



Crossroads: Showdown

Keta Diablo

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Crossroads: Showdown

A novella of homoerotic suspense by

KETA DIABLO

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Chapter One

Baltimore's humid, subtropical June climate suffocated Frank, more so after the air conditioning in his office went on the fritz that morning.

He pushed the intercom button on his phone. "Grace, are you there?"

"Every fan we own is working overtime, Frank." A chuckle followed his assistant's words. "Do me a favor so I can get some work done. Take the rest of the day off."

"Don't think I haven't thought about it, but Hayworth is expected within the hour." He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "When the hell is that repair man supposed to arrive?"

"An hour ago, so let's hope he shows before tomorrow."

"Gotta love your sense of humor, Grace, while we struggle to breathe."

"I'll buzz you when either Hayworth or A-One Air arrives."

Frank disconnected and stared across the desk at a picture. Taken in happier days, the people he loved most in the world smiled back at him—Quinn, Emily, and their kids, Rand and Marlow. The children looked to be about nine and six respectively, the parents in their early thirties. The snapshot was taken long before his ex-partner, Quinn, had been gunned down in a run-amuck drug bust. Like he said, *in happier days*.

An exasperated sigh left Frank's lips. Trouble brewed. What kind of trouble he didn't know, but like the fans in the office, the precognitive cells in his brain had been

working overtime for a week. Then a call came from Rueben Hayworth, the FBI agent from Washington, solidifying Frank's suspicions. Rueben couldn't discuss the conundrum over the phone, but requested a face-to-face meeting with him. Uh-huh, evil rode the wind again, and just when his relationship with Rand had finally reached a measure of accord, if not mutual contentment.

Rand had brought his pre-med grades up to A's, Frank's PI business flourished, and their sex life... well, Frank couldn't even think about Quinn and Emily's son without tamping down his perpetual hard-on. Mutual contentment, hell. Their relationship had advanced far beyond raw, primal lust. So why couldn't he just accept it, admit it?

Frank rose from the chair behind his desk with a disgusted shake of his head. A moron, that's what he was. A white-livered coward who couldn't face his own demon. In his case, the demon stood on common ground with the word *commitment*. And, contrarily, one tiny word from him—love—would rock Rand's world. "Say it out loud, you chicken, 'Rand, I love you.'" A growl came from his throat. Why was it so hard to speak the words when they would mean so much to Rand?

Annoyed with the heat and with himself, Frank yanked on the heavy curtains in his office until they met in the middle. If he intended to connect with his inner spirit, he had to set the stage first. He walked to the light switch, dimmed the overhead track, and slumped into his chair again.

The subliminal messages arriving this time were so unlike all the others. Nothing haunted his dreams at night, but rather scenes flashed through his head during his waking hours. They nibbled away at his thoughts until he could think of little else. But that's all they were at this point—a montage of snapshots, blurred and innocuous at best. The time had come to clear the mental barriers from his mind, engage in concerted meditation.

Frank closed his eyes. Moments later, patterns of light appeared. Drawing on a reservoir of meditation knowledge and experience, he focused on the light with reserved attention. His consciousness slipped into a deep state, the catalyst for a gradual shift into the highest level of consciousness. *That's right, come to me baby, give me all you got.*

As if on command, vignettes rushed forth in muted snapshots, although they meant nothing to him at this point.

Picture one—a child, a young girl to be exact, no more than nine or ten. Picture two—long blonde hair that reminded him of corn silk, and round blue eyes. Three—frail, and aside from the baby blues, her other features appeared almost elfin in nature. Four—an aura enveloped her.

Oh, Christ, she was dead. Even in his meditative state, a chill ran down his spine. He hated working on cases involving dead children.

And lastly, picture five—her face masked in sorrow, she rose and walked toward him. Toward him! And she kept on coming, like walking toward the lens of a camera. Her image grew larger and larger, but she didn't retreat or list off to the side.

Frank's heartbeat launched into an erratic rhythm. The game had changed. He wasn't just communing with the dead in this case; he had called forth the dead. The waiflike child had walked directly into his life.

The phone buzzed, jolting Frank from his meditative state. Sweat streamed down his back, ran in rivulets down his forehead and soaked the collar of his shirt.

He picked up the phone in a haze, a result of connecting on a subconscious level. Adding to his bewildered state, the last image of the girl walking toward him refused to fade from his mind. "A-One has arrived," Grace said. "Toolbox in hand, and he's working on the air as we speak."

"So there is a God?"

"Speaking of thou Most Holiest, Hayworth just walked in and wants to know if we moved your office to the Sahara."

"That's my Grace, always the comedienne. Show him in, please."

* * * *

"Jesus, Frank, had I known you couldn't afford to pay your electrical bill, I would have come sooner to offer you a gig."

With a flourish of his damp arm, Frank pointed to the chair. "Have a seat, Rueben. With any luck, we should feel a cool blast soon."

Rueben slumped into the chair opposite Frank's desk. "I saw the repair crew on my way in," he said with a chuckle.

"And for the record, before you begin your sales pitch, I don't need a gig. I'm up to my balls in missing person cases."

"You haven't heard my offer yet, or the gut-wrenching details." The agent dropped a folder onto the desk and slid it across to him.

"Gut-wrenching? Ah, shit, it does involve children?"

Rueben gave him a knowing look. "Have you been having strange dreams?"

He lied and shook his head.

"You said, 'Ah, shit—'"

"I know what I said."

"How do you know it involves children then?"

Frank leaned back in his chair, locked his fingers together, and placed his hands at the back of his head. "I liked you right off, friend, even more by the time we closed the case on the maniacal Dr. McBride. But I told you before, dabbling in perfections is a hobby for me, not a lifestyle."

"Which means?"

"It's imprecise, vague, thus, the reason I don't offer myself up to every Fed who calls my office."

"I liked you right off, too, and I believed in you then, like I do now." Rueben's face took on a somber expression. "I'm not just any Fed, but your friend. If I didn't think you were the right person for this job, I wouldn't waste your time... or mine."

A cool blast of air floated down from the ceiling. Frank arched his neck back and closed his eyes. "Man, what did they do before the invention of air conditioning?"

"Frank, stop changing the subject, and answer my question."

He blew air through his lips and picked up the folder. "I know you won't leave until I look at the file."

Rueben shook his head.

"What was the question again?"

"How do you know this involves children?"

"What would you say if I told you just before you walked in and ruined my already shitty day, I saw images?"

"I knew it!"

A chill came over Frank and not from the air conditioning. "Blurred images, Rueben, nothing more. They could mean anything."

"But you saw a child?" He leaned forward. "A boy? A girl? What did she look like?"

"Whoa! Who said I saw a girl? In fact, who said I saw a child?"

"Don't fuck with me, Frank. I'll fill you in while you're looking over the file."

A song came to Frank on a tiny voice and filled his head, or at least he hoped it was in his head. He hadn't heard the tune before, but most definitely a small, heavenly voice recited the lyrics—something about dreams and the color blue. Frank looked at Rueben out of the

corner of his eye and half-expected to see him scan the room for the sound.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Do you hear something?"

Rueben grew still for a moment. "Other than muffled voices through the door and the blessed whisper of the vent overhead, no. What should I be listening for?"

"Nothing," Frank said and opened the file. "Three missing girls?" He looked at their pictures after spreading them out on his desk. "West Virginia?"

Rueben nodded. "Ever been kayaking, Frank?"

"No," he said distractedly. "Can't say that I have. Do you expect me to search for them in the river?"

A deep-throated chuckle escaped Rueben. "We don't think they're in the water. Just a guess, but..."

"Then why the question about kayaking?"

"They disappeared from some little towns in Barbour County. Home to Audra State Park, the area is known for hiking, fishing and white-water rafting. I thought maybe while you were—"

Frank's head came up. "I never said I'd take the case. I agreed to meet with you and look at the file, see if I can give you some pointers."

"I appreciate your hospitality, believe me, but what kind of a Fed would I be if I didn't pressure you while here?"

"Why me? You have a shit load of special agents that work on missing children cases? And besides," Frank smiled. "It's smooth-sailing at home right now, and I don't want to rock the boat."

"How is Rand?"

"Doing well in college now, and I'm busier here than a one-legged man in a shit-kicking contest."

Rueben clucked his cheek. "Damn."

"What aren't you telling me about this case? Why is it so important to you or should I say important to the FBI?"

"One of the missing girls is the daughter of Judge Kenton, that's the Honorable Parker Kenton, brother to one of the upper echelon at the Bureau." He put his hands in the air and shrugged. "We're looking rather foolish at this point. Three girls missing without a trace and the heat is on."

"Think they're dead?"

"God, I hope not. If they were, wouldn't you think the cadaver dogs or the search parties had found something? A shoe, a piece of their clothing..." He paused. "A grave?"

"Well, with all that water you're talking about, it would be pretty easy to dump their bodies in a river, a stream. They float downstream, never to be seen again."

"Something would have washed up by now."

Frank studied the pictures again. "They're all about the same age." He looked closer. "Hmm, they resemble one another."

"Not a coincidence, I'm sure."

"It's not uncommon. A child molester tends to pick similar-looking victims."

"There are no child molesters within sixty miles of Barbour County, that we know of. It's not a very populated area."

"Great. Can't you ever ask me to go to a city with at least one five-star hotel?"

"Sorry, Frank, I don't pick the locations." What do you say? The Bureau is prepared to double your hourly rate on this case." Hope laced his words. He dug into the pocket of his suit coat and tossed an envelope onto the desk. "Two thousand up front, the balance when you find them, however long it takes."

"Dead or alive?"

Rueben nodded. "They want it over. After ten days, the story is beginning to hit the news circuit. Doesn't look good for the Bureau, and Judge Kenton is on us like ticks on a dog."

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Frank looked at the envelope. Talk about an offer you can't refuse falling into your lap. Rand's face floated before him. He wouldn't be happy about this, not when things had been running so smoothly between them.

Still, maybe he could soften the blow with a promise he wouldn't be gone long, and when he returned, they'd take the money and head off to Mexico for a week. Reluctantly, Frank said, "All right. I'll take the file home with me and call you in the morning."

"Is that a yes?"

"Barring a scene at home that would make the Apocalypse look like a picnic, yes."

Rueben came to his feet and shook Frank's hand. "Call me in the morning and I'll have my assistant make the necessary reservations. Sorry to say it won't be the Ritz, but probably a Super 8. Can you leave tomorrow?"

