

bsence of aith

Anthony Samuel Policastro

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For Joann, my loving wife, soul
mate and best friend, who has
always supported me.

In memory of my father,
Samuel Anthony Policastro, who gave
me a hands-on approach to life and
the inspiration to always reach for the
stars.

1925-1999

Many thanks to Marion McBride,
my beloved Mother-in-law
for her invaluable editing and
insight.

1933-2006

The Bridge - Chapter 1



He was tired and looking forward to sleeping late the next morning. He and his wife, Linda, had just left an annual reunion with his fellow classmates from medical school. They had become close and vowed to get together once a year to refresh their friendship no matter how far the winds of their careers had carried them. It seemed like only yesterday that they made that vow and now two years had slipped between that evening before graduation, and the night of this particular get together.

Carson and Linda approached the aging Red River Bridge; a forgotten wooden structure built in the 1920s and scheduled to be torn down in the summer. Carson enjoyed the clanking of the loose boards as the car went over them; Linda hated when he took this way home; she believed the bridge would collapse any day now and most likely it would be their car that caused the collapse. Below them, the river moved steadily marking their passage - a point in time captured like the click of a camera captures a split second of reality. Carson wondered what mysteries lay beneath the escaping, fouled water. He wondered how much history the river had seen - he knew that the river was old, very old. He knew that the river once flourished with crabs and oysters - the older men spoke of those days when they were children and the river teemed with edible sea life. It's hard to look at an old man and imagine that he was once a child - fresh, new and naive to the world he inhabited.

The river could have been here since the early beginnings of the earth, but today no one cared about such meaningless things. They regarded the river as a means to get out to the ocean or illegally dump unwanted chemicals or sewage. No one cared about the river - no one defended the river. His thoughts seemed to melt into others like a dream that progresses with random happenings all unrelated and all illogical.

* * *

The tiny orange light grew brighter as he was pulled downward at an ever-increasing speed. Shadows at the sides of the tunnel came to life and thrust out thin, spiny arms that grabbed at him. When the arms made contact, they were transparent and they transmitted an electrical-like pain through his skin that sliced his arms and legs into shredded raw flesh. He tried to avoid them but he couldn't. He fell faster and fear washed over him like the wind in his face as he thought of his impending doom. Suddenly he stopped falling as if he landed on a pillow of soft air. He was eased down on his back and he felt the back of his head sink into something soft, something familiar. He was in his bedroom lying in his bed, wondering how he got there. The curtains on the window were moving and he could see there was something outside pushing against the glass trying to get in. He tried to get up, but he couldn't feel his arms. The window shattered and a black entity resembling a long black scarf snaked into the room, stopped at the foot of the bed, and metamorphosed into a giant, angry dog with an oversized head and mouth. The dog jumped up on the bed and bit into Carson's left thigh violently shaking its head from side to side ripping the leg from Carson's body. Within seconds, the dog bit into Carson's other leg tearing it off with several quick turns of its violent head. Carson screamed in pain and tried desperately to move away kicking and pushing with a virgin terror that scared him more than the dog. The dog hovered over Carson its long pointy teeth dripping with Carson's blood and pieces of his skin and sinew. The beast opened its mouth wider and thrust its disfigured head towards Carson and Carson knew a new terror more intense, more frightening than all the others. This dog was familiar! Instantly, his mind reeled back to when houses were still being built in his neighborhood and he played in the wooded lot next door. The lot had a narrow dirt path that was well worn by all the neighborhood kids, and on this day, Carson, his friend Georgie, who lived across the street and tiny Sara from the house next door were on an adventure. The threesome walked down the path, Carson in the lead, Georgie behind him and Sara trailing when there was a rustling in the bush ahead. Suddenly, a large black dog appeared on the path with its teeth drawn

and a low growl in its throat. A gold tag hung from its black collar ringed in silver studs. Sara immediately turned and ran screaming; Carson and Georgie stood there paralyzed in fear.

"Nice, doggie," Carson said putting up his hand and slowly backing away.

The growl intensified and turned into a loud bark and then the dog lunged towards Carson knocking him to the ground. Georgie ran as fast as he could, screaming and crying down the path. The dog bit into Carson's thigh and dragged him into the bush where it was hiding earlier. The dog released Carson, then bit into his foot, and violently shook its head back and forth. Carson kicked the dog in the head and the dog released his foot and then moved on top of Carson. He stood there a few seconds growling and spewing its hot, acrid breath onto Carson's face, its eyes filled with hatred and evil. Then the dog opened his mouth wider and moved towards Carson's neck. Carson screamed and pushed the dog's head away.

"Crack!"

The dog's head flew to the left and the dog fell to the ground howling in pain. Carson looked up and saw the angry face of his father holding a baseball bat. The dog got up, shook its head and growled at Carson's dad. Carson's father hit the dog again on top of its head and it slumped down onto the ground whimpering. He hit the dog several times and the whimpering stopped. Carson only remembered riding in an ambulance and then waking up in the hospital, his mom and dad looking down at him his leg and foot in pain.

* * *

Carson could feel the pointy teeth pierce his neck and throat and his warm blood quickly squirt out over his chest. He screamed again, but there was no sound and he sensed his mind melt into the nothingness, into the darkness. He woke up standing in front of a dark figure surrounded by intense and wild fire. The flames burned behind the dark hooded figure so that Carson could not see its face. Then the figure spoke.

"You have been doomed to Hell! Your punishment will go on endlessly and each time you will have no memory that it occurred before."

Carson's throat burned and he couldn't breathe, but he could move again. He was crying, but there were no tears and fear thundered through his body again. He moved farther away from the dark figure and ran, but his legs moved as if they were in a thick sludge. Then he

saw Linda trying to reach for him under water! A golden light washed over them casting warm streams of light into the darkness. It was a light filled with love and familiarity, and it was the most beautiful light he had ever seen. A tiny voice told him to go towards the light, but he didn't want to - he wanted to go with Linda. He began to swim towards her and when he was close enough he grabbed her hand and a coldness he had never known rushed through his body. The cold blackened his mind and there was nothing.

* * *

Linda was jarred out her sleep by the clanking of the loose boards on the Red River Bridge as the car started over the quarter mile structure. She looked over at Carson and noticed his unmoving, glassy eyes.

"Carson!" she screamed as the car drifted towards the bridge's railing.

She lunged toward the wheel, but it was too late - the car crashed through the wood railing and plunged downward into the river about twenty feet below. Instantly, her world went black except for the dim, green hue of the dashboard lights. The car moved downward, scraped on some submerged tree branches, and slowly stopped. She could see a faint outline of the branches pushed against the windshield. She gasped when the icy cold water reached her ankles and numbed her feet.

"*Get out! Get out! Get out now!*" the voice screamed in her head.

She rolled the window down, but stopped after a few inches when the cold water sprayed in like hurricane rain. She gulped in a huge amount of air in anticipation of a scream, but before she could let it out, the cold shock of the water hit and she nearly passed out. She watched in horror as the water filled the car covering her legs, her stomach, and her breasts. She could no longer feel her body.

"*GET OUT! GOTTA GET OUT!*" a voice screamed in her head nonstop like a broken record skipping and playing the same message over and over. Within seconds, the water covered her face and she instantly thrust her head up and saw a large air bubble forming in the ceiling of the car. She tilted her head up, let out her breath of death and gulped the sparse air like a hungry animal. Renewed with the life sustaining air, she put her head under and groped for Carson finding it more difficult as the ethereal light from the dashboard faded into the cold death.

"*GOTTA GET OUT! GOTTA GET CARSON OUT! GET OUT!*" screamed in her head again. She found his limp arm and pulled, but he wouldn't move. She panicked and then as if something was thrust into her brain like a bullet piercing her skull she had a revelation - the seat

belt! Carson still had his seat belt on! She groped again in the icy blackness to what seemed like hours trying to find the belt, and then her hand touched something smooth and long. She thought an hour had passed when only a few seconds had elapsed. Everything was moving in slow motion. She ran her hand down along the belt's length, found the buckling device, and pushed on it. She pulled on the belt to get it off Carson, but it would not give. She panicked again and pushed all over the buckling device trying to find the release button. Her face hurt, her hands were numb and she could not feel her fingers touch the buckling device.

"GOTTA GET OUT! MUST GET OUT BEFORE THE BATTERY GOES DEAD! GOTTA GET OUT!"

Instantly, the belt broke loose and she pulled Carson towards her. Then she went limp. The pain in her chest increased and she tasted death for the first time. It was swallowing her, licking her, consuming her from within. She raised her head and saw a faint outline of what appeared to be a bubble of air. With little energy she had left, she raised her head and sucked in the elixir of life and was born again. She pushed the door open with her right leg, but it only moved several inches. Bubbling sounds filled the darkness as more air escaped from under the roof and rose up to freedom and life.

"OH NO! NO! NO!" screamed in her head. "GET OUT! GET OUT!" The voice seemed to be someone else shouting at her from inside her head - a being motivated only by fear and the will to live. The voice was alien to her as if she were watching everything happen as an observer.

She placed her back against the seat and used her legs to push the door open like a human wedge. The door slowly opened, but only enough for her to squeeze out. She looked up and saw another tiny bubble of air still trapped in the ceiling and thought she should go for it, but decided Carson was more important. She squeezed out of the car holding Carson's hand. Then she realized that she no longer had Carson's hand! She struggled to pull the door open and finally wedged her leg between the door. She could barely see, but Carson was on his back floating across the front seats like a watery corpse. She grabbed his ankle and pulled him towards her. His legs spread apart as she pulled and she reluctantly let go his ankle to grab his other foot. She finally pulled him through the tiny space. Then something touched her leg in the black darkness. "*The tree branches*," she thought with a new adrenaline fix.

She locked her arms under Carson's and around his chest. The water felt like a giant fist slamming into her body - her skin hurt and her head

ached from the coldness. The darkness swallowed her completely, but she kept moving what she hoped was upward toward the surface. The dim green lights of the dashboard vanished into nothingness, and the pain in her chest grew stronger as she struggled to swim to the surface with Carson. She could not feel her arms or legs, but she knew she had to keep sending signals from her brain to keep her legs kicking and her arms wrapped tightly around Carson.

"This is too hard, too much trouble - I can't take this anymore," she thought. "It would be easier to stop and rest. Yes, rest would be nice. I need to rest. I need to rest..."

Her thoughts drifted away, along with the pain in her chest and suddenly images of her life flashed in front of her one right after the other like the slide shows she often had to sit through when her husband was a speaker at one of the medical conferences. Her mom coming to help her when she fell off her bike and skinned her knee; her dad bringing in the large doll house for her eighth birthday; Jeremy picking her up for the prom dressed in a black tuxedo with a pink carnation pinned to his lapel; her friend, Denise from college kissing Tom Sanders on their first double date; her wedding day with her father giving her away to Carson standing at the altar in his white tuxedo. The images stopped there and the one of her wedding began to play out in slow motion. After her father released her arm, Carson turned to face her. He was crying - a terrible sadness oozed out of his face - sadness so intense she felt it squeeze her heart like a vice.

"Carson! Carson! What's wrong! Carson!"

"Don't let me die!" he said. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

Intense fear slammed into her again like a waterfall spilling into her. Suddenly the pain in her chest was very intense, and the images of her life vanished, and she could see a tiny inkling of fused light above. Her head exploded with an intense revelation - she remembered where she was. Fear mixed with adrenaline shot through her like a lightening bolt.

"I'M NOT GOING TO LET US DIE!" the voice screamed in her head.
"I CAN'T LET CARSON DIE!"

She instinctively focused all of her strength and will on getting to the surface. She didn't know how she did it later, but she kicked her legs in one last surge of energy, kicking, kicking, kicking. Seconds later, she felt her face hit the warmer air, and her lungs exploded as she let out the foul air of death and gulped the sweet breath of life. She pulled Carson's head up and swam for the embankment barely visible from a distant

street light on the bridge. The water was like thick sludge and it took all of her remaining strength to move her arm and legs. She reached the shore, grabbed hold of a small tree, and paused there to catch her breath. She dragged Carson out of the water - his body slid well on the mud and swampy grass. She gasped for air and her limbs started to tingle as her life force slowly revived itself. Despite her winded condition, she began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Carson. His forehead and hair immediately turned red with blood from a two-inch gash in his forehead. Moments later, lights appeared on the bridge and then a voice.

"Hello, anyone there?"

"Over here! Over here! Call 911!" Linda yelled between tears.

Minutes later the sky lit up fire red - an ambulance and a police car arrived - their sirens piercing the quiet darkness like a saw blade.

"Over here!" She screamed.

Bright, narrow light beams from several flashlights danced into the darkness below the bridge.

"Over here!" Linda screamed again.

The beams rushed over to her. Bill Watkins immediately grabbed his black bag and rushed down through knee-high brush and small trees to the riverbank. He went to Carson who was lying on his back. His skin was gray and his lips were blue. Linda knelt beside him - she shook violently from the cold fear. Several others swarmed them paramedics, police - it all became a blur to Linda. Someone draped a blanket over Linda.

"I've got no pulse and he's not breathing," one man said. "Ready for CPR?"

The man gave Carson mouth-to-mouth while another stuck a needle into Carson's arm. The paramedic blew into Carson's lungs several times, but Carson did not respond. He placed one hand just under Carson's rib cage and took hold of his wrist. Then he used his weight to push down in the hopes that it would jump-start Carson's heart. He pushed several times and then went back to mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

"Don't let him die!" Linda screamed. "He can't die!"

Her screams startled the paramedics. The other man pushed on Carson's chest, but Carson did not respond. The men became frantic in their efforts to save Carson.

The paramedic giving CPR stopped and gasped for air and placed two fingers on Carson's artery. "I think I've got a pulse," he yelled between sucking in gulps of air.

"Let's go! He'll do a lot better in the hospital."

They quickly placed Carson on a stretcher and hurried toward the ambulance. His body was like a giant rubber doll. One man slipped on the muddy bank.

"Oh God! No!" Linda screamed.

The man recovered quickly and moved off the slimy muddy bank.

Linda cried when she entered the ambulance - the reality of what was happening suddenly hit her like a tidal wave. Carson's skin was gray, his hair was soaked with blood, and he looked like a corpse. Within minutes, they arrived at Red Bank Hospital and Carson was wheeled into one of the emergency rooms. Several doctors and nurses followed the gurney into the well-lighted room.

"It's Doctor Hyll!" one of the nurses shouted. "I worked with him when I was at Ocean Village." The others looked at each other and picked up their pace. One nurse attached wires to his forehead, chest and fingers. Another felt along his arm looking for a vein to start an IV. Linda followed the activity - her face a distorted mask of fear. They worked frantically on Carson - mouth-to-mouth, shots of adrenaline and finally electrical shock.

"Clear!" the doctor holding the electrodes yelled.

Carson's body jerked and Linda wailed in fear, as the green line on the EKG monitor remained flat.

"Clear!" the doctor yelled again.

After several more attempts, the energy in the room paled and a shroud of silence overwhelmed everyone.

"We're sorry," said the doctor holding the electrodes.

"Noooooooooooo! You can't stop now! You can't stop now!" Linda screamed. "Try again! Try again! NOW! Pleeeeeeeeeeease!!!!"

A nurse ushered her out of the room and slowly the other nurses and doctors left the room as if they were in a funeral procession - a procession for Carson.

The nurse squeezed Linda's hand and said, "He's gone, Mrs. Hyll. I'm sorry."

The Awakening - Chapter 2



He could only lift his hand a few inches. Something was all around it. He only had enough space to bring his hand to his chest and feel the cold skin on his ribcage. He began to shiver. He felt along his hips and then down along his right leg. He was naked. He opened his eyes and saw only blackness. He closed his eyes and saw the same blackness and it scared him - black on black. He frantically ran both hands all around him with the slim hope that he could push the blackness away and find the light. The obstruction felt like smooth, cold plastic, and then his hand hit upon a metal object. The metal ran in a straight-line parallel his body and stuck out a bit. He continued to feel it - the metal line was about as thick as a pencil and it had grooves. Carson continued to run his finger along the metal line. It went past his face and over his head, and then stopped. He traced the metal line again with his index finger and found a small square smooth spot along the line above his head. Suddenly, his throat tightened.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" He screamed. The noise swallowed his consciousness, his entire being in a white noise of fear. The scream would not stop and completely controlled him, his thoughts, and his soul.

He knew where he was.

* * *

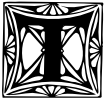
Dick Harrington, a thin man with a round head covered in closely cut white gray hair, got off the elevator and pushed an empty ER stretcher past the double swing doors into the dark corridor near the morgue. He heard what he thought was a scream. It was 5 am and he had a couple of hours left as the senior orderly on the third shift. *Probably, a patient on one of the upper floors having a nightmare*, he thought. In the past, the sound had moved down along the heating pipes in the ceiling echoing through the dungeon-like halls. It was common. He continued and thought of his granddaughter, Dawinda when one of her braids got caught in the chain on her backyard swing and she began to scream in fear.

"Helppppppp!" a second scream. He stopped and listened more intently. The screams came in a continuous volley. He backed up towards the double doors and pulled the stretcher with him. The screams were louder now, his chest tightened, and his hands shook as he slowly entered the dark, cold room. A strong scent of formaldehyde and disinfectant filled his nose, but he was used to it and hardly noticed. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he felt along the wall for the light switch. The room flooded with white cold light and he looked along the wall of giant silver drawers, each numbered, and each containing a dead person. He walked towards the rear of the room and the screams stopped.

With a shaking hand, Harrington reached down and opened a drawer near the floor. He unzipped the black shiny bag and saw blue-gray face of an old man with his mouth open. He quickly zipped it shut and turned away feeling a rumbling in his stomach. He closed the drawer and walked towards the double doors holding one hand over his mouth and the other on his stomach. His shirt was soaked with sweat. As he reached the doors, the screams started again. He froze – that moment when everything even your consciousness stops consumed by a single powerful force. He turned and stared at the wall of drawers. One door seemed to move slightly. The shrieks overwhelmed everything in the room. Harrington cautiously walked toward the drawer and with his shaking hand pulled on the large handle; the drawer slid towards him effortlessly. The black bag inside was writhing like a snake. He reached for the zipper, missing it several times because he couldn't control the shaking in his hand and because the bag kept moving out of his reach. The howling from inside the bag set every one of his nerves on fire. When he finally pulled the zipper back, two wide eyes filled with terror met his and he screamed, and the body screamed back at him. Then the "corpse" reached out, grabbed his arm, and squeezed it like a vice.

Harrington pulled away yelling, slipped and fell, but the "corpse" held him securely. Now its arms were half out of the drawer holding Harrington's arm with agonizing strength. Tears ran down Harrington's face as he struggled to get free and then the "corpse" let go. Harrington slammed his body against the double doors, bolted down the hallway, and vanished up the stairs screaming the entire way.

The Revelation - Chapter 3



he light hurt his eyes as he opened them. He couldn't see very clearly - there seemed to be a mist over them.

"Where am I?" he asked.

A man standing near the edge of his bed looked up from a chart and smiled, his blue eyes sparkled.

"You're in Red Bank Hospital. I'm Doctor Westwood. We're glad you're back - you were in a car accident and suffered a concussion. The concussion must have triggered some bad memories," the man explained.

"More like nightmares," Carson said. "What happened?"

"We don't know. All we know is that your car went off the Red River Bridge. Lucky for both of you your wife was not knocked unconscious," he explained.

"Linda? Is she?"

"Oh yeah she's fine. She pulled you out of the car or you would have drowned," the doctor said. "The water is pretty cold at this time of the year and hypothermia sets in in less than fifteen minutes. It's really a miracle that she got both of you out."

Carson moved his arm to brace himself up and then stopped.

"Ouch! Why is my arm burned? Boy, that hurts," he said. "Did the car catch on fire?"

"It's not only your arm, Carson. It's your whole body. We think it's some kind of psychological reaction to the crash or maybe something was in the water and you're having an allergic reaction to it. We're still doing tests. It's not that serious - the burns are like a severe sunburn so you should feel better in a few days," Dr. Westwood explained.

"How could that be?"

"We don't know. We first thought there might be some kind of pollutant in the water and your skin reacted with that, but our tests show that your internals were slightly damaged by...well, some kind of heat. You show all the symptoms of a person who suffered a heat stroke...someone who stayed in the sun for days without water," Dr. Westwood explained.

"The hottest day we've had so far has only been around 50 degrees and I wasn't sun tanning," Carson said.

"We're aware of that and we're still doing tests. Don't worry you're recovering nicely. You should be out of here by Saturday."

"It's probably from waking up in the body bag," Carson said.

Doctor Westwood was silent and looked down at the chart.

"Strange. I don't remember falling asleep while driving," Carson added.

"Well, we'll have one of our staff psychiatrists look in on you if you want. You hit your head pretty hard."

"No, that's okay. I'll be fine," Carson replied. "Why was I in the morgue?"

"I don't know. I wasn't the attending physician."

"Where's Linda?"

"Your wife? I believe she's on her way. Now get some rest. I'll see you again tomorrow."

Carson noticed a foul, burnt odor. He began to smell the sheets, and then he brought his arm up to nose, and discovered the origin of the smell - it was his own skin. The skin smelled burnt, foul and rotted, yet his skin was only damaged to the degree of severe sunburn. *Only burn victims would have such an odor*, he thought. He was puzzled. He thought about it for a moment and then drifted into a peaceful sleep staring at the flickering images of the TV floating above his bed.

* * *

When he opened his eyes, a face stared down at him.

"Linda!" he said.

"Oh, Carson I thought I lost you. I was so scared," she said her eyes watering.

"I love you," Carson said weakly putting his arms around her despite his pain.

"What happened?" Carson asked.

"You fell asleep, the car went off the bridge, and I pulled us out," Linda said between tears.

Her face hardened. "You damn near killed us! You should have let me drive or we should have stayed at Sean's if you were that tired!"

"But, I wasn't tired. I was wide awake and then there was nothing."

"You must have passed out from exhaustion. From now on I'm driving home from any parties."

"I guess so..." he said.

"You were DOA, Carson," she said. "I watched them try to revive you. You were dead."

"DOA? No wonder I can't remember any of it," he said. "I came back...in the morgue." He shuttered at the thought.

"It's a good thing that orderly was there. I would have been pretty damn mad if you left me," Linda said squeezing his hand and smiling.

"All I remember is holding onto your hand. I'm still puzzled how I could have fallen asleep. I was wide-awake and having fun driving on the bridge," he said.

"You remember holding my hand?"

"Yeah and I floated towards you, and grabbed your hand, and together we floated to the surface."

"You didn't grab my hand. You were unconscious the whole time," Linda said. "I remember waking up and staring at you. You were in a daze. The next thing I know the car is drifting towards the railing and then it crashed through. I was thrown forward, and the dashboard seemed to float downward, and my whole body lifted slightly. I screamed as the car fell and I remember the seat belt suddenly getting very tight against my shoulder. The car hit the water, I was thrown

forward, and then everything went black except for the dashboard. There was a scraping sound and the car came to a stop. I could see a faint outline of tree branches pushed against the windshield from the headlights. Then water sprayed into the car from all over. It all happened in slow motion, and I remember every detail - it was the most frightening experience of my life!"

The Symptoms - Chapter 4

"Hello, Doctor Hyll," said Doctor Matthew Stokes as he passed Carson in the hospital corridor. Stokes was the prominent chief of staff of the Ocean Village Hospital and towered at least a foot over Carson. "Good to have you back," he said as he scratched the side of his round, baldhead.

"Thank you, Doctor Stokes," Carson said. "Three weeks seems like an eternity. I was beginning to get into the soaps."

"Well, you take it easy these first few days. We don't want you back here as a patient," Stokes said and disappeared down a hallway.

Carson raised his hand slightly in a sort of half wave and kept walking towards the ER. Within seconds after arriving, the police radio alarm came to life.

"Here we go!" a nurse yelled. "We have a white female coming in with head injuries from a car accident. Age seventy plus. Vitals are iffy."

The double doors slammed opened and three paramedics hurriedly pushed a stretcher through. Several nurses rushed towards them along with Carson.

"It's Mrs. Whitehead!" one nurse screamed. "What's she doing still driving?"

"Her forehead is lacerated. Get me a saline pack," another nurse said.

"The old woman is delirious. She's mumbling something," another nurse said. They pushed the stretcher into the closest empty room. One

nurse rubbed her wrist looking for a suitable vein to plug in an intravenous needle. Another wiped a large section of blood off the woman's head; another attached contacts to her chest, which led to an EKG machine.

"We've got cardiac arrest!" the nurse yelled who had just placed the contacts in place.

"Bag her, now!" Carson yelled.

"Doctor! We don't have air flow!" A nurse yelled.

"Grab that tank over there!" Carson responded. "NOW!"

"Pads! Hurry!" he yelled. "Two hundred. Charge!"

A nurse handed him the pads, then spread the conducting jelly on the bases. She set the voltage at its minimum setting of 200 Joules. He placed the oval units on the old woman's chest.

"Clear!"

Carson pushed the buttons and the lifeless body flopped violently on the stretcher.

"Pulse?"

"Nothing," a nurse replied.

"Charge, 360! Clear!" Carson yelled.

The body bucked again.

"Still no response," said the nurse by the EKG monitor.

"Charge! Clear!" Carson yelled again.

"She's gone! She's gone!" the nurse said between tears.

"No activity," the EKG nurse said. "I think we lost her."

"Bullshit! Nurse, help me with CPR!" Carson said.

He pressed the heel of his hand so hard onto the woman's frail chest it looked as if he would touch her spine.

"Nurse, I want an Epinephrine IV push," Carson ordered.

A nurse hung a second intravenous bag to the hanger and connected the thin, clear tube.

"Any pulse?" Carson said between gulps of air. "Any breathing?"

"Nothing."

"Pads! Charge! Clear!" he yelled.

"Atropine, now!" Carson ordered.

Twenty minutes passed and Carson stopped. He gulped air through his small narrow mouth like a hungry animal, his skin flushed and sweat cascaded down his temples.

"Are you all right, doctor?" a nurse asked.

"Yeah," he replied softly. "She was the first patient I've ever lost and I didn't know it felt this way."

Carson stared at the old woman.

"No. No. This is not happening! I'm not going to let this happen! No. No. Clear! Clear!"

Carson placed the defibrillator pads on the dead woman again and pushed the buttons. The body bucked again. The nurse near Carson placed her hand on his arm to tell him it was not his fault.

Suddenly, the doors swung open and a large figure appeared.

"Carson! I got here as soon as possible!" Stokes said rushing towards the table. "Is everything okay?"

Carson looked up startled.

"No, we lost her," Carson said, the volume of his voice trailing off.

"Oh, no," Stokes said.

A nurse slowly pulled a white sheet over Mrs. Whitehead's face and turned to leave. The others followed. Carson and Dr. Stokes remained.

"This your first?" Stokes asked.

"Yeah."

"First one's tough," Stokes added.

"Does it ever get easier?" Carson said.

"No, not really, but you tend to feel less. You know not to get too close because it will destroy you."

"So we should all be cold, unfriendly bastards!" Carson shot back.

"No. Just keep it professional and don't take it personally. You have to learn to accept that these things are not your doing. There are other forces working here...forces none of us can control or hope to influence, but we try anyway...try to beat the odds...save a life, prolong another."

Suddenly, the beeping of the EKG machine broke the pall. The screen showed a jagged, moving green line. Then there was an agonizing, piercing sound.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"She's come back!" Carson screamed.

"Please! Please! Save me! Oh, the pain, the pain..." Mrs. Whitehead wailed.

She flailed her arms and kicked her feet like a wild animal.

"She's hallucinating! Nurse! Nurse!" Stokes yelled.

Two nurses ran in and took their stations next to Stokes.

Ten milligrams of Valium IV now!" Carson said.

The nurse administered the drug into the intravenous tube connected to the old woman's wrist. Mrs. Whitehead's wild ranting slowly faded.

"Put her in intensive care," Carson said.

"This is very peculiar, but not unheard of," Stokes said.

"You mean her coming back to life?" Carson asked.

"Yes. The Lord didn't see fit to take her just yet. It wasn't her time."

"Yes, that could be true, but I think we should run some tests on her anyway," Carson said.

"Of course," Stokes said.

"I just think there is a reason other than the Lord's intervention that caused her to come back. Maybe, she never died. Maybe, her metabolism slowed to a point where the EKG couldn't detect a heartbeat and we thought we had lost her," Carson replied.

"You could be right. I'm just feeling a little pious today. It's been awhile since someone died in the ER and her dying was a bit unsettling," Stokes said.

Carson left the ER and went to check in on his patients. He checked on Mrs. Whitehead periodically during the day and when he entered her room found the entire room smelled foul. He leaned over and looked at the old woman - all of her skin had turned red and some of it had blistered as if the woman had spent the day at the beach. He pushed the emergency button and a nurse with short red hair appeared.

"Nurse, have you noticed these symptoms on Mrs. Whitehead? Her skin looks like it was burned," Carson asked.

"No, she didn't have it when we brought her in. Look at that! It's like she was in the sun all day," the nurse said picking up the old woman's arm to examine it.

"What's that smell? It smells like burned flesh," she said.

"I noticed it, too when I came in. Have her blood tests come back yet?"

"No."

"Call Stokes. I want him to see this. Ask him to meet me here in about twenty minutes. I'm going to the lab. I want to know what's taking so long for her blood tests," Carson explained.

"Yes, doctor."

Carson left the hospital and walked across the street to a small brick building with a glass door. Painted on the glass in gold letters was "Medical Laboratory." He pulled on the door and was instantly pulled back into it when it didn't open. He peered in, but the overhead sun reflecting off the glass prevented him from seeing anything. He frowned, walked back to the hospital and checked into the main nursing station.

"Nurse, why is the medical laboratory closed?" he asked. "I was just there and the door was locked."

"Closed? What are you talking about?" she said, a large frown forming above her tiny oval glasses. "I just spoke with them. Let me call down there to see what's going on," she replied. She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello, Jeffrey. Did you leave for a while and lock the door? Doctor Hyll said he was just there and the door was locked. He thought you were closed," she said.

"Closed? We got so much work here I'll be putting in overtime. Send him down. I'll keep an eye out for him," Jeffrey explained.

"They're there, doctor," the nurse said.

"But I was just there and the door was locked," he said.

The nurse looked at him incredulously.

"You went across the street, didn't you?" she said smiling. "That's the old lab. They closed it last month because it was too small. They use an entire wing now in the basement. Didn't they tell you?"

"No," Carson said.

"Don't worry. You're not alone...many of our doctors make the same mistake. Have a nice day," she said.

"Thanks," he said.

He took the nearby elevator to the basement and walked down a long hallway enveloped in white light from the overhead florescent lights. He pushed on a double set of wooden doors with black stick-on letters that identified the lab.

"Are you Doctor Hyll?" Jeffrey asked pushing his ashen face into Carson's.

"Yeah," Carson said pulling away to avoid his stale breath and crooked front teeth.

"Well, glad to meet you. I hope you are feeling better these days. I heard about your accident," Jeffrey explained rubbing the hair net covering what little hair remained on his head. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you have Mrs. Whitehead's results yet?" Carson asked. "She's developed additional symptoms."

"Doing it now. I'm going as fast as I can," Jeffrey said. "These tests aren't simple and they take time. If you want to wait a few minutes..."

"Do I look like I have a few minutes?" Carson shot back.

"Cool your jets. You're not the only doctor that needs results," Jeffrey replied. "I'm doing the best I can."

Carson backed away and stood near the double doors. Jeffrey moved to the other side of the room and pressed his eyes into a microscope that sat on a large black slate table.

"So how do you like Ocean Village?" Jeffrey asked after several minutes. "I like it okay, especially since they gave me more room down here. The only thing is I feel like a mole working in the basement. I wish this place had windows. I miss the windows in the old lab, but I guess you can't have everything."

"What do you have so far?" Carson asked.

"So far she's clean as a whistle. Everything is negative. She's a little anemic and I'm doing the last one now for HTLV. Give me a few minutes - I'm almost finished," Jeffrey explained.

Jeffrey took a few drops of blood from a test tube with her name on it and placed them on a slide. Then he added a few drops of green dye.

"This dye stains the antibodies so we can see them," Jeffrey said. "Looks like she's negative on this one, too. Would you like to take a look?"

Carson moved towards the microscope and placed his eyes on the eyepiece. He didn't say anything.

"I'll have the report done in about an hour," Jeffrey said sheepishly.

"Fine," Carson said and left. "And...ah...thanks."

"No problem."

He went back to Mrs. Whitehead's room. Stokes, Nurse Janice Doherty and another doctor were there.

"Well, what do we have?" Stokes asked.

"Negative. She's clean. No viruses, HTLV negative, nothing to explain the symptoms," Carson said looking down at the sleeping Mrs. Whitehead.

"Could be an allergy or a reaction to the car accident," Stokes said.

"I don't think so. The same thing happened to me with the same results," Carson said. "Something would have to show up in the blood for that kind of reaction."

"Surely, we would see something that could cause such a severe symptom," Stokes said. "By the way, Doctor Hyll, this is Doctor Henry Graber."

"Hello," Carson said extending his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you. Dr. Stokes and I go back a long time. If you need any help with anything just call," Graber said taking Carson's hand firmly.

"Thank you. I will."

"She's coming around," Nurse Doherty said.

The old woman opened her eyes and looked at Carson. Her eyes were cloudy, red-streaked ovals filled with tears.

"Oh, it was so terrible. I don't want to go there again. Where am I? What did I do wrong? I'm so sorry..." she managed to get out. "Oh, I'm so thirsty...so thirsty."

"Mrs. Whitehead, Mrs. Whitehead? You're in the hospital. I'm Doctor Hyll and this is Doctor Stokes and Doctor Graber. You were in a car accident and you're going to be okay."

"Yes, you are going to be fine, Mrs. Whitehead. Nothing to worry about," Stokes added.

"Oh, oh...but the pain. There must be something wrong. The Lord must be mad at me. I was falling into a dark tunnel...it was so terrible! Can I have some water now?"

"It was just a very bad nightmare, Mrs. Whitehead," Stokes said. "Nurse?"

Nurse Doherty poured water out of the plastic pitcher into a tiny cup and held it up to woman's lips. She took meager sips.

"Was there a faint flickering light at the end of the tunnel?" Carson asked.

"Oh, yes. And then the pain..." the old woman said. "I've always been afraid of the pain."

Carson walked away from the bed and stared out the window at the parked cars below. Stokes approached him.

"What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost?" Stokes asked.

"She had the same nightmare I had. It just doesn't make sense," Carson said.

"Guilt. That's all it is. Guilt. You must be feeling guilty about something you did," Graber said from the bedside. "The mind works in strange ways and so does the Lord. Maybe she's being punished on account of you."

"I don't think so," Carson shot back. "I don't feel guilty about anything I did in my life past or present. And how do you explain the blistered, burned skin? They thought it might be something in the water, but Mrs. Whitehead...she didn't crash into any river. How do you explain her symptoms?" Carson walked back to Mrs. Whitehead's bed.

"I think you're a little out of line," Stokes added.

"Well, Doctor Graber here thinks her symptoms are divine intervention!" Carson said staring down Stokes. "How can you say that, Doctor Graber! If most people thought like you did, we'd still be in the dark ages!"

Carson stormed out. Stokes started after him, but stopped and looked at Graber. Nurse Doherty shrugged.

"I apologize for that outburst," Stokes said. "Doctor Hyll is a bit short tempered these days, and he's still recovering from that awful car accident. This is his first day back."

"It's okay. I understand, Matt. He's not a native and he doesn't understand our ways, but I'm sure he'll come around," Graber said. His thin lips parted into a tiny smile.

"Yes, our ways..." Stokes replied staring right through Graber. "Yes, our ways..."

Nurse Doherty shook her head and left; Graber followed her.

The Subbasement - Chapter 5



Carson's stomach was upset when he finished his shift probably from that stupid nurse who worked only one day a week. She often forgot the processes she was supposed to follow, but insisted she had done it correctly. He could never figure out people who thought absolutely in black and white and who saw the world with no gray areas. In addition, he didn't like working Sundays, but people just don't get mysteriously well on Sundays and then sick again during the week. When he pulled into the river stone driveway of his 1894 Victorian home, his wife was just starting to unload grocery bags from the trunk of her Nissan. Luckily, for both of them they could drive their cars on Sundays. The use of all vehicles was prohibited on Sundays in honor of the Sabbath until 1985. The town gates were chained shut from midnight Saturday until midnight Sunday and no wheeled vehicles of any sort were used on the town's roads. The courts ruled that the practice was a conflict between church and state and the gates had to remain open.

"I need some help," she shouted to him on her way into the house with several bags in her arms.

"Be right there!" Carson yelled back. He was exhausted and didn't feel up to carrying grocery bags into the house.

He looked down his street as the last streams of the sun cast a burnt orange glow on some of the houses. A cool breeze blew off the ocean

carrying a briny smell into the neighborhood. There was a breeze almost all the time because most of 19th century homes in this tiny coastal town were built on streets running perpendicular to the coast and high on a hill. The layout created a funnel that channeled the ocean breezes westward past the homes and their front porches. Their house was closest to the edge of the hill and setback from the road several feet. The next house was set several feet closer to the road. It looked like the builders made a mistake, but everyone had a view of the ocean from their porches.

He hurriedly grabbed three bags of groceries, walked up the steps to the wraparound porch, and opened one of the antique French doors. He entered the kitchen and placed the bags on the oval cherry wood table in the breakfast nook.

"Hi," Linda said kissing him on the lips and placing her bags next to his.

"Hi," he mumbled.

"What's the matter? You have that puppy dog face."

"I had an argument with Stokes today," Carson said dropping his eyes.

"Stokes? Want to tell me about it?" she asked.

"Yeah...well, I can't believe that I had an argument not only with Stokes, but with one of the senior doctors there. How could I be so stupid? I don't understand how Graber ever got through medical school with his preoccupation with religion. He tried to explain away Mrs. Whitehead's symptoms as an act of God and Stokes seemed to agree with him. Could Stokes be a religious fanatic? This is not what I expected of the man who is a pillar in the community, the man whom I admired and looked up to all this time."

"Maybe, he was having a bad day, too," Linda suggested. "I take it Mrs. Whitehead was one of your patients?"

"I'd hate to see one of his good days. You know I chose Ocean Village because of Stokes. Stokes had publicly denounced the government in the 1970s when those four students were gunned down at Kent State for protesting the Vietnam War. He had kept the younger people of those years from straying from their roots, from their beliefs, and their religion. He was a powerful man, a persuasive man, a man who said things that were important, but now he appears to be a ridiculous religious fanatic.

I wanted to live here because I wanted morals and values in our lives, and I wanted to pass them down to our children."

"We don't need to live here to pass them to our children," Linda explained. "We just have to have them and teach them to our children when the time comes. It doesn't matter where we live."

"I guess so."

"Don't worry about it," Linda said kissing him gently on the cheek. "Stokes will probably forget about it in the morning. He's got more important things to think about."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. What's for dinner?"

"Chicken, fish, or spaghetti?"

"Chicken."

"Chicken it is. I just got a new recipe for your favorite from Flora. She lives two houses down. That's why I went to the supermarket."

"Chicken Cordon Bleu?"

"That's it!"

"Thanks honey."

Linda unpacked one of the bags and noticed a few items on the floor near the garbage can.

"You know, Carson, I really wish you would put these paint cans in the basement now that the kitchen is done. They're just in the way," Linda said.

"Sure. I'll do it now."

Carson picked up the two used cans of latex paint, and entered the narrow stairwell into the basement. The aching wooden stairs went straight down, and then made a sharp left turn, and stopped at a dirt floor. The air had a musty, damp dirt smell. Carson's hair touched the ceiling as he carried the paint cans toward the back of the cellar. He had to stoop slightly to avoid hitting his head on the large oak beams that crossed the ceiling. The dirt cellar had walls of earth with six by six inch wooden beams placed strategically throughout the space to hold up the house. The wall facing the ocean had been cemented to prevent its collapse during hurricanes if the water rose high enough to reach the house. However, there were no records that the water ever rose that high.

Carson pulled a small metal chain hanging from the ceiling and a single suspended bulb came to life revealing a tangle of furniture, boxes,

and old lamps - objects of many lifetimes. Carson stared at the potpourri of items wondering what type of people used them, what were they like, and how they lived. There were several generations of belongings haphazardly strewn about. He wrapped his fingers around the brass neck of a standing parlor lamp trying to imagine the time and the world this lamp once inhabited.

He took his hand away and worked his way towards a crude, handmade workbench made of chewed and paint-stained planks of wood. Small clouds of dust curled around his shoes as he walked. He placed the paint cans on a shelf above the bench and turned to leave, but stopped when he spotted an old steamer trunk tucked away in a far corner. It had leather side handles now dried and cracked. He had seen many of them at the Red Bank antique center and he didn't think they were worth much. He lifted the center hasp, and unlatched the metal side clasps, and opened the large lid. A fold of white lace curtains that had since turned yellow lay next to several issues of *National Geographic* magazine. The dates on the magazines were from several months in 1960. The forty plus-year-old dust from the trunk smelled ancient and dry, and made him sneeze. *Someone else's junk*, he thought. He moved the curtains and saw a large object under them. He lifted it out and brought it into the light. It was a hand-cranked coffee bean grinder with a small wooden drawer in the base for the ground coffee. He knew what it was because his grandmother had had one. He stood up and held it closer to the light to get a better look. Suddenly the grinder spun in his hand and he watched it fall to the floor and split in half.

"Damn," he said staring at the broken grinder. He stared at it for several minutes. *Wait. It shouldn't have broken*, he thought, *the dirt is soft*. He moved the broken grinder and pushed some dirt aside. It was hard underneath. He got a small broom, brushed a small area, and found a wooden plank. He brushed more dirt away and another plank appeared. Slowly, as he brushed more and more dirt aside, other planks appeared. The wood was placed together vertically with a single small hole in the left side. Carson placed two fingers in the hole and lifted. The stubborn hinges creaked, but Carson was able to pull the door open. The door revealed five wooden steps that went down into nothing. He went back to the stairway and took a rechargeable flashlight from its charging base. As he descended the steps into the subbasement, a cool, damp, musty smell flowed past him. The subbasement was only four feet high forcing him to crouch down. When he threw the light on the walls, the light reflected back silvery light and colorful hues. Further in the walls were lined with shelves holding hundreds of Mason jars filled

with preserves. All had crudely made hand-written yellowed labels taped to the jars identifying their contents.

"Linda! Linda! Come here! Quick!" he yelled and raced back up the stairs towards the entrance of the basement.

"Linda! Linda!"

"What is it? Where are you?" she said in a far away voice.

She came to the stairway and looked down into the ancient basement.

"Over here. Look, the rest of Mrs. Hibbin's preserves," Carson explained. "This reminds me of my grandmother. She had a canning cellar and we used to love to go down there and pick out our favorite jam when we were kids. This is great!"

Linda reluctantly entered the canning cellar brushing cobwebs out of her way as she navigated into the dark hole.

"Wow! Look at all these jars! They're the same as the ones we found in the kitchen cabinet," she said. "Are they any good?"

"I don't know. The ones upstairs were good, maybe these are too," Carson said. "There's only one way to find out."

He took one off the shelf labeled "Blueberry Jam" and twisted the top. The jar hissed slightly as he opened it. He moved the flashlight beam into the jam.

"Looks okay and smells okay," Carson said. "But I would feel better if they were checked before we eat this stuff."

"Yeah, that's for sure," she said. "What's over there in that corner?"

Carson moved the light.

"Looks like a few blew up, and recently, too. Look the stuff is still wet," Carson said.

"No not that. Shine the light over there again. Look the wall is darker," Linda said.

"Looks like water leakage. Look the floor is green. There's mold all over the place. The water must be leaking in for that much mold to survive here," Carson said. "Look, there's more broken jars. They must have blown up months or even years ago. You know, I had a feeling something was here. I smelled something funny down here a couple of months ago. It was right after it rained. Now I know what it was."

"Do you think the ocean is leaking in?" Linda asked.

"I don't know. We'll have to check it at high tide. It would be a big problem if it did."

"Why? Couldn't you just cement it up like the other wall?"

"I don't know. I don't know if it would hold. The lower you go underground the closer you get to the water table."

"The what?"

"The water table. The ground level where there is water. Coastal areas have low water tables. You don't have to dig too deep to strike water and higher areas have high ones."

"Oh I'm getting out of here. This place gives me the creeps," Linda said.

They ascended the narrow steps into the regular basement.

"By the way, what are we going to do with all this junk down here? Maybe, we should get rid of it. I'd like to have the space for our stuff," Linda said.

Carson looked around thoughtfully.

"Why don't we sell it," he said.

"Who would buy this old junk?" Linda asked.

"Lots of people. We can sell it at the auction. People buy anything there," he explained.

"Yeah, they do. That's a great idea. We can borrow my brother's truck and cart a load down there every Saturday until it's gone. If you're working, I'll get him to help me," she said. "I can even sell these preserves at the Village Fair next week."

"Great. Here. Take these jars upstairs and I'll get some more," Carson said.

"Okay."

Carson went back down the steps and took several sealed jars off the shelves and headed up the stairs. When he emerged he noticed a green and white mold on the surface of the jars. He took them to the kitchen sink washed them, while Linda cut the fatty edges off four chicken breasts on the cutting board.

"You know what I think. She really died and then came back because it wasn't her time," Linda said.

"What? Who?"

"Mrs. Whitehead."

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"Haven't you heard about people who have had near death experiences?" Linda explained.

"Yes, I have. But if Mrs. Whitehead had a near death experience, it was a negative one. Besides, there's no scientific evidence proving that what these people saw is real or just a figment of their imaginations," Carson said.

"How do you explain all these people from different parts of the world having the same experience - leaving their bodies, floating up, entering a great tunnel of light, going up to this great, bright light, and then having feelings of ultimate happiness - free from pain, sickness, worry, and everything that afflicts us here on earth!" Linda explained.

"There's been research on this, and they believe that it's the birth experience - these people are reliving their birth experience - being in darkness, then going through a tunnel to a great light," Carson explained. "It's just a theory, but it has more credence than these people who claim they went to heaven and came back."

"What about my father when he got hit by a car. He was pronounced dead just like you were, and then he said he was sitting on the lap of this giant man who told him that it was not his time, and that he had to go back. As soon as the man told him that he woke up in the hospital," Linda explained.

"Maybe, it was a bad dream. There's no proof of what happened one way or the other," Carson added. "Besides, there are other studies that show the brain becomes very excited near death and that there is a lot of electrical activity just before death."

"And there's no proof that he didn't either. I believe that we go somewhere. I read an article about several people who died, and one boy said he traveled to the light and saw golden roads. Relatives and friends he knew had died met him and, and they all communicated telepathically. They took him down one of the roads and he just glided along. Everyone just floated along. His feet never touched the road. Then they told him it wasn't his time, and he woke up in the hospital," Linda said. "And what about your nightmare with the dog? What do you call that?"

"Okay, I believe in heaven and hell, but I also believe there is a medical explanation for people who seem to be dead and then come back to life. I think they never died, and maybe our instruments didn't detect

their life force, and they appeared dead. Then, there is a new burst of life and they come back to life. There has to be a medical explanation. I believe when you're dead, you're dead, and then you go to heaven or hell," he said.

"You just see things one way and that's it."

The phone rang.

Linda picked up the white receiver off the wall unit and said hello.

"It's for you, a Doctor Hansen? Who's that?"

"I don't know," Carson whispered.

"Hello."

"Hello, Doctor Hyll. My name is Doctor Albert Hansen and I'm head of pathology at the hospital. I've been meaning to meet you, but you know how our schedules are. What I'd like to do is invite you for lunch tomorrow. I'd like to discuss a business opportunity with you. I've been looking for a person with your credentials..."

"What kind of business opportunity?" Carson cut in.

"A partial partnership in a medical laboratory outside of the hospital. I'd like you to come on board with us."

"Why me? I just finished my residency."

"Because you're exactly what we need - someone young and ambitious to help us succeed."

"How many are there?"

"Eleven. You would be the twelfth partner."

"But, I just bought a house and I have loans..."

"Don't worry about that now. Meet me in the hospital cafeteria at one. Just ask a few of the nurses - they'll point me out to you."

Carson was silent for several seconds.

"Okay, I'll be there," Carson said. "I know what you look like."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow, and thank you."

"Bye."

"Bye."

"Who was that?" Linda asked.

"You won't believe this. Hansen is head of pathology at the hospital and he wants me to be a partner with him and some other doctors in a medical lab. I'm meeting him for lunch tomorrow."

"That's wonderful!" Linda said.

"Everything sounds wonderful until you find out what it's really all about," Carson replied. "It sounds too good to be true, that's all."

"What will it cost?"

"I don't know. He said not to worry about it right now. What can I lose except that I have to subject myself to that wonderful stuff the cafeteria serves as food."

The Offer - Chapter 6



Carson ran out of the ER room and took an elevator to the first floor. It was one o'clock and he wasn't looking forward to the meeting - he really didn't want to become a partner in a lab - he wanted to practice neurology and treat patients with nerve disorders, not be an entrepreneur in his own hospital. The cafeteria was crowded with noise and people. He picked the shortest line, grabbed a plastic tray and waited for the line to move.

"Hi, Doctor Carson. Come to fill that bony frame of yours with some fat today," a rather plump, large woman yelled over the glass counters that contained the heated food.

"How are the meatballs, Marsha?"

"Lousy. Want some?"

"Sure. Put them on a wheat roll," Carson said smiling.

The large woman seemed to float behind the counter moving from one section to the next to make the meatball sandwich.

"How's that?" she said holding the sandwich up for Carson to see.

"Looks good."

"And make sure you eat all of it!" she scolded. "You're too skinny."

"I will, I will," Carson replied.

He carried his tray to the center of a large room filled with rows of brown Formica-topped tables and metal folding chairs. Carson looked around the large room until he spotted a small man with graying hair and a wrinkled, drooping face sitting at a corner table. He walked past a maze of tables and chairs.

"Hello, Dr. Hansen?" The man looked up. "We spoke last night."

"Yes. Hello! Hello! Glad to meet you finally. I've seen you around from time to time," Dr. Hansen said rising and extending his hand. "Sit down, sit down."

Carson grabbed his hand - it was smooth, but firm.

"What do you think of Ocean Village?" Dr. Hansen asked tucking a paper napkin into his collar just above his blue bow tie.

"My wife and I love it here. The hospital could use some improvement, but its ok," Carson said.

"Well, that's how a lot of us feel, and that's why we'd like you to be on our team. Many doctors feel that the lab is grossly inadequate and poorly staffed for what we need to get done. Many are using outside labs, but these labs aren't quick enough, and have no loyalty to us, and they are expensive. If we need something done very quickly, they don't come through because they're swamped with work and they really don't care because they have plenty of business - pretty much the way our own lab works here. It's poorly understaffed and it has much too much work to do. We feel that the work is less than acceptable..."

"I haven't been here that long, but I got that impression, too," Carson said. "Have you tried going to the trustees to put more money into it?"

"Plenty of times. They really don't have the resources and they need to turn a profit this year. That's why we need our own lab and we would like you to be part of it," Hansen explained in a meek, tiny voice that did not fit his forthright manner.

"We've purchased the old lab building across the street and we already have the necessary permits to expand it to three times the size using the parking lot behind it and that abandoned house next door."

"What about the hospital? What do they think of all this? Won't they be against it?" Carson asked.

"Not at all. They're one of the co-signers on the loan. They can't afford to expand their own lab beyond what it is now, but they can afford to contribute some of the costs, and give us all the support we need to make it happen. It also works to their benefit in showing the

state that the hospital needs more funding. Besides, they're looking to make a profit on this just like the rest of us."

"But I don't have any money to invest. I've got my med school loans, my house needs work, and we want to start a family..."

"We know that, Carson," Hansen interrupted. "That's why we want to make you a partner in exchange for your time. We want you to manage the lab. Instead of investing money, you would invest your time."

"How would I do that? I barely have enough time now!" Carson said.

"I've talked to Doctor Stokes and he said he'd allow you to work at the lab one day a week, maybe two. I'm not saying it will be easy, but you stand to make a lot of money once it takes off. I know the day we open, eighty percent of the doctors here will use us because of our credibility," Hansen said. "I need you to complete our team. I don't expect you to make a decision right now. Think about it. Talk it over with your wife. As a partner, you would be entitled to one twelfth of the profits after the first year. Our plan is to promote it as a private lab and not part of the hospital. We want to attract other doctors in the area in addition to those 24-hour medical centers," Hansen explained lifting a spoon full of red vegetable soup to his lips.

"It's still unclear to me how I will ever find the time to do it," Carson said.

"Look. You don't have to do it. If you feel it will be too much for you, don't do it, but I believe it's a great opportunity for someone young like yourself. I wish I had such an opportunity when I was your age," Hansen added. "I'd probably be retired by now."

Hansen continued to deliver spoonfuls of soup to his mouth. Some of the soup soaked the gray hairs of his mustache. He quickly wiped it away with a paper napkin.

"I've got copies of our business plan, projections, and promotional strategies. There's also a copy of your contract, and your duties and responsibilities, and your compensation plan." Hansen handed him a thick folder with Carson's name handwritten on the top.

"You mean I get paid in addition to sharing the profits?" Carson asked.

Hansen took a bite out of his tuna fish sandwich. Some of the tuna fish dripped out and fell on to the plate.

"Ha ha, of course, but after the first year. Your first year will be a token salary - small. That will be your investment. We don't expect you to work for free after that. You can negotiate a real salary after the first year. If you don't want to work in the lab, you will still own a part of it as a full-fledged stockholder. If you don't join us now, we still have to hire a manager to run the lab. It's part of the business plan, just like we had to budget for telephones and a receptionist. With your salary, you will be one of the highest paid partners after the first year!"

"Okay, I'll take a look," Carson said.

"Of course, take your time but we hope to open by September fifth, right after Labor Day. I need to know your decision two weeks before that," Hansen said.

"You'll know long before that, one way or the other," Carson said. He looked down at the thick folder for several moments. "But, why me?"

"You come from a top notch school, you're a neurologist, and you're young. We need someone with a lot of energy, a lot of ambition, and your credentials if we want to make this thing a success," Hansen explained. "If it works out, we foresee this as a win-win situation for all of us. And most importantly, you are committed to Ocean Village and its residents. In the past few years our town is more like a retirement community with many of the young people moving out and no fresh blood coming in."

"Well, thank you," Carson smiled.

"Oh, I almost forgot. We're having a small get-together this Saturday night at my house around seven. You and your wife are invited. It would be a good opportunity for you to meet the others involved. Here's my address," Hansen said pulling a wrinkled business card and a pen from his shirt pocket. He began writing on the back of the card.

"Call me if you can't make it, otherwise, I'll assume you're coming."

"Well, thank you, Dr. Hansen," Carson said extending his hand.

"Thank you, Carson. I hope you will join us."

Hansen stood up wiping his mouth and still chewing the tuna fish sandwich.

"I have to run," Dr. Hansen said wiping his mouth again. "Hope to see you Saturday."

"Thanks again," Carson said.

Carson sat there for a few moments and looked at the business card. He could barely read the handwriting. He turned it over to read the other side. It said Jersey Medical Supply in plain black type.

Carson pocketed the card and headed back to the ER. After he checked in, he visited Mrs. Whitehead. She was sitting up watching television with a white, small stuffed dog under her arm.

"Hello, Mrs. Whitehead. Looks like you're feeling a lot better today."

"Oh, yes, doctor. When do you think I can go home? The nurses are nasty. They wouldn't let me watch Jay Leno last night!" she protested. "Puddles and I always watch Leno together."

"Well, they're only trying to help you get better. They know you need your rest. Is Puddles your friend, there?" Carson said.

"Oh, yes. This is not the real Puddles. He died years ago...before your time. He looked just like this," she said displaying the stuffed poodle.

"By the way, do you remember what you ate on the day of your accident?"

"Let's see...I had my usual tea and toast in the morning. I can't remember lunch," the old woman explained.

Carson wrote the information on her chart.

"Did you eat anything different like something that you don't normally have or something that you haven't eaten in a long time?"

"No, not that I can remember. Getting old is terrible. You forget a lot of things. Don't let it happen to you, sonny," she said.

"Don't worry I won't. Have a nice day. I'll see you again tomorrow," Carson said and left.

The Cooked Man - Chapter 7



he next day Carson walked into the hospital lab feeling a bit sheepish as he carried a paper bag with three jars of preservatives from his newly discovered canning cellar. It was 6:30 am - a half-hour before he was on duty in the ER.

"Hi, Jeffrey," he said. "How are things going for you?"

"Fine. Just fine," Jeffrey answered not looking up from a microscope.

"I found something interesting," Carson said pulling the jars out of the bag and placing them on the black slate counter top.

"So, what are they?"

"Preservatives. I found them in my basement and I was wondering if you'd be willing to check them to make sure nothing was wrong with them," Carson explained. "I'd be willing to give you a dozen or so if they're good."

"They don't go bad as long as the seal stays intact," Jeffrey said uninterested.

"You mean they'll stay good for years?"

