

The Witch's Ladder

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Resurrection

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Prelude

May 23rd 1984

Messina, South Africa

Sometimes, when the rains come, the distant thunder sounds just like artillery. Shekina still could not get used to the idea that peace had come to Zimbabwe. Though a small word, the concept of peace proved too confusing for her innocent mind to comprehend. Her whole life, all five years, had been filled with the horrors of guerrilla warfare spilling over the border into her quiet corner of South Africa. But peace had come to Zimbabwe, and with it also came peace in Messina.

"Shekina!" mother called, anxious but not alarmed. "Where are you?"

Shekina heard, however the cozy shelter beneath her bed provided too great a sanctuary to surrender, least not before knowing for sure that the guns of war would not find her.

It would be better, she thought, if Akasha were here. The rolling of thunder did not scare her twin sister so. Then, Akasha had always been the brazen one. Her audacious heart feared nothing.

"Shekina!" mother beckoned again, her voice sounding more desperate now, and closer as she neared the top of the stairs, zeroing in on one of the last best hiding places in the house. Shekina reached up quickly and pulled the bedspread down over the small opening that had formed a cave-like entrance to her secret hideaway. It could

have been a masterful move if not for her giggling, which alerted her mother to her den of seclusion, ultimately betraying her anonymity.

"There you are, child." Mother pulled the giddy girl out from under the bed. "You had me scared to death. Come. We must get you cleaned up before Father and Akasha come home."

"But Mother," Shekina exclaimed, her tiny face beaming. "Father and Akasha are home."

"No, baby, they are not, but soon they will be, so we must—"

"Yes they are! And Father has bought a new dress for Akasha. It is yellow and green with flowers and—"

"What are you talking about? I did not hear the Land Rover pulling up outside."

Shekina grinned at her mother's naiveté. "No, you did not, Mother. They are still at the gate. Muruto is letting them in now."

"Shekina, the gate is nearly two kilometers away. You could not possibly hear them from such a great distance."

Again the girl smiled, not fully understanding her mother's insistence on pretending she did not know of her family's arrival. She ran to the window, pulling the drapes to one side. "No, Mother. I cannot hear them coming." She pressed her nose to the glass. "The gate is too far."

"All right, then. So what is this nonsense? How would you know Muruto is letting them in?"

She turned, cupping her hands to her mouth to stifle a giggle. Then she placed them on her hips in mock aggravation for having to explain. "Akasha told me so," she declared. "That is how I know."

"Akasha told you?"

"Yes, and do you want to know what else?"

"All right." Seeing no harm in denying the child a run of her imagination, she said, "I will play along. Tell me. What else has Akasha told you?"

"She told me that Father has a box of chocolates for you."

"Oh, does he? And why would Father bring me chocolates, darling?"

"He brings chocolates because he wants to tell you he is sorry."

Thoroughly intrigued, her mother knelt and cuddled Shekina tightly. "Okay, so tell me." Her voice fell into a hush, as if guarding the child's confidence. "What does Father have to be sorry about?"

Shekina pulled her tiny hands back up to her mouth in a deliberately feeble attempt to block the words from escaping her lips. "Akasha told me that Father did not pay attention when she ran into the street and got hit by a car. Now her arm is broken."

"What? Shekina! That is not a nice thing to say about your sister. You should not wish her such harm. I am very disappointed in you."

"But, Mother, it is what Akasha told me."

"Enough of this nonsense. Downstairs with you, now. We must get you cleaned up. We will talk about this when your father gets home."

"But—"

"Enough, I say. Come."

She grabbed Shekina by the arm to escort her downstairs. Outside, the sound of a car's horn beeped repeatedly as it approached the house at great speed. It was a familiar horn, loud and unmistakable. She had not expected her husband and daughter for several more hours, yet she knew instinctively the impudent trumpeting could only mean one thing. She scooped Shekina into her arms and hurried downstairs. It had only been three days since they left for Johannesburg, but already she missed them as though many weeks had passed without word of their well-being.

She reached the foot of the staircase, excited and only slightly out of breath. A cloud of dust from the Rover's approach floated in like fog and settled over the porch in a thin veil. She put the child down, opened the screen door and stepped outside. At just a glance, her blood ran cold. She stepped back, grabbing the edge of the door with one hand. She gasped for air and almost forgot to exhale. It could have been a trick of the eye, the power of suggestion, or even the heat working on her mind. However, she knew it was none of those things.

As the dust settled, the image before her came into sharper focus. Her husband, Nakia, and Shekina's identical twin, Akasha, sat in the family's black and tan four-wheel drive. And just as Shekina had said, Akasha

wore a bright yellow sundress with green and gold flowers; on her arm, cradled in a brown cotton sling, a plastered cast from elbow to wrist. Nakia grinned nervously behind the wheel.

Mother gathered her wits and approached the jeep, trembling. It hardly seemed possible, but her baby girl had foreseen it. A box of French chocolates sat upon the seat next to her husband. She turned around slowly, fearfully. Shekina stood by the screen door, smiling. A second look back at the jeep, and she saw Akasha, also smiling, and watching Shekina. She could almost hear the two talking to each other, but their lips were not moving. A sudden, dizzying wave of nausea overwhelmed her. She reached out, grasping for the jeep in an effort to prevent falling. As her vision blurred, her legs weakened and she collapsed to the ground.

Nakia jumped out of the vehicle and tended to his stricken wife, but the twins paid little notice. They seemed so genuinely happy to see each other again that they ignored their mother's plight and kept talking, only; their tiny lips were still not moving.

December 29th 1986  
Interlaken, Switzerland.

It did not matter that a fresh layer of fine powder covered the landscape from Zurich to Verbier, or that this year, his father had finally agreed to the holiday ski trip. In the past, Michael Dietrich had tried to get his father to join him; but the elder Dietrich always seemed too busy for such things. Now it was all for nothing. His first day on the slopes, Michael had foolishly tried an impossible jump. It landed him in the hospital with a broken leg and a badly bruised ego. Five days later, and nearing the end of his holiday, Michael found himself back at the lodge, sitting impatiently by the fireplace, licking his wounds and getting drunk on stout German beer.

Across from him sat Josh Baker, a self-proclaimed ski virgin. Yet, for a chubby White American neophyte, Josh maintained a respectable air of confidence about him. Broad at the shoulders, with stocky arms and legs, he carried his surplus weight easily, and seemed to move with an unnatural grace for a young man of such abundant stature.

Josh arrived in Switzerland with his family the week before. His plans called for a two-week Christmas vacation that included a trip from Zurich to Interlaken for a father-and-son weekend getaway on the slopes. Unlike Michael, however, Josh had a terrible fear of skiing, and though he hoped that on this trip he would finally lay those fears to rest, it was not to be. Instead, he found an otherwise improbable friendship in Michael, a captive audience of sorts. The two shared little in common, but Josh became someone Michael could complain to, and Michael was someone Josh could put up with. In the end, it was better than spending the weekend alone, as both Michael and Josh's fathers had become friends as well, and were now out skiing the weekend together.

"It was never for the skiing anyway," Michael insisted. He propped his leg up on the hearth, chalking the stonework with the bottom of his cast. "I came to Switzerland because the Alps have the best-looking women in the world."

Josh sat listening to Michael dispensing sour grapes. He made no effort to conceal his curiosity, as he panned the room in search of the women Michael spoke of. Though there were plenty, all were conspicuously engaged in the company of other men.

"You come for the women?" he said. Michael heard the sarcasm in his voice.

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

"So where are they?"

Michael took another long sip of beer, announcing his pleasure for the brew with a belch. "Oh, they are here," he said, wiping his chin with his sleeve. "They are all outside now, skiing and what have you. But wait until tonight." He waved his hand in a broad sweep across the room. "This place will swarm with beautiful women from all over the world: Italy, France." He paused. "You are from the United States, aren't you?"

"I am. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. It is just that European girls love American men. Maybe we can team up tonight and get lucky."

Josh's brow hooked with interest at that. Like most men, he considered himself irresistible to some of the women some of the time, and downright acceptable to the rest of the women all of the time. He offered up a shrug. "It sounds like fun, but I'm confused. Aren't you American?"

"Please, I am German. Can't you tell?"

"No. I thought you were American. Your English is perfect."

Michael stiffened up in his chair. "Yah, vell danke-schön," he said, and smiled. "Actually, I grew up going to American schools. My father was as a consultant in the aerospace industry. We traveled all over America together. Only now that he is retired, I hardly get to see him anymore."

"Wow, how bizarre? And here I am on a weekend trip with my father, only I'm too scared to go skiing. Guess we're a couple of winners, huh?"

"No, but maybe tonight. Why don't you meet me back here after sunset? The first few rounds are on me."

Josh nodded his agreement before belting down the last of his beer and returning to his room. Hours later, after the sun had settled behind the mountains, he returned to the lobby and found Michael still sitting by the fireplace.

"Have you been sitting here all this time?" he asked, worried that Michael was now probably too drunk to pick up women.

"He is not back yet," Michael murmured. "He has not come back from skiing. Has your father returned?"

Josh took a seat next to his friend. "My father got back hours ago. He's upstairs getting ready to come down for drinks."

"Did he say anything about my father, where he went?"

"No, only that he left him on the slopes early because he felt guilty about leaving me here when we were supposed to be spending the weekend together."

"So where is my father now?"

"I don't know, but we'll find him. Don't worry."

As Josh spoke, Michael's attention drifted to the other end of the lobby. A receptionist pointed, directed two uniformed constables toward them. One of the men mouthed, thank you, to the woman before turning and heading their way. Michael struggled to sit up straight in his chair, though the weight of his cast seemed to hold him in place as though a great stone had been set on his lap.

"Mister Dietrich?" one constable said upon approach. "We are looking for Michael Dietrich, please."

"I am Michael Dietrich."

"Ah, Mister Dietrich. I am afraid we have some bad news. It is about your father. There has been an accident."

"An accident?" His voice cracked. "What kind of accident?"

The constable turned to Josh, perhaps wondering if the pudgy American was prepared to offer his friend the comfort he would soon need in the worst way. With obvious reluctance, his eyes came back to Michael.

"Your father, he has been in an accident. It appears he was skiing alone on the west slope where it is very fast and very dangerous. They found him only a short time ago. He apparently hit a tree." The constable bowed his head. "I am sorry. Your father is dead."

In the instant after, Michael did not say a word. A hollow stare settled into his eyes. His expressionless face grew flush. His mouth fell slack, and it seemed for a moment that he did not breathe. Slowly though, his head began to shake. "No," he said, though the constable standing furthest away could only read the word on his lips. "I will bring her down, damn it." Soon, his entire body shook, until Josh felt compelled to step in and physically restrain him.

"Mister Dietrich..." said the constable.

"I will bring her down!" Michael yelled. "I will bring the whole damn mountain down! Do you hear me? I am going to bring her down! No one will ski it again!"

Beer bottles scattered in a flurry of thrashing arms and legs, shattering to the floor, as Josh struggled to keep Michael from hurting him or others. In his mind, he had no doubt; Michael's rage was intense, and although bringing down a mountain seemed impossible, if it could be done, Michael would be the one to do it.

Curious onlookers gathered in the lobby, but hotel security quickly dispersed them, and within a few chaotic minutes, Michael had calmed down enough for Josh to release him. The awkward silence that followed made

Josh uncomfortable. He expected his young friend to break down crying, as any man might, but that did not happen. He imagined the burning in Michael's gut would explode if he did not vent his anguish. Yet the seething fires burned. The two constables searched for words to express their regrets, but there was nothing more to say. In the end, they simply nodded, their lips stitched tight and white across their faces, their chins wrinkled. They walked away, leaving Michael with his grief, and Josh with the unpleasant chore of comforting a friend he hardly knew.

Josh cupped Michael's shoulder with his hand, but said nothing. The hours passed. The two stayed by the fire, mostly staring at the flames and drinking beer. By one in the morning, they were both so drunk they could hardly see. When it came time to say goodnight, Michael thanked Josh for being there and offered a word of advice for his new American friend.

"Don't go skiing with your father tomorrow," he said, the somberness in his voice foreboding. "I do not want you to get hurt."

Josh smiled. "I appreciate your concern, but trust me; if I strap on the skis tomorrow, then me and my chubby ass are skiing down the bunny hill. I can tell you that right now."

"No, Josh. I said do not go skiing tomorrow, period. It will not be safe out there. I am going to bring the mountain down."

He laughed uneasily. "What?"

"You heard me. It is coming down tomorrow. As soon as I arrange transportation for my father's body back to Ravensburg, I am getting on the ten o'clock shuttle out of here. Before I go, I am bringing the son-of-a-bitch down."

Josh said, "Michael, you know you've had a lot to drink. If you want, I can—"

"No! You are not listening. I like you, Josh. You are a good man, you and your father. I cannot make you stay inside, but consider this fair warning."

"Sure," he said, "whatever you say." Josh gathered his things. Before retiring, he offered his friend a final handshake. It had been a long night; he knew the grief and the beer had done most of the talking, but out of respect, he promised Michael he would stay off the slopes, if for no other reason than to honor the memory of his farther.

The following morning started off bright and sunny, a stark but welcomed contrast to the gray skies that hung over the resort all weekend. Josh caught up with his dad in the restaurant. The conversation, as expected, centered on Michael and the tragedy the day before. It seemed sad and pitiful, but the experience had somehow brought both men closer together.

Shortly after ten o'clock, Josh glanced at his watch. "Would you look at that?" he said, tapping the crystal. "I guess right about now Michael and his father are on their way back to Ravensburg."

At that moment, a frantic woman ran past their table, crying and screaming something about an avalanche on the west slope. People were trapped and others dead. Josh looked up at his father, his eyes wide and fearful. "My God." His voice fell to a near whisper. "I don't believe it. He did it. He brought the goddamn mountain down."

July 2nd 1987

Nacaome, Honduras

Another night of unbearable temperatures, although the sun had long since faded from the horizon, the insufferable heat of the day continued to radiate into the evening; only now, there was no shade in which to seek relief.

Pedro glanced passed his shoulder. Through his tangled hair, he saw Maria, struggling to get comfortable, as she lay nearly naked in the corner, tossing restlessly on a homemade bed of straw and burlap. She did not seem to mind the rats climbing over her legs on their way to the kitchen, where they hoped to find repast in the empty sacks of corn meal. Such an inconvenience seemed a reasonable sacrifice for the marginal benefit of leaving the door open, allowing what little breeze there was to snake inside, cooling the beads of sweat on her body.

From his chair by the window, Pedro watched with vigilance for a signal indicating it was all right to sleep. If it did not come soon, he worried, the tequila might well make that decision for him. He sat back, reflecting on the past eleven years and how the neighboring Sandinista Government of Nicaragua had doggedly chased the rebel Contras in and out of Honduras in a bloody guerrilla war—a war that regrettably took more than its fair toll of innocent Honduran lives.

Pedro, like many of the young men in his village, learned to keep watch over his neighborhood through a network of sentries. He and the other husbands and fathers took turns watching for troop movement of any kind, giving warning to the villagers of their impending approach. Though officially denied by the Contra rebels and the Sandinistas, each group routinely resorted to killing innocent Hondurans suspected of sympathizing with the enemy. Their atrocities were widely acknowledged by the locals, but each side remained careful not to leave witnesses to the slayings, as both wished to maintain an air of legitimacy for their cause in the world's eye. Nonetheless, with the United States backing the Contras and the Soviets backing the Sandinistas, neither side warranted legitimacy in Pedro's eyes. To him, murder was murder, plain and simple.

The signal came shortly after midnight. From a nearby rooftop, two torches indicated the transfer of watch to the next sentry. Pedro took one last swig of tequila and wiped his chin with his shirtsleeve before climbing sloth-like into bed with his wife.

Just before he fell asleep, he heard the welcoming sound of raindrops tapping on the tin roof above. Soon the fragrant smell of fresh earth filled the room, as the falling rains whipped up loose dirt from the unpaved road outside, allowing briefly the unusual mix of earth, water and air to commingle in the savory essence of a hot summer's night. In time, the gentle rain became a heavy downpour, stirring a tropical breeze so brisk that even the rats seemed inclined to seek shelter under the house below the rotted floorboards. Maria moaned, rolling over without waking. She stopped after bumping up against Pedro, as she maneuvered away from the window where rainwater blew in cool and unchallenged. Pedro eased a sigh of contentment. Life, he thought, gets no better than this. He put his arm around his wife, closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Hours later, after the rains but before the sun, he awoke to the sound of voices. There were soldiers, five in all, dressed in military fatigues with guns drawn and bayonets readied. He recognized the uniforms immediately. They were Nicaraguan Government militia—Sandinistas. They yelled at Pedro, accusing him of spying for the enemy, demanding to know where the Contra base camps were hidden. When he told them he did not know, that they had mistaken him for someone else, they struck him repeatedly on the back of the head with the butt ends of their rifles.

Maria pleaded on hands and knees for mercy, begging the intruders not to hurt her husband. They rewarded her cries for compassion with cruel and callous indifference. One soldier, eager to quiet the hysterical woman, drew back his foot and kicked her in the face, landing his muddy boot squarely below her jaw. Pedro tried desperately to reach her, but the crashing blow from another rifle butt stopped him in his tracks, knocking him unconscious.

He awoke and found himself deep in the Honduran jungle, bound and gagged, situated in a way that he could see his captors taking turns ravishing his wife. Maria's body, bloody and naked, hung like a rag doll over the tailgate of a camouflage-painted jeep. Words of mercy squeaked from her lips, but her pleas fell silent to the ears of savagery, drowned in the raucous howling of her assailant's delight.

When it was over, the last soldier to rape her, the one they called El Diablo, stepped back and zipped his trousers. He then planted his foot on Maria's buttocks and shoved her off the back of the jeep. She rolled off the tailgate, hitting the ground with a muffled thump. Two more soldiers dragged Pedro to Maria's side and dropped him in the dirt where she lay. He could hardly recognize her battered, bloody face. Her swollen eyelids pinched back tears so tightly she could not even see her beloved husband. She struggled to rise when Pedro called to her, but the gag in his mouth allowed only grunts and groans to escape.

Finally, perhaps out of pity, one of the men removed the gag, permitting Pedro to speak the words to his wife that he hoped would take them both all the way to heaven.

"Te quiero, Maria," he said.

The sight of her tortured, defiled body proved more than he could bear. He began to cry, and if he hoped to die for having let her down, then at least he knew his captors would grant him that one last wish.

El Diablo gazed down on them from behind the jeep and spat in disgust. He looked back at his accomplices and gave the sign. It was subtle, barely a nod, but clearly understood. Two of the soldiers took up position behind the couple and prepared to fire into the backs of their heads. The jungle fell silent. A single shooting star ripped across the sky. Then, a most miraculous thing occurred. An apparition of a little girl, a Mestizos girl, half White and half ancestral Indian, appeared before the assassins. She seemed to float on air, as if drifting on a cloud inches off the ground. In seeing this, Pedro began reciting the Hail Mary. He spoke in a whisper, but loud enough still for Maria to hear.

The little girl stood passively—staring silently, a peculiar and stark contrast to the wickedly vile display of human suffering before her. Pedro did not know if the soldiers could see the girl, or if they were simply allowing him to make peace with God before the final despicable act. By the time he reached the concluding, “Amen,” he felt ready to die. He smiled at the little girl and found comfort inside when she appeared to smile back.

A sudden, rapid succession of gunfire cracked the still of the rising dawn. In an instant, Pedro and Maria were gone. Their bodies slumped into the mud—lifeless and cold.

Moments later, the little girl watched as the couple calmly stood up, free of the bondage and bones that had burdened them so in their final hours on Earth. She pointed to a light. They journeyed toward it hand in hand, following it without reservation. It led them on a path into a long tunnel. Midway through it, Pedro and Maria stopped and looked back at the world they were leaving. The Mestizos girl waved goodbye. “We shall meet again, fair angel,” Pedro sighed, and the apparition faded.

Off in the distance, the elusive sounds of wildlife started to return. Birds, crickets, and small game that had been scared silent by the gunfire, now began to reclaim their jungle. The soldiers, tired and hungry, gathered their gear and quietly drove off, oblivious to their culpability and the supernatural manifestation that had just occurred.

## One

Present Day

New Castle, Massachusetts; USA

It started innocently enough on that chilly Sunday evening. I had just wrapped up a burglary case that had warehouse owners up in arms down on Pier 4 four at Suffolk’s Walk. The culprits in a series of break-ins had come up under the buildings in a small boat, and then gained access by cutting holes in the floorboards and climbing up through them. They never got away with much, the boat being way too small to haul off any real payload, but their slipperiness in evading capture proved irritating enough to drive some warehouse owners to sit up nights, waiting with shotguns. I knew that if I did not catch the thieves soon, we would probably end up with a couple of dead juveniles on our hands.

It turns out I was right. The perpetrators were young boys; brothers that had bought a small fishing boat in hopes of making a few bucks selling live crabs. The problem was that after spending all their money on the boat, they had none left to purchase crab traps. A few more petty thefts and they would likely have made enough money for the traps they needed, and then everything would have gone back to normal. Then again, one more attempted burglary, and New Castle might have been burying two young brothers who otherwise had never done anything else wrong in their lives. Catching them meant that I would have to pull a couple of all-nighters sitting out in my own little boat, waiting for them to strike again. It was an unpleasant assignment, one I was not looking forward to. Only the week before, I had toyed with the idea of finally setting a retirement date. Forty years in the business can wear a cop down to the point where he doesn’t need to sit out on a boat on a cold night, hoping to catch a couple of juvies that just want to pilfer a head start toward an honest profession. I am not saying that’s right, or that I condone such things, but shooting the boys over a stupid adolescent mistake would not have made matters any better. It was in that vein that I knew I had to follow through on the case.

After staking out the pier on a cold Saturday night to the wee hours of the next morning with my partner, Detective Carlos Rodriguez, we finally caught the kids in the act. It was around three in the morning, and believe me when I tell you, they seemed almost as relieved as we were that it was over. We busted them, brought them downtown for processing, took mug shots and fingerprints, and then called their parents to come down and get them. At daybreak, I went home to take a long hot shower and an even longer nap. I went back to the station around seven-thirty Sunday night to file my report, thinking that maybe it was a fitting, if not so sensational, case in which to close the chapter on my professional career as a detective. It was not the big bang I hoped for, not some great jewelry heist that I might solve single-handedly and write a book about upon retiring. Then, in New Castle, big headline-making crime stories come far and few between the more mundane.

I had all but accepted that volumes of such less spectacular cases would fill my book of memoirs, not knowing that at that moment, the biggest, most bizarre case of my career was already unfolding only a few miles away. It took several months to conclude, and I am letting you know now that not all the pieces fit so tidily together like in some perfect Hollywood movie; real life cases seldom do. But it is what it is, and after collecting data from all the documents, interviews and personal accounts, and then sewing the ends together with a little speculation of my own, I'm going to tell you how it all went down, as best I can.

As I have said, it started innocently enough on that chilly Sunday evening. While I sat writing my report on the Suffolk's Walk burglaries, Millie Bradford was already heading for the outskirts of town to the research center. She drove past the New Castle Savings and Loan, making special note of the time and temperature clock on the front of the building. Thirty-three degrees, she noted, and wondered how she ever made it through the winter without heat in her old jalopy. A rippling chill snaked up the small of her back and the sudden feeling of intrusion made her fifty-something year-old-body shudder. She grabbed the crank on the door and tried closing the window tighter. Though up as far as it would go, the wind still whistled in along the top. Protesting under her breath, she mused how March might come in like a lion and go out like a lamb most years, but this year it was going out like a lion, as well.

She reached over and turned up the volume on the radio, catching the DJ just in time to hear him declare, "It is one degree Celsius out there, folks. I think that is just above freezing. Hey, is it me, or is this month going out like a lion? What's up with that? Well, here's a song guaranteed to warm your bones. It's called—"

"I know," she said aloud, and she turned the radio off again. "It's called *deja`vu*." She shook her head at the coincidence, convinced that another such coincidence and the group at the research center might likely include her in on their studies tonight.

She had heard a great deal about the group, or the workshop as the doctor referred to it. Doctor Phillip Lowell, New England's most prominent researcher in the field of ESP and other phenomena, ran the center where the workshops met. Though he did not have a monopoly on all things paranormal, he did have the market all but cornered in its research.

Before he gained national recognition for his work, many of Doctor Lowell's peers scoffed him and ridiculed his accomplishments. That was before his successes at the New England Institute for Research of Paranormal and Unexplained Phenomena, the quintessential research facility in the States, and envied worldwide. Millie considered herself lucky; having an uncle as the director of research carried considerable weight in the Center's decision to hire her as an assistant to the Program Coordinator. It was not, however, enough to keep her from having to attend the workshop meetings at the inconvenient hour of eight PM on a cold Sunday evening.

As she drove on, without the DJ on the radio second-guessing her thoughts, Millie began wondering about the people she would meet on her first night at the job. She knew that more than a few very special students attended the workshops, some coming from the far corners of the globe to participate in the studies there. They were the genuine psychics and masters of clairvoyance, the people she would meet tonight. The thought of that made her uncomfortable. She wondered how she might act in a room full of people that could all read her mind. Spooked, she reached over and turned the radio back on, deciding it would be better if she could get a song stuck in her head, and perhaps block out any embarrassing thoughts that the psychics might read. After fiddling with the dial, she hit upon a station playing one of her favorite old tunes. The words brought a smile to her lips and she began singing along.

Twenty minutes later, Millie arrived at the research center, parking in front of the main entrance, backing in as habit had taught her.



She got out of the car and stood in awe at the size of the complex. She remembered her uncle telling her how the buildings, situated on forty acres of pristine woodlands, had once housed an insane asylum for New England aristocrats. Constructed back in the days of the witch-hunts, it was there that people with money and affluence could commit family members and loved ones who had gone insane. In reality, however, the asylum might just as likely have been home to young boys who had partaken in acts of homosexuality, or young women who had gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Still, they were the lucky ones. The mentally ill or morally corrupt individuals who could not afford treatment at the asylum were more likely to meet a certain and despicable demise, as they would certainly be considered souls of the damned and the possessed. In such cases, the usual treatment might consist of a therapeutic stoning, or remedial hanging, or even one of early New Castle's favorites: a good old-fashioned burning at the stake.

Millie shuddered at the thought of such barbarity, yet it only seemed fitting to her now that the world's foremost leading institute for research on the paranormal should be housed there, in the complex where the unexplained had been studied for nearly three hundred years.

After turning her collar against the cold, she dashed across the moonlit parking lot to the steps of the old brownstone building. The lights were on in the room directly over the main entrance, and except for a dim bulb burning in the foyer, it seemed to be the only room in the building not set in darkness. She tugged on the handle of the large plate-glass door, but it would not yield.

Inside, she saw a small easel, sporting a handmade sign that read, WORKSHOP SECOND FLOOR. She tugged again, this time harder; still the door would not budge. She palmed the glass and struck it sharply. The door rattled and shook the casing to its threshold.

"Hello!" she hollered, "is anyone in there?"

Her breath quickened with her growing unease. Her warm exhalations pattered against the cold plate-glass as she pressed her nose against it for another peek inside. The resulting conditions produced a fine condensation on the surface of the door, creating a clouding effect that obscured the glass. She stood back, watching it slowly dissipate, and in the vanishing fog, she saw her reflection like a shadow in the wind. She studied it closely, noting a peculiar double image, as if someone were standing behind her. She turned and gasped, clutching her handbag instinctively and pulling it in close to her chest.

"Who's there?" she cried, her voice crackling. In the depths of darkness, she saw nothing. Her eyes scanned the parking lot, squinting tightly to make note of any movement within the wind-whipped trees lining the edge. Again she asked, only this time in a whisper, as if not wanting to hear a response. "Who's there?"

She turned back and began banging on the door once more; her sense of urgency now heightened. "Hello? Please, is anybody in there? Please...anybody?"

Her breath grew short, quick and labored. She stepped back and again noticed her reflection in the plate-glass, and again there stood the unmistakable shadow of a figure behind her. She pivoted sharply on her heels and pressed her ridged body against the door. She screamed for God Almighty to save her, but from what? She did not know. Once more, she stood alone. Her heartbeat accelerated, blood surging within her veins thumped wildly against her temples. She took another deep breath and let it out with a pucker, convincing herself that she was getting too old for such drama, just too damn old.

A brisk northeastern assault hit the front of the building. It wrangled in the doorway and rustled through her hair. She welcomed its embrace like a cold splash of water and accepted the opportunity to make gains on her composure. She tried telling herself she had nothing to worry about, but inside, anxiety simmered. She turned around, and unexpectedly found herself facing the stranger—this time eye to eye. She stumbled backward, preparing her for full-scale hysteria. Instincts told her to scream. Her jaw unhinged; her brown eyes blinked back in horror. Her lungs filled with a gasp of cold air.

But wait! She thought, and a giddy sigh relieved her of bated breath. He is on the other side of the glass. He is inside the building! "Oh God!" she cried. "Please, open up!"

On the other side of the door, a tall, imposing man in a white lab coat and wide-rimmed glasses smiled, trying hard not to seem too amused by the circumstance. He lowered his head to evade eye contact and unlocked the door.

"Hello madam," he said. "I'm sorry we didn't hear you out there. We lock the doors at sunset, and, well, come in, please."

Millie scurried thought the door like a mouse, still not feeling safe until the man shut and locked it behind her. "Yes, hello, I'm Millie Bradford," she said, her voice peppered with exhaustion. "Doctor Lowell hired me?"

"Of course, Ms. Bradford. "You're my assistant. I am Doctor Peter Lieberman, the project coordinator here at the Institute. I am sorry. I did not realize you were starting work tonight. I would've had someone watch for you."

"That's all right, Doctor." She paused again to catch her breath. "I think I'm running rather late, anyway. I should have called."

He motioned with his hand, painting the staircase in a broad brushstroke. "Ms. Bradford, the group is all here. What do you say we join them upstairs?"

She smiled thinly. "After you, Doctor," and she followed him up the oak staircase, heeding his advice to take hold of the banister and to step carefully on its creaking treads. There, he began elaborating on the programs conducted at the Center.

"We don't meet every Sunday with the entire group," he told her. "Normally, the workshop splits into two, with the first half meeting Tuesday and Thursday nights, and the second on Wednesday and Friday nights. Generally, the groups only get together like this in their entirety every third Sunday. Then we really have some fun."

"Interesting," said Millie, "but why nights? Doesn't the institute conduct studies during the day?"

The doctor laughed. "Oh, yes. Of course we do. That is one reason why this workshop meets in the evenings. You see, during the day, there are all types of studies and experiments going on in dozens of rooms with virtually hundreds of people. It can become somewhat distracting, however. This group is the real cream of the crop. Some have worked with us here for years, and all have displayed genuine aptitude in ESP, clairvoyance and other exceptional abilities.

"It was your uncle's idea, Ms. Bradford, and a good one, I might add, that we hold these special workshops in the evenings. We find that by meeting at night, there are far fewer distractions from both inside the facility and from the outside world in general. I think you will find the workshop most interesting. In fact, you will be one of only a few outsiders who'll enjoy the privilege of witnessing what many believe to be nothing more than hokey magic or smoke-and-mirror theatrics."

"Oh, my!" Millie smiled at that notion. "You know, Doctor, ESP, clairvoyance and the like have always been a subject I've embraced with great interest, ever since the days of my youth, playing guessing games with my Uncle. I must say, I feel most fortunate to be a part in it all now."

"Splendid. I believe you will fit in just fine with us then." He stopped in mid-stride, causing Millie to bump into him on the step below. "However, I have to warn you, Ms. Bradford. These people are, hmm, different. They are strong-willed and they don't all look upon their abilities as gifts, though indeed, their proficiency in the academia of clairvoyance, mental telepathy, bilocation and what have you, is undeniable. I hope you can look upon them first as people, and secondly as the talented individuals that set them apart from the rest us."

"Of course," said Millie. "I'll do my best."

The doctor smiled and nodded. "I know you will." He started back up.

At the top of the stairs and down the hall, sat a large room; its furthestmost wall complimented by four massive windows, trimmed in fluted casework and partitioned symmetrically with thick wooden mullions. Though the windows overlooked the parking lot, the grander view offered came just over the treetops to the moonlit landscape beyond.

Inside the room, on wide-planked floorboards, sat a large wooden table with a dozen chairs around it, and in them, sat the workshop members. Millie counted ten in all, six women of various ages from late teens to mid-fifties, and four younger men. None stopped what they were doing to look up at her or Doctor Lieberman, remaining instead absorbed in an ongoing experiment that seemed to focus on one individual in particular.

Millie looked up at Doctor Lieberman. He motioned with his finger to his lips, and then leaned over and whispered to her.

"You see the young man sitting at the center of the table?" he pointed. "That is Michael Dietrich. He comes to us from Ravensburg, Germany. We heard about Michael after a German newspaper carried a story on him and his father. The article reported that Michael, upon hearing of his father's death in a skiing accident, had caused an avalanche in the mountains simply by willing it to happen."

“An avalanche?”

“Yes, on the very spot his father was killed. As the story goes, he told an acquaintance that he would cause the avalanche at a specific time of day, and when that exact moment came, so then did the avalanche.”

“My goodness, Doctor!” Millie whispered. “And you believe he actually made it happen?”

“Oh, we don’t know that for sure, Ms. Bradford. What we do know is that the avalanche did occur, and that it happened at the exact time at which he said it would. Perhaps it is only coincidence, or perhaps he is clairvoyant and he simply foretold what he saw in a vision. However, one cannot rule out the possibility of psycho kinesis.”

“PK?” Millie said.

“Exactly, the technique of mind over matter. Experts have generally documented the phenomenon as a mostly spontaneous event, which, of course, by the sheer nature of its spontaneity makes it difficult to document at all. Cases of deliberate or conscious psycho kinesis on a large scale are rare events indeed, although not entirely disproved.”

Doctor Lieberman redirected Millie’s attention toward Michael Dietrich and the experiment in progress. “What Michael is doing now, is an experiment that I have devised. It allows anyone at all to test his or her powers of PK.”

Millie moved in closer, hoping to gain a better view as the experiment unfolded. Doctor Lieberman shadowed her closely, continuing his narrative.

“You see what Michael has there, Ms. Bradford? Directly in front of him on the table sit two equally sized magnets. Their magnetic poles face each other in a way that allows the natural magnetic gravitation of each to pull toward one another. Now, as you might imagine, if the magnets were very close to each other then you could hardly keep them from snapping together, as two magnets will. However, if you separate the magnets and maintain just enough distance between them until the gravitational pull of the Earth becomes greater than the pull the magnets have on each other, then they are unable to connect on their own. What Michael is doing now, is concentrating on the invisible magnetic field that still exists between the magnets, but is just not strong enough to allow them to overcome the force resisting them, namely gravity. As he concentrates, he is able to direct his own energy into the magnetic field, thereby increasing the magnetic pull and thus allowing the two magnets to overcome the barrier of distance which would normally prevent them from joining.”

The thought of such a simple yet fascinating experiment intrigued Millie. She soon found herself standing shoulder to shoulder with the other members of the workshop, and though she continued to listen to Doctor Lieberman, she had become as entranced, her energy funneling into the collective wave of the group for the purpose of the experiment.

“We started the experiment,” Doctor Lieberman continued, “with the magnets separated just enough to prevent the magnetic pull from overtaking the forces preventing their union: initially, a distance of barely a centimeter. In the past, Michael has succeeded in causing the magnets to overcome that barrier in no time at all. As you see, tonight a distance of nearly two meters separates the magnets now. If he can cause them to join together over such a great distance, we will have a new record.”

With that, Doctor Lieberman fell into a hush, as all eyes now focused on the magnets. Millie could sense Michael’s concentration intensifying. Beads of sweat dripped from his brow. The air seemed to buzz with electricity, its dull hum broken only by the sound of the group’s collective breathing, inhaling and exhaling as one entity.

At first, she did not see it, but one magnet began to vibrate ever slightly. When the other began to quiver, she let out a short gasp, interrupting the homogenous rhythm of breathing among the group. The doctor steadied her hand and she reigned in her excitement, allowing the others to regain their concentration on the experiment without consequence.

The magnets continued to tremble, still meagerly, but slowly the subtle pulsing gave way to a rapid and vibrant shudder. Eventually they began creeping toward each other. Initially the magnet on the left moved only an inch, then stopped but continued shaking. Then the magnet on the right moved, shimmying as it walked, almost with intelligent intent. The energy in the room gathered. Millie could feel it in her bones. Then it happened, as if a cord holding them back had broken. The two magnets raced toward each other, sliding along the tabletop like skaters on ice, until slapping together with a defining click.

The group cheered and clapped in celebration. Millie, too, clapped, though admittedly uncertain as to what had really taken place. It was supposed to be Michael's experiment, yet it seemed to her as though the entire group contributed to the cause and effect. When she questioned Doctor Lieberman about the outcome of the test, he concurred, noting that the entire group most likely combined their collective energies to facilitate the results.

"And to some small measure," he told her, "I suspect you were instrumental in the success of the experiment, as well." Doctor Lieberman even went so far as to imply that the experiment's ultimate success might have been due to her participation, saying, "Perhaps it was your small contribution of additional energy that enabled the magnets to overcome what otherwise might have been too great a distance."

"But Doctor," said Millie, "how then do you document to what extent Michael's part played in the experiment?"

He gave a casual laugh at that. "Well, Ms. Bradford, we don't. This experiment was just for fun. We are not videotaping or recording anything tonight. We hold the Sunday workshop mostly for the benefit of the two groups, just so they can get together once a month and share stories and experiences. You know? In other words to talk shop." He looked up, smiling at the others like a proud father. "Why don't you let me introduce you to everyone?"

Doctor Lieberman cleared his throat, signaling the others to simmer down. Millie stood with folded hands, thumbs rolling with anticipation. The doctor began with Michael. "As I mentioned earlier, the young man in the middle there is Michael Dietrich. To his left and right are Chris Walker and Travis Webber. Like Michael, both Chris and Travis possess abilities in psycho kinesis, with Travis here also displaying some promising results in telepathy experiments."

The three men acknowledged Millie with polite nods and smiles. "Barbara Richardson and Valerie Spencer," the doctor continued, gesturing toward the two women sitting next to Travis, "are our resident experts in ESP, or clairvoyance."

Millie reached across the table and began shaking hands, and in the process, could not help notice the large diamond ring on Valerie Spencer's finger, leading her to conclude that ESP and clairvoyance knew no sociological bounds. She looked back into Valerie's eyes and sensed her reading her thoughts. Valerie eased a wink, and a tiny smirk dimpled her cheeks. Millie smiled back sheepishly before following Doctor Lieberman on to the next introduction.

"Here we have our lovely twins," he said in a playful tone, one usually reserves for troublemakers. "These young ladies come to us all the way from South Africa. Ms. Bradford, please meet Ms. Shekina and Akasha Kayo. They, like Gordon Walsh, are also telepathic. However, the telepathy between Shekina and Akasha is particularly strong. I would venture to guess that at any given moment these two know exactly what the other is thinking. Am I right, girls?"

Shekina and Akasha turned to each other and smiled knowingly.

"There, you see," said Doctor Lieberman. "They are doing it again."

Millie observed, but saw only that the two seemingly normal, though extremely petite, young women were smiling innocently. How he knew they were communicating telepathically fell beyond her. She tried to imagine to what extent their telepathy reached, and if ever she would have a private thought all to herself anymore.

Next, the doctor turned his attention to the far end of the table where a remarkably young-looking eighteen-year-old sat with folded arms. She appeared shy and reserved, something the rest of the group could not be accused of. With her delicate cheekbones, innocent eyes and long, black hair spilling over her smooth brown shoulders, one might hold that she came straight from the pages of Teen Magazine.

"This is the lovely Leona Diaz," said the doctor. He reached over and gently stroked Leona's hair with the back of his hand. "Leona is the newest member of our workshop. She comes to us from the Honduras. She's a wonderful young woman with a most incredible gift: one that I'm sure she could go on for hours telling us about if she was not so terribly shy."

Leona's eyes fell down and away in timid retreat. Her lips tightened softly, curling up at the corners, further exemplifying Doctor Lieberman's description of her shyness.

"You see, Ms. Bradford, Leona has the ability, though mostly involuntary, to travel out of body and maintain a presence in two places simultaneously. You may have heard it referred to as astral-projection, which generally

happens when one sleeps. We call it bilocation, and with Leona, it often happens in an awakened state. It is uncertain what her double looks like, whether she appears as a solid or ghostly form to others, if at all, for she has been unable to bilocate to places any of us can be at that time. However, we have much documentation of her travels to substantiate her experiences. Always, it is information of events as they happen. Unlike ESP and clairvoyance, which generally tells of future or past events, Leona can actually see events unfolding and recite a virtual play-by-play of those events in real time. We're all very excited that she has joined us, and we hope to make her feel comfortable in her new home so far away from home."

Doctor Lieberman warmed his paternal-like smile over Leona. "Hola, Leona. ¿Cómo está?"

In a better English response than Millie expected, Leona replied, "I am fine, Doctor. Much thanks to you for asking."

He nodded approvingly. Millie, too, as she could see that he and Leona shared a special father-daughter like bond. For all her shyness, Millie imagined Leona needed someone like Doctor Lieberman in her life to offer guidance, and it was good to see she had found that.

Finally, Doctor Lieberman turned his attention to the last person in the room still waiting for introductions: another longhaired, dark-skinned beauty with rich ebony eyes. She stood alone in the corner, leaning against a filing cabinet, arms folded at her chest. She seemed dark and mysterious, yet confident, as though needing no introductions at all, and Millie wondered if coincidence had not led the doctor to save her introduction for last.

"Ah, yes. And here we have the enchanting Ms. Lilith Adams," he said, his smile tentative. Millie followed him across the room and met up with Lilith just as Doctor Lieberman announced bluntly, "Ms. Adams here is a self-proclaimed witch, you see."

"Oh!" Millie's outstretched hand froze in mid-reach. She blinked wide and then stared back blankly. "A witch?" she uttered, uncertain what the appropriate response to an introduction like that should be. "My, that is...exciting, isn't it?"

Her expression amused the young witch, but she contained it with a grin, thinning her lips subtly. She reached out and shook Millie's hand.

"A witch, yes," said Doctor Lieberman. "But don't be alarmed. I am sure Lilith here is a good witch. Aren't you, Lilith?"

Lilith hissed cat-like at the doctor, swatting at him playfully.

"Actually, Mrs. Bradford, we include Lilith in our workshop, not for her sorcery, but because she demonstrates abilities as a sensitive with surprisingly accurate results."

"A sensitive?"

"Yes," he answered, but then hesitated, wondering how he might explain to Millie what a sensitive was without it sounding too mystic. "Well..." he cleared his throat. "I guess you can say that a sensitive is a person who displays fundamental abilities to serve as a host for spirit communications. Ms. Adams has established a long and successful record in working with thought-forms and other nonphysical entities. It's rather bewitching, if you'll excuse the pun. But her work here at the institute has been enlightening. And, although her fascination with witchcraft is something we don't particularly endorse here, we do condone it for the sake of research."

"Heavens!" said Millie, squeezing Lilith's hand tighter. "You communicate with the dead? Do you suppose you could talk to my late husband, Arnold? I'd love to hear from him."

Lilith's grin grew doubtful. "Oh, Millie, I don't... That is to say—"

"Ms. Bradford," said Doctor Lieberman, "Lilith cannot actually contact the dead, as much as the dead can contact her, or rather; information about the dead comes to her. Sensitives are not mediums. Lilith is capable of learning things about your husband without you telling her any particulars, but she cannot actually speak with Arnold. You understand, of course?"

"Of course. I am sorry. That was inappropriate of me to ask. I am so embarrassed. Please forgive me."

"Not at all," said Lilith. "It's perfectly all right." She cupped Millie's hand, and with her fingertips began stroking her palm. Millie watched as Lilith's brows lower in contemplation, and before she knew it, Lilith had used that contact to gather information about Arnold through her thoughts.

"You know, Millie, I would talk to Arnold if I could. I know the two of you were truly in love."

"Oh, yes, we were. We were married nearly thirty years. He just recently passed. He died of—"

"Cancer. I know."

“Yes, he did.”

“And he told you before he died how much he loved you, and that he would wait for you in heaven. Didn’t he?”

Millie nodded.

“And some days, when things get hard for you and you’re not sure if you can take it anymore, you think of him, and you want to go to him. Don’t you?”

Millie lowered her eyes. “Yes.”

“Well, Arnold wants you to know that he is watching over you, and he doesn’t want you to hasten your reunion. He sends his love to you every day, and he knows you feel it.”

“Yes, I do, but sometimes it does get so hard that I lose all hope.”

“I know, and he knows this, too, but he wants you to be strong. Will you be strong for him?”

She nodded. “So long as I know that he’s waiting for me. I’ll keep the faith.”

“That’s a girl,” said Lilith, letting go of her hand. She reached behind her neck, unclasped a strand of beads and handed them to her. “Here,” she said. “This is a special kind of necklace, Millie. It holds the power of hope. Anytime you feel that hope is slipping away, I want you to remove a single bead from this necklace and drop it into water. It does not matter if it is a fountain, a lake, or even a puddle. Just drop it in and concentrate on the ripples. When the last ripple disappears, it will take with it your sense of despair and desperation and leave you with renewed hope.”

Millie took the necklace and held it tightly, unsure what to say in return. It did not seem right to take such a wonderful gift from a stranger, a gift she truly wanted if it could exorcise her demons of depression. She looked at Lilith with bewildered eyes, but before she could speak, Lilith said, “Yes. It is a wonderful gift, and yes, it does work. Trust me. Okay?”

“Okay,” she uttered, and no more words could she find.

Lilith smiled, satisfied. “Good girl. All right, then. Now, when the time is right, you and Arnold will be together again, but not a moment before. Meanwhile, he will wait for you. And when you see him again, Millie, he’ll be singing your favorite song.”

She looked at her strangely. “Our favorite song?”

“Sure. You know.” And she began singing the tune that Millie had listened to on the ride over.

“Oh, that one, yes. Thank you, Lilith.”

She turned away, wondering what other secrets she would lose to Lilith and the others. Then she looked back at Doctor Lieberman, imagining that he probably had not managed to keep a thought to himself in years. He smiled back at her, as if knowing what she was thinking. That doesn’t make it any easier, she told him silently, in case he was listening.

The rest of the evening saw the workshop continuing small independent experiments with members breaking up into smaller groups of two’s and three’s. Millie hopped from one to the other, observing, as Doctor Lieberman explained the experiments to her. By the end of the evening, she felt comfortable enough to call everyone by his and her first name, and seemed to bond especially well with the two clairvoyants: Barbara and Valerie. This came as no surprise to Doctor Lieberman, as Barbara and Valerie were also widows, having lost their husbands in accidents abroad. Ironically, both women experienced an unexplained sense of foreboding at the exact moment their husbands died. From then on, they had come to look upon their abilities with ESP as a gift and a curse. Doctor Lieberman has tried to show them that the gift is what they make of it, and that a curse is something they create from the gift if they do not know how to use it. Both were trying hard to learn the difference.

The only way out of the building after dark was through the front door downstairs. It did not open from the outside without a key, and it locked automatically when shut. For this reason, Doctor Lieberman would often leave the meetings before everyone else, entrusting the group to continue working on experiments unsupervised. On this night, he did just that. He thanked the group for coming, and for making Millie feel welcomed. Then he grabbed his coat, wished all a goodnight and left for the evening.

Not long afterward, the small groups working their experiments began breaking up. As that happened, those members also said their farewells and filed out the door, eventually leaving only Travis Webber behind.

Travis, by all accounts, committed to the study of psycho kineses, never took an experiment lightly. If he were in charge, he would have the workshop practicing twenty-four seven, with summer breaks consisting of field trips to Sedona, where he could slip into one of Earth's vortexes, find his Chi, and move objects with his mind all day long.

Though dedicated, Travis was not as adept with his PK abilities as was Michael. He had been a member of the workshop longer than anyone, and was first to welcome Michael when the young German joined the group after coming over from Europe. At that time, Michael had only limited control over psycho kineses. Travis watched over the years as Michael honed his skills, perfecting them to the point where he could move objects, such as magnets, at will. Although the workshop had never been a contest, it bothered Travis that his PK skills were not developing quicker. His decision to stay behind that night was motivated toward correcting that deficiency.

With everyone gone and the room now quieter than it had been all day, Travis took to setting up his experiment. He approached the endeavor with renewed enthusiasm, hoping to establish a new personal best. Beginning with the separation margin needed to keep the magnets from pulling themselves together, and then increasing that distance by degrees, he attempted and succeeded a number of times in marrying the magnets with relative ease. That success continued at ten-millimeter intervals until he reached the breaking point where he could no longer procure their union: thirty-three centimeters, far short of the nearly two meters that Michael accomplished with the same experiment earlier that evening. Though it was not enough to beat Michael's results, it was sufficient to meet his goal of personal best, and that was good enough for him. He packed up the magnets, grabbed his coat, turned off the lights and headed out.

Once downstairs, Travis pushed open the plate-glass door and stepped out into the cold. The brisk walk across the parking lot had barely begun, when he realized he had forgotten his car keys upstairs in the room. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and marched head down back to the main entrance. He needed only to tug once on the door before remembering that it locked automatically upon closing.

"Great," he moaned, cupping his hands to the glass. He wrapped on the door, hoping someone might still be around to hear him, but the longer he knocked the less that seemed likely. His choices were now limited. He could break the glass to get into the building and face the consequences with Doctor Lieberman in the morning, or turn and hoof it in hopes of catching a ride on a dark, lonely country road. Neither seemed appealing.

He was still staring at the door and weighing his options when he noticed someone moving about inside. He cupped his hands to the glass again, shielding his eyes from the glare of the moonlight washing over his back. In the darkened hall, pickets of alternating light through the narrow stairway cast prison bar shadows against the wall.

Odd, he thought. I could have sworn I saw someone....

He dropped his hands and stepped away from the door, when the figure he thought he saw reappeared. He studied it closely, its phantom form standing tall and ridged in the darkness. His brows gathered, as he squinted in stiff focus at the blurred silhouette. It seemed to bleed into the darkness, melting into the shadows as if it had no flesh. He thought of leaving, of turning around and walking away—hell, running away—as fast as he could. Nothing about the figure on the other side of the door seemed even remotely familiar or friendly. Then it came to him: the chilling realization that the mysterious figure stood not in the hallway inside, but instead was a reflection in the glass of someone behind him, and he could almost feel its hot breath bearing down the back of his neck.

He turned to confront the specter face to face, when the assailant's forward thrust knocked him off guard. He staggered backward into the plate-glass, shattering it to bits. His hands came up instinctively, protecting his face, but leaving his body open and vulnerable. The push of cold steel tore into his stomach and ripped up his chest to the bottom of his neck. He dropped to his knees. Steam from his gaping wound commingled lazily with the still, night air, and the smell of death—his death—lingered within its vaporous trail under his nose.

Some miles away, still driving, Barbara Richardson felt an ominous sense of peril; a feeling she believed went not without consequence. She turned down the volume on the radio, listening for warnings from sirens, or blaring horns from runaway freight trains, but heard nothing, only the wind as it whistled through her opened window.

At the same time, Valerie Spencer had already arrived home and was just putting her key in the front door. An abrupt and unexplainable horror gripped her from inside and squeezed her of breath. She gasped, dropping her keys and purse. She clutched her stomach in reflex, though it lasted only a moment. Such sensations had gripped her before, and she knew instinctively that not all was right.

The next morning, bright yellow crime-scene tape ringed the perimeter to the entrance of the research center. Reporters and news crews gathered a short distance away, as the city awoke to the early headlines:

Murder at the Institute  
of Paranormal and Unexplained.

My office had not yet released the details, but word had somehow leaked out that this murder was a particularly grisly one, revealing that the victim died of a knife wound and that the killer had cut his liver right out of his body. I am sure it made for great conversation over breakfast.

I arrived at the center around eight that morning to meet with Doctors Lowell and Lieberman, the project's director and coordinator, respectively. They had seen the murder scene close up for themselves, and one of them, Doctor Lowell, I believed, had been the one who called it in to 911. We gathered in the big room upstairs after my briefing with the first responders, the primary CSI team and the medical examiner's office. I started the conversation with the standard promise that I usually make in high-profile cases. It is a promise I had always been able to keep up until now. In the future, I think I will try to remain a little less committal about things.

"I'm going to find your killer," I told the doctors. "I've got a crack team of officers working the scene, and my partner, Carlos Rodriguez, downtown working on putting the clues together. Trust me. A sick puppy like this always screws up and leaves something behind. When we find that something, whatever it is, we will get him. Mark my words."

"That's comforting to hear, Detective," said Doctor Lieberman. "I don't mind telling you how shook up we are about this tragedy. Would you think it wise if we cancelled our nightly workshops until you can solve this murder?"

I pulled back from the conversation and took up sentry at the window, craning to gain sight of the activity still buzzing below. The coroner's team had removed Travis' body already, but in a town like New Castle, any concentration of police uniforms, outside of The Percolator, gives great cause for chatter. "No, Doctor," I said. "That's probably not necessary. My guess is that this is most likely a random act of violence, probably committed by a lunatic fringe cult group."

"A cult?"

"Sure. It is not as crazy as you might think. The fact that someone removed Travis' liver indicates a sacrificial ritual of some kind. You know, there are many cults out there today performing blood sacrifices to Pagan Gods and voodoo spirits. Even a small town like New Castle is not immune to such things. In some cases, these cults make their sacrifices under a full moon. And unless I'm mistaken, I believe we had a full moon last night."

I rolled my eyes skyward, squinting tight, as though I might still find the moon shining bright opposite the morning sun. "In my experience," I said, allowing the blinds to click shut with a snap, "It's unlikely that something this heinous will happen again soon. A ritual requiring something as important as a human liver is probably but a once in lifetime event."

"That's certainly true for Travis," said Doctor Lieberman. He smiled nervously, before turning away to avoid judgment for the remark. I let it go, instead, addressing Doctor Lowell with my plan.

"I'll have patrols in the neighborhood stepped up while we try to find the whacko that did this. In the meantime, I suggest you ask your workshop to put it to a vote. Let them decide if they want to continue meeting or not. If you ask me, I think they're safe enough."

"That seems reasonable," Doctors Lowell answered, and Doctor Lieberman agreed with a nod. "Naturally, the safety of everyone in the workshop remains paramount, but the experiments are also important; our research grants depend on their successes."

"Then, good luck," I said. "Thank you for your time."

Doctor Lowell said, "Thank you, Detective, and just let me say that on behalf of Doctor Lieberman and the entire institution, I am sure that we will all feel much safer knowing that you and your men are working on the case. I trust you will keep us informed of any new developments, yes?"



"Of course. You have my word." I crossed the room, shook the men's hands and showed myself to the door.

## Two

Over the next several days, the two workshops met and voted in open ballots to continue meeting as usual. They conducted no experiments, and instead devoted their time talking about and remembering their fallen friend. Barbara explained to her group how she had sensed the peril that Travis faced, but did not realize the warning was for him and not her.

Valerie also admitted how sudden terror and phantom pains had overcome her, immobilizing her at the instant Travis died. "It's as if he were calling out to us for help," she surmised, "but we just couldn't interpret the signs."

Doctor Lieberman empathized, noting the paradox of their situations. "You people are in a unique position to truly feel the pain of others," he told the group. "However, you must not confuse your gift for being able to remain in spiritual touch with other souls as being your responsibility for stopping that which is clearly out of your physical control."

Sadly, few found solace in his words.

It was during those first few days that my partner, Detective Carlos Rodriguez, and I interviewed everyone in Doctor Lieberman's workshops and found no cause to suspect any of them in Travis' murder. After several weeks, we had run out of people to question and found ourselves no closer to finding Travis' killer than we were on day one.

By the time the monthly Sunday workshop rolled around, all had grown eager to meet again as one group. There seemed a definite heightened sense of fellowship among the group combined, than what existed among the group divided. Chris Walker even mentioned this at one point in the evening, suggesting they alter their schedules to include the whole group meeting every Sunday instead of every third. Doctor Lieberman promised to take the idea under advisement with Doctor Lowell and to get back with an answer as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the experiments that night were all very lively. One in particular involved the twins, Shekina and Akasha, as they tried their telepathy skills out on each other.

"Okay people, gather round," said Doctor Lieberman. "We're going to try the Rhine twist."

Millie leaned in next to Lilith and whispered, "What is the Rhine twist?"

Lilith said, "It's a take-off of an old ESP experiment, sort of a card-guessing game where the subject has to guess one of five symbols without looking."

"You mean like ink blots?"

"Yeah, kind'a. Only these symbols are less abstract, like circles, squares, stars and things like that. The twist comes in the way that Doctor Lieberman plays Shekina against Akasha. You see, he has the twins sitting in chairs back to back. He'll show Shekina the card, but Akasha has to guess which one it is."

Millie scratched her head and wrinkled her nose. "Why does he do it like that?"

"Just to spice things up a little." She turned to Millie and smiled. The gleam in her eye sparkled like a flashbulb when she winked. "You like to spice things up a little sometimes, don't you, Millie?"

"Excuse me?"

She turned back to face the group. "It's simple. Doctor Lieberman wants to see if Akasha can correctly identify the cards through mental telepathy with any greater accuracy than if she were to use ESP alone."

"Oh? And can she?"

Lilith shrugged. "If she wants to. More likely they'll try screwing with Doctor Lieberman's head a bit."

"Why would they do that?"

"Like I said: to spice things up a little."