"Might as well get it over with."

Chapter Two

Rand was on the phone with a towel wrapped around his waist when Frank walked into the kitchen. "Okay, Mom, brunch tomorrow at noon it is. See you then."

Frank's base desires kicked in like they always did when looking at Rand. Hard to reconcile in his mind were the other emotions melding with those carnal stirrings. Eight years shy of forty, and with a half-dozen casual affairs behind him, Frank knew what he didn't want in life—more of the same. He wanted to settle down, be with someone who wanted to be with him, long term. The eight-year disparity in their ages bothered Frank, as did the fact that Rand was his ex-partner's son.

Lying in a cold grave for the last twelve years, Quinn Brennan wasn't able to sanction or reject the relationship. Yet, Rand's mother, Emily, had assured Frank on numerous occasions Quinn wished for only one thing... Marlow and Rand's happiness. "Rand is what he is, Frank," she'd said. "Just as you are what you are. Quinn and I agreed to accept and love our children above all else, no matter what."

Rand pushed his fingers through his damp hair and laughed; no doubt at some off-color joke from his mother. Frank loved the laugh that reminded him of water cascading over rocks in a mountain stream. He loved his voice, and hell, everything else about him. His cock twitched and grew hard, so fast it left him breathless. He fought against the jolt of lust curdling his blood. He needed Rand. And dear God, he loved him, wanted him naked and tangled up with his body.

Rand hung up the phone and turned to him, his eyes hazed over with desire. "Hi, Frank," he said, trying hard to mask his own need as Frank walked to the liquor cabinet. "Rough day at work?"

Frank nodded. "That apparent, huh?"

"You're heading for the Jack Daniels with briefcase in hand. Sure giveaway."

He tossed the black leather case on the sofa, opened the door to the cabinet, and grabbed the whisky. After topping off a short glass, he joined the briefcase and downed it. "I can't think of a better way to start my weekend."

Rand slow-walked toward him, his moss-green eyes sparking like jack pines under a harsh sun. "I can," he said, dropping to his knees in front of him.

The sensually curved lips descended and met his. Frank's mind-blowing reaction stunned him. The room swirled and his blood turned to liquid fire. Rand's probing tongue sought the depths of his mouth and his hand worked the zipper of Frank's trousers. He pulled the hardened shaft free, slid his hand along the throbbing length and then pinched the sensitive head. An involuntary moan escaped Frank's mouth.

"See," Rand said into his open mouth. Running his tongue over Frank's bottom lip, he drew him into that endless chasm he craved. "Tell me you can think of a better way to start your weekend."

Amid the giddy wave of dizziness, Frank's libido kicked into high alert. He wanted Rand in every way, more than anything he'd ever wanted. He must have come down with some type of disease to be thinking along the lines of permanent *commitment*. He'd agree to anything Rand wanted, say anything asked of him to feel his cock throbbing inside that hot, tight ass right now.

Winding his fingers in his long hair Frank said, "Ditch the towel." He didn't withdraw his hand until Rand loosened it with a flick of his wrist and tossed it onto the

floor. Only then did their mutual gaze break for a timeless moment. Frank felt his cock weep as he turned Rand toward the coffee table until a view of his naked back rose before him. "Lean against it with your arms bearing your weight, palms down."

Rand complied and Frank drank in the view, not touching him, but rather savoring the hard, lean lines of his body—the muscled biceps, broad shoulders, and narrow waist. Christ, had he died and gone to Heaven? His shitty day had just taken a dramatic turn and could quite possibly be the best of his entire week. Frank kicked Rand's feet out until his legs were spread wide, and then he slid a hand over one cheek of his ass.

A shudder rippled through Rand and his body tensed. Frank reached around with his free hand and found his cock, aware of the rise and fall of his ragged breath when he stroked it. Like his own shaft, Rand's throbbed and precum moistened the tip. Frank spread the liquid around with his fingers and squeezed the damp slit. Whimpers of need fell from Rand's mouth. The sound drove Frank over the edge when Rand's perfect bottom pushed back against his thighs.

Frank's hand slid to the cleft between his cheeks and he ran his fingers between it, finding his hole. Gradually, he slid a finger inside.

Rand cried out and bucked forward, "Oh, God."

"Want me to stop?" Frank asked.

"More," Rand gasped.

Unable to pull his eyes from the erotic sight, Frank pulled his finger out, slipped two in, probing and pushing amid a string of panted breaths from Rand. He repressed his own shiver and tried to concentrate on insignificant musings. If he didn't pace himself, the whole shebang would be over in a heartbeat, the last thing he wanted.

Rand's insides twitched against his fingers and his hips thrust backward to meet the assault. Frank couldn't take any more. He removed his hand from Rand's hot shaft

with his normal, unshakable control threatening to defeat him. Lust simmered in his veins and semen ran from his tip and glistened down the length of his own erection. Frank watched the taut muscles of Rand's forearms quiver as he positioned the tip of his cock at his entrance. He exalted in the potent trembling of Rand's raw hunger.

"This what you want, pretty boy?"

"Yes, yes," he panted.

Frank entered him slowly, burying the head an inch and then paused. An animalistic groan spewed from Rand's throat, and only when the tight muscles of his insides relaxed to adjust to his width, did he begin to move.

Rand thrashed and a deep, guttural groan escaped his lips when Frank pushed in slowly and buried his cock to the hilt. When Rand's arms collapsed and his face fell to the table, Frank grabbed his hips with both hands, retreated again and drove in hard and fast. Rand cried out, and a haze of pleasure unlike any Frank had ever known spread outward through every limb, an all-consuming fire that stripped his soul bare.

Rand undulated beneath him, his sleek, black hair glistening in ribbons of muted amber beneath the lamp next to the couch. His body spasmed and Frank knew his release grew imminent.

"Don't stop, not now, harder, faster."

Frank's balls tightened and hot liquid rushed to the top of his cock. He couldn't think, aware only of the beautiful man beneath him and his throbbing member moving inside him.

Hovering at the pinnacle of insanity, Frank reveled in the sound of another bestial groan from Rand. His hands were rough on the feverish skin of Rand's hips as he yanked him back hard and slammed into him with one final thrust.

Frank's cry echoed in the room as the orgasm tore through him in unending waves of blissful release, the

power and intensity all but blinding him. He collapsed against Rand's sweat-soaked body. Long minutes later, and after his breathing had returned to normal, Frank whispered into Rand's ear. "How's that for starting out our weekend?"

"Christ," Rand said. "Tell me I didn't just die and go to Heaven. If so, reincarnate me, will you?"

Frank laughed, lifted himself off that faultless body, and zipped up his pants. "Your skin is too hot for you to be dead."

Rand twisted around and rose on wobbly limbs.

"You okay?" Frank asked.

With a smile, Rand nodded. "More than okay, but I need another shower now."

Frank grabbed the bottle of whisky and poured a double shot into the glass. "Go ahead, and then we need to talk."

Rand's eyes narrowed. "Sounds serious."

"No, nothing too serious," he said with a wave of his hand. "I need to go out of town for a while and just wanted you to know."

"Oh-oh; out of town always means serious." He plucked the towel from the floor and wrapped it around his waist. "The shower can wait," he said, slumping into a nearby chair. "Tell me."

Frank shivered. Suddenly the room had grown cool... almost cold. The words wafted around him, the tiny voice nearly stopping his heart, *Shut your eyes of blue. Bringing dreams to you.*

Rand's voice came to him through a tunnel. "Frank, you all right? Frank..."

He placed his fingers to his temples and rubbed. "Yeah, fine, I think." He scanned the room, acutely aware of the drop in temperature. "Do you hear anything?"

"Hear anything? Nothing except a dog barking outside, but it sure got cold in here all of a sudden. Maybe the thermostat is on the blink."

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Bringing dreams to you...bringing dreams to you.

"Frank, what the fuck? You're a million miles away."

Frank shook his head. Great, now he heard voices—voices that no one else seemed to hear. "You do feel the cold though?"

"Well, yeah. Even an Eskimo would notice the arctic blast that just entered the room." Rand rubbed his hands up and down his arms. "What do you think it is?"

"You don't want to know."

"Why do you do that, Frank, shut me out all the time?"

"It has nothing to do with you."

"Well, thanks for making me feel such a big part of your life. Let's see, it has to do with me when you want to fuck me, but when it comes to other aspects of your life, it has *nothing* to do with me."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Yes, you did, and you do it all the time. Does this have something to do with you suddenly going out of town, and does it have to do with those weird dreams and visions you have?" He looked around the room. "Jesus, not only is it cold, but the eerie vibes I'm getting are freaking me out."

"From me?"

"That, too, but mostly from the room. Tell me, Frank, what's going on? Why did the room—"

"A ghost."

Rand's eyes widened. He looked at Frank. "You're serious? I'd laugh, but..."

"But what?"

"I can feel *it*."

"Not an *it*."

"No? What then?"

"A child. A girl."

"You gotta be shitting me."

Frank shook his head.

"A ghost is in the condo, and it's a young girl?"

"Yep."

"But how...why?"

"I think I mistakenly called her forth. She's singing right now. Please tell me you can hear her."

"The only thing I hear are unbelievable words coming from your mouth, and you're freaking me out." Rand paused, leaned forward and met his eyes. "All right, I'll bite. What's she singing?"

"I can't make out all the words, but something about the sandman, blue, and, damn it's right there, but..."

"You're absolutely serious?"

Frank nodded.

"Well fucking great. You called a ghost forth. I told you dabbling in perceptions or whatever the hell you call them would get you in trouble one day." Rand looked toward the ceiling. "This child ghost, she's not like the sister of Chuckie or anything, is she?"

"Perfections, Rand, not perceptions. And no, she's a gentle ghost, although a restless spirit. Not here to harm anyone, but help I think."

Rand rose. "That does it. I'm jumping into the shower before I turn into an icicle, and I hope when I come back, you'll have talked her into paying rent if she plans to stay."

"She's gone."

"Already? How do you know?"

"The singing stopped and it's getting warmer in here."

Rand shook his head, walked toward the hallway and turned to him. "Stay off the Jack Daniels while I'm gone. I have visions of returning to a full-blown séance."

"Very funny, Rand. When you return, I'll tell you about my trip out of town. I leave Monday."

"Take the damn ghost with you."

Chapter Three

Frank gassed up the Denali in Baltimore before heading out of town. Four hours and two hundred-fifty miles from now, he'd arrive in the town of Philippi, Barbour's County seat. He planned to enjoy the drive, take his mind off the flurry of questions rattling around in his brain.

