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Bantam Books by Kay Hooper
This one is for Jeff and Tommy, my shopping buddies. Mostly because they didn't believe I'd put them in a book. Hey, guys!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This time out, Bishop and his Special Crimes Unit owe even greater thanks than usual to the fantastic Team Bantam, whose members worked above and beyond the call of duty to put this story into your hands.

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Words aren't enough, but they'll have to do.

Thanks again.
THE VOICES WOULDN'T leave him alone.

Neither would the nightmares.

He threw back the covers and stumbled from the bed. A full moon beamed enough light into the house for him to find his way to the sink in the bathroom.

He carefully avoided looking into the mirror but was highly conscious of his shadowy reflection as he fumbled for a drinking cup and turned on the tap. He drank three cups of water, vaguely surprised that he was so thirsty and yet . . . not.

He was usually thirsty these days.

It was part of the change.

He splashed his face with the cold water, again and again, not caring about the mess he was making. By the third splash, he realized he was crying.

*Wimp. Spineless coward.*

“I'm not,” he muttered, sending the next handful of water to wet his aching head.

*You're afraid. Pissing-in-your-pants afraid.*

Half-consciously, he pressed his thighs together. “I'm not. I can do it. I told you I could do it.”

*Then do it now.*

He froze, bent over the sink, water dribbling from his cupped hands. “Now?”

*Now.*

“But . . . it's not ready yet. If I do it now——”

*Coward. I should have known you couldn't go through with it. I should have known you'd fail me.*

He straightened slowly, this time looking deliberately into the dim mirror. Even with moonlight, all he could make out was the shadowy shape of his head, dark blurs of features, faint gleam of eyes. The murky outline of a stranger.

What choice did he have?

*Just look at yourself. Wimp. Spineless coward. You'll never be a real man, will you?*

He could feel water dripping off his chin. Or maybe it was the last of the tears. He sucked in air, so deep his chest hurt, then let it out slowly.

*Maybe you can buy a backbone—*
“I'm ready,” he said. “I'm ready to do it.”

I don't believe you.

He turned off the taps and walked out of the bathroom. Went back to his bedroom, where the moonlight spilled through the big window to spotlight the old steamer trunk set against the wall beneath it. He knelt down and carefully opened it.

The raised lid blocked off some of the moonlight, but he didn't need light for this. He reached inside, let his fingers search gingerly until they felt the cold steel. He lifted the knife and held it in the light, turning it this way and that, fascinated by the gleam of the razor-sharp, serrated edge.

“I'm ready,” he murmured. “I'm ready to kill her.”

The voices wouldn't leave her alone.

Neither would the nightmares.

She had drawn the drapes before going to bed in an effort to close out the moonlight, but even though the room was dark, she was very conscious of that huge moon painting everything on the other side of her window with the stark, eerie light that made her feel so uneasy.

She hated full moons.

The clock on her nightstand told her it was nearly five in the morning. The hot, sandpapery feel of her eyelids told her she really needed to try to go back to sleep. But the whisper of the voices in her head told her that even trying would be useless, at least for a while.

She pushed back the covers and slid from her bed. She didn't need light to show her the way to the kitchen, but once there she turned on the light over the stove so she wouldn't burn herself. Hot chocolate, that was the ticket.

And if that didn't work, there was an emergency bottle of whiskey in the back of the pantry for just such a night as this. It was probably two-thirds empty by now.

There had been a few nights like this, especially in the last year or so.

She got what she needed and heated the pan of milk slowly, stirring the liquid so it wouldn't stick. Adding in chocolate syrup while the milk heated, because that was the way she liked to make her hot chocolate. In the silence of the house, with no other sounds to distract her, it was difficult to keep her own mind quiet. She didn't want to listen to the whispering there, but it was like catching a word or two of an overheard conversation and knowing you needed to listen more closely because they were talking about you.

Of course, some people would call that paranoia. Had called it. And at least part of the time, maybe they weren't wrong.

But only part of the time.

She was tired. It got harder and harder, as time went on, to bounce back. Harder for her body to recover. Harder for her mind to heal.

Given her druthers, she would put off tuning in to the voices until tomorrow. Or the next day, maybe.

The hot chocolate was ready. She turned off the burner and poured the steaming liquid into a mug. She put the pan in the sink, then picked up her mug and carried it toward the little round table in the breakfast nook.
Almost there, she was stopped in her tracks by a wave of red-hot pain that washed over her body with the suddenness of a blow. Her mug crashed to the floor, landing unbroken but spattering her bare legs with hot chocolate.

She barely felt that pain.

Eyes closed, sucked into the red and screaming maelstrom of someone else's agony, she tried to keep breathing despite the repeated blows that splintered bones and shredded lungs. She could taste blood, feel it bubbling up in her mouth. She could feel the wet heat of it soaking her blouse and running down her arms as she lifted her hands in a pitiful attempt to ward off the attack.

*I know what you did. I know. I know. You bitch, I know what you did—*

She jerked and cried out as a more powerful thrust than all the rest drove the serrated knife into her chest, penetrating her heart with such force she knew the only thing that stopped it going deeper still was the hilt. Her hands fumbled, touching what felt like blood-wet gloved hands, large and strong. The hands retreated immediately to leave her weakly holding the handle of the knife impaling her heart. She felt a single agonized throb of her heart that forced more blood to bubble, hot and thick, into her mouth, and then it was over.

Almost over.

She opened her eyes and found herself bending over the table, her hands flat on the pale, polished surface. Both hands were covered with blood, and between them, scrawled in her own handwriting across the table, was a single bloody word.

**HASTINGS**

She straightened slowly, her entire body aching, and held her hands out in front of her, watching as the blood slowly faded until it was gone. Her hands were clean and unmarked. When she looked at the table again, there was no sign, now, of a word written there in blood.

RAFE SULLIVAN ROSE from his crouched position, absently stretching muscles that had begun to cramp, and muttered, “Well, shit,” under his breath.

It was already hot and humid even just before noon, the sun burning almost directly overhead in a clear blue sky, and he absently wished he’d had his people put up a tarp to provide some shade. The effort wouldn't be worthwhile now; another half hour, and the coroner's wagon would be here.

The body sprawled at his feet was a bloody mess. She lay on her back, arms wide, legs apart, spread-eagled in a pathetically exposed, vulnerable position that made him want to cover her up—even though she was more or less dressed. Her once-white blouse was dull red, soaked with blood and still mostly wet despite the heat, so that the coppery smell was strong. The thin, springlike floral skirt was eerily undamaged but blood-soaked, spread out around her hips, the hem almost daintily raised to just above her knees.

She had been pretty once. Now, even though her face was virtually untouched, she wasn't pretty anymore. Her delicate features were contorted, eyes wide and staring, mouth open in a scream she probably never had the chance or the breath to utter. From the corners of her parted lips, trails of blood ran down her cheeks, some of it mixing with the golden strands of her long blond hair and a lot of it soaking into the ground around her.

She had been pretty once.

“Looks like he was really pissed this time, Chief. Bit like the first victim, I'd say.” Detective Mallory Beck made the observation dryly, seemingly unmoved by the gory scene before them.

Rafe looked at her, reading the truth in her tightened lips and grim eyes. But all he said was, “Am I wrong, or did this one fight him?”

Mallory consulted her notebook. “Doc just did the preliminary, of course, but he says she tried. Defensive injuries on the victim's hands, and one stab wound in her back—which the doc says was probably the first injury.”

Shifting his gaze to the body, Rafe said, “In the back? So she was trying to turn—or run—away from him when he stabbed her the first time. And either he turned her around so he could finish her face-to-face or she turned herself trying to fight him.”

“Looks like it. And only a few hours ago; we got the call on this one earlier than the others. The doc estimates the time of death as around five-thirty this morning.”

“Awfully early to be up and out,” Rafe commented. “Caleb opens his office between nine-thirty and ten as a rule. She was still his paralegal, right?”

“Right. Normally went to the office around nine. So she was out very early. What I don't get is how he was able to lure her this far away from the road. You can see there are no drag marks, and two sets of footprints—we have good casts, by the way—so she walked out here with him. I'm no Daniel Boone, but I'd say from her tracks that she was walking calm and easy, not struggling or hesitating at all.”

Rafe had to admit that the ground here looked remarkably calm and undisturbed, for the most part, especially
considering the violence of what had been done to the victim. And after last night's rain all the tracks were easily visible. So this murder scene, like the last one, clearly illustrated what had happened here.

From all appearances, twenty-six-year-old Tricia Kane had gotten out of her own car around dawn at an unofficial rest spot off a normally busy two-lane highway and then walked with a companion—male, according to all likelihood as well as an FBI profile—about fifty yards into the woods to this clearing. And then the companion had killed her.

Brutally.

“Maybe he had a gun,” Rafe suggested, thinking aloud. “Or maybe the knife was enough to keep her docile until they got this far.”

Mallory frowned. “You want my hunch, I say she didn't see that knife until they reached this clearing. The instant she saw it, she tried to run. That's when he got her.”

Rafe didn't know why, but that was his hunch too. “And it's the same way he got the other two. Somehow he persuaded these women to leave their cars and walk calmly into the woods with him. Smart, savvy women who, from all accounts, were way too careful to let any stranger get that close.”

“Which means they probably knew him.”

“Even if, would you leave your car and just stroll into the woods with some guy? Especially if you knew two other women had recently died under similar circumstances?”

“No. But I'm a suspicious cop.” Mallory shook her head. “Still, it doesn't make sense. And what about the cars? All three women just left their cars on pull-off rest areas beside fairly busy highways and walked away from them. Keys in the ignition, for Christ's sake, and not many do that even in small towns these days. And we don't know whether he was with them when they stopped or somehow flagged them down and then persuaded them to come with him. No tracks out at the rest stop to speak of with all that hard dirt and packed gravel.”

“Maybe he pulled a Bundy and claimed to need their help.”

“Could be. Although I still say that would have worked loads better if they knew who was asking. This guy isn't killing strangers. I think the profilers got that one right, Chief.”

With a sigh, Rafe said, “Yeah, me too. I hate like hell the idea that this bastard is local rather than some insane stranger passing through town, but I don't see any other way to explain how he's getting these women to go with him.”

“Unless he's some kind of authority figure they'd be inclined to trust and obey on sight. Like a cop.”

“Oh, hell, don't even suggest that,” Rafe responded so instantly that Mallory knew the possibility had already been in his mind.

She studied him unobtrusively as he scowled down at the body of Tricia Kane. At thirty-six, he was the youngest chief of police ever in Hastings, but with a solid background in law enforcement both in training and experience, nobody doubted Rafe Sullivan's qualifications for the job.

Except maybe Rafe himself, who was a lot smarter than he realized.

Mallory had wondered more than once if his tendency to doubt himself and his hunches had anything to do with his looks. He wasn't exactly ugly—but she had to admit that his self-described label of “thug” pretty much fit. He had a harsh face, with very sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes so dark they tended to make people uncomfortable. His nose had been broken at least twice, he had a sharp jaw with a stubborn jut to it, and his high cheekbones marked him indelibly with his Celtic ancestry.

He was also a very big man, several inches over six feet tall and unmistakably powerful. The kind of guy you
wanted on your side no matter what the fight was about. So he definitely looked the part of a cop, in or out of uniform—and it was mostly out, since he disliked uniforms as a rule and seldom wore his. But anyone, Mallory had long ago discovered, who had him pegged as all brawn and no brain or who expected the stereotypical dense, cud-chewing Southern cop was in for a surprise, sooner or later.

Probably sooner. He didn't suffer fools gladly.

“That's three murders in barely three weeks,” he was saying, dark eyes still fixed on the body at their feet. “And we're no closer to catching the bastard. Worse, we've now officially got a serial killer on our hands.”

“You thinking what I'm thinking?”

“I'm thinking it's time we yelled for help.”

Mallory sighed. “Yeah, that's what I'm thinking.”

Quantico

Isabel Adams made her voice as persuasive as she possibly could, and her well-rehearsed arguments sounded damned impressive if she did say so herself, but when she finally fell silent she wasn't surprised that Bishop didn't respond right away.

He stood at the window gazing out, only his profile visible to Isabel. In deference to the fact that he was actually on FBI territory, he was dressed more formally than was usual, and the dark suit set off his dark good looks and powerful build admirably. Isabel looked at Miranda, who was sitting on Bishop's desk, idly swinging one foot. Even more of a maverick than her husband and far less deferential to the FBI in any sense, she was wearing her usual jeans and sweater, the casual outfit doing nothing to disguise startling beauty and a centerfold body that turned heads wherever she went.

She gazed at Bishop now, seemingly waiting as Isabel waited for his answer, but her electric-blue eyes were very intent, and Isabel knew there was communication between the two of them on a level that didn't require speaking aloud. Whatever Bishop's decision turned out to be, he would arrive at it only after Miranda's views and recommendations were added to his own; although Bishop had far greater seniority in the Bureau and in the unit he had created and led, no one doubted that his partnership with Miranda was equal in every possible sense of the word.

“It's not a good idea,” he said finally.

Isabel said, “I know all the arguments against my going.”

“Do you?”

“I've gone over all the material that police chief sent when he requested a profile after the second murder. I even got on-line and read the local newspaper articles. I think I've got a very good feel for the town, for what's happening down there.”

Miranda said, “Your basic powder keg, just waiting for a match.”

Isabel nodded. “Small town on the teetering edge of panic. They seem to have a lot of faith in their police, especially the chief, and pretty fair medical and forensics facilities for a small town, but this latest murder has everybody jumping at shadows and investing in security systems. And guns.”