One by one, Doctor Lieberman revealed the Rhine cards to Shekina, who then concentrated on sending a telepathic image of the card to Akasha. The results were both amazing and entertaining. Not only did Akasha correctly guess the cards an impressive ninety-nine percent of the time, but she also identified them correctly even when Shekina purposely tried to send the wrong image to her sister. They repeated this experiment several

times, with Shekina and Akasha switching roles as the sender and receiver. The Doctor also included Gordon Walsh in the experiment because of Gordon's telepathic abilities, and though Gordon did score well, he proved no match for the combined telepathic powers of the twins.

At one point during an experiment that teamed Shekina with Gordon, Akasha stepped away from the circle and approached Valerie, who seemed preoccupied, staring off in the distance.

"Are you all right, Val?"

Valerie snapped to attention, as if suddenly awakened. "Oh, sure." Her voice hushed. She smiled. "Guess I was daydreaming."

Akasha leaned in closer. "I can tell there is something troubling you. What is it?"

Valerie searched Akasha's eyes, staring deep, and seeing only her own reflection in them. "I don't know. I'm sure it's nothing. You shouldn't worry. This has been a fun experiment, hasn't it?"

"You are changing the subject, Val. You cannot fool me. I read minds, remember? So tell me; what is on yours?"

"If you read minds, then why don't you tell me?"

"Because, I might be right, and people do not like it when someone reads their mind. It kind of...how you would say...freaks them out."

Valerie sighed and turned away. Across the room, Gordon grew frustrated with the experiment he and Shekina were attempting. She turned back and saw Akasha still smiling. "All right, you got me, Akasha," she said. "You're right. I don't think I want to know just how much of my mind you can read. The truth is, I don't know what's bothering me. I have an uneasy feeling, you know, like something bad is about to happen. I can't explain it. I mentioned it to Barbara earlier, but she said she doesn't feel it. I don't know. Maybe it's just my imagination. I suppose I'm letting it run away with me. Maybe it's because the last time we all met like this... I mean, the last group thing when we were all together—"

Akasha put her finger to Valerie's lips. "It is okay. I know what you are going to say, but I think it is all right to feel the way you do." She nodded across the room. "Come. I want to show you something."

Valerie stood. Akasha took her by the hand and escorted her to the window. She pointed outside to the parking lot below. "There, do you see?"

Valerie looked down and noticed a police cruiser sitting in the lot. "Yes?"

"They are looking out for us. And do you know what else?"

"What?"

She pointed again, this time down the street. "You see that car over there, the one by the van on the corner?"

"Yes."

"That is Detective Marcella. He is watching us also. So you see, there is nothing to worry about. They are looking out for us very well, you know?"

Valerie forced a smile, hoping to convince Akasha, but inside, she did not feel reassured. As the two turned back to join the group, she thought, It's not in my brain, it's in my mind.

She glanced over at Akasha, surprised to see her looking back with a skeptic brow, as if to say, I heard that. It only served to reinforce her observations that the workshop meetings were paying off well for Akasha. Without doubt, the twins' telepathic powers were growing stronger by the day.

As the meeting broke up, the members made it a point to leave the building in twos, touting safety in numbers. No one else had sensed the impending doom that consumed Valerie so, and for that, she felt grateful. Yet for her, the feeling persisted, and she remained convinced that trouble still loomed imminent.

Two days later, after arriving at the institute for the Tuesday night meeting, Valerie was surprised to learn that Leona Diaz had joined the group to work on a special experiment with Doctor Lieberman. When asked if she planned to change her usual Wednesday workshops to Tuesdays, Leona simply smiled and shook her head ambiguously.

Most of the experiments conducted that night proved routine and uneventful, notwithstanding the one Doctor Lieberman worked on with Leona. In that experiment, the doctor tried to get Leona to bilocate using hypnosis. They had attempted it before, succeeding in sending Leona to exotic places like Rome, Beijing and Mumbai. From past successes, they discovered it was possible to facilitate the process of bilocating by planting the desire to do so in Leona's subconscious. It proved exciting when successful, but the experiment often met with mixed

results. Though Leona was an easy subject to hypnotize, on this particular evening, the experiment did not pan out, leaving Valerie to conclude that no surefire trigger or mechanism for stimulating such a phenomenon existed.

Doctor Lieberman, always the first to admit just how little we know about those who bilocate, maintained that many mysteries remain concerning what actually happens when a subject engages in bilocation. Even Leona agrees that it is something she does not fully understand. And, although that particular experiment did not yield results, Doctor Lieberman did not consider it a failure.

“Anything that is tried but does not work,” he said, in his sometimes overly studious tone, “does not mean failure. It simply eliminates another possible approach to the problem. Therefore, every experiment is a success to some small degree or another. The idea,” he insisted, “is to have fun first. The learning will come naturally.”

With the evening ending, Valerie and Barbara found themselves lagging behind, engaging in conversations of recipes and fashions until both suddenly realized that they were the last souls left in the building. Immediately, the two women put on their coats, turned out the lights, hurried downstairs and stepped outside. They said goodbye to each other on the front steps, and then Barbara made a curious comment about the full moon, noting how particularly large it seemed. Valerie glanced skyward just quickly enough to take note, but did not offer a reply. She hurried across the parking lot to her car, fumbling through her purse for her keys as she walked and cursing herself for not having them out before leaving the building.

She found the keys in a side pocket of her purse, a pocket not usually used for that purpose. Coincidence? she wondered, or worse, a conspiracy of fate. She struggled to steady her shaking hands as she managed the key into the lock. The door opened, and she beat a hasty entrance into the car. Once inside, she shut the door, locked it and started the engine.

After seeing that Barbara had safely entered her vehicle, Valerie put her car into gear and punched the gas. Her tires spun in a cloud of blue and white smoke, as she pulled off the lot and onto the street. By then, the overwhelming sense of doom had returned stronger than ever, and she believed that nothing short of getting as far away from the research center as possible would make that feeling go away. With every mile, a measurable level of comfort returned, and with determination and a heavy foot, those miles quickly added up.

It probably would not have mattered, destiny being what it is, but as she sped off in haste, Valerie failed to notice something crucial. Her thoughtfulness had kept her in the parking lot long enough to make sure that Barbara had gotten into her car safely. However, in putting so much distance between her and the research center so quickly, she did not notice that Barbara had not pulled out behind her.

As her decades-old driving ritual demanded, Barbara sat in her car performing a pre-drive checklist, one she completed every time she got behind the wheel. Priority one on the list was to lock the doors, which she did. Next, a series of equipment checks that her father taught her to perform when she first learned how to drive. Starting from left to right and always in the same sequence; set parking brake, turn off directional lights, dome light, radio, depress clutch, shift transmission into neutral and start engine. The last thing on her list before shifting into gear was to adjust the rearview mirror. This step was not on her father list, but then her father never moved the mirror to check his make-up when he arrived at his destination.

As she had done a thousand times before, Barbara reached up, grabbed the mirror and swung it into position, allowing it to frame a three by six-inch landscape of the view out her rear window. Only this time something did not seem right. Something in the reflection caught her eye as it swept into position. She reached for the mirror again and swiveled it left to right. Except for the blind spots, she saw nothing outside to cause alarm. She pitched the mirror downward, onto the seat behind her. Wide brushstrokes of moonlight cascaded in through the windows, washing the interior in ribbons of steel blue, muted whites and gunmetal gray. On a cloudy night, it would have been easy to miss, but now she wondered how she could have gotten into the car without noticing it—whatever it was. She leaned forward, squinting into the mirror, and saw what looked like a large bundle of clothes or rags piled up on the back seat.

“Well I’ll be a...” She looked deeper into the mirror. “What the hell is that?”

She put her arm up on the top of the seat and turned around to inspect the oddity first hand. At that instant, it sprang to life, attacking with lightning speed, wrapping itself first around her face and then her entire head. With tremendous force, it plucked her from her seat, pulling her over the backrest, twisting and wrenching her head violently. She screamed for mercy but her muffled cries, suffocated in threads of black wool and hair,

would not come out. Her arms and hands flogged at the beast with no avail. She mule-kicked the dashboard and gearshift before her feet found the rearview mirror. When the mirror tore off the window, she kicked harder and broke the windshield. The horrid sounds of breaking bones and snapping vertebrae followed, until Barbara's head had twisted completely around and again faced forward. Her struggle ended with her lifeless body falling limp onto her seat.

A long, gray cloud slithered overhead; obscuring the full moon that Barbara had admired earlier. In the cloak of darkness welcomed by her killer, the bloody business of harvesting began.

Miles away, cruising toward the sanctuary of her home, Valerie Spencer took notice of how the damning sense of doom had suddenly abandoned her, leaving the void filled with an uncanny sense of tranquility. Once home, she drew a hot bath, lit an incense candle and set it on the windowsill. She then slipped out of her robe and into the tub, feeling silly for having worried herself so.

A medley of Spanish folk music tripped softly from wall speakers in the adjacent bedroom. Vapors of steam ascended in ghostly columns like morning fog. It felt both relaxing and delightful, a glorious and enchanting treat much deserved. She slid down lower, stopping when the water line met her chin, and the nagging kink in her neck seemed to melt away.

Perhaps I make too much of this ESP, she thought, scoffing at her own paranoia. Guess sometimes people just get a little on edge. Suppose I am entitled to that, too.

As the candles flickered in the April breeze, Valerie closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. When she awoke, the bath water had cooled, the candle had burned itself out and the wrenching pain in her neck had returned.

"Damn it," she hissed. She stepped out of the tub and wrapped a towel around her shivering body. "This thing isn't over yet. I just know it."

## Three

The next morning, the research center announced it had canceled all workshops, and once again, I had bright yellow crime-scene tape ringing the parking lot of the main building. The media gathered like jackals while my investigators continued scouring the perimeter for clues to the latest murder. We had little to go on, save for the victim's name: Barbara Richardson, a Caucasian female, age fifty-seven, single; and just like the previous victim, the killer had cut out her liver and taken it for reasons yet unknown.

The official sound bite my office put out suggested that both murders were random acts of violence, but no one in the department was overlooking the fact that the two victims participated in the same workshop at the institute. If the killings were not random, and for whatever reason someone was targeting the workshop, then the motive remained a complete mystery.

I asked Doctor Lieberman to arrange a group meeting of the two workshops for the following evening. Although I stressed that I considered none of them suspects, everyone, including Doctor Lieberman, knew that they were all suspect by association, and any detective worth his salt would have put them all on the top of a very short list of such.

At the requested meeting, I found everyone sitting quietly around the big oak table, twitching and fidgeting nervously. The only exception to the nervous bunch was Lilith Adams, who seemed content sitting alone, her hands busy tying knots into a small length of rope. She appeared to concentrate fiercely on my movements, as she tightened the knots in the line, spacing them precisely three fingers apart.

At the other end of the table sat Shekina and Akasha, who noticed Lilith's fixation with the knots. For the others, it may have seemed like nothing more than a nervous preoccupation with a silly piece of rope, but the twins knew better. They elected to observe Lilith with quiet suspicion while I addressed the group, reasoning that together they might learn more through silent observation than verbal confrontation.

I began by reintroducing myself and extending my sympathies to all. I then went on to promise everyone I would find the killer or killers, no matter how long it took.

“We don’t have many clues to go on just yet,” I admitted, “but with crime scenes as messy as the ones we’ve seen here...” A sudden chill ran up my spine and I shuddered involuntarily, visualizing the horrid details in my mind. I had never done that before, and somewhere in my subconscious, I had the feeling that someone in the room had planted those images in my brain. I regrouped and collected myself, shaking off the distraction, but misplacing my train of thought. “Well, anyway,” I said, “I’m sure my forensic people will come up with something soon.”

I started walking in slow, methodic strides, my head down, my gaze to the floor. I found it hard to look anyone in the eye after what had happened, fearing a greater vulnerability, should anyone glimpse into my mind. The others had seen it all before: visitors stopping by the workshop, feeling vulnerable, as though broadcasting their thoughts aloud. Some would smile with guilt for allowing themselves to think about sex and nudity after meeting Leona, Lilith or the twins. Others turned red-faced for the sins they harbored on the way in, but now were no longer secret. Still others, such as me, turned their heads, or kept their eyes focused on the floor, as though the eyes were not so much the windows to the soul, but to the mind. That I was in the company of the world’s most accomplished psychics did not escape my attention, and I understood keenly that my usual method of asking questions without giving away too much information in the process would not likely prove effective here. I imagined if the killer were in the room, then he or she could have a decisive advantage in the game of detective versus suspect, and for the first time since my rookie years, I felt the nervous lump in my throat threatening to undermine my tone of authority. I cleared my throat and swallowed hard before pressing on with my agenda.

“I know this is difficult on everyone, but I need to ask if you know of any reason why anyone would want to see Travis Webber or Barbara Richardson dead. Did either have enemies?”

The group shook their heads in unison.

“All right, then. Is there anyone here who might have overheard something; anything that might have sounded a little strange or peculiar, either at the time or now in retrospect?”

Again, the group shook their heads in collective denial, and this time I could see that not all were in tune to my interview. I observed Lilith, her head down now, though still diligently tying knots, and the twins preoccupied with watching her. Chris, Millie and Doctor Lieberman sat staring through glass eyes across the table. Gordon, Leona and Valerie sat glaring out the window at nothing in particular. Michael appeared altogether disconnected. It seemed obvious that nobody wanted to be there, and that a group interview so soon after the murders was a mistake. In hindsight, I realized they first needed time alone to come to terms with what had happened. I asked only a few more questions before cutting the interview short.

“Before I go,” I said, already my hand gripped the doorknob. “I just want to say this. It is still the department’s opinion that a fanatic cult is responsible for these killings, perhaps for the purpose of a demonic ritual of sorts. Now, I know it is not a lot to go on, but we have a list of gangs in the area. Our sources tell us that some of these gangs are involved in other satanic related activities like pet mutilations for the purpose of sacrifice.”

“Pet mutilations, Detective?” The question came from Lilith; her voice ripe with sarcasm. “Do we look like pets to you?”

“No, of course not, Lilith. I know it is a long stretch from pets to people. My point is this. Why else would someone kill, and take a liver if not for something like that?”

“Maybe it’s the Asians,” Gordon answered. “I saw on TV where members of the Asian black market were going around stealing people’s livers for transplants.”

“Actually, Gordon, that thought had crossed my mind, except usually the victims are drugged and it’s the kidney taken, not the liver.”

“But it’s possible. Isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Guess anything’s possible. We are looking into everything. I assure you. Does anyone have anything else?”

“Yeah,” said Chris Walker. “Do you think the killer is targeting us? I mean this workshop in particular?”

I shrugged. “Can’t say for sure, Chris. This is not the kind of thing we have ever seen here in New Castle, where specific groups are targeted for a sacrificial ritual like this. To be honest, I believe both Travis and Barbara were two people in the wrong place at the wrong time. The most likely scenario is that the cult operates

close by, and that they just happened upon Travis and Barbara. That is why I ask all of you to travel in groups of two or three when you come and go from this place.”

“Which brings up another question,” said Gordon. “Should we stop the workshops until you catch this guy?”

I exchanged glances with Doctor Lieberman. “It’s hard for me to say, son. Personally, I think you have little to worry about. That said, if any of you are uncomfortable coming here at night, then I’d suggest you stay home where you know it’s safe. I know you voted on it, and I cannot tell you not to come here. What I can tell you is this: we will beef up security and patrols around the vicinity, especially at night, and we will do everything in our power to help keep you safe.”

And those are the operative words, Lilith thought as she tightened another knot on the cord. Everything in your power! Ha! She grimaced at my naiveté. You have no power to stop this. But it is too late now. You’re in over your head.

Across the table, the twins silently agreed with Lilith.

“She let us hear that on purpose, you know,” said Shekina, sending the words to her sister telepathically.

“Yes, sister, I do. What do you think she knows?”

“More than she lets on, I believe.”

“Do you suspect she can hear us now?”

“No, sister, I suspect not. She is preoccupied. Do you see what she is doing with that rope?”

“The witch’s ladder?”

“Yes. She is tying the 40th knot now.”

“Do you know who it is for?”

“No. I should think not. Perhaps it is for one of us. She does practice pagan witchcraft, does she not?”

Shekina nodded to her sister’s silent question. The twins continued observing Lilith, but were unable to hear anything more of her thoughts. They knew Lilith meant for them to hear her remark about me, and as Lilith would have it—nothing more.

I wrapped up the interview by adding, “I want you all to know that my door is always open. I encourage anyone who might want to talk in private to come by and see me.”

I thanked Doctor Lieberman and the others for their time and proceeded to leave. I barely stepped out of the room into the hall when a thought occurred to me. I paused, and then turned again to face the workshop. I opened my mouth to speak, but the door swung shut in my face. The group erupted in a roll of thunderous laughter. It made me angry at first, but the sound all of them laughing seemed somehow all right. I decided to let it go, and so I stepped back from the door, followed the stairs down into the lobby and let myself out.

Gordon turned toward Michael, thanking him for the gesture by landing a congratulatory slap on his back. Among the howling crew sat Leona Diaz, perhaps the only one in the room not laughing. “I do not understand?” she said, timidly. “Did Michael do that with psycho kinesis?”

“Of course, you twit,” said Lilith. “Don’t you get it? Detective Marcella said his door is always open. Quite a hoot, don’t you think?”

“All right, simmer down,” said Doctor Lieberman, flagging his hands for quiet. “There’s no need for name calling. Now, if I may restore order. I want you all to listen up for a moment, please. I’ve got something to say.”

The ruckus settled into a thin stir before all eyes turned back to the Doctor. He stood to address the group, but came across looking strangely apprehensive. He cleared his throat and wiped his cheek below his eye. Though no one saw tears, the understanding they might have been there went generally unchallenged.

“I know what all of you are going through right now,” he began. “And I know Travis and Barbara were more than just shop mates to every one of us. They were very special people in our lives, and I, too, will miss them dearly.

“Some of you may not know this, but Travis was the first member of the workshop to have results of his PK experiments published in the New England Journal of Science and Medicine. I believe that article, perhaps more than any other, is what made the continuing studies here at the workshop possible for all of you today. Until then, the Center lost funding from both the government and the private sectors faster than I care to admit.

“Barbara, likewise, proved her importance in her own way for what she brought to the institute. As you know, Barbara became an ambassador, of sorts, for our cause. Whenever she saw the opportunity to gain a little publicity for us, she did not hesitate. Her gentle and kind demeanor brought a warm, friendly face to the work

we do here. I do not need to tell any of you that many people are afraid of psychics and clairvoyants because we deal with the unknown. Barbara's work with local clubs and charities contributed to easing the fears of those people and helped us gain acceptance in their world. I dare say; my very salary probably comes from the many contributions of the kind people she introduced to this facility, and without her..." Now a tear did actually escape the pinched corner of his eye. "Well, let's just say that we will sorely miss her and Travis."

Everyone nodded in agreement with Doctor Lieberman's words, and some, including Leona and Valerie, brushed away tears of their own.

"I would not blame any of you," the doctor continued, "if you wanted to stop coming here until Detective Marcella puts this killer behind bars. However, I suspect some of you may still want to carry on with the work we have been doing here—very important work, I might add. Therefore, I have decided to let you all put it to another vote. If the majority wants to continue the workshops, then we will do so. Now then, it does not mean you would all still have to come back if you do not want to, but the rest of you may if you wish. In other words, we can do it on a case by case basis."

Doctor Lieberman silently canvassed the room, searching the wide-eyed faces of his apostles for seeds of their growing apprehensions. Solemn looks and focused stares prevailed. He could no sooner read their faces than their minds. Eventually, the members began looking at one another for indications of how the vote might go, but even the best psychics in the room had not a clue.

The silence broke when Lilith spoke up. "I'd like to continue the workshops," she said, stroking her fingers along her rope and stopping at each knot to cinch it tight.

Immediately, the twins ushered in their response. "Count us in, too, Doctor. We want to carry on with the workshop, as well."

Lilith imagined their motive lay not in their passion to continue the work, rather in their mistrust and desire to carry out surveillance on her. She peered over the round of her shoulder and stuck her tongue out at the girls. Shekina regarded the gesture as a possible act of witchery and turned away with a decidedly worried look on her face. That alone made the evening worthwhile for Lilith.

Valerie spoke next, standing in an act of defiance against fear. "Me, too. Count me in, Doctor. I want to do it for Barbara. I sense her presence here tonight. I think it's what she would want."

One by one, the others came around. Gordon called out next, then Michael and Chris, and finally Leona.

"Okay, great. Then it's unanimous," said Doctor Lieberman. "I think as a precaution, however, you should all take Detective Marcella's advice and buddy up with a partner when you return. I trust he means what he says when he promises to beef up security around the building. Perhaps we can carry on as usual, maybe even have some fun again."

Is he kidding? Gordon thought. Fun? As he looked around, he saw others thinking the same. Michael and Lilith exchanged questioning glances; Valerie turned away altogether.

In the back of the room, Leona Diaz sank into her chair, her chin low to her chest, her arms folded in a tangled weave. Tiny ripples on her forehead accentuated her pouting lips. Shekina's gaze drifted to Leona. Their eyes locked. In the instant it took to smile and nod, she let Leona know that she agreed completely. Fun would never again reside at the Institute for Research of Paranormal and Unexplained Phenomena.

In the growing awkwardness spawned by silence, Michael Dietrich said, "Excuse me everybody. Is it me, or do any of you still have questions you'd like to bring up while we're all still here?"

Doctor Lieberman pointed. "All right, Michael. What's your question?"

"My question is this. Is anyone really buying this shit about human sacrifice and fanatic cults that Marcella is cramming down our throats, expecting us to believe without challenge?"

"Yeah," said Gordon. "The whole thing seems strange to me, too. I mean, who ever heard of something like pagan sacrifices happening in this country? Besides, I thought pagan cults only sacrificed dogs and cats and chickens and things."

"I don't know 'bout that, Gordon," Chris added, "but I saw a special on the Si-Fi channel where this pagan cult sacrificed young virgins on a bloody altar after forcing them to have sex with a snake."

At once, the room irrupted in chattering accusations, innuendoes and allegations. The group divided on many fronts, especially on the question of whether or not a fanatic cult bore responsibility for the murders. Eventually,

the inevitable prevailed and all eyes turned to the one member of the group who might possibly know the answer.

Until now, Lilith sat quietly, knowing well that the confrontation would end up pitting her squarely in the middle of the arguments. Yet, seamless poise ruled her nature and she welcomed the challenge. She rolled the knotted piece of rope up and slipped it into her pocket.

“All right, I know what you’re all thinking,” she said. “First of all, let me tell you that no, pagans don’t practice human sacrifice in this day and age. Nor do they sacrifice cats and dogs for that matter. You might find a few voodoo worshipers offering up a few chickens or goats in some third-world countries, but human livers are definitely not on the menu. And Chris,” she wagged an accusing finger at him, “if you think the Si-Fi channel reflects real life in the slightest, then you need to get a life. And tell me; just how the hell does a virgin have sex with a snake, anyway?”

“Okay then, what do you think is going on here?” asked Valerie. “Is this guy a modern-day Jack the Ripper or something?”

“Not hardly, Val. Jack the Ripper only killed women. So unless Travis left this building wearing high heels and a dress, I’d have to say that the killer had another agenda.”

“And just what do you suppose that was? What agenda would have someone running around and cutting people open in the middle of the night for no reason?”

“Yes!” said one of the twins (Lilith thought maybe Akasha) and then several others in the group moved in closer. “Tell us O-Great one.” (Definitely Akasha) “What agenda might someone have for ripping out someone’s liver, if not for ritualistic sacrifice?”

Soon, the rest of the group picked up on the inference that Lilith knew more than she let on. They closed in like wolves. She pulled away, taking several steps back until she found herself flat against the filing cabinet. Gordon’s chubby face now came close enough to Lilith’s to feel the warmth of her breath on his lips. She put hands to his chest and pushed him, uttering something in rhyme. The others immediately fell back.

“It’s a spell,” Gordon cried, “She cast a spell on me. She’s cast—”

“Cool it, you turd!” Lilith creased her collar and pulled on her shirttail to evict the wrinkles from the bottom of her blouse. “And don’t ever get that close to me again. You hear?”

Gordon nodded.

“Okay, folks. Let us get something straight. Everyone knows I dabble in witchcraft. Fine, but it is something I do on my own time in the privacy of my own home. I do not hang around with gnomes and goblins or cast spells on little children, though I do disdain the noisome little varmints—the children, I mean, not the gnomes—regardless of what you think. My interest in witchcraft stems from my psychic abilities and helps me to exercise my powers and explore my psychic potential. What I do on my own time is nothing different from what the rest of you do here at the workshop every week, which incidentally, three hundred years ago would have gotten us all burned at the stake. Psychics, Clairvoyants,” she turned and cast an implicating eye toward Leona. “And yes, even masters of bilocation. People would have looked upon all of us as witches. Now then, contrary to what Detective Marcella thinks, I’m here to tell you; neo-pagans do not run around cutting out people’s body parts for offerings to Pagan Gods.”

Michael said, “Lilith, no one is saying you had anything to do with this. I personally do not believe the occult, pagan or otherwise, is responsible for these murders. But even if it’s so, it doesn’t mean any of us suspect your involvement just because you’re a witch.”

Lilith settled back. Her ridged posture softened, but her eyes continued to pan the room with distrust, searching for those who agreed with Michael and those who did not.

Doctor Lieberman, perhaps fearful of the escalating tensions, said, “All right, people, enough. I think it is in everyone’s best interest if we call it a night. Okay, everybody has agreed to continue the workshops; however, I believe we should still take a few weeks off before we meet again so that we may collect our thoughts and our nerves. These have been difficult times for all. We should comfort, not turn against, one another.”

The collective bobbing of heads told Doctor Lieberman that finally someone had said something that all could agree upon. With no further discussions, they quietly packed their belongings, said goodbye and made their way home.



## Four

In the weeks following, two more murders occurred on the south side of town in the industrial district known as Suffolk's Walk. The area primarily served large shipping and trucking companies that worked out of tattered warehouses strewn along the once vibrant commercial end of the city. Now only a few scattered businesses, surrounded by condemned buildings and rusted bridge cranes operate out of the location.

The papers reported the new murders with as much sensation as the two at the research center. In the new cases, the attacker surprised the victims from behind, striking one over the head with a baseball bat (the bat later turned up at the scene) and stabbing the other in the back with a large knife. The obvious differences between the two latest killings and the ones at the Center were the victims themselves. The latest were homeless men, winos, with livers probably already scarred with end-stage cirrhosis. However, that did not stop the killer from meticulously cutting the livers out of their bodies; only this time he did not take them.

The press declared it official. The town had a bona fide serial killer in its midst. They dubbed him The Surgeon Stalker. An unofficial statement released by a department insider warned everyone to stay inside at night and to lock all doors and windows. Fanatic cult or not, the statement read, it appears no one is immune from attacks now. I am still trying to find the source of that release.

Meanwhile, I think it is safe to say that I had grown increasingly frustrated with the lack of physical evidence generated at the crime scenes. With few exceptions, I had little to go on. I did find some fortune in the case of the first homeless victim where the murder weapon: a thirty-two-ounce Louisville Slugger, turned up within yards of the body. Unfortunately, we found no fingerprints on the bat. Other potentially interesting informational tidbits came to me in the form of eyewitness accounts who described seeing a young woman, attractive, dark-skinned (probably Hispanic), with long black hair, stalking Suffolk's Walk prior to each murder. Several witnesses placed her there at about the right time, and all were consistent in their general description of her. Coincidentally or not, the description fit perfectly a young woman I had met only a few weeks earlier: Leona Diaz, the shy one in Doctor Lieberman's psychic workshop.

Several nights after the latest murder at Suffolk's Walk, the workshop reconvened, and the immediate topic of conversation, naturally, centered on the two killings. The group was still debating the relevance of the homicides to the murders of Travis and Barbara when I walked in. Their conversations surrendered to an immediate hush, as if I would not have expected them to discuss the murders anyway.

Doctor Lieberman greeted me with a handshake. "Good evening, Detective," he said. "Please come in. Join us. Make yourself comfortable. We have fresh coffee over there on the table if you would like to help yourself."

"And a good evening to you all," I said. I offered a fleeting wave to the group and casually made my way to the coffee and donuts. "Please don't let me stop you, people. Go on and continue with whatever you were talking about. Pretend I'm not here."

"Actually, Detective, we were discussing the murders at Suffolk's Walk," said Valerie.

"Yes. I am not surprised. I guess I can hardly expect you to discuss anything else; now can I?"

"Hardly," came the reply from the far corner of the room. Lilith Adams sat perched atop a three-drawer filing cabinet, kicking her legs out alternately and allowing her heels to slap back against the drawer fronts. In her hand, she held another piece of rope, into which she had tied several flawlessly spaced square knots. "You know, Detective, as much as we all enjoy your company, this is a workshop for members only. If you have questions, I'd suggest you ask them and get back to your business of solving homicides, because you won't find what you're looking for in a plate of donuts."

My back still faced the room, but Lilith saw me hesitate, as if acknowledging a nuisance noise but not giving recognition to its source. I set my coffee down on the table, turned around and trooped up to her, stopping inches from the filing cabinet where she sat.

"Ms. Adams," I said, my teeth gritting. "Normally, I am a patient man, but my patience is beginning to wear thin. So why don't you tell me what you think I'm looking for here?"

"Well, Detective, I guess you're looking for a killer. That is what you do, is it not? Or are you just up here for the free hand outs?"

Someone in the group giggled—one of the twins I supposed—but my irritation remained fixed on Lilith. I smiled at her, sighed and then turned toward the window, gazing at the blackness in the night sky outside. In the reflection on the glass, I saw all the members of the workshop watching me. “Yes, Ms. Adams,” I said, still concentrating on the reflection. “That is what I do. I look for killers wherever I can find them. However, that is not all I do. I also look for information, and I observe. In fact, that is what a good detective does mostly, you know. He observes things and people, places and dates...that sort of thing.”

“Yes, and I suppose that’s all very interesting. So tell me. What are you observing now? Is there anything outside, which interests you?”

I smiled. “No, Ms. Adams. There is not. Actually, it is what’s inside that interests me most. I am observing your colleagues behind me through the reflection in the window. That, I find interesting. Don’t you think so? I mean the fact that I can stand here and observe two worlds at the same time: the world outside the window and the one behind me in this room. Surely, you must know what that is like, Ms. Adams, what with you being a psychic and all. That must come in handy for you at times.”

Lilith set her sights on the window. She noticed how she, too, could see the faces of her classmates in its reflection. “Yeah, sure,” she said. “I suppose your right. Sometimes it does come in handy.”

“Of course it does. But you see; I can’t always look at reflections in order to see two worlds. I have to rely on information I gather before I can see the whole picture. Not being psychic, I cannot just put myself into the killer’s mind to see where he is hanging out, go there and then arrest him. Does that make sense to you at all?”

“Maybe. I guess what you’re saying is that you wish you were psychic like us, so that you can do your job much easier. You could be a super Dick, like Batman or something.”

I laughed. “Oh, no, not at all. Please, I have enough crosses to bear, thank you. Hell, I know you all consider your psychic abilities a gift, just as I consider my detective skills a gift. But I would not trade one for the other in a million years. No. All I am saying is that I need to gather information, plain and simple. I need to be free to pick and sift through whatever debris blows my way. That is why I am here tonight. All I ask is that you indulge me so that I may ask a few questions and observe a few moments here with your distinguished group. Then, having filled my little notebook with notes and observations, I can leave you in peace, return to my bat cave, if you will, and try to sort it all out.”

Lilith turned away from the window and found my eyes locked on to hers with a desperate intensity. She smiled, and I could feel her reeling me in on a thread of mistrust. “You know, Detective. You can ask all the questions you want. But trust me. If any of us knew anything about who killed our friends, we would have told you by now. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, perhaps. I suppose you would. That is if any of you knew that you knew something.”

“Excuse me?”

“Tell me, Ms. Adams. Are you familiar with the term divination?”

The question hit her like a slap on the cheek. She flinched back on her perch and I could tell that her heart skipped a measured beat. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “Sure,” she said confidently, and I knew that the others had not detected her initial misstep. “Of course, I know the meaning of divination. I am a witch, you know. And in case you are wondering; yes, I do practice the art.”

I thanked her for answering truthfully, and then looked around the room, imagining that some in the group had no idea what we were talking about. Michael took the opportunity to interpret the silent survey as an invitation to ask.

“Ah, excuse me, Detective, Lilith. Would somebody explain to the rest of us what divination is?”

I looked again at Lilith. “Ms. Adams. Would you care to explain?”

Lilith looked down at the rope in her hands, which now had fifteen perfectly spaced knots. She held it up to me and pulled tightly on each end as hard as she could, cinching the knots firmly in place. “My pleasure,” she said, and then hissed like an alley cat, soft and low. I felt sure she meant it as a playful jest, but it came out sounding sexy as hell.

I backed away from the filing cabinet and let her down. She turned to the curious group, threw her hair back over her shoulder and exhaled a deep breath. “Sure, Michael, I’ll tell you what divination is. Simply put, it is a means of communicating with the supernatural, mostly for foretelling the future. It is extremely ancient, actually, with roots going back to the earliest civilizations. Today you see it practiced mostly in paganism,

witchcraft and voodoo. For the most part, it is harmless, and the majority of people consider it superstitious at best.”

Michael nodded, seemingly satisfied with the explanation, but I was not.

“Oh, come now, Ms. Adams,” I coaxed. “Don’t stop there. Why don’t you tell them how some people practice the ahm...art?”

Lilith stiffened her back and took another deep breath through her nose. She squinted low in scorn, rolling her lips inward and forming a narrow horizontal sneer. The corners of her mouth pinched back into her cheeks, and for just a moment, some in the room believed they could actually feel the rumbling of her anger in the floor beneath their feet. Nonetheless, she remained composed, and continued.

“For some people, Michael, foretelling the future is as simple as making an observation of natural everyday occurrences, such as cloud formations, or interpreting the way a wave breaks over a sandbar. Others prefer to toss rice or grain into the air and then read the patterns they make in the sand after they fall. As for me, I prefer to pour oil into a pan of hot water to observe the formation of bubbles and rings.”

At that point, you could hear a pin drop. For three years, Lilith participated in the workshop and no one in the group had known as much about her. Chris seemed particularly amazed at the revelation, while Gordon seemed the most intrigued. The twins remained skeptical, even suspicious, believing Lilith much too audacious to practice such a benign form of divination as she described.

“Man! That’s incredible,” said Gordon. “You can actually foretell the future by reading oil droplets in water?”

“Of course, Gordon, but that’s not all. Do you want to know the best part?”

“What?”

“The best part is that the spaghetti won’t stick to the pan.”

A spontaneous laughter erupted, the likes of which surprised even Lilith. It roared loud and robust and it went a long way in easing tensions in the room. I found it difficult after that to turn the tables to the serious side once again, but I was making a point, and I had to complete what I started.

“Okay, great. That’s all very entertaining,” I said, and the clamoring ended almost as abruptly as it started. “But there is another form of divination, Ms. Adams, isn’t there?”

Lilith folded her arms to her chest and shot me a look of pure disdain. “Yes, of course there is, Detective,” she sassed. “Thank you for mentioning it. You are such a dear.”

I gestured by crimping the brim of my hat, but not actually tipping it. She reached up and gave the brim a flick with her finger before folding her arms back at her chest. It happened so quickly, I barely had time to flinch; and the look of surprise on my face made her smile with satisfaction.

“I believe what Detective Marcella is referring to is an ancient form of divination called hepatoscopy.”

The word meant nothing to most everyone in the room, save for Doctor Lieberman, who I caught gulping down a grape-sized lump in his throat.

“Hepatoscopy,” she continued, “is the examination or inspection of the liver of sacrificial animals for the purpose of foretelling the future.”

Lilith stepped back, reeling in the shock wave of horrified gasps and groans that rippled through the room like falling dominos, as each realized the profound implications of her words.

“My, God! Is that what’s been happening here?” a stunned Valerie Spencer asked, her hand covering her mouth in revulsion. “Some insane lunatic is killing us in order to tell the future by reading livers? What kind of barbarian does such things?”

“Yes,” said Michael, slamming the heel of his fist on the table. “Why haven’t you said anything about this before? This is totally unacceptable!”

“It’s insane! Absolutely disgusting!” an equally disturbed Chris Walker declared.

Soon, the entire room ignited in chaos and disorder, with everyone yelling at everyone else and no one at all. Even the twins, who usually preferred to communicate via telepathy, began yelling at the men, the women, and each other. It seemed Leona Diaz and I were the only ones not yelling. While I tried to decipher the accusations and innuendoes flying around the room in hopes of hearing something worth noting, Leona remained unwilling or unable to involve herself in the disturbance. She sat alone in the corner, biting her nails, watching, wrinkles crowding her forehead. Her lips quivered, and the anguish on her face portrayed a victim of circumstance.

The commotion continued unabated until Doctor Lieberman finally stepped in. “All right, everybody simmer down!” he ordered. “I need everybody to please take a seat and remain calm, everybody. Now!”

It took a few more pleas of persuasion, but eventually things died down to a restless murmur. Everyone took a seat, if not reluctantly, when Michael’s hand came down hard on the table once more. “Lilith, I ask you again. Why haven’t you mentioned anything about this before? Do you know anybody who might practice this hideous form of divination?”

“Do I know anybody?” she said. “Humm... You know I am sure you just took the words right out of Detective Marcella’s mouth. Well, the answer is no! I do not. But do you want to know why I haven’t mentioned this before? I haven’t mentioned it because I don’t know anything. Why is it you all assume I would, because I’m a witch? Is that it? Just ask the crazy witch, right? She’ll know. Witches know everything about everyone who ever practiced hepatoscopy. Well, bullshit! I don’t. You asked me before if I thought Detective Marcella was right about the pagan-ritual theory, and I told you I did not believe it. Did any of you listen to me? No. Detective Marcella has been doing his job for over forty years, so you all figure he knows what he’s talking about. Yet none of you bothered to ask him how many cases like this he has investigated in all those years? If you had, then you would probably find the answer is none. Am I right, Detective?”

I looked at her and shrugged ambiguously.

“So then, is this the other agenda you mentioned earlier,” Valerie asked. “The agenda you thought the killer might have for wanting the livers, if not for the pagan sacrifices?”

“Yes, Valerie. Divination is one of them. I suppose there are many possible reasons why some sick bastard would do this. I just didn’t believe it was for human sacrifice to pagan gods.”

Several heads nodded as though indicating they understood, but Lilith felt little comfort in that. Suspicions still ran high among some in the room, and she could sense it. When Shekina and Akasha turned to each other in a conspicuous attempt to discuss telepathically what they wished not to share with the others, Lilith blasted them.

“God damn you little twerps!” she boomed. “Have you no courtesy? Do you think this is a game? If you two have something to say, why the hell don’t you share it with the rest of us? Everyone is trying to communicate out in the open so we can all get this off our chests. I think it would be nice if you would please verbalize for the benefit of the telepathically challenged in the room so that we are all on the same page here. Is that too much to ask?”

Doctor Lieberman cleared his throat, but did not speak. Lilith acknowledged the doctor’s signal and backed down without protest. Akasha stood, faced Lilith directly and laid it all out on the table.

“Fine. I will tell you what we are thinking,” she said. “Shekina and I noticed that you seem to know an awful lot about divination. You told us you do not know who would do this, but you did not answer Michael’s question. Why did you not mention your theory about hepatoscopy as a motive for the killings before? Is it because you are afraid we would suspect your involvement in the murders?”

“Akasha,” said Lilith, “let me explain something. Witches employ many techniques for peering into the future. Divination for the purpose of clairvoyance is just one form of the technique, which is also called scrying. In theory, a skillful witch might engage whatever method of scrying she believes will produce the best results, regardless of ethics, morality or consequence. For gypsies, it is usually a crystal ball. For true magicians, shamans and witches, it could likely be shiny objects and stones that they concentrate on, or mirrors reflecting moonlight. Of course, in some rare cases, it could even be the reading of livers and entrails of sacrificial animals, including humans. Now then, I have many ways of seeing into the future. As a diviner, a psychic and a damn good witch, there are plenty of reliable tools at my disposal for scrying, and all are just as effective as the other. I have no need to cause bodily harm to innocent people or animals when these tools are so abundant and free.”

Lilith surveyed the room with a glance, tallying the eyes of both believers and non-believers staring back at her. It seemed split somewhere down the middle. But there, conspicuously wedged among the believers, if she could trust her instincts, stood her newest supporter: me. I listened intently with an open mind, more jury than judge if I could help it. Regardless of which side of the fence anyone stood, all hung breathless on her word.

“Divination through hepatoscopy is as ancient as civilization itself,” she told us. “And though I am no expert on the subject, it seems to me that something about these killings doesn’t add up. For instance, why is it—and

tell me, Detective Marcella, if you have not asked yourself the same thing—when Travis and Barbara were killed, their livers were cut out and taken, yet the two homeless men had their livers cut out and left behind?”

Most everyone in the room understood that the question called for no immediate answer, but Chris offered a possible theory nonetheless. “Maybe the killer didn’t have enough time to finish what he started when he killed the two homeless men.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Gordon. “They were killed in a dark, lonely alley a week apart. The killer had plenty of time to cut them up into little pieces and serve them for dinner if he wanted to.”

Michael said, “All right then, by the same token, perhaps in the case of Travis and Barbara, the killer did not have enough time, and so he took the livers with him to read later. That’s possible. Isn’t it?”

“Yes! That’s good, Michael,” Valerie answered. “I can believe that. It makes sense. What do you think, Detective? Is someone killing these people just to read their entrails? Or do you still think it’s a case of ritual sacrifice?”

I pulled on the brim of my hat without answering. I then turned and started walking over to Leona Diaz, still the quietest one in the room. She sat alone at the far end of the big oak table, closest to the corner by the door. Until now, few had noticed the look of fright etched so profoundly upon her face. As I approached, Leona stiffened her back and shoulders and tugged on her coat lapels as though snuggling up to a security blanket. She glanced several times toward Doctor Lieberman, looking for reassurance, but his smile offered no immediate comfort. I reached the other end of the table and knelt beside her.

“Hola, Leona. Buenos nochas,” I said, my voice trained softly. “Por favor, escusa mi Español. Para me, su sido un largo tiempo.”

Leona’s mouth pinched up at the corners, but stopped just shy of a smile. “Please, Detective,” she answered, practically in a whisper. “Mi Ingles, es not so bad.”

“Gracias. Porque no es preciso mi Español.”

“De nada.”

“Leona. Doctor Lieberman tells me that you can sometimes be in two places simultaneously, that you bilocate. Is that true?”

“Si, Detective, it is true, but I do not have power over such things. It happens mostly when I sleep, or if I am hypnotized.”

“I see. Then tell me, while experiencing this bilocation, have you ever gone to Suffolk’s Walk?”

Leona pulled back sharply, gasping as though the wind had been sucked from her lungs in a single instant. Her complexion grew flush, as it seemed she could no longer breathe at all. I reached for her hands, which clung like vice grips to the arms of her chair. Terror blazed in her eyes and I thought for a moment that I had seen the devil behind them. Valerie Spencer let out a shriek, perhaps evoking the vision that so horrified Leona.

“What is it, Leona?” I asked. “What do you see? Tell me what you see.”

Her stare grew more distant. Her hands trembled. She began reciting the Lord’s Prayer repeatedly, first in English, then in Spanish, until eventually the words became undecipherable, neither English nor Spanish, but rather an utterance of nonsensical gibberish.

“Glossolalia!” Shekina cried. “Glossolalia! She is speaking in tongues. She is possessed with the Holy Spirit.”

“Possessed?” I turned to her. “Why is she possessed?”

“She is communicating with the Holy Spirit. Glossolalia will prevent Satan from interfering. She most certainly cannot hear you now, Detective.”

Astonished beyond words, I watched as Leona fell deeper into a spontaneous trance. I imagined the struggle going on in her mind, and wondered if she had transported herself back to the scene of the crime at Suffolk’s Walk.

“What do you see, Leona? Tell me!” But she would not, or could not acknowledge my words. She continued speaking in tongues, clutching her rosary and repeating the chants like a mantra, drawing strength from its words or protection from its source.

I panned the room, hoping for some indication as to where Leona’s episode of glossolalia might take her next. I studied the faces to those looking back, and saw the look of concern on everyone present; everyone that is, but for Lilith Adams. Strangely, Lilith seemed not only unconcerned, but also amused. Her hands twiddled in

mechanical sequence as she tightened another knot in the piece of rope she had been working on earlier. I stood up and started across the room. She hastened her efforts, tying another and yet another knot in the line as quickly as she could before I approached. As I reached her, she had pulled taut the last of forty knots, looked up and tossed the line directly at me. I snatched the rope in mid-air as it sailed toward my face.

“So what is this?” I asked, holding the rope up by the first knot like a string of minnows on a fishing line.

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like a rope with a bunch of knots tied in it.”

“Bravo. You see? I guess that’s why you are the detective.”

“Yeah, but something tells me it’s more than just a bunch of knots, isn’t it?”

Akasha jumped to her feet, pointing. “It is a witch’s ladder, Detective, and it is the second one she has made. If she made it for you, then she is supposed to hide it from you. Once that is done, you have but days to find it and untie the knots or else death will befall you.”

I looked back at Lilith. “Is that right, Ms. Adams?”

She scoffed. “Not quite, Detective, but the glitter twin has it half right. The type of ladder of which she speaks is the Ladder of Death. Like any witch’s ladder, it can be a string of forty beads or forty knots tied in a line, similar to the one you now hold in your hand. As Akasha explained, the maker of the ladder might hide it from her adversary as a sort of time bomb. Depending on the strength of the spell, one might have days, or perhaps months to find it. The more time, of course, the better. The fun, so they say, is in watching the poor soul hunt for the ladder before his or her time runs out.”

“Sounds charming, but you don’t think I’m buying any of this crap, do you?”

Small pockets of snickering broke out like chirping crickets, difficult to pinpoint, but impossible to ignore. I turned around and it suddenly stopped.

“You don’t have to buy anything, Detective. You asked me; I’m telling you.”

I turned back. “Fair enough. So let us say I am still listening. You described the ladder of death. If this is not one of those, what is it?”

“What you are holding now is the other kind of ladder, the Ladder of Hope. It is my gift to you. You may keep it.”

“Ladder of Hope? Why would I want this?”

“As the name implies, it should give you hope. It’s an incredibly powerful tool, one you should not take lightly.”

“Oh, it’s a tool, is it?”

“Yes, that’s right. You see, sailors first used it centuries ago. A nice witch, such as myself, might give it to a handsome young sailor. If this sailor went out to sea for long periods and could find no breeze to push him home, then he would simply untie one of the knots. A single knot would give him a gentle breeze; two knots would deliver a strong gust. Of course, if he were foolish and wanted to get home quickly then he might feel tempted to untie three knots.”

“Three knots, huh?”

“Oh, yes. Big mistake: three knots.”

I chuckled. I had learned how to temper my skepticism and remain open-minded in the course of my investigations, but never had anyone offered me help from such an unlikely source. With some reluctance, I put aside my doubts to indulge Lilith further. “All right, Ms. Adams. I’ll bite. What happened if a sailor opened a third knot?”

“Well, then, he would unleash the fury of Mother Nature; that’s all. The winds would blow in cold like arctic ice. The waters would churn and the seas would roll, tossing his vessel on the swells like a cork, until eventually the ocean would swallow it whole.”

“Swallow it whole?”

“Yup.”

“The ship?”

“Not pretty, huh?”

“Yeah, well, if that’s so, then answer me this. What would prevent someone, a stranger let’s say, from happening along and finding this piece of rope and untying the knots all at once? Would he then not unleash the wrath of nature unwittingly upon himself?”

“No, not at all, Detective. First, the person needs to know what it is, and then he needs to believe in what it can do. Otherwise it is useless.”

“Okay, and what of the last witch’s ladder you made? If you made it for me and then hid it, what good is it if I do not believe in its powers?”

Lilith stretched a wicked little grin across her lips. She seemed prettiest when she smiled like that. Her eyes tweaked down to the size of dime slots, and a pair of flyspecked dimples pinched at her cheeks. “And if it were a Ladder of Death, why would you think I’d make it for you?”

“Ms. Adams, you seem to forget. As a detective, I observe things. The last time I came here, I noticed you tying knots into a piece of rope: much like this one. You were also concentrating on me with great persistence as I spoke. It would seem a fair assumption. Would it not?”

“Perhaps. But as you point out, the matter is moot if you do not believe, unless, of course, you do believe. Do you?”

“Should I?”

Lilith gestured for the rope, pointing toward the first knot. I looked down at it and smiled. I imagined I could put Lilith in her place by obliging her request and playing along. So I worked my fingers on the rope and untied the first knot. From nowhere, as abrupt as a cannon’s blast, a microburst of wind blew across my face. The phantom squall knocked my hat to the floor, ruffled my hair, and for a moment, seemed to dance on my head like a tiny tornado. I made a grab for the thing, but in an instant, it was gone. Then somebody gasped.

“Look at Leona!”

I turned around.

Leona’s hair stood up straight in a twisted spike-like tower as though the little tornado had become frozen in mid-swirl on top of her head. The rambling gibberish ceased from her lips. Her eyes opened. She emerged from her trance, though still somewhat dazed. She appeared not to know where she was, but smiled gradually as she slowly started to recognize the familiar surroundings.

I turned again to Lilith; her grin saturated with pleasure. “Now you believe,” she said. “Remember though, you must use the knots wisely. Untie only what you need, when you need it.”

“That was a coincidence,” I said, but Lilith heard the lack of conviction in my voice.

“You know, Detective, coincidence is just another way of explaining the unexplainable. You can untie another knot and see what happens, but remember what I told you about the foolish sailor.”

“This is ridiculous.” I wadded up the witch’s ladder and stuffed it in my pocket. “I haven’t time for this nonsense. Do you know what I’m thinking right now, Ms. Adams?”

That question no one in the room ever tired of. As far as Lilith was concerned, it served as an open invitation to screw with my head.

“Sure, I know what you’re thinking. You are thinking you would like to get the hell out of here. Now that I just said it, though, you cannot leave because that would prove I am right. But you see, by staying you still prove me right. Yes?”

I snarled. “No, you’re not right,” were the words that came out of my mouth, but what I thought was, No, you’re not right, you bitch!

“Yes. I am right,” said Lilith, with a teasing grin. “And I know I’m a bitch.”

The snickering that followed reminded me that I was fighting a losing battle in the war of the minds. I looked at Lilith and shook my head. “Remind me never to play chess with you, Ms. Adams, will you?”

Lilith rolled back and laughed aloud, and for the first time, I thought it sounded truly genuine, not a laugh of satisfaction, or even amusement, but—dare I say it—admiration. I could not know it at the time, but I had just won over Lilith’s soft side. To her ears, my comment signified nothing short of surrender. She reached out and pulled me in by my lapels and until our noses nearly bumped. I melted immediately at her touch, losing myself in the enchanting pools that were her eyes; cast aloft by the scent of her hair and the soft whisper of her breath upon my lips.

“Let me tell you a secret,” she cooed, and my knees nearly buckled beneath me. “We all have it in us, even you. The trick is learning how to turn it on or tune it out. The second part is easy. They cannot read your mind if you do not let them. You have to learn to tune them out; it’s that simple.”

I knitted my brows in bemusement. “Sorry,” I said, maintaining the whisper and feeling intrinsically obliged to allow her cheek to brush mine. “I don’t think I follow.”

“It’s like this, Detective. Think about your favorite color.”

“My favorite color?”

“Don’t question me. Just do it.”

“Okay. My favorite color is…”

I thought for only a second before Lilith fired back: “Green.”

“Yes it is, but how—”

“Never mind that. Now I am going to ask you another question, but I don’t want you to draw a mental picture in your mind. I want you to think about anything else.”

“Anything?”

“Yes. Think about anything other than what I am asking you to think about. It is not that hard. You got it?”

I nodded. “I s’pose.”

“All right then. What kind of car do you drive?”

I thought about it, or more accurately, not about it. Lilith peered over my shoulder, observing the group in a loose huddle, watching, wondering what we were doing.

“You ready?” she said.

“A-huh.”

“Okay. Let me see. You drive…you drive Canada?”

I smiled and nodded at the world map pinned on the wall at the front of the room.

Lilith tightened her lips in a struggle to refrain from smiling back. She slapped me affectionately on the cheek before pushing me away in mock anger. Then she pointed her finger in a scolding fashion in front of the others and warned, “And don’t you forget it.”

Before turning away, I flashed her a quick little wink. It was fast and subtle and missed by everyone but Chris Walker.

“Ha! I saw that.” Chris shouted. “What was that?”

“What was what?” Valerie inquired.

“He just winked at her. Detective Marcella winked at Lilith. Did you see it?”

“No, we didn’t,” said Valerie. “At least, I didn’t. What was that about, Detective? A minute ago you wanted to take Lilith out for a lynching. What did she say to you? Did she put a spell on you?”

Akasha sprang to her feet. “I told you so, people. Lilith is in up to her neck in this thing. Now she is casting spells on Detective Marcella.”

“Whoa, whoa now, folks,” I said, waving my hands to signal a cease-fire. “Nobody’s casting spells and nobody’s out to lynch anyone. I never said I thought Lilith was under suspicion.”

“No, but you did not have to. You forget, most of us here can read minds.”

“Well, then I’m sorry, Akasha, but you’re either reading between the lines or skipping some pages all-together, because Lilith is under no more suspicion than the rest of you.”

Shekina jumped in. “My sister is right. Do not let Lilith fool you. She is a pagan-worshipping witch. Whether the murders were done for sacrifice or divination, either way she has an overwhelming interest in the subject and cannot escape the fact that she knew two of the victims personally.”

“Yes, but you also knew two of the victims. How do I know that you weren’t involved in the killings? For all I know, you all might have committed the murders and now you’re looking to throw blame at Lilith.”

With a comment like that, I should have predicted the elicited response. No one questioned whether I had overstepped my bounds, or if I intentionally set out to play the devil’s advocate. In any case, the ensuing reaction lead to a semi-controlled state of chaos with the highly charged room once again filled with allegations, insinuations and accusations flying fast and furious from every direction. Once more, Doctor Lieberman stepped forward to rein in law and order.



“That is enough—everybody! Simmer down, now!” Somebody whistled and the group immediately snapped to attention. “Detective Marcella,” said the doctor. “I will not stand here and listen to you accuse anyone here of being a cold-blooded killer. Now, unless you have specific information you’re not telling us, then I think you—”

“No, Doctor. I am not accusing anyone of anything. I am only doing my job. You know the first thing a cop does in a homicide investigation is look for a motive. If we can determine a motive then we can begin looking at suspects, or more importantly, we can begin ruling out suspects.”

“Meaning we are all suspects. Is that it, Detective?”

“Doctor, at this time, everyone in town who does not have an alibi is a suspect.”

“What about Leona? Surely you don’t suspect her?”

“Again, you have to understand. Leona had been with both Barbara and Travis the nights they died. A young woman fitting Leona’s description showed up at the other two murders just prior to those homicides. Now, I am not suggesting she killed anybody; however, if several witnesses can place her at all four murders... Well, let’s just say that bilocation might prove a hard sell to a jury.”

Doctor Lieberman knelt by Leona’s side, offering her comfort by holding her hand. She appeared physically and emotionally drained by the experience and still unaware that discussions involving her were taking place. It soon became obvious to me that I could not question her further about Suffolk’s Walk. A quick visual of the room told me that the group, likewise, seemed in no mood to discuss the matter further. I turned to Doctor Lieberman and said, “I guess I’ll go now, Doctor. But I’d like to come back for the next workshop if that’s all right.”

Doctor Lieberman nodded, and so once again, I said goodbye and found my own way to the door.

“Can you believe that?” said Valerie, to no one in particular. “Imagine, Detective Marcella coming out and practically accusing poor Leona of committing those horrendous crimes. Just where does he get off?”

“Lighten up, Val,” Lilith jabbed. “The man is only doing his job.”

Akasha uttered her disgust with a snort and blurted out, “Sure, doing his job. It is all right if he is doing his job, as long as he is looking to blame someone other than you.”

A scattering of chair legs trumpeted along the wooden floorboards, as those sitting closest to Akasha quickly scooted away from the brazen twin. No one expected literal sparks to fly between the girls, but to err on the side of caution definitely seemed appropriate. Lilith, in an unprecedented show of restraint, chose to ignore her—this time.

From there on, much of the evening’s conversations dealt with my observations about the murders. I did not stand alone in my opinions, but I also did not carry the majority. There seemed no way of knowing for certain why the killings occurred, whether for ritual sacrifice or otherwise. Some in the group felt they were the intended targets all along and that the slayings of the two homeless men were designed to throw us off track. Still others felt that the killings at Suffolk’s Walk were random events, unconnected with the workshop entirely. Regardless, everyone agreed that the killer was not finished with his or her work.

In time, discussions about the murders gave way to more benign subjects, as the group managed to complete some basic experiments in ESP and PK. Doctor Lieberman suggested conducting the experiments to help restore a sense of normality to the workshop. It almost worked.

Earlier, I had assured the group I would provide adequate police protection, and throughout the evening, every member had taken a turn looking out the windows to make sure I kept my promise. With every peek, they found comfort in seeing a staunch police presence, with an unmarked patrol car sitting across the parking lot full-time and another making periodic sweeps at random intervals. This vigilance allowed them to focus on their experiments without the distractions of worry to keep them preoccupied.

It was during one of those experiments that the twins, Akasha and Shekina, decided to play a prank on Gordon Walsh. I never gathered the full details about what happened, but it did cause an upheaval so great that Doctor Lieberman reportedly put his foot down hard.