"That's why they call them preservatives," Jeffrey replied.

He walked away and looked into another microscope on a table across from the lab sink. Carson stood there and watched him. Jeffrey walked back towards Carson and grabbed one of the jars.

"Look. You open it, listen for the vacuum seal, and then look inside. If there's no mold, it's fine. Then you taste a tiny bit of it to make sure. It should taste sweet, a sour or bitter taste indicates it didn't preserve well. That's all there is to it," Jeffrey said sarcastically.

Carson watched Jeffrey closely wishing he had been a bit nicer the other day. *What goes around, comes around*, he thought to bite you right in the ass.

"They were old lady Hibbin's. She was into canning. She would sell them at the county fair. She had the best around," Jeffrey explained. He picked up one of the jars and stared at it for a moment. "Okay, when can I get my twelve jars?"

"Tomorrow. I'll bring them in tomorrow morning. Can you run some tests on it by then?" Carson said holding out his hand, but Jeffrey just looked at it and turned away.

"I guess," Jeffrey said reluctantly from the other side of the room.

"Thanks. I was in a bad mood the other day and I apologize for my behavior."

Jeffrey raised his hand in a gesture that said it is all right, but I'm on the fence about being friendly. Carson left feeling that he would never know if he could believe Jeffrey. He headed for the ER and forgot about it. A nurse sitting behind the ER station stood up as he approached.

"There's a message for you from the chief of surgery," the nurse informed him. "He wants to see you in his office right away."

"Doctor Stokes?"

"That's him. He is chief of surgery," the nurse replied shaking her head.

"Okay. I'm on my way," Carson replied thinking that he was in trouble from the fracas with Graber the day before.

When he walked in Stokes was sitting behind a cherry wood desk with a green banker's lamp sitting like an island in a vast dark brown sea in the center of the desktop.

"Hello, Doctor Hyll," Stokes said smiling.

"Hi," Carson said.

The room was silent.

"Sir, I would like to apologize for yesterday's outburst. It's just that I'm feeling very frustrated lately."

"Typical doldrums," Stokes cut him off. "I experienced the same feelings when I was just starting out back in the ice age."

Carson laughed.

"I shouldn't have sounded off yesterday," Carson said.

"Nonsense," Stokes said. "Graber must have sounded pretty ridiculous telling one of my colleagues that a patient's symptoms are an act of God. I think if I were you, I would have reacted the same way. It's just that Graber has a pretty good reputation around here - a lot of doctors respect him, and I suspect his head has gotten a bit too big for his shoulders. You took a stand against something you didn't believe in and I liked that."

"Well, I did think his statement was ridiculous, especially when I had identical symptoms," Carson replied. "We're not talking about hypothetical situations here - I experienced it first hand."

"Yes, I know and that scares me," Stokes said.

"You? What do you mean?"

Well, first I'd like to say that I misjudged you. For years now, doctors like yourself would come here, stay for a while to get experience, and leave. There are always plenty of residencies here because we are the last choice. So we get all the interns that couldn't get a residency anywhere else. I feel like we're used all the time. They all leave for the bigger hospitals. I thought you were that type of person. But after I witnessed your determination to save Mrs. Whitehead, I was convinced that you really cared about Ocean Village and its residents, even if we are a bunch of holy rollers with graying hair and polyester pants," Stokes explained. "As for Graber, he's a bit too much with religion. He takes it too seriously sometimes. What scares me is that I used to be just like him."

"You were? What changed that?" Carson asked.

"Vietnam. I was one of the lucky ones - my lottery number was 386. We lost fourteen from Ocean Village. Fourteen young men, boys I should say, and that convinced me that religion wasn't the most important thing in life - life is much more important and how you live it. The clincher was that of those fourteen, some were very religious and some were not, yet they all died, so it didn't matter if they went to church every Sunday. What mattered is what they did while they were

alive and what they did for this community and the people who live here. What mattered is how they treated others and what they did for them."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because things are happening here that have no explanation and it's got me rattled," Stokes said.

"You? Rattled?" Carson blurted out.

Stokes' face was a mask of stone.

"A man died here about fifteen to twenty years ago. He was hysterical just like you and Mrs. Whitehead, and he had the same symptoms," Stokes explained. "And just like you and Mrs. Whitehead, his blood was clean, nothing that could cause the symptoms..."

"Do you remember his name?" Carson asked.

"Never knew his name. I just heard about it through the other doctors. I often thought of looking into it, but I was always too busy."

"Maybe we can pull his records and see if there is a correlation," Carson said. "Do you remember the year?"

"Around 1985 I think."

"That's close enough. We can start at that year and go back to 1980 and forward to 1990."

"It's an awful lot of records. Are you sure?" Stokes asked.

Carson nodded.

"Okay then, I'll have accounting pull the records for you between those years. That's what I like about you, Carson - we think the same. You have a lot of work ahead of you. Nothing was computerized then. You'll have to sift through the records by hand. I don't know where you are going to find the time."

"When will they have the records?" Carson asked. "I'm on call tonight, so I might be able to get through some of them. We have to know if there's a correlation. We have to try to find out what it is."

"You're right. You're going to do well here," Stokes said. "Again, I apologize for misjudging you."

"Thanks. What did he die of?" Carson asked.

"He was cooked. His skin had 2nd degree sunburn and all of his internal organs were cooked as if he were in a microwave.

Kyle Mabus - Chapter 8



he woman struggled to reach the top shelf of her bookshelf to retrieve the box of Tarot cards. Her stubby fingers barely touched the box as she stood on her toes. Finally, she could no longer hold the stretch, already out of breath and puffing hard. The cards tumbled off the shelf and spilled onto her worn, dirty Persian rug. She struggled to bend over and pick up the cards - all faced down except one. She stared at the Death card and shuddered slightly and her hands began to shake, but she quickly blew the thought out of her mind and continued to pick up the Tarot cards.

The woman slowly stood up, still out of breath, and moved cautiously to the flowered, overstuffed couch in her tiny apartment. She placed the cards on the dust-covered glass coffee table and waited. She knew that in eight minutes her seven thirty appointment would knock on the door. She knew he would be five minutes late. At exactly 7:35, the door thundered with a knock.

"Come in," she struggled to get out. The door opened and the young man with brown hair down to his shoulders entered the cluttered room. He looked exactly like she had seen him in her mind's eye two weeks ago when she talked with him on the phone to schedule the appointment. She knew he would wear his faded yellow t-shirt with several holes around the seams, and she knew he would be her last appointment that day.

"Hello, Kyle," she said as if she knew him.

The young man hesitated at her tone then said, "Hi."

"Sit down. Would you like something to drink?"

"No."

The tall, young man moved his lanky frame into a worn rattan chair next to the sofa. The interwoven straw let out an agonizing sigh as if it were too tired to hold the man's weight. The woman watched him carefully.

"Is this your first time?" she asked.

"No. It's fifty, right?"

"Yes."

Kyle dug into his black jeans and pulled out two twenties and a ten. He handed the money to the woman. She took the bills and stuffed them into a pocket located somewhere in the lower part of her boring paisley dress that floated on her body like a bed sheet flapping in the wind.

"Okay. Let's start," she said.

The woman leaned over and picked up a small silver wire that looped to form a lower case letter "l". She held both ends of the wire, closed her eyes, and shook the wire in front of Kyle. Then she opened her eyes.

"You were not born here. You were born in Asia...Vietnam I think. Your father was an American soldier, but your mother was not an American. She was Vietnamese. Your father was killed there and you have never met him, you don't know him..." The woman shook the wire again. A frown formed on her bulbous head.

"Your father has been trying to contact you. He is very troubled...he is standing behind you right now!"

Kyle quickly turned and saw nothing. His eyes were wide and he tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair.

"How do you know this?"

"I don't know. I just tell what I see."

The woman shook the wire at Kyle again.

"You will meet a young girl who will betray you, but she will have good reason to do so. She will see things differently from you," the

woman said. "You have met this woman before...she will be your lover, and then your enemy."

She shook the wire again. "I see you in a soldier's uniform, but... I can't see your face. I know it's you though. It's another time...everything including the clothes the woman next to you is wearing is from that time. I see...I see...a Nazi insignia on your shirt sleeve!"

The woman opened her eyes and took a deep breath. "I saw one of your past lives," she said. Her forehead began to shine slightly. "I better open a window."

"No, wait. Tell me more. I want to know more about this past life."

"I sensed something very evil there, something that was trying to get into me...something that wanted to leave that time and enter ours..." the woman looked deeply into Kyle's eyes. He shifted his weight and the chair groaned again.

The woman took a deep breath, and then shook the wire again.

"I see you again. You are standing next to a table, a map table. You have stood there many times before...you have made many decisions that have affected the lives of hundreds...no hundreds of thousands of people..."

The woman's eyes suddenly rolled up into her head and her body collapsed onto the sofa. A few seconds later, she picked up her head and gasped for air. She started talking again.

"I know who you are. I know you're the Antichrist and you must be destroyed. I have proof. You are evil incarnate! You must be stopped. You are EVIL! EVIL! EVIL! I will not allow you to enter our time!"

The woman spit into the air. Kyle moved back on his chair. The spit landed on the rug and slowly disappeared.

The woman's eyes rolled downward and she looked at Kyle. "Oh...Oh...how awful...you killed her right there! I must stop! That was horrible."

"What happened?"

"You aimed a gun at a young girl's head and fired. You killed her instantly because she spit in your face. It was terrible," the woman explained. "Her hands were tied behind her back. She was responsible for disrupting your plans. She even tried to assassinate you several times. You were some kind of leader of something big...not a company...something bigger, much bigger." The psychic's face was flushed.

"Tell me more! Tell me more!" Kyle said. "I want to know more!"

"The girl is the same woman who will betray you in this lifetime..." The woman turned pale and her eyes filled with fear. The beads of sweat rolled down the side of her face.

"That's all I know now," she said.

"Go back! I want to know more!" Kyle said.

"No. I don't want to. I can't! Something evil is trying to escape that time into our own - something very evil," the woman explained. She reached down into the pocket in her dress and drew up the two twenties and the ten-dollar bill.

"Here, take your money back. I'm not going any further," she said standing up and holding the money out.

"You know more, but won't tell me!" Kyle yelled.

"No, I don't. Something evil is..."

The woman's hand holding the money stopped moving forward. Her flushed face froze and her large round body lost its stature and she collapsed to the floor crushing the glass coffee table under her weight. The glass cracked into several large pieces and the table's metal legs were distorted into unnatural shapes. Kyle leaned down to get closer to the woman. Suddenly, her eyes came to life and she started speaking another language in a deep, haunting voice. Kyle was surprised that he could understand the language.

"Wait. I want you to know that this is not the end, Eva. It is the end of the Third Reich and National Socialism, but it is not the end of my work. I will return near the end of the millennium. I have been here before and I will come again," the deep voice said.

The woman's voice changed to a higher pitch and spoke in German. "You are a great man, Adolph. I, too, will try to return when you do so that we can be together again. Thank you for being my husband these last few days. I will take the poison as you have asked. Good-bye, my love. I love you."

The woman became still and Kyle touched the woman's hand. It was hot. Within seconds she moved and her eyes fluttered back to life. She began speaking again.

"My greatest triumph is yet to come," the woman said in the deeper voice. "When I pull the trigger and end my life here, I will start again in another life and I will succeed...for next time," the deeper voice said.

The woman's head jerked violently. Kyle jumped back. Her body began to shake - her arms and legs moved randomly in all directions and Kyle backed away towards the door. Her torso began to convulse. He turned and ran for the door. Suddenly, the room was awash in blood red light. Kyle turned and saw that the woman's body continued its wild seizure, but now the red light surrounded her and her body became brighter and brighter. Kyle shielded his eyes and he felt his body hurling towards the door uncontrollably. He hit the door with his right shoulder and head. Dazed, he found himself on the floor trying to untangle his limbs.

"Swoosh!" Kyle felt the pressure increase on his eardrums. His back was hot and the air moved violently picking up papers and toppling the living room lamps. The pain in his head increased and he placed his hands over his ears. The woman's body suddenly began to violently thrash and flop like a mad fish out of water. Then two narrow streams of red-hot light burned through her eyes and formed an angled wedge about 10 feet long and four feet at its widest part. Kyle tried get up, but his body was pinned against the door by the intense air pressure. The wedge pulsed, and then there was a flash and everything in the room turned white. The giant wedge of light narrowed into a pencil thick beam, thrust itself into Kyle's left eye, and disappeared.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" Kyle screamed. It was the last thing he heard before he lost consciousness.

The Other Syde - Chapter 9



he day-glow red sign stood out like a beacon on the highway in the bright noon sunlight. It was like a fireball in the sky, despite the brightness of the July sun. Kyle noticed it right away and felt an uncanny attraction to the place. He pulled his dark green 1995 Dodge into the sandy parking lot and stopped in front of a large glass-windowed storefront. Another sign with the same script lettering and red day-glow neon blazed in the window, "The Other Syde." A hand-painted mural of gargoyles and demons pulling souls from the earth into a dark, fiery world surrounded the neon sign. Kyle stared at the mural, shrugged, and then walked into the store.

The room was dark and filled with large round display tables. Each table had a tall, but different, room lamp illuminating various items covering the tabletops. The lamps had sales tags hanging from the shades. The items on the tables included day-glow lipstick and nail polish, custom jewelry, and books on the occult and Satanism. Kyle picked up a silver necklace with a pendant in the form of a coiled snake.

"Welcome," said a raspy voice coming out of a dark corner in the shop. "That's nice. Do you like it?"

"Huh? No. Just looking," Kyle said.

He turned in the direction of the voice. "Where are you? I can't see you. My eyes haven't adjusted," he said. Suddenly, the room blazed

white and everything around him vanished into the white light. Kyle squinted.

"You're our first customer, today," she said. "Sorry, about the lights. I didn't get around to turning them on."

"What kind of store is this?" he said noticing the bright green streaks cutting through long, black perfectly straight hair.

"We sell everything you'll need for the other side," she said.

"What other side?"

"The side of our savior," she explained running her hand seductively over her shoulder and down her arm. "What are you looking for?"

"I don't know. I just saw your sign and decided to stop in," he replied. "The name was far out."

"Well, I can help you with whatever you need. I have more tables in the back," she said her eyes shining.

She moved like a ghost from behind the counter, her black robe-like outfit flowing like fine silk as she walked. Kyle followed her into the back of the store. She opened a door and passed through. Only candles - black and red candles, lit the room. The air smelled hot and waxy. The girl walked over to a shelf and pulled several books off.

"These will help you to learn what to look for. The set sells for \$129.95," she said handing him the volumes.

Kyle looked at the titles. *The Satanic Bible*, *The Compleat Witch*, *What To Do When Virtue Fails*, *Book of Shadows*. He opened the *Book of Shadows*.

"Ha! This one must be a reject or something. All the pages are blank," he said.

"That's the way it's supposed to be," the young woman replied rolling her eyes.

Kyle looked at her incredulously, a strange smirk on his lips. She stared back at him like a stone.

"Too much like religion to me," he said.

"Just the opposite. They're anti-religion," she said.

"Well, I hadn't planned to spend that kind of money on books."

"Think of it as an investment in your afterlife," she said moving to sit on a canvas cot on the other side of the tiny room. "Besides, you don't have to pay with money."

Kyle looked at her strangely. His stomach seemed to be lifted inside his body, but he liked what he was feeling.

"That's ok," he said placing the books on a small table nearby.

The woman moved her long legs up onto the cot and posed seductively. Kyle ran his eyes from her toes to her milk-white thighs. She smiled and deliberately turned her head towards the light of the candles. Her skin was flawless, white, smooth, and clear as if she had never been in the sun. A tiny round black object protruded from her lower left cheek. At first, Kyle thought it was mole, but when she turned, he saw it was an earring with a black polished stone about the size of a shirt button embedded on a silver mounting. A silver star was etched into the black stone.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I got to go," Kyle said and rushed out of the room. The woman followed and stopped at the door staring at Kyle. He looked up at her as he started his car and she smiled sweetly. Kyle drove out of the parking lot into the stream of traffic.

That night, Kyle couldn't keep her out of his thoughts. He kept thinking of what would have happened if he had stayed. She would have taken the robe off revealing her body. He would have touched her all over with his hands, and then with his mouth, putting kisses everywhere. He would go slowly, discovering every inch of her body, until the final moment of pleasure. He would ask her to do the same to him, first slowly peeling away his clothes, then his bad feelings, and then his dreams for he was in a dream and didn't need any others. He couldn't sleep.

The next day he returned to The Other Syde and found the store closed.

"Shit!" he grumbled.

The mural on the glass display window caught his eye again. He focused on a gargoyle pulling a thin, bony naked man down into a fiery pit. The gargoyle seemed to laugh at him. He turned away suddenly, and thought he saw his face on the unfortunate figure.

"Screw all the weird shit," he said to himself. "I'm not letting this one go," he stammered and got back into his car and drove off.

He returned the next day, and the store was open. He walked in wearing his tightest fitting jeans and a black t-shirt. The store had several customers milling around the tables. He walked toward the counter.

"I'm looking for the girl who was working on Saturday," he said to a thin man with a white pasty face.

"She's in the back. I'll get her," he replied.

The pasty-faced man returned with the girl in tow. She walked towards Kyle wearing black stretch pants and a purple stretch top, which accented the size and curves of her breasts.

"Hi. Good to see you again. Are you looking for me?" she said.

"Yeah, I was thinking about those books..."

"You're going to take them?"

"No, but I'd like to learn more about them and you. Would you like to go for a drink sometime?" he said.

"That depends on what you want to talk about...me or the books?" she replied.

"Honestly, I could give two shits about the books. I'd like to talk about you," Kyle said.

"Ok, you're on. I'll meet you at The Ink Well say around eight tomorrow night?"

"What? Where?"

"It's a small cafe in the West End on Canal Street," the girl explained.

"I'll find it. Ok, see you then," Kyle said. "I didn't catch your name?"

"That's because I never gave it to you. It's Chantress."

"That's a nice name," he said.

"It was my great grandmother's. What's yours?"

"Kyle."

"Nice to meet you," she said holding out her hand for him.

Kyle took her smooth white hand and shook it weakly. Her hand felt like velvet in his hand.

"Nice to meet you, too," he said. "Can I have your phone number?"

"I'll give it to you at the cafe," Chantress said. "Let me have yours. I'll call you if I can't make it."

"Yeah, ok," Kyle said.

Chantress walked behind the counter and grabbed a small pad and a pencil. Kyle recited his phone number and she wrote it down. The paper stock was neon green.

"Great, see you," he said.

"Bye. See you tomorrow."

Kyle went home and fell into a deep sleep thinking about Chantress and the tiny room in the back of the store and what would have happened if he had stayed. Then he thought about their date the following night and how they would celebrate their mutual attraction.

* * *

Kyle rushed into the Ink Well as if something terrible was chasing him outside. The room was dim and smelled of coffee. Everyone was dressed in dark clothing and some of the women wore white, pasty makeup.

"Over here, Kyle!" Chantress stood up from one of the larger tables against the wall in the back. She wore tight-fitting jeans and a black tube top, but it was the black cape with one-inch silver stars that Kyle noticed. Her hair glistened with silver sparkles and a rose-scented perfume.

"Hi," she said. "I thought you were a no show."

"Oh, yeah...my car got a flat," he said out of breath.

"Oh, I want you to meet some of my friends," Chantress said taking his hand and directing him into one of the empty chairs at the table.

"Guys, this is Kyle. Kyle, that's Krista and Yanni."

The two girls dressed similar - both had short black capes draped over their shoulders, too much black eye shadow and fire-red lipstick with matching long red fingernails. However, the two contrasted like a salt and peppershaker - Yanni's hair was blonde; Krista's was brown.

"Nice to meet you," Kyle said turning away from them.

"Likewise," they replied.

"This is nice," Chantress said.

"So...is this a preview of Halloween?" Kyle said.

The girl's faces went sour.

"Kyle doesn't know everything yet, guys, so give him a break," Chantress said.

"Know what?" he said.

"About our beliefs and what all of this means," she said. "I'll tell you about it later."

Kyle raised an eyebrow.

"Do you always ask strange girls out?" Chantress asked.

"No, not at all. I don't know why I even stopped in," he replied.

"Fate, I guess. I'm glad you did. Do you live around here?"

"Oh, yeah. I have an apartment in Cedarbrook."

"Oh. What sign are you? Wait, let me guess...Aries."

"How did you know?"

"It's not everyday that a guy asks me out after seeing me only twice. I think that was pretty bold - a dead giveaway for an Aries. Besides, I like that sign. I'm a Taurus. We are supposed to get along really well."

"I think we'll go to the ladies room," Yanni said. "See you guys later."

The two girls got up to leave, their black capes flowing like ominous shadows in the dim, smoky light. A waiter came over dressed in a black shirt and black pants. He looked at Kyle.

"What can I get for you?" the waiter said.

"A Bud Lite."

The waiter nodded and walked back to the bar. Kyle turned towards Chantress.

"Are those two...you know...connected?" Kyle asked.

"How could you tell?"

"Easy. They dress almost identical and their lipstick was the same color. What are the odds of that happening?" Kyle explained. "Anyway, I could just tell - a feeling I get...something about their body language...the way they moved next to each other as if their bodies were in sync."

"Does it work for guys, too?"

"Even better. I can almost pick one out of a crowd," he said.

"Does that make you one?"

"No, I'm straight as an arrow - and always will be. The whole gay thing has me baffled. I can't understand what makes them attracted to the same sex. I just don't see how they can do it to each other."

"Well, I'm glad," Chantress said.

"What about you? Are you like them, too?"

"Maybe," she said.

"You go both ways?" Kyle asked raising his eyebrows again.

"No, silly. I was only kidding. I'm as straight as you. I've known Yanni and Krista since high school. They are really sweet, sensitive girls, who got screwed up by too many guys," Chantress explained.

"So they became gay?"

"No, silly. All three of us are really good friends. They got screwed up and found comfort in us and it just happened," she said.

"And it didn't happen to you?"

"No. It's not my thing. What would you do? Disown your best friends because they're gay?"

"I guess," Kyle said looking deeply into Chantress' eyes.

"What? You don't believe me? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I know you're telling the truth. I can tell. I have this ability..." Kyle said.

"So do a lot of people. I can judge character, too," she said.

"No, no. This is different. It's like I can see into a person's soul, see into their mind, and see what they are feeling and thinking. It's so clear sometimes it's scary. It doesn't happen all the time, but when it does, it's intense," Kyle explained.

"How intense?" she said.

"Like I'm totally inside the other person. It's like I'm totally swallowed by them and everything around me disappears," he explained.

"You're clairvoyant, then?"

"I don't know. I don't think that's it. But, this is something different. I can tell if a person is good or bad," Kyle said. "I can sense their evil and their good. Some have more good...some have more evil. It's wild."

"That is wild. Have you ever spoken to anyone about this? You know, like another psychic or medium?"

"No. You're the first to know," he said.

"Where were you born?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Maybe, nothing, maybe, lots," Chantress said.

"Vietnam. My father was stationed in Saigon and met my mother there. They lived there until I was born. Then my father got typhoid fever and died. My mother took me to the states after that and we lived in New York until I was three, then she met my stepfather, married him, and we lived all over Europe. He's a career man in the Army. Europe is really my home. I was happiest in France. We lived there for about six years," Kyle explained.

The waiter returned and placed the bottle of beer in front of Kyle.

"That's four," the waiter said.

Kyle dug into his pocket and pulled out a crumbled five-dollar bill. He smoothed it out and gave it to the waiter. The waiter took a dollar out of his waist pouch and handed to Kyle.

"Keep it," Kyle said, and the waiter left.

"Where are your parents now?" Chantress said.

"They live in Middletown. My father retired from the Army about two years ago," he said. "He worked at Fort Monmouth."

"Would you like to go back to France someday?"

"Oh yeah, but just to visit...maybe live there for several months..."

"Gee, for someone who didn't want to tell me where he was born, you sure tell a lot," Chantress added. "Have you had these experiences before?"

"A few times, but they really just started," he said looking down. He brought his head up and stared into Chantress' eyes. "So tell me...what possesses you to work at The Other Syde? Excuse the pun."

She did not laugh.

"Sorry, I was only making a joke," Kyle said.

"It's ok. Many people react the same way at first, then they accept it," she explained.

"Accept what?"

"The occult," she replied. "I've always been fascinated with life after death and the occult."

"You mean devil worship?" he asked.

"Well, that's part of it, but most people don't know that there are good devil worshippers and bad ones," she explained.

"How could there be good devil worshippers? Isn't that a contradiction? Come on - you're worshipping evil - a figure that represents evil in its purest form," Kyle replied.

"Listen, it's really not devil worship. It's called New Age and it emphasizes human potential. Unfortunately, none of the established religions will recognize it so it sits alone. The good devil worshippers have embraced it and incorporated it into their beliefs so many people now mistake it as devil worship. We now have the good and the bad in the same group, and it's ready to split apart," she explained. "Anything that people don't know about, they condemn. It's their ignorance and fear of the unknown!"

"I see you're really into it," Kyle replied. He sipped his drink and Chantress did the same. They looked at each other.

"I am," Chantress replied.

"I still don't know the difference between good devil worshippers and bad ones," Kyle said. "It just doesn't make sense."

"The good ones embrace only the New Age philosophies, while the bad ones have black masses, animal sacrifices, blood rituals and other disgusting things like smearing blood on each other," she said. "The good ones break no laws and believe in a non-conventional religion."

"Well, then it's pretty dumb to associate with the devil worshippers," Kyle said.

"That's because New Age has no formal organization and no money to promote its beliefs. The devil worshippers have power and money. I suspect in time the New Ageists will split and form a separate group," she explained. "The New Ageists are mainly people who feel that their church, their religion, and their god have let them down - they can no longer find what they need spiritually from their religion so they put more belief in themselves and the human potential."

"They're going have a hard time shaking the devil worshipping image. I don't foresee it as a mainstream religion with a lot of followers," Kyle said.

"I think you're wrong. Look at all the books on the bestseller list that have to do with human potential and new age beliefs, personal success. I think it's going to be the next big wave," she said. "Every decade has something - in the fifties it was alcohol and sex; in the sixties and seventies it was sex and drugs; in the eighties and nineties it was the

Internet and now it has been and will continue to be spiritualism and the human potential."

"Discontent..." Kyle said.

"What?"

"It's because people are restless. It seems that all of these things are fueled by discontent. You may have something here," he said. "I think there are a lot of people out there who are not happy, not happy about their jobs, their marriages, how their children turned out, how they are going to pay their bills, not happy about their lives in general."

Kyle sipped his beer again.

"You look spaced out. Are you ok?" Chantress asked.

"Yeah, I'm just thinking. What's the purpose of worshipping the devil? Worshipping evil and hoping for bad things to happen - doing bad things?" Kyle asked. "What are the benefits?"

"Power," she answered. "The leaders are usually losers with big egos who can't get what they want out of life, so they turn to Satan and begin worshipping him. They find they can manipulate people in the process."

"Do they get what they want?" Kyle asked.

"Yes, at first."

"What do you mean?"

"The leaders get their followers and their power, and they begin to believe that they are truly Satan's messenger, but the followers are different. They begin to see the leader as another manipulator. Eventually they begin to realize that Satanism is just like any other religion, but with a different god and a different viewpoint," Chantress explained. "New Age is different - it's the worship of human potential - a full and genuine belief in one's self and self worth. There are no false promises because you promise yourself that you will achieve your potential, and if you don't, you have only yourself to blame for not making it happen."

"So who are these devil worshippers?"

"Many are soul searching types with strong religious backgrounds, fundamentalists, who feel frustrated by the restraints of their religions like the taboos on sex, cursing or whatever. They also feel that they won't go to heaven if they do anything bad. They have a hard time accepting a God who does not forgive, does not accept mistakes, and does not accept the human condition."

"So you're saying that most of these people have given up on God?"

"Yeah, some can't understand why we live in an unjust world, why God lets the good people die and the bad ones live. Why so much tragedy and suffering befall good people," she explained. "These are usually doctors, nurses and others in service professions. Medical people see a lot of injustice in life and death, and many are deeply concerned about it."

"You sure know a lot about it. Did this happen to you?"

Chantress hesitated.

"Yes, it did."

Are you one of the leaders?" Kyle asked.

"No, never. I've always been interested in psychology. I got involved as a way to rebel against my parents. They are Catholics and sent me to Catholic school - the whole bit. I just couldn't buy the Catholic religion - too unnatural for me. I believe the Church misinterpreted Christ's teachings to benefit their own ends with all this suffering they propose everyone should do to gain entrance into heaven. It just seems unnatural to me. I think God intended us to be happy, fruitful and fulfilled in what we do in our lives. I don't believe God intended for us to suffer, put ourselves down and be humble. So I joined the Satanists hoping to find those things," Chantress explained.

"Did you?"

"Yes and no. Satanism is the exact opposite of the Roman Catholic Church. Its ceremonies mimic the Catholic Mass only in reverse. It was great at first. I had found a group that put down the Catholic Church and its teachings and they maintained that you should do what you believed to make yourself happy. Do what you believe is good for yourself with little regard for rules and regulations...and others," she said. "The lure of Satanism is that there is no wrong. It's very powerful. We can have whatever pleasure we desire. Do whatever we want."

"That would cause total chaos," Kyle said.

"Yes and no. They didn't say break any laws; just do your own thing. Focus your energies on doing what you wanted," she added.

"So what happened? You sound like it didn't work for you?"

"It didn't. I realized that Satanism is just another religion and its leaders use it as a means to gain power over other people...a power trip

for the leaders. I also don't like Satanism's disregard for others. Do what you want; what makes you happy even if it hurts others."

"So you quit?"

"No. I organized a few members - ones that thought like I did - into this New Age group I was telling you about, but it's not working," she said.

"Why not? Just quit, hold your meetings somewhere else and forget about the devil worshippers," Kyle added.

"It's not that easy. Many have a bond with the Magus and if they leave misfortune will strike," she explained.

"Magus?"

"He's the leader, the high priest. The bond is like a curse, and many won't leave for fear of personal tragedy, even bodily harm."

"What a bunch of bull!" Kyle said. "He has that kind of power over them?"

"Without a doubt," she said.

"Does he have this over you?"

"No, because I'm not as high in rank as the others," Chantress said.

"Well then just have one of your meetings and invite everybody," Kyle suggested.

"No one would come. They're too scared, but if I brought you to one of the Black Masses, they would see that I was gaining support. Would you come?" Chantress asked.

"Yeah, why not. Are you sure I would be allowed?"

"Sure. They're having a Black Mass this Sunday at the Magus' house. I'll set it up," she told him.

The two remained silent until the waiter dressed in black approached their table and asked if they needed anything. Chantress ordered a cinnamon herb tea, and Kyle ordered another beer.

"DWI you know and I'm driving tonight," Chantress said. "I did all the talking, now it's your turn. Do you work? Go to school?" Chantress asked.

"I'm a bartender at The Drunken Pelican three nights a week," Kyle replied. "I tried some courses at the county college, but I just couldn't get into it."

"Oh," Chantress said.

"Tell me more about the Black Mass," Kyle explained.

"I'm not supposed to...you'll have to see it for yourself if they allow you to come," she said.

"Allow me to come?"

"You have to be approved by the Magus. I have to bring you to his house in the afternoon and he decides," she said.

"I have to be approved? What kind of crap is that? Either you want to be a member or not. Approved!"

"There are reasons."

"What? What reasons?"

"I can't tell you now."

"Let's go to my place. I have a bottle of wine, and I'd love to share it with you," he said.

Chantress looked deep into Kyle's eyes searching for something, just anything that would tell her it would be a mistake. The clearly defined pupils surrounded by a radiating blue with their unfocused, random movements set off ancient and primitive alarms in her subconscious. But the alarms remained unheard - an emotional fog that seeped into every crevice of her consciousness silenced their message. Once the voice did come through and caused her stomach to twitch slightly, but the wetness between her legs caused her to ignore this all-important message.

"Sure, I'd love to. Let's go," she said.

As they left the table, Kyle noticed a man staring at him from the table next to theirs. The man had piercing black eyes, black hair, ruddy dark skin and a long narrow face. The man was motionless like a photograph.

"What's the matter? Chantress asked also seeing the man. "Do you know him?"

"No, it's something about him. I think I know him, but I can't place him. His eyes seem to look right into my soul and grab hold. His eyes are hungry like he was after something...anxious," Kyle explained turning to leave.

"And I'm the devil worshiper," she laughed.

"His stare gave me a strange sensation. That's all," Kyle said.

"Like the ones you have been having?"

"No, this is different - I can't explain it," Kyle said.

Kyle looked back and the man was gone.

"Did you see him leave? Where did he go? He was just there a second ago!" Kyle said.

"Come on. We probably didn't see him leave," Chantress replied grabbing his arm. "I have to catch up with Yanni and Krista and give them my keys."

Kyle looked around the dim cafe.

"He just vanished," Kyle said. "Weird."

* * *

Kyle's garden apartment was typical of the apartments of the 1980s - built cheaply and quickly and now after almost twenty six years, the red brick was weathered and chipped, the wood trim cracked and begging for more paint. Chantress didn't notice the run-down appearance of the multiple housing units - she had only one thought on her mind, and it ricocheted around her head like a wild bullet with endless energy. They entered the main entrance and walked through a maze of hallways to his apartment. He opened the door, and turned on a light, and they entered a tiny alcove that led into a single, large room. The room was sparse - a black velvet couch, a lounge chair that leaned to one side, a glass-topped coffee table covered in pizza boxes and empty beer bottles, a TV, stereo and naked wooden floors, and equally-naked walls.

"The furniture was leftover from my parent's house," Kyle said. "That's why none of it matches."

"Oh, it's wonderful because it's all yours...your place," Chantress replied. "I would love to have my own place, but I can't afford it yet."

Chantress sat down on the black velvet sofa and rubbed her hand over the top. She let the smooth sensation excite her hands and run down to her toes.

Kyle went into the tiny kitchen and returned with a bottle of wine and two long-stemmed wine glasses with gold trim around the tops. Kyle filled the glasses and handed one to Chantress. She took a few sips and then moved closer to Kyle. She kissed him pushing his head down on the sofa, and then slowly moved the rest of her body on top of his. He smiled inside as her hand found his belt, and then his zipper, and eventually made its way inside. After several minutes, she sat up and slowly moved her hands over him. He peeled the black tube top off, revealing her large red nipples, and round, firm breasts. Kyle's hands then grabbed each one and squeezed. She pushed his hands away and

pulled up on his shirt. He raised his arms and she pulled it off. Then she stood and motioned to Kyle to peel off her jeans. First, he ran his hands over her hips, then slowly towards her groin. He stopped after a few seconds, then moved up and grabbed the waist of her pants and slowly peeled them down. When he pulled the pants down past her groin, she shuddered. He stopped shortly and smiled to himself again, and then he stood up and pulled his pants off. He was anxious now and moved like a snake about to ensnare its prey.

"I like it slow," she breathed into his ear.

He listened and slowly entered her. Every few minutes Chantress would shutter and gasp.

While they made love, Kyle glanced up through a haze of wine and ecstasy and saw a man standing in the alcove.

"How did you get in? What do you want?" Kyle shouted.

Chantress moved and turned like a coiled spring and knocked Kyle onto the floor. Kyle rolled over and then jumped up. He grabbed the wine bottle off the coffee table and threw it at the man. The bottle hit the shade of the table lamp and crashed to the floor. They were smothered in darkness. Kyle moved quickly toward the alcove and switched on the overhead ceiling light. The room lit up. The bottle punched a small dent in the wall.

The man was gone.

"Who was there?" Chantress said, covering her naked body with bits of scattered clothing lying about.

"It was the man I saw at the cafe - the one sitting near us. He must have followed us home. But, I don't understand how he got in and where he went. I'd better check the bedroom. Stay here."

Kyle vanished and returned a few moments later.

"Not there?"

"Did you see him, Chantress?"

"No. I was trying to figure out what was going on," she said. "Are you sure you saw him? I didn't hear anything."

"I know I saw him. He was standing right there with that same strange look. Scared the hell out of me," he said.

"Maybe you were dreaming," she said.

"Maybe, but it was awfully real," he said.

"Some dreams are like that. Maybe he's a ghost?"

"A ghost? Come on. I don't think so," he said.

"Well, how do you explain what you saw?"

"I don't know. Maybe, I was hallucinating. I don't know."

"Did you have one of your psychic experiences?" Chantress said.

Kyle stared at her strangely.

"No," he said.

"I'll clean up the glass for you," Chantress said.

"I'll take you home now. I need to be alone...to think this out," Kyle said.

"Whatever."

The Magus - Chapter 10



hantress called Kyle the next morning.

"Don't forget. I'm picking you up in about twenty minutes. We have that meeting with the Magus."

"Sure. I'll be ready," Kyle said.

Chantress arrived on time and had to blow the horn several times before Kyle came out. They drove to an upscale suburban development and entered a cul-de-sac with only four homes.

"I thought you said this guy is some kind of high priest. This doesn't look like a priest's house - this could be any body's house. I thought we were going to a church of some sort," Kyle said.

"Satanists are just normal people with different beliefs," she replied.

They walked towards a chocolate brown house with tan trim. Chantress pushed the lighted doorbell button. The door opened. A large barrel-chested man stood in the widening doorway.

"Methos, good to see you. This must be the one you spoke of. Glad to meet you. Come in, come in," the man said. "I'm making tea; would you like some?"

"None for me," Kyle said looking at Chantress with questionable eyes.

"No thanks."

The trio walked through a narrow hallway into a living room with red oak floors and a large ornate Persian rug in the center of the room.

"So you would like to join us?" the man said, adjusting his gold wire-rim glasses to get a better look at Kyle.

"Maybe, I'm just curious," Kyle said.

"Have you ever been to a Black Mass before?"

"No."

"Well, there is really nothing to fear. It's just like a mass you've attended in your church," the man said. "I take it you were Roman Catholic?"

"I've never been to a church," Kyle said.

A small smile formed on the Magus' face. The whistle from the tea pot revved up.

"Excuse me while I attend to that," he said and left.

"What's with that name he called you?"

"All of our identities are secret. We are known only by the ancient names we choose," she said.

"Why?"

"Because we are a secret group," she whispered. "Now stop asking questions. I'll tell you more on the way home."

"He's pretty nerdy to be a maggot," Kyle said.

"Ha, ha, ha," Chantress laughed. "Not a maggot, silly. A Magus."

"What's the difference? He seems to fit both descriptions," Kyle said with a smirk.

The Magus returned with a cup of tea on a wooden serving tray. Kyle thought it was strange that he used a tray to bring out a single cup of tea. The Magus looked at Kyle while taking several small sips from the white cup.

"Let me explain a little about the Black Mass. It's really a mass in opposition to the Church's. We do everything to mock the Catholic Church."

"What do I have to do at this Black Mass?" Kyle asked.

"Nothing at all. Just watch, learn, breathe in the experience," the Magus said. "Do you think this is something for you?"

"I guess."

The Magus motioned Chantress to follow him into the kitchen.

"What?" Chantress asked.

"There is something about this boy, something special. I've seen it in his eyes. His eyes burn with desire, with discontent, with a hunger, a power. I've never seen this in a person before, but I know what it is. It is a rare quality, a quality only a few men have had in the history of all mankind. Yes, indeed, bring him tonight. I will prepare something special for him," the Magus explained.

Chantress returned to Kyle and the two left.

"What was that all about?" Kyle asked in the car.

"He wanted to meet you and see if you fit in," Chantress said.

"I don't think so. He wanted to see if I was a cop or someone who would make trouble for the group like a nosy neighbor. That's what this was all about. Isn't it?"

"What do you expect? Many people are scared to death of Satanists, and there's more who would like to see us all go away. Yes, he has to be suspicious of everyone that comes into the coven," Chantress explained.

"Who is that guy, anyway?"

"No one knows," Chantress replied. "What did you sense from him?"

"Nothing, yet. I wasn't with him long enough," Kyle said.

"How long does it take?"

"I don't know? Sometimes, it happens right away, sometimes it doesn't."

* * *

Kyle arrived at Chantress' house at eleven that evening for the Black Mass. When she opened the door, she was wearing a long, black flowing robe.

"You're wearing that?" Kyle asked as they walked down the narrow sidewalk to the street.

"Yeah, it's what we wear," she said. "You'll get yours at the meeting."

"I hope so," he said rubbing his hand on her smooth back.

"Nothing underneath. Cool," he said.

Chantress smiled and kissed him lightly on the cheek. When they arrived at the Magus' house, an older woman with long black hair and wearing a robe similar to Chantress' greeted them at the door. She led them through a hallway and then into a doorway to the basement of the house. There were no lights - only lit candles. The narrow steps led to a large open room with stonewalls and oil lamps recessed into the walls every eight to ten feet. The air was filled with an oily odor. Several people - men and women of various ages sat on metal folding chairs around a large white circle painted on the cement floor. The circle had a large six-pointed star in the middle. Forward of the circle was a long, tall table draped in a shiny, purple cloth. The table was covered with red and black candles, except in the middle there was a small clearing. A large, inverted cross hung on wall behind the table. The Magus stood on a small wooden platform in front of the altar. Chantress and Kyle took seats around the pentagram.

"Welcome, Methos," the Magus said.

"Welcome, Methos," the crowd repeated.

"Methos brings us a friend, a savior, which we will call Hermes. He will have great power, great vision, and bring us what we want," the Magus said.

"We welcome our new savior, Hermes," the crowd chanted.

The woman who led Chantress and Kyle into the basement unfolded a red robe and walked over to Kyle. Kyle looked at Chantress, and she nodded. He stood up and the woman placed the robe around him, tying the cloth belt around his waist.

"Welcome, Hermes, my savior. Welcome to the Daimon Seclorum," the woman told Kyle in a raspy whisper.

She placed her hand on his shoulder and pressed. Kyle sat down. A man sitting next to Chantress rose and left. He returned moments later with two barking German Shepherds. The Magus took two plates off the altar and placed them on the floor. The dogs ate the meat readily. Minutes passed. Beads of sweat formed at Kyle's forehead and dripped down his face. Chantress noticed and squeezed his hand. The dogs became glassy-eyed and fell asleep. Another man tied the hind legs of the animals together and hung the dogs from a wood beam in the ceiling. A woman placed two large plastic buckets under the dogs. The Magus approached the dogs, and then raised his hands.

"Oh, Beelzebub, Azazel, Abaddon, Asmodeus, Astaroth, Belial and Leviathan...our princes of darkness, accept these creatures into your domain and grant us the power we seek," the Magus said.

"Grant us our power," the crowd echoed back.

The Magus took out a large hunting knife from his robe and slit the dogs' throats. The blood gushed out like an open fire hydrant spilling into the buckets below. Chantress squeezed Kyle's hand. Several muted sighs escaped from the small audience. Two women rose, lifted the bloodied buckets, and poured the blood into large, gold chalices. One woman handed the chalices to the Magus. He lifted the first cup and drank from it, then the other. He handed them back to the women. They did the same, and passed the chalices around. Everyone drank. When it came to Chantress, she lifted the chalice and only let the blood touch her closed lips. She handed Kyle the chalice. He put it up to his lips and readily drank the blood. Chantress pulled her hand away. The warm blood excited him as it ran down his throat like liquid fire.

"Oh great Satan, welcome Hermes into our house. Show him the way of darkness, show him the power of your majestic domain," the Magus said.

The Magus recited several long passages in what Kyle thought sounded like Latin. The group remained silent and still during the monologue. Several minutes passed.

"This concludes our mass. For those who would like to stay, we are having tea upstairs."

The people rose and filed up the stairs. Chantress grabbed Kyle's hand and rushed up the stairway.

"Aren't we staying for tea?" Kyle asked. "I'd like to get to know some of these people."

"No, we are not," she said.

When they arrived at Chantress' house, she rushed into the bathroom and washed her face vigorously.

"They've taken it too far. I'm quitting! I think after tonight, I'll get a lot of them to follow me. Wasn't that the most disgusting thing you ever witnessed...killing those poor dogs, and drinking their blood! Ugh!" she screamed. "I almost puked when he did it. Next, they will be eating the entrails and the heart! I knew this was going to happen. This all started when there was talk that some of the members wanted to compete with a cult in New York City. I'm not putting up with this anymore!"

"I thought you said the others wouldn't quit because of the bond with the Magus," Kyle recalled.

"I can quit. It's only a few of the members who have the bond. I'm sure I can get others to join me now. We can do it together," she said.

Kyle stared absently down at the rug.

"Okay. Sure. You and me head of whatever," Kyle said.

"You think so, Kyle? You would really help me?"

"Yeah, let's start tomorrow. I can't wait!" he said with a wild-eyed look. "This is perfect. It's just what I've been looking for. We're going to be great together!"

Chantress saw the wild darkness in his eyes. For a second, she was frightened, but in her excitement, she ignored her inner voice and hugged Kyle.

"This is wonderful! I'm glad we met," she said and kissed him.

"I'm glad we met, too," he said.

"Did you sense anything from the Magus tonight? Did you have one of your trances or whatever you call it?"

"Yeah, I did."

"What?"

"All evil," he said smiling.

The Dead Trash - Chapter 11



he clear, rising sun cut through the gray dawn with its sharp, angled beams of orange light. The air smelled fresh and wet and the grass glistened with dew as Carson walked towards his car in the doctor's section of the parking lot. He opened the locked door as if it were a major effort and flopped into the seat. He sat there stone still and dozed off for a few minutes. He opened his eyes with a jolt remembering where he was and that he had drive home. As he rubbed the sleepiness from his eyes he saw a man opening a large, white garbage disposal unit near the side of the hospital. The man, dressed in a white smock, looked around as if he wanted to make sure no one was watching. He approached a car nearby and slowly opened the trunk. Then he pulled out a large black garbage bag. The man struggled to lift the bag high enough to get it into the dumpster. He went back to the car and pulled out another garbage bag. He struggled again with this bag going through the same awkward movements. He closed the trunk, looked around again, and drove away very slowly with his lights off.

Probably a lab technician cleaning up after the last shift, Carson thought. But what could be that heavy from the lab? Besides, lab technicians were usually young. This lab technician was middle-aged and appeared to be a doctor, and he drove a black Chevy. Doctors usually don't own Chevys, Carson thought, but their wives might. Carson dragged himself out of the car and walked to the dumpster. He opened the lid and was hit with a blast of a

putrid, rotting odor. He backed away holding his nose. Stenciled on the side of the dumpster were the words, "Medical Waste." He went back for a second look, and spotted a chromed padlock with its shaft cut. The dumpster was nearly filled and alive with hundreds of flies. He went back to his car, opened the trunk and grabbed a screwdriver and a flashlight. He also put on a pair of surgical gloves he kept in the glove compartment. He punctured a hole in the black bag holding his breath so as not to smell the evil black odor. As he ripped the plastic open he saw a head - the head of a dog. He jumped back. His stomach rumbled and suddenly there was a pressure in his throat. He bent over and vomited. When his stomach had settled down a bit, he went back to the dumpster and directed his flashlight on the black bag. The dog's fur was soaked in blood and its eyes had been gouged out. A long cut was made under its neck. Carson found a second dog in the other bag. He hurried back to his car and called Stokes.

"Hello, Dr. Stokes. I'm sorry to wake you..."

"Nonsense. Mary and I are up at this hour every morning. Shouldn't you be sleeping by now?"

"Does the hospital use dogs in any of its testing or research?"

"Not that I know of. There is absolutely no reason. Why do you ask?"

"I saw an orderly or somebody put two dogs in the medical waste dumpster this morning when I left," Carson said.

"Are you sure? The dumpsters are locked."

"The lock was cut. I found the lock."

"Okay. I'll look into it right away," Stokes said. "Get home and get some sleep."

"It just seemed out of the ordinary."

"Did you get a look at him?" Stokes asked.

"No, but he had a hard time lifting the dogs into the dumpster. I got the impression he was a doctor, not an orderly," Carson said. "He drove a black Chevy."

"Why do you say that?"

"He was older than most orderlies and he struggled with the dogs."

Very peculiar. Anything else?"

"Yeah, there was a pentagram branded into the dogs' heads. It was right between the eyes."

The Party - Chapter 12



Carson's workweek ended at 6 p.m. on Saturday. As he drove home, he wondered if Dr. Hansen had anything to do with him getting off early - it was the first Saturday night he didn't work in twelve weeks. When Carson arrived home, Linda was lying on their bed in the upstairs bedroom.

"What's the matter?" Carson asked.

"I must be coming down with something. I got this awful headache and I feel a bit dizzy," she replied.

"Carson placed his hand on her forehead and then around her neck.

"You don't have a fever. Do you want to stay home tonight?"

"No. This is important to you. I'll go. Just give me a few more minutes to rest."

"Sure."

Several minutes later, Linda put on her makeup, brushed her hair and the couple left for Dr. Hansen's house.

* * *

"Make a right, here. That's Marina Drive," Linda said, trying to decipher her husband's handwriting on a tiny piece of paper she held in front of her.

The street was long and winding with the homes set back away from the road. High bushes and rows of trees hid some of the homes. The Atlantic Ocean washed up behind the homes. Carson pulled into Hansen's driveway - a cobble-stoned right of way lined on each side with mature cherry trees. The driveway was circular, winding past a large front porch with four white pillars. A hazy sun cast a diffused light on the multi-gabled, turn-of-the-century home giving it a warm, friendly glow.

"Nice house," Carson said.

"I love it," Linda added. "This is what we need for our family."

"Your wish is my command," Carson replied. "In about ten years."

"Some wish," Linda said.

Carson rang the doorbell, and a woman dressed in a black caterer's outfit with a white apron opened the door, and directed them to the back of the house. They walked through the house, and then through a sunroom that opened to a just-cut green lawn, which gently sloped downward to a sandy beach and the ocean. A light, comfortable breeze ruffled the sides of a large white tent, which housed several buffet tables covered with heated trays of delicacies. Clusters of people sat on white wicker lawn chairs and talked and ate from decorated plates. Some held paper napkins, which matched the floral designs on the plates.

"Carson!" Dr. Hansen piped up from a group of people nearby.

"Hello," Carson replied.

"This must be, Linda. My pleasure," Dr. Hansen said extending his hand.

"Nice to meet you," she replied.

"Carson, let me introduce you."

Dr. Hansen introduced Carson and Linda to several investors. They were mostly middle-aged, gray-haired established doctors from the hospital. When they were finished, Carson and Linda found two empty wicker chairs among a group of doctors close to their age.

"Hi, I'm Carson Hyll and this is my wife, Linda," Carson said to a couple next to them.

"Glad to meet you. I'm Gary Burnick and this is my fiancée, Julie Watson," Gary said.

"Nice to meet you," Carson replied. "What hospital are you with?"

"Bayside. Pediatrics," Gary said.

"I'm an investigative reporter with The Sentinel," Julie chimed in.

"Must be interesting," Linda added.

"Sometimes, not much happens around here though," she explained. "I'm still looking for my big break - you know the story of the century, but I doubt it will ever happen here. I'd like to see a 747 crash on the turnpike and be one of the first reporters there."

"Oh, well, let's hope that doesn't happen," Linda said turning to Carson.

"I know it would be horrible. I hoping to work in New York someday for The Daily News or the Times," Julie added.

"Lots of luck with that," Linda said not realizing the sarcasm that flowed with her words.

Julie turned and stared out at the calm sea.

"You work with Dr. Hansen," Gary asked Carson.

"No. We just work in the same hospital. I'm a neurologist," Carson replied. "How do you know Dr. Hansen?"

"He's my uncle," Gary said.

"He's a nice guy," Carson said.

Julie turned towards Linda.

"So when's the big day?"

"June," Julie said.

"Congratulations, again," Carson said.

"You're getting married?" said a dark-haired woman sitting across from Julie.

The woman moved her chair closer and the trio began to talk of Julie's wedding plans. Carson found he had to concentrate to hear Gary.

"Do you think you'll want to work at Riverdale?" Gary asked Carson.

"I don't know. I like Ocean Village. The hospital is small and everyone knows everyone. The hospital needs more neurologists and we live only a few minutes away," Carson explained. "I can walk to work if I want."

"But, they're not very progressive and they have no research facilities. If you want to advance in your career quickly, I would move on if I were you," Gary said. "I can help you get into Riverdale."

"Yeah, you're right about that, but I just started there and I'm not ready to move yet. Thanks for the offer," Carson said. He took a sip from his long tapered glass filled with dark beer.

"Have you ever had any cases involving people with near-death experiences?" Carson directed at Gary.

"Strange you should ask. We haven't had one in years; now they are becoming quite frequent. We had one last week."

"Did any ever come back with their skin burned?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said. Did any come back with burned skin?" Carson said.

"Not that I know of. Did you have case like that?"

"Two," Carson replied.

"Two! What were the symptoms?" Gary said.

"No vitals, a near death experience, hysteria, and the burned skin. The burn is like first-degree sunburn and heals in about seven days without scarring. The blood tests clean, the symptoms disappear and there are no after effects or reoccurrences that we know of," Carson explained.

"You know, we had a case like that about a month ago," said a sandy blonde man sitting across from Carson. "Same symptoms - a near death experience..."

"Near death experiences...I interviewed a woman once who had one," Julie cut in. "It made the national wires."

"What about your case?" Linda said to the sandy blonde man.

"Ours was similar - burned skin, mental depression and no trace of toxins. Now that I think of it, the patient was from Ocean Village. By the way, I'm Stephen Ventrilli," the sandy haired man said.

"Nice to meet you. When did this happen?" Carson asked.

"About two months ago."

"You think I can have a look at the records. We have a similar case right now - an older woman who blacked out while driving. Maybe, it's related..."

"Sure, call me on Monday and ask me about the Hellfire Syndrome," Stephen said. "Let me give you my card." He pulled out his wallet and searched. "Honey, do you have one of my cards? I've run out."

A tall slender woman with shoulder-length black hair and wearing a water blue, satiny dress opened a small, black purse and pulled out a business card.

"Oh, this is my wife, Ginny," Stephen said to the small crowd. He looked at Ginny's blue eyes and smiled. "I knew you would come through. You always do."

"You're welcome," she said handing him the card.

"Hellfire Syndrome?" Carson asked.

"That's what we call it because the patient woke up screaming his head off about going to hell and burning. HFS for short. It was probably a mental reaction to the burnt skin. We're still puzzled about what caused the burns. The patient fell down his basement stairs - thought he was already at the bottom of the stairs when he took the plunge. Luckily, he was carrying a basket of clothes and it somehow got around his head and cushioned his skull as he tumbled down, otherwise, I think he would have ended up in the morgue. A neighbor found him. We think he might have spilled something on his skin when he hit the basement floor, but the paramedics said there was nothing."

"You said you had two cases?" Gary said.

"Yeah, I did. The other case was me," Carson said.

"YOU!" Gary said.

"You?" Stephen said.

"Tell us about it!" Julie added.

Carson told the story. His face brightened when he told how Linda rescued him from the sinking car.

"I just did what I had to do to," Linda added. "I really didn't think about it. I just knew I had to get us out of the car and fast."

"What do you really think?" Julie asked Carson. "Did you really go to hell and back?"

"At first I thought so. It was so real, but now I think it was a nightmare. Something triggered the experience in my head. The burnt skin...well, I'm as puzzled as Stephen," Carson explained.

"How do you explain three people having the same nightmare?" Julie asked.

"I don't know. Whatever caused it might have affected the same area in the brain producing the same experience," Carson said.

"Wouldn't you all have different nightmares? I don't know any two people who have had the same dreams. Maybe, you really died and went to hell and back," Julie argued.

"Anything is possible. But, I'd put my money on a medical explanation," Carson said.

"So you can't prove what happened one way or another?" Julie asked.

"Right now we can't, but I believe we will eventually," Carson said.

"The same nightmare is possible, Julie," Stephen explained. "Especially since our patient was from Ocean Village. Ocean Village is a highly religious community, and one of the greatest fears would be to go to hell. It's probably discussed every week in church, and stays on people's minds quite a bit, don't you think? That would explain the three people having the same nightmare. Perhaps, they feel guilty about something and HFS just brought it out. You know, people interpret things the same way by association. Since each patient was burned, saw something they thought was fire, and experienced falling down, they logically associated it with hell. For example, if I said murdered wife, jealous husband, missing lover what conclusion do you draw?"

"The husband killed her and the lover when he caught them in bed, and got rid of the lover's body," Julie answered.

"Is that what everyone else thought?" Stephen asked.

Everyone looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Well, it's the same with the Hellfire Syndrome. Whatever is causing these similar reactions is causing the patients to draw the same conclusions about their experience," Stephen explained.

Carson moved closer to the group.

"I'm not highly religious and I don't think about going to hell all the time," Carson said. "I had the same experience as the others including the burned skin. How do you explain that?"

Linda perked up.

"You can explain it anyway you like, but I think it's all true. I think Carson and the others really went to hell," Linda added. "I've read about near death experiences and everyone says the same thing - about going up into a great and peaceful light to heaven. Carson and the others said they went down through a dark tunnel. They had negative near death experiences and went to hell."

