbia to fetch it."

"Wait a minute. Someone paid him for it? Why is he giving it to you then?"

"The deal was that he would be paid half of the fee to fly down there. He would receive the balance upon his return and delivery of the item. After the young man died, Gould decided to take him at his word that the ring was an heirloom. But the young man's words about the ring's history evidently kept rumbling around in Gould's head. He decided he wanted no part of it, his client, or his money."

"So just how valuable is this ring?"

"Priceless, but the important thing is the ring's background and what it represents. Years ago I heard of a lost papal ring, but thought it was a legend. When Gould described it to me, he and I agreed that it must be one and the same. He concluded that even if the item was indeed stolen, it needed to be placed in safekeeping and no one would be the wiser once he

returned to the States with it.”

“Dr Mittendorf,” she said, giving the snow blowing past the window a quick glance, “I don’t want to be rude, but—”

“Mr Gould was so fearful for his life that he took extra precautions on his return to the States. He told me he changed planes several times before arriving here on the 18th.”

“Fearful of who, what? The guy in Colombia who gave him the ring is dead. What’s he afraid of?”

“The ring is said to be cursed. That’s all I can say right now.”

“Don’t tell me you believe in all of that.”

“Ms Blake, in my line of study I’ve witnessed too many unexplained things to be skeptical of anything, no matter how outrageous they may seem.”

“But why involve me? You obviously feel strongly about it. What does any of this have to do with me?”

“Nothing. Except for the fact that you’re a journalist and I have no one else to trust with this information.”

“Oh.” Jennie sat back in her chair and gave him a nod. “I get it. I have to protect my sources, is that it?”

“Yes, precisely. Please.” He paused. “It really is quite important that you keep this in confidence. I remembered you from class. You were one of the few who didn’t cheat on the tests. As I recall, Ms Blake, you flunked most of them.”

“That’s an understatement.” Jennie could see from the corner of her eye large snowflakes drift past the coffee shop window in a diagonal direction. The wind had picked up again and all she could think of was going home, but the professor looked too pathetic in his tweed jacket and plaid bow tie for her to ignore. She had forgotten how weepy his eyes could look. Then again, she had never seen Professor Mittendorf beg before.

"You have ten minutes starting right now to convince me," she said, tapping the face of her watch. "On one condition. I'm not committing to anything. Understand?"

The way he nodded his head made her think of those stupid little plastic figurines with springs for necks that make their heads bob around in different directions.

"Agreed," he said, and continued with his story. "According to what the young man told Mr Gould, the black pearl ring belonged most recently to a Colombian healer of sorts – the young man's mother he assumed. A sorceress if you will."

"A witch?" she asked. "The dead guy was related to a witch?"

Mittendorf tilted his head and shrugged a shoulder. "That's not how someone with her talents is viewed by her culture. But the ring," he paused to take a drink of his coffee. "The ring is what's of interest. According to native folklore, it gives its owner great powers of vision, and the powers are always passed on to the first born child."

"Nonsense."

Mittendorf lowered and raised his glance in a condescending way that instantly made Jennie feel as if she were back in his six p.m. class. He had never been impressed with her comments then; he definitely didn't seem surprised by them now.

"It is not nonsense, I assure you," he said.

"If what you've told me is true, why would the woman's son try to get rid of it? Why not keep it for himself?"

"I wouldn't know."

"And where's the mother in all of this?"

He exhaled in a familiar, irritated manner, just as he always had when a student didn't understand his brilliant lecture. "Ms Blake, I can't see what difference

any of that can possibly make.”

“The difference between believing your story or not. That’s what.” Jennie pushed back her chair and grabbed her coat.

“Wait! Where are you going? You can’t leave.”

“I’ve heard enough,” she said. “It’s a great story but you’re a little late for a Halloween piece.”

“But you don’t understand.”

“I understand one thing. I’m not interested. I’ve had a long day, it’s snowing like hell, and I’m going home.”

“It’s not a story. Gould has the ring at his shop. Down on South 23rd Street. He asked me to pick it up.”

“Good luck with that.” Jennie slipped on her coat and was near the door when she felt his hand around her arm. She turned and jerked away from his grip. “I said, ‘no’.”

“Everything all right, Miss?” The man behind the counter leaned around a large copper coffee urn and glared at the professor.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she assured him. She was embarrassed by the ridiculous encounter and furious with herself for having agreed to meet with Professor Mittendorf. She had no business getting involved in whatever mess the professor had gotten himself into.

Mittendorf lowered his gaze and his voice: “All I’m asking is that you please go to his shop and pick it up for me. Here.” He reached into his pocket and produced a ticket. “This arrived at my office this morning by messenger. Just give the shop owner the ticket. That’s all.”

“Pick it up yourself. I don’t want any part of this.”

“I can’t. I have studied these cultures for years. I’ve seen too many inexplicable things in my life to not believe in the supernatural. Inanimate objects can and do transmit certain energies – curses if you will. They take control only over those who believe in their power.

You obviously don't believe. I knew you wouldn't. You deal in facts. Therefore, if there is any truth to what Gould has told me about the ring, you should be safe from its powers."

"And then what?"

"We put it in a place where no one can get their hands on it."

"Like a bank vault?"

"Yes! Exactly. A bank vault."

"What kind of a mess did you get yourself into, Professor?"

"No mess. It's just a very delicate situation."

"You better get someone else to pick up your stolen goods. Better yet, stay away from it."

"It's not stolen, I tell you. I can't say any more now. Tomorrow – tomorrow meet me at the First Union Bank on Broadway at noon. I'll tell you the rest of what I know when you give me the ring, but right now Mr Gould is waiting for you in his shop."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Jennie pulled back the sleeve of her coat and glanced at her watch. "There's no way."

"Now! It must be now. Tonight."

"Why? What's his hurry to sell it now?"

"It's not for sale."

She could feel the frown tightening between her brows. "Now I know I've heard enough. You said it's priceless. What kind of pawnbroker gives something like that away?"

"Let's say he's agreed to make a tax deductible contribution to the museum. Eventually, it will go to the museum but I ... I must have it tonight," he insisted. "We can't risk it falling into the wrong hands."

The sun set, the temperature dropped, and at seven-twenty p.m., a six-inch accumulation of snow covered

the streets. Jennie couldn't believe she had let Dr Mittendorf talk her into such a ridiculous scheme. "Voodoo mumbo jumbo – nonsense," she whispered as she drove down South 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. She nosed her car to a stop in the middle of the street and glanced at the address the professor had written down on a coffee shop napkin. "212." Jennie compared the numbers to those painted on the storefront above the screaming-yellow door.

The lettering across the pane glass window read, 23<sup>rd</sup> Street Pawnshop. "Now that's original," she sneered and parked the car.

A tiny bell on the door chimed to announce her entrance. While she stomped the snow from her boots, a short stocky man pushed aside the beaded curtain separating the back room from the storefront. He stepped up to the counter. The thick lenses of his black-framed glasses enlarged his eyes out of proportion and magnified the uneasiness in his stare.

"May I help you?" he asked.

A stench of sour breath drifted in her direction.

"Randal Gould?" Her eyes immediately dropped to the inch-long rip along the left shoulder of his brown cardigan sweater. The last time she checked, she stood five foot seven, which made him several inches shorter. Behind him, the items that sat on top of a shelf on the wall had a layer of dust that told of his failing business.

"Yes."

Jennie held out the ticket. "Professor Mittendorf sent me."

The man darted a look at the ticket then met her glance. "Yes, he – he called to say you were on your way. I have it right here," he said as he tore off a stapled slip of paper from the bag. He folded the note in two before he slipped it into his shirt pocket. "It's ready."



Please.” He motioned at the small paper sack on the counter. “Take it.”

Jennie offered him a half-hearted smile with a slight shake of her head. *Theatrics*. That’s what she thought of the two odd men that had infringed on her evening.

“This is it, right? The ring?”

“Please. Just go.”

It was already half past the hour. She thought of the promise she had made to the professor to meet him at the bank the following day. But now when she looked out the window neither the snow nor the wind had let up and more of the same was predicted for the next couple of days. At the moment, all she wanted to do was go home. After this little detour to the south side of town, it would be after eight before she’d reach her apartment. Jennie hadn’t eaten lunch and desperately needed to get some supper. She’d call the professor later to confirm their appointment, but right now what angered her most was that she missed the six o’clock news.

“Damn it,” she said under her breath and reached for the doorknob. At that same moment, the man on the other side of the door shoved it open with brute force.

“Excuse you,” she said, thankful he missed hitting her in the face.

He wore the hood of his sweatshirt pulled down over his eyes. All she noticed with any clarity was a bandage across his nose and his black leather jacket.

She would have normally responded to the cursing he mumbled under his breath with some smart-ass remark, but the men in this part of town hadn’t yet learned that it wasn’t nice to hit a lady. Jennie decided to duck out as fast as she could. She was tired, hungry, and not in the mood for another stupid male encounter.

## 12

This was not Alejandro's first trip to the States, but he had never traveled farther north than Miami. The frigid weather of Massachusetts was unlike anything he had ever known. His hands and feet were numb and his teeth would not quit chattering. He compared the address written on the note in his hand to the one displayed above the bright yellow door. Alejandro looked through the glass pane window and waited for the woman inside the shop to finish her business. The short bald man with the sun-burned face standing behind the counter looked like the art dealer described to him by the bartender back at *El Punto*. He swung open the door just as the woman pushed against it on the other side.

He let her through then shoved back his hood and shook the melted snow from his hair. No specific emotion registered on the old man's face when Alejandro stepped through the door.

"Crummy weather, hey pal?"

Alejandro did not respond. Instead, he raised his hands to his mouth and blew warmth into them while he studied the old man's eyes. He scanned the room. Nothing but rusty tools, old books, and the thief who had stolen his ring. Alejandro stood still for a moment waiting for the circulation to flow back into his hands and feet.

"Can I help you?" The man curled his lip to one side as if his tolerance had suddenly been breached. "Look, it's getting late, you either—"

"Did you like Mitu, Mr Art Dealer?" Alejandro flipped the deadbolt and locked the door.

Fear welled in the little man's eyes. "Who are you?"

Alejandro did not respond.

"What do you want?"

"What belongs to me – to my family." He closed the blinds.

"Hey! You can't do that. I don't know who you think you are or what you're talking about."

"You are the thief in the night, *señor*, and I am here to relieve you of your heavy burden."

"You crazy Spic. I'm the dumb schmuck who bought all this junk."

Alejandro stared down at him.

"Get the hell out of my store before I call the cops."

"I would not do that if I were you."

"Oh yeah? Watch me."

"I do not want to hurt you, but trust me, I am not leaving without my ring." Alejandro shoved his hands into his pockets and took another step. "This ring, it is all I want – you know the one. Pretty black pearl on a wide silver band."

"Look around buddy. Nothing but junk in here. Don't have anything like that. Now you stay back. I mean it."

"That could be a problem for you, my friend. You see, I know you took it out of Mitu and if you do not have it, then you must know who does." Alejandro's movements were deliberately slow and calculated as he made his way around to the backside of the counter. He tucked in his chin like a beast ready to pounce on his kill and gazed into the man's frightened eyes.

The old man looked up. His jaw clenched like a vise. Horror transformed his face.

"You killed Juan Carlos and took the ring."

"Who?"

"Do not play games with me." Alejandro slammed a fist against the countertop. His rage burned with the indignation of giving this – this nothing of a man the courtesy of an explanation. "You bought him a drink and did not even ask his name?"

"You high on something? I didn't buy anyone a drink and I sure as hell didn't kill 'em either. Go on. Get the hell out of here!"

"So tell me, how much did Juan Carlos tell you about the ring?"

"You're loco. You know that? Did you understand that? I don't know no one by that name and there's nothing in this dump that belongs to you."

The old man reached for one of the drawers beneath the counter. Alejandro grabbed hold of his arm and squeezed.

The man wailed. "I tell you I didn't kill him. The guy dropped dead right in front of my eyes. I swear it's the truth."

"You did me a favor killing him, I assure you. But you have had your fun and now it is over. I want my ring now. Give it to me." Alejandro's hold was still firm on the shopkeeper's arm when the shop owner reached for the alarm with his free hand.

Alejandro jerked him back throwing the old man's head hard against the doorframe of the entrance that led to the back room. The man stumbled and dropped to his knees then raised a shaky hand within inches of the alarm button again.

A wooden box on the counter was filled with a collection of rusty tools. Alejandro grabbed the first one he saw. He raised the hammer above his head and brought it down with a thrust. The rage that stemmed from Lorenzo's injustices surged through his veins and

had led him to this godforsaken place.

A warm jet of blood sprayed across Alejandro's face. He pressed his lips and wiped the splattering from his eyes. "Stupid old man." He studied his victim for only a second. This was not the way he had intended to handle things. The old man had killed Juan Carlos for the ring. Now Alejandro would never know what the old man knew of the ring or whom he had told. But none of that mattered. He would follow whatever trail this old man had left. He would track down his ring and return to Mitu and pay Lorenzo back with his mother's form of medicine.

Alejandro pushed through the beaded curtains. The back room was as filthy and crowded as the outer shop. To his right was a small cluttered desk in the corner. Stacks of newspaper clippings and invoices stamped past due were scattered across its surface. He pulled out the middle drawer and turned it over, spilling its contents onto the floor. Alejandro's hand followed his glance through years of forgotten rubbish. *Nada*. Nothing. He did the same with the others. *Nada!*

He looked around the room. Odd shaped boxes were jammed onto four metal utility shelves across the back wall. On the shelf immediately beneath the boxes was a collection of adding machines in various stages of disrepair. To the left was a small door. Alejandro turned the knob and pulled it open. A single light bulb suspended from a wire in the center of the ceiling gave off a dim glow when he flipped the switch. The toilet was set back, far enough away to allow the door to swing open. Next to it was a small round sink. Alejandro looked at his reflection in the mirror that hung above it.

The old man's blood had sprayed across the front of his black leather coat; his face and hair were disgustingly filthy. A turn of the faucets produced a

stream of cold rust-colored water. He immediately splashed it over his face and through his hair. The water turned red. He gave his jacket a quick wipe with a moistened paper towel as he made his way back into the shop.

"Where is it, old man?" Alejandro asked as he brushed back the beaded curtains again. He stepped over the corpse and stooped to search the man's pockets. From the right trouser pockets he took a set of keys, a couple of rubber bands, and a paperclip. In the other he found a worn leather wallet. Inside were Randal Gould's driver's license and a 1998 ticket stub to a Yankee's ball game. He let them drop to the floor.

Alejandro reached into the man's shirt pocket and fingered a piece of paper. It was folded in two with Professor Mittendorf's name written in a shaky hand across the top. Below the name was the word "ring." It was underscored with three bold strokes. A dash, the initials *JB* and a phone number. Alejandro remembered that the old man had gone for the drawer beneath the counter. He wasted no time to open it and shoved the day's earnings of fifty-eight dollars and change into his pocket. Near the back he found what he suspected the old man had reached for. A grin pulled at the corners of his mouth.

"Old man," he said, slipping the .22 handgun into his pocket. "You will not need this any more."

## 13

Large snowflakes had turned into tiny star-shaped pellets of ice. Jennie struggled to maneuver her Volkswagen Beetle through the frozen ruts along the road. Aside from a couple of snowplows, no one was on the streets tonight. By nine p.m., the road conditions had delayed her return home from the pawnshop by a good thirty minutes. But soon, she thought, she would be safely home.

The old Victorian home with its large bay window, high ceilings, and polished brick fireplace had been turned into lower and upper apartments. Jennie lived on the ground floor, her favorite place to be at the end of a crazy day. Today, she thought, easily qualified as one of the worst. All the talk of a mysterious ring and Colombian witchcraft was more than unsettling. *Ridiculous*, she thought. The word ridiculous and the image of Professor Mittendorf and his funny bow tie crossed her mind at the same time.

The boots were first to come off. Jennie placed them next to the briefcase on the floor near the front door. She let the purse drop on a chair in the living room, then tossed her coat over the back of the couch. The apartment was warm, but not enough to shake off the teeth-chattering chill that followed her home. Jennie brushed back wet, wavy ringlets of hair from her face and rushed straight down the hall. The only thing that

would warm her tonight was a steaming shower followed by a cup brimming with creamy hot chocolate.

Maybe the fire didn't crackle or smell like wood, but the gas log was clean and quick and warmth was all that mattered. Jennie sat down on the floor, leaned back against the front of the couch, and watched the blue flames dance across the fake log. She yawned and crossed the lapels of her pale yellow robe snugly around her neck, then fingered her hair. The warmth of the fire engulfed her with a sense of security.

Curls of steam floated from her mug of hot chocolate. She took a sip and closed her eyes. All she wanted to do was shove the stress of her day out of her mind. Brian, Harper, and now Mittendorf had frustrated her thoughts.

Jennie eyed the small sack from the pawnshop she had left on the coffee table with morbid curiosity. She wished she'd paid closer attention to Dr Mittendorf's foolishness about the ring. She took another sip. She couldn't remember all the details – it didn't matter. Jennie decided to not indulge the professor with any more favors. He could pick the darn thing up at her office tomorrow and take it to the bank himself. Jennie grabbed her phone and dialed his number. It rang several times before the call went to voice mail. She left a brief message then shut it off.

The ring's wide silver band adorned with a perfectly formed black pearl embedded onto its top was much too large for her finger. She held it up; mesmerized by how the light from the flames shimmered off the band's smooth surface. It made her think of a stream of water sparkling under a bright summer sun. Jennie's eyelids felt suddenly heavy.

"Okay, ten minutes." She was thinking about watching the eleven o'clock news as she slipped the



ring off and placed it back in the sack. She hadn't expected the overwhelming desire to close her eyes again. The image of a bubbling stream returned, this time a woman stood in it with outstretched hands. Water and lush green leaves were her final conscious thoughts.

Jennie woke up to the sound of her own throaty scream. Her heart thrashed inside her chest, shallow gulps of air came in rapid succession. She sat up with a jolt; perspired. *It was only a dream. Only a ...* A dream she couldn't remember, no faces, no people, only an intense fear that had produced a moist layer of sweat on her skin. A faceless, shapeless danger had chased her through inescapable darkness and threatened to crush her. She glanced around her living room not quite convinced she was in her home. Her fright was as real as the sensation that something had stroked her face with a clammy touch.

Jennie was immediately aware that the warm glow of the fire had grown cold. She blinked, cold chills ran up her arms as a sense of panic welled inside her. *Gas!* She held her breath as she crawled toward the hearth. She managed to turn off the switch, but didn't remember her feet touching the floor as she ran to open a window. She brushed back the curtain, shoved open the sash and then fumbled with a stubborn storm window. At last it opened.

She welcomed the bitter cold air on her face as she slowly caught her breath and looked out into the hush of night. The wind had erased her footsteps leading up to the house. Jennie leaned her forehead against the window frame and closed her eyes. It felt good to know she was still alive inside her home and certain there was nothing more to worry about. It had been a bad dream. And as far as the flames? She felt certain there

was a logical explanation. Perhaps a surge of gas had blown the fire out.

Jennie opened her eyes and dropped her glance to the snow on the porch beneath her window. A fresh set of prints. She darted a look at the front steps again. No prints and no sign the person had walked away. She jerked her head back and looked at the cold gas log. Goose bumps rippled along her extremities. *Windows? Are the windows all locked? The doors?* She slammed shut the window, locked it, and then moved to the next window and the one after that.

She had made it to the bedroom when the abrupt knock on her front door thundered as loudly as the pounding in her chest. She wanted to scream – she wanted to run – she couldn't do either.

"Jennie? You okay in there?"

Jennie closed her eyes and sighed at the sound of her neighbor's voice.

"Come on," Kim yelled. "Open the door. I'm freezing my rear end off out here."

"Sorry," Jennie said as she unlocked the door and flipped on the light.

"Are you okay? Was that you who screamed?"

"I heard a noise. Guess I spooked myself. Come on in. How was Florida?"

"Hot." A smug grin slipped across Kim's lips. "A heck of a lot more fun than Chandler. You should have come."

Jennie's smile felt tense as she handed her neighbor her week's mail.

"I don't know why I stay here." Kim shook her head.

"You have a good job, that's why."

"I can't stand the cold. Besides, I can find work in any hospital pharmacy."

Jennie crossed her arms and watched her neighbor sift through her mail, but her thoughts were fixed on the

footprints beneath her front window. The entrance to Kim's upstairs apartment was on the far side of the front porch that opened into an internal staircase and led straight upstairs to her apartment. Jennie awoke more than once to the sound of Kim's entanglements and wondered why she hadn't heard her come home tonight.

"Did you just get in?" Jennie asked. *Of course*, she thought, *those had to be Kim's boot prints*. The professor's ridiculous story about the ring had shaken her sense of logic, that's all. As the professor had pointed out, she believed in facts. There had to be a perfectly reasonable explanation for the fire in the hearth blowing out as well as the footprints that came out of nowhere.

"Nah," Kim said. "Got in around one this afternoon. After that twelve-hour drive I crashed. When did it start snowing again?"

## 14

Harper's day started at seven o'clock with a call to a tiny, nondescript pawnshop. The medical examiner's vehicle, the van from Forensics, and the two squad cars had beaten him to the two hundred block of South 23<sup>rd</sup>. All the attention was centered in front of the narrow brick building with the yellow raised panel door and grated front window.

Three more inches of snow fell overnight as predicted and the hush of the early hour was broken only by the murmured discussions of city personnel and the voice of a dispatch officer crackling through one of their radios.

The first unit to arrive at the scene secured the area with the standard florescent *Police Line Do Not Cross* banners. While one officer stood guard outside the store entrance, others took statements from the few neighborhood tenants who had ventured out into the cold. Carter Graves and his team of forensics were inside processing the scene. Harper knew the drill. No one could set foot inside the shop until Carter's people were done. Jack Fowler was playing it smart drinking a cup of take-out coffee while he sat comfortably inside the warmth of his medical examiner's vehicle.

Harper motioned to one of the uniformed officers.

"What do we know about the vic?"

"Owner of the place, Randal Gould, sixty-four,

widower, been in business here for twelve years. Blow to the head.”

“Witnesses?”

“Not a chance. Most of these shops close at five except for the bookstore next door. It closes at seven. The owner said Gould was still inside the shop last night when he walked past here to get to his car.”

“When was that?”

“Around seven-ten.”

“He saw him?”

“Said he did. Through the front window.”

“Seven-ten, huh?” Harper made a mental note of the closed blinds then switched his focus to the turn-of-the-century structures across the street. The stucco façade of the building immediately opposite the pawnshop was starting to pull away from the original brickwork. “Any apartments above those shops?”

“I’ve got my men on a door-to-door right now.”

“Who found him?”

“A Mr Tom Potter. Friend of the victim. Said they were supposed to go to a flea market this morning down in Belmont. Said they wanted to get an early start.”

“Where is he?”

“In the squad car. One of my men is questioning him now. Looks like the killer just walked in through the front door. No sign of forced entry.”

“Number of exits?”

“No other windows in the place except that one,” the officer said, pointing at the front of the shop, “and the back door is jammed shut.”

“A regular fire trap, huh?”

Just then, Carter Graves stuck his head out the entrance of the shop and gave them the okay to enter.

Harper slipped on a pair of gloves and glanced at the door latch. The officer was right. The locks,

doorjambs, and the glass on the door were intact. Inside, the place smelled as musty as a trunk full of mildewed love letters. Harper imagined himself in the killer's shoes. The intruder would have stood near the spot where Harper was standing. The killer's eyes would've viewed the very same objects. Harper glanced down at a box full of canning jars – no lids, just the jars and old license plates. Next to it was a chipped Blue Willow China tea set like the treasured wedding present his mother once owned.

A mental smile eased through his thoughts as he recalled her afternoon teas with the ladies from church. That's when he and his dad sneaked out of the house for a couple of hours of target practice. He had forgotten about those Saturday afternoons until now. Harper lifted the lid of the sugar bowl and carefully placed it back.

On the wall above the tea set hung three old guitars and an assortment of worn rakes and a pitchfork. Inside the glass case beneath the counter were miniature dolls, watches, and a small collection of diamond rings.

While a uniformed officer assessed the scene and took notes, Jack and his assistant examined the condition of the corpse.

"Harp. Over here." Jack was squatting next to the body. "He's in full rigor – death occurred sometime between seven and nine last night."

Jack had once told him the dead had their own way of revealing the truth; that he could tell more about a person from the way he had died than from the way he had lived. "So what's this one telling to you?"

"One stroke to the head. Upper right side crushed in." Jack pointed to the dented section of Gould's skull. "From the angle of the blow, either your victim was bending over or you've got one hell of a giant on your hands."

Carter stood two feet away holding a rusty hammer. "Here's what did it. I took a blood sample from the end."

"Didn't even try to cover his tracks," Harper said. "What else?"

The medical examiner rose to his feet. "Blood spattering on the wall and floor indicate everything happened right here. You can bet your killer walked away with bloody evidence on his clothes."

"The friend who found him ..." Harper said.

"Potter."

"Right. Potter. Did he notice anything out of place?" Harper asked Carter.

"No. The lights were on when he found him. He didn't think anything about it though, since he expected Gould to be ready to go. He claimed he walked in, found the body, and called it in."

Harper shot a glance toward the front window. "What about the blinds?"

"That's how Potter found them."

"Premeditated murder," Harper said.

"With a rusty hammer?"

"Jack said the time of death is between seven and nine."

"What are you getting at?" Carter asked.

"The sign on the door says the store closes at five, but the blinds were still open at seven-ten when the next door shop owner saw Gould through the window. Makes me think Gould wasn't in the habit of shutting them at the end of the day."

"Could have been working late – closed them later."

"Or the killer closed the blinds knowing what he was going to do before he walked into the place and didn't want to be seen," Harper said. "That makes it premeditated. Did you find any prints?"

"A million of them. Which ones do you want?"

"Just give it to me straight." Getting called out of bed

an hour before his normal schedule had dampened Harper's usual appreciation for Carter's humor.

"I'll see what I can get from the hammer, maybe I'll find a match to the prints on the blinds. I found a couple of other things on the floor next to the body." Carter held up one of the plastic evidence bags that contained an old baseball ticket stub.

"Damn. 1998, last game of the New York Yankees' season."

"Is that significant?" Carter asked.

"Are you kidding? It's the year the Yankees won a 114 games, the most Yankees wins in a season. That's worth some money to a collector."

"Guess the killer wasn't a fan or a collector," Carter told him.

Harper suspected Carter wasn't either. "Seems un-American, doesn't it? What else did you find?"

"Gould's wallet and a set of car keys. Dark green 1990 Buick Century Limited – four doors."

"That's some key."

"Potter gave one of your men the description. It's still parked in back. Only other thing we found of a personal nature was Gould's driver's license."

"How much do you suppose a pawnbroker makes in a day?"

"No cash in the drawer and a pile of past due bills on his desk. Probably not enough," Carter said. "What are you getting at?"

"The killer knew what he was after. Didn't touch the jewelry, didn't take the car, or get into anything except a confrontation with the owner. Why?"

Neither man spoke for a minute.

"You ever play chess?" Harper asked him.

"Check mate; cornered with nowhere to run."

"Exactly. Only one way out of this store and in this neighborhood, no shop owner opens a door without



loading his gun. Any sign of one?"

"We didn't find one."

"You can bet someone did." Harper raised his cell to his ear and made the call to police headquarters. They would know soon enough if Gould had registered a weapon.

Harper returned his phone to its case on his belt while he studied the area behind the counter and ran his hand along the lower edge. "There's the alarm button."

"Probably what got him killed," Jack said.

"Never made it," Harper said. To the right of the button was the partly opened cash drawer beneath the counter. "Empty."

"The primary concentration of blood is here around the victim and we found traces of blood in the bathroom sink," Carter said, motioning toward the back of the store. "Also found a paper towel on the floor in back with traces of blood on it."

"So the killer takes time to wash but doesn't try to conceal the crime. Sound cocky to you?" Harper didn't expect an answer and didn't get one. Instead, he brushed back the beaded curtain and followed the trail of objects that were strewn on the office floor. "Merchandise and the cash drawer are out front. What the hell were you looking for back here?" he whispered as he reached to answer his cell. It was the call Harper expected from the detective unit at the CPD.

"Harper? Rogers here. Randal Gould had a permit for a .22 Caliber all right."

"Well, isn't that special? Thanks. You just made my day."

# 15

## *Interrogation Room Two*

Dominick Ray leaned back in his chair and rubbed the overnight growth of hair on his cheeks. Harper gave him a bottle of water and a second to cool off. It was ten forty-five a.m.; they'd been at it since eight. It was time to move on.

"Victim number one. Thomas Johns. You know him?" Harper asked, shoving the first floater's autopsy picture in front of Dominick.

"I already told you."

"So tell me again. How do you know him?"

"He used to come by the shop two, three times a week."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Again!"

"For anything to get himself high on. Nothing heavy, mostly uppers and weed."

"Which you sold."

"Damn it, yes. So I sold the kid a few pills. So what?"

"So he's dead."

"Well I sure as hell didn't kill him."

"What about this one? Billy Washington. You know him?"

"Yeah, yeah. You know I do. And I didn't kill him either."

"Carl Messer." Harper slammed the third victim's picture next to the others.

"Yes."

"And Rocky Blount?"

"So I knew them. That's no crime."

"It is if they're dead and you're the only connection."

"I didn't do it."

"Prove it." Harper pulled out the chair directly across from Dominick and sat down. "The way I see it, they stiffed you. So you thought you'd teach them a lesson. Is that it?"

"No."

"Aw, come on. We see this type of thing all the time. These punks walk around as if the world owes them. Who could blame you? So, how'd you do it?"

"I told you I didn't."

"The thing I can't figure out is why you risked dumping the bodies in the bay. Everyone in these parts knows how the currents work. Anything that gets dumped in the bay eventually comes back. All you would have had to do was go a little further out to sea. I don't get that." Harper leaned in. "Instead, you emptied their pockets, took their IDs, tossed them into a boat, and dumped their bodies in the bay."

"You're out of your mind." Dominick rammed an angry finger onto the table. "You can't pin these murders on me. You have no evidence to—"

"I have autopsy reports that tell me I do."

"Autopsy." Dominick sneered and turned away.

"You're not going to walk away from this one," Harper said. "Plus, you have priors and now you're back in for possession and grand theft. Better hope the judge is in a good mood on trial day. You're looking at a max of fifteen counts of vehicle theft. For you, that's a life sentence and I haven't figured in the drugs yet."

Dominick shifted in his chair.

"But life will be a walk in the park, Ray, compared to what's going to happen to you if I connect you to the murders."

Dominick looked away.

"Come on, Ray. Just get it off your chest. What did you do with the boat?"

He drew in a breath and then whispered: "I can't swim."

"Beg your pardon?" Harper asked.

"I didn't kill those boys and I didn't take them out in the bay."

"Prove it."

"I told you I can't swim. The thought of getting into water deeper than my bathtub and drowning scares me shitless."

Dominick squirmed in his chair again.

"Ah hell. The four of them were in my shop all the time." Dominick shook his head. "They brought in the cars. Okay? That was the deal. They stole the cars, if they made it back to the shop without getting tailed, I paid them. Sometimes in cash, sometimes in drugs. It worked for everyone. Either way we all got what we wanted."

"Incredible. You just added contributing to the delinquency of minors to the charges against you." Harper studied him for an intentional moment. "Okay, let's say you're telling the truth, you didn't kill them."

"I didn't."

"Who else would want them dead?"

"How should I know?"

"I don't buy your 'can't swim' story and neither will a jury. Your only option is to work with us. What do you know about those boys?"

"I told you. Nothing. We never discussed it. The guys showed up one day in the shop and that's it."

"Just like that? You run a front for hot cars and

narcotics and you let these boys walk in from the street without questioning them? I don't think so."

"All right look, all I know is that a couple of them grew up at St Paul's orphanage and ran away. They were living off the streets when they came to see me." He narrowed his eyes and seemed to gather his thoughts. "The first one was Billy. Caught him out back of the shop rummaging through the dumpster. I didn't know what the hell he was doing. Turns out he was hungry; no home, nothing. The others weren't much better."

"Go on."

"He was hungry enough to do anything for some cash. Next thing I know he brought in another couple of runaways, Tom and Rocky. The fourth one, Carl, his mother made babies for a living. He got out of that hell hole as fast as he could."

"Smart kid. Ran from one dead end life so he could jump into another one." Harper jotted a note. "Billy ever mention where he met the other boys?"

"Hell, I don't know. St Paul's I guess." He paused for a moment. "That's right. Two of 'em ran away from St Paul's – don't know which two. Never asked – didn't care."

Kids living off the streets wasn't earth-shattering news, but that all four victims happen to steal cars for Dominick Ray was.

"I see your point," Harper told him. "Trouble is, no judge is going to put up with your indifference."

## 16

The morning drive into work was as slippery and treacherous as any Jennie could remember. She had placed the ring in her purse the night before so she wouldn't forget it in the morning rush. The professor had her phone message and her number. It was up to him to call. A list of the things she needed to do ran through her head as she entered the building. The first of several was to pick up a copy of the morning *Chandler Times* and check out her vaccination story. Brian Taylor, her editor-in-chief, had promised a front-page column.

"Come on, come on," she whispered, urging the elevator to hurry. She glanced at her watch. She was fifteen minutes late – again. Brian's roll-call meeting was well on its way by the time she rammed open the door.

"Well, aren't we privileged to have you join us, Ms Blake."

It was only eight-thirty and Brian was already chomping down on a stogie. He leaned back against the front of his desk and crossed his feet. His peppered hair was a mess and his shirt looked slept in. *Probably has been.* She thought.

"The roads—"

"Don't give me that crap, Blake."

"I got here as fast as I could, all right? Thanks for the concern."

He spread out his arms as he looked around at the other reporters. "Everyone else managed to get in."

Jennie pressed her lips together and tapped her notepad with her pen. "What do you want Brian? An apology? Fine, I'm sorry this city's street department can't keep up with the snow. Can we move on?"

Marc Dillings's snickering didn't help matters.

"Sure. If, of course, you don't mind, Ms Blake." Brian looked down his oversized square-tipped nose at her then broke into his usual speech about readership and the need for better coverage of news. Next on the agenda was the usual round of "Look at me," and "What's on my list to do." It was a sweet little chance for the reporters to brag and toot their horns about which interview they had managed to swindle from the other newspaper in town or the local television station. When the last of them sounded off, Brian's attention focused on her again.

"What about you? What's next on your plate?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going to work on it today."

"You know the deadline. On my desk by three."

"I just turned in my vaccination article last night," she said, jabbing her finger onto her front-page article of the morning paper. "It took weeks of work, Brian. Do you know how shitty those doctors can be with their time?"

He squinted an eye, pulled the cigar from his mouth, and pointed its soaked end at her. "Tell you what, Blake, I'll hand one to you this time. Pawnbroker down on South 23<sup>rd</sup> Street had his head busted in last night. Check it out. Make something of it."

"Pawnbroker?" She could feel her eyes widen. Images of the night before raced through her mind with pulsating speed.

"You got a problem with that?"

"No, no of course not."

"What, too small a piece for you?"

"No. It's not that. I'll, ah ... get on it."

The meeting was over and the other reporters rushed back to their desks. The nervous little man behind the counter at the pawnshop consumed Jennie's mind. She rose to her feet and was nearly out the door when Brian summoned her to stay.

"Not so fast, Blake."

"What?" Jennie had enough of his sarcastic remarks for one day. *What more did he want?*

"Don't worry. I'll have something on your desk by three sharp."

"You're a good journalist, but you haven't paid your dues around here yet. Understand?"

"I've done a damned good job on every assignment you've given me and you know it."

"You think that makes you special?"

"No, what I—"

"You blow into town, Boston Globe to your credit and sure, you picked up some front page stories. Big deal, around here you're still a rookie. Take a look out there," he said, pointing at the glass paneled wall of his office that overlooked the press room. "Every one of those reporters is waiting for you to fall on that pretty face of yours. They want it so bad they can taste it."

They were all watching her now. "Dog eat dog. Is that it?" she asked.

"You got it. Make or break your own luck."

"They had the same chance at success that I did. If they don't like it, too bad."

"Don't get cocky with me. It won't be flattering when you're out on the street and they're in here snickering at you from behind the window."

"Is that a threat?"

"Nope. That's life. I don't expect any more from you



than I do them. You do the leg work, meet your deadlines, and attend my meetings – on time – no exceptions.”

Jennie wanted to spit and was suddenly aware of the pronounced shallowness of her breathing. She glanced down at her notes hoping that a brilliant rebuttal would jump off the page. Her silence had just yelled submissiveness. Brian had drifted behind his desk and buried his nose in a stack of edits as his way to dismiss her.

She hated her dependency on the job and having to kiss up to a guy like him. “Brian.”

“We’re done talking. Go on. Get out of here.”

“Do they know the shopkeeper’s time of death?”

“The medical examiner estimates between seven and nine. Why?”

*Oh my God.*

“A point of reference,” Jennie told him.

*Damn, why didn’t she pay closer attention?* Maybe she could have ID’d the man that rushed in as she was leaving. If the thought that she might have been killed too entered her mind, it didn’t register.

“Who’s in charge of the case?” Jennie asked as she glanced over her shoulder toward the glass partition. For the moment, she was no longer the focus of her colleagues’ attention.

“Sam ‘Hollywood’ Harper.”

“Damn.”

## 17

The second morning bell rang at Harrison High School. Harper looked up at the dark brick and limestone structure. Chandler was no different than other metropolitan cities. Children of the affluent could choose from one of two private schools; St Paul's Catholic School or Northern Heights School for Girls. Everyone else bussed their kids to one of the three public high schools including the sixty-year-old Harrison on the south side. The high-level security system throughout the school; guards, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras, were telling of the kind of environment city kids lived in.

"Vinny T Woods," Principal Nagle said as he pulled the student's folder from a file cabinet. "You say Kenny and Woods were friends?"

"No. I didn't. But you seem surprised that they would be. Why?" Mann asked.

"Oh, just an unlikely combination, that's all."

"How's that?"

"Woods is on the varsity football team, popular with the girls, all around jock. You know the type. Kenny Teal was the complete opposite. Quiet, studious. His death was a shock to all of us. It's tragic what is happening to our youth these days. Kids killing kids."

Harper made a note of Nagle's assumption; that another youth had taken Kenny's life. They were

looking for facts, not educated guesses or speculations, but the statement was worth remembering. "What kind of grades is Woods getting?"

"He's barely making it this semester." Principal Nagle leafed through Woods's file. "If he doesn't bring them up, he'll get taken off the team."

Harper and Mann exchanged glances.

"Kenny's mother said he was helping a classmate to study for a Chemistry test. Do you think it might have been Woods?" Harper asked.

"Not likely. He's not taking that class. Must be someone else."

"Better call his parents in for a conference as well as Brenna Smith's parents," Harper said to Nagle. "We also need to see the contents of both Teal's and Woods's lockers."

"Brenna Smith?" Nagle asked.

"Mrs Teal said Brenna and her son were good friends."

"I see. In that case, Brenna may know more than the rest of us. I'll make the calls right now."

While Mann spoke with Brenna and her mother in the principal's office, Harper looked across the school's conference room at Vinny Woods and his parents.

Vinny leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, legs spread apart in cocky defiance of what was about to unfold. His glance dropped below eye contact with everyone inside the ten by twelve room.

"All right." Bud Woods refused to sit down. "You got me off the job, so talk. What'd he do now? Steal some kid's lunch money or what?" Mr Woods was called away from the construction site and it seemed that neither the loss of time nor Harper's presence settled well with him. He started to pace.

"Bud, please." Mrs Woods reached for her

husband's hand and pleaded just above a whisper.

Harper detected the familiar submissiveness of her tone. He'd heard it before in other family dispute cases. It was an all too familiar scenario to not recognize it for what it was – fear. Fear the husband would lose his temper, fear of being struck, fear that her slightest transgression would set him off on another rage.

Woods shoved his wife's hand away from him and took a step forward.

"Please." Harper pointed at the empty chair at the end of the table. "Take a seat Mr Woods."

"Why are we here?"