West Virginia this time of year lay in a virtual cradle of splendor. Noted for its lofty mountains and diverse forests of hardwoods, the miles sped by while Frank devoured the scenery. Logging and coal mining ranked high on the state's list of resources, and oh, yeah, lest he forget, the abundant outdoor recreational activities—skiing, whitewater rafting, hiking, fishing and hunting.

He didn't know where this journey would take him, possibly through rugged mountains or across rivers and streams, but he'd packed clothing for all kinds of weather and terrain. Something told him unless he got a momentous break he'd be searching long and hard for answers... or bodies.

He'd been through the file Hayworth left him a hundred times, and all roads led to Rome—out of the city, or in this case out of town. Studying a map of the local area, the surrounding countryside was littered with small towns. The girls, if they were alive, could have been transported to Moatsville, Kasson or Nestorville, the three closest towns. Then again, someone could have snatched them and hauled them all the way to Singapore by now. In most respects, hunting them down would be like looking for a turtle with a mustache.

Gut instinct or perhaps his inner eye told him the girls were alive, and that thought conjured up all kinds of nasty images. Why would someone take three girls, all around the age of ten, if not for sexual reasons? Frank shivered. A hundred movies, thoughts, and scenarios ran through his mind.

Thousands of kids went *missing* at any given time in the country. Although the reasons varied, the key to finding them was to uncover the motive. Frank wasn't just looking for Mindy Kenton, Chelsea Gimmel, and Lauren Brekken, but he'd be looking for the person who had a *reason* to take them.

He had one ace up his sleeve right now, Ghost-girl. No one could ever convince him her arrival in his life was coincidental. Although images of the sprightly little urchin were somewhat murky, she looked remarkably similar to the blonde-hair-blue-eyed missing girls.

Frank glanced in his rearview mirror and almost expected to see her sitting in the back seat. He hadn't heard her melodious voice or felt her presence since Friday night when she damn near froze him and Rand out of the condo. "Make no mistake about it, Frank, my boy, she's here somewhere, and here for a reason."

Another shudder claimed him. God, were ghosts able to observe everything going on around them in the physical sense? Had she seen him and Rand...? Oh, he didn't want to think about it. Thus, the reason he hadn't touched Rand for the remainder of the weekend. Not that Rand hadn't tried everything in his power to seduce him short of holding the Glock to his chin again.

He smiled at the memory of Rand emerging from the closet dressed like a cat-burglar—black clothing, his head masked. At the time, Frank's heart nearly stopped, and then he recognized the cocky swagger. His anxiety wasn't eased when Rand put the Glock to his cheek. Hell, Rand knew little about guns, and yet the entire scene was erotically hot...smoking, fucking hot. Rand knew

instinctively how to ignite his passion, fulfill his darkest fantasies.

There was something to be said about having a gun to your cheek when you knew the culprit, but didn't know what their next move would be. Rand's next move involved handcuffing Frank to the head rail while he sucked him off. The Denali veered left and edged the center line. Hell, if he didn't get his mind out of the gutter, he wouldn't have to worry about solving the case.

Frank straightened the car, laughed and wondered what Rand would think about the note he'd left for him on the kitchen counter. After addressing it to *Randy Rand*, he gave him a general idea of his itinerary and the number to the Super 8 in Philippi in case an emergency arose. After giving Rand the cold shoulder all weekend, and after the salutation on the note, he doubted Rand would even call if the condo burned to the ground.

He should have told Rand he didn't want to rebuff his advances, but rather he felt like an exhibitionist in front of Ghost-girl. Yeah, right, Rand would have a hard time wrapping his head around that concept. Frank had to remind himself occasionally that Rand wasn't in to perfections, mediation, and inner spirit type phenomena. And unfortunately, he wasn't in to explaining everything to Rand or anyone for that matter.

Frank stopped at the halfway mark to stretch his legs and grab a coffee, to which he'd add a shot of Jack Daniels. He had a feeling he'd need more than whisky when he met the Honorable Judge Parker Kenton.

* * * *

Judge Kenton's quaint two-story sat at the top of a hill at the end of town, somewhat isolated from the other abodes in Philippi. Frank had checked out his coordinates the moment he entered the small, down-home-feel town, a lasting behavior of his past detective work at the Baltimore

Police Department. Although he'd ditched the job the moment his best friend and partner, Quinn Brennan, was gunned down, he hadn't been able to ditch his instinctual *watch your back at all times* cop attitude.

He'd gone over the events leading up to Quinn's death a thousand times, and relived the horrific images of the man dying in his arms a million. Frank had read once that God picks the day and not the way. Until that fateful afternoon, he'd scoffed at the notion. Not anymore. It had all happened so fast—the druggie storming out the door of the bank with gun blazing, shooting at everyone and everything in sight. Frank's best friend happened to be in line of the bullet's sight—well, actually three bullets.

Lost in thought, Frank shook his head. Damn, he missed Quinn, thought of the man every day of his life.

A blue jay screeched from a nearby pine, jolting Frank back to the present. He glanced at the twin lions greeting him as he walked the cobblestone path to the house. Lifting the gold knocker, he rapped three times. Moments later, he heard footfalls from the other side and a middle-aged woman opened the door, presumably the housekeeper.

"Good afternoon," she said. "How may I help you?"

"Morning." He extended his hand. "Frank McGuire. I'm a private investigator, here to see Mr. and Mrs. Kenton about Mindy."

"Yes," she said. "The FBI notified Judge Kenton you'd be stopping by." She opened the door so he could pass through. "Please, come in." Leading him down a long hallway." She ushered him into a cozy, yet spacious room and directed him into an over-stuffed chair by the hearth. "If you'll wait here, I'll round up the Judge and his wife."

Moments later they appeared, the woman leading the way into the room. She extended her hand. "I'm Miriam, Mindy's mother, and this is Judge Kenton, Mindy's father."

The stately man stepped forward, offered his hand, and took a seat across from Frank. Lofty like the nearby mountains, and rather gangly-limbed, the intense green

eyes assessed him with the sight of a hawk. His gray hair met the collar of his stiffly-starched white shirt. Frank sensed an aura of superiority or at least heightened awareness about the man. Good, he was the first one Frank wanted to question about the girls' disappearance. He didn't imagine much got by Parker Kenton in this neck of the woods much less in the man's court.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. McGuire," the Judge said. "Would you care for a cup of coffee, or perhaps a soda in this Godforsaken heat would serve you better?"

"Thank you, nothing," he replied sucking on a mint to moisten his suddenly dry throat.

The woman took a seat next to her husband and folded her pale, white hands in her lap. They waited patiently while Frank pulled a pen from his pocket and opened the file. "First off, let me say how terribly sorry I am that your daughter, Mindy, has turned up missing."

"Our daughter has not turned up missing, Mr. McGuire," the Judge snapped. "Someone kidnapped her."

Frank paused and drew a breath from the tense air. "Yes, we'll talk about that in a minute, but first I must rule out several other options. Procedure." His gaze followed Mr. Kenton. "Mrs. Kenton—"

"Please, call me Miriam, and my husband, Parker. You'll find during your stay here, however brief..." She dabbed at her eyes with a well-worn hankie and Frank wondered how he'd missed the red-rimmed, swollen orbs when she entered the room. "You'll find we West Virginians are a social bunch and quite big on hospitality."

"Thank you, Miriam, and please, call me Frank." Other than her puffy eyes, Mindy's mother hid her distress well behind the stoic features, the Judge not so well. He'd already barked at Frank and the man fidgeted in his chair as if he wanted something, anything, to happen that would help find his daughter. "Let's just go over a few questions so I have a starting point." Frank shifted in the chair and

placed the notebook on his lap. "She disappeared June third, ten days ago, is that right?"

Miriam nodded.

"Two questions. Where do you think she disappeared from, the exact location, and the last time you saw her, was she alone?"

The Judge looked at his wife.

"Parker held court that afternoon, so I was the last one to see Mindy." Tears welled in her eyes. "We had just finished lunch and Mindy asked if she could go to the park down the street for a spell." Her back stiffened. "Mind you, before children started vanishing beneath our noses, not a parent in Philippi would deny such a request." Her voice rose an octave. "It's not unusual for our young ones to wander about their own neighborhoods or ride their bicycles here and there."

"Oh, please, understand; I'm not the law and not here to point accusatory fingers. I want to help find Mindy and the other girls, so please don't take offense at my questions."

"Very well. I'm sure you can imagine the guilt I feel piled onto the grief. We might appear calm on the outside, but inside, well..." She turned her head from his gaze and looked out a nearby window.

"Let's get back to your questions, McGuire." Parker said. "The local sheriff and his hooligans have wasted days running around in circles. My wife and I are most anxious to have an outside private investigator take up the case and find our daughter."

Yep, just as he imagined, a no-nonsense-cut-through-the-shit character if ever he'd seen one. "So, Miriam, you granted her permission to go to the park down the street. I'll drive down there and take a look when I'm finished here. Did she go alone?"

"Why yes, she often went alone and would meet up with other neighborhood children there."

Frank looked at the Judge. "I can assume the sheriff you spoke of questioned all the children who might have frequented the park that day."

"He claims he did, and Miriam and I have also spoken to her classmates, friends. I don't believe she ever made it to the park."

"Why do you say that?"

Miriam rose and retrieved an object from a fancy sideboard against the wall behind her chair. She held it out before Frank. "This is Betsy, Mindy's doll. The sheriff found her one block from the park next to her bicycle."

He looked at the doll briefly and then back to Miriam. In that infinitesimal moment, all the blood had been siphoned from the woman's face. Whiter than chalk dust, he thought perhaps she might faint. "Please, sit down," he said coming to his feet and talking the doll from her hand.

On wobbly legs she returned to the chair and eased into it with the grace of a ballet dancer. The woman regained the false poise that Frank found admirable under the circumstances. Good, Frank thought, she'd need it at the end of the day. "Gone, vanished into thin air," she said softly. Clearly the woman suffered immeasurably. "She would never have left Betsy behind unless something happened to her, not in a million years."

Frank resumed his seat, and was about to ask the next question when the words to a song took flight.

Go to sleep, my dolly. Shut your eyes of blue.

The room spun. He looked at the doll in his lap and expected to see her lips moving.

Parker's voice came to him from a far-off place. "McGuire, are you all right? Are you sure you wouldn't like a glass of water or something? Mr. McGuire?"