"Now you're going beyond my field. Can I get anyone a drink?" Gary asked and stood up.

He took several orders and vanished into the white food tent nearby.

Linda's face turned into a scowl and Carson looked searchingly at his wife.

"But, you're saying if!" Stephen said. "If there's a heaven, there's also a hell. We don't know if either exists. I can document my theory with proven cases in psychology. I proved it to all of you tonight with a few words and everyone drew the same conclusion!"

"I just believe there is a spiritual realm, a life after death, and some things cannot be explained away by medical research or scientific facts," Linda said moving to the edge of her chair.

Suddenly her eyes rolled and her limp body rolled off the wicker chair, her face was buried in the thick, grassy blades of the lawn. Carson rushed to her as did the other doctors and checked her breathing and pulse. It was as if they were all in the emergency room again. Linda awoke a few seconds later groggy as if she were in a deep sleep.

"What happened? Why am I on the ground? I'm sorry," she said.

"There's no need to be sorry," Carson said. "I'll call an ambulance."

"Oh, no, I'm all right. It must be the wine. I'm just tired. Let's go home. I don't want to go to the hospital. I'll be all right," she protested.

"I don't know," Carson said. "But we're going to take some tests in the morning."

"Oh, stop. I'll be ok," she said, standing up with the help of the three men.

She sat back on the wicker chair, and put her head back. A tiny, elderly woman ploughed her way through the crowd carrying a cold, wet towel and a glass of ice water.

"Here, drink this and put this towel on your forehead," the older woman said. "I saw you fall off your chair. Scared the heck out of me."

"Thank you. I'll be fine, Mrs. Hansen," Linda said taking the glass and towel.

Linda and Carson left a few minutes later. The late summer sun dipped down behind the house, and the comfortable breeze turned into a chilly wind that swept off the ocean. The pleasant evening turned gray, then blackened into a cool summer night - a sign that the summer was giving way to fall.

Gary and Julie left when the chill arrived in the air.

"You look relieved to leave," Gary said as he fired up the engine in his two-seat Honda.

"Yes and no. I don't feel very well, and I caught a chill there," Julie said.

"You, too? Well, the doctor is in and I have the perfect remedy for you," Gary said.

"Not tonight, Gary. I'm sorry, but I just don't feel right. I have my period and I just want to go home."

"Oh."

"Poor Linda. How embarrassing to black out like that," Julie said.

"I don't think it was embarrassing. It just happened. What can you do," Gary said.

They drove the rest of the way in silence, and when they arrived at her house, he walked Julie to her apartment door.

"I'm sorry, Gary. I just don't feel up to it."

"It's okay. I'll call you tomorrow. We can go to the beach," Gary said.

"That would be nice," she said. "Good night."

"Good night. I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she replied and disappeared into her apartment.

Gary got into his car and drove to a dark section of the beach. The darkness suited his mood. He got out, and stared at the breakers - only their white foam was visible in the dim moonlight. He wondered if he had made a mistake with Julie. There was something about her that gnawed at him. It came and went like a mood, a bad mood. He couldn't quite pinpoint it in his mind, but he was troubled just the same. It wasn't because she had refused him - he had grown accustomed to her rejections. He had even done it himself after working a 16-hour shift in the OR and the only thing that he wanted was to sleep. Maybe, what bothered him was her attitude, but he liked her cockiness - it reminded him of how he would like to be. It was her aggressiveness that convinced him to apply to Riverdale, and he has been indebted to her ever since. She made his life better, he thought, because without her, he would still be at Ocean Village Hospital making almost half as much as he earned now.

Most times during their goodbyes, he would advance and kiss her, and it was as if she wasn't there. Tonight, he wanted to see if she would approach him and she didn't. It bothered him not because she didn't kiss

him, but because her actions were telling him something he didn't want to hear, something he feared most - that he loved her, but she didn't love him. He looked up at the crescent moon with its companion, Venus, and thought he could be wrong. Venus was the Roman goddess of love and beauty. It was a sign that maybe he was wrong. But if his inner voices were right, he knew he was trapped - addicted to her like a drug addict. He walked back to his car and drove home.

* * *

Julie went into her small kitchen and made herself a cup of green tea. She sat down at the round table in the corner and drank it down quickly. Then she changed into jeans and a sweatshirt and drove to the Ocean Village Sentinel. The building was dark except for several brightly lit "EXIT" signs near the doorways. The light guided her down a short hallway, which led to a large room filled with cubicles, computers and the stale smell of Friday's micro waved lunches. She walked over to her desk by the window and turned on her desk lamp. She pulled the shade down, and moved the mouse to disable the screen saver and then put in her password. She should have pulled the shade down first, and then turned on the light, she thought, but no one would notice anyway. The computer hummed softly and the monitor came to life, illuminating her face in an eerie light that made her appear spectral. She began typing - her eyes were on fire.

Deception - Chapter 13



Carson couldn't dial the phone fast enough, his emotions spewing out like hot lava. "That was pretty low of your girlfriend to print that story without asking. If I had known that everything I said could end up in print, I wouldn't have said a thing!" Carson shouted.

"What are you talking about?"

"The article! Haven't you seen the article! It was on the front page!"

"No, I haven't seen it! What does it say?"

"The Hellfire Syndrome!" Carson shouted. "It just makes us all look like a bunch of quacks!"

"I'll talk to you later about this," Gary said and hung up. His stomach twisted and turned as he took an elevator to the first floor and headed towards the lobby gift shop. He found the stack of the Ocean Village Sentinels and picked one up. The front-page headline read:

Doctors Baffled Over Hellfire Syndrome Patients Appear to Enter Hell

By Julie Watson
Special Investigative Reporter for the Sentinel

OCEAN VILLAGE - Several
specialists from local hospitals reported

that area patients have had unexplainable near death experiences and seemingly entered hell.

The mysterious symptoms have been labeled, the Hellfire Syndrome, and include being pronounced clinically dead, coming back to life with burnt skin, and having memories of entering a dark tunnel and falling downward, according to the specialists.

The doctors have no clue to the origin of the symptoms.

Many patients have awoken hysterical, claiming that they went to hell. All develop burnt skin, similar to severe sunburn shortly after they awaken, the specialists explained. The doctors declined to give their names.

Although many of the physicians interviewed said there was a medical explanation for HFS, they could not produce any evidence of a disease and only produced unproven theories for the cause of the symptoms.

A psychiatrist explained that for several people to have the same experience, they would have to have the same fears. However, he added that it was only a theory.

One church official, however, disputed the doctors and said that it is very possible that these patients actually entered hell because the devil has been gaining strength in this century as evidenced by the rise of Satanism.

"That bitch! How could she! How could she do this?" Gary yelled.

A white-haired woman behind the small counter looked up with wide eyes. Gary glared back and started toward the doorway.

"Hey, aren't you going to pay for that newspaper!"

He threw the newspaper at the old woman, its pages coming apart like a fallen bird.

"I'm going to report you to your supervisor!" she screamed running from behind the counter to pick up the pages.

Gary took out his cell phone and called the Ocean Village Sentinel. Julie wasn't there. He dialed her cell phone and got her voicemail.

"Who the fuck do you think you are? Where do you come off printing that story without permission! You really screwed things up!"

Gary hung up and dialed Ocean Village Hospital. He got a busy signal. After several attempts, he got through.

"Doctor Carson Hyll, please," he said.

"Hello, Carson. I had no idea she'd write that story. I can't even find her - she's out on assignment. I'm really sorry. It makes us look like a bunch of witch doctors. I would never let her write it if I knew - I would have insisted that she interview everyone directly and ask permission. I hope this doesn't cause any trouble," Gary said.

"Well, it has!" Carson said. "The hospital's phones are ringing off the hook - everyone in town is scared to death and calling to find out if it's true. There's a general panic!"

"I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"I have to go. I'm being paged," Carson said.

"I'll call you when I get more information," Gary said.

Carson reported to a nearby nursing station, where a sleepy-eyed nurse stared into a computer display.

"Doctor Hyll, Doctor Stokes wants to see you in his office," she said.

"Ah, shit!"

The sleepy nurse looked up at him. He turned and rushed off to see Stokes. When he entered, Stokes looked up - his face wrinkled by a large frown, and his face was drawn and tired.

"Do you know what's going on? Did you leak the story to the press? We have riots in the lobby, and the phones are jammed. You've turned this hospital into a zoo! The whole town is in an uproar over the story! Did you see it?"

"I didn't do it, sir. Let me explain," Carson said.

After he explained the events, Stokes opened a lower drawer in his desk and produced a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"I didn't think you'd do something as foolish as this," Stokes said. "We'll have to issue a press release right away discrediting that reporter. Get two paper cups from that water cooler, would you, Carson? This is the right medicine for times like these."

"Sure. I didn't think you drank at all," Carson said.

"Come on. Religion is good for the soul and the spirit, but this is good for the body...in moderation, of course," Stokes said.

"Of course." Carson smiled.

"Stick around. I want you to talk to public relations so we can put out a press release right away," Stokes said. "Then I have to take care of the people in the lobby. It's a mess down there."

"You're kidding? I thought the phones were the only problem."

"No, see for yourself. If it weren't for that quote by the preacher, none of this would have happened. The fool told the reporter that he believed people were going to hell," Stokes said. "That's all it took. You know how these people are in this town. They would believe a preacher before you or me."

"I'll bet he never said that. She just twisted it around like she did with us," Carson added.

"You're probably right, Carson," he said. "But that doesn't change things. We still look like idiots."

Stokes called the public relations office and a young woman with a note pad arrived several minutes later. Stokes spoke and she took notes. The young woman asked a few questions, then left. Stokes and Carson then went to the lobby. When they arrived, the lobby was filled with a crowd of boisterous senior citizens milling about in the lounge area.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention? May I have your attention?" Stokes yelled over the noise.

The crowd settled down.

"You are all aware of the story that appeared in today's Sentinel. Well, let me assure you we did not make any official statements to the press regarding a Hellfire disease or any disease for that matter."

"Are you telling us the newspaper's lying?" a man leaning on a cane yelled from the crowd.

"Yes and no, Mr. Roberts. What I'm saying is that there is some kind of disease - very rare that causes these effects, but in no way do we have

any evidence, medical or whatsoever, that proves beyond a doubt that the victims went to hell and came back. There is a medical reason for the symptoms - not a religious one," Stokes explained.

"What about the preacher who said it's true?" a tiny, wrinkled woman shouted from the crowd.

"What preacher? Here's a copy of the article and it says a church official made that statement not a preacher. A church official could be an assistant. It could even be one of the choir members or a janitor who happened to be there at the time when the reporter called. No one that we know of is quoted in the story. There are no names. As far as I'm concerned and this hospital, the story cannot be confirmed," Stokes said. "It's just another effort at sensationalism."

Several people in the crowd laughed.

"Come on, Jerry. I told you this was a hoax," a tall, lanky man said. "Did you really believe that someone could go to hell and come back? Come on let's go home. This was a waste of time."

"Yeah," another voice came out of the crowd. "I could have finished my laundry."

"Well, I don't know," Jerry said. "I've always thought that what the newspapers printed was true."

"When are you going to grow up, Jerry? Come on let's go home," said another man.

The crowd slowly dispersed and the lobby emptied out.

"That was easier than I thought. Let's hope it stays that way," Stokes said.

"We should call you spin doctor," Carson replied. "You defused that story in a split second. That was brilliant."

"All in a day's work. Let's go back to my office. I have some information for you."

"You mean the cooked man?" Carson asked.

"That's the one."

Loss of Faith - Chapter 14



ary left the fifth floor of Bayside Medical Center with his stomach squirming. He couldn't get in touch with Julie after leaving several messages at the newspaper and on her cell phone. Gary wondered how she could do this to him - after all, they were engaged to be married, and now the most important person in his life was avoiding him. He was more sad than angry because he knew in his heart this was the beginning of the end. When he reached the hospital lobby, he pulled out his cell phone and made another call to Julie. The phone rang and rang until the call was forwarded to her voicemail.

"Julie! If you don't call me, we're through!" he shouted into the phone surprised at what he had said. He slammed the phone shut and drove to her apartment. He walked up to the tiny porch, rang the bell, and waited. Nothing. He rang it again and again. Frustrated, he returned to his car and waited. About two hours later, Julie pulled up, and Gary rushed towards the car.

"Why did you print that story!" he yelled, his face flushed and his eyes on fire.

Her neutral expression turned to one of agony as she looked up at Gary's wild face. Within seconds, her face relaxed again. Gary gripped the edges of the door as if he were hanging on for life...for their relationship.

"I'm just doing my job. Do you think I want to work for the Sentinel for the rest of my life? I'm going places," she said calmly. Her face was a sheath of ice.

"That's right, and I'm not going with you! You've showed me your true colors! I want the ring back! I've had it with you!" he shouted back.

"It's in the mail," she replied sternly. "And stop calling me...you're using up my minutes on my phone every time I have to retrieve my voicemail. I could miss important calls."

Gary's face flushed again and his eyes burned white hot.

"You're a real bitch! Go to hell!" he yelled and walked off.

Julie flipped her hand to wave him off and pretended he was no longer there. Gary sped off. Seconds later he slammed on his brakes realizing he almost ran a red light. He quickly backed up and waited for the light to change. He wiped his eyes so he could see more clearly.

Julie whipped her purse onto her sofa as she entered her living room.

"He called me a bitch! What a bastard!" she said aloud to the empty room. "I'll fix him!"

She opened the refrigerator, and grabbed a paper-wrapped sub sandwich, and then she picked up her purse, and left for the newspaper office. When she entered, the dark air smelled of burnt coffee and microwave popcorn. She went to her desk, turned on her computer and waited for the machine to boot up. She moved the pointer with her mouse and clicked twice on an icon on the screen named, "Hellfire Syndrome." She quickly edited the story. She opened the email program and attached the story. Then she wrote,

Hi Jacob, I really have a scoop this time. You can be the first to run it. Just make sure my byline is on the story.

Thanks, Julie

She waited several minutes and then picked up the phone.

"Hello, Associated Press, Newark Bureau," the burly voice said.

"Hi, this is Julie Watson. Is Jacob Schwartz there?" she said.

She un-wrapped the oil-stained, white paper covering the sub and looked at the hardened bread.

"Hold on. Let me check," the man said.

She listened to the silence in the phone and tapped her fingers.

"No, he just left. Do you want to leave a message?"

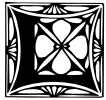
"Yeah. Tell him to check his email. I just sent him a story that I think he would like to run," she said. "He has my cell number if he needs to call me. He can call me anytime."

"Your name again?"

"Julie Watson."

Julie hung up the phone and sat back in the darkness. The white glow from the computer screen lit her face with a spectral gray light. She took a bite from her sub - it was her first meal since breakfast. The lids of her eyes closed slightly and her eyes rolled in pleasure.

Sunday Mass - Chapter 15



Linda shivered from the cold rain that seemed to permeate through her clothes as they approached the tall oak double doors of the Ocean Village Methodist Church.

"I guess that story really scared a lot of people," Carson said, opening the thick, heavy door to the one hundred-year-old church.

"Oh, yeah, I've never seen it so crowded."

"Me neither."

Linda and Carson moved through the crowd to get a better view. They stopped at a row of beige metal folding chairs.

"They had to bring the folding chairs out of the rec room," an elderly man with a large nose and leathery face told them as they stood near the chairs. His eyes seemed to be peering out through a mask as he stared at them in a funny way.

A few minutes later, the crowd became silent and Pastor James Millard entered the room and stepped up to the pulpit with a smile.

"Good morning. I see we have many of our friends here today that we haven't seen in a while. Well, I hope you are all feeling well, and can join us regularly. Today, I want to talk about a particular story I read in the newspaper this week about the rise of Satanism and a particular incident that occurred at the hospital involving what I call a peculiar

disease - a disease I call Satan's disease. It's another one of his temptations to see how loyal you are to God and your faith. It's a way to sway you to have doubts about your faith in the hopes that you will leave our church and join his. Should we conclude that sin and Satan actually control the world? Satan would like you to believe that he controls the world so you will fear him. He made that boast to Christ in Luke 4:6. However, Satan is the father of lies and must not be believed. Some dear believers have concurred with Satan's claim, which is most dishonoring to Christ. It is true that Satan is far superior in strength and wisdom than man, but it is also true that God has granted him a degree of influence over wicked men and institutions. Satan is not independent of God. There is only one absolute Sovereign in the universe and that is God, according to Dan 4:34-35," the pastor explained. He raised a small glass of water to his lips and drank.

"The Christian journey is like a walk of faith. It requires that we put our faith in the Lord. We don't know what the future holds, but we do know we have a God we can trust who will be with us every step of the way. By knowing that God is with us, we can walk by faith and not by sight alone. The root of most of our problems is original sin - lack of faith. When we place ourselves at the center, we fall and we are miserable. When we allow God to be the center we find the joy described in Revelation 7:17.

We've also been content to allow people to stop with only a second-grade Christian education, and then we wonder why their lives are spiritually empty and they are unable to stand up to a crisis in life. We're teaching a faith that lives with integrity that is taught with credibility and relevance. I want us to start teaching the biblical story so that it is relevant to our modern lives, important to us and credible. I want it to be understood by our children and ourselves so that it determines the way we see the world and how we live our lives. We need to make our beliefs more relevant to modern living, and I want all of you to help. We are all God's children. You have nothing to worry about if your faith is strong. Good reigns over evil, but sometimes it seems that evil is stronger and this is hard to accept. It is only another test of our faith and its strength. The weak will fall into the clutches of Satan, while the strong, the faithful, the true believers go on forever with our Father in heaven," the pastor explained.

He looked down at his bible, and then raised the glass again to his lips. He looked out over the congregation, rows of heads anxiously waiting for him to say more.

"Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always even unto the end of the world,' from Matthew 28:19-20. Now I would like to hear what you think about this," Pastor Millard said.

A bald man with gold wire-rimmed glasses raised his hand. His white, wrinkled hand shook nervously.

"Yes, Mr. Whitehead," the pastor said.

"How do you explain my wife's burned skin? She swears she's being punished and was sent to hell," Homer explained.

"I don't think she went to Satan's home. The symptoms have to do with something medical. The experience she had was probably a reaction of some sort to the accident. The mind works in strange ways," Pastor Millard explained. "But these symptoms whatever they are, have given Satan an excellent opportunity to doubt our beliefs."

"Well, you're gonna have to convince her of that. She's pretty shook up and believes she went to hell. I'm not so sure you're telling us everything," Homer responded.

"I'm sure there is an explanation for this, and you just have to believe," the pastor said. "I will talk to her personally."

"I heard that one of the doctors...what's his name, Hyll, had the same thing happen to him, and you just said it was the work of the devil...so I think they really went to hell," Willard McJames shouted from a pew in the back.

"Well, Willard, if that's what you believe, then I think you should be here on more Sundays," Pastor Millard said. "You would think differently."

Laughter escaped from the audience and echoed in the high ceiling and around the tiny stained glass windows like the flapping wings of a thousand wild birds. Willard stood up quickly as if his seat were on fire.

"Well, I'm not gonna take this! I think we should go to a higher authority. I think we should talk to the church elders," Willard yelled over the laughter.

The crowd went silent, and then flared up with everyone talking at once.

Linda looked at Carson - his lips were curled tightly as he tapped his hand on the side of his leg.

"May I have your attention, please!" a voice boomed over the audience. "May I have your attention?"

A man stepped out of the crowd from the back of the church. Heads turned and eyes widened. The noise slowly died down.

"I'm Doctor Carson Hyll, and I suffered from the Hellfire Syndrome," he announced.

The crowd went silent as if the dark chill from outside had seeped into the room and paralyzed them.

"My belief in God and church are as strong as anyone's, and I experienced it, and I don't believe I went to hell. There is a medical explanation for the symptoms, but we haven't found it yet. I don't believe I died and came back. I don't believe anybody has...I believe something is happening and that we just don't have enough information to make any solid conclusions," Carson explained.

"Willard, Martha always said you should come to church more," a large, overweight woman from the front row shouted, piercing the audience with her booming voice. "Ever since she died, we ain't seen you in here since."

"Shusss, Loretta. Keep your opinions to yourself," Willard shot back. "The world would be a lot better off."

"Don't push your luck, Willard. Everybody knows you as the neighborhood grouch," the woman fired back.

The audience laughed again. Linda looked at her husband and sensed something was wrong. It was the way he talked to the congregation and the look in his eyes when the crowd laughed. Something was not right, but she didn't know what. She was in a fog that was slowly swallowing her.

"Doctor Hyll is right," Pastor Millard added. "There is nothing to fear. Let us make our faith stronger by praying. Let us pray."

The minister bowed his head and the congregation followed. After several seconds, he raised his head and motioned to the organ player. Sound filled the church like thousands of butterflies fluttering in every corner and crevice. The chorus added to the sound with soft, velvety voices that flowed through the air like many colored lengths of silk.

When the service ended, the pastor made his way to the entrance of the church, moving gingerly through the crowd. He stopped in the doorway and greeted the parishioners as they left, as he had done every

Sunday in the past. When Carson and Linda approached, he grabbed both of Carson's hands.

"Thank you. Will you stay awhile and we'll talk more," Pastor Millard said.

"Sure," Carson said.

Linda and Carson waited near the doorway as the congregation filed past. It seemed the line would never end. It was a service most people in Ocean Village would not forget.

"Thanks again for waiting. Come...we'll go to my office and talk," the minister told them.

Carson and Linda looked at each other and followed the pastor to his office in the back of the church. The old door creaked as it opened revealing a tiny, dark-paneled office that smelled dusty and stale.

"Sit down. I'd offer you coffee, but I ran out and the churchwomen won't replace it until tomorrow," Pastor Millard said.

"At least he's being honest," Carson said looking at Linda.

"He should be." Linda smiled.

"Thank you for standing up today. You helped a lot," the pastor said.

"I was only telling them what I know," Carson said sitting down on a beige metal folding chair.

Linda sat next to him on an identical chair and looked around the office.

"But they believed you because you're a doctor and because it happened to you," the pastor explained. "Ever since the newspaper printed that story it has been nothing but hell her, excuse the word, no pun intended."

"What do you mean?"

"I have parishioners calling me day and night; some show up in the middle of the night and stay all night. I don't think I've slept a full night in several days. I'm ready to collapse," Pastor Millard explained. "I think this town has gone nuts."

"What are you talking about?" Carson said.

"The Hellfire Syndrome. Mrs. Whitehead is not the only one. I've had parishioners call me hysterical on the phone, saying that they went to hell and have the burns to prove it!"

"How many?"

"At least five. Winfred Paisley was so frightened of the experience that she refuses to go home and lives in the spare room in the church. I don't mind, though. She cleans the church and my office during the day," Pastor Millard said smiling.

"Have you seen any of the victims?"

"Yes. I went to some of their houses and they tell me they had this nightmare of falling into hell. They see fire, then they wake up and their skin is burned, and none of them have been in the sun," he said. "Their skin was sunburned. I saw it with my own eyes. The most disturbing thing about all of this is that some of them have been unconscious for a whole day."

"A whole day!" Carson raised his voice.

"Yes, and I'm afraid if this keeps up some may never wake up. We may find a whole town of corpses lying in their beds."

"Did any of them say they were falling into a tunnel and into the fire?"

"Yes, that's exactly what they said. Is that the nightmare you had?"

"Yes, it is," Carson said.

Linda noticed a change in Carson's face.

"I don't understand how all these different people can have the same nightmare?" Pastor Millard said.

"I don't either," Carson replied.

"They would all have to have the same fears and the same experiences to have the same nightmare," Linda added. "And what's the chance of that happening? I think they really went somewhere."

"But, many of the people in this town have had the same experiences. They've lived here all their lives, met their spouses here, married, bought a house, raised a family, and then one of the spouses died. They have the same fears of God, of Hell, and of evil that I have been preaching to them since I started here," the minister explained.

"Doesn't make sense," Carson said. "No two people think the same or have the same fears or the same level of fear except maybe twins or triplets, but even then it's marginal. It's impossible. Take me for instance. I didn't grow up in this town."

"But you are a God-fearing man and you have faith. You have the same beliefs as any of us here about heaven and hell. Your fears of doing

wrong are the same - you fear the same fate - eternity in hell," the pastor said. "What about all the people who have had near-death experiences and claimed they went to heaven? They all describe a similar experience of going up into a bright light."

"I was thinking of the same thing," Linda added.

Carson was silent. Linda saw questions in his eyes. Then his eyes grew bold again.

"I think there is something causing all of this. One theory is that the tunnel and the bright light is really the mind remembering the birth experience of going through the birth canal and into bright light," Carson explained looking at Linda. She saw questions in his eyes again.

"Perhaps, but I really called you here because I don't know if this will really help, but whatever is happening is not just happening here," Pastor Millard said. "It's happening all over the area. I've had calls from others - religious leaders - a priest from St. Mary's, a minister from The Good Shepherd and a rabbi from Temple Beth Torah. They're all having the same problems."

"You're kidding! That means its spreading! But why now after all these years!" Carson said.

"Has this happened before?" the pastor asked.

"Maybe, but I can't be sure. There was a similar case about twenty years ago. I'm looking through hospital records right now for the reports," he said.

"Really? Then you have to come to this meeting next week. It's an interdenominational meeting with many of the religious leaders here. Some believe this is the work of the devil," Pastor Millard said.

"You mean a meeting with the other church leaders who are having the same problems?" Carson questioned.

"Yes."

"I could ask about other cases and their symptoms. When?"

"Tuesday at 7:30 at St. Mary's Roman Catholic in Asbury Park. It's on Jerome Street," the pastor said.

"Okay, I'll be there."

"What about your schedule? Will you have to work?" Linda asked.

"If I do, I'll ask Stokes if he can schedule someone to fill in for me. He may even want to come. Would you mind if I brought Doctor Stokes?"

"Not at all. Bring him."

Linda saw the excitement in Carson's eyes turn into questions again.

"What do you believe, pastor?"

"On or off the record?"

"Off the record."

"I believe it is the work of the devil. Did you ever believe in something and know it's true, but you couldn't prove it - you just know it's true. That's how I feel about this. It's a strong feeling. I believe these people had near-death experiences and somehow the devil got to them for a short time. There are good and evil forces in this world and this has given the devil a good opportunity. It really scares me. I've seen a lot on this earth in Vietnam and Bosnia and for this to send a chill into my soul means it has to be something more than a disease."

Carson looked hard at the pastor.

"I know from that look you believe it's a medical problem, but I don't because there is too much that is unexplainable here," the pastor said. "You think the Catholic Church is the only one that does exorcisms. We do them also, but we call them deliverances, and they don't make the newspapers as often as exorcisms."

"My point exactly. When all the great diseases of the past like the Black Plague and others were rampant, didn't the people believe it was the work of the devil before science could provide otherwise?" Carson said. "Did you think Ebola is the work of the devil, Pastor?"

"I just think both of you are looking at this only from your own points of view," Linda added.

"If you're right why now?" Carson asked.

"Because more and more people are losing faith, losing faith in their churches, in the spiritual realm of life. Many worship technology, and making money, and material things, and what gives them instant gratification. No one has time to stop and ponder the great wonders of this world to think of God and all he has done. Everyone is into performance, efficiency, and results. They have lost their hope, their spiritual self in a world of facts and figures," the pastor explained.

"I think you're wrong, pastor. I think it was that way, but it's turning around again. More and more people are interested in traditional values. More and more are substituting success and material things for family, friends, and community. Material things, success, and working twelve hours a day and on weekends are no longer what they want out

of life. I think this is the best of times for getting people back into the congregation, but you have to show them the teachings are meaningful to their lives. If you go off and claim that the devil is getting stronger because of lack of faith and because something cannot be explained either medically or religiously, then you might as well be telling them a bedtime story. They will regard this as pure fantasy and label you as all the other religious leaders who cannot convince their parishioners that religion is meaningful and purposeful in their lives," Carson explained. "You must give them a reason for believing, a purpose, and a benefit."

The pastor looked thoughtfully at Carson, bowed his head and rubbed his eyes. Then he looked up with a profound sadness in his eyes.

"I know," he said almost tearfully. "But whatever this is, it's scaring people like nothing I've seen before. Not even death itself has frightened people like this. There is something evil in all of this and it won't stop this time."

The Prophecies - Chapter 16



Carson drove to Doctor Stokes' house feeling ambivalent - he wanted to believe the Hellfire Syndrome was a disease of some sort, but then there were questions, many questions. He had Doctor Stokes to back him with the case from the 1980s, but Stokes did not have any details, and Carson was still searching the records for the report. The fact that several religious leaders had agreed to meet and discuss the phenomenon suggested to him that maybe this was the work of some evil force in the world - the rise of Satanism or the rise of Satan himself. He had a hard time dealing with such a nebulous concept. He was a doctor and he was taught to look for causes and effects to determine truths. It would take a spectacle of some kind to convince Carson that Satan was rising, and his power was getting stronger in the world. He needed a clear-cut cause and effect. He had the effect - the interdenominational meeting would be the first to take place in many years. Holy men from the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Jewish, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian, and Lutheran followings would be there. The cause, however, was untenable for Carson.

Carson drove into the Misery Hills section of Ocean Village named because of the misery and grief that befell the widows who lived there. The roads were lined with tall, aging oaks, whose branches intertwined forming a tunnel of leaves over the road. The gloom created by the trees seemed to creep into his soul. He made a left turn and proceeded down

Hickory Street. Misery Hills was an older development with well-manicured lawns and neat patches of multi-colored flowerbeds, and tall aging trees. Some residents were descendents of the original inhabitants; others were the highly successful professionals of the area. Industrial-age sea captains built the massive, restored Victorian homes during the 19th century, when nearby Shark River Inlet served as a major delivery port for the fledgling coastal communities of New Jersey. Many of the homes had widower's walks, tiny balconies overlooking the sea, where the wives of the sea captains would walk and search for their husbands' ships to return from the sea. The area coined its name from the loss of many of ships that sank in the treacherous inlet during bad weather and storms.

Carson pulled up to Stokes' house, a multi-gabled white Victorian mansion that belonged to Stokes' great grandfather. Stokes' grandfather was instrumental in reviving European trade at the inlet in the early 1900s. Carson walked up the cobble stone walkway and rang the doorbell. Stokes opened the thick mahogany door.

"Come in, Carson. I'll just be a second," he said.

"Thanks."

Stokes disappeared up the steep carpeted staircase that joined the foyer. Carson waited there and noticed the dark oak wall panels crafted by a skilled carpenter long gone. He could hear the ticking of a far-away clock and the area smelled of aged wood - wood that had stood majestically for many decades as a staircase, a wall panel, a newel post - the smell one encounters in a fine antique shop...the smell of the past. The staircase creaked and groaned as Stokes came down holding a light jacket in one hand and a notebook in another.

"Let's go," he said.

The two got into Carson's car.

"I hope you are prepared for the worse," Stokes said.

"What do you mean?"

"I have a feeling the clergymen are going to tell us things we don't want to hear. I think they will confirm our worst fears," Stokes explained.

They approached a major intersection and Carson stopped. He looked both ways and waited for the traffic to clear. He waited for one more car to pass, lifted his foot off the brake, and then slammed it down. The car directly across from them entered the intersection prematurely and was slammed by an oncoming car. The moving car skidded and

pushed the other car to the side of the road. At first, it the cars appeared to have minor damage, but when Carson and Stokes approached they could see the cars had life threatening damage.

"There's one in here!" Stokes shouted.

"I've got three here and one's a kid!" Carson shouted back from the car that was struck. He pulled the door open and put his fingers on the artery in the child's neck.

Stokes immediately pulled his cell phone out of his jacket and dialed 911.

Carson gently pulled the young boy out of the car and laid him on the pavement. He held his nose and administered CPR. His parents rushed over to him. After several attempts Carson found he couldn't blow into the boy's lungs. Stokes joined him and pushed on the boy's chest with a closed fist. The boy awoke, but had hard time breathing. Carson ripped his shirt open and saw a metal tag attached to a chain around his neck.

"He has asthma," Carson said holding the medical alert tag so he could read it.

"He's having an attack!" the mother said. "Here's his inhaler!"

She frantically searched in her large straw handbag for the inhaler and finally dumped all the contents on the road. Carson picked out the inhaler among nail polish bottles, makeup, and the pieces of her life. He put it on the boy's mouth and hoped he would respond. The boy had difficulty breathing and his lips were turning blue.

"I don't think so, Doctor Stokes," Carson replied. "I think he has a collapsed esophagus. I had a hard time getting air in!"

"No. I've seen these before! It's an attack!" his mother insisted. "Give him his inhaler!"

"I think you're wrong. He needs a tracheotomy or he'll die," Carson said.

"Don't do it, Carson. Wait for the paramedics!" Stokes shouted.

"I can't wait!" Carson yelled. "He'll die!"

"I think you're making a mistake!"

"I'll take full responsibility," Carson said. He ran towards his car to get his medical bag.

A strange sensation instantly washed over him and suddenly he was a member of his local first aid squad again and they had received a call about a choking, three-year-old boy. Carson had been on the squad only a short time. When they arrived, the mother was hysterical and they couldn't understand her. She kept saying he was having an asthma attack.

"I think he's choking on something!" Carson told the squad leader.

"It's an asthma attack. His mother said so," the leader fired back.

"Who are the professionals here?" Carson stubbornly shouted back.

"We're not doctors! Now load him into the ambulance! I've seen asthma attacks before and that's what this is. Now MOVE!"

Carson followed orders. They arrived at the hospital minutes later, but the boy had died. Doctors found a piece of hard candy lodged in the boy's throat. Carson never forgot the little boy as he watched his face turn blue in the ambulance and slowly die.

"If only I had been forceful enough. If only I had followed my heart," he once told his wife, Linda. "I could have saved his life. It was what made me become a doctor. I feel I have to save people to make up for it."

"That's not a good reason to be a doctor. You should love what you do," she said. "Besides, it wasn't your fault that the little boy died. You were just following orders."

"I do love what I do, but I also feel driven to do the best I can at all times," he said. "And I guess that's good."

Carson found himself staring at the struggling face of the little boy on the pavement. It twisted and seemed to change form. The face was familiar and suddenly Carson could see the three-year-old boy's face again.

"Follow your heart this time, Carson. You tried to save my life once, but were not strong enough to follow your convictions. Do it this time," the boy's face seemed to say.

Carson blinked in disbelief and fear. Stokes and the parents were yelling, but their shouts were muted as if they were shouting through a closed window. He slowly cut a tiny incision into the boy's windpipe. Instantly, the boy sucked in a large amount of air through the tiny cut. Carson inserted a plastic tube into the cut and taped it in place. The boy's natural color returned.

"You were right," Stokes said wide-eyed. "You're a better doctor than I thought."

"Are the others stabilized?"

"Yes. One has an abrasion on his forehead and other has a broken arm and probably a couple of broken ribs. We've done all we could here. Where are those damn paramedics?"

* * *

Stokes and Carson arrived at Holy Mary's Roman Catholic Church an hour late. They walked up wide cement steps to the large black oak doors that made up the entrance to the elaborate church.

"What do you think is going to happen at this meeting?" Carson asked.

"I'm not sure. On one hand, they strongly believe in good and evil and Satan. On the other, I believe there is a scientific and pragmatic answer for the symptoms. I'm torn on how to approach it," he explained.

"I felt the same way earlier and then that accident sort of set me straight. I think it has to do with the amount of fear and the amount of faith one has in their religion and themselves. I still don't believe I went to hell and came back to tell about it," Carson explained as they ascended the steps. "I think if you really believe in yourself, your religion, and you don't let fear take hold, then you will come to the same conclusion as I have - that this has to be some type of new disease that is undetectable."

"I think you're right. But why are all these religious leaders here? Do you think they are going to interrogate us and try to determine that it's some kind of disease? There is something far worse going on here and we'll find out soon enough."

They opened the doors to the church and the odor of stale incense greeted them. Their footsteps echoed throughout the high ceiling like a flock of birds taking off. The two doctors walked towards a figure in black at the altar.

"Greetings, gentlemen," said the figure. "We saw you pull up."

"Hello, Father," Stokes replied.

Another priest walked up to the group.

"Doctor Matthew Stokes, Doctor Carson Hyll, this is Father Keith McDuffy of St. Mary's," Pastor Millard said.

"Glad to meet you."

"My pleasure," Father McDuffy said holding out a large burly hand that seemed not to fit that of a priest.

"We apologize for being late. There was a car accident and we had to assist," Stokes said.

"Were the injuries serious?"

"Unfortunately," Carson said. "I had to do a tracheotomy on a young boy with a collapsed esophagus."

"Carson saved the boy's life," Stokes added.

"We'll pray for them tonight and for you as well," Father McDuffy said. "We hadn't started yet. We're waiting for Bishop Phulax from the archdiocese. Come, gentlemen. We'll join the others in the conference room."

The men walked across the altar, went through a doorway off to the left, and entered a room with a long oval conference table. Brown soft leather chairs with armrests surrounded the table, and the soft off white light from the overhead lights gave the room a warm, comfortable ambiance. Three sweating glass pitchers of water each with several tumblers nearby were evenly spaced on the table.

"May I have your attention, please," Father McDuffy announced to the small crowd. "This is Doctor Matthew Stokes, chief of staff at Ocean Village and Doctor Carson Hyll, also of the hospital."

The crowd smiled and nodded through a fog of gloom that seemed to hang in the room. The fog made Carson's stomach turn slightly, but Stokes appeared oblivious to it. Carson and Stokes were directed to seats near the end of the table. Father McDuffy and Pastor Millard took seats on each side of them. The head seat remained vacant.

"We'll start as soon as the bishop gets here. He should be here any minute now," Father McDuffy said.

Several minutes later, Bishop Phulax entered the room dressed in black.

"Gentlemen, may I introduce Bishop Oino Phulax of the Archdiocese of Trenton," Father McDuffy announced.

The religious leaders stood. Bishop Phulax towered over them all, his frame measuring over six feet. He looked more like a prizefighter than a bishop.

"Be seated," the bishop said.

Father McDuffy directed him to the head of the table, but he did not sit. The bishop placed a hard black briefcase on the table and snapped the hasps open. The sound and deliberate motions of the bishop suggested that his black case held something ominous and evil and that

it would be unleashed when he opened it. The men in the room watched trance-like as the bishop opened the case and took out a small stack of papers.

"All my life I have battled evil. I have avoided it at every turn. I have turned it back whenever I could. I have sacrificed and I have worked very hard to lead my people on the right road, the good road, the road towards salvation. And I have been successful. But now for the first time in my life I don't feel this is something we can ignore or to be taken lightly. I feel that this evil is very strong and we have to push hard to help our followers hold on to their faith. I have never said this, but I feel the evil is winning," the bishop announced in a deep, dark authoritarian voice.

"I believe we are seeing the beginning of the end - not a disease or a pestilence, but the rise of Satan, the rise of evil in the world. Armageddon. This did not just happen yesterday or last week or last year. I have been watching it for several decades," the bishop said.

He reached into his briefcase and took out a pair of reading glasses. He positioned them on his large, baldhead, and then reached down and took hold of a thick rust brown leather-jacketed book. Its edges and corners were lighter in color than the rest of the jacket. He pushed his briefcase aside and placed the heavy book on the table in front of him. His hand disappeared into his pant pocket and then reappeared holding a small gold key. He placed the tiny key in a gold lock that held the book shut. The men could hear themselves breathing. He turned the key and the lock made a sharp click. He moved the belt clasp out of the tiny hasp and slowly opened the book. Its pages were the color of old newsprint. He bent down close to the book and turned several pages and then he stopped. He began to read:

"'And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison,' is from Revelations, 20:7 '...as ye have heard that Anti-Christ shall come, even now there are many Anti-Christ...' from 1 John 2:18. This Anti-Christ is expected to spread evil throughout the world, only to be conquered by the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. The first Anti-Christ was Napoleon, who was responsible for the deaths of two million people and fourteen years of war. The second Anti-Christ was Hitler, who was responsible for the deaths of some fifty million human beings in his pursuit to conquer the world. I believe the third and last Anti-Christ is here now and living somewhere in this world in our current century," Bishop Phulax explained without blinking once.

The small crowd sighed.

"It is also in the prophecies of Nostradamus, who lived in the 16th century, and predicted many, many things throughout history. Of course the Church has never condoned his prophecies, but now we are forced to take another look. In modern times, he predicted that a man named DeGaulle would rule France, that the Russians would invade Afghanistan and that the United States and Russian would one day become friends. He even predicted the nuclear accident at Chernobyl. Let me read to you what he wrote in his eighth century 77th quatrain,

'The third Anti-Christ very soon annihilated. Twenty-seven years his bloody war will last: The heretics are dead, captives, exiled Blood soaked human bodies, water and a reddened icy rain covering the entire earth'.

He also names the identity of this Anti-Christ in his second century 62nd quatrain.

'Mabus will soon die, then will come A horrible slaughter of people and animals, As once vengeance is revealed coming from a hundred lands. Thirst, and famine when the comet will pass.'

Nostradamus also wrote that the third Anti-Christ will be the evil man of blood, who will be responsible for triggering World War III and the final extinction of mankind through a nuclear holocaust," he said.

The bishop filled a tumbler with water and raised it to his mouth. He drank most of the water and then put the glass down.

"I don't believe the world will end by nuclear war - something much worse will happen and it is happening now," the bishop explained. The whites of his dark brown eyes seemed to flair and contrast against his smooth, black skin.

The men grumbled among themselves in disbelief.

"I can't say I believe totally in Nostradamus - I only believe in the scriptures, but I offer these facts to you because they also confirm what is written in the New Testament."

"Why do you believe the end is near?" asked Stokes. "Every new millennium brings these prophecies to light. The heretics, the doomsday seers, the mystics all seem to come out of the woodwork when we enter a new millennium. Years have passed and we are all still here."

"You are right, sir..."

"Sorry, that I didn't introduce everyone," Father McDuffy interrupted. "That is Doctor Matthew Stokes, chief of staff at Ocean Village Hospital."

The bishop nodded, but did not smile.

"My pleasure, Doctor Stokes," he said.

"Mine, also."

"You are correct Doctor Stokes, but there is something extremely evil out there, and I believe that members of your profession have named it the Hellfire Syndrome..."

"You're talking about an unknown, undetectable disease, not the coming of Satan!" Carson interrupted. "There's nothing Satanic about the symptoms of a disease. I had the symptoms and I experienced the disease first hand and I don't believe I went to hell and back!"

"Doctor Carson Hyll, I presume," the bishop said.

The men sitting around the table stirred, and some whispered to each other.

"We would like to believe that it's a disease, too, Doctor Hyll, but too many things indicate otherwise," the bishop replied.

He looked at Father McDuffy and the priest looked at the other men.

"We have reason to believe it's more than a disease," the priest said directing his words to Stokes. "John would you like to start?" He focused on a thin young man with dark circles under his eyes and a drooping face.

"Yes, I would. I'm Pastor John Denby of the First Presbyterian Church of Manalapan," he said slowly as if he were too tired to speak. "I also would like to believe that the events we have heard about are a disease of some kind, but my beliefs tell me otherwise. For the past two months, eighteen people from my parish have had this experience or a relative who did. Six of those had to be committed to mental institutions because they were no longer functional, three died, and two women had their fetuses aborted because they didn't want their children to be born and end up in hell. Others have refused to leave the hospital because they fear dying. I can't believe that a single disease can cause all these different tragedies."

"I also had similar experiences with my following," added a middle-aged man with a wide face and ashen pasty skin. His silvered hair thick and full.

"George Bradson, pastor of the Freehold Baptist Church. I've had several people who have come to me hysterical over dying. Their fear is real. These are levelheaded, sane people, who swear that something evil

is after them. They believe it's the devil and if they die, he will get them. They believe God has abandoned them."

"What seems strange to me," Carson added, "And I don't want to sound like I don't believe in God or that I'm anti-religion, but all of these people came to the same conclusion - that people who have this experience have been to hell. Where did that assumption come from? Wouldn't some just blow it off as a terrible nightmare or an experience triggered by the symptoms? Seems to me there are a lot of people out there thinking about heaven and hell all the time."

"I can explain that," interrupted a bearded, overweight man with a round, red face. "I'm Reverend Bruce Motter, Saint Ambrose Episcopal Church in Neptune. People have been talking about it ever since that story appeared in The Ocean Village Sentinel. That kind of news is like gossip - it travels everywhere. When word got around that others had the same experience, then it hit home. It was no longer gossip, and people started getting very upset, especially when a member of their church had the experience to confirm what they had been hearing. This meeting is just in time because the lid is about to blow off on this thing."

"Well, one thing is certain to keep this out of the press at all costs," added Stokes. "If the Asbury Park Press gets wind of this, it will go national, and then it will be out of control. We have a major problem here, gentlemen, because until we know for sure what we are dealing with, we have no way to control the hysteria."

A rabbi from the far end of the table raised his hand. He had short-cropped sandy hair and was younger than the others by ten years or more.

"Yes, Rabbi Bernstein," Father McDuffy said.

"Rabbi Jacob Bernstein, Temple Beth Torah in Red Bank - Why don't you issue a statement to the press on your position that as a man of science, a learned physician, you believe it is a disease of some sort."

"I think the less attention we give this the better off we'll be," added Stokes.

"What if it gets worse?" the rabbi asked.

"Then we'll have to deal with it," Stokes said. "One thing is certain that whatever is happening is shaking the foundations of all organized religion and this has never happened in the history of mankind. Even the Communists had a god - their god was the state, everything for the state. Whatever a man's religion is it is his hope, his future, his dreams, and when you take that away there is no telling what will happen."

A shroud of silence enveloped the room. Even the light from the overhead lights seemed to pale with Stokes' explanation. The group remained silent for a few minutes.

"We have a common cause now," Pastor Denby blurted out as if he were suddenly awakened out of a nightmare. "We have a common enemy; one that we know is trying to destroy every known religion. We should unite our efforts."

"I think that's a noble and intriguing idea and I would like to live long enough to see that happen," Stokes added. "But I think the best thing to do is to go on as if nothing has happened, and make subtle attempts to strengthen your parishioner's belief in God and religion."

"I disagree," Rabbi Bernstein interrupted. "I support Pastor Denby. I think we need to shout as loud as we can. I think we should have a multi denomination event for the public. Bring in the top evangelists like Billy Graham, his son, Rev. Franklin Graham and others."

"Where could we have something this big?" Pastor Denby asked.

"The Great Auditorium!" Carson said. It can seat 6,000 and it is almost the size of a football field. It's been used for these types of events since it was built in 1894; it is the largest enclosed auditorium in New Jersey and its right here in Ocean Village."

"Perfect," Bishop Phulax added. "You will have the full support of the diocese. I can arrange for you to have any resources you need. Can you organize the event in a week or so?"

The men mumbled among themselves.

"I would say it would take a month just to notify the right leaders and get a commitment," Pastor Denby added. "You will have the support of my church also. I don't know if we can get the Reverend Graham in such short notice."

"We can once I explain our problem to him," added Pastor Bradson of the Freehold Baptist Church. "I know him well. We studied together in the same seminary when we were starting out."

"I'm still not sure we should do this," Stokes added. "I think this will bring unwanted attention to the problem."

"I think if we can also present the scientific viewpoint, it will have more impact and be more effective," Carson added. "We are witnessing a convergence of science and religion. Science is now providing more evidence that Biblical events are probable, and actually happened. And

Doctor Stokes if you would serve as our medical authority on this, I think we can pull it off."

Stokes shrugged and resigned himself to the majority consensus.

"Okay. Anybody have any questions?" Father McDuffy asked. "Then we'll meet here same time next week. I'll draw up an agenda of what I would like to see at the event. I suggest everyone do the same and then we'll discuss them next week."

The small gathering nodded in agreement. The small group left. Carson and Stokes were silent until they reached the car.

"What do you think?" Stokes asked looking intensely at Carson's solemn face.

"I may have come off a bit cocky in my position, but now I'm not sure again."

"Why?"

"Your speech about shaking the foundations of religion. They're all serious enough to meet and discuss this. There may be something beyond science..."

"Nonsense," Stokes replied.

Carson raised his eyebrows.

"What are you talking about?"

"Until we have exhausted every possible avenue in medical research and then some, I have to believe it's some kind of disease. However, whatever this is could be perpetrated by you know who," Stokes explained.

"Satan?"

"There is real evil in the world and everyone is exposed to it in a lesser or greater degree. If you are unfortunate enough to experience it to a greater degree then you have a stronger belief that it really exists. Take someone who has never had a bad experience. Luck seems to favor them; everything goes their way; they are successful, happy, and content. These people see the world through rose-colored glasses and cannot even fathom anything bad happening to them. They don't have strong beliefs in evil, and don't do much to fight it. They believe evil is something that happens to other people. When a crisis happens, they half believe it is happening to them and make the wrong decisions."

Carson shook his head and remained silent the rest of the way home. When he opened the door to his darkened house the dim light from a

small plug-in nightlight in the foyer cast a soft yellow sheen over the varnished oak floor. As he stepped inside, the floor creaked and the air was motionless filled with the ancient smell of a house that had weathered more than eight hundred seasons. He went upstairs and pushed the partially-opened door to his bedroom. The hinges struggled to move producing an eerie creaking sound that startled Linda sleeping in their king-size bed.

"Is that you Carson?" she said in a sleep-filled voice.

"Yeah, I have to fix those hinges. Sorry, I woke you."

"I was half awake anyway. You know I can't sleep when you're not home."

Carson took off his clothes, put on striped pajamas, and slipped under the covers next to Linda. He stared into the endless darkness thinking. He looked at the clock - 12:10 am. He dozed for what seemed like a few minutes, and then awoke, and looked at the clock a second time - 1:13 am. He turned on the small light on his nightstand with the stained glass shade and picked up the small silver cordless telephone.

"Hello, Centers for Disease Control," a woman answered.

"I'm looking for Frank Tessler," Carson said.

A few seconds of white noise.

"He's not in. Do you want to leave a message?"

"Sure."

The call was transferred to Tessler's voicemail. Carson listened to his friend's voice and hung up. He held the phone in his hand and stared at it as if it were going to tell him something, give him more information. Then he put it down, turned off the light, and finally fell into a deep sleep.

The Omen - Chapter 17



Carson felt a change in the air as he and Linda stepped out of their Victorian house onto the wrap-around porch. The air was cool, clear, and smelled of the ocean, an indication that summer was ending and fall was approaching. He loved the cool breezes that blew off the ocean during a hot humid day, but now the weather was changing to its unpredictable patterns - one day could be hot and summer like, the next could be cool and damp like the fall. He felt lucky that he could afford a home where the cool winds prevailed and the smell of the ocean permeated everything.

But, this evening, however, was different. A fear fell upon him like a dreaded weight with an intensity that was stronger than usual. He was skittish and nervous. He walked down the six steps off the porch and towards his car in the gravel-blanketed driveway. Linda went around to the other side of the car. His hard leather shoes forced the stones to rub together making a crunching sound. He dismissed his fear as a reaction to his lack of sleep and the strong coffee Linda made for him after dinner. He got in the car, waited for Linda to settle in and drove to the church for Friday night Bingo. Linda had volunteered Carson and herself to help distribute the cards and playing pieces, confirm winners, and hand out prizes.

They arrived early and sat at the head table in the large meeting room in the church basement. It was especially crowded this Friday since the

story of the Hellfire Syndrome was published and since Pastor Millard was supposed to make an appearance and talk about the most recent events. Carson heard his name come out of the whispers around him and he knew people were talking about him and the strange events.

A door in the front of the meeting room suddenly opened and a robed, elderly pastor came out and stood next to Carson at the head table. He took his time preparing his paperwork then looked up in a gesture indicating that he was ready to start.

"I see we have quite a turnout this evening," he said, his voice booming through the room's loud speakers.

The crowd fell silent and all eyes moved forward.

"I'm Pastor Herbert Wilcox, formerly of the Grace United Methodist Church in Red Bank. Pastor Millard asked me to fill in for him while he attends a meeting of the World Methodist Council in London," the pastor explained with some difficulty. "I'm sure you all have your lucky charms with you tonight and I hope there will be a lot of winners."

His voice faded losing its intensity and vibrancy.

"I know many of you are concerned about what's been happening lately..." Pastor Wilcox said stopping to catch his breath.

Carson watched him carefully. The fear he felt earlier returned like a tidal wave, but he didn't know why he was afraid - the fear was just there.

"If you have faith in God, we can overcome this evil...if you have lived a pure life, a good life then you have nothing to fear," the pastor said. "Heaven awaits those who are good and hell awaits those who are evil."

The pastor's eyes rolled upward, and he clutched his chest slowly collapsing to the floor. The crowd gasped in horror. Carson instinctively grabbed hold of the minister as he fell and awkwardly lowered him to the floor. He quickly opened his robes and shirt and checked for a pulse. The parishioners surrounded Carson until he pushed them away with the movement of his hand. The crowd backed away slowly, but several elderly women remained and knelt down to help him.

"It's cardiac arrest!" Carson shouted. The faces looked down at him unmoving. "A heart attack! Call an ambulance!"

Carson administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation alternating with cardiopulmonary resuscitation, but the pastor did not respond. He

worked harder and harder, and a few of the older women standing nearby began to cry. Carson's fear returned when he noticed that the pastor's mouth felt warmer and warmer each time he placed his mouth over it and blew into his lungs. He thought the man was coming around and worked harder and harder, but then Carson smelled a foul odor - the odor was familiar to him and brought back painful memories. The visions of those horrible memories flashed through his mind like a slide show. Then the pastor's body jerked and convulsed, shaking and thrashing uncontrollably like a fish out of water. Everyone backed away and Carson tried to hold him down. Then there was a searing sound like that of meat cooking in a frying pan and pastor's skin bubbled and pulsed. His skin turned yellow, then red, and then brown. Several women fainted; others ran out screaming.

"It's the devil, I tell you. He's come to get us all and God can't help us anymore!" a voice yelled out of the crowd. "There's the proof!"

"It's an omen. It's the end of the world!" a woman screamed.

"The gates of heaven are closed and we are all going to hell!" another man yelled. "If the devil can take a pastor, he can take us all!"

The crowd bolted out of the church like spooked wild horses. The older, less capable seniors, who moved slower, were trampled in the mad rush. People ran in all directions outside of the church nearly knocking down the three paramedics making their way into the church. The paramedics moved up the church steps as fast as they could - two carrying a stretcher, the third carrying a small bottle of oxygen and two large medical bags. When they entered the meeting room, five seniors lay on the floor moaning. One paramedic attended to them.

"Over here!" Carson yelled.

The men with the stretcher walked over the people on the floor and rushed toward Carson. Carson knew the paramedics.

"He's gone," Carson said sadly.

"What happened to him? Was there a fire?" one of the paramedics asked. "I've seen bodies like that come out of a fire."

"It's a long story. Let's get him to the hospital," Carson said. "Try to keep this to yourselves. I don't want the media to get a hold of it until we know what's going on."

"Sure," one man said. The two nodded in agreement. As they moved out of the church with the pastor's body on the stretcher, one talked into a walkie-talkie and ordered two additional ambulances for the others.

"Are the others ok?" Carson said as they passed the one paramedic attending the fallen seniors.

"I can handle it until the others arrive," he said.

Carson rode in the ambulance with the dead pastor and Linda went home. When he arrived at the hospital, he sat down in one of the cushy blue chairs in the lobby and pulled out his cell phone.

"Hello, Centers for Disease Control. Can I help you?"

"Yes, this is Doctor Carson Hyll from Ocean Village Hospital in New Jersey. Is Doctor Frank Tessler available? I have to talk to him; it's an emergency."

"I'll check," the receptionist said.

The few seconds seemed like an eternity to Carson.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Hyll. Doctor Tessler is not on duty tonight. Can someone else help you?"

"No. I must talk with Doctor Tessler. Please contact him and tell him it's an emergency. He can reach me at the hospital here. Here's the number."

Carson closed his phone and wondered if he did the right thing. He got up and headed for Stokes office. He waited a few minutes in the hallway until Stokes arrived. Once inside, Carson told him what had happened.

"This is going to blow wide open," Stokes said frantically. "It's out of control unless we can prove it's a disease of some sort! Have you found that patient in the old records, yet?"

"No, but I will spend all night looking. Those people were hysterical," Carson said fearfully.

"This is so terrible. I feel so bad I wasn't there. I knew Herbert very well. We were good friends. Mary was sick all day with a stomach virus and a fever and I didn't want to leave her in the house alone. What are we going to do now?" Stokes said sadly.

"I called a friend at the Centers for Disease Control," Carson said.

"You did?"

"I'm just as confused as you are, but deep down I believe we have an unknown, undetectable disease on our hands and it's becoming an epidemic," Carson said.

"What's that?" Stokes said.

"What's what?"

"Listen. Do you hear all that noise? Something's going on! Come on!"

The two doctors rushed out of the office and headed down the hallway towards the emergency room. Several doctors and nurses were also running in the same direction.

"Oh my God!" Carson gasped.