She paused, then added, “Three murders makes this a serial killer in Hastings. And he's showing no signs of stopping now. Chief Sullivan just officially requested the FBI's help, and he's asking for more than an updated profile. Bishop, I want to go down there.”

Bishop turned at last to face them, though instead of returning to his desk he leaned back against the high windowsill. The scar on his left cheek was visible now, and Isabel had been with the unit long enough to recognize,
in its whitened appearance, that he was disturbed.

“I know what I’m asking,” she said, more quietly than she might otherwise have spoken.

Bishop glanced at Miranda, who immediately looked at Isabel and said, “From all indications, this is the sort of killer that local law enforcement can handle with very little outside help. Maybe a bit more manpower to ask questions, but it'll be inside knowledge that catches this animal, not an outsider's expertise. The profile marks him as nothing out of the ordinary. He's local, he's killing local women he knows, and he's bound to make a mistake sooner rather than later.”

“But it wasn't an SCU profile,” Isabel pointed out. “None of us developed it.”

“Special Crimes Unit can't develop all the requested profiles,” Bishop reminded her patiently. “We barely have the manpower to handle the cases we do get.”

“We didn't get the call on this one because this killer is so seemingly ordinary, I know that. Around a hundred serial killers active in this country on average at any time, and he's one of them. Nothing raised a red flag to indicate that our special abilities are needed in the investigation. But I'm telling you—there's more to the case than the official profile picked up on. A lot more.” She paused, then added, “All I'm asking is that you take a look at the material for yourselves, both of you. Then tell me I'm wrong.”

Bishop exchanged another glance with Miranda, then said, “And if you're right? Isabel, even if the SCU took on this investigation, given the circumstances in Hastings you're the last agent I'd want to send down there.”

Isabel smiled. “Which is why I have to be the agent you send. I'll go get the file.”

She left without waiting for a reply, and as Bishop returned to his desk and sat down, he muttered, “Goddammit.”

“She's right,” Miranda said. “At least about being the one who has to go.”

“Yeah. I know.”

_We can't protect her._

_No. But if this is what I think it is . . . she'll need help._

“So then,” Miranda said calmly, “we'll make sure she has help. Whether she likes it or not.”

_Thursday, June 12, 2:00 PM_

“Chief, are you saying we *don't* have a serial killer?” Alan Moore, reporter for the Hastings _Chronicle_, had plenty of practice in making his voice carry without shouting, and his question cut through the noise in the crowded room, silencing everyone else. More than thirty pairs of expectant eyes fixed on Rafe.

Who could cheerfully have strangled his boyhood chum. With no particular inflection in his voice, Rafe answered simply, “We don't know what we have as yet, except for three murdered women. Which is why I'm asking you ladies and gentlemen of the press not to add unnecessarily to the natural anxiety of our citizens.”

“In this situation, don't you think they should be anxious?” Alan glanced around to make certain all attention was on him, then added, “Hey, I'm blond, and even I'm nervous. If I were a twenty-something blond woman, I'd be totally freaked out.”

“If you were a twenty-something blond woman we'd all be freaked out,” Rafe said dryly. He waited for the laughter to subside, fully aware of the fact that it was as much nervous as amused. He was good at taking the pulse of his town, but it didn't take any particular skill to feel the tension in this room. In the town.

Everybody was scared.
“Look,” he said, “I know very well that the women here in Hastings are worried—whether they're blond, brunette, redhead, or any shade in between—and I don't blame them a bit. I know the men in their lives are worried. But I also know that uncontrolled speculation in the newspaper and on the radio and other media will only feed the panic.”

“Uncontrolled?”

“Don't start yelling censorship, Alan. I'm not telling you what to print. Or what not to print. I'm asking you to be responsible, because there is a very fine line between warning people to be concerned and take precautions, and yelling fire in a crowded theater.”

“Do we have a serial killer?” Alan demanded.

Rafe didn't hesitate. “We have three murders we believe were committed by the same person, fitting the established criteria for a serial killer.”

“In other words, we have a lunatic in Hastings,” somebody he didn't recognize muttered just loud enough to be heard.

Rafe responded to that as well, still calm. “By definition a serial killer is judged conventionally if not clinically to be insane, yes. That doesn't mean he'll be visibly any different from you or me. And they seldom wear horns or a tail.”

The reporter who'd made the lunatic comment grimaced. “Okay, point taken. Nobody is above suspicion and let's all freak out.” She was blond.

“Let's all take care, not freak out,” Rafe corrected. “Obviously, we would advise blond women in their mid to late twenties to take special care, but we have no way of knowing for certain if age and hair color are factors or merely a coincidence.”

“I say err on the side of factor,” she offered wryly.

“And I can't say I'd blame you for that. Just keep in mind that at this point there is very little we can be sure of—except that we have a serious problem in Hastings. Now, since a small-town police department is hardly trained or equipped to deal with this type of crime, we have requested the involvement of the FBI.”

“Have they provided a profile?” This question came from Paige Gilbert, a reporter with one of the local radio stations. She was more brisk and matter-of-fact than some of the other women in the room had been, less visibly uneasy, possibly because she was brunette.

“Preliminary. And before you ask, Alan, we won't be sharing the details of that profile unless and until the knowledge can help our citizens. At this stage of the investigation, all we can realistically do is advise them to take sensible precautions.”

“That's not much, Rafe,” Alan complained.

“It's all we've got. For now.”

“So what's the FBI bringing to the table?”

“Expertise: the Special Crimes Unit is sending agents trained and experienced in tracking and capturing serial killers. Information: we will have access to FBI databases. Technical support: medical and forensics experts will study and evaluate evidence we gather.”

“Who'll be in charge of the investigation?” Alan asked. “Doesn't the FBI usually take over?”

“I'll continue to head the investigation. The FBI's role is assistance and support, no more. So I don't want to read or hear any BS about federal officials superceding states' rights, Alan. Clear?”
Alan grimaced slightly. He was a good reporter and tended to be both fair and even-handed, but he was close to phobic about governmental “interference,” especially from the federal level, and was always loud in protest whenever he suspected it.

Rafe took a few more questions from the assembled reporters, resigned rather than surprised to find that several of the people were from TV stations in nearby Columbia. If the investigation was getting major state coverage now, it was only a matter of time before it went national.

Great. That was just great. The last thing he wanted was to have the national press looking over his shoulder and second-guessing every decision he made.

Bad enough he had Alan.

“Chief, do you believe this killer is local?”

“Chief, has anything else turned up linking the victims?”

“Chief . . .”

He answered the questions almost automatically, using variations of “no comment” or “we have no reliable information on that” whenever possible. Even though he had called the press conference himself, it was only because he'd gotten wind of some pretty wild speculation going on and hoped to head off the worst of it before it was in print or other media, not because he had any real progress to report.

He was concentrating on the crowd in front of him as he answered their questions, but even as he did, he felt an odd change in the room, as if the very air had somehow sharpened, freshened. Cleared. It was a weird feeling, like waking suddenly from a dream thinking, *Oh, that wasn't real. This is real.*

Something had changed, and he had no idea if it was for better or worse.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of movement and was able to turn his head just a bit, casually, so that none of the reporters picked up on his suddenly diverted attention.

Still, he was surprised that no one else seemed to have observed her entrance, even though she came into the room from the hallway, behind the flock of reporters. Rafe doubted she went unnoticed very often. He saw her pause to speak briefly to one of his officers, producing what appeared to be an I.D. folder, saw Travis's visible surprise and undoubtedly stuttering response, then saw her move past him and take up a position near the door. She scanned the crowd of reporters and their tangle of cameras, a small half smile that was not so much amused as it was rueful playing around her mouth. She was dressed casually and for the weather in jeans and a sleeveless top, her hair pulled up into a neat ponytail. She could easily have been one of the reporters.

She wasn't.

When her gaze met his fleetingly across the crowded room, Rafe was conscious of an instant certainty that made him go cold to his bones.

No. The universe couldn't hate him that much.

“Chief, could you—”

He cut off the question abruptly. “Thank you all very much for coming today. When there are further developments, you'll be notified. Good afternoon.”

He stepped away from the podium and went straight through the crowd to the other side of the room, ignoring the questions flung after him. When he reached her, his statement was brief and to the point.

“My office is across the street.”
“Lead the way, Chief.” Her voice was as extraordinary as the rest of her, one of those smoky, husky bedroom voices a man would expect to hear if he called a 900 sex-talk line.

Rafe wasted no time in leading the way past his still-goggling officer, saying merely, “Travis, make sure nobody bothers the mayor on their way out.”

“Yeah. Okay. Right, Chief.”

Rafe started to ask him if he'd never seen a woman before, but since that would have resulted in either stuttering incoherence or else a lengthy explanation that would have boiled down to “Not a woman like this one,” he didn't bother.

He also didn't say a word as they left the town-hall building and walked across Main Street to the police department, although he did notice that she was a tall woman; wearing flat sandals she was only a few inches shorter than he was, which would put her at about five-ten.

And her toenails were polished red.

With most of his people out on patrol, the station wasn't very busy; Mallory was the only detective at her desk in the bullpen, and though she looked up with interest as they passed, she was on the phone, and Rafe didn't pause or greet her except with a nod.

His office looked out onto Main Street, and as he went around behind his desk he couldn't help a quick glance to see whether the reporters had left the town hall. Most were still clustered out in front, some obviously recording spots for today's evening news and others speaking to each other—speculating, he knew. It didn't bode well for his hopes of keeping things calm in Hastings.

An I.D. folder dropped onto his blotter as he sat down, his visitor taking one of the chairs in front of his desk.

“Isabel Adams,” she said. “Call me Isabel, please. We're pretty informal. Nice to meet you, Chief Sullivan.”

He picked up the folder, studied the I.D. and federal badge inside, then closed it and pushed it across the desk toward her. “Rafe. Your boss saw the profile, right?” was his terse response.

“My boss,” she answered, “wrote the profile. The updated one, that is, the one I brought with me. Why?”

“You know goddamned well why. Is he out of his mind, sending you down here?”

“Bishop has been called crazy on occasion,” she said in the same pleasant, almost careless tone, not visibly disturbed by his anger. “But only by those who don't know him. He's the sanest man I've ever met.”

Rafe leaned back in his chair and stared across the desk at the special agent sent by the FBI to help him track and capture a serial killer. She was beautiful. Breath-catching, jaw-dropping gorgeous. Flawless skin, delicate features, stunning green eyes, and the kind of voluptuous body most men could expect to encounter only in their dreams.

Or in their nightmares.

In Rafe's nightmares.

Because Isabel Adams was also something else.

She was blond.

The voices were giving him a pounding headache. It was something else he was getting used to. He managed to
unobtrusively swallow a handful of aspirin but knew from experience it would only take the worst edge off the pain.

It would have to be enough.

Have to.

Still exhausted from the morning’s activities, he managed to do his work as usual, speak to people as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Nobody guessed, he was certain of that. He’d gotten very good at making sure nobody noticed anything out of the ordinary.

*You think they don't all see? Don't all know?*

That was the sneering voice, the dominant one, the one he hated most and heard most often. He ignored it. It was easier to do that now, when he was drained and oddly distant from himself, when the only thing for him to do, really, was wait for his next opportunity.

*They know who you are. They know what you did.*

That was more difficult to ignore, but he managed. He went about his business, listening whenever possible to the nervous gossip. Everybody was talking about the same thing, of course. The murders.

Nobody talked of anything else these days.

He didn't hear much he hadn't already known, although the speculation was amusing. Theories, most of them absurd, abounded as to why the killer was targeting blondes.

A hatred of his mother, for Christ's sake.

Rejection by a blond girlfriend.

Idiots.

The pharmacist downtown told him there'd been a run on hair color, that those women trying blond as an option were going back to their natural colors.

He wondered if the natural blondes were considering changing, but thought probably not. They liked the effect, liked knowing men were watching them. It gave them a sense of power, of . . . superiority.

None of them could imagine dying because of it.

He thought that was funny.

He thought that was funny as hell.
RAFE SAID, “Please don’t tell me the general idea is for you to be bait.”

“Oh, I’m probably too old to tempt him.”

“If you’re past thirty, I’ll eat my hat.”

“Salt and pepper?”

Rafe stared at her, and she chuckled.

“I’m thirty-one. And, no, that isn’t the idea. I’ll do a lot for king and country, but I don’t have a death wish.”

“Done anything to piss off this Bishop of yours?”

“Not lately.”

“Has the profile changed?”

“Not as far as this animal’s fixations go. He’s still after white females with blond hair, and he’s likely to stay within the age range of twenty-five to thirty-five. He apparently likes them smart and savvy as well as strong, which is an interesting twist on the stereotypical image of helpless dumb blondes as victims.”

Rafe said something profane under his breath.

Ignoring that, Isabel went on briskly, completely professional now. “He’s someone they know or at least obviously believe they can trust. Possibly an authority figure, maybe even a cop—or impersonating one. He’s physically strong, though he won’t necessarily look it; he might even appear effeminate.”

“Why effeminate?” Rafe was listening intently, his eyes narrowed.

“These women were killed brutally, with a viciousness that suggests both a hatred of women and doubts or fears about his own sexuality. All three were sexual crimes—deep, penetrating wounds and targeting the breasts and genitals are classic signs of a sexual obsession—and yet none of the women was raped. That, by the way, will probably be his next escalation, raping as well as killing.”

“And if he’s impotent? This sort of killer often is, right?”

Isabel didn’t hesitate. “Right. In that case, an object rape, possibly even with the murder weapon. And it will be postmortem; he doesn’t want his victim to see his possible sexual failure. In fact, he’ll probably cover her face, even after he kills her.”

“So he’s a necrophiliac as well.”