"Sir, you need to sit down," Harper said. "Now."

"Bud, do as he asks, please," she said again.

"You stay out of this." Woods kept his eye on Harper and paced again; three steps in one direction and then back like a caged cat waiting for the gatekeeper to look away.

"I'm not asking again. Do yourself a favor. Take a seat."

"A favor? What? You threatening me?"

"Don't make this harder than it has to be. Sit down, Mr Woods."

A frown furrowed across the dry, weathered skin of Woods's brow. He grabbed the chair and with one brusque sweep of the hand, pulled it away from the table, and dropped himself into it.

"All right. So I'm sitting. Talk."

"You've no doubt heard about Kenny Teal's murder," Harper said.

"Yeah, sure. A real shame, but what's that got to do with Vinny here?"

"I need to ask your son some questions about it."

"Wait a minute. I don't see you questioning anyone else. What are you saying? That my boy—"

Harper watched the subtle shifts in the teen's and

Mrs Woods's expressions; the darting of the eyes from side to side. There was a secret hidden within them. He could almost smell their fear, their tension. It was only a matter of time before one of them would crack under pressure. "No one is accusing your son of anything at this point except possibly communicating with Kenny Teal hours before he was murdered."

"So what? It happens. Don't mean a thing. And I'm not going to let you drag him into this and rummage through his things without proof."

"I don't need your consent to search his locker." Harper dropped the search warrant on the table in front of Woods. "But first we're going to talk."

"My boy didn't do anything wrong." Mr Woods turned toward his son. "You don't say a word, understand? Not a word. You hear me. Not without a lawyer."

"You're free to call your attorney, but Vinny isn't under arrest." An obvious spark flashed between father and son. The kind of nonverbal connection between like minds that Harper had witnessed countless times during the course of an interrogation. "Just need to know where he was on the evening of November 15."

"Vinny. I'm warning you," Mr Woods said.

"We have reason to believe that your son was one of the last persons to talk with Kenny Teal before he was murdered." Harper grabbed hold of the back of the chair immediately across from the teen, raised a foot to its rung, and leaned forward. "How 'bout it Vinny? Where were you at two in the morning on November 15?"

"Where else? Home in bed," Vinny blurted. "Just ask my old man."

Harper had already heard Vinny's old man, as he called him. Instead, he focused his attention on Mrs Woods. Aside from two failed attempts to quiet her husband, she repressed her comments or any

objections she might have to his line of questions. She could will her lips to be still but not her eyes. He read them like a couple of neon signs flashing a want ad for attention across a barren, neglected landscape. All the signals were there; the way she looked away from her son's outburst, the helplessness in her gaze when she managed the courage to look Harper square in the eyes. She'd be the one to snap first, but not here. Not in front of the two men in her life who oppressed her.

"You knew Kenny, right?"

"Yeah, I knew him. So what?" Vinny asked.

"Vinny I'm gonna brain you!" Mr Woods yelled with a slam of his fist on the table.

"Pops, stop already. What do you expect? I saw the guy here at school every day."

That much was true, but Harper had no proof the boys ever contacted each other. He had nothing except a hunch and the tension mounting inside the room. The uneasiness sweeping over the three faces staring back at him from across the table told him he didn't just hit a nerve, it was on the brink of exposure.

"Well enough to e-mail each other?" Harper asked.

"I e-mail lots of kids. Got friends, you know?"

"So you two *were* friends?"

"You're twisting his words," Mr Woods yelled.

"I don't hang with nerds."

"Okay, you weren't close, then what did you write to him about?"

"Who said I did?"

"Kenny. We found a portion of an e-mail in his pocket. Normally, stuff like that doesn't mean a thing to me. But that one was addressed to you dated September 14." Harper paused for a moment hoping to get a reaction. "Do you remember getting an e-mail from Kenny at the start of the school year?"

"Never happened."

"I have to assume Kenny wrote the e-mail we found on him. Did he?"

"What? You don't know?" Vinny threw his parents a glance and shifted in his seat. "Some cop you are."

"Come on, Vinny, what's the problem? It's just an e-mail, right? Either Kenny wrote it or he didn't."

"That was a long time ago."

"But important enough to have it with him on the night he died. And why that one?" Harper waited for the flash in Vinny's eyes. The look that admits to guilt. "Do yourself a favor, answer the question."

"I don't remember. He probably had some stupid homework question."

"Kenny was a straight A student. You're barely passing. Why would he ask you anything?"

Vinny pressed his lips and looked away.

"Why would Kenny carry that old e-mail in his pocket?"

"How should I know? He was weird. Ask anyone."

"I'm asking you. I think you do know. Also think it's what got him killed."

"All right!" Mr Woods rose to his feet. "That's enough."

Harper motioned to Mr Woods to keep silent. When Vinny didn't argue the point, Harper went on.

"Trust me. We'll know in a matter of hours who wrote it and what it said." Harper knew if they were on the right side of luck, it'd be more like days before the search of the boys' computer files would prove successful in finding the missing e-mail. It would take even longer to ID the sender. But at the moment, truth on his part wasn't as critical as perception. "Computer memories are a wonderful thing. Just thought you'd save us both the time." Harper paused again. This time long enough for the Woods family to understand his meaning. "I think we're done here."

"What? Just like that?" Shock swept across Mr Woods's face.

"Yes. You're free to go."

Mr Woods exhaled and shoved back his chair, nearly tipping it over. Visibly irritated and without saying another word, he grabbed Vinny by the arm and walked him out of the room. An exchange of harsh, inaudible words crossed between them. Mrs Woods lagged behind.

"Jane," Mr Woods yelled in a curt, angry tone. "Come on."

"Mrs Woods," Harper said. "Is there anything you want to talk about?" Harper followed her gaze down the hall in the direction of her husband and son as they thundered out the front doors.

She shook her head. "I have to go."

"Here's my card if you change your mind."

She nodded, slipped it into her purse, and left.

The moment wasn't right. Mrs Woods wasn't ready to fold. Not while there was the slightest chance the evidence was mistaken and she could walk away from this incident with a false sense of hope that things would work out in her family's favor. Still, it felt as if some unthinkable thought had crossed her mind leaving Harper to wonder what she couldn't shake off the tip of her tongue. A second later, Mann walked up behind him.

"Ready?"

"Yeah, let's go."

The partners were searching the boys' lockers when Harper received the call they'd been waiting for from the lab. "Good, print them out, will you? I'll pick them up as soon as we get back to the station."

"Lab?" asked Mann.

"Yeah. Twelve e-mails between the two boys on the



night Kenny was killed. Seems Woods set up the meeting at the docks.”

“You want Vinny picked up?” Mann asked. “Dispatch can have a unit at their house and in place by the time the Woods get home.”

“Send a couple of cars. I want them out of sight until the Woods arrive. Then instruct the units to position their cars in front of the house. I want the Woods to know we’re watching. Setting up the meeting with Kenny at the docks still doesn’t make him a killer.” Harper flipped open his cell and speed-dialed Captain Holloway’s number. “But it sure as hell makes him a suspect. We’re not going there without a warrant.”

Detective Rogers searched the Woods’s autos while inside the family’s residence, Harper and Mann began the tedious job of searching for a motive. Inside the boy’s bedroom, the screen saver flashed across the computer monitor. Mann nudged the mouse; the hard drive kicked on. He shut down the computer and motioned to one of the uniformed officers to take it out to the squad car. Mr Woods’s protests carried through the house as the officer left with the teen’s computer.

“You know we’ll need more than an e-mail to convict him.” Harper noticed a set of barbells on the floor next to the bed. “He’s on the football varsity team, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“So where’s his letter jacket?”

Mann looked at him as if the same thought had just crossed his mind.

“When we questioned Brenna at the school, she said Woods always wore his, but he wasn’t wearing it today, it wasn’t in his locker, and it’s not in his closet either.” Harper pushed the hangers aside and looked at the items stacked on the shelves lining one of the closet walls. He shot another glance at the clothes

scattered about the room then knelt to peek beneath the bed.

"Not here." Harper went down the hall into the living room where the family waited with two other uniformed officers.

"Mrs Woods." Harper motioned for her to following him back into Vinny's room. Her husband rose to follow. "Not you," he said. "Just Mrs Woods."

Harper let her in first then followed and shut the door. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. He's ..." she thumbed over her shoulder. "We're just worried. You understand."

"Yes ma'am. Wonder if you could help us out. Does Vinny have a varsity jacket?"

"Yes, why?"

"We can't find it. Any idea where it's at?"

"Well, it should be ..." Mrs Woods edged toward the closet and glanced in. "I don't understand. He's never without it. Maybe it's at school. That must be it. In all the rush, he must have left it at school."

"We checked," Harper shook his head. "It wasn't in his locker."

"I can't imagine what he's done with it." She raised a hand to her lips. Tears welled as she glanced around her son's bedroom. "Recently it's been one thing after another with Vinny."

"Why don't you sit down?" Harper pulled out the desk chair and decided it was worth an extra minute or two of their time to allow Mrs Woods to gather her thoughts.

"He's not ours, you know." Mrs Woods folded her hand on her lap. She glanced at him with a drained look in her eyes. "We adopted Vinny when he was two-years-old. It's a terrible thing for a mother to say but sometimes I wish ..." She choked on the words.

"It's okay," Harper said. "Nothing leaves this room. Go on."

"Bud and I tried for a few years to have a family. We'd practically given up when we joined St Paul's Church. Monsignor Keller knew about our situation and suggested we consider adopting Vinny. It seems Father Keller always took a special interest in Vinny."

"Why's that?"

"Vinny was such a cute baby. He felt sorry for him, I guess. Told us he was afraid the older Vinny got, the harder it would be to find him a good home."

"You said it's been 'one thing after another with Vinny'. Tell me about it," Harper said.

"Bud wasn't always a hothead and after we got Vinny, things were great, really. Of course we sent Vinny to the Catholic school, went to mass, we were actually a family for a while. Father Keller was a wonderful influence on Vinny too."

"What changed?" Harper asked.

"I wish I knew. Right after Vinny turned fourteen he started running around with some rough kids he met at St Paul's Mission. You know, runaways, street kids. Before we knew it he'd take off without saying where he was going. He started coming home late. If we questioned him, he became belligerent, rude. You heard him today. That goes on all the time. One day he refused to go back to St Paul's. Said if he couldn't go to public school he'd drop out. Bud nearly killed him. I think the only reason Vinny didn't quit was because he loved to play football. Anyway, that's how it started."

"What about Father Keller? Where was he in all of this?"

"He was furious. Accused us of failing to be good parents. Swore he'd make things right again." She shook her head. "But there was nothing any of us could say to change Vinny back to who he was."

“Can you swear that Vinny was home in bed in the early hours of November 15?” Harper asked.

“Can’t swear to anything any more.”

Outside, the three detectives stood looking down into the trunk of Woods’s car. Vinny’s bloodied letter jacket was hidden beneath the spare tire. At the back of the trunk, under a stack of old newspapers, they found a wooden baseball bat.

Harper reached in and grabbed the bat and pointed a gloved finger at a strand of hair embedded in the wood. “He’s tried to wipe off the blood,” he said, handing the bat to Rogers. “Bag it and the jacket nice and easy.”

“What the hell was he thinking?” Mann reached for his handcuffs and swept a glance at his partner.

“At that age, they’re invincible. Getting caught never crossed his mind.”

## 18

At nine o'clock on Thanksgiving morning Harper was in the forensics lab looking over Carter Graves's shoulder at an interesting heel mark.

"What do you think?" Harper studied a photograph Carter had placed on the table in front of them of a bloody heel mark found in the pawnshop.

"What do you make of this?" Harper asked as he pointed to the small round impression near the back of the heel.

"Not sure," Carter said. "Looks like he stepped on a thumbtack or something. Whatever it is, it's not supposed to be there."

"What else do you have?"

Carter swiveled his stool around, scooted toward the table a few feet away, and grabbed the evidence bag containing one of Gould's receipt pads.

"We looked at all of his sale slips – couldn't find where he made a sale on the day he died." Harper had examined the receipts himself. He had gone over every crime scene photograph and every viable piece of evidence they found in Gould's office.

"If you ever wonder why you need me around, it's to find the cool stuff like this." Carter held up the small receipt tablet and the slip of paper he had placed over the pad and rubbed with the lead of a pencil.

The rubbing revealed the words, *Professor*

*Mittendorf* – ring. On the next line beneath it were the scribbled initials *JB* and a phone number.

"I know that number," Harper told him.

Carter glanced up at him with a questioning look in his eyes.

"It belongs to some reporter from *The Chandler Times*, a J T Blake."

"You sure?"

"Trust me. She doesn't know how to take 'no' for an answer." How could he not recognize it? Emma had shoved each of her phone messages bearing that number into his face. Now it shows up here. "So who's this Mittendorf?"

"A faculty member at Crompton College. Don't bother to reach him. I've been trying since yesterday, must have left early for Thanksgiving break. But I was able to pull up his phone records. He made one call to the reporter around two-thirty on Tuesday afternoon and another call to the pawnshop three hours later." Carter grinned and swiveled himself around on his stool in a victorious gesture.

"What about the fingerprints from the hammer used to kill Gould?" Harper asked.

"Sorry. AFIS came up a blank on that one."

After his talk with Carter Graves, Harper headed north toward his father's farmhouse, located in the small community of Litchfield thirty miles from Chandler. Only a few weeks ago, the foliage along this road had been a vibrant display of color. Now it was reduced to browns, grays and barren tree barks. An amber tint filtered through the overcast sky; a color he recognized as a sign of more snow. It was two in the afternoon and his only thought was to have no thoughts in the few hours left of this Thanksgiving Day. He was going to kick back, eat too much, have a few beers, and watch

too many football games before he returned to work in the morning. His father's two-story home was visible from between the pine trees that lined the narrow road leading to the driveway. As he nosed his black Jeep Commander into park, a familiar figure stepped out onto the porch to greet him.

"Hey Dad. Were you waiting behind the door?"

"Heard you pull up." Walt waited for his son to walk up the front steps before giving him his usual pat on the back. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Right. You look like crap and you've lost more weight."

"I'm all right."

"Come on, I left something simmering on the stove."

Harper placed his duffle bag on one of the living room chairs and followed Walt into the kitchen. Since his mother's death a few years before, Harper's father insisted on maintaining the Thanksgiving tradition.

The aroma filling the kitchen assured Harper that he was home. Cinnamon and nutmeg lingered in the air as steam rolled off the freshly baked pumpkin pies on the counter. Next to the pies sat a container filled with Snicker Doodles, his favorite kind of sugar cookies. As far back as he could remember it had been his job to scoop the dough into inch-size balls and roll them in a mixture of sugar and powdered cinnamon. Sometimes he'd placed them too close together on the cookie sheet and they'd baked into one. Whether a solid mass or perfectly formed three-inch circles of sweetened dough, they always baked into a flat chewy cinnamon encrusted cookie he couldn't resist.

Walt's fifteen-pound turkey had a couple more hours of roasting to go. Harper glanced at the finely chopped celery and onions on the cutting board; the key ingredients that would go into his favorite oyster

dressing. Harper's father always complained that he couldn't figure out his late wife's secret ingredient for her sweet potato pie. Harper suspected it was his father's way to finagle a compliment which Harper was glad to give. Creamed spinach, on the other hand, would need a lot of doctoring before he would try it. Still, it was a Thanksgiving staple. Everything was out on the counter, including the cranberry sauce, waiting their turn in the process of Walt Harper's well-timed annual ritual.

"How many are you planning to feed?"

"Elaine and Bernie."

Aunt Elaine, his father's older sister, was a retired phone operator who had settled nicely into the official post of family meddler. Every year, she asked Harper the same question: "When are you going to find a nice girl and settle down?" Every year his reply was the same: "When I find her, you'll be the first to know." That seemed to satisfy her for a few weeks until her next visit. She and his Uncle Bernie were as different as any two people could be, yet they were forty years into what seemed to be a happy marriage. One of these days, he'd ask for their secret.

His partner, Dave Mann, had already mentioned that he and his wife Abby were also planning to come for dinner. When Abby was five, the family had moved into the house next door, so she and Harper had grown up together. Now in their thirties, their relationship remained close, more like brother and sister, and the fact that she had fallen in love with his partner made them all feel like family.

"Dave and Abby still coming?" Walt asked.

"They'll be here."

Walt pointed at the refrigerator with a spoon. "Grab a beer and tell me what's been keeping you up these days."



Harper didn't need to be told twice. He reached for a Samuel Adams Winter Lager, uncapped the bottle and took a swig.

"It's these kids. The floaters. Four in the morgue so far. Aside from a handful of similarities among the victims, we don't have much to go on."

"Sounds like someone's cleaning up the turfs."

"Wish it was that simple. If it were, we'd know where to look."

"What makes you so sure it isn't?"

"The way the killer disposed of the bodies. Jack has a theory about it. I have to agree with him."

"You're not telling me anything."

"Aside from where they were found, Jack is convinced it's the same killer because of something he found in their autopsies. At any rate, we've ruled out the chance of them being gang related." Harper took another drink and watched his father combine the ingredients for the oyster dressing. Coming back to the farm always meant home cooked meals. Still, Harper knew his dad would rather be working a case than playing chef. Early retirement from the force had never been in Walt's plans, but the bullet he took to the back in the line of duty forced the decision. So aside from the food, Harper expected to have long discussions about his current cases. Most days, he was glad to indulge his father's passion.

"Did you find the boat?" Walt asked.

"A power boat was reported missing from the marina around the time of the first murder. No sign of it yet."

"What about evidence?"

"Traces of metal particles in a couple of the victims' lungs led to a body shop down in Avondale. Found a matchbook from the place in the fourth victim's pocket."

"And that's not your case?" Walt asked.

"No." Harper shook his head. "There's more but you

know how it goes. Can't do anything until we hear from the lab."

"Yeah, I remember. You sure it's only one killer?"

"I have my doubts."

"What about the guy you arrested? Dom— what's his name?"

"Dominick Ray. We took him in on auto theft and possession of drugs. Found out he was using the boys to steal the cars for him."

"That ought to put him away for a few years," Walt said. "What about the victims? Is this Ray character the only connection between them?"

"As far as we know. They all have arrest records but no connection to each other in that respect."

"So what's the motive?" Walt asked. "Did you question Ray about motive? And what about an alibi? Did he—"

"Dad, can we please stop?" He didn't come home to replay the case, but the look on his father's face brought him an instant feeling of guilt. "I'm sorry."

"No. You're right. It's none of my business any more."

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm tired."

"No need to explain. I know how it is." Walt wiped his hands on the dish towel, tossed it over his shoulder and shoved the oyster dressing into the oven.

"We're still waiting to find out if Ray's dental records match the mark we found on one of the victims. That's what this case is hanging on — teeth marks. Any DNA or trace evidence the killer might have left behind washed off the bodies leaving us with zilch."

"It also left you looking exhausted. All right, enough. Your case will wait until Monday."

"I wish it could. I work tomorrow."

"I thought you were off?"

"Come on, Dad. You know how it is." Harper

knocked back the rest of his beer and tossed the bottle in the trash. He wanted nothing more than to spend the weekend at the farm, but he had four floaters, Mr Gould and now Kenny Teal in the morgue and no suspects on any of their murders.

"In that case. Maybe you should lie down. It's going to be a few more hours before everyone gets here."

"I thought you'd need help with the cooking."

"I've got everything covered. Go on, I'll call you when we're ready."

The two-hour nap did Harper some good. He could have slept more, but Elaine's high-pitched chattering woke him up in time for dinner. It was now seven p.m. Family and friends were still gathered around the table eating, laughing, and enjoying each other's company. Aunt Elaine was coming back from the kitchen with an apple desert in her hands. She placed it on the table then put a hand on Harper's shoulder.

"Shame you didn't bring anyone home for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Elaine, when I find her—"

"Oh it's that same old line," she said. "I better be the first one to know. I'm getting older by the minute. You know my friend Barbara's granddaughter is in town for the weekend."

That was his prompt to change the subject. "You don't miss a beat, do you?" He gave her a kiss on the cheek, rushed into the den, and settled in for an evening of football.

Thanksgiving gave Harper a glimmer of hope that life could still be normal. Aunt Elaine took up her crossword puzzle, Uncle Bernie and Walt fell asleep by half-time. And the big announcement tonight was that the Manns were expecting their first. Abby was four months pregnant and starting to show. Harper decided

that maybe he had been wrong to blame Mann's edginess on the floaters and the other murders they hadn't been able to solve. Harper caught himself watching them; the way Abby fell asleep in Dave's arms; resting her head against his chest, the way he leaned in to kiss her.

This was as normal as life could get.

Dawn had barely gleamed above the horizon. The smell of fresh coffee and his dad's tinkering around in the kitchen lured Harper downstairs.

"Morning," he said, rubbing his eyes.

"Morning – you're up early. Sleep okay?"

"Yeah." Harper brushed one of the kitchen curtains aside and glanced across the side yard then up at the clouds. "Temperature is supposed to drop again today." The sight of the blue-purple hues painted over the snow-covered ground gave him a shiver. He poured himself a cup of coffee and pulled out a kitchen chair across from his father. He was seconds away from taking his first sip of the day when his cell phone rang.

"Forensics," he told his dad when he saw the number flash across the screen. He listened, drew in a breath, and assured the technician he appreciated the call.

"Trouble?"

"Just more of the same." He took that first drink of coffee while the words formed in his thoughts. "That fine thread holding my case together just snapped. Dominick Ray's teeth imprints don't match the mark on our victim."

## 19

On a morning so cold that Alejandro's breath hung in the air and his nose hair felt unnaturally stiff, his immediate concern was to stay warm. *Blasted north!*

For now, for the next couple of hours, all he wanted was a hot cup of coffee and to find the woman whose phone number the pawnbroker had scribbled on the piece of paper and placed in his pocket. When Alejandro called, a woman identified herself as J T Blake at the newspaper office. He had made an excuse, hung up and thought back to the night at the pawnshop and the woman he saw leaving the store. He could not get her out of his mind. Nothing about her seemed right. She didn't belong in that place at that hour of night and wondered what were the chances the two would be one.

He needed a plan – an excuse to get J T Blake alone. The coffee shop around the corner from the newspaper office was as close as he could get to her at the moment. It was the perfect place to make him look inconspicuous too. He could sit and plan his next move all day and no one would notice or care. He was not concerned if the plows cleared the streets or if cars stalled in the middle of traffic. He did not plan to be in town long enough to care about anything except getting his hands on the black pearl ring. But time was slipping away. Christmas Eve was only a few weeks away. That

was all the time he had to find her and the ring before the fulfillment of the prophecy came to pass.

By midmorning, city plows had cleared the roads of the snow and ice that had covered the city of Chandler the evening before. Traffic picked up again and the little coffee shop began to buzz with activity. Customers came in with shopping bags hanging from their arms and stayed without an apparent rush to leave. A college girl came in and asked for Cinnamon Mocha and a muffin to go. She never left either. Instead, she sat at the counter, sipped her coffee, and giggled at the cleverness of the young man who served it to her. The young server was too busy flirting to pay attention to what Alejandro was doing at the other end of the shop.

Alejandro studied the Friday morning newspaper. Not the headlines or the meaningless articles. All he wanted to see were the bylines and maybe a picture.

"J T Blake, where are you?" he mumbled. What were the chances he wondered? The face of the woman he saw in the pawnshop was a blur, but maybe, if he saw her again he would know if the lady reporter was really a threat or a mere coincidence.

Alejandro had never planned to come back to America. He cursed Juan Carlos for complicating his life, for ruining his plans to go to Brazil until the trouble in Mitu blew over. He wanted to take over the cartel, not travel to another continent. Killing came easy enough. He would kill ten times as many if he had to for the sake of the ring. But he raced against an unyielding opponent – time. The perfect alignment of the planets was exactly four weeks away, the day he would acquire his mother's powers. So what if he killed a few people? In the end it would all be worth it.

He took a sip of his java and turned the page. A smug grin creased his lips when he read the police

account of Mr Randal Gould's death. The reporter quoted a bookshop owner to say he suspected a juvenile killer.

"That is right, Mr Detective Harper, sir. A kid must have hit the old man over the head. So many delinquents in your city. Go chase your tail into a corner. You will never find me." He scanned the article down to the end then paused when he caught the fine print. *J T Blake*.

Alejandro eyed the three laptops chained to the counter along the wall. He booted one up and did a Google search for *The Chandler Times*. The link had her picture, beneath it the name of J T Blake. He frowned at his stupidity. *It is her ... did she see his face*, he wondered. She could ruin everything. This time it would be clean and simple – no mess. Her death would have to look like an accident. He would take his ring and leave. After all, he had no record, no fingerprints on file, nothing in the States for the police to sift through. *Americans*, he thought. He would be gone long before they ever knew he existed.

The coffee shop was packed tighter than a two-for-one Christmas sale at the Stanton Department Store. Jennie inhaled the wonderfully rich aroma of fresh-ground coffee beans and the smell of just-out-of-the-oven muffins. She dug deep into her pockets for cash and scouted the room for an available chair. Three people stood in line ahead of her and no seats in sight.

Just as she stepped up to pay, she turned her head and spied one small empty table toward the back. She handed the server a five. Without waiting for her change, she quickly nudged her way towards the vacant seat as if it were the last piece of chocolate in a three-tiered box. She pushed aside an empty cup belonging to the slob who sat there before her. Jennie

took a sip of her own, drummed her fingers while her laptop booted, and sensed a presence. She didn't have to look up to know someone was standing in front of her.

"Excuse me. This is my table," a man spoke in broken English.

"Not any more. I'm willing to share though. All I need is one chair and this corner of the table."

"If you insist," he said.

"Then have a seat." She typed in her password and hit enter before looking up. The man with the golden tan, dark hair and eyes stared down at her without a hint of a smile on his face. "What are you staring at? Sit down if you want."

He nodded and took a seat.

"What happened to you?" she asked. The bruises around his eyes and nose weren't nearly as ugly as the cut over his left eye. It would undoubtedly leave a scar.

Again, he didn't respond.

"Whatever. I didn't come here to chit-chat either."

"In my country, women are not so rude."

"Well, in my country, an empty chair is fair game and I have a deadline." She didn't know what this guy's problem was or why she should care.

"I have seen your picture, no?" He grinned. "You are a reporter?"

"That's right."

"Your picture does not do you justice."

"I'm sharing the table with you, no need to sugar coat it." She didn't know why she said that. She was being rude for no reason. Brian had put her on edge ever since he assigned the damned pawnshop case to her. How could she tell him that she had a biased opinion about it? That, for all she knew, she had passed the killer on the way out of the shop. A journalist should be observant at all times, yet she



failed by not taking time to look at his face. What the hell kind of a reporter was she anyway? And now this poor schmuck was obviously not from around here and didn't deserve her discourtesy. "Where's that accent from?"

"South America."

"No kidding." *Damn, did it again.* "I'm pretty savvy about world geography. Where in South America?"

"Venezuela."

"Really? What's your name?"

"Alejandro. I thought you did not want to talk?"

"I don't, but I'm curious to know why someone from Venezuela comes to the cold north for Christ's sake?"

"Business."

"What kind of business?" Her glance naturally aimed at his clothing. What he said didn't match what he wore. The neckline of his sweater was worn and looked as if it had been brutally pulled out of shape by a pair of rival gorillas. When he picked up his empty cup and tried to drain the last drop from the bottom, she sensed his avoidance to answer her question. Jennie decided to skip it. She wouldn't care what he did for a living two minutes after they parted ways. She was only trying to make up for her rude behavior. She took another sip of her coffee and opened her document.

"So you are working. Here? In a coffee shop?"

She leaned in toward the screen. "That's right."

"Do you work everywhere you go?"

"Seems that way."

"No rest?"

"Not really."

"What about lunch?"

Jennie drew in a breath. "Look. Do you mind?"

"You did not answer my question."

"All right, no. I don't stop for anything – I work straight through."

“You do not understand. I want to know if you would like to have lunch with me?”

“I understand perfectly and the answer is still, no.”

“But you need to eat.”

“What I need to do is get my work done. Look, Al, I came here to get away from the interruptions in the office. So if you don’t mind.”

“You Americans are so ... how do you say it ... stressed. It is not good, you know.”

Jennie looked up from the laptop. She didn’t intend to explain her habits to this control-freak stranger. She had heard the rumors about Latin lovers, but handsome or not, this guy didn’t have what it would take to hook her. She didn’t like pushy men who assumed to know her needs without first asking if she was remotely interested. Five minutes with him frayed her nerves further and there didn’t seem to be any sign of him leaving. The exit was up to her. Jennie slipped on her coat, grabbed her purse and computer, and left. She didn’t need to look back to feel his gaze follow her out.

## 20

Harper gave Captain Lou Holloway's office door a set of repetitive taps before entering.

"Yes, I know sir. I can assure you—" Holloway had the phone to his ear and his back to the door. He leaned forward in his chair and ran a quick hand through his hair. He glanced over his shoulder. Without giving Harper and Mann a second look, he motioned for them to take their seats. "You have my word. Yes sir. Goodbye." He hung up the phone and let out a puff. His eyes remained closed for more than a second. "Christ Almighty. Right off the bat, first thing on Friday morning."

Harper and Mann remained silent.

"Do you know who that was?" Holloway asked. "The Mayor. Turns out one of the floaters, Rocky Blount is related to Senator Zellers' wife's family. Some distant cousin, but close enough for him to want answers and fast."

"The matchbook we found on him led us to Ray's garage. Ray admitted knowing and paying him to steal the cars, but that's it."

"Who killed him and why? That's the question."

"The lab eliminated our only suspect. We're out of leads, back to square one," Mann told Holloway.

"Find one."

"We're working around the clock as it is."

"I don't care! It's been damned near two months since the first floater came up. We need an arrest. We need a conviction. That's a direct quote from the top." Holloway rubbed his brow then loosened his tie with one tug of the finger. "What the hell is wrong with people?"

"It's the season without reason. Crime always goes up this time of year. You know that." Harper's glance wandered briefly to the falling snow outside the captain's sixth-floor window. When had he started to count down to the holiday season by the hike in the crime rate and the number of bodies piling up in the city morgue? He was starting to sound more like his dad every day. Harper had worked through most of Thanksgiving this year and Christmas was only twenty-eight days away.

"Rocky Blount's autopsy report just came in. Have you seen it?" asked Holloway.

That wasn't a question or Holloway would have waited to hear the answer.

"Take a look at that," Holloway said, handing Harper the file folder. "Look down at the bottom of page three under unusual markings."

Harper was anxious to see what Holloway was in a sweat about and quickly thumbed to the page the captain had mentioned. A two by three-inch close-up shot of the victim's torso was paperclipped to it. He removed the clip and started to turn the photograph around.

"No. It's right side up."

"An upside down cross?" Harper narrowed his eyes and studied the medical examiner's notes. "According to this, the cut is on his abdomen and measures five centimeters in length and two in width."

"Sign of a Satan worshiper; a symbol of Christian mockery and rejection of Jesus." An uneasy look

washed over Mann's face. "We've got us a nut case."

Harper gave his partner a look.

"Every good altar boy knows his Catechism." Mann arched his brows.

"None of the others were carved up. Why this one?" Holloway asked.

"Because he's not one of the floaters," Harper said. "That's a copycat killer's handiwork."

Mann shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Damn it, Sam, we have no proof. We need to assume—"

"I don't want assumptions, gentlemen. I want answers. So who is this copycat?"

"I don't know." Harper shook his head. He thumbed through the rest of the report as if the answer would pop out from between the pages. "Same as I don't know why Jack didn't mention this to me, or why a copycat would so obviously deviate from the evidence and leave Blount's body positioned face up on the beach instead of being tossed in the bay."

"Why not? What the hell is this city paying you for?"

"To keep my cool and solve cases."

"Then we're not giving the citizens their money's worth, are we?"

"Oh for Christ's sakes, come on," Mann said. "We're short-handed and everyone's doing their best."

"Then get me some answers!" Holloway yelled through clenched teeth. "The last thing I need is a senator breathing down my neck."

Holloway knew the score and had read the same reports on the victims as he and Mann, but whenever the captain got wind of a political disaster, there was no steering him away from a panic attack.

"We're doing everything by the book," Harper said. "We did a door-to-door in each of the boys' neighborhoods, the schools, even the churches. No one is talking."

"There's no such thing as a perfect murder."

"You know exactly what we're up against. What the hell else do you want us to do? Jack and Carter have been meticulous in their examination of what little evidence we have."

"Maybe Jack's wrong," Holloway said. "He's not perfect you know – maybe he missed something."

"You want to be the one to tell him?"

"What if you're right about a copycat killer with his own calling card? Maybe this fourth kid was just made to look like the others. He's related to the Senator's wife, damn it, and it's an election year. There has to be a connection." Holloway rose to his feet and began to pace.

"Then why go after some distant in-law who no one cares about?" Mann asked. "No. If someone was out to get the Senator, they'd go to the heart of things; they'd kidnap his wife or one of their children."

"And they wouldn't disguise it as part of another murder case either." Harper wasn't sure what was wrong with the captain. He had known Lou Holloway all his life. It wasn't like him to rush through a case. Holloway and Harper's dad had been partners for years before his father retired from the force. And to his recollection, Holloway had never lost his cool this early in an investigation. "What do you want us to do? Investigate the Senator?"

Holloway cursed under his breath. "God no. I don't want anything about the Senator to leak to the press, understand? Just handle it."

Harper reached for his cell after the second ring and looked at the number reflected on the screen. "It's Jack," he said, grateful for the interruption.

"Harper." He sat up and listened intently to Jack's voice on the other end. "What's the address?" He paused a moment longer. "We're on our way."

“What now?” Holloway asked.

“Professor Mittendorf, Carter found his name on one of Randal Gould’s receipt slip. Seems he hadn’t left town for Thanksgiving break after all. When he didn’t show up for class this morning, one of his colleagues went to his house. According to Jack, he’s been dead thirty-six hours.”

## 21

Several *Chandler Times* reporters were eating lunch at their desks today. Deadlines and the bitter cold weather had everything to do with their choice to stay indoors. It had been snowing on and off for several days and the weatherman predicted another five inches by early evening.

Jennie glanced around her computer monitor toward Brian's office. He was at his desk with the phone to his ear in his usual pose; leaning back in his chair and staring out the window with his stogie dangling from his mouth. Earlier, he had wandered over to his doorway, leaned against it, and acted like an overseer. A couple of times, he had tapped his watch and grinned at Jennie. He'd let out a chuckle then waddled back into his smoky haven.

*Idiot*, she thought.

Gould's murder was days old. Jennie thought back to the moment she had left the shop. Could the man on the other side of the door have been the killer? She had never been at such a wrong place at such a wrong time. *Would Harper see it that way?* She wondered. If he knew, he was sure to push the issue, but nothing he'd say could make her see the man's face.

Harper would press to know what she was doing in that part of town at that hour. *He was bound to suspect her.* She couldn't keep the questions from flooding her



thoughts. *Would he? Hell yes.* She could practically hear him now. Mittendorf's story about the ring sounded flaky to her. Harper would probably accuse her of lying, maybe even of being involved. But the shopkeeper's death had nothing to do with her reason for being there. Little stores like that were magnets for crime, especially around the holidays. This one just happened to get poor Mr Gould killed.

She had left Harper an endless number of phone messages, but Randal Gould's murder changed everything. Now Jennie wasn't so sure she wanted to draw Harper's attention. Still, her stomach was knotted with angst and wished she could unload her secret.

Jennie had already made one useless trip back to the scene of the crime. The other shopkeepers had speculated about the killer, but none were witnesses with cold hard facts to support their hunches.

"Hey, Blake. You okay?" Marc asked.

"Sure, why?"

"Because I know when something is bugging you. Don't let Brian get to you."

"I'm not." She paused, wondering if she really wanted to get into a conversation about Gould's murder with Marc. Her inquiries about the pawnbroker's death to the medical examiner's office, police headquarters, and forensics had each referred her straight back to Harper who wasn't giving her the time of day.

"I'm not getting anywhere on the Gould case."

"I thought you said the police department's public relations rep called you back."

"Some interview," she said. "The only information the woman cut loose with was that Gould had been robbed and killed and they have no suspects. I could have pulled that out of any story I wrote in the past three months, changed the names, the dates and the rest would have fit."

That's what Jennie reported in yesterday's article – a robbery, murder, no suspects. This morning's piece was nearly a duplicate copy. Tomorrow's story needed pizzazz or it would slip to the bottom of page five of section C if Brian didn't fire her first.

"You can't make up the news. Go with what you have."

Jennie glanced at the notes she wrote from her talk with Mr Potter. "One of Gould's friends filled me in on Gould's family history." She ran a finger over the words. "Widower, no children, owned the shop for twelve years. He had lived an amazingly normal life and now he's dead. I suppose I could call for a public outcry in the case of a lonely business owner who became the next victim of Chandler's crime hike," she said, then reached for her purse. "That should draw Harper out of hiding."

"Careful, Blake."

"Who cares? It would serve him right." Jennie glanced at the calendar. It was the day after Thanksgiving and Mittendorf had not yet returned her call. Maybe she had been too hasty in dismissing his obsession. After all, he is an expert on cultures and artifacts. He promised to tell her the history behind the ring and cult pieces always attracted attention. If this one panned out, it could lead to her next big story. *Another damned good reason to keep it quiet*, she thought.

Brian would have to accept the fact that Harper had refused to give her a quote. There was nothing more she could do. Just like there was nothing she could have done to stop that man from entering the pawnshop, or from feeling sure she had brushed past the killer.

Jennie reached into her purse, removed the ring from its small paper sack, and angled it toward her

desk lamp. She squinted to read the inscription. *Draco exedo mulier.*

"Hey Marc. How's your Latin?"

"Rusty. Why?"

"What's this say?" Jennie started to hand Marc the ring, when the person who entered the press room and stopped at the receptionist's desk shattered her train of thought. She immediately recognized the tall slender man with his signature Caesar-cut hairstyle. He leaned in to speak to the receptionist who turned and pointed at Jennie.

She wanted to look away, instead she froze.

He and Jennie locked eyes as he made his way through the rows of desks. The front panels of his coat flapped back with each long step. His navy scarf hung loosely around his neck. His badge hugged his belt. Jennie had expected his hair to be a tad darker, but his eyes – his eyes were every bit as blue as they appeared on camera.

"J T Blake? Jennifer Blake?"

"Yes."

"Sam—"

"Harper, Homicide. I know who you are," she said.

"We need to talk."

"In person no less, I'm impressed. You could have returned my calls instead, you know. Have a seat." She motioned for him to pull up a chair. "I have some questions about the fourth floater and Randal Gould."

He mentally rolled his eyes at her nerviness. His thoughts flashed back to the early morning call he responded to a few days before at the pawnshop on South 23<sup>rd</sup>. Gould and the murdered professor they found this morning had one thing in common and he was looking straight into her big brown eyes. But getting facts out of a newspaper reporter was every

cop's nightmare, and right now he didn't know if she was a witness or suspect.

"Never mind them," he said.

"Excuse me?"

Harper glanced over his shoulder. Fourteen sets of inquisitive eyes and ears were on him. "Is there somewhere where we can talk – in private?"

"I have a deadline in three hours. If you're still refusing to talk to me about the floaters or Mr Gould, there's nothing for us to discuss."

Harper leaned down on her desk within inches of her face and whispered: "Ms Blake, don't play hardball with me. I'd like to spare you the humiliation of hauling you out of here in front of your colleagues. But to tell you the truth, I've had a miserable day and it's only noon. Doesn't matter to me how we do this. Police headquarters is three blocks away. What's it going to be?"

With a wide-eyed look she swallowed hard and pushed her chair back. She rose to her feet and darted a look to the other reporters. "There's a conference room down the hall."

"That'll do."

A young male reporter got up and went to her side. "Everything okay, Jen?" he asked.

"This doesn't concern you," Harper said to the young man who was now standing defiantly next to Blake. Her co-worker reached an arm across her back and leaned in as if to protect her. The guy had a gallant streak, but she was totally out of his league.

"It's all right Marc. This won't take long," she said, without taking her eyes from Harper. "Right?"