A wall of people pressed up against the double glass doors to the emergency room. The crowd behind it grew thicker and wider as the mob pushed and shoved to get into the hospital. The people at the doors were pushed harder and harder into the doors, and began pushing back with little effect. Carson saw the glass waver slightly from the weight and then he spotted a small crack in the lower corner of the door.

"OPEN THOSE DOORS!" He screamed at the nurses at the reception desk.

The head nurse quickly pushed a button activating the automated door opening mechanism, but nothing happened. Carson looked at the doors and at the nurse again.

"OPEN THE DOORS!" he screamed.

The nurse pushed the button several times, but the doors stayed closed. The crack was now about eight inches long and growing. Carson ran towards the doors waving his arms.

"GET BACK! GET BACK!" he screamed, but the crowd ignored him.

The people against the doors squirmed in pain as they were crushed against the glass. Others desperately tried to move their faces away from the glass to breath. Carson pulled on the door handles, but the doors refused to move. Stokes joined him, each one pulled on one door. The crack was now about a foot long and still growing. The crowd grew and it pushed even harder.

"CRAAACK!" the glass burst into the emergency room like a rogue wave. Hundreds of shards scattered like a stream of high-pressured water. Stokes jumped back at the right moment avoiding the explosion of glass. People quickly buried Carson in a heap of mangled limbs, blood and glass. Most of the crowd spilled over the bloody pile; others rushed in to find a doctor or an open bed. Stokes and several orderlies pulled several people to their feet, some had lacerations, and others had broken

arms. Many were dazed. A nurse led each to a bed in one of the curtained examining areas. Carson pulled himself free from the man that lay on top of him – the man's limp body did not move after it slowly fell onto the cold tile.

"My God!" Stokes gasped.

Carson was soaked in blood. A nurse ran over to him with several towels and wiped the blood off his face. Carson immediately turned to the man and gently turned him over onto his back. Stokes helped. An elderly woman lay next to the man.

Carson face turned into a mask of fear. Stokes stared at him as if he saw him for the first time.

"What?"

"They're my neighbors,"

He placed two fingers over his eyes and pulled his lids down. He hesitantly, carefully put his fingers around the bloody shard and pulled it out of the man's neck - the glass had sliced through his main artery just above the Adam's apple.

The Dream - Chapter 18



lowing streams of orange light from an awakening sun sliced through the thick green bush setting the dew on fire. A man dressed in army fatigues appeared out of the large leafy palms and stopped at the other men lying on the ground. His eyes were in shadow partly from the helmet and partly because the fire streams of light from the light beams ran diagonally across his chin. Suddenly his eyes widened and his jaw began to move in slow motion. Fog from the cold ground formed giant wisps that wrapped around his legs like luminous snakes.

"Kyyyyyyyyyle!" the man finally screamed.

The man's jaw began to move again in slow motion - he was trying to say something, but there was no sound this time. Then, the bush behind the man parted and several Asian men stood there aiming rifles at the man. Smoke and fire flashed out of the gun's barrels and the man fell forward with his chest and stomach blowing out red and meaty in front of him. As the man fell, the fire streams of light touched his twisted face and Kyle recognized the face.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" Kyle screamed.

Kyle's could feel his skin turn hot and wet. He began to shake.

"What's the matter?" Chantress asked.

"Oh man, what a nightmare," Kyle said sighing in relief.

"A bad one?"

"The worst," he said. "It was the man I saw in the restaurant."

"Are you sure?"

"The one that appeared here the other night," Kyle said.

"Oh."

Kyle went into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He looked at his face in the mirror and deeply into his eyes. *The windows of his mind*, he thought. *Who was that man? What does he want and what was he trying to say?* As he stared into his eyes, he screamed again. He burst out of the bathroom and ran into the bedroom, jumped into bed, and pulled Chantress close to him.

"What's the matter with you?" she said.

"I don't know. Something crazy. I was looking at myself in the mirror and suddenly I saw that man. My face had transformed into his. My eyes were his eyes. It scared the hell out of me," Kyle said.

"Maybe, this man did something awful to you when you were a child and now you remember it," Chantress said.

"No, I don't think so," he replied.

"Maybe, it was one of your mother's boyfriends."

"She didn't date anybody except my stepfather."

"I'm really sorry you're having a bad time," she said caressing his face.

He squeezed her hand and closed his eyes. He strained his memory in hope of remembering this strange man who appeared in his life like an apparition. *A man without an identity*, he thought. *Who are you mister boogey man? The man who saves the world? Ha! Where are you going? What is your future? Was that really my eyes I saw in the mirror or yours?*

Suddenly, Kyle knew the answers. Chantress was the answer. She had given him vision, a future, a place under the sun. He simply had to reach out and take it. Perhaps, it was a view of the future - his future.

He sat up and looked at Chantress with strange admiration.

"I know who that man is."

"Why are you looking at me like that. You're giving me the creeps?"

"I know who that man is."

"You do?"

"My father. He's trying to tell me something. Before we met I went to a you know...a fortune teller and she told me my father was trying to contact me."

"You went to a psychic?" Chantress said. "We're so alike. I'm so impressed. I want to hear all about it!"

"Okay, but it's scary."

"Oh come on! How scary can going to a psychic be?"

He told her about the awful experience how the woman died, and how he passed out several times, and about the beam of light that pierced his eye.

"What bothers me is that he was trying to tell me something, but he was blown away before he could say it. Like he was trying to warn me about something and someone else didn't want me to know."

"Well, it was only a dream," she said.

"Yeah...only a dream, but I have a feeling it really happened."

Kyle turned and stared out the window at the empty gray street.

"What's the matter?"

"Just thinking. There are people out there who have dreams that come true. I just hope I'm not one of them."

"Are you crazy? Everybody has dreams and everybody wants the good ones to come true. It's just that some people give up on their dreams, forget about them, and never try to make them happen. Many people just wish for things to happen," Chantress said.

"I didn't mean my dreams. I meant the nightmares."

"So then what are your dreams, Kyle?"

"You know, I never had any real dreams until I met you. I was just drifting along, looking for something to turn up. I really didn't care about much of anything until you came into my life. Now I have a direction and I can see things more clearly."

"That's wonderful! I knew we would be good together. I just knew it!" she said hugging him like a long lost teddy bear.

"Are we ready for tonight's meeting?"

"Everybody will be here at seven thirty. We'll go over the rules and meetings dates, and then we'll have the open discussion," Chantress explained. "My parents would never let me have this meeting at my house."

"This is not devil worship, is it? We won't be worshipping anything except our own potential, right?"

Chantress nodded.

"So where is the mystical, the spiritual part of all this?"

"The spiritual, mystical part is realizing the power within oneself, the power to do whatever you set your mind to do. Isn't that mystical enough? It's the same as devil worship except more positive, more normal and with results that are acceptable to everyone. We don't have to hide in dark cellars or abandoned buildings. And I'll bet we'll attract more people because it makes sense. New Age is spiritual - it's the age where people realize higher levels of their selves, a new spiritual self. Look at all the seminars that are held on positive thinking and self motivation!"

"I guess so," Kyle replied. "But it's not like a religion or devil worship?"

"I suppose you got a kick out of drinking dog's blood! Personally, I thought it was disgusting and so did the others who are coming tonight," Chantress said.

"Well, yeah...I thought it was disgusting, but it was kind of exciting, too," Kyle confessed.

"You men are all alike. The animal has never grown out of you. Either you are with me or you're against me on this. There are no maybes. Are you going to help me with this or not?"

"Oh, yeah, I said I would. Don't get so bent out of shape," Kyle said.

Chantress looked at him icily and vanished into the bathroom to shower. Kyle sat back down on the edge of the bed and ran his hand through his long, thick hair. The running water broke the silence and it excited him knowing Chantress was naked. He opened the bathroom door and slipped into a hot, moist wall of steam. Chantress' naked body was shiny and silky from the cascading water.

"I thought you'd never come in," she said her eyes afire.

They soaped each other's body and then slid their hands all over each other enjoying the slippery sensation. Chantress' last bit of frosty

feelings washed away with Kyle's touch and the hot, pulsating water. They floated in and out of a fantasy with the steam, the water and the soap enveloping all of their senses. The fantasy turned into a combined ecstasy as they made love. It nearly caused them to pass out.

The New Ageists - Chapter 19



hey spent the early part of the day preparing for the meeting. Kyle bought cold cuts and vegetable salads from the nearby supermarket, and Chantress made several trays of finger sandwiches. Kyle placed bowls of chips, pretzels, and crackers on the small round table in the kitchen.

"This is going to be some party!" Kyle said as he positioned the bowls on the table.

"A celebration," Chantress said.

The guests arrived around 7:45 – first to arrive was a 50s something doctor and his wife, a dentist and his son, a construction worker and his friends, and several others Kyle did not get a chance to greet as they entered the tiny apartment. They all introduced themselves with their real names. To Chantress, it was like meeting a group of new people since she had only known them by their secret identities used in the cult. The room was very crowded. Chantress began the meeting setting down the guidelines, and the rules, and the philosophy of the group. Kyle half listened - he was tuned into a small group near the door - the construction worker and his friends.

"I knew this was going to be dumb," one of the men whispered.

"Sounds like a lot of this intellectual shit that I hate," the other man replied. "Look most of them are those college types."

"Yeah, I agree," said another man overhearing the conversation.

"We'd better stay until she stops talking to be polite," added another man.

"Fuck it. Let's go," said the construction worker.

The four men moved toward the door.

Chantress saw Kyle follow the men and frowned.

"Kyle would you like to tell everyone your views on the group and where you want it to go?" Chantress said.

"Uh...sure," his eyes wide and questioning.

Kyle walked to the center of the room where Chantress was standing. The men by the door stopped.

"First I would like to welcome everybody. We are on the verge of a new beginning - the beginning of a new life, a better life, a more fulfilling life, and it will all start right here tonight!"

The crowd applauded. Chantress could not believe it was Kyle. Kyle looked at her and smiled. His eyes blazed with steel blue confidence and the sweetness of success.

"We are all here because we want something more, something better for our lives. We don't want to be like everybody else, we don't want to think or act like the masses. We're better than that - superior in many ways and we have the mind power to prove it to the world!" Kyle said.

The crowd applauded louder this time. The group was mesmerized. Chantress beamed. The construction worker and his group stayed.

"I like this guy," said one of them.

"Me, too."

When the formal session of the meeting ended, the crowd surged towards Kyle offering him their hands and several pats on the back. Chantress slithered up to him.

"This is great. You were great. We're going to be great together," she said.

"Yeah, we will," he said.

When the last guest left, Chantress grabbed Kyle's hand and led him into the kitchen.

"I've saved the best for last," she said.

She opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a bottle of champagne.

"For us," she said holding up the bottle. "I knew this was going to be a success."

Kyle took the bottle from her and began twisting the wires holding the metal security cap. Then he used his thumbs to push the cork upward. The bottle opened with a piercing pop and Kyle let the plastic cork hit the ceiling and ricochet around the room like the feelings bouncing around inside of him. Chantress held two tumblers up and Kyle filled them, and then they toasted. Chantress peeled off her jeans and her tube top and stood before Kyle. She sat on the kitchen table bringing Kyle closer to her. His clothes fell to the floor in a small pile. They touched each other passing in and out of a pleasurable fantasy. Chantress was breathless. They both slipped into a numbing euphoria when he entered her, and they stayed that way until the euphoria exploded into yet another greater one that completely swallowed their senses, their consciousness. They lay on the table for some time letting reality slowly drift back.

"Kyle, it's never been this good with anyone else. You have something magical," Chantress whispered into his ear.

"I feel the same way. I can't get enough of you."

They finished the champagne and made love a second time on the sofa in the living room. They watched a movie wrapped in each other's bodies. They celebrated each other's existence. When the movie ended, Chantress got up and put on her clothes.

"What's the matter? Did I do something wrong?" Kyle asked.

"No. I have to get home...my parents, you know," she said.

"Oh yeah, give me a second to get dressed and I'll take you home."

* * *

They kissed long and hard as they sat in Kyle's car in front of Chantress' house. She gave him several smaller kisses on his face. Her eyes sparkled like stars in the night and the warmth pouring out of her eyes sent a hot, fiery burst of emotion through Kyle's body.

"I feel very lucky to have you. I hadn't had such an intense relationship since I was in high school. Most of the girls I've met in the bars were losers...screwed up. Others were parasites - looking to latch onto the first decent guy that came along. A lot of them were looking for

husbands to support them, so they could quit their jobs and stay home. I didn't want any part of that," Kyle explained. "I'm glad I found you."

"I feel the same way, Kyle," Chantress replied with a kiss.

They embraced and kissed for several minutes.

"I have to go," she said. "Call me tomorrow."

"Okay," he said.

She got out of the car and leaned down to blow him a kiss through the window. He caught it with his hand and put it to his mouth. She smiled and faded into the darkness. He started the engine and drove away. Suddenly, he was very tired and struggled to stay awake for the short drive back to his apartment. The champagne and the lovemaking must have caught up with him, he thought. He turned down his street and instantly slammed on his brakes. The car skidded to a stop - the screeching of the tires bounced around in his head like an explosion in a tunnel. Chantress stood in the middle of the road wearing a long, flowing white robe. She walked to the side of the car and smiled.

"What are you doing in the middle of the street?" Kyle asked. "How did you get here? I just dropped you off."

Chantress smiled, and then she put her arms around his neck and began to pull Kyle out of the car.

"Hey! Wait until I get out!" Kyle shouted. He wondered why he was angry with Chantress.

Then the door on the other side of the car opened and two men with distorted, ugly faces got in and grabbed Kyle's arms. They wore strange smiles and began pulling Kyle in the opposite direction. The men wore black robes and their hands seemed especially large with abnormally long fingers.

"Hey! What the...?" Kyle shouted, but his voice had no volume. It was as if he was shouting in a vacuum and neither Chantress nor the weird-looking men seemed to hear him. Kyle struggled to get away from the men, and then he struggled to get away from Chantress. He was uncertain whom to go to and he didn't understand why he was ambivalent. Then one of the men placed his large hand over Kyle's head and suddenly Kyle felt an exhilarating, exciting sensation run through his body. It was a feeling of the wild and it seemed to penetrate into the deepest recesses of his mind and soul. It touched his most primitive instincts. He pushed Chantress away and moved toward the men. This was where he belonged, he thought. But, the sensation went sour and he

was filled with guilt. He turned toward Chantress and noticed he was naked! How did he get naked? He was horrified and then filled with an intense ecstasy that flowed through his entire body. It was as if he were making love over and over. Suddenly, the feeling stopped. It was replaced by the excitement he experienced earlier. The wild feeling. One of the ugly men grabbed his face, and pulled it towards him, and the wild feeling intensified. He turned to look at Chantress. She was crying, but he didn't know why. As each tear fell from her face, it tore at his heart and he wanted to put his arms around her and hug her each time. He turned, brought his arm up to push the men out of the car, but stopped. He was filled with that intoxicating and exhilarating feeling again. It overwhelmed him. This time it was stronger, addictive and refreshing. He looked at Chantress again, but her tears did not pull at his heart this time. He moved across the seat to follow the men. Her face turned to hatred sending an icy spear through his heart. He felt sad, but the excitement of the feeling dominated him and he left with the ugly men.

He ran down the street following one man, while the other ran behind him. He wasn't naked anymore. The street led into a dark tunnel with glistening walls and hot, stale air. The farther down Kyle ran into the tunnel the warmer it became until he could feel his skin become wet. Several beads dripped into his eyes, burning and blurring them. It was hard to breathe the hot, motionless air. He turned back, but the ugly man with the long fingers was still behind him following his every move like a mirror image. Suddenly flames leaped out of the walls like giant orange tongues and licked Kyle repeatedly. He felt the tongues burn his skin, but there was no pain. The pounding of the men's footfalls was all he could hear as they ran farther and farther into the tunnel to escape the flaming tongues. The pounding became louder and louder. Kyle ran faster and faster. Then Kyle heard a snap and the black tunnel opened up to blinding white light. A giant, wrinkled face with deep-set eyes and distorted features hovered above him.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" he screamed.

He jumped away hitting the back of his head on something hard, and then everything began to spin around. After a few seconds, the steering wheel of his car came into focus.

"Are you all right in there?" a tiny muffled voice said.

Kyle rubbed eyes and opened them to see an old woman peering in at him through the driver's side window. He cautiously rolled the window down about three inches.

"I was walking by and saw you slumped over - I thought you were dead. Scared the dickens out of me. Then I thought if you were alive, it must be pretty hot in that car with all the windows rolled up," the old woman explained.

"Where am I?" Kyle asked.

"Chestnut Street," the woman replied. "I better call 911."

Kyle waved her off. He looked around and saw that he was parked in front of his apartment.

"I must have slept in the car all night after leaving Chantress," he said. "I'm all right now and thank you."

The old woman grinned slightly, and walked away looking back several times. Her wrinkled skin reminded Kyle of the iguana he had as a child in Costa Rica - the skin hung down off its neck in wrinkled layers. Kyle lifted himself out of his car - his legs stiff and his shirt soaked with sweat. A sliver of fear ran through his body as he thought about how he could have fallen asleep in his car while still driving. The last thing he remembered was turning down his street. He felt awful, but he didn't know why, and then he recalled the dream. He was sad that he left Chantress. He entered his apartment and dialed her number, but no one answered. He walked into the bathroom and looked into the mirror. He saw a cloud swirling around in his mind and he wondered why the cloud bothered him so much. It wasn't the dream. The cloud was vanishing and the thought was trying to make it through. It was almost there when a knock on the door shattered the thread. Kyle left the bathroom, opened the door, and his eyes widened.

The Request - Chapter 20



thin woman with long red hair tied into a ponytail stood next to the Magus with empty, drawn faces. At first, Kyle saw the Magus as one of the men in his dream with the ugly distorted faces. The woman was the same one he had seen at the cult meeting.

"Hermes. I'm glad you're home. I would like to talk to you. Can we come in?" the Magus said.

"How do you know where I live?"

"Chantress told us," the red-haired woman said.

Kyle hesitated and then moved aside to let them pass.

The woman smiled seductively at Kyle.

"What do you want?" Kyle asked impatiently.

"May we sit?" the Magus asked moving toward the sofa.

"Go ahead."

"Your future, of course," the Magus said. "Can you come to the house tomorrow around seven?"

"I don't know. What for?"

"We've decided that you really belong in our group and we have a little initiation ceremony planned," the Magus explained. "It would definitely be worth it."

"You won't be sorry. It's for you," the woman said her green eyes titillating Kyle's most primitive desires.

Kyle looked around the room and then frowned.

"Okay, I'll come, but I can't stay long."

"Whatever suits you," the Magus replied. "Then it's settled. You won't be sorry. I'm looking forward to this."

The Magus took a tiny piece of yellow folded paper out of his shirt pocket and gave it to Kyle. Kyle opened the paper and saw it had an address written on it in pencil. He noticed the address was different than the house where the first meeting was held.

* * *

A blood-red sun slowly dipped out of sight when Kyle left for the Magus' house. He arrived at the house about fifteen minutes early so he sat in his car and listened to the radio. A black car pulled up in front of a two-story house and a heavy, bald man got out. It was the Magus. The Magus went to the door and rang the doorbell. A young couple, both with jet black hair walked out, and got into a car in the driveway. The Magus nodded to the couple as they passed him. Kyle approached the house.

"Good evening, Hermes," the Magus said opening the door. "Come in, come in."

Kyle was silent and walked into the living room where the furniture like the surroundings, was clean, neat, and simple. Several small Chinese paintings of colorful birds hung on the off white walls.

"Sit down, sit down. Would you like some tea?"

"No." Kyle sat down on the far right of a small light blue sofa. The Magus slumped down on a matching easy chair.

"Well, as you know some members of my group have left including your friend, Methos," the Magus explained.

"How do you know that?"

"Simple. They didn't show up at last week's meeting, and I knew for some time that they weren't happy with us," he explained.

He reached up with his right hand and scratched the side of his puffy freshly shaved face.

"It doesn't matter anyway. Let them do what they want. I'm only interested in loyal followers."

"So what do you want to talk to me for?" Kyle asked.

"Well, I sensed something different in you, something unique," the Magus explained. "And I wanted to know how you felt about our Black Mass."

"I liked it," Kyle said.

"I thought so. I could tell from your eyes. But what about Methos? Are you and her an item?"

"Why do you want to know?" he said.

"I could tell she hated the Black Mass, and I know she's formed another group. Are you part of it?"

"Yeah," Kyle said staring down at the rug.

The Magus sat back his round, overweight body crushing the pillowed cushions beneath him. A frown formed on his large round head.

"You know, you could be a member of both. Methos' group is about New Age and ours is about devil worship," the Magus explained. "I don't see a conflict, do you?"

"Well maybe, but she doesn't like what your group has become," Kyle said.

The Magus paused to gather his thoughts.

"Yes, but you do," the Magus said. "You like what we're doing, don't you?"

"Yeah, sort of..."

"Well, then it's settled. You could be one of us. Come to the next meeting. I'll work out something very appealing to you," the Magus said.

"I don't know..."

"What have you to lose? You know, you will always be a second fiddle in Methos' group - that's her thing. This could be your thing."

Kyle looked at him intensely. The Magus seemed to suck his mind out through his eyes.

"What are you saying?"

"You can go places with us."

Kyle's eyes were in another place. A small smile creased his face.

"Well...okay."

"Great. We'll see you Sunday at seven thirty."

* * *

Kyle left his apartment that Sunday feeling that he had made a big mistake. He slowly drove past the Magus' house and parked his car on the next block. He sat there thinking about what he should do. He got out and started walking towards the Magus' house. *I'll tell him I don't want to be in his group*, he thought. He took a deep breath and sighed. He looked at his watch – it was 7:35. He started walking again and a chill ran over his head and down his spine. He slowly turned to see who was following him on the empty street. It was the dark figure of a tall man only a few feet away. Kyle ran.

"Kyle! Stop!" the dark figure echoed.

The voice seemed to be coming from everywhere. Kyle stopped and turned around. The man stepped into the mercury orange light from the streetlight. It was the man he saw in the restaurant, the man he saw in his dream, the man he saw in his apartment.

"Who the hell are you?" Kyle shouted.

"Kyle, you know this is evil. You know the Magus is evil. Don't go," the voice echoed.

The man's face did not move and his eyes remained fixed and trance-like.

"You're my..." the voice faded away. Then the figure dropped back into the darkness and vanished.

"Holy shit! What the hell is happening to me?" Kyle darted off like a spooked deer back to his car. When he opened the door to his apartment, he glanced at green glowing numbers on the stove and saw it was 9:20 p.m.

"What's going on?" he shouted into the empty apartment.

He couldn't account for the lost time.

The Decision - Chapter 21



he rain fell steadily in straight lines dashing all of Chantress' hopes of getting to the beach that day with Kyle. The sky was covered in dark gray clouds indicating that the rain would stay for hours. She was sad because it would have been their first time together on the beach and she felt in touch with nature lying on the hot sand and listening to the roar of the waves. She looked forward to having Kyle's hot skin touch hers, to his touch as he rubbed suntan lotion all over her, to his kisses and his contained passion. She was still wearing the black T-back bathing suit she purchased especially for him. Her thoughts excited her. She stared at the long silver slivers of rain hitting the bay window and dripping off like endless tears - tears for the sun. She was anxious for Kyle to arrive - they had planned to spend the afternoon in her house since her parents had gone to their vacation home in the Pocono Mountains in nearby Pennsylvania.

She watched every car hoping that Kyle's would be the next one. Then a green car appeared and she watched it slowly make its way up the suburban street. She watched him pull into the driveway and try to duck the rain as he ran to the front porch. The doorbell chimed its familiar sound and Chantress got up.

"Hi," she said as she opened the door.

"Hi," Kyle said looking her over from head to toe.

"I bought it just for you," she said turning around to model her backside.

"Wow! I love it!"

"Me, too," she replied breathing the words instead of speaking them.

"Come on in."

She led him to the living room sofa and they kissed long and hard, then she stood up.

Kyle took hold of one of her shoulder straps and moved it down. He did the same with the other, then grabbed the suit and pulled it down to her ankles. He undressed quickly and they embraced.

"Now, I want you to put suntan lotion all over me," she said. "Then I'll put it on you."

Kyle looked at her strangely.

"Well, if we can't have the beach and the sun, we can pretend," she explained matter-of-factly. "Besides, the smell of suntan lotion makes me horny."

"Anything you say," he said.

Kyle grabbed the large brown bottle of lotion and squirted some on her shoulders. He worked his way down from there slowly rubbing the lotion into her smooth, silky skin. He moved down her back to her backside and rubbed there for a long time. Then he turned her around and squirted more lotion on her shoulders. His hands worked downward. When his hands reached her thighs, she pulled him close to her and down onto the sofa.

"What about me?" Kyle asked.

"What?" she breathed out.

"You didn't do me!" Kyle protested.

"I am doing you!" she replied.

She pulled him into her and they made love several times. When they had finished, Kyle got up and looked at the family photos on the fireplace mantel.

"Is that really you?" Kyle said staring at a photo of Chantress and her parents at the beach taken a few years ago.

Chantress had short hair with yellow streaks and wore black lipstick.

"Don't look at that. That was my ugly stage."

"I think you were cute."

"Thanks. I think you are, too."

"Whoa! Look at that! I've never seen a gun with a barrel that long!" Kyle said looking at the .44 magnum stainless revolver locked in a glass case in the middle of the mantel.

"That's my dad's. It's his prized possession. He's won several tournaments with it."

"Why is the barrel so long? It looks hard to hold."

"I think for accuracy and speed. It's a target shooting gun. You wouldn't hunt with it or use it for self defense."

"How do you know so much?"

"My, dad, he took me to all the competitions. I guess he really wanted a son and since I was a tomboy growing up, I was the next best thing."

"Do you still go now?"

"No. My dad doesn't shoot much anymore. He's into golf now. We should go upstairs and shower."

"Okay."

She led him upstairs to the bathroom and they got into the shower together.

"Can you stay the night?" she said while she washed his lower body.

"Yeah," he said barely getting the word out.

They lathered each other into a frenzy, and let their love flow like the constant streams of water that bounced off their soft bodies. After the shower, they lay on the bed and slept. When they awoke several hours later, Chantress prepared a salad and put a pot of water on the stove to boil some spaghetti while Kyle read the sports page of the local Ocean Village newspaper, *The Sentinel*.

"You know, the Mets have never had a fair shake," he said. "Since day one they have been the underdogs."

"What do they play basketball?" Chantress asked.

"I can see you're a big fan," he said. "Baseball."

"Oh."

Kyle finished the sports section, and then turned the paper over and glanced at the front-page headlines. The lead headline caught his eye.

Pastor dies at Bingo then burns Parishioners flee in panic

By Julie Watson
Ocean Village Sentinel
Special to The Associated Press

OCEAN VILLAGE - A retired pastor died at a Bingo game Friday at Ocean Village Methodist Church, sparking a stampede, resulting in the injury of five senior citizens.

Pastor Herbert Wilcox, formerly of the Grace United Methodist Church of Red Bank, died yesterday while speaking before the Friday night Bingo crowd at church here on First Avenue.

More than 100 parishioners fled the church in a panic when the pastor's skin began to mysteriously burn and blister. The fleeing crowd trampled five seniors and three suffered minor injuries, according to a representative at Ocean Village Hospital.

Many of the fleeing parishioners claimed it was the work of Satan, and that the pastor was taken to hell, according to an eyewitness.

"It's definitely the Devil," said Homer Whitehead of Atlantic Avenue. "His skin burned black - that's all the proof I need. The Devil took him to hell, and if he can get a pastor, then he can get anybody."

The pastor's body has been taken to Ocean Village Hospital for an autopsy,

but the results are not available at this time, a hospital representative said.

The representative had no comment when asked about the pastor's skin.

In a related report, an Ocean Village woman claimed she died, went to hell, and came back with burnt skin as proof of her journey.

Mrs. Martha Whitehead of Atlantic Avenue said she was taken to hell by the devil.

"I was there. I know I was there. The devil is going to get us all," she said. "This is the end of the world."

An Ocean Village Hospital doctor, who declined to be identified, reported several cases of unexplainable near death experiences, where patients claimed they went to hell.

The mysterious symptoms have been labeled, the Hellfire Syndrome, and include being pronounced clinically dead, coming back to life with burnt skin, and having memories of entering a dark tunnel and falling downward, according to the doctor.

The origin of the symptoms is not known at this time, according to the doctor.

"Many patients have awoken hysterical, claiming that they went to hell. All develop burnt skin, similar to severe sunburn shortly after they awoken," the doctor said.

One religious leader reportedly said, "This is definitely the beginning of the end of religion as we know it."

(See related story on Page 3)

Kyle opened to page three.

Hundreds of seniors flock to hospital; 2 die

By Julie Watson
Ocean Village Sentinel
Special to Associated Press

OCEAN VILLAGE - An elderly couple from Cherry Blossom Boulevard was killed last night in a stampede of seniors who rushed to Ocean Village Hospital in a panic claiming they were fearful of dying, according to police.

The crowd swarmed the hospital emergency room demanding to be admitted for ailments as minor as the common cold, according to hospital staff.

The crowd pushed on the emergency doors until the glass burst sending a couple through the doors killing them, police said.

John and Mary McBride were pronounced dead on the scene and 5 others reported broken limbs and multiple cuts, according to a hospital spokesman.

"The devil is going to get us all!" Mrs. Jerry Washburn shouted from the unruly crowd. "We need to be in the hospital to make sure we don't die."

Many seniors said that they wanted to be in the hospital so that when they became ill, the hospital staff was immediately available to prevent complications and death. Many said they would pay anything. One man reportedly told the staff they could have his house as long as he could stay in the hospital.

"Satan has regained his power and he is more powerful than God now. He has taken some of us already,"

explained Homer Whitehead of Atlantic Avenue. "He took Pastor Wilcox and he almost got my wife! The poor pastor burned right in front of our eyes!"

Mr. Whitehead's wife, Martha, had a near death experience and claimed she was pulled into a fiery hell. When she regained consciousness, her skin began to burn and blister, according to Mr. Whitehead.

The mysterious symptoms have been labeled, the Hellfire Syndrome, and include being pronounced clinically dead, coming back to life with burnt skin, and having memories of entering a dark tunnel and falling downward, according to a hospital doctor, who refused to be identified. Other cases have occurred throughout the county, sources said.

However, Doctor Matthew Stokes, chief of staff at Ocean Village, and Doctor Carson Hyll, a neurologist, said an undetectable and mysterious disease that attacks the nervous system, and later skin cells has caused the symptoms.

"No one is going to hell and coming back," Doctor Hyll said. "The burnt skin is a symptom of the disease and the experience is a chemical imbalance in the brain due to the disease."

Doctor Hyll told the crowd that the symptoms were caused by a medical problem since he was ill with it six weeks ago and had the same reactions.

"Everyone is jumping to conclusions," he said. "I know there is a medical explanation for all of this. The devil is not rising up and taking souls to hell."

Doctor Stokes, a town elder and former mayor, said he agreed with Doctor Hyll.

"There is nothing to worry about. In all my years as a physician, I am sure we'll find a medical explanation," Doctor Stokes said.

Kyle put the newspaper down and stared out the window.

"What's the matter?" Chantress asked.

Kyle remained silent and trance-like. Chantress went over to him and brought her face close to his.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

His eyes were threatening, empty, and cold. A chill ran through her like an icy river. She had seen this look before in some of the Satanists, especially in the Magus and it frightened her. It was as if a blackness was seeping into him, taking control of his inner being.

Kyle did not respond and then suddenly jumped up shouting as if a bolt of lightning had struck him.

"That's it! That's it! Hannibal will love it! This is so great!"

Chantress' frowned and her eyes grew darker.

"Where did you hear that name?" she said coldly.

"What name?"

"Hannibal," she replied, her eyes burning with anger.

"Ah...one of the devil worshippers told me it was the Magus' name," he said weakly.

"Don't lie to me. You went to one of their meetings without me, didn't you? The only time his name would be mentioned is when they are going to appoint a new high priest. Who is the candidate?" she asked furiously.

Kyle hesitated. The fear swirled around inside of him like a wind-blown smoke, and then it was whisked away and replaced with anger.

"I am," he said defiantly.

"You?" she shouted. Her eyes were white hot. "You? What kind of person are you? I thought you and me...I thought we had something special together. Those people are dangerous...evil! Get out! You disgust me!"

Kyle's cold stare pierced Chantress like a bullet. The blackness she had seen earlier intensified and penetrated into her soul with icy precision.

"I need one more thing before I leave," Kyle said in a tone she had never heard before.

He moved closer and she backed away.

"I said get out!" she screamed.

She slowly moved her hand towards the wooden spoon on the counter. When he reached for her and she grabbed the spoon and brought it down hard catching his wrist.

"Ahhhhhhh! You bitch!" he screamed.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to!" she yelled.

Kyle looked up at her his eyes on fire and the muscles in his face twisted in pain and anger. Chantress turned and ran up the stairs to her bedroom. She slammed the door in his face, but his foot caught the door and he wedged his way in. He pushed her down on her bed and slapped her face several times. Then he grabbed her breasts and pulled her close to him forcing his lips on to hers. She tried to push him away, but the pain in her chest was too much. His eyes were filled with hatred. He released his grip slightly and pulled her shirt upward. Buttons popped off in all directions and her sore, red breasts were exposed. She raised her hand and swung it hard hitting him on the side of the face. His eyes widened. She pushed him off and he rolled off the side of the bed hitting his head on wall as he fell. She darted toward the door, but he lurched out and caught her ankle. He moved his hands up her leg, pulling her towards him like a hungry animal. She kicked striking him on the bridge of his nose and he let go. She grabbed the cordless phone in the living and ran into the kitchen towards the back door. She dialed 911. It seemed to take hours before she heard a ring, but it was only a few seconds. She heard Kyle leap down the stairs and then there was a loud crash. She heard two rings, and then the phone went dead. Kyle entered with the base of cordless phone in his hand, wires dangling ominously. She threw the receiver at him, watching it hit him in the forehead and bounce off as if his head were made of rubber. She watched it all in slow motion. He grabbed her, pinned his arms around

hers, and dragged her into the living room. He threw her down on the sofa, reached down and tore her panties off, then pushed her legs apart. She stopped struggling for a moment as she remembered her chances of survival were better if she didn't resist, but then her anger rose when he pulled his underwear off and attempted to penetrate her. She thrashed and fought to keep moving so that he could not get into her, but she felt him slide partially into her vagina. She was shocked to realize that her vagina was soaked. Maybe, it was blood; maybe she was cut there. Maybe, he had a knife she didn't see. Her wild thoughts vanished like a dust cloud on a windy day when the room filled with the chimes of the doorbell. Kyle froze for a split second and Chantress pulled back her arm and slammed her fist into his nose with all the anger and fury that grew from the thoughts she had just had. It was like a great burden being released from her because she wasn't comfortable with those thoughts. Blood poured from his nose and splattered on her breasts making large red sickening blotches. She looked into his eyes and saw that the blackness had been replaced with fear, disillusionment and mostly surprise. She pushed him off and watched as he rolled and hit his head into the side of the coffee table moving it a few inches. She ran to the door and started to unlock the deadbolt, but suddenly something was holding her back - a fear spread throughout her body like black smoke filling a room. Kyle, still dazed, pulled her away from the door. The doorbell rang again, and Chantress' adrenaline peaked. She used the new energy to free one arm, swing it around landing her clawed hand on Kyle's left cheek. She pulled down hard ripping his flesh like paper. She could feel some of his skin bunching up under her long nails. His grip fell off and she saw him grab his face in agony. She ran into the kitchen, opened a drawer and pulled out a metal ladle. Kyle rushed in behind her and she swung it horizontally striking him in the ear.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" he yelled. "I'll kill you, bitch!"

"Go to hell, you bastard! Get the hell out!" Chantress screamed back, her voice like an explosion.

Kyle smiled hauntingly. He grabbed her, swung her down onto the kitchen table, and spread her legs apart again. Chantress did not struggle as much this time. He held her hands down with one hand pressing all of his weight on them.

"What's the matter? Tired? Bitch," he breathed into her face. His breath was like a blackness that swallowed her face.

The long cuts on his cheek and the dark anger in his eyes turned him into a beast from hell. She looked away. She let him penetrate her and

waited. Then she felt hotness inside of her and Kyle's weight on her hands eased up. She instantly pulled one hand free and her arm swam in the air like a wild snake with its tail caught. The wild snake coiled back and her hand formed a fist. The snake moved forward with all of her force and struck Kyle in his left eye. He fell backward and onto the floor. He covered his face with his hands and rocked and moaned. The second blow had reopened the cut in his nose and blood oozed out between his fingers and dripped onto the white tiled floor.

Chantress bolted for the living room, rushed towards the fireplace, picked up the pointed andiron.

"Now get out, you bastard!" she screamed holding the iron in a strike position.

Kyle was silent as he moved slowly, gathering his clothes and his pride. He put them on just as slowly. He was dazed from Chantress' blow and his nose bled slightly. As he walked toward the front door, he turned and looked at Chantress still poised in the attack position by the fireplace.

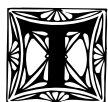
"Bye, bitch," he said. The blackness she had seen earlier had completely engulfed him and now there was a devil in her house. She shivered at his words. When he left, she rushed towards the door and locked it. Then she sat down on the sofa and thought about calling the police, but it didn't seem like a good idea since her parents would find out about Kyle spending the night there, she thought. Besides, many date rapes are thrown out of court since everyone sides with the accused. She battled with the decision over and over, and then finally decided to forget the entire horrible experience. Besides, she had her revenge - he probably had a black eye by now, she thought, and he was pretty beaten up, and that was good enough for her. Suddenly and without warning, her chest heaved and tears rolled down her face. She had gotten even with Kyle all right, but she had also lost what she thought was a special relationship. The pain in her chest and heart was more intense than the burning of her groin. She cried for quite a while, and then headed upstairs to shower and wash away her grief. In the shower, the thoughts she had during the struggle crept back into her mind and she couldn't understand why she would have liked any part of the ordeal. Maybe it was sexual, maybe emotional; maybe she could not accept how Kyle was acting and how he could treat her in such a way. Perhaps, she could not face being deceived and knowing that Kyle was capable of violence in a most horrendous and cruel way. She wanted to believe that whoever it was, it was not Kyle that he was not himself, and that he would have

stopped at some point dazed and confused, and say he was sorry, very sorry. But in her heart of hearts she knew that what she experienced was Kyle's true self waiting just under the surface to erupt and declare itself to the world. She watched the silvery water run down her sore and bruised body along with her tears that melted into the water unnoticed.

* * *

Kyle had trouble seeing out of his blackened eye as it quickly swelled shutting out most of the light. The pain shot across his face and into the back of his head with a constant throbbing and pounding. When he arrived home, he wrapped a few ice cubes in a towel and placed it on the bruised eye. He put a large bandage on his raw cheek and fell onto the couch, closed his eyes and thought about the following Sunday. He clearly knew what he was going to do - his conscience no longer conflicted with his desires. His vision was clear.

Destiny - Chapter 22



he next meeting of the Daimon Seclorum was held the following week and Kyle arrived late. When he descended into the basement of the Magus' house, the room was half-filled unlike the Black Mass he attended weeks earlier. The Magus was at the makeshift altar waiting and Kyle took a seat in the front row next to the thin woman with red hair who was with the Magus when they visited his apartment. Her hair was not tied in a ponytail, but flowed down her back like a shimmering red waterfall. She looked at him and smiled. He half-smiled back not sure how to interpret her friendliness.

"Tonight my friends, we experience a monumental event, an awakening to the power we seek, a new, more powerful path. Tonight we will rejoice!" shouted the Magus.

The woman with the long red hair stood and walked around the Magus. He handed her a robe folded to the size of a hardcover book.

"We have a new high priest...Hermes, lord of the darkness," he said.

The Magus went over to Kyle, lifted his arm, and turned him towards the audience.

"With this robe, I grant thee the power, Hermes," he said. "Do you accept?"

"Yeah...yeah, sure," Kyle said.

"Then let it be so," the Magus replied.

"Let it be so," the audience repeated. "Let it be so."

The Magus went back to the altar, opened a silver box, and took out a silver cup and two plastic hospital bags filled with blood.

"Tonight, we taste the blood of humans to celebrate our new leader," the Magus said.

The audience watched trance-like as the Magus poured the blood from the plastic bags into the large silver cup and then lifted the chalice over his head.

"To the new high priest of the Daimon Seclorum!" he yelled and brought the cup to his lips.

He handed the cup to Kyle and Kyle tasted the blood in a similar fashion. The group let out low sighs and bowed before Kyle. He smiled back at the small gathering and then handed the cup back to the Magus. He filled it again and then gave it to a round, plump woman sitting in the first row. She sipped from the cup and handed it to a man sitting next to her. When the cup returned to the Magus, he nodded to the woman with the long red hair. She took Kyle by the hand and led him to a tiny room behind the altar. They slide past a cloth curtain into the tiny room, lit by red and black candles. A worn, green sofa sat against the naked cinder blocked walls like a lazy, sleeping dog. The women untied her robe and let it drop to the floor - revealing her body. Then she undressed Kyle and led him to the couch. Kyle was careful not to let her place him in a vulnerable position. When they began having sex, Kyle maneuvered so that he would be on top. The woman didn't speak a word - she only moaned. The old green sofa growled like an aggravated dog under their weight and Kyle was oblivious the moldy odor that puffed out of the dogged sofa.

When they emerged from the small room, the crowd applauded. Kyle flinched as if a swarm of bats had attacked him. Then he smiled.

"That officially makes you our newest high priest, Hermes. You are now one of us. Power to Hermes!" the Magus announced.

"Power to Hermes!" the group repeated, and then they bowed to Kyle.

"This is unbelievable!" Kyle said.

"No it isn't. It is your destiny," the Magus said.

The Media - Chapter 23



ather Keith McDuffy knelt, made the sign of the cross, and went to the pulpit to the left of the altar. He opened a large missal and read a gospel from Saint John. His eyes were bloodshot and the bags under his eyes were larger than normal. Holy Mary's Roman Catholic Church was packed to capacity - the ushers had to patrol the aisles several times to make sure there were no empty spaces in the pews taken up by someone's purse or hat. Father McDuffy cleared his throat - the sound echoed throughout the church's public address system like an explosive noise. The parishioners fell silent.

"It seems rare that we have standing room only on such a warm, beautiful day. But I know it is last week's events at the Methodist church that has everyone concerned. I can assure you that God has not abandoned us - those with strong faith and beliefs in the Almighty have nothing to worry about. God has not forsaken you if you believe," Father McDuffy said.

A large part of the congregation moved uneasily in their seats. Many stared stone-faced. Father McDuffy knew he wasn't getting through to his followers.

"Lies! All lies!" a voice boomed from the rear of the church.

A figure dressed in a red, flowing robe stood silhouetted by the bright light as he held the rear doors open with both arms outstretched. The congregation gasped in unison.

"Your god has forsaken you. I am the true leader of the true faith - the faith of Satan. Satan's way is the true way. The gates of heaven are closed," the dark figure said. "I am here to save you...to give you powers you had never dreamed possible in this world - the powers of Satan, the powers of yourselves to do what you want when you want to. We are not humble slaves to your god. We are gods unto ourselves!"

Several women let out muffled screams. The dark figure moved forward, his head covered in a black hood. Others dressed in black robes followed the leader to the head of the altar. They too, wore hoods.

"You and your kind are not welcomed here," said Father McDuffy shakily. "Leave now!"

"We don't need a welcome. We are the way and you're not," the figure in red said. Father McDuffy backed away from the pulpit.

"Power to Hermes," the hooded group chanted several times. "Power to Hermes."

The priest was motionless. The figure in red stepped up to the pulpit and faced the audience.

"Those who want to follow us can. You will be placed in high esteem in Satan's domain. Those who do not are doomed to horrible deaths! Save yourselves!" Hermes shouted his eyes ablaze and intense.

"Get out!" Father McDuffy screamed. "Get out!"

"SILENCE!" Hermes replied. He turned towards the congregation again. "You must come now or be lost forever."

Hermes started to leave with his followers close behind in a procession of darkness. Some followed, moving silently and deliberately out from the pews. No one looked back. Those who remained watched intently. When the last person exited, Father McDuffy raced down the aisle and slammed the doors shut. Minutes later, the church was filled with a blinding burst of light as the doors swung open again. A small crowd rushed in.

"Father McDuffy? My name is Wanda Jackson from Eyewitness News," a voice came out of the light. "I would like to ask you about what just happened here." There was a pause and then the woman spoke again.

"Andy, make sure Fred gets those characters outside in the robes. Have him do an on-camera interview. Just let the guy babble on. We'll edit later. Now father, can you tell us what happened here?" the TV reporter pushed her way into the church and stuck a microphone in front of the harried priest.

"That character or whatever you call him barged in here and disrupted our Mass. Scared a lot of the parishioners," the priest said.

The interview was cut off as the camera crew was pushed forward as the inside of the church lit up. Wanda Jackson, an attractive brunette with large, puffy lips, was pushed into Father McDuffy and they were face to face with the microphone wedged between them. The crowd swelled.

"Father McDuffy! Father McDuffy! We need a statement. I'm from Channel 4 News," a voice said from within the crowd.

"You must all leave now!" Father McDuffy shouted as loud as his lungs would allow him. "We are in the middle of a holy Mass!"

The crowd continued to push the priest back towards the altar. He turned and headed for the pulpit. From his higher position, he watched the church fill with several TV camera crews, radio reporters, and photographers wearing army green vests with multitudes of cameras hanging off their necks. The camera crews and radio reporters pushed and shoved each other in their scramble to place a microphone near the pulpit. The reporters fired a volley of questions at the priest. The questions were incomprehensible as one question cut off the other in a swirl of noise and confusion. Father McDuffy began to shake. He suddenly felt very tired and short of breath. The room seemed to move from side to side and then he felt someone grip his arm. Two altar boys had grabbed him and slowly lowered him to the floor. One ran into the back office and called an ambulance. The media people watched with jaded eyes, and then frowned in disappointment.

"At least we got that other weirdo outside," one of camera technicians said to Wanda Jackson.

"Yeah," she replied in a tone of disappointment. "Let's interview some of these people, and then we'll come back in an hour for the priest."

"It's a good thing you spotted this story on the wires," the technician said.

"We'll give it to the national feeds after we air it. I just know they'll pick it up," Wanda Jackson said.

The News - Chapter 24



Carson sat down at his dining room table waiting for Linda to bring in two plates filled with one of her gourmet dinners. He offered to help, but Linda refused. It was 6 pm and the linen drapes filtered a yellow-orange light into the dining room giving Carson a feeling of warmth and security. Linda carried two white plates with two slices of gravy-covered meatloaf, buttered string beans and fluffy brown rice. Carson filled their glasses with red Bordeaux and buttered two freshly baked dinner muffins.

"To us," he said raising his glass.

"To us," Linda said clicking her glass against his.

"This is great," Carson said smiling. "You make the best meatloaf around. I'm glad I gave you my mother's recipe."

"I didn't use your mother's recipe," Linda said.

"No?" Carson said.

"Joan Paulson gave me hers. She's a teacher at school."

"Well, it's great. Better than my mother's."

"Thanks, darling," she replied.

The phone rang.

"I'll get it," Linda said rising from her seat.

"No, no. Sit. You made dinner. I'll get it."

Carson walked into the kitchen and picked up the phone.

"Carson! Did you catch the six o'clock news on Channel 7? They're doing a story on Ocean Village. Turn on your TV!" Stokes shouted.

"Really? No kidding! Okay."

Carson rushed into the living room and turned on the TV. A car commercial was on and the announcer was talking about a marathon of sales with great deals and low cost financing.

"More bullshit," Carson mumbled to himself.

The TV commercial ended and a shot of the anchor desk appeared on the screen with a close-up of an anchorwoman.

"Devil worship appears to be on the rise in Monmouth County today. Here's a report from Eyewitness reporter Wanda Jackson in Asbury Park," the anchorwoman said.

Linda joined Carson.

"What's going on?"

"I'll tell you later. I have to watch this," he said.

"Churches here in this tiny, religious community appear to be losing their followings to a group of Satanists, who appear to be growing in strength..." Wanda Jackson said while holding a microphone in front of St. Mary's Church.

"That's St. Mary's!" Linda said.

The report showed the interview with Father McDuffy and with Hermes, and then the screen switched to another reporter - a young man in a brown suit.

"This is Richard Dieters from the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office. Sheriff James Locust has noticed a higher than usual crime wave in the past three weeks and he attributes it to the Satanist movement in Ocean Village..." A burly man in his 50s with graying hair then appeared on screen.

"In the past three weeks, we have had several model parolees commit the worst crimes in their prison record. It has us baffled until one confessed that it's because of the devil worship," Sheriff Locust explained.

The camera moved to Dieters. "Do you mean that model prisoners have become worse because of the Satanism, Sheriff?"

"I guess. All I know is that several of them told me they don't have a reason to be good anymore because they believed they were going to hell anyway. It's all tied in with those people burning up over in Ocean Village."

The phone rang again. Carson ran into the kitchen and picked it up.

"Did you hear that? This thing has gone far enough. We've got to do something!" Stokes yelled.

"What can we do?"

"I don't know," Stokes replied. "I'll think of something."

"I start in the lab tomorrow and maybe I can clear it with Doctor Hansen to start some tests and we can nip this in the bud if we can come up with a diagnosis," Carson said.

"I'll talk to Hansen tomorrow and get that cleared. He may not believe any of this stuff, but if I talk to him, he'll take my word," Stokes explained.

"Okay. Are you all right? You sound frazzled."

"I am." Stokes replied.

"Don't you know what this all means Carson?"

"No. It's just a disease we can't detect, and people are very frightened because they choose to believe it's tied to religion."

"You might as well be from another planet. You're way out in left field. People no longer believe that God is there for them - they think the devil has won the war of good against evil. They believe God has abandoned them and allowed the devil to get stronger and be able to take souls into hell. The very foundations of all religion are being shaken for the first time in the history of mankind. Without some kind of religion whether a man worships a giant rock or the sun, man is nothing but a savage animal. Religion is man's hope for a better future, a better life, everything better. Religion is a check and balance system for mankind. Without that hope, he has no reason for living and no reason for doing the right thing. Criminals become extremely evil when they believe there is no hope for them. No one is born a criminal and no one aspires to be criminal. They do evil things because they believe there's nothing good for them in the world, that they don't deserve anything

good - that they have been denied the good life for whatever reasons. Religion is the glue that holds our society together."

"What about the atheists - the nonbelievers - they don't believe in God?" Carson asked.

"They don't believe in God or a formalized religion, but they have religion. They may believe in themselves or in fate, and they have hope. It's not in the shape of a formal religion. When you have people doubting their religion like we have here and their religion is all the hope they have in their lives, then it's dangerous," Stokes explained.

"How dangerous?"

"It scares the hell out of me, excuse the pun. I can't be sure, but the fear of God and his reprisals have probably kept some people in check - you know from going off the deep end and doing wild and crazy things. Religion is one of the foundations of our civilization. Not everyone is like this, but there are some who have repressed desires that they might want to satisfy now since they believe everything is lost, and they no longer fear God and his reprisals. I'd be careful and keep your eyes open, Carson."

The Dogs - Chapter 25



he overweight, middle-aged man with gold wire rim glasses stepped into a black 1977 Chevy Impala with red vinyl seats. The car was a leftover from the days of GM lavishness when bigger meant better and cost didn't matter. The man had purchased the car new and now used it for hauling firewood, furniture and items too small for a truck, but too large for his wife's scaled down Mercedes. The man drove through several towns that dotted the New Jersey coast until he entered Long Branch, once a great resort that attracted many prominent men and women in the earlier part of the 20th century. The man stopped in front of a animal shelter in the downtown section, where every other storefront was boarded up. He looked at himself in the rear view mirror and smiled a smile of victory. He entered the small building and was struck with the pungent smell of animal urine, sundry odors and the explosive sound of barking dogs.

"Hello Mr. Jones," said a thin, pimpled-skinned youth from behind a glass-topped counter. It was cluttered with point-of-purchase display cards from the humane society and other similar organizations. "How's the breeding going?"

"Oh, just fine, just fine. I'm here to pick up the Dobermans Larry said he got in," the Magus said.

"Oh, yeah, Larry said you would be by today. I'll get them," the young man replied.

A few minutes later, the youth returned out of breath with two black barking Dobermans tugging frantically on their leashes.

"This one is a bit vicious...so be careful," said the young man gasping for air. "The other one is ok until he's with this one."

"Thanks, but I always tie them to the seat belts," the Magus replied.

The Magus took the leashes and pulled the dogs with him. He stopped, put his free hand in his pocket and pulled out a \$20 bill.

"Here," he said. "For your trouble."

"Thanks, Mr. Jones. Anything else you need, just let me know!" the young man said.

"There is one thing...just don't spread it around that I'm breeding. You know, I don't want the competition to get wind of it," he said.

"Sure, Mr. Jones, I know," the youth said.

The overweight man was winded by the time he reached his car. He opened the rear door on the passenger side, and then walked around and opened the rear door on the driver's side. He backed into the car and secured the leashes onto one seat belt, then dragged the dogs into the car, moving out of the car as he pulled the leashes. He shortened the lengths of the leashes by attaching them to another seat belt. The dogs sat in the back seat, and the short leashes prevented them from moving forward or jumping into the front seat. The Magus closed the car doors and drove away. The dogs barked at every passerby. When they were not barking they snarled and growled as if they knew who their new master was and what he had planned for them.

The Magus turned onto Route 35 and headed towards his house. The dogs became more excited as the car increased speed. They struggled desperately to get free and strained their necks to get out of the collars, occasionally letting out horse coughs. The Magus occasionally looked back at them through the rear view mirror. A few moments later, the dogs were silent. The Magus turned up the radio. Mozart's fifth symphony was playing on one of the classical music stations broadcast from New York. He placed his arm across the top of the bench seat and enjoyed the music. A few moments later, the Magus heard the dogs breathe in deeply and then growl. Suddenly, his arm burned in pain - a piercing pain so intense his vision blurred. He turned to look, but he knew before he looked what had happened. He was filled with horror -

one of the dogs had gotten free and was ripping his forearm to pieces with its crushing jaw and razor-sharp teeth. The Magus pulled his arm away, but the dog hung on ripping more flesh as he tugged. He saw his ivory shirt turn crimson as his blood soaked into the material. He instantly brought his other arm up and made a fist aimed straight at the dog's head, but he was never able to follow through with the punch. The other dog jumped up, and with a single bite grabbed hold of the Magus throat, and ripped. Blood showered the windshield and the dashboard. The Magus slumped down in the seat his life ebbing away with each heartbeat. His foot held the accelerator and the car veered off the road into an open field and continued accelerating like a wild comet. The comet slammed into a large oak tree cutting the car nearly in half. The front end crumbled like tin foil and the engine and transmission were pushed into the front seat. The massive engine pinned the Magus between it and seat, nearly severing his limp body in two at the waist. The windshield shattered spewing tiny, red clumps of glass everywhere. The glass looked like rubies in the mid-afternoon sun as they shimmered in the peaceful grass. A small fire started in the carburetor and began to ignite the fluffy insulation lining on the underside of the crumpled hood. Smoke oozed from under the wreckage as the fire burned steadily and stronger. The dogs, sensing the fire, quickly squeezed out of the car though the shattered windshield and vanished into the nearby woods. An old, white-haired woman stepped out of her tiny house nearby and surveyed the wreckage. She ran back into house and called the police.

The fire ignited a clump of dry leaves under the car and soon the front tires were ablaze pushing out billows of black smoke like two giant chimneys from a turn-of-the-century factory. The flames joined the others inside the car. Within minutes, the interior was glowing orange as the flames appeared like bright orange serpents trying to escape out of the glassless windows. A police car and an ambulance arrived, along with a fire truck. The firefighters jumped off the truck and scrambled to get a hose out and pumping. One moved too close with the waterless hose and an angry billow of fire roared out of the window nearly swallowing the young firefighter. His hair and eyebrows were singed. The dogs watched from the woods; they seemed to be smiling.

* * *

Stokes was enjoying the sunset on his enclosed porch and reading the last chapter of Sankara Saranam's *God Without Religion*, when the phone rang. The last hint of the golden orange sun disappeared and a gray pale was beginning to shroud the last light of the day.

"Hello, this is Doctor Stokes."

"Doctor Stokes, this is Doctor Hillgren from Riverdale Medical Center ER. We have one of yours...just came in. His name is Henry Graber..."

"Is he all right? What happened?"

"A car accident. He didn't have a chance..."

Stokes was silent.

"Hello, Doctor Stokes? Are you still there?"

"Yeah...he was a good friend," Stokes said in a near whisper.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"How did it happen?"

"We're not sure, yet. The body was pretty well burned."

"Burned? What happened?" Stokes asked.

"His car struck a tree on Route 35. Could have had a heart attack."

"Oh, no!"

"I'll keep you informed when I know more," Dr. Hillgren said.

"Please do. Has his wife been told?"

"I don't know. The police usually take care of that."

"Sure."