“The whole nasty bag of tricks, yeah. And he will be escalating, count on it. He’s got the taste for it now. He’s enjoying himself. And he’s feeling invulnerable, maybe even invincible. He’s likely to begin mocking us—the police—in some way.”

Rafe thought about all that for a moment, then asked, “Why blondes?”
“We don’t know. Not yet. But it’s very possible that his first victim—Jamie Brower, right?”

“Right.”

“Twenty-eight-year-old real-estate broker. It’s very likely, we believe, that something about her was the trigger. Maybe something she did to him, that’s possible. An emotional or psychological rejection of some kind. Or something he saw, something she made him feel, whether or not she was aware of doing so. We believe she was a deliberate choice, not merely a random blonde.”

“Because she was the first victim?”

“That, plus the uncontrolled violence of the attack. According to the crime-scene photos and ME’s report you sent us, she was riddled with stab wounds.”

“Yes.” Rafe’s lips tightened as he remembered.

“The wounds were ragged, multiple angles, but virtually all of them so deep the hilt or handle of the knife left bruises and imprints in her skin. He was in a frenzy when he killed her. With the second and third victims, except for some minor defensive injuries, most of the wounds were concentrated in the breast and genital areas; Jamie Brower had injuries to her face and wounds from her neck to her lower thighs.”

“It was a bloodbath.”

“Yes. That sort of fury usually means hatred, very specific, very personal hatred. He wanted to kill her. Not just a blonde, not just a representation of his killing fantasy. Her. We believe that by focusing the investigation on the life and death of Jamie Brower, we’re likely to uncover facts or evidence that will help us to identify her killer.”

“Focusing on her how? We’ve accounted for all her movements the week before she was killed.”

“We’ll have to go further back than that. Months, maybe even years; the pressure built inside him for a while before he acted, and during that time their paths crossed.”

“If she was the trigger.”

Isabel nodded. “If she was the trigger.”

“And if she wasn’t?”

Isabel shrugged. “Still a valid, even critical, investigative approach, knowing who the victim was. Who all of them were. We won’t understand him until we understand the women he’s killing. Something more than superficial appearance connects them.”

“They were all unusually successful at their jobs,” Rafe said, relaying the information without the need to consult any file or notes. “Jamie had been Broker of the Year with her company the past three years; Allison Carroll had been recognized both locally and statewide as an outstanding teacher; and Tricia Kane not only had a very good job as a paralegal to one of our most successful attorneys but also was a very talented artist gaining regional recognition.”

“It might be the public recognition of their abilities as much as their success that drew his interest,” Isabel mused. “They stood in a spotlight, lauded for their achievements. Maybe that’s what he likes. Or doesn’t like.”

“You mean he could be punishing them for their success?”

“It’s a possibility. Also a possibility that he was attracted to them because of their success and was rejected by them when he expressed his interest.”

“Men get rejected all the time. They don’t turn to butchery.”
No. The vast majority don't. Which is a good thing, don't you think?”

Rafe frowned slightly, but she was going on before he could comment.

“It means this particular man has some serious, deep-seated emotional and psychological problems, which have apparently lain dormant or at least were hidden here in Hastings until about three weeks ago.”

“Hence the trigger.”

Isabel nodded. “There’s no question about that, not as far as we’re concerned. Something happened. To him, in his life. A change. Whether it was an actual event or a paranoid delusion on his part remains to be seen. But something set him off. Something definitive.”

Rafe glanced at his watch, wondering if there was time today to visit all three crime scenes.

“Starting with the actual crime scenes,” Isabel said, “would probably be the best way to go. According to the map I studied, they’re within a five-mile area. And it’s still hours till sunset, so we have time.”

“Where’s your partner?” Rafe asked. “I was told there’d be at least two of you.”

“She’s settling in. Wandering around, getting a feel for the town.”

“Please tell me she isn’t blond.”

“She isn’t.” Isabel smiled. “But if you’re wondering, she doesn’t resemble the conventional FBI suit any more than I do. The SCU really is an unusual unit within the Bureau, and few of us conform to any sort of dress code unless we’re actually on FBI grounds. Casual and understated are sort of our watchwords.”

Rafe eyed her but decided not to comment on that. “And do you normally show up unarmed?”

“She isn’t.” Isabel smiled. “But if you’re wondering, she doesn’t resemble the conventional FBI suit any more than I do. The SCU really is an unusual unit within the Bureau, and few of us conform to any sort of dress code unless we’re actually on FBI grounds. Casual and understated are sort of our watchwords.”

Rafe eyed her but decided not to comment on that. “And do you normally show up unarmed?”

“Who says I’m unarmed?” She lifted one hand and gently wiggled her fingers, each one adorned with a neat, but hardly understated, red-polished oval nail.

Hearing the faint note of mockery in her voice, Rafe sighed and said, “Let me guess. Martial-arts expert?”

“I’ve trained,” she admitted.

“Black belt?”

“Got that when I was twelve.” She smiled again. “But if it makes you feel better, I’m also wearing a calf holster—usually my backup, since my service automatic is worn in a belt holster. Our unit doesn’t break all the rules, just some of them; on duty, we’re expected to be armed. Since I was taking a casual look around town, a visible weapon would have been a bit conspicuous, I thought.”

Rafe had noticed that her jeans were very close-fitting from waist to knees, so he couldn’t help asking, “Can you get to that weapon in a hurry if you have to?”

“You’d be surprised.”

He wanted to tell her he wasn’t sure he could take too many more surprises but instead said only, “We’ve set up a conference room here as a base of operations, so all the reports, evidence, and statements are there. Couple of good computers with high-speed Internet access, plenty of phones. Standard supplies. Anything else that’s needed, I’ll get.”

“In a situation like this, the city fathers generally say to hell with the budget.”

“Which they pretty much did.”

“Still, you and I both know it'll come down to basic police work, so the budget is likely to go toward overtime
rather than anything fancier. As for the crime scenes, I really would like to take a look at them today. And it would help if it's just you and me out there this time. The fewer people around me when I'm studying a crime scene, the better.”

“Fewer distractions?”

“Exactly.”

“We've kept the scenes roped off,” Rafe said, “but I'd bet my pension that at least a dozen kids have tramped all over them despite the warnings. Or because of them.”

“Yeah, kids tend to be curious about crime scenes, so that's to be expected.”

More than a little curious himself, Rafe said, “It's rained since we found Tricia Kane's body on Monday; what do you expect to find?”

“I'm not likely to find anything you and your people missed,” Isabel replied, her matter-of-fact tone making it an acknowledgment rather than a compliment. “I just want to get a sense of the places, a feel for them. It's difficult to do that with only photographs and diagrams.”

It made sense. Rafe nodded and rose to his feet, asking, “What about your partner?”

“She may want to take a look at the scenes later,” Isabel said, getting up as well. “Or maybe not. We tend to come at things from different angles.”

“Probably why your boss teamed you up.”

“Yes,” Isabel said. “Probably.”

Caleb Powell wasn't a happy man. Not only had he lost his efficient paralegal to the killer stalking Hastings, he had also lost a friend. There hadn't been the slightest romantic spark between Tricia and him, particularly since she was almost young enough to be his daughter, but there had been an immediate liking and respect from the day she first began working for him almost two years before.

He missed her. He missed her a lot.

And since the temp he had hired was still trying to figure out Tricia's filing system—and kept coming to him with questions about it—his office wasn't exactly his favorite place to be right now. All of which explained why he was sitting in the downtown coffee shop sipping an iced mocha and staring grimly through the front window at the media-fest still going on across the street at the town hall.

“Vultures,” he muttered.

“They have their jobs to do.”

He looked at the woman seated at the next table, not really surprised she had responded to his comment because people did that in small towns. Especially when there were only two customers in the place at the time. He didn't recognize her, but that didn't surprise him either; Hastings wasn't that small.

“Their jobs stop when they cross the line between informing the public and sensationalizing a tragedy,” he said.

“In a perfect world,” she agreed. “Last time I checked, we didn't live in a perfect world.”

“No, that's true.”
“So we have to cope with less than the ideal.” She smiled faintly. “I've even heard it said that the world would be better off without lawyers, Mr. Powell.”

Just a bit wary now, he said, “You have me at a disadvantage.”

“We're a bit more serious here,” said Hollis Templeton. “My name is Hollis Templeton. I'm with the FBI.”

That did surprise him. An attractive brunette with a short, no-fuss hairstyle and disconcertingly clear blue eyes, she looked nothing at all like a tough federal cop. Slender almost to the point of thinness, she was wearing a lightweight summer blouse and floral skirt, an outfit eerily like the one Tricia had reportedly worn the day she was killed.

His disbelief must have been obvious; with another faint smile, she drew a small I.D. folder from her purse and handed it across to him.

He had seen a federal I.D. before. This one was genuine. Hollis Templeton was a Special Investigator for the FBI.

“Actually, it is.” She shrugged. “It was hot as hell outside, so I came in for iced coffee. And to watch the circus across the street. I recognized you, though. They ran your photo in the local paper Tuesday after Tricia Kane was killed.”

“As you noted, Agent Templeton, I'm a lawyer. I don't really appreciate impromptu interviews with federal officials.”

“But you do want to find out who killed Tricia.”

He noticed that she didn't deny it was an interview. “I also don't appreciate typical law-enforcement tactics and questions designed to encourage me to talk carelessly to a cop.”

“Take all the care you like. If a lawyer doesn't know how much is . . . safe . . . to disclose, nobody does.”

“I think I find that offensive, Agent Templeton.”

“And I think you're awfully touchy for a man with nothing to hide, Mr. Powell. You know the drill better than most. We'll be talking to everyone who knew Tricia Kane. You were her employer and her friend, and that puts you pretty high up on our list.”

“Of suspects?”

“Of people to talk to. Something you know, something you saw or heard, may be the key we'll need to find her killer.”

“Then call me in to the police station for a formal interview or come see me at my office,” he said, getting to his feet. “Make an appointment.” He left a couple of dollars on the table and turned away.

“She liked tea instead of coffee, and took it with milk. You always thought that was odd.”

Caleb turned back, staring at the agent.

“She always felt she had disappointed her father by not becoming a lawyer, so being a paralegal was a compromise. It gave her more time for her art. She had asked you to pose for her, but you kept putting her off. And about six months ago, you offered her a shoulder to cry on when her relationship with her boyfriend ended badly. You were working late at the office when she broke down, and afterward you drove her home. She fell asleep on the couch. You covered her with an afghan and left.”

Slowly, he said, “None of that was in the police report.”
“No. It wasn't.”

“Then how the hell do you know?”

“I just do.”

“How?” he demanded.

Instead of replying to that, Hollis said, “I saw some of her work. Tricia's. She was talented. She might have become very well known if she'd lived.”

“Something else you just know?”

“My partner and I got into town last night. We've checked out a few things. Tricia's apartment, for one. Nice place. Really good studio. And some of the paintings she'd finished were there. I . . . used to be an artist myself, so I know quality work when I see it. She did quality work.”

“And you read her diary.”

“She didn't keep one. Most of the artists I know don't. Something about images as opposed to words, I guess.”

“Are you going to tell me how you know what you know?”

“I thought you didn't want to talk to me, Mr. Powell.”

His mouth tightened. “What I think is that alienating me is not at all a good idea, Agent Templeton.”

“It's a risk,” she admitted, not noticeably disturbed by that. “But one I'm willing to take if I have to. You're smart, Mr. Powell. You're very, very smart. Too smart to play dumb games. And at the end of the day I'd really rather not have you as an enemy, never mind the fact that you know all the legal angles and could keep us at arm's length for a long time.”

“You think I'd do that? Potentially put other lives in danger by withholding information?”

“You tell me.”

After a moment, Caleb crossed the few feet separating them and sat down in the second chair at her table. “No. I wouldn't. And not only because I'm an officer of the court. But I don't know anything that could help you find this killer.”

“How can you be so sure of that? You don't even know what questions we want to ask you.” She shook her head slightly. “You aren't a suspect. According to Chief Sullivan’s report, you have a verifiable alibi for the twenty-four hours surrounding Tricia Kane's murder.”

“What the thrillers like to call a cast-iron alibi. I spent the weekend in New Orleans for a family wedding and didn't fly back here until Monday afternoon. I got the news about Tricia when Rafe called me at my hotel around noon.”

“And a companion places you in your hotel room from just before midnight until after eight that morning,” Hollis said matter-of-factly. “She's positive you never left the room.”

Without at all planning to, Caleb heard himself say, “A former girlfriend.”

“Former?” Her voice was wry.

A bit defensive despite himself, he said, “We also happen to be old friends, what my father used to call scratch-and-sniff buddies. We see each other, we end up in bed. Happens about twice a year, since she lives in New Orleans. Where we both grew up, and where she practices law, which makes her highly unlikely to perjure herself. Any other nuggets you want to mine from my personal life, Agent Templeton?”
“Not at the moment.”

“Too kind.”

She didn't react to his sarcasm except with another of those little smiles as she said, “About Tricia Kane. Do you think her ex-boyfriend might have wanted to hurt her?”

“I doubt it. She never said he was violent or in any way abusive, and I never saw any signs of it. Besides, unless he slipped back into town in the last three weeks, he's out of the picture. They broke up because he thought his pretty face could earn him screen time in Hollywood and he didn't want Tricia along for what he was convinced was going to be a wild and award-winning ride.”

“Sounds painful for her.”

“It was. Emotionally. She went home for lunch that day and found him packing to leave. That's when he told her he was going. Until that moment, she'd believed they would end up married.”

“Since then had she ever talked about a particular man?”

“I don't think she was even dating. If so, she never mentioned it. She was concentrating on her painting when she wasn't at the office.”