Harper didn't respond. He was taking her in – the way the light reflected off her auburn hair, the spark in her eyes and wondered how much she knew of the murders. He became acutely aware of the room's

deafening silence that seemed to engulf him.

"It's down this way." She motioned to him to follow her out of the room.

Harper turned and faced the question in everyone's eyes. He was used to the scrutiny, but these were reporters with a hungry look; their mouths ready for a taste of fresh, raw scandal. One wrong move and his good reputation would be smeared on tomorrow's headline. This pack of journalists could lick their lips and starve before he'd give them a crumb to feed on. He stepped back to let Blake walk ahead of him then followed her through the maze of desks.

Harper was pleased to go 'this way' as she had instructed. Mindful of the curious glares, he made damned sure to seem indifferent when he dashed a look at the soft curves of her hips. He followed their swing and imagined a pair of shapely legs beneath those navy slacks.

Up ahead, Brian Taylor was standing outside his office. From a distance, Harper couldn't tell if that was a grin ripping across the fullness of the editor's face or the weight of his stogie. Either way, Taylor wasn't going to let him slip by without a comment.

"Harper. What brings you out on a crappy day like this, huh?"

"Taylor." Harper gave him a nod and kept walking.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Just need to talk with Ms Blake for a minute."

"Want me to come along?" Brian called out to him again.

"Won't be necessary." Harper had known the editor-in-chief for several years. The conservative *Chandler Times* was a long-time supporter of the police force, but things hadn't exactly been normal in Chandler these past few weeks. The formerly amicable rapport between the press and police had slowly splintered.

Now Blake's possible involvement in Gould's and Mittendorf's murders was about to strain their ties further.

She led him into the glass-front room down a side corridor. It was the same room used for a conference he had attended nearly a year before. It was spacious with large windows at either ends and a table and chairs for ten. She took a seat nearest the door and waited.

"Ms Blake." He shut the door and sat directly in front of her.

"Jennie," she corrected him.

"Do you know a professor Gaylord Mittendorf?" Harper made a mental note of her hesitation, the slight puckering of her brow, and the movement of her eyes.

"I know of him."

"How?"

"He was one of my college professors."

"Your mentor?"

"Hardly. A night class. Anthropology and boring as hell."

"How long ago was that?"

"Six – seven years ago."

"When did you last talk with him?"

"What's this about?"

"Just answer the question."

"I took one of his classes years ago. I didn't know him well then, I haven't seen him since. What's going on?"

"He's dead – murdered."

"Oh my God!" Her glance darted from side to side as if searching for answers.

Blake seemed too stunned by the news. The shock that swept across her face was genuine if Harper had ever seen an honest reaction. It happens. The gentle way she bit her lip was a telling sign of concern. Too

much concern for a man she claimed not to have seen in years.

"When was he killed?" she asked.

"Late Wednesday night." Harper caught the next slight frown to slip across her brow, how she folded her hand and squeezed her fingers together.

"I see, but why come to me with it?"

"Mittendorf had your name and phone number pinned to a bulletin board by his phone."

"Is everyone in the man's address book a suspect?"

"No. Only the woman who left a message on his answering machine on the night he died. Now do you want to tell me the truth?"

She dashed a glance to one side. "We were playing phone tag. I never talked to him. I'm sure he had other calls that day. Are you questioning the other callers too?"

"What about Gould? Were you playing phone tag with him as well?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We have reason to believe the two murders are connected. If there is anything you think I should know, now would be the time to tell me."

"What makes you think I know anything about either man?"

"You wrote the article on Gould. Had you known him?"

"No, of course not. Brian assigned it to me."

"Why you?"

"Why not me?"

"Because it strikes me odd that I investigated two seemingly unrelated murders that occurred hours apart and your name and phone number show up next to each of the victim's phones. No other apparent connection between the two men except you. Want to explain that?"

"I can't."

"Why would the professor want to talk with you after, as you indicated, all these years?"

"He was a quirky little man seven years ago. He was probably senile by now."

Harper leaned in. "Anyone ever mention you're not a good liar."

A flush of color washed over her cheeks as she turned away again.

"You know what happened to them, don't you?"

"No. I really don't," Jennie insisted.

"Who are you protecting?"

"You're amazing, you know that? You waltz in here as if you own the place. Who do you think you are making these incredible accusations?"

"I make a living at sniffing out lies, I can do it faster than you can run."

"I had *nothing* to do with their deaths. How dare you come here accusing me of such a horrible thing?"

"You've lied about not being in contact with him. I could take you in right now for withholding information."

"He called – we played phone tag. Besides, I'm a journalist. People call me all the time. Why or how my number ends up in their hands I don't know, but the last time I checked, Detective, receiving phone calls wasn't a crime."

"But you and I both know there's more to it," he said. "You were in contact with both of those men hours before they died. That makes you my primary suspect."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Your cooperation."

"Me cooperate? Do you know how many phone messages I left for you? At least seven. You couldn't bother to call me back and now *I'm* not cooperating?"



Give me a damn break, Harper.” Jennie pushed back her chair and rose to her feet; slender fingers poised on the edge of the table. “Read me my rights or get out. I have a deadline in three hours.”

“So you said. Sit down, Ms Blake. We’re not done.” He wasn’t about to let her leave. To hell with the silence that fell between them. “Lie again and I will arrest you on charges of obstruction of justice. Do you understand me?” He paused. “Blake, look at me.” He didn’t take his eyes from her, not that he wanted to, but every move and gesture she made was more telling than a three-page report.

She crossed her arms and began to pace. After a moment, she glanced over her shoulder.

“All right. Look, I was following a lead on a story – one of Mittendorf’s artifacts.”

“What artifact?”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t specific. He thought Gould knew something about it. He didn’t.”

“Why involve you in it?”

“I’m a reporter, Harper. The man remembered me from his class and wanted me to do a story on the piece.”

He studied her for a moment. “This artifact. Anyone else interested enough to kill for it?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Where did it come from?”

“I – don’t – know. I only got the gist of the conversation from his messages. I had nothing to do with either murder.”

“That you know of.”

Jennie shook her head and threw up her arms. “I don’t believe this.”

“What’s not to believe? I think you know a lot more than you’re saying.”

“That’s your opinion.”

"Careful, Ms Blake. No law will protect you if you're an accomplice."

"Don't you dare threaten me. I know the law as well as my rights. I also know I didn't do anything wrong. Take it or leave it."

"It's not a threat," he said. "I'm your only way out."

"What do you mean, out?"

Harper stood up, carefully pushed the chair in, and walked up behind her. He was near enough to catch the delicate scent of her perfume. For a moment, his thoughts weren't particularly professional, but he allowed himself the pleasure. He leaned in close to her ear.

She didn't move.

"Two men were brutally killed," he said. "If I found a connection between you and the victims, so will the killer."

## 22

Mann waited for Harper outside the newspaper building. He sat behind the wheel of the city's Crown Victoria, tapping a finger on the steering wheel whistling *Jingle Bell Rock*. When Harper opened the car door, he was greeted by the song blasting from the car radio speakers signaling the start of the Christmas shopping craze.

"You're feeling better." Harper reached to turn down the volume.

Mann smiled and rattled off an itemized list of the things he was going to buy the baby for Christmas. Whatever it was about babies and Christmas had transformed Dave Mann into his former self, but the day was young and too early to predict how long his good humor would last.

"Well? What'd she say?" Mann asked as he cut into traffic.

"She's holding back."

"And you expected what? The truth? What's she lying about?"

"All of it – none of it. I don't know. She claims she never talked with the professor."

"What'd she say when you told her we have Mittendorf's answering machine tape with her message?"

"She admitted to playing phone tag with him. Said

Mittendorf asked her to write an article about one of his artifacts.”

Harper looked into the passenger side mirror as they drove away. The *Chandler Times* building was still in view, but getting smaller in the distance. The sound of her voice – her spirit kept rolling around in Harper’s head. So was her odd reaction to the news about the professor’s death. He gave Mann a detailed account of their conversation then waited for his partner’s reaction. After a moment he asked: “So what do you think?”

“Up until this morning, I thought Gould was just a victim of an attempted robbery. But, luck being in short supply these days, Mittendorf’s murder threw that theory out the window. This artifact he was interested in, what was it?”

“Blake doesn’t know. She said she never had a chance to talk to him about it.”

“What about Gould? What was he doing with her phone number?”

“She didn’t know that either. Seems Mittendorf had some connection to Gould. He evidently thought Gould knew something about the object he was after.”

“Did he?”

“Not that she knew of.”

“Doesn’t sound like she told you much of anything.”

“She said plenty.”

“Like what?”

“She definitely knew Mittendorf. But she’s a journalist. She’s not going to screw up her career over a couple of old men and a relic. I think she told me all that she could.”

“Sam, we both saw Mittendorf’s phone records.”

“Right. The last two calls made by the professor were to Blake and to Gould.”

“So who else besides Gould and the professor knew about the relic?”

"She couldn't say."

"Couldn't or wouldn't?"

"What's with you? I told you she didn't talk with Mittendorf."

"And you believe her?"

"We don't have a choice right now. But yes, I think she would have told me. Hell for all anyone knows the killer has it."

Their exchange of ideas came to a slam dunk stop. The minutes seemed to drag before either man spoke again.

"We have to assume the killer is aware of Blake's involvement. If he didn't get what he was after, she could be his next target," Mann said.

"I know that."

"Unless, of course, she's an accomplice."

"She doesn't seem the type."

"So what's *the type* look like? Blake is the only connection between the two victims. Are you telling me you're ready to take her off the list of suspects?" Mann asked.

Harper wanted to believe she was telling the truth. Most people though, especially reporters, asked for the gruesome details; how the victim died, the list of suspects and their motives. Was the victim dressed or did the police suspect sexual misconduct? Had the victim been sliced open or shot? She never asked for any of it.

"Well, are you?" Mann asked again.

"Am I what?"

"Are you ready to pull Blake from the suspect list?"

Harper drew in a breath. "No. I left her sweating with plenty to think about. Let's see what she does next."

## 23

"Jennie?"

Marc's concern was bordering on intrusiveness. A nice guy, her best friend and co-worker, but Jennie didn't feel obligated to let him in on all her decisions.

"I'll talk with you later."

"What's wrong? What happened?" he asked.

"Don't ask." Jennie quickly gathered the papers from her desk and shoved them into her briefcase. She e-mailed her article on Gould to herself, a habit she started after the last time her laptop crashed. Once in cyberspace she could easily retrieve her e-mails from any computer. She turned off the laptop, shoved it into her briefcase, and slipped on her coat.

"Where're you going?"

"Out. I can't think in here."

"Are you going to make the three o'clock deadline?"

"I don't know. Cover for me, will you?"

"What am I supposed to say when Brian wants to know where you went?" Marc leaned against her desk and tried to force her to look at him.

"Hell, tell him the truth for a change. You don't know where I'm at, all right?" She reached into her purse again and handed him the ring. "Here. Look at this. What's that say inside the band?"

He angled it toward the light. "I can't ... it's almost worn off. Looks like Latin."

"So? Can you read it? What's it mean?"

He frowned and gave her a quick glance before studying the ring again.

"What's wrong?"

"I took Spanish. Where'd you get this?"

Jennie studied the expression on his face and for the first time saw something more than a journalist's curiosity. As impetuous as he was at times, she knew she could trust him, after all, they were pals. They always covered for one another, but this was different. The two men involved in obtaining the ring were dead. Gould's slaying could have been an isolated incident like any number of crimes that vied for front-page space. But Mittendorf's murder placed the pawnbroker's death in a new light. Jennie caught herself wondering if the professor's notion about the ring's curse was true.

"Can I trust you to keep your trap shut?" She grabbed the ring out of Marc's hands.

"Of course. What is it?"

"I don't know what *it* is, but that pawnshop owner who got killed the other night, you know, the case Brian assigned to me? He and a professor from Crompton College were both killed within hours of one another."

"What about it?"

"Aside from yours truly, they were the only other two people who knew about this ring."

A solemn look washed over Marc's face. "And you're assuming the cases are connected?"

"Harper told me they were."

"Harper? Just like that?"

"Harper said the professor was killed hours after Gould. And ... he thinks I'm involved."

"Why would he think that?" Marc narrowed his eyes. "What have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"Cut it out." Jennie told him about meeting with the

professor, going to the pawnshop, and the rude man that nearly knocked her down trying to get into the shop.

"According to the autopsy report, Randal Gould's estimated time of death is right around the time I left the shop."

"You could have been killed."

"You're damn right. In fact, I think I walked right past the killer."

"Did you tell Harper?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Tell him what? The man I saw had a hood pulled down covering most of his face. It was cold. I didn't think anything of it."

"Did the man speak?"

"No."

"Did he notice you, give you a second look?"

The footprints in the snow under her living room window came rushing back into her thoughts. What if Harper was right and the killer had found her? What if he thought to follow her home? Goose bumps rippled up her arms and sounded off an alarm.

"No. I don't think so," she lied.

"Get rid of that ring."

"I can't. I have to know what's so damned important about it."

"Give it to Harper."

Jennie waved him off.

"Damn it, Jennie, he could arrest you for withholding evidence."

"Thanks for the warning. He made it a point to bring that up."

"So he threatened you?"

"But he didn't arrest me, did he?"



"Let me have it. I'll ... work on figuring out that inscription."

"Not now. We can do it later over pizza or something." She tossed the ring into her desk drawer and locked it. "I have to go."

"What about Harper?"

"That pompous snob can read my article in the paper like the rest of Chandler." Jennie slipped the strap of her purse onto her shoulder, grabbed her briefcase, and rushed down the hall.

"Jennie, wait a minute! Where are you going?"

"If I told you, you'd have to lie to Brian. Wouldn't want you to stain your soul." She wrapped her scarf around her neck and slipped on her gloves. "Someplace where I can think. Quit worrying about me. I'll call you later."

"I want to hear from you by five. You got that?"

"Right, Marc. Five o'clock." She stopped and looked back at him. "It's really sweet of you, but useless. I'm a big girl; been taking care of myself for a long time."

"Blake, if I don't hear from you by five, I'm calling Harper."

"Damn it. You do and I'll never give you another lead."

Secretly, it felt good to know Marc worried about her. He was probably the only one who genuinely cared. But whoever murdered Mittendorf and Gould, was a thug bent on killing poor little old men over a piece of jewelry. *Expensive? Probably, but not worth two murders, or was it?* There had to be more to it than market value and if so, it raised the stakes and made anyone who got in the killer's way a liability.

She rubbed the base of her skull. The dull ache that began to form during her talk with Harper had managed to grow into a throbbing pain. As soon as the elevator

doors opened, she rushed in and ran into the man from the coffee shop.

"Ah, you are here," he said.

"Oh, please, not now."

"You look upset."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you."

"Look, Al—"

"Alejandro, please."

"Look, we had a nice chat this morning, but this really isn't a good time for me." She got in and hit the button for the first floor. "I'll ride down with you to the lobby. After that, you're on your own."

He asked her to lunch again. When Jennie refused, he reached for her arm.

"Excuse me!" She tried to pull from his grip. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Jennie was still trying to squirm from his hold when the elevator stopped at the second floor to allow four more building employees in. The six people who squeezed into the tiny moving cubical caused the distraction she needed to pluck her arm free from his hold.

As soon as the doors opened again, she shoved past the others and fled. She'd seen his type in action before; possessive and wouldn't take no for an answer. Next time she'd call the police, but for now, she'd give him the slip. Jennie ran to her car without looking back and thought of her options. Home wasn't one of them. That would be the first place Marc would go to check on her; the coffee shop was also out of the question. She needed a few hours of uninterrupted research into the origin of the ring and several more hours to pull the story together.

She merged into traffic, turned north on College and got in the lane leading to the exit ramp for I-54. To her,

the possible connection between the ring and the Mittendorf/Gould murders was obvious and that made her thoughts shift back to Harper. "I'll give you cooperation."

The aquarium was quiet today. Several school closings meant no kiddy tours to distract Jennie from her work. She liked the dark tranquility in the lower levels of the building and loved looking through the plate glass window into the Beluga Whales' environment. Bella, one of the younger females, easily identified by the scar on her right flipper, swam past the glass. Her smooth white body was in perfect contrast to the deep cobalt colors of the tank.

"Hey Bella," she whispered, tapping lightly on the glass. "How's it going, baby?" As Bella made her graceful turns and twists, Jennie turned her head in the direction of children's voices. Evidently, not every school closed due to the weather today. Soon twenty-three first graders surrounded her, buzzing around, squealing, and leaning their little faces against Bella's glass. Jennie's minutes of solitude were over. In her final peaceful moment, she watched Bella slice through the water, turn, and swim to the other side.

The hysteria of jovial squeals lasted a few more minutes before they moved on in a mass of pink Barbie and super hero backpacks into another section of the building. Jennie sat on one of the benches along the opposite wall from Bella's exhibit and waited for her laptop to flicker to life. She wasn't sure where to start. Mittendorf had mentioned the ring belonged to a Colombian healer. Maybe a search into Colombian folklore, witchcraft, or voodoo would lead to some answers.

Jennie glanced at her watch. She had a couple of hours left before Marc would send out the posse. *Traitor.*

She continued her search; pulled up one site and another and quickly lost track of the time until another set of voices distracted her attention. A couple stood next to Bella's window trying to keep their young son from hitting the glass. A moment later they too moved on. The sound of their voices fading into the next room made Jennie realize the solitude she had always enjoyed in this section of the aquarium felt disturbingly eerie today. Sounds of footsteps and doors closing echoed through the hall, but no one was there to make them.

She scanned the next web pages, bookmarked the ones that looked promising, and then clicked on a new set of links. After several more sites, one caught her interest. It mentioned a Colombian lineage to an African tribe and the missionaries who had tried to save them. She leaned her face close to the screen as if doing so would help her believe what she was reading.

The lights flickered.

She jerked a glance over her shoulder at the sound of footsteps.

"The aquarium is closing in ten minutes." The attendant in the red blazer moved from room to room calling out the announcement.

Jennie let out a soft sigh of relief and resumed her search. She followed one of the links within the page and stopped. *Jesus, what the hell does Rome have to do with—*

"Lights out in five minutes!" The man called out again.

Jennie bookmarked the site, locked down her computer, and shoved it into her briefcase.

The slamming sound of nearby metal doors echoed another stern warning to leave. Jennie glanced at her watch. *Five twenty-five*. Marc crossed her mind. She'd have plenty of time to check that site while they waited on their pizza. She slipped on her coat and gathered her things. The lower level lights snapped off. Only the blue light from inside Bella's tank lit the way toward the stairs. Its reflection rippled and danced across the walls of the hall and swayed in ghostly silence. It reminded her of that vivid image of water she had seen the week before when she tried on the ring.

From where Jennie stood, she could see the small green exit signs lit at the top of the stairs pointing the way to the main entrance. She quickened her step. She was near the top when the silhouette of a man stepped into view. He slowly motioned for her to hurry.

"I'm coming!" she said.

He didn't answer.

When Jennie reached the top of the stairs, she tried to walk around him. He blocked her way. She moved in the other direction; he stepped in front of her. It was like a well-choreographed dance she hadn't agreed to.

"What are you doing?" The man was still in the shadows when she raised a hand to push him out of her way. "Let me through."

She arched her back too far and started to fall. Her briefcase and purse flew out of her hands and landed on the staircase behind her scattering their contents. The full weight of her body balanced precariously on her heels. Her arms swung wildly.

Only one thought tore through her mind. *Alejandro*.

"No. Please! Don't do this!" she yelled.

"Ma'am? I've got you ma'am." The guard's firm hands wrapped around her arms and pulled her safely up to the landing. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry. Here, let me help you with your things."

Jennie leaned against the railing, tried to catch her breath and cursed herself for getting so spooked. She could feel her heart pounding through her sweater. What had she been thinking? It wasn't like her to panic. She thanked the security guard and forced a smile, took her things from his hands, and left.

Outside, the frigid air brought her quickly back to her senses. She spotted her car; reached for her phone and speed-dialed Marc's cell. "It's me. You didn't call the cops, did you?" She waited. "Good. Are you still up for dinner?" Another pause. "I'll meet you there. I want to go home and change first."

"You sound out of breath."

"I'm fine." Jennie slipped behind the wheel of her snow-covered Volkswagen Bug. "I'll see you in an hour."

*He knows.*

The words hung in the air like thin, fragile pieces of ice that dangled from every wire, gutter, and tree limb. Jennie jerked her head hard to the right. *Expecting to see what?* She scolded herself again and rolled her eyes at her self-induced fright.

*He knows-s-s.*

Again, the words lingered inside her head refusing to fade – they weren't hers. Definitely not hers.

Jennie's breath billowed in quick shallow puffs. Her shaky gloved hand jabbed the key at the ignition then dropped it on the floor. "Damn it," she mumbled with a sweep of her hand over the floorboard. She let out a grunt, stretched, reached deeper beneath her car seat, and groped for anything that felt like her key ring.

Jennie found them and let out a sigh of relief then jolted when a movement caught her attention from the corner of her eye. A scream more chilling than the tomb she was in sprang from her at the sight of a hand

wiping away the snow from her side of the windshield.

The man from the coffee shop clenched his teeth.  
His eyes, lifeless pinpoints of icy detachment, held her.

She shrieked and fumbled with the locks.

Snow fell on her as he opened the door.

“Oh God! Oh God! No!”

## 24

Marc Dillings waited for Jennie until after seven the night before. She never called to cancel their dinner date. Now it was after nine the following morning; she hadn't made it to work either.

Marc pulled open the heavy oak doors of St Paul's Church. The massive hinges creaked and echoed an announcement of his presence throughout the hallowed space of the sanctuary. He dipped his fingertips in holy water and crossed himself. From the threshold, his eyes rose to the crucifix suspended above the altar. Beneath it, to one side of the communion rail, knelt a familiar figure dressed in traditional black. Marc glanced at his watch and wondered how much longer Monsignor Keller's morning prayers would last. He genuflected next to a pew near the back, quietly slid in, and prepared to wait.

Off to the left, daylight penetrated the panes of stained glass. Beams of yellow, red, and purple streamed past him. Memories of the marriage vows he had wanted to take, the woman he loved, and the faith that wouldn't allow it crept in. He blamed himself. He should have stopped the madness. Two years they waited to learn the Vatican wouldn't acknowledge their union. He would never forgive the archaic views, the guilt the church forced upon him, or the sense of betrayal he felt from Jon Keller, a man he had once



considered his friend. The church held the upper hand then and now, inside this place, those sentiments emerged from hiding.

Keller simultaneously rose to his feet and crossed himself. He eased down the aisle with an authoritative beat in his steps toward the double doors at the back of the church.

Marc met the priest's glare and stood.

"Marc."

Monsignor spoke his name with a familiar disdain. The sternness in the priest's eyes bore into Marc with the same disapproval he remembered looking up into as a young boy. The years hadn't softened the old man's obstinate determination to intimidate in the name of the church.

"This is unexpected."

"Have a minute?" Marc shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

"A couple," Keller said, without checking his watch. "In my office."

In spite of his argent white hair and his sixty-five years, Keller's height and broad shoulders mirrored the image of a man half his age. In high school, the five in the morning jogs had left Marc and the other members of the track team panting and heaving, but not Keller. He ran laps around them before moving on to the weight room. From the look of the form beneath the black cassock, it seemed as if Keller was still pumping iron.

The monsignor's office on the second floor of the rectory looked the same as the last time Marc saw it; the expected display of clutter had only worsened with time. The priest had books and papers stacked on his desk with no sense of order or regard to size or shape,

yet they managed to stay in balance wherever he placed them.

Monsignor pointed to the chair across from his desk; his signal for Marc to take his place. He leaned back in his armchair, elbows propped, his hands folded in front of him. "Didn't think I'd ever see you here again after the way—"

"Believe me, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't necessary. It's business."

"I see." A wisp of a frown rippled across the monsignor's brow. "What kind of business?"

"I'm a reporter for *The Chandler Times*."

"Yes, I know. I've read your work."

Marc hadn't expected the monsignor to admit to such a mundane act as following his writing career. It didn't feel like a compliment; Marc didn't take it as such. "I've been assigned to cover the story on the alignment of the planets."

"The string of pearls – 1997. That's not exactly news."

"Don't play games with me, Jon. I'm not one of your impressionable altar boys any more. I'm talking about the one that is happening right now. All eight planets in a row will reach perfect alignment with the sun on Christmas Eve."

Father arched his brows. "Why come to me with it?"

"I remember my Catechism – your lectures. Your very interesting lectures about the end of time that scared the daylights out of me and every other kid in the class."

Keller rose to his feet, acted as if he was going to pace then stopped. "It should scare you. It should scare you into the complete submission of your soul to the Lord."

"This astronomical phenomenon is more significant than anything we've seen in the past, isn't it?" Marc asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Cut it out. Playing coy isn't your style. You said there would be three signs; one from the sky, one from the water, and a fourth nation would emerge and point to the Antichrist."

"I thought you said this wasn't personal."

"Two of the three signs have come to pass, haven't they? The planets and those boys washing up from the bay are connected."

"Who said they are?"

"I'm not blind."

The monsignor returned to his desk, sat down, and began to write something on a small piece of paper. "I have a friend at the university. He's an astronomer. He'll be able to tell you all you need to know for your article."

"I know my science. What about the prophecy you pounded into our heads from the time we were this high?" Marc extended his hand straight out like a three-foot marker. "Tell me about the third sign."

"Stick to astronomy."

Marc grabbed the note from the priest's hand and tore it in half. "Damn it, Jon, I need the truth. Are the two events connected?"

"There are forces at work in the world right now fighting against everything that Christians value; everything good and holy. Forces that you can't even begin to understand."

"You taught me everything I know about Revelation." Marc took a Bible off the desk, quickly thumbed to the Book of Daniel. He rammed his finger on the page. "Chapter seven verse one: '...and four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse from one

another.' Each one of those boys was brutally murdered in different ways. Verse twenty-three: 'The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon the earth.' You once told me – the fourth kingdom is the Roman Empire; the ten horns are ten kings but never mind them. What about the little horn? The Vatican. The kingdom within a kingdom? Does the lost ninth century papal ring, – the black pearl – represent the Vatican, the fourth kingdom? Is that why hundreds of men throughout history risked their lives to find it? So that it could never be used to fulfill the prophecy of the Antichrist?"

"You should have stayed in seminary."

"I should have married Rebecca with or without your blessings."

"I did you a favor."

"You ruined my life!"

"You, of all people, a former priest, should have known the church would never acknowledge the marriage between a Catholic and a divorcee. A Jew no less." Keller sized him up in his typical judgmental style without masking the ragged edge of contempt.

"Don't go there."

"It's my job to go where I'm needed in the name of God." Keller reached for the onyx and silver crucifix he wore around his neck and tightened his grip around it.

"In the name of ...? No. That was never enough for you. You insisted on playing His role. You're no more qualified now to pass judgment on me than you were two years ago. You're getting off the subject."

"You were one of the brightest at the seminary. What were you thinking?" Keller asked.

"Thinking had nothing to do with it. She was pregnant and she died trying to ..." Marc dropped his gaze. "Damn you."

"I didn't know," Keller said. "And the child?"

"Is the ring the instrument that fulfills the prophecy or not?"

Keller frowned and lowered his glance. A brief, uncomfortable silence engulfed them. "I forbid you to print anything church related."

"What are you going to do? Excommunicate me? It's been tried, remember? Freedom of the press. You can't stop it."

"You'll start a public hysteria."

"No," Marc said. "Most are too blind to see it and those of us who know the scriptures, have already figured it out."

"I'm warning you. Don't get involved."

"It's too late. I have the ring."

The color bled from the monsignor's face, his nostrils flared, a frown pressed above his steel-blue eyes.

"Now do you understand?" Marc asked. "The cursed papal ring shows up in Chandler at the exact time as the planetary alignment. Those boys floating up from the bay complete the circle. Just as Daniel wrote it. Tell me I'm wrong."

Angst burned in the priest's eyes.

"That's it, isn't it? The last of the three symbols is the ring."

"It can't be." The priest's words faded into a whisper.

"What are the odds, Jon? The Church sought it out for centuries and it shows up right here in Chandler, Massachusetts at the same time—"

"What do you mean *you* have it? How?"

"It's not important."

"Tell me!"

"What difference does it make? A colleague of mine at the newspaper came across it."

"That's impossible. It was ..."

"What?"

"Nothing," Keller said.

"I've never seen you over-react at nothing. You knew where it was all along, didn't you?"

"What does this colleague of yours know about it?"

"She has no idea what it signifies. It's time you answered my question. Is the black pearl the key to what is happening? Is this the curse of a blasphemous pope – to signal the coming of the Antichrist?"

"It must be a fake." The monsignor's eyes glazed in a shroud of shock and denial.

"It's not. I read the inscription inside the band. It's worn; almost illegible."

"*Draco exedo mulier*," Keller mouthed the words.

"The dragon consumes the woman. The ring and the inscription match the descriptions I found in my research," Marc said.

Keller turned his head and stared into space. "Did you tell this colleague of yours what it says?"

"No. I saw no point in it."

"She gave it to you? Without question?"

"Not exactly." That's all Keller needed to know, not that he stole the ring from Jennie's desk, or that he had it locked in his glove compartment.

"Who else knows about the ring?"

"No one now. The two men responsible for bringing it here were killed."

"Killed? I didn't read anything in the paper about it."

"It was in there, a couple of small pieces."

"What about the police? You cannot give the police that ring."

"As far as I know, they're not aware of it," Marc said.

Keller closed his eyes. "He's here then. The Beast. He's keeping one step ahead of them." His lips quivered in silent prayer.

Marc had never seen Keller crumble with fear. For all his contempt of the man and the pain the monsignor

had inflicted on him, Marc's anger wasn't enough to separate himself from the church's teaching. Catholicism is a conditioning of the soul. He believed in the prophecy with the same intense passion he believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jennie was right, Gould's and Mittendorf's killer knew exactly what he was after and he wouldn't stop until he found it.

"The police found the killer's prints," Marc said. "They'll find him."

"If the fires of hell can't contain the Beast, what makes you think a jail can? Bring me the ring," Keller said.

"It's safe enough where it's at. The police will catch the killer before he figures out I'm the one who has it."

"The police – blind fools. The answers are right in front of them. Clueless idiots."

"They're doing all they can. The killer will make a mistake sooner or later."

"We don't have time for sooner or later! The answers are not in some ... lab test." The priest's eyes bulged with rage. "If that is the true ring, all three signs have indeed finally converged and there is no stopping him. Look around you at the evilness of man. Lucifer is gaining power, Marc. He's using the weak to do his bidding – that's how he works – inside their minds before he destroys their hearts. He is the link – the key. Find this man who has killed for the ring – destroy him."

Marc couldn't speak. Keller was suggesting murder – a sin no matter how righteous the reason. "You can't stop the will of God, Jon. You know as well as I do the scripture says: 'Not even the angels in heaven know the hour.' The police will find him."

"They won't. There's no stopping any of it now. If you won't bring me the ring, destroy it." Monsignor Keller bowed his head again. He ran both hands through his hair. He looked like a man who had been

beaten and left to die on parched soil. "You must destroy it."



## 25

"She's twenty-six. The woman surely has a life outside of work," Harper said to an alarmed Marc Dillings who was panic-stricken on the other end of the phone. It was six-thirty on Saturday night and all Harper wanted to do was fix himself another Scotch and soda, kick back, and watch a few more hours of football. In his world, six open homicide cases took precedence over a temperamental woman with a mind of her own. And although Harper was sure Jennifer Blake knew more than she was saying about the Gould and Mittendorf murders, Marc's insistence that she had disappeared and must be in trouble didn't necessarily make it so. There were too many possible scenarios to consider before running a red flag up the pole.

"Jennie isn't answering her cell. She always answers her cell."

"Could be a hundred and one reasons for it. What makes you think she's in trouble?" Harper pulled off his socks and leaned back in his black leather recliner.

"She ran out of the office yesterday furious about something," Marc said. "She wouldn't listen to reason."

"Is that unusual?" Most women Harper knew were pissed half the time and never listened to reason. From what he saw of Jennifer Blake, she was no exception. He massaged his brow at the hairline where the pang of a headache had started to throb a moment after he

answered Marc's call. The last thing he needed now was a missing person, especially if that person was Jennifer Blake.

"We agreed to meet last night for dinner. She never showed up. This morning she was scheduled to go to the office. I tried to call her today after I got done with an early appointment."

"And?"

"I still couldn't reach her."

"Maybe she changed her mind. Women do that, you know."

"Not Jennie. I've never known her to not follow through with things."

Marc made a few valid points, but the fact remained that he hadn't given Harper a solid reason to suspect that she was anything but safe.

"Are you going to help me or not?" Marc asked.

There was nothing Harper could do, not without proof. But that was an answer he was sure Marc wouldn't be willing to listen to.

"Relax, okay? When's the last time you talked with her?"

"Last night around five-thirty or so. Like I said, we were supposed to grab a bite after work."

"You two seeing each other?"

"No, dinner was her idea. I gave her until after seven before I called. When I couldn't reach her on the cell, I tried the house phone. She didn't answer that one either."

"It's the weekend. Ever think she might have made other plans?" Harper pegged him as a clingy admirer who was about to cross the line into obsession.

"You're not listening. Jennie called me to say she was on her way home. She was going to change clothes and suggested we meet for a pizza at Ragio's. She never made it. I'm asking you to find her."

"How can I? You haven't said one thing that is out of the ordinary in her behavior so far."

"I just told you she never made it to dinner."

"Doesn't mean a thing except that she stood you up," Harper said. "I can't go off on a wild goose chase to find out she spent the weekend at a spa and didn't tell you about it."

The silence on the other end of the line lingered a second too long.

Harper closed his eyes and put the cool glass of Scotch to the throb on his forehead. "You said you called her today. When was that?"

"Five times today. Just tried a few minutes ago. Still nothing." He paused. "I know what you're thinking. It's just that Jennie isn't the type to get rattled easily. She was upset when she left the building yesterday. I had hoped I was over-reacting last night – that she was probably in the shower or something when I called, but when she didn't show up for work this morning, I knew something was wrong."

"You two normally work on Saturdays?"

"This time of year? Yeah."

"And she didn't call in?"

"No."

"Any chance that she might have worked from someplace else and sent in her story?"

"I checked. Brian was ranting around about it in his usual style. He's thinking the worst. That she left for Florida or something."

"Why Florida?"

"It's just an example of his complete lack of compassion. I'm worried that she's hurt and all he can think about is his ridiculous deadlines."

"You're sure she never mentioned taking a day off?"

"She's a workaholic. She's always working on something. That phone and that computer of hers never leave her sight."

"How well do you know her?" Harper asked.

"Better than most. Why?"

"Where does she go to get away?"

"Jennie doesn't let anyone get that close."

"What about family?"

"Doesn't have any. She's an only child. Her mother drank herself to death after her father ran off with another woman. Jennie lived with her grandmother since she was twelve."

"Where's the grandmother now?"

"Chapel Hill Cemetery."

"How about a boyfriend or fiancé? Is she seeing anyone?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Jennie attended college here, left, then moved back six months ago from a little town south of Boston. She doesn't know many people in Chandler any more."

"So what you're telling me is that you don't know anything about her except what you've seen in the past six months?"

"She would have told me if she had other plans, all right?"

"She would, huh. So. Where is she?"

"I don't know." Marc's voice was seeped with annoyance. "Look, I drove past her house this morning before going to work and again this afternoon. Her car's there but she wouldn't answer the door."

"Marc, listen—"

"I know that's not exactly what you'd consider evidence, but something's not right."

"Okay look, the only thing I can do at this point is to call dispatch and have a patrol car drive through her

neighborhood.”

Marc's breath hummed into the mouthpiece. “Twenty-four hours, Harper. She hasn't been seen for twenty-four hours and all you can do is send a patrol car?”

“Getting flustered isn't going to solve anything.” He paused briefly. “Tell me again about your last conversation with her.”

“What's the point?”

“To convince me that she's really missing.”

“Never mind, Detective. I'll find her myself.”

“Don't be a hero. If you want me to look for her, you're going to do it my way, understand?”

Marc waited a moment then said: “She hasn't been herself lately. In fact, she's been jittery for a couple of days and now she's gone.”

“You said she was upset before she left the office yesterday. About what?”

“I asked her if there was anything wrong and she said, ‘don't ask’. I assumed it had something to do with her talk with you.”

Harper traced his thoughts back to their conversation. She had balked when he asked about the professor. That's when she gave him the line about following a lead. “What about this story she was working on for Mittendorf?”

“The only article she mentioned was the Gould murder. All I know is that she ran out of the office; said she needed to think.”

“Does she do that often? Rush off, I mean.”

“Yeah, but this was different.”

“Different? How?” The more Harper learned about Jennifer Blake, the more he agreed with his instinct. The lady was waist deep in trouble and sinking fast.

“She got angry when I told her not to go off like that,” Marc said.

"Jennifer Blake doesn't strike me like the type of woman who takes kindly to orders." Harper thought back to the twenty minutes he spoke with Blake. It only took five to get hooked. Even her wild outburst of indignation had intrigued him. He caught himself wondering just how close she and Marc really were. The last thing he needed was a panicked hero getting involved and adding his name to Harper's list of homicides.

"Are you in love with her?" Harper asked.

"No, it's nothing like that. What difference would that make anyway? Are you always this indifferent about your cases?"

"I have two men and four boys in the morgue and God knows how many killers on the loose. I warned her to be careful, to work with me. Yesterday I could have protected her. Now, if she really is in trouble, I'm not so sure. So don't kid yourself, I'm taking it seriously. The woman just complicated my life and if *you* know more than you're telling, you better spill it before I hang up."

"No don't! Please. You're right. There is more."

Harper waited several seconds for the silence to break. "Well? Come on, give."

"Jennie made me promise not to say anything, but she was there, at the pawnshop the night Gould was killed."

"Damn," Harper slammed down his glass on the end table then flipped the recliner forward. "What the hell was she doing there?"

"She met with Mittendorf earlier that evening," Marc said. "He asked her to go to the pawnshop and pick something up for him."

Harper thought back to the set of questions Jennie had refused to answer. "She mentioned Mittendorf was interested in an artifact. What was it?"

"I don't know exactly."

"How well did she know him?"

"Not very. From what I gathered, they hadn't talked in years." Marc paused. "There is one more thing. Jennie is certain she saw Gould's murderer. A guy rushed into the shop as she was leaving."

"Jesus. How sure?" Harper asked.

"Based on the estimated time of Gould's death, pretty sure," Marc said.

"What about a description?" Harper held the phone in the crook of his neck while he slipped on his socks and laced his tennis shoes.

"No. She never saw his face. It was late. She was in a hurry to get home and didn't pay any attention to him."

Things were starting to fall into place. No wonder Blake wanted to know when Mittendorf had died. She had made the connection between the two back-to-back murders. What the hell was he thinking? It was there all along and he missed it. That almost breathless fear in her voice when she insisted she didn't know what had happened to Gould or Professor Mittendorf. She had played it cool and slipped one past him – no more.

"Harper? Are you there?"

"What's the make of her car?" Harper scribbled down its description, her address, and cell phone number. "Can you think of anyone she might be staying with?"

"No."

"Are you sure she's not seeing anyone?"

"Yeah, I've already told you she isn't. I don't see why you keep asking."

"Need a place to start looking." Harper finished writing his notes, slipped the folded sheet of paper into his pocket, and grabbed his keys.

"I want to go with you."

“No.”

“Why not? I’ve shadowed cops plenty of times before.”

“Because I said so. You stay there by your phone. She may stop by or try to reach you.”

The truth was, Harper never knew what he would find when he knocked on a door. If the killer had tracked her down, he didn’t want to worry about a tag-along reporter, a love-sick biased eyewitness on hand to whatever had happened to her.

“What if she’s hurt?”

“I’ll handle it.” He paused for just a second. “I’ll call you the minute I know something.”



## 26

To Harper, Sycamore Boulevard looked like a Currier & Ives postcard. Wet snow clung to the sides of antique lampposts that lined the street and the gingerbread that adorned some of the old homes along the historic west end of Chandler. According to the address Marc gave him, Jennie's apartment was in the next block.