“Akasha, Shekina!” he hollered. “Your actions tonight are totally uncalled for. This is a scientific experiment; you’re making a mockery of everything!”

“Come, Doctor.” Shekina complained, “We are simply having a little fun.”

“Ladies, you are always ‘simply having a little fun’. But there is a time for fun and a time for work. It is not up to you to decide between the two. That was a cruel prank you pulled on Gordon.”

“Yes, but we—”

“No Shekina, save it! I am tired of your antics, and I am disappointed with the rest of you for allowing yourselves to get so out of hand. Honestly, I wish I had just half the psychic powers all of you have. Don’t you people see? What you have is a wonderful gift. You should consider yourselves fortunate, instead of constantly bickering and arguing. As a group, you are the most powerful people on earth, yet you act like spoiled brats fighting over who gets to play in the sandbox. Don’t you know that if you put your minds to it, there is nothing you can’t accomplish? Nothing. But to do this, you have to unite in your efforts. Isn’t that what we are all working toward? When did we lose sight of our goals? When did we stop caring about one another?”

A dull silence hung stagnant in the air. Doctor Lieberman shook his head. He reached into his pocket for his keys. “Guess that’s all I have to say.” Millie reached out and patted him on the forearm, and the two then gathered their belongings and left without goodbyes.

“He’s right,” said Valerie, as she also gathered her things to leave. “Two of our dearest friends have been murdered in cold blood, and we sit here arguing over something as trivial as a practical joke. It’s shameful.”

Lilith said, “So, why don’t we do something about it?”

“Like what?” Shekina cracked. “You want us to try and bring them back from the dead? That would be a new trick, would it not?”

“No, seriously. You all heard what Doctor Lieberman said, We can do anything we set our minds to. So why don’t we set our minds to solving these murders? We can all meet here tomorrow and—”

“And what?” Again, Shekina. “Put our names into a hat and pull out a lucky suspect? Sacrifice one for the good of the many? Great plan Elvira.”

“What?”

Again, the chairs closest to the twins skidded back, as Lilith hiked her sleeves up in slow, methodical increments. Some at the table fully expected her to walk over and bitch-slap the girls from one end of the room to the other. But that would have been too easy. Instead, she simply looked Shekina in the eye, smiled and said, “You know before I forget, I should tell you that I have misplaced one of my witch’s ladders; that nasty one you detest so much. Maybe you can let me know if you see it around anywhere. I would hate for it to stay lost for too long. You know what I mean?”

Shekina swallowed hard and returned a meek smile. “Yes, of course, Lilith, whatever you say.”

Lilith nodded. “Good girl. All right, so where was I? Oh yes, tomorrow. We will all meet here then, agreed?” When no one challenged her, she said, “Wonderful. I guess it is unanimous. We’ll see you all back here tomorrow.”

## Five

The following evening, with Doctor Lieberman’s approval, the members of both workshops gathered at the Center. Michael arrived first, followed by Gordon and Chris. Akasha and Shekina drove their Saturn in behind Doctor Lieberman. Millie, Lilith, and Valerie followed respectively. As they stepped out of their cars, each noticed how ominous the Center appeared once backlit by the rising moon.

“Almost spooky,” Chris uttered, and those who could hear him, agreed.

The only member not in attendance was Leona Diaz. When asked about that, Doctor Lieberman explained how Leona had called to say she had not been feeling well. Nobody seemed surprised given the episode she experienced the night before with the whole glossolalia affair.

They had just started filing into the building when Officer Quinn pulled up in his squad car. Doctor Lieberman headed the cruiser off by the front entry. “Evening, Officer” he said, offering his hand for proper introductions. “I’m Doctor Peter Lieberman. I suppose Detective Marcella asked you to watch over us tonight?”

“That’s right,” said Quinn, biting down on an oversize stogy as he reviewed the doctor with disappointment. “So you’re what the big fuss is all about, eh?”

“Excuse me?”

“The whole town’s talkin’ about you and your carnival sideshow.”

“Sir,” said Doctor Lieberman, “I can assure you that the work this institute conducts here follows the utmost —”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Hey listen; as long as my tax money isn’t going into your coffers, then what the hell should I care about it. In the meantime, let’s get something straight. If you want us to protect you and your precious clan of mind benders, then you have to start doing what we tell you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m talking about your little caravan. I saw you all pull up here tonight. I thought Detective Marcella told you people to carpool. For God sakes, don’t you know there’s a psycho out here cutting people up like gutted fish? You fruitcakes are just inviting him to come and get you; aren’t you?”

“Sir, we are all painfully aware of our circumstance, but it’s not that easy. You see, most of the people in my workshop live a great distance from one another and the simple fact of the matter is—”

“Please spare me, will ya, Doc?” Quinn pulled the stogy from his mouth to spat a doughy wad of tobacco out onto the ground. “Look, there’s a fight on the tube tonight and I got fifty bucks riding on it. What do you say? Maybe you and your voodoo friends can hurry it up tonight so that I can get home early and watch it on my big screen instead of this puny little piece of shit.”

Doctor Lieberman peered into the squad car. On the front seat lay a small black and white TV, plugged into the cigarette lighter. “Is that a television?” he asked.

The officer nodded. “That’s right.”

“So, I take it that you will not be watching over us with great diligence?”

“Oh, sure I will. I promise that during commercial breaks you’ll get my utmost undivided attention. But again, if you could wrap it up early, I would appreciate it. You know, these little black and white screens hurt my eyes.”

“Yes...well, we will see what we can do to accommodate you. But sometimes these things do go awhile.”

Quinn cranked up a smile and held it there with considerable effort. “Hey, I got an idea. Why don’t you and your physic clowns tell me how the fight turns out? Maybe I can call the Sergeant and see if he wants to go double or nothing.” He reeled his head back and laughed crudely at his own dull wit. Doctor Lieberman returned to the building, unimpressed.

Upstairs, the mood in the room remained serious and conciliatory from the onset. There were no bouts of partisan bickering, childish finger pointing or senseless name-calling. Even the twins made a special effort to work amicably with Lilith, who had arguably become the evening’s mistress of ceremony. The consensus among the group was simple: in order to start their own investigation, they would need to go back to the beginning. Lilith began.

“All right, Folks. Let’s take it back to the evening Travis died. What do we know about that night?”

Gordon volunteered. “For starters, we know it was a Sunday night, because we were all together as a full group that night.”

“Okay, good. What else?”

“I know the date was March 19th, if that’s important,” Michael added. “I remember, because that’s the night I broke the record with the magnet experiment. I even made a note of it in my journal.”

“You keep a journal?”

“Yes, Gordon. I keep a journal. So what?”

“It’s kind of sissy-like. Isn’t it?”

“Sissy-like? I’ll sissy you with a slap—”

“Boys!” said Doctor Lieberman, and the two quickly retreated. He looked back at Lilith and gave her a nod.

“Thank you Doctor. All right, we have Sunday, March 19th. That’s a good start. What else, people?”

“It was cold,” said Millie. “I mean unusually cold. I remember the temperature dropped to something like 32 degrees. Pretty cold for mid-March.”

“Yes!” Valerie said. “That’s another thing. That was the first night you joined us at the workshop.”

“That’s right, and...oh, my! How could I forget?”

“Forget what?”

She splayed her fingers across her mouth. “I remember now. I got here late; the doors downstairs were locked. Something terrible happened.” She narrowed her focus to a corner up on the ceiling and concentrated on

a spot there, using it as a palette to draw on from memory. “I remember pulling on the door handle and banging on the glass for someone to let me in. That’s when I saw....”

She gasped. Her knees grew suddenly weak and she wobbled backward, putting her hand out on the wall to catch her fall. Valerie and Lilith hurried to her side, each putting an arm around her shoulder as they steadied her to a chair.

“Go on, Millie,” Lilith urged. “Tell us what you saw.”

Millie melted into her chair. She leaned her head back, as if looking for the paint spot on the ceiling again before setting out to recall what she could about that night. “I’m not sure what it was. It took me by surprise. I remember banging on the door—feeling quite agitated because I saw the lights on upstairs, but I couldn’t see any of you through the window. I looked at the front door again. That’s when I thought I saw something: a reflection in the glass. I turned around, looked, but there was nothing there.”

“You didn’t see anything?”

“No, just the steam from my breath. I was huffing like an old locomotive by then. I turned back and started to bang on the door again, when I saw it a second time, the reflection in the glass. It looked like a person, like a. ... I don’t know, someone wearing dark clothes and a hood or something. I was so scared, I screamed and turned around, but again it was gone! The next thing I knew, Doctor Lieberman came to the door and he let me in. I figured whatever I thought I saw must have been my imagination, so I brushed it off once I got inside the building and calmed down.”

“Millie, why didn’t you tell this to the police?” Michael asked.

“I didn’t remember it. I thought it was my imagination. I wouldn’t have held back something so important from the police if I had remembered.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” said Lilith. “It’s all right. Don’t worry about it. We’ll fill Detective Marcella in on the details later.”

“Well, now,” Gordon surmised. “This could be really big news. It could mean something. It might help.”

Chris stood and cleared his throat. “Ah...excuse me, Gordon, but this could mean what? I mean, face it. Millie didn’t see anything. It’s possible there wasn’t anything there to see. So how does this help us?”

“It’s simple. If there was someone out there—that is, if the killer was out there, then maybe he was waiting for someone special. Maybe he knew Millie wasn’t a member of the workshop. She wasn’t one of us.”

“One of us?”

“Yes. You know, psychic or telepathic. Maybe he spared her because she’s not one of us.”

“All right, that’s good,” said Lilith. “That could be important, maybe, or maybe not. Come on now; give me something else, something more. What else do we know?”

Valerie said, “I know both Barbara and I felt something peculiar that night, just about the time Travis was killed: a feeling of peril, of impending doom, which overwhelmed us. I actually felt a sharp pain in my stomach, like someone cut me with a knife, but it went away just as fast as it came.”

“Yes! I remember you telling us that,” Shekina said. “And you also felt something the night Barbara was murdered. Did you not?”

“I did. Again that awful feeling of doom completely overwhelmed me, except then it was accompanied by a sharp pain in the back of my neck.”

“So, perhaps it is no coincidence. The killer snapped Barbara’s neck in two. That could explain your mysterious pain.”

Gordon said, “I have to tell you; I find all this very interesting. In the case of both Travis and Barbara, Valerie experienced phantom pains relating to the injuries of each. Yet in the case of the homeless men she had no foretelling sense of doom or phantom pains.”

Michael said, “So, what do you make of that, Dick Tracy?”

“I don’t know. It’s just an observation, which I happen to find very interesting, that’s all. Why are you giving me so much shit about it?”

“I’m not giving you shit.”

“Yes, you are, Michael. You’re all over my shit.”

“Well, I’m sorry. It’s just that you keep making these observations without offering some kind of connection.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Lilith said. “He still might have something there. Think about it. Why could Valerie sense danger for Travis and Barbara, but not the other two victims? Is it because she knew Travis and Barbara, or because the others were not psychic?”

“I do not know,” said Akasha, “but it does bring us back to the question of why the killer went to the bother of cutting out the livers of the two homeless men without taking them.”

Gordon laughed. “We’ve been there, Sweets. But go ahead. Let’s hear your take on it. Why do you think the killer left the livers behind?”

“I think it is obvious, Doughboy; the killer did not want them.”

“Doughboy? Why you fucked up little—”

A sudden handclap cracked like a whip and the room fell silent. “Let it slide, Gordon,” Doctor Lieberman pointed a stern finger at him. “Let’s keep it civil.”

Akasha continued. “I think he cut out their livers to throw the police off track. Whoever this person is, he obviously wants everyone to believe we are dealing with a serial killer.”

“Listen to the expert,” said Michael, “telling us the obvious. Maybe you should apply for Marcella’s job.”

Akasha turned to her sister and thought, “Did you hear the way he said that, Shekina?”

“Yes, I did, Akasha. He thinks you are holding something back, does he not?”

“I believe so, the little snot. I should give him a piece of my mind.”

“Temper now, sister, perhaps that is exactly what he wants. He is trying to catch you with your guard down.”

“But Shekina, Michael does not know telepathy. He cannot read my thoughts.”

“No, sister, but his chubby-ass friend can.”

“Gordon?”

“Yes They may be working together. You should guard your thoughts carefully; let no one in, especially Lilith.”

“Yes, I agree, especially Lilith. By the way, what do you make of her witch’s ladder threat?”

“I would not worry about that. I believe the princess witch is bluffing. She would have had no reason to make one for us—not a month ago, anyway.”

“No, perhaps not. But beware, should you see her fashion another.”

While the twins were exchanging thoughts, the group decided that Valerie, with Lilith’s help, would try psychometry to secure an image of Barbara’s last moments on this celestial plane. Valerie had employed psychometry in the past to help police find missing children and such, but generally, this method of prognostication did not see much experimentation in Doctor Lieberman’s workshop. When asked by Millie what psychometry was, Doctor Lieberman explained it with his usual flair for details.

“You see, Millie,” he began. “In theory, psychometry allows an individual to gather information about a subject by simply holding an object, which that subject either owned, or came in recent contact with. We base this theory on the belief that the human mind radiates an aura of consciousness, constantly transmitting a record of one’s existence in all directions. This record is then absorbed, or recorded in the day-to-day objects that come in contact with that person. Through psychometric examination, a clairvoyant, such as Valerie, can review or replay the record of someone’s existence in her mind, merely by concentrating on the object connected with that person.”

Millie nodded as Doctor Lieberman enlightened her on the finer attributes of psychometry, but in her eyes, he could see her understanding of the subject remained sketchy, at best. He continued. “For this experiment, Valerie is going to first try her luck with an object that belonged to Barbara: a scarf she left behind at the workshop the night she died.”

Before beginning the experiment, the group pulled the large oak table to the center of the room and positioned chairs all around it. Next, they turned out the lights in the hallway and adjacent rooms, as well as the main lights overhead in the workshop. The only remaining light came from three lone wall sconces mounted between the windows, and from the full moon casting horizontal shadows from the blinds onto the floor. As Valerie prepared herself with deep breathing exercises, the rest of the workshop settled in quietly around her.

“Should we hold hands or something?” Millie asked.

“No, silly,” Shekina laughed, her arrogance unforgiving. “Holding hands is for séances. You just relax and take notes, or whatever it is you do for Doctor Lieberman.”

Akasha giggled at the comment, adding, "By the way, what is it you do for Doctor Lieberman, anyway?"

Millie pitched her shoulders back and straightened her spine. "If you must know, I do whatever Doctor Lieberman needs me to do. I take notes, memos, prepare documents for his seminars and presentations; I make his appointments and reservations and if necessary, I even pick up his dry cleaning. If he needs someone to...."

Shekina glanced covertly at Akasha and thought, "Get this old girl, sister. I believe Millie is more a wife than an assistant to the good doctor. Do you suppose she even turns down his bed at night?"

"Would not surprise me, Shekina. I thought I noticed an extra bounce in his step lately. I thought it was the bran muffins."

Again, the twins broke into simultaneous laughter, betraying the collusive nature of their telepathic conversation. Doctor Lieberman grveled his throat and delivered his classic stare. The girls cleared their smiles, folded their hands atop the table and straightened forward.

Valerie began, holding the scarf in her hands and concentrating on it intensely. She felt the energy in her fingers ignite as she rubbed along the length of the scarf, sensing every stitch and thread.

"I'm starting to see something," she said, her eyes tightly closed. "I see Barbara. She is walking toward her car. She is looking at something, something in the sky. She is stopping now, still looking. It is the moon. It is just the moon, but it is so big and full, it is beautiful. The clouds—they are sweeping across the face of it. They're moving so swiftly." She inhaled and exhaled with a shudder. "It's very cold—so cold and lonely, but the moonlight, it's shining so brightly on the parking lot. The car is well illuminated. She's walking toward it again."

As Valerie described the events, Millie took notes, recording the particulars on a pad of white-lined paper. Everyone else sat with folded hands, motionless and spellbound.

"I am in my car now," Valerie said, vicariously living out Barbara's last moments by assuming her identity. "I always do my pre-drive checklist just as Daddy taught me. I know it's silly, but Daddy says it is good practice."

Akasha nudged Shekina with her elbow and the two girls giggled. "Daddy says it is good practice," she mocked, but in a hushed voice. Valerie remained undistracted.

"Let's see now," she continued. "I lock the door—check, set the parking brake—check. Then I make sure all the light switches are off—check. Then I—"

Gordon watched Valerie role-playing through the checklist, marveling at her ability to visualize herself in the car. Her hands, set properly on the wheel at the 10 and 2 positions, moved only to turn the knobs and switches as the checklist provided. When she reached down to where the radio might be to turn an imaginary dial, Gordon made a clicking sound with his tongue and cheek.

The sound apparently met her approval, as she smiled at the accomplishment and announced, "Okay, radio is off. Now I depress the clutch, shift into neutral and start the engine."

She reached for the ignition key and Gordon made a noise like an automobile engine starting up. Valerie's eyes opened wide, but she remained in full character and now appeared to view her surroundings as if sitting in Barbara's car, still parked in front of the compound.

"Okay, I check the mirror, make sure it's.... What's this?"

She reached up, as if adjusting the rearview mirror. A strange curiosity molded her face into lemon-puckered wrinkles and folds. Now she not only sounded like Barbara, but looked like her, as well.

"All right, slow down, Valerie," said Doctor Lieberman.

"She's okay," said Michael.

"Maybe. But I believe we are at a critical point, and Valerie's state of mind may be too closely tied to Barbara to break away in a hurry if necessary." He inched closer. "Take it easy, Valerie. Don't move too quickly."

"Call her Barbara," Lilith said. "Remember, she thinks she's Barbara."

"Yes, of course, you're right. Barbara, wait. You see something in the rearview mirror, don't you?"

"Yes, Daddy, I do. There is something on the back seat. I don't know what it is."

"What does it look like?"

"I don't know, like a pile of clothes or something. Now who do you suppose put those there?"

"I don't know. Can you tell what kind of clothes they are? Work clothes? Dress clothes?"

“It looks like a big old pile of black clothes. Let me turn around and see.”

“No, wait!”

Before he could stop her, Valerie turned back and let out a blood-curdling scream. Her body jerked violently against the back of her chair, as if someone had grabbed her by her throat and pulled her back. Doctor Lieberman tried holding her down, but the harder he held her, the stronger her twisting, wrenching and convulsing became.

“My God!” Akasha cried. “Somebody do something!”

Michael and Gordon jumped in, and even with Doctor Lieberman, the three struggled to keep Valerie from flipping out of the chair. Then a disturbing manifestation occurred, as Valerie’s head began twisting involuntarily, beyond the point of natural control. Chris cupped his hands over her ears and fought to keep her head from moving, but he was no match for the unnatural force working against him.

“I can’t stop her!” he shouted. “I’m afraid I’ll hurt her. She’s fighting too hard. I don’t...don’t know what to do!”

Akasha again, “Her neck is breaking. Do something!”

“Do what!”

In the back of the room, somebody screamed; a bulb on one of the wall sconces burst in a flash of light, then another, and another. The floor heaved. A blast of wind shot like a cannon across the room and shattered a window. Overhead, a crack of thunder shook the walls, and in that instant, it was over. Valerie stopped convulsing, went limp and fell to the floor.

“Oh, God!” said Chris. “Is she...dead?”

Doctor Lieberman searched for a pulse and found it. He smiled and looked up, but before he could answer, I announced from across the room, “She’s not dead.” The others turned to see me standing there, smiling in the doorway, twirling that silly piece of rope in my hand. “That was a two-knotter,” I said, and I strolled into the room as slick as smoke. “I heard the commotion on my way upstairs. I didn’t know if it would help, but I decided I better untie a couple of these knots and find out.”

Lilith smiled at me. “So then, Detective, am I to understand that you believe in the witch’s ladder now?”

I shrugged. “Not at all, Ms. Adams. I’m sure it was just coincidence.” I looked down at Valerie. She appeared to be coming around from her ordeal. “Does anyone want to explain to me what’s going on here?”

“It’s an experiment in psychometry,” said Doctor Lieberman. “Barbara saw a mysterious bundle of clothing in the back seat of her car. We suspect the killer hid there waiting for her.”

I assisted Doctor Lieberman in helping Valerie back onto a chair. “Yes, we did find some torn fibers in Barbara’s car and under her fingernails,” I said. “Fibers that don’t match anything else at the crime scene.”

“That’s good, Detective. Does this mean you have a suspect in the case now?”

“No, Doctor. It does not.” I found myself twirling the witch’s ladder absentmindedly. “I’m afraid the lab has not provided me with a link to the fibers—yet. But they will.”

“Yeah, right,” someone scoffed.

I turned around to see who had mocked me, but too many misgiving eyes stared back for me to be sure. It could have been anyone, one of the twins I thought, but it did not matter. The one thing I knew for sure was that it was not Leona. I turned back to Doctor Lieberman. “Where’s Ms. Diaz? I still have questions for her.”

“Questions?”

“Yes. Like what was she doing at Suffolk’s Walk the night those hobos were killed.”

“You don’t know she was there, Detective. All you have is vague witness descriptions of a young woman that looked like Leona. I am sure it was not her.”

“No. It was her, Doctor. I’ve shown her surveillance pictures to my witnesses and they made a positive I.D.”

“Surveillance! You have us under surveillance now?”

“For your protection, Doctor. That’s all. For your protection.”

“Yes, well, I don’t appreciate you wasting our tax money by following us around and taking pictures when you should be out there looking for a serial killer.”

“I am out there; I’m in here; I’m anywhere this investigation takes me, and right now it takes me looking for Leona Diaz. All I want to do is ask her what she saw at Suffolk’s Walk.”

“Detective, if Leona had any information for you, I believe she would have told you straight away. Besides, if she was at Suffolk’s Walk at all, she wasn’t there in person; she was bilocating.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “Bilocating? That’s another thing. You know, I’m very anxious to learn more about this bilocating stuff, and maybe gain a little insight into what happened here last night when Leona became so conveniently disengaged.”

“I’m afraid all that is going to have to wait,” said Doctor Lieberman. “Leona’s not coming to the meeting tonight. She called to say she is not feeling well.”

“Not well—or is she trying to avoid me?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“Yes, I did. And I don’t like the implications.”

“Implications? I am more than implying. I’m beginning to believe Leona may have staged her sudden episode of spontaneous disengagement, along with the whole glossolalia thing, just for the sake of escaping interrogation.”

“Oh, so now it’s an interrogation. Since when did your interviews get so formal? You know, Detective, I think you should consider whom you’re dealing with here.”

“I know whom I’m dealing with,” I said, but then realized the truth in Doctor Lieberman’s words. I did know whom I was dealing with, and I almost forgot that I was dealing with psychics.

Someone turned the remaining lights in the room back on and that is when I turned my attention to Valerie. “So, Ms. Spencer, tell me what you saw while you were doing your Psychometry thing. Anything interesting?”

“I don’t know, Detective. I don’t remember anything.”

“Is that so? Maybe a trip downtown will help you remember. Or need I remind you; holding back critical information in a homicide investigation is considered—”

“She said she doesn’t remember, Detective.” The interruption came compliments of Lilith Adams this time. “It’s just the way it works. Besides, we already told you everything we’ve learned. Barbara saw something in the back seat of her car just before the attack. She couldn’t tell what it was. We’re still no closer to knowing the answer than you are.”

“I see.” I put my hands into the pockets of my trench coat and started across the room. I stopped when my toes touched the wall below the window. All eyes followed, and a hush preceded the final dull thump of my leather soul coming to rest on the wooden floorboards. I removed one hand from my pocket, and with it came Lilith’s witch’s ladder. I raised my hand to the window, extended my finger and pried open a peephole through the blinds. I could see Officer Quinn outside in the parking lot, his cruiser emitting tiny flickers of light from his black and white TV. A thin veil of fog had rolled in low to the ground, but from where I stood, I could still see Quinn paying more attention to the TV than to his surveillance. I shook my head, and a low but audible groan lurched from the pit of my stomach.

“Why are you doing this,” I said. I allowed the blinds to snap shut before turning back to face the group. “I mean, why are you engaging in your own investigation into these murders?”

“We just want to find out what happened to Travis and Barbara.” Lilith answered. “We feel we have some resources at our disposal, which you do not have at yours. And we think these resources may help us gain information not available to you through conventional means.”

“Resources, Ms. Adams? So now you’re all psychic sleuths. Is that it?”

Akasha stepped forward, and in an unusual show of solidarity for Lilith, declared, “We are trying to get to the bottom of it. If this guy is out to get another one of us, then we want to know; that is all.”

I turned to Akasha. She stood before me, rigid and determined, her hands on her hips in an image of defiance—an image I would have expected more from Lilith. “This guy?” I said. “What do you mean? How do you know it’s a guy and not several guys, or a woman or even several women for that matter?”

Akasha dropped back some. Her mouth unhinged; her eyes blinked doubtfully “I...I guess I do not. It is an assumption.”

“Assumption? Doesn’t your assumption cut down your possible field of suspects by an unqualified 50 percent or more?”



She did not answer. I turned to the others. "What now, folks? What form of psychodrama can you perform now? Got any more tricks up your sleeves?"

Lilith raised one hand up over her head and then another. She arched her back delicately, as she stretched on tiptoes like a cat waking from an afternoon slumber. Her arms melted downward and the palms of her hands brushed gently along the sides of her face. Her fingertips caressed her cheeks, slid along her jawbone and traced a path behind her neck. She pushed her hands outward, lifting her hair and letting it fall onto her shoulders. "You know what I think, Detective?" she said. "I think you're afraid we might actually come up with something on these murders, something you have been unable to find yourself."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, Really. You are two months into your investigation; what do you have? Nothing. You have a baseball bat with no fingerprints, a stitch of fiber with no clue as to where it came from and four dead bodies with missing livers. If I were you, I would welcome outside help no matter how unlikely the source. Who knows, maybe you can solve this case before someone else loses a liver."

"And who knows, Ms. Adams, maybe you might stick your nose someplace where it doesn't belong and end up just like the others."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. That is common-sense advice. If you think you have reliable information that can help me solve this case, then I would appreciate your input. Otherwise, it is my duty to demand that you refrain from interfering with the case in any way."

Lilith reached behind her neck again, this time gathering her hair up into a ponytail. She tied it off with a hair tie resembling a miniature witch's ladder. "We have work to do here," she said to me, bluntly. "If you would like to stay and observe, then perhaps you can have a seat. If not, I'm sure Doctor Lieberman will ask you to leave."

I looked at Doctor Lieberman. "Would you mind, Doctor?"

He gestured subtly, motioning toward an empty chair. I nodded and took the seat without comment.

Valerie, meanwhile, recovered from her ordeal with the psychometry experiment. She appeared drained and slightly disoriented still, but in time, pulled herself together enough to participate in the next experiment.

Lilith called for everyone's attention, and received it undivided. "All right, folks. I am going to attempt to conjure up a thought-form. I will need everyone's help, even yours, Detective Marcella."

"Mine?" I pointed at myself. "Really?"

"Yes," she said, though I believed she worried my skepticism might hinder the process more than help it.

"I thought you wanted me to just observe."

"I did, but for this, you can't just observe. If you are present, you must partake. A thought-form requires everyone in the room to concentrate intensely on the subject matter. I need you to believe in this, Detective. You must concentrate very hard and visualize with the rest of us, or it won't work."

I wanted to laugh, and almost did, but quickly realized Lilith was serious. I wiped the smile from my face and sat up straight in my chair. "Okay. Tell me what I'm supposed to concentrate on. I mean, what's a thought-form look like?"

"A thought-form is a nonphysical entity created from thought," she explained. "This energy gives off vibrations, and with our collective minds focusing our energies at the same time, we may give these vibrations definition, and even character. We can create a sort of artificial element. Once this element has taken form, it can take on energy of its own and even assume intelligence. All I want you to do is concentrate very hard on Travis Webber. Do not let your mind become distracted, no matter what you see, hear or feel. Once the thought-form appears, you must allow it to take its course. It won't hurt you, it won't cause any trouble, and it probably won't break anything."

"Probably?" I said, though my comment went without reply.

Lilith shut the lights out again, opened the blinds to the night sky and then took a seat at the head of the table.

"Let's get started. I want everyone to assume a comfortable position. I recommend sitting up straight with hands folded in front of you and heads forward."

She paused to allow a few to squirm in their seats before settling comfortably into position.

“Okay, now everyone take a couple of deep breaths and relax. You must expel the tension from your bodies before this can work. Your minds must remain focused. If you have an itch, scratch it now; otherwise close your eyes and think only of Travis Webber. I must have your full and complete concentration. I want you to visualize his face and his body. Think about his smile and even the spelling of his name. Whatever vision of Travis stands out the strongest for you, then that is the thought I want you to stay with. Collectively, we can bring him back in thought-form, but you all must concentrate.”

Lilith surveyed the room to make sure everyone complied with her instructions. To solidify the group’s mindset, she closed her eyes and concentrated on Travis as well. She told us that she could feel the residual energy of Travis’s aura still in the room, even though two months had passed since he took his last breath there.

“His presence is strong and undeniable,” she said, and the others concurred in murmurs.

Within minutes, the room grew noticeably colder, and not just because one of the windows had blown out. The chill first settled along the floor at ankle height. From there it radiated upward. At mid-waist, it raised goose bumps on exposed skin, and above that it blew out in vaporous trails upon exhale.

Lilith started humming a low, almost inaudible tone, like a monk in meditation. It started at the top of a deep breath and continued as she let her breath out slowly and with barely an effort of vocal cord movement. Before long, the entire group followed her example and soon the room filled with an almost electrifying low-level chant.

“Ohmmm—Ohmmm.”

The harmonics blended like a symphony, creating a collective wall of sound that vibrated and reverberated around the room in waves. In time, it actually seemed as if the chorus, once uttered, continued to carry along on its own, even as we all vocalized another verse. Soon the choir of just ten people grew to that of many, as layers upon layers of sound resonated repeatedly in predictable patterns. Eventually, we all stopped humming, but the wall of sound continued unhindered. It swirled like a whirlpool clockwise around the room. No longer merely an echo or reverberation, but now it had become pure energy in sound form, growing and feeding off itself.

I opened my eyes and panned the room in disbelief. I felt afraid but intrigued, remembering Lilith’s words that the thought-form would not hurt us. I blinked when a sudden blast of wind whistled past my side of the table. The other participants opened their eyes as if on cue, no longer bound by concentration to the task.

“The thought-form is here,” Lilith told us, her voice rising above the noise that now filled the room in harmonic waves. She turned toward a window; we followed her lead. I noticed immediately the intense vibration in the glass. It rattled fiercely within its pane, yet the other windows remained unaffected by the phenomenon.

By then, the wall of sound seemed to shift entirely to the other side of the room. I could not be sure, but at that moment, I believed the noise now originated from the window! I sat twitching with unease, anxious beyond words, watching in amazement at the spectacle before me. I looked at Lilith, but she and the others sat quietly with hands folded, as if waiting for something else to happen—waiting for it to happen.

Some moments later, I came to realize that the sound was not coming from the window at all, but rather rushing to it on a current of high-energy plasma, of sorts. The window absorbed the sound like a sonic sponge, sucking and feeding desperately its ever-hungry need for energy. Moreover, as the wall of sound grew weaker, the window shook with greater and greater intensity. It journeyed beyond my comprehension why the window did not break with such apparent force working against it. Then, what I had witnessed so far remained equally beyond anything I had imagined before. Yet all that was about to become incidental still, as if not already a believer, I was about to become one.

Without warning, the noise abruptly ceased, and just as suddenly, the window quit rattling. Then a fog or a thin mist appeared on the glass like steam on a bathroom mirror. I concluded it could be neither steam nor fog, however, as the other windows remained transparent. I watched as the mist took shape upon the glass, or more accurately, took on form.

At first, it appeared undistinguishable, a curious but random sculpting of evaporating moisture changing from one clouded abstract shape to another. Eventually, a recognizable form did appear, and soon it became obvious; the thought-form that materialized was indeed Travis Webber. The stunning revelation quickened my heartbeat and shortened my breath, as well as those of nearly everyone in the room. It provided a splendid, yet frightening glimpse of unnatural wonder—a perfectly unbelievable event unfolding before our very eyes.

For some, like Millie and me, the sight seemed nothing short of a miracle. We had never heard of something called a thought-form before, let alone seen one. We watched in awe, as the form appeared to move across the window like an actor in a silent movie walking across the screen. No sound accompanied the vision, but the color and texture produced a life-like 3-D image so real that one could almost reach out and touch Travis and he would know it—he would feel it.

All doubts I had harbored about the paranormal were quickly fading. The phenomenon before me I could not explain—least not with an understanding that anyone would accept—but it could be described, as I later did with my colleagues back at the precinct. “Very simply,” I told them (lest those who would listen) “we were watching a movie, a movie of things that had already come to pass.”

In the movie, we saw Travis on the night of his murder, leaving the research center alone. We watched him step out the front door and put his hands in his pockets to keep them warm. His breath blew visible in the form of steam and dissipated in the chilly night air.

For his fellow shop mates, it seemed an unusual perspective, glimpsing Travis through the eyes of another, presumably the killer’s, lurking in the shadows of the compound. Knowing that the murderer was still out there left many in the group feeling uncomfortable, especially me, as I believed more than anyone that the killer could likely be someone very near; perhaps someone sitting beside me, watching again what happened to poor Travis. I looked toward the door and took note of those sitting closest to it. I imagined that if someone tried to run, I could catch up to him quickly, though I did not expect that to happen. Running now would be the worst thing any of them could do, guilty or not.

An impish breeze frolicked in mischievous little circles about the room, frisking the hairs on one’s neck, as the scene played out before our eyes. In the backdrop of the movie, we saw the full moon shadowed by the real full moon outside the very window we watched. We saw how Travis stopped in his tracks on the way to his car. He turned and backtracked to the front door. From there, we saw the killer’s view, coming up on Travis, standing directly behind him, watching him pound in vain on the locked door. We watched Travis cup his hands to the glass to shield the glare and peer inside.

Until then, we could only imagine what happened next, knowing the extent of Travis’ wound. Still, imagination could hardly prepare anyone for the horror unfolding so vividly. For some, the visualization of the murder proved more than they could bear. Several shielded their eyes and panted with anticipation of the inevitable. Those who did not saw Travis turn, his face assaulted by leather-clad hands. The force drove his head back against the door; the plate-glass shattered upon impact. He drew his arms up to his face, leaving his midriff vulnerable. His attacker looked down at the knife pressed against Travis’ stomach and pushed it in.

More gasps of indignation bled from the group, as they watch Travis fall to his knees. They stared in dismay as he clutched his gaping wound, looked up at his killer and mouthed the words, “It’s you!”

Drained of color and numbed by cold, he closed his eyes, lurched forward and collapsed onto the steps face down. The thought-form then faded, as the fog on the window lifted, leaving only a full moon hanging in the branches of the gray oaks outside.

When Doctor Lieberman turned on the lights, I saw Valerie Spencer sobbing openly and two others, Chris and Gordon, wiping away tears.

Apart from them, no one else seemed too choked up about what they had seen. I considered that Millie had only just met Travis on the night of his murder. It made sense that she might remain composed. Still, her apparent lack of outrage for the brutality of the murder appeared questionable.

As for Doctor Lieberman, I recognized his strong emotional character, and having served in the first gulf war, he had likely seen his share of horrific deaths. Therefore, I understood that if upset about what he had just seen, he might and not display his emotions overtly.

Considering the rest in the group, I imagined that Lilith could somehow be involved in the killings, but my gut feelings told me otherwise. Still her obvious lack of grief for Travis seemed suspicious, at best.

The only others left were Michael and the twins, Shekina and Akasha. Having done some homework in the past couple of months, I knew that the twins had come from a village in South Africa, one of the oldest in the region. This village guarded their old customs long after Apartheid, clinging instead to ancient traditions and myths that guided their culture for centuries. Among the cultural traditions was their belief in voodoo and witchcraft. This realization surprised me, as my belief early on was that the twins regarded Lilith’s connection

with witchcraft as somehow evil or immoral. Though they acted as if they knew little of divination and sacrificial rituals, I suspected the twins knew very well the concept of such things, and likely had participated in a number of pagan sacrifices themselves. At the very least, they would have been required to undergo a centuries-old pagan ceremony when they entered womanhood, which may have even involved female genital mutilation.

When it came right down to it, the more I learned of the killings, the more I believed that ritual sacrifice outweighed the theory of divination, if only slightly. That being the case, then the twins fell into the category of best potential suspects. And because of her involvement in witchcraft, I could not entirely rule out Lilith under the motive of divination.

Michael presented still another perplexing study. By all accounts, he and Travis were good friends and shared much in common, including their psychokinetic abilities. Michael did not dabble in witchcraft or voodoo, and he had no motive at all for wanting either Travis or Barbara dead. Still, his lack of emotion after seeing the aberration on the window seemed strange.

From what I gathered, I knew Michael came to the United States from Germany after an avalanche, which he reportedly caused, resulting in the deaths of eight people. In my mind, that made Michael a killer, just as the arsonist is who sets a building ablaze with eight people inside. So the question I asked myself was this: if Michael was capable of murder then, is he capable now? Though neither divination nor pagan sacrifice fit his motive, he did have the capability to commit the crimes.

Having assessed the possibility of every member as suspects, I lastly focused my attention on the one person not in attendance: Leona Diaz. I still could not get over Leona's reaction the night before when questioned about Suffolk's Walk. It seemed obvious she knew something about the two homeless men murdered there, but whether or not she put on an act to avoid questioning, remained suspect.

Doctor Lieberman took a seat after turning the lights back on. Gordon stood up and pointed at the window. "Did anyone see that?" His finger shook visibly. "It looked to me as though Travis had mouthed the words: 'It's you'."

"Yes. I saw that," Chris admitted, raising his hand.

"Me too," said Michael, his hand also in the air to be counted.

Slowly, everyone in the room raised a hands, affirming the obvious, but fearing the implications. Lilith said, "Looks like he knew the killer."

Akasha stood. "That does not surprise me."

"Why is that?"

"I think you know why, Lilith. Your magic tricks do not fool us. Do you think we do not know what just happened here?"

Lilith's eyes melted into this black slits. "All right, Akasha," she said, her upper lip in a snarl. "Suppose you tell us what you think just happened here."

Shekina sprang to her feet. "We will both tell you what we think happened. We think you are pretty good with your smoke and mirror, dog-and-horse show."

"You mean, pony."

"Whatever, but you do not fool us, Lilith Adams. If that is your real name."

"My real name?"

"Come now," said Akasha. "You know very well what that means. Lilith Adams is not your real name. It is Sonya Stewart. You changed your name to Lilith before coming to the institute. I think everyone here might find it interesting, not so much to know why you changed your name, but why you changed it to Lilith Adams."

Lilith stood silent—uncharacteristically so. The room simmered in murmurs and whispers before quelling in a rolling hush. "For those of you who do not know," Akasha continued, "Lilith takes her name from ancient Hebraic tradition. As legend has it, Lilith—not Eve—was created with Adam to subordinate herself to his wants and needs. But she would not meet the demands of Adam's male dominance, and so she cursed him in the eyes of God before running off to lay with Satan and other demon lovers."

This shocking statement took most everyone by surprise, especially me. Until now, I thought I had heard everything. I regarded the room with suspicious eyes, fearing the group had targeted me for a practical joke. But the look on the faces staring back dispelled that notion entirely.

“Lilith is known as the female demon of the night,” Akasha told the group. “She kills babies and copulates with men while they sleep to propagate demon babies of her own. She also drinks the blood of the dead, as she did with Abel after Cain had slain him. If she is to live forever then she must make sacrificial offerings to Satan and drink the blood of the sacrificed to replenish her strength.”

Akasha’s words read like gospel. As she preached, the unlikely evangelist kept an eye on her peers, continuously searching for validation in their faces and concurrence in their eyes. But her story of Lilith, the she-demon, left only more questions, confounding the matter and confusing the issues. I tried making heads or tails of the sermon, but frankly, found it absurd.

Lilith pushed her chair out from the table and eased her five-foot eight-inch frame to her feet. She started walking, slipping her hands into her back pockets where her onionskin jeans hugged her butt so tightly, only her fingertips fit, her rings remaining exposed. One ring in particular caught Michael’s eye: a tiny skull face with horns like a devil and a smile like the Jolly Roger. In watching Lilith pass, he reached out to touch it, but Valerie slapped his hand and scolded his perversion with just a look.

Lilith continued around the table, passing the twins and the window where Travis’ thought-form had just played out his final minutes so vividly. She took her time in contemplating the words she would choose next, giving opportunity for anyone in the room to say something to defuse the situation. Nobody did. Nobody dared. She turned to face the twins.

“I owe no one an explanation as to why I changed my name,” she said, coldly. “Least not the likes of you two twits.” She swept the bangs from her eyes with a flick of her hand. “For the record, however, I will tell you all anyway. I did change my name from Sonya Stewart to Lilith Adams, in part, because of what you say. It is true; Lilith was of Adam, created by God as his twin, but she was not his equal. And it is true, she refused to lie submissively beneath him, as later the obedient Eve so willingly oblige. Eventually, Lilith left Adam, angry because he continually denied her the equality she so righteously deserved.” Lilith’s brow arched curiously now. “You know, in a way, I see Lilith as mankind’s first suffragist, fighting for the equality that all women still fight for today. You of all people, Shekina and Akasha, you should appreciate that. If not for your father’s wealth, then you two would still be home in your backwards little village, having babies and serving your men barefoot and bare breasted and speaking only when spoken to.”

She paused long enough to consider her own words. “Come to think of it,” she said, and a sly smile crossed her lips, “maybe that’s why you’re both so outspoken now. Maybe you hate me because I am everything you wish you could be, but are not.”

The twins glared but did not speak. They drew back, their shoulders pinned together in conjoined fashion. Perhaps they expected a denial from Lilith regarding the name change. Instead, Lilith admitted proudly that she had changed her name to pay homage to the infamous fiend. For Lilith, the declaration proved empowering, even liberating. She held her head high. “I do not sleep with Satan,” she continued. “Nor do I bring him offerings of human sacrifice. Hell, I do not even believe in him. However, I do warn everyone here; you should know your foe as you know your friend. You all saw Travis tonight. It appears his foe was his friend, and since I suspect that Detective Marcella is too cautious to say what he is thinking, I will say it for him. In all probability, the so-called Surgeon Stalker is either in this room now or she is home avoiding us tonight.”

“You don’t mean Leona?”

“Yes, Chris. Leona.”

“No way! Impossible.”

“Perhaps, but if not Leona, then you’ll have to agree that somebody here is most likely a cold-blooded murderer. And whoever it is, I’m sure he feels the circle of justice closing in.”

“Or she,” said Michael.

“Yes. Or she.”

Lilith’s words cut deep, and it suddenly became apparent that no one was above suspicion. They turned to me. The look on my face spoke of concurrence. I could hardly have said it better. Lilith’s words cut straight to the point. In all probability, the killer dwelled among us, a virtual wolf in sheep’s clothing.

I stood up and stepped to the head of the table. “Look,” I said, “before you all go off jumping down one another’s throats, let me say this. It is true I must consider you all suspects by association. I am sure that comes as no surprise to anyone, least it should not. That said, I am not limiting my investigation to this group alone. In

fact, none of you is actually very high on my list. Although some seem eager to point fingers, I see no evidence that leads me to believe any of you know anything about the killings other than what you have learned here tonight. Do you all agree?"

A number of heads nodded, yet now some realized how well I had learned to block out their efforts to read my thoughts. It occurred to them that I might say those things to deflect attention from the fact that the killer probably was among them. So verbally and in principle, they agreed they were getting carried away with the finger pointing. Silently, they all wondered: which one of us is it?

Before saying goodbye, I offered everyone one final word of advice. It was something they had heard just moments before, yet somehow I think it carried more weight coming from me. "Folks," I said. "As a wise person once pronounced, know your foe as you know your friend. I think that is good advice."

Lilith smiled at me. I glanced back before leaving the room and returned it; though admittedly still uncertain which one was she, friend or foe.

The group could talk no more without fear of further confrontations. Nobody knew if Travis' thought-form was anything more than Lilith's elaborate hoax fabricated to deflect suspicion, or the real thing; not that they doubted the concept. Everyone, including Millie and Doctor Lieberman, had witnessed enough supernatural and paranormal events by now to accept a thought-form as a real phenomenon of nature. They just did not know if this one was real.

Shortly after I left, Valerie complained of feeling fatigued from her psychometry experiment, and announced her intentions to leave. Gordon and Doctor Lieberman excused themselves not long after, and Millie, Lilith and the twins followed respectively.

Officer Quinn kept a vigil outside in the parking lot, dividing his attention between listening to the police radio and watching the fight on his portable black and white. As the members left the building, he made notes of their departures, writing down the license plate numbers of the vehicles as they pulled away.

Inside, Michael and Chris had stayed behind to discuss the evening's astounding turn of events. Their views differed concerning the possibility that the killer could be one of their own. Michael supported the theory, sometimes banging on the table for dramatics in debating his point. Chris countered with statistics and probabilities, accompanied by hand gestures for accents and more table thumping. In the end, the only thing both agreed whole-heartedly upon was that they could agree upon nothing at all.

In the wake of silence between words, Chris walked to the window, pulled the blinds and noted the patrol car parked outside. "My, God," he uttered. He turned and checked the wall clock over the door. "Look at this. It's after midnight. Everyone else is gone. We're the only ones left in the building! We should go, and I mean now!"

"Damn," said Michael. "I didn't realize how late it was. This is not a good place to be this time of night. Is it?"

"Not unless you have some extra body parts you don't need. Com'on."

Michael grabbed his coat, "Don't need to tell me twice," and he followed Chris to the door. "I think we both agree on that much."

The two stampeded across the hall and down the steps. Stopping at the door, Chris said, "Man, you know?" His voice sounded nervous, but not panicked. "I really need to call home and let my family know I'm on my way. Can I use your phone?"

"Don't have it," said Michael. "Where's yours?"

"I left it home on the charger."

"So you don't call."

"I have to. I've got almost an hour's drive. They'll worry themselves sick over me."

"Hey, there's a phone in the main lobby. You can use it."

Chris looked past his shoulder into the darkened hall beyond the stairs. "I guess I could. You gonna wait for me?"

Michael checked his watch. His hand trembled, and he laughed when Chris reached out to help him steady it. "I don't know. It is getting late."

"All right then. Forget it. Go on, I'll be okay."

"Yeah?"

"Sure, you go."

“Yeah, okay. Listen, Quinn is still out there. You should be...I mean you will be fine.”

“I know,” Chris nodded. “Of course, I will. Now go. Besides, this will only take a minute. I’ll see you at the next workshop.”

“Yeah.” Michael nodded. “You got it. Take care.”

The two shook hands. Michael turned, pushed the door open, stepped outside and sprinted off. Chris watched his fading silhouette disappear into the night, swallowed by whisks of milky-white fog and echoes of moon-cast shadows.

He doubled back and followed the darkened hallway to the far end of the complex. There, in the main lobby he found a phone. As he picked up the receiver, a flutter of shadows danced by in a wink, startling him into a corner. He looked around him, but saw nothing there.

Easy now, he thought, it is just the light. Sometimes bulbs will do that. A surge of voltage can caused the lights to flicker. He laughed nervously at that, convincing himself that as long as he was still inside the building, then no one could touch him. He counted to ten, allowing his heartbeat to find a steady rhythm. When it did, he picked the phone up again and dialed. His mother answered on the second ring. He told her he would be home soon and that she should not wait up, and then he told her that he loved her, something he realized he had not mentioned nearly enough in the past. She asked him to hurry. He said he would—promised, and hung up.

Back at the door, he took one last look across the parking lot. Fog had rolled in much thicker now, consuming the night landscape. He could no longer see the patrol car, but a flickering light from the television told him that Quinn was still there. So, he pushed open the door and stepped outside, allowing it to lock behind him.

His long strides shuttled him across the lot in double-time until the toot of a horn stopped him in his tracks. He glanced back at the patrol car. A wave of light washed over him in a swirl. Blinded, he could see only that the lights came from the patrol car, and that Quinn, barely a shadow behind the lights, seemed to wave him over. Chris smiled and waved back. The horn tooted again. Once more, the shadowed silhouette silently beckoned through the window.

Odd, Chris thought, and the wheels of paranoia began spinning. He imagined that Quinn was trying to warn him of an ambush awaiting him by his van. He turned and ran to the patrol car, reaching the driver’s side window short of breath, but glad to be safe in the protection of the law.

“Hey,” he said, panting. “What’s up? You honk?”

The officer said nothing.

“So, how’s the stakeout going?”

He still did not answer, nor did he look up.

“What are you watching there? Is that the fight? Chris leaned into the window, barely, but enough to catch a glimpse of the television. He squinted to make out the details on the screen. Slowly, the images came into focus. His heart skipped a beat and then quickened in offbeat palpitations. He gasped and swallowed with a forceful gulp. It did not seem possible, yet somehow the images broadcasting on the television were the same as those he has seen on the window with Travis’ thought-form. Again, the murder of Travis Webber played out before his eyes in vivid detail.

He pushed away from the window just as the end came for Travis and the picture faded from the screen. He looked at Quinn with dismay, but the officer still would not look up.

“Did you see that?” he said, his voice croaking. “Did you see what just happened there? That was Travis!”

Something stirred in the corner of his eye. He turned sharply and looked out toward the parking lot. There he saw Leona Diaz, washed in the lights of the patrol car, surrounded by an illuminated mist swirling all about her. She appeared dazed, partially naked in a sheer nightgown, barefooted, and if he could trust his eyes, hovering several inches off the ground.

He called to her, “Leona!”

She did not respond, but motioned with her head from side to side.

He turned to see if Officer Quinn could see her, too, and was surprised to find he was not looking. He reached out and nudged him on the shoulder. The officer slumped over sideways, and Chris could see then that someone had slashed his throat from ear to ear. He stumbled away from the window, horrified, turned again to Leona. Her tears fell silent, her head shaking no in anguish.

“What have you done?” he shouted. “Why did you do this?”

She stood mute. Her mouth moved but no words came out. She gestured. Chris shrugged. “I don’t understand. What are you telling me?”

She raised a finger and pointed.

“Me?” he asked, pointing to himself.

She shook her head no.

“I don’t get it. You are not pointing at me?”

No.

“You...you pointing behind me?”

Yes.

He wheeled about, his fears and instincts realized. He managed only two words: the same words that Travis managed before his death.

“It’s you!”

The Surgeon Stalker plunged his blade into Chris with the force of a charging bull. The blade tore upward through his chest, cutting meat and scoring bone indiscriminately, until reaching the top of his neck. The attack came so quick and clean that Chris, like Travis Webber, was still alive when he fell to his knees with the Surgeon’s blade propping up his jaw. The shadowed demon smiled wickedly as he pulled the blade out, slicing his chin through to his lower lip. Chris’ body dropped to the ground like a rag doll. A thickening stream of blood beaded in trails and snaked along the pavement in quiet retreat.

Just feet away, Leona’s apparition faded into the swirling vortex of fog, leaving the Stalker to finish the harvest in the still of a haze-shrouded night.

## Six

On the other side of town, in a small efficiency, Leona awoke, her frail body dripping in sweat, unable to cope with the frightful vision of what she had witnessed in her sleep. She tried desperately to convince herself it was nothing more than a dream, but deep down she knew it was not a dream, that it was, instead, another night of bilocation. For reasons she does not understand, the forces that bring her to bear witness to bloodshed, also stop her from changing the course of the events. As a spectator, she can do nothing. The outcome, she knows, is inevitable and predestined.

Doctor Lieberman once told her it was a gift, but to Leona the gift of bilocation is nothing more than a curse: one that plagues her to no end with visions that haunt her relentless nights. They take her back home to Honduras where, as a little girl, brutal slayings of both the innocent and not so innocent played out before her. In the skirmishes along its borders with El Salvador and Nicaragua, rebels killed countless Honduran Countrymen. Often, sometimes twice a night, Leona found herself bilocating to a secluded place in the jungles of Honduras, El Salvador, or Nicaragua. There, she witnessed the bloody executions of whole families in the hands of ruthless militia. Many, mere victims of circumstance, no doubt wondered how she could stand by and do nothing as the rebels beat, tortured and butchered them unmercifully. They could not understand that her reluctant participation kept her in the shadows just out of reach. How could they understand? How could she understand?

Leona’s first thought after waking up was to call me, but she quickly decided against it, unsure of what she would say. She knew that I suspected her involvement somehow in the Suffolk’s Walk murders. I had been to her apartment twice already, but missed her both times. How would she explain her knowledge of this case, bilocation? To the non-believer it seemed too fantastic, and knowing more about the killings than even the police could prove enough to persuade a skeptic of bilocation that she was either involved, or responsible for, the murders herself.

The rest of the night brought little rest and no sleep for Leona. She watched television all night, hoping for breaking news about Chris and the officer, but no word came.



They must know by now, she thought, and of course, we did. She considered going to the Center to see for herself, but curiosity gave way to good reasoning. She stayed home.

By daybreak, Leona had fallen asleep on a chair in front of the television. She dozed only awhile when the telephone rang, awakening her with a startle.

"Hello, Leona. It's me," the voice said when she picked up. "I'm sorry to call you so early. Did I wake you?"

Leona recognized the voice. "No, you did not wake me, Valerie. I was just about to make coffee."

"Okay. Listen. I'm afraid I have some bad news to tell you. It's about Chris."

"I know. He is dead."

"You saw the news this morning?"

"I did not."

"Then how did you hear about it, on the radio?"

Leona began rambling on about something in Spanish, though much too quickly for Valerie to catch it all. "Whoa—whoa, slow down," she said. "Start from the beginning."

Leona took a deep breath and let it out with a quiver. "Valerie, I need to talk to you and the others, but I do not want to see Detective Marcella. I am afraid he will not understand."

"Leona. Dear, God! What is it? Are you all right?"

Leona nodded.

"Are you all right?"

Another nod.

"Jesus, girl. If you are nodding your head, stop it. I may be clairvoyant, but the phone is still the best medium for cross-town conversations."

"Yes, I am fine." She laughed. "Can we meet tonight?"

"Sure. I'll call Doctor Lieberman and the others, tell him we need to meet as a support group." After a brief silence, she added, "You know that Detective Marcella will want to be there, too. We may not be able to avoid him."

"Yes, I know. Perhaps that is not so bad. Who knows, maybe...." Another sigh. "We will see."

Later that night, the group filed somberly across the parking lot outside the perimeter of the crime scene masked off in yellow tape. The county coroner had removed the bodies, but one could still clearly see where the murders took place. A chalked outline of Chris' body ringed the ground next to the parking spot where the patrol car sat. Small orange police cones marked the dried blood that trailed downhill through the lot into a drainage grate.

Across the street, reporters and news crews trained their cameras on the bewildered faces of the arriving workshop members, their lights drawing the attention of both the curious and the morbid. The gathering crowd of pedestrian on-lookers lent a ghoulish sense of disorder to the picture, as the city gobbled up its live-at-five television report on the latest Surgeon Stalker killings.

Inside the building, the group gathered in the room on the second floor at the top of the stairs, taking their seats around the big oak tables as usual. Down the hall, Doctor Lieberman discussed the future of the workshop with Doctor Lowell in his office. At one point, the group overheard Doctor Lowell demand that the workshop disband; Doctor Lieberman argued vehemently against it.

"This whole thing is just bad publicity for the Center," Doctor Lowell complained. "We have people out there that think you're running some kind of psycho-sorcery playhouse. Some think you are toying with this Surgeon Stalker by enticing him with live human bait. My God! How else can the Center explain why three people from the same workshop were singled out by this...this madman?"

Back in the classroom, tears were already mixing with goodbyes when Doctor Lieberman returned, grinning.

"Don't pack your bags just yet," he announced. "I've convinced Doctor Lowell to let us continue with the workshops."

"How did you pull that off?" Lilith asked.

"Never mind. Let's just say that I offered up a very persuasive argument, but let there be no mistake; Doctor Lowell and I are extremely concerned for your safety. That said, I must warn you; should we continue, then the Center cannot ensure your safety anymore than Detective Marcella can. Our vigilance and caution may be our only defense for survival in the days and weeks to come. That is if you all still want to continue."

"Well, hell yes!" said Michael. "I think we should. We can take care of ourselves."

"You're damn right," Gordon added. "I'm not afraid of the Stalker. Shit, I'll kick his ass!"

"You, Gordon, you can't kick a bad habit."

"No? Maybe not, Lilith, but I can kick your scrawny ass."

"Ho, don't even go there, chubby. You don't want to piss me off."

"Oh, yeah. Big bad witch. Whatcha gonna do?"

"That is right, Gordon," Shekina inserted. "You better watch out. The princess witch might turn you into a newt."

Lilith said, "No, Shekina. I am saving that spell for you and your little poster child for anorexia nervosa sibling. In the meantime, why don't you find yourselves a crouton and go have a picnic back there in the corner?"

The ensuing response from the twins, and the spontaneous outbreak of every opinionated mind in the room, quickly gave way to a new round of name-calling, swearing and innuendoes. The unruly discussion barely reached its peak when Valerie stood, demanding the group's attention.

"People!" she slapped the table hard. "Listen up. I think we may have some news for you." She waited until a hush cascaded over the room. "I guess it's clear by now that for whatever reason, somebody wants us dead. I know that Detective Marcella questioned Michael this morning, and I am sure he will be up here shortly, wanting to question the rest of us. Before he does, there's something you all should know and we need to discuss whether we should tell Detective Marcella or not."