Frank shook his head.

Soon will come the sandman. Bringing dreams to you.

Miriam's voice. "Frank, did I say something to—"

"No, not at all." Ghost-girl had returned. She'd followed him and he heard her words now just as clearly

as he heard the rain tapping on the roof of the condo. There wasn't any sense asking Mr. and Mrs. Kenton if they heard her voice. The answer would be no. He'd called her forth, albeit mistakenly and only he could hear her.

"Spit it out, man, what do you think happened to our daughter?"

Frank moved the doll aside to jot down a note before answering Parker, and his hand met a surge of resistance. Ghost-girl had tried to take the doll from his lap. He clutched the toy firmly, pressing it against his thigh while asking for directions to the park. Again he felt a solid tug to the doll's dress.

Oh, you want her, do you? I have your attention now. I bet you won't be disappearing for days at a time as long as I have little Betsy in my grasp, will you? Perhaps we can make a trade, little one. The doll for some information.

Frank wrote down the directions and turned to the parents, looking at them individually. "To answer your question, I think it quite likely your daughter was kidnapped. Of course, I have no idea by whom or why. My work has only just begun here. I'm off to take a look at the park and to speak with the parents of Chelsea Gimmel and Lauren Brekken."

"The Gimmels live in nearby Kasson, the Brekkens in Nestorville. Would you like directions?"

"Thank you, no," Frank said coming to his feet. "I have a map and by the looks of it, I'm sure I could ask anyone in town and they'd know the families." Frank handed Parker his card when the man rose from the chair. "I'll be staying at the local Super 8 in town. Call me if you think of something, anything at all you might have forgotten." Parker took the card from his hand. "One more thing. I've looked at the pictures of the missing girls. They look very much alike, wouldn't you agree?"

Miriam's hand went to her throat. "Why, yes, they do now that I think about it. You must forgive me, Frank. I've

been so distraught, haven't been much good to anyone these days."

"Understandable. Does Mindy know Lauren and Chelsea?"

"Yes, of course," Parker said. "Everyone knows everyone around these parts." His eyes misted over. "Thank you, Frank, for not saying *did* Mindy know Lauren and Chelsea. We appreciate every little scrap at this point. Hope against hope she could still be alive."

"Never give up hope until she's found. I've worked on cases where children have been missing for months, at times years."

A long breath of air left Miriam's lungs. "Thank you, Frank. Please find our Mindy and bring her home."

"I'll do my best. Will it be all right with you if I take Betsy here with me? I work best when I have something that belonged to the missing child."

"Of course," Parker said. "Whatever you need to help you in your search, please just ask."

"I'll be in touch tomorrow, after I get familiar with the area and meet with the other parents."

Parker escorted him to the door and moments later, Frank pulled from the curb, the doll resting in his lap, away from Ghost-girl.

Go to sleep, my dolly. Shut your eyes of blue.

"What's your name?" Frank asked the vacant air in the most honey-toned voice he could conjure. He didn't know Ghost-girl's precise location, but she was in the front seat of the Denali tugging on Betsy's pink dress. The doll's long black eyelashes fluttered as if someone had blown a tiny breath over her porcelain face.

Soon will come the sandman. Bringing dreams to you.

"Not ready to tell me your name yet, huh? That's all right. The doll's name is Betsy, and she's going to stick with me while I'm here. You help me find those missing girls and I bet I can make arrangements for you to keep her. Would you like that?"

Frank's windshield wipers kicked on at high speed. "Ah, so you have psychokinetic abilities? That's good, little Ghost-girl, just as long as you don't try to smash my head in with something."

The wipers stopped and Ghost-girl tried to grab the doll from his hand.

"Oh, I know you want the doll and you want her something fierce. When you're ready to tell me your name, I might let you hold her for a while. What do you think of that? If you can move objects, you can write your name in the dirt. Are you old enough to write your name?" The wipers started up. "I get it. If the wipers kick in, that means yes. If you stop the wipers that means no." Frank looked at the wipers working overtime on his windshield. "Did you learn your letters? Can you write your name?"

Click. Click.

"Will you tell me your name?"

The wipers came to an abrupt halt.

"Do you want to keep the doll?"

Click. Click. Click.

"Do you know where the missing girls are?" A long pause while Frank's eyes bore into the glare of the windshield. "Okay. No answers, no Betsy. Do you know who took the girls?"

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

"I thought so, and that's why you're here, isn't it? You want to help me find Mindy, Chelsea, and Lauren, don't you? And when you do, I'll give you the doll."

Close your eyes of blue. Close your eyes of blue.

Frank looked at the doll and her eyes remained closed. A stillness fell over the inside of the car along with a deep sense of peace. Ghost-girl must have fallen asleep.

"Hey, you forgot to turn my wipers off."

Chapter Four

Frank tucked Betsy under his arm when he left the car to check out the park. A typical playground area for kids, a set of swings anchored one side, a jungle-gym the other. Interestingly enough, a dense copse of forest surrounded the locale. In fact, he'd followed a line of trees that ran parallel to the sidewalk for an entire city block before he found the park. Someone must have exited the woods and stopped Mindy as she rode her bike to the park. The perfect cover for an abduction, a quick hit-and-run. Walk from the woods, stop child, grab her, and duck into the forest again.

Miriam was right about one thing: whatever happened, it went down fast. Frank took several pictures of the park with his camera, jumped back into the car, and snapped a few photos of the woods through the windshield before heading for the Super 8. He needed to check in, grab a drink and call Rand.

Although sick and tired of carrying the damn doll with him at every turn, he couldn't afford to lay her down and run the risk of Ghost-girl snatching her. If the little imp had the capability of moving objects, she could damn well move Betsy right on out of the hotel room. Once the little spirit got what she wanted, she'd leave again. Or would she? Maybe she'd left the otherworld to help him and *then* she became fascinated with Betsy. The doll and the lullaby were synonymous—connected. To Ghost-girl.

Frank plugged in his laptop, flipped it open and typed *Shut Your Eyes of Blue* into the browser. A Web site called BusSongs.com popped up. He then did a search by using

the simple lyrics Ghost-girl had planted in his brain. "Bingo!" he said under his breath. "*My Doll's Lullaby*." He downloaded the lyrics, but nothing remarkable turned up. No history about the song, only four simple lines, *Go to sleep, my dolly, Shut your eyes of blue. Soon will come the sandman, Bringing dreams to you!* Another Bingo. So he had a name of the lullaby, and the lyrics Ghost-girl sang, but what did it mean? She knew the words to the song, so it didn't take a rocket scientist to realize someone had sung it to her at one time or another. Apparently repeatedly. Is that why she'd become so attached to Betsy or did she have a similar doll at one time?

The questions rattled around his brain and drove him nuts. Somehow he had to get Ghost-girl to communicate with him. In order for that to happen, he had to earn her trust, find out why she came forth and what she wanted. He sensed her restlessness, and knew from past experience in communing with the dead, Ghost-girl wasn't a poltergeist.

The quasi-scientific definitions for a poltergeist were quite simple, although not proven. Poltergeists didn't possess personalities. Ghost-girl oozed individuality. Poltergeists can't hold a conversation with the living in any manner. She had communicated with him through the windshield wipers, however rudimentary.

He knew some ghosts could move objects and make noises. She moved Betsy's eyelashes and he'd felt the tug on the doll's dress numerous times. As for noises, well she hadn't actually made noise in the real sense. The words to the lullaby he heard were in *his* head, albeit in *her* sweet voice.

Frank also knew that *some* ghosts could manifest into balls of light or other forms of energy, and some could speak, communicate with the living in a sentient manner. Hmm. He'd already seen her form of energy when he called on his inner spirit and accidentally called her forth.

How could he get her to speak to him, and more importantly, could he handle it when and if she did?

He'd become attached to Ghost-girl, strange as it seemed. Could he handle looking upon her angelic face? He knew it would be angelic, like Mindy's, Chelsea's, and Lauren's. What if he couldn't deliver what his newfound little friend needed? What if he failed to deliver the peace her soul longed for?

With Betsy resting on his thigh, Frank rubbed his chin, stared at the screen and dissected the messages rushing through his mind. *Ghosts are the sentient remnants of dead people, what is left after the body dies. Most of the time the soul moves on to the next thing, whatever that thing is. Sometimes the soul remains for whatever reason, but there is always a reason.* His Ghost-girl, he thought of her as his now, had moved on to another place, but not permanently. If she had, he wouldn't have been able to call her forth. Damn, why did he take on these cases?

He slammed the laptop shut, rose from the bed, and poured a drink. With his head pounding and his brain scrambled, he picked up the phone to call Rand.

He answered on the second ring. "Hey, Frank, how's life in the Alleghenies?"

"I'm not exactly in the mountains, but close. You're not mad at me?"

"Would it do any good?"

"Probably not," Frank said. "I have this weird sense of the macabre."

"Don't I know?" Rand said with a laugh. "Speaking of bone-chilling morbidity, how is our little ghost doing?"

"My little ghost, you mean." Frank scanned the room and wondered if eavesdropping fell under the column of 'Ghost-girl specialties'. "She won't talk to me. I can hear her sing, but nothing else."

"You're kidding me, right? You can hear her sing?"

"Yep, the words to a lullaby, and she launched my wipers into high-speed today in the car when I tried to question her."

Another laugh from Rand. "You sound so dejected. Shit, should I be worried about this little love affair you're having with a female spirit?"

"She's a child, Rand, and she needs me right now."

"So do I, Frank."

"I've only been gone a day. I hope to wrap this up soon and I'll be back before you know it."

"Well I need you in that way, too, but I meant I need to talk to you about something."

The pulse in Frank's head throbbed. At times Rand could be needy, and most of the time that need turned him on until he couldn't think straight. However, now wasn't one of those times. He had his hands full with this missing kids case and hadn't even put a hairline fracture in the tip of the iceberg.

"You're going to tell me whether I want to hear it or not, aren't you?"

"I gotta get it off my chest," he said with a sigh.

God, how many times have I felt his warm breath against my neck, around my cock just before... "Jesus, Rand, you are pissed about last weekend. You know I always want you, but I had this crazy feeling Ghost-girl was standing guard over us like an avenging wraith, and I couldn't..."

"Ghost-girl? That must mean you don't know her name yet. You're slipping, Frank, slipping."

God, the sound of Rand's voice, low and husky, sent a shiver of desire through him. "I don't exactly hear a ring of confidence in your tone."