Jennie's car was parked in front of her house just as Marc said it was. Harper nosed his Jeep parallel to it, grabbed his flashlight, and got out. The porch light was off and from the street, there were no lights visible from any of the apartment's windows. He aimed the beam at the sets of footprints left on the path leading to the house. It hadn't snowed in the past six hours and the tracks in the snow didn't mean a thing. Any number of people could have walked up and down the path during the day.

Harper removed his right glove as he walked around to the front end of her car and touched the hood. It was cold and the dusting of snow on the windows meant it hadn't been moved since the last flurries.

A small sign two blocks back warned that this was a neighborhood watch area. The thought immediately registered that one of the neighbors would have reported unusual activity. He followed the footprints up the front steps to the entrance. The swing of her storm

door had cut a semi-circular pattern into the snow on the porch.

Ornate wood framed a sturdy oak door that was adorned with a beveled glass window. He leaned his face into it. A gathered sheer curtain hung tightly on the other side. He could barely make out the shape of a small table and lamp on either side of the foyer. Reflected light came from a back room he assumed might be a kitchen.

Harper knocked and glanced at his watch. It was going on seven. No answer.

He waited a moment longer, strained to look through the sheers, and knocked again. "Jennie? Anybody home? It's Sam Harper. Open up."

Harper reached into his pocket; he tried her cell. A second or two later he leaned his ear to the door and heard it ring. He thought he saw the cell phone's faint light flicker on the floor beneath the small table near the door. He let it ring several more times and listened attentively to her voice mail recording. Her tone came across in the same straightforward business manner she had tried on him. No reporters he knew would stray far from their cell. They were like cops, always on call, waiting for the next assignment.

Harper rubbed off the condensation from the glass on the front room window, cupped his hands and pressed his face against it. He couldn't see much through the slit between the curtains and the next couple of knocks brought no response. He knocked on the other apartment door – no answer there either. He walked around to the back of the house only to find that every door and window was locked. Nothing looked jimmied; her car was here, but he couldn't find anything that made him suspicious. That's what Harper told Marc when he called him a few minutes later.

It was twenty past seven. He made his way back to

his Jeep when he stopped next to her car and tried the door. Leaving her car unlocked wasn't the safest thing for a young woman to do; careless, but no crime. The inside looked and smelled like it had just rolled out of the showroom floor. Nothing out of place except for the briefcase she left on the back seat and her laptop computer he found inside. Marc's words leaped back into his head and he had to wonder what reporter would leave her livelihood in an unlocked car in twenty-degree temperature?

Harper wanted to believe she was careless because if she wasn't, the only other conclusion was that someone had forced her out of her car. He made note of her license plate number, but for now, he still had no proof that she was missing and no idea where to start looking. Nothing more he could do but call dispatch and give the order to send a patrol through Blake's neighborhood. Harper's glance skipped from the house to the briefcase in his hand. He placed it and his cell on the passenger seat, turned the key in the ignition, and left.

## 27

Jennie rubbed the spot on her arm Alejandro had squeezed as a way to make his point. Nearly twenty-four hours ago, he had forced his way into her car and rammed the barrel of his gun into her side. Except for the few moments of privacy he had allowed her, he demanded she sit on the floor within his sight at all times with her hands and feet tied.

He had ransacked her home. The sounds of drawers being thrown to the floor and items hurling against the walls had gone on for hours. She was his prisoner; even during the few hours she had been allowed to sleep, Alejandro had kept her close by his side.

No drawer or closet had escaped his wrath.

During their struggle the evening before, Jennie's cell phone slipped out of her hand and landed somewhere in the foyer. She was nowhere near it and with her hands and feet tied, she would be helpless to grab it if she were.

Alejandro seemed to be wearing down. He came back into the room, huffing with exhaustion and untied her feet. He pulled her up and pressed the gun into her side again. With another yank of her arm, he shoved her down the hallway towards the back of her apartment and into the study. She stumbled and fell over the scattering of things he had left on the floor. He

grabbed her by the arm again and yanked her up on her feet.

"Move – in there," he demanded.

Jennie cautiously glanced around the room. She had nothing in her study she could use to defend herself. This was her reading and workroom. She had books, CD's, cushions, and baskets. She had intended this room to be a comfortable place to sit and relax, not crack an intruder's skull open. The plants hanging in front of the windows were worthless weapons and the lamp on her desk was out of reach.

She had ridden the emotional rollercoaster since the evening before. Fear had led to survival and now, watching his stamina dwindle, anger took over propelling her to find a way out. He had her car keys, though. If she could get away, how far could she make it on foot before he caught up to her and brought her back, or worse?

"Get it through your head," she said. "I don't have your stupid ring!"

Spanish blurted from Alejandro's mouth. The tone of his voice told Jennie he cursed.

"I heard your message on the professor's phone," he said.

"It had nothing to do with you."

"You lie. What did you do with it? I saw you in the store. You were the last person to see that old man alive and those were your initials on the sales slip I took from his pocket. It does not take a genius to see what has happened. I have searched every inch of this place. If it is not here, what did you do with it?" His nostrils flared with contempt and he narrowed his eyes. "I can track men through the jungle so don't think I need you alive to find what I want."

"It's not–"

"Tell me where you have it. NOW!" He pressed the

gun against her forehead.

She gasped. A sudden rush of heat shot up her neck to her cheeks. *Don't let him see you sweat.* She had never been this close to the barrel of a gun before, loaded or otherwise. She had to believe he was bluffing. He wouldn't kill her. Not yet. Not as long as he thought she had the ring. Her heart hammered against her chest. She held her breath; he held the gun – neither gave an inch.

Jennie didn't have time at the aquarium to read the pages of text from the web, but she had picked up enough to understand the scope of the evil associated with that ring. She wasn't about to let this asshole get his hands on it.

"All right, look. The professor told me about the ring. He sent me to the pawnshop, but Gould wouldn't give it to me, so I left."

"More lies." But he narrowed his eyes again and looked as if he might be considering the possibility that she was telling the truth.

"The police never found it. It's probably still in the shop," she said, knowing he would probably force her to go with him. She'd get away. She'd throw herself from the car if she had to.

A crease furrowed between his brows as he pressed the gun harder against her skin. He blurted more inaudible words.

The rim of the .22 was as cold and hard as her captor's eyes. Jennie reminded herself not to show fear, but the crisp, snap sound of an empty clip made her jolt. The lump lodged in her throat felt like her heart. She held her breath for all of four seconds before she let out a scream; tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Russian Roulette, Miss Blake?"

"You Latin moron."

The back of his hand stung across her cheek. The

blow knocked her down and sent her flying over her desk. She raised her fingers to her lip and wiped off the blood. *You shit.* Jennie was still trying to cope with the pain when he grabbed her from behind.

She hastily scanned over the items on top of her desk; picture frames, a pencil holder, a paper tray. *Shit! Nothing on this damned desk is a weapon. Where is the goddamned letter opener?* He was too strong. She looked at her wrists and the rope he used to secure them and knew her only defense was speed. Jennie reached for the three-hole punch and swung the narrow metal contraption with the sharp little corners. A lucky aim hit him across his already bruised nose.

He bent over holding his face; blood ran down his hand.

Seconds stood between her and freedom. She ran to the front door – *so close*. Heart pounding, *almost there. Almost ...* she felt his grip clutch her sweater and jerk her back.

He raised his hand at her again then froze. Someone was at the front door, jiggling the doorknob, banging on the glass for attention.

Alejandro forced her into the shadows of the front room and against the wall. She could read his thoughts when he jolted and looked in all directions – her thoughts. All the caller had to do was glance in through the slits between the curtains on any one of the large windows to see them.

“Who is it?” he whispered.

She shook her head.

Another pounding at the door followed by the answer to Alejandro’s question.

“Jennie? Anybody home? It’s Sam Harper. Open up.”

*Harper?* Jennie wanted to scream, to run. Alejandro’s hand felt coarse across her mouth; his

blood on her lips. The .22 jammed hard beneath her jaw.

“Not one word.” His breath was hot and sour against her cheek. “I swear, I will snap your neck in two.”

Her captor’s arm was like a vise around her chest. She couldn’t breathe – couldn’t move. Harper was calling her name again. *Break down the damned door, stupid! I won’t press charges!*

Harper’s insistent knock stopped; the silence choked the air out of the room.

*No! Don’t go!* She moaned. Seconds later another start; the ringing of her cell came from down the hall near the door. It rang five, six times then stopped. She jabbed the heel of her boot into his foot. For a moment, he let her go. Adrenaline propelled her forward again. Harper was still there, on the sidewalk, down by her car, talking on his cell. If she opened the door or banged against the window, he’d hear her. He’d come back for her. She knew he would.

The doorknob was inches from her grasp when Alejandro took hold of her hair. With a firm grip and a yank he ripped strands from her scalp. The pain made her head swim with nausea.

He shoved her cell into his pocket, squeezed her close to him, clasped his hand over her mouth again, and waited for Harper to leave.

Jennie stood in the darkened foyer feeling defeated; a prisoner at the hands of a killer. Hope slipped away as Harper drove off. As if on cue, the house phone rang and immediately switched to the answering machine. Jennie listened intently.

“Jennie, it’s Marc. I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s time you answered your phone. The least you can do is let people know you’re okay. Don’t worry, I made the usual excuses for you at work.” He paused. “Look, there’s more to that ring than Mittendorf let on.”



Jennie closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

"I should have told you the truth. It wasn't smart to leave it in your desk drawer though. Anybody could have ... so I ..." Marc paused again. "You have to tell Harper about it. Promise you'll call me, okay?"

"Shit!" she whispered, unable to believe what she had heard.

Alejandro pressed the gun to her again. "So now we know. You will take me to this man."

"No! Stop!" She sobbed and shook her head. "It's not true!"

"Enough."

Her reward was another blow across the face that left her slipping into unconsciousness. Jennie heard him gasp and mumble a few in inaudible words before she blacked out.

## 28

"The car's gone."

It was quarter to nine and thanks to Blake, Harper had just walked through his door and was looking in the fridge for a bite to eat when he answered the officer's call. He shoved the bottle of ketchup and carton of eggs aside and reached for the package of deli ham. "Finally got back, huh? Someone drop her off at the house or what?" He had been right after all. Blake's plans didn't include Marc and Marc's panic blew a couple of precious hours out of Harper's weekend. Evidently, Marc had worried for nothing. "Did you see which way she went?"

"No. We drove past the house right after you called. By the time we made our rounds and came back a few minutes later, the car was gone. Looks like she left in a hurry too."

"Why?"

"Left the front door wide open."

The officer's words made Harper wince and curse under his breath. "Put out an APB, I want her car stopped, then call for back-up and don't touch anything until I get there."

Marc's words about Jennie seeing the killer tugged in the pit of his stomach. It was still there when he arrived at her house again. It felt like a torque when he noticed the fresh marks in the snow. It was the same

heel mark they had found at the professor's house, the one Carter Graves had shown him with the thumbtack mark stuck near the edge. It wasn't there an hour before, he would have seen it. Harper flipped open his phone and dialed the lab.

"Detective," one of the officers called out from his car. "What do you want us to do?"

"Wait for Forensics."

Harper was glad to see Carter Graves was on call, he knew the case and what to look for. By the time Harper was allowed inside the home, the forensic team had finished processing for the usual fingerprints and body fluids. Lab technicians were gathering their tools and preparing to leave when Harper stepped through the door. His immediate thought was to find Jennie's cell phone.

"Looking for something?" asked one of the techs. A camera hung from her neck and swung as she counterbalanced her weight against the apparent heaviness of the utility case in her hand.

"There was a cell phone here near this table earlier tonight. Any of your people find it?"

The tech shook her head. "No, sorry. Can't say that we did."

"Where's Carter?"

"In the study. Straight ahead."

Harper walked past an open arch on the left side of the hallway and glanced in. Blake's home was in a turned-upside-down state, similar to the way he had found the professor's belongings. Twenty feet away, toward the back of the first floor apartment was the room he had seen a light in earlier in the evening. Harper slipped on a pair of gloves and looked at the bloody handprint on the doorframe.

Inside the study, save for a lamp, Jennie's desk had

been swept clean of the usual things he would expect to find on someone's workspace. Books, papers and writing utensils lay scattered across the floor. Three black and white photographs framed in black were hanging askew on the opposite wall, a fourth one had landed on the floor. Beneath it were shards from its broken glass. "Mind if I take a look now?"

"I thought this was your night off." Carter held up a pair of tweezers with a long auburn hair and sealed it inside an evidence bag. He marked it and placed it inside his case.

"Yeah, I did too. Guess I could ask you the same thing."

"We're all pulling doubles these days."

"Well, what do you think?" Harper asked.

"That print you found in the snow matches the ones we found at Mittendorf's house. Didn't take long. How did he find her?"

"He followed her trail the same way I did. She might as well have dropped bread crumbs behind her."

"We went through the whole apartment." Carter glanced around. "He turned it upside down, but this is the only room where we found blood; small droplets of blood on the desk, the doorframe, and over there." Carter said, pointing to a spot on the floor.

Harper swept a glance across the room to a nearby bookcase that had escaped the struggle. On a shelf were a couple of framed photographs. One in particular caught his attention. It was a picture of Blake and two other women taken on a sunny summer day at the beach. He removed it from its frame, examined the backside.

"Looks like a recent photo. Mind if I take this?" he asked.

"Suit yourself."

Carter gave him the go ahead, but his questionable

look begged for an explanation.

"That's Marley's Lighthouse in the background. Supposedly Blake is new to Chandler – doesn't know many people except maybe three, these two in the picture and whoever took it. We'll need copies of this for the other officers. Anyone find her cell phone?"

"No, why?" Carter asked.

"Because I dialed her cell earlier when she didn't answer the door. It was in here, I heard it ring." Harper reached for his phone and dialed her number again.

"Must have it on her."

"Still rolling to voice mail," Harper said.

"Speaking of the front door, you need to see this." Carter led Harper back toward the front. The door with the tightly pulled sheers was opened wide against the foyer wall. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Etched on the outside of the front door's beveled glass window was a series of letters. Harper leaned in and touched the grooves of the words. He closed the door and pulled back the curtains. "Anita? Who's Anita?"

"I was hoping you'd know. The name's written backwards, meant to be read from inside."

"That wasn't there earlier," Harper said.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I leaned into the window to look in. I would have seen it. If nothing else, I would have felt it."

"Detective!" One of the uniformed officers called from the porch. "They found her."

## 29

Intermittent beams from the lighthouse danced past the front window and chased shadows across the wall of the two-bedroom home near pier forty-eight. Aside from the occasional shaft of light, Travis Stoebe sat in the dark on a cold hardwood floor. He tucked his legs close to his chest and wedged himself into a corner.

His scholarly works in physics had stopped six years before when the “others” entered his mind. He survived on odd jobs to keep himself fed and warm. Tonight, the growl in his stomach rumbled three times since dusk. He thought of the piece of chicken, potatoes, and peas he had eaten at the mission, but he lost precious time since then. Time he couldn’t account for. How long had it been since his last meal?

Travis slowly tilted his head toward the narrow west wall of his living room and the place where his mother had hung a crucifix. Thirty years ago, she immersed herself into the Catholic Church and insisted he and his father join in her fervor.

Aside from wondering what it would feel like to nail a spike through a man’s flesh, he never thought of the crucifix or prayed to its image.

He never prayed. *Why was he now looking at the mark it had left on the wall?* Religion hadn’t saved him from his parents’ abuse. Why would he think anything

as ridiculous as a small piece of wood could save him from his demons?

Memories flickered in and out, blurred like worn, faded strips of film. Images ran through his mind, blotched with imperfections, marked with tears and neglect. He frowned. His thoughts were scattered like a bad set of letters in a round of Scrabble. Nothing made sense and only a fragmented set of irrational thoughts connected to create his dark reality.

The silence within the four walls of his room was suddenly shattered by the hiss of the small black and white television coming to life. He arched his brow and peeked up over his folded arms. He listened then immediately closed his eyes and drew in a breath. His lips quivered uncontrollably.

"No more! No more!" He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears. "Go away!"

Stoebe clasped his knees, brought them tight to his chest, and pressed his face into them.

*If he hummed*, he thought, *he could block it out*. Whatever *it* was that made him lose time. If he could find a way to block it out, he wouldn't wake up with blood on his hands, his clothes and face ever again.

He rocked back and forth. In his mind, he was seven again at the park on that swing. He could almost feel the thick links of chain in his hands. He swung his legs high into the air, leaned his head back, and felt a breeze ruffle his hair. He remembered the warmth of the sun on his face and opening his eyes to see a cloudless blue sky. If only for a moment, he felt safe.

Slowly, very slowly, a moan spilled from his mouth to form two words.

*He's here.*

It was nearly ten p.m. when the ambulance transporting Jennifer Blake arrived at Community Hospital's emergency room. She was in one of the wards by the time Harper arrived.

The nurse at the front desk pointed him in the direction of room three, bed four, down the hall and to the right. Inside, four beds were positioned side by side separated only by wrap-around curtains for privacy. He walked up to the last bed and called Jennie's name.

A muffled moan responded.

He pulled back the curtain, nice and easy, far enough to know it was her. The swelling around her right eye, the bruise on her cheek, and the laceration on her lower lip were visible from five feet away.

Jennie opened her eyes. She drew in a breath and immediately covered her face. "Go away."

"Talk to me," he whispered. "Who did this to you?"

He leaned forward to listen to her response when a nurse flung the curtain open around the bed.

"Are you family?" she asked.

"No." Harper held out his badge.

"Has anyone contacted them?" She kicked loose the brakes on the gurney and began maneuvering it out of the ward and into the hall.

"I don't have any," Jennie said.

"Where are you taking her?" Harper picked up his



step to keep up with the nurse.

"Radiology. There's a waiting room there if you plan to stay."

Harper waited five hours before the doctor admitted Jennie for an overnight stay and a day's observation. While the nurse helped Jennie get settled in, Harper took the doctor aside.

"No broken bones, Detective. No internal bleeding either. Nothing short of a miracle since she couldn't break her fall."

"What do you mean?"

"Whoever called for the ambulance told dispatch she had her wrists tied in front of her when she fell. That would explain the excessive bruising and swelling on her face and shoulder area."

Harper wasn't so sure it explained all of it. "What happened to the rope?"

"They bought it in with her. I thought you'd want it. I'll see that you get it. She's a lucky young lady. Got away with mostly cuts, bruises and quite a fright."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll see what she can tell me," Harper said as he started to go into her room.

"You won't be getting anything out of her tonight," the doctor said. "I ordered some pain medication. She needs to sleep and from the look of things, so do you. Go home."

Harper glanced at his watch.

"I'll ask one of the nurses to call you when she wakes up."

Sure, there was nothing more he or anyone else could do tonight. But her attacker was still out there. He spared her life once. But there was nothing stopping him from coming into the hospital and finishing her off. That's what Harper was thinking when he asked: "How long are you going to keep her here?"

"We'll see how she does, probably no more than a day."

With that, the doctor left, the nurse made a final adjustment to the heart monitor and followed him out the door. Harper sat down in the armchair near the foot of the bed, kicked off his shoes, raised his legs on another chair, and closed his eyes.

"Harper?"

The room was still dark when he pried his eyes open at the sound of Jennie's voice. Her soft, drowsy tone made her seem every bit as vulnerable as he knew she would be upon waking and bolstered his decision to stay. She had rolled onto her side and was propped up on one elbow. The fluorescent hall lighting seeped into the room allowing him only a glimpse of her profile.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Harper glanced at his watch again. The lit hands were at the five twenty-three position. He rubbed his eyes and went to her bedside.

"How do you feel?" The monitor next to her bed registered a normal heartbeat.

"I've been better." Jennie raised a hand to her temple and cringed at the feel of the lump right above it. As she tried to sit up, she winced with pain. "My back. How long have I been here?"

"A few hours."

"Where's Marc?" she asked.

"Marc?" A frown creased his brow. "At home I suppose. You had him worried."

"He worries about everyone."

"Seems to have more than a casual concern for you."

"It's not what you think," she said.

"Right." At the moment, it didn't matter what he

thought. Jennie's relationship with Marc was beside the point. His immediate concern was her condition and keeping his only witness alive. His second was capturing her attacker.

"You got lucky this time. A few bruises and scrapes, but the doc said you'll live."

"What a comfort." She pulled her hospital gown up over her partly exposed shoulder and lay back down. "You didn't have to stay you know."

"You were out of it last night. Thought I better stick around to answer questions." It was a lie he hoped she wouldn't detect. She had been through enough. What good would it do to tell her she was still easy prey? He ran a hand through his hair. "You want to talk about what happened to you?"

"Not particularly."

"Who did this to you?" he asked her again.

"I tripped in the subway," she whispered.

"Sure you did. I'm talking about the guy who roughed you up and ransacked your apartment. Was it the same guy you saw going into the pawnshop on the night Gould was killed?"

"How did you ...? Marc. He told you, didn't he?" Tears welled in her eyes; she looked away.

Harper gave her a moment to gather her thoughts. He took her hand. It felt small, soft, and in need of some holding. "Do you know his name?"

"Alejandro. He never told me his last name."

"What does he look like?"

"Tall, dark, and straight out of hell. He's Venezuelan, accent as thick as molasses."

"Venezuela? Are you sure?"

"No, that's what he said, but Mittendorf told me the ring was from Colombia."

"What ring?"

"Oh damn." She pulled her hand from his grip.

"The relic?" he asked. "You knew all along what Mittendorf was talking about, didn't you?"

"Crap, Harper my head is killing me. Do we have to do this now?"

"You could have been killed and it's not over yet. Not by a long shot."

"Don't remind me."

"Someone has to. Cut the charades and tell me the truth."

"Don't look at me that way."

"Then work with me. Help me find him," Harper said. "Damn it, you're the only one who knows what he looks like." He paused for only a second. "Why did you lie to me?"

"You wouldn't have believed me, that's why." Jennie pulled the gown's loose neckline over her shoulder again.

Harper caught sight of the bruise beneath her collarbone and wondered how extensive her injuries were.

"Are you going to arrest me?" Her voice, still laced with sleep trailed off as she closed her eyes.

"Yes. If that's what I have to do to keep you alive."

"Can it wait until later?" Jennie inhaled and let it out. She slid her hand beneath her cheek and closed her eyes.

Harper was as exhausted as she looked. He couldn't stay by her side forever. He'd leave orders with the head nurse to prohibit visitors. That's the only way he'd be able to get a few more hours of sleep. They could talk later when they were both in a better frame of mind. He pulled the covers over her shoulder and started to leave when the sound of her voice made him turn.

"Harper," she paused. "I'm scared."

"I know. We'll find him."

“You promise?”

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours.” He took a business card out of his wallet and placed it on the nightstand next to the bedside phone. “That’s my number. Call if you need anything. That reminds me. Where’s your cell phone?”

“Alejandro took it.”

## 31

When Harper returned to the hospital a few hours later, he walked past a young brunette in a white lab coat leaning against the wall outside Jennie's room.

"I wouldn't go in if I were you," she said. "There's a nurse with her."

He stopped, gave her an appreciative nod, and immediately recognized her from the picture he took from Jennie's apartment.

"Are you a friend of Jennie's?" she asked.

Harper reached into his breast pocket for his badge and introduced himself.

"Homicide?"

"How well do you know her?" he asked.

"As well as anyone knows their neighbor."

"You live upstairs?"

"Yes, she moved into the apartment below mine a few months ago. Our work schedules don't give us much time to hang out together if that's what you're wondering."

"Where were you last night between seven and ten?"

"Right here. Got off duty a little bit ago. Thought I'd check in on her before going home."

"Have you noticed anyone suspicious in or around your neighborhood in the past couple of days?" he asked.

"Sorry, no. I got back from vacation last Tuesday and left again on Thursday morning. Didn't get back into town until yesterday; came straight into work. What's going on?"

"Her apartment was broken into."

She paused for a moment. "I heard she fell down the stairs in the subway. The two things can't be related, can they?"

Harper glanced down at the picture ID clipped to her lab coat. "Kim. What do you do here?"

"I work in the pharmacy." She slipped her hands into her pockets and leaned an ear toward Jennie's door. "You didn't answer my question. Are the two things related?"

The tilt of her head made it clear this lady was used to getting answers. He looked away.

"I get it. None of my business, right?"

"I can't discuss it."

"Jennie woke up screaming the other night, you know."

"When was that?" he asked.

"Tuesday night. She tried to tell me it was just a bad dream."

"You don't sound convinced."

"Christ, no. I heard her scream through the floorboards. By the time I made it downstairs, she looked as if she'd seen a ghost. I stayed with her the rest of the night. I don't know what happened, but she was jittery the whole time."

Those were almost the exact words Marc had used to describe Jennie's behavior.

From her hospital bed, Jennie could see a cloud-covered sky through the fifth story window. Every detail of the past two nights was singed into her mind. She turned at the sound of Kim's voice.

"Holy crap." Kim eased up to the bedside and brushed back the bangs from Jennie's eyes. "You didn't get those bruises from a fall."

"They're nothing."

"Bullshit. The cop out in the hall said someone broke into your apartment."

"Harper?" Jennie eyed the door. "Tell him I'm asleep, will you?"

"He knows you're not. I was supposed to come in and see if you were decent, not get your permission," Kim said.

"Do you have a hairbrush? Damn! I don't have any makeup. I need to brush my teeth." Jennie combed her fingers through her hair.

"Slow down. He's here to question you, not take you out to dinner."

"Where the hell was he when I needed him?"

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"I can't. Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry? He's from Homicide. Who got killed?"

"No one you know."

"Why didn't you call me?" Kim slipped into the patient's restroom, rinsed out a washcloth, and returned to Jennie's bedside. "Here, want to wipe your face?"

"Thanks. You weren't home, remember and you never gave me your cell. Besides, if I could have called anyone, it would have been him. What time is it? Do you have a mirror?"

"Almost nine," Kim said, handing Jennie a small compact from her purse.

"My face! Look at my lip! Asshole." Jennie ran her hand across her chest as she examined the bruise Alejandro had left just below her collarbone. "Crap." She placed the warm moist washcloth on it. It felt good against her skin.



"What kind of trouble are you in?" Kim asked.

"It's work-related." Jennie glanced at the door and tried to fluff her hair.

"Right. Your apartment is broken into, you fall down a set of stairs, and there's a CPD homicide detective out in the hall waiting to question you. Since when is news reporting this dangerous? What kind of jerk editor would put you in that situation?" Kim shoved her hands into her lab coat pocket and turned to leave.

"Kim, it's not like that."

"For what it's worth, I'm going home if you need me. I'll tell him you're decent."

"Jennie?" Harper tapped on the door. The drawn curtains allowed the pale winter light to sweep across the sparsely furnished room.

"Detective Harper. Well, I'm not dead and I don't see any flowers. Guess this means we're going into round three?"

"You must be feeling better."

"I'm fine."

"If you say so." Harper pulled a chair up close to her bedside and reached into his breast pocket for his note pad and pen. "Your neighbor said she heard you scream last Tuesday night. What was that all about?"

"I told her it was a dream."

"That's what your neighbor said. She doesn't believe you either. So what really happened?" he asked again.

"I was tired and fell asleep on the living room floor in front of the fireplace. I woke up in a start from a horrible dream and realized the flames had blown out on my gas log. I smelled gas and panicked. I was opening windows to air out the room when she came down to check on me. That's all."

Her explanation sounded reasonable, but he'd already figured out that behind that pretty face, was a

shrewd mind. She could think on her feet and pull a lie out of her hat without detection. He tucked the dream incident to the back of his mind and changed the subject.

"Let's start with when you first heard from Professor Mittendorf. And this time, the truth. I want facts and a step-by-step."

"He called my office on the afternoon of the nineteenth."

"The day before he was killed?"

"Yes, but I swear I hadn't talked with him since college. He insisted on seeing me. I agreed to meet him after work at the coffee shop around the corner from my office. He told me an outrageously fantastic story about a black pearl ring that he wanted to get his hands on."

"That's the story he wanted you to write?"

"There was no story," she said. "He mentioned the ring was cursed; it had belonged to a voodoo woman from South America. I have no idea what he was talking about."

"Was he prone to storytelling?"

"I wouldn't think so. But, whether it was a story or not, he was deathly afraid of it."

"He told you that?"

"Not in so many words. Supposedly, the ring had been in a Colombian family for several generations. He had read that the ring has some magical powers or something ridiculous like that."

"What kind of powers?"

"Vision. The power to see into the future."

"Did he say how the ring ended up in Chandler?"

"Gould brought it back with him from his last trip to Colombia."

"So Gould and Mittendorf were in on it from the start?"

"That's not the way the professor told it. Someone paid Gould to get it and then he stiffed the guy. Mittendorf claimed he knew of the ring's existence but didn't know it was available until Gould called him."

"To sell?"

"That's the thing, according to Mittendorf, Gould wasn't selling it, just anxious to get rid of it. In fact, when I got to his shop, Gould barely spoke to me. He had the ring in a paper sack ready and waiting. He didn't even ask for an ID. Just told me to take it and leave."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't think the ring had anything to do with Gould's death, not until you told me about Mittendorf."

"And still you lied."

"You noticed."

"We might have been able to catch this guy and you wouldn't be here now."

"You don't know that." Jennie dropped her gaze. "Besides, I wouldn't have been able to describe Alejandro to you at the time to save my life."

"It may come to that. One of our crime artists will be here later this morning to do a composite." Harper watched her tuck a strand of hair behind one ear. She seemed vulnerable and just as helpless now as she had the night before in the ER. "Why did you agree to go to the pawnshop for Mittendorf in the first place?"

"Aside from being out of my way, I didn't think anything of it. He was old and frightened, didn't have anyone else to turn to, at least that's what he told me. For all his smarts, I think he believed in superstitions and the cultural myths. He was certainly scared enough to not want to touch it."

"What else did he say?"

"Nothing. He promised to tell me more after I gave him the ring. We were supposed to connect the

following day. Obviously that never happened.”

“Go on.”

“There’s nothing more to tell.”

Emptiness washed over her face as if she had wrung the last bit of information from her mind and convinced Harper she was finally telling the truth.

“I spoke to the college dean about Mittendorf,” Harper said. “Seems he was an expert on primitive civilizations and folklore. I suspect Mittendorf knew exactly what was at stake in acquiring that ring. I’m willing to bet his fears had nothing to do with a curse.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying he knew the ring’s value and didn’t want to get caught taking it.”

“Do you suppose he and Gould knew Alejandro would come after it?” she asked.

“Mittendorf and Gould may not have known who would come, but they had to know someone would.”

“Come to think of it, Mittendorf did say something odd that night at the coffee shop. When I told him I didn’t want to go to the pawnshop, he said that we couldn’t risk the ring falling into the wrong hands. He must have known someone would be coming for it.” Jennie told Harper about meeting Alejandro in the coffee shop and how he followed her to her office and then to the aquarium. “You were right about him finding me. Not sure how he knew I was a journalist though. He must have been waiting for me all along.” She paused for a moment and met Harper’s glance. “I just remembered something else the professor told me; that Gould suspected his contact in Colombia had stolen the ring.”

“Alejandro? Was he the contact?”

“I don’t think so. He claims it’s his. But get this, I found several sites on the Internet the other night that

mentioned a ring similar to the black pearl that was linked to the Vatican.”

“How did we get from Colombia to the Vatican?”

“That’s what I want to know,” she said. “Unfortunately, Mittendorf took the answer to his grave.”

“You’re an investigative reporter, what’s your take on this? Why does a man like Alejandro travel to the States and kill two people for it?”

“Only three reasons that I know; it’s his and he wants it back, he’s been paid to retrieve it by its rightful owner or he—”

“Believes in the myth surrounding the ring and its powers,” he said, “and now you’re the only one standing in his way.”

“Not exactly.”

The tone of her voice made Harper wonder if he wanted to know what she had done to divert Alejandro’s attention.

“That afternoon, after you left my office, I locked the ring in my top desk drawer. I needed to get away to think, to see what I could find out about the ring’s origins. I figured it would be safe in my desk. There’re always people working who would have noticed anyone nosing around who didn’t belong there. When Alejandro forced me to take him to my apartment later that night, he went nuts. He looked everywhere for it.”

“You were willing to risk your life for a chunk of metal?”

“Yes. Whether you and I believe in the myth is irrelevant. What’s important is that Alejandro does and if there is any truth to the legend, Alejandro is the last person who should have it.” She paused for a moment. “Mittendorf said that inanimate objects can transmit energies. It’s my understanding that some cultures interpret those energies as curses.”

"Get to the point. Who else knows about the ring?" Harper asked.

"I told Alejandro that Gould must have hidden it in his shop. I think I had him convinced until Marc ruined everything."

"Ruined how?" His mind wandered back to that night and how wrong he had been to not trust Marc's instincts.

"Marc called right after you left my house. The machine picked up his message," she said. "Marc said he should have told me the truth about the ring and scolded me for leaving it at the office. He made it sound as if he had broken into my desk and taken it."

"So Marc knew about it all along?"

"Yes, and now Alejandro knows Marc has it. There's an inscription inside the band. I let Marc see it, but he couldn't make out what it said."

Marc's evasiveness about Jennie's trip to the pawnshop left Harper willing to bet a week's pay that Marc too had a private agenda. "What did Alejandro do next?"

"He was furious when he heard Marc's message and gave me this," she said, pointing to the bruise on her right cheek.

"He didn't find the ring on Gould or Mittendorf and killed them. I see that type of thing all the time. Killing comes easy to guys like Alejandro. So why not you? Why did he let you live?"

"Disappointed?"

"Puzzled. Especially since you can ID him. How'd you get away from him?"

"When I came to, he rushed me out the door and forced me into my car. He wanted me to take him to Marc. We were at a red light on Third and Hanover when a fire truck drove past. I took a chance while he was distracted, got out of the car and ran."

"To the Third Street subway entrance? That's when you fell."

"I didn't fall. I was pushed. I can still feel the hand on my back."

"Alejandro's?"

"I don't know. I left him blocked in traffic. I remember thinking that I had a head start on him, that he wouldn't be able to catch up to me. So my first thought was that it had to be someone else but—"

"Excuse me, Detective?" A woman's voice came from the doorway.

Harper turned around in the chair. A small plump nurse with short dark over-sprayed hair, dressed in green scrubs and a matching pink and purple floral top stood in the doorway. "The doctor will be here in a few minutes. You'll have to wait in the lobby."

Harper nodded. "I'm done for now anyway." He glanced at his watch and stood to leave. "The name of our crime artist is Reba Brendini. She'll be here within the hour."

The nurse was pre-occupied studying the notes attached to Jennie's chart. She pulled a stethoscope from around her neck, stepped to Jennie's bedside, and checked her blood pressure.

"Are we finally done?" Jennie asked.

She could mask everything but the fear that had settled in her eyes. Whether she knew it or not, her attacker was a fool to let her live. That was one mistake Harper knew Alejandro would try to correct, but posting an officer at her door was out of the question. They were short staffed as it was.

"Who's the head nurse on this floor?" he asked the nurse.

"I am."

"I want her visitors monitored."

"Oh, please. Alejandro wouldn't even know to come up here," Jennie said.

Harper ignored her plea. "A young lady from police headquarters will be by within the hour," he told the nurse. "She and I will show our badges. No one enters this room except us. Understand?"

"What about Marc?" Jennie protested.

"No one!"

After the nurse agreed, he returned his attention to Jennie. "I'll see you later." Harper was already thinking about the next item on a long list of things to do that morning when he stopped at the doorway and looked back. Jennie had slumped down into her pillows clutching her covers to her chest seemingly oblivious to whatever the nurse was doing or saying to her. He studied her a moment longer.

"One more thing," he said. "Does the name Anita mean anything to you?"

"No, why?"

"Just wondered." He rubbed a spot on his brow and left.



Harper unlocked the door to his Jeep and briefly looked back in the direction of the hospital. A bitter cold wind picked up again and was starting to spit pellets of sleet. He slid behind the wheel and turned the ignition. *Let It Snow* blared from the radio. That was the last thing he needed to hear. He reached for one of his rhythm and blues CDs and slipped it into the player.

The floaters, Alejandro, and now Jennie Blake were competing for his attention. "Satanic symbols, cursed rings. What the hell is wrong with everyone?"

Police headquarters was a half mile to the west of the hospital but he needed to think. He turned east and headed toward the scenic route instead, along Fishers Point Road and the miles of vast shoreline. Within minutes, Chandler Bay came into view. As he pressed down the accelerator, the scenery began to haze. A few yards from the pavement, a snow fence near the shoreline blurred and danced along as it rushed past him in rhythmic time to the sweet mellow sound of a sax. He caught himself blinking. He rubbed his eyes then shook his head. Heavy lids slipped shut.

He was jerked awake by a blow to his forehead. A heaviness engulfed him, his mind was in an unshakable fog. He looked around and knew he was in a ditch but didn't remember getting there. He reached for his cell and passed out.

“Harper! Sam, can you hear me?”

Harper opened his eyes to find Wayne, one of the emergency personnel he knew, hovering over him. Harper jolted back in his seat and wished he hadn't.

“Whoa. Take it easy.”

Harper looked around. He was in his Jeep with no immediate idea of where he was, how he had gotten there, or why Wayne was shining a light into his eyes. “I'm fine.”

“Sure you are.” Wayne took a piece of gauze and dabbed the blood from Harper's forehead.

“I just fell asleep,” Harper said, pushing the medic's hand away.

“How many fingers?” Wayne asked, holding his hand up in front of Harper's face.

“Count them yourself.”

“Funny. How many?”

“Three.”

“What happened, Sam? Did a lady keep you up all night?”

“You might say that.” He didn't need Wayne to distract him, keep him talking. No time for any of it. “Would you let me out of here?”

“In a minute.” The ambulance attendant placed a butterfly bandage on the cut above Harper's eye. “Where's it hurt?” He asked as he checked for other wounds and visible signs of injuries.

“Only pain I have is the medic who's in my face. Come on. I need to get going.”

Wayne helped him out of the Jeep and led Harper toward the ambulance.

“I'm not going to the hospital.”

“You know the routine. You need to be checked. It won't take but a minute.”

Harper caught a glimpse of Mann's black Crown Victoria coming to a stop near the ambulance. “There's

my partner. Don't worry, I'll have him take me."

"Detective!" The ambulance attendance didn't stifle his frustration. "I can't let you do that."

Harper pressed his hand to his temple and left the attendant yelling something about signing a waiver.

"Christ, Harper. I came as soon as I got the call. Are you all right? What the hell happened?" Mann asked.

"Fell asleep, hit some ice, all of the above."

"I got your message about Blake. What'd you do, stay up all night with her?"

Harper reached for his cell and called the tow truck service. "She has nothing to do with this. I was fine one minute, next thing I know, Wayne is shining a light in my eyes and trying to take me to the hospital."

"Which is where I'm taking you."

"No you're not."

"You've hit your head."

"Just take me home, will you?" Harper had never fallen asleep at the wheel. His first thought was the curse of the black pearl ring, but he forced it out of his mind as quickly as it had entered. He leaned an elbow against the window, ran his fingers across his mouth, and allowed himself to think of Jennie again. He and Mann had driven nearly twenty minutes before the road began to sway away from the shoreline toward the hub of the city. Snow mixed with sleet continued to spit; the repetitive swish of the wipers numbed his thoughts except for the one that tapped at the back of his head: *Why did he let her live?*

"Captain, you're going to want to see this." Mann spoke into his cell as he glanced over his shoulder. "We have the boat. The Coast Guard found her bottomed out in one of the wooded inlets sixty miles due north of Chandler."

"How bad is it?" Holloway pushed himself away from his desk. He repositioned the phone on his shoulder while he slipped on his jacket.

"A blood bath."

"Recent?"

"No way of telling when it happened. Between exposure to the weather and wildlife the evidence got contaminated."

"Are the lab boys there?"

"They just got here. Carter says there are more blood stains below deck."

"You think that's the vessel used to dump the bodies?"

"God I hope so. If it's not we're in trouble. It's not hard to picture what happened here."

"Where exactly is this place?" asked Holloway.