She turned to Leona and took her hand again. "Last night, as you all know, while the rest of the town slept, something terrible happened; something so shocking and brutal that the devil's own could not have committed a more hideous act. Something so gruesome and so horrifying that absolutely nobody on Earth should have had to witness it, certainly no one as precious and innocent as this young woman. But unfortunately..." She swept the room with her gaze. "Leona witnessed it. She was there last night through bilocation. She saw Chris and Officer Quinn slain by that savage bastard."

The room immediately filled with a mix of gasps, sighs and shrills of, "Oh, my God!" and "Mother of Jesus!"

"You saw it all?" Gordon asked. "You saw the killer? Who is he, someone we know?"

"Yes, who?" Michael added, feeding the frenzy of questions now thrown at Leona from all directions.

The volume of voices exploded, threatening to send the frightened Leona off in retreat, until Lilith blurted out: "Is it one of us?"

Her question silenced the room. Leona shrunk into her chair, her eyes darting nervously from one curious face to another before settling on one friendly and familiar: Valerie Spencer's. The warmth in Valerie's eyes seemed to calm her. She smiled, stood and slowly made her way to the window. Below, the remaining investigators had begun packing up for the evening; the news people and their bright lights had already gone, pressed hard to meet the six o'clock news deadline. Leona opened her mouth and her soft-spoken words spilled out effortlessly.

"I used to see everything," she said, her monotone voice void of emotions. "When I was a little girl in Honduras, I saw such things and I remembered every detail. I remembered the faces and the uniforms of the men who came to kill." She put her finger to the glass and traced a sign of the cross as she gazed out in a hollow stare. "They came to kill. They always kill." Her finger slid down the glass and her hand came to rest by her side. "They came and took people away into the jungle. I saw the color of their eyes peering from above the bandanas they wore to cover their faces, and I remembered. I saw them clearly, but they could not see me. The innocent could, but not the evil ones.

"Many of the women in their pretty dresses...the men shot them dead. Blood ran down the front of their dresses, turning it bright crimson. I learned to despise that color. To this day, I do not wear anything red. To me, it is the color of death."

She turned her cheek to the glass, as the memories brushed passed her like autumn winds. Her voice, already barely loud enough to hear, came back even softer when she continued.

"When I became older..." She reached up for the beads around her neck and clutched them. "I slept with the holy rosary so that I might have it with me when I traveled out of body. I could do nothing to help the innocent

whose murders I witnessed; but when they saw me holding the beads, they would think the Holy Mother sent me. They would look up at me and make the sign of the crucifix. I think it gave them a sense of peace before..." Her voice trailed off to an inaudible whisper.

As she spoke, Leona could see the reflection of the others in the window. They stood behind her, silent, but for their breathing, straining to hear her words. She had not spoken of those horrible memories to anyone before, not even to Valerie or Doctor Lieberman, though both found it encouraging that she could speak of it now, after all these years, finding the strength to confront her demons within.

Leona continued. "One night, about two years ago, I went away to Puerto Castilla on holiday with my Uncle and his family. I went to sleep, but suddenly found myself in the jungles of Nicaragua. It had been many months since I traveled out of body, so I did not sleep with my rosary. I knew then what I would see there: another killing. What I did not expect was that this time it would be me own papa. They beat him severely and dragged him into the jungle so they could shoot him and leave him dead. Papa begged on his knees for his life. He looked over and saw me. I knew he did, but his assassins could not.

"When they executed him..." She broke again to catch her stifled breath. "I looked at the men who did it so that I could remember their faces." She shook her head softly. "For some reason, I could not see them. They were not wearing masks or covering their faces anymore. I just could not see them. My brain would not allow me to see. That was the last time I experienced bilocation in my sleep. That is, before all of this started."

Leona turned from the window. A single teardrop skittered down the side of her cheek, splashing delicately onto her chest before disappearing in a salty trail down the front of her blouse.

"So then, you were at Suffolk's Walk, weren't you?" asked Michael.

"Yes, but I did not see who did it. It was just a shadow to me. I was very frightened. I feel whoever it is, he knows me. He can see me; only now, I cannot see him. I cannot explain. I just have this feeling. The killer knows me and soon..." She began to tremble. "Soon I will be next."

Valerie hurried to Leona. Doctor Lieberman also rushed to her side, and together, they helped escort her back to her chair.

"So you know it is a man?" said the doctor.

"No, not for sure. Every time the shadow seems somehow different. Sometimes the figure is large and menacing, and sometimes it is not so large."

"Maybe it's not always the same person," said Valerie.

Leona shrugged.

Shekina said, "Let me get this straight," her voice twanged with cynicism. "You are telling us that you were present at all six murders. You saw everything, but you cannot tell us if the killer is a man or a woman? I find that difficult to believe. Am I the only one who thinks that is unbelievable?"

Akasha stood. "No, Sister. You are not the only one. It seems to me if one is watching, then one can see everything and not just shadows. I believe we have much documentation including vivid accounts of Leona's bilocations. In them, she has never mentioned seeing shadows, only colorful details."

"Now, wait just a minute!" This, from Lilith. "I don't remember anyone saying that Leona was at all six murders. Nobody said she saw Travis or Barbara murdered. Why do you make that assumption now? Are you morons, or just pathetically lacking compassion for this poor woman?"

Akasha turned her nose up. "Why are you so hot to defend her?"

"Because she deserves the benefit of the doubt. No one said she was there the night—"

"Yes, I was there," said Leona.

The room quickly fell silent again. "What?"

"I was there when Barbara and Travis were killed. I saw everything, every bloody detail, everything—except for who did it."

Doctor Lieberman said, "Leona. Why haven't you told us this before? Don't you know that any information you have could be very important?"

"I was afraid that whoever it was would come for me if he knew I could help the police."

"But you have to come clean now," said Valerie. "This is very important. Maybe we can help you remember. Would you let us try to help you?"

Leona clutched her rosary to her chest, and after searching Valerie's eyes for reassurance, replied, "All right."

Doctor Lieberman motioned for Millie to check outside the door. Gordon and Michael drew the shades over the windows. Valerie grabbed a chair and slid it to the middle of the room. "Lilith," she said, "will you help me?"

Lilith agreed with a nod. The two led Leona to the chair and took up positions by her side.

"Leona," said Valerie. "Lilith and I are going to try something on you. It will help you remember. It is a form of hypnosis called spontaneous trans-neuromanipulation, or STM for short. It will not hurt a bit. It will help you to relax. Is that okay?"

Leona nodded.

Most in the group knew what to expect next, except Millie. She asked Doctor Lieberman, who explained the procedure the best he could.

"It's a simple but delicate procedure," he said, describing the little-known technique of hypnosis. "It involves the manipulation of both the temporal lobe and the spinal accessory nerves at the base of the skull."

"The procedure requires two people to perform the manipulation. You see, as Valerie implements pressure on Leona's spinal accessory nerve here at the point where her upper spinal cord and medulla oblongata meet," he demonstrated by gently pressing the same area behind Millie's head, "Lilith applies equal force to Leona's temporal lobes, approximately one-half inch behind each eye. If performed correctly, Leona should fall into a relaxed state of consciousness. Signals to her cerebellum, the portion of her brain controlling motor skills, will temporarily short circuit, while at the same time the temporal and frontal lobes of her cerebrum, the portions harboring long and short-term memory, will energize and become super charged. As you can see; for this procedure Lilith will stand behind Leona and work the temporal lobes, while Valerie stands in front, reaching around the back of Leona's head to work the spinal nerve."

Millie nodded, as though she could possibly have understood, but Doctor Lieberman suspected he had already lost her somewhere between the medulla oblongata and the temporal lobes. Though his narrative proved difficult to understand, the results of the experiment were realized immediately. In no time, Lilith and Valerie had rendered Leona under hypnosis, and before long, Leona began vividly recalling the horrid events of the night before.

"Tell me what you remember about last night, Leona," Valerie said, her voice soft and soothing. "Start from the beginning, just after you called Doctor Lieberman to tell him you weren't going to make it to the meeting."

Leona's body fell relaxed with the tautness in her muscles faded. As Lilith and Valerie continued the manipulation, she seemed to melt comfortably into her seat, releasing inhibitions and surrendering them to the will of her guardians.

"I remember feeling so very tired," she said, rocking her head back into Valerie's cradling fingers. "All day I did not feel well. By early evening, I remember going to bed for a nap. The next thing I remembered I was here at the Center. I knew then I was bilocating."

"How did you know that?"

She smiled. "Because I hovered outside the second-floor window."

"Oh, okay. I guess that would be a good indication. What happened then?"

"I looked in the window. I saw you all gathered around Valerie for an experiment."

As she spoke, Leona curiously tilted her head from side to side as if trying to see through the window. "I know the experiment also involved Barbara, because I saw her here as well. She stood beside Valerie with one hand on her shoulder. She tried to say something. I think she wanted to warn Valerie of something—in the back seat. You must not look back there, Valerie. There is something bad there: something very bad."

"Yes, Leona, I know. She wanted to warn me about the danger in the back seat of her car. Didn't she?"

"Yes. There is much danger. You must not look back there."

"Do you know what it is, Leona?"

"Something bad. Something very bad."

"I know. It's a person, isn't it? A very bad person. Do you know who it is? Do you know who is hiding in the back seat?"

Leona shook her head, but her hesitation to say the word no left everyone wondering if she were not still suppressing memories.

"That's okay, Leona. We can get back to that later if we must. Why don't you tell me what else you remember about last night? What happened next?"

"Detective Marcella came by. I saw him standing in the hallway outside the door. He watched the experiment, too."

"Detective Marcella? He was here the whole time?"

"Yes, from the beginning. He watched everything."

"Really? Did he do anything? Take notes?"

"No. He did not take notes. He stood in the hall, playing with the rope, twirling it, watching, and listening."

Valerie and Lilith looked up, first at each other and then toward the door, perhaps expecting to see my shadow outside in the hall. Michael even went so far as to tiptoe to the door, poking his head out and peeking around the corner. He returned with a shrug. The two women continued the trans-neuromanipulation.

"Go on, Leona. What happened next?"

"After that, I remember something drove me away for a moment. A strange force pushed me away from the window. It was very powerful. It happened the moment Detective Marcella untied the knots."

"The witch's ladder," someone said, and several in the room echoed the phrase in a whisper.

Leona went on to describe how she suddenly found herself inside the room with everyone else, but that no one could see her. "I sat over there," she said, with a nod toward her usual seat in the corner. "I knew I was still bilocating, but I did not know why I was there."

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody killed. I only bilocate when somebody is killed." Then she added, "Unless Doctor Lieberman helps me to bilocate through hypnosis." A soft grin tugged gently at the corners of her mouth. She seemed to fight it at first, but eventually gave in, and her parting lips peeled back to reveal a gorgeous, though seldom seen smile with teeth so brilliant against her mocha cheeks. It was hard to believe that one so frail and beautiful had lived to see so much pain and death in such a short lifetime, but when she smiled that way, it seemed easy to forget.

"You like it when Doctor Lieberman lets you go, don't you?" Valerie said, happy for Leona that she could know some relief from her curse.

"Oh yes, it is wonderful. He has allowed me to visit such wonderful places. I have seen many happy people: mothers with babies, fathers with sons, children playing with other children. It is always so wonderful. Everybody is so happy, not like when..." Her voice trailed off. Her smile faded, replaced by a sour grimace of disapproval.

"Not like when you bilocate on your own," Valerie said. "Is that it?"

"Yes. I do not like to bilocate on my own. It is always a nightmare for me. It is a nightmare I know is really happening, and people are really dying. Sometimes, I would do anything to trade places with those people. Then I would not have to see any more. I could make it all go away."

Leona's demeanor grew more somber, as the excitement in her voice gave way to a familiar tone of repression. Afraid that she might withdraw, Valerie attempted to redirect the dialogue.

"Leona, I want you to listen to me. Tell me what happened afterward, when you found yourself back in the room with us last night. What happened next?"

Leona lifted her head and turned toward the window, her eyes still shut. "Travis was here," she said in a near whisper. "He came in the form of thought energy, there," she pointed, "on the window. He wanted to tell you something. He wanted to tell you that he knows who killed him, and that you know this person also." She turned forward again. "The killer moves freely among us. We should all beware. No one is safe. We are all in danger."

Valerie looked first at Lilith, then around the room at the faces of her fellow shop mates. "Who is it, Leona? Is he in this room? Is he here now?"

Leona shook her head and repeated, "The killer moves freely among us. That is all I know. No one is safe."

"All right, fine. We'll come back to that. Tell me; after Travis appeared on the window, you went back outside. Didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What did you see there? Tell us what you remember."

Leona drew a deep breath in through her nose, and a thin smile came to her, as she let it out. "I love the fog," she said. She breathed in again, exhaling with savory delight. "It reminds me of my home in Honduras. When I was a young girl, I remember how the fog rolled down from the mountains early in the morning into the valley where I lived. It always smelled so fresh and clean. Sometimes it came in so thick that I could stand in one place and let the moisture collect on the tip of my nose in tiny water drops. Then I would reach up with my tongue and try to lick the drops off my nose."

She giggled as she attempted to demonstrate her ability to touch her nose with her tongue. Valerie and Lilith smiled. From the corner of her eye, Lilith saw Gordon and Michael attempting to duplicate the feat.

"It was very foggy last night, wasn't it?" Valerie said, realizing the connection.

"Yes, it was. The fog rolled in off the lake. It shrouded everything. Officer Quinn sat in his patrol car, watching you leave. He wrote down the license plate numbers of the cars as they drove away."

"Why did he do that?"

"He was counting, seeing who had gone and who remained. He knew that two people were still inside."

"Michael and Chris."

"Yes, but when Michael came out and got into his car, the officer did not write down his number."

Valerie glanced across the table at Michael. He offered an uncertain shrug.

"Why is that, Leona? Why didn't he record Michael leaving?"

"I have told you; the killer moves freely among us. There is no place to hide."

"He was already dead, wasn't he? You were there. You saw Quinn murdered. Didn't you?"

Leona nodded. "Yes. There was no place for him to hide. He looked up and...it happened."

"Did he see it coming?"

"Not too much. It happened very fast. He did not have time to think. I do not believe he felt much pain. The blade cut his neck quickly."

"So, you saw who did it?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"No."

"What do you mean?"

"I did not see."

"You just told me you did."

"I am sorry. I do not know. I know only that the killer moves freely among us."

"Yes, I know. We heard that. Tell us something we don't know."

"Don't get excited, Val," Lilith warned. "You're getting frustrated."

"I know I, but she's blocking the memory. It is in there. She knows who it is."

"Then what do we do?"

Doctor Lieberman said, "Valerie, you're not likely to get her to remember something she does not want to remember. Perhaps if we try a more conventional form of hypnosis we can—"

"No, Doctor. She remembers. She is blocking it out for some reason. I want to proceed." She turned again to Lilith, who continued maintaining pressure on Leona's temporal lobes. "You in this with me?"

Lilith nodded. Valerie clinched her teeth and gestured a nod back. "A little more pressure then." She refocused her attention on Leona's spinal accessory nerve and pinched it harder. "She just needs to remember, that's all."

Throughout the procedure, Leona remained remarkably placid, and seemed even more at ease as Valerie and Lilith increased pressure on the vital nerve points.

"All right, Leona." Valerie's voice grew noticeably impatient. "Concentrate. Officer Quinn is gone; there is nothing more you could do. Tell me about Chris. What happened when you saw him last? He came out of the building after Quinn was murdered, but he didn't realize it yet, did he?"

She shook her head, as tears began pooling behind her closed eyelids. "He did not realize it." Her voice quivered. "He thought he was safe because he saw the patrol car there. He stepped outside and headed toward his van when he heard the horn."

"What horn?"

"From the patrol car."

"But you said Quinn was dead."

"Yes, but the killer tricked. I tried to warn him, but he could not hear me. None of them can hear me."

"None of them?"

"The damned and condemned."

"The people in your travels, you mean, when you bilocate."

"Yes. They can see, but they cannot hear me."

"Could Chris see you?"

Leona smiled and sighed. "He was so beautiful. He always talked after workshop. Sometimes he would come to my apartment and watch television with me. He always insisted on watching the Spanish stations to make me feel at home, even though he did not speak Spanish. Is that not so sweet?"

Valerie and Lilith exchanged glances, confused, until Shekina blurted out what seemed obvious to the others: "Get this! I think Chris and the little twerp were in love!"

"Shekina!" said Doctor Lieberman.

"Well, she was."

"Enough!"

This revelation surprised Valerie, who now felt a sense of guilt for trying to force Leona into remembering. "Do you think we should stop?" she asked. "We haven't gone too far yet."

"We can't stop now," Gordon argued. "She's there. She knows who he is. You have to let her continue. Make her tell us who killed Chris."

"No," said Doctor Lieberman. "I think you should stop. You're getting into police matters now. Leave it for Detective Marcella."

That is when I stepped in, calling out from across the room. "No. Keep going!" All eyes turned, surprised again to find me standing by the door. "Let's hear what she has to say. I'm tired of finding dead bodies around here, especially when they include my deputies." I pointed at Lilith and Valerie. "You two just keep on doing whatever it is you're doing. Get some answers out of that girl or I will have her hauled downtown for questioning. I mean it." I looked to Doctor Lieberman, "Do you have a problem with that, Doctor?"

I thought he would call me on it, but he did not. He turned to Valerie and Lilith and gave them the nod. Valerie shrugged and Lilith winked, and so the questioning continued.

"Leona, honey, I didn't know you were in love with Chris. Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Because," she answered, and then she blushed some. "Chris thought everyone would tease us if they found out. He did not want the attention."

"Yes. I can imagine, but I think you two would have made a lovely couple. I wish you had said something."

Leona lowered her head, embarrassed but smiling, apparently agreeing with the comment.

"Leona, you know what happened to Chris. It is very important that you remember everything so that we can catch the guy who did this to him. Won't you do that for us? Won't you try to remember?"

She rocked her head back. "Chris walked over to the patrol car and leaned into the window," she said. "He thought the policeman was watching a movie. Then he looked up and saw me standing in the headlights and he realized the officer was dead."

Again, her voice began to quiver. Tears, which had collected in pools behind her closed eyelids, now rolled freely down her cheeks. "I tried to warn him, but he thought I did it. How could he think that? He asked me why. I wanted to warn him of the evil standing over him."

"What evil? Who was it?"

Leona did not answer.

"Tell us, Leona!"

Still, she offered no response. Then Doctor Lieberman stood. "This has gone far enough. I demand you stop and let this girl rest. Can't you see what you are doing to her?"

"Come on, Leona. Tell us now. Who stood over him?"

"Valerie, that's enough!" The doctor turned to me. "Detective, I'm sorry, but if you want to take Leona in for questioning, then I'm afraid you'll just have to come back tomorrow, and that's doctor's orders!"

A rustling of whispers stirred among the group. Valerie looked to Lilith for endorsement, but saw the commitment waning in her eyes. "He's probability right, Val," she said. "Besides, we can always do this again later."

"I don't know," she said, and she looked at me, and again at Doctor Lieberman. We both waited on her uneasily, though for different reasons. "Let me just say one more thing." She leaned in close to Leona, close enough that their noses almost touched. "Leona, it's all right if you don't tell us tonight, but I want you to remember what the killer looks like in case you're ready to talk about it later. Will you do that for us—for Chris?"

Leona remained silent at first, but then suddenly reeled back in her seat with a horrifying gasp. Her eyes open, filled with terror. She clutched her rosary and pulled it close to her heart. Valerie and Lilith pulled back in startled reflex, letting go of the pressure points that until now, held Leona under hypnosis.

"¡Por Dios!" Leona cried. "Yo se quien es el asesino!" She sprang from her chair and ran for the door, crossing the room in a blur and nearly knocking Millie to the floor in the process. She barreled from the room and then down the hall, departing in such haste that she did not even stop to retrieve the sandals that had fallen off her feet.

Without thought, I scooped up her sandals and started out after her. Doctor Lieberman shouted for me to wait up and then followed in close pursuit.

"Whoa!" said Gordon. "What the hell just happened? That wasn't English, was it?"

"Hardly," said Michael. "It was Spanish."

"Spanish?"

"Yeah, my Spanish is not that great, but I believe what Cinderella said was: 'Oh dear God, I know who the killer is'—or something like that."

"I knew it!" Gordon slammed his fist on the table. "Damn! I tried to read Leona's thoughts as she formed a mental picture of the killer in her mind, but I could not do it. Hell, how could I have been so inept?"

"Ha," Shekina grunted. "Maybe it's hereditary."

"Yeah, I think your death wish with that wisecracking mouth of yours is hereditary."

"Better a wisecracking mouth than an innate ineptitude."

"Very funny, tiny tits, but if you're so smart, why didn't you read Leona's thoughts to see who the killer is?"

Instead of a quick-witted come back, Shekina offered only a coy smile.

"Oh, no! You did read her thoughts. You know who he is, don't you? You know who the killer is! Com'on, spill it, Shekina. Tell us, this minute!"

The group closed in on the twins, circling like wolves and backing them into a corner. Shekina threw her arms out in front of her to curb their advance. "People," she said, taking hold of her sister's hand. "You are probably not going to believe this, but Akasha saw it too. And if not for that, I would not believe it myself."

"You're stalling, Shekina. Tell us. What did you see?"

"You are not going to like it."

"Shekina!"

"All right, I will tell you." She took a deep breath and then blurted out the impossible: "It is Doctor Lieberman!" Akasha nodded in agreement. "Doctor Lieberman is the one Leona thought of when she said she knew the killer."

Several in the room, including Millie, gasped; others simply stared at Shekina, mouths unhinged, hoping at any moment that she would laugh and yell, April Fools. Though ample time passed, allowing her to expose her vicious prank, Shekina did not oblige. It soon became painfully obvious she was telling the truth. Doctor Lieberman and the notorious Surgeon Stalker were the same.

In the break of silence, Michael stepped forward. "Wait a minute, folks. Let us not jump to hasty conclusions. There could be lots of reasons why Leona thought of Doctor Lieberman when she said she knew the killer."

Shekina said, "Give us one."

"All right, maybe Leona's thoughts were on Doctor Lieberman because she was frightened and her first instinct was to run to him for comfort and protection. Alternatively, maybe because he happened to be the first



person she saw when she opened her eyes. And then there is the possibility that she doesn't know the killer, and she was afraid to disappoint Doctor Lieberman by not being able to say."

"No." Shekina insisted, her head shaking. "I hardly believe that. First of all, if Leona wanted to go to Doctor Lieberman for comfort or protection, then why did she run past him so fast that she nearly knocked Millie down?"

"Hmm, good point. She was confused."

"Yes, confused, and I suppose if you were the first person she happened to see when she opened her eyes, then we would all be standing here accusing you of being the killer."

"I suppose so."

"Then, perhaps we should," said Akasha.

"What the hell does that mean? Are you saying I had something to do with the killings?"

"I do not know, Michael. I am just saying, you seem eager to defend Doctor Lieberman when the evidence is right in front of you. I cannot help wonder why you would try to protect him, unless you are involved, too."

"That's ridiculous. I don't know anything."

Shekina tagged in. "Maybe so, but you were the last person to see both Chris and Officer Quinn alive last night. If you did not do it and Doctor Lieberman did not do it, then who did?"

Lilith said, "Wait a minute. Let us hold up on accusations." She pointed toward the door. "Someone shut that. We don't need half the town hearing this debate."

Gordon made a quick sprint to the door, checking the hall outside before closing it. "It's okay," he said. "The coast is clear."

"Thank you, Gordon. All right, listen up, people, this is serious business. Now then, we do not know why Leona pictured Doctor Lieberman when she said she knew the killer, but we at least have to consider the possibilities. First, remember what she said about the killer, that he moves freely among us. So, who thinks they know what that means?"

Gordon's hand went up. "It means it's either someone in this group or someone very close to us."

"Okay, that makes sense. So then, outside of the workshop, who moves freely among us?"

"Detective Marcella moves freely among us," Shekina said. "And at times so does Doctor Lowell."

"Yes. That is very observant, Shekina, but Detective Marcella was not involved in any of this until after Travis' murder. Besides, why would he kill his own deputy? No. I hardly think he would do that."

Barely before Lilith could finish excluding me as a suspect, the usually quiet Millie Bradford pushed her way forward. "Doctor Lowell is a kind and gentle man," she argued. "Don't drag him into this. He is a very decent, loving person. I'm sure he had nothing to do with the murders."

"Yes, of course, Millie," said Lilith. "Let's not get too excited, shall we? I'm sure your uncle is a nice man, and I don't think anyone here believes he's a killer." She looked around the room for reassurance. "Do we, folks?"

For Millie's sake, everyone agreed, except Shekina, who mumbled bitterly under her breath, "Fry the bastard."

Lilith heard the remark and Akasha even laughed openly over it, but Millie did not, so Lilith ignored it and continued the forum.

"There you have it, then. We all know the killer must be someone very close to this group, and until we see evidence to the contrary, I think we have to consider Doctor Lieberman a suspect. Do you all agree?"

"Yes. I agree," said Gordon. "That would explain why he was so eager for you and Valerie to stop doing the STM thing on Leona. He obviously felt afraid she would remember his face and identify him."

"Yes," said Akasha. "And not only that, if you think about it, how strange is it that Doctor Lieberman should want us to keep meeting in the evenings like this, after six people have been murdered? It does not make sense unless he wants to maintain access to all of us so that he can kill us one-by-one."

"Whoa—people," said Michael, "come on, reel it in a few notches. You all seem to forget one very important thing here. There is no motive. Think about it. What motive could Doctor Lieberman possibly have for wanting to kill off the members of his prized workshop? Do you really think he did it for the divination factor? You think that all of a sudden he decided to go around cutting out people's livers just so he can see the future or know

which stock picks to invest in? Or maybe you think he needed to know what the weather would be like from one day to the next so that he would know to wear his raincoat to work? Seriously, what's his motive?"

Valerie came forth. "Obviously, we don't know, Michael. So, how do we find out for sure? There is no way that any one of us can read his mind. He knows all too well how to block our efforts to do that."

"We need evidence," said Akasha. "We need to find the smoking gun, or in this case the bloody knife. If we can find that, we have our man."

Gordon asked, "How do we do that? Do we just go up to Doctor Lieberman and ask him where his bloody knife is?"

Akasha smiled wickedly. "That is one way."

"Excuse me?"

"That is exactly how we find out. We ask him."

"He won't tell us."

"No, but he will think it."

"Come back?"

"It is easy. We get him to start talking about the murders with us; you know, like we are looking for his guidance. Then one of us will say something like, I wonder where the killer might hide a big knife like that. Naturally, when he hears the question, his mind will automatically flash back to the last place he saw the knife. When he does that, Shekina or I will read his mind and bingo; we will know exactly where to find it."

"In theory, the plan sounds good," said Lilith. "And I see only one enormous inherent flaw to the whole scheme."

"And what is that?"

"Simple, Akasha. The plan is yours. No offense, but your idea sucks. Even if you can get Doctor Lieberman to picture the location of the knife, remember what Valerie said. He is a master at blocking out our attempts to read his thoughts. If he catches you trying it, he's likely to make you his next victim."

Akasha recoiled slightly at that and backed down without comment.

Michael said, "Wait a minute. I'm not saying that I think you're right about Doctor Lieberman, but it seems to me that if you want to find something belonging to him, then you have to look where he puts his stuff."

"You mean his office?"

"Exactly. Listen, four of the six murders occurred here at the Center. Therefore, it stands to reason that if Doctor Lieberman is the killer, and I stress the word if, then it makes sense he would need to get rid of any bloody clothing or weapons right away? In each case, the victim was last to leave the building, so there are no witnesses. Doctor Lieberman has a key to the building and he can come and go at will. Remember, he moves freely among us. Who is to say that when he leaves here he does not return to the building from another wing? If he wanted to kill somebody, he could. Afterward, he could go back inside and shower up, dispose of his bloodstained clothes in the furnace downstairs and hide the weapon in his office. He lives alone, so no one can confirm what time he gets home. When you think about it, for every night in question, he really has no alibi."

Lilith, the twins, Valerie, Gordon and Millie looked at one another in total amazement. Suddenly, the pieces all seem to fit together perfectly. Even Michael stood in awe at his own assessment, realizing that he had just put together the most probable scenario to explain the murders.

"So then, does this mean you're with us?" Gordon asked.

In a reversal of opinion, Michael replied, "Shit, I guess I am."

Valerie said, "Hold on, boys. We are not there yet. Time is getting short. We still need somebody to get inside Doctor Lieberman's office and snoop around. Do we have any volunteers?"

"I'll do it," said Millie. She pulled on her coat tails and stepped forward proudly.

"No, it's too dangerous," Valerie insisted. "Someone else should go."

Gordon agreed. "It should be somebody who can handle himself with Doctor Lieberman if he gets caught: somebody who can put up a good fight like Michael or me."

"He's right," said Lilith. "Besides, the killer is targeting group members only. It would not be wise for you to get involved. It will only draw you into his pool of potential victims."

"I say let her do it," Shekina blurted out.

Her sister echoed her thoughts, adding, “Yes. She is an old lady. What does she have to lose? Right, Shekina?”

“Yes, sister. Millie is twice the age of most of us here. She has had a good life. Have you not had a good life, Millie?”

“Shekina!” this from Lilith. “You cold-hearted bitch! I have a good mind to—”

“No. She’s right!” said Millie. “Shekina makes a point, however crude. The truth is; I don’t have much to lose, not since my Arnold passed. I should be the one. Besides, I am perfect for the job. As Doctor Lieberman’s personal assistant, I can get into his office without questions from other staffers if spotted. Even if Doctor Lieberman catches me, I am sure I can make up some excuse. None of you here can fabricate a good enough reason to be in his office without permission. No, if catches any of and it turns out he is the Stalker, then you wouldn’t have a chance. He’d kill you for sure.”

Michael said, “I’m with Millie. She is clearly the best person to snoop around without looking suspicious.”

With little more discussion and no arguments, everyone eventually agreed that Millie should search for the evidence needed to implicate Doctor Lieberman. They decided on a plan that called for her to arrive at the Center next Sunday ahead of Doctor Lieberman. She would go immediately to his office and see what she could find. After the meeting, she and the others would reconvene on neutral ground and discuss the findings. The rendezvous, they decided, would take place at the lake behind the research center a few hundred yards beyond the tree-lined parking lot.

They no sooner finished solidifying their plans, than Doctor Lieberman returned to the room. He made no comment about the closed door, and some wondered if he had stood out in the hall listening as they devised their scheme. It made them nervous, but if they showed it, Doctor Lieberman did not notice.

“We couldn’t catch her,” he said, slightly out of breath, though a full fifteen minutes had passed since he ran from the building. “Detective Marcella put out an all-points bulletin for her. So don’t worry. I’ll get her.”

Lilith rolled her eyes at the Freudian slip, but said nothing, and before Doctor Lieberman could catch his breath, the workshop began filing out, one behind the other.

“I’ll see you all this Sunday,” said Doctor Lieberman, as the big glass door shut tightly behind Shekina, the last to exit the building. And like the shadows of dusk, Valerie, Lilith, Michael, Gordon, Millie and the twins slipped away into the pale, moonlit night.

## Seven

Sunday brought a seasonably cool evening to the greater New England states. All day long a depressing drizzle had fallen, leaving the grounds around the campus soggy and mud-soaked.

Millie arrived at the Center early as planned and made a quick sweep through Doctor Lieberman’s office in search of evidence supporting the group’s theory of his involvement in the murders. Though heavier than normal traffic on the ride in slowed her down, she still managed to pull off the covert operation without detection. By the time Doctor Lieberman arrived, she had already slipped out of the building with a mysterious brown bag, ditched it in her car, and returned to the workshop.

Doctor Lieberman entered the room, surprised to see everyone already assembled around the table, waiting quietly. He thought it strange there were no late stragglers, save for the one conspicuous exception: Leona Diaz. When he inquired about her, the others replied they knew nothing of her whereabouts. He suspected one of them, possibly Valerie, had to know something, but he did not press the issue.

“I think we should talk about what happened here the other night,” he said. “I know it’s difficult to talk about, but it’s clear now that someone out there is interested in all of you, and for whatever reason, this someone wants to see harm befall you.”

Shekina glanced at her sister through the corner of her eye. Did you hear that, Akasha? she messaged telepathically. He refers to someone’s liver being torn out from their torso as having harm befall them.

He is obviously playing us, Sister, Akasha messaged back. Where do you suppose he is taking this?

I do not know, but I find it strange he did not ask more about Leona.

Yes, I agree. Should we pump him for information?

By all means, but let us not seem too eager.

No, of course not, Sister. We should move cautiously.

“Doctor Lieberman,” said Shekina. “Can you think of any reason why somebody would want to kill us?”

The question seemed to come as a relief to the doctor. His ice-blue eyes perked open wide, pushing his brows high and wrinkling his forehead. “No, Shekina. I cannot,” he answered. “Detective Marcella and I had a long talk about that this afternoon. The only motive we came up with is Detective Marcella’s second inclination: the divination theory. But why you people, in particular, have been singled out is beyond me.”

“But Doctor,” said Michael, his head shaking. “That still does not explain why Travis, Barbara and Chris lost their livers to this psycho when the others did not.”

“No, Michael, that’s not necessarily so. Although Officer Quinn’s murder seems like a case of someone being at the wrong place at the wrong time, the two victims at Suffolk’s Walk did lose their livers.”

“Well, no, Sir. I mean, with all due respect; the killer removed their livers, but did not take them. Technically, they still had them when they found. Travis, Barbara and Chris actually lost theirs. They were totally gone. So don’t you think that pretty much shoots the divination theory full of holes?”

The doctor’s posture grew suddenly rigid. He crossed the room in quick stride, his rubber soles scuffing the floor with a squeak as he stopped in front of Michael’s chair. “I don’t know,” he said, a noticeably surly tone resonating in his words. “Do you have a better theory, Michael? If you do, then maybe you would like to share it with the rest of us?” He waved his hand in a broad sweep through the air. “Everybody seems eager to say what the motive isn’t, but no one is willing to submit a better suggestion for what it is. Maybe there is no motive at all. Did you ever think of that? Who says a psychopathic murderer even needs a motive for butchering someone? Maybe the guy just does it for kicks. Is that so damn hard to believe!”

The doctor’s sudden and uncharacteristic outbreak caught everyone off guard. By the time he finished, his voice had risen to a full shout, something few in the group had ever witnessed before. Michael reeled back in his seat, blinking. He glanced uneasily around the room, and saw without exception that everyone understood he had struck a pathetic nerve. The twins even felt so suddenly intimidated that they cease verbalizing aloud altogether.

My, what do you make of that, sister? Akasha thought.

Most interesting, Shekina replied. Do you want to know something even more intriguing? Look at Michael. He is sending out some very powerful thought waves to Doctor Lieberman, and I do not think they are happy thoughts.

Really, Sister? Why do you suppose he is doing that?

Shekina’s face cringed in contemplation, but before she could answer, Doctor Lieberman let out a groan like a wounded Grizzly and began massaging his temples with the palms of his hands.

That is why, Shekina explained.

Oh, my, but he can be a vindictive little son of a bitch. Yes?

Indeed, Sister. And you thought tonight would be no fun.

I did not say that.

No, but you thought it.

Yes. I suppose I did. Can you blame me, what with a room full of psychic neophytes and a witch with an attitude?

Shekina responded with a smile and a restrained giggle. The girls continued watching with amusement as the others looked on, uncertain what to make of Doctor Lieberman’s plight. Moments later, the doctor retreated to his office. Some expected him to return with aspirins, others, with a knife.

In his absence, the group engaged in a heated discussion over the doctor’s behavior, debating if it indicated signs of culpability. The discussions did not evolve far before he returned, seemingly free of the pain that had gripped him so tightly only moments before.

Lilith noticed first how especially preoccupied he seemed with the floor, or more accurately, the muddy footprint on the floor. She realized immediately that he had discovered a trail of muddy footprints leading from his office, down the stairs and back up into the workshop. Although everyone had mud on his shoes, the footprints he searched for came from one person responsible for snooping around in his office.

Because of the similarities, it did not take long for Doctor Lieberman to narrow the muddy prints down to just three people: Shekina, Akasha, and Millie. All three wore sneakers, which appeared similar in size and design, and all three had rich, black mud encrusted on the bottoms and sides.

He said nothing for the first minute, continuing his inspection openly, appearing not to care if the others knew what he had discovered. Because of Millie's unwavering loyalty to the Center, by virtue of her uncle, Doctor Lieberman immediately ruled her out as a suspect in the office break-in. That led him to suspect that one of the twins had brazenly violated his privacy by gaining access to his office and rummaging through his belongings. The very notion proved none too difficult to believe, given the sometimes cunning, often contemptuous nature of the twins in the past. The thought of such an intrusion angered. He had learned to deal with the girls on an as-is basis, extending trust only when earned in kind, but this act of antagonism left him utterly infuriated.

In a completely unexpected turn of events, and just as the twins were preparing for a full-scaled inquisition, Doctor Lieberman cleared his throat and announced, "It is time for all of you to go home now."

"Excuse me?" said Lilith.

"You heard me. Go home."

"We just got here."

"Then stay. I don't care anymore, but we are done here. Expect Doctor Lowell or his surrogate to conduct future meetings, if there are any future meetings. As far as I am concerned, the workshop is disbanded."

"But Doctor, we don't understand," said Gordon. "What did we do?"

"What did you do? Maybe you should ask the twins over there, or Michael. He'll tell you."

Doctor Lieberman then turned and stormed out of the room. Heavy footstep echoed down the hall all the way to his office, with a slamming door punctuating his retreat.

The surprised faces turned to Gordon when he asked, "What do you make of that? I have never seen him like this. It's like he's a different person."

"Exactly," said Shekina. "Perhaps we are just now seeing the real Doctor Lieberman: a desperate and dangerous man."

"What do we do now?" asked Millie, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"What do we do?" said Lilith. "We go out and see what the hell is in the bag you found in his office. That's what we do."

"So, what are we waiting for?" said Gordon, leading the group out with all the spirit of a nineteenth century cavalry charge.

Down in the parking lot, they gathered around Millie's car, where she popped the trunk and produced the mysterious brown paper bag for inspection. Valerie peeked inside first, took one look and backed.

"What is it?" asked Gordon, as the others took turns looking, only to back away as speechless as Valerie. Finally, Gordon got his turn. He looked in and blurted out, "Bloody towels?"

Michael reached out and slapped him. "Shut up, stupid!" He gestured toward the squad car.

Gordon glanced over his shoulder, taking notice of the black and white parked some forty yards away. "Oh, shoot! I forgot. He didn't hear me. Did he?"

"I don't know. Probably not, but we can't act too suspiciously. Anyone have any ideas what we do now?"

"I do," said Valerie, snatching the bag and rolling it up tight. "We need to find out what these towels can tell us."

"I know one thing they tell us," said Gordon. "They definitely belong to Doctor Lieberman. They're monogrammed with his initials, P. L. for Peter Lieberman."

"We can see that, Gordon. I'm talking about something else."

"You mean psychometry?" Lilith guessed.

"Yes, psychometry. I believe I may be able to see exactly what transpired the moment that blood came to be on these towels. Who's with me?"

"I am!" came the answer from everyone, including Millie, whom some would have guessed too squeamish for such things. They solidified their original plans to meet by the lake before jumping into their cars and speeding off, leaving the deputy waving to a parade of departing vehicles. Once at the lake, they gathered under an old wooden gazebo overlooking the water.

"All right," said Valerie, as she took up position in the center of the gazebo. The others quickly formed a circle around her. "I'm going to need everybody's cooperation and silence as I attempt to extract the impression of events recorded on these towels."

"What would you like us to do?" Millie asked.

"Just get in close. Tighten up the circle. You do not really need to do anything else but stand there. This is not like a séance where we all sit around and focus our energies to summon a spirit. Psychometry only requires me to focus on the object. By forming a tight circle around me, you can help deflect bad or distracting energies, allowing me to concentrate totally on the task at hand."

Valerie reached into the bag and pulled out the first of three blood-soaked towels. Almost immediately, a wave of energy rified through her body, plunging her into a deep trance-like state. She saw, at once, the course of events surrounding the towel's recent history.

"This Christopher Walker's blood," she said, rolling the towel in her hands. "I see a dark figure standing over his body. It is the killer. I am sure. I cannot see his face, but I sense this person is the very essence of evil. To know this individual, one cannot readily see the duplicity, cunning and deception within. I see this evil wrapping Chris' liver in the towel, still warm and moist."

Valerie's words sent chills rippling throughout the group. Michael wondered if she would even remember her words once freed from her trance, imagining how difficult it might be repeating the unsettling narrative to her when the time came. "Valerie," he said, the frustration in his voice hinting of his need for more proof before believing in Doctor Lieberman involvement. "Surely you can see this person. You have to know. Who is he? Where does he come from?"

Valerie remained engaged, stone-faced and removed from the others. Her mouth delivered the spoken words, but they were not Valerie's. They came instead from somewhere beyond.

"This evil derives from the source of black magic," she told the others, her voice rigid and void of emotion. "It is not of this sphere. It is from another dimension of time and transition. This evil entity, it knows of our intentions to expose it and is committed to the destruction of our bodies and souls."

Millie gasped at those words, staggering backward against the rail of the gazebo. Shekina and Gordon, already flanking her sides, reached out to steady her and eased her back into the circle.

"Who is this evil entity?" Michael urged. "Is it Doctor Lieberman?"

Valerie's eyes floated skyward. She stared unflinching into the moonlit night, answering without hesitation. "This evil entity is in the soul of the person to whom these towels belong. It has consumed the individual entirely, but for the physical being that now moves freely among us. We must return this individual to the Eighth Sphere or more will die."

"Goddamn!" said Gordon, gulping hard to force his heart back down his throat. "Did you hear that? She used the same phrase Leona used. She said the evil being moves freely among us."

"We heard," said Shekina. "She also said the entity is the one who owns the towels, and that is Doctor Lieberman. What more proof do you need?"

"Shhh! Let her continue," Lilith snapped. "We mustn't jeopardize her concentration. We can discuss everything after she is finished. Go on, Valerie. Tell us what this entity wants with the livers. Why is he cutting them out and why does he only take the livers from those in the workshop? Does he do it for divination?"

Valerie lowered her head. Her hands clutched the twisted towel as though trying to wring the answers from it. "It is the attraction of blood," she said. "The entity takes the livers for physical consumption. Those attributes, which the blood contains, will so endure in he who consumes it by the light of a full moon. Thus is the Law of Contagion."

"Holy Shit!" Lilith cried. "Of course! That's it. Attraction of blood! How could I have been so stupid?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Attraction of blood, Michael. It's the motive. Damn it! I should have seen it all along."

Valerie stumbled forward before dropping the towel and falling into Michael's arms. Gordon retrieved the towel from the floor and handed it back, but the distraction proved too great for Valerie, whose concentration now lost allowed the energy holding her to slip away.

"Oh, see. Now look what you have done," Shekina complained. "What if Valerie cannot get back into her trance?"

Lilith reached out and snatched the towel from Valerie. “Doesn’t matter. She won’t have to. I know exactly what’s going on now.”

“Great. Then maybe somebody can tell me what’s going on, so I’ll know, too.”

Lilith wadded the towel up and stuffed it back into the bag. “Sure, Gordon. I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you all. It’s so obvious. I can’t believe I didn’t realize it before.”

“Realize what?”

“Look. When Valerie did the psychometry thing with Barbara’s scarf, didn’t she say that Barbara came out of the building and stopped to look up at something in the sky?”

“Yeah,” Gordon answered. “She stopped to look at the full moon. She commented on how big and bright it looked.”

“Right. And how about when we were watching Travis’ thought-form on the window? Did you notice the full moon in the background behind him?”

Again Gordon answered affirmative, and this time Millie, Michael and Valerie recalled that detail as well.

“And this past Friday night with Chris?”

“Full moon!” Shekina shouted.

“Yes. Full moon. Every time members of the workshop were killed, a full moon hung big and bright in the sky.”

“All right, then. All the murders occurred on a full moon. So big deal. Full moons. Dead bodies. What’s your point?”

“The point, Michael, is that a full moon did not shine when all the murders occurred, but only on the nights that Barbara, Travis and Chris were killed.”

“Okay, so only they were killed on a full moon. Again, what’s the connection?”

“Don’t you see? That is the connection. What Valerie described is a phenomenon known as Law of Contagion, or attraction of blood. As far back as ancient times, people believed that one’s blood not only contained his life’s essence, but also the characteristics and qualities of that individual. The term attraction of blood comes from these beliefs and that if one consumes the blood of another during a full moon, then he will acquire the characteristics and qualities of that person.”

“What? Are you saying that Doctor Lieberman is a vampire?”

“No, Michael. That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

“Yes you are. You are saying Doctor Lieberman comes out on full moons so he can drink the blood of his victims. That’s what vampires do.”

“Okay, let me explain the difference. A vampire sucks the blood from his victims because that is what he lives on. He simply needs blood, anybody’s blood, for nourishment. With attraction of blood, one consumes blood not for nourishment, but for the quality of that person contained within the blood; the quality he desires to obtain from another and does not possess himself. It is a ritual, of sorts, once practiced all over the world and throughout the ages.

“Warriors of ancient Babylon, for instance, drank the blood of other warriors who fought and died, having displayed the greatest courage and fortitude. In fact, as recently as the late nineteen seventies we see this. When the Reverend Jimmy Jones orchestrated the mass suicides of more than six hundred of his followers in the jungles of Guyana, the last members of the congregation still standing actually drank the blood of their beloved leader. They followed this ritual in hopes of being reincarnated with all the power and charisma of Jones, himself.”

Lilith paused to gauge the comprehension of her listeners. Heads nodded even after she stopped speaking, and so she assumed they were getting it.

“In the case of Doctor Lieberman,” she continued, “I think he is obviously looking to acquire the supernatural or paranormal qualities of everyone in the workshop, and he’s willing to kill us all to get it.”

“Good God!” Millie cried, reeling back squeamishly. “That’s barbaric. Doctor Lieberman is killing people just to drink their blood?”

“Worse, Millie. Because the liver is the organ that purifies the blood, he has actually taken to eating it to insure maximum gestation of the benefits.”

“So what are we going to do?” asked Gordon. “Go to the police?”

Akasha stepped forward and grabbed towels from Lilith. "I will tell you what we are going to do," she said. "We are going to do what we have to. We will send the evil entity back to the Eighth Sphere like Valerie said."

"What the hell is the Eighth Sphere?"

"It is not a what, Gordon. The Eighth Sphere is a where."

"All right. Where the hell is the Eighth Sphere?"

"To put it simply: it is a place where the souls of the exceptionally evil are sent and destroyed once and for all."

"Really?" A nervous twitch snarled at the corners of his mouth. He had already sensed the conversation's direction, but against his better judgment, he inquired anyway. "And how do we do that? I mean, exactly how do we send his soul to this place, the Eighth Sphere?"

Akasha replied simply. "We kill him."

"We what!"

"You heard me. We kill him."

"You're out of your mind! We can't kill him. That's crazy! Am I right, Guys?" Gordon's eyes searched the faces of his shop mates for reinforcement, but found instead a shocking lack of outrage. "Com'on, guys! Tell her. It's crazy. Isn't it?"

"Is it really?" Lilith asked him. "You think it's crazier than killing people for their livers?"

Gordon tried to answer, but the words would not come out. He knew that anything they did at this point might seem crazy, but not crazier. Lilith approached and set her hand on his shoulder.

"Look Gordon. If we go to Detective Marcella with our story, there is a good chance he is not going to believe it. Even if he does, the evidence is no good since we removed it from Lieberman's office. Of course, by then Doctor Lieberman will know we are on to him. There is no telling what consequences we will face after that. This whole thing may seem crazy to you, but still we're sure of one thing: Doctor Lieberman killed six people, and logical deduction leads me to conclude that he intends to kill again; only next time it'll be one of us."

For a chilling moment, the night stood unnaturally still. The burden of responsibility weighed heavy on the sole survivors, as they absorbed the gravity of the situation. It had become a matter now of life and death. There would be no more workshops after this. That much they knew. What they did not know, what they could not know, was what would become of them once they took the irreversible step: once they had taken on the agent of evil and tried to send it back to the eighth sphere. It would be better, they thought, if they did not think of it at all. Better if they just did it.

In the depths of their struggle for answers, Valerie stepped forward and said, "We need to do it. Dam the consequences. You can count me in."

"Me too," Lilith added. "This has gone on long enough."

Millie joined the allegiance next. "Me too," she said, the tone of defiance in her usually passive voice now somewhat animated. "I'll do it for my uncle and the good name of the Institution for which he stands. I'm not going to sit idly by and let Doctor Lieberman bring my uncle and the Center down in ruins."

The girls huddled in solidarity, their hands totem-poled atop one another. But the five could not pull it off alone. They could not take on the evil entity without the help of the boys. Lilith looked back at Michael and Gordon, her brow arched in subtle request. The decision did not come so easily for them. Perhaps they were not as desperate, vulnerable, or convinced. They looked at each other, contemplating options.

"So, what do you think?" Gordon asked. "Is this too crazy?"

Michael took a deep breath and let it out with puckered cheeks. His eyes peeled downward and away. He paced uneasily, and when he finally looked up, Gordon saw that he had his answer.

"I don't know what to say, Gordon. I think the girls are right. We cannot go to Detective Marcella with what we know. Doctor Lieberman's reputation is impeccable. Marcella will never believe us. I mean, come on. Think about it. Attraction of blood? Hell, it almost sounds too unbelievable for me. If Marcella doesn't throw us all in jail for possessing the only real evidence in these murders, then I think Lilith is right; Doctor Lieberman will surely kill us all. If we can kill Lieberman and get away with it, then we'll have avenged the deaths of Travis, Barbara and Chris. If we get caught, well, at least we'll have the satisfaction of knowing that we probably saved countless other lives; not the lease of which could be our own."



Michael turned toward the open lake at the south end of the gazebo. His eyes pitched skyward. A thousand stars shone down, casting tiny rays of light that danced like nymphs on the water in glittering shapes. “We have powers that most people would envy,” he said, his back still to the others. “And yet we are nothing more than mere specs in the greater scheme of things, no more than the insignificant specs of light blinking off this lake and bouncing back into space. Some of us dare to ask what it all means. Maybe it is not for us to know.”

When he turned again, Michael saw Gordon and the others gazing upon the water—a sort of peace reflected in their eyes. He knew what he had to do. “I really don’t see where we have a choice, Gordon. I believe our destinies lay waiting at the steps of the research center. Maybe it is the reason fate brought us all here to begin with. I mean, do you think Detective Marcella would have really had a chance putting all this together?”

“No. I suppose not.” Gordon offered. “Not without our help.”

“That’s right. It’s not his destiny.”

“And you’re sure it’s ours?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “We have to do this.”

The boys reached out and joined hands in prayer with the girls. They prayed to God for guidance, understanding and forgiveness for what they were about to do. No one really knew if they could expect forgiveness, but they at least hoped He would grant them the guidance. After all, they were about to take on the devil himself, and for that they would need all the help they could get.

After swearing allegiance to one another, Lilith wondered aloud about the only other member of the group not included in their plans. “What about Leona?”

“What about her?” Shekina asked.

“Shall we tell her what’s going on?”

“No. We should not tell a soul outside this group.”

“But Leona is in the group.”

“No, she is not, Lilith. She is not in the group tonight.”

“But she may be in grave danger. Doctor Lieberman knows she can identify him as the killer.”

“The point is moot, ladies,” said Valerie. “I haven’t been able to reach Leona since the other night when she ran out in hysterics.”

“That’s odd. Do you suppose she’s all right?”

Valerie shrugged. “I hope so. I can’t imagine where she could be. She doesn’t know anyone else in town but us.”

“You know what I think?” said Gordon. “I think the worst has already happened to her. If Doctor Lieberman went to see her after workshop the other night, then he probably already killed her. There’s no way he’d take a chance and let her tell someone what she knew.”

Valerie said, “Let’s hope you’re wrong about that,” and the tone of her voice said to drop it. “For Leona’s sake, let’s hope you’re wrong.”

Nothing more was said about Leona, and the time came for the group to plan their course of action for what would become known as the operation.

## Eight

The slow, persistent drizzle that had so thoroughly soaked the landscape for a continuous eighteen hours finally let up by the time Akasha and Shekina completed the outline for their plan to kill Doctor Peter Lieberman.

“This is how we will do it,” Akasha instructed. “We will go back to the research center tonight and wait outside for Doctor Lieberman to leave the building. When he does, Michael and Gordon will jump him and drag him into the bushes along the tree line this side of the parking lot.” As she spoke, Akasha drew an imaginary line on the gazebo floor, indicating the respective positions each would take up during the operation.

“Once he is in the bushes and out of sight, one of us will have to slice his throat like this.” She motioned with her index finger across her throat, starting at the bottom of her left ear and ending at the bottom of her right.

“After his throat is slit, we will string him up by his feet from the nearest tree. That way all the blood will drain from his body and the essence of evil within him will ooze out with his blood.” As a conciliatory gesture, she added, “If you like, Lilith, after that you can cast a spell or something to banish his soul to the Eighth Sphere.”

Lilith forced a smiled, but it came out looking like a sneer. “No, that’s all right. I’m sure his soul will find its own way after that.”

“It seems a little harsh,” said Gordon. “Don’t you think? I mean the throat slitting part. Can’t we just shoot him or something?”

“No! That is not good enough,” Shekina answered. “Akasha is right. Unless Doctor Lieberman’s blood spills completely, the evil does not die. Its essence will rise and seek another host. If not done correctly, then it might choose one of us to carry on the evil. I know I do not want to be that someone. Do you?”

Gordon did not answer, but his nervous smile told Shekina what she needed to know. He did not want it to be him.

A while later the group returned to the research center, taking up positions exactly as planned. The girls took cover in the brush behind the trees at the edge of the parking lot, while Michael and Gordon hunkered down low behind Doctor Lieberman’s Mercedes. They crouched only a few moments when they realize they had overlooked one small detail. In their haste to plan the perfect crime, they had forgotten about my deputy sitting out front in the squad car, watching the building.

“Damn. It’s almost ten o’clock,” said Gordon, pointing to his watch. “You think he’s going to sit out here until Doctor Lieberman comes out?”

“Of course,” said Michael. “We’re going to need a back-up plan.”

The two retreated into the woods at the end of the lot and caught up with the girls.

“Nice going, Akasha,” Michael snarled, his voice mixed with anger and disappointment. “Looks like your perfect plan overlooked one minor detail.”

“What?”

“The cop! Now what are we going to do?”

“No big deal. Take him out.”

“What! Are you insane? I’m not going to kill him.”

Akasha and Shekina both laughed. “You idiot, I don’t mean kill him. I mean take him out like you took out Doctor Lieberman tonight when you gave him that headache.”

“Headache?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, right.”

“What’s she talking about?” Valerie asked.

“She’s talking about earlier tonight when I got pissed at Lieberman. I shot him with thought energy and gave him a two-minute migraine.”

“Really? You can do that?”

“I did it. Didn’t I?”

“Can you do it again?”

“I suppose, but I never did it at such a distance before.”

“You have to try,” said Akasha. “Everything is hinging on it.”

“Fine. I will see what I can do.”

He turned back and crept guardedly through the brush and thicket until he reached the clearing at the edge of the lot. He crouched low, keeping within the shadows and setting himself up in direct line of sight with the squad car. He then closed his eyes and focused his attention on the deputy, managing through concentration to send out a high-level thought energy wave sufficient to disrupt the magnetic corona around the unsuspecting officer. Within minutes, it began working, and soon the deputy started his car and pulled away, leaving Doctor Lieberman at their mercy.

Again, their plans were set, and this time there would be no complications. At precisely twenty past ten the anxious vigilantes-to-be spotted the lights in the second-floor window going out. The boys reclaimed their positions behind Doctor Lieberman’s Mercedes. Lilith and the twins kept back in the shadows behind the tree line, waiting nervously with the only tools for the operation they could find: a pair of jumper cables and a tire

iron from the trunk of Gordon's old Chevy. At the other end of the parking lot, within eyesight of the main street, Valerie and Millie kept watch for traffic.

Moments later, Doctor Lieberman emerged from the building, unsuspecting and oblivious to the righteous arm of vengeance awaiting him. As he approached his Mercedes, his darkened silhouette stretched before him. A single chirp alerted Michael and Gordon that he had unlocked the car door by remote key entry.

The footsteps grew louder as he approached the vehicle, until finally stopping with a slight scuff on the pavement, his heels snapping together directly in front of the driver's side door. The car door opened. Doctor Lieberman turned his back to the trees and to the two boys crouched below his line of sight. He extended his right leg over the threshold and proceeded into the Mercedes as he had done hundreds of times before. Three more seconds would likely have done it. Three more seconds, and he would have found the comfort, warmth and security as only a precision-made luxury European automobile could offer. But three more seconds were not afforded Doctor Lieberman this night.

On cue, Michael and Gordon jumped from behind the car and descended upon the doctor like birds of prey, taking him by complete surprise. Michael reached him first, grabbing Lieberman by his arm just as he began to pull the door shut. He dragged him out of the car and onto the cold, wet pavement, headfirst and facedown. The assault proved quick, precise and devastating. Before his keys hit the mat, Michael had Doctor Lieberman sprawled out flat with the hefty Gordon leaping unmercifully onto his back. They heard grunts of pain, along with the snapping bones buried deep in the dull thuds of each body slam Gordon delivered. On the third jump, blood discharge from Lieberman mouth; on the fourth, something resembling stringy hamburger discharged from his nostrils. The doctor struggled to catch his breath, coughing and choking laboriously, but the thick, dampened air smothered the mayhem in a cloak of muffled groans.