"What do you hear in my tone?"

"Don't go there, Rand. The child is in the room with me. She could be watching."

"Send her away."

"I can't. I don't have the ability to do that." Frank clenched his hand around Betsy, clenching his teeth at the same time.

"I want you, Frank; I'm so fucking hard right now."

"What is this, payback for brushing you off this weekend?"

"I don't do payback, but once I heard your voice, the images started rolling in."

"Images?"

"Yeah, of me sucking you off and licking your balls."

"Christ, stop it, Rand." A throaty groan escaped his throat. "Are you trying to torment me?"

"No, pleasure myself. I'm going to jerk off and just let the images flow in. What do you think of that, McGuire?"

Frank felt his cock jerk and spring to life. Caught up in Rand's voice and the visions of him jerking himself off, he was too far gone to stop his burgeoning erection. "Hang on for a minute, Rand."

"Where you going? Here I am, talking dirty to you and you're off to take a leak or something?"

"Fuck! Just hold on, will ya?"

Frank set the cell phone down, grabbed his handcuffs from his briefcase, and rushed into the bathroom with Betsy in his hand. A stream of pale white mist followed him. "Now you decide to show yourself? Now, when I'm in the middle of a crisis here?"

Ghost-girl's harmonious voice echoed in the small room. *Soon will come the sandman.*

"You want Betsy? Here," Frank said. "Look, she's right here." Frank squished Betsy's pliant body into one handcuff and locked the other around the shower curtain pole. The doll hung in midair with the smoke-like mist swirling around her. "You play with Betsy and I'll be right back." With his balls aching, Frank rushed from the room and closed the bathroom door behind him. Her obsession over Betsy should keep her fascinated for a long time, at

least long enough for him to finish the phone-sex session with Rand. "All right, I'm back, you little prick."

"Oh, yeah, I'd rather you were here fucking my brains out right now."

"You keep talking about me fucking your brains out, and I'll be jerking myself off."

Rand blew air through his lips. "Do it. Jerk yourself while I'm doing the same. Here, I'll help you."

Frank stifled a groan, reached inside his pants, and stroked his dick.

"Do you know when you enter me, I can't help rocking back against you, impaling myself on your cock. I can't get enough of you, Frank. Does that swell your head?" Rand chuckled. "I mean your real head, not—"

"I know what you meant. Don't stop now; I'm rather into this."

"Man, my balls ache, drawing up tight against my body. How about yours?"

Pre-cum leaked from Frank's tip.

"You there, Frank; you stroking yourself, imagining it's my hand around your cock, my lips sucking you dry? I'm imagining it. You tell me, 'harder, faster.' And your eyes are glazed over. I swallow the entire length until I can feel it at the back of my throat."

Running his hand up and down the length of his rock-hard dick, harder, faster, like Rand said, he couldn't help the muffled groan. "You're a fucktard, you know that, Rand?"

"Yeah, I know, but you love that about me, don't you? You're too cool to act like a fucktard or too cool to admit you love me, but you get off on me crawling all over you, huh, Frank? You want the truth? I'd like to crawl right inside your skin, so fucking deep, I could never crawl my way out. I'd give anything to worm my way into your head and fucking destroy all those demons that torment you night and day."

"Now you're talking stupid. I like you better when you were talking about impaling yourself on my cock." Frank's breaths came in short bursts and he knew his release was imminent. He wanted to hear more, craved the intimate details of how Rand felt when he took him.

"I'm almost there. My dick is leaking and my heart's pounding. I'm thinking about kneeling on the bed, my body dripping sweat. Your hands grab my hips. You hold me tight and drive in hard and fast."

With Frank's fantasies spiraling out of control, he pumped hard on his shaft and bit down on his bottom lip.

"I cry out and you rock into me, again and again until I'm fucking mindless beneath you. "Oh, God, Frank, I'm going to come."

"Not yet, hold off." His voice dropped to a whisper and Frank imagined Rand with his eyes closed and face flushed.

"I whimper like a wounded animal and clutch the bed sheets, begging you for more. You like that, too, don't you, McGuire? You like to hear me beg. You grab my hair in your fingers and force my head back. I'm hot and tight, gripping your cock like a vise, and drowning in the incredible feeling."

The stab of need between Frank's legs rose to unbearable heights and his cock jerked and twitched with impending release.

A strained hoarseness edged his words. "Oh, God, I'm going to explode from the inside out at any second. Can't... can't hold off."

Frank pumped harder and swore he could feel his cock plowing into Rand. Hot semen rushed to the top like hot-running lava. He'd never heard anything so erotically perverse. Briefly he thought about Ghost-girl in the other room, but only briefly. A bestial growl spewed from Rand's lips. Frank imagined his head thrown back. Vaguely aware of his own inhuman moan, semen spurted

from his cock, so intense and strong, he grew dizzy for a second or two.

Long minutes passed with nothing but heavy breathing passing through the phone line. Exhausted and weak, Frank grabbed the box of tissue from the nightstand, wiped himself off and zipped up his pants. "Satisfied now that you proved your point, Rand?"

He sounded replete, like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. "What point is that?"

"You know what I mean. I might get off on you crawling all over me, but you get off on having some sick type of control over me when it comes to sex, isn't that right?"

"What does that mean? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. You wanted to see if you could pull me in deep enough to get me to jack off on the phone like a fucking high-school kid going through puberty. And, you succeeded."

"Really, that wasn't my objective. I missed you, wanted to let you know I wasn't sore about this weekend or the note, and..."

"And what?"

"I told you, I wanted to talk to you about something important. I just got carried away after hearing your voice."

Frank heard muffled noise filtering through the bathroom door. Water running, he thought. Ghost-girl wouldn't leave the bathroom without Betsy and she obviously couldn't manipulate the handcuffs.

"Rand, I'll call you back. I've got to take care of something right now."

"What happened?"

"Let me call you back. I gotta go, will explain when I call you back. Give me an hour."

"Don't forget, okay. It's important."

CROSSROADS: SHOWDOWN

"I won't, promise," Frank said and hung up the phone.

He hustled toward the bathroom and opened the door.

Chapter Five

A room steamier than a sauna hit Frank in the face when he stepped into the bathroom. Hot water poured from the showerhead. "How the hell... sorry, how on Earth did you turn the water on?"

Silence met him. Overhead, Betsy twirled in a circle. Due to the heavy layer of steam, Frank had no idea if Ghost-girl still occupied the room. Grabbing the door handle, he pushed and pulled in an attempt to scoot the mist out the door.

When the vapor cleared he looked toward the ceiling and gasped. Light energy huddled above the marble tiles of the shower and surrounded his little ghost. She blinked her round, blue eyes and watched him. Tucked behind her ears, long, pale hair fell over her shoulders, so white he couldn't classify the shade as blonde. Angelic all right, there were no other words to describe her features. Her tiny face, heart shaped, and a chin that was almost pointed. A pert, upturned nose rested above plump lips and her eyes loomed enormously large compared to her other features.

"I'm Frank," he said and thought he sounded like a fool. "You finally decided to come out and meet me. That's great."

She blinked again and moved her gaze to Betsy.

"You want to hold the doll?" Hot water trickled from the showerhead again. "Oh, no, don't start up the water again. I finally got the room cleared. Here," he said, digging the key to the handcuffs out of his pocket. He unlocked the cuffs and held the doll out in her direction.

"Let's make a deal. If I let you hold Betsy, are you going to take off on me?" Without moving his head, Frank watched the showerhead and prayed it wouldn't begin to drip again. "Okay, good." He held the doll up. "It's okay, you're safe. Take her, take Betsy."

A tiny arm came out and grabbed the doll. She held it to her chest, looked down at the doll and smiled. His heart wrenched. Like her, the smile embodied innocence. Similar to a dragonfly in flight, Ghost-girl flitted from the ceiling and landed on the sink. Frank held his breath and wondered what came next. Other than watching Rand and his sister Marlow grow up, he didn't have much experience with children. The spirit-child lifted a hand and with her finger etched out letters in the steam-covered mirror. When she finished, she turned and studied him again.

He stepped forward and leaned in. "Your name is Cricket?"

She crooked a finger, turned to the mirror again and wrote some letters beneath her name.

Frank squinted. "Christine? Your name is Cricket Christine?"

She shook her head.

Puzzled, Frank stared at the letters for a while. "Your name is Christine, but they call you Cricket?"

She blessed him with another smile.

Damn, he wondered if angels had descended from the sky and shot an arrow into his heart. The girl-child had totally stolen his. "Good, this is very good. Just so we have an understanding now. You don't need to start up the water or turn my wipers on. Just nod your head for yes and shake it for no, agreed?"

She nodded.

"Cricket. I like it. The name suits you. Do you want to tell me your last name?"

Her eyes darted about the room and her energy sparked, lit up like fireworks on the fourth of July.

"Okay, no problem. Let's just take it slow. Forget I asked you that last question."

Her light grew dim and she focused on the doll again. Frank thought about her reaction for a minute. He'd have to bide his time with her, understand that perhaps she didn't want to give up certain information right now. Which immediately he translated into, she had something to hide.

He tried another approach. "When we were in the car today, you said you knew about the missing girls." Her aura blazed, but not as much as last time.

Go to sleep, my dolly. Shut your eyes of blue.

He heard her words clearly, but in his head. So if he could hear her sing, why couldn't she transmit spoken words to his mind? Mystified, he decided he needed to go back to the drawing board on this one; see if any information existed about this phenomenon. Maybe he heard only what she wanted him to hear. He had communed with the dead many times, by hand signals, expressions, a shake of a head, a nod, but never through spoken words.

"You like that song, don't you Cricket?"

This time she graced Betsy with a smile.

"Did someone sing that to you when you were a baby?"

She lifted her sorrowful baby blues and nodded before turning to the mirror. Her small finger met the dissipating steam as she carved out the word *Mommy*. Before he could ask her another question, she scattered from the sink and landed on one of the beds in the other room.

Frank flopped down on the opposite bed and drew a deep breath. Jesus, here he was in a fucking Super 8 conversing, or trying to converse with a ghost. His life had taken a dramatic turn from the norm in just one day. Three girls were missing and a spirit-child had entered his life. He didn't know why yet, but every possible scenario for an ending to this nightmare ran through his mind. What

would become of his little Ghost-girl, his Cricket, when all was said and done? His heartstrings tightened. She wasn't his, and whatever the outcome—girls found dead or alive—she wouldn't be staying. Why did the thought devastate him? He didn't have three girls on his hands, he had four.