"Two miles north of Wallace Point. I'm sending one of the officers to pick you up."

"Detective?"

Mann looked up to find Adams, one of the techs

from IT standing in his doorway. The stocky twenty-some-year-old guy had an unmistakable raw spark in his eyes. A look steeped in optimism not yet extinguished by pangs of disillusion. Only two things about Adams looked tired and crumpled; his shirt and tie. The tech's youthful energy reminded Mann he was pushing forty.

"I found something for you on the Vinny Woods case." Adams held out a sheet of paper. He shifted his weight from one foot to another like a thoroughbred waiting to shoot out through the starting gate.

"We arrested him for Kenny Teal's murder." A million things ran through Mann's mind as he took the page from Adams's hand. He prayed they hadn't screwed up on a technicality. Woods was absolutely guilty of Kenny Teal's murder. They had all the evidence they needed for a conviction; each piece was confirmed by the lab. "It's an open and shut case. What's wrong?"

Adams nodded at the printed page. "You found the evidence to convict him of murder; there's his motive."

Mann scanned the copy of the e-mail Teal had addressed to Woods on the day before he was killed. He was immediately drawn to Teal's accusations of Woods's association with the three boys whose bodies were dumped in the bay.

"Found that saved on Teal's hard drive," Adams said.

"Where was *this* when you guys found the other twelve e-mails?"

"Must have deleted that one from his in-box after he copied it to his computer. Saved it in a literature assignment subfolder he named, *Pride and Prejudice*," Adams grinned. "Found the program he used to hack into Woods's computer too."

"How's a kid like Teal know how to do that?"

"He worked in a computer shop, right? It's not that hard to hack one if you know what you're doing. He certainly had the means. For a smart kid like him, it was probably no worse than cracking open a clam."

Computers weren't Mann's forte. All he wanted to know was which key to hit to save and print his reports. Everything else was over his head. He decided to sit back and let Adams explain it to him. He motioned for the young tech to take a seat.

"Sharp kid." Adams drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair and squirmed for a second or two.

"We figured as much. So how'd he do it?"

"Woods downloaded a proprietary video player from a porn site."

"Which means?" Mann asked.

"Without that site's video player, Vinny couldn't watch the girlie side shows." An insuppressible grin flashed across Adams's face. "Don't you see? Kenny had to know the only way to make sure Vinny would download the keylogger was to send him something he would absolutely need. An upgrade for the player."

"You've lost me."

Adams shot out of the chair. "Look in layman terms, the only way Kenny was going to get into the kid's computer and read his e-mails was to get his hands on Vinny's e-mail password and that wasn't going to happen unless he infected the unit with a virus. He used a virus to track Woods's key strokes. Understand? That's how Teal got into Woods's e-mail account." Adams paced in front of Mann's desk. "So Kenny copied an e-mail message he found on a site he knew Woods was fond of," he said, grabbing an imaginary folder and tapping out a key stroke or two in mid-air, "added some custom text, images, and a little something extra, a tracking device."

"The virus?"

"Right," he said, pointing at Mann with a pretend pistol.

"Okay, so the virus was embedded in the bogus upgrade," Mann said. "Then what?"

"The virus downloaded a keylogger which means, from that point on, all of Woods's key strokes were recorded and sent to Teal's computer."

"And that's when Teal found the incriminating e-mail? The one he based these accusations of Woods on?" Mann leaned back in his chair, rested his head in the cup of his hands and watched Adams paced back and forth like a duck in a shooting gallery.

"Not quite. He still needed Woods's password to get in. Most e-mail programs keep the user logged in for a period of days before it expires. Not sure how long Teal had to wait for Woods to log in again. At any rate, he got it."

"And that's when—"

"Yeah," Adams grinned. "The minute Woods logged in again, Teal snatched the password. All he had to do after that was log in as Woods and start reading the kid's e-mails. Must have found some dirt on Woods to write that one," he said, pointing to the page Mann placed on his desk. "For whatever reason, Teal copied that message to his hard drive and deleted it from his mailbox."

Mann read through the e-mail again. "I still don't get it. So what if Woods knew the floaters? Woods's mother admitted he had been running around with some rough characters. Their neighborhoods are within blocks of one another; no surprise in any of this. What's more, there's no evidence to connect Vinny Woods to the floaters' murder case. So how am I supposed to use any of this," Mann waved the sheet of paper at Adams, "as a motive for killing Teal?"

"That's the note that brought things to a head between the two."

"What are you getting at?" Mann asked.

"Harper instructed me to find the e-mail that matched the date and time of the note found in Teal's pocket. The one addressed to Woods by a sender unknown."

"Right, so did you?"

"Checked both kids' computers. There's no record of it anywhere. But here's the kicker, based on the cookies in Teal's computer, he had only been reading Woods's files a couple of days before he died. The e-mail you guys found on him was three months old."

"Which means this e-mail was Teal's way of letting Woods know he had something on him," Mann said.

"Right. Woods called his bluff; must have told him to prove it. After Teal did, Woods must have deleted it from his mailbox."

Mann was finally seeing the picture. "Woods sets up a meeting. Teal shows Woods the ace in his hand and gets killed. Woods panics and runs but not before he rips the incriminating evidence out of Teal's hands." A frown eased across Mann's brow. "Thinks he's home free."

"What's the matter?" Adams asked.

Mann shook his head. "This ... is nothing."

"There's your motive for murder."

"Might be able to con him into talking, but the court will want proof of the e-mail that pushed Woods over the edge. You have to find it. Damn thing has to be in their computers. What about the history files. Don't those things collect everything?"

"Documents, Detective, not the e-mails. Woods cleaned out his in-box, his sent files, and the recycle bin. Couldn't find it in Teal's computer either."

"So Teal digs up something big on Woods," Mann



said. "Obviously Woods would want his e-mail account cleared of whatever dirt Teal found on him, but what about Teal? Why would he get rid of his blackmail insurance against Woods?"

Neither man had the answer. After a moment, Adams turned to leave.

"So that's it?" Mann asked. "End of the road? You're done?"

"Nah. You know me better than that. I have a couple of other things to check into."

"For instance?"

"Found an encrypted file on Teal's computer I haven't been able to crack." Adams managed a smile but couldn't disguise the concentration in his eyes. "Thought I was good; the kid has me stumped on this one. I'll let you know when I have something."

The moon still hung in the western sky when Harper drove to police headquarters the following morning. Jennifer Blake and her story about Alejandro remained etched on his mind.

He stepped off the elevator into a semi-darkened detective unit on the fourth floor. The light coming from the other end of the hall meant Emma was at her desk and the coffee was hot and ready. He switched on his desk lamp, hung his coat on the hook behind his office door, and looked at the stack of case files on his desk. This was his only chance to enjoy the fleeting hush before the noise and clatter of day encroached on him.

"Sam," Emma asked, "what are you doing here? I heard about your wreck. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It was nothing."

"Fine my foot. That's a doozy of a bruise you have there. I heard about you working all weekend. The force has other detectives, you know."

"So I hear."

"No wonder you fell asleep at the wheel."

With all his investigative know-how, he never could figure out how Emma got her information. She was a capable, well-connected, intelligent woman, but her intuitive skills were unexplained and unmatched by anyone's standard. He tried questioning her about it once or twice without success then decided to quit

trying. The last thing he wanted to do was jinx his luck. Emma's information had saved him more than once and now was not the time to annoy his secret weapon.

"You look terrible," she said.

"Thanks."

"Seriously. You look drained. Go home – get some sleep."

"Can't, boss. You know that."

"You're as stubborn as your father. He never listened to me either. Here." Emma placed a steaming cup of coffee on the desk in front of him. "Just the way you like it. Blonde and sweet."

He smiled and took a sip.

"How badly did you wreck your Jeep?"

"Small dent on the right front fender."

"You're lucky. Here's something else. Forensics faxed this a few minutes ago."

Harper took the sheet of paper from her hand and scanned through it. Carter Graves had matched the prints found in Mittendorf's and Blake's home to the CIA's foreign criminal fingerprint database.

"Alejandro Salas – last known residence, Mitu, Republic of Colombia. Sounds like our man," he said. "Jesus, this guy's wanted by the CIA on charges of drug smuggling and murder – killed three of their agents." Harper's sight dropped to the list of charges pending against the suspect. "Get the phone number of the nearest Columbian embassy. Find all you can about this Alejandro Salas."

"And if they ask me why I want to know?"

"Tell them he filed a report on a stolen item. Tell them we need to confirm his identity."

"That wouldn't be far from the truth," she said.

"Now you're catching on. You know the routine, get as much from them as you can without giving away our case."

"The CIA will be knocking at your door, Sam."

"Good. They can have him. But not before I find out who he is and what he's doing here."

"Sam, save yourself the headache. Let the Feds handle him."

"Right, and while we wait on the red tape to clear, he's still out there doing God knows what. My one concern is to keep him away from our only witness."

"How is she?" Emma asked.

"Bruised, a little shaken, but stable." Harper reached for a scrap piece of paper and wrote down Jennie's cell phone number.

"Here," he said. "Give this to one of the techs. I want a trace on any phone calls made to and from that number since last Friday night." Harper handed the note to her and nodded at the two other file folders in her hand. "What do you have there?"

"This one's another case of a guy who let his knife do the talking."

Harper glanced through the file. The wounds to the twenty-two-year-old victim's head had disfigured her face beyond recognition. "No suspects, no motive. Seems to be the norm these days." Grateful it wasn't his case, Harper closed the folder and gave it back to her.

"What about the other one?" he asked.

"It's Vinny Woods's file."

"What did he do now? Break out of prison?" Emma did a fluttering thing with her eyes that told Harper he had ruined her big announcement. "What's the matter?"

"He's dead. Dave got a call a few hours ago from the prison. Said he was going to stop by there on his way in this morning. He should be here any minute."

"What happened?"

"Woods accused one of the inmates of stealing his girlfriend's picture. Things got out of control. Evidently,

the accused took it upon himself to teach Woods a lesson on anger management and went a bit too far. They have the suspect in solitary confinement. Shall I go on?" she asked.

"There's more?"

"Dave told me the techs found additional evidence against Woods over the weekend. He was going to question him today until he got the call from the warden."

"What did he mean, additional evidence? We have an air-tight case against him. His jacket and murder weapon were—"

"He said to tell you not to leave until you two had a chance to talk. It has something to do with Woods and inside information about the floaters."

He met her gaze for a second then turned. The chair let out a familiar squeak when he swiveled it sharply around toward the window to watch the falling snow.

"Are you okay?"

"Give me a minute will you, Em?"

"Do you need anything?"

"Yeah, round me up some answers that make sense. Better yet, how about a miracle or two?"

"I'll start with the Embassy."

His partner's insistence that the floaters' murders were gang related made a quick comeback. What had Mann seen in the evidence that he missed? *Maybe Jack's wrong*, Holloway had said. *He's not perfect you know – maybe he missed something.* They hadn't missed a thing. He and Mann, Carter and Jack went over the evidence a million times; each time it all pointed to a dead end stop at Ray's Garage. None of the evidence made a connection between Dominick Ray and Woods.

It was seven-thirty and Mann wasn't answering his phone. The Woods case would have to wait. Harper's

thoughts shifted to Jennifer Blake and his discussion with her the day before about the professor. The logical first step was to look back through the evidence. Not the murder evidence they had collected, but rather the information they didn't know to consider the day they were called to Mittendorf's house. Harper reached for the professor's file. He thumbed through the report and read his notes. The information was as straight forward as the day he wrote it and then he stopped, tapped his finger on the last paragraph on page three, and left.

The activity at Crompton College continued in spite of Professor Mittendorf's death. Harper walked past the first floor classrooms in Bateman Hall and caught bits of lectures that drifted out into the main corridor. The Anthropology department office was two doors down on the right.

Inside, the woman who identified herself to him a few days before as Agnes, Mittendorf's secretary, was busy typing on her computer. Thin white hair parted down the center hung in a blunt cut above her shoulders. The pale tone of her skin matched the color of her hair and her lipstick was a perfect match to her cherry red blazer.

She looked up over her reading glasses and shot him a glance. "May I help you?"

"Detective Harper," he said, displaying his badge. "I was here a few days ago. Wondered if I could ask you a couple more questions about Professor Mittendorf?"

"Is anything wrong?"

"No," he lied. "Just double checking my notes. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"There's no one else in the office," she said. "How can I help you?"

"The last time we talked, you mentioned the professor had taken a couple of trips earlier this year. Can you tell me where he went?"

"He was always going on what we call field studies – he's traveled all over the country."

"What about outside the U.S.?"

"That too." She reached for her calendar. "How far do you want me to look?"

"Go back a year."

Agnes grabbed the previous year's records and scanned through the pages. "Last November, he was in London for a few days at a conference then traveled to Spain. In December he flew down to the Yucatan Peninsula on one of his research projects." Her finger slid down the page. "From there he went down to Costa Rica and Panama. He was gone three weeks that time."

"What about Colombia?"

"He's been there before, but not on that trip." She paused for a moment. "Come to think of it, he was supposed to go but changed his mind."

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm just the secretary. He never discussed his logic with me."

"Did he ever mention doing business with a man by the name of Randal Gould?"

"Why does that name sound familiar?" Agnes looked to one side as if the answer would leap out from her inbox. Without another word, she dashed into Mittendorf's office.

Harper followed her in. The room was in a state of disarray, but the way Agnes moved files from his desk and shuffled books to one side told him the woman knew exactly what she was looking for and where to find it.

"Here," she said. "A courier dropped this letter off to him the day before he was killed. Mr Gould's name and address are on the envelope."

Harper studied the scrawled note signed by the



pawnbroker. "The professor never mentioned Gould's name before?"

"Not to me."

"It says *the enclosed*. What else came with this note?" Harper asked.

"I don't know. The professor opened it."

"Do you have any idea if the professor knew this person by the initials of *M K*, that Gould mentioned in the note?"

"Sorry. I've worked here eight years; the only time Mittendorf noticed me was when his coffee ran out," she said. "You know, I'm *just* the secretary."

Harper picked up on her emphasis and understood her meaning. "Was he expecting this delivery?"

"I don't think so. He seemed a little agitated after it arrived. In fact, he canceled the rest of his classes that day. That's the last time I saw him alive."

"He didn't say where he was going?"

She shook her head.

"I'm going to need this."

"Be my guest. One less piece of junk I'll have to sift through."

Jack Fowler was right. He usually was, but this time the medical examiner hit the mark. Blood had seeped into tiny crevices and places only Forensics would know how to find. Mann slipped on a pair of gloves and shoved open the lab doors.

After three days, Carter Graves and four other technicians were still running tests and processing the evidence collected from The Lucky Draw.

An assortment of bloodstained items lined one of the four work areas within the lab. Another technician was comparing the shoe prints found below deck against the soles of known tennis shoe manufacturers.

Carter lifted a clear plastic evidence bag containing the section of quarter inch rope they had found coiled and frozen on one of the deck chairs. "It's the same width as the rope used to strangle one of the boys." Carter laid out a life-size head shot of victim number two and placed it on one of the tables. He removed the rope from the bag and positioned a strand of it over the victim's marks.

"It's a close match. Nothing special about the rope though, readily available anywhere from a supermarket to hardware store. Bet half the households in Chandler have something similar in their garages."

"What about AFIS? Did you get any matches on the prints?" Mann asked.

"We matched the fingerprints from the first three victims to their police records and eliminated six sets of prints belonging to the boat owner's family."

"The marina's records show that the family never took the boat out after Labor Day weekend," Mann said. "In fact, they were getting ready to winterize it days before it was stolen."

"That narrows the dates then," Carter said.

Images of the bloody trail of footsteps and fingerprints going down into the lower hull were still vivid in Mann's mind. The helm was marred in a savage array of brown smeared prints. He picked up the evidence bag containing the seven-inch blade with the thick black handle one of the techs found below deck.

"That," Carter said, pointing to the knife, "still had traces of human tissue along the edge. I'm running a DNA test on it."

"We know the victims. What I need is the bastard who walked away from the slaughter."

Carter handed Mann a computer printout of the chemical analysis. "Maybe this will help. You know the rope we found frozen on deck? The killer left us a little present. I found some particles embedded in the fibers when I examined a strand of it under the microscope. Ran the usual tests on them; came up with a familiar element. See this?" Carter grabbed his pen and pointed at the printed spiked points on the color graph. "Sometimes Mother Nature works in our favor. Minute particles clung to the rope fibers and froze in place."

"What am I looking at?"

"It's the same metal composition Jack found in the victim's lungs. The answer's in Dominick Ray's body shop." Carter handed Mann another sheet of paper with a set of bloody fingerprints his techs had taken from the boat. "Here. Find a match to these and you'll be home free."

Endless hours of work, tedious digging for clues, and door knocking had gotten them nowhere. There was nothing standard about it; no patterns, no connections, and no plausible leads. Sure finding The Lucky Draw and linking the boat to Dominick Ray's garage was their first break in weeks, but the thought that stuck in Mann's craw was that it led them right back to their only suspect and Dominick Ray had been removed from the list for lack of evidence.

Ray's dental imprints had earned him a reprieve, but it wouldn't mean crap if the bloody prints placed him square on The Lucky Draw. Mann would know within the hour if Ray's fingerprints were a match. Even so, another search warrant for his body shop was in order. He reached for the phone and another thought crept into his mind. Risk is part of the game – the rush. It's the downside a killer must face in order to satisfy irrepressible urges – the need to control – inflict pain. Keeping souvenirs of their victims prolongs their rush; getting away with the kill feeds their ego. No criminal could keep that sort of thing to himself. Word would get out and spread through the streets like a bad case of pneumonia. All it'd take is a slip of the tongue; the guilty's or someone else's. Like any typical thug, Ray should've been tripping over lies by now, but he wasn't bragging.

The metal particles Carter Graves found embedded in the strands of frozen rope he took from The Lucky Draw led Harper and Mann back to Dominick Ray's garage, but the bloody fingerprints and shoe patterns were a match to an unexpected assailant. Harper studied the man's face he arrested on four counts of murder. Travis Stoebe's prints matched the ones they found on the boat and now he was on the other side of a two-way mirror in the mental ward at Community Hospital.

The forty-three-year-old man was lying in a fetal position in the corner of his padded cell. Dreadlocks had fallen onto his face; tattoos covered his right arm and hand. Little else was visible from where Harper stood.

"Travis Stoebe." Dr Julia Brannon, the CPD psychiatrist, glanced at her notes.

"What do you have on him?"

"He's a former physics professor at Crompton – something of a genius, according to this. A native of Chandler. His father ran the ship yard until his death twelve years ago."

"That explains his knowledge of boats and currents."

"He's been in and out of Ash Grove Asylum three times in the past six years. He was last diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia on May 12 of this year."

“Seven months. What the hell is he doing out?”

“According to his file he didn’t have a history of violent behavior.”

“You still believe that after what we found on the boat? What about the switch blade we found in his room wrapped up in that blood-stained T-shirt? The prints on the knife match one of our victims.”

“So he had the victim’s knife. It doesn’t prove a thing.”

Harper’s sessions with Brannon following the shooting death of his former partner the year before were over, but not forgotten. She was clinical, by the book, and the most frustrating person he knew. Hers was a world of facts; black and white, no gray areas, no assumptions, no exceptions. She relied on formulas and definitions. So if Stoebe’s record said ‘non-aggressive’, she believed it without hesitation.

“Most schizophrenics withdraw into their own space.” She pointed to a section of notes. “Says here they treated Travis for thirteen months. He was responding well to his antipsychotic medication. If that was the case, the doctors wouldn’t have had any reason to keep him confined to the asylum.”

“You think his victims would appreciate your theory?”

“It all boils down to economics. Every facility has the same problem – even hospitals – you know that.”

“Right, economics. Kind of like our prisons, huh, Doc? Guys like Dave and me bust our butts going after scumbags. We do it by the book, find the evidence and get them convicted. If some fast talking attorney doesn’t find a loop hole in the law, you can bet civil rights advocates will get it in their heads that prisons are inhumane – over-crowded. So they cut loose convicted murders to make room for new ones. And who do you think they call first when those convicts

come knocking on their door? Yeah, that makes a hell of a lot of sense to me.”

“You can’t compare the two.”

“Four boys would still be alive if they had kept him locked up.” Harper wondered how an intelligent, young, attractive woman like the Doc had become so cold and indifferent. “While the head of the asylum lines his pockets, monsters like this guy walk the streets and become my problem.”

“Harper, they can’t keep patients indefinitely. There comes a point in time when the doctors have to decide which patients can go and who needs to stay. It’s that simple.”

“It’s irresponsible.” Harper glanced through the glass again. The middle-aged man hadn’t moved in the past twenty minutes. “You said he was on medication. Don’t they monitor these people? Conditions can change, can’t they?”

“His doctor should have checked on him, but it would be up to the patient or his family to follow through.”

“So tell me, Doc, did any of his doctors bother to check if anyone was going to care for him before they tossed him back out on the streets?”

“Dominick Ray is a distant cousin.”

“That’s comforting. Did Stoebe say anything to you about the murders?”

“No, just some gibberish,” she said.

“Like what?”

“He kept repeating: ‘He’s coming, he’s coming.’”

“Who’s coming?” When Harper had made the arrest, he remembered the inside of Stoebe’s home was a testament to his insanity. It was a sanctuary of the occult and the diary entries placed into evidence reflected his worship of beings that were not of this world. There was nothing to indicate premeditation,

only a state of mind that was out of control. No life simmered in Stoebe's eyes. They were filled with burning hatred and harbored an unnatural, inhuman look that made the hairs on the back of Harper's neck stand on end. The truth was, he didn't want to know who Travis Stoebe thought was coming.

Brannon shook her head. "Like I said, gibberish. At this point, I don't know what he means. You saw how he was when you arrested him."

"Indifferent."

"He was incoherent, Detective."

"Come on, Doc. A couple of those boys were carved up like pieces of meat. Are you trying to tell me a confused man can plan four murders, follow the same gruesome ritual, and still have the presence of mind to abandon the boat in a secluded place, *then* row back to shore in a dingy? What nut case follows a plan like that?"

"These patients are not ignorant. Many of them have high IQ's. They can function in a normal, rational manner with the proper care and medication."

"So you're telling me he could have known what he was doing?"

"You're twisting my words. From the condition he was in when he arrived, I seriously doubt he had continued his medication. He can't be held responsible. His mind is locked up."

"Then open it."

"These things take time."

"We don't have time. He's suspected of committing four goddamned cold-blooded murders!" A sharp pain rippled across the side of his head. He winced and raised his hand to it.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

*Hell no.* He wanted to scream. *If you want to help, quit defending the bastard.* It was the same needle



sharp pain that had plagued him for over a year since around the time of his sessions with Dr Brannon. *Stress, try to relax*, his family doctor had said. Harper gave Brannon a sideward glance. How could he relax with her in charge, he wondered?

“He’s a cold-blooded killer,” Harper said.

“He’s not in his right mind.”

“No kidding.”

“Over time the illness advances. It’s entirely possible he was hearing voices.”

“How much time?”

“It’s hard to say. Months – years. It all depends on the patient’s condition.”

“Was he hallucinating when they released him from Ash Grove in May?”

Dr Brannon blinked and lowered her gaze. “I don’t recall reading anything about that.” She flipped through her notes again then frowned. “That’s odd.”

“What?”

“I didn’t notice this last night when they brought him in. There’s a page missing from his records.”

Harper's edginess had nothing to do with meeting Marc for a drink in half an hour at the Pig and Whistle. The knot in the pit of his stomach was more in tune with each tick of the clock that measured another segment of time without answers.

He had expected more from the Colombian Embassy than Salas's family history and the information the CIA had on file was three-years-old. None of it gave Harper a clue into the man's mind, where he was hiding, or Salas's next move. The answers had to be somewhere imbedded in the witnesses' statements and evidence collected from the scenes of Gould's and Mittendorf's murders. But Emma was right, he was drained – exhausted, his mind was in a fatigue-induced fog. He needed to step away, if only for a moment and forget the madness.

Harper swept a glance across the living room to his upright piano. Music was in his blood as thick as police work, but he hadn't taken the time in weeks to play a note. He nudged the lid open and closed his eyes. He didn't need to look at the keys to know their position. A gentle touch from his hands instantly brought a cluster of notes to life. He and the music were one; it gradually pulled him in. Entranced, he swayed with the rhythm as it swelled and rose to a crescendo. For several minutes he was lost in its beauty then he abruptly opened his

eyes and stopped, pulled away by an uneasiness that invaded his space. The same set of questions continued to thrash around in his head denying him a respite from Salas, his two victims, and Jennifer Blake.

A steady surge of tiny flecks had changed into sleet again then turned to large wet flakes. Chandler was under another four inches. Harper checked his windshield wipers. They were already on the highest position yet struggled to keep up with the heavy snowfall. As the day faded into dusk, another thin layer of ice formed making the frozen tire tracks on the road difficult to maneuver, even for his four-wheel drive.

The sign above the pub depicting a dancing pig blowing into a black whistle was a landmark within the business district. Tiny red and green Christmas lights flashed around the Pig and Whistle's front windows and were visible from the distance. Inside, the owner had wrapped tinsel and plastic holly around the supporting posts that divided the booths in one section of the room from another. Mistletoe hung deliberately over the barmaid station and at the southwest corner of the pub sat a five-foot tree decorated with red balls and a garland made of joined together beer can tabs.

Patrons were well into the happy hour by the time Harper entered the bar. The familiar aroma of grilled steaks and cigarette smoke welcomed him into a place dotted with regulars and a few new faces. He looked in all directions before spotting Marc Dillings sitting near the back. The empty beer mug at the edge of the table told him Marc was nursing his second or more than likely, from the look in his eyes, his third.

"I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind." Marc raised his mug to gesture a toast. "The waitress is floating around here someplace." He looked over his shoulder and motioned for her to bring two more.

"It's snowing like hell again." Harper wasn't sure why he felt the need to explain himself other than to assure Marc his late arrival had not been intentional.

"I tried to see Jennie. What's the deal with the no visitor order?"

"Protection."

"I'm her friend."

"And she's my only witness. If we had the manpower to spare, I'd post an officer at her door."

"Do you really think he's going to go after her again?"

"I have to assume he will. She won't be safe until we catch him."

"It's up to you then. To keep her safe, I mean. She doesn't have anyone, you know."

That seemed like an odd statement coming from a man who made it clear a few days ago that he was interested in her too. Then again, he didn't know Marc well enough to judge his behavior or to understand his motives. Either way, Harper didn't need the Jennie distraction. His meeting with Marc had only one purpose. "Why didn't you tell me you knew about the ring?"

Marc dropped his glance into his drink then took a sip.

"Someone's going to a lot of trouble to get it back," Harper said.

"Do you have a suspect in the Gould/Mittendorf murders? Is it the same guy who attacked Jennie?"

"Off the record?"

"She's a friend, Harper. Of course it's off the record."

"Then yes on both counts."

"Who is it?"

"You should know better than to ask for a name." Earlier in the day, Harper and Captain Holloway had a drawn out debate on the subject of the CIA and what

they would do if they found out Salas was back in the States. They'd take custody, and God knew how long it would be before they could try Salas for Gould's and Mittendorf's murders.

"He's after the ring, isn't he?" Marc asked.

"That appears to be his motive. How much has Jennie told you about it?"

"Aside from the fact the professor was obsessed about it, nothing," Marc said. "She doesn't know what that ring represents."

"But that's not the case with you, is it? She told me about the message you left on her phone."

"He won't stop until he gets it, you know."

"What makes you think the guy can't be stopped?"

"I didn't say that. He's determined, but so are you." Marc sat up. "Grit is written all over you." A frown creased his brow and he paused as if trying to form the next few words. "You *will* catch him, won't you?"

"That's what I do."

"You're running out of time."

"It's never on my side," Harper said. "So tell me about the ring. What makes it so damned valuable?"

"Monetarily, it's priceless, but that's not why he wants it. It's not just a piece of jewelry, it's ancient – historical."

"A relic?"

"In a way."

"If not the money, what's the point? Why kill for it?"

"To have the power to change the course of humanity – life as we know it." Marc ran a hand over his mouth and raised his brow as if that would help him form the words. "Do you believe in curses?"

"No."

"You will before this is over. The black pearl ring has been around since the ninth century."

Harper said nothing at first. The tension in Marc's

voice made it clear he not only believed in the curse, he was terrified of it. "Go on."

"Life and death. The final battle between good and evil. That's what I'm talking about."

Harper crossed his arms and leaned forward against the table. He was looking for something more tangible than a Sunday school lesson. "Armageddon?" He shook his head. "Get serious. What about the inscription?"

"It's in Latin – from the Bible. Are you Catholic?"

"No. Does it matter?"

"Not really. I'm just trying to figure out how much I need to explain to you." Marc tossed back his mug and drained it.

"Popes weren't always the spiritually perfect beings we'd like to think they were. They were human – a product of their environment."

"Popes? I asked you about the inscription in the ring."

Marc shook his head and tapped his ear. "Listen up, I'm getting to it. Throughout history, there were a number of men who became popes not out of devotion to Christ, but because of their social status. Most came from the upper classes; with nobility came greed, position, and power. Look it up yourself, the early popes were involved in murders, bribery, carnal acts; things that even our free-thinking society considers unspeakable."

"I don't care about popes or ancient history," Harper said.

"You better."

"Why? What do they have to do with the ring?"

"Everything. In the ninth century, one of these nobles rose to power. He took to the papacy an exceedingly violent nature and lustful tendencies that changed the course of mankind."

"Changed it how?"

"We're heading toward the end of time, Harper. It's taken us thousands of years to get to here and it isn't pretty." Marc signaled the waitress for another round.

"How many does that make?" Harper nodded toward the empty mug in Marc's hand.

"I'm fine."

"You're drunk." Marc's theory was ridiculous. Was Marc attempting to make a fool of him by trying to expose his gullibility, or was he still angry because Harper hadn't rushed to Jennie's rescue before checking the facts? "I didn't come here to listen to some crazy history lesson about the Vatican."

Marc slid out of the booth and rose to his feet. "Guess I was wrong – thinking you might be open-minded. I thought you were different than the other officers. Suit yourself," he said, tossing a twenty on the table. "You're so smart, figure it out. But ask yourself this: How many more homicides can you handle before Christmas? The days are numbered."

"What are you talking about?"

"You really think a serial killer picked those boys at random and tossed them in the bay for no reason?"

"What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"What do you know about the floaters?"

Marc took a few more steps toward the door.

"Son of a bitch," Harper said under his breath and rushed after him. "All right, stop! Goddamn it, just stop." He narrowed his eyes. "What do the flo—" Harper looked around. The man sitting at the next table turned in his seat and glanced up at him with a question in his eyes. Harper motioned to Marc. "Sit down ... please ... just sit down and tell me what you know."

Crazy or not, Marc was all Harper had and tossing the floaters into the mix just gave him a reason to find

religion. As reluctant as Marc may have tried to act, it seemed he wanted to get whatever he knew off his chest as much as Harper needed to hear it.

"What do you know about the floaters?"

"I think their deaths are symbolic."

"All the physical evidence points to one person bent on killing gang leaders."

"I'm not talking about the physical."

"Then quit talking in circles. I suppose you think some higher power is behind the killings."

"No. He's human all right, but let's just say this killer's motives are different than what you're used to dealing with."

"How do you know so much about him?"

"I don't, but I know what that ring represents."

"I'm listening." Harper was ready to hear all the options no matter how weird they might sound.

"First, you need to understand the origin of that ring before you can tackle anything else," Marc said.

Harper had spent weeks trying to decipher the facts, interviewing witnesses, questioning the inconsistencies, and ramming head on into roadblocks. Had all of his investigative work boiled down to this? Sitting in a bar and getting his information from a half-cocked crusader? Harper drew in a breath knowing he was going to regret asking his next question: "All right. So what did the perverted pope do to change mankind?"

"He drank toasts to Satan."

"I imagine that didn't go over well with the faithful. Bet you're going to tell me that he got his just reward."

"He was murdered while in an adulterous act at the hands of the woman's husband. All three, the pope, the husband, and the woman, died within an hour of one another. His successor was quick to dispose of rumors and the distrust that enfolded the papacy so he ordered his predecessor's body cremated and all of his



belongings destroyed by the same fire, symbolic of the fires of hell that awaited him.”

“Seems reasonable.”

“His successor died days later as well.”

“And the ring fits into this how?”

“They never found it. They were supposed to have crushed and burnt it along with the pope’s corpse. They never found any sign of it in the ashes. It was assumed that someone took it before it could be destroyed.” Marc leaned forward and lowered his voice. “The ring was never found and over time it was forgotten by all but the Vatican until the late 1800’s when it reappeared in the Congo.”

“Sounds like the Holy Grail. The jury’s still trying to decide if it’s a hoax or not.”

“A Franciscan monk assigned to one of the villages in the interior region was the first white man to see it in nearly a thousand years,” Marc said.

“How did he know what he was looking at?”

“The Vatican inscribes each ring with a biblical quote. The monk was evidently well-versed in the ring’s history.”

“Like you.”

“Recognized it when he first laid eyes on it.”

“Also like you.”

“One of the tribe’s elders had it hanging around his neck.” Marc shook his head. “Irony, isn’t it? The Church had emissaries all over the world on a perpetual search in the hopes of destroying it and some old man walked out of the jungle with the thing hanging around his neck.”

“Destroy the ring, destroy the curse. Is that it?”

“Exactly.”

“How?”

“Holy water. It has to be kept in holy water. The monk talked the tribe’s elder into letting him see it.”

"I have two good friends who are Catholics, they never mentioned it and my grandmother was a Bible-thumping believer. Why haven't I heard anything about this pope or his ring before?"

"The CIA doesn't have anything on the Vatican when it comes to keeping secrets."

"Then how do you know it's not just another story?"

"Does it matter?" Marc asked.

"I don't have time for games."

"You'll just have to trust me, that's all."

"I don't trust anything but my gut instinct and right now I'd feel a hell of a lot more confident if I thought you knew what you were talking about."

"I don't want to discuss it."

"We're beyond secrets, don't you think?"

The waitress brought their next round of beers. The interruption allowed each man a minute to think.

"How do you know so much about it?" Harper asked again.

Marc reached for his mug, took a drink before whispering: "I was in the priesthood up until a year and a half ago." He paused again. "I had my reasons for leaving."

"I didn't ask."

"But you're curious. Everyone is when I tell them. Anyway, we had records available to us in the seminary that the public is never privy to. I researched the heck out of it."

Harper's immediate thought was to wonder how many cuss words he'd said in the past thirty minutes in the presence of a former priest.

"How long have you studied this?"

"Longer than you've been a cop."

"The trail didn't end with the monk, did it?" Harper asked. "What did he do with it? Send it back to the Vatican?"

"He didn't have time to lick a postage stamp. He held it in his hand only as long as it took to read the inscription; he was dead within twelve hours."

"You held it. So did Jennie."

"And look what's happened to her," Marc said.

"What about you?" Harper watched Marc tilt back the mug. "How do you explain the fact the curse hasn't affected you?"

"It will. It's a matter of time."

"Then this would be a good time to answer my question," Harper said. "The inscription, what's it say?"

"*Draco exedo mulier*. Roughly translated it means, dragon devours woman. You'll find a reference to it in Revelation."

"I'm familiar with it." Harper drained his mug. "Why didn't the elder die? Everyone who got near it dropped dead, this guy wears it around his neck and lives. Why?"

"The force that surrounds the ring is evil; its strength comes from the wickedness of the person who holds it."

"So you're telling me the monk was wicked?"

"You of all people should know not to let a man's appearance fool you. Some men hide behind their faith more than others. They can strap on a white collar and memorize every passage of the Bible, but they can't escape God's eyes. That's why we can't let this man get a hold of it. He'll destroy himself and everyone else in the process. The only assumption the church has drawn is that the curse can't hurt the pure at heart."

"Guess we're all screwed then." Harper's thoughts flashed back to his conversation with Jennie. She not only had it in her possession, she held it and tried to read its inscription. She had been kidnapped, held at gunpoint, beaten, and pushed down a flight of stairs, yet she was still alive.

"Keep your eye on her," Marc said, as if he had read Harper's mind.

"She's safe for the moment." Harper impulsively glanced at his watch and wondered if she was awake. "What doesn't make sense is that the killer walked into that pawnshop convinced Gould had the ring. When he didn't find it, he killed Gould and went looking for the professor. Killed him then went after Jennie. He held her for twenty-four hours, knew she didn't have the ring, yet let her live. What made him spare her life?"

"If this man is after the ring purely for its monetary value, then I'd have to say I don't know. He's a fool to leave behind a witness. But if he is the true owner of the ring ..."

"What?"

"Well, that's another matter. It means he has an understanding of the spirit world. I wouldn't be surprised if he's clairvoyant."

"Are you saying he talks with ghosts?"

"Spirits, Harper. And they talk to him," Marc said.

"Does the name Anita mean anything to you?" Harper asked.

Marc shook his head. "Why?"

"It was scratched on Jennie's front door."

"How much do you know about this man so far?" Marc asked.

"He's mixed up with one of the drug cartels in Colombia, killed a couple of CIA agents. According to the Colombian Embassy, he's wanted on other murder charges down there as well."

"What about his family?"

"Not much information. No record of his father; his mother Ann Mari had gotten into some trouble with the law as well. They wouldn't say what. She's deceased, he doesn't have any siblings."

"In Spanish, the name Anita is a derivative of Ann."

"Coincidence?" Harper asked.

"There are no such things as coincidences." After a second Marc offered a half-hearted smile. "Then again, maybe it's Jennie's guardian angel letting her know she's watching over her. Poor thing must wear track shoes to keep up with her. It's time you answered some of my questions. How did the ring end up here in the States?"

Harper recapped the story Jennie got from Mittendorf. "According to the professor, Gould had recently been in Colombia and brought it back with him. Jennie told me you took the ring from her desk. Did you?"

"I was only thinking of her safety," Marc said.

"You need to hand it over."

"Why?"

"Because now he knows you have it. Makes you his next target. Besides, it's evidence." Harper noticed the shifting movement of Marc's eyes. How many times had he seen a similar expression during an interrogation?

"You know how things can get lost in the evidence locker," Marc said. "It's safer with me."

"Where did you put it?"

"I can't tell you."

"Don't make me get a warrant."

"You have physical evidence and a suspect in the Gould/Mittendorf murders. You don't need the ring."

"It was the killer's motive for the murders and Jennie's kidnapping. Either you hand it over or I'm going to arrest you right here, right now."

Marc looked away. After a moment he broke his silence. "All right, but not here." He glanced at his watch. "Meet me at St Paul's in half an hour."

"You're in no condition to drive. Where do you have it? I'll drive."

“I’m fine. You’ll just have to trust me on this one. I’ll give it to you, but only at the church. I’ll explain when we get there. I promise.”

Harper didn’t know what he believed or how much more he could take of this nonsense, but it was time Marc talked to him more about the floaters. “I’ve listened to your story about the ring, now, where do you see the connection between it and the floaters?”

“The Book of Daniel, chapter seven, verses one through seven.”

Marc insisted they meet at St Paul's Catholic Church; Harper insisted he sober up.

It was nearly eight before Marc washed down a sandwich and fries with several cups of coffee. Whether Marc liked it or not, the ring was headed straight to the evidence room at police headquarters. If they left the pub now, Harper had plenty of time to drop off the ring and get back to the hospital before nine.

The temperature had dropped below freezing. The crisp bite in the air coupled with the gusts of wind that blew across Chandler Bay caused snow to drift along city streets. They were treacherous before, now the roads were nearly impassible and hard to maneuver. Only a single car was parked in the lot outside St Paul's. From the accumulation of snow that covered it, it hadn't been moved all day.

Marc gave him specific instructions to wait inside the church and cross himself with the holy water. It was ridiculous, but he realized there was no harm in going along so long as Marc held up his end of the bargain.

Each move Harper made in the vast open space of the sanctuary echoed back to him. Straight ahead, red carpeting lined the steps toward a limestone altar; an intricately laced cloth draped over its sides. Immediately in front of it were clusters of potted red poinsettias and to one side, a single candle flickered

inside a ruby red globe. He eased into the last pew nearest the back doors, leaned his head back against the wall, and looked up at the massive oak beams that curved into an immense vaulted ceiling. He could see why people flocked to places like this. It was a haven of peace; easy to lose track of time. He didn't even notice he had closed his eyes.