Except for the scuffling feet and tortured moans, the assault came off effectively stealthy. From the other end of the parking lot, Valerie and Millie heard nothing but their own rapid heartbeat and heavy breathing. They watched the attack unfolded with a sense of surrealism, accepting their involvement in the operation as an undesired necessity—foot soldiers in the greater war against evil.

With adrenaline soaring, Gordon and Michael continued pummeling their victim. They shouted for the girls to come help, fearing the larger and stronger Doctor Lieberman might eventually break free. But the reality proved less threatening, as the fight had long gone out of the old man. The once-feared and dreaded Surgeon Stalker could offer no substantial resistance. By then Doctor Lieberman had figured out the identities of his assailants, even called them by name as he begged for mercy. But no mercy came, just as no mercy came for Travis or Chris, as each gazed in horror into the eyes of evil with their entrails spilled out before them, or for Barbara, as she watched the mysterious dark figure through her rearview mirror. It sprang to life and pulled her back over the car seat, twisting her head completely around until severing every connecting fiber to her brain. This, Michael and Gordon were determined, is the same mercy Doctor Lieberman would know tonight.

Lilith and the twins hurried out from the shadows. They surrounded the doctor like wolves. At that moment, Lieberman caught some of his breath, and in his agony began calling for help. Now, even Valerie and Millie heard his cries. They ran to the scene, anxious and panting, and alerted the others that they could hear everything all the way across the parking lot.

"You've got to shut him up!" Valerie warned. "Someone will hear us!"

Again, Lieberman wailed, this time louder, perhaps sensing his last chance.

"Do it! Do it now!" she cried. "Finish him, or somebody's going to hear us. We're going to get caught!"

In a take-charge stroke of leadership, Shekina grabbed the tire iron from Lilith and wedged herself between Gordon and Michael. Then, with shocking precision, she delivered several powerful blows in rapid succession to Doctor Lieberman's skull, the whirling tire iron narrowly missing both boys by only inches each time she drew back her arm. In a matter of a few scarce seconds, it was over. Doctor Lieberman lay motionless, face down on the pavement; only a sickening gurgling sound escaped through the corner of his mouth in a mixture of frothing blood and spit.

"He's still breathing," Michael revealed, after leaning in closer to Lieberman's face for examination.

"Good," said Shekina. She seemed pleased. She stood back and held the bloodstained tire iron up to the light for inspection. "It is better this way." She looked around for just the right tree limb before spotting the perfect

branch on a huge oak several yards away. "There," she said, pointing with the tip of the tire iron. "That one is perfect. Take him over there."

Michael and Gordon grabbed Doctor Lieberman by the feet and began dragging him across the parking lot, caring not that his face peeled raw all the way down to the cheekbone on the coarse pavement. Reaching the tree, they tied the jumper cables around his ankles and hoisted him upside down from its branch until his head swung barely inches off the ground.

"All right," said Shekina, "someone needs to cut him. Who has a knife?"

Gordon answered, "A knife? Jesus! No one thought of asking that before we started."

"You're kidding," said Michael. "We went through all this shit and nobody has a damn knife? What happens now, Shekina? Does it still work if he dies like this?"

"No, Michael. Doctor Lieberman dies, but the evil does not. His blood must spill."

Millie stepped forward. "Wait! You know, my late husband's carpentry tools are still in the back of my Plymouth. Maybe there's something there we can use."

An immediate search of the car turned up only the basic carpentry tools: a hammer, level, an apron full of nails and a rusty handsaw.

"We will have to use that," Shekina said, pointing to the saw. "That will do the job."

"Fine," said Michael, wanting just to get the operation done. He grabbed the saw and marched back to the tree where Doctor Lieberman hung stiffly by his ankles. "Hold him steady," He ordered, and he placed the saw to the doctor's neck and began cutting. Gordon, Shekina and Akasha worked to steady the body, while the others watched in squeamish silence, knowing that this would be the worst part of all.

At first, the rusty saw only tugged on Lieberman's leathery skin, but once it bit in, it sliced through meat, bone and cartilage with ease. The head swung down, hinged at the back of the neck, coming to a rest on the muddy ground with a sliver of skin holding it to the body.

"That is far enough," Shekina declared. "The blood will drain from the head better if left attached like that."

The others nodded, as though they knew from experience that Shekina was right. "Yes. That will be better," Akasha echoed. "We should leave him like that."

Michael looked down at his blood-soaked sneakers and grimaced. "Look at this," he said, shaking one foot as though the blood might shake off. "I just bought these a week ago. Okay see, now I expect all of you to chip in and help pay for a new pair 'cuz—" He looked up and froze. The others, noticing his reaction, turned immediately to see what had silenced him.

They had probably expected to see me with my posse coming in to arrest them for the gruesome slaying they had just committed. Instead, they saw something possibly more disturbing. Leona Diaz, or more accurately her apparition, appeared before them and hovered barefoot some six inches off the ground.

"Lord have mercy!" Michael cried. "Does everyone see that?" The night air had grown considerably calm, but Leona's long black hair and sheer ankle-length gown seemed to blow freely in a phantom breeze.

"She's lighter than air," said Millie. "She's a ghost!"

Valerie started toward her, but Leona's apparition floated backwards upon her approach. "What are you doing here, Leona? Has he hurt you?"

Leona did not answer. She continued hovering, shaking her head. A single tear filtered down her cheek.

"Are you saying no, he did not hurt you?"

Again, the question elicited the same response. Leona shook her head only slightly, with more tears skirting the corners of her mouth.

Neither Valerie nor the others had ever seen Leona in this way before. Her body appeared not quite solid, but not transparent either. Her usually dark skin seemed much lighter, with an almost translucent glow about it. They did not know if they were seeing her ghost, or her life form as it appears when she bilocates, though Valerie suspected the latter.

"I know you can hear me," Valerie said. "I'll try to ask you simple yes and no questions." She attempted to move in closer, but again, with each step, Leona moved back an equal distance. "Does Doctor Lieberman have you locked up somewhere?"

No response.

"Are you in hiding? Is that it? Are you hiding out someplace?"

Again, Leona did not, or could not respond.

“Leona, please. I’m trying to help you.”

A subtle breeze meandered in, and Leona’s image wavered like a reflection in a rippling pond. When the breeze settled, Leona reached into her pocket, which until then did not even exist on the gown she wore. From the pocket, she produced a string of beads, or rosaries, as Valerie later described them, and she held them out for inspection. Yet, as Valerie predicted, when she tried to approach to retrieve them, Leona glided backwards, maintaining a distance just out of reach.

“Leona, honey, I can’t get them. Can you drop them on the ground for me? I’ll pick them up after you back away.”

At first, Leona did not seem to comprehend. Valerie held her hands out and turned her palms down until Leona understood and did the same. She turned her outstretched hand upside down, allowing the beads to spill out. Instead of falling to the pavement, however, the beads fell to her feet and levitated with Leona only inches from the ground.

Valerie attempted to approach again to retrieve them, and once more, as Leona floated backwards and away from her advance, so did the beads. Then, without warning, as mysteriously as it appeared, Leona’s apparition faded. Valerie inspected the spot where Leona tried dropping the beads, only to find the pavement bare, and except for the stunned look on everybody’s face, no sign that Leona’s apparition had appeared at all.

“What the hell just happened here?” Gordon asked. “Why was she trying to give you those beads?”

Valerie shook her head. “I don’t know. But they must mean something.”

“I know what it means,” said Akasha, offering her dismal view of the circumstance. “She probably wanted you to pray for her soul with them, as I am sure Doctor Lieberman has already killed her.”

“No. I don’t think so. I don’t think she’s dead. I think we just saw her bilocating.”

“Bilocating or not,” said Lilith. “Whatever you think, one thing is for sure. Leona now knows what we’ve done to Doctor Lieberman, and if we don’t all get the hell out of here pretty soon, Detective Marcella and the rest of the world will know, too.”

“Lilith is right,” said Akasha. “We need to go, but first everyone needs an alibi in case Detective Marcella asks questions. It does not matter what anyone tells him, just so long as the stories match if we are going to use one another for collaboration.”

The group listened, as Akasha recited the instructions carefully. Somehow, amid all the insanity, she had emerged as the brains of the operation, maintaining her composure and revealing her true potential for cunning and deception. Gordon, in particular, gave silent praise to Akasha for how calm and levelheaded she remained during the entire operation. He admired her ability to remain focused, even as Doctor Lieberman pleaded for mercy and the others worried that someone would hear him. Even with all that, Akasha carried on as if it were just another experiment.

“Shekina and I will think up our own alibis,” she continued. “If the rest of you want to partner up with someone to back your story, then remember to leave us out of it. Also, I want you all to get rid of every stitch of clothing you are wearing: shirts, pants, blouses, whatever.” She looked down at Michael’s feet. “And of course, shoes. We are probably leaving more evidence behind than all the other murders put together. Detective Marcella is going to have a field day. We do not need him matching any of the footprints we leave here tonight with our shoes tomorrow.”

As Akasha spoke, she noticed that everyone, including Millie, looked to the ground at the seemingly hundreds of footprints in the mud around the tree and on the pavement leading from Doctor Lieberman’s Mercedes.

“If you can burn everything,” Akasha went on, “then do it. Otherwise, dispose of your stuff in plastic bags and throw them in a Dumpster somewhere.” After a pause, she added with great emphasis, “And not in your own trash cans at home!”

“Why are you looking at me when you say that?” asked Gordon.

“I did not look at you.”

“Yes you did. You looked right at me.”

“Okay. So I looked at you.”

“What, you think I’m sloppy?”

“No. I think you are lazy.”

“I’m not lazy.”

“Sure, Tubs, whatever.” She looked up at the jumper cables used to suspend Doctor Lieberman from the tree limb. “We will have to leave those,” she said. “Can they be traced back to you?”

Gordon shrugged. “They can’t lift prints off them, can they?”

“Probably not, but you will have to take that chance now.”

Akasha finished by stating that she and Shekina would dispose of the tire iron and the bloody handsaw. She then advised her co-conspirators on one final precaution. “When you go back to your cars, after you sit down, but before you swing your feet in, I want you to kick off your shoes. Take your shirt, jacket or whatever, and wrap your shoes up with it. Be careful not to dislodge mud onto the floorboards or seats. There is likely a lot of blood mixed in with the mud and that could place you at the scene of the crime. Again, remember to make sure you get rid of everything as soon as you get home. Does everyone understand?”

The bobbing heads told Akasha they did, and all were thankful for her advice, though silently they wondered how she became such an expert on crime-scene cleanup. For now, that was not important. What remained important was that Doctor Lieberman continued hanging from the tree until every drop of blood drained from his body, and that they all left the crime scene completely evidence-free.

## Nine

Michael awoke on the couch late the next morning feeling tired and sore. He had been up most of the night worrying about his role in the murder. Though he tried rationalizing it by calling it the Lieberman operation, in his mind it was still a crime, worthy cause or not.

Ten after twelve, the telephone rang. Nearly fourteen hours had passed since the operation and still he had not worked on his alibi. He figured he could say that he had been home alone all night, but that would leave him without a collaborating witness, not very useful if someone else confessed. He reached for the phone, taking a deep breath before lifting the receiver to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Michael. It’s me.”

“Gordon. Man, am I glad it’s you? I thought it might be Detective Marcella wanting to—”

“Michael, are you watching the news?”

“What?”

“The news, are you watching it?”

“No. Why?”

“Turn it on, now! Channel five, they’re doing a remote down at the Center. Something really strange is going on down there.”

“Like what?”

“Michael! Just do it!”

“All right! Give me a second.”

Michael hurried across the room and turned on the local news just in time to see the prerecorded footage of paramedics loading Doctor Lieberman’s body in a bag and into an ambulance. The camera view switched back to a live shot of the crime scene with a local reporter recapping the day’s big story of another Surgeon Stalker killing.

“Yeah, all right, Gordon. That’s no surprise. Of course, they are going to make a big deal about it. Doctor Lieberman was the program coordinator of an institution that has already seen four other murders. What did you expect?”

“No, Michael, you don’t understand. You didn’t see the rest of the coverage.”

“What did I miss?”

“The body, Man. You missed the way they found the body. You know how we left Doctor Lieberman hanging from the tree?”

“Shut up you idiot! Don’t say that over the phone!”

“I’m sorry, but you know?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“Well, this morning they found him on the ground.”

“On the ground?”

“Under the tree!”

“Gordon, that’s no reason to go off. There is probably a logical explanation. I suppose the cables could have slipped or broken, or maybe the branch let go.”

“No, Michael. You don’t understand. They found Doctor Lieberman on the ground—and get this. His liver was cut out!”

“What!”

“You heard me. Someone came back last night and cut it out. Do you realize what this means?”

“Shit! Gordon, don’t tell me. Doctor Lieberman...he wasn’t the Sturgeon Stalker. Was he?”

“It doesn’t look that way. I don’t understand. How could this have happened?”

“It beats me, but damn it! I knew it! I just knew it! I should have trusted my instincts. I knew Doctor Lieberman wasn’t the one. How could we have been so foolish to let the girls talk us into you know what?”

“Killing Doctor Lieberman?”

“FUCK! Gordon! You idiot! Not over the phone!”

“Oops. Sorry.”

“Damn it!”

“Listen, if you ask me, I think this was all Lilith’s idea. She is the one who came up with that ridiculous theory about contagious blood or whatever. I think she planned this all along. Don’t you?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. Let me think a minute.”

Michael lowered the phone to his chest and struggled hard to reconstruct in his mind the details of the night before. So much had taken place, and all of it happened so fast. He found it difficult to fill in the pieces without it seeming like a blur. Slowly, though, it came to him, and the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. He placed the phone back up to his ear. “Gordon. It’s not Lilith. It’s the twins.”

“What?”

“The twins!”

“Why do you say that?”

“Think about it. After Leona ran out of the room the other night, who was it that said she could read Leona’s mind when she said she knew the killer?”

Gordon thought for only a second before replying, “Shekina?”

“Yes. Shekina told everyone it was Doctor Lieberman. So how do we know she didn’t make that up? Don’t you think it’s strange how neither you, Lilith nor Valerie were able to read the same thing from Leona’s thoughts?”

“Well, yeah, I thought about that because I did try to read Leona’s thoughts, but I couldn’t get through.”

“No, of course not, and I bet neither could Shekina and Akasha. They used Doctor Lieberman as a scapegoat to protect themselves.”

“What about the towels? Millie found them in Doctor Lieberman’s office.”

“The twins could have planted them there. Remember when Valerie did the psychometric readings on them? She said the killer was the one who owned the towels. She did not say Doctor Lieberman owned the towels. We took it for granted because his initials were on them. I’ll bet the twins did a quickie iron-on monogram on them. That’s why they insisted on keeping the towels so we wouldn’t see them in the daylight.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Gordon said, adding that Valerie also had trouble identifying the sex of the killer. “Remember, first she said that he was a person of duplicity, but then added, she. Maybe Valerie meant that the duplicitous individual is really two people: the twins.”

“Yes. It adds up. And when we all met later at the gazebo, wasn’t it Akasha who insisted that Doctor Lieberman must die, and that we had to kill him?”

“She did take over and start ordering everyone around like a brigadier general, didn’t she?”

“Pretty cold and calculated, huh?”

"No doubt. Not to mention the unladylike manner in which she wielded that tire iron when she clobbered Doctor Lieberman."

"I know it, and how about her sudden expertise on crime-scene cleanup? Do you get the feeling she's done this before?"

"Oh man, Michael. You're right, it all adds up...except one thing."

"What's that?"

"Why did the twins go back and cut out Doctor Lieberman's liver. Was it just to make sure Detective Marcella would think the Surgeon Stalker killed him?"

Michael considered the question, but there were other things to consider as well, and the more he thought about those things, the more they delivered him to his conclusion.

"I'll tell you what I think, Gordon."

"What?"

"I think Lilith is right about the liver thing. I think it is the attraction of blood, this Law of Contagion. It makes sense. Have you noticed how the girl's psycho kinesis and telepathic skills have developed since the first murder took place?"

"Yes, considerably. You are so right; that is awesome. You suppose the twins are eating the livers?"

"Gordon, they are from South Africa. Shekina once told me that in her village, many people practiced voodoo and witchcraft. She asked me not to say anything because she did not want Lilith to find out. If you ask me, anything is possible. I think we should call Lilith now and ask her what she thinks our next move should be. She is a better witch than the twins will ever know. Maybe she'll have a trick or two up her sleeve."

"All right, Michael, but there's just one more thing."

"Oh?"

"Akasha. She has the bloody handsaw, the one with your fingerprints all over it."

"Damn it. You know I wondered why she insisted on disposing of it herself. I'll bet she's going to use it to frame me if things get too hot for her."

"Or frame us."

"Us?"

"They have my tire iron and jumper cables. Remember?"

"They have the cables too?"

"I guess. There's no mention about them on the news. I think they cut old Doc Lieberman down and took my cables for a little added insurance."

"That's it, Gordon. We are screwed! Stay by the phone. I'll call you back."

A half-hour later, Michael phoned Gordon and explained how he and Lilith discussed the situation and came up with a plan.

"It's like this," he said. "I talked to Lilith and she called Valerie and Millie. I guess it wasn't a very pretty sight. Millie went off the deep end when she found out that Doctor Lieberman wasn't the Stalker and that we... well, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Can you blame her? I mean, only a couple of days ago she was this sweet little old lady, and now we've turned her into Ma Barker."

"I know. I guess it took Lilith a while to get her calmed down, but I think she's all right now. Anyway, we should not talk over the phone; so here is the plan. Meet us at the gazebo at eight o'clock and keep your car out of sight. We're going to put this thing to bed once and for all."

"What...what do you mean? You're not going to do something drastic, are you?"

"You mean, are we?"

On the other end of the phone, Michael could almost hear Gordon swallowing back the lump in his throat. "I don't want to know. Do I?"

There came a sigh. Michael said, "See you tonight buddy. Don't be late."



At exactly eight o'clock, Gordon walked out from the moonlit shadows of the tall pines and oaks that encircled the lakeshore gazebo behind the research center. Michael and Lilith were already there, along with someone else that Gordon definitely did not expect to see.

"What's she doing here?"

"Relax," said Michael. He tossed Gordon a heavy piece of nylon rope. "We need her if we're going to pull this off. Besides, Millie feels bad for what we did to Lieberman. Thanks to those evil little bitches, the poor woman's beside herself." Michael laughed and put his arm around Millie's shoulder. "And as it so happens, our sweet Ms. Bradford here has quite a vengeful streak in her. Don't you, honey?"

Millie shrugged off the unwanted attention and turned away without comment. Gordon's assessment of her action fit the mood he harbored, as well. She may have been willing to get back at the twins, but she would not necessarily enjoy it.

"So, what's with the leash?"

"You still remember how to make a noose, don't you?"

Gordon wielded the rope with interest, weighing it in his hands and looking at it closely as though judging its suitability for such a cause. He tugged on it sharply before looking up at Michael again. "Hangman's noose?"

Michael held up his first and second fingers. "We'll need two, and make them good. We don't want them to fail."

The request seemed unimaginably bizarre, and if not for the circumstances, it probably would have been funnier than hell. The joke is on you, Michael might say, and they would all laugh it off and then go have a beer somewhere. But Gordon knew it was no joke, and the only laughing tonight would likely come from the bowels of hell when the devil realized that two more souls were on their way. Gordon glanced uneasily at Lilith, and then at Millie. Both remained tight-lipped and turned away as soon as he made eye contact.

"Gordon, we have to do this," said Michael, noticing the awkward exchange of glances. "We've already discussed it. We need to do this for our own survival. You have to believe that."

"Yeah, I know," he said, and he did. He knew it and he believed it with all his heart. It was a matter of survival. He imagined that if Akasha and Shekina ever succeeded in framing them with the evidence still in their possession, then he, Michael and everyone else would all rot in jail for their crime. As sure as night followed day, they would live to regret their mistakes—that is, if the twins did not end up killing them for their livers first. Gordon turned his eyes to his work and began quietly making the first hangman's noose. He cleared his throat to speak, but changed his mind several times before yielding to his greater curiosity. "So how is this going to go down?" he asked.

Michael peered over his shoulder and across the gazebo. "You want to field this one, Lilith?"

"Sure," she said, and she launched into the particulars, calmly and decisively. "It's like this, Gordon." She started across the gazebo floor, exercising caution not to trip over the section of rope stretched between Michael and Gordon. "I called Millie and asked her to help us, because I knew the twins would believe her. I told her to call and tell them that she overheard me saying how I made a witch's Ladder of Death for them."

"Really? Do those things actually work?"

"That's not the point, Gordon. The point is that Akasha and Shekina not only believe they work, but also that I would make one and hide it on them. Do you understand this?"

"Yes."

"All right then, stop interrupting. Anyway, Millie called the twins this afternoon and told them she overheard Valerie and me talking about it. Then she arranged to have them come here tonight to meet her."

"They're coming here?"

"They think they're going to learn where I hid the witch's ladder."

Lilith's pacing intensified as she spoke. Her strolling took her back and forth over the nylon lines a dozen times without looking; yet she neither stopped nor tripped over them. Her feet moved through the shadows on the floor as if passing through smoke.

"When they get here," she continued, "you and Michael will hide in the bushes. Millie will wait here in the gazebo. Then, just as they had you ambush Doctor Lieberman, when you hear the signal, you'll jump out and

grab them. You should take them by complete surprise; only this time we'll be ready with all the tools we need to do the job right."

Lilith wheeled her hands out from behind her back to produce a roll of duct tape. For dramatics, she yanked on the roll, pulling free a three-foot section of tape. She then mocked an assault on Gordon, demonstrating how quickly she would have the twins completely bound and gagged. "That's where Valerie and I come in," she said. "We'll tape them up like yesterday's garbage and have them ready for the final solution."

"The final solution?" Gordon held up the hangman's noose. "This?"

"Yes."

"We're going to hang them?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because that's what you do to bad witches. That's how you send them back to the Eighth Sphere."

"But I thought we had to drain all their blood."

"That's bullshit!" said Michael. "That's what the twins told us. They said that to get me to cut Doctor Lieberman's throat. Lilith did some checking. Remember when Valerie said that the evil entity embodied black magic?"

"Yes. I thought she meant witchcraft."

"Well, you were right, my friend, African witchcraft. It turns out that in South African voodoo witchcraft, it is commonplace to use the livers of goats, sheep, dogs and even people for everything from divination to medication. And in some extreme cases, they use the livers to exercise the law of contagion."

"I've heard that phrase."

"We talked about it. Remember? That's what Valerie called it: the law of contagion, or as Lilith so eloquently puts it, attraction of blood. The concept originates in Africa. Since the earliest known tribes of humankind, the law of contagion has been put to the test. Often a stronger, younger tribal warrior would take on an elder tribal leader in a battle for leadership. And when the younger warrior won, which was often the case, the first thing he'd do is cut out the elder's heart, liver or kidneys."

"And he would eat them?"

"Yes. He would eat them, and the rest of the tribe would celebrate because they believed that their new leader would not only be stronger than the last, but also wiser."

"Wiser?"

"Because now he possessed his own wisdom, as well as the collective years of the elder. It is really not much different from what they saw going on in the animal world all around them every day. The younger, stronger lions challenged the older dominant ones for control over the pride. Same thing went on among monkeys, jackals, hyenas, so on and so on."

"And so this law of contagion, or attraction of blood, you're sure it's what the twins practice in order to enhance their powers of the supernatural?"

"Apparently so." Michael strolled up to Gordon and patted him on his overly plump belly. "And you better watch it, Pal. I bet your liver would feed them both for a week."

Gordon laughed and made a playful advance toward Michael with the finished hangman's noose. The tomfoolery contrasted greatly with the subject matter of their conversation; still, no one lost sight of why they were there, especially Millie. She stepped away and sat quietly in the corner, wondering how Gordon and Michael could act so carefree one moment, while plotting the cold-blooded murder of two young ladies the next. Her reserved demeanor did not escape Lilith's attention, and soon Lilith found herself wondering if Millie had the guts to go through with the new operation. She considered how crucial the old woman's role in the plan had become. Her ability to gain the confidence of the twins without raising suspicions meant the difference between failure and success. If she backed out early, she would put everything in jeopardy.

Lilith eased her butt against the railing and kept a quiet eye on Millie from across the gazebo. She watched for signs that might indicate her defection, yet despite her outward appearance of lackluster commitment, the signs did not manifest. She remained reasonably focused to the cause, and Lilith finally began to feel at ease with her decision to involve her in the plan.

Around eight-thirty, Valerie showed up carrying a flashlight and a can of gasoline. "Sorry, I'm late," she said. "Detective Marcella called unexpectedly to ask me some questions about last night."

"Damn it!" said Michael. "I knew it. He suspects us, doesn't he?"

"Not at all. Actually, he is worried about us. He wants to provide us with round-the-clock protection. Can you believe it?"

"You've got to be kidding!" Lilith laughed. "He can't do that. That would spoil our plans for killing the twins; now wouldn't it?"

"That's cold," said Gordon; still he and the others laughed. "Such irony. Bravo. And wouldn't it be funny if the twins showed up tonight with Detective Marcella?"

"Oh, that is funny," said Michael, and they laughed louder.

"Yeah. What then? Guess we'd have to kill Marcella, too, I suppose, right?"

Michael squinted across the gazebo and nodded. "If we must," he said, no longer laughing. "Then yes. We kill him, too."

A dampening hush rushed in and wiped the smiles clean. Michael moved to the edge of the stairs at the gazebo's opening, blocking the exit for anyone thinking of leaving. A silver beam of moonlight caught the side of his face, and for a moment, made him look almost skeletal. Millie gasped and clutched at her heart, but waved it off when Valerie came to her.

"Look," said Michael. "This is serious business. You know what these girls are capable of doing. If we do not put an end to this tonight, then others will die because of our failure. The girls will either kill us or turn us in for killing Doctor Lieberman, and then they'll be free to continue killing as they please. Am I wrong?"

His comment solicited no rebuttals.

"Okay. Leona is still out there. We will never find her if we fail tonight. I hope you all understand; this is war. It is not pretty, and sometimes as in war, innocent people get hurt. As it stands now, only Leona is truly innocent. I think we owe it to her to help."

Instinctively, the group gathered toward the center of the gazebo in a huddle. There, they joined hands and observed a moment of silence for their fallen friends. The huddle broke when Valerie spotted headlights approaching from a distance. "That's them!" she said. "That's Akasha and Shekina!"

Michael, Gordon, Valerie and Lilith scurried off the gazebo and out of sight behind the brush surrounding the structure. Millie took up position in the center of the floor, her heart racing, her palms sweating. Behind her, a twig snapped, and then another, as the others settled into the thorny thicket.

"Quiet back there!" she said in a muted shout. "They're almost here."

She turned around to face the headlights. More rustling stirred the branches, another snap and then finally silence.

"Hello, ladies," she said, smiling as Akasha and Shekina approached the gazebo. "I'm glad you could come. I was so afraid for you when I heard Lilith talking about that witch's ladder, I just had to call."

"We are glad you did," Shekina replied, climbing the three wooden steps into the gazebo. "I just knew Lilith was making one of those dreadful things for us. I honestly do not know why she despises us so."

"Me neither, Shekina. I like you girls. You're strong-willed, smart and independent. I suppose that is why Lilith doesn't like you. Perhaps she is jealous or intimidated by you."

"Jealous, I am sure," Akasha replied. "But I hardly think she is intimidated, the way she flaunts her witchcraft at us all the time."

Millie forced a smile. "I bet your witchcraft is every bit as good as hers."

"Oh? What makes you think we practice witchcraft?"

"Well, don't you...I mean, I assumed you did, considering your background. Don't you come from Messina?"

"You know Messina?"

"I know of it, sure. It is a virtual hotbed of voodoo and witchcraft culture in South Africa. Isn't it?"

"Hmm...yes, well, there are some in Messina who dabble in those kinds of things, but we certainly do not. It is more the ways of the elders, and not of our generation."

"That's funny, because I thought you were...that is, I thought...ahm, never mind."

"Millie, you called us here to tell us about the witch's ladder. Do you know where Lilith hid it?"

“Yes, of course, Akasha.”

Millie’s heart began racing again. She caught herself nervously rubbing her palms on the sides of her slacks and forced herself to stop. Her posture grew rigid, her moves fitful and jerky. Akasha turned to Shekina and their eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“Are you okay?” one of them asked, but Millie seemed too flushed to answer. In the shrubs behind the gazebo, another twig snapped. Akasha turned quickly to look.

“Yes, the witch’s ladder,” said Millie, coerced by the sound of the twig. “I do know where you shall find it.” She led the twins to the far end of the gazebo away from the exit, against the railing overlooking the lake. “There,” she said, pointing across the water, evoking the coded phrase signaling for the boys to spring into action. “What you seek is out there. You have to look closely. It is there, and the time is now!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I said, the time is now!”

A fluttering of snapping twigs and cracking branches spilled out from the shadows behind the gazebo. The twins turned around in time to see Michael and Gordon storming the structure like charging bulls. They struck with such speed and surprise, howling like warriors, that even Millie shrieked with terror. They rounded the corner pounced unmercifully on the girls, taking them down easily with no regard for the broken bones or lacerations that each undoubtedly suffered. Then, as quickly as the boys had subdued the two, Valerie and Lilith emerged with duct tape and nylon rope in hand.

“Hold her steady!” Lilith ordered, referring to Akasha who struggled considerably harder than her twin. “Don’t let the feisty little bitch get away!”

“Ouch!” Gordon cried. “She bit me!”

Michael, “Hold her! I got her, I got her!”

Gordon, “Ouch! She bit me again!”

Lilith, “Watch her feet!”

Michael, “I got them! Tape her up!”

Bodies, large and small, rolled clumsily along the floorboards, back and forth, thumping and slapping to painful ends. Somewhere in the mayhem, Akasha managed to slip out from under Gordon’s weight and began scurrying for the exit.

“Stop her!” Lilith hollered. “She mustn’t get away!”

Michael reached out from the midst of twisted, tangled limbs and snatched Akasha by the ankle. The sister began crying, pleading for their lives as loudly as possible in hopes of attracting the attention. But time had run out for the girls, and they were quickly restrained once and for all.

Lilith tore a foot-long strip of tape off the roll and slapped it across Akasha’s mouth. The next piece found Shekina’s lips. “That should shut them up,” she said, and she commenced hog-tying Shekina’s ankles and wrists with all the finesse of a rodeo cowgirl. The kicking and squirming continued among muffled moans, but their struggle to escape now meant only more pain.

Gordon and Michael pulled the girls to their feet, as Valerie slip the hangman’s noose around their delicate necks. Lastly, with the ropes cinched tight, they pulled on the lines and hoisted the two into the air. Their wire-frame bodies wrenched violently, but their bound hands and ankles wrapped tighter than a witch’s knot afforded neither the room for escape. Thus was the last memory of life on Earth for Shekina and Akasha Kayo.

“It’s a bit unsettling to watch, isn’t it?” Valerie remarked, noting Millie’s difficulty in coming to terms with the affair.

“It is,” she said, turning her eyes away. “I’m sorry. I thought I could do this.”

“Don’t go off on us now, Millie,” Michael warned. “It’s too late to turn back. Just keep reminding yourself that these two are vicious, evil, sadistic agents of Satan.”

“I know, Michael. In my heart, I know you are right. I just...I hate to see the suffering.”

“They’re not suffering. They can’t feel a thing!”

Millie looked back at the girls, their bodies hanging limp. Only the occasional twitch gave indications that life still lingered within their tiny bones. “They feel nothing?”

“That’s right. Trust me. The twitching is just involuntary muscle spasms. They blacked out as soon as we hoisted them into the air.”

Though she wanted to believe him, inside, she suspected the opposite rang true. In all likelihood, the twins forgot about their broken bones and lacerations the moment the noose tightened around their necks and jerked them skyward. There they learned that the frailty of their build provided no comfort once the noose and gravity began a tug-of-war on their bodies, the pain increasing exponentially until the last spasm subsided. Until that moment came, Millie closed her eyes and turned away.

"So, what do we do now?" Gordon asked.

"We finish the job," said Michael. "That's what we do."

He cleared the gazebo's three wooden steps in a broad jump and sprinted around to the backside. Returning with the gasoline, he ordered, "Everyone out!" and immediately began spilling the fuel over the floor and on the girls, as they swung silently in the temperate breeze. Then, with the structure thoroughly soaked, he calmly, coldly, pitched a match into the gazebo. The flames burst to life with a whoosh, igniting the night as though the sun itself had come out to bear witness to the eradication of evil.

"We don't have much time now," he said. "We need to get out of here before someone sees the flames and comes to investigate."

"Wait," said Gordon, yielding to the urge, compelling him to watch the flames as they consume the twins. Michael, too, stood mesmerized, as he watched and wondered just what they had done. He turned to Lilith. She set her hand upon his shoulder.

"We did the right thing," she said, the reflection of firelight dancing nervously in her eyes.

"This is for you, Chris," Gordon uttered, "wherever you are."

"And you, Barbara," said Valerie.

With barely a breath's delay, Michael added, "And for you too, Travis. We'll never forget you guys."

A hallowed silence followed for the memory of those and Doctor Lieberman who had suffered needlessly, and for that moment, time stood still. They might have watched the flames for hours if not for Millie, who jolted them back to reality by giving warning of an approaching fire truck, its distant scream creeping closer.

"We better go," said Valerie. "Remember to look around. Don't leave anything behind, and for God's sake, work on an alibi. I am sure Detective Marcella will try to reach us all tomorrow. Be ready for him."

"Wait. Look!" said Gordon. He appeared to point at the fire, but as the others looked closer, they saw him pointing, instead, through the fire to the other side of the gazebo. "Over there. Do you see it? Someone is standing there, on the other side."

Amazingly, somebody was on the other side of the gazebo, watching in silence, as the rope around the twins melted tighter around their necks, the intense heat morphing the nylon into a molten glob of synthetic lava, bubbling and blistering against their skin. The line ultimately burned through and broke, allowing their lifeless bodies to plummet to the floor, surrendering to the flames in a sizzle of meat, bone and marrow.

Valerie pointed across the gap. "It's Leona, she's come back!"

In the brilliant glow illuminating Leona's face, Valerie could see tears tracking steadily down her cheeks. Just as she had the night before, Leona seemed somehow only semi-solid, not see-through, but translucent. Not a doubt lingered in anyone's mind this time. Leona had come to them in a state of bilocation.

The flames danced wildly, at times obstructing their view, but in the flickering glimpses they observed Leona again holding what looked like a string of beads.

"I don't understand," Valerie complained. "I can't imagine what she's trying to tell us. I'm afraid whatever it is, it must be terribly important."

"I'm sure it is, Val," said Lilith. "But we really have to go now. The fire trucks are almost here."

"I can't leave her. I have to know why she wants us to have those beads. They must mean something."

"Maybe they do. Maybe they don't. But one thing is for sure." Lilith grabbed Valerie by the arm and began leading her from the gazebo. "We've got to get out of here now. We will see her again. I promise, but we must leave this minute!"

Valerie resisted, but not greatly, and when Lilith tugged harder, she yielded. The group fell back, vanishing into the night, leaving only the charred and blackened remains of the once beautiful, Akasha and Shekina Kayo, burning in the fiery hells of vengeance; and Leona, once again, a silent witness to it all.

By the time the fire trucks pulled alongside the gazebo, only blackened timbers remained. The roof had caved in, crashing down on the twins. The firefighter knew nothing of their presence, and so made no efforts to retrieve their bodies.

An early morning investigation into the blaze pointed to arson, with the focus set mainly on the flame-scorched automobile parked alongside the ruins. The car's license plates gave investigators a name, but to the fire department, Akasha Kayo meant nothing. This bought the group a little more time. Had they used that time to flee the state, things might have turned out much differently. Lord knows how many a night I sat up in the dark by myself wishing they had.

## Eleven

Aside from attending psychic workshops in the evening, Michael, like most in the group, held down a full-time job during the day. He worked at a local Home Depot store, and it was there that I came to see him on the morning after the gazebo fire. I found him in the paint aisle stocking shelves and I approached him from behind.

"What's the best thing for a cover-ups?" I asked.

He answered without turning around. "Outdoor paint or indoor?"

"No paint, just cover-ups. You see, I figure if I know how someone covered something up, then I can figure out what to use to uncover it. Any ideas?"

"You're talking about the Sturgeon Stalker. Aren't you, Detective?" Michael turned slowly around.

"That's all I can talk about these days. It's getting a little out of hand and it seems there's nothing I can do about it. I'm sure you know about Lieberman?"

"Of course. I heard about it yesterday. I suppose now you believe our workshop has been singled out by this killer for some reason."

"Oh, I've imagined that much already, ever since Christopher Walker and Deputy Quinn were murdered. But you know what I don't understand?"

"No, sir?"

"Doctor Lieberman. I don't understand why the killer beat and tortured him before cutting out his liver. The other victims showed no signs of torture. Did you know the killer cut his head off?"

"Doctor Lieberman's?"

"Yes."

"Oh, really?"

"You didn't know?"

"Should I?"

"You said you heard about it."

"Yeah. I think I heard that, maybe."

"I see. Well don't sweat it. If you're wondering, they did say it on the news."

"Oh, then I guess I did know. Yeah, I did hear that, come to think of it. So they cut his head off. That is pretty gross, isn't it?"

I nodded. "I suppose no more so than the others. Actually, it was not completely severed. The killer left it hanging like a Pez dispensers." I smiled thinly and paused to take note of Michael's body language. My comment was crude; I knew that, but I meant it to measure his sensitivity to the subject. I also knew that although it was important to listen to what Michael said, I would likely gain more information from the way he said it. I listened and watched, but his response to my remark yielded neither amusement nor contempt: only a blank stare. In my book, even a lack of response can sometimes tell volumes. I picked a can of spray paint up off the shelf and read the label on the back. "You know, Michael," I think he could tell I was not really reading. "I'm surprised you're not in hiding. Did you know Leona and the twins have gone into hiding?"

"Oh?"

"Yes, or so we think the twins have. I just learned an hour ago that authorities found their car last night, abandoned by the lake next to a gazebo. Do you know anything about that?"

“About the gazebo? No, Detective, I don’t. Why, do you think the twins burned it down?”

I smiled a gotcha grin. “Who said anything about in burning down?”

“Didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. I guess maybe I heard that on the news, too.”

“I see. Well, the answer is no. I don’t they burned it down. That wouldn’t make sense. Why would they set the gazebo on fire and then leave their car behind?”

“You’re right. It doesn’t make sense. Maybe some kids stole the car and drove it to the lake and then torched the gazebo. Kids are funny like that, you know? They’ll do anything for kicks.”

“Yes, you see that’s the other thing.” I set the spray paint back on the shelf and reached into my pocket for a set of keys. “I don’t think the car was stolen. We found the keys in the ignition. I think the girls drove it there. The car seat was still pulled up as far as it could go, with the steering wheel telescoped out, you know, like someone small had been driving: someone like Shekina or Akasha.”

“Or some kid.”

“I suppose, but I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know, then. That is strange. Guess I can’t help you there. No telling who knows about that mystery.”

“Listen. Can you think of any place Leona might hide out? Something tells me she’s the key to this whole thing.”

“Gee, you think?”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“No, I’m just asking. You think?”

“Yes, I do, and I’ll tell you why. The other night, before she ran out of the room, she said something in Spanish. Do you know what she said?”

“No, sorry. My Spanish is not that great.”

“Then let me tell you. Her last words were, ‘Oh my God, I know who the killer is.’ Do you think that’s possible?”

“Detective, anything is possible. You should know that by now.”

“Yes. I think I’m beginning to see that.” I gestured of farewell by tugging on the brim of my hat before turning away. I took only a few steps before stopping and turning back. “Oh, just one more thing.”

“Yes, Detective?”

“A moment ago we were talking and I mentioned how Doctor Lieberman’s head had been cut off.”

“Yes, sir. You did mention that. I’m sure it was gross.”

“Of course, it was, but my point is that I never referred to the killer as they, but you did. Did you know that more than one person might have been involved?”

Michael hesitated, gulped hard and then turned away to break eye contact. He cleared his throat and struggled to find a comfortable stance, keenly aware that I would probably analyze and try to interpret his body language.

“I didn’t know that,” he said, shrugging before finally meeting my eyes again. “I guess I didn’t really notice I did that.”

I hatched a foxy grin. I love it when I catch someone in a lie. “Yes, that’s the strange thing about this case. Doctor Lieberman was a large man. It appears someone badly beat him before his death. It probably would have taken a couple of strong individuals to take him down. Don’t you think?”

“Sure. I suppose. It could have been an entire gang.”

“Yes, and that’s just it, another inconsistency. In Doctor Lieberman’s case, there are not many similarities between his death and the others. The unnecessary brutality, for one, doesn’t fit the same MO as the others.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Isn’t it? I think I can say with certainty that somebody other than the Stalker killed Doctor Lieberman. I believe several people killed him. Oddly though, I also think the Stalker came by later for the liver, after the real killers had gone.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because the neatness in the way the liver was removed contrasts so greatly to the sloppiness of the killing. The extraction of the organ definitely carries the signature of the Surgeon. Somehow, he knew about the murder.”

“And you suspect all this because Doctor Lieberman got his ass kicked before he died?”

“Yes, that and the fact we found the footprints of five, six, maybe seven other individuals at the crime scene.”

If I listened a little harder, I could probably have heard Michael’s heart skip a beat before picking up again double time.

“Footprints?” he said, and his eyes fell involuntarily to the floor around his feet. My eyes followed, locking upon a pair of black-leathered work boots. They seemed free of the mud and blood I might expect to find, had he worn the shoes at the site of Doctor Lieberman’s murder only two nights before. I imagined Michael’s thoughts flashing back to that night when the seven of them trampled recklessly in the mud around Lieberman’s hanging corpse. At the time, I could not know how suddenly grateful he felt for Akasha demanding that they all discard their shoes and clothing after they got home. He probably also felt grateful that I could not read his thoughts, as he found it impossible to stop the replay of the murder in his mind.

“We’ve taken plaster impressions of the mud around the tree by the body,” I said. “We’ll know more in a day or two.” Michael looked up again and saw me smiling. “And yes, Michael, we recovered a lot more clues from the site this time.”

“Clues?”

“Of course, I’m not at liberty to discuss any of that right now, but if his murder is tied to the others, and it seems obvious it is, then we’ll soon have our Surgeon Stalker and whoever else is involved. Mark my words.”

Michael cleared his throat unintentionally. “Consider them marked.”

An old man in the isle behind me stumbled clumsily into an end cap display of paint, sending several towers of stacked cans crashing to the floor. Michael flinched. His arms flew up in defensive posture in front of his face and stayed there briefly until he realized what happened. The last of the run-a-way cans still spun at his feet when he regained his composure and let his arms back down.

“A little jumpy there, aren’t you?” I said.

“Jesus, Detective. It sounded like the whole damn house was coming down. How come you didn’t jump?”

I gave a nod up at post behind his head. “I saw the whole thing unfolding in the security mirror up in the corner. I knew it wasn’t going to be pretty.”

“And you didn’t warn me?”

“Didn’t see what good it would do. Besides, I get the feeling there’s things you’re not telling me, either.”

“Yeah, well, if there isn’t anything else, Detective; I’ve got some paint cans to pick up.”

“Yes, Michael. There is just one more thing. I want you to tell me something. Do you think Lilith is involved in any of this?”

“Lilith? What makes you think she’s mixed up in anything?”

“I don’t know. Just wondering. It never hurts to ask another’s opinion.”

“Detective. Lilith may be a lot of things, but she’s basically a good girl, and she wouldn’t willingly harm an innocent person.”

“Would she harm a not so innocent person?”

“What?”

“Let me ask you. Can you tell me what you did when you left the research center after Doctor Lieberman was killed?”

“What I did?”

“Yes, what did you do. Where did you go?”

Michael’s answer almost rolled out, when he caught himself. “Detective, don’t you mean after I left the research center the night Doctor Lieberman was killed?”

“Why. What did I say?”

“You asked me what I did when I left the center after Doctor Lieberman was killed. I was not there after; I left before.”

“Oh, did I say it like that? I am sorry. So, what did you do after you left the research center?”



"I went home. I had a bite to eat and went to bed."

"Okay, good enough." I pointed to the spilled cans. "I guess I'll let you get back to your work."

As I turned and started away, I heard Michael call back, "Detective Marcella?"

I stopped and looked back over my shoulder. "Yes."

"Lilith," he said. "She really is a good girl. She mean well."

"And you?"

He shook his head. "Don't worry about me."

I turned and started walking again, worried more now than ever.

## Twelve

Later that afternoon, Michael left work and returned home to call Gordon, curious to know if I had paid him a visit. He allowed the phone to ring only once before hanging up, fearing the possibility that I had tapped his line. He thought about going over to see Gordon in person, but again changed his mind; worried I might put a tail on him. He kept telling himself not to make a big deal over it, that my visit was strictly routine, but he could not shake the feeling that I had caught on to him.

Another paranoia-filled hour of pacing the floor and checking windows passed before he convinced himself he had overreacted. Again, he picked up the phone and dialed. Gordon answered on the second ring.

"Hello."

"Gordy. It's me. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Oh, hi there," said Gordon. "How you doing?"

"I'm good. Can we talk?"

"Well, actually, I am a little busy right now...ah, Dad. Can you call back later?"

"Dad? Oh, right. Marcella is there now, isn't he?"

"Yup. Au-huh, that's right. I got it in the mail a little while ago. Thanks."

"All right, he just got there a little while ago, huh?"

"Yupper. You got it, Dad."

"Is he asking questions about the twins and Doctor Lieberman?"

"Oh, sure, and lots of other things, too."

"Be careful, Gordon. He'll trip you up."

"Oh, don't I know it?"

"Okay, just keep your cool. He doesn't have anything on us."

"Okay, Dad, I'll remember that. Thanks for calling. Tell Mom I said hello and that I'll talk to you guys later."

"You'll call as soon as he leaves?"

"Yes, Dad, as soon as I can, I'll call. Goodbye now."

Gordon hung up and smiled at me, sheepishly. I could see the word, GUILT, sprawled across his forehead like a neon sign. He hoped I could not read it, but we both knew better. I watched him steady the receiver back on the hook before taking a deep breath.

"So, that was your dad?" I said.

"What? Oh, yeah. That was Dad calling to check up on me. He sent me money the other day. Wanted to make sure I got it."

"That's awfully nice of him. Do you keep in touch often?"

"Sure. I guess." Gordon's voice grew suddenly squeaky. "Sometimes he calls me—sometimes I call him, you know?"

I nodded.

"Detective, is there anything else you would like from me?"

"Just a few more questions please." I pulled a small black notepad from my pocket and began jotting down highlights from the interview. "I have to ask you this, son. Where were you the other night when Doctor Lieberman was killed?"

Outside, a fire truck with sirens wailing, rushed by the window, stealing Gordon's attention until it had rounded the corner and faded from sight. He turned back and shrugged, the unusual blend of emotional unease and anxious relief tugging on a crooked grin. I made note of his reaction and scribbling my observation down on my pad. It was not so important that I documented it, rather that he saw me do it.

"So, what do you say, Gordon?"

"What do I say?"

"Where you were the other night? You do have an alibi. Don't you?"

"An alibi? Why would I need an alibi? Do you think I had something to do with Doctor Lieberman's death?"

"Not necessarily. But as I said, I have to ask."

I could see Gordon's thoughts reeling. He had an alibi ready, but he really had not thought the story through all the way yet. Unfortunately, the time to use it had come.

"See, it's like this," he began. "The workshop got out early because Doctor Lieberman developed a wicked headache. It came over him really fast and strong. It must have been bad, because he threw everyone out on the spot—told us not to come back."

"So, you left?"

"Yeah, we left, and I went to the video arcade at the Plaza to play video games. I stayed there for a couple of hours, maybe three I guess, and then I went home to bed."

I made another entry on paper. "You went to the arcade. Did you see anyone there?"

Gordon pitched his head back and gave me a side-glance, unsure if I was giving him a chance to validate his story or change it completely. "Like who?"

"I don't know, like maybe Michael?"

"Michael? Did he say he saw me there?"

"Did you?"

Gordon rolled his eyes down at the floor where he noticed my shoes, and how they still had mud on them—mud that I had picked up outside the institute where they killed Doctor Lieberman. He thought about Akasha and Shekina standing by the tree, warning them all to come up with foolproof alibis, and he wondered if his was. His eyes came back to me skittishly. "Oh, yeah," he said, nodding. "Michael was there. We played on the same machine for a while. Huh. Isn't that funny how I almost forgot?"

I made note of his response, jotting it down in longhand and punctuating the period at the end with a jabbing stab. I looked up again and found Gordon peering into my eyes, as if trying to read from them the believability of his story. I smiled back thinly, finding neither solace nor displeasure in the response.

"So tell me, Gordon. How is it that you came to join the Institute?"

"You mean the workshop?" He smiled genuinely. "That's easy. Travis got me in."

"Did he?"

"Yes. We were good friends, you know. We go all the way back to grade school. Travis and I used to talk to one another through telepathy even before we knew what that was. We didn't know the other kids couldn't do it until we got older. By then, we learned how to make money off them by guessing cards from an ordinary playing deck. See, the way worked is, I would stand behind the kid with the card so that I could see it, and then I thought about that card and Travis would read my thoughts and guess it correctly. It worked every time."

"So you were little hustlers."

"Yeah, but I ain't apologizing for it."

"No, of course not. You were just having a little fun."

"That's right."

"Making a little money—a little scratch?"

"Yeah, you got it: a buck or two here and there. We weren't hurting anybody."

"No, it's all good."

"Damn straight. So anyway, that kind of stuff went on till after junior high. Then Travis transferred out to another school for gifted kids like him. By then, we both knew we had telepathic abilities, but his was much stronger and he really wanted to excel with it. That's why he was so excited about getting into the Institute."

"With the workshops."

"Ah-huh. He really cut his teeth there when it came to his gift."

"Then he eventually got you into the program?"

"Yeah, after high school. That's when Travis told Doctor Lieberman about me. The rest is history."

"I guess it's fair to say that you two were pretty tight?"

"That's what I've been telling you. Travis and I were buddies—the best."

"And you would have done anything for him, wouldn't you?"

"You bet I would."

"Even avenge his death?"

Gordon's face soured. "Did you want to say something, Detective?"

I shook my head. "I'm just doing my job. Tell you what. How 'bout you let me ask you a couple of more questions and then I'll get out of your hair."

He nodded.

"I need to ask you about the twins. Do you know where they are now?"

"I didn't know they were missing. When did that happen?"

"Apparently, last night. We found their car by the lake, next to a burning gazebo."

"The lake behind the Center?"

"That's right. You're familiar with it?"

"Sure. I've been there a few times. We all have; most of us, I mean."

"Why would the girls go there?"

"Beats me. Maybe to practice witchcraft."

"Witchcraft?"

"Sure. Lilith wasn't the only witch at the Center. But you knew that, didn't you?"

I nodded. "I guess I suspected it. It is in the girl's culture. Isn't it?"

"I don't know about that, but from what I hear, between the witchcraft and their voodoo worshiping, they were really just a bit more than weird."

"Strange that you used the past tense."

"Oh, I don't know. They were. They are, whatever. If you ask me, they're just evil."

"The twins?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't know you felt that way. What have they done to warrant that label?"

"I don't know. They just are. That's all."

"Or were?"

"Yeah, or were. Either way, I don't care. I hope they're gone for good."

"Is there something about them I should know?"

"You mean like do I think they killed Doctor Lieberman and the others?"

"Do you?"

"Maybe."

"Gordon, I need more. If you know something, you have got to tell me."

"Look, Detective, let's say the twins killed Doctor Lieberman and the others. So what if they did? If they are gone now, then all your problems are over. Aren't they?"

"That's not good enough, Gordon. It doesn't go away like that. If you're holding something back, I will find out."

"Sorry, I don't know anything. It's just an observation. The twins practiced witchcraft and voodoo. You have people with livers cut out. If you put one and one together what do you have?"

"I don't know, but if you get two, then it still doesn't add up. If the twins wanted to kill Doctor Lieberman and then leave town, how do you explain the abandoned Saturn and the burning gazebo, or all the footprints in the mud where Doctor Lieberman was killed?"

"Footprints?"

"Yeah, footprints. Maybe you should ask Michael about that when you return his call."

Gordon winced at that. His eyes darted suspiciously toward the phone and back to me.

"Do you have any more questions, Detective?"

I grinned gratuitously. "Just one more thing. Did you kill Doctor Lieberman?"

The look on his face told me the answer. He brushed past me, bumping me hard enough to knock me off balance. Then he crossed the room in a steady march, yanked the door open and pointed. I recognized the invitation and saw my way out into the hall.

"We'll talk again," I told him.

"We'll see about that," he replied.

He slammed the door. I heard the clicking of locks and security chains latching behind it. "Yes, we will see," I uttered under my breath. "We will see."

## Thirteen

The Second Precinct is not pretty, but it is functional and it has been my home away from home for decades. The red brick and mortar building, constructed early in the last century, serves dual purpose as courthouse and jail. The furnishings: desks, file cabinets and what have you, are all leftover relics from the days of rotary phones and pinstripe suits. The ground-floor office houses nearly twenty workstations: one for every detective, a special investigator, and administrative assistants.

My desk sits in the corner, tucked away like an old footlocker. Upon it sits a phone, a Rolodex and a vintage crank-type pencil sharpener. No computer for me, thank you. I do not go for those glitzy monitors and keyboards. I could care less what a gigabyte, megabyte, modem or ram is. I prefer ink-ribbon to inkjet and Whiteout to the Delete command. Am I stuck in my ways? With some things, yes, but like an old shoe, it fits me well.

So, that's where I went after leaving Gordon's apartment: back to the precinct where I found an envelope waiting for me on my desk. I picked it up and tore it open. Inside, was the lab report on the plaster footprint casts we made at the institute. It confirmed what I already suspected, that seven people were present on the night of the murder. The report further concluded that the group consisted of two men and five women, based on the physical size of the prints.

Surprising? Hardly. I had gathered as much from viewing the prints myself. What did surprise me were the interesting little pieces of evidence inadvertently picked up by the plaster in one cast: three small beads from a necklace or rosary. One of the suspects must have stepped on them, pressing them into the mud where they transferred into the castings the next day. I knew I had seen similar beads before, but I just could not bring myself to believe it. For, if true, it meant I had no choice but to consider Leona Diaz a prime suspect in the murders.

I eased myself around the desk and flopped down into my chair, considering the various implications of the find. As I allowed my imagination to wander, I could see how easily the non-threatening Leona might have distracted Officer Quinn from one side of the squad car, while the twins moved in for the kill from the other. I envisioned the same cunning deception used on Chris and Travis, as well as the two homeless men. All would have let his guard down readily, as the shy and reserved Leona approached, acting as decoy for Shekina and Akasha's brutal attack from behind.

With Barbara, however, things may have played out differently. I could only imagine that the twins, possibly acting alone, managed to sneak into the back seat of Barbara's car and surprised her after she got in. The entire matter seemed too bizarre, and it troubled me greatly. Why, I wondered, would the others have joined in on the mayhem, attacking Doctor Lieberman and killing him with viciousness seemingly beyond their capacity? What evil could have seduced them, recruiting their powers for such a barbaric deed? It truly made no sense.

With my thoughts still adrift, absorbed in a fantasy of modern day Jekyll and Hyde, another large envelope dropped down on my desk, jolting me back to reality. I looked up and saw Carlos, my old partner, confidant and friend, standing over me, smiling.

"Carlos!" I said. "What do you know?"

He nodded at the envelope, his know-it-all grin pinching dimples deep into his cheeks. "Go ahead, open it," he said.

"What is it?"

"It's the murder weapon used to kill Doctor Lieberman."

"What? In this little envelope?"

He laughed. "Go on. Open it."

I opened the package and studied the photos inside. "It's the handsaw and tire iron we found in the twins' car," I said.

"That's right. They're the real deal."

"Excellent!"

"Better than the beads?"

"You know about the beads?"

"Yeah, I talked to the lab this morning."

"You don't miss a trick, do you, Carlos?"

"Not many."

"How about fingerprints?"

"None," he said, and the dimples quickly faded from his cheeks. "Sorry. The lab was unable to lift prints from either. But the blood is definitely Doctor Lieberman's. It's fresh. The tire iron has Doctor Lieberman's blood and hair on it, and the saw even contains skin and muscle tissue embedded between the teeth."

"But no prints?"

"No prints."

I stared at the photos for a while, saying nothing, as a gritty sort of determination overtook me. I felt my brows crowding low on my forehead, my lips drawing tight like white chalk lines below my mustache. I knew that Carlos could sense my frustration, knowing how close we were getting to the Stalker, yet not close enough.

"Is there any way of tracing the origin of these items?" I asked. "Can we find out who bought them?"

He shrugged. "Not likely, Tony. The tire iron could have come from anywhere; and as far as the saw, well, it's just an old run of the mill carpenter's crosscut. We can probably trace it to the original manufacturer, but I suspect we'll find it's one of a million others that could have been purchased anywhere. And that it looks like it's about twenty years old doesn't help much. Guess it's a real setback."

"Not necessarily. After all, we have the saw, the tire iron and now the beads. That's more than we had to work with for months."

"So, what do you make of it?"