He glanced over at her. She seemed content at the moment with Betsy in her arms. "In the morning, I have to meet with Lauren and Chelsea's parents. If you go with me, maybe we can add to your doll collection."

That comment sparked her interest. Her eyes grew wide and her lips curled into a smile.

"I thought that might interest you."

He wondered if ghosts ever slept. Tired, he was so damn tired; he couldn't keep his eyes open. He closed them and prayed she'd be there when he awoke in the morning.

* * * *

Frank jackknifed up in bed when his cell phone rang. He picked it up and scanned the room for Cricket. "Damn, you promised!"

"No, I didn't promise to call you; you promised to call me, last night."

"Rand, oh yeah, I'm sorry. I fell asleep and I just plain forgot.

A long pause ensued.

"Forgive me?"

"I suppose, but I'm starting to worry about your mental state, Frank."

A sigh of relief left Frank's lips as Cricket floated down from the ceiling and landed on the bed again. "Oh, thank God, you didn't take off."

"Take off? Why would I take off? Where am I supposed to be going?"

"Not you, Rand. I'm talking to Cricket."

"Cricket? Your Ghost-girl? She's talking to you now?"

"In a fashion. She nods and shakes her head when I ask her a question, but I can't hear her speak."

"You can see her now?"

"Clearly."

"I thought you said you heard her singing?"

"I hear the words to a lullaby in my head. It's not like when you speak to me." How to explain? "I can't hear her words in the room; they're in my head."

"Whatever. Hey listen, I waited for your call last night, which never came, but since I was up anyway I surfed the Net a little. Found something you might find interesting about Ghost-girl... about *Cricket*."

"Shoot."

"I don't think she's a poltergeist. I found this neat site about ghosts versus poltergeists, and from what you tell me Cricket definitely falls under the ghost category. I'll read it to you, and you interpret this any way you like."

"Go ahead."

"Poltergeists can't manifest into an apparition, nor can they communicate or have a conversation with the living. You won't hear a poltergeist speak or call your name, except as a mimic. Poltergeists can mimic noises, kind of like a very talented parrot."

"I figured she wasn't a poltergeist."

"Is that a good thing?"

Frank laughed. "Very good thing. Nasty, those poltergeists."

Rand cleared his throat. "Some think poltergeist activity is a type of *involuntary* psycho kineses manifested by a teenager, usually a female."

"She's not a teenager. Age ten at best."

"This article goes on to say, 'So if you can see the ghost, it's not a poltergeist. If the ghost communicates with you, whether verbal or through writing, it's not a poltergeist.'"

"I'm relieved. You confirmed what I thought I'd read at one time. Thank you, Rand."

"No problem."

Frank filled the mini-coffee pot on the counter with water, dropped a packet of Folgers in and watched it brew. "You said you wanted to talk to me about something last night."

"How to explain?" he said with a laugh. "Okay, now don't go bonkers on me. Let me get it out first before you say anything."

Frank poured the coffee into a cup, added a packet of cream and took a sip. "This sounds serious. You're lucky they leave a coffee maker in every room. Go ahead."

"I'm done with college for the summer now. Already I'm bored. The thing is," he drew a deep breath. "The thing is; I don't want to return in the fall. I'm not cut out to be a doctor."

"Rand!"

"Hey, you said you'd hear me out."

Frank's turn to draw a deep breath.

"I promised Mom I'd try med school. Well I tried it and it's not for me. I'm dropping out."

"Just like that; you're dropping out after one year?"

"Yep. I want to know one thing. If I drop out of college, does that mean I can't live with you anymore?"

"You remember our agreement?"

"Hell, like you'd ever let me forget."

"And you'd still drop out knowing that?"

Rand paused briefly. "Yes, I have to do what's best for me."

A wave of dread washed over Frank. How had it come to this? The thought of Rand leaving him made him sick to his stomach. "What do you think is best for you at this point in your life?"

"I want to work with you, want you to teach me everything you know about being a private investigator."

"Are you kidding me? You're too smart for this kind of life. It's hard work, dirty work at times, and you're not suited for it."

"When are you going to realize, Frank, I'm no longer a child? We've been down this road before. I don't want to be a physician. Either you let me work with you or I'll take up where my dad left off."

Frank choked on his coffee. "Over my dead body will you become a cop!"

Frank looked over to the bed and caught Cricket's bright blue—narrowed—eyes boring into his. He forgot she was in the room, and apparently he forgot she might be able to hear and understand every word he said to Rand.

He lowered his voice. "You want to end up like your old man... bleeding to death on the street after taking a bullet from a hyped-up speed-freak?"

"Your choice, Frank. Either you let me live with you and join your business or I'm taking my ass over to the Baltimore Police Department and signing on. They'd love to see Quinn Brennan's son join the force."

"That's fucking blackmail!"

"Ah-ah, remember you're supposed to act like a role model. Isn't that what you told me last weekend every time I touched you?"

"You little bas... jerk. I don't want to talk about this right now."

"That's another thing that has to change, Frank. You never want to talk about us. I'm done with that shit. Make up your mind. You take me on or I will find someone who will take me for what I want."

Frank looked at the ceiling, the floor, and then at Cricket. She rolled her eyes.

"You still there, McGuire?"

"I'm here. You damn well know I'm still here."

"Well?"

"I have to give you an answer right this minute? Or what, when I get back, you're bags will be packed?"

"That's the bottom line. You want me here waiting for you, say the word. You want me out, well, say that, too."

"If you were here right now, I'd knock some sense into your immature, thick brain."

"No you wouldn't. If I was there, you'd be jumping my bones. When I had you at my mercy, I'd force you to admit you want me to stay with you... *want me*." Rand's tone turned somber. "Why is it so damn hard for you to commit? Either you want me in your life on a permanent basis or you don't. Just say it, damn it."

"I do."

"What was that? I think the phone went dead. Did you say something, Frank?"

"I said, yes, damn it, I want you in my life, permanently."

"You mean it?"

"Would I say it if I didn't mean it? What do you want a dozen red roses delivered to the condo?"

Giddiness laced his words. "I don't like roses, but I'm fond of lilies."

"That'll be the freaking day. Don't push your luck with all that romantic stuff. You can't change me, Rand, you know that, right?"

"I don't want to change you. I just want you to tell me how you really feel about things. Is that asking too much?"

Frank put the coffee cup down and ran his hands through his hair. "No, it isn't asking too much. I can't make any promises, but I'll work on that."

"All right then. I'll let you go. I know you have a lot on your mind. Call me tonight, will you?"

"Yes, when I get back to the hotel, I'll call you."

"What do you think, Frank, are those girls still alive?"

"Are you asking me to make an educated guess?"

"No, I'm asking you what your inner spirit shows you when you call on it."

"My inner spirit went on hiatus the moment Cricket walked into my life."

"What does that mean?"

"Damned if I know. All I know is; I have to deal with what is."

"Like I said, I'll get off the phone and let you deal with it."

Frank clicked his cell phone shut, poured another cup of coffee and plopped onto the bed. "As soon as I'm done with my coffee, I'll take a shower and then we're out of here, Ghost-girl, okay?"

Cricket nodded and smiled down at Betsy.

Chapter Six

If Frank thought his meeting with the Kentons tough, it paled next to what he went through with the Gimmels and the Brekkens. The mothers were too grief-stricken to speak, the fathers almost as debilitated.

The stories were relatively the same. Both girls had left the house alone and never returned. Chelsea was on foot, Lauren on her scooter. One minute they were there, the next gone, vanished without a trace. The Gimmels and Brekkens claimed that to the best of their knowledge, no one held a grudge against them or any family member. They had seen nothing suspicious in the neighborhood either before or after the abductions.

Chelsea Gimmel had been taken two days before Mindy and Lauren two days after Mindy. Yes, they both knew of Judge Parker Kenton, and were absolutely confident a stranger had taken the girls.

When Frank asked them if they thought the girls were still in the vicinity, they offered him a puzzled look. Only Ray Gimmel had asked the significance of that question. Frank reminded them that in many cases children were transported out of the county, often out of state and on occasion, out of the country. He knew by their individual expressions, they hadn't considered the possibility. Why were they so convinced the girls had been taken by a local, yet could not think of one, single possibility of who that local might be?

Frank kept Betsy by his side when he talked to the parents. He wanted to see if Cricket reacted to their conversations. She had the capability of dimming her aura

around other people, like she had with him when they first met. And dim it she did.

He wondered what other ghost-like abilities she possessed, or if she even knew how to manifest other powers. Some spirits held monumental strength, others, keen concentration enabling them to move objects with exceptional force or at tremendous speed. He read once that the longer the dead remained a ghost, the more their powers increased. Those musings took him down another path. How long ago had Cricket died? Mostly, he wondered how she had died.

Could it be possible she had also been kidnapped, perhaps by the same person and that's why she'd entered his life now? He likened it to a retribution-type materialization. Maybe she'd waited a long time for this opportunity, had come forth to see the score settled so her restless spirit could find the peace it craved.

Poor, sweet, little Cricket. Not only had she died before she had a chance to live, but her otherworld existence had been spawned on the wings of evil. Some tragic event had caused her death; Frank felt it in his bones. A ghostly state originated only when the living passed on suddenly or unexpectedly and weren't prepared for death. This was a common occurrence among the young, more specifically from those who died in violent accidents. No matter how many times Frank tried to discount those theories when it came to Cricket, he knew in his heart her life had ended tragically.

He wasn't a religious man, didn't attend church every Sunday, and had broken more than one of God's commandments. So why would the man upstairs listen to him now when he asked for His mercy where Cricket was concerned?

After meeting with first Lauren's parents and next Chelsea's, Frank climbed into the Denali and drove out of Nestorville. Less than a mile down the road, Frank felt a tug on the steering wheel.

"Where are you, Cricket? You can stop hiding now." He looked over at the passenger seat and then down at Betsy in his lap. "If you want the doll, take her, she's all yours again." A solid pull on the steering wheel veered the car left. "Hey, stop that. Want us to have an accident?"

Her aura lit up above him.

"Yeah, you don't care because, well forgive me for sounding so crass, but you're already dead. I'm not yet, I want to remind you, and I'll thank you not to hurry it along."