Harper's catnap was shattered by the ringing of his cell and the call from police dispatch. He glanced around church then checked his watch. *Eight forty-five*. Marc was nowhere in sight.

"Harper," he said, while calculating the various scenarios of why Marc hadn't shown and feeling a surge of anger.

The sergeant on the other end of the phone wasn't making any sense either.

"It's a traffic accident." Harper slammed his Jeep door and turned the engine. "Why are you calling me?"

"The officer at the scene asked for you. He was pretty insistent."

Harper looked both ways before rushing through the four-way stop near Gates and Tenth Streets. He hadn't saved Marc's phone number on his cell and had no way to reach him. If this was Marc's attempt to ditch him, Harper would deal with him later.

He drove six blocks before coming upon the red and blue pulsing lights of patrol cars. They flickered across the storefronts, shimmering off the icicles suspended from the overhangs on the buildings along the street. Harper got out of the car, turned up his coat collar, and braced himself against the wind as he walked toward the wreckage. Up ahead, a grocery delivery truck was on its side. A medical personnel had the truck driver prepped, strapped to a stretcher, and ready for transport to the hospital. As he walked around the



wreckage, the crumpled remains of a familiar blue compact car came into view. Harper quickened his step and ran toward the second ambulance attendant standing feet away from wreck. Next to the medic was a man on a stretcher.

"Harper," said one of the officers. "He's been calling your name. Doesn't look good, I thought I better try to get a hold of you."

Harper recognized the thick head of dark hair on the critically injured man. "Jesus," he said. "Marc?"

"Harper." Marc mouthed his name.

"Don't try to talk. You're going to be okay. You hear me?" Harper took hold of Marc's hand. He squeezed it. Marc squeezed back, tighter than Harper expected.

Marc coughed; a gurgled stream of blood slipped out the corner of his mouth.

"Glove compartment. Holy ..."

"Holy water. I remember," Harper said.

"Jennie." Marc coughed again. "Keep her safe."

"Marc? Stay with me. Keep your eyes open! Marc!"

An hour ago, they were having drinks and Marc was deep into theology. *It will. It's a matter of time*, Marc had said in response to the curse – now his words would forever be burned into Harper's mind. All his suspicions plunged deep into the pit of his stomach and turned like a torque. Harper refused to believe in the curse. It was the ice and the snow and however many beers Marc had consumed over the course of the evening, not a goddamn inanimate object. A knot shoved itself into his throat.

"Detective. He's gone, sir." The officer gripped Harper's arm above the wrist. "Let him go, sir."

Harper nodded.

"Any special instructions?" The officer stood still for a moment. His breath billowed out into the frigid night air in short even spurts. "Sir?"

"No." Harper closed his eyes and slammed his fist on the roof of the car, leaned in, and looked into the back seat. Marc's briefcase, his papers, and other personal belongings had been tossed in the wreck. He reached in to gather them up and found Marc's Bible beneath them. *Damn it.*

The front end of the car was gone, ravaged as if a wild animal had sunk its teeth into the hood and had torn it away from the frame. What was left of the dash and front-end interior was unrecognizable. Harper took a crow bar from one of the officers' cars, forced its edge down beneath the lock of the Marc's glove compartment, and popped it open.

The urgency that prodded him two minutes ago was suddenly gone. *It's nothing but hogwash*, he told himself. A wives' tale told to scare the shit out of weak men and innocent children. *Nothing but a silver band worn by an old horny pope on his last night on earth.* It's evidence, nothing more, he thought as he reached into the compartment. Harper immediately pulled his hand out sensing the sting of whatever had sliced his finger. The car registration, candy bar wrappers, and title, were soaked not just with his blood, but with the holy water from the broken flask that Marc used to protect himself from the ring.

## 40

The trouble with sleeping in a different bed was that Jennie couldn't. This was her second night at Community Hospital and the only reason she had slept so soundly the night before was due to the wonder of painkillers. Tonight was a different matter.

Jennie tossed and turned, itching to end this hospital ordeal. The black pearl ring story begged to be typed. It was the one that would blow Brian's socks off and make it to the front page of *The Chandler Times*. The doctor admitted her injuries looked worse than they were; only bruises, a few scratches, and the cut on her lip from the Latin ogre who held her hostage. Her body ached and felt stiff, but it was nothing that wouldn't eventually work itself out. The doctor was supposed to have released her to go home that morning. *What gives?* she wondered.

Jennie was infuriated with the thought of Alejandro pressing his gun to her ribs and making her forget her computer in the car. By now, it was probably ruined or stolen. Either way, the darn thing and her files were certainly lost. With a flip of the wrist, a two-month-old, dog-eared issue of *House and Garden* landed on the nightstand.

She grabbed the remote control and stared at the small television suspended from the opposite wall near the foot of her bed. As one mind-numbing program

after another flashed across the screen, the flickering hallway lights that signaled the end of the visiting hours caught her attention. *It must be nine*, Jennie thought. Marc had reached her on her bedside phone and mentioned he was meeting Harper for drinks at four and would call her back. *Five hours ago*. Where was he and what about Harper? Yes, what about Harper? What difference did it make if he came back with more questions or not? All Jennie wanted to do was go home. But the thought of home dredged up the horror of her abduction. Alejandro found her exactly as Harper had warned he would. The apprehension was still in Harper's eyes when he stopped by to see her the day before. To Jennie's surprise, she liked the feel of his concern.

Going to sleep was the only way to make the unbearably long hours pass without notice. She adjusted her pillow and had laid back down when a shadow swept past her door. There were no noticeable footsteps or the sounds of carts getting wheeled down the hall. She jerked her head toward the door. Chills rippled along her arms and legs at the sound of the woman's voice. Again those words: 'He knows'. Jennie seized the covers and pulled them up to her chin. Fright wrapped its cold fingers around her throat and stifled her scream.

"The doctor got my message?" Harper rushed down the hospital hallway. The evening nurse, a short, middle-aged woman, struggled to keep up with him. Her jet-black hair was pulled back in a tight little bun at the crown of her head making her eyes stand out like two bits of coal centered on a round face.

"He knows," she said in broken English. "I spoke to him myself. Hurry, you must leave. Take the back elevators. No one will see you."

Harper didn't want to draw attention to Jennie's release. If the other nurses and orderlies didn't see him taking her out, they wouldn't have to lie if Salas came looking for her.

"Stay here. I might need your help," he told her as he stepped into Jennie's room. Jennie was under the cover, curled up with her back to the door. She jumped when he tapped her on the shoulder.

"Jeez Harper! Give a girl a heart attack. This place is creeping me out the way it is. The last thing I need is for you to sneak up on me. What are you doing here anyway? Visiting hours are over."

"I'm getting you out of here. Come on."

"Really?" The corner of her mouth made a slight upward turn. She swung her legs out of bed, grabbed the back of her gown, and threw him a look. "Do you mind?"

"This nurse will help you."

"What nurse?" Jennie leaned over and looked around him.

Harper shot a glance over his shoulder and pursed his lips. At least the woman left him a wheelchair.

"I don't need help," she said. "Just give me a couple of minutes – in private."

Jennie was ready in one. He edged out into the hallway first and looked both ways; not a person in sight. They hurried down the hall then turned the corner toward the back elevators as the night nurse had instructed. Harper waited until they were inside his Jeep and out of the parking lot before letting her in on his plan.

"Your house? No, I want to go home," Jennie said.

"It's not safe there and you know it. Salas knows where you live. You don't have anywhere else to go and don't ask me to put you up in a hotel."

"I wouldn't dream of asking you for anything."

"That'll be the second place Salas will look," he said.

"I need a shower and change of clothes," she said.  
"I need my shampoo and my—"

"I'll get whatever you need tomorrow – you can borrow some of my stuff tonight."

"But—"

"Quit arguing. This isn't up for debate."

The next outburst he expected to hear never happened. She looked more nervous than anything else. He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. She twitched, but didn't pull away.

"You're wrong, you know," she told him. "I do have friends. You don't need to bother, I can always stay with Marc."

He wondered how long it would take for her to mention Marc's name.

Harper nosed his Jeep into the garage of his home and parked. Jennie eased herself out of the car and was up the three short steps that led into his kitchen before he could offer to help her. By the time he walked into the house, she'd found her way through the living room and was sitting in the only comfortable seat in the house; his black leather recliner. He was suddenly aware of the beating inside his chest. Harper decided to write off his edginess to the multitude of things that had already gone wretchedly wrong, and now, as he watched her scrutinize his home, he began to question his sanity.

"Mind if I shower?" she asked.

Harper led her down the hallway to the bathroom and switched on the light. He forgot about his dirty shirt draped on the rack and the socks and wet towel he left in a pile on the floor that morning. He quickly gathered things up and got out of her way.

"Don't worry about it," she said, eyeing the clothes in his arms.

He handed her a clean towel then nodded at the robe hanging from the hook on the back of the door. "You can put that on when you're done if you like. I'll see what I can find for you to change into. I'll ah ... just leave it on the bed."

She thanked him and shut the door.

He hadn't had time to clean out Kay's drawers. He knew his former flame wouldn't be back. Kay hadn't called since the day she left for New York in late October nor had he tried to reach her. Would any of that matter to Jennie? Harper questioned himself for even thinking it would. He rubbed the back of his neck and opened the top dresser drawer.

The first thing to catch his eye was the familiar black lace camisole. Harper held it at arms' length by the straps, thought for a moment, then put it back. He rummaged through the rest of the clothes in Kay's drawers, but none of them were remotely appropriate for Jennie, except one. He placed the night clothes on the bed and made his way into the kitchen.

It was after ten and it wasn't the sound of running water from his shower that had him distracted but who was in it. They hadn't exactly hit it off and the chance of them coming to terms seemed as remote as her not crying when he'd break the news to her about Marc.

Harper opened the fridge with the intention of making himself something to eat. He wanted more than a cold sandwich and settled on a three-egg omelet. Harper cracked the eggs into a bowl, threw in a dash of salt and pepper, and whipped them together. The margarine in the skillet had started to sizzle when he heard Jennie's voice.

"Great fit, huh?" She smiled as she held out her arms to show off her ill-fitting outfit.

Her towel-dried hair had a natural wave he hadn't

expected. He turned off the stove. She was standing four feet away wearing his white terrycloth robe. The belt was tied snugly around her waist; the sleeves bulged on the ends from the number of times she had rolled them up. The neckline of his gray T hung loosely around her neck, but the blue and green plaid leisure pants were a perfect fit. Bruises or not, she was ... irresistible.

"These pants aren't yours, are they?" she asked.

"They fit okay."

"Will she be back to claim them?"

"No." He paused for a moment. "She—"

"Don't. It's none of my business." She crossed the lapels close around her neck. "You look frazzled."

"I'm fine, just tired." Right now all he wanted to do was memorize her face and pretend a mad man wasn't hunting her down. He wanted life to be normal again like it had been before the floaters sprang from the bottom of the bay and Salas went on a killing spree. For the next several hours he wanted to forget all of it. But Marc's comment about the floaters nagged at him and begged for answers. If Marc was right, Salas was key to more than just Gould's and Mittendorf's murders.

"Are you hungry?" He wiped his hands on a dishtowel and walked around to her side of the breakfast bar. "Want anything to drink?"

"No, thanks." She took a seat at one of the stools. "How'd you cut your forehead?"

"Slipped on some ice."

"What about your hand?" she asked. "It looks nasty. You should have that looked at."

"It's nothing. Cut it on a piece of glass."

"Have you cleaned it? Where are your bandages?" She slipped off the stool and started to head back toward the bathroom.

"Never mind my hand," he said, taking hold of her



arm. "Something's come up. Please ... sit down."

"What's wrong?"

"We need to talk."

"Look, if this is about your kidnap attempt, don't worry. I forgive you. Seems to be a trend lately."

He ran a hand through his hair then sat on the stool next to her and took hold of her hands. "It's about Marc."

"He told me you two were going to meet. Did he—"

"Jennie, Marc was in a traffic accident tonight."

"Is he all right?" Disbelief faded the play in her smile.

"He's dead."

A blank look washed over her face. Jennie waited as if to hear the punch line before she frowned. "When? I just talked with him this afternoon."

"Not more than a couple of hours ago. A truck lost control on the ice – hit him head on."

"Oh my God." A tear glistened and slid down her cheek. "You saw him?"

"I was waiting to meet him when I got the call."

She covered her mouth to stifle a cry.

"He never knew what hit him." Harper lied knowing that Marc had to have been in excruciating pain. The truck crushed his chest. His head injuries alone should have killed him instantly. It was a wonder he survived as long as he had. She didn't need to know any of that. Not this minute.

"It's the ring. Isn't it?" she asked. "He had the ring."

"You saw the roads. It had nothing to do with the ring, or the curse, or any other superstition."

Marc and Jennie had focused on the ring and its supposed curse. But Harper had to deal with reality; the tangible evidence like DNA, fingerprints, and eyewitness accounts he could give to the prosecuting attorney. Hard evidence alone would put Salas behind bars. He was a wanted man in two countries, he

murdered Gould and Mittendorf, car-jacked Jennie, and kept her hostage. The only glitch was finding him. Unless they could track him down from Jennie's cell phone records, Salas, for all intent and purposes, was an invisible man.

"Were you aware that Marc knew the story behind that ring?"

Jennie shot him a glance.

"That's what we were talking about earlier tonight," he said.

"Wait a minute. He didn't even know I had it until a couple of days ago. How could he know anything about it?"

"He was a former priest. He said he studied it for years."

Another look of surprise swept over her.

"He gave me a detailed account of it, who it belonged to, how it got lost and who found it." Harper told her about the ninth century pope, the missionary who found the ring in the 1800s, and Marc's theory of how it got to Colombia. "Marc said Salas won't stop killing until he gets it back. I have to agree with him. Think. Did Salas mention a restaurant, a landmark or street, anything like that?"

"No." She shook her head. "Nothing."

"I was hoping he'd slip."

"I've told you everything. I swear it."

"Mittendorf's secretary said he went on a trip to Central America a few months ago. Did Mittendorf say anything about it to you?"

Again she shook her head. "All he talked about was the ring. Why do you keep asking me about him? I don't know anything."

"Because I need facts, evidence that I can hold in my hand, not curses or this supernatural hogwash. Mittendorf and Marc studied the ring's history. They

knew exactly what it was worth and one of them had to have known about Salas.”

“What are you saying? Are you accusing Marc of ... he was the most honest person I’ve known.”

“That may be, but this whole prophecy thing is a smoke screen. Can’t you see that? Think Jennie. There has to be more.”

She slid off the stool, took three steps, crossed her arms, and lowered her head. Harper didn’t need to see her face to know that she was trying to piece together the bits of conversations she had had with the men. After a moment she looked over her shoulder.

“Mittendorf said someone paid Gould to go after the ring. Don’t ask me who. He didn’t say.”

Harper’s immediate thoughts rushed to the note Agnes gave to him and the person Gould referred to in the note as *M K*. “Did he mention anyone with the initials of *M K*?”

“The only name he brought up was Gould.”

“What about Marc? Do you think he knew about Gould?”

“I can’t believe that Marc had anything to do with Gould’s murder.”

“I didn’t say that he was involved, but he knew more than he told either of us. What kind of assignments was he working on?”

“Brian had him on a story about the upcoming planetary alignment. Marc was fascinated by it. In fact, he went to talk to a priest about it the other day.”

“Why a priest?”

“An amateur astronomer, I guess.”

“I need to see Marc’s notes. Where would he have kept them?”

“He carried everything in that briefcase of his.”

In the rush to go to the hospital, Harper forgot Marc’s briefcase was in the back seat of his Jeep. He

wasn't gone more than a minute or two. When he returned, Jennie was across the room looking out the patio doors into the pitch blackness of the night.

"Got it." He placed the briefcase on the countertop and started to look through its contents. "Let's hope he left us some answers," he said then heard a soft cry. "Jennie?"

The normal things one would ask like: "What's wrong?" or "Are you okay?" seemed ridiculous after all that had happened in the past few days.

"I'm sorry." He went to her side; every fiber of his being wanted to pull her close and tell her things would be fine, knowing damn well they had changed forever. He glanced at their reflection in the glass and touched her arms; she eased away.

"Don't." She held her open palm out toward him.

"What's the matter?"

"Don't pretend you remotely care about either of us."

"What are you talking about?"

"Me and Marc." She turned with tears in her eyes. "We're nothing more than two little pieces to your murder puzzle. He's dead and all you care about are those two old men who probably deserved what they got for stealing the damned thing. What happened tonight? How did Marc really die? Did you think bringing me here would make everything better?"

"No." He reached for her arms again and felt her push. This time he didn't let go. "None of it will ever be better, understand. And yeah, I care. That's why I brought you here. There's a lunatic running around out there and I'm fresh out of ideas on where to find him. Marc's death was an accident plain and simple, but you, you're next on Salas's hit list and I'll be damned if I'm going to let him get near you."

Jennie buried her face in her hands and cried uncontrollably.

Harper drew in a breath and let her go. He turned away briefly not knowing what to do next. He could see she was scared and probably felt more alone than ever before. He decided to try it again. "Come here." He pulled her near. This time she didn't resist. She rested her head against his chest inhaling in short, shallow breaths as she tried to suppress her tears.

"It's okay," he whispered.

"I can't believe he's gone. Has anyone called his family yet? Brian probably knows how to reach them."

"You let me worry about that." Worrying for her was the first thing he could do toward fulfilling his promise to Marc.

"If I hadn't agreed to meet Mittendorf, none of this would have happened."

"Stop it. This isn't your fault." He rubbed her back then let his hands drop down around her waist.

"Say what you want, but Marc would still be alive if it wasn't for me. I might as well have put a gun to his head and squeezed the trigger."

"Don't. I was there and I'm telling you it was an accident."

"I don't believe that for a minute. Look at everything that's happened since I picked up that ring."

"Jennie, there is no such thing as a curse. It's all explainable."

"Let's start with Gould and Mittendorf," she said. "They were killed because of the ring."

"You said it yourself, Gould probably stole the ring and tried to pawn it off on Mittendorf. Salas just followed the trail."

"Then why not report it?" she asked. "Why didn't Alejandro report it stolen?"

"Are you listening to yourself? He's a murderer. The CIA has been after him for years."

"And what about—"

Harper waited to hear her next point. Instead, she buried her face against his chest again. "What?" he asked.

"Never mind. You'll think I'm ridiculous."

"At this point, nothing is ridiculous. What is it?"

Jennie told him about the footsteps beneath her window leading from the house back down to the steps without any indication of where they came from.

"Is that when you screamed?"

"No. I told you I had a dream. The dream woke me up." She looked at him for a minute before trying to describe the woman in her dream. "I couldn't see her face. All I remember is feeling scared out of my wits. I got that same creepy feeling tonight at the hospital."

"You were frightened and it's understandable, but there was no one on your floor tonight other than a couple of nurses." Harper's thoughts flashed to the name Carter found etched into her front door window. "Earlier you said you blacked out after Salas hit you. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I'm not sure. I think I heard him scream, but I couldn't be certain. Why?"

"I asked you if the name Anita meant anything to you. You said no."

"What about it?"

"It was scratched across your front door. Do you remember seeing Salas do it?"

"No. Why would he?"

She had a point; none of it made sense. Why would Salas do it unless he had tried to implicate someone else in the murders? "Was there anyone else in the house that you know of?"

"No. Unless, of course, you want to count the knight in shining armour who hightailed it out of there and left me alone with the killer."

"Jennie I didn't—"

Jennie cupped her hands around his cheeks and pulled his face to hers. "I know," she said.

In that moment, nothing mattered but the soft touch of her lips. He wrapped himself around her, closed his eyes, and kissed her again.

He brushed a strand of hair from her face and sensed her guilt. "You did what you thought you had to do about Mittendorf. You couldn't know any of this was going to happen."

"Instinct – I knew I shouldn't have gotten involved. I should have told him 'no' right from the start. I should have—"

"It'll be okay."

"How can you be so certain?"

"I promise I'll get him. Come here." He took her by the hand and led her to the coffee table. "I have something for you."

Her face lit up at the sight of her laptop and rushed to open it. She sat at the edge of the couch and waited for it to boot up.

"I found it in your car. Hope you don't mind that I took it. Your briefcase is here too," he said.

"Are you kidding? My life is in here. It's charged and everything!"

He lit a log in the fireplace and left her to do whatever it was she was now preoccupied with while he slipped back into the kitchen to finish cooking his omelet.

When he returned, she was engrossed in her Internet search.

"What are you trying to find?" Harper sat down on the couch next to her and propped his feet on the coffee table. He glanced down at the way she sat on the edge of his couch and imagined the form beneath the bulky robe. He wanted to reach around her waist

and pull her close. Instead, he fluffed up a pillow and slipped it beneath his head.

"Marc was right about the origins of the ring. Mittendorf told me it belonged to a Colombian medicine woman. Some sort of voodoo priestess. I found several references to it in a missionary site. Maybe that's the monk Marc told you about. Also read a few local stories about a prophecy too," she said.

"What prophecy?"

"I'm not sure I understood any of it," she said.

Harper had grown increasingly curious about the ring. It was still in Marc's briefcase, but it was late and there'd be time to look at it tomorrow.

"You said Marc went to see a priest about the planet thing. Which priest?" he asked.

"If he mentioned his name, it slipped my mind. Someone from St Paul." Jennie covered her mouth to stifle another yawn.

*St Paul*, he thought. He hadn't made the connection before, but each of the recent cases he and Mann had investigated in the past several weeks led straight to the steps of St Paul's; Vinny Woods and at least two of the floaters had lived at St Paul's Mission, and now Marc. Harper made a mental note to visit the monsignor this week and find out which of his priests had talked with Marc.

"You're tired," he said. "Why don't you shut it off? I turned down the bed for you. You can work all day tomorrow without interruptions."

"I need to go home."

"I can't let you do that. Not until we find Salas."

"Who knows how long it will take. What about my clothes – my toiletries?"

"Make me a list. I'll get whatever you need tomorrow."

Jennie glanced at him for just a second before



shutting down her computer. "You're not as tough as you'd like people to think you are, you know that?"

"Yeah, well, don't tell anyone." He reached for the table lamp and turned off the light. The glow from the fire in the hearth warmed the room and filled it with a sense of welcome tranquility.

She leaned back and nestled herself into his arms. Not much more left to say. Jennie was his only witness and up until now, his focus had been on her safety. But she had nudged her way into his life and there was no mistaking the signals. He kissed her forehead, one cheek and then the other. He pressed his lips to hers then made his way down her neck while he reached for the knot on her robe and worked it loose.

She guided his hand and kissed him back.

## 41

*Beat him in for a change.* Mann was usually running late and Harper was the one waiting around for him to lumber into the office. Today the roles were reversed. Mann kept an eye on the clock as he poured himself another cup of coffee. When he settled into his chair, he noticed a drop of the brew had landed on his tie as well as on some of the papers he had scattered across his desk. He quickly dabbed them dry with a napkin and dusted the Danish crumbs from his desk. He coyly glanced up at Abby's picture. *I got it.* He grinned, as if his wife had seen his mess. He returned his attention to the work in front of him when he heard the knock on the door.

"Detective?" Reba Brendini held out her artist rendition of the suspect in the Jennifer Blake assault case. "There you go. Handsome thug isn't he?" she said. "From what Blake told me, you could sit down and have a fancy meal with this guy and not know he was a killer. He's articulate and could pass off as a gentleman if he had to." She crossed her arms seemingly waiting for Mann's reaction.

"That's him, huh?" he asked as he studied her drawing. Brendini had an amazing eye for detail and if this drawing was as accurate as the others he had seen, they could start looking for this thug, as she had called him, as soon as Harper got in.

“Blake said Salas looks to be in his mid to late twenties – approximately five-nine; a hundred and sixty pounds.”

The drawing reflected a man with even features, a narrow forehead, deeply set dark brown eyes, brown skin, and thin lips. Brendini drew the suspect's hair to seem nearly black and closely cut on the sides, longer on top and combed back. On each ear he wore silver looped earrings.

“Blake told me the last time she saw him, he was wearing a pair of jeans, a dark green sweater, and a black leather jacket,” Brendini said. “So where's Blake now?”

Mann looked at her without a clue or an answer.

“I stopped by the hospital a few minutes ago to make sure I had this right. The nurse said Blake sneaked out in the middle of the night. Is Harper in yet?” she asked.

Mann let her last question simmer a minute, reached for the phone then said: “Thanks for this. I'll take it from here.”

“She's at my house.” Harper jerked his head from one side to another watching for oncoming traffic. His Jeep swung into a fishtail as he tried to cross the ice covered intersection.

“You sneaked her out of the hospital? Are you nuts? What were you thinking?” Mann asked.

“That I should do whatever I have to do to keep her alive.”

Harper didn't have to be in the same room with Mann to read his mind. “Quit worrying. I left word for the doctor. The head nurse said she talked with him and he understood the situation.”

“Sam—”

“She doesn't have anywhere else to go,” he paused.

"It's a long story. I'll fill you in later."

"How's she doing?"

"She's okay. She was right about Marc having the ring. Salas knew it too." Harper gave Mann a short version of Marc's incredible story and about the accident that took his life. "The minute Salas figures out that Marc's dead, Blake will go right back to the top of his list."

"I get it."

"So far, we've been one step ahead of Salas. How long do you think it'll take him to figure out that she was taken to the hospital?"

"Sam, I understand, okay?"

"There's something else too. We have to look at the floater cases again."

"What now?"

"Marc suggested Salas is somehow connected to it."

"That's crazy. The embassy said the Colombian police spotted Salas a few weeks ago in his home town. He wasn't even in the States when those boys were killed."

"That's what I told him, but he was pretty insistent. Any news on the kid who killed Woods?" Harper asked.

"I questioned him. Said he'd given his life to Jesus. And are you ready for this? He claimed he killed Woods to rid the world of a sinner. That's all we need, another under-aged crusader. When I asked him about the cross he scratched on Woods abdomen, he said he was marking him for the Beast."

"Who's been filling his head?"

"Prison records show that the kid's only visitor in the last two weeks was the monsignor from St Paul's, Jonathan Keller."

"Keller again? So he knew both Woods and this kid?"

“Yeah, must have a soft spot for the souls of juvenile delinquents.”

“He’s already on our call list.” Harper couldn’t be sure that this Keller was the person Gould referred to in his note to Mittendorf as *M K*. But if Marc’s story was accurate, it would make sense that the professor would want to discuss the ring’s history with a priest. “Stoebe is lying in a padded cell, might as well be brain dead for all the good he is to us. Maybe this priest can fill in some blanks.”

Harper recognized the long pause on the other end of the line. Mann wasn’t entirely convinced the cases were in the least way connected, but he knew his partner was thinking it through.

The officers were talking among themselves, waiting in the detective bullpen for their eight-thirty session to start. They shot a glance at the door when Harper walked in. The tension was as undeniable as the apprehension he saw in each of their faces. They were all ready to put the cases to rest starting with the recent murders of Gould and Mittendorf.

“Everyone, take a stack,” Harper said as he passed around copies of Salas’s drawing. “Alejandro Salas. Remember the name, memorize the face. CIA wants him on charges of drug smuggling and murder.”

“Here we go again,” said one of the officers. “We do the dirty work and the Feds take the glory.”

“He killed a couple of their agents. They’re going to get greedy with this one,” Harper said. “Can’t blame them; we’ll turn him over to them – as soon as we get some answers. In the meantime, I want every patrol on alert. Salas is believed to be armed and dangerous. Approach him with caution and back-up. Understand?”

The men and women nodded; some voiced their agreement, others grunted.

"We're going on the assumption he doesn't know anyone in the city – that means he's not staying with family or friends," Mann said. "He's tied up with a Colombian drug lord so that gives us reason to believe he has financial resources at his fingertips. He doesn't look like a hood. He's clean-cut and well-mannered so stay sharp."

"Where do we start?" someone asked.

"Check every hotel and restaurant within the metro area," Harper said. "Blake's car is still missing; you have the make and color. Find it. Run it through the lab. She first met him at the coffee shop around the corner from the newspaper office. He might return to familiar places. Check with the servers. See if anyone remembers talking with him or seeing him lately. If we're lucky, he slipped and asked about a hotel or a restaurant. The guy has to eat and sleep."

At that moment, one of the detectives assigned to track Jennie's phone records barged into the bull pen. "Harper, we got a locale on Salas. Seems he likes delivery pizza from Roma's on East Forty Second. Hilton Hotel, room 257."

"Wilson and Neff, you two set up a surveillance. Oliver and Jacobs back them up. Call me the minute you spot him."

"No disrespect, Father, but we're not talking about disclosing a confession." Harper leaned over the monsignor's desk and aimed an accusing finger at Jonathan Keller. "Maybe you can't be held responsible for what that kid did to Vinny Woods, but your code of silence on this other matter doesn't mean a thing to me except obstruction of justice."

Keller slipped the ledger he had been working on into one of his desk drawers. Dressed in the traditional black cassock, he sat erect in his chair, each perfectly white hair in its place. He adjusted the silver and black crucifix he wore around his neck then lowered his hand to the desktop. The priest knitted a set of slender fingers together and stared back in defiance.

"What my partner means to say, Father, is that—"

"I'm not stupid, Detective Mann. I know exactly what Mr Harper here is implying."

"We really need your help on this." Mann forced a smile.

Harper mentally cursed at his partner's attempt to smooth things over. "Two old men were bludgeoned to death, three boys washed up from the bottom of the bay, and one was left for the gulls and dogs to scavenge. Each suffered a violent death and according to Marc Dillings, the deaths of these six victims are connected. Any thoughts on that?"

"I couldn't begin to say what Marc had in mind." Father Keller looked down his nose at them as if scolding a pair of choirboys. "Marc was always a bit of a rebel. He was obsessed with signs. I wouldn't be surprised if he thought those poor boys represented something biblical."

"Like a sign from the sea?" Harper asked. There was no maybe about it. Marc told him about biblical references to signs from the sea and sky. The monsignor would undoubtedly know them as well but it was the tone of Keller's statement that stuck in his craw.

"You sound skeptical, Father. Isn't faith about believing in the word of God?"

"What are you insinuating?"

"I'm not insinuating anything. It's a straightforward question. Isn't faith the belief in the things we can't see or prove?"

"Of course it is. What's that have to do with any of this?"

"Marc was convinced of a connection between what is happening in Chandler and the biblical signs. He didn't sound obsessed to me, but he was scared. Scared enough to die trying to prevent whatever *it* was from happening."

"Nonsense."

"Father, you're the last person I expected would scoff at this."

"How dare you!"

"The man is dead," Harper said.

"Marc's death, Detective, was an act of God. He was too zealous for his own good. I believe I read in the paper that he had blood/alcohol content in his system. He was as unpredictable as the wind." The monsignor remained as expressionless as a piece of granite.

"The man we're looking for in connection to the



Mittendorf/Gould murders is wanted by the CIA. He risked his life and traveled halfway around the world for a ring that is supposedly cursed. That's a fact, Father. Marc saw the ring and claimed it's the same ring that a Franciscan monk uncovered in the Congo in the 1800s. He said it can be traced back to the ninth century church. Is that true?"

"Anything is possible. Marc studied the life out of that ring. I suppose—"

Harper reached into his pocket and placed the ring on the desk in front of Keller. "This one?"

Fear leaped into the monsignor's blue eyes. He leaned back, refusing to look at it. His lips drew tense at the corners.

"Come on, Father, you said yourself – it's nonsense, right? Or is it? What better court of law than your own church? You wouldn't lie this close to His house, would you?"

"Get that off my desk."

"Why? It's just a ridiculous notion, remember? Just a ring. I didn't think men of the cloth were supposed to believe in curses and superstitions." Harper watched the color drain from the old priest's face as he slipped the ring back into his pocket. "Hate to tell you this, but you have the same look in your eyes that Marc had before he died. What's scaring the daylights out of you?" Harper waited for a meaningful answer, a quote from the Bible or a blessing would have been nice.

"You're right, Detective. I don't believe in curses. But I believe that Satan will use whomever and whatever he deems necessary to win souls. That ring is an inanimate object. It has no powers of its own other than those conjured up in the minds of men."

"Good. At least that's one thing we agree on. Is that what you told Mittendorf?"

"The good professor didn't know what he was getting himself into."

"So you did talk with him."

"Briefly. I shared with him what I could, that the ring is a representation of Lucifer's evil. An ancient pope called upon Satan and it is as you say, a fact, nothing good ever came to anyone who possessed it."

"And where's that leave us with Marc's theory?"

"It's nothing more than a theory; one he conjured up to fit one of many prophecies."

"Which prophecy?" Mann asked.

"The final days. They will come whether we like it or not. Not much anyone can do about it, but that ring must be destroyed."

"Not until we find our suspect," Mann said. "Theory or not, he came a long way for it and we're going to use it to haul him in."

"Fanatics will do anything to get their way. I'd post the ring on eBay if I thought it would bring him out in the open," Harper said.

"No! You can't."

Harper was looking square into the eyes of a man who knew a hell of a lot more than he was willing to say. "Last night, hours before Marc died, he told me I had days left. What did he mean by that? Days left until what? What is going to happen in the next few days?"

"I will not ... be part ... to mad hysteria," Keller said through clenched teeth. A blue vein on his temple jutted out.

"Then take a part in the man's arrest! Tell us what we need to look for! What is he going to do?"

Father Keller slowly pushed himself away from his desk. He drifted across the room toward the limestone fireplace on the opposite wall. With a steady grip of the poker, he broke up the smoldering logs until they shot into a blaze again; sparks snapped and crackled then

settled into a warm glowing fire. He returned the poker to its stand, leaned against the mantel, pressed his lips to his fist, and stared at the small nativity centered on the cherry surface.

"I don't know what he'll do. Does this man know you have the ring?" Keller asked.

"No. Does it matter?" Harper asked.

Keller frowned and closed his eyes briefly. "Of course, it matters a great deal." A second later he turned to face his cross-examiner. "This man's goal is to possess it, and if he does, he will use it to—"

"I only deal in facts, Father, not fantasy. My only interest in the ring is that it goes to prove the killer's motive. We have his prints, same ones taken from each of the three crime scenes. That's enough for an arrest and conviction but we have to find him first."

"He's too cunning to allow that." Father Keller grew quiet again and stared into the fire. Without taking his eyes from the flame, he said: "This man will stop at nothing to get his hands on that ring."

"Those were Marc's exact words and I'm banking on it."

"You've put yourself in grave danger, Detective."

"Story of my life, Father. Are you going to answer my question?"

"I've given you more than you need."

"Not exactly. What did Marc mean by a few more days?"

"Marc was fascinated with the history behind the black pearl ring. It was his passion for as long as I can remember." Keller paused again. "He came to see me a few days ago on the pretense of writing an article for the newspaper."

"On the planetary alignment?"

Keller nodded. "I let him talk to see just how much he knew about it. He did his homework, I'm surprised

he left you hanging. The exact alignment will occur at seven o'clock on the morning of December twenty-fourth – that's Marc's reference to a few days."

"Christmas Eve," Harper said.

"You're talking physics," Mann said. "There's nothing mystical about it."

"There is if you believe the way Marc did. The story goes that when the old pope died, he called out to Satan and his soul was immediately lost to eternal damnation. He cursed his papal ring and anyone who would ever possess it."

"We know the story." Harper paced three steps one way; two the other. They were losing precious time listening to another recap of Marc's theory.

"Do you? Really? The pope swore events would point to this time. That when the planets formed a straight line with the sun the Antichrist would appear to take possession of the ring and his place in the world," Keller said.

"The Anti... Not exactly what the scriptures say is it?" Mann sank into his chair unable to mask his annoyance with the man who embodied his childhood beliefs. "This isn't the first time the planets lined up like this."

"No, but it's the first time the ring has surfaced in the northern hemisphere without its protector at precisely the same time the eight planets make the formation. That's what makes it unique, that the ring was hidden for hundreds of years and now it's here." Keller raised and lowered a weary glance.

"What do you mean, 'its protector'?"

"The person entrusted to its safekeeping. Obviously, it was taken from its rightful owner." He took hold of the poker again and seemed obsessed with the log in the fireplace. Keller jabbed the broken, sweltering pieces again as if to destroy them completely. A hot cinder

flipped dangerously close to the carpeting. He quickly shoved it back into the fireplace with the toe of his shoe.

"The man we're looking for claims the ring is his," Harper said.

"Trust me. He's lying. The protector would have never allowed him to have it. It must be crushed."

"Marc said to immerse it in holy water," Harper said.

"He's wrong. Papal rings must be crushed. When he came to see me, he mentioned he had the ring knowing full well the danger it represented."

"So you do believe in the curse thing after all?"

"Think what you like. If Marc had destroyed it, he wouldn't have been out on that night and he'd still be alive," Keller said. "His death, Detective, was in God's plan and no one can interfere with it. Now you have the ring. As it is, you're running out of time. Destroy the ring before it destroys you."

"What about the floaters? Still no thoughts?" Harper caught the frustration in Mann's eyes. He knew his partner's mind better than most. Sure, they arrested Stoebe for the murders but, as the good doctor Brannon pointed out, Stoebe's mind was locked and Harper was still looking for answers. All the physical evidence pointed to Stoebe, so as far as Mann was concerned, the floaters' case was closed. If it wasn't for the monsignor standing five feet away, Harper was willing to bet Mann would have shouted at the top of his lungs that there was no goddamned connection between the floaters and Salas.

"Sorry I can't help you there. Such a tragedy." The monsignor rubbed warmth into his hands and returned to his chair. "Technically, we're in the same line of work. We try to protect people from harm – from themselves, but we don't always succeed, do we? You know as well as I do that for every good there is evil. If

God has his emissaries on earth so does the Beast.” Father leaned back in his chair and paused for a moment. “Satan takes on many forms and uses the weak to do his bidding.”

Harper’s dispute with Dr Brannon about Travis Stoebe’s mental condition came rushing back to him. *Incoherent, withdrawn, can’t be held responsible.* Those were her words but her assessment was equal to shoving a square peg into a round hole. It didn’t match the evidence against him. Images of the upside down cross carved into the victim’s flesh flooded Harper’s thoughts. He threw a glance at the wall immediately behind the monsignor’s desk. The simplicity of the décor, a huge wall adorned by a single thin wooden crucifix was in stark contrast to another scene Harper had witnessed just days before. He scoured his memory for details of Stoebe’s home. “We need to go.” He nodded good-bye to Keller and left.

“Appreciate your time, Father.” Mann rose to his feet and followed his partner out.

Harper was already down the front steps of the parsonage when he heard Mann calling his name.

“Hey. Harper, wait up. What was that all about?”

“Come on, there’s something else. Remember that collage in Stoebe’s bedroom?”

“What about it?”

“Pictures, drawings, religious symbols, remember?”

“Yeah, he’s a certified nut case.”

“Damn, it was there all the time. Stuck out like a ship out of water. I didn’t see it until now.”

“See what? The guy suffers from a leftover guilt trip; a souvenir from his over-bearing mother. It’s in his medical records,” Mann said.

“Not guilt – the answer.” Harper strapped on his seat belt. His breath billowed before him. “What are you waiting for? Start the damned car.”

“I’m not turning this ignition until you tell me what is going through your head.”

“Stoebe. Keller spilled it when he said Satan uses the weak to do his bidding. You and I both know that mentally Stoebe couldn’t have pulled off those murders on his own.”

“What are you saying?”

“He was set up.”

## 43

Captain Holloway saw it coming. When Harper mentioned he and Mann had questioned Monsignor Keller, he knew the call was minutes away. Harper had pushed the monsignor's sacred buttons and Keller threw up a holy flare. It was now up to Holloway to smooth things over. It was a task of monumental proportions that would require him to dig deep into his diplomacy pocket to pull out a miracle.