"The twins' involvement?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. There is still so much that doesn't add up, like if the saw wasn't new, then where did the girls get it? And why did they set the gazebo on fire?"

Carlos considered the questions briefly before offering his version of a likely scenario. "Maybe..." he started slowly, as though the complete theory had not yet finished forming in his head. "Maybe the girls drove to the gazebo to perform a voodoo ritual of some kind: a ritual involving Doctor Lieberman's liver and a sacrificial fire. Then maybe something happened; the fire got out of control and they got scared, so they ran."

"That's a lot of maybes, Carlos."

"All possible, though."

"Yes, but you think they would run instead of taking their car?"

"I suppose. I mean, if they panicked and they just wanted to get out of there in a hurry."

"Okay. So you're saying you think they haven't come forward to reclaim the car because they knew the bloody handsaw was in the trunk, and that we'd find it?"

"Sure, Tony. Think about it. Would you return? The first thing they probably figured out was that we would search the car. Once that happened, they would have to go into hiding. My guess is that they are probably back in South Africa by now."

I nodded, acknowledging the plausible scenario. It was not as though I had not thought of it myself, but coming from Carlos, it actually sounded more credible. I leaned back in my chair and propped a foot up on my desk.

"So tell me about the jumper cables. Got anything on them yet?"

“Ah, yes, the cables...” he said, and the trademark dimples returned. I took that as a sign he had probably saved the best for last. “Well, Tony, we just might have something there for you.”

I pulled my foot from the desktop, dropping it to the floor and squirming to attention in my chair. “You have something on the cables?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag with tiny strands of fibers inside. “Know what this is?”

He handed me the baggie. I smiled curiously. “I’m guessing carpet fibers?”

“You got it. We pulled them from the clamps on the jumper cables. Those are carpet fibers from the materials used to line the trunks of automobiles, and it is not the same color as the carpet in the Lexis. I did some checking. Those fibers came from matting used to line the trunks of late model General Motors vehicles. We’re still working on narrowing down the make model and year, but so far it looks like a Chevy Cavalier or Malibu maybe, manufactured between ‘95’ and ‘98’. I’ll know more in a day or two.”

The news absolutely rejuvenated me. I sprang to my feet and kissed Carlos on the cheek. “Rodriguez, my friend,” I grabbed my coat and hat, “in a day or two, I’ll not only tell you what make, model and year that car is, but I’ll also have it in the pound, dusted, stripped and tagged for evidence. And if my hunch is correct, I’ll only need to check out a few quick leads before that happens.”

I sprinted off before Carlos could ask me where I was going. By the time he figured it out, he could likely have kicked himself for not thinking of it first. It is not that his way would not have narrowed it down eventually, but mine just proved another example of old-fashioned sleuthing beating out newfangled technology.

It did not take me long at the Department of Motor Vehicles to track down the registration of all the cars owned by the surviving workshop members. In all, there were two Fords, one Jaguar, a Toyota and a Chevrolet. They belonged to Michael, Leona, Valerie, Lilith and Gordon, respectively. Not surprisingly, Gordon’s Chevrolet was a 1998 red and gold Cavalier, one of the cars Carlos had mentioned on the list. Within twenty-four hours, we had Gordon down at the station, questioning him on the murder of Doctor Peter Lieberman, while officers from my precinct executed a court-ordered search warrant on his apartment.

“Do you know why you’re here, Gordon?” I asked from across a small wooden table in the interrogation room.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, his fingers drumming nervously on the tabletop. “You think I killed Doctor Lieberman.”

“Well, I do have to ask you some questions about that. Before I do, I also have to inform you that you’re entitled to have your attorney present.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“No, son. You’re not under arrest, but this is a formal interview. Anything you say to me now can and will be used against you in a court of law, if it comes to that. So, do you wish to have an attorney present?”

“No. I don’t need one.”

“Are you sure? Because if you cannot afford one, we will—”

“I said I don’t need one!”

“Very well.”

I took a deep breath before shifting my eyes to one side of the room and giving a nod at the mirror on the wall. Gordon followed my lead, also turning his attention to the wall. He assumed he was looking at a two-way mirror and that several officers and a video camera were on the other side documenting everything. He exaggerated a wink and blew a kiss into the mirror. I tried not to smile, but the camera caught me doing so anyway.

“All right, Gordon. Let me start off by asking you where you were the night of Doctor Lieberman’s murder.”

Gordon smiled. “I already told you, I was at the Plaza, playing video games with Michael all night.”

I nodded. “All right, then. Let me ask you this. Do you own a 1998 Chevy Cavalier, License BXK-278?”

“Yes.”

“Do you ever let anyone else drive the car?”

“No, sir. I’m the only one that drives it.”

“Do you keep it locked up at all times?”

“Of course. It’s not the nicest car on the road, but I still don’t want it stolen.”

"No, of course not. That being the case, is it fair to say that, since you keep it locked up, then there is nobody else in a position to put something into your car or take something out without your knowledge or permission?"

"That's fair. Not unless they also have a key, and I doubt that."

"I see. Well, the reason I ask is that Doctor Lieberman was murdered out front of the research center the other night, and upon our investigation at the scene, we found, among other things, a set of automobile jumper cables. It appears they were used to tie Doctor Lieberman to a tree limb."

Gordon's face grew instantly pale. I expected him to put an end to the interview at that moment, changing his mind about wanting to have a lawyer present. He did no such thing, and so I continued.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush, Gordon. Even as we speak, I have officers searching your apartment, your car and even the trash receptacle outside your building. It is only a matter of time before we complete a fiber analysis on the lining in the trunk of your car and match it to the fibers found on the jumper cables. You can save me some time and trouble by telling me now that those jumper cables are yours and that you used them in the Lieberman murder."

Gordon shook his head, disbelieving the dirty reality that the cables had betrayed him. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he said. "I don't own jumper cables."

"Oh, don't you? What about a spare tire? Do you own one of those?"

Gordon thought about that. It seemed uncomplicated enough. "Yeah," he answered, and he smiled nervously. "I own a spare."

"Of course, you do. Everyone carries a spare."

"Yeah. It's silly not to."

"Sure, it is. So, naturally, if you carry a spare tire then you carry a tire iron. Correct?"

Gordon snorted when he laughed. "Yes, of course. What good is a spare tire without a tire iron?"

"Exactly. So, tell me. Do you know where your tire iron is now?"

That is when the farm-boy smile slipped from his face. "Where it is?"

"Yes. It's a simple question. Do you know where your tire iron is right now?"

"Well, I...I guess it's in my trunk."

I shook my head. "It's not in your trunk."

"No?"

"Uh-uh. We have it locked up in our evidence room, along with the jumper cables. I suspect they will eventually become people's evidence A & B at your trial."

"My trial?"

"Yes. You see we found the tire iron in the trunk of Shekina's car, along with a carpenter's handsaw, covered in Doctor Lieberman's blood. Now then, the tire iron does not go with the jack set found in Shekina's car, but it, too, has blood, hair and tiny carpet fibers all over it. My guess is that the tire iron came from your car, Gordon, along with your jumper cables."

I waited for a response, but the hapless young man sat motionless, paralyzed with fright. I leaned forward over the table. "Gordon. Do you want to know what I think? I think you just got yourself caught up in something very bad with some very bad people. If you come clean and tell me what I need to know, I will see to it that the DA goes easy on you. So, what do you say?"

Gordon's gaze began to thaw. He swallowed back the lump in his throat as beads of sweat, coaxed by the interrogation lights, form in horizontal lines along his forehead. He assured himself it was no coincidence that my chair sat directly below the ceiling vent, which blew cool, refreshing air across my face, teasing my thinning gray hair with its subtle breeze. The insult, by design, was supposed to help wear his resistance, instead, I think it may have strengthened his resolve.

"No!" he said. "I know where you're trying to take this, Detective. I had nothing to do with Doctor Lieberman's murder. Anyone from the institute could have taken those things from the trunk of my car. I have an alibi and a witness. You can ask Michael Dietrich. We were together all night."

I rocked back in my chair, lacing my fingers across my chest. "Yes, I don't doubt it," I said, "but if you two were together all night, you were not at the Plaza playing video games. You were busy killing Doctor Lieberman."

Gordon blinked in mock surprise. "Excuse me?"

“Michael alleges he was home alone all night. After you first told me your alibi, we checked the surveillance cameras at the Plaza. You are nowhere on the tapes. Face it, Gordon. You have no witnesses. You have no alibi. You have nothing.” I leaned forward again and whispered low, under the listening ears of Carlos and the cameras on the other side of the mirror. “I hope your friends appreciate your loyalty while you sit in prison rotting away for the rest of your life. I doubt they would do as much for you.”

Gordon withdrew his folded hands from the table. He lowered his head and tucked his chin to his chest. Burying his face in his hands, began to weep. The pathetic sobbing continued openly for several minutes before he pulled himself together enough to speak again.

“Detective?” he peeked out from behind splayed fingers. “I think I’d like to stop now. I want to talk to a lawyer.”

A featureless black phone, void of dial and buttons, hung on the wall next to the two-way mirror. It rang once. I picked it up.

“Yes,” I said, and listened. Gordon imagined I had been expecting the call. What he heard of the conversation was “Oh? Uh-huh. I see!” I hung up the phone without saying goodbye, turned to Gordon and said, “Son, I think getting a lawyer is a good idea. You probably should get yourself a good one. That call was from one of the officers searching your apartment. I forgot to tell you earlier, but at the crime scene, we also found a button from a man’s shirt. We suspect it broke off during the scuffle Doctor Lieberman had with his assailants. The coroner found it wedged between the doctor’s collar and the back of his neck. It did not come off the shirt the doctor wore that night. In fact, we searched Doctor Lieberman’s home. He does not own a shirt with those same buttons. But do you know who does?”

“Yeah,” said Gordon, his head dropping to his chest again. “Me.”

“You should have gotten rid of everything, son. That’s the number one rule. Get rid of everything.”

I turned toward the mirror and made a slashing motion across my throat. The camera on the other side of the glass stopped taping.

“Gordon, I’m afraid I have enough to hold you on suspicion of murder for the death of Doctor Peter Lieberman. When you pull yourself together, we will let you make your phone call. Use it wisely.”

## Fourteen

Something Gordon said in an earlier interview made me want to question Officer Burke again. It was a comment he made referring to Doctor Lieberman and how the Doctor suddenly developed, as he put it, ‘a wicked headache’. I was not sure if it meant anything, but I thought it warranted looking into further.

Officer Bruce Burke pulled patrol duty the night of Doctor Lieberman’s murder. I assigned him to security in charge of surveillance. I remembered reading something in his report about observing seven of the workshop members outside in the parking lot. They all left the building together, mulled around one of the cars for a while, and then vacated the premises, leaving only Doctor Lieberman alone inside the building. Burke also mentioned that he had developed ‘a wicked headache’, compelling him to call the station for permission to leave the surveillance early. After reading the report again, I decided to call on Burke to clarify a few of the details. I caught up with him later that day at his home.

Burke greeted me at the front door and invited me in. He looked tired, as though he had not slept or shaved in days. I could see his wife out in the kitchen preparing dinner. He hollered to her that they had company, but with the children screaming, the dogs barking and the TV blaring, it seemed unlikely she heard.

He started across the room, motioning for me to follow, as he stepped over piles of clothes and toys that lay scattered on the floor in a virtual minefield. Together, we negotiated around the obstacle course, tiptoeing in some places, flat footing in others, until reaching the den on the other side of the house.

“Gets kind of crazy around here,” he said, closing the door in a hurry. I got the feeling that his den was his only sanctuary in an otherwise chaotic life. “It’s no wonder sometimes I can’t wait to get back out on patrol where I can catch a little peace and quiet.”



“Yes, I see what you mean,” I said. I glanced at the bookshelf behind him and noticed several framed photos of the family. In all, I counted five children, two dogs, a cat, a hamster and a parakeet, plus the wife—definitely a large tribe. “These are all your kids?”

He smiled proudly. “Yup, all mine. How ‘bout you, Detective? Any kids?”

“Me? Uh-uh, no way. None for me thanks. I’m too old for that. I’d rather leave it to you young guys.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t know what you’re missing.” He eased himself into a Wingback by the window. “A couple of kids can keep you out of trouble—make an honest man out of you.”

“Oh, there you have it, then. That’s reason enough for me right there not to have kids. Life’s no fun unless you’re getting into a little trouble now and then.”

Burke shook his head and laughed politely. “So, what’s on your mind? I know you didn’t come all the way out here just to talk about kids.”

“Well, a couple of things,” I said. I crossed the room and settled into the chair next to his. “First of all, I wanted to see how you were doing. You okay? They tell me you requested a couple of days off after learning about Doctor Lieberman. They said you—”

“Went bonkers?”

“No. They didn’t say that. Just that it hit you.... You know.”

“I let him down. I let—”

“It wasn’t your fault. You went by the book.”

“A man is dead.”

“Yes, and we’ll get the bastards that did it. In the meantime, the important thing is you and your family.”

“I know. I’ll be fine, really. I spoke to the Captain today. He wants me to come back to work tomorrow.”

“Do you feel ready?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, though his words were not entirely convincing. “I guess I’ll just have to get used to it.”

I reached over and grabbed his wrist. “You better not. I mean it. Listen. Let me offer you a bit of advice. When it comes to things like this, you learn to deal with it, but you never get used to it. The day that happens, you might as well ask for a desk job, because your instincts as a good street cop will be gone.”

“Easier said, Detective. With all due respect, I’m sure there are many things an older, more experienced cop like you can teach a rookie like me, but learning to deal with the death of an innocent man because of something I failed to do, well, uh-ah, that’s not one of them.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I can’t. No one can. What I offer you is advice, not instructions. It’s just something to think about.”

“And I will,” Burke said. He got up and made his way to the bar on the other side of the room. There he poured himself a whiskey and slammed it back. He filled his glass again, along with a second, which he handed to me.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I said, waving off the offering. “I’m still on the clock. In fact, that is the other reason I am here. I need to ask you a few questions about the other night, if you don’t mind.”

Burke reclaimed his seat by the window. He belted back the whiskey in one quick slam and then followed it up with the one I had just refused. It hit him like a cold wave, perking him up and knocking him for a loop all at the same time. After several deep breaths to tame the liquor’s bite, he turned to me, refocused his vision and answered as though nothing had interrupted his stride. “Not at all. Ask away.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a copy of the report he had filed the night of Doctor Lieberman’s murder. “You mention here in your report that you came down with a headache while on watch that night.”

He nodded. “I did. It came all of a sudden, too, right out of the blue.”

“I believe you used the word, wicked?”

“Yeah. No other way to explain it.”

“Have you ever had a headache come on like that before?”

“No, sir. Not like that one. It’s almost as if someone just flicked a switch, and bam! It came on so fast. It scared the hell out of me. I thought I had a brain aneurysm or something.”

“I see. What happened after that, after you left? Did the headache continue?”

“No, it didn’t. That’s the funny thing. You see, even as I drove away, I felt it getting better. Seemed like the further away I drove, the better the headache got. By the time I got home, I felt great. I made myself a sandwich, watched a little television, had a couple of beers and then went to bed.”

“And the headache never came back?”

“Nope. Except when I got the call around six the next morning, you know, after they found Doctor Lieberman. When I heard that, well, I got sick, literally.”

“Burke. Let me ask you, and forgive me, there really is no easy way of putting this. But about your drinking.”

“No, sir! I know what you’re thinking. I did not have a drop to drink that night, not before I got home. I was as sober as a preacher on Sunday morning. I swear! The headache is a complete mystery.”

I leaned back in my chair, but not before reaching over and patting Burke on the back of the hand. “I believe you,” I said. “You understand. I had to ask.”

For Officer Burke, the headache may have been a mystery, but the answer seemed clear to me now. I had no doubt that Michael, or one of the others in the group, caused Burke’s headache through psycho kinesis. But it would have made no sense getting into the details about that with Burke. I turned to him and said, “Bruce. That night, when everyone left the building, did they all go straight home?”

He looked at me puzzled. “I don’t know. Who’s to say? They could have gone home; they could have gone to a movie. Hell, they could have gone anywhere.”

I laughed. “Yes, of course. I’m sorry. Let me rephrase that. Did they all get right into their cars and drive away?”

He thought about it a moment, and I think he was about to answer yes, when he suddenly remembered. “No!” he said. “They didn’t, now that you mention it. As I recall, they met outside in the parking lot immediately after exiting the building. They gathered by one of the cars. One of them got something out of her car for the others to look at.”

“Do you remember what it was, a pair of jumper cables, perhaps?”

“Ah-uh. Nothing like that.” Burke scratched his head. “She had a bag, a brown paper bag. I really didn’t give it much thought. It didn’t seem like a big deal at the time.”

“Do you have any idea what was in it?”

“Sorry. Whatever she had, she didn’t take it out. I figured it was probably a bag of cookies or something.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know. I guess because of the little old lady. I figured what else could it be?”

“You mean, Millie Bradford?”

Burke stood up and staggered back to the bar, where he poured himself another drink. In the background, I heard Burke’s wife calling him to dinner. Burke let the call go unanswered. Not until he refilled his glass and took the first sip, did he answer my question.

“I guess so,” he said, slipping right into his next sip of whiskey. “If you mean, Doctor Lieberman’s assistant, then yeah, Bradford, that’s the gal.”

“What happened next?” I rose to my feet, prepared to knock the glass out of his hand if he dared take one more sip before answering. “What happened after they took turns looking into the bag?”

Burke’s wife called again, only now the dogs were barking, and the kids on the other side of the door shouted for their dad to let them in.

“Nothing happened.” Burke sounded tense from the excitement building outside the room. “That’s when they all got into their cars and drove off. A little while later, I got the headache and I called in for permission to leave my post.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. No real story there. Sorry.”

It may not have been much of a story, but it was enough: another piece of the puzzle and another hunch on which to act. I thanked Burke with a handshake and a pat on the back.

Once outside, I could hear the dogs, the wife and the children all settling down for a semi-quiet dinner. Perhaps, I thought, Burke’s family life offers just enough chaos to help keep it all in perspective. It brought to

mind a line that Carlos often used to sum up life's madness. 'Sometimes you win; sometimes you lose. And sometimes it's all just one big push'. For Burke, I imagined there was a lot more pushing than anything else.

## Fifteen

The following morning, I called on one of the few people with whom I had really been putting off having another interview. In my entire career, I had never met a person so perplexing, so complicated and so intriguing that I actually worried about doing the interview for fear of revealing more information than I got in return. Of course, in my entire career, I had never met another like Lilith Adams.

I drove to Lilith's home, imagining what surprises awaited me. Having never known a witch before, I worried about walking into a situation more dangerous than I perceived. The thought provoked me, and before long, my imagination tripped into overdrive. Previews of doom and anarchy raced through my brain. I imagined how I might approach the house and knock politely on the door. I would straighten my coat and tie, trying hard not to look at the peephole as Lilith sized me up from the other side. The door would suddenly open, and legions of vicious black cats would run out to besiege me. I would struggle, but in vain, to fight off the clawing felines while a swarm of killer flying monkeys swooped down to tear me apart limb-by-limb. I imagined I would probably remember nothing until only my eyes rolled up and peered out from a bubbling, boiling vat of witch's brew. There I might see Lilith sprinkling a fine dust of dried, mutilated bat wings over my pupils, until everything turned black once more. My eyes would then roll back and sink to the bottom of her pungent-smelling concoction and boil away. And Lilith would laugh, delighted by the thought of another mere mortal sacrificed in the name of Satan and all that is unholy.

It was not the sort of apocalyptic foreshadowing I was known for, but my imagination had grown remarkably vast in the preceding weeks, allowing me to conceive of far greater probabilities in a world I perceived most improbable. I began to believe there was nothing I could do now that would seem too ridiculous if it safeguard me from evil. As an added deterrent, I even began carrying the witch's ladder Lilith made for me earlier. I kept it in my coat pocket, not so much for the magical powers, (I was still not convinced of that) but more for the general luck that one might expect from a lucky rabbit's foot or a four-leaf clover. I had come to recognize that many people attributed good luck to various object of faith, but that bad luck seldom found its blame in anything other than just plain old bad luck. I considered that the validity of an object's worth as a lucky piece could only be what the holder believed. So exactly that logic I employed now to conclude why carrying the witch's ladder was a reasonable precaution. From the beginning, Lilith contended that the witch's ladder would be useless unless the holder believed in its powers. Several months ago, I would have scoffed at the notion of a simple piece of rope possessing magical powers, but again, several months ago I had yet to meet the unusual members of Doctor Lieberman's workshop.

I arrived at Lilith's home shortly before noon, preparing for the worst. In my mind, I had envisioned a medieval-looking building, perched on a desolated hilltop and framed in a tangle of muddy-gray skies. I imagined crumbling brownstone walls, thick with mold and covered in mesh-like blankets of creeping ivy. I pictured shutters, clinging precariously to rusted hinges, blowing haphazardly in the wind, whipping and slapping their rotted, splintered boards recklessly against broken windows and battered sills. The scenario, though unlikely, seeing that no breeze stirred at all that morning, seemed entirely possible in my head, and my heartbeat quickened at the very thought of it.

As I pulled my car into the driveway, however, a scene very different materialized, and I saw the opposite of what I feared. I found a house more pleasant than my own, with shiny white vinyl siding, pleasingly trimmed in warm hues of peach and gray pastels, and tacky little garden gnomes peeking out mischievously from behind miniature plastic windmills placed strategically along the walkway.

I found her lawn meticulously manicured, amazingly green and lush. Even her multicolored annuals had gotten a healthy head start on the growing season, beating out her neighbor's botanical hopes by several weeks or more. It lead me to wonder if Lilith possessed a green thumb, or if she had simply used her witchcraft to substitute good home and garden skills with home and garden spells.

Trepidation aside, I approached the front entry, stopping at the door. I pulled at my coat bottom to work out the wrinkles and straightened my tie. My fist clenched as I reached for the doorknocker, a large lion's head with a brass ring in its mouth and a snarl so real that I almost heard it growl. My knuckles whitened; my arm felt heavy and dull, as though a brick had been tied to my wrist. I drew back on the brass ring, but suddenly stopped when I noticed the doorknob turning slowly on its own. At once, the visions of crazed felines returned. I snapped a quick glance to my left and to my right, and then over my shoulder, spying escape routes in the event my worst fears happened. I eased backward, away from the door just a little, allowing room for a running head start if needed. But as I prepared my retreat, something mildly wonderful happened. The door crept open several inches, moaning on its hinges, as if calling for me to enter. I stepped closer, and the door opened wider, but instead of hordes of angry cats from hell lashing out and attacking me, a single white kitten poked her head around the corner, managing barely to muster up a tiny, squeaky meow.

I looked down and smiled at possibly the cutest little kitten I had ever seen. She bravely ventured outside and approached cautiously on shaky legs, as though just learning how to use them. The irony was not lost on me. I laughed to myself, comparing how only moments ago I, too, felt skittish about the unknown, intimidated like the kitten before me.

I watched the kitten curiously sniff at the tips of my shoes, her scrawny tail pointing straight up in the air, as she explored yet another new scent in her bold and wondrous new world. A sight to behold, I thought, and one too irresistible to refuse. I made a move to bend down, hoping to befriend the kitten, when my foot slipped backward, scuffing the pavement and startling the timid creature. The kitten jerked her nose back with a snap and then turned tail, scampering off into the house, presumably under a nice safe bed.

I straightened to attention and reworked the creases in his pants. I peeked into the house through the slight opening in the door, pushing on it gently to open it further without seeming too nosy. Inside, I saw no one, and if not for the stereo playing low, I would likely believe the house empty.

I pushed again on the door, this time enough to cause it to open fully. It swung back until the doorknob bumped quietly into the wall behind it.

"Is anyone home?" I called, though just louder than the music on the stereo. I listened, but there came no reply.

"Hello? Ms. Adams?"

Not even the cat responded. Already, my thoughts began swirling around images of creatures big and small, lying in wait, lurking in shadows, ready to strike at the drop of a hat. The situation seemed much too eerie. Nothing made sense. I had seen the doorknob turn just before the door opened, before the kitten came out. I was sure of it. There was no way it could have opened by itself, and certainly the cat could have done it.

I called out once more, this time louder in case Lilith had gone upstairs or to another room. "Hello! Is anyone home?"

Still no one answered. I convinced myself that something was wrong. Police instincts took over. I reached behind my back, under my coattail where I kept a holstered .38-caliber handgun in my waistband. I drew my weapon and stepped over the threshold in a classic police stance, announcing my presence properly.

"This is Police Detective Anthony Marcella. Any persons inside, come out slowly with your hands up!"

Still, only the stereo kept me company. I moved in on a cushion of air, sweeping through the house room-by-room, ducking behind walls and furniture and jumping out with the element of surprise, gun ready, eyes scanning rapidly for anything that moved. Several times I found myself only an instant away from shooting a number of fleeting figures, finding, to my relief, that the only apparent threats came from my own reflection in the mirror, or more accurately, mirrors. There were dozens of them, perhaps scores. In some rooms, I counted no less than ten or twelve mirrors, sometimes as many on a single wall. Some were large, as big as windows; others smaller, no bigger than the lens of my reading glasses.

"Man-o-man," I uttered, thinking about Lilith and adding, "Didn't imagine you the narcissistic type."

I continued my sweep down the hall, curious of the oddity, and now of Lilith, evidently so incredibly self-absorbed in her own good looks that she would need a room full of mirrors at every turn. I imagined that with such a setup, she could likely see herself from anywhere in the house.

Then it dawned on me. The mirrors were not for Lilith to see herself; instead, they were there so that she could see the other mirrors. Their alignment, so particular, hung on walls in such a way that they allowed her to

see perfectly into adjacent rooms by reflecting images from one mirror to another. In some cases, she could see through several rooms and even down the hall through a series of reflections from as many as a dozen mirrors at once. The sheer logistics of mirror placements seemed almost unbelievable, yet definitely not coincidental.

I tried to imagine why she might find it necessary to see from one room to the next. Paranoia, perhaps? She certainly did not come across as the insecure type back at the workshop. Maybe she has enemies—a reason for needing to look over her shoulder. That seemed possible. But who, Shekina, Akasha? Then it hit me. I suddenly realized that in every room, at least one mirror faced a window, and if my calculations were correct, I believed that on any given night, especially when the moon was full, Lilith could probably see its reflection in the mirrors from anywhere in the house. I considered that for most of the occult, their ritualistic sacrifices involving blood usually involved a full moon, as well. I surmised that if Lilith made sacrificial offerings to pagan Gods, then she might certainly do so at her convenience from any room in the house. I found the thought unsettling and considered it another reminder that things are not always what they seem. “Know your foe,” I uttered under my breath. The rest of the phrase went unspoken. Between friend and foe, when it came to Lilith, I still was not sure which one was she.

Having made a clean sweep of the residence and finding no one home, I holstered my weapon and headed through the house toward the opened front door. I passed through the kitchen and into the living room when a voice called out from behind.

“Leaving so soon?”

I wheeled about on the ball of my foot, reaching instinctively for my revolver.

“Oh, come now, Detective. I hardly think you need that in here.”

I looked around the room and back at Lilith. She seemed to have appeared from nowhere, and now stood in the corner of the kitchen, far from any door or window. She wore a long white robe that hung nearly to the floor, and on her feet, unbelievably, a pair of fluffy white slippers that looked remarkably like the little white kitten I had seen on her doorstep earlier. I stood motionless, stunned and a little scared.

“How did you, I mean what—where did you come from?”

“Where did ‘I’ come from?” She laughed, and for the first time it sounded like the laugh of a witch. “Why, I live here, Detective. Perhaps I should ask you the same thing. Why are you in my home?”

“I came to see you. The door opened. I mean, after your cat came out, so I let myself in. I called for you. Didn’t you hear me?”

“My cat? Oh, come now. You will have to do better. I don’t own a cat.”

“Sure you do. You have a cute little white kitten. She looks just like...”

I stopped before embarrassing myself further. Lilith smiled at me hauntingly, shaking her head, as if anticipating my next words. I smiled back, though not as easily. I straightened up, and my smile fell away.

“Never mind,” I said. “The cat’s not important. I am sorry for the intrusion, but since I’m here, if you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

She shrugged. “Hmm, I suppose.” She looked back at the kitchen table and seemed to point to it with just the arching of a brow. “Why don’t you have a seat? I’ll brew us up a nice hot cup of herbal tea. I think you’ll enjoy it. I grow the herbs myself, you know, right outside in my garden.”

I obliged, and took a seat at the table facing her. “Herbal tea?” Immediately the image of the boiling witch’s concoction that I had so vividly imagined on my ride over came back to haunt me. A sudden chill rippled down my spine, causing me to shudder. “Oh, so that’s what you call it.”

“Excuse me.”

“Nothing. A little tea sounds nice. Thank you.” I removed my hat and placed it on the table next to a dandelion centerpiece. “You know, Ms. Adams, before we get started, I feel I should tell you something.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It’s about Gordon Walsh. We’re holding him downtown at the station.”

I watched for Lilith’s reaction, but she made no effort to turn around. She continued filling the teakettle with water. When she spoke, her remark came casually over her shoulder. “Gordon Walsh, you say. And why are you holding him?”

“We’re holding him on charges that he conspired to kill Doctor Lieberman.”

Lilith finished filling the kettle. She set it on the stove and lit the gas burner, all the while humming softly. The unnatural indifference in her attitude struck me as a sign of her uncanny ability to block people out of her thoughts—something she apparently practiced routinely even though she knew I could not read them anyway.

“Conspired to kill Doctor Lieberman?” she said. “That would imply a conspiracy, would it not?”

“Yes, Ms. Adams. It would.”

“I see. I suppose that’s why you’re here this morning. You want to know if I’m a part of that conspiracy?”

“I’m just here to ask a few questions. That’s all. Of course, you are not obligated to answer any if you prefer not to. But I would appreciate anything you can tell me.”

“Sure,” she said, and she turned her head in my direction to offer a wink. “Ask me anything you like. I’ll tell you whatever I can.”

“Whatever you can? Or whatever you know?”

“Hum... Well that depends on your questions, now doesn’t it?”

She turned back and continued preparing the herbal tea. I took the opportunity to sneak my hand into my pocket and pull out the witch’s ladder. I gently loosened one of the knots on the line, keeping it carefully out of sight, under the table.

“I talked to Officer Burke,” I told her. “You know, the officer on duty at the Center the night Doctor Lieberman was killed?”

Lilith did not comment; she continued chopping up her homegrown array of dried herbs and packing them into a tea strainer. The water on the stove was now coming to a boil, and I could not clear my thoughts of how mutilated bat wings might somehow make its way into the herbal mix. I tried to swallow, choked back the ball in my throat, and then continued.

“Anyway, he tells me he saw you all leave the building the other night; said you gathered around Millie’s car and that she took something out to show you. He said it looked like a brown bag and that everyone seemed pretty excited to look inside.”

My tone remained calm and direct, and except for the throat clearing, I felt sure I controlled the pace of the interview without letting on how uncomfortable it made me. I watched carefully for even the subtlest of signs that I might knock Lilith off balance by anything I said, but she remained unflappable. Meanwhile, under the table, my hands were still busily working the first knot on the witch’s ladder. With a final tug, the knot broke loose. I pulled the ends apart and fired off the next question.

“So tell me, Lilith. What exactly was in the bag?”

The words barely left my lips, when a sudden flash, as brilliant and blinding as the sun, struck the back of my eyes like a bolt of lightning. I snapped to attention, and a powerful vision streaked through my brain, gripping my senses and numbing my body. It came as a memory, or a flashback of sorts, only not a flashback of mine, but of Lilith’s. I knew immediately that having asked the question so suddenly, Lilith could not help but picture the contents of the bag in her mind. She had to think about the contents in order to concentrate on deliberately giving me a wrong answer. The amazing part came, not in knowing that Lilith would conclude a mental image in her mind, but that the witch’s ladder really did work!

The moment came as an epiphany for me, and solidified my beliefs in the powers of the supernatural. I had focused my attention on reading Lilith’s thoughts at the precise moment in which she formed the mental image of the bag, and surprisingly, with the help of the witch’s ladder, I could see that image. So now, even as Lilith searched for a suitable lie, unaware I had breached her defenses, I possessed a clear picture of the bloody monogrammed towels and the reaction of everyone who saw them in the parking lot that night.

Officer Burke told me that he thought the bag contained cookies, and so I tried hard to concentrate on the same thing, hoping to solicit a similar response from Lilith. Time seemed to screech to a halt. At first I feared Lilith would catch on to my game, but I kept a straight face and a steady nerve, and as the image of the bloody towels faded and thoughts of cookies took its place, Lilith, at last, turned back to face me.

“Oh, that,” she said, brushing her hair off the top of her shoulder. “That was just a silly bag of...cookies.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Millie baked them that afternoon.”

“Really?” I said, nodding. “That’s what Officer Burke thought it was.”

Lilith smiled and turned back to her work, never suspecting my use of the witch's ladder. She continued preparing the herbal tea, satisfied with her performance, and me, satisfied with mine.

"Did I mention we found the murder weapon used on Doctor Lieberman?" I asked.

"Did you?" She sounded surprised. "You found the saw?"

Finally, the slip-up I had waited for. "Yes, but how did you know it was a saw? We didn't release that information to the press."

She stood frozen, guilt-riddled and speechless, surprised at herself for slipping up so carelessly. She laid her knife down on the counter, took a deep breath, and let it out softly. "Of course not, Detective," she said without turning. "I didn't hear it in the news. I got it from you. Don't you remember? I'm psychic."

I smiled confidently behind her back. I felt good now, having managed to knock her off guard and set her up for the next question. With my hands still below the table, I loosened the next knot on the ladder and untied it with ease.

"You know, there's one thing about the handsaw I just cannot seem to picture in my mind, Ms. Adams. Do you know what that is?"

"Hardly, Detective," she said, and I could hear the frustration building in her voice. "I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

"It's Gordon," I said. "I just can't picture him using the saw to cut Doctor Lieberman's head off. Can you picture that?"

Immediately, her mind flashed back to the night of the murder. Visions of Michael came streaming into my head via hers. I saw him bending over Doctor Lieberman's inverted body, as it swung precariously from the tree limb by Gordon's jumper cables. The flashback continued, with Michael using the rusty handsaw to hack through Doctor Lieberman's neck, causing blood to spurt and spew like a Texas oilrig onto his shirt, shoes and pants. Visualizing the gruesome imagery, I recoiled sharply and gasped, and in the process, unintentionally revealed to Lilith my underhanded maneuver.

"So, it's Michael!" I said, fearing nothing to lose by my allegations now. "Come clean, Lilith. Tell me everything you know about Doctor Lieberman's murder!"

Lilith turned on her heels, clutching firmly in her white-knuckled fist the knife she had used to chop tealeaves so harmlessly just moments before. She stood firm and rigid, simmering with anger, seething and sneering at me like a wounded dog. The look of betrayal grew cold on her face. Her eyes flared wickedly from ebony to fiery red, searing everything within her gaze.

Suddenly, the walls began to rumble. The floorboards groaned and splintered before buckling beneath my feet. Dishes danced nervously in the cupboards, rattling on shelves now precariously hanging on their pins.

"You would be wise to leave now, Detective," she murmured through clinched teeth, displaying amazing restraint for retribution.

I stumbled to my feet, wasting no time in accepting her offer and exercising as much courage as I could muster. I put my hat on and walked briskly for the door, resisting the urge to run like hell. I stepped outside and heard the door slam shut behind me. Following that, a thunderous commotion of busting glass and furniture raised a hellish ruckus from every room in the house simultaneously. I imagined a cyclone had formed from within, and now wrecked havoc upon havoc, blowing out windows and sending debris flying out into the street. I feared for Lilith's safety, yet somehow knew that she stood in no greater danger than I.

Bits of glass still whistled past my head, pelting the little garden gnomes as I made a retreat to my car. I hopped into the front seat, just as one of the gnomes took a conical projectile through the heart. I started the car and threw it in reverse when Lilith's front door flew open wide. To my utter astonishment, I witnessed a tiny white kitten darting from the house and into the neighboring woods. I rolled down my window and only then realized that the devastating sounds of destruction coming from the house had mysteriously stopped. As quickly as it began, the fury had ceased. I sat back in my seat and laughed to myself.

So much for flying monkeys, I thought. Witches today have no sense of humor.

One of the garden gnomes that had escaped the wrath of flying debris peeked out curiously from behind a windmill and watched as I pulled the car out of the driveway and headed back to the station. It had been a most interesting afternoon: one I knew that no one would ever believe. Yet that didn't matter, not as long as I believed, and I did. I believed in Lilith's powers as a witch; a witch's power over nature, and the power of the

witch's ladder over both. With that in mind, I reached for my coat pocket to make sure I still had the witch's ladder in my possession. A smile of reassurance settled over my lips when I felt it still there.

## Sixteen

After leaving Lilith's, I met with Carlos Rodriguez at the police station to compare the latest notes. There were few at the precinct that I could talk to about what happened at Lilith's. Most of the men there think that I tend to exaggerate things a bit. Carlos does, too, but the difference is that at least he listens. He may kid me if my stories sound too far-fetched, but he knows when to stop. I found him back in the corner by my desk. He did not look happy to see me, but I guess I get that a lot, too around there.

"Carlos!" I said. "You are not going to believe what just happened to me. It is the most amazing thing. I just came back from the Adam's place and—"

Carlos threw his hand up in front of me. "He's dead, Tony."

I stopped and blinked back the moment. "What? Who's dead?"

"The Walsh kid." He handed me the report. "We found him this morning. He hung himself in his cell."

My jaw went slack. I took the report from Carlos, but did not look at it. All around me, the sounds of a busy precinct bustled, but only the words Carlos spoke came ringing back in my ears over and over: 'He's dead, Tony, dead, dead...'

Carlos stood quietly, his loss for words filling him with a sense of awkwardness. I walk back to my desk and drop into the chair, my distant stare fixed forward, though focused on nothing in particular.

"I'm sorry, Tony," he offered, knowing how I would blame myself for the tragedy. "I should have had a suicide watch on him."

"No, it's not your fault. He wasn't your collar. It wasn't up to you to place a watch on him. It was up to me. Damn it!" I pounded the desk with my fist. "I failed him, Carlos. I failed him miserably."

Carlos neither agreed nor disagreed. A response either way would not have been the right one. Instead, he gazed impassively at the floor, nudging the desk leg with his toe, and giving me room to vent. But I would not have it. I screwed up and I knew it. Venting would not change a thing, and it certainly would not help Gordon any. If I needed to, and I still might, I could beat myself up over it later. I tucked my anger up my sleeves and cleared my throat to get Carlos' attention.

"Does his kin know?" I asked.

"His kin?"

"His father, mother, family."

"Tony, he has no kin."

"What?"

"I thought you knew. I mean—"

"Never mind. Call Father John at Saint Andrews. Tell him to start planning a funeral. Have him bill me for whatever expenses the church incurs."

"What about you? You okay?"

"I'm fine. I just need a little time to let it sink in. How about getting us some coffee while I look over this report?"

"You got it, Tony." He walked away and came back a few minutes later with some hot coffee from the machine in the lounge. He handed me a cup. "Tell me what you were about to say earlier. Something about me not believing what happened to you?"

"What happened to me?"

"Yes. You said something amazing happened to you."

"I did?"

"When you walked in."



“That’s right! I started to tell you. Carlos, the most amazing thing happened to me at Lilith Adams’ place!” I pulled him in closer, assuring his undivided attention. “I read her thoughts!” I said, bubbling with exhilaration. “I asked her a question, and as she thought about the answer, I read it!”

Carlos shook his head and laughed guardedly. “I know you’re putting me on.” He looked over his shoulder. Several of our fellow officers glanced discreetly in our direction, some smiling. “The guys are listening, Tony, so I will give you a chance to retract your statement before the entire department labels you a loon.”

“Me? A loon? What, because I have an open mind? Because I have seen things my brain can’t explain? The truth is out there, Carlos, and I have seen it.”

“Tony, if you have seen things that your brain cannot explain, then maybe it is because your brain has been influenced by the mystique of what goes on in that workshop.”

“No. You are wrong. I read her mind.”

“Did you?” Carlos reached up and broke free of the grip I had on his lapels. “Tony. Is it possible that you asked Lilith a question to which you already knew the response? Then when she answered as you predicted, you simply thought you read her mind.”

“No, Carlos. That is not it at all, my friend. Although she did answer exactly as I predicted, the image I saw while reading her mind was another thing altogether.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes. It makes perfect sense. I asked Lilith about the contents of a brown paper bag, which Burke said he saw the group holding the night Doctor Lieberman was murdered. Lilith told me the bag contained cookies, but what I picked up from her in a flashback was that it actually contained several bloody towels.”

“Oh, you picked that up from her, did you?”

“That’s right. I picked it up as the memory flashed back to her. That is what she was really thinking when she answered. You see, she said one thing, but thought another. People do it all the time, you know.”

“Maybe you experienced a fluke or something. I mean, sometimes when I’m interviewing a suspect, I get strong vibrations and I imagine—”

I shook my head. “No, no, no, Carlos. I am telling you. What I saw was more than just vibrations, although I certainly felt those, too. No. What I saw was bloody towels and the flashback of Michael Dietrich killing Doctor Lieberman.”

“You saw what?”

“You heard me. Michael Dietrich killed Doctor Lieberman with the handsaw. Lilith was there and she witnessed it. I am telling you; she had a flashback. I saw the whole thing just as she saw it that night.”

Again, Carlos grinned suspiciously, expecting at any moment that I would yell Gotcha, or April fools! But the moment passed. Nothing. I peered anxiously into my partner’s eyes, waiting for validation through concurrence, but Carlos was not buying.

“Tony. Do you really expect me to believe any of this? Because if you do, then I think you—”

“I’ll tell you what. I will make you a bet. You find me that brown paper bag, and if there is not a bloody towel or two inside, I’ll buy you lunch for a week. How’s that?”

That turned his soft grin into a smile. “Lunch, at the Black Angus?”

“Any place you like.”

“All right. You got a deal. I’ll find your bag of cookies.”

“Okay, but if you do, and instead of cookies we find bloody towels, then you owe me lunch for a week.”

Carlos considered the offer, tempted but cautious not to jump on it too soon, knowing how I seldom lost a bet. “All right,” he said. “Answer me one thing first. Tell me how you think you were able to read Lilith’s mind.”

I pulled the witch’s ladder from my coat pocket and held it up proudly. “This is how.”

Carlos reached out. He took the knotted rope and wrapped it partially around his neck like a hangman’s noose. “What the hell is this?” he scoffed, mocking its obvious usefulness for only one thing.

“It’s called a witch’s ladder, and it’s very powerful.”

“A witch’s ladder? And with this you were able to read Lilith’s mind?”

“Yup, that’s right, my little Cuban amigo. And that knotted piece of hemp is going to help me solve this case, come hell or high water.”

Now Carlos laughed robustly, and half the precinct turned their heads to see what fared so funny. “All right, Tony. You got it. We are on. But remember; I can eat a lot of steaks.”

I took the witch’s ladder back and stashed it in my pocket. Then I smiled, as though I had already won the bet. Carlos smiled, too, thinking the same thing, and for a minute the two of us stood there, looking at each other, smiling and bobbing our heads like a couple of dashboard Chihuahuas, smiling and bobbing—bobbing and smiling, and thinking: do I want fries or a salad with that T-bone?

Twenty minutes later, I found myself back on the road. This time, I set out to see the most unlikely suspect in the case: Millie Bradford.

Except for the report about the brown paper bag and my flashback of the bloody towels, I would not have considered seeing Millie again for questioning. After all, the report I received on the plaster footprints suggested that only five women were present on the night of Doctor Lieberman’s murder. Considering that Lilith, Leona, the twins and Valerie would have accounted for the five, then that left no room in the equation for Millie. Still, I couldn’t see the harm in having a talk with her now.

I arrived at Millie’s house just as it started to rain. I pulled my collar up around the back of my neck and started up the walk. I passed a parked car in the driveway, and something in the back of my mind clicked. I remembered that Millie drove a beat-up old Plymouth sedan with rusted out fenders, missing hubcaps and bald tires. The car in the driveway was a shiny new Cadillac. On the dashboard, driver’s side, I noticed a valet-parking ticket for New Castle Downs, dated the night before. On the front seat, cast arbitrarily about, lay countless programs, newspapers and more valet-parking receipts.

I continued along the walkway to the front door, where I knocked square-knuckled with three firm wraps. A voice inside hollered, “Come in, Detective. It’s open.”

I turned the knob, pushed on the door and entered. At once, something strange, but intriguing happened. The rain, which had started so abruptly the moment I pulled up to the house, suddenly ceased, almost as if the compliment of showers fell solely for me. I looked over my shoulder. The warm, penetrating rays of the sun were already steaming away the puddles of rainwater in a mist of evaporation. I turned back, and a funny, sinking feeling settled in my gut. Coincidence? I thought. My mind flashed back to the garden gnome behind the windmill at Lilith’s place. I remembered the gnome smiling at me when I left. Thinking back, I was sure now that it was not smiling when I got there.

I closed the door, being careful to wipe my feet on the mat just inside the entry. “Hello,” I called.

“Back here,” Millie replied, her voice booming from down the hall. “I’m in the kitchen. Please come in.”

I followed my nose toward the aromatic scent of pasta sauce cooking on the stove.

“Mrs. Bradford?” I turned the corner and poked my head into the kitchen. I expected to see the very essence of Italiano, slaving away at a hot stove like Mama Celeste in traditional Italian garb. Instead, I saw Millie, dressed in sweatshirt, blue jeans and Nike sneakers, sitting at the kitchen table, combing through the sports page.

“Oh, there you are,” she said cheerfully, though barely looking up.

I crossed the room and looked over her shoulder. She had been recording all the winning horses from the previous day’s races in a small notebook.

“I see you play the ponies.”

It seemed like an undertaking, but she finally managed to peel her eyes away from her task to look up at me. “Yes, well, sometimes I do get caught up in it a bit. But you know, in all my years of trying to guess the outcome of a perfectly random event, I’ve never found anything more stimulating than a good horse race. It just gets my juices flowing, especially when I’m on a winning streak, as I am now.”

“Oh, are you?”

“My, yes. I should say so. Didn’t you see my new car out front in the driveway?”

“The Cadillac, of course. Don’t tell me you won that.”

Her face lit up. “First of all, Detective. Please call me Millie, and secondly, yes. I won that car, or should I say I won the money at the racetrack to buy it. I put five hundred dollars down on a long shot. It paid sixty-to-one! Can you believe it? The horse’s name was Millie’s Turn. It felt like an omen; I had to bet on her.”

“Wow! No kidding? That’s wonderful.”

“Thank you.” She winked and pointed to a seat at the table opposite her. I pulled the chair out and sat down. She refocused her attention on the sports page and continued making notes for that evening’s race.

“Was there something you wanted to ask me, Detective?”

I watched her circle one of her picks: a horse named Wild Card. I smiled minutely. Ironic, I thought, as I began to look at Millie in just that light. Something seemed amiss, not terribly wrong, but out of place just the same. A similar feeling crossed me back at Lilith’s place. I could not put my finger on it, but somehow I knew she had been expecting me, and expecting questions about the brown paper bag. I cleared my throat and swallowed.

“Yes, there is something I wanted to ask you.”

“All right.”

“I believe you all left the workshop early the other night, after Doctor Lieberman became ill. Is that correct?”

She nodded, but did not look up. “That’s right. We all went home early because Doctor Lieberman suffered from a nasty headache. It seemed to come on rather sudden-like, and it left him totally incapacitated. I offered to stay behind to help him in any way I could, but he insisted that I not worry, and he sent us all home.”

Millie circled the name of another horse in the paper: True Lies. I nearly chuckled aloud this time and had to bite my lip to keep from doing so.

“I see,” I said, and only the smallest of dimples in my cheeks hinted at a smile. Still, I think that Millie would have noticed had she looked up. “What you say certainly agrees with what the others have all said. Not that I expected to hear anything different from you, of course.”

“Of course,” she said, circling another pick.

Without seeming too conspicuous, I began looking about nonchalant, as I pulled the witch’s ladder from my pocket. I maintained a low profile with my hands concealed under the table. “You know, Millie,” I said, “there’s something else. It is a little peculiar, not much, but I need to ask you about it anyway.”

“Peculiar?”

“Yes, you see, Officer Burke, the patrolman on duty that night, he tells me that he saw everybody leaving the building at the same time: around eight o’clock. Instead of leaving right away, he says you all gathered outside in the parking lot to look at something. He said you were all looking at a—”

“A brown paper bag?”

“Yes.”

“And you want to know what was in the bag. Is that it?”

I flinched at her frankness. Still, my fingers fumbled feverishly with the witch’s ladder under the table. I had not expected such a straightforward response about the bag, especially if it had contained bloody towels, as I knew it did.

“Well...yes, that’s correct,” I said. At last, I could feel the knot beginning to loosen. “I do want to know what was inside the bag. Before you answer, I want you to know that I already have a good idea.”

“Oh, I figured you did. You seem to have a natural sense about these things.”

“But you’re going to humor me anyway. Aren’t you?”

“If it so humors you, Detective.”

Millie put her pencil down and peered into my eyes, her stare reaching deep within me, saturating my mind with visions of bloodied and tortured bodies. The images raced through my brain, quickening my heartbeat and shorting my breath. Not since Lilith had glared so intensely at me in her kitchen—her knuckles white with rage, her fingers wrapped tightly around a long serrated knife—not since she had cast fair warning through gritted teeth for me to leave, had I felt so disquieted before. My intrusive look into Lilith’s mind had put my life in jeopardy. However, these visions of bloodied bodies were not Millie’s visions. Somehow, I knew that. They were not like the flashbacks I witnessed at Lilith’s. Instead, they seemed like visions of events past, random and unrelated, visions of no particular accord. I imagined that a willingness of sorts allowed me to see like a psychic, perhaps through a residual energy still emitting from the ladder, though I could not understand why I could sense all this now. Under the table, I continued working the ends of the knot. Finally, just as Millie volunteered her answer, the knot broke loose.

“Cookies,” she said. “I had a batch of cookies in the bag, Detective. If you must know, they were chocolate chips, and they were very good.”

Her answer came quick, and bound with conviction, so much so that I found myself almost believing her. I waited for the flashback concerning the towels, but strangely, it did not come. I shuffled my hands beneath the table, feeling along the length of rope to make sure I had properly untied the knot. In my mind, I knew I had.

"Cookies?" I said, stalling, as I tried desperately to untie another.

"That's right. I meant to bring them up to the workshop earlier, but I forgot. Then, after we all got outside, I remembered they were in my car, so I called everyone over to try some."

I see," I said, and I wondered how conspicuous I looked, struggling with the witch's ladder under the table. I sensed Millie's growing suspicions, but determination drove me to know for sure what the bag held, for I was certain it did not hold cookies.

"How many would you say you had in there?" I asked, realizing the question sounded frivolous, but necessary for buying time and for keeping Millie's thoughts focused on the contents of the bag.

"Oh, I don't know. Let's see now." She pretended to count in her head. "I'd have to say about two dozen or so. I know the recipe called for thirty, but I like to make my cookies a little bigger, you know." With a wink she added, "That way I can eat fewer and still be satisfied."

I smiled and nodded politely. "Two dozen?"

"Yes, two dozen."

At that moment, I finished slipping the end of the rope through the loop, effectively untying the next knot on the ladder. At once, a huge gust of wind kicked up outside the window, blowing and whipping the trees into a frenzy of thrashing limbs and leaves. The curtains over the kitchen sink blew in nearly horizontal, tipping little flowerpots and Chia Pets straight into the basin. All this, as I waited for a vision or a flashback from Millie. I felt certain she would form a vivid picture of the bloody towels in her mind, but if she did, the vision did not materialize for me.

As seconds passed, the wind graduated from a whistling nuisance to a howling menace, tearing through the window with greater and greater intensity. Once inside, it appeared to take on a mind of its own, forming a pattern of circulation in the kitchen like a mini tornado, scooping pots and pans and hurling them about like paper cups. I reached across the table and grabbed Millie's hand.

In no time, the swirling torrent of white vaporous wind completely engulfed the room, tearing open cupboard doors, emptying shelves of dishes, cups and bowls, and sending them sailing through the air with the pots and the pans, smashing them violently into the walls, ceiling and floor. In spite of the havoc, remarkably, the very center of the room remained free from flying debris, as Millie and I found shelter in the literal eye of the storm.

Over by the stove, sparks arced in blue and white flashes across the room. Millie saw that and screamed, but the crashing of glass and the roar of the wind made it impossible for anyone outside to hear her. I scooted my chair around the table, grabbed her other hand and pulled her in close. Bits of ceiling dropped down on our heads. The room trembled, darkening by degrees, as the tornado grew stronger and more ferocious, feeding off the fresh stream of air sucked through window with the force of a Boeing jet engine. Before I knew it, I found myself fighting just to keep balance on the chair.

In a frantic, feeble, attempt to keep from losing her notes, Millie pushed me away and threw herself on the tabletop, covering the papers with her body while keeping her head turned from the battering winds that gave flight to all things not tied down.

"What's happening?" she cried, clinging to the table's edge for dear life. "This is not possible!"

But I knew better. I also knew what started it and now tried desperately to stop it, hoping that by untying another witch's knots I might reverse the curse. I pulled on the rope, and a sharp pain sliced through my forearm. I looked down and saw blood streaming from a gash and a steak knife stuck in my flesh. I grabbed the knife, pulled it from my arm and flung it back into the wall of whistling wind. I looked up again, and through burning eyes saw something, so undeniable wicked that it could not have been the tornado. In the midst of hell, as surely I knew it, I saw the face of evil, the Devil's own, a long-faced snarling beast with horns and teeth, grinning with anticipation through the blackened, cylindrical shadows streaking by. I turned my head so not to see, but noticed instead a menace more threatening still. The tornado's eye had grown more organized. It had gotten tighter, smaller, and now impossible to escape from.

"It's closing in," Millie warned, abandoning all attempts to save her newspaper. "The eye is closing in on us!"

I did not answer. My hands continued working the knots with diligence, only now the sheets of newspapers, which kept blowing in my face, hindered my progress.

Incrementally, the eye drew in on us, eventually closing in so tight that Millie barely escaped it taking her by dropping to the floor at my feet. In an instant, the wind picked up the table she had abandoned and pitched it into the wall. It exploded in splinters and joined the swirling cluster of airborne projectiles hurling about.

By then, the eye had compressed to an intolerable circumference and was closing in fast. Millie found nothing better to hold on to but the chair in which I sat, and even that, she knew, would soon surrender itself to the cyclonic stew. She huddled closer to me, clutching my leg, as the rushing wind nipped at her heels, stripping her shoes clean off her feet.

“We are going to die!” she cried, and she closed her eyes tightly so as not to see the end coming. “I’m going to see my beloved Arnold. Here I come, honey. Wait for me. I’m coming for you!”

“Not yet, you ain’t!” I yelled. I pulled free another knot on the witch’s ladder and the tornado disappeared, leaving an aggregate of rubble momentarily suspended in mid-air. Then it all came down. Everything; bits of table, dishes, knives, forks, and even hot pasta sauce, rained down on us like fallout from a bomb blast.

When it was over, I helped Millie to her feet. I brushed debris off her head and shoulders and she wiped away pasta sauce from the side of my face.

“What the hell just happened here?” she asked.

My lips thinned. “I think we just lived through a real live tornado.”

I walked across the room, tiptoeing over broken glass and splintered wood to peek outside her window. Millie followed, peering over my shoulder, expecting to survey the damage to the rest of the neighborhood. What she saw, I had fully suspected. The rest of the neighborhood remained completely untouched. The pristine beauty of the day had been compromised only within the confines of Millie’s kitchen.

“How did that happen?” she asked.

I shook my head and stepped away, backing over piles of rubbish on my way to the door. “It beats me,” I said, restraining my amusement. “But you sure do cook up one hell of a sauce, Millie. I hope you’ll have me over for dinner sometime.”

Once outside, I shook the clinging dust and debris from my coat, turned my face skyward and took a deep breath to savor the moment. Things were getting interesting, I thought, and that made me smile. I only hoped I might stay alive to see how it all ended.

Just then, my phone rang. It was Carlos. He called to tell me that he was about to show me up in a big way. Sometimes, I think that is his true mission in life. It is what brings him the most pleasure. I do not care much when he does that, but what the hell if it makes him happy. I told him to hold the news until I returned to the station. Keeping him on pins and needles makes me happy, too.

## Seventeen

I returned to the station and found Carlos waiting there with his usual bigger-than-life grin. He gave me the once-over, capping his mouth with his hand to conceal his widening smile.

Holy cow! Tony, what happened to you? You look like crap.”

I glanced down at my suite and coat and their obviously compromised condition. I knew that the boys would not let my appearance go unchallenged. I thought about having a story ready, about how I fell into a manhole or something. In the end, I decided to go with the truth: something much more fantastic than anything I could fabricate on my own.

“I got trapped inside the eye of a tornado,” I said, and immediately the gathering group of curious onlookers dispersed. “What? It’s true! I did!”

“Hell, Tony. If you don’t want to talk about it, then just say so.”

“Carlos. I am telling you the truth. I got caught up in—”

“No. Really. Forget it. Here.”

He handed him a small manila envelope. I snatched it with a grimace and shook it about curiously. I then held it to the light, hoping to glimpse a clue to its contents.

"More fibers?" I asked.

"Better. More beads."

"Beads? Carlos, mi amigo! Tell me you're not putting me on."

"I kid you not, Tony. We have five more beads and they are all just like the others. They definitely came from the same lot."

"That is great. Where did you find them?"