“Do you know if anything unusual had happened lately? Strange phone calls or messages, someone she'd noticed turning up wherever she went, that sort of thing?”

“No. She seemed fine. Not worried, not stressed, not upset by anything. She seemed fine.”

“There was nothing you could have done,” Hollis said.

Caleb drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Oh, I have no illusions, Agent Templeton. I know how quickly random acts of violence can snuff out lives, no matter how careful we think we are. But those acts tend to be committed by stupid or brutal people, for stupid and brutal reasons. This is different. This bastard is pure evil.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

She smiled an odd, twisted smile, and her blue eyes had an equally strange, flat shine to them that made Caleb feel suddenly uneasy. “I know all about evil, Mr. Powell, believe me. I met it up close and personal.”

Thursday, 3:30 PM

Isabel stood gazing around the clearing where Tricia Kane's body had been found. It was mostly in shade now that the sun was no longer directly overhead, which she appreciated since the day was hot and humid. She was conscious of Rafe Sullivan's scrutiny, but she had been at this too long to allow him to distract her.

Much.

Both the blood and the chalk used to mark body position and location had been washed away by the rain, but she didn't need either to know exactly where Tricia Kane had suffered and died. She looked down just inches from her feet, her gaze absently tracing the shape of something—someone—that was no longer there.

She had been here, in this sort of place, so many times, Isabel thought. But it never got any easier. Never.

“He got her in the back,” she said, “then jerked her around by the wrist and began driving the knife into her chest. The first blow to her chest staggered her backward, the second put her on the ground. She was losing blood so fast she didn't have the strength to fight him off. She was all but gone when he began stabbing her in the genital area. And either her skirt came up when she fell, or else he jerked it out of the way when he began stabbing her, since the
material wasn't slashed. He pulled the skirt back down when he was done. Odd, that. Protecting her modesty, or veiling his own desires and needs?”

Rafe was frowning. “The ME says she died too fast to leave any bruises, but he told me privately he felt she'd been jerked around and held by one wrist. It wasn't in his report.”

Isabel looked at him, weighing him for a moment, then smiled. “I get hunches.”

“Yeah?” He crossed powerful arms over his chest and lifted both eyebrows inquiringly.

“Okay, they're a little more than hunches.”

“Is this where the special in Special Crimes Unit comes in?”

“Sort of. You read the Bureau's brief on our unit, right?”

“I did. It was nicely murky, but the gist I got is that the unit is called in when a judgment is made that the crimes committed are unusually challenging for local law enforcement. That SCU agents use traditional as well as intuitive investigative methods to solve said crimes. By intuitive I gather they mean these hunches of yours?”

“Well, they couldn't very well announce that the SCU is made up mostly of psychics. Wouldn't go over very well with the majority of cops, considering how . . . um . . . levelheaded you guys tend to be. We've discovered through bitter experience that proving what we can do is a lot more effective with you guys than just claiming our abilities are real.”

“So why're you telling me?”

“I thought you could take it.” She lifted an eyebrow at him. “Was I wrong?”

“I'll let you know when I make up my mind.”

“Fair enough.”

“So I gather you don't normally inform local law enforcement of this?”

“Depends. It's pretty much left up to our judgment. The assigned team, I mean. Bishop says you can't plan some things in advance, and whether or not to spill the beans—and when—is one of them. I've been on assignments where the local cops didn't have a clue, and others where they were convinced, by the time we left, that it was some kind of magic.”

“But it isn't.” He didn't quite make it a question.

“Oh, no. Perfectly human abilities that simply don't happen to be shared by everyone. It's like math.”

“Math?”

“Yeah. I don't get math. Never have. Balancing my checkbook stresses me out like you wouldn't believe. But I always liked science, history, English. Those I was good at. I bet you're good at math.”

“It doesn't stress me out,” he admitted.

“Different strokes. People have strengths and weaknesses, and some have abilities that can look amazing because they're uncommon. There aren't a lot of Mozarts or Einsteins, so people marvel at their abilities. Guy throws a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball and puts it over the plate three out of five pitches, and he's likely to be set for life, because very few people can do what he does. Gifts. Rare, but all perfectly human.”

“And your gift is?”

“Clairvoyance. The faculty of perceiving things or events beyond normal sensory contact. Simply put, I know
things. Things I shouldn't be able to know—according to all the laws of conventional science. Facts and other bits of information. Conversations. Thoughts. Events. The past as well as the present.”

“All that?”

“All that. But more often than not it's a random jumble of stuff, like the clutter in an attic. Or like the chatter of voices in the next room: you hear everything but really catch only a word or two, maybe a phrase. That's where practice and training come in, helping make sense of the confusion. Learning to see the important objects in that cluttered attic or isolate that one important voice speaking in the next room.”

“And you use this . . . ability? In investigating crimes, I mean.”

“Yes. The Special Crimes Unit was formed to do just that. For most of us, becoming a part of the unit was the first time in our lives that we didn't feel like freaks.”

Rafe thought that much, at least, made sense. He could understand how people with senses beyond the “normal” five might feel more than a little alienated from society. Having a useful and rewarding job and a place where they were considered entirely normal had probably changed their lives.

Isabel didn't wait for his response, just went on in that slightly absentminded tone. “There's been very little study into the paranormal, really, but we've built on that with our own studies and field experience. We've developed our own definitions and classifications within the SCU, as well as defined degrees of ability and skill. I'm a seventh-degree clairvoyant, which means I have a fair amount of ability and control.”

Rafe watched as she knelt down and touched the ground, no more than an inch or so from where Tricia Kane's blond hair had lain. “Touching the ground helps?” he asked warily.

“Touching things sometimes helps, yeah. Objects, people. It's better when the area is contained, enclosed, but you work with what you've got. The ground is pretty much the only thing left out here, so . . .” She looked up at him and smiled, though her eyes held a slightly abstracted expression. “Not magic. Maybe we're just a lot more connected to this world and to one another than we think.”

*It was hot, the way it is now. But barely light. She could smell the honeysuckle. But that's all . . . all she could get about the murder, at least. That and her certain sense of something dark and evil crouching, springing . . . But only that. Isabel wasn't really surprised. This place was wide open, and they were always the toughest.*

He watched her intently. “What do you mean?”

He had very dark eyes, she thought. “We leave footprints when we pass. Skin cells, stray hairs. The scent of our cologne lingering in the air. Maybe we leave more than that. Maybe we leave energy. Even our thoughts have energy. Measurable electromagnetic energy. Today's science admits that much.”

“Yeah. And so?”

“Our theory is that psychics are able to tap into electromagnetic fields. The earth has them, every living thing has them, and many objects seem to absorb and hold them. Think of it as a kind of static electricity. Some people get shocked more often than others. I get shocked a lot.”

“Are you getting shocked now?”

Isabel straightened and brushed the dirt off her hand. She was frowning slightly. “It'd be easier if the clairvoyant bits came in neon, but they don't. That cluttered attic. That noisy party in the next room. In the end it's usually just a jumble of information, stuff I could have read or heard or been told.”

Rafe waited for a moment, then said, “Except?”

“Except . . . when the information comes in the form of a vision. That is in neon. Sometimes in blood.”
“Not literally?”

“Afraid so. It's rare for me, but it does happen from time to time. In the case of a murder, it's as if I become the victim. I see or hear—or sometimes feel—what they do. While they're being killed. I'm told it's a bit startling to watch. Don't freak out if it happens, okay?”

“You're telling me you actually bleed?”

“Sometimes. It fades away pretty fast, though. Like I said, don't let it bother you.”

“Don't let it bother me? Cops see blood, Isabel, we tend to freak out. In a controlled, professional manner, of course. We take it as a signal that it's time to do our job.”

Her eyes sharpened abruptly, and she smiled. “Well, if you see blood on me, resist your instincts. Chances are, it'll belong to somebody else.”

“In Hastings, chances are it'll be yours. Unless you want to color your hair for the duration.”

“Wouldn't help. He already knows.”

“Knows what?”

“He's already seen me, Rafe. One of the clairvoyant bits I've picked up. I'm on his A-list.”
“GODDAMMIT, YOU TOLD ME being bait for this bastard wasn't the idea.”

“It wasn't the plan. It was always a possibility, of course, but it wasn't the plan.”

“Isabel—”

“Besides, it isn't that clear-cut. I said I was on his A-list, but I'm not next. He gets to know his victims before he kills them, Rafe. He doesn't know me. Not yet. And he won't come after me until he does. Or thinks he does.”

“Are you willing to bet your life on that?”

She didn't hesitate. “To catch this bastard? Yes.”

Rafe took a step toward her. “Have you reported it to your boss? Does he know you're on the A-list?”

“Not yet. I'm scheduled to report in later today. I'll tell him then.”

“Will you?” His doubt was obvious.

Isabel chuckled. “Rafe, our unit is made up of psychics. You don't keep secrets, or withhold vital bits of information, when half the team can read your mind. Very few of us have been able to keep anything important from Bishop no matter how far away we were.”

“Have you?”

Isabel took a last look down at the ground where Tricia Kane had died, then started toward him with a slight gesture to indicate they might as well walk back to his Jeep. “I thought so once. Just after I first joined the unit. I thought I was being very clever. Turned out he'd known all along. He usually does.”

Rafe didn't say anything else until they were in the Jeep and he had turned the air-conditioning on full-blast. “The simplest thing to do,” he said, “is to have you recalled and somebody else sent down here. Somebody who won't draw this bastard's attention.”

“The simplest thing,” Isabel said, “is not always the smartest thing.”

“I am not going to stand by while you're dangled on a goddamned hook.”

“I told you, I'm not next on his hit parade. But somebody else is. Some woman is walking around in your town right now, Rafe, and a killer is stalking her. My partner and I are up to speed on this investigation. Bishop thought we were the best team to send down here, and his success rate, our success rate as a unit, is over ninety percent. We can help you catch him. Send me back, and the next team has to start from scratch. Do you really want to waste that time, especially when this killer is averaging a victim a week so far?”

“Shit.” He stared at her grimly. “I'm taking a hell of a lot on faith here. This psychic stuff.”

“At least you didn't call it bullshit,” she murmured. “That's usually the first reaction.”

Ignoring that, he said, “I'm supposed to be okay with you being on our killer's list because you assure me you
aren't next. That we have time while he stalks his next victim and, not incidentally, finds out enough about you to feel that he knows you. So he can kill you.”

“That pretty much sums it up, yeah.”

“Convince me. Convince me that this clairvoyant knowledge you have is genuine. That it's something I can trust.”

“Parlor tricks. It always comes down to parlor tricks.”

“I'm serious, Isabel.”

“I know you are.” She sighed. “You sure you want to do this?”

Suddenly wary again, he asked, “Why wouldn't I be?”

“Because the best way for me to convince you is to open up a connection between us and tell you things about yourself, your life, your past. Things I couldn't possibly know any other way. You might not find that very comfortable. Most people don't.”

“Women are dying, Isabel. I think I can endure a little psychic reading.”

“Okay. But when we speak of this later—and we will—just remember that I tried to warn you. I get bonus points for that.”

“Fine.”

She held out a hand, palm up, and Rafe hesitated only an instant before placing his hand on hers. He nearly jerked away when their flesh touched, because there was a literal, visible spark and a definite, if faint, shock. But her fingers closed over his strongly.

Matter-of-factly, she said, “Well, that's new.”

Rafe wanted to say something about static, but he was busy having another of those strange feelings, just as he'd had when she walked into the press conference, but much, much stronger. That a door had opened and a fresh breeze was blowing through. That everything around him was in sharper focus, more real than it had been before. That something had changed.

And he still didn't know if it was a good change or a bad one.

Isabel didn't go into some kind of trance or even close her eyes. But her eyes did take on that abstracted expression he had noticed before, as if she were listening to some distant sound. Her voice remained calm.

“You have an unusual paperweight on your desk at home, some kind of car part encased in acrylic. You prefer cats over dogs, though you don't have either because of your long working hours. You're allergic to alcohol, which is why you don't drink. You're fascinated by the Internet, by the instant communication of people all over the world. You're a movie buff, especially interested in science fiction and horror.”

Isabel smiled suddenly. “And you wear a particular style of jockey shorts because of a commercial you saw on TV.”

Rafe jerked his hand away. “Jesus,” he muttered. Then, getting back on balance, he added somewhat defensively, “You could have found out any of that. All of it.”

“Even the jockey shorts?”

“Jesus,” he repeated.

She was looking at him steadily, her eyes still faintly abstracted, distant. “Ah, now I understand why the idea of an FBI unit made up of psychics didn't throw you. Your grandmother had what she called ‘the sight.’ She knew
things before they happened.”

Rafe looked at his hand, which he had been unconsciously rubbing with the other one, then at her. “You aren't touching me,” he noted in a careful tone.

“Yeah, well. Once a connection is made, I tend to pick up stuff from then on.”

“Jesus Christ,” he said, varying the oath somewhat.

“I tried to warn you. Remember, bonus points.”

“I still don’t— You could have found out most of that some other way.”

“Maybe. But could I have found out that your grandmother told you on your fifteenth birthday that your destiny was to be a cop? It was just the two of you there at the time, so nobody else knew. You believed it was weird, she was weird, because you hadn't thought of being a cop. The family business was construction. That's what you were going to do, especially as you'd been swinging a hammer since you were twelve.”

Rafe was silent, frowning slightly.

“She also told you . . . there would come a point in your life when you would have to be very, very careful.” Isabel was frowning herself now, head slightly tilted, clearly concentrating. “That there was something important you were meant to do as part of the destiny she saw for you, but it would be dangerous. Deadly dangerous. Something about . . . a storm . . . a woman with green eyes . . . a black-gloved hand reaching . . . and glass shattering.”