Keller never approved of Holloway's marriage to his niece, Gwen. He had scorned her for wanting to marry outside of her faith; he had imposed his opinions about their childless marriage. His disapproval of their divorce was even more stinging than it was on their wedding day. It wasn't enough that twenty years of their lives had crumbled apart a piece at a time until there was nothing there to salvage. Keller had to go for the throat. The priest had added his own splash of guilt to the mix making damned sure they were adequately burdened with thoughts of eternal damnation.

The memories of Gwen he had painstakingly shoved into remote pockets of his consciousness began to surface; the hollowness in the pit of his gut was a haunting reminder that he'd never stop caring.

Until the recent murders and Harper's visit with Keller, Holloway had managed to shove the monsignor out of his life as well, but the light blinking on line one of



his office phone was about to thrust him back into a harsh reality. The minute the captain heard the monsignor's voice drenched in righteous arrogance, he knew the conversation was going to be short and ugly.

"He had no right!"

"Harper was doing his job," Holloway said.

"The man is a menace. He has no respect for what is good and sacred," Keller said in his best pulpit tone.

"Since when is murder either good or sacred? Face it, you played your usual cat and mouse games and you lost. For once, quit hiding behind your white collar. If you would have given him straight answers, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"I should have known not to expect Harper to be different. He questioned my beliefs just like you. The business of this church is no concern of his or yours."

"Murder is. Last time I looked, there is a commandment to that effect too, isn't there?"

"I will *not* have your thugs coming here and grilling me in that manner again. Do you hear me?"

"Agreed. Next time I'll drag you to police headquarters myself."

"Do I have to call the mayor?"

"Call whomever you want. Do you want his number? How about the commissioner's number? Better yet, let's call the press and let them know that a Roman Catholic priest's resistance to answering a few simple questions makes him a suspect in a murder investigation."

"How could you think that I would have anything to do with those murders?"

"No one's above suspicion; not even you."

"You'll regret every word of this, Holloway."

"There are a great many things I regret, but doing my job isn't one of them."

"You've never changed, have you? Poor Gwen," Keller said.

"Leave her out of this."

"Your job always came first."

"And she can thank you for her mental breakdown. Don't even try your tactics with me," Holloway said. "Go ahead, make your calls if you really think you can afford the exposure."

Holloway slammed down the phone. He knew Keller's political connections went straight to the Senate Floor. Did Keller really think elbow rubbing with the Washington top dogs earned him the right to push the department around? In his youth, Keller had served as a Navy Seal turned political activist. Holloway couldn't remember exactly when Keller entered the church, but somewhere between his religious beliefs and political links, the priest should have known better than to threaten the CPD.

## 44

Harper was still trying to visualize the details of Stoebe's wall collage as Mann pulled into traffic from St Paul's parking lot.

"Where to?" Mann asked.

"To get my car. We need to split up. I'll check out Stoebe's house, you go back to Ash Grove. Talk with the doctor and nurses who treated him. See what else you can find out about him. His background, family, friends, visitors."

"You're not spooked by this prophecy thing, are you?" Mann asked.

"Spooked? No. I just happen to think there're more crazies outside of the pen than there are in and I mean to catch at least one of them. You know as well as I do that Jennifer Blake won't be safe until Salas is behind bars."

As if on cue, Harper's cell phone rang.

"Harper, it's Oliver."

Harper motioned to Mann. This was the call they had been waiting for; that Alejandro Salas was finally in custody.

"He gave us the slip," Oliver said. "The hotel manager said he stayed there last night and left early this morning without paying."

"Check the other hotels in the area. He's still in the city." Harper's stomach rolled as he said the words.

The minute he was done speaking with Oliver, he dialed his home telephone. His panic eased when Jennie answered on the sixth ring.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"What took you so long to pick up?"

"I hate answering your phone," she said. "Your father called and couldn't figure out if he had the right number or not. It was more than a little awkward."

"You have all the doors locked?"

"Yes. Is something wrong?"

"Just being cautious. Promise me you'll stay inside."

"Harper, what's going on? You're starting to scare me."

"Nothing is wrong, just want you to be careful." He paused for a moment realizing his first mistake was in alerting his houseguest to an impending threat. Jennie's curious mind would probably prompt her to stand on his front porch and flag danger down. He decided his only option was to change the subject. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Do you like Chinese?" she asked.

He glanced at his watch. "Sounds good. Have a couple more stops to make. I'll be home by six."

The official police adhesive tape was still intact along the seam of Travis Stoebe's front door. Harper reached for his pocketknife and sliced it open. Forensics had been through every square foot of the home. They took the necessary pictures and measurements from each angle imaginable. Stoebe's shoes, his fingerprints, the blood-stained shirts they found and strands of his hair made up their evidence. Now it was Harper's turn.

A gloved hand groped for the light switch to the right of the entrance. With a single touch, Harper brought the forty-watt light bulb suspended from the center of the

ceiling to life. Moist sea air had penetrated the small structure where the lack of heat had encouraged the growth of mildew to spread across one of the walls. Harper was instantly taken back to spring days inside their family's barn where, after the long rainy seasons, the smell of wood, rotting hay, and a winter-long accumulation of animal waste congealed into a pungent stench.

Four dingy white walls surrounded the near-empty living room. Harper focused on the wall directly in front of him. Discolored squares marked the places where pictures once hung. In the center was the distinct mark of a cross. Aside from their ghostly remains, the walls were as blank as the look on Stoebe's face when they took him away. A gold couch sat against the wall beneath the stains. Its threadbare arms and lumpy cushions were lifeless testaments to Stoebe's meager existence. Straight ahead, to the right of a narrow hallway, was the kitchen. He glanced in to see a mouse scurry across the counter. Shelter from the cold was all it would find here. Harper remembered there wasn't a stale cracker to eat in the house on the day they arrested Stoebe.

The bedroom was to the left. Harper pushed back the door and aimed his flashlight directly at what he came here to see. Across the width of the back wall was the road map into Stoebe's mind. Pages ripped out of books depicted a massive collection of Christian symbols. Each one was a key to the door Stoebe had locked. Starting from the upper left hand corner to the center of the display were a multitude of drawings of Christ, His church and Christian symbols; the lamb, the chalice, the Eucharist and medieval pictures of the Holy Crusades.

*God's soldiers going to war for the sake of salvation,* he thought.

Harper recognized and was stopped by the copy of Michelangelo's work in the center of the collage. The Crucifixion of St Peter – an upside down crucifixion. Four inches beneath it was a picture of Bethlehem and the familiar star beaming down on a manger. At the very top of the wall, with its edges touching the ceiling, Stoebe had carefully positioned a picture of a white dove with its wings spread apart. Four hand-drawn thick black lines depicted rays of light beaming down from it. The four rays pointed straight to different pictures of biblical beasts.

*Daniel, chapter seven, verse one through seven.* Marc's words flooded his mind. Harper shot the beam of light around the room. He remembered seeing a bookcase on the opposite wall next to the bed. Slowly, sweeping the light across the spines of the books, he studied their titles. Stoebe's books on the occult shared space with books on physics, economics, and politics, but the book that interested Harper the most was a battered small black-covered Bible on the third shelf from the bottom. He didn't have to flip through the pages to find the Book of Daniel – it was marked with a red satin sash. The verse was highlighted in yellow. *Chapter seven, verse one through seven.* Harper flipped the book on its side to read the handwritten note along the margin. A single word written in a child-like hand jumped out at him: *Marc*.

## 45

*Mitu.* Alejandro would not allow himself to think of home. But the snow felt like lead weights on his feet and each gulp of frigid air he inhaled made him yearn for the feel of a moist tropical breeze on his face. Still, he refused to give up, or to eat or sleep in the same place twice. He kept on the run to shun unwanted attention, but even the beast of the jungle required a rest between hunts. Alejandro needed to think and work out his next course of action. The evening before he had noticed the public library was four blocks south of the Hilton. *The perfect place*, he thought, *to vanish if only for an hour or two.* No one would think to look for him here. That is what he was thinking as he opened the door.

Inside, the scent of ink and dusty pages permeated the room and engulfed him as he summed up his options. The five or six patrons on the first floor were too engrossed in their reading to notice him take the elevator to the third floor. The doors opened onto a room with an infinite number of towering bookcases in rows that stretched out the length of the building. Slowly he made his way down one of the aisles to the other side of the room. At one end he found a corner where he could rest. Alejandro removed his leather jacket, draped it over the back of a chair and wiped sweat from his face. His eyes burned, his throat was

raw, and his head ached from the pressure building up from his cold.

The morning paper had another one-column story about the flu epidemic and the number of lives it had taken so far. He turned to the obituaries – no mention of Blake anywhere.

Images of the woman reporter consumed his thoughts. Indignation rose at her swift escape. By all accounts, she should have died at the bottom of the subway stairs. He saw her plunge and land hard on the concrete walkway. People had rushed to her aid and crowded around her body. He watched them from a few feet away. She did not appear to be breathing, one of them had said. That was all he needed to know. Alejandro had turned and left and now wished he had not. He needed proof she was dead, and scanned the obituaries again. *Nada!* Clearly she was alive and if that was the case, there was only one place she could possibly be.

“You must be mistaken. Jennifer Blake – two days ago,” Alejandro insisted. He wanted to grab the old woman sitting at the front desk of Community Hospital by the throat and shake her. Instead, he drummed his fingers on the counter and faked his composure.

The woman scanned the screen of names again. “I don’t see her.”

“She has to be here! Look again.” He raised a hand to his temple.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir, but ... are you all right?”

“Just find her.”

“Her name isn’t listed. There’s nothing else I can do.” The old woman leaned back and gave him a helpless blank stare. “You really should see a doctor about that cold. So many have died from the flu this year.”



He cursed under his breath, rammed a fist on the counter, and walked away. He would go to every floor and look in every room if he had to. If she was not here, he would go to the morgue. What had he been thinking? He should have killed her that night in her home. He needed to see her body, to touch her cold flesh, and know she was dead.

He seethed with disgust, but terror at the sight of his mother's name on the glass had paralyzed him. Death had not stopped her powers. He had seen Anita's face through the window. She returned every night in his dreams and haunted his thoughts. His mother had refused to give him the ring; she would not be his ruin now.

Alejandro stopped at the hospital gift shop and handed the sales clerk a ten for a three-dollar bouquet of fresh flowers then left without taking his change. He repeatedly jabbed the elevator button to the second floor. One level after another, no one had heard of Jennifer Blake. Each new face was another grim reminder that Blake and his ring had slipped through his fingers again.

When Alejandro stepped onto the ninth floor, he had no reason to think he would find her here either. He was certain another indifferent face would look up at him; another stupid woman would shake her head before resuming her meaningless duties.

"Are you family?" the nurse asked.

"No, but we are very good friends," he lied. "I just returned from a trip and heard about her accident. Is she here?"

She studied the patients' log. "Not any more. Looks like she checked herself out." The woman stared at him with the same indifference each of the other nurses had shown him. "Have you tried her home?"

"Yes. I have," he lied again, sensing the woman

would not return to a place she knew he could find her. "Did she leave the hospital alone?"

"I wouldn't know. It wasn't my shift. The police put a standing order of no visitors."

"Police? Why? Was she in danger?"

"I'm really not at liberty to say, besides the police tend to keep things to themselves." She glanced at the flowers in his hands and pursed her lips. "Look, I don't know how she got home. She was brought in by ambulance; I'd imagine she left in a taxi."

"Perhaps you can tell me who gave the order. Maybe the officer can help me locate my friend. No?"

The woman lowered her glance and after a moment reached for a file on her desk. "I suppose there's no harm in that. Here, that's the name and phone number of the detective who brought her in."

"Homicide Detective Sam Harper. Thank you very much. You are most kind." Alejandro feigned a smile, bowed his head, and handed the nurse the small bouquet. He left her cooing and blushing at his gallant gesture.

*Stupid woman.* He thought as he grabbed a handful of tissues from her desk. It was a calculated move, nothing more. But now if asked, her distorted sense of romance would not allow her to betray him.

Alejandro studied the handwritten note as he left the floor knowing exactly what he had to do next.

## 46

Harper returned to headquarters from Stoebe's house in a hurry to look through the contents of Marc Dilling's black leather briefcase again.

He placed the items into two small stacks on his desk. Marc's cell phone battery was dead. He set the phone aside and reached for the planner. As he thumbed through the pages, he quickly summarized the last few days of the journalist's life. He turned his attention to the hand-held recorder, switched it on, and listened to the first few minutes of an interview Marc had conducted for one of his articles. Harper pushed those things to one side as well and decided to concentrate on the sheets of hand-written notes before him. The twelve pages in Marc's handwriting contained facts for a Christmas article he would never see published. As Harper read it, his mind drifted back to the alleged killer in padded cell 329. His attention shifted again at the sound of Mann storming through their office door from his trip down to Ash Grove Asylum.

Mann tossed his notepad on the desk and hung his coat on the hook behind the door. He dropped into his chair and flipped through his notes. The cautious, take-it-a-step-at-a-time, Dave Mann seemed uncharacteristically agitated this afternoon.

"What's wrong?" Harper asked.

"You tell me. Travis Stoebe spent eight months in Ash Grove Asylum. They released him last May. In September he snapped."

"We knew that."

"Yeah, but Stoebe was a loner. Never got involved with anyone at the asylum. No family – apparently no friends. In fact, during his eight-month stay, he only had one visitor who came to see him religiously three times a week. Care to guess who?"

"You got me."

"Marc Dillings. Surprised?"

Harper frowned. He glanced down at the pages on his desk for a moment. "I would have been a few hours ago." Harper opened Stoebe's Bible and pointed to the place where Stoebe had written Marc's name. "What was he doing at the asylum?"

"According to the head nurse, preaching the word of God," Mann said.

"This nurse, did she see Marc herself?"

"Said she did. She checked the visitor's log in front of me. Here, she made copies of the pages. He signed in as Father Dillings to see Stoebe three times a week, every week, eight months straight."

"You're sure about that?" Harper reached for his notes from his talk with Dr Brannon.

"Christ, Harper, take a look for yourself. I made her check the logs twice; she made a smart remark about how the white collar was a dead give away. What's the matter?"

Harper glanced at the copies from the asylum and set them aside. He thumbed through the notes he made from his talk with Dr Brannon and pointed to Stoebe's Ash Grove admittance date. "Marc told me he left the priesthood a year and a half ago, months before Stoebe was admitted to the asylum. Why would he go there and impersonate a priest?"

Mann slapped an open palm on a stack of homicide case files. "Why did any of these jerks do what they did? Maybe he thought he'd have a better chance of seeing him if he passed himself off as a spiritual guide."

Harper shook his head. "According to Brannon's notes, Stoebe's mother was the converted Catholic in the family and she died before Marc was assigned to St Paul's. Stoebe never converted and wasn't a member of the church so when would the two have met?"

"What difference does it make? We made a connection between Stoebe and Marc. A fanatic and a loose cannon. That, my friend, is a dangerous combination."

"What do you suppose those two found to talk about three times a week?"

"Hell, Marc could have been working on an article; slipped in as a priest so he could talk to the patients. Doctors don't like journalists lurking around in their asylum, you know," Mann said. "Then again, once a priest, always a priest. One thing's for sure, they weren't cordial acquaintances."

"How's that?"

"The head nurse said the two of them always got into some heated discussions. Three weeks before Stoebe's release, they ask Marc to leave. Seems he got Stoebe a little too agitated for their taste. It took him days to settle down and adjust to a new batch of medicine."

"What was the argument about?"

"Penitence."

"Nothing good ever came out of a forced feeding of religious goo."

"What are you getting at?" Mann asked.

"Ever read the book of Daniel?" Harper carefully turned to the page marked with a red satin sash. "Marc referred to this verse the other night. Listen to this.

Verse three: 'And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.'

Mann didn't speak, but the glint of interest in his eyes and the tightness at the corner of his mouth told Harper his partner instantly saw the parallels with the floaters.

"I know that book. Each beast represents a nation," Mann said. "Each one of those boys led a gang."

Harper glanced back to the page at verse four. "*The first was like a lion ... wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand upon two feet like a man.*" He read the next verse: "*The beast had three ribs in his mouth.* Yell if any of this sounds familiar."

"Shit, Stoebe and Marc played this whole prophecy thing out," Mann said.

"Someone did, but I don't think it was either of those two."

"Face it Sam, everything points to Marc. Who else would have put Stoebe up to it? He made sure Stoebe tied the first vic's feet together – the second had broken ribs." Mann rolled his chair back toward the file cabinet and yanked out a drawer. He fingered through several file tabs until he found what he wanted – copies of the autopsy reports. Mann found the file and began to read the rest of the verse and compared it to Jack Fowlers's conclusions in the autopsy reports.

"In Stoebe's state of mind, it was more like planting a mutant seed; damned thing swelled out of control," Harper said.

"Exactly, where else would Stoebe have gotten the idea to murder those boys and make it look like a biblical prophecy if not from a clergyman?"

His partner was right but the notion of Marc's involvement didn't ring true. Still Harper couldn't deny how easily Marc had connected the condition of the

victims' bodies to the book of Daniel. "We didn't give the press one damned description."

"Then how do you explain the fact that Marc knew exactly what Stoebe did to those boys?" Mann asked.

"I don't but then again, we didn't find a bit of evidence that Marc was anywhere near those boys."

"He didn't have to be. You said it yourself, he set Stoebe up to do the work for him. That's the only explanation for it. Marc knew the Scriptures, he must have force fed them to Stoebe and kept in touch with him after his release from the asylum. That's how Marc knew about the murders."

"Mind control?" Harper leaned forward in chair. "Keller made it sound as if he and Marc weren't exactly on good terms on the subject of this prophecy. You're saying that Keller was right? That Marc was a brick short of a full load but savvy enough to set Stoebe up?"

"It's possible."

"Granted. What I don't get is why Marc was so frightened of this prophecy thing if he was responsible for perpetrating it."

"We're not talking about a logical mind, Sam."

"You should have seen him. He begged me to help him."

"A cry for help? Hell, sounds like he should have had a padded room next to Stoebe."

Harper tugged at the knot on his tie and jerked it loose then reached for the copies of the visitors' log from Ash Grove. He ran a finger down the list of names making a mental note of the dates.

"He buffaloed you," Mann said. "He made it look as if his reasons for taking the ring were noble, out of concern for Jennifer Blake. All he really wanted was the damned ring. Keller told us Marc was fascinated by the whole prophecy thing including the ring, remember?"

"Keller's a self-righteous fool," Harper said. "I'm

telling you, Marc wanted to keep the prophecy from happening and thought if he took the ring, it would break the cycle. He was in a panic hours before he died. You weren't there. He pleaded with me to take it."

"Sam, how else would Marc know about the condition of the bodies if he wasn't involved? If he knew Stoebe was the killer and had nothing to hide, why the hell didn't he report it? Face it, we've been duped." Mann leaned back and jammed the fleshy heel of his hand against his brow. "We can thank Marc for giving us the connection between the Salas case and the floaters – the ring, but he duped us in the process."

Stoebe didn't believe in God when he was sane enough to know what he was doing, yet his bedroom was filled with religious symbols. Mann was right about one thing. Keller had made Marc out to look like a fanatic, but it was Keller's comment about emissaries who use the weak to do their bidding that rattled around a little louder in Harper's mind.

"I should have seen it." Harper wanted to kick himself for not having pressed Marc when he had the chance. He shoved his chair back and turned his glance toward the window. "I can't believe he had anything to do with those murders." There was nothing he could do about it now. Marc was dead, Keller had a biased opinion of Marc, and Stoebe didn't know one day from the next.

"I don't care what Brannon says, we have to get Stoebe to talk to us."

"Doc Brannon was right about one thing," Mann said. "The nurse at Ash Grove confirmed that Stoebe was a college professor in his former life. Unbelievable. Some sort of genius in physics until he started hearing little voices in his head."

"Brannon said most people with Stoebe's disorder have high IQs. In the same breath, she told me Stoebe



was incompetent to stand trial, that he was deranged – out of his mind,” Harper said. “Seems what little logic the guy clung to vanished.”

“If we want him convicted, we’ll have to prove he was still taking his medication at the time of the murders.”

While Mann talked, Harper began to compare the Ash Grove logs to Marc’s handwritten notes on that Christmas article he had found in the briefcase.

“And another thing,” Mann said, “I asked the nurse what information would have been logged on the final pages of Stoebe’s medical records.”

“The missing pages?”

“It was a summary of the patient’s activity as well as the doctor’s prognosis,” Mann said. “According to their records, there was no reason why Stoebe couldn’t live a normal life so long as he remained on his medication.”

“Which any doctor could tell us,” Harper said. “So the question is who would gain the most by making Stoebe’s condition seem hopeless?”

Harper knew what was coming next and his partner was right. If Stoebe was taking his meds, the insanity plea wouldn’t hold. Stoebe would have been aware of his actions and smart enough to plan them or worse, ID the killer.

“Someone needed Stoebe to appear to be out of his mind so that even if the evidence pointed to him, he’d get off on the insanity plea. But ripping out the pages was pointless. All the court would have to do is bring in the doctor to testify.” Harper marked his place in Marc’s notes as he flipped through the visitors’ log. “You said those pages also documented Stoebe’s activities, visitors, that type of thing?”

“Yeah, why?”

Harper turned the pages around on his desk for

Mann to see. "Marc's signatures on the log don't match his handwriting."

Harper leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and allowed his thoughts to fall into tight little compartments. He had to see his thoughts in their proper place; to make sense of his findings, but something else plucked at the farthest lobes of his mind.

"We never checked Gould's phone records, did we?"

## 47

### ***Community Hospital Mental Ward Recreation Room 215***

The sign above the entrance of Ward 215 was an oxymoron if Harper ever saw one. The area behind the locked metal door was nothing resembling a recreation room. Around the perimeter of this bleak white-walled space, were rows of once over-stuffed chairs and a mismatched assortment of sofas. Sitting at a table to the right of the entrance were three men dressed in their robes and slippers at four in the afternoon. One chattered compulsively while the other two stared wide-eyed into the space of their private worlds.

Harper caught a glimpse of five other patients who seemed content to walk in endless circles and figure eights. They shuffled their feet along the tile floor with no urgency in their steps and no direction. Harper's reason for returning to the mental ward at Community Hospital was at a table not more than ten feet away. He recognized the slender man who sat sideways in his chair and faced one of the grated windows as Travis Stoebe. His pajama collar stuck out from beneath his blue seersucker robe. Up close, his face showed signs of an evening's stubble. Harper reached into his breast pocket for his tape recorder, switched it on and placed it on the table.

"Travis? Mind if I sit down?"

Stoebe was as responsive as the cinder block wall.

"Are they treating you okay here?" Harper took a seat across the table from him and waited for a sign of acknowledgement. "Do you remember me? I'm Detective Harper." He held out his badge. It was a useless try to get Stoebe's attention. "I was at your house the day they picked you up. Remember?"

He wondered if Stoebe understood what had happened on the afternoon of his arrest. Had he understood the charges or his rights? Harper drew in a breath and waited a few silent seconds for Stoebe's reaction. A yell or a cry would have at least signaled a sense of comprehension.

"Do you understand why we went to your house?" Harper followed Stoebe's glance out through the window. Beyond the grime-covered glass, there was nothing to look at except an open field lined with bare trees along the edges of the distant hillsides. It was snowing again.

"Travis, look at me. We need to talk about the boys. Do you remember the boys on the boat?"

Stoebe remained unresponsive.

"What happened?" Harper asked. "What triggered the murders?"

The man's indifferent stare remained fixed on an unknown point. His thoughts seemed as isolated as the snow-covered hills that surrounded the hospital and just as secluded.

"Travis. Listen to me. If you understand what I'm saying, you have to pay attention." Harper glanced at his watch. Stoebe hadn't said a word since Harper arrived. There were no guarantees that whatever was going through the man's mind would find its way out, but he had to try. Brannon said she was going to have him transferred back to Ash Grove in a day or two. Harper had to get through to him now. He'd give it another ten minutes – fifteen if he thought–

"Why?" Stoebe asked without twitching a muscle. "What makes you think I want to listen to anything you have to say?"

Harper quickly read him his rights again.

"Do you understand these rights?"

Stoebe nodded. "I know them – also know you can't take me out of here without the doctor's orders."

"I don't intend to."

"What's your point then?"

"Do you understand the charges against you?" Harper leaned in. "We have you on four counts of murder."

"I'm crazy, remember?"

"No you're not."

"Hmf, then it must be you." Stoebe turned away again.

"You sound as rational as anyone I know. Dr Brannon said the medication would kick in. Ten minutes – that's all I'm asking for."

"You can sit there till you rot for all I care. We have nothing to talk about."

"Is this what you want? To stay locked up in a hell-hole like this the rest of your life?"

A hint of a grin crept across Stoebe's lips as he shook his head. "That's not how it works. Brannon will send me back to Ash Grove. They'll keep me there for a while like they did the last time. After a few weeks of therapy they'll load me up with a new bunch of meds that I can't afford and send me home."

"Not this time," Harper said. "There's no going home in your future. A release from your doctor will send you straight to death row. You *will* stand trial. We have enough evidence against you right now for a conviction."

"You're wasting your time, Harper. None of that matters to me. Besides, you'd have to prove intent."

"Intent? Your bloody prints were all over that boat. Hell, right now the case is a slam dunk against you. They'll sentence you to death. Your life will be snuffed out like the butt end of a cigarette."

"Then you and the prosecutor will be doing me a favor. I've been dead for years."

"It doesn't have to be this way."

"You're as cracked as Jimmy over there," he said, motioning to one of the men who was still walking in circles. "This is it. This is my life and I don't give a shit any more."

"Help me," Harper said.

"No."

"They weren't random killings and you know it."

"I don't remember."

"Why those boys? Why were they murdered?"

"I don't know!"

"Think. You have to know. Don't you want to understand it?"

Stoebe shifted in his chair. He lowered and raised his glance. "Not particularly. What difference does it make now?"

"To prove your innocence," Harper said.

Stoebe turned himself around in the chair. He crossed the lapels of his robe snugly over his chest. His expression instantly transformed his features into a show of intense curiosity. He crossed his arm on the tabletop and leaned in. "What're you saying?"

"The evidence places you on that boat. We matched your fingerprints and the imprint from your tennis shoes to the prints we found onboard. We have the boy's blood on your clothes; you had Rocky Blount's pocketknife when we picked you up. Do you understand what I'm saying? Everything points to you."

Stoebe didn't flinch; he didn't move or look away. In that second, Harper was sure that Travis Stoebe was all there.

"You have your case then," he said. "What's your point?"

"It doesn't prove you killed them."

"Jesus, leave me alone."

"What the hell is wrong with you? I'm offering you a chance to clear your name. The jury is going to look at those prints as evidence beyond a reasonable doubt."

"Don't you get it?" Stoebe asked. "I don't care. All they have to do is look at my medical record. Doc Brannon will testify that I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. The minute I got off my medication I turned into a fucking lunatic! I'll get off for reason of insanity."

"We both know that's not true." Harper grabbed the recorder. "You just proved it."

If there was ever a question in anyone's mind as to whether Travis Stoebe was mentally competent to stand trial or not, he just debunked it. Stoebe's mind wasn't locked up – not permanently – at least not now. Beneath the knitted brow and that dull, detached glare, cranked a well-greased set of wheels that were churning over the logic in Harper's statement. Stoebe looked like a man who had just miscalculated the curve in the road.

"How do you plan to do that? Prove my innocence."

"We have other evidence – a factor that doesn't match."

"Like what?"

"I can't discuss it."

No one had matched the tooth imprint and it wasn't something Harper cared to discuss with the obstinate man sitting across the table.

"Bullshit. You're full of bullshit. Take your evidence and your fucking tape recorder out of my face!" Stoebe

slammed his fist on the table. The sound thundered throughout the room and caught the attention of the conscious few.

An orderly wandered to their table. "Hey, Travis. You okay?"

"He's fine." Harper held out his badge without taking his eyes from Stoebe.

"You're not supposed to upset him."

"I said he's fine." He looked up at the man. "Go on. Get out of here."

The orderly stayed a second or two then left.

"Why are you doing this?" Stoebe asked.

"To keep you alive."

"My life is shit. I used to teach. Did you know that? Yeah, college no less; used to have all sorts of plaques and papers that said I was a smart man – no, brilliant – I was brilliant. I don't know the fucking time of day any more. You really think I give a damn what happens to me?"

"Did Marc Dillings care?"

"Leave him out of this."

"What did you two talk about?"

"I don't remember. Ask him."

"Wish I could. Marc's dead."

"How?"

"Does it matter?"

"Did he suffer?" Stoebe's hands curled into tight fists.

"He can't hurt you," Harper said.

"I want to know if he suffered."

"Yeah. He did."

"Good."

Harper thought back to the comment the head nurse at Ash Grove had made to his partner about Stoebe's and Marc's arguments. They had clearly ingrained Stoebe with hostility toward the late Marc Dillings.



"Did Marc force you into doing anything wrong?"

"No."

"Did he tell you to hurt those boys?"

Stoebe shook his head. "I don't remember."

"Who told you to kill them?"

"What makes you think anyone else was involved?"

Stoebe closed his eyes. He leaned his head back and pressed the heels of his hands to his temples. "Don't want to talk any more."

"I'm not leaving without an answer."

Stoebe sprang to his feet. The sound of the metal chair echoed through the room as it shot back and slid across the floor. He moved toward the window, wrapped his fists around the grates, and pressed his head against them. "Leave me the hell alone! You have your evidence, what more do you want? A confession?"

"The truth." Harper moved to the window and stood close enough to see the subtle back and forth movements of Stoebe's eyes. "I want to know who forced your hand. Did Marc Dillings visit you at Ash Grove and talk you about the Book of Daniel?"

Stoebe shook his head, "I don't want to talk about it."

Harper wasn't ready to give up. Right now, Stoebe was rational and he was the only person who knew what really happened to those boys and why. He'd keep trying as long as there was an ounce of hope that Stoebe might remember.

After a moment, Stoebe blinked. He ran his hand through the stubble of hair that remained on his head. The dreadlocks didn't survive the nurse's clippers in ward 329.

It seemed Stoebe had something to say, but his thoughts remained his own. Slowly, he returned his attention to the gray, desolate scene outside the window.

"Like I said, the evidence against you only proves you were on that boat. None of it proves you're the killer."

"Screw it. I can't remember my last clear thought. I can't help myself, let alone you."

"This isn't about you. Marc was a religious fanatic – you know that."

"What the hell do you expect? He was a priest."

"You scrawled his name in your Bible."

"So what?"

"Did he talk to you about the black pearl ring – the prophecy?"

"No," Stoebe said, slamming his head against the window grate.

"I studied your collage. St Peter was crucified upside down on the cross. His picture dominates the collage; one of those boys had an upside down cross carved into him."

"No!" Stoebe tightened his hold on the grate.

"I read the Book of Daniel – the four beasts coming out of the sea. What's an atheist like you doing with religious pictures and artifacts in his bedroom?"

"Leave me the hell alone!" A ripple slid across Stoebe's brow.

"Answer me! Who are you protecting?"

"No one. Let it go."

"I can't and you know it."

Forensics hadn't matched anyone's dental records, including Marc's and Stoebe's to the teeth marks found on victim number three. Stoebe couldn't be guilty but refused to be saved. *Why?* "Four beasts, four bodies. Is that it? No rhyme or reason except for the delusions of a former priest who wanted to see a biblical prophecy come to life?"

"You're wrong."

"About what?"

“Everything.” Stoebe swept a glance at him then turned and made a move toward the metal door at the far end of the room.

“While I’m trying to save your miserable life,” Harper called after him, “the murderer is still out there, isn’t he? Do you really think he’s going stop killing just because the Bible only mentions four beasts? How many more kids are you going to let this guy kill before you stop him?”

Stoebe reached for the doorknob. His hand was inches away from it when he stopped and glanced back. “You still have that contraption on?”

Harper held up the recorder.

“One.”

“One what?” Harper yelled as Stoebe left the room.  
“Stoebe! One what?”

The windshield wipers struggled to keep up with the falling snow and the spray from oncoming traffic. Two car lengths ahead, a snowplow cleared the road as Harper made his way back into the downtown district from Community Hospital.

Stoebe's final words slammed against the sides of Harper's mind. "What the hell is *one*?" he whispered. *One more beast, one killer, another death?* "Son of a bitch."

He scoured his memory for the details from each victim's case. The similarities among them outweighed the discrepancies; teenaged gang leaders, the paint and metal particles found in their bodies. The evidence led straight down a dead end path to the body shop. Their only other suspect, Dominick Ray, had been held on lesser charges while the lab scurried to find proof that would lead to a murder conviction. When that didn't pan out, Harper wondered if Holloway was right about Jack. Maybe this time the medical examiner had made a costly mistake and now Marc seemed to be the glue meshing the two cases together.

Harper reached for his cell and dialed his home. "Damn it." The phone rang several times. He hadn't counted how many. "Five – six. Answer the damned phone," he mumbled again. *Eight rings*. He had programmed his answering machine to kick in on the

ninth. *Where is she?* Jennie's cell was still missing; he had no other way to reach her. He slapped the cell shut and set it aside. He wasn't surprised she had kept her promise to not answer the phone. She was frustratingly bull-headed. What made him think he could force her to do anything she hadn't decided to do on her own? The digital numbers on the dashboard clock indicated the time was precisely six-twelve.

Jennie had blown him away with that first kiss. He never thought it would go that far. How could he? He was only doing his job, trying to keep her alive. That's what he was thinking when he rushed down the hospital hallway toward her room. He took her home to keep her safe from Salas. He promised Marc he would protect her. His motives? Why was he questioning his motives? He hadn't planned the sex. He thought of it, God yes, every time Jennie's face flashed through his mind. He'd have to be dead or insane not to. The last time he checked, he was neither.

Jennifer Blake just happened one hot kiss after another, right before she slipped into his arms and immediately after she helped him undress her. The image of her lying on his robe in front of the fireplace was entrenched in his mind. The sweet scent of soap on her skin was as real now as the feel of her supple, heart-stopping body pressing against his. He didn't have to close his eyes to hear the sound of her moans. Every move she made, every provocative inch of her form was permanently seared into his thoughts. That's where he wanted to be right now; with her, holding her again; breathing her air.

He switched on the siren and cut past the plow.

Except for the light coming from Harper's kitchen window, the house was startlingly dark. The idea she had disregarded his warning sparked indignation. It

flared his anger and then just as suddenly sank into an unsettling sense of loss. *What the hell was she thinking?* A few more days, that's all he needed. Sooner or later Salas would make the mistake that would land him behind bars and life would get back to normal.

She was hair-yanking stubborn and his damned job made him a crazy cynic. What the hell made him think they would ever work things out? Different scenarios flashed through his mind. Maybe she fell asleep or was in the shower. This time, he'd join her. Harper nosed the car into the garage and closed the door behind him. The Red Dragon bags of their Chinese dinners were still warm to the touch and stirred his appetite. He took two steps at a time up the stairs toward the door. He flipped on the kitchen lights and placed the bags on the counter.

"Jennie?"

The kitchen opened up into the living area. The couch, the fireplace, and the patio doors to the deck were along the right side of the room. He called her again – no answer. Except for a flapping sound coming from the direction of the patio door, the house was quiet. Too quiet and why the hell were the patio doors open? Harper reached for his Magnum and eased toward the sliding glass door.

He was two feet away from the door when he heard a crunch beneath his step. He slowly brushed back the vertical blinds to expose jagged shards of glass that clung to the door. The chill that swelled on his skin had nothing to do with the wind that forced its way through the busted glass on the door. His glance dropped to the footprints in the snow. One set, a man's size eleven, coming in. *Jennie*. He held his breath for a second. He didn't have to turn around to know that someone had the barrel of a gun pressed to his back.

"I would not do that if I were you, Detective Harper. Drop the gun and put your hands up on your head, please."

"Salas." Harper had to assess his surroundings before he could act. "We have a law here in the States called trespassing. Ever hear of it?"

"It seems inconsequential compared to murder, no? Drop your gun."

Harper obliged and turned to face his assailant.

Salas kicked the Magnum to a safe distance from Harper. Without taking his eyes from him, Salas picked it up and shoved it into one of his pockets then backed away toward the opposite side of the room.

Harper could hear Jennie's gagged, muffled scream coming from the over-stuffed chair in the far corner to the right of the fireplace. It was the only corner of the room hidden from view of the kitchen. With the house in near darkness, it was the perfect place from which to surprise him. He wanted to kick himself. How many times had he told his detectives not to let their guards down? Especially when entering the one place of safety – their homes. Harper had to think fast and stall. "Jennie? Are you okay?"

"She is fine, for now."

"Jennie?" It was dark, but Harper could see her form in the chair. "Let her go."

"I ... do not think so. You see, I have my gun aimed at her very pretty head. She is, as you Americans say, my insurance. It would be a shame to kill her, but that will be entirely up to you." Alejandro turned on one of the table lamps and coughed three times. "That is it. Keep them up." He said, waving his gun at Harper.

"Jennie?" Harper quickly assessed her condition. Alejandro had bound her ankles and wrists with duct tape he kept in the kitchen drawer. Tape was holding

the rag in place that Salas had shoved into her mouth. "Everything will be fine."

She groaned and kicked then shook her head and groaned again. Her hair fell down into her face. Under the circumstances, Jennie seemed to be all right. She was pissed as hell, but unhurt.

"Her fate is in your hands."

"I suppose there's no point in asking you what you want." At last, Harper could look into the eyes of Gould's and Mittendorf's killer. The police crime artist had hit it right on the mark. Alejandro Salas was clean cut and good looking. He looked classier than any hoodlum he'd ever seen and he was the only killer Harper knew who said "please" as he aimed the barrel of a loaded gun at his heart.

"The lady again claims not to have my ring."

"She's telling you the truth. She doesn't have it. Let her go before someone gets hurt."

Alejandro drew a breath and let it out with a roll of the eyes. "Then where is it?"

Harper cut a glance back at Jennie. Neither the ring nor Marc's briefcase were here in the house. They were on his desk at work and he was damned sure Salas wasn't up for a ride to police headquarters. The best he could do was stall while he thought of a way to restrain him. Harper inched his way toward the bookshelf to the left of the mantel.

"Stand still."

"I'm tired, okay. It's a damned bookcase. I'm just going to lean." Harper feigned a troubled frown. "So, you're still after that ring, huh? Must be worth a pretty penny. Damn thing has caused you a lot of trouble."

"Get it."

"What's the rush?"

"Now, Mr Detective."

"Settle down. I'll give it to you. After all, it's yours,



right?" Harper glanced at the leather bound book at hip level on the third shelf from the bottom.

"You seem like a man of reason, but I need it *now*." Alejandro leaned down and pressed the gun firmly against Jennie's temple.

Her eyes grew wide. She let out another muffled scream. Her breathing became erratic.

"The problem is, I'm an officer of the law and you've broken a few." Harper tried to lower his arms.

"Keep your hands up!" Salas reached into his pocket for the Magnum.

"Look man, I'm exhausted. Had a long day and I come home to you. You have my gun and my girl. Do you really think I'm going to do anything stupid?" He ran the back of his index finger up and down the books' leathery spines, but his eyes never left Salas.

"So far you've racked up a couple of charges of murder and kidnapping. Now we can add breaking and entering. Oh yeah, you stole a couple of weapons and you're holding us hostage. Add those to the list. And wait until the CIA gets wind that you're in Chandler. The Feds don't take kindly to having their agents killed."

"Give me the blasted ring!"

"Let's trade."

"First the ring, then I will let her go," Salas said.

"Well, yeah, eventually you'll have to cut her loose. But I was thinking more along the lines of information."

Jennie stomped her feet and let out another grunt.

"I've heard all sorts of strange stories about that ring. What's yours?" Harper asked.

"The ring, Detective, or I swear I will kill you both!" Salas rammed the barrel of the gun hard beneath Jennie's jaw. She threw her head back and squeezed her eyes shut.

Harper sucked in a quick gulp of air. "That's right. You need it by tomorrow, don't you? Christmas Eve."

He took another step forward. "That's the story I heard. What's up with that?"

"You would not understand."

"Humor me. Hell if you're going to kill us, at least give us the courtesy to know what we're dying for."

The men locked eyes.