Carlos again flashed his boyish grin, a half-grin really, somewhere between a shy smile and a wisecracking smirk. He said nothing at first, appearing reluctant to reveal the source of his find. I wondered if Carlos' reluctance came out of pride for good detective work or embarrassment for bad. His answer proved a little of both.

"You're not going to believe this, but after we pulled the first three beads from the plaster impressions, I decided to reinvestigate the sites of the other murders."

I listened, mentally kicking myself for not thinking of it first. A couple of beads: something seemingly so insignificant, but if we found more at the other murders, then it could offer something very important. My teeth clenched in self-torment, but it showed as a grin for Carlos, as I indulged him, allowing him to embellish on every detail.

"The first place I looked was the back seat of Barbara Richardson's car," he said. "Mind you, it was an easy thing to miss the last time we searched." I took that as meaning; don't blame yourself, old man. You're not perfect. "But this time, knowing what I was looking for, well, it wasn't so difficult. I just pulled the back seat out and there it was, this little rosary bead, staring up at me so innocently."

"Yeah right, innocent," I cracked. "If only that little bead could talk."

Carlos acknowledged my remark with a quick nod and continued with barely a pause. He seemed eager to push on with the account of his brilliant detective work. Perhaps, I thought, because he so seldom got a chance to do that.

"Yeah, right, if only. Anyway, after that, I went back to the Institute to do a little looking around. That's where I found two more beads, one in the grass by the front entrance at the foot of the steps where the Webber boy died, and another in the gutter near where Quinn and Walker got it."

"What? With all the rains we've had, they weren't washed away?"

"Gees, Tony! Let me finish."

I shrank back in my seat and snarled like a scolded dog, jokingly, of course—really. "You love it when you get one up on me, Carlos," I said. "Don't you?"

"Well, it's not often. So the least you can do is let me savor the moment."

I gestured my permission with a wave. "By all means, my friend."

"All right then. As I was saying, after I found those two beads, I went out to Suffolk's Walk to where the two homeless men were killed, and sure enough, two more beads. That puts the same person at the scene of all six other murders."

"That's incredible, Carlos. Great work!"

"Really? You mean it?"

"Absolutely." I stood up and shook his hand. "That now officially links Doctor Lieberman's murder to all the others."

"Yes, but what I can't figure out is what good this information does us when we can't find the twins? I mean, if the beads weren't Gordon's, then they had to belong to one of the girls."

"No. I'm afraid not. This conspiracy goes much deeper."

"How so?"

"For one thing, we know from the plaster footprints that there were a number of people involved. I think we have to assume now that all these people were involved from the beginning, and likely played a part in all the murders. And as much as I hate to admit it, my hunch tells me that not only are Lilith and Michael in on this, but also Leona and most likely Valerie Spencer."

"That's the whole damn workshop."

“That’s right, the whole damn workshop.”

I reclaimed my chair, dropping into it with a heavy thud. I sat back, taking a moment to reflect on the situation and trying to imagine just how all the pieces might come together. “You know, something still doesn’t make sense to me,” I said.

“Oh?”

“If the entire workshop is involved in this mess, then why have only Leona and the twins gone into hiding?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“I don’t know either, but I’m willing to bet that neither Leona nor the twins left town.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and if that’s the case then we have to ask ourselves, where have they gone? Why have they gone, and is their disappearance something of their own free will or have they become victims to their own conspiracy?”

“All good questions,” said Carlos. “What is your take? Where do we go from here?”

I thought about it, and tried putting myself in either Leona’s or the twins’ shoes. If they had not left town, where could they go? For Leona, a girl who bilocates, that could be anywhere. With the twins, I considered that sometimes the best place to hide is right in plain sight.

“The gazebo!” I said, springing to my feet and startling Carlos something fierce.

“The gazebo?”

“Yes. We have to excavate. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner.”

“What will we look for, more beads?”

“No. If my hunch is correct, I believe we will discover what happened to the twins. Get on the phone and call the Department of Parks and Recreation. Have them line up a backhoe and a small crane. I will call the coroner’s office and forensics. I want everyone out at the lake by seven tomorrow morning.”

Carlos made no comment. The look on his face told me that he understood. He knew if my theory proved correct, then the case was about to take on a new twist, and we would suddenly find ourselves with a string of murders to solve where most of the prime suspects were now, themselves, dead.

The following morning, Carlos and I met a county work-crew and a half dozen uniformed officers out at the lake with enough equipment to begin sifting through the charred ruins of the old gazebo. Once we removed the heavy timbers and larger sections of the collapsed roof, the workers were free to shift their attention to the more gruesome aspect of the job: searching for bodies by hand, one piece at a time. Almost immediately, one of the workers discovered what I had suspected he might.

“I think we have a skull here,” the man called out.

Another worker declared, “I have a body here, too.”

Carlos turned to me. His face grew cold and emotionless. There seemed no reason to hang around any longer. We were both certain that the charred bodies at the gazebo would prove to be the remains of the missing twins, Shekina and Akasha Kayo. We turned and walked away.

“It’s kind of funny,” said Carlos. “Seems like with every question we answer, there is yet another waiting to take its place.”

“Indeed,” I said. “It does get more complicated all the time.”

“So what do you make of it? Did Gordon kill the twins and then try to frame them for Doctor Lieberman’s murder of by planting the handsaw and tire iron in the trunk of their car?”

“I don’t know. Someone may have planted the evidence. In retrospect, it does seem as though finding them in the trunk was too convenient. If you ask me, it was not just Gordon. I can’t see him taking on the twins alone.”

“So, you still think the others are in on it?”

“No doubt about it, Carlos. Everyone has something to hide, and the more complicated things get, the more someone keeps slipping up.”

“What do we do now, wait for the next slip-up?”

I shook my head. “We can’t do that. Another slip-up almost certainly means another body. We have to force someone’s hand.”

“So, back to Lilith’s?”

“No, not Lilith’s. I’m going to see the one person I really haven’t questioned enough.”

“Valerie Spencer?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, she is a good looker. I don’t suppose you will mind that call, will you?”

I stopped in my tracks, and for an instant, wondered what strange events would greet me if I used the witch’s ladder again at the Spencer home. I thought it might be good—even fun—to take Carlos along for backup this time. I turned to my old pal and said to him, “You know what? Seeing whereas you are a nonbeliever of such matters as witchcraft and the like, what do you say you join me? Things could get interesting.”

“Interesting?” For Carlos, the case had become interesting enough. He could not imagine it getting much more. Still, he knew I had something up my sleeve or I would not have invited him along. “You buying lunch when we’re done?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Do I have a choice?”

He shook his head. “Not if you want company.”

I slapped him on the back and nudged him toward the car. “Okay then, let’s go. I imagine you’re getting hungry already.”

“Oh, you know me so well, Tony. Lead the way.”

## Eighteen

On the ride out to the Spencer residence, I took time to brief Carlos on what he might expect once questioning got under way. I tried to remain vague without leaving him ill prepared, but Carlos simply failed to appreciate the unique circumstances inherent to this particular visit.

“With all due respect, Tony. I have been doing this a while. I hardly need instructions on how to participate in a routine interview.”

“But that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I don’t expect this will be routine.”

“Okay, what makes this one different?”

“That I’m not sure, but be prepared, because once I start asking Ms. Spencer questions, you may experience some, shall we say, strange phenomena.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. It might get windy, or the room might shake a little. I don’t have a lot of experience with this, so I’m not sure exactly what to expect myself.”

“Windy, inside the house? Are you serious?”

I thought about what I was saying. I realized how bizarre it must sound to someone who had not already seen the things I had seen: the thought-form of Travis Webber on the window at the institute, the quaking in Lilith’s house and the cyclone at Millie’s. None of it could be explained in scientific terms, and science was the only reasoning Carlos understood. I glanced at him with alternating eyes, dividing my attention between him and the road.

“Look, all I can do is to warn you. In all sincerity, you must listen. As soon as I begin questioning Ms. Spencer, I am going to take out the witch’s ladder and untie one of the knots. If anything should happen and I cannot stop it, I want you to get out of there with your life. You got that?”

A nervous sort of twitch tugged at the corners of his mouth. “You are pulling my leg, right?”

“No. I am serious. Something weird might happen. You have to be ready. Okay?”

“Tony. The only thing weird is you losing touch with reality. I hate to say it, but maybe you have been working too close to this case. Maybe getting a little too caught up in all this supernatural voodoo hocus-pocus stuff.”

“That may be, but I still want you ready for anything. Okay?”

“Hey, Amigo. I am a cop. I am always ready for anything.”

I pulled my car into the driveway of Valerie Spencer’s home. Carlos rolled down the window and stuck his head out before the car came to a full stop. “Wow! Will you look at this,” he said. “Ms. Spencer must be worth a bundle.”



I threw the car into park and shut off the engine. "I'd say so, Buddy." I leaned over the wheel to get a better look out the windshield. "I've been doing some checking these last few weeks. I found out that Ms. Spencer's husband had a successful business down in Venezuela. When he died, he left her millions. She's probably worth more than you and I will ever make in a lifetime."

Carlos nodded. "What a shame."

"Oh?"

"I mean, think about it. What a shame if it turns out that she put it all on the line by getting involved in Doctor Lieberman's murder, and for what?"

"Indeed. That's what we're here to find out: for what?"

We strolled up the front walk to the elaborate granite-lined entryway with its massive fluted pillars flanking each side. A security camera mounted high up in the corner activated upon our approach. It rotated on a swivel, automatically tracking our moves by infrared sensors. We reached the front door and were mildly startled when a voice on the intercom acknowledged our arrival even before we knocked.

"Good morning, Detectives," the voice said. It sounded familiar, but it did not sound like Valerie's. "Just a moment; I'll let you in."

A mechanical click and the sound of a sliding deadbolt echoed against the granite walls, as the door mysteriously unlatched itself and sprang ajar. Carlos pushed on the handle and watched, amazed, as it glided open effortlessly.

"Wow! Did she do that with her mind?" he asked, only now beginning to believe some of my stories about psychokinetic phenomena.

I started to answer, when the obviously amused voice came back over the intercom. "No, Detective," she said, and a portentous laugh followed. "It's not psycho kinesis. It is Teltech Security. I have a remote entry control switch hooked up to all the doors in the house."

Carlos turned away from the camera, a little embarrassed. He looked at me and noticed me biting down on my lower lip, trying hard not to laugh. "What?" he said. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," I said. "I'm just thinking how this is definitely worth the cost of a lunch."

"I can leave right now if you want."

"No, don't. Come on. Get in there."

We stepped over the threshold, allowing the door to close automatically behind us. Again the voice came over the intercom, this time through the house speakers mounted in the ceilings. "Please go on to the back of the house, gentleman. You'll find me by the pool."

I led the way. We passed the grand foyer and the sweeping circular staircase, continuing through the formal living room, the sitting room, library and then finally the butler's pantry.

"I think we took a wrong turn," Carlos whispered. "This looks like a pantry."

"Gee, you think?"

"Yeah. We should backtrack."

Overhead, the intercom clicked on. "Go through the living room and turn right. When you pass the movie theater, take a left."

"Did she say movie theater?"

"Yes."

"Holy cow! Then what do we do, turn right pass the concourse and take the shuttle to Penn station?"

"It's all right, Detective," the intercom voice said. "You're almost there. Keep going."

I gave Carlos the look before shoving him forward to make him take the lead. I followed on his heels, making mental notes of all the possible exits in case the front door no longer offered an option for quick retreat. Carlos, on the other hand, trampled blindly, marveling at the rich décor, its lush indoor greenery, exquisite paintings and the overall flamboyant architecture of the building. The house had a distinctly South American ambiance about it, a sort of aristocratic Venezuelan touch with an air of Spanish Colonialism thrown in. I could understand now why Valerie and Leona Diaz hit it off so well from the beginning. Even though Leona came from Central America, she would have likely felt right at home among the Mexican tile, archways and subtropical plants that adorned the entire house inside and out. Though probably more up-scaled than Leona ever knew, it likely came closest to home than anything else she had seen since arriving in America.

Thinking about Leona reminded me that I needed to question Valerie about her whereabouts. Leona still represented the only person not questioned in the murders of Doctor Lieberman and the others. I also wanted to know if Leona still had her rosary beads and if they were intact. Deep inside, I truly hoped they were. Whatever evil had possessed the others to partake in murder; I wanted desperately to believe it did not take hold of her, as well. As it stood, her mysterious disappearance seemed to point to only one of two possibilities: either she partook in the murders and had gone into hiding, or like the twins, she had already met her demise. Whatever the case, it seemed far too unlikely that Valerie did not have a clue as to which of the two applied. With the help of the witch's ladder, I hoped to find.

We caught up with Valerie by the pool, lounging in a teakwood reclining deck chair. With her dark sunglasses, floppy hat and yellow one-piece swimsuit, she hardly looked as though she had much to worry about, except for possibly getting ticketed by the fashion police for impersonating a wayward Miami Beach tourist.

In her left hand was a frozen margarita, garnished with a little umbrella and a long plastic straw sticking out the top. I imagined that the odd-looking mechanical device in her right hand was probably the control she used to open the front door.

"Good morning, Detectives," she cooed, her voice drawling with exaggeration. She sounded unusually relaxed, almost sedated, suggesting her margarita may not have been the first of the day.

I tipped my hat and smiled. "Morning to you, Mrs. Spencer."

"Well, aren't you going to introduce me to your handsome friend, Detective?"

I stepped back and allowed Carlos to move in closer for a handshake and a proper introduction. "Of course," I said, and I splayed my hand in a presentational gesture. "Mrs. Spencer, indulge me, as I introduce to you, Detective Carlos Rodriguez. Detective, Mrs. Valerie Spencer."

"Pleasure, Ma'am," said Carlos.

Valerie placed the mechanical device by her side and offered her right hand to Carlos. "The pleasure is mine, Detective, I assure you. The pleasure is all mine."

She seemed genuinely intrigued by Carlos: the essence of his mannerisms and the subtleties of his ruggedly good looks. Carlos smiled and took her hand, and then kissed it softly in that Cuban-gentleman sort of way. Valerie pulled her hand back, smiling, as goose bumps flowered up and down her arm.

"Oh, aren't you sweet," she said, and she passed the margarita to her right hand and offered up her left for another kiss.

Her preoccupation with Carlos allowed me to steal a glimpse of the little mechanical box on the ground. The device seemed smaller upon second glance, but I saw it contained several rows of buttons and knobs like a TV remote, but with a tiny LCD screen, as well. I imagined she used to it view images from the security cameras all around the house. When Carlos noticed me checking out the device, he broke away, strolling off in the opposite direction, distracting Valerie further. He meandered along the edge of the pool with a leisurely pace, taking conspicuous interest in the house and the beautiful grounds surrounding the patio.

"This is really some place you have here, Mrs. Spencer," he said.

"Please, Detective. Mrs. Spencer was my mother-in-law's name. Call me Valerie. It's much less formal, and I'm not reminded of that dreadful old coot every time you say my name."

"Of course, Valerie, I take it you and your mother-in-law did not get along?"

"Hmm, let us just say that had my husband died before her, then you and I would probably be having this conversation from opposite sides of a prison fence."

Valerie's unusual comment caught me by surprise, causing me to stumble as I leaned precariously over her shoulder, viewing the little screen on the device. Valerie heard the scuffle, but her floppy hat acted like blinders, preventing a possible incident.

"You know, it's funny you should say that, Mrs. Spencer," I remarked, deliberately disregarding her preference to be addressed otherwise. "That's sort of the reason we're here today. I would like to ask you some questions. Would you mind?"

Valerie sipped her margarita with indifference, lending a deaf ear to my comment. Her eyes gleamed with fixation, engaging Carlos with wanton intent, as he continued to stroll not so unsuspecting along the edge of the pool.

“Did you hear what I said, Mrs. Spencer?”

“Yes, Detective. You have questions. As a matter of fact, I talked to Lilith and she told me to expect you might come around asking questions about the twins, Doctor Lieberman and some silly bag Millie showed us out in the parking lot.”

“Oh, she did? Then why don’t we start there? Would you mind telling me what you saw in the bag?”

“Not at all. I saw cookies: chocolate chip as a fatter of mac.”

“What?”

“I mean, matter of fact.”

“Cookies?”

“Yes. Why? What did Lilith tell you?”

“She said cookies, too.”

“But you didn’t believe her?”

“Should I?”

“I don’t see why not. She is a good witch, you know.”

“Yes, but good witches can lie, too, can’t they?”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No. I am not saying that at all. I am just saying Lilith can lie, also. She could be a good witch, but she could lie—too.”

“Yes, well, it still sounds a bit insulting. I am not sure how I should take that. Did you say if your friend over there is single?”

“Carlos?”

“Yes, Carlos, Carr-r-los. You have to roll the R, you know.”

“I know. I can never do that.”

“Then you can never learn Spanish. Maybe that’s why I don’t like you.”

“You don’t have to like me, Mrs. Spencer, but I would like you more if you answered my questions without giving me a hard time.”

“I’m not giving you a hard time. You are giving me a hard time; accusing me of lying and such.”

“I did not accuse you of lying.”

“But that’s how I took it.”

“Then take it as you wish, Mrs. Spencer, but it was not meant as an accusation.”

“I tell you, Detective, you should learn to employ a little more charm around women; say, like your handsome partner over there. He is a real gentleman. I can tell you that, and ladies like gentlemen. It’s true, you know, what they say; you get a lot more flies with honey.”

“Flies?”

“It’s an expression.”

“Yes, Mrs. Spencer. I understand. Honey is sweet and flies like sweets. But if flies are answers, then I can tell you I’ve found my share of them around things that are rotten, too. You know what I mean?”

“So you go from accusations to insinuations, Detective. Is that it?”

I rolled my eyes up and away. I could see that Valerie obviously wanted to play the hostile witness, but I was in no mood to engage her in a verbal joust. I took a deep breath and panned the deck for Carlos, who by now had strolled clear around the other side of the pool. Valerie’s gaze locked onto him, as well, providing a diversion and affording me ample time to fish the witch’s ladder from my pocket.

As Valerie sat admiring Carlos, toying with the straw in her margarita glass, both nibbling and sipping with teasing delight, I loosened the next knot on the line. Then, just as I had done with Lilith and Millie, I untied the ends of the knot and surprised Valerie with my question.

“Mrs. Spencer. I want you to tell me about the bloody towels inside the paper bag that Millie showed you the other night.”

For all intent, Valerie knew that I had come to her house to ask exactly that question. She even knew I would try to employ the witch’s ladder to elicit a visual image of the bloody towels. Unfortunately, she did not expect me to come to the house with Carlos Rodriguez. This tactic proved exceptionally beneficial to me. As far as Valerie was concerned, Carlos was a bundle of TNT. His natural charm and boyish smile, coupled with an

undeniably Cuban-sized dose of sexual magnetism, made for a combination too impossible to resist. When the question about the bloody towels came, she found herself thrown completely off guard. My exceptional timing and her preoccupation with Carlos led her unwittingly down the path of vivid recollection.

Her mind instantly flashed back to the moment she first held the bloody towels in her hand that night at the gazebo. She recalled how quickly she embraced the sinister secrets that the monogrammed linen surrendered through psychometrics. Three words came to mind and repeated often: attraction of blood. The recurring image was powerful, and the more she tried to stop it, the faster it came. It delivered a haunting image, one she hoped never to remember again, as it stirred both shocking and grotesque memories of a killer scurrying off with the liver of his latest victim wrapped neatly inside the bloodstained cloth.

Valerie tried diverting her attention to a more benign subject before the images of what else happened that night came to mind, too; the images of her and her fellow accomplices performing the unspeakable act of human mutilation upon the still breathing Doctor Lieberman.

On the far side of the pool, a startled Carlos recoiled sharply; daunted by the sudden crashing of glass after Valerie dropped her margarita to the pavement. Hastened by instincts, Carlos reached for his holster, drew his Glock and aimed, laser-like, at her chest. I stepped forward, placing my body between Carlos and his target, my hands flagging to wave off the assault. Valerie leapt suddenly from her chair and dashed into the house, leaving behind her sunglasses, floppy hat and the peculiar little remote control box with its LCD screen. In her wake, lay a trail of blood leading from the slivers of broken glass to the patio doors, to which she disappeared behind.

“What did you do to her?” Carlos asked, after sprinting back to meet me.

“Nothing. I only asked her a question. The next thing I knew, a flood of images came to me.”

“Images of what?”

“Of somebody running off with body parts wrapped up inside the towels I told you about.”

“You mean, like what you saw at Lilith’s?”

I nodded and held up the witch’s ladder. “I told you it works. For a moment, I could read her every thought. And what’s more, she knew I was doing it.”

Wanting to believe, though not wanting to admit it, Carlos pressed me for more details. He listened with intrigue as I explained how Valerie had seen the Surgeon Stalker wrapping his victims’ livers up and carrying them off in the monogrammed towels.

“Carrying them off? For what?” Carlos asked, and he found himself looking over his shoulder, half expecting Valerie to come sneaking up from behind with a butcher’s knife.

“I don’t know. But I believe it must have something to do with the phrase, attraction of blood.”

Carlos grimaced. “What does that mean?”

I turned back and glanced toward the second-floor window overlooking the pool. I saw Valerie, peering out discreetly through a small break in the blinds. “I don’t know, Carlos. Though as curious as I am to find out, I hesitate to use another knot in the ladder to see.”

Carlos smiled teasingly, and the raised brow over his right eye indicated that he either questioned my reluctance to untie the knot, or my sanity for suggesting that the knot might actually yield the answer. At that moment, I looked down at the little black box and noticed something unusual. I picked it up and studied the image on the screen closer, hardly believing my eyes.

“Whoa! Carlos! Did you see that?”

He grabbed the device, prying it from my hands in hopes of seeing what had excited me so. Instead of a candid shot of bedroom voyeurism, which he had expected, and perhaps preferred, he saw only the image of a small white kitten scampering about playfully.

“It’s just a kitten, Tony.”

“No, Carlos. That is Lilith. I saw her. I swear!”

Carlos looked again at the screen. His face grew long with worry. The hours, the exposure to all the stories about witches and ladders and psycho-voodoo, he believed it was obviously taking its toll on me.

“Tony, maybe you should take a couple of days off from this investigation. It really has been a busy week for you.”

I grabbed the box from him and began randomly pushing buttons and knobs, causing the image on the screen to go static. “Carlos, I’m telling you, I saw her! I saw Lilith standing in one of the bedrooms, and then right before my eyes, she turned into a kitten, the same little white kitten I saw yesterday at her house.”

“Oh, so Lilith is a little white kitten now?”

“Yes. I know it sounds crazy, but I know what I saw.”

We both glanced again at the screen, me, for validation, and Carlos, for another glimpse into Valerie’s bedroom.

Static.

“A white kitten?”

“Carlos, I know what I saw.”

“So you say, but don’t witches usually turn into black cats?”

“Oh, and if she turned into a black cat then you would believe me?”

A guilty grin crept across his face. “I didn’t say that, exactly. I suppose it would make more sense though. I mean if a witch could turn into a cat, then wouldn’t she turn into a black cat so that she could prowl the night in stealth?”

“Who says witches prowl the night?”

“Of course they do. They prowl at night. They make potions by day, and the rest of the time they fly around on broomsticks.”

I lurched out and took a swipe at him. “All right, now you are just pissing me off. You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

He shrugged.

“Okay smart aleck, I’ll show you.”

I pulled the witch’s ladder out, and with my back turned to the window, untied another knot.

“What are you doing?” Carlos asked, his eyes shifting curiously between the window and the witch’s ladder.

“I’m going to find out what she’s thinking. Keep your eye out for tornadoes, or locusts, or anything else that might seem strange.”

“Strange? The only thing strange is you. I really think you should see someone. I mean it. You—”

“Shut up. Something’s happening!”

“What? Are you starting to see something?”

My hands froze along the line; my eyes darted left and right as I strained to hear or see what I felt. “There’s a rumble,” I said, “coming from down low. You feel it?”

It seemed almost undetectable at first. Carlos did not feel it yet, but it was there just the same and coming fast.

“I don’t feel anything,” he said.

“Damn! It’s happening again!” Though I could not exactly say for sure what it was, I knew it was not another of Valerie’s flashbacks.

“What’s happening, Tony?”

“Something. I don’t know what, but something.”

Now Carlos felt it, too: a rumble down low in the Earth, not exactly an earthquake, but surely a tremor. He felt it at his feet, reverberating upwards all the way to the top of his spine.

I looked up at the window just in time to see the blinds snap back into position. I wondered if Valerie had taken cover, perhaps knowing the fate that Carlos and I would share. I suddenly felt extremely vulnerable. I turned to Carlos, who now stood with buckled knees.

“All right, Tony,” he said, in a voice shaking from the ground tremors. “Tell me what we need to do.”

Various options raced through my mind. I knew that every second we wasted could cost us our lives. But what could we do? If it were an earthquake, then going inside the house could prove tragic. On the other hand, if a tornado hit, then standing out in the open certainly could not be very healthy either. I decided that in either case, our best bet might be to jump into the pool. That would get us down low in case of a tornado, yet keep us out of the house in case of an earthquake.

I reached for Carlos’ arm and prepared to give the order to jump into the pool, when a thundering rush of wind blew in suddenly from the southwest, a burst so powerful it nearly swept us off our feet. The phantom

force moved swiftly and without discretion, sending lawn furniture and patio chairs sliding along the length of the terrace and into the pool. The blast came in like a gunshot, quick and abrupt, but for only a moment and then it was gone. Carlos looked at me with skeptic restraint, but before he could react, another microburst exploded, this time from the north, and seemingly more powerful than the first. I ducked, as a renegade tree limb sailed past my head. The branch caught Carlos across the back, knocking him to the pool's edge and leaving him dazed.

I knelt on one knee and attempted to help him, all the while sheltering him from the wind with my body.

"Stay low!" I warned, fearful that he might try to stand again. We retreated on all fours, away from the open area of the pool-deck to a less vulnerable location behind a brick and mortar barbecue. Just as we reached our refuge, it happened again. The north wind, which so fiercely tore through Valerie's back yard, suddenly ceased, and the tremors gave way to a cold, eerie calm.

I looked down at the witch's ladder. "What Pandora's box have I opened up this time," I asked.

Carlos tried to explain that it was only the wind. "A meteorological freak of nature," he said. I knew better. I had seen it once already in Millie's kitchen, and here again, there could be no denying that this wind had a mind of its own. Like the hit-and-run tactics of a Great White, it had let its presence be known with a curious nudge and then returned to the depths. Now it lay waiting—waiting to strike again.

Carlos attempted to stand with the help of the barbecue's brick wall to lean against. I reached up, grabbed his coattail, and gave it a yank. "Not yet!" I said. "It's not over."

The words barely left my mouth, when the ground began rumbling again. At once, the Southwest wind returned, this time stronger. It howled unmercifully, turning the skies gray in its wake and taking on a visible form, as if fueled by a vitreous, molten matter spewing from the pits of hell. However, unlike before, this returning wind seemed more concentrated, as if blowing through a horizontal tube or wind tunnel. It had definite boundaries that I could see: a perimeter of confinement perhaps only ten feet in diameter. It had a direction, or purpose, focusing on a harmless course in which nothing stood in its way. There were no trees to knock over—people or animals to sweep away and no windows to blow in. If its track came as a coincidence, then it came as a fortunate one. If not, then surely something more diabolical lay in store. Still, its sheer beauty endured to behold. We marveled at its intensity, reeled in its seduction and hailed to its awesome splendor.

The temptation to stand, to approach it, seemed almost irresistible. It called to us, inviting us to touch, to indulge in its secrets—even flirt with its authority. It seemed so incredibly powerful, yet somehow mysteriously benign. The whitecaps breaking across the pool's surface defined keenly the narrow course of the jet stream. It appeared as though the wind had blazed a meticulous path, entering the yard through a narrow opening between Valerie's guesthouse and the cabana, skirting across the pool, and then exiting between a stand of oaks and the neighbor's house next door. All the while, the train of wind upset nothing but the water in the pool.

"Will you look at that?" Carlos uttered. "I've never seen anything like it. You don't suppose it's El Niño, do you?"

I smiled, unsure of the phenomenon, but confident it was not El Niño. A little voice in my head cautioned me. This phenomenon was not exactly like the one I experienced at Millie's, but if the witch's ladder brought it on, then I knew there would be more.

It did not take long to prove my suspicions right. Without warning, another sudden blast of air barreled past us. The north wind had returned. The two opposing winds collided directly over the pool with a thunderous roar. An immediate reaction ensued, as the dual winds forced themselves upon each other, feeding the other's ferocious appetite for air in a continuous cross-pattern of circulation. The colossal swirling tube pitched itself upright in a vertical tower, growing and stretching until the top of the funnel stretched completely out of sight. The raging winds of the north and the furious winds of the southwest had become the lifeblood of an even direr spectacle of nature: a bona fide cyclone, twisting and dancing ominously in place directly over the pool.

Here stood the phenomenon I expected, the proof I needed to convince Carlos of the great potential of the witch's ladder. Though I still could not direct or predict the actions of the ladder, I felt certain now that Carlos could no longer deny its powers or the dangers and consequences of its use.

We watched in awe, as the swirling column heaved with intimidating gesture, energy of immense proportion epitomizing the fusion of strength and beauty. It grew larger with every second, and soon even the shelter

behind the barbecue did not seem safe. We began backing away slowly, never once taking our eyes off the spectacle.

It was difficult to see at first, for the blackened belly of the spiraling beast concealed well its reason for forming where it did. I could not see inside its walls, but beneath the spinning giant, I notice the sudden drop of pool water, its levels falling proportionately to the growth of the cyclone. It soon became apparent that this was not just a twister, but a massive waterspout. With tremendous might, the merciless whirlwind siphoned the contents of the pool, gallon-by-gallon, drop-by-drop, until it had succeeded in sucking it dry. Then, as if quenched of its thirst, the mighty tempest ascended skyward, taking with it some twenty thousand gallons of water, a couple of lounge chairs and hopefully, I thought, all doubts that Carlos might have about the witch's ladder and its awesome powers.

When it was all over, when the roar of the wind ceased and calm returned, Carlos turned to me, his eyes cast in perpetual surprise. Bits of twigs peppered my coat and slacks, leaves jetted from my short gray hair, but I stood at ease, a gloating smirk inch-wormed across my face.

"What?" he said. "You're not going to tell me that you made that happen!"

"Oh, come now, Carlos. How can you deny what you just saw?"

"What I just saw? Tony, that was just a little tornado. They happen all the time. Surely, you have heard of them. You watch the news, don't you?"

"The news? Carlos, when have you ever seen a tornado like that on the news? It sucked all the water right out of the pool! Come on. Admit it. I did that with the witch's ladder. Go on. Say it."

He hemmed-hawed a bit, and then walked to the pool's edge, peering inside, as if needing to survey the obvious. I watched him slip his hands into his pockets and nod over the observation. "Yeah, it's empty," he said. "What do you know?"

He turned back, granting only a shrug. It was not an admission, but it also was not a denial. The inchworm smile returned to my face. Carlos was coming around; I knew it. It was only a matter of time. Soon my skeptical friend would believe. Until then, a shoulder's shrug would suffice. I am not picky.

We could do nothing more then. We knew Valerie would not come out of the house as long as we were there. If she did, I felt certain she would have nothing more to say. There were so many questions still unanswered. Figuring out priorities now seemed more important than ever. For Carlos, our priority was clear.

"Oh, look. It's almost noon," he said, rapping the face of his watch. "I believe you owe me lunch."

I took one last look up at the window on the second floor. The blinds again were partially open, and I saw Valerie peering out. I shook my head and turned away. Without reasonable cause to take her downtown, I knew that whatever questions remained would have to go unanswered for now. I tapped Carlos on the arm. "Yeah, all right," I said, and I started walking. "Let's go eat."

As we meandered back through the house, retracing our steps toward the front entry, I felt the eyes of another watching our every move. "It's the cameras," I noted, sensing that Carlos was about to comment on the very same thing. "She's watching us, you know."

"I know," he said in mocked repugnance. "She makes me feel so dirty."

A voice came over the speakers in the ceiling, presumably Valerie's, but oddly, I thought it sounded a like Lilith's. "I can fix that," the voice said.

Carlos stopped me. "What do you suppose she means by that?"

"I don't know and I don't care. Let's get the hell out of here. This place is starting to give me the creeps."

We continued, and as we approached the front door, I heard the familiar click from the deadbolt unlatching. It was just another eerie reminder that not only were our moves monitored, but Valerie still commanded a certain power over us, at least until we made it safely out of the house.

The front door opened automatically and we wasted no time in scooting out. Carlos barely got his heels beyond the threshold when the door slammed shut. The locks clicked tight and the camera overhead swung into position. We stepped out from the covered porch and stood at ease on the front steps, relaxed and happy to have made it out in one piece.

"What do you suppose she meant by that?" Carlos asked.

"What?"

“You know. When I said that she makes me feel dirty and then she came back saying, ‘I can fix that’. What do you suppose she meant?”

He no sooner spoke, than we felt the rumbling of earth beneath our feet again.

“Shhh! Do you feel that?” I asked, though the look on his face suggested he undoubtedly did.

“It’s happening again, isn’t it?”

I did not answer. Instead, I began a frenzied search through my pockets for the witch’s ladder, fearful that I had dropped it somewhere in the house and that Valerie had found it. “Damn it!” I hissed. “If she unties too many knots, then there’s no telling...”

“No telling what?”

I could not bring myself to finish.

The rumbling grew more intense. Even Valerie’s house began showing signs of the seismic vibrations, its windows rattling menacingly in place. Carlos watched anxiously as I patted myself down in hasty fashion, riffling through every pocket of my coat and pants. Finally, as if all I needed to do was find it, I produced the witch’s ladder from an inside coat pocket and held it up in triumph. “I’ve got it! We’re safe!”

“Safe?” said Carlos. “How could we be safe? In case you haven’t noticed, there’s still an earthquake going on here.”

“Yes, but I’ve got the ladder.”

“Then do something with it!” he said, and in his plea, I realized he had unwittingly admitted his belief in the ladder’s ability to affect some power over the unexplained. I began fumbling with the next knot, but before I could untie it, he let out another cry. “Tony, look out!”

I spun about, barely in time to see an enormous wall of water rolling over the top of the house. We both turned to run, yet the mammoth wave crashed down on us like an Asian tsunami, sweeping us off our feet in a flood of unyielding proportion and depositing our water soaked bodies on the lawn in front of the Spencer home. We looked about in dismay. As suddenly as it appeared, the colossal wave had gone, dissipated through adjacent yards and sewer grates, leaving behind only lounge chairs, puddles and two very awestruck detectives.

Shaken, but unscathed, we helped each other up, choking and coughing on swallowed water as we hobbled to the curb. There we sat and collected our wind and our wits.

“What the hell was that?” Carlos asked, though not actually expecting an answer.

I coughed up another dribble of water and spit it out in the gutter. “That?” I said, my voice throttled. “That was your swimming pool.”

“My what?”

“Smell it? That’s chlorinated water.”

“Are you kidding? How? Where did it come from? I mean, we saw it all get sucked up in the tornado. This came from...from...well, where the hell did it come from?”

“It’s the witch’s ladder. I told you. Valerie must have one, too. Somehow she caused all the water that got sucked up in the tornado to fall back on top of us.”

“I don’t get it.”

I smiled, realizing the humor in Valerie’s gesture. “I guess it doesn’t really matter. The important thing now is, well...”

“What? Tell me. What’s important now?”

“I guess the important thing now is that you shouldn’t feel so dirty.”

Carlos flopped backwards onto the soggy grass. “You’re a ball buster, Marcella, you know that?”

“Yeah, Rodriguez,” I said, flopping backwards onto the grass beside him. “I know.”

We lay there for several minutes, regaining our breaths and composure. I said to Carlos, “What do you feel like for lunch?”

He thought for only a moment. “You know it’s funny,” he said, “but I have a strange craving for fish.”

I laughed. “I knew you were going to say that.”

Back inside the Spencer residence, Valerie peered through the blinds at the front window. “They’re okay,” she said, before allowing the blinds to snap shut again. “I told you it wouldn’t work. We should have done it my way.”



Across the room in a darkened corner, an obscure figure sat quietly in the shadows, her hands busily working with defiant resolve. "It's just as well. Another death with your name linked to it would not make things any easier."

"But Lilith, what could anyone prove?"

"It doesn't matter! Two drowned cops, one empty swimming pool. It has all the makings of a Sunday mystery movie of the week. No. We will go about it another way. I'll call Michael and Gordon."

"Lilith. Didn't you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Gordon; he's dead. He hung himself in jail yesterday morning."

Lilith's hands iced in mid-stitch. In the dim light filtering through the blinds, Valerie could see her expression morphing through shadows of shock and grief. It lasted only a moment, but her display of emotional vulnerability gave Valerie some cause for concern. Lilith, perhaps sensing it, snapped to order and resumed with diligence the immediate task that had previously occupied her: the stitching of another witch's ladder.

"That's all right," she told Valerie, her eyes glowing phosphorus. "We can do it without Gordon. We'll need Millie again. I think Marcella still trusts her. Now, here's what we need to do."

## Nineteen

The following morning, I received a call from Millie Bradford. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. After the incredible episode with the kitchen tornado, I hardly expected to hear from her anytime soon. If I thought she might still be upset, I could not hear it in her voice.

"Mrs. Bradford," I said, after picking up the on-hold call. "I'm sorry I couldn't hang around and help clean up after that little...incident."

"That's all right, Detective. You know it's the funniest thing. As it turns out, I went to the track later that night and I bet a thousand dollars on a horse named Windy."

"Don't tell me."

"She paid ninety to one!"

I rolled my eyes in disbelief. I could not count all the times I had lost a race by just a nose with odds like that. It was all I could do to congratulate her with any semblance of sincerity. "I'm happy for you, Mrs. Bradford. Perhaps someday you can give me a good tip so that I might get lucky, too."

"Well, that's sort of why I'm calling."

Even over the phone, I sensed Millie's mood grow serious. I sat up straight in my chair and grabbed a pencil and a pad in case I needed to jot down something important—like maybe the name of a horse.

"You have a tip for me?"

"I do, but it's not about horses."

Oh, no, of course not. "Then, what, Mrs. Bradford?"

"It's about your case. I am not sure how to broach this exactly, so I will just come right out and say it. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure I'll have no trouble forgiving you. So why don't you just go ahead and tell me?"

"Okay. You know the brown paper bag you've been asking everyone about?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I have not been totally honest with you."

"Oh?"

"I guess I just got nervous. Do you know what I mean?"

"Of course. I understand. Continue, please."

"I found the bag in Doctor Lieberman's office. When I saw the towels inside, I did not know what else to do. The next morning I heard about Doctor Lieberman's murder and...well, I became very frightened. I thought the towels might implicate me, so I hid them."

I struggled to contain my excitement. I knew that finding the towels could be just the break I had been hoping for: the one hard piece of evidence that could link any or all of the workshop members to the murders. I still had the beads, of course, but I understood that those were circumstantial, lacking the most critical of all courtroom evidence: DNA. The bloody handsaw and Gordon's jumper cables had plenty of DNA on them; unfortunately, it all belonged to Doctor Lieberman. And with the finger of guilt from those items pointing only to dead people, namely Gordon and the twins, obtaining new evidence was crucial to getting indictments. Though I had no doubt that Gordon and the twins either killed or helped kill Doctor Lieberman, I felt sure the conspiracy went much deeper, so deep that it now seemed to include even Millie Bradford.

"Mrs. Bradford, you say you found the towels in Doctor Lieberman's office?"

"Yes. In his desk drawer."

"I see, and would you mind me asking why you were looking in his desk drawers to begin with?"

She hesitated, perhaps wondering if I would find it so difficult to believe now. "Well, Detective, to be honest, the others all thought Doctor Lieberman might be the Surgeon Stalker. They wanted me to search his office for just such a clue. I did not want to do it, but I wanted to clear the good name of the Institute. I did not really expect to find anything. I swear. Once I showed it to the others, I hurried home. I didn't want anything to do with whatever was going to happen next."

"What do you mean? What did you expect would happen next?"

A cold silence gapped the next few seconds. At first, I thought the phone line went dead. "Mrs. Bradford? Are you still there?"

"Detective, I can't talk much longer. I want you to listen closely. On the other side of town, there is an abandoned fish house at the end of Pier 4 at Suffolk's Walk. Inside the fish house, you will find a large bait box. Lift the cover. There you will find the bag with the bloody towels. If you are lucky, the towels will contain a loose hair, a piece of fingernail or even a drop of the killer's own blood. That is all I can tell you. Except that, if you don't find the DNA you're looking for, then you might as well just close the case and call it quits, because you never will."

"Mrs. Bradford, I don't understand. If you found the bag inside Doctor Lieberman's office, then why—"

"That is all I can tell you, Detective. Goodbye."

The line went dead. I reached into my pocket, pulled out the witch's ladder and ran my fingers along the line. "Thirty knots," I uttered. "Why on Earth would anyone need 40?" It occurred to me that at the rate I was going, the next knot I untied could be my last.

"Millie Bradford, huh? Sounds like you have a lead on the phantom brown bag."

I looked up at Carlos and smiled. "It could be a big break."

"What is she doing with it?"

"Nothing now. She dumped it."

"Hid it?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

"I don't know. None of this makes sense. First, people are getting cut up like sausage, and then the very people we are trying to protect go out and kill each other. I just don't get it."

"What exactly did the old girl say?"

"She told me she found the bag in Doctor Lieberman's office."

"Oh?"

"And get this. For whatever reasons, the others all thought that Doctor Lieberman was the Surgeon Stalker. They had Bradford rummage through his office to find incriminating evidence."

"They?"

"The group: all the other members of the workshop."

Carlos took a seat opposite me. "All right, let me get this straight. The members of the workshop, including Millie Bradford, believed Doctor Lieberman was the Surgeon Stalker. So, they have the old lady search his office and she finds this bag with bloody towels inside. Right so far?"

I nodded.

“Okay. The old lady shows the bag and the bloody towels to the others and they...what? Decide to kill Doctor Lieberman?”

“I guess so. That’s certainly the way it looks, isn’t it?”

Carlos eased his chair up on its two back legs. His face soured as he digested the facts, but one thought kept returning to him. He dropped the chair back on all fours and folded his hands up on the desk. “It does look that way, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned from you over the years, it’s that things are not always what they seem.”

“What do you think?”

“I think Doctor Lieberman wasn’t the Stalker, was he?”

“No, not after—”

“After someone cut out his liver.”

“That’s right. He didn’t do it himself.”

“I think I get the picture now. I see these guys killing Doctor Lieberman, but then the next morning they find out that the real Surgeon Stalker had come along and cut out the doctor’s liver. Realizing their mistake, the twins threaten to go to the police with the truth. The others vote against it. They argue about it at the gazebo. Unfortunately, the twins are unable to convince the others to turn themselves in to the police. A fight ensues, they bludgeoned the twins to death, and in an effort to cover up the crime they set the gazebo ablaze.”

This time I shook my head. “No. I don’t think it’s that simple, Carlos. I think you are overlooking a couple of small details. For instance, how did the Stalker know to find Doctor Lieberman’s body hanging from the tree? And why were the bloody towels in Doctor Lieberman’s office in the first place?”

“You think he was set up?”

“It sure looks that way. I think someone set him up.”

“Someone? You’re thinking the twins?”

“Perhaps, and then maybe the others found out. So they killed the girls.”

“Or maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe the twins figured out that Michael or Gordon was the Stalker, and were killed for discovering his secret?”

I agreed, remembering how Michael actually did the deed according to the flashback I witnessed at Lilith’s house. “That brings us full circle then, doesn’t it?”

“How so?”

“There’s still Valerie’s role in all of this. Don’t forget; yesterday while you were strolling around the pool, I had an opportunity to read her thoughts about the bloody towels.”

“That’s right. You did, didn’t you?”

Oh, how times have changed, I thought. Not twenty-four hours earlier, if I had made a statement like that, Carlos would have accused me of bordering on the lunatic fringe, unable to resist making snide comments laced with sarcastic overtones and stinging innuendoes of psycho dribble. Now it seemed amazing how readily he accepted the notion that I could read another person’s mind.

“I’m not really sure what to make of her thoughts, Carlos,” I said. “The image is very strange. I think she may have performed a psychometric analysis on the towels.”

“Psycho...?”

“It’s when someone reads the events connected with an object by holding the object and concentrating on it until it produces an image of past events in one’s mind.”

“Oh, I thought it was the study of psychos.”

“Yeah, close. Anyway, the killer used the towels to wrap up the bloody livers so he could carry them away.”

“Carry them where?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know. Valerie recited the phrase, attraction of blood, to herself. I’m sure that has something to do with it.”

“What does it mean?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea. The questions still outnumber the answers. But I do know one thing.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Valerie thinks you have one hell of a nice butt.”

A sputtering of laughter broke out among the guys in the immediate vicinity. Carlos fell back in his seat, his cheeks grew pink and his jaw dropped. I got up and ruffled my fingers through his hair as I walked past him on the way out the door. I made it halfway across the room when Carlos stood again and hollered, "Where are you going?"

"To pick up some dirty laundry," I said.

"You think I should go with you?"

I waved goodbye with one hand over the back of my head. He retreated to his desk in a hail of teasing catcalls and whistles. "Jealous!" he said to those who participated. He dropped into his chair with a grunt, admitting to himself that he would never hear the end of it.

20

Fifteen minutes after leaving the station, I pulled my car up to the gates of a once thriving marina district known as Suffolk's Walk. As I strolled along the boardwalk, I slipped my hand into my pocket to check on the ladder. This move had become routine to me now, subconsciously drilled into my brain. My fingers brushed the rope's burly knots and a subtle smile came to me.

At the end of pier number 4, just as Millie said, sat an old abandoned fish house. It stood battered and worn from years of neglect and the relentless assault of Mother Nature's elements.

I walked the rickety planks the length of the pier out over the oil-stained waters of the bay. The pier creaked and groaned with every step, as I placed one cautious foot in front of the other, avoiding the loose, broken or missing boards that eagerly awaited the chance to deliver me to the chilly waters below. When I reached the tattered structure at the end, I turned back to look, assessing the virtual minefield I would have to negotiate again on the return trip.

The tide was high and rising. At the end of the dock closest to the shore, the frigid waters broke in rhythmic waves, slapping into the pilings and spraying up like geysers through the cracks and holes in the planking. Just as I had done at Valerie's, I calculated my escape route. It was not just a matter of academics; it was an essential prerequisite to any potentially hostile situation. It was prudent then, and now was no different, but I hoped I would not have to repeat the journey across the pier in haste.

I found the door on the shack, heavy with wood and sheet metal, staunchly mounted to the structure by oversized hinges attached with quarter-size bolt heads. A large slide-pin latch, substantial enough to secure a door twice its size, held the marriage of door and structure with impeccable integrity.

I reached for the latch, wary of surprises lying in wait on the other side of the door. The idea that I might find myself walking into a trap did not escape my thoughts, but this was something I had to do.

I slid the steel latch pin to one side and pulled firmly on the handle. The door relented, creaking open with unusual ease against the rusty hinges and the high-tension spring designed to keep it shut in the usually persistent sea breeze. I peered inside, curiously, but saw nothing of imminent danger. The place appeared empty, save for a small wooden table with vacant shelves clinging to the otherwise bare wall above. It seemed obvious that no one had used the shack in years. It stood void of windows and skylights, and except for the nearly horizontal beam of sunshine that poured in through the partially open door, it remained dark, damp and uninviting.

In the middle of the floor, as Millie promised, stood a large fiberglass bait box, once used for keeping shrimp, minnows and other baitfish alive for the many recreational anglers that once tooled the chilly New England waters. Now, like the fish population, the bait box and the fishing have long since dried up, leaving only memories of better times and better days.

The box measured approximately five feet wide by three feet tall, with several small air holes drilled into the lid, though they were much too small to allow a peek inside it. I looked around for a suitable prop to hold the door open, and found the perfect wedge-shaped nugget of glass scattered among the broken pieces of beer and wine bottles at my feet. I picked it up and jammed it under the door. Its sharp edges dug deep into the softened timbers of the boardwalk, biting down like bear claws into the wood and proving ideal for the task.

With the door securely propped open, I took a deep breath, gathered my wits and stepped inside. The floorboards moaned ominously beneath the weight of my body, and I felt the uneasy sensation of someone, or something, watching me. In the shadows throughout, I heard the scratching of tiny nails against the walls and

ceiling. Rats, I thought, seeking refuge from an unlikely intruder. I made a silent promise to leave them alone if they did the same for me.

Two large tension-springs, similar but smaller to the one used on the door, were fastened to each side of the flecked-stained bait-box to hold its lid in place.

"This is it!" I said aloud. I felt it in my bones. I had within my grasp the missing link needed to crack the Surgeon Stalker case wide open. I walked up to the box, placed two hands firmly on the cover and gave it a jerk. The lid popped loose from a crust-like powder that had formed along the edges, and it opened with a bang. I looked inside, my eyes beholding the much-anticipated treasure: a lone brown paper bag. I removed a handkerchief from my pocket and covered the top of the bag before snatching it up. When I pulled my hands away, the springs snapped the lid shut in a cloud of chalky white dust.

At last, I had it, but I was not entirely without trepidation. A nervous twitch gnawed in the pit of my stomach, as I unfolded bag, gingerly, but with great anticipation, careful to use only the handkerchief so not to contaminate the evidence. I looked inside, my hands shaking, and only then realized what a fool I had been. A sickening feeling of betrayal robbed me of breath and dizzied my balance.

"How could I have been so stupid?" I said, sifting through the bag's contents in dismay. "A lousy bag of cookies?"

It seemed almost too perfect to condemn, almost comical. I knew then I was not only dealing with a heartless killer, but someone with a sense of humor. Immediately, I thought of Lilith. But why? Why did she want me to come all the way out there just to play a joke on me? The answer came to me like a cold slap in the face. I walked into a setup!

Behind me, a shattering of glass raked across the floor. I turned on my heels and drew my gun. Something outside flashed by the doorway, but the sun silhouetted its figure, and so I did not take the shot. The door swung shut. I heard the heavy slide-pin locking into place.

"No!" I stumbled blindly forward, throwing all my weight against the door. Outside, someone began nailing spikes into its frame.

I fumbled through my pockets and found a book of matches. I lit one. A tiny flame sputtered to life. I held the match above my head, squinting into the darkness. Familiar forms began to take shape as my eyes adjusted. Then the flickering glow fizzled, as the match burned down to my fingers. I used the dying flame to ignite another. When that one burned down, I repeated the process until nearly all the matches in the book were gone.

Outside, people gathered. I heard them talking, but could not hear what they were saying. A man laughed; another shushed him, and then the talking stopped. I thought they had gone away when the silence lingered too long. Then I heard it: a peculiar splashing of sorts, random and unnatural. I imagined that the tide had come in and the crashing waves were spraying up through the splintered planks of the boardwalk outside the shack. It seemed probable at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I doubted that scenario, and it seemed the splashing sounded more like someone tossing liquid onto the building's walls and roof. That is when it hit me. The realization sent shivers through my body. Somebody was tossing liquid onto the structure, and now I could smell it: the unmistakable odor of kerosene.

Fearing cremation by my own device, I blew the match out and stomped it to the floor. My sudden plunge into darkness proved short-lived, however, as an abrupt whoosh of air pushed past me like a phantom breeze. I felt it rush in from all directions, eager to feed a spontaneous and demanding blaze that engulfed the structure in a ferocious ball of fire.

Now I had plenty of light. The red-hot flames outside peeked menacingly through every knothole, nook and cranny the old fish house had to offer. Already, I could feel the intense heat infiltrating the room, bringing with it a thick plume of choking black smoke. I threw myself against the door again, gaining little more for my efforts than a badly bruised shoulder.

Smoke gathered overhead, soothing over dry, bulky timbers in a ghostly cloud. It thickened quickly, forming a lid of swirling black soot that descended upon me with each passing second. I began choking, the hot air cutting into my lungs like bits of glass. My options for escape were evaporating. I contemplated the only two choices for dying presented before me. I could either burn to death, or face asphyxiation from inside the bait box. The latter, I imagined, would come less painfully.

Flames were licking the walls inside the shack from all four sides, as I prepared to climb into the box. I palmed the edge and began lifting my foot, when something incredible happened. At first glance, I believed my imagination had played a trick on me. It's the shadows, I told myself, flickering shadows on the wall. Then, from my periphery, I saw it again. I turned and looked over my shoulder, not believing my eyes. I was not alone. Leona Diaz stood before me, as majestically as anything I had ever seen before. She looked like an angel, a vision of tranquility amidst a backdrop of smoke from Hell's own fire.

"Leona!" I cried.

She did not respond. I called to her again, this time offering outstretched hands. I thought she might join me, if only temporarily before the smoke and flames consumed us both.

"Leona, you must give me your hand!"

Off in the corner, a beer bottle popped and a shard of glass sliced through Leona's silhouette unimpeded. It caught my right cheek, leaving a cut below my eye a half-inch wide. I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand before reaching for her again.

"Leona. What is it?" I supposed fear had paralyzed her to the point that she could not move, but if so, I did not see it in her eyes. Instead of terror, I saw only empathy, a calm but passionate look of concern. I realized then that her concern was for me only, as she was not there, at least not physically.

I had never seen Leona, or anyone else for that matter, in the non-physical state of bilocation, yet I knew that was how she came to me in my final hour—my final minutes.

She stood there, holding something in her hand, and offered it to me. I tried to take it from her, but could not unite the physical link between her world and mine. I could not take the object; I could only study it. I squinted through stinging eyes, concentrating on the object. It looked like her rosary, and I had no doubt that the beads in her hand were the same as those Carlos found at the murder sites.

"Why are you showing me this?" I asked her. "It's self-incriminating."

She held them higher, and I realized then that another rosary already hung around her neck. The beads in her hand were not hers.

I tried to ask her what it meant, but the thickening smoke choked me to the point of nausea. I could no longer speak. The intense heat licked at my flesh, singeing the hairs on the back of my neck. Then, in the middle of God's own fury, it came to me: the significance of the beads and the reason Leona was trying to help me. How obvious and ironic, I thought, that I should figure it out just in time to take my newfound discovery to my grave.

I imagined that the beads Carlos found at the murders sites came from the same strand Leona now held in her hand. They were not rosary beads at all, but the beads of a witch's ladder, as I remembered Lilith saying that a strand of forty beads, so designed by a witch, can serve as a witch's ladder equal in power to that of forty knots on a rope. Somehow, a witch's ladder had played an important role in all of the murders, beginning with Travis and including Doctor Lieberman's. Leona had come to tell me that the beads, not the towels, were the real key to the mystery.

But had she come too late? The intense heat and blinding smoke forced me back down. I struggled to breathe the last few morsels of clean air left hovering only inches off the floor. Many thoughts ran through my mind: the suspects, the motives, the witch's ladders... The witch's ladder! Why I did not think of it sooner, I will never know. I looted my pockets and came upon my last best hope for salvation. Though my eyes were welded shut by the smoke, I knew I had untied enough knots under the table to undo one or two more without looking now.

As it happened, the first knot surrendered quickly, but time for tremors and warning gusts had long expired. I needed results immediately. I untied a second knot and then another until I felt the earth began to shake. I did not know what to expect, a tornado, an earthquake or tidal wave. Any one or all, I would have gladly welcomed. I forced my eyes open in time to see Leona disappear into the swirling black smoke. The trembling structure now rocked beyond all reasonable tolerances. Hot tar and bits of wood rained down on me in a hail of burning ash. I pulled my coat up over my head, sprang to my feet and jumped into the bait box. The tension springs made sure the lid came down hard and stayed there, and for that, I was grateful.

Seconds later, an explosion ripped through the fish house, annihilating the tiny structure and sending thousands of fragmented bits into obliteration.

From a remote hilltop overlooking the pier, several individuals watched unemotionally as the last vestige of humanity slipped from their souls. With the smoldering fragments still cascading from the skies around them, the group casually packed their gear up and walked away.

## Twenty

Nightfall found Carlos Rodriguez at the police station, frantically working the phones. No one had seen me since I left that afternoon, giving him sufficient cause to worry. First responders found my car at Suffolk's Walk shortly after the explosion on Pier 4. The keys were in the ignition, the windows were down and a half-eaten hamburger sat on the front seat in a to-go box next to a watered down soft drink. Although they never recovered my body, all indications pointed to a sad and obvious conclusion: I was dead.

Carlos hung up the phone following a call from the New Castle Fire and Rescue Squadron. They called off the search for me due to nightfall, but promised to resume in the morning. That did not sit well with Carlos. He knew that in the morning it would be too late. In the morning, the gulls would be picking at my bloated corpse like the ocean vultures they were. The mere thought of it sickened him.

He crossed the room, sat down at my desk and dropped his head upon it. I walked up to him and said, "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be out looking for your best friend?"

He rocked his forehead along the blotter. "Give it up, pal, will you? I've had a bad day."

"You had a bad day!" I nudged him on the shoulder. "Try getting blown up, why don't you."

"What?" He raised his head, his red eyes blinking through tears. "Tony?"

"That's me!" I said. "You were expecting maybe a ghost?"

"Yes!" he said, laughing. "Actually, I was." He bounced out of the chair and sprinted around the desk. "I thought you were dead." He grabbed me by the lapels and pulled me in close, wrapping me up in a bear hug so tightly that he almost squeezed the life right out of me—again.

"Carlos, please, if you don't mind."

"I'm sorry, Tony, man! I am just so happy to see you."