He drew a breath. “Vague enough.”

Isabel blinked, and her green eyes cleared. “According to what our seers have told me, visions often come that way, as a series of images. Sometimes they prove to be literal, other times it's all symbolic. The green-eyed woman could be a jealous woman or someone who resents you or someone else. The black-gloved hand a threat. The storm, violence. Like that.”

“Still vague,” he insisted. “Any of that is something a cop deals with regularly.”

“Well, we'll see. Because I have more than a hunch that what your grandmother saw was this point in your life— otherwise I probably wouldn't have picked up her prediction.”

“What do you mean?”

“Patterns are everywhere, Rafe. Events touch other events like a honeycomb, connecting to one another. And seeming coincidences usually aren't. I may pick up some trivial information unrelated to what's going on at present, and not all the stuff I get could even be called hits, but I'm focused on this investigation, this killer—and when that's the case it almost always turns out that most of what I get is relevant to what's going on around me at the time.”

“Want to use a few more qualifiers?”

She smiled at his exasperation, though it was more rueful than amused. “Sorry, but you've got to understand we're in frontier territory here. There aren't a whole lot of absolute certainties. Conventional science pretty much sneers at psychic ability, and those who were brave enough to test and experiment found themselves dealing with an unfortunate commonality among psychics.”

“Which is?”

“Very few of us perform well under laboratory conditions. Nobody really knows why, that's just the way it is.” Isabel shrugged. “Plus, the tests tended to be poorly designed because, to begin with, they didn't know what they were dealing with. How can you effectively measure and analyze something without even knowing how it works? And how do you figure out how it works when you can't make it work within a controlled situation?”
“Somebody must have known, or you wouldn't be here. Would you?”

“The SCU wouldn't exist if Bishop hadn't been highly motivated and exceptionally driven to figure out how to use his own abilities to track and capture a serial killer years ago. Once he was able to do that, he believed other psychics could be trained, that we could learn to use our abilities as investigative tools. And that those tools would give us an edge. We're proving it works. Slowly, carefully—and with setbacks now and then. We're also learning as we go.

“What we've found through sheer trial and error in the field is that our abilities function best when we're focused on something compelling—such as a murder investigation. But that doesn't mean we can flip a switch and get exactly the piece of information we need. As with everything else in life, we have to work for it. It's still trial and error.”

“So, bottom line, your best guess is that because you picked up what my grandmother told me over twenty years ago it means what she saw has something to do with what's happening in my life today. This investigation.”

“It's a good bet, based on how my abilities have worked so far. Plus, logically this'll probably be the toughest case of your career, assuming you don't move to a big city and deal often with violent killers. And though I can't speak to the specifics of your grandmother's vision—yet—I can tell you it's going to be dangerous as hell tracking and catching this killer.”

Listening to her tone as well as the words, Rafe said, “You picked up something else out there where Tricia Kane was killed, didn't you? What was it?”

She hesitated just long enough to make the internal debate obvious, then said, “What I picked up out there confirmed something I suspected even before I came to Hastings. This town is just his latest hunting ground.”

“He's killed before?”

“In at least two previous locations. Ten years ago, he butchered six women in Florida. And five years ago, six women in Alabama.”

“Blondes?” Rafe asked.

“No. Redheads in Florida. Brunettes in Alabama. We have no idea why.”

“And nobody caught him then.”

“Lots tried. But he hit quick—one victim every week, just like here—and then he vanished. Typical serial killer cases, if there is such a thing, usually drag on months, years, and it takes time to get law enforcement organized once a pattern is even noticed. But this monster hit and vanished before the task forces could even get up and running. And he didn't leave so much as a hair behind to help I.D. him, so they had almost nothing to work with.”

“Then how do you know it's the same killer?”

“The M.O. The profile. The fact that Bishop himself worked on the second set of murders—one of his very few unsuccessful cases.”

“I wasn't told about any of this in the initial profile.”

“No. The first profiler wasn't a member of the SCU. And even though the two earlier sets of murders came up on the computer as possibly connected, he discounted them because it was believed at the time that the most likely suspect was killed trying to escape police in Alabama. His car went off a bridge. But they never found the body.”

“So do you and Bishop believe he didn't die—or that the suspect the police were chasing wasn't the killer?”

“We believe the latter, actually. The man the police were after had a few violent crimes on his rap sheet, but neither Bishop nor I was convinced he had the right psychological makeup to be the clever serial killer we were
after.”

“So he kills his six victims, lays low for five years, and then starts up all over again. That's a hell of a cooling-off period.”

“And unusual. We believe he uses the time to relocate and get to know the people around him. We also believe there's always a trigger, as I said. Something sets him off. Something always sets him off.”

Again, Rafe heard a note in her voice that made him wary. “There's another reason you believe this is the same killer. What is it?”

Isabel answered without hesitation. “Standing where Tricia Kane was murdered, I felt him. Just the way I felt him five years ago when I first encountered Bishop and joined the team. And the way I felt him ten years ago when he killed a good friend of mine.”

It was nearly midnight when Mallory Beck pulled herself reluctantly from bed and began getting dressed. “Dammit. Where on earth did my bra get to?”

“Over there by the bookcase. You could stay, you know. Spend the night.”

“I'm back on duty at seven,” she said. “First big meeting of our task force, FBI agents included, starts at eight. That's off the record, Alan.”

“Mal, I've told you before, anything you say to me privately is off the record.” His voice was patient. He propped himself up on an elbow and watched her dress. “I'm not going to cross that line.”

She was reasonably sure he wouldn't. But only reasonably sure.

“Okay. But I still need to go home. I won't sleep much if I stay here, and I want to be rested tomorrow.”

“You don't have anything to prove, you know. To these FBI agents, I mean. Or to Rafe. You're a damned good cop, everybody knows that.”

“Yeah, well, being a good cop hasn't been enough so far, has it?”

He frowned a little as he watched her, wondering as he so often had in the last few months if he would ever really know her. It was undoubtedly part of the attraction as far as he was concerned, he knew that very well; there was so much of her beneath the surface, and his instinct was to dig, to explore and understand.

She wasn't making it easy for him.

Maybe that was part of the attraction as well. Plus the mind-blowing sex, of course. Either it was sheer natural talent, or else Alan had to take his hat off to the men in her past, because Mallory was something else in bed.

Addictive was the word that came to mind.

“You can't blame yourself,” he said finally.

“To Protect and Serve. It says that on the sides of our cruisers and Jeeps. It's what we get paid for. Our entire reason for being, so to speak.”

“It's not a one-woman police force, Mal. Let some of the others carry the weight.”

“They do. Especially Rafe.”
“Yeah, give him his due. He wasn't too proud to yell for help.”

Mallory sat down on the bed to put her socks and shoes on, eyeing her lover. “We've both known him a long time. Pride is never going to be his downfall.”

“No. But failing to trust himself might be.”

Since she'd had the same thought herself, Mallory could hardly disagree. But she felt uncomfortable on several levels discussing her boss with Alan, so she simply changed the subject. “I'm sorry I missed the press conference today. I hear you cracked up the room.”

“Rafe did—with a joke at my expense. I gather that gorgeous blonde he left with is one of the FBI agents?”

“Mmm. Isabel Adams—and I better not see that name printed in the paper unless and until it's released officially.”

“You won't, dammit.” Still, Alan couldn't stop asking questions. “She's not down here alone?”

“No, she has a partner. Another woman. I haven't met her yet.”

“Did it occur to anybody at the Bureau that sending a blond female agent down here at this particular time might be a little dicey?”

Mallory shrugged. “They wrote the profile. I have to assume they know what they're doing.”

“I bet Rafe is pissed.”

“You'll have to ask him about that.”

“Jesus, you're pigheaded.”

“It'd be more polite to call me stubborn.”

“And less accurate. Mal”—he leaned over to grasp her wrist before she stood up—“is something wrong? I mean, aside from the obvious maniacal-killer-stalking-Hastings thing.”

“No.”

That mild syllable didn't give him much room to maneuver, but he tried. “I know you're preoccupied. Hell, we all are. But sometimes I get the feeling you're not even here.”

“I didn't hear you complaining a little while ago. Even though I always wonder when a guy calls out God's name instead of mine.”

Refusing to be sidetracked, Alan said, “You barely caught your breath before you were up and dressing.”

“I told you. I have to go to work early.”

“If you'd leave some stuff here, you could spend the night occasionally and still get to work early.” He heard the note of frustration in his own voice, and the familiar resentment pricked inside him. Why does she make me do this?

“Alan, we've been over this. I like my own space. I never leave any of my stuff at a man's apartment. I don't like sleepovers except for vacation trips out of town. And I'm not real comfortable being in bed with a reporter in the first place. Conflict of interest rings a rather ugly bell.”

Her patient tone grated, but he managed to keep his own voice calm. Even careless, around the edges. “It's that last that really bugs you, and don't think I don't know it. You don't trust me, Mal. You don't believe I can separate my work from my personal life.”

“Why should you be different from the rest of us?” she asked dryly, pulling away from him and rising to her feet.
“My job is in my head twenty-four seven. And so is yours. We’re both career people. We live on takeout and caffeine. Half the time our socks don’t match, and when we realize it we just buy new socks. We do our laundry when we run out of clean clothes. And when the biggest, baddest bad to ever hit Hastings rears its ugly head, both our careers kick into high gear. Right?”

“Right,” he agreed reluctantly.

“Besides, let’s not kid ourselves. Neither one of us is looking for anything more than a few hours of stress-busting sex every week.” She smiled down at him. “Don’t get up. I’ll let myself out. See you.”

“Good night, Mal.” He remained where he was until he heard the front door of his apartment close. Then he fell back against the pillows and muttered a heartfelt “Shit.”

Outside Alan’s apartment building, Mallory stood on the sidewalk for a moment breathing in the slightly breezy but otherwise mild night air. It was a well-lighted sidewalk close to downtown Hastings, and Mallory shouldn’t have felt particularly threatened.

The breeze intensified suddenly, blowing an empty soft drink can across the sidewalk a few feet away, and Mallory nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Shit,” she muttered.

She could hear the trees whispering softly as the wind stirred their leaves. Hear the occasional swish of a car passing a block or so away. Crickets. Bullfrogs.

Her name.

Not that she really heard that, of course. It was just that she had the uneasy feeling she was being watched. Even followed sometimes.

She’d been conscious of it for some time now, days at least. At odd moments, usually but not always when she was outside, like now. If she were a blonde, she would have been getting really nervous about it; as it was, the sensation just made her wary and a lot more careful.

And jumpy as hell.

She had to wonder if this killer, like so many she’d read about in the police manuals, kept an eye on the cops as they investigated his crimes. Was that it? Was some wacko watching gleefully from behind the bushes, congratulating himself on his cleverness and their incompetence?

If so, maybe it made sense that he’d concentrate on one—or more—of the female officers rather than the guys. She made a mental note to herself to ask some of the other women in the department if any of them had been aware of this creepy feeling. And if they had, or maybe especially if they hadn’t, she’d have to ask the FBI profiler about it.

The gorgeous female blond FBI profiler.

Mallory knew Rafe was pissed and unhappy about that; he’d never been a man to hide his feelings. But she also knew that Isabel Adams had somehow managed to persuade him to accept her presence in the investigation.

And it hadn’t been by batting her baby greens at him either.

No, there was a lot more to this than sex appeal; she knew Rafe too well not to feel sure that his reasons for accepting Isabel were logical and completely professional. She was still here because he believed she was an asset to the investigation. Period.
Which wasn't to say he was immune to the effects of a beautiful face, green eyes, and a body that looked really
good in clingy summery clothing. He was a man, after all.

She half laughed under her breath but kept a wary eye on her surroundings as she unlocked her car and got in.
Then again, she thought, maybe she wasn't being quite fair to Rafe. Maybe having her own man problems at the
moment made her overly sensitive to undercurrents.

Not that Alan was being particularly subtle. Mallory was somewhat bemused to find herself, for the first time in
her adult life, on the traditionally male side of things in their relationship: she was the one who was perfectly happy
with casual sex a couple of times a week, no strings or promises.

Alan wanted more.

Sighing, Mallory started the car and headed off toward her own apartment on the other side of town. It was
relatively easy to push Alan and the various problems he presented to the back of her mind, at least for the moment,
because in the forefront there was still the vague but persistent feeling that she was being watched.

All the way home, she couldn't shake the feeling, even though she didn't see anyone following her. Or anyone in
the vicinity of her apartment building. She parked her car carefully in its slot in a well-lighted area and locked it up,
then kept her key-chain pepper spray in one hand and her other hand resting on or near her weapon all the way
inside and up to her apartment.

Nothing.

No one.

Just this nagging feeling that someone was watching every move she made.

Once inside, Mallory leaned back against her locked apartment door and softly muttered, “Shit.”

“Let me get this straight.” Isabel rubbed the nape of her neck, staring at her partner. “You met Caleb Powell in that
coffee shop on Main Street, and you spilled all that stuff I picked up at Tricia Kane's apartment?”

“No all of it.” Hollis shrugged. “Just some . . . selected bits. I told you, he didn't want to talk to me. And from the
jut of his jaw, I'd say he wouldn't have been willing to talk to any of us. So I got his attention. What's wrong with
that?”

“Did he ask you how you obtained this information?”

“Yeah, but I distracted him. More or less.”

“Hollis, he's a lawyer. They don't get distracted, as a rule. Not for long, anyway. What happens when he starts
asking questions?”

“I don't think he will. He wants to find out who killed Tricia Kane. Besides, you told Chief Sullivan.”

“As closely as we'll have to work with Rafe and his lead investigator on this case, he had to know. So will she.
But a civilian?”