"All right," Salas said. "It is said the black pearl was made by Satan himself; that the powers of hell will transform he who possesses it. When the eight planets reach perfect alignment with sun—"

"Tomorrow morning, seven o'clock," Harper added.

Salas seemed taken back. "How would know that?"

"It's my business to know. Go on."

"Yes, seven."

"And then what?"

"It is said that Satan will manifest himself and will rule the world."

"And you think what, that you're the Antichrist?" Harper hadn't intended to crack a smile, but the idea of a drug smuggler/killer bringing the world to its spiritual knees was as ridiculous as a rabbit hiding Easter eggs.

Salas grabbed hold of Jennie's hair and pulled her toward him. "Enough! Where is the ring?"

Her head tilted back to expose her neck. The barrel of the gun had left its mark on her. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Do not make the mistake of thinking that I cannot kill a woman."

"Wouldn't think of doubting you. Do you mind?" Without letting his eyes stray from his captor, Harper motioned the intent to remove his coat. He took Salas's lack of response as a go ahead, slipped it off, and tossed it onto the couch. Perspiration moistened his shirt, now it felt instantly cool against his skin. Harper knew the exact distance between him and the gun in Salas's hand – his gun, the Magnum. At eight feet

away, Harper was an easy target and the .357 ammo would rip through his flesh and explode clean through to the other side. Alone, he had a fifty-fifty chance of survival, but a hostage lowered the odds again. One way or another it had to end.

“Are you a betting man, Salas?”

Salas coughed again.

“I am,” Harper said. “I gamble every waking minute that I’ll live to see tomorrow. I never know what the day’s going to bring my way. But you know what? I haven’t lost yet and right now, I’m betting you won’t see the crack of dawn.” With one practiced stroke, Harper flipped out the leather bound book from the shelf and grabbed the Glock he kept hidden within the hollowed pages. He aimed and fired his .38 once into Salas’s face.

Salas dropped the gun. His knees buckled before he slumped to the floor.

The blast drowned out Jennie’s next scream and filled the room with the smell of sulfur. Harper’s ears rang. She threw herself from the chair onto the floor and rolled into a ball.

One shot. One bullet hole a half inch beneath Salas’s left eye had finished him off. No need to take the man’s pulse. Bits of his brain mixed with a splattering of blood clung to Harper’s wall and seeped into the carpeting beneath his head.

Jennie was in hysterics, screaming and kicking more violently than before. He sat her up, ripped the tape from her mouth, and pulled out the rag.

She gasped. “I can’t breathe!” She sobbed and shook. “I can’t ...”

He knelt behind her and pulled her close. She was starting to hyperventilate and fought for every breath. “It’s okay.” He cupped his hands around her nose and

mouth. "Inhale. Easy, nice and deep. Just breathe. That's it."

After a moment, Jennie's breathing stabilized.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

She gasped. "No. I'm okay."

Harper kissed the back of her head, took out his pocketknife and sliced through the tape on her wrists and ankles.

"Come on. Let's get you out of here."

"I can't."

Her legs buckled beneath her and trembled too hard to walk. He swept her up in his arms and carried her to the dinette table and chairs in the other room.

She was still clinging to his neck when he lowered her into a chair.

Harper brushed the hair from her face, leaned down, and wrapped himself around her. He wiped her tears, kissed her forehead, her cheeks and lips. The words he wanted to say wouldn't form in his mouth. Harper leaned his head against hers and swallowed the lump that had lodged in his throat.

"I can't stop shaking."

"It's over." He knew the routine. He had to call in the shooting. It wouldn't take long for his house to be swarming with fellow officers and forensics. Jack and Holloway; they'd be here too, but Salas wasn't going anywhere of his own accord. Harper would call in a minute. That's all he needed – a minute alone with Jennie to hold her close and to revel in the fact they had beaten the odds.

"Sam!" she cried.

"I'm here." He leaned in to kiss her again.

"Oh God! I'm going to be sick."

## 49

The incident at 1020 Clipper Drive was destined to become a *Chandler Times's* front-page spread.

It had the making of a Hollywood flick. It could have been taken from any number of crime scenes Harper had worked throughout his career as a city detective. There was a body, bloodstains, a bullet, a forced entry, a fired weapon, and a damsel in distress. Jack Fowler hovered over the body while Carter Graves busied himself with the dusting for prints, gathering of evidence, and reconstruction of the scene. Across the room, one of Carter's crime scene investigators snapped photographs from every imaginable angle. Captain Holloway stood in the kitchen and waited for answers, while a uniformed officer did his best to ward off the press.

It could have been a reenactment of any murder scene on file at the CPD, but this was Harper's home, it was his .38 caliber bullet that ripped through the assailant's head, and the victim was the beautiful J T Blake, a *Chandler Times* newspaper reporter. Harper didn't have to look twice to know her news-hungry colleagues were sucking this up with a straw and vying to get an exclusive.

"I'll talk with Internal Affairs," Holloway said. "You'd have to be an idiot to not see what happened here."

Then again, we are talking about Internal Affairs. You all right?"

Harper nodded. This wasn't his first – it wouldn't be his last round with the pricks from IA. They were the CPD watchdogs everyone loved to hate, but they were good at what they did. They sniffed out the facts every time an officer fired a weapon. They were the cleaning crew, so to speak, that tidied things up and kept those pesky questions off the mayor's worry list. But right now, IA was the least of Harper's problems.

Jennie was at the other end of the room arguing with the medic who was trying to get her ready for the trip to the ER.

The next person to walk through the door was Dave Mann. He and Harper were side by side when Mann cut a glance in Jennie's direction. "Abby followed me out. She'll meet Jennie at the ER and stay with her." He gave the room a quick look. "What a fucking mess."

Mann had a knack for stating the obvious, but the look on his partner's face told Harper there were bigger concerns than Salas's splattered bloody remains on his wall and berber carpeting.

"Did you get anything out of Stoebe?" Mann asked.

"Enough to know he's not nuts," Harper said. "What about you?"

"You were right. We should have checked Gould's phone records. I'll tell you all about it on the way to St Paul's." Mann gave him a nudge on the arm. "Come on. I have the warrant. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, give me a minute."

Mann followed his gaze to the other side of the room and nodded. "I'll wait outside."

Jennie was still sitting on one of the kitchen chairs arguing with the emergency medical tech. He had finished his examination and was trying to convince her to go to the ER to no avail.

"Don't argue with the man," Harper said.

"I'm fine. I don't want to go there again," she said, as the medics strapped her to a gurney.

"You don't have a choice."

"Look, I'm not shaking or anything," she said, holding out a trembling hand.

"I have another call and it's time you started following instructions." Harper looked at the medic. "She's ready."

"Sam, please. Don't leave." Jennie blinked away her tears and held out a hand.

Harper instinctively took it. It was cool to the touch. He gave it a gentle squeeze, a meager attempt to settle her nerves. Any other time, he would have given in to Jennie's plea without question. He'd ride in the ambulance or take her himself, but Mann had obviously found a connection in Gould's records and was waiting for him outside. With Salas out of the way, they could focus on closing the Gould/Mittendorf murders and maybe, if they were lucky, they could get their lives back on track.

The cases had merged into one. Marc's comment about the four murdered youths and the Christmas Eve prophecy kept gnawing in the back of Harper's mind. Christmas Eve was hours away and all the crazies were not yet nestled in beds behind bars.

"I just want to go home," she said.

"When it's over."

"What are you talking about? Salas is dead and Stoebe is locked up. Who else is there?" she asked.

"Sam!" Mann yelled from the doorway. "Come on. What's holding you up?"

Harper brushed another strand of hair from Jennie's face. "I'll see you later." The next several days were theirs. He'd answer her questions, they'd talk all night if she wanted to, but this wasn't the time or place. As he

walked out alongside her, a group of journalists yelled from the other side of the police line for Harper's attention.

"My partner's wife, Abby, is going to meet you at the ER," he said.

"Sam." Jennie grabbed his coat sleeve and glanced around him at her fellow reporters.

"I don't have time to argue with you."

"Harper, you promised I could go home as soon as you caught Salas. Well he's dead and I have a story to write."

"Later."

"No, now. I want an exclusive."

"Is that all this is to you? We could have been killed tonight."

"But we weren't."

"You're impossible, you know that?"

"Promise me." She tightened her grip on his arm. The plea in her voice hardened into an order.

They were the like sides of two magnets, pushing with the same force in the same direction and perpetually going nowhere. But if opposites did attract, he was terminally screwed. Every fiber of his being told him not to get involved. He knew to follow his instincts.

"Hold it." He stopped the medic just as they were ready to lift her gurney into the back of the ambulance. He leaned down within an inch of her face. "I can't do this. Not now."

"Sam I—"

Before she could voice her next protest, he kissed her — hard, and walked away.

At quarter after ten, Christmas Eve was less than two hours away and the planets were gearing up for their seven a.m. alignment. While the citizens of Chandler snuggled in for the night, Mann sliced their Crown



Victoria through the snow-covered streets as if it were the middle of August.

Harper clenched a flashlight between his teeth and aimed its beam at Randal Gould's phone records. He thumbed through the pages and studied the eleven calls his partner had marked with a yellow highlighter.

"What did Gould want with Keller?" The pawnshop owner had called Father Keller's personal number at the rectory eleven times in the three months before his death.

"Those dates." Mann paused to steer clear of an oncoming car. "Those calls started right around the date that Jack estimated the first floater was killed."

"What are you saying? You think Gould killed them?"

"It's a hell of a coincidence, don't you think?" Mann asked.

"Jennie said Gould was a ball of nerves when she met him. Except for his busted skull, Jack didn't find any defensive wounds on him."

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"If he couldn't defend himself against Salas it's unlikely he would've had the strength to strangle kids half his age with twice his stamina. It doesn't make sense."

"Hell no it doesn't make sense, but then what's new?" Mann asked. "All I know is that there's a parallel between the dates Gould called Father Keller and the approximate dates of those boys' deaths." Mann reached into his breast pocket. "Here. That warrant is for Keller's office and personal quarters, don't expect him to talk about Gould though. No priest will ever repeat what he heard in confession."

"You think that's what this is about? Gould's confession? To what?" Harper's partner was a Catholic so he should know, but Mann's assumption didn't feel

right. "What idiot would confess to a damn near perfect crime?"

"It's just a thought."

"How many Hail Marys does it take these days to obliterate four murders?"

"All I'm saying is don't be surprised if Keller uses that as an excuse to not talk. If he does, there's nothing we can do about it. We'll have to use some other angle to get him to open up."

They were a couple of blocks away from the rectory when Mann's cell rang. He drew in a breath and mumbled something under his breath.

"Where at?" Mann asked. "Yeah, we got it." He slammed his fist on the steering wheel and made a U-turn toward the rocky shore along Williams Landing.

Williams Landing wasn't some dark, isolated section of coastline. During the day, the pier bustled with activity. Small shops and eateries along the north side of the pier continued to offer services in spite of the blustery weather. The boardwalk was easily accessible from Kingston Boulevard that ran north and south along the outskirts of Chandler's business district. Kingston was usually backed up with bumper-to-bumper traffic for a mile on the northbound lane that led straight toward the I-54 exit. But tonight, the Landing's vendors had closed down at six p.m. Harper glanced at his watch again. *Ten thirty-seven.* The boulevard was nearly deserted and Christmas Eve was an hour and twenty-eight minutes away. He assumed most of the holiday travelers had arrived at their destination hours ago.

As usual, Forensics was the first to assess the scene. After signaling the go-ahead for the ambulance and medical examiner to drive down the access road to the site, a couple of marked city units followed with their grille lights and light bars blinking at full power.

Neither Harper nor Mann spoke after they left their car and made their way down the narrow snow-covered path toward the shore. Before reaching the beach, Harper could have recounted the crime scene from memory, frame by frame, like a worn out newsreel. The

portable spotlights broadcasted a warning their killer had struck again.

"Harper," one of the women from Forensics called out. "We found tire tracks just over there." She thumbed over her shoulder. "Looks like they came in from the access road, stopped here, dumped the body, and took off in that direction."

Harper acknowledged her finding, then aimed his flashlight at the corpse. He took one look at the rope burns across Dominick Ray's throat and immediately rubbed the throbbing pain that swept across his brow. Harper hadn't eaten since noon and the sight of Ray's bulging eyes and the blue tint of his skin rushed pungent bile to his mouth. He coughed, but it did nothing to alleviate his heartburn.

"What a crack," Mann said. "The evidence pointed straight to his garage, we eliminate him as a suspect and he turns up dead all the same."

"Yeah, a real belly buster. Should have pushed him when we had the chance." Harper paused for a moment. "The thing is, the killer just made another blunder."

Mann turned and narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Only two suspects in the case; one is dead, and the other's locked up in the psych ward. He just narrowed the field."

The assistant medical examiner had moved in ahead of them to inspect the body. She made a few notes and after a moment, looked up. "Rigor hasn't set in yet." The doctor raised her voice to be heard above the howl of the wind and the slapping of waves against the coastal rocks. "I'll have fingerprints for you as soon as I get him back to the morgue."

"No rush on the prints," Harper said. "That's Dominick Ray, sixty-three, occupation; dead car thief."

"You know him?"

"Yeah. He was one of our suspects."

"Missed your mark?"

"Yeah, but Stoebe didn't." Harper and Mann exchanged glances. They were looking down at who Stoebe had referred to as *one*.

Ray's blood-shot eyes bulged from the force of the rope yanked taut against his throat. Except for Ray's body getting dumped on the snow covered beach like a bag of yesterday's garbage, the scene was eerily similar to how they found victim number four. The officers used their cars to protect the scene from the bitter harsh winds blowing in from the bay, but it wasn't enough to keep it from slapping against the portable lights and knocking them off their stands.

"There's nothing more I can do here. We have to move him. This weather is impossible. The longer he's exposed to these elements, the greater the chances of contaminating the evidence." The doctor bagged the victim's head and hands then carefully wrapped the body in a standard cotton sheet before placing it into the body bag. "I'll have my report to you as soon as I can."

"I'm going with you," Harper said.

"I'm not going to get to him right away. I'll call you the minute I'm ready."

"It can't wait."

"Why is it you're the only detective who expects us to make exceptions?"

"Because if you don't, you'll have twice as many bodies tomorrow."

"Spoken as if you were the only cop with a corpse in the morgue," she said.

"That's where you're wrong. I'm the one with seven." This time, Harper wasn't going to leave the morgue without answers.

“What about Keller?” Mann looked at his watch. “It’s going on midnight.”

“He’s not going anywhere. We’ll question him in a few hours. Go home,” Harper said, “get some sleep. I’ll call you as soon as the doc gets done.”

Harper managed three hours of sleep courtesy of Jack Fowler’s office couch. He didn’t need to stay the full five hours or so required to autopsy Dominick Ray. He didn’t need a report to know Ray had been strangled to death. He expected the doctor to find the same paint and metal particles in his lungs that Jack had discovered in the other victims. Harper even expected the assistant medical examiner to locate the mark of the cross somewhere on Dominick’s body. What he hadn’t anticipated was finding it in the palm of the victim’s hand.

# 51

## *December 24*

Snowing again. Big wet flakes packed into solid arches above the relentless swing of the wipers. Cars parked askew on the streets were proof the city's plows had tried to keep up with the constant snowfall of the past couple of weeks.

While Mann drove, Harper leaned his forehead against the passenger side window. He closed his eyes and allowed the chilled glass to soothe the ache in his head that had settled into a dull pain above his temple. The string of events over the past twelve hours had caught up with him. Stoebe, Salas, and now Dominick Ray had led them here on their five-thirty-in-the-morning call to the rectory at St Paul's Catholic Church.

Harper's three-hour nap in the city morgue left him with little more than a light-headed sense of exhaustion. He pried open his eyelids and glanced out the window. The lights along the street shimmered off the snow making the scenery look as peaceful as any Christmas postcard suggested this day should be.

Behind them, the two back-up units drove under the orders of no lights or sirens. Moments later, the three city cars eased to a stop in front of the rectory.

A light shone and a movement was visible through a set of thickly gathered sheer curtaining on the home's front room window. As soon as Harper opened the cruiser's door, the crisp cold snapped him out of his

fog. He rang the doorbell once, waited a moment, and rang it again.

"I heard ya plain enough the first time." An elderly voice called out in a stern Irish brogue from behind the door. "Who is it?"

"Chandler Police Department, ma'am."

A couple of locks clicked, the door cracked open, and two small brown eyes set deep beneath a pair of knitted thick brows peered back at him. "Police? Is someone hurt?"

"No ma'am. I'm Detective Harper, this is my partner Dave Mann. We were here to see the monsignor a couple of days ago." He displayed his badge and handed her the search warrant. "We need to search the premises."

"Search?" She motioned for them to come in.

"Your name again?" he asked.

"I'm the housekeeper, Mrs O'Rourke." She dropped her gaze to the warrant then raised it again. "What's this about?"

"Mrs O'Rourke, if you'll permit us." Harper pointed to an over-stuffed chair near the door. "This won't take long."

"But Father is sayin' mornin' Mass." She dashed a look from one detective to the other then gazed at the four other officers standing behind them. "Ya can wait right there in the parlor, but I can't let you search Father's home without him bein' here, now can I?"

"Yes you can and you will." One look at her troubled face and Harper could easily imagine the thoughts that raced through her mind. "I promise Father Keller won't hold it against you. In the meantime, we need to see his phone records for the past year."

"Oh Father keeps a tight grip on the parsonage's records. The post arrives by ten every day like clockwork, except on Sundays, of course. I takes it



directly to him the minute it comes. If he's not in, he insists I leave the stack of letters on the small table outside his office door. Ya know, so to make sure he sees it apart from all that mess of his."

"Do you know where he keeps the phone records?"

"Now I wouldn't be know'n that, would I, as I leave his office the minute I drop off the post. He won't allow me to look around or clean things up or anythin' like that," she said. "Just pick any stack on his desk, I say, and start lookin'. Ya know the way." She thumbed at the staircase.

"Yes, ma'am." Harper slipped on a pair of gloves and ordered the officers to search Keller's bedroom. He and Mann took the monsignor's office.

Mrs O'Rourke kept the rectory in a spotless realm of perfect order; a complete contrast to the chaos they found in Monsignor's office. His desk was in the same disarray Harper had seen a few days before. Except for the clearing immediately in front of the priest's chair, the desk was a cluttered stack of books and papers.

While Mann moved to the bookcase along the south wall examining the titles of Keller's books and the pictures he kept on the shelves, Harper sat in the priest's chair looking beyond the obvious. "No computer, no calendar."

"He has to have a calendar." Mann handed Harper a photograph he took off one of the shelves. "Look at this. Keller used to box in the Navy."

"Do you remember the last time we were here?" Harper asked. "Keller was writing in a ledger. Remember?"

"Vaguely."

"Funny how things stick in your mind."

Mann grunted something under his breath. He gave up looking through the books and shifted his attention

to the files starting with those in the top drawer of a five-drawer cabinet.

"His office is a freaking dump, but he made it a point to put the ledger away the minute we walked through the door." Harper slid open the top right-hand desk drawer and rummaged through it. "It has to be here." He scanned the desktop again and reached for a set of envelopes that were leaning between two stacks of books. He shuffled through them before deciding they were church related and of no use to them. Moments later, a commotion downstairs drew their attention.

"Fogerdy, come here," Mrs O'Rourke yelled. The tapping of a dog's toenails on the hardwood floor in the hallway announced the arrival of the black and tan Shepherd. He scurried into Keller's office with the housekeeper close behind, panting as hard as the dog.

"Isn't that the same dog ..." Harper studied the animal's agitated behavior.

"Mr Zirmack's dog; found one of the floaters." Mann reached down to pet him. The dog licked Mann's hand. Fogerdy paced and tugged at his pant legs. "High strung isn't he?"

"There ya are ya crazy mutt. I'm terribly sorry," she said. "The dog never comes up here. Ever. I can't imagine what's gotten into him."

"Is this your dog?" Harper asked.

"Oh, heavens no. He's a stray poor Mr Zirmack found a while back. Always brought the brute with him while he did his chores. He seemed nice enough for a dog, but he never took well to the monsignor. Poor thing hasn't been the same since Mr Zirmack passed. Acts a bit blue if ya ask me."

"Mr Zirmack was the caretaker here, right?" Harper asked.

"For fifteen years. Caught the flu and that was that."

Harper studied the way the dog paced between

them and a small closet door to the left of the bookshelf.

"Here now. That's enough, you!" Mrs O'Rourke said when the dog started to scratch at the closet door. "I won't be havin' none of that. I can't take care of the house and a dog too. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with the beast now."

"Mrs O'Rourke, why don't you go back downstairs? We'll take care of the dog," Harper said, without taking his eyes off him. As soon as she left, Harper opened the closet door. "What is it, boy?"

Inside, Harper found five black cassocks and a jacket hanging from the rod and a strong scent of pine. A pair of black loafers were on the floor to one side. Above, on a shelf, were a couple of clear plastic boxes filled with white candles. Foggerdy rooted toward the back of the closet and seemed more interested in whatever was on the floor behind the priest's robes. Harper shoved the garments to one side to expose a small storage box. He pulled it out into the room, looked inside, and reached for a small pocket calendar.

"AG written three times a week, nearly every week between October of last year and this past May." Harper thumbed through its pages while trying to keep the dog from tearing at the box.

"Ash Grove." Mann grabbed the dog by his collar and pulled him away. "Well, now we know who pushed Stoebe over the edge."

For Harper, things were falling into place one piece of evidence at a time. Keller had been willing to push anyone under a bus to save his skin. His was a logic trapped between reason and madness. Harper reached into the box again and pulled out a laptop.

"Look at this."

"Let's see what he's hiding." Mann placed the laptop on Keller's desk, turned it on and let it boot.

"You sure you want to do that?" Harper asked. The two exchanged glances. The guys from IT would have a fit if they knew Mann had messed with the evidence. Then again, who would know and right now they needed every bit of information they could get on Keller. Harper left Mann to his search while he reached for the monsignor's supposed missing ledger. "It's all here; Gould's trip to Colombia, calls to Stoebe, Mittendorf." Harper paused when he noticed a gray T-shirt wadded into a ball at the bottom of the box. Forensics would be able to tell him which of the boys had worn the shirt last, but he didn't need their analysis to know what the dried, brown stains were, or how they had gotten there.

"Sam, I found something. There's an e-mail here Keller addressed to Vinny Woods." Mann reached for the notepad inside his breast pocket. He thumbed back to the note he had made after talking with Adams from IT division. "The date and time match the missing e-mail."

"The torn e-mail we found in Teal's pocket?"

"That's the one. Seems Keller wasn't keen about Vinny leaving the church." Mann continued to read in silence. The further he read, the tighter his frown became.

"Dave? What's the matter?" Harper watched his partner flip further back through his notes.

"Remember when we searched Vinny's bedroom?" Mann asked. "His mother stated that Father Keller was furious when Vinny left the church. He didn't stop after accusing the Woods of being bad parents. According to Mrs Woods, Keller swore he'd make things right again. Remember?"

"Does making things right include five murders?" Harper asked.

"Evidently the first boy's death was an accident.

Keller confronted the boy, they argued. Keller must have reverted back to his Navy boxing days, hit him too hard, just right and he died. He claims here that he only wanted to scare the boy."

"No doubt, so what's the catch?"

"Vinny was there. He witnessed the murder. The two were in on the cover up to stage it as a murder."

"And the two were inseparable again," Harper said.

"Only it didn't stop with one." Mann pointed at the screen as he read on ahead and then stopped. "Keller admits here that he had a vision of the prophecy and that killing those boys were key to stopping the Antichrist. Spells it all out, the threats, everything."

There was nothing more to discuss. The e-mail was proof of Keller's guilt in a multiple homicide and Kenny Teal's threat to expose Woods's involvement in the cover up was the motive for murder. Harper returned the items to the box. "Tell the guys to get in position."

Fogerdy continued to scratch at the box and barked incessantly.

"Come on, boy," Harper said, grabbing the dog by the collar. "What do you say we get out of here?"

Candles flickered inside the windows of St Paul's Church while a soft chorus rose to a gentle pitch then eased into a hum. Their words, *Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel* drifted into the hush of dawn. Harper pulled open the oak door. Images of that last evening with Marc rushed to greet him. Today, the sanctuary was vibrant with the holiday spirit. Mammoth fresh evergreen wreaths tied with Christmas red bows hung on each of the columns that led from the back of the church to the altar.

The uniformed officers entered the front of the church from either side, careful not to disturb the service. Two other detectives arrived and positioned

themselves in the back pews. Harper waited out in the foyer and looked in through the windows on the doors leading into the church. He made sure to stay out of sight while keeping watch of what was about to unfold. Keller briefly glanced toward the doors at either side of the altar. There was an unmistakable tug at the corners of Keller's mouth. By now, Harper was sure the priest had spotted the uniformed officers standing guard inside those doors.

Keller raised his hands in prayer. On cue, the faithful souls in attendance bowed their heads to receive the final blessing.

The congregation broke out in a chorus of "Hark the Herald Angel Sing" as Keller made his way down the center aisle. From where Harper stood, Father's steps seemed to be a half beat too fast for the music. A few more steps and the monsignor was his.

Harper followed Keller's gaze to the women standing alone near the back of the church by the aisle. The monsignor stopped, but neither he nor the woman spoke. He stretched out a hand to her and then recoiled. The look of repulsion washed over the priest's face as he rushed toward the door. Harper recognized the woman's jet-black hair and knew she was the nurse who had helped him get Jennie out of the hospital.

"Morning, Monsignor." Harper held out his badge in front of Keller's face. "What's the rush?"

Panic rendered Keller speechless. He jerked a glance over his shoulders at the detectives standing behind him.

Harper's men stood between Keller and the parishioners they directed to leave through the other doors.

"What's the meaning of this?" Keller asked. "We are in the house of the Lord! Have you no respect? No decency?"

"We need to talk."

"Make an appointment, Detective. I'm done playing games with you."

Harper held up the medical examiner's photograph of a small silver and onyx crucifix in front of Keller's face. "Did you lose something?"

"I don't—"

"That's you, right?" Harper pointed to the name engraved on the back of the cross.

There was a slight hesitation in Keller's response before he managed a feigned smile. "Thank goodness you found it. It was blessed by the pope. Where was it? I ... I'm not sure when I lost it."

"You had it around your neck two days ago, in your office when Detective Mann and I paid you a visit. How did Dominick Ray end up with it?"

"The chain link on it was loose. I meant to have it fixed."

"How did it end up in Dominick Ray's hand?" he asked again.

"Ray?" He blinked – twice.

Nothing would give Harper more satisfaction than to hear Keller's confession in the foyer of St Paul's Church. Instead he reached for the cuffs and snapped them around the priest's wrists.

"You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

"That's obvious, isn't it?" Keller said. "Ray must have stolen it when ..." Keller's voice trailed.

"You have the right to an attorney ..." Harper finished reading Keller his rights but the suspect wouldn't listen.

"The man had no morals."

"Should've kept to your calling, Father, starting with your own soul." Harper shook the picture of the crucifix

in front of Keller's face. "Ray was holding your crucifix in his fist when he died."

The men locked eyes.

"The dead never lie." Harper had all the evidence needed, including the blood stained T-shirt he found in Keller's closet, to charge him with five counts of murder. He was also willing to bet Keller's bite would be an exact match to the mark on the third victim's hand.

"You don't understand!"

"You're damned right I don't. But I know who and how and that's all that matters."

"I had to do it. To expose the Antichrist for the sake of the faithful," Keller paused. "Don't look at me like that. You can't begin to judge my actions. You know nothing about these things."

"You'd be surprised."

"I saw the ring years ago when I was a missionary in Columbia. That woman is a prophet. Anita, she's here. Look, she'll tell you herself. She's—" he looked back over his shoulder. "She's gone ... she told me of the prophecy handed down to her along with the ring. It was the same prophecy I had studied for years. She knew when the planets aligned, the end would be near. Don't you see? Everything was in place for his coming, her son – a bad seed and she knew it. He was of age. I knew he would come after it, that's why he had to be drawn out into the open and stopped."

*Anita.* Harper glanced past the priest. What was Keller talking about? The embassy reported Salas's mother was dead. He was delusional. Harper could hear the judge now. *Guilty by reason of insanity.*

"Dominick Ray was the worst offender, like the fourth beast," Keller said. "He corrupted those boys with earthly desires."

"You were in the Navy. You understood the waters



around the bay better than anyone and knew exactly where the currents would take the bodies, didn't you?"

Keller remained silent.

"Then you used Stoebe to help you dispose of the bodies. You were willing to let him and Marc take the blame for your crimes."

Keller looked away.

"What was it you said about Satan's emissaries? They take on many forms and use the weak to do his bidding. You should know." He grabbed the priest by the arm and led him toward the exit.

"Stoebe killed Rocky. You have to believe me. And Marc, he knew too much. His death was no accident. It was God's will, just like all the others. It was part of the deal."

"Who exactly were you making deals with?" Harper handed him over to one of the officers.

"They were all lustful in body and soul," Keller yelled. "Foul servants of Satan. Proverbs 21:8, 'The way of the guilty is crooked, but the conduct of the pure is right.' They had to be sacrificed."

"A good friend of mind told me that some men hide behind their faith more than others. They can strap on a white collar and memorize every passage of the Bible, but they can't escape God's eyes." Harper motioned to the officer. "Get him out of my sight."

Harper ran his hands over his mouth sensing disgust mixed with relief, and the start of some closure. He was standing in the vestibule watching Keller get into the squad car when, from the corner of his eye, he noticed the nurse leaving the church through another exit. "Wait! Ma'am, hold up. I need to talk with you."

She paused and glanced over her shoulder. She gave him a nod and a smile. "She is in your hands now," the woman said and slipped into the dark.

The door slammed behind her.

Harper swung it open. He jerked his head in one direction and then the other. In a matter of seconds she was gone.

## 52

"Where is she, Abby?"

"Sam, thank God you called. I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? I just got to the ER. The nurse said they released Jennie hours ago. I thought you were going to stay with her?"

"I did. I was right there by her side the whole time. But what was I supposed to do? I couldn't talk her into coming home with me."

"You should have insisted."

"I was in no position to do that."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"Not a word."

"Come on, Abby, think. Jennie must have said something."

"I'm sorry, she didn't. She wouldn't even accept a ride from me. I offered to drop her off wherever she wanted to go, but she ran out of the hospital before I could stop her."

"Damn it. I have to go."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find her." It was Christmas Eve and he could almost smell his father's cooking. But he wasn't going anywhere until he knew she was safe.

"What about your dad? He's expecting us all—"

"Tell Dad I'll be home as soon as I can." He was beyond hunger and exhaustion, not that he would allow

those things to keep him from looking for her. Harper snapped his cell shut and thought back to his first encounter with Jennie at the newspaper. Abby was right. Jennie's stubborn determination was the first thing that caught his attention. Aside from that, he could count on one hand what he knew about Jennifer Blake.

All she had talked about was going back to her apartment. That's where he'd start. That's what was running through his mind when one of the medics patted him on the back.

"Hey, Harper. Close call with that prowler, huh?"

"The what?"

"The prowler. You know, the guy who broke into your house." The medic shook his head. "Takes all kinds, doesn't it? What an idiot breaking into a cop's house."

"How did you know?"

"Ah, hell, it's all over this morning's front page. Where've you been? Haven't you seen it?" The medic grabbed the paper off the nurses' station. "Here, there it is, in big bold headlines. 'Homicide Detective Sam Harp—'"

Harper snatched the paper from the medic's hands, cut a look at the byline, and left.

Except for the security guard sitting at the front desk thumbing through a copy of *Newsweek*, Harper saw no one when he entered the Chandler Times building. Christmas or not, the void in activity was uncharacteristic for the local newspaper office. He took the stairs two steps at a time to the fourth floor office and ran down to the pressroom. He swung open the double glass doors, fully expecting to see Jennie sitting at her desk, but the place was as empty as the lobby below. He shot a look to one end of the room and then

the other. He checked the employee lounge and the conference room and found both empty. He decided his first thought, that she would have gone back to her apartment seemed like a logical next step. He turned and started to leave when he walked past the editor's office and caught sight of a foot dangling over the side of Brian's couch.

Harper leaned into the editor's office and breathed out a sigh. She was beautiful and sound asleep. He was suddenly aware of his feelings. Not the obvious physical; the desire to be smothered by her embrace and to feel her kisses grow with want. He planned to take her there, but this was deeper. It was an urgent sense of concern, a relief to know that Jennie was safe, and the need to protect her had nothing to do with Marc's dying request.

She was curled on her side with one arm draped above her head. Careful not to startle her, he raised her leg onto the couch, sat down, and studied the curves of her face. With a light touch, he stroked her cheek then leaned forward to kiss her.

Jennie awoke with a start. She searched his face. Tears welled in her eyes as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"Why would you think that?"

She shrugged. "You were so angry when you left."

"I'm sorry. Everything happened so fast. It had nothing to do with you."

"But what did you mean when you said you couldn't do it? Couldn't do what?" She pressed herself closer to him and choked on her words. "After everything we've been through, I can't imagine ..."

What? Not want her? She rammed into his life with the explosive thrust of a runaway train, spun him around, and left him dancing on the edge of an abyss; a frightening, provocative, heart-pounding thrill. Was

she kidding? A million thoughts blazed through his mind that he couldn't begin to verbalize.

"You could have been killed," she whispered into his ear.

"And I'd do it again." He kissed her once more.

"Are you okay?" she asked, cupping his face.

*Yeah*, was all the response he could manage. It was Christmas Eve, the planets had just aligned without fanfare or interference, and the only thing he wanted was the comfort of her arms.

"I read your article," he said.

"And?"

"Not bad."

"I was there, remember. It's damn good and you know it." She pulled him toward her.

"It's not finished," he said, between kisses. "You didn't report the connection between the ring and the floaters."

Jennie froze, her eyes grew wide. "You found the killer?" She pushed him back and sat up.

"Not now, okay?"

"You arrested him? The guy who killed those boys?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? What does that mean? Maybe?" She rose to her feet. "You either have him or you don't."

He took her hand and pulled her onto his lap. "It means it's Christmas Eve and—"

"This is the biggest news since last summer's shootings. Every person in Chandler has been waiting months to know he's been caught."

"Blake, I'm officially on a two-week vacation."

"Damn it, Harper. Tell me what happened!"

He glanced at his watch. "It's early; just after seven. The sun's barely out."

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"Your deadline is eight hours away."

"Or sooner."

"We have plenty of time. You're a fast typist, aren't you? Besides, I'm not doing another thing before I get breakfast and some sleep."

"Sam, please don't tease me."

"I'll tell you all about it, but not here. You can write and submit your story from anywhere, can't you?"

"Well ... yes. What did you have in mind?"

He nudged her off his lap. "Come on, where's your coat?" He helped her slip it on, took her by the hand, and walked her out.

The snow had stopped a few hours ago, the wind had subsided and an opening in the clouds allowed the last star to shine through. When they reached his car, the morning's silence was broken by his new companion's bark.

"So what happened with Stoebe?" she asked. "Is he the killer? What was the connection with Salas?"

"Later."

"At least tell me what you did with the ring. Did you destroy it?"

"It's going into evidence." Harper decided that giving up a bit of information now might save him a long discussion later when he least wanted to talk about business. He told her about finding the monsignor's diary, Gould's phone records, and the cross Dominick Ray had pulled from Keller's neck. All of which were damning enough, but the bloodstains they found on the T-shirt alone would seal Keller's conviction.

"Wouldn't the Vatican be the ring's rightful owner?" she asked.

Harper grinned at the thought. "You mean send it back to the pope?"

"Sure. Why not? Let him deal with it." She paused for a second to slip on her gloves. "You know, Sam,

you've saved my life more than once, but I don't know anything about you."

"Not much to tell."

"I don't believe that for a minute. Let's start with siblings. Do you have any?"

"Just one. A younger brother."

"Interesting."

"Not in his opinion. Why?"

"Just checking."

There was nothing casual in the tone of her voice. He had picked up that much about Jennifer Blake and knew when she was digging around for another story. This time, he didn't trust the ease in her smile.

"All right, Blake. Let's have it."

"It's nothing, really."

"I know better," he said.

"Okay, I remembered something that Mittendorf told me about the ring. He said it gives its owner great powers of vision, and those powers are supposed to pass on to the first born child who is in possession of it when the planets align. That, Sam Harper, would be you, wouldn't it?"

He rolled his eyes and kept walking.

"After all, that's why Alejandro wanted it, right?" she asked. "Think how fast you could solve your cases if you knew where to look."

"It's going into evidence." He wanted nothing more to do with the black pearl ring. Marc assured him he would believe in curses before it was over and a part of him had to admit his perspective had changed. Powers or not, he'd throw the ring in the bay before ever thinking of keeping the damned thing.

"And what about—"

"S-h-h. Later." Harper touched his fingertip to her lips. He sensed Jennie was working herself up for another exclusive. They were both due a distraction



from work. That's all he was thinking about as he helped her into his Jeep. He certainly wasn't thinking about work when he turned the ignition, nor did he want to know who was calling him on his cell when he drove away from the curb. Damn it, he was done – off duty and on vacation.

“Sam. Shouldn't you ...?”

He glanced at the number on the screen. “It's the IT division at police headquarters. I have to take it.”

“Harper? It's Adams. I have your smoking gun.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jon Keller. I just spoke with Dave Mann. He said you two arrested him for on four counts of murder.”

“That's right. What about it?”

“Whatever Keller says, you have to know the murders were premeditated.”

“Go on.”

“Mann dropped off Keller's laptop to me a few minutes ago. Care to know the kind of stuff the good father was searching for on the Internet weeks before the murders? Things like decomposition, north Atlantic currents, water temperatures, effects of water on a corpse. No jury will deny he was planning his move.”

“Whatever you do,” Harper said. “Make damn sure it's admissible.”

“It is. There's a murder case on the books where a man, in addition to other evidence, was found guilty of murdering his landlady based on the search words; ‘neck,’ ‘snap,’ and ‘crush’ before the woman was found strangled in bed. The search terms were found on that killer's computer too. If we have to, we can subpoena the search engines for Keller's search history. Just thought you'd want to know.”

“And a Merry Christmas to you too,” Harper said as he turned off his phone. Premeditation was the final nail in the case. The detective unit had done its best, now it

was up to the prosecutor and a jury to find Keller guilty.

Aside from the blinking white lights on the garland strung across the streets, nothing stirred on this frigid Christmas Eve morning.

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me what that was about either," Jennie said.

"Nope."

"Sam."

"No."

"You're impossible, you know that?" she asked. "I'll give you until noon to rest – that's it. Christmas or not, my deadline is still three o'clock." She paused for a second. "That's going to cut it really close." She reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze then turned to look out the window. "You never did say where we're going."

He shot a glance at the dashboard clock. Christmas Eve dinner was hours away. He could see his father tinkering around in the kitchen. By now the presents were under the tree and he instinctively knew the traditional honey glazed ham was ready to go in the oven.

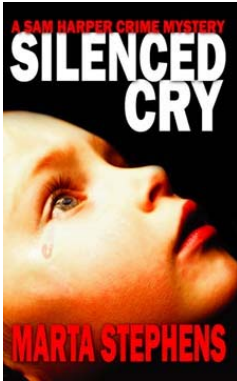
The Harpers were all about family and holiday rituals. That's what he was looking forward to now. His job was done, but as hard as he tried, he couldn't wipe the case from his mind. Capturing the guilty didn't begin to make anything right. Two men's obsessions had destroyed lives and shattered beliefs.

"Sam? Did you hear me?"

Jennie's hand felt warm. He embraced it with a sense of relief and belonging. He wove his fingers through hers and smiled. "Yeah, I'm taking you home."

***The End***

## Also by Marta Stephens



### Silenced Cry

Detective Sam Harper is left guilt-ridden after his partner is shot and killed during what should have been a routine pick-up for questioning. The discovery of an infant's body during the demolition of an abandoned building leads Harper to unearth murky secrets involving those he respects most. His former partner, his revered boss, and even his police-hero father are all under suspicion of drug-dealing, corruption, rape, and murder.

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**Excerpt**



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