Stokes went back into the living room, sat down and cried. He had known Henry Graber most of his life. Their children had played together, swam together on the beach and enjoyed summer cookouts. Mary entered with her unfinished quilt and a wicker sewing basket with pieces of wicker sticking out. When she saw Stokes' face, she dropped the basket and went to him. Stokes looked up at her through a blur of tears and fetched a pad and pencil to make sure she didn't read his lips incorrectly and wrote,

"Henry Graber is dead. Killed in a car accident...just this afternoon."

Mary's face constricted and tears ran down her face. She wrapped her arms around her husband and they cried together. Stokes wrote on the pad again.

"I'm going to Riverdale; I want to be there. He was a good friend."

Mary nodded.

As Stokes drove to the medical center, he had to keep wiping his eyes to see where he was going. He entered the hospital through its emergency entrance and had to push his way inside. There were lines formed outside.

"What's going on, here?" he asked one of the fleeing interns.

"I don't know," he said.

Stokes went to the main reception area, where several nurses and doctors rushed back and forth trying to keep up with increasing number of patients.

"Does anyone know what's going on?" he asked.

A petite nurse sitting behind the counter looked up.

"No sir," she said. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Doctor Stokes from Ocean Village and I'd like to know what's going on here?"

"Your guess is as good as ours," she explained. "It's been like this for the past two days. Everybody with the slightest ailment is here and they all have the same excuse, that if they die they will go to hell and they want to make sure they stay healthy as long as they can. These people are totally paranoid of dying. It has something to do with that priest dying over in Ocean Village and the Satanist cult," she explained.

"Who's in charge of the ER tonight?" Stokes asked.

"Doctor Hillgren. His office is down that hall; first door on the left," she said. "But I don't think you'll find him there. He's running around like the rest of us."

Stokes darted away and pushed open two swinging doors that led into the examining rooms of the ER. He began to gasp for air. He rushed to each examining room asking for Doctor Hillgren. Panting, Stokes dragged himself into a room at the end of a long corridor and abruptly pulled the curtain aside. Stokes saw a sandy-haired doctor placing a stethoscope on an old women's chest. Two nurses stood next to the doctor.

"Hold on! Who are you?" the doctor shouted at Stokes. "What are you doing here?"

"Forgive me...I'm Doctor Stokes from Ocean Village. I'm looking for Doctor Hillgren," Stokes said between gasps.

"That's me. Close the curtain and wait for me outside," Doctor Hillgren said turning back to the old woman.

A few minutes later, Hillgren approached Stokes in the corridor. Stokes was still gasping for air.

"What's the matter? Sit down. Take it easy," Hillgren said.

"I'm just very concerned," Stokes said between gasps.

"It's all those people in the ER, isn't it?" Hillgren said. "I'll bet it's that opportunity-seeking maniac that's been on the news that has riled them up."

"It's not some maniac! I'll tell you," Stokes said still gasping for air.

"You know, I also noticed a rise in the number of abortions," Hillgren said. "It could be related to that Satanist cult."

"Oh, Lord. Not that, too!"

"You think it's related, too?"

"No, no. It's not that. There's more to it," Stokes said.

"There is?"

"Absolutely."

"Fill me in while we walk to the morgue."

The two men took a nearby elevator down to the basement. Stokes filled Hillgren in the details of the events, which had led to the chaos. Hillgren listened, but had no reaction.

"You have an increase in abortions?" Stokes asked.

"Yes. They send us their overflow or any that might lead to complications," Hillgren explained.

"Who?"

"Family Planning."

"Can you find out why there's been an increase?"

"I can call the clinic later," Hillgren said.

The men stood in silence for a few moments.

"Do you really believe this Satan stuff?" Hillgren asked.

"I don't know," Stokes said. "When fourteen clergy from every denomination in the county get together and talk about it with hopes of finding a solution, maybe there's a problem."

"You don't say," Hillgren replied rubbing his golden moustache. "I've seen this kind of panic before."

"You have?"

"Sure. When the media announced the discovery of AIDS, when the temperature goes up to 90 for three days straight and a few seniors die of heat stroke, suddenly the ER room is flooded with people complaining of everything from a headache to the common cold, and they all swear they are going to die from it," Hillgren explained.

"This is different..." Stokes said. "This goes far deeper than people dying of heat strokes. People believe they have lost their religion. Religion gives people hope, a destiny, a future, something to look forward to, a goal to achieve, a mountain to climb and all of that is being taken away by this strange disease we can't get a handle on," Stokes explained.

"See, even you believe it's a disease and not this crazy Satan business!"

"It doesn't matter whether it's a disease, a plague or an epidemic. What they believe is happening is what's important. Their reality is phenomenological and until we can prove otherwise, this craziness is going to get worse...a lot worse," Stokes said his voice shaking.

"Phenomenological?"

"Seeing is believing. Perception is reality. If they experienced it, they believe it happened."

They entered a narrow corridor with cinder-blocked walls enameled with hospital green paint. The floors were covered with gray enamel speckled with dings that revealed the naked cement under it. They walked a short distance and the corridor widened. The florescent lights cast a cold, frosty hue on everything. Hillgren turned right and pushed two double swinging doors open. A thin young intern with dark skin and short hair met the two. The man's eyes were bloodshot and his white shirt was wrinkled.

"Hello, I'm Doctor Stokes. I'm here to see...Henry Graber."

The man turned and walked to a gray metal desk that looked like someone used it for a temper tantrum. The sides were dented and scratched. He picked up a clipboard from the tired desk, and then looked up at Stokes.

"Number 610A. Pretty bad. Just came in," the young intern said.

"Thanks."

Doctors Stokes and Hillgren scanned the numbers on the large silver drawers until they found 610A. Stokes pulled the drawer open revealing the smooth black body bag and quickly unzipped it. The two men stepped back. Hillgren coughed several times. What remained of Graber was a mass of blackened bone and skin. The skin was flaky and hugged the bones like shrink-wrap.

"It's hard to believe that this was once a living human being," Hillgren said.

"He was a good friend. I knew him most of my life," Stokes said softly.

"I'm sorry," Hillgren added.

Stokes started to close the zipper when he noticed that the esophagus and jugular vein had been torn. He unzipped the body bag all the way and examined the rest of the body. He spotted the remains of ripped skin, muscle and bone in the right forearm.

"Has there been a determination on the cause of death," he yelled to the young intern.

"Nothing has been done. We're waiting for the dental records for a positive ID. We got only a preliminary identification from the police," the intern yelled back.

* * *

Stokes left the medical center and drove to Graber's house. Graber's daughter, Melissa, opened the door - her eyes rimmed in red.

"I'm so sorry, Melissa," Stokes said and hugged her.

He entered the living room. Helen sat in a rocker in the corner staring out of the window.

"I'm sorry, Helen. We all loved him," he said taking her hand.

The older woman looked up with watery eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I know this isn't a good time, but I'd like an autopsy on Henry. I was at the morgue and I don't think the accident killed him," Stokes said.

"Oh no!" Helen said and burst out in tears.

"I'm sorry. I'll call you tomorrow."

Stokes left with watery eyes. He went home and poured himself a glass of Remy Martin VSOP that he brought out only during the holidays. He took a large gulp and swallowed slowly letting the cognac coat his throat as it went down. The experience reminded him of better times, of holidays, and of good friends, and warm homes with crackling fires in their fireplaces. It eased some of the pain in his chest and forced his tense body to relax despite the agony in his heart and mind. Stokes put his head back and pushed the lounge chair into a reclining position. The tired springs and levers creaked. In a few minutes, he was asleep free from his sadness, his fear, and his sense of impending doom that seemed to swallow him.

The New Magus - Chapter 26



yle lay on a white beach with Chantress next to him. Another woman lay on the other side, but he couldn't quite see her face. He thought it was strange that they had no towels or blanket to lie on and the warm sand did not stick to his body. The surf was violent like an angry, wild animal struggling to reach them, but always falling short and being swallowed by the white sand. Kyle shuddered with fear at the water - it was as if it were alive. Kyle knew if the water reached them, they would be burned. The water was bad; the ocean was bad. The sun was very bright, but its light was cold. Kyle wanted to leave because the sunlight made his skin cold. He knew that Chantress was mad at him because the other woman was there, but Kyle didn't know how she had gotten there - he didn't know who she was or where he was. Suddenly, a man dressed in army fatigues walked up to them.

"Kyle! Look at yourself! You're naked to the world now! How will you cover up?" the man said. His face was dark by the shadow cast from his floppy-brimmed hat that dripped beads of water. "What will become of you, now that everyone can see you?"

Kyle looked down at his body and saw he was naked. Chantress laughed at him, but the other woman smiled at him seductively. He wanted to run away. He did run, and then stopped and turned to look at Chantress. She was still laughing and she was still close to him. He ran, but he went nowhere. He moved behind the other woman holding

on to her waist. She moved like a snake in his hands - an evil smile broke across her face. She was nude like him.

"You can't hide behind her, Kyle," the army man said. He lifted his hat and the sun lit his face. His face was a dark tan, ruddy, unshaven. Kyle's jaw dropped. It was the man he saw earlier in his dreams, who had appeared at the restaurant and in his apartment.

"Kyle, you must stop what you are doing. I'm telling you this because I'm your father - the father you never knew. I'm telling you because I love you. You are my only son and what you are doing is wrong. Please believe me," the man explained.

The woman pulled away from Kyle and headed towards Kyle's father. She grabbed him and thrust her hands into his chest one at a time piercing the skin and entering the rib cage. The man screamed in agony. The woman moved her hands around, and then pulled them out holding his heart. The man collapsed. The clump moved in the woman's hand. She turned and thrust it towards Kyle.

"Now you won't have to worry about him anymore. We have his heart!" she screamed her eyes fiery like her hair.

Kyle recognized her - it was the woman with the red ponytail from the cult.

"Nooooooooooooo!" Kyle screamed.

He ran along the beach not looking back. Then he heard a loud ringing that stopped and started several times. He opened his eyes and squinted at the bare bulb hanging in the center of his bedroom. He reached over and grabbed the receiver. He had kicked off his covers during the night and his skin was cold.

"Hello," he said.

A fog seemed to swirl in his mind and he had to make an effort to concentrate. His eyes would not focus.

"Hermes," the man's voice said. "There will be a special meeting in one hour. Make sure you're there. You know where."

"What? Now?" Kyle protested.

The dial tone blared. Kyle dropped the phone back in its cradle and rubbed his eyes. He walked over to a chest of drawers and searched for his watch among piles of dirty socks, underwear and scraps of paper. He found it under one of his socks. His eyes slowly focused on the dial - it was 3:04 a.m. He walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower,

and stepped in. Black mold had formed on the bottom of the curtain, but he hadn't noticed. The water grumbled on its way out of the showerhead as if it didn't want to come out. It instantly covered his body with a warm heat and washed away his drowsiness and the chill that had penetrated to his bones. As he washed, he wondered why the Magus would have a meeting at four in the morning. He dressed quickly and left.

* * *

When he pulled up to the white clapboard house, the street was filled with cars and he had to park several houses away. The air was cool, but smelled stale, as if there were a pollutant hanging in the air. Kyle knocked on the door firmly. The woman with the red ponytail opened the door and smiled her familiar seductive smile. Kyle stepped back.

"Come in, Hermes. What's the matter? Did I scare you?" she said seductively with a slight Southern accent.

"Oh, no. You just answered the door so fast. I didn't expect it to open right away," Kyle lied, the nightmare replaying in his mind.

"Oh. Well come in. We have a lot to talk about," she said smiling.

"Sure," Kyle said.

He hesitated and then entered the foyer.

"In case the Magus never told you, my name is Nidal," she beamed.

"Hi."

"Hi," she said and grabbed his arm. Her touch made his groin tingle.

She led him down the steps to the basement. Red candles were placed on each step instead of the usual black ones. The room was also lit with red candles and Kyle could see the anxious faces of the people standing there waiting for him and Nidal. Their eyes sparkled in the dim light. Kyle had never seen such a look. She led Kyle to a front row seat and stood in front of the group. She took a deep breath.

"The Magus is dead. He has joined our savior and we must choose another among the high priests. According to the Book of Procurements we must cast secret ballots," Nidal told the group. "I will pass out the ballots. Please write your vote down and hold it until we pass the opinion box."

Nidal picked up a steno pad and a pencil and handed it to a thin woman with stringy gray hair in the first row. The woman wrote on the

pad, then ripped off the page and handed the pad and pencil to the person next to her. When they had all written their votes, Nidal handed a cardboard box to the thin woman. She stuffed her ballot in the slit in the top of the box, and passed it to the next person. When the box was returned to Nidal, she opened each ballot and read the names. Then she placed the ballots in separate piles representing the three high priests. At the end, she counted the number of votes in each pile out loud.

"Hermes is the new Magus," she said and bowed to him. The others applauded and chanted. Kyle felt a rush of adrenaline speed through his body.

"Hermes! Hermes! Hermes!" the crowd chanted.

Nidal took out a golden chalice out of a box on the altar and emptied a hospital bag of human blood into it.

"Tonight, we drink to Hermes, our new Magus," she said holding up the chalice. She handed the cup to Kyle and he looked at her intently. She nodded to him and he sipped the cool blood. It tasted metallic and sour. He handed the cup back to her and she sipped the blood, and then handed the cup to the woman in the first row. After the chalice had reached everyone, Nidal took it from the woman and handed it to Kyle.

"Raise it over your head, holding it with both hands," she told him. Kyle obeyed. The small crowd fell to their knees and bowed their heads in unison. Kyle looked from person to person and soaked in the power that was flowing from each one, the power that was forming in his head, the power he had over these individuals. Nidal tapped Kyle on the arm and motioned for him to lower the chalice.

"It is done. Hermes, you are our new Magus. May you lead us true," she said to Kyle. The members slowly stood to their feet and began to leave. As they left, some patted Kyle on the arm, others shook his hand. All were silent. After the last person ascended the stairway, Nidal spoke.

"Congratulations," she said smiling. "I'll fill you in on the details at my place. Follow me in your car," she said her eyes on fire.

She turned and emptied the remaining blood in the chalice into a utility sink near the washer and dryer. Then she blew out the red candles one by one working her way around the room toward the stairway. She grabbed hold of Kyle's arm and walked with him up the stairway. She blew out candles as she approached them casting darkness in her wake.

Kyle followed her gray BMW into a dirt driveway that cut through a thickly wooded area. The bumpy, forgotten driveway turned to gravel and led to a clearing. Set back in the clearing was a small white Victorian house, lit only by the lights from the cars. The once white house was faded with many layers of paint chipped off revealing the naked wood beneath. Kyle stepped out into the cool darkness and stood near the opened door of his car. Tall blades of grass tickled his pants. Several wild dogs howled in the distance, their ominous, haunting pain echoed through the darkness.

"Is this your house?" Kyle asked.

"No, I rent it. Come on in," she said, switching on a small penlight attached to her key chain.

"Why don't you leave a light on?" Kyle asked.

"I do, but the bulbs keep burning out and I forget to replace them," she explained.

She used the tiny flashlight to illuminate the doorknob, stuck a brass key in, and turned. The door opened with a swish and the two entered the house. She flipped a switch and tiny table lamp with Tiffany shade came to life. All of the furniture, the sofa, and the gents chair, were Victorian. The gents chair had been re-upholstered with a blue and red floral print. The room was neat and well kept. A faint trace of incense filled the air and reminded Kyle of a flower shop. The room was small, comfortable, and well decorated.

"Sit down. Would you like something to drink?" she asked.

"A beer would be nice if you have one."

"I think I have some."

She left and came back several minutes later wearing only a smile. She handed him the beer and there seemed to be a glow surrounding her.

Kyle stared at her taking in her radiating beauty and innocent vulnerability. His eyes moved up and down her slender, perfectly shaped body.

"Remember the last time we made love...well that really wasn't part of the ceremony. I asked the Magus if I could...I hope you didn't mind?"

"Oh no, not at all," Kyle said gently pushing the aluminum tab on the can. The escaping air seemed to interrupt the quiet mood of the moment. Nidal didn't notice.

"Well, I had to have you from the first time I saw you. I think you have the most beautiful eyes..."

Kyle pulled her close to him and placed his hands on her small, supple breasts. She unbuttoned his shirt and helped him take off the rest of his clothes. She pushed him down gently and crawled on top of him. Her long, silky red hair fell into his face like flowing water. She reached her climax first and then fell all over him like a limp doll after he reached his. She drifted off to a peaceful sleep and Kyle lay there with his eyes open staring at the ornate white ceiling. Maybe it was the memory of the dream, maybe it was her position in the cult, he thought. He was uncomfortable with the feeling. She awoke and walked over to a stereo unit by the wall. There was a soft click. Billy Joel's "In the Middle of the Night," filled the tiny room. Even her music was dated.

They made love again, but Kyle did not feel any bonding with this woman as he had had with Chantress. If he never saw Nidal again, he would not miss her, he thought. He was merely making the best of a good situation.

"Now that we know each other a little better, what's your real name?" Kyle asked.

"Janice. What's yours?"

"Kyle."

"I like that name. It has a sense of power to it," she said.

"Were you and the Magus...you know...doing it?"

"At first, then it stopped. It wasn't good for either of us. We work together. I only did it because he asked. Besides, he was married," she explained. "Want another beer?"

"Okay."

She returned with another can of beer and caressed his thigh.

"I don't think I can," Kyle said. "I should be going."

"You can stay if you like."

"Not this time. I need to do some thinking," he said as he gathered his clothes and began to dress.

"Let me give you my number. Call me tomorrow. I have the day off," she said. "I can tell you more about the group. I'll cook you dinner."

She got up and walked into the kitchen. She returned holding a piece of paper and handed it to him.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a nurse over at Ocean Village."

"Oh. That explains the blood."

She gave him a culpable look.

"I never took blood. It was the Magus."

Kyle turned and was about to open the door when he felt her gentle tug at his arm. He turned and she put her arms around his neck and thrust her tongue into his mouth. He didn't resist. She ran her hand down his stomach and into his pants. Her hand stopped when it reached his groin. They kissed for several minutes. Kyle moved her to the sofa again and she helped him get his clothes off again. When he was naked, she got up, took his hand, and walked him up a narrow stairway into a small bedroom. The queen-sized bed overtook the tiny room. A canopy covered in white lace made a roof over the bed. A tiny lamp with a multi-colored Tiffany shade on a nightstand spread a dim, sleepy light throughout the room. A faint odor of perfume floated in the air. Janice pulled the flowered quilt off the bed and climbed under the covers. Kyle followed. They began to make love, first slowly then quickening the pace. Kyle rolled over and was surprised to see himself reflected in the overhead mirrors lining the inside of the canopy.

"Nice," he said.

"I like it," Janice replied.

* * *

Kyle woke up and squinted to a bright white light that filtered through the lace curtains. It was as if the light was alive and actually entered his brain and roused it out of sleep. He went downstairs into the kitchen and found Janice mixing several eggs in a large, orange bowl.

"Hi. Do you like scrambled eggs?" she asked leaning towards him and planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Yeah," he said.

"Good."

Kyle went back into the bedroom and put on the rest of his clothes. He spent most of the day with Janice talking about the cult and themselves and making love. He drove home in a daze. Within minutes of walking into his apartment, the telephone rang. He picked up the receiver.

"Hi, Kyle. This is Vic. Are you working tonight?" said a deep, raspy voice.

"Yeah?"

"All right, I called you last night, but I should have known better. A couple of us went over to The Wall. You were out with your chick, right?"

"No. We split. Got a new one, though," Kyle explained.

"You work fast!" Vic replied. "Who is she?"

"One of her friends..."

"You slime!" Vic said laughing.

"Well, I don't know about her. She's all over me, all the time. It's not the same as Chantress. She's great in bed, but I don't feel anything - its just sex..."

"So? What's wrong with that! I wish I had your problem. Every time I meet some chick, she's married with kids and wants me to play daddy. No, thank you!" Vic said. "She have any kids?"

"No, none."

"Lucky dog."

"I don't feel lucky, though. You know, Vic, for the first time, I miss Chantress. I know that sounds corny, but I had this thing with Chantress," Kyle explained. "At least when we had sex, I felt something. With Janice, there's nothing."

"You are really getting weird on me. Chicks are good for only one thing anyway. Once you start with that serious shit, they start putting the screws to you. Just go with the flow until something better comes along," Vic said.

Kyle was silent.

"Kyle."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here. You know, I am better off without her. She was like my mother - always nagging, and pushing me to do what she wanted. She wanted to run my life!" Kyle shouted into the phone. "I won't let anyone tell me how to live my life! She was going to ruin my life and I had to stop her. She was a bitch! She punched me in the eye. If she were walking across the street right now, I'd run her over!"

"Whoa! You never told me that! Intense. What are you on anyway?"

"Nothing, asshole!" Kyle shouted back.

"Hey, chill out. I'll see you later at the club. Hang in there, buddy," Vic said.

Kyle slammed the phone down.

"Bitch!" he said.

The Horror - Chapter 27



hantress sat at a small oak desk in the corner of her bedroom. A small lamp with a black shade lit her face with a soft glow and cast a bright light on the book she was reading. A stack of new books was piled on one side of the desk. The books included several on the New Age movement - Nostradamus' prophecies, holistic medicine, near-death experiences, and heightened spiritual awareness. She skimmed through the pages of a guidebook on New Age, looking for a definition for her newly formed group. In the first section, she found,

New Age follows the teachings and heritage of ancient visionaries who, throughout history, have dreamed of a radically transformed society. New Age promises a spiritual awakening, a fundamental change, a world based on different values. Nostradamus is one of the leading prophets of the New Age movement.

She had already read books by Carlos Castaneda, Edgar Cayce and several by Raymond A. Moody, Jr., MD.

She was looking through the pages of *Millennium*, a book written about the prophecies of Nostradamus, the 16th century prophet and visionary of the future, when there was a light knock on her bedroom door.

"Come in," Chantress said.

"I don't get it," said her mother, a slim, tall woman in her forties with short auburn hair and round, clear blue eyes.

"Get what?" Chantress replied. She turned to face her mother.

"You never go out anymore. Your friends call, you never see them. Is there something wrong? You want to talk about it?"

Chantress looked back into the pages of the guide.

"It's just that I'm really into this New Age stuff and I'm trying to learn as much as I can," Chantress said. "I have to organize my group, hold meetings..."

"Well, that's no excuse for not seeing your friends. You've been cooped up in here for weeks. The only time you leave is to go to work. You should get out, honey."

"I'm really into this now."

"And what happened to that nice boy you were seeing, Kyle?"

Chantress' eyes flared white-hot.

"Oh. I'm sorry. You didn't tell me you had a falling out," her mother said trying to conceal her fear.

Chantress heard the concern in her mother's voice and pulled back her anger.

"Yeah, we had a big fight. I threw him out and that's the end of it," she explained.

"Do you want to talk about it? Your father won't be home for a few more hours and I don't have to start dinner..."

"No. I'd rather not. It wasn't very pleasant."

"Okay. Well, that's no reason to stay up here. There's plenty of fish in the sea, and you're not going to get any if you stay up here and read all the time."

"It's just that I don't feel like going out right now. I'd rather stay here," Chantress said.

"Well, I'm here if you need me," her mother said.

Chantress went back to *Millennium*, but she could not comprehend what she was reading - her mind was an angry, burning fire. It had been smoldering since Kyle raped her. She had tried to put the entire experience out of her mind, but the fire would not go out - it smoldered somewhere hidden in the depths of her mind and heart burning a hole in

her sanity, her goodness, her very being. All of her love and decency were transformed into hate and evil like a burning piece of wood is turned into worthless ash after it burns. She put the book down and cried. She cried for herself because she didn't want to become hateful and malevolent like the people she left in the cult. There was enough evil in the world and she didn't want to add to it.

She wiped her burning eyes and began to read the chapter on the coming of the third Antichrist. The first Antichrist, according to Nostradamus and historical accounts, was Napoleon, the second was Hitler, and the third was still unknown. Nostradamus predicted the third Antichrist would appear during the 20th century. She read Nostradamus' eighth century, 77th quatrain:

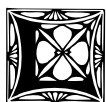
*The third Antichrist very soon
annihilated
Twenty-seven years his bloody war
will last:
The heretics are dead, captives, exiled
Blood soaked human bodies, water,
and a reddened
icy rain covering the entire earth.*

What does all that mean? she thought. She continued reading Nostradamus' second century, 62nd quatrain.

*Mabus will soon die, then will come
A horrible slaughter of people and
animals,
At once vengeance is revealed coming
from a hundred lands.
Thirst, and famine when the comet
will pass.*

She sat back in horror. An icy chill ran down her spine and numbed her very existence. She shivered in fear. She closed the book and sat there staring into the blank wall not wanting to believe the horror she thought she knew. Kyle's last name was Mabus and as far as she was concerned his spirit had already died.

The Nightmare - Chapter 28



Linda stepped out of the shower and dried off with a white towel - a souvenir of the Holiday Inn in Bermuda, where she and Carson spent ten days on their honeymoon. The towel always reminded her of the honeymoon - the hot, white beaches, burning, ocher sunsets and plenty of good food and happy music played by equally happy Bermudian men and women. She remembered it as a happy, beautiful place. She held the towel close to her as if the memories passed through the towel and into her mind. When she had finished, she hung the towel back in its rack to dry, and then put on a light blue, quilted housecoat that zippered in the front - a gift from Carson's mother.

"You'll need it, honey," she recalled Carson's mother saying when she received the gift last Christmas. "Winters are cold here and it will suit you well in this old, drafty house. I've had one all my life."

Linda forced a smile as she unfolded it from the box and held it up for all to see. *How frumpy*, she thought. *I'll never wear it. Maybe I can give it to my sister.* Carson also forced a smile and looked at Linda. When their eyes met, they both knew each other's thoughts. Linda thanked her mother-in-law and later that evening placed the housecoat on the top of a shelf in their clothing closet out of reach. About a week later, a cold front from Canada settled into the area bringing with it twenty-degree weather. A wind came out of the northeast creating a wind-chill factor of seventeen below zero. Linda had the thermostat up to 90 degrees that

evening, but the house remained cold and drafty. She went into her clothes closet for a sweater, but couldn't quite reach one on the top shelf. Her fumbling caused the housecoat to tumble down onto her head. She stared at the pile of material, then picked it up, and tried it on. She was surprised by its warmth and comfort. She had worn it ever since.

The wind whipped off the ocean this night and carried with it a dampness that made the air much colder. The powerful wind hit the old Victorian house rattling the loosened clapboards and putting Linda on edge. She hated when the wind blew off the ocean - it made the house very drafty and cold, and the noise from the loose boards made her feel vulnerable to the violence outside. If there had been a prowler outside, she would never hear him. And she hated when Carson had to work all night. He wouldn't be home until nine the next morning and then he would go to sleep after a few hours and not awake until dinnertime. She wouldn't see him all day since she had to be at her teaching job at eight. She would miss him.

Linda walked down the straight, creaking flight of stairs to the living room and picked up the channel guide. She thumbed through a few pages, checked the listings, and turned on the TV. She flipped through a few channels as she had flipped through the pages of the guide. She wasn't particularly interested in watching TV. She picked up the book she had started the other night. It was *No Greater Love* by Danielle Steel, her favorite author. She read romance novels like a chain smoker - one right after another. She had hoped to write her own one day, but she wanted to have children first and be there for her husband when he needed her. Each time her friends and family prodded her to start one the words would not flow. She knew it wasn't time yet, and sometimes she wondered if the time would ever come when she felt a great need to express her passions, her emotions, her inner being. She knew that inspiration could not be turned on and off like a light. It came like a dream - unexpected and random. She had no inspiration to write a romance novel; she needed to read them; she needed to start a family, and she needed to take care of Carson. Perhaps, she read them because she secretly wanted her life to be like the heroines portrayed in those steamy books. Maybe she wanted to be alive in the days when men were men and ladies were ladies when women were not treated as equals, but were placed on high pedestals and remained there. Perhaps, as farfetched as it sounded, she had lived in another era in another life. Perhaps, she had been one of those women, who lived during the Victorian age, who was pampered with the mores of the day. She loved things from the past - antiques, old clothing, and vintage jewelry.

Perhaps, it was her way of escaping the loneliness of a doctor's wife, of escaping the empty nights, the enduring solitude. She grew tired of thinking of her situation.

She sat down on the colonial sofa with its blue and pink flora-pattern and opened the book. She plucked her bookmark out of Chapter 4 and began reading. A few minutes later, she felt a draft on her neck. She moved to the other side of the sofa and resumed reading, but the draft seemed to follow her. She endured for a few minutes until she began to shiver. She got up and walked over to the window facing the ocean. She pushed the mauve drapes aside and checked the window latch. It was open because the window would not shut all the way - decades of paint layers and a rusty pulley system inside the window frame made it stubborn to close. She looked at the bottom of the frame and saw the window was open only a quarter of an inch or so, but that was enough for a draft to get through and waft around the room. She put all of her 115 pounds on the window frame, but the window did not move. She tried several times until she was out of breath. She went into the hallway linen closet, and pulled out a towel, rolled it up, and placed it on the windowsill to stop the wind. She also took an Afghan from the closet that was a gift from one of Carson's aunts in New Hampshire and covered herself with it as she lay down on the sofa.

Several hours later, Linda put the book down on her chest and fell asleep to the howling wind and constant tapping of the loose clapboards. She slept soundly. Suddenly she heard the window open and saw several figures climb through it. They were dressed in red and black robes with hoods over their heads. They moved closer and closer, seemingly swallowing her in the darkness that followed them. She tried to scream, but nothing came out. She screamed in silence. Then there was nothing. Occasionally she thought she saw figures hovering over her holding red and black candles and her fear mounted. She heard a ringing, but it lasted only a few seconds, then there was nothing. She felt something tugging at her arm, opened her eyes, and saw Carson's face. She could not focus on his eyes.

"What are you still doing here on the sofa? Are you sick? It's ten and Mrs. Vanderbilt called three times. Do you feel ok? You've really overslept."

"What time is it?" Linda replied. "Why are you so blurry? Oh, my head..."

Carson put his hand on her head.

"You don't have a fever. You'd better stay home just in case you're getting something. I'll make you some tea and call Mrs. Vanderbilt," Carson said.

"Oh, yeah. School...damn," she replied.

Linda sat up and felt like a thousand drummers were inside of her head. She kept blinking trying to focus. A sliver of fear swam around in her stomach as she still could not focus. Carson went into the kitchen and called Mrs. Vanderbilt, the principal of Linda's school. He hung up the phone, and then put a chromed teapot on the stove. He waited several seconds for the gas to ignite and then he went back to her.

"You know. You didn't give me a kiss when you came in. Did you forget?" Linda said as he approached her.

"Oh. I just didn't expect to see you here when I got home," he replied.

He bent down and kissed her gently on the lips, and then wrapped his arms around her.

"I missed you and I'm glad you're home," he said. "But I was worried when I saw you."

"I missed you, too. I wish you didn't have to work all night," she said.

"Me, too. It'll be over sooner than you think," he said. "What is that you have on? It smells like antiseptic," he said.

"I don't know," she said.

"It smells like ether," he replied.

"Well, I assure you Doctor Carson Hyll, I haven't been hitting the furniture polish while you were away," she said jokingly and put her arms around him a second time.

They hugged for several minutes, but Carson was still curious about the hospital-like odor.

"Want to make a baby? Come on, let's go make a baby," Linda said and got up from the couch pulling Carson by his hand.

When she stood up, she collapsed. Carson quickly caught her and pulled her back onto the sofa.

"I feel drunk, Carson," she said. "Oh, my head. I feel like I didn't sleep all night."

"Come on. You're going right to bed. Put your arm around my neck," he told her. "You need to rest."

"I want to take a shower - that will wake me up. I'll be all right after the shower," Linda protested.

"Sure. You're going to take a shower, fall and crack your skull open on the tub and then bleed to death while I have breakfast," Carson said. "You're going to bed. Doctor's orders."

Carson put Linda to bed and turned on the TV in their bedroom.

"Now you can watch all those silly daytime shows," he said smiling.

"Yes, doctor."

Carson brought her tea in a white mug covered with many colored balloons.

"How come every time you bring me tea you bring in it that cup?" she said smiling. "You like that cup or something?"

"I just want to remind you what a great person you are," he replied. "Make you feel better."

He took off his hospital greens and snuggled under the covers next to Linda. He fell asleep within minutes. Linda awoke a couple hours later and tried to salvage the day. She felt a lot better and decided to take a shower.

"Carson! Carson!"

Carson jumped out of bed his heart beating like a hummingbird. The sleep in his body washed away like a sandcastle hit by a raging wave. Linda sat on the toilet in tears.

"What is this!" she said pointing to her inner thigh of her left leg.

Carson saw three symbols about two inches high on her thigh - a diamond flanked by two inverted C's. The symbol was made with a felt marker.

"What?" he bent down to get a closer look and then he ran his fingers over the letters.

"Damn!" he said.

"I had a nightmare last night that people came in the window in the living room - the one that's hard to close," she said trembling.

Carson ran down the stairs to the window and drew back the drapes. Linda followed.

"What's this?" Carson said and picked up the towel off the floor.

Linda looked on in horror. Carson turned and felt her fear pierce him like a thousand razor blades.

"Oh, baby. What's the matter?" he said taking her into his arms.

"I put...put that towel on the window to keep the draft out!" Linda said.

"Wind probably blew it off. It was gusty last night," he said.

"It's a pretty heavy towel," Linda said.

"Wind blew it off," he said.

The Detective - Chapter 29



etective Nick Vancuso was on his way to his home in Little Silver after an all night drug-related stakeout in Asbury Park when he decided to drive through Ocean Village and catch a glimpse of the ocean. He was frustrated, tired, and wished he could jump out of his body because of the constant, dull pain in his joints and muscles, but he figured the ocean air might invigorate him. The stakeout had been a washout - bad information or someone got tipped off. He hated to be unproductive, and especially having to chase leads that went nowhere. He wondered at times how he lasted fifteen years in the police business and had made head detective of a special task force on violent crimes. He was the best detective in the county with the highest number of arrests and convictions and he had the awards to prove it. He was a survivor of New York City.

"If you could work in New York, you could work anywhere," his chief told him when he was a rookie starting out in the 23rd Precinct. After he had married an Irish girl - Katy McFadden - from his neighborhood in the Bronx, and after the second child was born, the couple decided they wanted to move to the "country." To Nick, the "country" was anywhere outside of the city, where they had grass and trees that covered more than one lot.

They settled in Woodbridge, a rapidly growing community right off the New Jersey Turnpike. All of their friends said they had moved to a

farm. Nick had chosen the location because it was where his car had broken down, and the area was not too much "country," he told his friends. The couple purchased a small two-bedroom house in a newly developed subdivision, and Nick joined the Woodbridge Police Department. They welcomed him warmly since it was rare that they would get someone of Nick's caliber. Nick considered the police department amateurish compared to the sophisticated techniques used in New York City at the time, but the crime rate was considerably lower so it didn't matter. Eventually, he brought those new techniques to the department long before they became commonplace among police departments across the country. He rose to the rank of detective very rapidly because of his expertise and knowledge. He was very happy - recognized as an outstanding professional in his field, a loving husband and a good father. Then one night it all changed. A tractor-trailer driver had fallen asleep and his truck drifted across the center of the highway slamming head on into Katy's car killing her instantly along with his eight-year-old son, Matthew and ten-year-old daughter, Constance. Nick didn't know life could be so cruel. He had seen plenty of life's tragedies on his job - enough for a hundred lifetimes, but this was far worse. A year later, he quit the force, sold his house and moved to Little Silver so he could be near the water. The water seemed to soothe his pain somewhat. He joined the Middletown Police Department as a detective and he worked all the time. Soon his coworkers nicknamed him detect-a-holic.

"Don't you ever rest?" his commanding officer asked him one night when the shift was over.

"Crime never rests," Nick replied. "Besides, I don't have much to do at home anyway."

"There's more to life than this job, Nick. Why don't you come down to the pub with us tonight and have a few?"

"Thanks. But, I'm afraid there isn't much for me except this job."

"Nick, you can't go on punishing yourself for Katy's death. You have to go on - live a little," the older, burly man said.

"I know, but I don't want to. This job is all I need right now," Nick said.

"Okay, but I think you're missing a lot. Take care and don't stay too late!"

The police radio in his car suddenly came to life and the dispatcher barked out an all-car bulletin about a possible break in and entering.

Nick glanced at the GPS unit on the dashboard and slammed on his brakes.

"Jesus! That's right there!" he said to himself. He turned the red Chrysler Crossfire around and pulled up to the address on the GPS display. He didn't fit the sleek, sporty look of the car with his receding hairline and gray tweed sport jacket. He had shed his New York City, stereotypical image of a dumb Italian years ago, who spoke with "da's" and who wore an over abundance of gold chains around his neck and a gold ring on every finger.

Nick picked up the microphone and told headquarters he was taking the call.

"You're nuts, Vancuso! Go home and get some sleep. This is a job for a uniformed," Charlie, the dispatcher, gawked back at him.

"I'm right in front of the house now. I'm taking it. Send a uniformed as a backup," Nick barked back. "Besides it's my way of salvaging a bad night."

He got out of the car sucked in his aging and slightly protruding gut and walked up to the porch of Linda and Carson's Victorian house. A wave of sadness washed over him - the house reminded him of a life he once had - a life, which seemed like it was hundreds of years ago. A crisp, clean breeze whipped off the ocean, and its coldness bit into his face like an invisible hand that had just slapped him. He rang the doorbell and waited. A few seconds later, a tired man in his mid thirties opened the door.

"I'm Detective Vancuso," he said holding his wallet badge up to Carson's face.

Nick suddenly felt a tinge of regret for taking the call - this kind of call was way out of his league. A uniformed, beat cop would normally handle such a call. He had handled many such calls years ago when he first joined the force.

"Come in," Carson said, opening the door wider. "I'm Carson Hyll." He was too tired to notice that a detective had responded to the call.

Nick walked in and instantly scanned the surroundings without being obvious, and then he looked at Carson with a questionable look on his face.

"Come in here," Carson said leading Nick through the long foyer and into the small living room.

"This is my wife, Linda," Carson said.

"Glad to meet you," Nick said. He stopped and stared at her. Linda shifted on the chair. Nick continued to stare at the young woman. She could be his wife's twin.

"We believe we had intruders here last night. My wife thought she was having a dream, but now we know it wasn't..." Carson said.

Nick said nothing and continued to stare at Linda.

"Excuse me, detective!" Carson said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry. Your wife looks like someone I knew," he said sheepishly. "What did you say?"

"We think the intruders came in through that window," Carson said pointing to the east window.

"How do you know?" Nick said cutting him off.

"The window can't be locked because it's old. Linda couldn't close it all the way last night and put a towel on the sill to keep a draft out. This morning the towel was on the floor."

"So? A gust of wind could have blown it off," Nick said. He felt a bit smug since this call was just a routine complaint. This was too easy. Maybe, he should have taken the dispatcher's advice, he thought.

"We thought of that except when Linda woke up this morning she found something," Carson said.

Linda pulled the one leg of her shorts up revealing the strange symbol painted on her inner thigh. Nick's eyes widened. He approached her and bent over to get closer look. Linda moved back on her chair and put the shorts down.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to get a closer look," Nick said.

"Have you seen this before?" Carson asked.

"Yeah, I have," Nick said and rolled his eyes slightly. "Can I see it again?"

Linda slowly pulled up her shorts and revealed the diamond flanked by two inverted Cs. Nick looked at it with renewed interest. Linda watched his changing eyes.

"What it is?" Linda said alarmed.

Nick stood up and faced Carson. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, but they were overshadowed by dread. Carson did not notice the

change. Nick did not want to look Linda in the eye and say what he had to say, but Linda knew that something was wrong.

"The symbol is Satanic...from a cult."

"Oh, God! What does it mean?" Linda screamed.

"It means...it means that they have designated you as Satan's bride and that you have been chosen to have the Devil's baby," Nick explained his voice cracking and losing volume. He seemed to have a large dust ball in his throat.

"Oh, no!" Linda screamed and burst into tears.

Carson went to her.

"I was afraid of that," Carson said.

Nick waited for Linda to calm down.

"I've seen this before...several years ago. What's strange about it is that it's usually a voluntary thing. A girl volunteers to have the Devil's baby and she usually tattoos or paints this symbol on herself. Can I talk to you alone, Mr. Hyll?" Nick said and turned to leave.

"We can go into the kitchen," Carson said.

Carson pulled a chair and sat down at the small kitchen table. Nick did the same.

"Do you know if your wife is involved in such a cult? This kind of thing can go on without the spouse knowing - they are very secretive and very adept at hiding. Does she go out at different times at night?"

"No. She goes to work, comes home, goes food shopping - nothing out of the ordinary," Carson explained. "Besides, you said the woman usually volunteers for it. Why would she be so petrified about it if she were in a cult? Why would she bring attention to herself if she was trying to hide her membership?"

"You have a point there, but I wouldn't put it past these bastards to come up with some kind of scheme. They are really clever sons of bitches," Nick explained.

Carson frowned.

"You really think so? I know my wife better than anyone. I think you're full of shit," Carson said standing up.

"Listen. Do you remember the Harmon murder a few years ago in Little Silver?"

"I didn't live here then," Carson said.

"Well, it happened on the street next to mine. Good old Bobby Harmon. He was a typical teenager from a typical Catholic family. He went to Catholic school. He cut lawns in the summer and shoveled driveways in the winter for extra cash - an all-American kid, except for one thing. He got involved in a cult. The son of bitches convinced him that he had to kill his parents to reach Satan. This is the ultimate test for Satanism to disown your parents, to relinquish their love, the family and everything that's good. I was one of the first detectives on the scene...I found his mother in the basement...she was lying face down in her own blood and vomit. Her nose had been cut off, her eyes were gouged out and her cheeks carved up. He also stabbed her 28 times in the chest and then smashed her skull in with a hammer. Her hands were also cut off. Then he tried to kill his father with a baseball bat while he was sleeping. Luckily, the father woke up seconds before the fatal blow and moved out of the way. The brutality was enough to make even me sick. We knew that this kid was capable of anything so we organized a manhunt, but we didn't find the kid until the next day. He went into the woods and cut his own throat, all in the name of the Devil. We found all kinds of stuff in his room...books, pamphlets, DVDs. We investigated for about year trying to find the cult and track these sickos down, but found nothing. You still think I'm full of shit - I'll get you the damn police report! I don't know who did this to your wife, but there are two kinds of Satanists - the traditional, who condemn anything illegal and openly worship the Devil in their own churches, and the outlaw Satanists, who form secretive cults and use sex and drugs and everything else to lure teens and whoever else into the group. They usually target teens because they are highly rebellious, and the most destructive. They convince these poor kids to literally do anything," Nick explained. "I'd bet we have one of the outlaw cults involved in this."

Carson was silent. He stared at the detective in a daze.

"Now, is there a time that she could go out and you wouldn't know about it?"

"Yeah," Carson said meekly. "I'm a doctor and many times I work all night, but if she's a Satanist, I'm Albert Einstein."

"I'm not convinced your wife is a member of any cult judging by the way she reacted, but I wouldn't put anything past them. Do you have any dealings with them or did you cross one of them in any way?"

"No. I'm a doctor. I work with other doctors and nurses," he said. "What do you take me for?"

"Listen, everyone is a suspect when it comes to them. Like I said, they are very clever," Nick shot back.

"So what are you going to do?" Carson said.

"I'm going to take this case," Nick said rising from his chair. "Don't touch the window. I'll send CSI to dust for prints. After that, fix the window so it locks, and keep the rest of your house locked at all times. I might suggest getting a big dog or an alarm system. And keep your eyes open."

Carson was silent. They walked to the door.

"One more thing," Nick said as he stepped onto the front porch. "Try to think about anybody you might have pissed off recently. Satanists come in all shapes and forms and some of them are doctors and nurses."

The Enigma - Chapter 30



Helen had asked Stokes to take care of funeral arrangements and to check her husband's car for any possessions. She was too distraught over Henry Graber's fiery death to do it herself. Besides, she had no one else to turn to because Henry's one brother was dead, and the couple's two daughters were equally upset. Stokes reluctantly accepted knowing in his mind that it would be almost as painful for him as it would be for Helen. He had told Helen he would free up some time and do it as soon as possible.

It was the following Monday when Stokes drove to a Gulf service station near where Henry had the fatal accident to view the car. Helen had said she did not have the courage to see the car that her husband was killed in - the wake and funeral were hard enough. Stokes pulled up to the run down, dirty station - even the large orange and white sign towering above the roof of the square building looked greasy from lack of cleaning. The front of the building consisted of two large square windows separated by an equally dirty glass door. The inside of the windows had years of nicotine, soot and dirt layered on their surfaces. When one glimpsed through them, it was like looking through a fog.

Stokes pushed open the door and walked in. An unshaven man wearing soiled blue work pants and a matching blue shirt talked on a grease smudged beige telephone. *Why would they have a light-colored phone in a place like this? Why not black or brown so you couldn't see the*

grease marks? Stokes thought. The man talked with a burning cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth. He squinted now and then as the curling smoke touched his eyes and caused them to water. *It was strange,* Stokes thought. The man knew that the cigarette smoke would burn his eyes, yet he still held onto the cigarette instead of putting it out. The man finished his conversation, hung up the phone, and looked up through red teary eyes at Stokes.

"I'm here for Henry Graber's stuff. I was sent by his widow to get his personal items out of his car. It was a Chevy - the one that burned," Stokes said.

"Oh yeah. It's in the back. I don't think there's much to get from the looks of it," the man said.

"Yeah."

Stokes left the messy office and walked around to the back of the building to a chain link fence. He pushed the gate open and headed towards Henry's car in the back of the yard. When he viewed the violence of the accident - the twisted, rusted metal, the broken glass, the charred and blackened interior - his chest began to heave and he had a hard time holding back the tears. The wrecked car made the reality of Henry's death even more real and believable, and now he knew why this would be too painful for Helen. He walked up to the rear of the car, and pulled up on the paintless trunk. It was stuck. He exerted more force and it popped open. He spotted a metal toolbox, a small flashlight, and a few road flares tucked away in one of the corners. He took the items out and placed them on the ground next to the car. Then he walked over to the driver's side and pulled on the door several times until it opened. He looked around the inside of the car and determined that anything that was here would be either melted or turned to ash. He went back to the trunk for a last look, and noticed the light brown, short hair scattered over a small black rug. Some lay in balled clumps. He determined it was dog hair by its coarse feel and length. It puzzled him because he knew that Henry didn't own a dog. *Perhaps, he had bought one that day, but why would he put it in the trunk?* Stokes thought. He gathered the few items he had found in the trunk and left. When he arrived at Henry's house, he asked Helen if Henry had a dog or was thinking of purchasing one.

"Not that I know of. He didn't say he wanted a dog, although a dog would have been nice to keep us company and add some life to this house," she explained.

"Do you think he would have purchased one without telling you?" Stokes asked.

"No. Henry wasn't like that. He would always tell me about things like that. He always wanted to include me in anything he did..." she broke off and began to cry.

"He was a good man and a good friend," Stokes said. "I placed the few items from the car in the garage. I have to get back."

"Oh, thank you so much Matthew. You are truly a good friend," she said grasping his hand. "I'm so happy you did this for me."

"It was nothing at all. If you need anything else just call."

She escorted him out the door, and then stood in the doorway and watched him pull away. He drove back to the hospital with the weight of his grief bearing down. It was hard to believe Henry was gone and the worst part of it was that it was so sudden. If he had contracted an illness and was dying, one could slowly adjust to the fact that he would die one day, and one could prepare for the inevitable. The car accident was a shock and a waste of life because he was a perfectly healthy and functional man. Many deaths were a waste of life, but it just seemed more acceptable when a man died of old age because he had his share of life - he had had his turn. Life was not fair or equitable.

The dog hairs troubled Stokes like a tiny voice hidden beneath all of his grief. It intrigued him because he didn't understand why he was distressed by it. Why should his mind place so much importance on it - it could have been a neighbor's dog that had jumped into the trunk. It could be anything at all and of no importance, but Stokes' mind lingered on the enigma.

He arrived at the hospital within minutes and when he entered his office he found a large, white envelope on his desk. He opened it and saw it was the autopsy on Henry Graber. He had a few minutes before the board of trustees meeting so he read it quickly and then called Carson. Carson was sitting in his office at the new lab when he felt a vibrating sensation at his hip. He looked at his cell phone and smiled. He opened the phone and said hello, but there was nothing. He pressed the redial button.

"Hello, this is Doctor Stokes," the voice said.

"Hello, doctor, this is Carson. You called me?" Carson said.

"Oh, yeah, I've got to talk to you, but I can't now. Why don't Linda and you plan on dinner at my house around seven tonight," Stokes said.

"Okay, I'll call Linda and hopefully she's got nothing planned."

"Great. I'll see you around seven. Now I have to go," Stokes said and hung up.

Carson looked at the phone and frowned because he knew that whatever Linda had planned had to be canceled. Stokes voice had a tone of urgency in it and Carson knew this could not be postponed to a later date. He dialed her cell phone hoping she had left it on. She was supposed to turn it off while in class. It rang several times.

"Hi," he said. "Can you talk?"

"Well, this is a surprise. Did you call me to ask me out?" Linda said.

"As a matter of fact I did. I was wondering if you were busy tonight?"

"Maybe," she said.

"Well, I would like to ask you out to dinner at Doctor Stokes' house."

"No, I have to wash my hair and I'll probably have a headache by then."

"Sure you will. I'll just have to ask someone else, that's all."

"Do that and I'll break your legs," Linda said laughing.

"He just called and invited us to dinner. He said he has something important to tell me."

"Okay, what time?"

"Seven."

"Pick me up at 6:45 and don't be late," she said.

"I'll be there."

"So how's your first day at the lab?"

"Oh, it's ok. I'm in charge of scheduling shifts, payroll, and quality control. I have to make sure every job that comes in from one of our doctors gets priority over the others. It's a far call from neurology, but I figure it will help us save some money," Carson said. "Besides, after the first year if I don't want to manage it I don't have to."

"I'm glad you like it," she said.

"I feel important, too. Like a team player, you know, one of the guys, and especially with Doctor Stokes. He's included me on everything

concerning the Hellfire Syndrome. I'm sort of under his wing. It's great."

"I always knew you were good at what you did. I'm proud of you. I love you, Carson."

"I love you, too."

Mary - Chapter 31



ary loved when company came to her house. She had never held a job since marrying Matthew and spent all of her time decorating their large, 13-room, restored Victorian mansion. The house was once featured in *House and Garden* magazine and it was considered a landmark in the town. Mary became an instant celebrity when the article was published and soon every interior decorator in the area had called offering her a job. Others wanted to hire her as a consultant, but she declined them all since she had no interest in decorating other people's homes. Besides, she would have to trek to all of these homes and she had never obtained a driver's license. There was never a need to go anywhere - Matthew took care of everything and Mary was content to arrange, and rearrange the decor of her home, and to try new recipes on her husband. When Matthew began to gain weight she called a nutritionist at the hospital and learned how to make meals low in fat and low in cholesterol. She was fully devoted to her husband. She loved to cook and impress visitors with her gourmet delicacies.

Suddenly, several lights in the house began to blink. Mary rushed into the kitchen. On a tiny shelf next to the phone was an Apple laptop computer. She pressed the return key and the screen lit up. And Instant Message screen appeared with Stokes headshot in the left hand corner. She watched it like an excited child.

"Hi, Mary, I've invited Doctor Carson Hyll and his wife, Linda, for dinner tonight. They will arrive around seven. Is that ok with you?"

Mary's eyes lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. She typed back,

"Wonderful. I love you."

Stokes typed,

"I love you, too. I will be home at six. Bye."

The news brightened Mary's day. This was her chance to shine and she loved it. She instantly planned to bake an apple pie and make Chicken Vienna from a recipe she obtained from an international cookbook she had borrowed from the local library. She would bring out the best china and the best silverware, and there would be long white tapered candles rising up from antique silver holders in the middle of the table. Luckily, she and Matthew had done the week's shopping the day before so there was plenty of fresh food in the house.

* * *

Carson and Linda arrived a few minutes after seven and were greeted at the door by Stokes. Stokes brought them into the kitchen to meet Mary. She was washing a few pots at the sink and Stokes tapped her on shoulder. She turned and instantly beamed a smile to Carson and Linda. Her grandmotherly ambience instantly warmed the room.

"This is my beloved Mary," Stokes said and then he began moving his fingers in sign language to introduce Carson and Linda.

Mary moved forward, grabbed Linda's hand with both hands, and shook them. Then she did the same to Carson smiling the whole time.

"Let me help. What can I do?" Linda asked.

"Nothing," Mary replied in the unique pronunciation indicative of people who learned how to speak without ever hearing the spoken language. "Go. Sit. Relax. Everything is done."

Stokes led them into the study, a dark mahogany paneled room with a wall of books on one side. Carson and Linda sat in a burgundy-leathered loveseat across from Stokes' matching lounge chair.

Carson felt a bit closer to Stokes when he entered the room because he had always felt that the inside of a person's house was a window into their mind, their personality, their attitudes, their entire being. It was the ultimate personal statement about a person. One saw the workings of

one's mind inside a person's home. If they were neat and orderly, you knew they were organized, efficient and ambitious. If the home was untidy, but clean, you knew that person was more creative than most and dwelled on higher issues in life rather than putting things in their rightful places. If the home was dirty and unkempt, then that person was lazy and had low self-esteem. If a person's house was not in order, how could their lives be in order? Carson knew it was a broad generalization and didn't apply to everyone, but the generalizations served as a starting point for reading people. One would usually find a mix of all the generalizations in most people - a strange balance.

"Can I get you something to drink," Stokes offered.

"No, thanks," Linda said.

"I'll have a beer," Carson said.

Stokes left and returned with two beer glasses filled with the golden, bubbly liquid.

"So what's going on?" Carson asked taking a sip from the tall, tapered glass.

"Complications..." Stokes said looking at Carson and frowning.

"Your house is lovely," Linda added.

"Thank you. We are comfortable here."

Within a few minutes, Mary came in and motioned that dinner was ready. The dining room had a warm green glow from the ornate wallpaper, oak chair rails and brass and crystal chandelier. The chairs were original Chippendales with a matching mahogany table large enough to seat eight. A white linen tablecloth covered the table and the place settings were formal with an array of gold flatware and cloth napkins. Mary placed a large platter with the Chicken Vienna on the table along with a bowl of brown rice and another platter of corn on the cob glistening with melted butter.

"Wow, this is fantastic!" Carson said.

"Very lovely. Do you need help, Mary?" Linda asked.

Mary shook her head and motioned for them to sit.

"Mary grew the corn herself in our garden," Stokes added.

"That's wonderful," Linda said.

"Fresh corn on the cob; I haven't had it in years," Carson said.

Linda gave him a look.

After dinner, Stokes and Carson went into study with sniffers of cognac and Linda helped Mary clear off the table, and make coffee.

"So what is this new complication?" Carson asked while settling into a leather recliner.

"Henry Graber was not killed in a car accident," Stokes said after taking a sip. "An animal of some sort ripped his throat open. There was hardly any blood left in the body and the burnt remains indicated that the flesh had been torn. The medical examiner ruled it might have been caused by glass from the windshield or some other projectile. I think it was a dog."

"A dog?" Carson nearly shouted.

Stokes gestured in a downward motion with his hand telling Carson to lower his voice.

"I found hair in the trunk and had it analyzed. It belonged to a Doberman Pinscher and a German Shepherd," Stokes said softly.

"What would he be doing with dogs?"

"I don't know."

Carson looked around the room. Stokes noticed a sudden sparkle in his eye.

"Speaking of dogs...that reminds me...did you ever find out who put the dead dogs in the incinerator bins?" Carson said.

Both froze instantly and their eyes locked. They stared at each other in disbelief.

"I don't believe it!"

"What kind of car did Graber have?" Carson asked.

"A black Chevy."

"It had to be him!" Carson said. "It all fits."

"What would Henry be doing with a couple of dead dogs?"

Carson looked away. He knew what he had to say, but he wasn't sure how to say it. The revelation was turning into a nightmare. He took a deep breath.

"Satanism. Those dogs' throats were cut clean," Carson explained. "Nobody kills a dog that way, not the pounds, not the vets, no one. Only

the cults do it that way. They use the dogs as sacrifices to the devil. They cut their throats so they can get the blood quickly and sip it while it's still warm. They sacrifice the dogs in pairs."

"You're making me sick!" Stokes said putting his snifter down on the cherry wood end table next to his chair. "How do you know about this anyway?"

"I'm from New Hampshire, remember?" he said. "Cults in New England are as common as lobsters in Maine. Many are harmless, but this one isn't because once they graduate from dogs, they go after humans. I had suspected that it might be a Satanist cult, but I wasn't sure until now."

"I still don't believe Henry was involved in something so foul. He was one of the most religious men I knew - an outstanding member of the community."

"A perfect cover. No one would ever suspect him."

"But, why?"

"Because religion did not satisfy his needs...did not give him what he needed, so he turned to the only alternative that seemed logical. I think the church let him down at some point and he lost faith. It could also be that he was after power," Carson explained.