Hollis sighed, clearly impatient with the discussion. “Somehow I don't think a lawyer finding out we're psychics
is going to be our major problem. I'm new at this whole thing, and you might as well have a bull's-eye target on your
back. In neon.” She stood up. “Since we have that early meeting in the morning, I think I'll go back to my own room
and get some sleep, if you don't mind.”
Without protest, Isabel merely said, “I’ll be up and ready for breakfast at seven if you want to meet me here.” The small inn where they were staying didn't provide room service, but there was a restaurant nearby.

“Okay. See you then.”

“Good night, Hollis.”

When she was alone in her room again, Isabel got ready for bed, brooding. Just as the night before, she barely noticed the uninspired, any-hotel-in-any-town-U.S.A. decor, and out of habit she filled the silence by having the air-conditioning on high and the TV tuned to an all-news network.

She hated silence when she was in an unfamiliar place.

She had put off calling Bishop, undecided despite what she'd told Rafe as to what she intended to report. So when her cell phone rang, she knew who it was even without the caller I.D. and answered by saying, “This is supposed to be one of those lessons you're always saying we have to learn, right? A reminder from the universe that we don't control anything except our own actions? When we're able to control them, that is.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Bishop replied, calm and transparently unconvincing.

“Yeah, yeah. Why team me with Hollis? Answer that.”

“Because you're the one most likely to help her through this first real test of her abilities.”

“I'm not a medium.”

“No, but you understand how it feels to be forced suddenly to cope with abilities you never even dreamed were possible.”

“I'm not the only other team member who wasn't born a psychic.”

“You're the best adjusted.”

“That's an arguable statement. Just because this stuff no longer scares the hell out of me doesn't necessarily mean I'm all that well adjusted.”

“I didn't say well adjusted. I said best adjusted.”

“Which only proves my point. I would think you'd want somebody well adjusted to help Hollis.”

“You're going to keep arguing about this, aren't you?” Bishop said.

“I thought I might.”

“Are you asking me to recall Hollis?”

Isabel hesitated, then said, “No. Dammit.”

“You can help her. Just listen to your instincts.”

“Bishop, we both know mediums are fragile.”

“And we both know how difficult it's been for us to find a medium for the unit. They're rare, for one thing. And, yes, they're emotionally fragile. Most can't handle the job, and those who can tend to burn out quickly.”

“So far,” she reminded him, “we haven't found a single one who was able to gain information for us by contacting murder victims. I mean an agent. Bonnie did it, but she wasn't an agent. When she grows up, though—”

“She still has a lot of growing to do. Right now, she's preoccupied with being a teenager. It's not the easiest time
of life, remember? Especially when you're gifted.”

“Or cursed. Yeah, I remember. Bonnie aside, the few mediums we've found and tried to bring into murder investigations have either been terrified of opening that particular door or else didn't have enough strength or control to do it in any way helpful to us.”

“Which is another reason you're teamed with Hollis and why she's in Hastings. She's strong enough to handle the work, and her control has been steadily improving.”

“Maybe, but her field experience is zilch. And she's not ready to open that door, not yet. Strong or not, she's one of the scared ones. She doesn't show it, unless you count the chip on her shoulder, but she's terrified of facing death.”

“Can you blame her? She fought like hell to keep death at bay on her own account hardly more than six months ago. Willingly opening that door and confronting what's on the other side is going to be the hardest thing she'll ever have to do.”

“Yeah, which is one reason I don't think she's ready for this job, not yet. Look, I'm as sympathetic as anyone about what Hollis has been through, but—”

“She doesn't need sympathy. She needs to work.”

“She isn't ready to work, if my opinion counts for anything.”

“She believes she is ready.”

“And what do you believe?” Isabel challenged.

“I believe she needs to work.”

Isabel sighed. “This killer is vicious. The attacks have been vicious. If Hollis is even able to nerve herself to open the door, she's going to find a hell of a lot of terror and pain barreling through at her.”

“I know.”

“I can't push her, Bishop.”

“I don't want you to.”

“Just be here to catch her when she falls?”

“No. Don't focus on that. It's not what this is about. You investigate your case. Hollis is intelligent, curious, intuitive, and observant, and that plus the training we've given her means she'll be an asset to the investigation. If she's able to use her psychic abilities, we'll find out in a hurry whether she can handle the fallout.”

“And whether I can. She could end up a basket case.”

“Possibly, but don't count her out. She's exceptionally strong.” Bishop paused, then added dryly, “The more imperative problem, I'd say, is that this killer you and I are both all too familiar with has noticed you this time around. For all we know, he may remember you. In any case, you're on his hit list.”

“Damn,” Isabel said.
HE WOKE UP with blood on his hands.

It wasn't an instant realization. The alarm was droning on and on, and he had the vague notion that he had overslept. Again. He'd been doing that a lot lately. The bedclothes were tumbled, tangled around him, and it took a considerable amount of effort just to roll himself over and slap at the irritating alarm clock to stop the damned noise.

He froze, hand on the now-silent clock.

His hand was . . . there was blood.

He pushed himself slowly up on an elbow and looked at his hand, at both hands. Reddish stains covered the palms. Dried stains, not wet. But now that they were close to his face, he could smell the blood, sharp and metallic, so strong it made his stomach heave.

The blood.

Again.

He fought his way out of bed and hurried to the bathroom. He stood at the sink, washing his hands over and over until there was no sign of the red. He splashed water on his face, rinsed his mouth, trying to get rid of the sour taste of fear.

He raised his head and stared into the mirror, hands braced on the sink.

A white, haggard face stared back at him.

“Oh, Christ,” he whispered.

Isabel wasted no time, at the first meeting of the four lead investigators of their combined police and FBI task force, in explaining to Detective Mallory Beck what made the SCU team “special.”

Mallory, like Rafe the previous day, took the news quite calmly, saying only, “I'd call that a pretty unusual sort of unit for the FBI.”

Isabel nodded. “Definitely. And we exist as a unit only as long as we're successful.”

“Like that, is it? Politics?”

“More or less. Not only are we unconventional in too many ways to count, but the Bureau can't use us and our success to improve their own image; what we do too often looks like magic or some kind of witchcraft rather than science, and that is not something the FBI wants to publicize no matter how high our success rate is. We're becoming quietly well known within other law-enforcement organizations because of our successes, but there are still plenty of people inside the Bureau who'd love it if we failed.”
“So you haven't yet?”

“Debatable point, I suppose.” Isabel pursed her lips. “A few got away. But the successes have far exceeded the failures. If you call them failures.”

“You don’t?”

“We don't give up easily. Bishop doesn't give up easily. So . . . just because a case goes cold doesn't mean we forget about it or stop working on it. Which brings me back to this case.” She explained their belief that they were dealing with a killer who had terrorized two previous towns and had a dozen murders under his belt even before he came to Hastings.

“I think we're gonna need a bigger task force,” Mallory said dryly.

Even though he smiled faintly, Rafe’s response was matter-of-fact. “Technically, we have one. Every officer and detective we have will be working on some aspect of the investigation. Overtime, more people to handle the phones, whatever it takes. But only you and I know about Hollis’s and Isabel’s psychic abilities. That's the way it stays. The last thing I want is for the press to turn this thing into a carnival sideshow.”

“And they will, given the chance,” Isabel said. “We've seen it happen before.”

Great, Mallory thought, one more thing I have to hide from Alan. Out loud, she said, “I don’t know much about ESP, unless you count commercials from those psychic hotlines, but I gather neither of you can just I.D. our perp for us like snapping your fingers?”

“Our abilities are just another tool,” Isabel told her. “We use standard investigative techniques like every other cop, at least as much as possible.”

Mallory was more resigned than scornful. “Yeah, I figured that would be the deal.”

“It can't be too easy,” Hollis said. “The universe has to make us work for everything.”

“So how will your abilities help us, assuming they do?” Mallory asked. “I mean, what specifically is it that you're able to do?”

“I'm clairvoyant,” Isabel said, explaining the SCU’s definition of the term.

“So you have to touch something or someone to pick up information about them?”

“Touching helps, usually, because it establishes the strongest connection. But I also get information randomly sometimes. That tends to be trivia.”

“For instance?” Mallory was clearly curious.

Without hesitation, Isabel said, “You had a cinnamon bun for breakfast at home this morning and you feel guilty about it.”

Mallory blinked, then looked at Rafe.

“Spooky, isn't it?” he said.

Mallory cleared her throat and, without commenting on Isabel's statement, looked at Hollis. “And you?”

“I talk to dead people,” she replied with a wry smile. “Technically, I'm a medium.”

“No shit? That must be . . . disconcerting.”

“I'm told you get used to it,” Hollis murmured.
“You’re told?”

“I’m new at this.”

Rafe frowned. “You weren’t born with it?”

“Not exactly.” Hollis looked at Isabel, who explained.

“Some people possess latent—inactive—paranormal abilities. For most of those people, the abilities remain unknown and unused their entire lives. They may get hunches, flashes of knowledge they can’t logically explain, but they generally ignore it or dismiss it as coincidence.”

“Until something changes,” Rafe guessed.

“Exactly. Every once in a while, something happens that causes latent psychics either consciously or subconsciously to tap into the previously dormant ability and actually begin using it.”

“What could do that?” Mallory asked warily.

“The most common, and most likely, scenario is that a latent becomes an adept—our term for a functional psychic—due to a physical, emotional, or psychological injury. A head injury is the most common, but almost any severe trauma can do it. Generally speaking, the greater the shock of the awakening, the stronger the abilities tend to be.”

“So Hollis—”

“So both of us. Both of us survived a traumatic event,” Isabel said matter-of-factly. “And became functional psychics because of it.”

9:00 AM

Officer Ginny McBrayer hung up the phone and frowned down at the message pad for a moment, debating. Then she got up and went around the corner to Travis’s desk. “Hey. Is the chief still in that meeting?”

On the phone himself, but obviously on hold judging by his propped-up feet, bored expression, and only semicontact between the receiver and his ear, Travis replied, “Yeah. Not to be disturbed unless it’s an emergency. Or ‘relevant,’ I think he said.”

“This might be.” Ginny handed over the message slip. “What do you think?”

Travis studied the slip, then searched his cluttered desk for a minute, finally producing a clipboard. “Here’s the list we already have going. Women of the right general age reported missing within a fifty-mile radius of Hastings. We’re up to ten in the last three weeks. It was twelve, but two of them came home.”

Ginny looked over the list, then picked up her message slip again and frowned. “Yeah, but the one I just got the call about is local, from that dairy farm just outside town. Her husband really sounded upset.”

“Okay, then tell the chief.” Travis shrugged. “I’m waiting for the clerk at the courthouse to get back to me about all that property Jamie Brower owned. She’s got me on hold. Remind me to tell them they need some new canned music, okay? This shit is giving me a headache.”

“I don’t want to interrupt the chief’s meeting,” Ginny said, ignoring the irrelevant information he’d offered. “What if this is nothing?”

“And what if it’s something? Go knock on the door and report the call. Better for him to be mad at an interruption than to be mad because he wasn’t told something he should have been.”

“Easy for you to say,” Ginny muttered. But she turned away from the other cop’s desk and headed for the conference room.
Neither of you was born psychic?” Mallory said in surprise. “But—”

Isabel smiled, but said, “Understandably, neither one of us is all that eager to talk about what happened to us, so if you two don’t mind, we won’t. We’re both trained investigators, of course, and I’m a profiler. Plus we have the full backing of the SCU and the resources of Quantico. But anything Hollis and I are able to glean from our abilities or spider sense will have to be considered a bonus, not something we can count on.”

Rafe eyed her. “Spider sense?”

“It’s not as out there as it sounds.” She smiled. “Just our informal term for enhanced normal senses—the traditional five. Something Bishop discovered and has been able to teach most of us is how to concentrate and amplify our sight, hearing, and other senses. Like everything else, it varies from agent to agent in terms of strength, accuracy, and control. Even at its best it isn’t a huge edge, but it has been known to help us out from time to time.”

“I have a question,” Mallory said.

“Only one?” Rafe murmured.

“Shoot,” Isabel invited.

“What you? I mean, why did this Bishop of yours pick you to come down here? You fit the victim profile to a T, unless there’s been a change I don’t know about.”

“It gets worse,” Rafe told his detective, his voice grim. “Isabel believes our killer has already spotted her. And added her to his list of must-kill blondes.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m all that surprised.” Mallory lifted a brow at the blond agent. “So why’re you still here? Bait?”

“No,” Rafe said immediately.

Isabel said, “We have some time before it becomes an issue. This bastard gets to know his victims before he kills them, or at least has to feel that he knows them, and he doesn’t know me. In any case, the reason why I’m here is much more compelling than any risk I face as a possible target.”

“And that reason is?”

“As I told Rafe yesterday, patterns and connections are everywhere, if we only know how to look for them.” Isabel spoke slowly. “I have a connection with this killer. He killed a friend of mine ten years ago, and five years ago I was involved in the investigation in Alabama of the second series of murders.”

Mallory was frowning, intent. “Are you saying you know him? But if you know him, doesn’t that mean he knows you? Knows you the way he has to know his victims? That thing that’s rapidly becoming an issue?”

“No. I wasn’t in law enforcement when my friend was killed, I was just another shocked and grieving part of her life—and her death. And I was on the fringes of the official investigation in Alabama; by the time I was officially involved, he’d already murdered his sixth victim and moved on. So it’s at least as likely as not that he won’t even know I was involved in the previous investigations.”

“But you’re on his hit list.”

“On it, but I’m not next in line. I’m not local, so it won’t be easy for him to find information about me, especially since I don’t plan to become too chatty with anyone outside our investigation.”
“What about inside?” Mallory asked. “We've had at least the suspicion that the perp could be a cop. Has that been ruled out?”