Sparks flew over his head, and he knew the moment he said the words, he should have kept his mouth shut. What a terrible thing to say to a child, living or passed on. His cell phone buzzed. He plucked it from the dashboard and looked at the messages waiting for him. Damn, Rueben Hayworth, Parker Kenton, Grace, and Emily. Emily? Rand's mother had left three messages? Shit, there would be hell to pay now. Rand had probably told her of his plans to drop out of college, and no doubt said he had *his* blessing.

He tossed the cell phone back and vocalized his frustration. "I didn't give Rand my blessing, Em. The little prick all but blackmailed me. Rueben, when I know something about the missing girls, I'll let you know. And Grace, right now I don't care if the fucking ambassador to Egypt calls about a missing child. In fact, tell everyone I'm no longer taking cases on missing or abducted children. Ever! Honorable Judge Parker Kenton, sadly, I have nothing to report about your daughter. I'm stuck out here in bum-fuck no-man's land without clue one. I agree with your wife. The girls vanished into thin air. Poof! Without a trace and I have no idea where to even begin to look."

Frank slammed his fist into the side window in an attempt to tamp down his aggravation. The car crossed the center lane and almost landed in the ditch. He slammed on the brakes and brought the Denali to a halt.

Opening his door, he jumped out and drew a deep breath. "What is it with you, Cricket? I said you can have the doll. I'm not driving another foot until you stop pulling on the steering wheel. That last stunt nearly put us in the trenches."

Cricket fluttered from the car, her aura working overtime.

"What? I'm sorry if I upset you. I'm frustrated, pissed off and most of all, worried about those girls."

She took off across an open field, flying against a gentle breeze and then doubled back. He cupped his hand over his brow to block out the sun and watched her. She hovered over him for a brief second and took flight again in the same direction, only to return seconds later.

"God, why can't you speak to me? Why can't I hear you?" He toed the dirt with his foot when she repeated the maneuver. "Damn, you're trying to tell me something, and I must be denser than moss. Show yourself, give me hand signals; give me something."

As if his words called her forth, her image appeared in front of him.

"That's my good girl. I knew you could do it."

She hovered in front of him and waved her hand in the air.

"You want me to follow you?"

A burst of energy flared before his eyes.

"In the car?"

It dimmed.

"Okay, on foot. Go, I'm right behind you."

Frank had to run to keep up with her. They crossed the meadow, traipsed through a thicket of underbrush, crossed a creek and at last, came to a clearing. The moment the house came into view, Cricket disappeared behind his shoulder.

"This house? Is this what you wanted to show me?"

He felt a jab between his shoulder blades.

"The girls are here?" Before she had a chance to respond, he asked, "Are they alive or buried here somewhere?" *Oh, God, please don't let them be dead.*

He strode through the cluttered yard and up the rickety steps. His stomach plummeted and his sixth sense kicked in. He roiled against the wicked vibes washing over him. Malevolence oozed from the decrepit ramshackle of a house, seeped out the barricaded windows and withered in the stale afternoon air.

Another jab to his shoulder blades forced him to knock on the door. Long, long minutes later, the door creaked but not before Cricket took flight for parts unknown. Ghost-girl had a connection with this place, a deep, malicious bond that scared the daylights out of her.

Anger took over. Frank fully intended to barge past the man when he opened the damn door, storm into the house and search every nook and cranny until he found Mindy, Chelsea, and Lauren. They were here somewhere, alive or dead, and he wasn't leaving without them.

He nearly stopped breathing when the woman opened the door. She stood before him looking like a specter had taken hold of her. Dressed in a tattered black skirt and matching blouse, she reminded Frank of a rag-picker. Covered in remnants of leaves and broken twigs, he couldn't help but wonder what type of thorny bush the woman had fought with. Matted, gray hair sprouted from the sides of her head, hung down her back in wild disarray. Her face, gaunt and pale was crisscrossed with streaks of dirt and caked mud.

A blank stare greeted Frank as he wedged his body between the door and the stoop. "Hello, ma'am."

The woman nodded tentatively.

"My car broke down a mile back, and my cell needs a charge. Wonder if I could use your phone."

She peered over his shoulder as if searching for his companions.

"I'm alone, and I can understand your reluctance to let me in."

Frank reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out his card. Make or break time. Once she realized he was a PI, she'd either slam the door in his face or ask him in. To his surprise, she opened the door and with a flourish of her arm directed him in. He drew a ragged breath and stepped inside the humble foyer, waiting for her to lead him to the phone.

He didn't need to use the damn phone, but he'd worry about that when the time came. Dread clawed at his gut as she ambled through what represented the living room with him close behind her.

"I'm alone here," she said. "Lost my husband a year back and I'm afraid the place has gone to hell in a hand basket since then."

"I'm sorry to hear about your husband. Don't worry about the house, ma'am. I'll just use your phone to call for help and be on my way."

Frank stopped dead in his tracks as he walked by the old stone fireplace that separated the dining room from the living room. On the mantle sat a picture of a young girl... his Ghost-girl—his Cricket. His heart fell to parts unknown.

When she realized he'd stopped, she turned around to face him. "This way. The phone is in the kitchen."

"Such a lovely child." He nodded toward Cricket's picture. "Your granddaughter?"

"Daughter," she said wistfully, and he thought he saw her eyes mist over.

"I'm sorry; I thought you said you lived alone here."

"I do. We lost Christine twenty-five years ago this fall." He'd been right about the tears. A single drop fell from her right eye. "An accident, a terrible mistake..."

He couldn't help himself, had to know. "I don't mean to pry, but you said a terrible... a terrible what?"

Her back stiffened. "I thought you said you needed to use the phone." Like a light bulb going on, her face transformed. Her eyes blazed and she drew her lips into a thin, hard line. "PI? Is that the same thing as a private investigator?"

Frank nodded.

She lurched forward and grasped the back of a dining room chair. "How stupid of me," she said, her knuckles turning white.

Her eyes darted about the room as if looking for an escape route. Frank's hackles rose and his sixth sense kicked in, finally. The woman emanated black vibes. He didn't know what she was capable of. He only knew something was terribly wrong and it had to do with the missing girls.

"Let's end this here, now, before someone gets hurt. Tell me where the girls are."

"You can't have them." Her face paled beneath the streaks of dirt. "You'll not take them from me!"

"Where are the girls? I'm taking them out of here one way or the other."

A pained whimper left her throat and her eyes took on a glassy stare. "You don't understand. They must die like Cricket."

Good, God, he had a hard time believing this woman was Cricket's mother? Frank took in the room and noticed the small dining room table was set for a feast. Fine china graced the linen tablecloth and crystal goblets sparkled under the afternoon sun pouring through the window.

Although baffled by the scene, and despite the potent rush of adrenaline coursing through him, he tried to keep his voice calm as he pulled his cell from his pocket. "I'm going to ask you one more time and then I call 911."

Her shoulders sagged. "There," she said pointing to a door off the kitchen. "At the bottom of the steps, you'll find a door. They're in the cellar."

Frank rushed past her and headed for the door. He opened it and before he knew it, he tumbled down a set of narrow, wooden stairs. He sensed a hand near his back just before the crazy bitch pushed him down the stairs. In his enthusiasm to reach the girls, find out if they were dead or alive, he'd dropped his guard.

At the bottom, he heard a groan fill the room and realized it was his. His shoulder hurt like a son of a bitch and when he sat up, it hung at an odd angle. Damn, he'd fractured his collarbone. Blood seeped from a gash in his forehead. He must have hit the fucking garden tools he saw parked halfway down. His back hurt and one or two of his ribs were either broken or badly bruised. He tired to reach for the Glock strapped to a holster across his back, an impossible feat.

Muffled cries echoed out from behind the door to his right. The old woman must have bound and gagged the girls. Frank looked up when he heard the basement steps creak. Through a haze of confusion, he saw the black form coming toward him, one slow step at a time. What the hell did she have in her hands?

Oh, Christ, a shovel.

Chapter Seven

Pain racked Frank's body, preventing him from rising to his knees. The woman advanced as if in slow motion, and he could do nothing to deter her. So this is how it would end, his face smashed in by a lunatic wielding a garden shovel? He'd always thought he'd meet his demise like Quinn had, by a bullet—it seemed a more honorable way for a man of his calling to die.

Rand's green eyes surfaced, and his ebony hair that reminded him of volcanic glass under moonlight. Hey, who said he wasn't a romantic? If only he could take back one day in his life he'd tell Rand how he really felt. The word *commitment* seemed so inconsequential at this moment, so miniscule it shouldn't be considered between people who loved one another, man and man, woman and woman, hell, man and woman. He'd spent so many hours, days, weeks in tremors over the word, and it remained just that now, fucking negligible drivel that assholes like him clung to.

"Rand, I'm sorry," he whispered.

She stood above him, the crazed female in the long black skirt, her hair in a tumble, her blue eyes—Ghost-girl eyes—glazed over with a triumphant gleam. He'd never know why she'd taken the girls, or know how Cricket died. What did it matter now? The lore proved factual—his life, every minute, every day flashed before him. Christ, the end was at hand, his end.

She raised the shovel, a maniacal leer splitting her cracked, blood red lips. He closed his eyes and accepted his

fate, asked again for mercy and forgiveness from all those he had harmed in life.

A commotion above him snapped his eyes open. Things happened so fast, he couldn't remember in what order they appeared. Cricket's bright aura lit up the dimly-lit room. It whirled, twisted and dipped around the spade, driving it back with a force he didn't think possible. The woman's eyes hardened, an indication she'd dug in to fight to the death. When a great gulp of air heaved her chest, Frank sensed her shock that someone or something had usurped her plans.

Amid the pain and confusion, his heart swelled with emotion. Cricket, his waif of a restless spirit, had come to his defense against her own mother. Calling on a lifetime of resolve, Frank willed the pain from his mind and commanded his good arm to move toward the Glock. His fingers came in contact with the handle, and hope reared its head. *You can do it, Frank, two more inches. Grab the gun, pull it loose.*

The battle roared around him. The woman stumbled back, the mass of energy parried. Forward and back they lunged, the shovel holding a tenuous position above his head.

Frank gripped the gun in his hand and pointing it at the human specter, bellowed, "Put it down! Put the spade down or I'll shoot!"

Out of breath, a series of raspy wheezes left her lungs. Bent at the waist and gasping like a fish out of water, she dropped the shovel to the cement floor.

Frank crawled to his knees with the gun pointed at a spot above her heart. *Please don't do anything stupid, lady. I don't want to shoot you, not in front of Cricket.*

Her eyes blank, the woman backed away from him until her heels clicked against the bottom step. She turned and sped up the stairs in spite of her breathless state and advanced age. Cricket's aura swept up the staircase behind her.