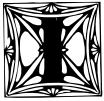
"I don't know. I just don't know. I knew him my whole life," Stokes said. "What should we do?"

"I'm calling Detective Vancuso," Carson said.

"Who's that?"

"He's investigating the break-in at my house and he thinks a cult may be involved."

The Garden - Chapter 32



In her garden, Mary's mind drifted with the wind - a funnel of memories that streamed into her consciousness one after another at lightning speed. The funnel of memories was endless and she thought it was a bit strange that almost all of her most pleasant memories were recalled with such vivid detail at this time. Her thoughts scared her as she pulled up willowy green weeds and trimmed her overly healthy rose bushes.

She loved the garden - it gave her a sense of accomplishment and purpose. Like her cooking, it gave meaning to her life as she gave life to the plants and flowers that struggled to make their way out of the dark, cold earth. She worked slowly feeling her energy run down as the day grew older. She wore a large floppy straw hat to keep the sun off her face and out of her eyes because her skin had become extremely sensitive to the sun in her later years. She wore a light cotton, long-sleeved shirt and baggy blue jeans. The only part of her body exposed to the sun was the back of her neck. A light breeze kept her neck cool so she didn't notice the intensity of the sun's rays and the sunburn she was receiving at the nape of her neck.

The kaleidoscope of memories continued as if she were in a dream state. The first date with Matthew suddenly streamed into her consciousness. They had grown up on the same street only several houses apart on Acorn Drive in the nearby coastal town of Atlantic

Highlands. They said the street got its name from the rows of large oak trees that lined the street and eventually dropped hundreds of acorns each spring covering the sidewalks. They had occasionally played together as children in the early and mid 1950s, but never took notice of each other until high school. He was on the football team and she was in the Literary Club.

Mary felt very tired and walked to the far corner of the yard and sat down in the teak settee under the giant maple tree - her favorite place. A cool, gentle breeze whipped her face as she settled down on the settee. The tree made her feel safe - the large stately branches protected her against the evils of the world. She loved the old shade tree. It was one of her few cherished things. Like she had done always, she leaned her head against tree on this day and closed her eyes. Its 85-year-old bark served as an anchor in the world. She dozed into a peaceful sleep, and dreamt she was back at her high school football stadium. The smells and sounds of the nearby locker room drifted towards the bleachers, where Mary and her friend, Dolores, sat waiting for the team to come out after their showers. The locker room smelled of stale sweat, worn leather, disinfectant and soap. The players dripped out sporadically and Mary kept a keen eye for Matthew. When he emerged - his black hair shiny and clean and slicked to his powerful head - Mary always stood up and waved. Matthew would approach and when he was close enough, he would always ask the same question.

"Hi, Mary," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Just thought I'd say hello," Mary said twitching with embarrassment.

"Well. Hello," Matthew replied with a large smile.

"Hello."

"There's a dance Friday night," Matthew said hesitating.

Several moments passed, and then he spoke again.

"Would you like to go?"

"I'd love to!" Mary said jumping up from the bench.

"Great! I'll pick you..." Matthew said, but his voice suddenly lost its volume and faded away. Suddenly, she began to float upward away from Matthew like a wisp of smoke. She reached out towards him, but she could not reach him. He stared up at her in disbelief and sadness. She began to cry for only a moment and then felt a tremendous peace flow through her consciousness - a peace without conditions, a peace she knew was not fleeting.

Matthew and the football field vanished into a darkness that swallowed her completely. She found herself rocketing through space, traveling at what she thought was immense distances in only seconds. Then a light began to appear below her. A strange green pattern formed that moved back and forth, horizontally. The pattern appeared out of focus, and then slowly became recognizable - it was the top of the old maple tree swaying back and forth from a slight breeze. A figure appeared under the tree - it was her, asleep, curled up on the settee and looking content. She wondered how she could be floating above her own body. She no longer felt part of it. It was someone else's body now, she thought. She floated for several moments until a gust of wind seemed to swirl off the top of the tree and move towards her. She could feel a tiny wisp of a breeze move over her and flow harder past her. Then it turned into a great wind and suddenly there was an explosion of sound. She could hear again! She could hear the wind rushing past, the sweet deep melody of her backyard wind chime and the chirps of several birds. An inner peace and great wisdom overwhelmed her and she tried to reach out toward the old maple tree and the singing birds, but her arms would not respond. Suddenly, the wind increased again and pulled her away from the old maple tree, and she tried to resist, but the wind was stronger. It pulled and crushed her at the same time. The maple tree vanished and she sensed being pulled downward at tremendous speed. A tiny flickering orange light appeared below her and slowly became larger and brighter. The light reflected off the walls of a dark tunnel covered in stringy, translucent arms that whipped out towards her as she descended. She lunged toward the wall and stretched her arms out as far as she could to stop her falling, but she couldn't reach the wall. As she moved closer to the glowing orange light, she could feel the heat and her skin beginning to burn. At first, the pain was like severe sunburn, but as she was thrust closer, the burning increased. The pain became unbearable and there was no escape. Then she stopped moving and found herself standing on a rim of a pool of red-hot molten liquid. Several beings oozed out of the hot liquid - they were black and resembled human forms, but changed shape constantly as their skin blistered and oozed, reformed, and deformed. Their large bulbous eyes were filled with pain and horror. The figures floated out of the red-hot pool and landed next to her. They stood on each side of her on the narrow rim that resembled a slate walk. She was trapped, she thought. If she stepped forward or back, she would fall into the molten liquid. One figure reached out and touched her arm. Mary jumped back and screamed. Her arm began to blister and burn. The being on the other side touched her shoulder, and it turned black, collapsed and reformed

again disfigured. Suddenly, the pain stopped and her arm and shoulder went back into its original shape. The beings vanished and a bright, brilliant light shown overhead. The light was the size of a man and its shape changed constantly. The light communicated to her, not with words or sounds, but with thoughts.

"Come," it said.

Mary reached up toward the light and was lifted upward. The pain and heat vanished and she felt a tremendous amount of love coming from the light - an unconditional love without judgment, without boundaries; a love that transcended space and time and clearly extended into infinity. A profound peace seeped into her and she felt that she had arrived "home." The light brought her to a plush, pastoral field with rolling hills of green grass and endless white roses spreading out into the horizon. Mary breathed in the sweet scent of the roses and the hearty smell of the fresh grass. She could hear birds singing in the distance, and the rustling of tree leaves. She spotted a tiny valley shaded by two large maple trees. Three small children played in the fresh grass with a small rubber ball. The little girl looked up at Mary.

"Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" the tiny girl shouted.

The two little boys looked up and shouted the same words. They all began running towards Mary. Mary ran to them with outstretched arms. She hugged them all. She had never felt such an intense love - the emotion seemed to stream through her like water rushing over a waterfall. She knew instantly that these were the children she had lost to miscarriages over the years. *If only Matthew hadn't been so stubborn about that operation*, she thought. He was sure it would have killed her, but at least one of her children would have lived.

Mary looked up and saw Matthew stooping in front of one of the trees. A woman dressed in a light cotton long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans was curled up on a wooden bench. He was crying; she had never seen him so sad, so emotional. His pain stabbed her like a knife. She wanted to run to him, to hug him, to sooth his pain away. Instead, she hugged the children again and experienced the profound love and wisdom that she had sought all her life. She was finally at peace. A being of light appeared from behind one of the trees and approached Mary. The being was translucent and the light moved like smoke in windless air. Mary jumped back remembering the clear arms in the tunnel that burned her skin.

"Will you come now or later?" said a melodic voice from the light.

Mary looked at the beautiful faces of her children and then at Matthew's face covered with tears. Her house suddenly appeared in front of her - movers were bringing in more antique pieces; then she was hosting a dinner party with doctors from the hospital; she was gardening; her and Matthew were on a trip to Italy - Matthew was the key speaker at a convention in Naples; more dinner parties; a luncheon with other doctor's wives - all in lonely, isolated silence. The scenes rushed past her like a kaleidoscope of memories. Mary looked at the children again - their wide, beautiful eyes beckoning her, their tiny smiles giving her unimaginable joy.

"Now," she thought.

The light being became more brilliant and everything vanished except the three children. They held each other's hands and walked into the glorious light. Mary suddenly realized where she was. The part of the world she had just left and the world she was in now were one. She had an increased appreciation of life and death and a renewed purpose of existence. She was more loving, more caring, and more compassionate than she had ever been in life, and she had her three lost children to share her feelings with for all eternity. All the pain and discomforts from her life on the earth melted away into a peace she had never experienced before. She came upon a profound wisdom that all of the Earth and the universe were one; that time with its past, present and future were merely an illusion because all events just exist - nothing happens or occurs; that good and evil are also one because without evil there is no good, and without good there is no evil, and that all forces in space and time are in harmony with each other. She followed the light being into eternity, her children beside her, her life fulfilled with the new world ahead of her.

Frank Tessler - Chapter 33



Frank didn't notice the weather as he walked through the narrow canopy to the departure gate - the rain pounded on the thin metal roof like thousands of tiny drums beating together. He wore a loose fitting striped green shirt, tight blue jeans and black, richly ornate cowboy boots. Like his personality, the clothes suggested that he moved fast and in no way hinted that he was an investigative pathologist employed by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. The flight was uneventful from Atlanta to Newark, and he was looking forward to seeing Carson again. He and Carson had been friends since childhood. They lived on the same block and played together as kids. They went to the same high school, the prom, studied together and attended Rutgers Medical School at Cook College. They loved each other like brothers and would do anything for each other.

He grabbed the side of the buttery soft leather valise that hung off his right shoulder and brought it forward. The worn, cedar brown leather reminded him of his grandfather, whom he had never met and had only seen in cracked and faded tiny black and white photos with bent corners.

"You're grandfather loved to travel. He always said that travel was educational and he always carried his leather valise wherever he went," his mother told him one day holding it lovingly seeing the memories of her father in the worn leather.

"Where did he go?"

"All over. He was a businessman."

His mother had given Frank the valise when he graduated medical school. She had kept it hidden away all those years planning to give it to Frank when it was old enough to appreciate it. At first, Frank wasn't impressed - the leather bag was worn and looked ancient. He placed it in a closet and forgot about it for several months until he saw one of the older, established doctors carrying a similar case. He began using it the next day and soon grew to love it. It was large enough to carry all his paperwork, a laptop, lunch, and anything else, he needed. The front had two small pouches with large flaps that tied shut with leather ties. The more Frank carried the bag, the more he realized its importance - its link with the past, his link with his lineage. He often wondered where the case had been, what cities, what countries and who of importance had been in the same room with the valise during a time that was long gone. As he ran his fingers across the smooth leather, it was if he could touch the past and transcend the barriers of the present. When he touched a computer keyboard or drove his car, he knew those things were made only a short time ago by people who were still alive, but the case was made more than three generations ago and its artisans no longer existed, but their work lived on through the valise.

He deplaned into the waiting area and scanned the crowd for Carson. After several minutes, he grew tired of looking for his friend and went to the coffee shop. He ordered a coffee and drank it black so that he could experience the total taste of the beverage. He had just started drinking his coffee black and discovered it was a whole new beverage. The tiny airport shop was warm and steamy, but the atmosphere was electrified with the bustle of people coming and going. Frank did not notice the flurry as he stared into his cup at the black shiny surface. He thought about an investigative strategy he would use in search of the virus that he thought was causing the Hellfire Syndrome. He never let distractions cloud his thought processes or his goals in life. He believed that most people never achieved what they really wanted in life because of too many distractions. Ever since he realized that he wanted to study disease and find its cause and hopefully a cure, he focused his energies on doing just that. Like most people, a chain of circumstances kept getting in his way, but he did not allow them to stop him. He did not let people persuade him to do something different like Aunt Sophie, his mother's sister, who kept telling his mother that pathology was a waste of time.

"He should be a surgeon or a gynecologist, open an office on Park Avenue, make lots of money. Saul has friends; Saul can call Jerry. Jerry can set him up," she would tell his mother in a sharp telltale accent that revealed her Long Island roots.

"No. The boy does what he wants, Sophie. I can't control him," his mother would reply.

"He's gonna be a pauper. What nice Jewish girl is gonna marry him? You tell me?"

"Maybe, he won't marry a nice Jewish girl?"

"Marry a gentile! Oy vay, I don't know what these kids are coming to these days," Aunt Sophie would say.

"They don't think like we did. They think for themselves."

"Drink your tea. Drink your tea. I don't want to hear this anymore! Saul, call Jerry! Jerry's a good friend."

Saul was in the other room talking with Frank's father and watching a football game. He never responded.

Frank turned and searched the crowds again.

"Carson! Carson! Over here!" he yelled waving his hand high over his head.

Carson worked his way through the moving crowd zigzagging like a pinball until he reached Frank and his smiling face.

"Good to see you, old buddy!" Frank said.

The two friends hugged.

"What's the matter? You look terrible!" Frank said.

Carson's face drooped as if it were made of melting wax and the dark circles under his eyes revealed his deep pain.

"Has it gotten that bad?"

"Yes and no. Maybe you can help me end this craziness. Come on. Your baggage is downstairs. I'll fill you in on the way home."

"Well, I'm glad I got your message and I was able to convince my boss that we may have a level 2 emergency."

Carson was silent as they loaded Frank's luggage into the trunk of Carson's car. They drove out of the underground parking deck into the black, wet night.

"So what's going on?" Frank asked as they sped onto the New Jersey Turnpike heading south.

"You remember talking with Doctor Stokes?"

"Oh, yeah. I spoke with him a few days ago," Frank said. "Oh no! Don't tell me he died, too?"

"No. His wife did."

"Of the disease?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, how awful," Frank said.

"He's taken it pretty badly. He's organizing the town into a fanatical religious group and he's attracted all the crazies. Worst part is that he's lost all his better judgment as a doctor - he no longer believes it's a disease; he believes it's the work of the devil."

"Gee, he's lost the faith," Frank said as they passed the towering distillation columns that lit up the sky over the Elizabeth City oil refinery. The columns distilled crude oil into various petroleum-based products like heating oil, gasoline, and jet fuel.

"More like he's embraced it," Carson said.

Frank appeared distracted and looked at the decaying factories harnessed by rusting chain-link fencing.

"You don't understand. Stokes is very influential in Ocean Village. He's like the mayor, the police force, the council, and the social conscience of the town all in one. Remember that commercial? 'When EF Hutton speaks...people listen.' That's Stokes. I just got a bad feeling about him going around reading from the Bible and making people crazy. He won't even talk to me anymore. How do you think the hospital is going to react to us?"

"How is it supposed to act?" Frank said. "I think you're being a little paranoid, Carson. Do you honestly think an entire hospital is going to believe one doctor claiming that all the deaths are the work of Satan?"

Carson looked at him straight in the eye and said, "Yes. You don't know this town."

Frank was silent a few moments. "I'll have to see it to believe it."

"You would take a pathologist's viewpoint. What are you from Missouri - the show me state?" Carson said to lighten the troubled look on Frank's face.

"Yeah, that's me."

"Well, I'll show you," Carson said. "You haven't seen the effect this disease has on people."

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Didn't it happen to you? How come you didn't turn into a religious fanatic, quoting the Bible every five minutes?"

"I'm a doctor. Even though the experience was as real as sitting here talking with you, I know it was a hallucination. I don't really believe I was in hell, but it was scary. My worse nightmare came to life there, but I know I was never there. These people still fear God. It's their whole life. They live and breathe religion - they come from the old schools. Most of them are much older than our parents. They were raised to fear God, and when something like this happens to them, they really believe it," Carson said changing lanes for Exit 11. "They are the generation that believes everything they read in the papers. We don't read the papers - we watch CNN or browse the Internet and then we take everything with a grain a salt."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"No? What do you mean?" Frank said.

"I sometimes tend to side with them. I lose confidence in myself and slip into believing it really is an evil force causing all this madness, especially when we can't find what's causing it."

"There's got to be an explanation," Frank said. "Remember Legionnaires' disease? Everyone was panicking because they couldn't find a reason for all these men getting sick and dying. Mankind has been battling infectious diseases for centuries, and this won't be the end of it. Today, we have the West Nile virus and the pandemic bird flu - 150 years ago, it was influenza, in the 1920s it was diphtheria, in 1952 it was polio, and now it's the Hellfire Syndrome. When was the last time you heard of someone dying of polio or TB in the United States? It's rare. Most of us will never know the panic and worry people suffered back then when everyone seemed to be dying of the flu or suffering from polio. It's the same today with AIDS. People assume we have all these great cures and preventative vaccines. But, new diseases develop everyday and they will always develop and we don't always have a cure or an idea of what causes them. A disease could develop and wipe out the entire human race someday."

"Boy, you sure are optimistic."

"I'm only making a point that new diseases pop up every day. Have you ever heard of NORD, the National Organization for Rare Disorders and orphan diseases?" Frank said.

"Of course. But what does it do exactly?"

"NORD is an informal coalition of small voluntary health agencies and individuals affected by orphan diseases. It was formed to get the Orphan Drug Act passed," Frank explained.

"Now, I remember studying it," Carson said.

"It's any disease that affects fewer than 200,000 Americans. There are more than 6,000 such afflictions such as Tay Sach's disease, Huntington's, Cystic Fibrosis, and Multiple Sclerosis. The Hellfire Syndrome certainly fits into this category. NORD helped get the Orphan Drug Act passed in Congress that requires government to offer drug companies incentives to develop and market orphan drugs, otherwise, they wouldn't do it because there's no profit in orphan drugs. Look at it this way. If you manufactured Valium, you're producing quite a bit of it and making a good profit. Then someone comes along and says they need such and such a drug, but they need only enough for one thousand patients. You find that it costs ten times the amount to manufacture a thousand doses. Would you make the drug?"

Carson put on his directional signal for Exit 11.

"That's typical of them. If there's no profit in it why bother to develop drugs that save lives or cure diseases," Carson said.

"And I've seen many good doctors bought off by the drug companies," Frank said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Just that. The drug companies are very powerful and they have deep pockets. They offer many incentives for doctors to push their drugs on patients, even if the patient doesn't really need it. I'm talking about weekends in Palm Springs, Las Vegas, special discounts, junkets, all kinds of fringe benefits," Frank explained. "I even heard of one company putting a down payment on a house that a doctor wanted."

"Are you talking fact or fiction here?" Carson asked.

"Fact."

"Well, it won't happen to me. I'm not going to be caught up in that shit. I didn't become a doctor for the money. I became a doctor because I really want to help people. Sure, the money is nice, but that's not my sole motivation. That's why I chose Ocean Village. I've had offers from Boston, Philadelphia and New York at triple the salary, but I took Ocean Village because I believe the people there really need me," Carson said. "Besides, I wanted to live by the ocean."

"You're a rare bird, Carson," Frank said.

"I hope so for the sake of our profession. It has a bad enough rep as it is. I hope our generation changes things," Carson added.

"I hope so, too."

Carson approached the tollbooth, paid the toll, and headed left towards Route 9 south. After three miles, signs for the Garden State Parkway appeared and Carson got in the right lane to take the exit south.

"So where do I set up shop?" Frank asked.

"In the lab. I've cleared it already with Dr. Hansen. He's the one that offered me the partnership," Carson said glancing over at Frank. "It's a brand new facility with state-of-the-art equipment and a new high speed Internet based program, which links all member labs, and all university and research center databases including the CDC.

"Really? I haven't heard anything about it," Frank added.

"That's because it's not launched yet. We are one of the first labs to test it. You simply fill out a web site and it matches your data to all known cases and research. You get to see what's out there from some of the largest research centers and universities," Carson said.

Frank looked out at the tall overgrown grass on the side of highway rushing past in a blur of green.

"Isn't Stokes a partner in the lab? You think he'll allow it now that he's...you know?" Frank said twirling his index finger by his ear.

"He doesn't have much say in it. He's not one of the partners, just an investor. Hansen has the controlling interest," Carson explained. "I just can't understand Stokes. He and I were like partners in this, now he's a religious nut and turned against me."

"It's an absence of faith," Frank said.

The Search - Chapter 34



warm breeze whipped Doctor Matthew Stokes' face as he sat in a wicker chair on the screened-in porch in the rear of his house staring at the tree where Mary had died. He kept telling himself of how peaceful it was for her to die at her favorite place. A tear formed in his left eye, and cascaded down his face and another was about to make the plunge when the chimes of his doorbell sounded. He quickly wiped his eyes and got up. He still held the snifter with a splash of Remy Martin sloshing around when he opened the door to a white-hair man with a face of wrinkles and ice blue eyes.

"Hello Homer. Come on in," Stokes said opening the door.

The man nodded and sheepishly entered.

"What can I do for you?" Stokes said.

"I was thinking. Maybe we should form a group to fight these devil worshippers. Run them out and maybe people will stop dying and going to hell," he explained. "People will rest better without them."

"Homer, let's sit out on the deck and talk," Stokes said. "You want something to drink?"

"Yeah, got a beer?"

"Sure. Have a seat out there."

A few moments later, Stokes appeared with bottle of Heineken and a tall narrow glass. He sat down next to Homer and Homer took the bottle.

"I think we should consider all non-believers our enemies. This is a war between the devil and us and we could win if we just keep the faith and have everyone else around us do the same," Homer said tilting the bottle up to his mouth. "I believe my wife when she says she went to hell. Martha is not one for tall tales. Now she just sits home and prays all day. I'm not saying we should not pray, but she's too scared to go anywhere except church. She believes that if she goes too far from the house or the church, the devil will get her. In a sense, I've lost her, just as you have lost Mary. We have to do something."

"Yes. We have to lead the way and show they are wrong. The Bible foretells of the moral collapse of men, that the evil ones will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, disloyal, with no self-control, betrayers, headstrong, proud, and lovers of pleasure. Evil men have advanced from bad to worse and this is what we are seeing now."

"What can we do?" Homer asked taking another drink of his beer.

"I think we have to find the devil worshippers and try to convince them to follow us," Stokes said. "Go to them."

"But they are evil! Shouldn't we get rid of them...run them out...scare them off?"

"No, Homer. They are children of God just like you and me, but they have lost their way."

"You sound like the pastor," Homer said bringing the emerald green bottle to his mouth again.

"I have to be. Someone around here has to lead the way."

"So how do we find them?"

"We know that Henry was one of them..."

"Doctor Graber? You must be pullin' my leg!"

"We have good reason to believe he was one of them. It's hard for even me to believe it. You know he had to have associates."

Stokes looked out at the old maple tree its leaves were still and the last orange beams of the setting sun streamed through its entangled branches. Homer watched him waiting for an answer. The men were

silent while a warm breeze played with their hair like a mischievous child.

"She could be one of them," Stokes said, his voice disconnected from the moment.

"Who?"

"Nurse Doherty. She was always with him as if she were his private nurse. He had requested that she follow-up on all his patients. It was a special request and she was assigned to him. She could be one of them," Stokes took another sip of cognac.

"Homer, can you get one of the guys to follow her after work for about a week? Get one of the younger guys because he'll have to watch her place all night. Get someone good. These people are clever and they retaliate in extreme ways."

"Hmmm?"

Homer finished the beer.

"I think I can get Jack Graham to do it and he's good," Homer said.

"He's not so young."

"Oh, he'll do it. He'd love it and he would stick it out. He hasn't done anything like this in years."

"Okay, if she is one of them, then I want to know where they meet. Get as much information as possible."

"Okay." Homer got up to leave.

Stokes grabbed his arm. "I'm sorry about your wife."

"Thanks, doc. I'm sorry about Mary. I'll have Martha say a prayer if she's not already."

Homer left the porch and then came back a few seconds later.

"Can I get another beer?" He said. "Martha won't allow alcohol in the house."

"Sure. Help yourself. Let me know if Jack will do it."

"Okay, take care," Homer said and left.

Stokes sipped his cognac and stared at the old maple tree. Something seemed to move near the settee at the base of the tree. A white luminous gas appeared at Mary's spot. The light coalesced into a form - a human

form. It was Mary. She looked at Stokes, smiled, and waved. Stokes rubbed his eyes, and then looked again. She was still there.

"Mary!" he yelled and raced down the porch steps to the tree.

When he got there, the luminous gas had dissipated. He stared at the tree's ancient trunk for several seconds trying to comprehend what he had just seen. Then he sat down and ran his hand over the spot where Mary usually sat on the settee. The air was cold and damp.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" he screamed. "Why did you have to die, Mary? Why did you leave me? Why did the devil take such a good person? Oh, Mary I love you so much. Why? Why? Why? You were too young to die!"

Stokes pounded the settee with his fist.

"It's so unfair! So unfair! You were cheated out of life...I was cheated!"

The Body - Chapter 35



he young rookie extended the fishhook into the Shark River until it reached the floating body a few feet from the dock. He moved it slightly, hooked it under one of the arms, and pulled.

"Oh this is the worst!" the police officer said as he rolled the floating torso around to get a look at the dead man's face. The young cop handed the fishhook to another officer, turned to the other side of the dock, and threw up the ham and eggs biscuit he had just eaten for breakfast.

"Gee! No head," the other police officer said.

"Shit! They took his hands, too. Now we'll have a heck of a time ID-ing this one," Nick Vancuso said.

Several other police officers and detectives turned away. The officer with the fishhook rolled the body over again. Its bloated gray skin seemed more fish like than human.

"What do you think? A mob hit? It's typical. No dental charts or finger prints to ID," Jerry Vandergarde said, Nick's partner.

"Maybe," Nick added. "They usually dump them in New York Harbor. There is no way this body could have floated into the inlet and up river this far. Mob hits usually end up on the beaches. The currents just wouldn't bring it up this far."

"So who could do something like this? This is pretty sick shit!" Jerry said looking down at the headless torso.

"I have a gut feeling that it's a cult," Nick said. "Look his clothes are all black. He could be a minister or priest."

"You really believe that shit about these cults and human sacrifices? It's pretty weird stuff," Jerry said moving his right hand through his short blonde hair.

"I've been investigating a break-in that could be related," Nick added. "A young couple out in Ocean Village. I took the call last night when I got off duty. Remember the Harmon case in Little Silver?"

"Yeah, the kid who murdered his mother...cut her face up like a steak. It was the worse thing I've ever seen," Jerry said.

"Well, I think Satanism is on the rise again with this new generation of teenagers. You know that report that came in last month from the library about the missing books? Most of them were books on cults and Satanism. Try finding a book on Satanism in the library; the computer will tell you it's either checked out, lost or long overdue. Lost means it was stolen. Libraries don't lose books - people steal them," Nick explained. "Go to any web search engine and put in Satanism and tens of thousands of sites pop up."

"Yeah, but today's kids are into video games and downloading music. They don't have time for that shit!"

"You know back in 1978 when Jim Jones committed suicide with all those people in Guyana, people said it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing, an exception and that it would never happen again. Well, it did happen again in Waco with that sicko Koresh. It could happen again given the right set of circumstances and the right people," Nick said, staring at the body bobbing gently from the movement of the water. "There are potential Jones towns out there waiting for the right moment. It just takes something or someone to light the fuse."

"When did you become the cult expert?" Jerry asked.

"After the Harmon murder. I found it so repulsive and so dangerous that I had to know more. What could drive a person to be so savage? It obsesses me."

"Did you find out?"

"Sort of. There are things to look for like an extraordinary devotion to the cult leader or the group, members isolated from family and friends

and an attitude that all non-believers are evil and out to destroy them," Nick explained wiping beads of sweat off his forehead. "Look at the damn terrorists - you can call that one big cult."

"The Harmon boy wasn't in a cult," Jerry said.

"We don't know that for sure. Just because we couldn't track those bastards down doesn't mean he wasn't a member. I talked to his father months afterward and he told me that the boy did change somewhat...a drop in grades, mood swings, loss of interest in old friends, but he thought it was just the normal changes kids go through as teenagers," Nick explained. "I believe he was involved with a group of outlaw Satanists."

"What do you mean?"

"There are two basic groups. There are the traditional Satanists, who openly worship the Devil in their own churches, conduct Black Masses, and live their lives as they want. Then there's the outlaw Satanists, who form secret cults and use sex and drugs to lure teens into committing crimes. The Harmon boy was probably a member of an outlaw cult. Satanism and its powers especially intrigue teens because it's the religion of defiance, the religion that challenges the status quo, its rules and regulations. They don't live their lives fearful of the wrath of God for doing what they want. They live freely. Teens are attracted to this like a moth is to a candle. And you know the killer of this is that these groups are made up of doctors and lawyers, law enforcement, pastors, and ministers," Nick explained taking in a deep breath.

"No. You're pulling my chain!" Jerry said looking down at Nick from his six-foot frame.

"Yeah, it's true. Satanism is infiltrating every aspect of American life," Nick said. "The typical Satanist is a person with a strong ego, a lot of confidence in himself...too much confidence. He's mad at God for all the bad things that has happen to good people. He thinks, 'if God is really good, why does He let all these bad things happen?' He has a higher sense of justice than most people do and he likes everything to be completely fair. Unfortunately, many things that happen in the world are unfair. The other element is power - power over yourself, over others, over your surroundings. He begins to believe that he can actually obtain this power through Satan and the rituals they perform."

"Really?"

"Do you remember that case in 2005 about that pastor in Louisiana, who confessed about abusing children and animals in his church and performing Satanic-like rituals?"

"Vaguely," Jerry said.

"I'm telling you - it happening all over and it's getting worse."

"If you say so. You're the expert."

Jerry shook his head and walked down to the end of the dock. A few minutes later Nick called him.

"Here comes the coroner and the CSI folks. Let's go. Wait up."

Two men dressed in black coroner's overalls lowered a stretcher with a black body bag onto the floating dock where the other police officers were standing. Two other men and woman followed wearing the dark blue uniforms of the Crime Scene Investigative unit. The coroner followed dressed in a gray suit and red tie.

"Hey, Kraas. What's with the red tie...to hide the blood stains?" one detective asked.

"No, asshole. It's to impress idiots like you."

The coroner's men opened a black cylindrical-shaped athletic bag and took out white plastic overalls. They slipped them on, and then placed white painter's masks on their faces and rubber gloves on their hands. They laid out the black body bag on the dock near the body and zipped it open. The woman from the CSI team began snapping photographs of the body. When she finished, the coroner's men lifted the body out of the water and placed it on the body bag.

"Wait a minute," the coroner said. "Open the shirt more." One of the men moved the bloodied shirt out of the way. There was a large hole in the center of the chest.

"Looks like something else is missing," Kraas said.

"What?" the other detective asked.

The coroner leaned over the body and looked closer.

"Looks like his heart."

The Investigation - Chapter 36



Nick returned home to his empty apartment and opened the refrigerator; the one bare bulb cast a pale yellow glow on a few items perched on the dirty glass shelves. He grabbed yesterday's tuna sub and a bottle of beer. He walked into the living room and placed the beer on a chipped mahogany end table of the Italian Renaissance period - a left over from his marriage. Just as he turned on the TV the phone rang. He picked up the black receiver.

"Vancuso," he said forgetting that he was home and off duty.

"Hello. Detective? This is Doctor Carson Hyll."

"Oh yeah," Nick said in a groggy voice. "I was just about to call you."

"I've found the dog killer," Carson said.

"Who?"

Nick dropped the TV remote device.

"Henry Graber. The autopsy report indicated that he died of loss of blood due to a puncture of the common carotid artery. The artery was lacerated," Carson spoke rapidly.

"Slow down, slow down. Now can you tell me in English," Nick replied.

"His jugular was torn and it looks like an animal did it. There are small punctures around the wound that look like teeth marks from an animal, and the skin was torn. He died before he hit the tree," Carson explained. "Doctor Stokes also found dog hairs in the trunk of his car, and it was the same black Chevy I saw weeks ago by the disposal bin."

"What are you guys playing Sherlock Holmes?" Nick asked. "What disposal bin?"

"I saw a man dump two dead dogs into the bin when I was getting off my shift one morning. When I looked at the dogs both had their throats cut. The car was an old black Chevy...Graber drove a black Chevy," Carson explained. "We couldn't believe it; then all the pieces fell into place."

"Graber. He's one of yours, right?" Nick asked.

"Yeah."

Well, thanks. I'll stop by tomorrow and take your statement."

"Do you have any new information?" Carson asked.

"No, but this is a good start. I'll call you when I have something."

"Thanks."

Nick placed the receiver back in its cradle and thought about returning to the office, but the day-old sub and the cold bottle of beer was very tempting right now. He started to pick up the bottle when the phone rang again.

"Vancuso," he said.

"Nick, this is Kraas. The ME identified the headless body as a visiting minister from Louisville. He was visiting the Riverside Presbyterian Church on River Road and left two days ago. They must have gotten him when he was leaving that's why no one reported him missing. He was from the Presbyterian Church in America."

"Shit," Nick said. "I'll step up the patrols around all the churches in the area, and maybe we'll get lucky."

"Good idea," Kraas said and hung up.

Nick wondered if Kraas was being sarcastic or if he really meant what he said. He picked up the bottle of beer and was about to twist off the cap, but stopped. He thought about the case and was undecided.

"Psssssst," and the beer opened. Nick smelled the cool aroma of the hops rise out of the bottle. He placed the bottle up to his mouth and

swallowed. Then he pushed back in his brown leather lounge chair and picked up the sub. *I'll start early tomorrow*, he thought.

* * *

The next day Nick arrived at his office just as the sun was casting its first light on the modern municipal complex. He drove up the long circular driveway that was surrounded by a well-manicured lawn and then made a left to the back of the complex and parked in a space labeled, "Police." He walked to the rear entrance and opened a white metal box next to the door. He pulled a white plastic card out of his wallet and thrust it into the slot. The doorjamb clicked and he pulled the door open. He walked through a narrow hallway, up one flight of stairs, and past the maze of partitions that made up each uniformed officers workstation. He didn't even get a cup of coffee from the kitchen, where he would chat with fellow detectives and exchange leads. Instead, he plopped down in his squeaky desk chair and opened the area telephone book. He turned to animal shelters and marked the page with a sticky note. Then he turned on his computer and searched the Internet for animal shelters in the area. The search page brought up 15 shelters in the county. He launched the automatic dialer, a custom software program that dialed each number on the search page and forwarded the call his desk phone. If no one picked up after one minute, the dialer moved to the next item on the list. After the dialer had gone through four listings with no answers, he decided to get a cup of coffee. He stopped the program and headed towards the kitchen. He poured himself a cup and went back to his desk. After running through several more listings on the site, the dialer connected to Casey's Animal Shelter & Pet Store in Long Branch.

"Hello, Casey's," a youthful voice said.

"Hello. I'm Detective Nick Vancuso of the Middletown Police Department."

"Yeah." the youth said.

"Listen. I just have a few questions," Nick said.

"Okay."

"Are you the owner?"

"No, that's Mr. Thompson. He's not here now," the young man said.

"Well, ask him to call me. My number is 555-1067. You got it?" Nick said not sure that the voice on the other end was attached to a thinking person.

"Yeah."

"By the way, have you sold or given away any Doberman Pincers say within the last week?" Nick asked.

"No. Well, yeah. I sold two Dobermans to a Mr. Jones. He's a breeder and didn't want me to tell other breeders."

"When did you sell them to him?"

"Last week, I think. It's the second pair he bought. He bought two others, oh, about three months ago," the youth said.

"Do you have a phone number or an address for Mr. Jones?"

"No. He would just call in the order, and then show up every few weeks to pick up the dogs. He usually paid in cash."

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know. He was just an old guy."

"If I showed you a picture, would you recognize him?"

"Oh, yeah, sure."

"I'll be right there. Don't go anywhere. What's your name?"

"Glenn Harris."

"Thanks, Glenn. You've been very helpful."

Nick fired up his red Crossfire and accelerated rapidly out of the police parking lot. He did that a lot when he was excited about a case. As he sped out into the main road, he noticed a run down white pickup truck appear to dart from lane to lane seemingly trying to catch up with him. After a few lights the truck merged with the normal flow of traffic and he paid it no attention.

Nick found the pet store easily enough since it is one of the larger buildings in Long Branch - a cement one story warehouse that once served as a distribution center for a large supermarket chain that went out of business. The center had a dual function - it served as the city's animal shelter and a commercial pet store. Nick parked near the wall-size glass windows and walked in. The store smelled of dry dog food and one could hear the faint barks of dogs from the shelter section in the back. A short girl with long black hair and a dark complexion approached Nick.

"Can I help you," she said smiling.

"I'm looking for Glenn Harris."

She turned and yelled, "Glenn!"

A tall, lanky, young man with his head shaved walked over.

"This guy is here to see you," the girl said.

"You're Glenn Harris? I'm Detective Nick Vancuso. I spoke with you on the phone a few minutes ago."

"Yeah."

Nick said placed one 4x6 color photo on the glass counter. "Is that Mr. Jones?"

The young man looked at the photo for several seconds.

"Nope."

Nick took out another.

"Nope."

Nick finally brought out a photocopy of a Henry Graber's driver's license with the name and address blackened out with a permanent marker. The young man picked up the paper and stared at it for several seconds.

"This is Mr. Jones. He looks a lot different than this photo - fatter and balder."

"You're sure that's him?"

"Yep, that's him. He always gave me a big tip. You don't forget people like that."

* * *

Nick returned to his office and started searching through the piles of papers that covered his desk. He pulled a yellowed newspaper clipping out of one of the piles and placed it in a 3-ring binder with a black vinyl cover. He grabbed the mouse to his computer and clicked on the icon for the FBI's National Criminal Information Center. In the search field, he typed in "Satanic cults, Monmouth County, NJ" and put in a date range going back seven years. The search engine found 184 entries and Nick clicked on the first one. The screen displayed

1. 7/9/06 suspicious fire - Asbury Park

"An abandoned warehouse off Dugan Street was mysteriously set ablaze at approximately 2 a.m. Mrs. Pam Jacobs of 1497 Dugan Street reported the incident at 2:19 a.m. Several animal bodies were found in the debris. Satanists are a probable cause, but

no leads found; Fire is labeled suspicious. Detective Raymond Pierce investigating officer."

Nick clicked on the print icon and then walked over to Pierce's office. He was an older man with facial skin that hung off his face like a St. Bernard's. He smoked cigars and had a raspy voice. He was the only one in the office who smoked. He was normally given the "easy" assignments since he often complained about everything when given a complex case.

"Hi Ray," Nick said as he walked into the office slowly so as not to disturb any of the paper stacks. Pierce had his head down intensely reading a report. He looked up through emerald green eyes.

"Nick! Got something for me?"

"Yes and no. I saw your report on that warehouse fire back in July, and I was wondering why you suspect Satanists were involved?"

"We found a lot of bones from dead animals there - all in one spot. Cats, dogs, squirrels...I mean a lot. Too many to rule out anything but Satanists or a cult of some sort. I believe they were using it as a meeting place, and sacrificing small animals there. Somebody found out so they burned the place down."

"Any leads?"

"Nothing substantial. I did get an anonymous call from a woman who identified the leader of the cult. What was his name now?" Pierce hesitated and looked around the room. "Wait I have it written down in one of my pads."

He opened a drawer in his desk, rummaged through, and then pulled out a small pocket-sized notebook. He leafed through it.

"Here it is," he said squinting at his own handwriting. "Henry Graber. He's a doctor over in Ocean Village."

"Did you ever talk to Graber?" Nick asked deliberately concealing his excitement.

"Nope, I could never get a hold of him. Called for weeks and even went to the hospital, but he could never see me. Personally, I don't believe he was the leader of a cult. He's been a doctor there for years," Pierce explained.

"Anything else?" Nick said.

"Yeah, now that I'm thinking of it the caller said a nurse...her name was?"

Pierce began looking through the small notebook again.

"Here it is, Janice Doherty. She was supposed to be second in command, his high priestess, but like I said I felt it was a crank trying to get even with Graber."

"Did you ever talk to the nurse?"

"Oh yeah. She was the sweetest young thing. She was horrified by the whole thing and couldn't believe there could be such a cult associated with doctors and nurses at the hospital."

"Thanks."

"Sure, anytime."

Nick walked over to the laser printer and took the pages of Pierce's report from the holding bin. Then he went back to his office, picked up the black vinyl binder and told the dispatcher he was going to Ocean Village Hospital. He arrived at the hospital just before one and went to the information desk in the lobby.

"Hi. I'm looking for nurse, Janice Doherty. Can you help me?" he said flashing his badge in front of the white haired woman behind the reception desk.

The woman looked through a directory and then said, "She works on the second floor. You'll have to contact the nursing supervisor to see her. Ask for Nurse Silberg."

"Thank you."

Nick took the nearest elevator up to the second floor and walked down a long corridor before he reached the nursing station. He spoke with Nurse Silberg and she told him that Nurse Doherty had just finished her shift and had left. Nick walked back to the elevator. He pushed the down button and waited. A few moments later, a nurse walked towards the elevator. When she approached, Nick looked at her nametag pinned below her blouse collar.

"Are you Janice Doherty?" Nick asked.

"That's what it says here," she replied, pointing to her badge.

Her face was tired and gray.

"I was wondering if I can talk with you a moment? I'm Detective Nick Vancuso of the Middletown Police. I just have a few questions," he said.

Her face soured immediately and Nick noticed.

"Well, yeah, okay, but I have to get home," she said.

The elevator doors opened and they stepped inside.

"Thanks. I only have a few questions. Did you know Doctor Henry Graber?" Nick said and pushed the button labeled "L1."

"Oh, yeah, he was a fine man. We worked together. It was terrible the way he went," she said.

"Have you heard about any doctors or nurses belonging to a Satanist cult?"

She looked at him and Nick saw a tinge of nervousness flash through her eyes.

"No, but there was another detective asking about that, too," she said calmly. "Is there a cult here at the hospital? That would be awful."

"Not that we know of," Nick replied watching her as if she was prey. "You're not involved in a cult, are you?"

"Me? The whole idea repulses me. I'm a nurse. I'm here to help people, not wish evil on them or glorify death. I see enough death and suffering here to last ten lifetimes," she explained.

The elevator stopped and the letter "L" above the door lit up. The doors opened.

"Well, you've been very helpful Miss Doherty. Thank you."

She walked out ahead of Nick, and turned left towards a corridor that led to the rear of the hospital where the employees parked. Nick walked towards the front entrance, but when she turned a corner, he headed back towards the rear entrance. He walked down the corridor to the double glass doors that led to the parking lot. He watched her get into a dark gray BMW. He rushed up to the doors and read the number on the rear license plate. He went back to his car and called headquarters.

"Hello Sam. This is Vancuso. Patch me to Irene in DMV," he said.

"Sure." Nick waited a few seconds for the connection then heard the low melodic voice of Irene, one of the DMV information specialists.

"Hello, DMV," she said.

"Hi, Irene, this is Nick Vancuso. I need an ID on this number.

Tango, Romeo, November, five, four, one, eight."

"One second."

Nick watched a middle-aged woman help a bony elderly man into the passenger side of a blue Ford.

"The car is registered to Janice Doherty, 784 Old Creek Road, Neptune. It's off Sandy Point Road out in the boondocks," Irene explained.

"Thanks. I owe you one," Nick said.

"You owe me everything," she replied. "When are you gonna let me cook dinner for you?"

"I gotta go."

"Bye."

Nick drove to the address and was disappointed because the road was wooded on both sides for about a half of a mile in each direction. He couldn't park and stake out the house without being seen. The long dirt driveway disappeared into the woods, so he couldn't tell if she were home because he couldn't see the car. He knew he would have to come back after dark.

Nick drove to the Drunken Pelican, a local bar and grill that served the best cheeseburgers in the county. Nick often had lunch and dinner there. He pulled into the white gravel parking lot and suddenly he relaxed. He walked the long wood-planked walkway as he had many times before memories of better times flooding into his consciousness - memories of Friday nights there with his wife. When he opened the heavy wooden door made of several ships' hatch covers it creaked like a door in a haunted house. Inside, the air smelled of cigarette smoke, beer, and perfume. The bar was dark except for small, wall lamps that illuminated each table. A few people filled the nightspot, where a local band would play on weekends. Nick made his way towards a booth on the side of the bar, where he had line sight of the door and where he could catch the bar conversations if he wanted to listen in on other people's problems. The conversations were easily captured from the bar by the upside down dingy hanging from the ceiling that clearly amplified the sound and channeled it into Nick's booth. He always sat there and the waitresses began calling it Nick's booth. Nick ordered his usual, a cheeseburger with tomatoes, lettuce and a tangy house dressing with a hint of barbeque and smoked cheese. Nick was content

occasionally glancing at the door and out the window to view the boats sailing by on the Red River. The waitress brought his cheeseburger after several minutes and Nick took his first bite of enjoyment that day. Then the door creaked and as it slowly opened Nick's eyes widened. He immediately turned towards the wall pretending to read the tent card next to the buoy shaped salt and pepper shakers.

The Conversation - Chapter 37



nurse Janice Doherty was dressed in blue jeans and a white loose-fitting blouse that hid her small breasts as she pushed the heavy wooden door open and entered the Drunken Pelican. Feeling confident and at peace with herself, she had tied back her hair into a braided ponytail that extended to the top of her butt, and she wore makeup - something she rarely used. The thin nurse walked to the bar and took a seat. Nick saw her walk in and quickly moved to the other side of his booth with his back to the bar so she wouldn't spot him. He stopped eating so he could hear her talking.

"Kyle come in yet?" she asked the burly bartender.

"Due in a few minutes, and I hope he's on time. Steve wants to leave early," he said. "Want a beer?"

"Sure."

Nick took a few more bites of his cheeseburger, a thick juicy affair on a hard roll with poppy seeds, tomato and a special house dressing. He couldn't believe the luck he was having today. It was like hitting a home run after a season of no hitters. Nick took another bite of the sandwich. It was the best he had ever had. He was thoroughly enjoying it when the door creaked open again. A tall young man with long brown stringy hair entered. His hair was parted in the middle and reached his shoulders. Nick could barely see him in his black t-shirt, jeans and black

boots. He walked towards the end of the bar where the nurse was sitting.

"Kyle. Hi!" the nurse said. "I was waiting for you." Her voice was sensual.

"Hi." he said. "Nice to see you, too."

"I was wondering if I can come to your place tonight? I'd like to talk to you about the meeting at the coven stead. I have a lot of things I want to talk about and I'll make it worth your while."

"Yeah, sure, okay," he said.

Kyle reached into his pocket and pulled out a single-ringed key chain with six keys on it. He located a tarnished brass key with a round head and peeled it off.

"Here's the key. What's a coven stead?"

"It's the place where we meet, silly," her wide mouth smiling and her eyes beaming.

"Oh. Sounds like something out of a western."

"You're so silly," she said and kissed him on the cheek.

Nick perked up when he heard Doherty say "coven stead" the cult's meeting place and home base. He knew she had lied to him in the elevator earlier. Now, he had another possible link - Kyle the bartender. Doherty had a second beer and stayed another hour talking with the bartender and Kyle. Nick ordered two more beers and slowly consumed the brew waiting for the nurse to leave. He could not let her see him for she would surely recognize him and suspect that he was following her. He didn't mind waiting - he was enjoying his small victories, the atmosphere of his favorite bar, and the beers he consumed that were making the night so pleasant.

The bar began to fill up and the noise level escalated. Nick could no longer hear them talking at the bar. He was just about to order another beer when he saw the long ponytail of the nurse walking towards the door. Nick began to move out of the booth, and then stopped. The nurse turned around and waved to Kyle with a big, bright smile. When the door closed, Nick counted to ten slowly and left. He moved quickly since the day was almost gone and she would not recognize him in the gray light of the approaching night. He walked quickly to his car, keeping his eye on her gray BMW as she pulled out of the parking lot. He was as stealthy as a cat. He followed the BMW to Anchorage

Apartments, a short distance from the Drunken Pelican. She parked behind building 2950 next to a row of garages. Nick moved quickly - he parked the car and ran towards the front of the building, but she had vanished. He stopped there. If he went inside and started looking around, she could pop out anytime and see him. He knew the night was too good to be true, but nothing was lost. He had the name of the apartments and the building number. Besides, the beers had made him feel lazy and he really wanted to go home. He decided to leave and come back in the morning.

* * *

Nick had a slight headache when he arrived at the superintendent's apartment in the late afternoon. He had worked most of the day on other cases that needed his attention and now he was feeling a lull in his energy. He rang the bell and waited. The door opened and a short, older man wearing blue coveralls appeared. His gray hair and wrinkled face suggested he was not fit for the job.

"Hello, are you the superintendent?" Nick said.

"Yeah."

"I'm Detective Nick Vancuso of the Middletown Police and I need to know if you have a man named Kyle living in building 2950."

"I don't know. You'll have to talk to the secretary. She can look it up for you," the man replied. "What's this for? He do something wrong?"

The man opened the door wider to let Nick enter.

"I just want to talk to him," Nick said and walked into the apartment.

The living room contained a desk against one wall, filing cabinets and a long table covered with small piles of papers. A tall, pretty girl with her hair styled in a pageboy worked on a computer at the desk.

"Hello, can I help you?" she said, looking up from the computer.

"I'm Detective Nick Vancuso of the Middletown Police. Do you have a man named Kyle living in building 2950."

"That would be easy enough," she said and her fingers began to move on the computer keyboard.

"Here he is."

"May I?" Nick asked.

"Sure."

Nick walked around the desk so he could see the computer screen. He took out a tiny pad and a thin gold pen.

"Here," the girl said pointing to Kyle's name and address.

Nick copied the information in his pad.

"Thanks. You've been helpful," Nick said.

"Working on a big case?" she asked, her green eyes sparkling.

"No. Just routine stuff," Nick said and left.

Nick parked in the back of the building hoping that if Kyle was going to make a run for it his car would be back there. Nick walked around to the front and entered through a double door entrance. Overhead fluorescent lights illuminated the long carpeted hallway. The tacky rug was black with large orange octagons that connected each other. It should have been retired years ago, Nick thought. He found 295C and rang the doorbell. He waited a few moments listening for sounds inside, and then knocked on the door. No one answered.

"Kyle Mabus?" Nick said. There was no response. Nick went to the door across the dark hallway, raised his fist to knock, and then stopped. He decided to leave. Outside, he felt someone was watching him as he walked back to his car. He pulled away, turned left out of the parking lot and parked nearby. Then he ran back to the apartment building, hid behind a row of bushes, and watched the entrance. After an hour, Nick was tired and went back to his office. There, he gathered his briefcase and then informed the dispatcher he was going home.

Nick fired up his Crossfire and pulled out of the parking lot in the rear. He turned left and headed towards Ocean Village. He decided to avoid the traffic and turned off onto a small one-lane county road that went in the same direction. The road was empty as the day succumbed to darkness. The faint lights of far-away houses occasionally peeked through the dense trees that lined the road. Nick liked this road because of its hills and tight curves - he really liked to see how fast he could negotiate the turns. He was a kid again, who had just received his driver's license when he drove on this road. He approached a downhill straightaway that curved sharply at the bottom. He pushed the accelerator down and the car shot away like a rocket. This was his favorite stretch of the road. He would brake hard near the bottom to make the curve because he wanted to beat his last record of 40 miles per hour. He waited until he was a few hundred feet from the curve before he lifted his foot off the accelerator and placed it lightly on the brake pedal. He turned carefully as he approached the curve, glancing at the

speedometer occasionally. Suddenly, the car slipped and moved sideways instead of following the road. The tires screamed as they tried to grip the road, but the loose sand was no match for them. Nick instinctively turned the wheel in the direction of the skid and pressed lightly on the brake, but he didn't have the room to let the car move any further off the road because it was so narrow. He had only one choice - he turned the wheel sharply in the opposite direction and slammed on the brake, hoping the car would spin completely around and stop facing the opposite direction. The car spun around, but not all the way. The driver's side rear slammed into the trunk of a small tree causing the car to ricochet off the tree and head straight into a large oak. Nick kept his foot hard on the brake and gripped the steering wheel with all of his strength.

"Ah, shit! Shit!" he managed to get out as he watched the hood of the car crumple in slow motion and the large tree trunk loom up and swallow him.

A few minutes later a white pickup truck that had seen too many miles and too many seasons pulled over - its lights focused on the back of the damaged Crossfire. Two men got out and walked over to the driver's side.

"Well is he alive or dead?" the one with the shaved head said.

"I don't know. You know how to check his breathing or something like that," the other replied putting his hands in the front pockets of his worn and faded blue jeans.

"Look dummy, you take two fingers and you put them on the side of his neck and you feel for a pulse, a heartbeat. Now do it! We got to get out of here before someone comes," the man with the shaved head said.

"Okay, okay, I'm doing it."

"Well, do you feel anything?"

"Yeah, I guess," the other man said looking stupefied.

"Look out, idiot, I'll do it."

The man with the shaved head placed his two fingers on Nick's neck and turned to the other man.

"See that's how you do it. Now let's get him into the truck," the man said.

The two men struggled to open Nick's door, which was hard to open because the front fender was pushed against the door. After several tries the door popped open with a sound of metal scraping on metal.

"He really fucked up this car," the man with the blue jeans said. "Too bad it was a nice car."

"Yeah, this was a stroke of luck for us. I don't know how we would've gotten him," the other man replied.

They dragged Nick out of the car and towards the old white pickup truck struggling with his weight and bulk.

"Sure is a heavy son-of-a-bitch!" the man with the shaved head said between gasps.

"Yeah."

The men struggled to lift Nick's limp body onto the truck bed. A gash on Nick's forehead gushed blood down his face. Some of it had turned dark and dried. They covered him with a canvas tarp and closed the tailgate. The man with the shaved head took a red gasoline can from the rear of the truck and poured it under the car near the gas tank. Then he poured a trail towards the truck about twenty feet long. He also took the gas cap off of the Crossfire. He put the gas can back in the truck and got in the passenger's side.

"Now, when I say go, you GO!" he said. The man took a book of matches out of the glove compartment and lit the entire book. Then he dropped the matches on the gasoline trail.

"GO! GO! GO!" he yelled.

The matches ignited the gasoline and the flames flashed like lightening towards the wrecked car. The truck sped off like a bullet vanishing into the encroaching darkness.

The Crash - Chapter 38



When Sutton was intensely involved in *Jurassic Park* by Michael Crichton, a bestseller about dinosaurs that are cloned and recreated for an amusement park, when an explosion rocked his house. He dropped the book and shuddered - he instantly thought a Tyrannosaurus Rex had kicked its way into the front of his house, destroying everything in its path. He didn't know if he should hide under the bed or run out. Finally, he summoned enough courage to run out and confront the beast. He stopped dumbfounded when the house was intact.

He entered the living room and saw a flickering light bounce off the sheer curtains that covered the window facing the road. He approached the window cautiously, not really comprehending what to expect, and looked out across the long expanse of his front yard and through the trees towards the road. He shook with fear. Again, he had to muster up enough courage to get closer to see what had happened. He opened his front door and ran towards the tall flames that were beginning to consume the large oak tree on the other side of the road. When he approached the road, he saw the twisted, gnarled metal hulk that was once a red Crossfire. He looked hard to see if any heads were inside the car now enveloped in flames. He began to feel the heat from the burning wreck and he knew that if anyone was still in the car it was too late for them. He ran back to the house and dialed 911. He was still gasping for air and he could barely get his finger to stop shaking long enough to

push the right numbers on the keypad. He decided he was going to stick to the diet his doctor had prescribed to him weeks earlier. Minutes seemed like hours and then he heard the sirens and saw the red flashing lights bounce off the trees in his front yard. He went into the kitchen, opened the cabinet above the sink, and took out a bottle of brandy. He shook as he poured the dark golden liquid into a highboy glass, spilling some on the white granite counter. He filled the glass halfway and downed all its contents in a single swallow.

"Damn dinosaurs," he said and went back into the living room to watch the activity outside his house. His hands still shook.

* * *

Jerry Vandergarde pulled up to red flashing lights reflecting and bouncing around the glass in his windshield. The fire trucks had already arrived and several firefighters were spraying the burning car with expanding, yellow foam. Jerry parked a few car lengths away and walked toward a uniformed officer standing near one of the large pumper trucks.

"What happened? I got the call at home," Jerry said.

"It's your partner's car all right, but there's no sign of him," the young officer replied.

"If I know him, he probably walked away from it and is now down the road looking for a ride home. Has anyone checked the wooded areas?" Jerry said.

"No. Not that I know of."

"Okay. I'm going to call for more help. Can you spare me some men to search the area?"

"Yeah, McBride and Ross are over there. We got this under control," the officer said.

Jerry went back to his car and made a call to headquarters. Several minutes later a police car pulled up and a second car arrived several minutes after that. Jerry gathered the police officers, gave them instructions, and the men vanished into the nearby wooded area. Jerry walked closer to the burned car, which was charred and smoking now and moved his flashlight around the wreckage. He washed the light over the driver's seat, the passenger seat, and then the small rear seats. Sweat formed on his forehead from the heat of the smoldering car. He looked at the driver's side door and then he saw that the grass was crushed and some of it torn out in a long path that lead to the edge of the road. He

walked along the edge of the road and saw wide tire tracks with thick treads etched into the grass.

Jerry pulled his pocket radio out of his back pocket and pressed the talk button.

"Captain Buranski?"