“Unfortunately, no. Our feeling is that we're not dealing with a cop, but there are some elements of the M.O. that make it at least possible.”

“For instance?” Rafe was frowning slightly. “We haven't seen the updated profile,” he reminded her.

“I have copies here for both of you,” Isabel replied. “Not a lot has changed from the first profile as far as the description of our unknown subject is concerned. We have revised his probable age range upward a bit, given the time frame of at least ten years as an active killer. So, he's a white male, thirty to forty-five years old, above-average intelligence. He has a steady job and possibly a family or significant other, and he copes well with day-to-day life. In other words, this is not a man who's obviously stressed or appears in any way at odds with himself.

“Blondes are only his latest targets; in the earlier murders, he killed first redheads in Florida ten years ago, and then, five years ago, brunettes in Alabama. Which, by the way, is another reason he wouldn't have noticed me then even if he'd seen me; he's always very focused on his targets and potential targets, and I had the wrong hair color for him both times before.”

“What about the elements that could indicate he's a cop?” Rafe asked.

“The central question of this investigation—and the two before this one—is how he's been able to persuade these women to calmly and quietly accompany him to lonely spots. These are highly intelligent, very savvy women, in several cases trained in self-defense. None of them was stupid. So how did he get them to go with him?”

“Authority figure,” Rafe said. “Has to be.”

“That's what we're thinking. So we can't rule out cops. We also can't rule out someone who appears to be a member of the clergy, or any other trustworthy authority figure. Someone in politics, someone well known within the community. Whoever he is, these women trusted him, at least for the five or ten minutes it took him to get them alone and vulnerable. He looks safe to them. He looks unthreatening.”

Mallory said, “You said earlier that he'd killed a dozen women before coming to Hastings. Exactly twelve?”

“Six women in six weeks, both times.”

“So it is just women,” Mallory said. “Bottom line, he hates women.”

“Hates, loves, wants, needs—it's probably a tangle. He hates them for what they are, either because they represent what he wants and can't have or because he feels somehow emasculated by them. Killing them gives him power over them, gives him control. He needs that, needs to feel he's stronger than they are, that he can master them.”

“A manly man,” Hollis said, her mockery both obvious and hollow.

Isabel nodded. “Or, at least, so he wants to believe. And wants us to believe.”

Alan Moore had always thought that calling the central work area of the Chronicle offices “the newsroom” must have been someone's idea of irony. Because nothing newsworthy ever happened in Hastings.

Or hadn't, until the first murder.

Not that there hadn't been killings in Hastings before, of course; when a town had been in existence for nearly two hundred years, there were bound to be killings every now and then. People had died out of greed, out of jealousy, out of spite, out of rage.
But until the murder of Jamie Brower, no one had been killed by pure evil.

Alan hadn't hesitated to point that out in his coverage of the murders and their investigation. And not even Rafe had accused him—publicly or privately—of sensationalizing the tragedies of those murders.

Some things damned well couldn't be denied.

There was something evil in Hastings, and the fact that it was walking around on two legs passing itself off as human didn't change that fact.

“How many times have I told you to pick up your own damned mail, Alan?” Callie Rosier, the Chronicle’s only full-time photographer, dumped several envelopes on his already cluttered desk. “It's in a little box with your name on it right on the other side of that wall. You can't miss it.”

“I just said you could pick up mine while you were getting yours, what's wrong with that?” Alan retorted.

“What is this ‘while you're up’ thing with you men?” She continued to her own desk, shaking her head as she sat down. “You sweat your brains out running miles every morning and lifting weights in the gym so you'll look good in your jeans but pester other people to get stuff for you when it's in the same damned room. Jesus.”

“Don't you have film to develop?” The question was more habit than curiosity, and absentminded to boot since he was leafing through his mail.

“No. Why are all these places offering me credit cards?”

“The same reason they're offering them to me,” Alan replied, tossing several into his overflowing trash can. “Because they haven't checked our credit records.” He eyed his final bit of mail, a large manila envelope with no return address, and hesitated only an instant before tearing it open.

“I think these telemarketers are morons,” Callie said, studying the contents of one envelope marked URGENT! “They don't even bother to be accurate in who they're sending this stuff to anymore. I ask you, does the name Callie sound like it belongs to a man? This one should have been addressed to you. Take a little blue pill and get another inch or two. I'm sure you'd like another inch or two. And more staying power, says here.”

“I'll be a son of a bitch,” Alan said.

“Aren't you usually?”

He looked at her, saw that she was focused on her own mail and not even paying attention to the conversation. With only an instant's pause, Alan said casually, “Oh, yeah, always.” Then he looked back down at his mail and, this time under his breath, repeated, “I'll be a son of a bitch.”

Rafe accepted the message slip, absently introduced Officer McBrayer to the federal agents, then read the information she had offered. “Her husband says she's been gone since Monday?”

“He thinks since Monday.” Ginny made an effort to sound as brisk and professional as she could, even though she was nervous and knew it showed. “He didn't see her that afternoon, and with two cows calving he was out in his barns all night. He says it could have been Tuesday; that's when he realized she wasn't in the house. He thought she'd gone to visit a friend in town, since it's something she often does, but when she didn't come home, he checked. She wasn't there. Isn't anywhere he could think to check. I think it only slowly dawned on him that maybe he should be worried.”

“Yeah,” Rafe muttered, “Tim Helton isn't the sharpest pencil in the box.”
“Understatement,” Mallory offered. “The way I heard it, he once decided that moonshine would work just as well as fuel in his tractor. Dunno if he got a bad batch or what, but it blew the sucker all to hell and nearly took him with it.”

“Moonshine?” Isabel asked curiously. “They still make that stuff?”

“Believe it or not. We’ve had the ATF out here a few times over the years because of illegal brew. Seems like a lot of trouble to go to, if you ask me, but the bootleggers seem to feel it’s worth it. Either that or they just don’t want to pay The Government a cent more than they have to.”

Rafe said, “And there’s at least one survivalist group in the area. They consider it the norm to make everything they need themselves. Including booze.” He made a note on the pad before him, then handed the message slip back to his officer. “Okay, standard procedure, Ginny. I want a detective out there to talk to Tim, and let’s get a list of places she might possibly be. Friends, relatives, anybody she might be visiting. From now on, we treat every missing person, man or woman, as if he or she could be a murder victim.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the young officer had hurried from the room, Isabel said, “Is this people starting to panic? I mean, is this an unusual increase in women reported missing?”

He nodded. “Oh, yeah. In the past three weeks, we’ve seen the reports jump tenfold. Most come home within twenty-four hours or are discovered visiting relatives or talking to divorce attorneys, or just at the grocery store.”

“Most. But not all.”

“We still have a few missing in the general area, but we haven’t yet been able to rule out a voluntary absence in any of the cases.”

“We’ll probably see even more of this,” Isabel commented.

“Problem is,” Mallory said, “we have to treat every report seriously, just as Rafe said. So we’ll waste a lot of manpower searching for women who aren’t really missing or who ran off and don’t want to be found. Lady last week cussed me out good for finding her.”

“Motel?” Isabel inquired sapiently.

“Uh-huh. Not alone, needless to say.”

“Still, we have to look for them,” Hollis said.

Rafe nodded. “No question. I’m just hoping it won’t muddy the water too much. Or deplete resources needed elsewhere.”

“In the meantime,” Isabel said, “those of us in this room at least have to focus on what we know we’ve got. Three murdered women.”

Rafe said, “You told me there’s always a trigger. Always something specific that sets him off.”

“There has to be,” Isabel responded. “You said yourself that five years is a hell of a long cooling-off period for a serial killer; it is, especially after a fairly frenzied six-week killing spree. A gap that long usually means either that murders in another location have gone unnoticed or at least weren’t connected to him, or that he’s in prison somewhere or otherwise unable to keep killing.”

“I gather you’re certain that isn’t the case here.”

“When he hit in Alabama five years ago, we combed through police files of unsolved murders from coast to coast. Nothing matched his M.O. except for the series of murders five years before that. We were convinced he had been
inactive during that five-year gap, yet there was also no even remotely likely suspect we could find who had been in
prison for exactly that length of time. And according to all the information gleaned from databases we had Quanti
do double-check yesterday, he’s also been inactive in the five years since Alabama. Until he started killing in Hastin
a little over three weeks ago.”

Mallory rubbed her temple, scowling. “So something sets him off and he kills six women in six weeks. Then,
apparently sated for the time being, vanishes before the cops can even get close to catching him. Why six women?”

“We don't know,” Isabel replied. “The number has to be important, since it's been exactly the same twice before,
but we don't know how or why. We can't even be absolutely positive he'll stop at six this time. He could be
escalating. Most killers of this sort do sooner or later kill more or get more viciously creative in the killing itself.”

Mallory shook her head. “Great. Because we didn't have enough to look forward to. So he kills at least six
women. Moves on to a new location. Then waits five years—it's not exact, is it?” she interrupted herself to ask.

Isabel shook her head. “Not to the day, no. The gap between the first and second set of murders was actually four
years and ten months. The gap between the last set and this one was five years and one month. Give or take a few
days.”

“Okay. But he moves somewhere new after his six-week killing spree, settles down, settles in. Which has to mean
we're looking for someone who's been in Hastings no more than five years, right?”

“Or someone who used to live in the area and has moved back. Or someone who works in Hastings but lives
outside the town—or the other way around. Or someone who takes long vacations every few years; that's at least
possible.”

“Goes on vacation to kill people?”

“We've encountered stranger things. He could scout out his hunting grounds in advance, maybe start picking his
victims, and return later for the actual kill.” Isabel shook her head. “Honestly, if you look at a map, the two previous
hunting grounds and Hastings are all within a day's drive, despite being in three different states. So we can't even
rule out the idea that he lives in an area central to his hunting grounds and has just somehow managed to spend
enough time in each to get to know his victims.”

“Oh, hell, I was hoping we could narrow down the possibles at least a little bit.”

Hollis said, “The universe never makes it easy, remember? Probably the only people we can even begin to rule
out are those who have lived continuously in Hastings during the last fifteen years at least. And I mean
continuously: no vacations longer than, say, two weeks; no going away to college; no out-of-town visits, no day trips
fitting the right time periods.”

Mallory grimaced. “Which is just not possible. Even those of us who’ve lived here our whole lives tend to go
away to school or travel or something. And day trips? Lots of good shopping in Columbia, Atlanta, other places
within a day's drive.”

“I was afraid of that,” Isabel said with a sigh.

With a nod, Mallory said, “That sort of thing is so common I doubt we could find anybody who was absent or
took weekly day trips out of town during those six-week stretches specifically, not without questioning every soul in
town and probably not then. Who remembers specific dates from years ago? And like I said, people travel on
vacations or for business, go away to school. I was away in Georgia three years finishing college. It was four for
you, wasn't it, Rafe?”

“Yeah. And I went to Duke, in North Carolina.” He sighed. “It's like Mal said, we've all traveled, been away from
Hastings, most of us more than once. And people do take regular day trips, even out of state, for shopping or
business. I get the feeling this isn't going to help us narrow the list all that much.”

“Probably not,” Isabel agreed. “Although if we get lucky enough to find a suspect or two, we have some concrete
Hollis didn't intentionally tune out the discussion. She didn't want to; despite the repetition of details she already knew, she was still new enough to the investigative process itself to find it interesting, even fascinating.

She wasn't even aware at first that Isabel's voice had faded into a peculiar hollow silence. But then she realized the discussion around her had gone distant, deadened. She felt the fine hairs on her body rise, her flesh tingle.

It was not a pleasant sensation.

She looked around the table at the others, watching their mouths move and hearing only a word now and then, muffled and indistinct. And they themselves appeared different to her. Dim, almost faded. They seemed to be growing ever more distant moment by moment, and that frightened her.

Hell, it terrified her.

She opened her mouth to say something, or try to, but even as she did, a new and unfamiliar instinct urged her to turn her head toward the doorway. Again without meaning to, without wanting to, she looked.

Standing near the doorway was a woman.

A blond woman.

She was clearer than the people around Hollis, brighter somehow, and more distinct. She was beautiful, with perfect, delicate features. Her hair was burnished gold, her eyes a clear, piercing blue.

Eyes fixed on Hollis.

Her lips parted, and she started to speak.

A chill swept through Hollis and she quickly looked away, instinctively trying to close the door, to disconnect herself from the place from which this woman had emerged.

It was a cold, dark place, and it terrified Hollis.

Because it was death.

Mallory rubbed her temple again. “Okay, back to what sets him off. What sets him off?”

Isabel answered readily, if not too informatively. “Something specific, but we don't know what that is, at least not yet. The gaps between his killing sprees can and might be explained by his need to get to know these women.”

“Might,” Rafe said. “But you aren't sure?”

“I'm sure he has to feel he knows them. For whatever reason, they can't be total strangers to him. Maybe in getting to know them, he discovers something about them—at least the initial victim—that sets him off, something that pushes his button. Or maybe he has to win their trust; that could be part of his ritual, especially since these women appear to be leaving their cars and going willingly with him.”

“He doesn't pick out all six women before he starts killing, right? Otherwise you wouldn't have made his list.”
“Good point.” Isabel nodded. “It’s also a point that he is able to look beyond the woman he’s currently stalking in order to take note of, and even choose as a future victim, another woman. Even though this guy’s actual killings are frenzied, it’s becoming clear that he’s quite able to think coolly and calmly right up until the moment he kills them.”

“We have to find her.”

They all looked at Hollis. Her voice had been tight, and her face showed visible tension. She was chewing on a thumbnail, which, Rafe noticed, was already bitten short.