I smiled, knowing that I had looked death right in the face and cheated it. I sidestepped Carlos, easing myself around the desk and dropping into my chair. "Carlos, my friend, I thought I was dead, too."

"So what the hell happened? I told you I should have gone with you. Did you find the bag with the towels? Who blew up the pier? What did you—"

"Whoa, whoa! Slow down. Come on. One question at a time."

By now, others had gathered around to welcome me back and to share their relief. There were very few in the group who had not already heard of my wild stories concerning the case, and all were eager to hear the latest spin on that morning's episode.

"I don't know if you're going to believe this," I began, "but after Millie lured me to the fish house, somebody shut and locked the door on me. Before I knew it, the whole damn place went up in a ball of fire."

Carlos pushed the telephone aside and set his butt up on the corner of my desk. "You were inside it?"

"I was, and it was awful. The smoke grew black and thick," I said, my eyes squinting to simulate the trouble I had seeing. "It filled the room with the sickening fumes, and I knew my time had come. Then, I saw something move in the corner of the shack. I looked up and saw somebody standing there."

"My God! Who was it, Tony, Who?"

"Leona Diaz. Sure as I am sitting here now, she stood there with me. At first I thought I was crazy, but then I realized she was not really there at all; she was astral-projecting."

"Astral what?"

"She was bilocating."

"No kidding? You saw her bilocating?"

"Yes," I answered, though I found it amusing how Carlos now accepted without question such a phenomenon. The others were more skeptical however. "She tried to tell me something," I said, and I went on to explain about the beads. "I believe they are the key to this case. Although the bag with the towels is relevant, it

was only a decoy to lure me to the fish house. The whole thing was a setup, and I'm sorry to say, Millie Bradford is into this thing up to her neck."

"That's all fine and good," said Carlos, "but tell us how you got out of the fish house alive."

I surveyed the expressions on the faces of my fellow officers. They already only believed half my story. Witch's ladders, bilocating—of course, it would all sound ridiculous to the nonbelievers. I imagined that if Carlos had not experienced the bizarre episodes of paranormal and supernatural for himself, then I would likely be telling the rest of the story to an empty office. At the risk of branding myself a total lunatic in front of the entire department, I went on to explain my adventure.

"Okay," I said, my voice falling into a gravelly hush. "I'll tell you how I escaped. You see, after Leona showed me the witch's ladder, it dawned on me to try to use the one I had in my coat pocket. I did not know what to expect, but I knew that anything would be better than dying in that fiery hellhole. After I untied a couple of the knots, I hopped into a bait box and closed the lid. The next thing I knew, a terrible explosion blasted me through the rotted floorboards and into the icy waters."

With that, all but one of the officers huddled around the desk turned and walked away, leaving only Carlos to endure the story's conclusion. Undaunted by the other's cynicism, he pressed me to finish.

"At that point," I continued, "I think the explosion knocked me unconscious. When I awoke, I had this sensation of floating on a cloud. I really thought I was dead! My ears were ringing, and there were all these tiny lights beckoning me from the darkness. I remember thinking: is this a test? Which light do I walk to? What if I pick the wrong one, will I end up in hell? I did not think that death was supposed to make you choose like that. I mean, I was cold and wet, and achy. I remember saying to myself: 'Surely this can't be the road to heaven.' Then I realized what the tiny beacons of light were. They were the holes in the lid on the bait-box. I was outside! The lights were beams of sunlight streaming in. 'Good God almighty!' I shouted. 'I'm alive! I'm still alive!'"

"You were still inside the bait-box?"

"Yes, Carlos. Of course! And to the best of my knowledge, I was floating around in the bay somewhere."

Carlos smiled, but skeptically. "That's incredible! How did it happen? I mean, the explosion, was it the witch's ladder?"

"I don't know. Maybe, or maybe it was the propane tank on the side of the building. Either way: it got me out of one predicament and into another."

"How so?"

"Well, as it turns out, the blast freed me from the burning building all right, but then I found myself hopelessly imprisoned inside the bait-box. The force of the explosion jammed the latching mechanism on the lid. It was sealed shut. I tried pushing on the lid like a madman, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't budge it."

"Holy cow, Tony. You could have been carried out to sea in that thing!"

"Could have? Carlos, I was! I drifted inside that box for over seven hours. It carried me so far out into the Atlantic that I could practically hear the bells of Nova Scotia. If that wasn't bad enough, the waves breaking over the top of the lid were starting to fill the box with seawater. I tell you, Carlos, I thought I was a gonner."

"Gees, Tony! How did you get out?"

"Sheer luck, Pal. That is all it was: sheer dumb luck. The currents were flowing just right, or maybe it was the wind. Hell, maybe it was the witch's ladder. I don't know. Just when I had given up all hope, along came a fishing trawler heading back to shore with a full haul, and lucky for me they had a little room for one more catch. They saved my life!"

Carlos shook his head at me. He had heard many of my stories in the past: some more far-fetched than others, but this one beat all. "I don't know, Tony," he said. "I think maybe you are pulling my leg this time. Do you really expect me to believe an explosion blasted you and the box through the floor of the fish house and that you weren't killed?"

"Do I look dead to you?" I quipped. Then, having glanced down at my ragged condition, added, "Don't answer that. Listen, I know I sometimes have a propensity for exaggerating. But this time every word I told you is true."

"Really?"

"I swear."



“Okay, if you say so.”

“Wait. You want to hear the best part?”

“There’s more?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What?”

“Her name was Tony’s Dream.”

“Whose name?”

“The trawler that picked me up.”

Carlos shook his head and turned away. “In your dreams,” he said under his breath. A few steps in, he turned back and added, “Well?”

I shrugged. “Well what?”

“Did you find the bloody towels?”

“No, I did not..”

“Ah-huh. I knew it. You owe me lunch!”

“I owe you what?”

“Lunch. We had a bet, remember. If you found the bag and there were no bloody towels inside, then you would buy me lunch for a week.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, my little Cuban hustler. The deal was that you had to find the bag, not me. Besides, I think the beaded witch’s ladder is the thing we need to find now.”

“How is that?”

I leaned back in my chair, propped my muddy boots up on the desk and laced my fingers across my chest. “I don’t know for sure,” I said. “But there has got to be a link. Why else would Leona come to me with it?”

“Maybe she wanted you to have it for evidence.”

“Evidence? What would she be doing with it? How would she have in her possession a witch’s ladder if it were used by the killer?”

“Maybe she is the killer.”

“No,” I said. “The killer is holding Leona hostage! That is how she can get her hands on the witch’s ladder and take it with her when she bilocates. As far as leaving it for evidence, she can’t, at least in the physical world. She can only show it to us as long as she can get her hands on it.”

Carlos nodded. “You know, Tony, I’m not sure if this helps, but while you were out taking a pleasure cruise today, I looked something up on the Internet for you.”

I smiled, reluctantly letting the remark go unchallenged. “Does it have anything to do with Leona?”

“I don’t know. You tell me. It’s about that phrase you said Valerie kept repeating.”

“Phrase?”

“Remember? You mentioned it again this morning: attraction of blood. You said she kept repeating it.”

“Yes, of course,” I said, remembering the incident that ultimately led to the infamous draining of the pool episode. “At Valerie’s, right. What did you find out?”

“Well, it turns out that attraction of blood has been around for centuries, millenniums even. As far back as the Stone Age, observations held that when a man lost enough blood, say from a battle or an animal attack, he died. It is a fundamental rule of survival: no blood—no life. That led to the belief that a man’s blood is his life and when it all leaks out he is no more. These beliefs eventually evolved to include the notion that not only does a man’s bloods contain his life, but also his character, his qualities and abilities. It soon became accepted that the very essence of a man resided in his blood, and if one were to touch or consume another man’s blood, then that person might acquire some or all of the qualities and characteristics of that man.”

Carlos continued explaining the history of the phenomenon, but somewhere in the mix, my mind began to wander. I did not need to hear more to understand the importance of what he was saying. It all made perfect sense at last. Before now, I had not ruled out pagan ritual sacrifices as a motive. Now, knowing that the liver purifies the blood, I understood the connection. If someone wanted to consume the richest, purest blood of an individual, then the liver would be the way to go. It seemed reasonable to assume that someone was consuming the blood of only workshop members for their abilities in the paranormal. Certainly, those were qualities worthy of the attraction. Attraction of blood was not merely the key to finding the motive. It was the motive!

“Carlos, stop right there! That’s it! You’re a genius! That is the one thing this case has been missing: a logical motive.”

“What, attraction of blood? All it means is that someone is out there sucking down other people’s blood.”

“Not exactly, Carlos. To be precise, someone is out there cutting up people’s livers to eat them.”

“Whoa! You think?”

“Of course!”

“Someone is eating the livers because he thinks it will make him psychic?”

“Sure, but since I suspect the killer is someone in the workshop, then perhaps the expectation is that he or she will become not psychic, but more psychic.”

“Doctor Lieberman wasn’t psychic.”

“I know, and you’re going to ask me why they took his liver. Aren’t you?”

“Well?”

“The answer is, I don’t know, but I am sure of one thing. Attraction of blood is definitely the motive. The question now is whose motive is it? Frankly, I suspect Lilith Adams. She seems brazen enough.”

Carlos took a seat at the desk opposite me, his head shaking in doubt. “Tony. I never met Lilith Adams, but from what you’ve described these past several months, I just don’t see it.”

“Why not? She is a witch, you know. She made the witch’s ladders.”

“That’s my point. She is too smart. Why would she remain so high profile, knowing that she is on the top of your list of suspects? Besides, she gave you one of those witch’s ladders. Why would she do that if she didn’t want to help you?”

“Maybe she didn’t think I would use it.”

“And maybe she did. Maybe someone else got hold of one of her ladders and now she’s using it to try to kill you.”

“You’re talking about Millie Bradford?”

“She did lure you to the fish house.”

“If that’s the case, she most definitely had help. She could not have nailed the door shut and set the place ablaze on her own.”

“Want to know what I think?”

“I’m listening.”

“Michael Dietrich and Millie Bradford are in on it together. I think they tried to kill you.”

“I think you are absolutely right, Carlos,” I said, “but all of them are going to jail, not just Millie and Michael. In any case, I still want to know who the Stalker is, because he or she will be the most dangerous to approach.”

“Perhaps not. Remember, they all think you are dead. Their guard may be down now. If you want, I can have a buddy of mine at the New Castle News print up an obituary for you.”

“You can?”

“Sure.”

“Great! That will buy us the time we need.”

“Consider it done.”

“All right then. We should plan our next move carefully. We don’t want to lose the element of surprise.”

“Definitely. So what is our next move?”

I glanced down at my ragged wet clothes, still stinking like day-old fish. “I don’t know about you, but my next move is to go home and take a long hot shower.”

The grimace on Carlos’ face conveyed his concurrence. We were both eager to get on with the case, but waiting for a fresh start in the morning definitely seemed like a good idea.

## Twenty-one

The following morning, I met up with Carlos at the Percolator. I no sooner sat down, than he launched straight into his theory about the Surgeon Stalker.

"It's Millie Bradford!" he said excitedly. "I'm telling you, Tony, I thought about it all last night and it makes sense."

"What, that Millie somehow managed to overpower no less than five bigger, stronger men and kill them without receiving a single scratch? Or that she, with her one hundred and thirty-pound body, managed to pull the considerably heavier Barbara Richardson over the front seat of her car while twisting her head completely around? No. I don't think so. I can't see it."

"No, Tony, you don't understand. It wasn't Millie."

"You just said—"

"I know, but what I am saying is that it's Millie, but isn't. You see?"

I hunched forward, picked my coffee up with cupped hands and sipped it. "No, I don't see. Maybe instead of staying up all night, you should have gotten some sleep. Then your head wouldn't be in an obvious fog."

"Tony, listen to me. I got to thinking about what you said about the witch's ladder. It does have incredible powers, we both agree. Maybe Millie learned to control those powers to allow herself to transform into a monster. I don't mean like Godzilla or anything, but someone or something large enough to overpower somebody like Travis or Chris. It's possible; don't you think?"

I leaned back and dabbed the glazed sugar specs off my chin. "A monster? Go on. I'm listening."

"Okay. Look. Who in the group might benefit from this supposed law of contagion more than the only person with no special powers or abilities to begin with?"

"I don't know."

"Nobody, that's who. Nobody but Millie could possibly reap greater results, because she started with nothing."

"You might have a point."

"You're damn straight I do! How about this? The first murder occurred at the Center the very night that Millie started working there?"

"I remember," I said, but Carlos was doing well and was not really looking for my feedback anymore. He started in with facts, dates, and tidbits I had long since forgotten about. However, none of that mattered anymore. As he continued, all the ambient noises in the coffeehouse seemed to fade. I could hear only the voice in my head asking why I had not pieced it together sooner. All the signs were there. When I went to Millie's house to question her about the towels, she called to me from the kitchen and told me to come enter, yet the kitchen was at the back of the house. She could not possibly have seen me at the front door—unless she was psychic.

Also, Millie told me she had stumbled upon a lucky streak, winning all kinds of cash at the racetrack. Again, picking long shots that paid sixty-to-one and ninety-to-one. It all seemed nothing short of clairvoyant.

I slammed my hand down on the table, causing cups and saucers to chatter nervously. "Carlos! You're absolutely right!" I said, paying no attention to the consequence of my actions. My sudden outburst startled Carlos, who fumbled his cup and spilled hot coffee all over the table. He squirmed in his seat, trying to avoid the spill rolling off the table's edge onto his lap.

"Millie is the Surgeon Stalker. I see that now. She came to the workshop to kill the members and steal their psychic powers."

"By all accounts," said Carlos, "we have six down. If you count Leona, then we still have four lively paranormal candidates out there with nice healthy livers just waiting for the taking."

"I think we have to include Leona."

"So, who's next? Michael?"

"No, I don't think so. My guess it is Lilith. She represents the most danger to Millie after this. If another killing occurs and another liver gets cut out, then Lilith will surely put two and two together and figure out who's doing it."

"And if there is another killing, any idea when it might happen?"

“That’s a good question.” I flipped my phone open and brought up the calendar. “Let me see. If I note only the dates in which workshop members were killed, excluding the twins because their livers were not removed, then that would leave us with...”

My words faded with preoccupation, as I worked on identifying a pattern for the killings, hoping to predict the next murder. Meanwhile, Carlos got busy emptying the napkin holder, trying desperately to dry the spilled coffee from his lap. A young, curly-haired server named Natalie came by offering fresh refills of coffee, but Carlos waved her off, embarrassed that she might see the wet spot on his pants. Instead of escaping humiliation, however, he exacerbated the situation by accidentally knocking over the remainder of his coffee, spilling it, naturally, on his lap.

Out of sheer innocence and instinctive reflex, the young woman dropped to her knees, and with a towel proceeded to rub the coffee stain from his pant leg. The ensuing commotion commanded the unruly attention of everyone in the house. By the time poor Natalie looked up and noticed the shock on Carlos’ face, the entire restaurant had erupted into juvenile howling, whistling and catcalling. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the disruption came from the other cops in the café. The abashed young woman gasped in utter humiliation and scurried off into the kitchen in tears.

I looked over and shot a disapproving glare at Carlos. “Are you done having fun now?”

“Tony. I didn’t do anything. We had an accident.”

“You know if that girl is under eighteen you can get into big trouble for fooling around like that.”

“Tony, I... I...”

“Never mind. Listen up. Travis Webber was killed on March 19th, Barbara Richardson on April 18th and Chris Walker on May 18th. See a connection yet?”

Carlos nodded, but his answer came slowly. “It looks like once-a-month intervals.”

“That’s right, just about once a month. What does that tell you?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know, that Millie suffers from a mean case of PMS?”

My lip curled sharply upward. “No, Carlos. It is not PMS.”

He sank sheepishly in his seat. “All right then what?”

“Well, it’s not that your take is necessarily wrong, but I was thinking more along the lines of astronomy rather than biology.”

“Come again.”

“Think lunar cycles, not menstrual cycles.”

He slid down lower, clearly uncomfortable talking about the female condition. “Okay, lunar cycles,” he huffed. “I see where this is going. We’re talking about full moons.”

“Yes. As near as I can tell, all three murders occurred on full moons. And unless I miss my guess, we have until June 16th before the next bloodbath.”

“So then why don’t we take Millie in for attempted murder on your life now?”

“It’s not that easy. I cannot prove anything. Her sending me to the pier is circumstantial at best. When you think about it, we have nothing on any of them. I’m afraid our choices are limited.”

Carlos straightened up in his chair again. “Limited to what?”

“Waiting. We wait until the 16th and hope no one else loses a liver before then.”

“Hmm, would this be a good time for me to put in for vacation?”

I waved the curly-haired server back to the table for coffee refills. “No, Carlos,” I said. “I think you should stick around. It’s just getting interesting.”

## Twenty-two

The next several weeks proved excruciatingly difficult for me. I had to keep out of sight so that Lilith and the others would not know I was still alive, and the sitting around with nothing to do gave me cabin fever. At one point, the boredom got so bad that it nearly gave way to a catastrophe of epic proportion.

In the middle of a bright June day, after only the second week of biding my time, I decided to see what would happen if I untied one of the knots from my witch's ladder inside the police station. I imagined if I employed intense concentration and discipline that I could produce a very small tornado, not unlike the one in Millie's house, only much smaller. As the resident office moles and attending detectives gathered around, I cleared a space on my desk and proceeded to tap the potential of Mother Nature's fury.

It started innocently; a novelty of amusement for all whom bore witness to its charming, whimsical little dance. Like a miniature Tasmanian devil, the swirling wind whipped an enchanting path across my desk, lightly ruffling papers and files hastily pushed aside for its crusade.

My amused associates took turns poking and probing with intrusive fingers inside its conical orifice. It seemed harmless enough, until we noticed the tiny tornado responding to touch with an almost lifelike emotion. Much like fish reacts when you tap the side of a fish tank, the inquisitive little twister actually seemed drawn by curiosity and then frightened by its discovery.

In time, some of us decided to feed the miniature cyclone a variety of storm worthy debris: cigarette ash, peanut shells, shredded bits of paper and even open packets of coffee sweetener. The tornado grew bigger with every morsel it gobbled up, until finally, I worried that things were getting a bit too scary.

Soon, a controlled panic set in. We immediately assembled a cyclone committee to address the emerging crisis. The committee submitted suggestions for how best to snuff out the runaway tempest. Only after attempting to drown it with water, blow it out with a fire extinguisher and suffocating it with coats and hats, did we finally realize that the genie was truly out of the bottle, and it was not going back in voluntarily.

In just minutes, the wicked little monster grew ten-fold its original size, sucking up everything in the office that was not tied down or part of the structure. Books, papers, desktop photos, all went first, becoming nothing more than a mere blur in the swirling-white vaporous cloud. By the time it began tossing small office furniture about, the cops and staff of the Second Precinct put the word out to abandon ship. Only after escaping the building in a crushing stampede did I consider using the witch's ladder to neutralize the cyclone. It worked at Millie's house, I reasoned, and so it would have to work here.

Against solid advice, warnings and even orders from friends and superiors, I turned back, penetrating the building to square off with the spiraling menace.

An airborne coffee mug greeted me as I re-entered the office, missing my head by only inches. The windows, already blown out by airborne debris, now fueled the cyclone and its ever-ferocious appetite for fresh air.

I wondered how the tiny office could contain such a storm, and worried if the cyclone were to get out, would it continue to grow and wreak havoc on the entire town? At the rate it was going, it seemed possible. Everything in the office not bolted down was now an integral part of the twister or just fragmented splinters permanently embedded into the walls.

From a huddled behind an old cast iron radiator, I began to whittle away on the next knot in the ladder. Pieces of wood and glass pounded me constantly, riddling my hands with hundreds of tiny cuts and nicks. My eyes drew shut from smaller, stinging bits of debris sandblasting my face through the spaces in the radiator.

The situation seemed almost hopeless, but with luck and perseverance, I managed to loosen the miracle knot. I pulled the rope free, and the tornado suddenly ceased. Once again, bits of plaster, wood, metal and glass came crashing down around me like bomb fragments. Some of the fallout hit me hard, causing more cuts and bruises, but most, fortunately, missed me. Once again, I had saved the day: a day that I had almost ruined, and again I promised myself I would burn the witch's ladder as soon as I solved the case.

The morning of June 16th rolled around, bringing with it a surreal sense of calm. After all the waiting, fraught with anxiety and apprehensions, I finally found inner peace with myself. I knew not what the new day would bring, or what the night would leave behind, but I felt confident that by the next sunrise I would either find resolve for the victims, or die trying.

Carlos spent the morning, as he usually did before a big stakeout, making sandwiches and packing junk food in an overnight bag. Our plan was to stake out in front of Millie house. If she held Leona captive and planned to kill her, then she would most likely try moving her to a secluded place where she could easily deal with the bloody mess. That is, if she had not already done it.

Carlos and I waited for the sun to slip behind the hills before moving our surveillance vehicle into position, and there we waited. We watched the bulk shadows from the oak-lined boulevard succumbed to the night long

before the moon made its debut in the eastern sky. From there, the hours crawled. Near midnight, Carlos had eaten the pre-made sandwiches and had put a healthy dent in his box of Twinkies. He was just tearing open a Scooter Pie, when I ordered him to duck.

"What?" he said, regarding me suspiciously, as though I might steal his treat.

"I said duck. I think that's her."

We dropped our heads below the dashboard, just as a Cadillac pulled alongside us before turning into the driveway and parking next to Millie's old sedan.

"Damn it!" I blasted under my breath. "I forgot she bought a new car."

We watched from a crouch, as she exited her vehicle and carried into the house a small brown bag.

"She didn't see us," Carlos observed.

"That's a relief," I said.

"So, what gives? Have we've been watching an empty house all night?"

I did not reply. I grabbed a flashlight and trained it on my watch. "Look at that. It is almost midnight. Where do you suppose she's been all this time?"

"I don't know, but you can bet she wasn't at a Girl Scout meeting."

"I hope we didn't blow it. Carlos, if she killed Leona, I swear I will—"

"Whoa, calm down, Tony. We don't know if that happened. Listen; we have been here since sunset. If Millie was gone when we arrived, then that means she left home sometime this afternoon. Right?"

"So what?"

"Think about it. Would she drag Leona out of the house kicking and screaming and making a scene in broad daylight?"

"What makes you think Leona would go kicking and screaming? What if she drugged her?"

"She'd still have to move Leona to the car and take a chance that someone might see her."

"I suppose," I said. "That wouldn't make sense then, would it?"

Carlos smiled. "See what I'm saying?"

It was not much to pin one's hopes on, but Carlos was right. We settled into position again and continued watching the house. We soon spotted Millie through the window using the telephone. She seemed to answer a call rather than make one, with the conversation apparently short. She hung up and immediately began working the rooms, shutting off lights and closing blinds.

"Look at her," said Carlos. "You think she knows? Maybe someone tipped her off that we are out here."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. She has not tried looking out the window to see for herself. It's the first thing she'd do if she thought we were watching."

"Well, if she's getting ready for bed, she sure is in a big rush about it."

"She's not getting ready for bed. She's closing up shop to leave again."

Minutes later, as I suspected, Millie hurried from the house with her coat and handbag over her arm. She jumped into the Cadillac, backed out of her drive and pulled off without ever noticing us.

"Now that's interesting," Carlos noted. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I can't imagine where she's going. Maybe we were wrong. Maybe she is holding Leona someplace else and now she's going to finish her off."

"Maybe in the trunk of her car."

"Maybe."

Carlos glanced out the passenger window, skyward toward the full moon. "We better do something quick. Whatever's going to happen, it's going to happen tonight."

I fired up the engine and dropped the car into gear, keeping one foot on the gas and one on the brake. "Carlos, listen to me carefully. You are going to have to get out. I want you to break into Millie's house and see if Leona is in there. I'm going to follow Millie."

"Tony! That is breaking and entering. Cops can't do that!"

"Carlos! Do it! We don't have a choice."

I reached across his lap, yanked the door handle and pushed him out onto the curb. As I sped away, I shouted, "Call me as soon as you're in!"

It did not take long for me to catch up with Millie's Cadillac. I followed her across town, passing the New Castle Savings and Loan, where the time and temperature clock acknowledged the hour of midnight, exactly. I reached into my jacket and patted down the inside pocket where the witch's ladder resided, realizing it had become both a lucky charm and a trusted weapon for me. I tried to imagine where I might be without it, and wondered if I entrusted too much confidence in the ladder to bail me out of dangerous situations. In the end, I decided it was just another tool, no more, no less. I removed the ladder from my pocket and slung it over the rearview mirror for the rest of the ride.

Twenty minutes in, I was still tailing Millie from a safe distance, far enough back not to alert her of my presence, but close enough that I needed only to run a stoplight or two to keep from losing her. As the ride continued, and my eyes fell transfixed on the glowing taillights before me, peeking in and out around every corner. My mind drifted deeper in complex thoughts of conspiracy, lies and duplicity. I still believed that something about this case just did not add up. It was not the possible motive, for that I could accept. In my days as a police officer and detective, I had seen stranger motives for murder than attraction of blood. It also was not the mysterious death of the twins, Akasha and Shekina. For whatever reason they were killed, I had seen dozens more where killers betrayed killers. Discounting that and the mystery of Leona, something else still did not sit right. One missing key to the puzzle remained.

I was still consumed in thought when my cell phone interrupted my concentration and snapped me back to attention.

"I'm sorry, Tony," the caller said. "Leona is not here, and there is no sign she ever was."

Somehow, in the back of his mind, I knew Carlos would say that. "Yeah, well don't ask me why, Carlos, but I'm not too surprised."

"You're not? Then why did you have me break in here in the first place?"

"We had to know for sure. Is there anything at all unusual there?"

"No, nothing. Where are you now?"

"I'm still following Millie. I think she is heading for the research center. Why don't you call a couple of black-and-whites and meet me there as soon as you can?"

"You got it. Oh, and Tony; you be careful."

"Always, Carlos. Always."

Another twenty minutes into the drive and, as predicted, I found myself following Millie up the road leading to the Institute for Research of Paranormal and Unexplained Phenomena. It seemed ironic that Millie would lead me to the place where it all began, and only fitting it should end there.

She swung her Cadillac onto the lot. I stayed back, holding shy within the shadows of the main building. I barely shut my engine off when Michael Dietrich barreled through the lot from the other entrance in his red and white SUV, whipping into the space next to Millie's Cadillac and coming only inches from taking out her entire rear quarter panel. Millie's obvious lack of surprise told me that she had expected him, though perhaps not with an entrance so grandiose.

Now I knew that the two planned the midnight rendezvous, though for what, I could not imagine. Then I realized something peculiar: Lilith's car was also there, parked several spaces away. I concluded that a meeting of some sort was about to take place and now all but Valerie were present. I watched Millie and Michael get out of their cars. Surprisingly, instead of going into the building, they headed for the woods behind the parking lot, slipping through the brush and disappearing in a thin veil of fog that seemed to swallow them whole. I contemplated following, but anticipating Valerie Spencer would also show, I held back for the moment to wait it out.

Back in the woods, just beyond the burned-out gazebo, stood a clearing of trees some thirty feet around in a dish-like pattern. The site remained heavily shrouded by a compliment of tall pines and a number of old-growth oaks.

Michael and Millie forged through the brush and thicket along a narrow dirt trail carved haphazardly in serpentine fashion. As they neared the clearing, they heard a rustling through the bushes ahead. There they found Valerie Spencer—dead, her insides spilled out over the ground like twisted strings of catgut and sausage. Over Valerie's corpse, if they could believe their eyes, stood Lilith Adams. She said nothing to the new arrivals,

her face void of expression, her hands stained in blood. Around Valerie's feet and neck lay a rope of considerable length, enough to tie her from head to toe with plenty left over for three more victims.

"Lilith!" Michael cried. "What have you done? Why did you kill Valerie?"

Lilith glanced down at her blood-soaked blouse. At her feet lay organs and entrails up to her ankles, steeping in still warm gaseous steam.

"I thought we were all in this together," he said. "I don't understand."

Millie pushed Michael aside. "I'll tell you why she did this. Lilith killed Valerie because SHE is the Surgeon Stalker!"

"No. I do not believe it. We killed the Stalker. The twins, Shekina and Akasha, that's who the killers were."

"We were wrong. Look at her. She is soaked in Valerie's blood. She killed her. Lilith killed Valerie and the others. She used us like pawns in her evil game, forcing us to kill Doctor Lieberman, the twins and Detective Marcella. She is the evil entity, Michael, the one Valerie warned us about. She is the one who moves freely among us. It is time we stop her. It is up to us now. We must put an end to her carnage." She pointed to the rope. "Grab that. We'll tie her up."

"Wait," said Lilith. "I didn't do this. I found Valerie like this when I got here. I found her hanging upside-down from this tree by that rope."

Michael continued gathering rope without comment. He untied a section from around Valerie's hands and feet and used it to tie Lilith to the tree. All the while Lilith remained remarkable submissive, neither fighting nor protesting Michael's attempts to restrain her.

"That's it," Millie cooed, watching from a distance. "Tie her up good. We'll burn her at the stake like in old times."

As Michael worked on tying up Lilith, he worried about her docile disposition. He had never seen Lilith so passive before, or Millie so directorial, almost as though the two had switched roles. He had barely finished securing the last knot around Lilith's hands when she began to thaw from her traumatized state. He recognized then how lucky he was that the ropes held as they did, for in no time she returned to her usual scrappy self.

"What the hell's going on here!" she squalled, yanking on the ropes until her arms and wrists began to bleed. "Michael. Untie me now, this instant! Do you hear?"

"No," said Millie. "Your day has come, Ms. Lilith Adams, or Miss Sonya Stewart, whatever your real name is. Or do you prefer we just call you Ms. Stalker?"

"What are you talking about? How did I get here?"

"What, are you going to stand there and deny that you just killed Valerie Spencer?" Millie motioned toward Valerie's lifeless body with a nod.

Lilith's eyes followed. "Oh, God! Is that Valerie?"

"Of course, it's Valerie," said Michael. "You acknowledged that much yourself, just moments ago. You said you found her like that. Remember?"

"No!" she said, shaking her head. "I don't. I don't know what I am doing here, I swear. I...I think I've been drugged."

"Yeah, well, Millie and I just got here, too, and we found you standing over Valerie with blood all over your hands and blouse. Maybe you can explain that."

"Yes, I can. I can explain. I drove here because Doctor Lowell asked me to come and meet with him. He said he had news about the Stalker. I met with him upstairs. We had a drink and then.... Then I woke up and found myself here."

"I find that very interesting," said Millie. She strolled around the blood-drenched carcass, its stomach, bladder, lungs and intestines splayed out in a sprawling mess. "Tell me, Lilith, how is it that you can commit all those murders without creating an ounce of suspicion, and yet now you cannot fabricate a decent lie to save your own toxic skin?"

"I didn't kill anyone. Michael, you have to believe me. Why would I kill anybody?"

"Why?" Michael answered. "I think I know. Maybe you kill for the very reason you would have us believe that Shekina and Akasha killed. It is the attraction of blood. Only the attraction was yours."

"No. You are wrong. Come on; think about it. Why would I provide the motive for a crime that I committed?"



“To throw suspicion away from you,” said Millie. “Until your theory about attraction of blood, we were all leaning toward Detective Marcella’s theory of pagan ritual sacrifice, something that would have put your name on the top of a very short list of suspects, seeing you’re a pagan witch and all.”

“No. You are wrong; you know it. You, too, Michael. Look around. Where is the knife? If I killed Valerie, then what did I do with the knife?”

“You tossed it into the woods,” said Michael, and he began collecting dried branches and stacking them around the tree at Lilith’s feet. “You heard us coming, so you tossed it. I should have trusted my instincts. I knew Doctor Lieberman was not the Surgeon Stalker, but you were so convincing. How could I have let you talk Gordon and me into killing him? You are an evil, wicked woman, Lilith. You taught me to kill, and so now it is your turn to die.”

He turned to Millie and handed her a book of matches. “You’re in this, too,” he said, apologetically. “We both need to do this, for Gordon, for Valerie—Jesus, for everyone in our lives we ever cared for. She took them away from us. It’s time she pays.”

Millie took the book and lit the first match. She handed the book back to Michael and waited for him to do the same.

I think it is fair to say that Lilith stood within moments of becoming the first witch in three hundred years to burn at the stake, when I came out of the woods into the clearing with my weapon drawn.

“That’s enough,” I ordered. “Drop the match, Michael; you, too, Millie. Put it down!”

Almost comically, the three uttered in surprise, “Detective, you’re alive!”

Michael and Millie blew out the matches and surrendered their hands to the sky. I moved in, believing I had successfully secured the scene, but I had woefully underestimated Michael’s resolve, for just as he had done with Doctor Lieberman and Officer Burke, he began concentrating fiercely on sending out thought energies capable of crippling me. In a matter of moments, I was on the ground holding my head and temples in a futile effort to squelch the intense pain. As I lay in agony, Millie ran up and seized my weapon.

“Grab that rope,” she hollered. “Tie him up with Lilith. We’ll finish this thing once and for all.”

Michael moved in quickly with another piece of rope, and soon had Lilith and me bound back-to-back to the tree. “I’m sorry we have to do this, Detective,” he said, rearranging the scattered kindling back into a neat pile. “But you just keep getting in the way. I suppose you can thank your friend, Lilith, here.”

“No, Michael, you’re wrong,” I insisted, as my crippling migraine began subsiding. “Lilith is not the Stalker.”

“Sure she is. She is a witch, you know. See, she even fooled you.”

“Don’t talk to him, Michael,” Millie barked. “He’ll try to confuse you. He is the last person standing in our way now. We must put the evil entity down tonight while the moon is still full, and Detective Marcella must die with her.”

“Do you hear that, Michael? Have you ever known Millie to act so cold? The entity has possessed her, not Lilith. I believe she is your Surgeon Stalker. Just ask her about the beads.”

“What beads?”

“The beads we found at the site of every Stalker killing, including Doctor Lieberman’s. They are from a witch’s ladder. Go ahead and ask her.”

Michael turned to Millie, but before he could ask, she obligingly reached into her blouse and pulled out a necklace made of small black beads. “Are you talking about these, Detective?” she said. “Lilith gave me this on the first night we met. She told me it was a necklace of hope. She gave it to me because I was having trouble getting over the loss of my husband. She said it would restore my hope.”

“Yes, and did she tell you that if it contained forty beads, then it could also double as a witch’s ladder?”

“No. I do not know what you are talking about. Michael, you should light the fire now.”

“No, Michael, wait. I want to hear Millie explain to me how she got so lucky recently at the horse track. Am I supposed to believe it wasn’t psychic in nature?”

“I told you. I hit a lucky streak.”

“Then explain how you knew it was me at your front door when you were sitting in your kitchen all the way at the other end of the house.”

Millie sputtered a contemptuous laugh. "Detective Marcella, I'd have thought you smarter than that. I saw your car coming around the corner behind my house through my kitchen window. One hardly needs psychic powers to see through glass, you know."

"No, Millie. I do not believe it. I saw the tornado in your kitchen. That happened because you were able to psychically block my attempts to read your thoughts. You caused some sort of boomerang effect."

"Oh come now."

"It's true. I attempted to read your mind just like I read Lilith's, but you knew it was coming. I'm guessing you used your witch's ladder to read my mind before I could read yours."

"Okay. I think we have heard enough. Honestly, boomerangs, witch's ladders; It is enough to make you laugh. Michael, it's time to burn someone."

Michael approached the tree, listening but not commenting as he lit another match.

"No, wait!" said Lilith. "Michael, it's true. Detective Marcella is telling the truth. I did give the necklace to Millie, and under the right circumstances she could use it as a witch's ladder."

"Yes," I added, "and it's true that we found those same beads at all of the Surgeon Stalker murder sites. Go ahead. Ask her to show you how many beads are on her necklace? If she has less than forty, then ask her to explain where the other beads went."

Millie clutched the beads to her chest. "That's not fair," she said. "I don't have all the beads because I already used some."

I sneered with vindication. "Yes. You used them when you killed those people, then you cut out their livers and you ate them."

Michael cringed. "Is that true, Millie? Did you use the beads like Detective Marcella said?"

"No. I swear. I used them the way Lilith told me to use them. I dropped them into water so that I could count the ripples. It was supposed to help me with my grief." She turned to Lilith and snarled. "Incidentally, Lilith, they don't work worth a damn."

"You have to believe," Lilith said.

"Whatever. Michael, I swear on my late husband's soul, I don't know anything about a witch's ladder."

The match in Michael's hand burned down to his fingertips and fizzled out. He tossed it to the ground. He then walked up to Millie and put out his hand. "Let me see the necklace."

Millie unclasped the coupling and surrendered the beads. He turned back with the necklace in hand and began walking toward me. His lips moved as he counted softly. Lilith heard him on his approach: "Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine...." His trek back to the tree seemed expertly timed so that his arrival coincided with the final count.

"How many did you say you found at the Stalker murder sites, Detective?"

"We found eight, Michael, but that doesn't mean there aren't more. The point is: they were found at all of the murders, meaning that whoever those beads belong to is most definitely the Surgeon Stalker."

Michael nodded. "Finally, something that makes sense to me. Do you know what, Detective? I believe you." He held the necklace up for Lilith's inspection. "Lilith. Do you recognize this?"

"It looks like one of the necklaces I made."

He turned and held the necklace up for me to see. "And Detective, do you believe the beads you found looked exactly like these?"

"Exactly," I said.

"And you found eight of these beads?"

"Yes."

"There you have it, then. We have our Surgeon Stalker."

"Good!" I said. "So, you believe me. Millie is the real Stalker."

"No, I'm sorry, Detective. I hate to advise you of your miscalculations, but Millie is not the Surgeon Stalker. She only has five beads missing on her necklace. You found eight. Now, I am no rocket scientist, but if you ask me, I would say the person losing all those beads was probably the same person making all those necklaces in the first place. And Detective, you're sharing a tree with her right now."

Michael turned to Lilith, and in a show of condemnation, ceremoniously draped the necklace over her head. "Let's see it help you now, Witch." He turned and walked back to Millie and relieved her of my gun. He clicked

the release and swung the revolver's circular chambers open. "Five," he counted aloud. I had five bullets in the gun, and I knew that at least one had my name on it.

I looked on, dumbstruck. I could not believe Lilith was the culprit all along. Even though I had more than enough circumstantial evidence to incriminate, my every instinct told me otherwise. I leaned to my left and uttered through the corner of my mouth, "I would not have believed it, Lilith. You had me guessing all along."

Lilith leaned to her right and whispered back, "Yeah, well keep guessing, Sherlock, because I didn't do it."

"But the beads...we found them all over the place. They were at every murder."

"Detective, I must have made a dozen necklaces just like the one I gave Millie. I gave them to everybody."

"Really? So, think about it. Who else is still alive that might have one of your necklaces?"

"Hell I don't know. What difference does it make now?"

"It makes plenty, Lilith. Think!"

As she struggled to recall the names of everyone she had given a necklace to, Michael familiarized himself with the lock and trigger mechanism on my gun. His intentions now seemed obvious; he planned to shoot first and burn later. Like any cop, I loathed the idea of someone shooting me with my own weapon, but giving the choice between that and burning at the stake with Lilith, getting shot seemed almost palatable.

I hoped that Michael would drop the gun and leave it behind after doing the deed. If so, then Carlos would find it, and Michael's would be the first set of prints he would look for. I did not figure more than twenty-four hours would lapse before Michael was in custody. Only then would Carlos stop to appreciate the irony of Michael using my own gun to kill me, the gun Carlos bought me for my thirty-eighth anniversary on the force. It is a .38-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver. Carlos joked that it represented one caliber for each year of my tenure. I remembered how Carlos mentioned that he'd have gotten me a Colt .45, but that then I'd have to wait another seven years. At the time, I did not expect I would be on the force that long. It appeared now I was right.

As I thought about it, I was glad for the .38 Smith & Wesson. A Colt semi-automatic just was not my thing. Besides, Carlos had even gone through the trouble of getting the revolver engraved with my initials. "How many cops have their guns monogrammed?" Carlos asked at the time. I wondered: indeed, how many? That is when the thought hit me. I leaned over and whispered into Lilith's ear.

Lilith leaned closer, but the sight of Michael taking aim at her with my gun made it hard for her to concentrate. "What did you say?"

"Doctor Lowell," I said. "Have you ever made a witch's ladder for Doctor Lowell?"

She thought hard. "Yes. I believe I have. Why do you ask?"

I turned and shouted to Michael. "Who called you here, Michael?"

The point of the question was not clear, but enough to cause him to lower the weapon. "What's that?" he asked.

"I said who called you here to the woods tonight? Why have you come? Did you all plan this meeting?"

Michael looked over his shoulder at Millie; his brows creased sharply. Millie stepped forward. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm asking you both why you came here tonight. Who called you here? Did you not expect to see Lilith and Valerie here also? Did Doctor Lowell call you all out here tonight?"

Neither answered.

I took another approach. "I know about the bag with the bloody towels, Michael. You can deny it, but we all know about it. We know it existed. You all thought the towels had Doctor Lieberman's initials on it. That is why you killed him. You thought he was the Stalker. Well, guess what? I know who the Stalker is."

"We don't need to hear this, Detective," Millie insisted. "We know who the Stalker is, too; you're standing next to her. It's Lilith Adams."

"No, Millie. You are wrong. You know who the Stalker is, and you're protecting him."

"What are you talking about?" asked Michael. "A minute ago you said Millie was the Stalker. You sound like a desperate man."

"No. The desperate man is the person whose monogrammed initials are on those bloody towels. That's the real killer."

"That was Doctor Peter Lieberman."

"No, Michael. But Doctor Lieberman did share the same initials with the killer, and for that he died."

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the initials P.L., which stand for Phillip Lowell, Doctor Phillip Lowell. The reason Millie is protecting him is because he’s her uncle. Isn’t that right, Millie?”

“That’s enough!” Millie howled. “I won’t stand for this blasphemy. Michael, make him shut up. Now!”

Michael raised the gun, obeying Millie’s command, but with apprehensions.

“Shoot him, Michael!”

He squinted into the sight, took aim, but still did not fire. Again, Millie barked the command to shoot, and although he did not shoot, neither did he lower the muzzle.

“You’ve got to shoot him, Michael! He knows everything. He knows we killed Doctor Lieberman. He knows we killed the twins, and now we have to kill Lilith. How can we let him go after this?”

“We can’t,” said Michael. “I’m sorry, Detective. Millie is right. If we let you go, you will hunt us down. There’ll be no rest for us, ever.”

He drew a deep breath, taking aim once more through squinted eye until my head rested perfectly in the V-groove of the gun-sight. He pulled back slowly on the trigger. The hammer came up. He steadied his aim, gritting his teeth in preparation of the blast and its expected recoil. Millie, lost in her impatience, nudged him to shoot. The gun went off, shredding bark from the tree between my head and Lilith’s.

Michael spun about and pointed the gun at Millie. “Don’t rush me!” he ordered. She stepped back, and it happened: a divine intervention, perhaps; I cannot be sure, but at that moment, Michael saw it. A mysterious figure in the distance began walking toward him.

“Leona!” he said.

She appeared as she had before, her body floating only inches off the ground, her delicate, milky skin radiating a warm translucent glow. He knew instinctively that she had come only in spirit through bilocation, but he was glad to see her just the same.

“Leona!” he called again. “Tell us what is going on, please.”

Lilith and I turned our heads in her direction. From our proximity, we could see her crying, glistening trails of salt-stained tears parading down her cheeks. Her long black hair and sheer ankle length gown flowed freely in a phantom breeze. I looked at her hands, expecting to see a witch’s ladder. To my surprise, they were empty.

“Leona,” I said. “I know you can hear me. What happened to the beads?”

She held out her hands, palms open, striking an eerily resemblance to the Holy Mother. Looking at Michael, she shook her head no. He turned and trained the gun on Lilith, but again she shook her head.

“Then who, Leona? Tell me who the Stalker is?”

She raised her hand higher and pointed into the trees behind Michael and Millie. All eyes turned. From the tranquil silence of the prickly pines, a dark, hooded figure emerged. It stole from shadows of silver and gray moonlight to cloak its size and mask its identity. It watched with innocuous intent until Michael lowered his weapon to better vantage his view. That is when the beast swooped down upon him with a swift and exacting vengeance. It snatched Michael off his feet and slammed him to the ground. It cut into his flesh with a ten-inch knife, slicing first his throat from ear to ear and then his chest from neck to groin.

Lilith screamed; I gasped, and we both tugged wildly on our ropes. On the ground, not five yards from my feet lay my gun, which only moments before had almost ended my life.

“Millie! Untie us. Now!” I shouted.

Millie did not budge. Ether paralyzed by fear or seduced by blood, she watched intently as the mad Surgeon Stalker ravaged Michael’s body, gorging on his liver, though long stringy fibers of flesh still connected it to his carcass.

“Millie! Can’t you hear me?”

In a calm but authoritative voice, she said to me, “Soon enough, Detective. Your turn will come soon enough.”

“My God! Lilith, she is with Doctor Lowell. They are in this together. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Gee, you think?” said Lilith. “And here I was waiting for permission to excuse myself.”

“Not funny, Lilith.”

“Sorry, Detective, but I’m fresh out of ideas. You got any?”

“Yes. In my coat pocket, there is the witch’s ladder you made for me. See if you can reach it.”

Lilith contorted her arms against the ropes enough to squeeze her hand into my pocket. She fished around with the tips of her fingers, exploring first the left side, and then the right. "It's not there," she said. "The ladder's not there."

"What do you mean? It has to be there. I take it with me everywhere."

She searched again, this time pushing her hands so far into my pocket that she tore a hole in the liner. "Damn it, Detective! It is not here. I'm telling you."

"Oh, hell," I said, and Lilith could feel those two simple words snatching the last vestige of hope from her being. "Of course it isn't, Lilith. I just remembered; I took it out of my pocket while I was following Millie out here. I slung it over my rearview mirror for luck."

"Luck?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I guess I'm out of tricks."

"Me too. I'm sorry you ever had to get involved in this in the first place. If it means anything to you now, I'd like to say that I think you'd have made one hell of a witch, Detective."

"Really? What's a witch detective?"

"Very funny, smart ass."

"Thanks, Lilith. Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah. I do. I really mean it."

I smiled, imagining it would be my last. "Well thanks. And I think you'd have made a really nice, ah...I mean, you know, probably a sweet...."

"Hmm. Straight from the heart. I can tell you're a real softy, aren't you?"

"I'm just not good with words."

We stopped talking when we saw Doctor Lowell stand up and hand a piece of Michael's liver to Millie. Millie accepted the offering and immediately gorged herself on the mutilated organ. The doctor then turned and paced his steps slowly toward us. Michael's warm red blood still dripped from the corners of his mouth, as he raised his knife to his tongue and licked it clean.

I stared at him defiantly. "Attraction of blood, Doctor?"

His reply came as no surprise, not to me, and especially not to Lilith. "Yes, Detective," he said, and he did not flinch when the blade sliced into the flesh of his tongue. "Attraction of blood, it really is true what they say, you know. My powers of psycho kinesis, clairvoyance and telepathy have grown tenfold already."

"What about Doctor Lieberman? He wasn't psychic. Why did you take his liver?"

"Ah, the good Doctor Lieberman, an extremely brilliant man. His liver was just hanging there waiting for me. I couldn't very well let it go to waste, now could I?"

"So you ate it?"

"Of course, and it has served me well, as I expect yours should also."

"I'm not psychic."

"No, but you do have some endearing qualities of cunning and deductive reasoning, traits that should serve me well in evading capture by less qualified detectives, such as that bumbling fool, Rodriquez."

"I wouldn't sell Carlos short if I were you."

"No, I should think there are many things you wouldn't do if you were I, but we'll never know now, will we?"

"What about Leona. Have you killed her already?"

The doctor motioned with the blade in the direction of Leona's apparition. "Does she look dead to you?"

"I don't know. I suppose so."

"I assure you, she is not, though she may wish she were."

Doctor Lowell blew Leona a kiss, which caused her to recoil in disgust before disappearing altogether.

"Yes, a dear sweet girl, that little Honduran virgin. She is going to be my bride you know. By the end of tonight's full moon, she will no longer be as pure as arctic snow."

I grimaced at that thought. If there was only one thing I could do before I died, I wished I could free Leona from the evilness before me. "You are a sick, wicked man," I said. "What have you done to that child?"

"Oh, come now, Detective. Leona is not in pain. She is not cold, nor is she hungry or lonely. I have her locked up, yes, but she is in a warm room downstairs in the basement of the Center with all the comforts of

home. I expect we shall have at least one child a year.” He drew his gaze skyward, fixing his sights on the ominous full moon. “I’m sure the blood of a newborn’s liver should hold quite the attraction, don’t you think? With a little luck, I suspect I will live another hundred years or more.”

Again, Lilith gasp. Meanwhile, Millie continued tearing into her prize meat like a rabid dog. Doctor Lowell licked the bloodstained blade one last time. He positioned himself directly in front of me and raised the blade high over his head. I closed my eyes and prepared for death by reciting the Lord’s Prayer. Lilith let out a final sigh and squeezed my hands tightly.

The mad doctor took a deep breath. A grunt of execution left his lips, when there came a fantastic roar from above, shaking the ground with the ferocity of an exploding volcano. I opened my eyes in time to see Doctor Lowell suck up into the twisting, howling hole of a swirling black vortex. The pull of the wind was so intense, it easily scooped up Michael and Valerie’s mutilated bodies, as well. Lilith cried for me to hold her, though tied to the tree, I could do nothing more than squeeze her hand tighter.

Millie ran across the clearing, seeking safety from a nearby boulder, but the rushing current of air swept her feet out from under her. Her body levitated horizontally, tethered to Earth by only her grip on the huge chunk of rock. She held out longer than I thought possible, and although her grip seemed firm, she eventually tired out and let go. Her body sliced through the air like a dart and ascended into the abyss of the funnel in the blink of an eye.

I hollered to Lilith above the deafening roar, “Nice work! Now how about making it stop?”

“I’d like to oblige,” she screamed, “but this is not my handy work.”

“Then whose handy work is it?”

She turned her head and nodded into the stinging wind. “I think it’s his.”

I looked back. In the woods just beyond the clearing, I saw Carlos, hunkering down behind a tree stump. “Carlos,” I yelled, though unsure if he could even hear me. By then, the deadly black twister had doubled in size and grew stronger by the second. “Carlos, toss it in! Toss the ladder into the cyclone!”

It was no use. He could not hear me above the rushing wind.

“Lilith, do something!”

“Like what?”

“Anything! Can’t you send him a thought wave or something? Tell him to surrender the ladder to the cyclone.”

“What good will that do?”

“I don’t know. I just have this feeling. Will you do it?”

“All right, fine. I will try it, but it is not really my area of expertise. You should probably try it with me.”

“Yes, fine. Let’s do it together.”

With that, Lilith and I concentrated our thought energies on sending Carlos a message telepathically. Meters away, the raging cyclone continued to grow stronger, sucking up anything not tied down or grounded by roots. Luckily, Lilith and I easily met that requirement. For Carlos, things were getting more dangerous. Even as he backed away, the winds pulled at his clothes like a riptide, threatening to suck him in at any moment.

Lilith and I continued concentrating on sending a telepathic message. I cannot say for sure, but just when we thought he would give up, he seemed to hear us. He emerged from behind the safety of a Norfolk Pine and hurled the knotted piece of rope into the heart of the beast. A thunderous explosion echoed through the woods, accompanied by a brilliant flash of light. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the colossal twister spun itself out, surrendering all the branches, twigs and leaves that it had sucked up into its belly, allowing them to rain down harmlessly on the cold bare ground.

Conspicuously missing from the falling carpet of debris, however, was any trace of Doctor Lowell, Millie, Michael or Valerie. Absolutely no evidence of their existence remained. Neither body nor blood returned to earth. Lilith uttered something under her breath about the Eighth Sphere, but I paid little attention.

By the time Carlos cut Lilith and me loose, nearly forty of New Castle’s finest boys in blue had surrounded the area.

“Damn, Carlos, what took you so long?” I said jokingly.

“Hey, don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Just be thankful I found your witch’s ladder in your car.” Carlos flashed his bold, boyish grin. “I thought that thing was like your American Express.”

“Come again?”

“You never leave home without it.”

“Oh, right. Well don’t worry my friend. I’ll ask Lilith to make me another one and—” I turned to the spot where Lilith had been standing only seconds before. “Where did she go?”

Carlos scanned the clearing quickly. “I don’t know. She was here a minute ago. Don’t worry. She won’t get far. We have forty guys out here. We’ll find her.”

That is when I spotted a little white kitten off in the distance, perched atop a small boulder some twenty yards away. She watched curiously, as the hunt for bodies, blood and answers continued around her. Carlos was still looking in the opposite direction when I raised my hand to my forehead and dropped it again with a snap of my wrist. It was not exactly a salute, but something very close.

The kitten hopped down from her perch, but before walking away, she glanced back at me, flicking her scrawny tail side to side, as if waving goodbye. I motioned again with a wave, only this time Carlos noticed.

“Who you waving at, Tony?” He squinted into the darkness at the tree line beyond.

My lips tightened. I drew a short breath before drawing my attention in another direction. “Oh, nothing. Just swatting at them damn mosquitoes.”

Inside of ten minutes, we were in the basement of the research center. We found Leona, and contrary to Doctor Lowell’s assertion, she was scared, cold and hungry. He chained her to her bed with wrist and leg irons. The abrasions on her arms and around her ankles indicated she had struggled with great difficulty to break free of her bonds, but to no avail. She seemed uncertain about the sudden attention, the excitement of everyone gathering in the room frightening her more. When she saw me, however, she broke down and wept openly.

“Mi Salvador! Mi Salvador!” she cried, and fell into my arms.

We sat on the edge of the bed and I hugged her shivering body, holding her close until a woman officer came in with a blanket and a hot cup of coffee. She introduced herself as Officer Brittany Olson, but for Leona, she was another angel of mercy sent from above. I took the coffee from Olson and placed the cup in Leona’s trembling hands.

“Leona, Aquí. Por favor, beber este.”

Leona drank it down quickly. “Ooh! De café...es muy caliente!” she said, fanning her mouth with her hand. I laughed, relieved to see a bright smile washed over her. Olson laughed, too, and then another officer, and soon we were all laughing, with Leona the loudest. That is when I knew that everything would be all right.

Olson excused herself, returning moments later. “They’re here, Detective,” she said. “Is she ready?”

I looked up. “Hmm?”

“Leona. Is she ready to go? The ambulance is waiting out front.”

“Yes, of course. Please, come in.”

She approached gently, offering her hand like a mother to her child, her fingers gently coaching Leona forward. At first, Leona did not want to go. She turned to me, her big brown eyes filled with apprehension.

“It’s okay,” I said, and I smiled reassuringly. “No one’s going to hurt you now.”

She smiled back. “Promesa?”

“Sí, Leona. Promesa.”

In that brief moment, I could almost imagine what it must have been like for Leona: so scared and alone. Yet I knew Leona was a fighter, and I knew she really was going to be okay. I stood up and helped her to her feet. Her knees wobbled, but she held her own, and soon she and Officer Olson were ready to go. I watched as the two started for the door, but as they reached the threshold, Leona turned around one last time. I drew a tight-lipped grin, one designed to help me fight back the tears pooling in my eyes. In the end, though, a simple wink in her direction was enough to set them free. They rolled down my cheek in a silent parade. Then she was gone.

The ambulance took Leona to the hospital where a subsequent medical examination determined that she had not been molested. Another night, maybe, and I would have been too late. I realized that many things did not go our way in the course of my investigation; but for this one small miracle, I was grateful.

After they took Leona away and the excitement died down some, I happened to notice a string of black beads sitting on a nightstand next to the Leona’s bed. It was perhaps the only thing within her reach. I figured they were the beads Lilith had given to Doctor Lowell, and imagined the irony of it all. Had Leona known and believed in the powers of the witch’s ladder, she might have had everything she need to set herself free of her

nightmare. I reached down, picked up the beads, and fondled them gently within my fingers. I realized then that was exactly what Leona had done. She had managed to use the beads to get away every night in the only way she could, through bilocation. For a few horrible, wicked weeks, maybe her curse had become her gift.

I counted along the string. Thirty-two beads remained on the strand. Assuming the strand had forty to begin with, I felt reasonably sure I had found the source of Carlos' beads. I wondered if Doctor Lowell had dropped them on purpose, one at every murder to throw suspicion toward Lilith. Maybe he left them behind as a way of getting caught. Perhaps he wanted to stop his barbaric crusade but could not.

I clutched the string of beads tightly in my fist, trying hard to imagine what it might be like if only someone could actually control the witch's ladder and use it for the good of man. It truly was an instrument of incredible potential. I realized how fortunate it was that Doctor Lowell never figured out its potential. If he had, his attraction of blood might never have ended.

I looked around the tiny room where Leona spent those miserable weeks chained to her bed. I vowed to make sure she would never have cause to fear again. I made a solemn pledge to make it my personal crusade to fight the evil side of the paranormal and supernatural. For this, I would need the courage and I believed I had plenty of that. I would also need strength, which I possessed in numbers with Carlos Rodriguez by my side. Most of all I would need an edge, something to put me on an even keel with the supernatural powers working against me.

I held my fist against the side of my jacket and unclenched it, allowing the beads to spill freely into my pocket. As I walked the damp, dank halls from the basement back to the main level of the research center, I noticed the light in the tiny room behind me tripped off by itself, not that I see that as an omen or anything. Light bulbs do burn out. That is to say, it may have been just a coincidence.