Jerry released the button. A bolt of static blared out of the tiny loud speaker.

"Captain Buranski?"

"This is Buranski. Is that you Jerry?"

"Yeah, I need road blocks on every road that feeds off this one going north. Have your men search all vehicles in the area. I think Nick was kidnapped."

* * *

Nick felt a cramped sensation in his left arm and slowly the pain began to intensify as he reached full consciousness. He moved the arm slightly and the pain ignited into a blaze. It was dark and it smelled musty. His face and head also ached. He moved his hand and felt that he was lying on his stomach on some kind of metal with deep grooves. The metal was cold and hard. He reached around to his left arm and found something covering him; something rough and stiff. *Canvas*, he thought. He gingerly felt along his arm's length, checking for a broken bone. It was ok. Suddenly he realized the loud rhythm of crickets...thousands of them. It was getting louder and louder. Fear washed over him.

Where am I? he thought. *The car...the turn...am I dead? No. I can't be dead...my arm.* He slowly moved his body up. Pain streaked across every limb, every muscle, and his abdomen. *Damn, I feel like shit*, he thought. He felt along the canvas looking for the edge. When he found it, he slowly moved it over his head and peered out. Total darkness. He moved forward and his hand touched a wall. His hand followed it up to the edge and pulled himself up. The cool, damp air streamed over his face, and made him more alert. He moved his hand down his right leg to his calf and felt the hard metal of his 22-caliber pistol. He pulled himself up. From the faint light of the moon, he saw he was in the back of a pickup truck. He was looking at the cab to see if anyone was there when it began to blur out of focus, and then it slowly faded away.

Retaliation - Chapter 39



he six men climbed the small hill. When they reached the top they could barely see the tall spire of St. John's Roman Catholic Church in the silvery light. The men wore navy blue work pants and shirts so they were not readily visible despite the dim glare of the full moon. They descended on the church like a pack of red wolves running the 200 yards to the back of the church in minutes. When they reached the white stucco building, they crouched down and opened their backpacks in unison as if they had rehearsed the scenario many times. The first man took out a long crow bar and wedged its flat end between the door and frame a few inches above the doorknob.

"Crack!" the wood gave way and the door easily splintered revealing the door's bolt. He jammed the crow bar between the doorjamb and the bolt and pried the bolt back and the door opened.

The six men quickly entered and the last man closed the door behind him. They ran through a narrow hallway, up two flights of stairs and then poured out into the altar area like a swarm of flies. Their bright Xenon flashlights created a disco-like scene as the bluish white beams danced around the narrow passageway and into the main church area. The men dug in their backpacks and pulled out small hatchets and sledgehammers. They looked around moving their beams in all directions. Then one of them slammed his hammer into the statue of the Virgin Mary beheading the five-foot structure. Large chunks of the icon

broke off and crumbled into thousands of smaller pieces that ran away in all directions when they hit the oak floor. The cracking of the statue seemed to signal the start an all out frenzy. The other men quickly began smashing other statues and two men used hatchets on the altar making large gashes in the old wood. One grabbed the chalice burse, ripped it from the altar, and threw it on the floor. Another man tore the altar cover off and placed it in a pile next to the burse. Another man came over with a half gallon jug of clear liquid and carefully poured it over the pile of cloth and then placed a small cardboard box the size of a deck of cards under the pile. He slowly pulled a small string out of the box.

"Okay, let's get the hell out of here!" he shouted.

The men rushed out of the area, down the narrow stairway and through the hallway to the back door. Once outside they sprinted back into the woods like a heard of deer running from a predator. The men vanished into the blackness of the backwoods like peccant specters.

Within minutes a there was a low rumbling inside the church until the pressure was so great that the six 12-foot stained glass windows blew out almost simultaneously. White-hot flames spewed out of the gaping holes like gigantic blowtorches instantly burning away the wooden walls. Within seconds the entire structure was a large fireball with wild, violent flames racing upward.

When the first fire truck arrived nine minutes later, the 40-foot spire had collapsed taking what was left of the roof. Twenty-two minutes later the walls fell into a fiery pile of charred and deformed wood. Four firemen focused two hoses on the fire merely to contain the flames. Within minutes, there was nothing recognizable in the pile of blackened wood and metal. One firefighter approached the chief surveying what was once a thriving, living church.

"I have never seen a fire burn so hot so fast," the firefighter noted.

"Definitely arson," the chief said. "Unlike the other four - they used a hell of an accelerant. They must have used jet fuel or something just as powerful because whoever did this wanted to make sure this church was completely destroyed."

The Accused - Chapter 40

"Welcome everyone. Welcome to the good times!" Kyle Mabus said to the coven of thirteen individuals, who had joined his cult. Other groups of thirteen stood nearby and conducted a similar ceremony.

"Satan and I would like to thank you for showing faith in him. We are sure we can all work together to finally defeat the diseased minds of the prophets of the world who seek to condemn our mighty lord Lucifer. Our master has regained his position of prominence in the world and those of us who help him will be rewarded beyond our wildest dreams. Those who work against him will have unfortunate events," he said.

"Worship here consists of three basic rituals," he went on. "Sexual - to fulfill a desire; Compassionate - to help one another and Destructive - to eliminate anger, annoyance and hate. Tonight we have prepared the path for you to make contact with Satan. Nidel is our altar tonight...you see her naked before her master. She represents carnal power and lust," Kyle said pointing to Nidel, the woman with the long red ponytail. She was lying on her back nude on a table behind him. The table was raised with two cinder blocks under each leg.

"Now everyone...gather close to the edge of the pentagram and repeat after me," he commanded.

"Emperor Lucifer, master of the rebellious spirits, I beg you to be favorable..." Kyle paused and waited for the others to repeat.

"Now that I call for your minister the great Lucifuge Rofocale."

The small crowd repeated the words.

"As I desire to sign a contract with him. In the name of Satan the ruler of the earth," Kyle said. "...The king of the world, I command the forces of darkness to bestow their infernal power upon me. Open wide the gates of Hell and come forth from the abyss to greet me as your brother and friend. Grant me the indulgences of which I speak. I have taken thy name as part of myself. I live as the beasts in the fields, rejoicing the fleshly life. By all the gods in the pit, I command that these things of which I speak shall come to pass."

Kyle picked up an athame off the table, a ceremonial dagger that tapered towards the point.

"Now each and every one of you, repeat after me, 'Hail Satan, Hail Satan, Hail Satan,'" Kyle said holding the dagger in front of his face.

The members repeated the slogan.

"I call upon the messengers of doom to slash with grim delight this victim we have chosen. Silent is that voiceless bird that feeds upon the brain pulp of him who hath tormented me and the agony of this shall sustain itself in shrieks of pain."

Kyle turned again and brought forth a golden chalice. "Drink now," he said. "The life force of this world."

He sipped the liquid in the chalice and handed it to a tall thin man standing near him. The man slowly brought the cup to his lips. "It's blood!" he said.

"Yes it is the life force. Drink," Kyle replied.

The man handed the cup to a woman standing near him. Every member of the group took a turn drinking from the chalice. Kyle placed the chalice back on the altar.

"Bring the sacrifice - the center of our annoyances and hate," Kyle said.

Two men stepped forward out of the shadows of the room, and then vanished through the large wooden doors. They returned minutes later, each holding the arm of man with only a black sack tied around his head. The man had trouble standing up, and the two men had to keep lifting his arms to prevent him from falling. Some of the woman in the group gasped when they saw him. The two men laid the man down on the ground in the center of the pentagram. One went towards the south wall and released a long rope that was tied to a hook in the wooden wall.

The rope swung across the room and stopped over the center of the pentagram. The rope passed through a large wooden block that was secured to cross beam in the roof. The other man grabbed the rope and tied it around the ankles of the man lying in the pentagram. After a few minutes, the man joined the other man, and both began to hoist the naked man up over the pentagram. The naked man groaned as his body was lifted into the air. The men pulling on the rope grunted and gasped for air.

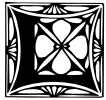
"Remove the hood and let him see his accusers," Kyle said. One of the men by the wall walked over, untied the hood, and removed it. Several women in the group gasped again. One side of the man's face was covered with dried blood and his eyes were glassy and empty.

Nick woke up and saw heads floating in front of him upside down. His own head swelled with pain, and his thoughts were slow in coming. He was cold, his ankles hurt, and he felt nauseous. The floating head closest with the darkest eyes held a dagger in front of him. Nick thought he was having a nightmare. Then the floating head spoke.

"Accused! You are doomed. A pestilence to our majestic group," the voice said. "You are one of the holy who has mocked our Satan and tried to stop us from doing his bidding. Die pig! Die pig!"

Nick was convinced he was having a nightmare even until he felt the slight piercing pain of the dagger in his side. He feebly reached up and felt his own warm blood trickle through his fingers. *I should wake up now*, he thought. But he didn't. Instead, he saw the blade strike his other side and the pain was the same. The blood trickled down his chest, up his chin and into his mouth. He tried to scream, but it came out as a whimper. The floating heads began to vanish and Nick thought he would wake up soon.

Satan's Bride - Chapter 41



Linda snuggled into the wood post bed and turned on the China rose prism lamp on the small oval night table. The glass shade with three hand painted roses each a different shade of crimson cast a soft, romantic glow into the room. The lamp was one of her most prized possessions having purchased it from an estate sale in Charleston, South Carolina on their third wedding anniversary. The estate manager told her the lamp was made in 1864 and was typical of the Victorian lamps that populated the parlors of most Southern mansions during the Victorian period. The family had the lamp converted from oil to electricity in 1912.

She picked up *Love's Fury*, a Harlequin novel by J.P. Polk and removed the bookmarker on page 121. If she did not have to work, she could read one or two novels a day, she thought. There were two large boxes of novels she had read with yellowing pages still unpacked in the basement - she had not decided if she would keep them or give them away. She reached over and turned on the clock radio to an easy listening station. Then she began to read.

About an hour later, there was a rumbling sound, very faint and far off. She turned off the radio and listened. The rumbling sound came from the west, a low sonorous sound - it was thunder of an approaching storm. She thought of Carson working all night, and then returning in the morning looking like he hadn't slept in a week. She smiled to herself

picturing his haggard face, dulled eyes and "I don't give a shit about anything" attitude. It was a perfect time to ask him to do something or approve a purchase he would normally not consent to without a lot of persuasion. She turned the volume up slightly on the radio and went back to her book. Several minutes later, the wind began to act like a mischievous little boy - first rattling a couple of clapboards on one side of the house, swinging around and rattling some on the other side. Linda listened as the wind whipped around the house. She began reading again, but the words turned into meaningless images on the page and her eyes felt very heavy. She turned on her side, hugged the pillow, and let the pleasure of sleep take over.

A low faint tinkling noise seeped into her consciousness as she slept on and off, awakened by an occasional peal of thunder and the white light flash of lightening that splashed into the small room. The tinkling noise was followed by a loud thump that reverberated through the walls of the house. She bolted up in her bed like a dog trained to hunt - her eyes wide and ears tuned to the slightest sound. She knew the thump was too close to be something outside like a lawn chair blown against the house or a door slammed in the wind. She glanced over at the clock radio - 3:09 AM glowed on its face. Too early for Carson, she thought. She cautiously turned on the China rose lamp and grabbed the frumpy robe her mother-in-law had given her from her clothing closet leaving the door open. After putting on the robe, she quickly opened her door, knowing the hinges would not squeak when it was thrust open like that. The light from her Victorian lamp spilled out into the stairway. She descended only three steps and stopped. She knew the fourth step and three others squeaked like a cranky old woman who didn't want to be bothered. It was as if the steps protested each time someone stepped on them. She listened for several minutes. A zephyr wafted up the stairway carrying with it a briny, wet odor. The tinkling sound heard earlier replayed itself in her mind. *Maybe a tree branch blew down and broke a window*, she thought. *Maybe a lawn chair was blown into the window. Maybe, someone broke in.* This last thought made her shiver. She immediately discredited it, but remained leery just the same.

She moved onto the fourth step and its protests seemed as loud as a 20-piece band playing downstairs in the parlor. After the initial shock of the sound, she moved quickly down the stairs and headed for the light switch that would turn on the Victorian-styled room lamps. She reached the switch and pushed it up. The lamps lit as usual. The wind from the storm whipped the delicate curtains that she had just put up last week on the window behind the sofa. A loud and long peal of thunder shook

the house and she thought it would never stop. She walked closer to the window, but then stopped to avoid stepping on the shards of glass that lay scattered on the floor. She moved closer and stopped again. Her bare foot had touched a wet spot on the rug that could not have been soaked by the rain that was being blown in by the wind. Or could it?

She slowly turned and moved towards the stairs and took each step cautiously looking in every direction like a cat on the prowl. The kitchen was dark so she ruled out using the phone there. *Once I get back to the bedroom, I'll be safer*, she thought. She moved quickly up the stairs, taking long strides to skip steps to avoid the noisy ones. When she reached her room, she closed the door and locked it, then sat on the bed and picked up the cordless telephone. The room seemed different as she dialed 911 with a bit of relief, not paying much attention to her instincts. *If there was someone in the house, the police would flush him out*, she thought. Her thoughts and energy focused on calling 911.

She opened a small drawer in the night table and reached in for a tiny canister of mace that Carson had bought her when they had moved in since she was afraid of guns. She got up and headed towards the closet door to get a pair of slippers but when she put her hand on the glass doorknob, she stopped. *The door, the door, the DOOR WAS OPEN!* screamed in her head! The door suddenly exploded forward, hitting her in the face and knocking her onto the bed. The telephone bounced and tumbled on the rug and landed under the night table. She also dropped the mace canister. Linda found herself pinned on her bed with a figure dressed in army fatigues and a black ski mask over his face. He pushed his hand over her face. His hand had something in it, something soft that smelled medicinal like rubbing alcohol. She lifted her arm and slammed her fist into his face, and felt the pressure on his hand release momentarily. She screamed and the piercing sound seemed to pull the man out of his temporary daze and he pushed his hand harder against her face. She thrust her hands forward, grabbed the man's throat, and immediately tightened her grip around his neck, squeezing, squeezing...then she felt his powerful grip on her wrists and her hands were pulled away. She felt something entangle her hand then disappear. He thrust her hand down hard on the bed, but she pulled her hand free thanks to the hand cream she had put on earlier. She reached over for the China rose lamp and managed to get her hand around the narrow base. She mustered all her strength to lift the lamp and slammed the glass shade into the man's head. She watched in slow motion, as the hand-painted crimson roses broke apart and splintered into several white and red shards of glass. A small shard with one of the leaves still

intact moved down the man's cheek slicing the skin like a surgeon's scalpel. She brought her arm back again and moved her fist towards his face again, but when she slammed it into his face, it was like thrusting her hand into a giant marshmallow. The marshmallow head slowly faded into darkness and she could no longer feel her arm. She could no longer feel anything. The man, the room, all of her surroundings slowly faded into blackness that seeped into the room.

* * *

The call from Linda's cordless telephone was routed to the Allenwood State Police Barracks in nearby Wall Township since Ocean Village did not have its own police force and contracted the state police for protection. The call went to the state police computer and the number was entered into the database. The computer did an instant search taking a little more than three nanoseconds. Dr. and Mrs. Carson Hyll and their address flashed on the screen in front of 911 dispatcher Denise Middleton. Denise listened closely on her headset. She looked over to the snapshot of her two redheaded boys at camp hanging next to the display and then pushed a button on her console and spoke into a tiny microphone attached to her headset.

"I think we got something here. There was a scream, but no one is talking now. I can hear scuffling. We need to send a car out," she said.

"Maybe, it's a kid playing with the phone," overweight dispatcher Todd Jacobs said.

Denise's face went cold. She pushed another button and spoke again.

"We have a possible break in or a family dispute at fifty six Cherry Blossom Boulevard in Ocean Village. Send a car immediately."

* * *

Linda awoke with a pain in her head so severe that she thought there was a large weight on her head. Her mind was foggy and thoughts streamed in fragments - the broken window, the closet door bursting open, the man in the green fatigues. The China rose lamp...*oh it can't be broken*, she thought.

The room was without traces of light anywhere. She thought this was odd. Even the streetlights outside her home would cast a faint silver of light into the bedroom windows. She could at least see the windows framed in this pale light. She reached over to turn on her Victorian lamp next to her bed and her fingers touched something that felt like many tiny sticks. It made a dry rustling sound like paper. She moved her

hand around wildly like a fish out of water feeling the area around her. The entire area was covered with the dry, stick-like substance. She felt a rough blanket that smelled of mildew beneath her. Under the blanket, the floor was hard and rough and felt like wood.

She sat up and her head spun out of control. Tiny white stars swirled in front of her eyes. She laid back and took several deep breaths. Her stomach was about to erupt when she heard a sound. *What was that!* She thought feeling the fear quickly seep through her body. The sound had an animal quality to it and she began to sweat. Seconds later, the sound came out of the darkness again - a low moan of pain and fear. She backed away from the sound, but her movement created the rustling sound again. She stopped out of fear that the animal would find her in the darkness and attack. The voice moaned again.

Linda stared into the darkness hoping her eyes would adjust and she would be able to see something, anything. She was still sweating, but not as much. She stared at the darkness for several minutes, letting her fear escape and her thoughts take over. Slowly, she began to think again - her thoughts were clearer now. Slowly she took a deep breath.

"Hello."

There was silence for several seconds.

"Hello. Is anyone there?" she said louder.

Nothing. Then she could hear breathing, short and shallow, but it was breathing!

"Who are you?" she said.

There was a garbled sound at first like someone trying to talk with a throat full of mucus.

"Help...me...help..." the voice said.

It was a low, very faint voice. Linda slowly moved toward the cry, crawling on all fours like a cautious animal. "Help...me," the voice was raspy and strained. Linda stopped and used her hands to feel in front of her. She did this several times, moving toward the sound, until her hand touched something warm and slightly hairy. She moved her fingers along the length of the object. It was an arm. She moved closer and moved her hand along the arm's length until she found a hand. It was a large hand with a slight hardness on the palm and inside of the fingers. She picked up the hand and then slowly lowered it to the floor. She felt along the man's arm to his shoulder and found his face. She touched his

cheek; it was rough from the stubble of a beard several days old. She leaned over him and whispered near his head, "Where are we?"

"I don't know," the raspy voice said in a strained whisper.

"What's your name?"

"Nick."

The Cross of Nero - Chapter 42



Carson sat down for the first time in eight hours. He dropped into a dark brown stuffed chair in the doctor's lounge on the first floor of the hospital. It was his first 45-minute break. This was his week for the all nighters, and he didn't mind because he knew it would soon be just a mere memory. Three more months and he would be off the hook - no more all night duty unless it was an emergency. He let out a breath of relief at the thought and then fell into a deep, restful sleep.

Carson awoke slowly to a vibration at his hip. He wasn't sure now if his beeper went off or not. He rubbed his eyes trying to hurry them to focus, and then glanced down at the beeper. A tiny triangle blinked on the LCD screen. He pressed a tiny button next to the screen and his home telephone number flashed on the tiny screen. He looked at his watch. It was 4:15 a.m. He quickly went to the phone on the wall and pressed "9" to get an outside line. When he heard the second dial tone, he dialed his home number.

"Detective Vandergarde," the voice said.

"Who?" Carson asked.

"Vandergarde here," the voice said.

"I'm sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number..." Carson replied his head still swimming in sleep.

"Doctor Hyll?"

"Yeah. How did you know my name?"

"I'm at your house now and I think you better come home right away."

"Is Linda ok?" Carson yelled into the phone.

"We don't know. You'd better come now," Vandergarde said.

"Is she there? Let me talk to her. Is she hurt?"

"Missing, we think. You'd better get here as fast as you can. I'll explain everything when you get here."

Carson slammed the receiver back into its holder and rushed out of the lounge. The phone bounced off the holder and swayed back and forth like a pendulum. As he rushed past the nearest nursing station, he told the nurse he had an emergency at home.

Carson pulled up and it looked like a late night party with every light on in the house. Several police cars were parked in front along with several more unmarked cars. He rushed up his porch and entered. Two men dressed in suits stood in the living room, while several uniformed officers moved through the house like they were old friends over to see the new house. The uniformed police dusted for fingerprints and looked around.

"What happened? Where's Linda?" Carson said frantically.

"I'm Jerry Vandergarde. I spoke to you on the phone," said the tall, blonde man as he approached Carson.

"What's going on?" Carson asked.

"We're not sure. We got a 911 call from here and then nothing. The call was connected, but no one spoke. When we arrived, the front door was open and a window over there was broken. We're checking with neighbors to see if they saw anything," Vandergarde explained. "Looks like a break-in, but we're not sure."

Carson rushed past Vandergarde into his bedroom. Several detectives and crime scene investigators were examining the room. He rushed out, went back downstairs, and approached Vandergarde.

"Would your wife go out around 3 a.m. for any reason? Visit a friend?"

"No. Nobody! She would call me if she went out. She was leery about going out at night since the first break in."

"That's why we responded," Vandergarde said. "We knew about the first break in. So far it looks like we have to treat this as a missing person unless we find evidence to prove otherwise."

"Don't bullshit me!" Carson yelled.

Vandergarde raised his eyes.

"Why would all these cops be here? Tell me what's going on or do I have to talk to your boss!"

"Listen, asshole!" Vandergarde replied pressing his face close to Carson's. "I don't have to tell you a fucking thing! You can call the governor! I don't have to tell you anything! I'm conducting an investigation and right now you are my number one suspect!"

Carson looked away and his face flushed red.

"Okay," he said clenching his fist. "Would you mind filling me in? I'm telling you that she has no reason to go out at this hour. Even if she were sick or dying, she would call 911 before driving herself to a hospital. She would call me first. I'm a doctor!"

"Okay. We're checking the hospitals now for that possibility," the detective said. "If you would come out to my car, I'll fill you in on what we have so far."

Vandergarde led the way to his black GMC truck parked in front of the house.

"We had a hellva time trying to get in here. The gate guard wouldn't let us in until a uniformed pulled up. You got good security here," Vandergarde said.

"It's ok, I guess. Keeps the cars out after eleven, but not the people," Carson replied.

The two men got into the truck.

"What I am about to tell you stays in this car. Okay?"

Carson nodded.

"I'm Nick Vancuso's partner," Vandergarde said. "All those calls you've been leaving for Nick, I've been getting. Nick is what we call in the force a ghost buster - a detective who becomes an expert on crimes related to the occult and Satanism and anything else that is weird or out of the ordinary. Personally, I didn't believe any of that shit until Nick disappeared two days ago, and I was given his files."

"He disappeared?" Carson said.

"Yeah, I didn't even know Nick was a ghost buster. Until a few years ago, any crime related to Satanism was kept under raps, because we didn't want everyone panicked, but mainly because you lose credibility with most judges when you mention occult stuff, and you end up losing most of the time. Plus the damn newspapers play it up to high heaven," Vandergarde explained. "Excuse the pun."

"So Nick and my wife may have been kidnapped by Satanists?" Carson asked incredulously.

"I'm not saying anything, but it is a possibility."

"Oh come on! What kind of shit is this?" Carson said. "Why would they want to kidnap Nick or my wife?"

"Listen. It is a possibility until proven otherwise. We have reason to believe, it may be such a group. Why Nick? He was getting too close to them, making them uncomfortable, so they would go after him."

"He's dead?" Carson said.

"It's a possibility. A veteran detective just doesn't disappear for a few days and not tell anyone, especially Nick. He was one of the best."

"What about Linda? Is she dead, too?" Carson asked his voice trailing off to a whisper and his eyes welling up.

"Not yet," Vandergarde said.

Carson looked at him intensely.

"How do you know?"

"Nick reported that your wife had been marked with a funny symbol, a symbol that marked her the bride of Satan."

"A diamond flanked by two inverted C's. They painted it on her with nail polish," Carson said.

"Well, she's a special person to them and they won't kill her because she's supposed to have the Devil's son," Vandergarde explained. "This was all in Nick's notes."

"That's what Nick said and I'm still having problems believing all this. I think it's just some crazy maniac out there who kidnapped my wife. This is just a bunch of crazy shit!"

"I thought so, too," Vandergarde said. "Until I read Nick's files."

"What's the motive? Why would they pick Linda?" Carson asked.

"They just don't pick anyone. There's a motive. You or your wife is a target. Have you ever crossed anyone connected with them? Anyone at the hospital?"

"How am I supposed to know that?" Carson said. "They don't wear name tags."

Vandergarde reached in the inside pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a small pad. He turned on the overhead light and then flipped several pages.

"How about a nurse named Janice Doherty? Ring any bells?"

Carson stared hard at the detective and Vandergarde watched him closely.

"She worked with Doctor Graber, but I never worked with her, never met her."

"But she knows of you?"

"It's a small hospital."

Carson looked out of the window at the large oak tree near his house.

"Is she one of them?" he asked.

"We don't know, but Nick spoke with her and then he disappeared."

"I don't know. I just don't know," Carson said. "I'm having a hard time with all of this."

He pressed his fingers into his eyes and rubbed them.

"Maybe, I'll get a ransom note or something like that."

"I wouldn't count on it," Vandergarde said. "They don't want money."

Carson looked up at the detective.

"So what do I do now?"

"We'll put out a missing person's report. You'll have to come to the station to sign it. Do you have a recent photo of your wife? We'll give it to the media."

"Sure," Carson said and opened the car door.

They went into the house and Carson went upstairs to the bedroom to get a photo of Linda. Vandergarde stayed downstairs in the living room. Carson noticed her things on the vanity - uniquely shaped bottles of perfume, the gold-plated jewelry box from Paris, two hairbrushes

filled with strands of her brown hair - objects that defined her life. He stopped at the photo of them taken in Bermuda on their honeymoon. Carson had set the camera on a small tripod and put the camera on self-timer. He hurriedly joined Linda sitting on a large rock that was part of the jetty. The camera clicked just as a wave splashed white water up behind them - a perfect shot. Carson could still hear the waves hitting the jetty. His eyes began to water and tears rolled down his narrow cheeks falling into the rug below. His chest heaved and he burst out crying. After a few seconds, Carson reached over and picked up the photo. He looked at it again and a new wave moved up from his bowels into his throat. He held the photo against his chest and cried again. He unconsciously dropped the photo and it bounced slightly on the rug and partially slid under the vanity. He bent down to pick it up and saw a silver chain with a pendant attached lying under the vanity. He moved his hand under and picked it up. The thick silver chain was broken and the pendant was about the size of a quarter and in the shape of a peace symbol. Carson stared at the jewelry for several minutes, turning it over, examining it, and looking for any clues that could explain what had happened to Linda. Then he put the pendant in his pocket and headed downstairs.

"Did you have trouble finding a photo?" Vandergarde asked.

"No," Carson handed him the framed photo.

"Do you mind if I take it out of the frame?"

"Go ahead. I also found this on the floor," Carson reached into his pocket and handed the pendant to Vandergarde. "It's a peace symbol, and I know it doesn't belong to Linda. She would never wear anything like that."

"It's no peace symbol," Vandergarde explained. "In the sixties it might have been, but now it's used by Satanists. Nick had a copy of it in his file."

The detective reached into his blazer again and produced a tiny notebook. He began flipping the pages.

"Here, it is. It's called the Cross of Nero and it symbolizes the defeat of Christianity. See how the cross arms point downward. It represents a broken cross."

Husk - Chapter 43



Chantress sat in her room looking out her window a frown growing on her forehead. She had just watched the 11 o'clock news and saw Kyle raid Holy Mary's Roman Catholic Church dressed in his satanic robes.

"It's getting out of hand," she whispered to herself.

She got in her car and headed for The Ink Well, the small cafe in the West End section of Long Branch, where most of her friends congregated, and where she could hear the latest news on the underground groups in the area. When she pulled into the tiny dirt parking lot she could hear guitar music faintly drifting out of the cafe. The Ink Well was a tired Victorian house that had its last paint job in the 1960s and later converted into a cafe. The owners left the original decor and set up a small stage in the large living room, put in track lighting and filled the rest with small round tables. It even had a large brick fireplace that added to the intimate atmosphere on cold nights.

Chantress entered and scanned the small room looking for her friends. A man with stringy gray hair touching his shoulders sat on a stool in the middle of the stage and sang an Irish tune while playing a guitar. It was Irish night and the parade of featured artists would sing Celtic, Welsh, and Irish music.

"My bonnie and I climbed the hill together,
And many a times we sat there looking at one another,
But now she is gone,
Taken by the love of another man."

Chantress was about to leave when she spotted Yanni sitting at a table in the corner of the room with two men.

"Yanni! Yanni!" she said.

"Chantress! What are you doing here?"

"I got bored and decided to come out," she replied.

"This is Chuck and Roger. We're doing a little celebrating," Yanni explained.

Both men wore black jeans and white t-shirts.

"They just got engaged. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Great. Yanni, can I talk to you alone for a minute?" Chantress said.
"Would you excuse us?"

The men nodded and Yanni followed Chantress into the bathroom. Chantress checked under the stalls.

"What's going on?" Yanni asked.

"Have you heard about Kyle? He was on the news, dressed as Hermes," Chantress said in a whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"He raided a church and convinced members to follow him! And the TV stations picked up on it!"

"You're kidding?" Yanni said.

"It was all over the news," Chantress explained. "Haven't you heard anything?"

"There's been some rumors, but nothing really out of the ordinary," Yanni said.

"What kind of rumors?"

"You know the usual stuff. I heard about a group doing animal sacrifices, and..."

"Do you know which group?" Chantress demanded.

"No. I just heard about it."

"Who would know?"

Yanni frowned then looked around the tiny bathroom.

"I don't know, there is this guy Husk I know," she said.

"What about him?"

"I don't know. He's a weird dude. He comes here every night about one, and stays till closing," she said. "He must live nearby or something."

"Think he'll come tonight?"

"I don't know. What's with you? You're really paranoid. What did you take?"

"Nothing, I'm just upset over Kyle. He still pisses me off," Chantress said.

She let out a deep breath struggling to hide her emotions.

"Forget that low life. He's lower than dirt."

"I know. That's what bothers me. I think he's going to do something really bad."

The hinges on the door squeaked and a woman with brown hair down to the middle of her back walked in and chose one of the stalls. The two women left and went back to the table with Chuck and Roger. A waiter approached and Chantress ordered a glass of white wine. She kept her eye on the door, and whenever someone entered, she would turn to Yanni and ask if it was Husk. Yanni would roll her eyes and say no.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Roger asked. "You keep looking at the door."

"Sort of," Chantress replied.

Roger took another sip from his drink and turned to watch the man with the guitar.

Bonnie Best Morgan was a young maiden,

She was lovely, young, and free,

Bonnie Best Morgan she stole my heart,

When I think about her tears do softly fall,

Bonnie Best Morgan was too wild for me.

At ten after one Chantress turned to Yanni.

"You think he'll show?"

"I have no idea. I'm not his personal secretary," Yanni replied raising a green bottle of beer to her mouth.

"Well...excuuuuuus me," Chantress said jokingly. The two women laughed. The men looked at each other oblivious to what was going on between them.

Minutes later there was a muffled roar of a motorcycle outside.

"Vroom! Vroom! Vroom!"

The sound rose above the soft guitar music and Yanni looked at Chantress.

"I think that's him," she said smiling. "He always likes people to know he arrives."

The engine revved several more times before it fell silent. Seconds later, a figure stood in the doorway. His head towered only a few inches from the doorframe and his body filled in most of the width of the door. He wore black jeans, black boots, and a black leather jacket. A large silver belt buckle six inches long and four inches deep covered his middle like an ancient shield. The buckle had turquoise stones embedded with ornate flourishes surrounding the stones. He was decorated with various turquoise and silver rings, and pendants. He was big boned with a narrow dark face and dark, piercing eyes that scanned the room with an icy presence. His hair was as black as the night and was pulled back into a short ponytail.

"Is that him?" Chantress asked.

"That's him."

He walked around the room like peacock displaying his feathers and then chose a table near them. He rested his hands and arms on the table taking up most of the space.

"Do you know him, Yanni?" Chantress asked.

"Sort of, I used to know one of his friends."

"He has friends?"

Yanni got up and walked over to the giant's table. She leaned over putting her face close to his so she knew he would hear her. He looked up at her with a bothered look on his face and then he looked over at

Chantress. His cold, black eyes pierced hers and drove a cold darkness into her heart. She shivered slightly. Yanni returned.

"He said he'll talk, but you'll owe him," Yanni said. "It's like his way."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"If he asks you out, you should go," Yanni said.

"I'm not going out with him!" Chantress protested. "I'm not even attracted to him!"

"Then he won't talk to you," Yanni said. "Listen, I went out with him once. He's not that bad...a little beer, a little sex, and it's over. He won't call you again."

"How do I know he knows anything?"

"He knows everything. I don't know how he knows but he knows everything. One thing about him, he's straight. He honors his word. He's very proud."

"I don't know. I just can't go out with someone and have sex and that's it," Chantress said.

Yanni raised her eyebrows. Their eyes met and Yanni went back to Husk's table. She spoke with him a few minutes and returned.

"It's taken care of. He'll talk to you now," Yanni said.

"But I'm not going out with him!" Chantress said.

"You don't have to, I am," Yanni said.

"You? Yanni, you don't have to do this for me, really."

"What are friends for? Besides I don't mind and you do," she said. "It's been a long time, and I've forgotten what it's like."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, now go talk to him," Yanni said and motioned her friend to get up.

Chantress moved slowly towards Husk's table. Husk stared at her the entire time she approached. She shivered again.

"Hello," he said. "Sit."

He pulled out a chair.

"Hi."

"What do you want to know? The moon is high in the sky and it is a time for revealing much," he said. "Our spiritual forefathers are angry and need to be pleased."

"What are you talking about?" Chantress said turning her fear into anger.

"Listen. I am Oglala, and my people were here first," he said. "My full name is Husk, the Revealer."

His gaze softened and Chantress sensed a warmth flow from his eyes.

"We listen to the earth and her cries. We listen to life and live our lives accordingly. The white man has stripped us of much, but we still have our beliefs and our souls. He cannot take them from us. What I see is the evil of all evils taking hold. He is destroying the greatest gift we have received from the earth - life itself. The cults have an edge now. They are getting many new believers and with that comes power, a power that is being used for evil, great evil. They are using other's life forces as sacrifices to their evil ruler. They are taking life and doing with it what they please. No one is safe from them. The evil has grown very strong and it may be hard to stop," Husk explained. "Hermes is the dangerous one."

Chantress looked at him doubtful.

"How do I know this is true?"

"I know this because I used to be one of them. I joined because I needed something more. I was lost between two cultures - yours and mine. After I joined, I realized that they were the lost ones and not me. The cult made me realize that my own heritage and history is what's really important, and that I should embrace it, and be proud of my forefathers," he explained. "They made me realize who I am."

Chantress let out a deep sigh and looked deeply into his eyes.

"Are you still a member?" Chantress asked.

Husk looked around and then gently and slowly pushed her hair away from her ear and placed his lips close. His warm breath against her ear made her tingle with excitement. When he was done, he placed his hand over hers. It covered her hand completely. Chantress saw the sincerity in his eyes. She saw the strength and confidence he held; she saw the goodness of his soul. She took his large hand into hers. Her white, clear hand contrasted against his tanned, leathery red skin.

"Thank you," she said and squeezed his hand. He nodded and sipped his beer. The two men were gone when she returned to Yanni's table.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Yanni said. "What did he tell you?"

"Husk is telling the truth. He's weird all right, but there is something about him. When he spoke I heard ancient words. Words from the past, words laced with wisdom. I'd say he is probably the more advanced species on this planet, in touch with the earth and the spiritual part of life. He's the harbinger of our future."

"Now you sound like him. What did he do, hypnotize you?"

"No, he didn't hypnotize me, stupid! One of the cults is taking people and using them as human sacrifices and I think its Kyle. The son of a bitch has gone too far!"

Yanni stared at Chantress, her eyes wide.

"No, that can't be happening," she said. "No."

"It is, Yanni."

"Why?"

"Because a human sacrifice serves two purposes to a Satanist; to release the Magus' wrath or anger and to get rid of people they don't like," Chantress explained. "They also believe that it is a way to summon the ultimate power of Satan. They have become an outlaw cult."

"Disgusting. What about the bodies?" Yanni asked.

"They have ways. They burn the body parts and get rid of the ashes or they find an open grave in a cemetery, dig two or three feet down and put the body in. Then the cemetery has the funeral and places the real coffin over the body they put there. No one ever knows. There could lots of bodies buried under coffins. How do you find them? Dig up every grave?"

"Gee. How awful," Yanni said. "How could you be in with them?"

"I wasn't. What I'm talking about is the outlaw cults. My group didn't do any of those things. Besides, I quit," Chantress said. "I have my own group now, and it's not Satanism."

"What should we do?" Yanni asked.

"I don't know. Maybe call the cops. Tell them what's happening," Chantress said.

A frown formed on Yanni's face and Chantress noticed. Then Chantress looked at Husk. He sat contentedly and watched the guitar player strum another ballad.

"This is really scary," Yanni said.

"We're going there," Chantress said.

"Going where?"

"To the place of the sacrifices," Chantress said. "We have to warn someone first."

The Visit - Chapter 44

"It should be one of these houses," Chantress told Yanni. "Have you seen any numbers yet?"

"I'm looking...I'm looking! I still think this is a stupid idea. We could be on the beach instead of looking for some doctor's house. How do you know he'll talk to you?"

"Quit complaining. He'll talk to us. Did you see the news? His wife is missing, and I think I know where she is. He'll listen," Chantress said.

She slowed the car down and looked at the numbers on the houses.

"I'm not so sure. He may just slam the door in your face thinking you're some kind of nut case."

"Just keep looking and have faith. Is that it?"

Chantress pointed to a freshly painted Victorian house.

"I don't know. Could be," Yanni said.

"What was the number of the last house on that side of the street?" Chantress asked staring at the large, old house.

"Fifty two."

"Then that has to be it!" Chantress said.

She pulled the car next to the curb and parked.

"Well, are you coming?" Chantress asked.

"No way! This was your idea. You go. I'll stay here."

"Chicken."

Chantress walked up to the porch, and rang the doorbell. After a minute, she rang it again and turned to look at Yanni.

"Maybe he's at work," Yanni yelled.

"I called the hospital. He wasn't there," Chantress said.

She turned and rang the bell a third time. A few minutes passed. Chantress turned and watched Yanni get out of the car and walk down the hill towards the beach. She watched Yanni climb the narrow weather-beaten stairs to the top of the sea wall and vanish over the wall. She rang the bell again. Its muffled chimes squeezed through the thick wooden door. She waited a few more moments, and then left to find Yanni on the beach. Yanni had already kicked off her sandals and waded into the cold ocean. Chantress approached as close as she could without the ocean rolling up and soaking her shoes. Yanni turned around.

"Isn't this great! We should be hanging out here soaking up some rays," Yanni yelled.

She looked past Chantress and stared at the sand dune behind her.

"I thought this was a nice neighborhood. Look at that bum sleeping over there," Yanni said. "I'm surprised the cops haven't gotten him yet."

Chantress turned and saw a body slumped against the side of the dune. Its right arm was extended and the hand held a glass bottle. Chantress walked closer. It was a young man dressed in green hospital scrubs. Yanni came up behind her.

"He's no bum," Chantress said. "He's a doctor!"

The man slowly opened his eyes and squinted at the two women.

"Doctor Hyll?" Chantress ventured.

"Huh? Where am I? Oh my head," he said, letting the empty whiskey bottle fall out of his hand. "Who are you?"

"Chantress and I think I know where your wife is."

"Nothing like getting right to the point, Chantress," Yanni said.

Chantress frowned at her and Yanni shrugged her shoulders.

Carson sat up and held his hand over his brow to block the sun.

"Where?" he said slowly managing to stand up. "Oh, my head."

He took a few moments to stabilize himself, and then stared at Chantress and Yanni in their tie-dyed t-shirts.

"Come on. Let's get out of the sun. I can barely see you."

Carson turned and slowly walked towards the wooden steps. He took each step with great difficulty. The two women followed.

Carson approached his front door, reached into his pocket, and produced a large key ring with twenty or more keys. It took him several seconds of fumbling before he found the right key and unlocked the door.

"Come in," he said as he held the door open for the two women.

He left them in the living room and told them to have a seat. A few minutes later, he returned - his face fresh and alert, despite his pounding head. He sat in the love seat adjacent the sofa where the two women sat.

"You know where Linda is?" he asked looking at Chantress and Yanni as if he saw them for the first time.

"Yeah, she was taken by a cult called Daimon Seclorum to be used as the bride of Satan in a special ceremony only a few days from now," Chantress explained. "The name means demon generations, demon centuries, demon ages or ages of demons."

"Daimon what? How do you know this?"

"I used to be a member, and I still have friends there," Chantress said.

"How do I know you're still not one of them and coming after me," Carson said.

"You don't know, but listen Doctor Hyll, you're wife is about to be publicly raped by a bunch of sickos and kept prisoner until the baby is born. After that, they'll kill her!" Chantress said.

Carson put his face into his hands and began to cry. Yanni went over to him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"We're only trying to help," she said in a low voice.

Carson cried for several minutes. Yanni rubbed his back.

"I'm sorry you have to see me this way," Carson said. "I normally don't get wasted and sleep on the beach all night. It's just that this has been so awful. I haven't slept in days. Raped...publicly? What are you talking about? Linda?"

"They will have a ceremony for sex magick. They believe it's a way of influencing nature or people by supernatural means. Magick is spelled with a "k" at the end to distinguish it from magic done by a magician." Chantress explained. "They light red candles and wear red robes because red represents affairs of the heart, lust, and sex. They will place your wife up on a wooden table - sort of like an altar and she will be nude in front of all the members. Her significance is that she represents carnal power and lust and Satan represents indulgence rather than abstinence. The Magus will then approach her and rape her in front of the members. They will chant and recite secret sayings asking that Satan enter the Magus and plant his seed in your wife. Then they will kill off an animal or a person and drink the blood as a sacrifice to the devil. They will keep your wife a prisoner and take good care of her until the baby is born. If she does not want to join them after nine months, they will sacrifice her and drink her blood or eat her organs. I've never been to one, but I've heard this is what happens."

"Really?" Yanni said.

"What's a Magus?" Carson asked trying to hold back more tears.

"The leader...the high priest...the guy that calls the shots," Chantress replied.

"Are they really capable of this?" Carson asked.

"They are capable of anything at this time because of what's been going on here with everyone believing they've been to hell and back," Chantress explained.

"The Hellfire Syndrome," Carson added.

"Yeah, that's it. Whatever it is, it has given the cults an edge...sort of like they're coming out of the closet now, and they no longer feel threatened. They have new confidence in themselves, a new faith, and more followers. Satanism was there all along like a weed, but no one really noticed because there weren't that many, but as times get harder, people's lives get more complex, more troubled, Satanism grows. Now, it's spreading everywhere because it is hard to resist when a lot of people feel down and out...powerless. Satanism is the easy way out. It appeals to one's desires to do what they want rather than to do what is right or expected. It is a selfish, self-indulgent religion that glorifies the self as the most important aspect of human existence. It gives confidence in a dangerous way to those who had none. But now it has gotten out of hand and this particular group feels it can do anything without consequence," Chantress explained.

"When did you become the philosopher?" Yanni asked.

Carson shuddered as if he caught a chill.

"Do you know where my wife is?"

"Yeah, they are using an abandoned farm in Howell as a coven stead. It's the place they meet to perform their ceremonies. They are holding her there," Chantress replied. "The marriage ceremony will take place Saturday night at midnight."

"How do you know that?" Yanni asked.

"Husk told me," she replied.

"How would he know?"

"Believe me. He would know," Chantress said.

"Do you know where the farm is?" Carson asked.

"No, only Husk knows. He said he would lead us there, but he's not going anywhere near it."

"We should call the police," Carson said.

"I've already been there, and they don't believe a word. Besides, if they see the police around that farm, they'll disappear and we may never find them."

"Who did you talk to?"

"I don't know some detective. He wasn't listening," Chantress explained. "I could tell."

"Did you talk to a Detective Vandergarde," Carson asked.

"I don't know. I don't remember his name."

Carson looked towards the front window.

"Why do you want to help me?" he asked.

"I have my reasons," she said.

Carson stared into her emerald green eyes. She stared back just as intensely.

"Let me have your phone number. I'll call you," Carson said. He got up, went into the kitchen and returned with a small pad and a pen. Chantress wrote down her name and phone number. When she finished, she pushed the pad towards Carson. He looked at the number and nodded.

"Is that your wife?"

Chantress reached over and picked up a small-framed wedding photo of Carson and Linda.

"She's very pretty."

"Can I see it?" Yanni asked.

Chantress handed the photo to Yanni, but it slipped from her fingers and crashed onto the coffee table. The glass shattered and the frame broke apart.

"Oh no!" Carson yelled. "Linda! Linda!"

He picked up the photo as if the image would suddenly vanish. His face flushed.

"GET OUT! GET OUT! NOW!" he screamed. "LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Chantress and Yanni stood up and rushed to the door. Yanni went out first. Chantress stopped.

"I'm the only one that can save your wife!" and she closed the door.

Carson sat on the couch, stared at the photo, and then felt an intense pressure building in the pit of his stomach. The pressure moved upward like a volcano into his chest and mouth until he could hardly contain it. He ran into the bathroom and leaned over the toilet until it stopped.

Depression - Chapter 45

"The door! Someone's knocking on the door," he yelled. "It's Linda! I know it is! She's come back!"

Carson raced towards the door and opened it. He was greeted by sunlight so bright that it hurt his eyes and he had to squint. The bright light slowly lost its intensity and he found himself looking off the edge of a steep cliff. Sand colored boulders dotted the bottom and gray jagged rocks were wedged between the boulders. He instinctively knew that if he fell, he would die. As soon as he thought it, he felt himself falling, and he had to use all of his strength to hold onto the doorknob to keep from falling. The door swung open wider and he pulled it back using all his strength. He began to sweat copiously. It was as if something was pulling the door open from the other side. Still, the knocking continued and it was louder now.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

He sensed something behind him and turned around. It was Linda. She was crying.

"Linda!" he yelled. "Where have you been? I've been worried to death!"

"I know. Good-bye, Carson. I love you," she said tears streaming down her face.

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!" he yelled. "You can't go now!"

"Good-bye, Carson," she said and pushed him out the door.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" he screamed as he fell. The rocks moved toward him like rockets that knew where to strike.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!" he screamed. The rocks were only several feet away now.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Carson awoke in his bed just as he was about to hit the rocks - the sheets were scattered onto the floor and he was wet with sweat. The dusk colored light from the window painted the walls a burnt orange.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Carson sat up and looked around the room like an animal being stalked.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

He rushed to the door and began releasing the locks. He opened the door slowly.

"A few more minutes and I was going to break in," Frank Tessler said.

Carson waved on his feet and Frank grabbed him in a bear hug to prevent him from falling. Carson took hold of the floor again.

"What's going on? I haven't heard from you in two days," Frank looked at his friend closely. "You look like shit! What the hell are you doing?"

"Nothing," Carson said moving nervously into the house.

"Gosh, you reek," Frank said.

Carson walked into the living room and sat down on the edge of the sofa. Frank sat on the love seat. Empty glasses with dried liquid peppered the coffee table along with a few empty beer cans. Several bags of potato chips and pretzels lay opened on the table. The glass tabletop was stained with watermarks and spilled sour beer.

"This place is a pigsty!" Frank said. "Listen, I know it's tough with Linda missing, but you can't just sit here and drink your life away. You've got to help find her. People at the hospital are worried about you and we have to find out what's causing this craziness."

"I have nothing without Linda and you sound like my mother. What good doing anything without her? She is everything."

"She's is everything and she isn't. You have to go on and especially now if you want her back. You have to pull yourself together and fight back!"

"Oh what the fuck do I know? The devil may really have risen up, taking people to hell. Maybe, it's the end of the world. Maybe, we're all being punished for being so greedy, and heartless, and unconcerned about our fellow human beings! I don't know what to believe anymore," Carson said between tears.

He watched his friend cry for a few moments and then took a deep breath.

"But, if you want Linda back you have to do something! Get out of this rut."

Carson looked at him and then looked away in disgust at his surroundings.

"I know, but it seems so hopeless. I really don't know what to do."

The two men sat in silence for a few moments.

"Two women came by yesterday, and they said they could find Linda," Carson said. "But, I didn't believe them and threw them out. They were weird and I didn't trust them. One said this cult kidnapped Linda and they planned to make her the devil's bride. I just couldn't take it."

"Can you get in touch with them?" Frank said. "They could be the only lead we have right now."

"I think so. Look around for a small pad. It's around here somewhere," Carson said looking around. "It has her number on it."

"This it?" Frank said picking up a small white pad from under the coffee table.

Carson looked at it.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Chantress? What kind of name is that?" Frank asked staring at the handwriting.

Carson shrugged.

"Maybe, she made it up. It's nice. I like it," Frank said. "What she look like?"

"I don't know," Carson said. "Tall, thin, long black hair, clear skin. What else you want to know?"

"Oh."

"Her friend is better looking."

"Really? What's her name?"

"Yanni."

"Ok, now I'm convinced you're on something."

"No, really that's her name, the same as the famous musician. That's how I remembered it."

"Well, here. Call her!" Frank said handing the pad to Carson.

"I sort of don't want to talk to her. I was wasted when I saw them."

"You want your wife back or not? Now call!" Frank said.

Carson walked into the kitchen and picked the telephone. His head ached. He stared at the phone not wanting to call, but he did.

The Hunter - Chapter 46



People who met Jack Graham said he was like a cloud floating through life, being pushed in this direction or that at the slightest breeze or suggestion. But people who were his friends knew he was different. Beneath his easy-going, fluid personality was an aggressive, cunning, and clever predator, who held the record for the most deer bagged in one season at the Red Bank Gun Club. Some said his passiveness was an act, but his real friends knew he was staking out those around him as if they were prey, and his easy-going charm left them all the more unsuspecting. His *modus operandi* worked well for him in the jungles of Vietnam, and it worked well for him now in business. Jack was not malicious. His stalking had just become a way of life for him, almost an unconscious habit that he sometimes didn't realize he was doing. It was one of the reasons Jack wasn't surprised when Homer Whitehead called him one evening.

"Hello, Jack. We need your help. It may require two weeks of your time for a few hours each day. You think you can do it?"

"Sure. Why not? What it is?" he said in his usual agreeable tone.

Homer explained the details to Jack and Jack agreed.

On the first night of his assignment, Jack went to Stokes' office dressed in a light gray suit. Big-boned and muscular with a full-face and a red beard, Jack's presence had an intimidating effect on most people he

approached. It was one of the reasons he had done so well in his own business selling security equipment. He literally scared people into buying his equipment and services, he would say. Stokes told other doctors that Jack was a new candidate for the hospital board of trustees and that he had to give him a brief tour of the facility, but the real reason was so he could point out Nurse Janice Doherty to him. Jack memorized her face, her figure and noticed her walk for several minutes as she moved between patient's rooms and the nursing station. The whole time Jack talked and joked with another nurse sitting behind the nursing station.

That evening Jack returned to the hospital about an hour before Nurse Doherty would end her shift. He parked his four-wheel Jeep Cherokee about 300 feet away from the rear employee's entrance and waited. He turned on the radio to a New York rock station and pulled out a Tom Clancy novel. While he read, he kept a vigilant eye on the entrance watching everyone who entered and exited. Around 7:10 p.m., a thin, willowy woman with red hair pushed open the double glass doors and walked out into the orange light of dusk. Jack watched her walk towards the left to the end of the parking lot. He was sure it was her by the stance of her walk. He opened the glove compartment and took out a small pair of Nikon binoculars. He zoomed in on the woman and made a positive identification. When the gray BMW pulled out of its parking space, he watched closely through the binoculars. He grabbed a short, black pen that was attached to a small clipboard secured to the inside of his windshield and wrote the plate number down. Then he put the Jeep in gear and followed.

After following the BMW for about twenty minutes, the car turned off and entered a subdivision of middle-class homes. The nurse drove through the subdivision and then turned left onto a narrow paved road with thickly wooded areas on both sides. Jack slowed down and let her car gain more distance between him. There were no other cars on the road or neatly nestled homes to distract her from spotting him. There were no connecting roads he could turn off. He was like a sitting duck. He remained almost a mile behind her following very cautiously. Then the BMW turned right and disappeared. Jack saw brake lights so he knew that she hadn't turned into a road similar to this one. She had turned onto something smaller, like a driveway. Or she could have found a clearing and turned off to wait for him. Jack immediately pressed harder on the accelerator. The car bounced on the road like a toy, kicking up a dust cloud as it accelerated. He roared past where her car disappeared and quickly glanced to his right. It was a narrow

opening in the woods - a driveway. He continued down the road for about a quarter of a mile and found a small clearing. He pulled the Jeep in far enough from the road so it was completely hidden. He turned it around so the vehicle faced the road for a quick getaway. He opened a small cooler on the passenger side and took out a white bag filled with several cheeseburgers and a small order of fries. He opened the bag, pulled two burgers out, and then grabbed a can of soda buried in a sea of ice cubes. His doctor had told him to stay away from fast foods because of the high fat content, but he figured a burger once in a while wouldn't hurt. Besides, he felt fine. He picked up the Tom Clancy novel on the seat next to him and began reading.

Nightfall seemed to drop in quickly like a giant shroud that had fallen over the area and Jack could no longer read his novel without turning on the overhead, dome light. He placed the book on the seat and stared into the darkness ahead. He switched on the CD player and waited for the voice of Bruce Springsteen to bellow out the words to the song, *Human Touch*. Jack watched the road wondering how he would be able to stay up most of the night. When the last light of the day vanished, a small car roared out of the driveway and turned left heading away from Jack. Jack started the Jeep and accelerated; the tires kicked up a small plume of dust and rocks. He couldn't turn on the vehicle's lights for the nurse would certainly become wary of it. Jack drove as fast as he could desperately navigating in the dark. He kept the vehicle centered on the narrow road but it was difficult in the near total darkness. He opened the glove compartment, took out a small flashlight, and directed the narrow beam out the window to make sure he was on the road. He was sure the nurse would not notice the tiny light. He watched the two red beams of light as they bobbed and wiggled down the dusty road. He was about a quarter of a mile behind the lights, when they flashed brighter. Jack slammed on the brakes. Then the lights moved right and the car disappeared. Jack quickly turned on his headlights and floored the accelerator. The Jeep jumped forward and sprinted down the remainder of the road. Stones and dust shot out from his rear wheels.

When Jack reached the intersection, he quickly glanced left and saw the car's taillights. He pulled up behind the car and his eyes widened. The car was a silver Honda and not the nurse's gray BMW. Jack turned around and raced back to where he first saw the BMW vanish. He drove past the driveway and pulled off the road about 300 yards away. He turned off the car, got out and walked towards the driveway. *I broke down*, he thought. That's what I'll tell anyone who comes by and asks. Then Jack started jogging. He often jogged after work to keep in shape -

he believed that being in good shape was a power, a power over your physical environment and over others. He felt more alive when he could keep up with younger people and his triumphs made him feel that he wasn't getting old. The narrow road was quiet except for the constant sounds of chirping crickets. He took out his penlight flashlight and held it between his teeth as he jogged. The tiny beam of light bobbed on the ground before him, illuminating his way. Jack jogged for several minutes then stopped when he heard the loud crack of a tree branch snapping. He stopped and listened. He slowly moved away from his previous position to the side of the narrow driveway. There was a rustling in the brush nearby. The rustling continued and something whooshed across the road in front of him and vanished into the woods. He immediately switched on his penlight drawing the beam into the dark woods. Seconds later, a second whoosh blew past him and he moved the light up in time to see the large creature dance and sprint across the road vanishing into the dark wood. It was two deer. Jack took a deep breath and resumed his jogging.

About a quarter of a mile down the road, the woods cleared slightly and Jack had reached the driveway where the BMW had vanished. He jogged up the driveway; it was just wide enough for a small car. By now, he was breathing heavy and he hoped the driveway would end soon. Then a large black structure loomed ahead, blotting out the few visible stars in the night sky. It was an abandoned two-story storage shed. The gray BMW was parked next to the large doors. Jack stealthily moved towards the car. When he reached it, he looked at the license plate and confirmed it was the nurse's vehicle. Then he moved away and hid in the nearby underbrush. After a few minutes, the large shed door opened with a rusty squeak and Nurse Doherty came out. She opened her car door, took out a white plastic bag, and carried it into the shed. Jack thought he heard something that sounded like screams, but he wasn't sure. She came out about a half hour later and took a yellow beach towel from the trunk. She wiped her face and the front of her shirt. Her hair was disheveled and wild as if she had just gotten out of bed. She wrapped the towel around her neck, got into her car and drove away. Jack waited a few minutes, and then approached the shed. The large door opened easily. The air smelled foul, pungent, like rotting meat. Jack used his penlight to examine the large room. The wood floor creaked as he walked and some of the floorboards were missing revealing the dusty dirt beneath. The floor had a large pentagram painted in the center of the room. Farther on was a crudely constructed table with a plywood top and two-by-fours for legs. It stood about four

feet high. Under the table were several cardboard boxes. Jack approached the boxes and opened them one by one. The largest box contained red candles measuring about a foot long and three inches in diameter. Another box contained a red satin sheet, a silver chalice and two crosses. Another contained an old-fashioned brass school bell and a large dagger with a curved blade. The knife looked rusted, but when Jack picked it up, he saw that the dark color on the blade was dried blood. Then he saw several photos on the bottom of the box; he picked one up and gasped.