He had to get the girls out of the cellar, get them secured at the table upstairs, and see what the demented woman was up to. He patted down his shirt and searched for his cell phone. *Shit, must have lost it in the melee.* Frank crawled to the door of the cellar and from his knees, pulled it open. Three blonde-haired, blue-eyed girls met his gaze. Their eyes widened and shivers passed over their small bodies.

"Friend," he said with great difficulty. He laid the gun on the floor and looked at the one he thought might be Mindy. "Walk over here to me and I'll see about untying your hands."

Fear crossed her eyes, but she stood up, walked toward him, and knelt down with her back to him.

"You're Mindy, right?"

She turned to face him and nodded.

"Good. Now listen carefully. I need to find my cell phone to call for help. Untie Lauren and Chelsea, and then we're going to walk up those stairs. Stay behind me and make as little noise as possible. I have no idea where that woman is, so until I do, we're going to be as quiet as church mice, okay?"

Mindy nodded again, walked toward the other girls and untied their hands.

"We're sick," Mindy said. "She fed us berries at night, and I think they got poison in them."

The smallest of the trio spoke up, her voice a whisper. "Tonight she said we would have mushrooms like her daughter, Christine."

"Mushrooms?"

"I think they got poison, too," Mindy said. "She said we would join Christine in Heaven tonight so she had someone to play with."

Frank closed his eyes. Cricket had died from eating poisonous mushrooms. The woman's words echoed through his head, *An accident... a terrible...*

"Come on, girls. Everything will be all right. You have no idea how happy your parents will be to see you. You ready to walk up those stairs?"

They nodded in unison.

Frank found his cell midway up the steps. He punched in 911 and asked the operator to put him through to the Washington FBI branch stat.

Rueben came to the phone a minute later. "Frank, I've been trying to call you for two days."

"Listen, Hayworth, I don't know how long I can hang on here, and when I say here, I'm not sure where here is."

"You're in trouble?"

"To put it mildly."

"Give me something, Frank, a name, an address."

"Don't have a last name or an address, but I'll give you this. Twenty-five years ago, a little girl died near the town of Philippi from eating poisonous mushrooms." Frank's chest clogged with emotion. "Her name is Christine. Find the newspaper article or talk to the local sheriff. As they say, everyone knows everyone around here, and I'm sure most will remember that sad event. That's where you'll find me, Rueben, at Christine's house, and I have the missing girls with me."

"Two questions, Frank. Are the girls alive?"

"That's a positive."

"Second question. You said, 'her name *is* Christine'. If she died twenty-five years ago, don't you mean her name *was* Christine?"

"Your FBI roots are showing." Frank chuckled despite the pain. "It's a long story, and we need help. Now, Hayworth."

"Got you covered, McGuire. I'll have so many red lights flashing; you'll hear them from three miles off."

Frank closed his phone and turned to the girls. "Change of plans. We'll sit right here and wait for help. I don't think I can make it up those stairs."

* * * *

"We finally found her, Frank," Hayworth said. "She fell down an old well shaft about a half a mile from here. The sheriff thinks in her state of mind she either forgot where it was or became disoriented and ran right over it. Looks like her neck is broken, possibly her back by the angle of her body."

"You see anything else out there?"

"Anything else? Like what?"

"Never mind. I'll look myself."

"You can't walk out there in your condition. You need to get to a hospital."

"You're right, but you can drive me there, can't you?"

"Frank, I assure you she's dead. The coroner is on his way."

"I'm going out there, Hayworth—"

Rueben put his hand in the air. "I know, one way or the other. Come on, let's go."

With every rut and gopher hole Hayworth hit in the open meadow, Frank grimaced. Rueben looked over at him, apologized and said, "I brought the newspaper article with me about the girl's death."

God, did he want to hear it? "She died from eating poisonous mushrooms, didn't she?"

"Yes. The article said she and her mother went for a walk in the nearby woods. Apparently, she'd been told never to eat wild plants, mushrooms, but that day, she hadn't listened."

God picks the day and not the way.

"An only child, the mother never got over Christine's death. Locals claim she went off the deep end. After her husband died last year, she sunk deeper and deeper into a depressed state. A woman who has known her for years claimed this past year she vacillated between various stages of manic depression, at times catatonic, at other times, inanely gleeful."

"And no one put two and two together?"

Hayworth shook his head and clucked his cheek. "Why would anyone have reason to believe a woman would kidnap three girls twenty-five years after her daughter's death?"

Frank's answer was more of a statement than a question. "Yeah, why would anyone believe that?"

"Her friend thinks the death of her husband drove her over the final edge. Who knows, perhaps she planned to kill herself when all was said and done."

"Could be. I'm just happy we found those girls."

"You found them, McGuire, and I knew you would."

"I had help. One day I'll tell you about it. Not today."

"I'd be happy to have you share it with me one day."

Rueben stopped the car, opened the door and pointed to a stone structure a block away. "There. She's in there."

Not without effort, Frank left the car by hanging on to the handrail by the window and pushing his body out the door. He struggled for breath on the short walk, but determination to confirm the woman could never hurt another child again propelled him forward.

He looked down the well and recognized the black skirt and the wild, gray hair. The image brought him little solace. A tiny energy of light pulsed in front of his eyes. His breath escaped in a rush. *Cricket.*

She hovered near his face for a moment and he felt her kiss his cheek, so soft, so opaque, it could have been the breeze. God, he hoped not; wanted to believe she would be happy now, at peace. She swooped down the well, her aura fading with every passing second. With misty eyes, he leaned over the rim and searched the dark depths. *Where are you, Cricket? Please show yourself.* A tiny light flickered before she landed on her mother's bosom. Her aura pulsed once or twice and then blew out like a candle in the wind.

"Frank, you okay?"

A tranquil, serene feeling washed over him. Cricket would finally rest in peace.

CROSSROADS: SHOWDOWN

"I'm fine, Rueben, just fine."

Epilogue

Rand walked into the bedroom of the condo two weeks later with a tray of food — spinach salad, broiled shrimp, au gratin potatoes, fresh croissants and caramel cheesecake for dessert. “All your favorites, Frank,” he said, setting the tray down on his lap. “Two more days and you’ll be back on your feet, the doc says.”

“I should have been back at work yesterday. Time is money, you know.”

“He didn’t say you’d be back at work in two days. He said you’d be on your feet.”

“I know when I’m well enough to return.”

“Is that right?” Rand pulled a chair up to the bed and plopped into it. “So tell me, how well are you?”

“Take this tray off my lap and I’ll show you.”

Rand waggled his brows. “You sure?”

“Are you going to talk it to death or show me how happy you are I returned in one piece?”

Rand crawled onto the bed and straddled his hips. Frank’s mind reeled and his body tensed with need. “You going to do me with your clothes on?”

“Uh-uh,” he said. “I’m going to do you with *your* clothes on and one wrist handcuffed to the bed. Your other arm is out of a commission, so you’re at my mercy, McGuire.” Rand produced the cuffs from behind his back, locked them on Frank’s hand and hooked them to the bed rail.

“A magician, huh?”

“Yep, and I’m going to make you soar like a white dove.”

He slipped his trousers off, next his boxers, and slipped his shirt over his head. Sliding down his body, Rand wrapped his mouth around his cock and sucked. He ran his tongue along the bulging vein on the underside.

He paused briefly and looked up at him. "Isn't this what you love? My tongue licking you, my mouth sucking you, taking it all deep in my throat?"

Frank moaned his pleasure, his pelvis digging into the mattress and then rising up as Rand went to work on his dick again.

Rand stopped and caught his gaze. "I love your eyes. They remind me of a storm at sea. Hell, you remind me of a storm at sea, rough, wild and wet."

"Suck me, so it doesn't hurt you going in," Frank said closing his eyes and drowning in the indescribable sensations.

Already his cock leaked and Rand had barely started. God, he must be getting old. At one time, he could last all night, or had he become addicted to Rand and the wicked things he did to him? *The kid*—he always called him *the kid* although he'd long ago come of legal age—was like a drug he couldn't get enough of, and one he might possibly die from. At the moment, Frank would gladly play the part of an addict.

His hips vaulted forward again, and an animalistic groan escaped under Rand's tortuous assault. Rand took his cock harder and faster, spurred on by the sound. Christ, if he didn't stop, soon he'd be begging for him to impale his ass on his dick. A sigh of relief claimed Frank when moments later, Rand shifted his body forward, used his knees for leverage and positioned his ass over Frank's weeping shaft.

"This what you want, Frank?" he whispered against his damp chest, pushing his bottom down to take the head of his cock.

"You're a *cock teaser*. If my hand was free you wouldn't be resting on my pole, you'd be taking it in deep and full."

"Like this?" His voice cracked with primal lust as he drove his ass down hard and fast, taking the full length of Frank inside him. Rand rested there for a few seconds and drew a deep breath.

Even to him, his own voice sounded pathetically fragile. "Unlock the cuff."

Rand rocked against him; his neck arched back, his eyes closed.

"Where's the damn key?"

He fumbled around the sheets with his hand and held it up in the air.

"Unlock the cuff, Rand." A click echoed in the quiet room. "Now, you asked me if I was ready for this."

He pushed him off his body with his good arm, onto his back and loomed over him with his hand near his shoulder. Rand's eyes widened. "Keep your eyes open. I want to watch them while I fuck you."

More than ready, Rand brought his knees to his chest and cried out when Frank pushed in swift and deep. "Oh, God, yes."

Senseless with need for one another they moved in perfect rhythm; their bodies one. For the first time, their minds met on some distant plane as together they sated their mutual hunger.

Long minutes later, Frank collapsed on top of Rand with a throaty groan and pulled him close to his sweat-soaked body. "I'm glad you forced my hand, and proud of you for standing up for what you wanted."

"I learned it from the best of the best."

"Oh, yeah? Who's that?"

"You, McGuire. You're the best of the best, and always will be in my eyes."

"Ditto," Frank said, and for the first time in a long time knew he'd finally come home in one piece.

About the Author

Keta's passions include watching movies, reading, dabbling in genealogy and metal detecting. She lives in the Midwest on six acres of woodland, a great place to look for underground artifacts. One day, Keta hopes to live in a year-round temperate climate spending every day writing in the great outdoors. Keta writes erotica fantasy and historical.