* * *

Linda awoke to the sound of wood creaking. She had heard it before when her jailers brought her food. Since they had brought her here, she had lost her voice and she had trouble thinking clearly. She struggled to hold onto a single thought and her attempts to think through ideas were extremely difficult. She figured they had placed something in her food so she hadn't eaten the last two meals, but they gave her so little food she was constantly starving. Now she did not know if she could resist the food when it was placed in front of her.

Linda squinted when the single bulb overhead went on and then she heard the lock click open. The door slowly opened and it was the woman who brought the food. She handed Linda a soft white plastic enclosed tray with one hand while she held the door handle with the other.

"I got you something hot tonight," the woman said. "I hope it didn't get cold."

"Thanks. A hot meal will be wonderful," Linda said as she opened the plastic tray revealing hot, steamy brown rice.

"I hope you like Chinese," the woman said.

"One of my favorites."

The woman opened the door wider.

"I like your hair pulled back into a pony tail. It accents your face and eyes," Linda said.

"I keep it this way for work. It's a special braid that my grandmother taught me."

The woman turned her head to show the braid and Linda grabbed the ponytail and pulled it down as hard as she could. The woman was spun around and fell hard on her back. Linda smashed the hot rice onto

the woman's face as she hit the floor pushing it hard. The woman screamed in pain, but instantly lurched for Linda's ankle and held on. Linda fell slamming her head into a large flat rock near the doorway. Linda kicked her in the face several times with her other foot, but she would not let go. Linda spun around on her back, grabbed the woman's hair again, and pulled it as hard as she could towards the floor. The woman screamed again, but did not let go of Linda's ankle. The woman brought her leg up, hooked it around Linda's neck, and quickly slammed her down to the ground. Linda lost her grip on the woman's hair, and woman quickly moved on top of Linda and kicked her in the head.

"Bitch!" the woman said.

She took out a set of handcuffs and pulled Linda's limp arm towards a rusty pipe that ran along the wall on one side of the small shed. She clicked Linda to the pipe and kicked Linda in the side.

"That's what I get for being nice," she said and left.

Several minutes later Linda woke up to a pounding in her head and an ache in her side. She sat up and realized she couldn't move her arm very far. Then she heard the creaking again and shuddered. The sound stopped and then started again. Linda sat perfectly still and listened intently. The sound moved to a different part of the larger shed, stopped, and then moved to a different area.

"Hellllllllllllllllp!" she screamed but her voice was slightly louder than a whisper.

The creaking sound continued and Linda slammed the handcuffs down on the metal pipe as hard as she could.

"Clack! Clack! Clack!"

Then the creaking stopped. Linda tapped again.

"Clack! Clack! Clack!"

She listened. Nothing. Then she kicked the walls with all she had over and over until her foot hurt. The darkness seemed to swallow her sounds. She closed her eyes and her thoughts drifted to Carson and her longing to go home.

* * *

Jack was holding several photos when he heard something. He held his breath and listened.

"Tap, tap, tap."

He wasn't sure what he heard or that he heard anything at all. His chest hurt again.

"Tap, tap, tap."

It was very faint and he didn't know where it had come from. He dropped the photos back into the box and closed the lids. He moved slowly like a cat towards the door trying to prevent the floor from creaking as little as possible. Then something caught on his shoe. He jumped back like a cat and shone his light down by his feet. A woman's sneaker had entangled with his shoe. He moved the light towards the corner and saw the other sneaker in the corner along with a pair of men's slacks and a shirt. He took a white cotton handkerchief from his back pocket and carefully picked through the clothing using the handkerchief like a glove. He searched in the pockets for anything that could identify the owner, and then he noted the shoe size of the sneaker. When he didn't find anything he got up, stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket and slipped outside. His eyes darted around in all directions and he moved quickly away from the building. A small breeze began to toss the nearby tree leaves. The crickets were silent.

Linda stopped her tapping and listened to the wind rustling through the trees. Frustrated, angry, and filled with fear, she let all of her bad feelings burst out.

"Helllllllllllllllllp!"

Jack thought he heard something but he wasn't sure. He thought it was a cat at first, but knew it was something larger. His chest tightened and he wanted to leave - he had plenty of information and he confirmed that the nurse was a member of the cult, but his curiosity peaked so he slid back towards the building and moved along its right side to the rear. He stopped at the smaller building hidden behind the main building.

Linda's throat burned and she withdraw into herself - the pain had overwhelmed her. She resolved that there was no hope. Her captors were going to kill her. She was going to die. She thought about never seeing Carson again and silently cried.

Jack looked at the single gray metal door to the small shed. He moved closer and gingerly grabbed the doorknob so it would not make any noise. He held the knob tightly and slowly turned it without making a sound. It turned slightly then stopped and Jack let go - it was locked. He moved slowly around the left side of the shed like a shadow - unseen, silent. The building was like the larger warehouse - no windows with walls made of unpainted cinder blocks. He looked

around in all directions - he knew he should try to get into the smaller shed, but he wasn't curious anymore - he was scared, frightened of what might be in the shed. Suddenly, there was a rustling in the woods behind him - a crunching of dried leaves. Jack ran through the darkness back down the driveway. When he reached his car, he wasn't even out of breath. He slipped in quickly put the key in the ignition and drove off.

When he was close to home, he stopped at a convenience store and parked next to a lone public telephone on the right side of the building. He hated cell phones and vowed to never use or own one. He said they caused cancer and were harmful and disrupted human communication. He hated the fact that it was getting harder and harder to find a public phone. He was glad that this convenience store still had one and he used it gratefully. He placed fifty-five cents in the phone and dialed.

"Hello, Doctor Stokes, this is Jack. She's one of them all right, and I found the place," he said.

"Good work and thanks." Stokes said.

"I found some clothing with some blood stains," Jack said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, a man's clothes and women's sneakers."

"Oh."

"There is one more thing. I found a lot of photos of children together."

Jack hesitated.

"And the children were nude."

Confrontation - Chapter 47



Homer Whitehead could not sit still. He paced back and forth from the living room to the kitchen. Martha, his wife, sat in her yellow flowered lounge chair with a Rosary wrapped around her hands and slowly fingered the black plastic beads while her lips moved slightly as if she were talking to someone. Homer glanced at her and walked into the tiny kitchen with its dark wood cabinets and dulled, cracked linoleum.

"How long are you going to say the Rosary?" Homer yelled over to her. "I think God has heard you by now."

"As long as it takes to rid the devils among us," she said. "And don't think you are going to watch TV down here. You go upstairs."

"I don't care about TV. I just can't get over what Jack found. I feel like going there and blowing them all away!"

"Never you mind. You let God take care of them and he will you know."

"Sure he will," Homer mumbled so she couldn't hear him.

The phone rang and Homer instantly picked it off on the wall.

"Yeah."

"Homer! This is Jack. Everyone's gone nuts! There are hundreds of people at the hospital and they're rushing in scared out of their wits that

they will go to hell. Wilbur the mail carrier died an hour ago, his skin burned and bubbled, and it's all over town. Every time someone dies in this town, people go nuts!"

"They should be hunting down the devil worshippers not hiding like cowards in the hospital!" Homer yelled. "Damn fools."

"I found out there are several more doctors and nurses involved in this devil thing."

"Really? Who?"

"I don't know yet. I'm supposed to meet this guy and he's going to give me the names."

"Sounds like a damn trap to me. You'd better not go alone. Talk to Doctor Stokes first and then figure out what to do."

"Ok."

Homer hung up the phone and dialed Stokes' cell phone. It connected, but it wasn't Stokes.

"Sorry, all circuits are busy," the recorded voice said. "Please try later."

"Damn!"

"Homer! How many times have I told you not to swear in our house?"

"Shut up old woman!"

He grabbed his keys on the counter and rushed into the living room.

"Where are you going?" Martha said as he rushed past her to the front door.

"Out, I have something to do."

"Don't you go chasing those people and getting into trouble," Martha said.

"No, it's something at the hospital."

"I'll be praying for you, Homer."

"I know you will," he said and slammed the door behind him.

* * *

The road to the hospital was grid locked about a quarter of a mile in each direction. People were getting out of their cars to see what was

causing the traffic jam. Homer pulled up behind a tall green SUV and slammed his hands on the steering wheel.

"Damn it!" he yelled.

He put the car in reverse, backed up about 300 feet, and made a right onto an adjoining street. He parked the car, got out, and started walking towards the hospital. He walked under a canopy of 20-year maple trees that stood on both sides of the street like old matrons guarding some ancient secret. As he walked under one of the larger trees, a small flock of blue jays came to life and descended in a cacophony of screeching and fluttering onto Homer's head pecking the top of his head and pulling his hair. He hunched over waving his hands to ward off the attacking birds and ran as quickly as he could. The birds retreated when he was far enough away. The top of his left ear started to hurt. He touched it and discovered he was bleeding slightly.

"Damn blue jays," he mumbled as he walked towards the hospital wiping his finger on his pants.

The double-doors to the emergency room were jammed with seniors seven persons thick and twelve or so wide. Homer pushed his way through the crowd.

"I have to see Doctor Stokes. I have important information for him. Let me through," he repeated as he squeezed through the crowd.

"What important information could you have, Homer?" said Charles Skyler, Homer's crotchety neighbor.

"I have information. Now if you don't mind moving out of the way so I can get through."

"I do mind. You're not any better than the rest of us. Wait in line," Skyler said moving his body in front of Homer.

Homer moved to the right and Skyler mimicked his movements several times preventing Homer from getting through. Finally, Homer grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him out of the crowd.

"Now I said move!" Homer yelled.

Skyler turned and punched Homer in the face causing his nose to bleed. Homer fired off a punch, but Skyler ducked and he missed. Skyler then ploughed his short, fat body into Homer knocking him on to the ground. The two men rolled and wrestled like two high school boys fighting over a pretty girl.

Another man in the crowd turned and rushed into the hospital cutting in front of several people. Another man grabbed him and knocked him to the ground. The first man got up and tackled the second man. Soon other men were rolling on the ground next to Homer and Skyler. A couple went over to the fighting duos, attempted to break them up, and was dragged into the melee. The fighting was contagious as two women began fighting their way into the hospital and soon the entire crowd was pushing and shoving and knocking people over.

Two Monmouth County Sheriff's cars pulled up and four officers got out of the cars. The flashing lights and loud sirens unnerved the crowd and everyone turned to look.

Homer, Skyler, and the two other men stopped and picked themselves up. The four officers corralled the men between the two cars.

"Now I don't want to arrest anyone," the tallest officer said. "So I would suggest that all of you go home and we can forget any of this happened."

"But we need to be in the hospital to be safe. What happens if the devil strikes one of us?" asked a short grandmotherly type with frizzy white-hair.

"Don't worry we have our top officers working on that and the hospital is on red alert," the officer said.

"Well, I would still like to be here just in case," the woman countered.

"That would be all well and good, but you would be in the way of the other patients who really need help. Besides, as you can see the emergency room is full. Now if you can all just go home everything will be all right."

The crowd reluctantly dispersed and the officer turned to Homer and the other men.

"I should arrest all of you for disorderly conduct, fighting in public, and inciting a riot. Now do any of you want to press charges against each other?"

The men looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Good. I suggest you go home. This has been the fifth hospital I've been to today and I'm getting sick of it. If I see you here again, you're going to jail," the officer said.

The men nodded and walked away, but Homer moved slowly towards the hospital doors shaking his head. When he was far enough

away from the officer, he darted into the hospital pushing and shoving people out of the way.

"Hey! You! Stop!" the officer yelled.

The emergency room was wall to wall with people hoping to see a doctor. Homer kept pushing people out of the way like a stubborn wild bull. Many grabbed his arms and shoulders and attempted to hold him back, but he shrugged them off and pulled away. When he reached the reception desk, several older women punched him in the ribs and pulled on his arms. He sucked in a large gulp of air from the blows.

"Hey, where's Dr. Stokes. I need to talk to him right now!" he yelled at the three nurses guarding the reception desk.

"You and about two hundred other people," said a tall, large-boned nurse with a drill sergeant's bite in her voice.

"No, I have to talk to him. It's not about going to hell. It's very important."

"He's on the second floor, but I doubt if you will get there before dawn. Knock yourself out."

The police officer followed Homer through the crushing, paranoid crowds, but he wasn't moving as quickly as Homer. Finally, he reached the reception desk.

"You! Stop there! You're under arrest!" the officer said and drew his 9mm handgun from his holster aiming it at Homer.

The crowd thinned out quickly upon seeing the weapon and the two men faced each other about ten feet apart. Homer put his hands in the air.

"I didn't do anything!" he protested.

"Turn around and lie on the floor!" the young officer yelled back.

Homer turned around with his back to the officer and the police officer reached behind himself for his handcuffs. Suddenly there were several people screaming and rushing the hall behind them. The crowd violently surged forward like a rogue wave pushing the officer forward. He stumbled, and fell, and the gun fell out of his hand and bounced on the floor. The discharge was like a small explosion in the small space. The officer immediately lurched for the gun and then jumped on top of Homer and secured the handcuffs.

"Now get up," the officer said.

Homer did not move.

The tall nurse with the sergeant's voice rushed out from behind the reception desk and put two fingers on Homer's neck feeling for a pulse.

"Turn him over!" she yelled.

When they turned Homer on his side, his eyes were motionless and the front of his shirt was red from the blood oozing out of the fist-sized hole in his chest. Several women screamed and one collapsed to the floor while two others cried hysterically. The other nurses rushed from behind the desk and gasped at the bleeding man.

"Bonnie, call for help!" the tall nurse yelled.

She bent down, placed two fingers on his neck feeling for a pulse, and then shook her head.

Husk's Directions - Chapter 48

"What time is he supposed to meet us here?" Frank asked.

"Now," Chantress replied.

"Can we just get one drink?" Yanni asked.

"No," said Carson. "I don't want to miss him."

"Don't worry, you won't miss him," Chantress said.

The four sat in Frank's rented SUV in the parking lot at the Ink Well. The cold, white light from the full moon created ghostly shadows in the dirt lot.

"Is this guy for real?" Carson asked.

"Yeah, he'll show. He has before. Right, Yanni?" Chantress said.

"He always keeps his word. He'll show," she said looking out the window.

"I think we should call the police and let them handle it. This is crazy," Frank said.

"No. I'm not going to sit back and put Linda's life in their hands!" Carson said. "If they botch it up Linda's gone."

"We could end up dead. She could end up dead!"

"We're not going to end up dead. I'm confident it will work."

A half hour later, the group heard the roar of a motorcycle. The engine got louder and louder until it was unbearable as Husk pulled

alongside of the blazer. He smiled strangely, as the group peered out at him. His lips moved, but no one heard him. It was like watching a silent movie. Husk laughed strangely and turned off the motorcycle.

"Get in. Let's go," Carson said.

Husk looked upward at the shining moon and howled. Carson looked at Frank with a questioning look on his face and Frank shrugged his shoulders. Husk swung his leg around and got off his motorcycle. He moved the bike forward engaging the dual kickstand under the chassis. Satisfied that the bike was secure, Husk climbed into the SUV. Yanni introduced everyone and Husk laughed again when she had finished.

"Husk! What the fuck is wrong with you!" Yanni said pulling on his denim vest with her small bony hands.

Husk smiled and then his face soured.

"I'm sorry. This is not easy for me. I had to get a little fucked up to do it," he said.

"Why?" Chantress asked.

"It's a long story and you don't want to know," he said.

"Where are we going?" Frank asked after starting the engine.

"Head south on seventy one towards Neptune. I think I can find it again in the dark," Husk said.

They drove on a dark highway for about twenty minutes and then Husk directed Frank to turn off onto a single lane road that was also devoid of lights, homes, and any trace of civilization.

"Slow down a bit. I think this is it," Husk said straining his eyes. "Turn down that driveway."

"What are you nuts?" Chantress said.

"No," he said calmly. "I'm pretty sure this is not it. I'm just checking for a certain tree near the entrance to make sure."

"Damn it!" Carson yelled. "My wife's life is in danger and you're looking for a fucking tree!"

"Carson!" Frank yelled. "Give the guy a chance. He's doing you a favor. Don't forget that."

"Well, he's supposed to know where it is and now we're running around God knows where."

"Take it easy," Frank said. "We'll get there. Don't worry. We'll get there."

"Head back towards the highway and run south again," Husk said. "Then take the next turnoff."

Frank turned the truck around the followed Husk's directions. A few minutes later, Carson turned towards Husk.

"Sorry," he said.

"I understand," Husk said.

Carson saw intense anger and a deep sadness in Husk's eyes. It reminded him of what he felt now, and the realization sent a shiver down his spine. He had become like Husk - angry, sad and full of revenge and he didn't like what he was feeling, but he couldn't help it.

The SUV turned left off the highway onto another light less, narrow road. The pavement turned to gravel and dirt and it seemed the road went nowhere.

"This is it," Husk said, looking all around at the thick brush and trees that hugged the road. "There! That's it!" Husk pointed.

Frank slowed down.

"No! Keep going! Keep going! Go down about a mile to a small clearing and pull in there," Husk said.

Frank found the clearing and drove into it.

"Looks like someone was here," Frank said noticing the tire tracks of another vehicle in the dirt. The others were silent.

"Turn around so the car is facing the road in case we have to get away quickly," Husk suggested.

Frank turned around, shut the engine down and turned off the lights. The darkness swallowed them completely. Seconds later the area seemed to brighten as their eyes adjusted to the white, cold moonlight. Carson grabbed the handle on the door and pulled.

"Stop!" Chantress said. "There are three rings of defense around the coven stead."

"What are you talking about?" Frank asked.

"Guards. They always guard a coven stead and they do it in rings. The first ring is usually people who will stop you and say you are on

private property. In the second ring, the guards will run you off the land or chase you out of the area." Chantress explained.

"And the third ring?" Carson asked.

"They really scare you," she said.

"Okay. What areas do you think they would guard the most?" Husk asked.

"I think the entrance, and the most vulnerable areas, where the woods would be the thickest," Frank said.

"How many are there?" Yanni asked.

"We don't know. It depends on how important they consider the ceremony. I'd bet this one was pretty important," Chantress said.

"Where does that driveway lead?" Frank asked.

"It goes straight back to the coven stead," Husk said.

"Okay," Frank said. "Carson, Husk, and Chantress enter the woods over there. Yanni and I will drive the SUV up the driveway. When someone approaches us, we'll tell them we're looking for a friend's house and we're lost. You guys follow the lights to point you in the direction of the meeting. Then approach from the rear. Hopefully, they won't have the rear guarded."

"Hopefully," Chantress added.

"Sounds good to me," Husk said.

"Okay, let's do it," Carson added.

"Let's synchronize watches. I got a quarter after. In three minutes, I'll drive in," Frank said. "You got the bullhorns?"

"Yeah."

The trio vanished into the woods and headed in the direction of the warehouse that Husk said should be at the end of the road. Frank and Yanni stayed in the SUV. At the appointed time, Frank started the vehicle and headed for the driveway, lights blazing away.

Husk led the way into the woods and Carson and Chantress had a hard time keeping up with him because of the heavy foliage and narrow spaces between the trees. It was as if Husk was at home; he was comfortable here and he knew how to move through it quickly and silently like a deer.

"Hey! Wait up," Chantress said in a low voice.

"Come on. We have to move fast," Husk said.

The trio came to a small clearing, stopped, and crouched down.

"There's the lights," Carson said looking down at his watch, barely making out the numbers in the dim moonlight. "Ready?"

They watched the straight beams of light bounce and flicker through the deep woods until they stopped.

"That's it. Let's go!" Husk said. The trio moved in the direction of the long beam of light. The woods were not as dense, and the group moved quickly. Husk led the way, Chantress was behind him and Carson was last. The wooded area led to a narrow clearing that resembled a right-of-the-way, as if someone had cleared it for another road.

"We'll meet here," Husk said.

The group jogged along the cleared section. The night air was damp and cool and it smelled rotten. Within minutes, Carson was winded and Husk and Chantress moved ahead of him. When they were about 100 yards from the large shed, Husk stopped.

"This is close enough," Husk said. "You know what to do?"

Chantress and Carson nodded.

"Chantress, you go that way and count to thirty and then stop. Carson, do the same in that direction. I'll start then Carson then Chantress."

"Okay, let's do it," Carson said.

Chantress and Carson vanished into the woods in different directions and Husk moved closer to the warehouse. He counted to fifty, and then turned on the bullhorn.

"This is the police. You are surrounded. Come out and no one will get hurt."

He immediately ran back to the clearing where they had agreed to meet. A few seconds later, Carson's voice echoed through the woods from a different direction with the same message; seconds after that, Chantress' voice filled the silence from her position. Several minutes later, all three were back at the original clearing.

"Okay. They should be rushing out soon," Husk said. "We'll approach from the rear and hopefully get in."

"Craaaaack!" an explosion pierced the silence and Husk twisted to the left and fell to the ground.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!" he screamed.

Chantress instantly darted away into the dense woods and vanished like a spooked deer. Carson crouched down near Husk.

"What happened?"

"Ugh! My shoulder!" Husk cried.

Carson looked and saw a tiny hole in Husk's shirt near his shoulder. The material around the hole darkened. Carson touched it. The shirt was warm and wet.

"You've been shot!"

"Get out of here! Now!" Husk said. "Go before they come. The bastards must have night vision goggles."

Husk tried to get up, but Carson easily guided him back down.

"Got to slow the bleeding first," Carson said.

He gingerly removed Husk's shirt and Husk protested painfully. Then Carson tied the shirt in a tight knot under Husk's arm and around his shoulder.

"Can you stand?"

Husk nodded.

Carson helped Husk to his feet nearly collapsing from his weight.

"Oh, man does it hurt!" Husk gasped.

Carson and Husk walked slowly stumbling through the darkness with only the light of the full moon illuminating their way.

"Where's Chantress?" Husk asked.

"She took off into the woods over there," Carson said.

"I hope she knows what she's up against," he said.

A shadow suddenly appeared about thirty feet ahead, and then another seemed to materialize next to it out of the darkness. Carson and Husk stopped. The shadows moved closer. They moved back, but the dark figures continued to approach them. When the shadows were close enough, they turned into two men dressed in black with rifles aimed at them. Their faces were covered in ski masks.

"Oh, shit!" Husk said.

"Move it," one of the men said and he moved his rifle forward.

Carson and Husk turned around and began walking; the men in black followed. The clearing turned into a narrow path and Carson continued to help Husk walk. A few minutes later, Carson noticed a strange object attached to one of the trees ahead. When he was closer, he saw it was a black cross, nailed to the tree about five feet from the ground.

"It's to keep the bad in and the good out," Husk said in a low voice.

Carson nodded.

The group reached the old warehouse a few minutes later. One of the men moved in front of them and opened the large door. They walked into a wall of hot, stuffy air that smelled of burning candles and incense. Many red candles placed on several small shelves illuminated the large room. A small portable fire pit burned in the center of the room inside the large circle. The live embers and smoke curled its way upward and escaped through a large jagged hole in the roof. Everyone was dressed in red robes. The air was acrid and the candles and the fire cast an eerie light on everything.

"We have guests," Kyle said turning to see the group as they entered.

"You?" Kyle directed at Husk. "You're a traitor! A traitor!"

Kyle spit on the ground.

"Fuck you, asshole," Husk said. "I was never one of your kind. Your kind is everything bad and evil in the world, scum, the lowest of the earth. Your kind took my brother, and I'm going to take you to hell with me!"

"Ha, ha, ha. You talk bravely for a man who won't see the sun again," Kyle replied. "You have caused enough trouble for our covenant."

"Wrong! I've just begun," Husk said.

Kyle ignored him and walked closer Carson.

"We also have a healer among us," he said. "A doctor, the very doctor that has been doing harm to us, the one who has been trying to undermine our efforts. This will surely be a glorious night for Satan and his followers."

Carson was silent. The crowd applauded.

"We heard your feeble attempts to scare us off, but we were one step ahead of you. We knew you were there."

Carson gave him the finger.

"Bring out Satan's bride," Kyle ordered.

Two men appeared holding a woman under both arms. The woman could barely walk and her head drooped. When the men came closer, Carson began to shift on his feet. The man in black moved the barrel of his rifle in front of Carson.

"Linda!" Carson screamed.

Linda slowly picked up her head and half opened her eyes. He noticed a flicker in her eyes, confirmation that she knew he was there.

"What did you do to her?" Carson yelled lunging forward.

The man with the rifle pushed him back and jammed his foot into Carson's stomach.

"I'll kill you, you son of a bitch!" Carson yelled holding his stomach.

Several of the guards instantly jammed their rifles into Carson's chest. Carson stopped moving and stared at the men his eyes filled with hatred. They pulled the guns away and then motioned Carson and Husk to the side of the altar, a crudely constructed wood platform with a red satin sheet placed over the top. They trained their rifles on the two men. The others huddled inside the large pentagram. Nurse Doherty then moved out of the crowd of eight and approached the altar. She smiled at Carson. Carson eyes burned into hers. *You bitch. You're responsible for this*, he thought. The nurse removed Linda's robe. She was nude. Carson pushed forward towards Linda.

"You degenerates!"

The two men pushed Carson back with their rifles. Linda was placed on her back on the altar. She moaned and then fell silent.

Kyle picked up a large, brass bell from the altar and whipped it in the air as if he might catch something. The crowd went silent and still. Kyle lifted a silver chalice off the altar and drank from it and then he handed it to nurse Doherty. She took a drink and passed it to the others. The others drank from it one by one. Kyle faced the small gathering.

"Emperor Lucifer, master of rebellious spirits, we command you to place your seed in this woman of the flesh through me. Take her as your bride and let her bear your child."

Carson shifted on his feet.

"You fucking low life!" he yelled and lunged for Kyle with his hands outstretched.

One of the men swung the butt of his rifle into the side of Carson's head. Carson collapsed like a rag doll. Husk caught him as he fell and both slowly slumped to the dirt floor. Drops of blood trickled out of Carson's head and ran down the right side of his face.

"You, asshole! You didn't have to hit him!" Husk yelled at the man holding the rifle.

Linda moaned again and Kyle continued.

"We want the Prince Beelzebub to protect our newborn. O Astaroth, great count, be favorable likewise and make it possible for the great Lucifuge to appear through this child. O great Lucifuge, we command you to leave your dwelling wherever it may be to come here and speak with us."

Kyle took a pinch of red powder from a small pouch on the altar and sprinkled the dust over a lit candle. The dust sparked and flared as it touched the small flame.

"In the name of Satan the ruler of the earth, the king of the world, I command the forces of darkness to bestow their infernal power upon me. Open wide the gates of Hell and come forth from the abyss to greet me as your brother and friend. Grant me the indulgences of which I ask."

Kyle took more of the powder and sprinkled it over the small fire burning in the center of the circle.

"By all the gods of the pit, I command that these things of which I speak shall come to pass."

Two men left the circle and went to a far corner of the warehouse. They returned with a middle-aged man pale and catatonic. His eyes were closed and he mumbled and moaned. Blood oozed from two large cuts on each side of his body just above the waistline.

"Prepare the sacrifice," Kyle ordered.

Another man brought a long rope over that was attached to a ceiling crossbeam.

"That's Nick!" Carson gasped.

The men put Nick on the floor and then tied the rope around his ankles.

"Go ahead," the man said.

Two other men pulled on a rope near one of the walls. The block squeaked as the rope ran through it and Nick was slowly raised into an upside down position.

"I call upon the messengers of doom to slash with grim delight this victim I have chosen," Kyle said to the small group.

No one moved. Then Kyle moved towards Nick and stood there staring at the naked man. He pulled out the athame, the ceremonial dagger, and thrust it into the existing wounds on the side of Nick's body and turned the knife. Nick squirmed and moaned louder. More blood oozed out the cuts.

Kyle returned to the altar and removed his robe. He was nude. He climbed up on the altar and moved over Linda. The nurse moved her legs apart. She helped Kyle get ready by touching and stroking him.

Carson moved to get up and Husk held him down and shook his head. Husk moved his eyes down towards his hand to show Carson he had gathered a small pile of dirt with his good hand. He slowly scooped the dirt near him until he had a couple of large handfuls. Then one of the men with the rifles stepped closer to Husk. Husk stopped moving and closed his eyes as if that would ward off the blow. He waited several seconds wondering where he would feel the pain. Nothing. He opened his eyes cautiously and then slowly looked up at the man. The man was mesmerized by the activity on the altar.

Kyle was on all fours posed over Linda when one of the large doors swung open. Chantress stood in the doorway holding a large silver revolver. She quickly looked around the room and when she spotted Kyle, she aimed and fired. The gunfire was so loud it seemed to numb everyone. Chantress' arm jerked upward from the kick of the gun and she stumbled and fell. When she hit the ground, the gun went off again and the bullet went through the roof. Kyle jumped off behind the altar and vanished. The two gunmen instantly raised their rifles and aimed them at Chantress. Husk kicked the gunman's feet closest to him, knocking him down. The man fell forward onto his face and the rifle went off - the bullet slamming into the portable fire pit sending sparks and flames everywhere. The robes of several people near the pit caught on fire and they ran out in a panic. Then Husk threw a handful of dirt into the face of the other gunman, and Carson jumped forward, grabbed his ankles, and pulled. The man fell backward, his gun going off and tearing a hole in the roof. The man struck his head on the edge of the altar and collapsed. Husk quickly moved on top of the first gunman, no longer feeling the pain in his shoulder, and pushed the man's face to the

floor. The man struggled to push him off, but Husk grabbed his hair and used it as a handle to smash the man's face repeatedly into the hard dirt. When the man no longer moved, Husk stopped. Nurse Doherty and the others ran towards the rear of the building and disappeared into the darkness. Husk took both rifles and kept one trained on the unconscious men. He turned towards the door, but no one was there. Carson got up and rushed towards Linda.

"Oh, baby. Are you all right? Are you all right?" he said holding her head up.

She opened her eyes and smiled. Carson hugged her. He took one of the robes lying on the floor and covered her.

"You'll be fine. Don't worry. It's all over now. You'll be fine," Carson said while lightly kissing her on her face.

"Boom!"

"What was that?" Carson asked fearfully.

"Another gunshot!" Husk added. "Could have been Chantress. It was loud enough."

Seconds later two patrol cars pulled up piercing the night with their sirens. Red and blue light flashed on the front of warehouse. Frank pulled up behind the patrol cars and then a fourth car followed by two more patrol cars. Two uniformed police officers rushed into the warehouse with their guns drawn and flashlights shining.

"Hold it right there!" said one of the officers.

Carson and Husk raised their hands.

"Stop! They're my friends!" Frank yelled as he rushed in after the officers.

Yanni followed.

"Carson, is Linda ok?"

"I think so. They drugged her," Carson said holding her hand. "We need to get her to the hospital."

"Are you all right?" Frank asked. "You look terrible."

"Maybe." he replied. "Husk needs help. He got shot."

"Oh, no!"

"Where's Chantress?" Yanni asked.

"Don't know," Carson said. "She took off."

Jerry Vandergarde got out of the fourth car, rushed into the warehouse, and went over to Nick. The two officers first on the scene had lowered Nick to the ground.

"Nick! Nick!" Vandergarde said knelling down next to him.

Nick did not respond.

"We need an ambulance," Frank said.

"It's on its way," Vandergarde said.

"How did you know we were here?" Carson asked.

"We got a call from Frank earlier and had the area staked out since nightfall," Vandergarde explained. "When we heard the shots, we came in."

Carson gave Frank a nasty look.

"Well, I'm glad you came."

Two ambulances arrived several minutes later and Linda, Nick, and Husk were carried out on stretchers. Carson went in the ambulance holding Linda's hand. Several police officers appeared from the rear of the warehouse leading several people in handcuffs.

"How many is that?"

The female officer turned and counted them.

"Twelve, detective."

"One's missing!" Husk said. "They always have these ceremonies with thirteen people."

Husk raised his head and scanned the crowd. "It's Kyle."

"Who?" Vandergarde reacted.

"Kyle, the leader. He's missing."

The Chase - Chapter 49



Chantress ran to the back of the warehouse, the barrel of her gun still warm from the shot she fired at Kyle. She entered the thickly wooded area, and crawled close to a dense bramble bush careful to avoid its prickly thorns. The police would be out in full force looking for her, she thought. It was best to lay low near the warehouse where they would not think to look. Chantress' eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight and she could see the silhouette of the warehouse clearly. She watched as the members of the coven fled in fear one by one. One man nearly stepped on her, missing her leg by only inches as he ran.

"Crack!" The first shot rang out and Chantress shuddered thinking they had killed either Carson or Husk.

"Crack!" The second shot rang out and she trembled. A tear formed in her right eye and escaped down her cheek. She brushed it away with the back of her trembling hand, and then looked back at the warehouse. She took a deep breath.

"Enough is enough!" she whispered to herself.

She got up and froze. The door to the smaller shed behind the warehouse opened. A dark figure slowly slithered out. First, the head appeared and turned from side to side, and then the thin body emerged. The figure walked a few feet and the light of the moon illuminated his face.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Chantress screamed.

She raised the gun instinctively and fired. The great flash from the barrel temporarily blinded her. When her eyes adjusted the dark figure was gone. Off to the left, she heard a rustling and she moved in that direction as fast as she could, breaking small tree branches as she pushed through the foliage. The rustling sound moved as fast as she did and sometimes faster. She was convinced it was Kyle. She chased the figure for several minutes until she reached a small clearing. The dark figure ran through the clearing and down a small path. She followed like a crazed animal chasing down a meal. After several minutes, she felt beads of sweat form on her scalp and cascade down her temples and down her cheeks. Her lungs began to burn, but she didn't slow down. The black memory of the rape flashed through her mind, the deception, the pain of losing someone she had truly loved. He had turned all of her emotions into hatred, and now that hatred was turned into energy and a will to catch him at all costs.

Suddenly, the rustling stopped. Her breathing was louder than the cadence of hundreds, maybe thousands of crickets singing into the night. She held her breath to listen. Her chest burned. Then there was a new sound. It was unfamiliar at first and then it was clear. She started running again, but at a slower speed and with more care. The path led into a field of grass about three feet tall and she could see freshly damaged blades of grass that marked where her prey had moved through the field. *An instant road map*, she thought smiling to herself. She moved quickly and then stopped as the coldness struck her feet and ankles and ran up her legs. It was a swamp! The tall grass was swamp grass! A sliver of fear cut through her mind - fear of snakes, fear of the darkness, fear of things lurking in the black, brackish water. She looked at the broken swamp grass, swallowed hard and started moving again. Her feet numbed in a few minutes and she no longer felt the alien swamp creep up into her legs, into her consciousness.

Chantress moved as fast as she could through the brackish water, fearful of water snakes and other slithering things. The path led out of the swamp quickly and back onto dry land. She stopped there and listened. There was only the sound of the crickets. Then the rustling started again and she moved silently towards the sound. A beam of light danced in the darkness and moved in her direction. She walked slowly to the left of the light, found a small indentation in the ground, and laid in it on her stomach. She looked up and watched the light as it moved closer and closer. It stopped several times and then resumed moving again in her direction. The light moved closer and stopped again. She

put her face down on the dark, damp earth and held her breath. The dark figure stood only several feet from her with the light of flashlight dancing all around her. The figure was breathing heavily. She moved her head ever so slowly in his direction. The figure crouched down and put the large flashlight on the ground. He fumbled with something in front of the light and then stood up. He brought his hand up to his face and there was a scratching sound. Suddenly, his face lit up by the flame of a small lighter and the red, glowing tip of a cigarette. He wore a hat - a police officer's hat.

Again, something moved. It was by her belly. It moved again slowly and Chantress pressed her teeth together tightly to control her fear. It moved again and the cold sensation started. At first, the cold feeling was at the base of her stomach, and then it increased and moved towards her side and moved around to her back. Chantress remained stone still, although her mind screamed in total chaos. The slithering creature moved along her back, then moved upward towards her neck, then went back down towards her waist. It tried to slither into her jeans, but her jeans were too tight. It turned and slithered up her back again. The police officer was still close by enjoying the cigarette. The snake made its way under her armpit and then slithered along her arm. Chantress clenched her teeth harder and beads of sweat dripped into her eyes. Her mind was a fog of fear. The snake continued along her arm and exited her shirtsleeve. The police officer threw his cigarette and it landed on Chantress' back. Almost immediately, she could feel the heat of the cigarette intensify. The police officer lingered - the heat on her back increased. She clenched her teeth again - this time harder. The heat from the cigarette felt like a small knife slowly pushed into her back. The police officer stepped forward right over her head and vanished into the swamp grass. Chantress sprung up like a coiled spring and shook off the cigarette. She stamped it into the ground in a mad dance of hatred and frustration. When she stopped, she noticed a dim orange light lit up the horizon in front of her. She started running towards the light.

As she moved up to higher, dryer ground, the sky grew brighter. She followed the misty orange light to the end of the woods and a marina came into view. She picked up her pace and began running again until she reached the docks. Several mercury vapor lights cast the eerie orange light onto the boats creating ominous angled shapes. A slight breeze caught a sailboat halyard occasionally slamming it against the aluminum mast causing a metallic pinging. The water rippled from a light wind. Chantress walked along one of four floating docks as silently as a cat. Her weight caused the dock to move and creak. Fear and anger

raced through her body at an uncontrolled pace. A fish broke the surface nearby - Chantress instantly pointed the gun towards the splashing. Her emotions swirled in a stew of chaos, confusion, hate, anger, and fear. *Did she really want to kill Kyle? Would she go through with it? What had she gotten mixed up in? Revenge? Murder? Had she become like them,* she thought. She wedged the gun between her jeans and her butt and walked off the dock. *What did I think I was going to do when I found the coven stead? Shoot everybody who resisted? Take them hostage? I should have called the police,* she thought. She walked towards a large wooden house that resembled an oversized shanty that served as the marina bar and office. She moved alongside the building towards the parking lot scolding herself for letting her emotions turn her into a savage beast out for revenge. She had had enough. *Let the police handle it,* she thought. Kyle will cause his own downfall. *Why should I lower myself to his level?* she thought.

When she reached the end of the building, she looked up at the starry sky and noticed the Big Dipper. She had never really seen it - only in pictures. Suddenly, her head was pulled back violently and she felt herself falling. She was slammed to the ground and the pain spread throughout her entire body. A dark shadow was suddenly on top of her and it grabbed her neck and began to squeeze.

"I should have done this earlier," the voice said.

She knew immediately who it was.

Chantress felt her stomach heave as her lungs tried to suck in air. Fear took hold of her body and she began to kick her legs and pivot her abdomen like a fish out of water. But, the dark weight on her was too heavy and her lungs screamed for more air. She was beginning to feel tired, very tired and her thoughts were beginning to cloud. Her chest burned and the pain in her neck intensified. *Not this time, you son-of-a-bitch!* she screamed in her mind. She moved her arm behind her and her arm felt like it weighed hundreds of pounds. Her fingers could barely feel the gun, but then the cold metal of felt like the water in a pond in mid winter. She ignored the sensation and got her hand around the handle and her finger on the trigger. Her arm felt heavier now, but she had to go through with it. She was very sleepy now and thought it might be better just to sleep. Sleep felt so good, so good. Then the voice in her head screamed again. *Not this time! Never!* With all that she could muster, she focused what little energy remained on moving her arm. Her arm moved out behind her and she saw her finger pull on the silver trigger.

"Tap!" and everything turned white and vanished.

Chantress awoke and sucked in large gulps of the damp night air insatiably. The darkness returned and her hand was touching something warm and sticky. She looked at her hand - the gun was still there. She sat up on the dusty driveway and looked at the gun covered with blood. As her eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight, she quickly looked around, but no one was there. The clouds in her mind began to evaporate and she attempted to stand up, but when she stood, the surroundings swam around as if she were on a merry-go-around. She stumbled to the building and leaned against the wall, still vigorously filling her lungs with air. Her stomach tightened and she touched her throat - it was sore. She smiled slightly as she realized she had beaten death, beaten Kyle. She saw death coming and that frightened her more than what had happened.

The whirling, steel rattling of an outboard starting suddenly pierced the night silence and she ran quickly towards the docks. She saw a small powerboat quickly back out of its slip and hit an adjacent piling. The figure driving the boat was dressed in black.

"Noooooooooooo!" Chantress screamed.

The figure steering the boat turned and the sickly orange glow from the mercury vapor lights washed over his face. She raised the gun and pulled the trigger. The shot lit up the docks in front of her, and the boat surged forward out of the marina towards the inlet.

The boat had to travel west for about 200 yards to clear the jetty to enter the inlet. Chantress knew that if she reached the jetty, she could head him off. She ran as fast as she could and her chest hurt. The moon, now a tiny spot in the sky, did not provide much light. When she reached the blackened rocks, she could barely see them. She slowed down somewhat, but not enough. Her right foot slipped and slid into a crevice.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" Chantress screamed, and fell flat on the rocks, landing on her hands. Her shin scrapped against the edge of jagged rock and the sharp pain ran up her leg. The rock scrapped the skin off like a fine chisel. Blood oozed out of her leg, her left forearm, elbow and palm. The roar of the boat engine loomed in the darkness, increasing in volume as it sped closer to the end of the inlet. She dragged herself up and stood shakily on the black jetty like a drunk. She moved closer to the water, stepping carefully onto the slimy, slippery rocks making sure she had a foothold. The engine roared on and she could see a dark mass

moving rapidly towards her. She raised the gun, took aim, and put her finger on the trigger. Suddenly, her left foot gave out and she fell backward.

"Boom!" the gun went off sending the bullet harmlessly into the air. The boat roared past, creating a bow wave that washed up on the first two rows of rocks. Chantress hit the jetty hard and everything began to swirl around. Ignoring her pain, she turned over onto her belly and took aim at the boat, which was nearly clear of the jetty. The boat seemed to move sideways and she felt like the jetty was one big carousel going round and round.

"Boom! Click! Click! Click!" The boat turned right at the end of the jetty and roared out into the quiet inlet.

"No! No!" she screamed.

She stood up still dizzy, her body on fire with pain and her eyes filled with tears. She sat down on the jetty hoping the dizziness would go away. Suddenly, there was a flash of orange light followed by a loud explosion. She turned quickly and saw an orange ball of fire rise up out of the water. The fireball died down seconds later and drifted out to sea slowly vanishing under the calm water.

"Now you can go where you belong," she said as she watched the flames slowly burn away all of her hate and anger.

The Anti-Christ - Chapter 50

"We'll never find that boat," Vandergarde told the balding, overweight prosecutor. "The Coast Guard said there are strong currents and it was an extremely high tide because of the full moon. The remains of that boat could be in Europe by now and the body, too."

He sat down at a small brown desk that bore decades of coffee rings on its dulled and marred surface. The desk was in the middle of an equally worn and messy office. The prosecutor moved a gray metal chair near Chantress and stared at her menacingly. His large, overweight body ballooned off the sides of the chair.

"Now Miss O'Connell, tell me one more time why you followed Kyle Mabus with a loaded gun?" the interrogator asked her a fifth time.

"I told you a thousand times. He tried to kill me; he was going to kill everybody. I didn't kill him. He was the third Anti-Christ that was predicted to appear in this century by Nostradamus. Nostradamus said he would be the evil man of blood. He was obsessed with blood. Nostradamus said the man would be from the Middle East. Kyle was born in Vietnam. Nostradamus called him Mabus...that was Kyle's last name! Nostradamus said the Anti-Christ would be at home in Europe. Kyle longed to return to France, where he grew up. Nostradamus said the Anti-Christ would help with the fall of the church. Didn't he almost do that by leading all those people to follow Satan and give up Christianity?"

"Miss O'Connell. We're not buying that. You've been watching too many horror flicks," he said moving his hand over the skin of his head in frustration.

"You will when he shows up somewhere causing more trouble," she said.

"You're saying he's alive?" Vandergarde asked.

"I don't know," Chantress said. "I saw the boat blow up, but I'm not sure he blew up with it."

"It's a possibility," Vandergarde added. "We don't have a body and we don't know one way or another. If he is alive, he's wanted for murder and a laundry list of felonies. And we have no evidence linking her to a crime."

"I fired at the boat, but I missed. I fell and the gun went off into the air. I don't know why the boat blew up," Chantress explained.

"Where is the gun now?"

"It's home; it's my father's. Please don't get him involved. He didn't do anything. He didn't know I took the gun."

"Is it registered?" the prosecutor said looking at Vandergarde.

"Perfectly legal. I know her father. I competed with him at several ranges. He's quite a marksman. Besides, the marina is out of city limits so it's perfectly legal to fire a weapon there. I think you've wasted enough of her time. I'm sorry we had to put you through this. It's our job. You're free to go, now."

"Just a minute. I'm not through yet!" the prosecutor said.

"You have nothing to hold her on and she doesn't have to answer your questions. Let her go, Scalapino!" Vandergarde said.

The prosecutor tapped his fingers on the table. He was silent and his face was drawn in a tight smirk. Chantress didn't smile as she got up to leave.

"I hope you're going to look for him. He's out there and he's dangerous."

"We have warrants out for his arrest and we'll do what we can," Vandergarde added. "Thanks for your cooperation. Wait. I'll walk you out."

Chantress hesitated and then nodded slightly. Vandergarde joined her and the two walked out of the tiny conference room.

"I hope you catch him," Chantress said.

"Why do you want him caught?"

"Because he's dangerous," she replied. "You saw what he did, kidnapping the doctor's wife, and one of your own detectives!"

Vandergarde bowed his head as they walked.

"How is he?" she asked.

"Nick?"

"Yeah."

"He died this morning," Vandergarde's voice trailed off to a whisper.

"I'm sorry," Chantress said and touched his arm.

"I think he wanted that all along. He was just never the same after he lost his family in a car accident years back. He really missed them. He didn't believe in anything anymore. I think he's happy now."

The Homecoming - Chapter 51

"Our house never looked so good," Linda told Carson as they pulled into their driveway. "I couldn't wait to get out of the hospital."

"You can say that again," Carson said. "The house is probably a mess since we haven't been here in two weeks."

"I don't care what it looks like, I'm just glad to be here," Linda smiled. "I'm glad you stayed with me at the hospital the whole time."

"Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way. I wanted to be with you as much as possible and working the night shift was perfect. I don't think I'll eat there again. I'm sick of that awful stuff they call food."

"You should have eaten what they gave me," she replied.

He helped Linda up the porch steps. She was still weak from malnutrition and walked slowly. He placed the key in the door and opened it.

"Surprise!" A chorus of voices struck them like a crashing wave.

"Welcome home," Frank said reaching for Linda's hand and shaking it.

"I can't believe this!"

"You're crazy, Frank!" Carson added.

"Not at all," he said.

Multi-colored balloons danced along the ceiling and the dining room table was covered with hors d'oeuvres, lunchmeats, rolls, salads, and heated foil pans. Someone turned on the stereo and music mixed in with the cornucopia of conversation and laughter. Everyone waited their turn to greet Linda and Carson.

"Come on in. Here Linda, sit here," Frank said leading them to the sofa. Frank sat on the love seat with his wife, Lori.

"I haven't seen you in ages. It's really good to see you!" Linda said to Lori.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," she said. "I'm glad you're back and well."

"Thanks for coming," Linda said.

Lori nodded and smiled.

"We found it," Frank said to Carson.

"What?"

"The cause of the Hellfire Syndrome," Frank said his face beaming.

"YOU DID!" Carson said his eyes wide and mouth open.

"It's a retrovirus, a variant of the Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease, and similar to Mad Cow disease."

"I knew it! I knew it all along!"

"HFS is very similar to the Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease, which affects men and woman 55 to 75 years old. It's rare - about one case per million in most metropolitan areas. The symptoms begin with a progressive mental deterioration - memory loss, mood changes, errors in judgment, dizziness, and headaches. The patient may also experience hallucinations, confusion, and see distortions in the shapes of objects," Frank explained.

"That's exactly HFS!" Carson said.

"Yes and no," Frank added. "HFS seems to be a mutant of the Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease and affects any age. Both are retroviruses, but Creutzfeldt-Jacobs runs its course in about eight to ten months, HFS in several weeks. Like Creutzfeldt-Jacob, HFS was transmitted by an agent, and we found that agent in the jam in your basement!"

"What! The jam in my basement was infected?"

"Sort of. Something in the jam entered the body and stayed dormant. By itself, it was harmless, but after someone ate the jam and then was exposed to certain levels of ultraviolet radiation from the sun, the reaction occurred. We found that the agent infiltrated only skin cells, the coatings of certain organs and the nervous system. When the reaction starts, it puts the nervous system on overload and causes the skin cells to burn. We believe the agent is a mutant strain. Mrs. Hibbins may have had a virus and contaminated the jam when she made it. Over the years sealed in a perfect environment, the virus flourished. Somewhere along the line, it mutated."

"And Linda sold that stuff at the Englishtown Auction and the town fair, plus we gave quite a bit of it away at one of the hospital fund raisers," Carson added.

"That's how we found it. We asked all the patients if they had eaten anything different in the past few weeks. We found the agent in the liver, kidney and spleen - that's how we knew it came from something they ate," Frank explained.

"And all that craziness about going to hell was caused by the virus?" Carson said.

"Yeah, that's why you passed out and drove off the bridge. The same thing happened to Mrs. Whitehead - she might have hallucinated while driving. After she passed out, her nervous system overloaded, and then shut down - that's why she appeared dead. HFS has the characteristics of two virus types. It behaves like a lentivirus or slow virus, which slowly attacks the nervous system and it acts like an oncornavirus, which causes malignant symptoms - the burnt skin," Frank explained. "The UV light accelerated the symptoms to unprecedented levels."

"But I found the jam after I had the symptoms!" Carson said.

"Perhaps, you caught an airborne version. There were several jars that had broken open, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You may find some things in the house out of place. The CDC quarantined the house and had it fumigated, sterilized and whatever else they do to make sure every living germ in the house is annihilated," Frank explained. "They wanted to condemn the house, but I convinced them otherwise citing its historical importance, the cost of replicating the exact house, and a possible lawsuit that the owners might file. After that they decided to sterilize the entire house."

"Thanks for saving our house!" Carson said. "I owe you one."

Carson got up and went into his bedroom. Frank looked at Linda questionably. Carson returned carrying a thick, dog-eared folder.

"Check this out," he said and opened the folder. "Remember, that guy I was looking for who died of HFS during the eighties? Well, I found him. His name was William Hibbins, and his address was fifty six Cherry Blossom Boulevard."

"That's our address!" Linda said.

"That's right. His wife was Martha Hibbins, and he was probably the first HFS victim," Carson explained.

"Well, now we even have a case history," Frank said.

"Does Stokes know? Where is Stokes?" Carson asked looking around at the clusters of people.

"He's at the Great Auditorium giving the speech of his life. We didn't think you would be clear-headed with all that has happened and with Linda just getting out of the hospital and all, so I'm filling in for you. We did get Rev. Graham to make an appearance and speak about the Hellfire Syndrome. I have to leave in a few minutes and present my speech right after Stokes."

"That is great!" Carson said.

"And there will be plenty of media there. All four networks in New York requested to cover it. It should make the evening news tonight and all the newspapers tomorrow."

The Hotel Guest - Chapter 52



he neon blue "Vacancy" sign splashed its cold, haunting light on the shiny wet street below. A tall figure approached the light and bathed in it momentarily. The nearby parking lot was empty. Cars swished by every few seconds, spraying a cold fine mist towards him. The man felt a small pebble, maybe a grain of sand, strike his cheek and sting it. He touched his face - the long stubble that covered his cheeks made a gritting, scratching sound. He turned and walked towards a glass door framed in corroded aluminum. When he pushed it open, the cool stale air smelled of cleaning fluids and cigarette smoke. A skinny man with an oversized round head and several front teeth missing sat mesmerized in front of a tiny flickering television set. A cigarette burned in his left hand. The fingernail of his index finger was yellowed from the smoke curling its way around the digit.

"Yeah," the man behind the counter said.

"I need a room. How much?" the stranger said.

"Nineteen. Out by noon the next day," the man said in a bored manner.

He had said it many, many times before. Maybe, he should put up a sign so people wouldn't bother him when he was watching TV.

"Here," the stranger dropped two \$20 bills on the counter. "If anyone asks, I was never here. One of those is for you."

The hotel clerk snatched up the bills as if a wind would blow them away any second. He looked up at the stranger inquisitively. He noticed that he held his left arm close to his stomach as if an invisible sling was holding it.

"I was never here," the stranger repeated. "You got that?"

The clerk pushed a worn school composition book toward the stranger.

"I got it. But, you have to sign in. Regulations," the clerk said.

The stranger picked up a dirty white pen on the counter and began writing. When he was done, he pushed the dog-eared book back. The clerk looked at the name and smirked.

"Hermes? What kind of name is that? Is it a last name, a first name or what?"

Hermes grabbed the clerk's shirt near his neck and pulled him close to his own face.

"It's neither. It's my name. You would be smart to stop asking questions and get on with whatever you do here," Hermes said.

The clerk smirked and moved back. Then he remembered the two twenties in his pocket.

"You're going to need something for that shoulder?" the clerk suggested eyeing the growing dark red wet spot on his left shoulder

"I'll be fine."

"A dog bite you?"

"Yeah, a bitch got me," he said.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Samuel Policastro has been writing all his life.

The publication of his first novel, *Absence of Faith*, is the pinnacle of his work having previously published articles in *The New York Times*, *American Photographer* and other national, regional, and local publications.

Policastro was the former editor-in-chief of *Carolina Style* magazine, a regional lifestyle publication similar to *Southern Living* magazine. He was a former journalist, photographer, and web master.

The author's background is in technology, business intelligence, and communications.

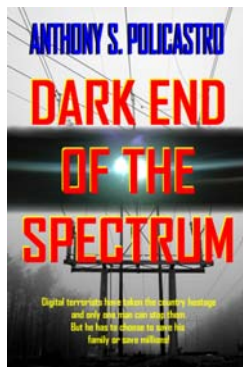
He has two BA degrees - one in Creative Writing, and another in American Studies from Penn State University, both of which have greatly enhanced his writing career.

Born in New Jersey, he now lives in North Carolina with his wife. He has two sons and a daughter.



Don't miss Anthony S. Policastro's mystery thriller, DARK END OF SPECTRUM available in paperback from Amazon.

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DARK END OF THE SPECTRUM will make you think twice before turning on your cell phone or PDA!

DARK END OF THE SPECTRUM is a frighteningly plausible and headline ripping tale of the real threats that loom in cyberspace and beyond with a Michael Crichton realism.

DARK END OF THE SPECTRUM is a thriller that will connect with everyone with a cell phone, PDA or wireless device.

Dan Riker's life was pretty well planned, predictable and almost boring until a seemingly harmless blackout occurs along the East Coast. The blackout thrusts him into the biggest challenge of his life where he is forced to save millions or to save his family. For the first time in his life he is faced with what seems an impossible goal, a goal that is not planned with a predictable outcome.

The CIA asks him to investigate the blackouts since they believe hackers may have caused them; Dan helps them until they tell him his family may be in danger and he walks out on them.

When the hackers, a group secretly known as ICER, take over the power grid and the cell phone network, Dan is nearly killed in an ambush because he may be the only person with the technical know-how to stop them.

Shortly after that, ICER kidnaps Dan's wife and 8-year-old daughter, and he is thrust into a high-tech hunt for his family and the hackers using all of his training as a radio frequency engineer and security expert.

He discovers that the hackers used a newly developed wireless technology and a special wireless device installed in cell towers by Homeland Security after 911 that can reprogram any computer from aircraft to PDAs. The hackers also turned the device into a powerful weapon that can kill any living creature in its swath using cell phones as tracking devices.

ICER gives the government an ultimatum - bomb the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan with nuclear weapons to put an end to Osama Bin Laden and his followers or they will start downing commercial airliners – one for each day that the bombing is delayed. What started as a group of concerned citizens has morphed into digital criminals, who take control of the power grid and the cell phone network for their own agenda.

One alternative is to physically destroy every cell phone tower in the United States. The other is to ground all aircraft until they can disable the weapons.

Will Dan Riker save his family or will he fail because life was always easy for him?

What readers are saying about Dark End of the Spectrum!

“This is certainly a thrilling book for anyone who likes technology, conspiracy, action and disaster; one to read when you've plenty of time to spare because you'll not want to put it down. Your computer had better not be acting up and your cell-phone not be on the blink. And you'd better hope no one hacks into the power grid.

But the novel isn't just about technology gone wild. Dan has a wife and child and a home life too, and the up-down relationship of a marriage strained by work grounds the tale very realistically. The author writes convincing dialog, and Amelia's sudden anger as Dan leaves to help the CIA saddened me because of its plausibility.” – Sheila Deeth