“He’s stalking her even now. Watching her. Thinking about what he’s going to do to her. We have to—”

“He’s stalking her even now. Watching her. Thinking about what he’s going to do to her. We have to—”

Hollis looked at her partner almost blindly. “How can you be so calm about it? You know what’s going to happen to her. We both know. We both know how it feels. The helpless terror, the agony—”

“Hollis.” Isabel’s voice was still quiet, but something in it caused her partner to blink and stiffen in her chair.

“I’m sorry,” Hollis said. She pressed her fingertips briefly to her closed eyes, then looked at them again. “It’s just that—” This time, no one interrupted her.

But something did.

She turned her head abruptly as if someone had called her name, staring toward the closed door of the room. Her eyes dilated until only a thin rim of blue circled the enormous pupils.

Rafe sent a quick glance toward Isabel and found her watching her partner intently, eyes narrowed. When he looked back at Hollis, he saw that she was even more pale than she had been before, and trembling visibly.

“Why are you here?” she whispered, looking at nothing the others could see. “Wait, I can’t hear you. I want to. I want to help you. But—”

Softly, Isabel said, “Who is it, Hollis? Who do you see?”

“I can’t hear her. She’s trying to tell me something, but I can’t hear her.”

“Listen. Concentrate.”

“I’m trying. I see her, but . . . She’s shaking her head. She’s giving up. No, wait—”

Rafe was a bit startled to feel his ears pop just an instant before Hollis slumped in her chair. He told himself it was his imagination, even as he heard himself ask, “Who was it? Who did you see?”

Hollis looked at him blankly for a moment, then past him at the bulletin board where they had posted photos and other information about the victims.

“Her. The first victim. Jamie Brower.”
Emily Brower wouldn’t have admitted it to a soul, but she was a horrible person. A horrible daughter. A really horrible sister. People kept coming up to her with shocked eyes and hushed voices, telling her how sorry they were about Jamie, asking her how she was holding up.

“Fine, I'm fine,” Emily always replied.


“I'm okay, really.”

Being there for her grieving parents. Allowing people she barely knew or didn't know at all to hug her while they whispered their condolences. Writing all the thank-you cards to people for their cards and flowers, because her mother couldn't do anything except cry. Dealing with all the phone calls from Jamie's college friends as the news rippled out.

“I'm getting through it.”

I'm a hypocrite.

They had never been close, she and Jamie, but they had been sisters. So Emily knew she should feel something about Jamie being dead, being horribly murdered, something besides this slightly impatient resentment.

She didn't.

“I don't know what she was doing those last few weeks,” Emily told Detective Mallory Beck in response to the question she'd asked. “Jamie had her own place, a job that kept her busy, and she liked to travel. She came to Sunday dinner a couple of times a month, but other than that . . .”

“You didn't see much of her.”

“No. She was six years older. We didn't really have anything in common.” Emily tried not to sound as impatient as she felt, even as she stole glances at the tall blond FBI agent who was across the living room standing before the shrine.

“So you don't know who she might have been dating?”

“No, I already told you that.” Emily wondered what the FBI agent found so fascinating in all the photos and trophies and awards littering the built-in shelves on either side of the fireplace. Hadn't she ever seen a shrine before?

“Do you know if she had an address book?”

Emily frowned at Detective Beck. “Everybody has an address book.”

“We didn't find one in her apartment.”

“Then she must have kept it at her work.”
“The one in her office held business information and contacts only.”

“Well, then I don't know.”

“She had a good memory,” Agent Adams said suddenly. She looked back over her shoulder and smiled at Emily. “There are awards here for spelling and science—chemistry. Jamie didn't have to write things down, did she?”

“Not usually,” Emily admitted grudgingly. “Especially numbers. Phone numbers. And math. She was good at math.”

Agent Adams chuckled. “One of those, huh? My sister was good at math. I hated it. Used to turn numbers into little cartoons. My teachers were never amused by that.”

Emily couldn't help but laugh. “I always tried to make faces out of the numbers. My teachers didn't like it either.”

“Ah, well, I've found there are numbers people and words people. Not a lot who do well with both.” She reached out and lightly touched a framed certificate that was part of the shrine. “Looks like Jamie was one of the rare ones, though. Here's an award for a short story she wrote in college.”

“She liked telling stories,” Emily said. “Made-up ones, but stuff that happened to her too.”

“You said she traveled; did she tell you any stories about that?”

“She talked about it sometimes at Sunday dinner. But with Mom and Dad there, she only talked about the boring parts. Museums, shows, sightseeing.”

“Never talked about any of the men she met?”

“Nah, to hear her tell it she was a nun.”

“But you knew the truth, naturally. Was she seeing anybody, locally?”

“She didn't talk to me about her private life.”

Agent Adams smiled again at Emily. “Sisters don't have to talk to know, do they? Sisters always see what's there, far more than anybody else ever does.”

Emily wavered for a moment, but that understanding, conspiratorial smile combined with the stresses and strains of the last few weeks finally caused her resentment to escape.

“Everybody thought she was so perfect, you know? It all came so easy to her. She was good at everything she tried, everybody loved her, she made loads of money. But underneath all that, she was scared. It really showed in the last few weeks before she died. To me, anyway. Nervous, jumpy, rushing around like she had too much to do and not enough time. She was scared shitless.”


“Because of her big secret. Because she knew how upset and disappointed our parents would be, other people would be, how horrified. It's just not something you do in a little town like Hastings, not something people could accept. And she was always scared they'd find out. Always.”

“Scared they'd find what out, Emily?” Agent Adams asked.

“That she was gay.” Emily laughed. “A lesbian. But not just any sort of lesbian, mind you, that's not the part she was terrified people would find out. Lovely, sweet, talented, good-at-anything-and-everything Jamie was a dominatrix. She dressed in shiny black leather and stiletto heels with fishnet stockings, and she made other women crawl and fawn and do whatever she wanted them to.”

Agent Adams didn't seem in the least surprised. “Are you sure about that, Emily?”
“You bet I'm sure. I've got pictures.”

As they got into Mallory's Jeep a few minutes later, she said, “Did you know about Jamie Brower going in or pick up something there in the room?”

“Picked it up while I was there. That house was practically screaming at me.”

“Really? Amazing how much people can keep hidden. Because we didn't get any of this before, and both Rafe and I talked to Emily several times. And Jamie's parents, friends, coworkers. Not so much as a hint that Jamie led any kind of unconventional life sexually.”

“Yeah, I read the statements you guys collected. Jamie even dated local men, and at least two claimed fairly recent sexual relationships.”

Mallory started the Jeep but didn't put it in gear, turning her head to frown at Isabel. “They weren't lying about that. I'd bet my pension on it.”

“I think you're right. Just the fact that they were willing to admit to intimate relationships and put themselves in that police spotlight makes it fairly certain they were telling the truth. But I don't believe Jamie was truly bisexual, that she enjoyed sex with men and women.”

“Then why sleep with the men? Just to keep her secret life secret?”

“I'd say so. Emily was right; in a small town like Hastings, any successful woman like Jamie would hesitate to come out of the closet. Especially if that closet contained whips, chains, and black leather. She wouldn't have wanted that image in a client's mind while she was trying to sell them real estate.”

“Hell, I don't want the image in my head. But it's there now.”

Isabel smiled wryly. “I know. The question is, how important is this information? Is it what triggered our killer's compulsion? Did he find out he could never possess Jamie Brower the way he needed to? Did he discover her secret and find himself unable to bear it for some other reason?”

“Or,” Mallory finished, “is it just an extraneous fact completely unconnected with Jamie's murder.”

“Exactly.”

Mallory put the Jeep in gear and headed toward the end of the Browers' circular driveway. “Well, it's a new fact for us, at any rate. Lucky you could get chummy with Emily about the trials of sisterhood.”

“I never had a sister,” Isabel said.

After a beat, Mallory said, “Ah. You used what you picked up psychically from Emily to encourage her to talk. The cartoon numbers she drew in school. Being lousy at math when her sister was so good at it. You used the knowledge to be sympathetic, be on her side so she'd feel comfortable talking to you. So that's how your abilities can be used as investigative tools.”

“That's how,” Isabel said. “An edge that sometimes makes all the difference. But something else I learned in there is that Emily was all but invisible in that family. Which is why she knew about Jamie's secret life. Why she saw more than anyone else realized. And why there's a good chance she saw something that could get her killed.”

“What?”

“Her sister's murderer.”
Isabel closed the folder and looked at Rafe with a sigh. “Just like I remembered. As far as we could determine both
times, the twelve women killed before he came to Hastings were all straight. No secret sexual closet, with or without
whips and chains. And the second and third victims here, Allison Carroll and Tricia Kane, were straight as well,
according to the information you got. Right?”

“That’s right.”

“Still, I’m going to ask Quantico to reopen those old files, maybe send an agent to the towns in Florida and
Alabama to double-check, particularly the lives of the primary victims just before they were killed. With Jamie’s
secret life staring us in the face, we have to be sure whether or not it has anything to do with what triggers his killing
rage.”

“Makes sense to me. Could be, he got the kind of rejection he couldn’t take. Rejection as a man, for being a man.”

“That is entirely possible.”

Rafe looked down at the three small in-living-color photographs of Jamie Brower in full dominatrix gear: a silver-
studded, black leather bustier, fishnet stockings held up by garters, stiletto heels—and a whip. In each shot, there
was another woman, crawling, fawning, or in some clearly submissive pose, just as Emily had said.

And while Jamie’s face was unmasked and highly visible, her companion was completely unidentifiable due to a
black leather hood and mask.

He lined up the photos on the table and studied them intently. “I’d say this is the same woman in all three shots.”

Isabel nodded. “And I’d guess all three shots were taken on the same day. Same . . . session. Though all the details
of costume and . . . um . . . accessories being exactly the same could be part of their whole ritual, so we can’t assume
too much.”

“Can I assume the second woman is nobody I know personally? Please?”

Isabel smiled wryly. “It is unsettling, isn’t it? Other people’s secrets.”

“This sort of secret, at least. I guess you never really know about people.”

“No. You don’t.” There was something oddly flat about Isabel’s response, but she went on before Rafe could
question it. And her voice was easy once again. “That outfit the other woman is wearing shows a lot of skin, but
considering how tight and rigid it is, it’s also doing a dandy job of disguising her true body shape. So are her
positions; we can’t even realistically estimate how tall she is. Her face is never turned to the camera, so not even her
eyes are visible. And her hair’s caught up under that hood.”

Rafe cleared his throat. “And since she’s shaved . . . ”

Isabel didn’t seem at all embarrassed or disturbed, and nodded matter-of-factly. “Not uncommon in S&M
scenarios, according to the list Quantico sent us, but pubic hair would at least have given us a hair color, and
probably natural. I didn’t see a birthmark, tattoo, even a blemish that might help us I.D. her.”

She paused, then added, “Several things interest me about this little twist. We don’t know if any or all of Jamie’s
playmates lived here in Hastings, though my guess is that more than one isn’t very likely.”

“A few weeks ago,” Rafe said, “I would have said investigating a serial killer in Hastings would be the next thing
to impossible. A few S&M games seem fairly tame by comparison. Hell, almost innocent.”

“Yeah, but not innocent to Jamie. If she was so afraid of discovery, it could well have been because her partner—
at least the most recent one—lives here and maybe isn’t as good at keeping secrets as Jamie was. That might explain
what Emily saw as Jamie’s increasing worry and fear. Another thing is that we don’t know where these photographs
were taken, and though Emily claims she borrowed these three from a photo box full of them, your people found no sign of the box at Jamie's apartment when they did an intensive search.”

“T've surprised Emily found it,” Rafe said. “This is not the sort of thing you'd leave lying around, I'm thinking.”

“T've, you can bet Emily snooped. She said she caught a glimpse of the corner of the box under her sister's bed and was curious, but she had to be looking for secrets. She knew her sister was afraid of something, and she wanted to know what that was. It was the first chink she'd seen in Jamie's armor.”

“Why take these?” Rafe wondered.

“Proof. Even if she never planned to show them to anyone—including Jamie—she had something that proved to her that Jamie wasn't as perfect as her family believed she was. That was probably enough for Emily; she doesn't strike me as a blackmailer or the vindictive type.”

“I'd agree with you there.”

Isabel shrugged. “I'm also willing to bet that she left the box just enough out of place to make Jamie uneasy about it. If it really was filled with photos, then she couldn't be sure any were missing. But she had to wonder if her sister found the box. That's probably why we haven't found it.”

“Because she hid it somewhere safer.”

“T would have. The question is, where? Your people checked her office thoroughly, but I wouldn't have expected to find something like those photographs there anyway. Did she have a safe-deposit box?”

“T've, but the only items in it were legal documents. Insurance policies, deeds to some property she owned, stuff like that. I've got some people putting together a list of the properties, what they are, where they are, but nothing else in the box provided anything in the way of a lead.”

Mallory came into the room in time to hear that, and said, “Jamie's lockbox? I just double-checked, and that's the only one she had. No other bank has her on their customer list.”

“At least not under her real name,” Rafe said.

Mallory sighed. “I can go around to all the area banks and show them a picture of her. Or, better yet, send a few of the guys out on Monday to do that, since it's too late to get a decent start today. Although you'd think someone would have come forward after seeing all the pictures of her in the newspapers.”

“People generally don't,” Isabel said. “Don't want to get involved, or honestly don't believe they have any knowledge of value.”

“And secrets of their own to protect,” Rafe noted.

“Definitely. It's amazing how many people get nervous about some little transgression they're afraid we'll be interested in.”

“Transgressions can be entertaining,” Mallory noted.

Isabel grinned, and said, “True enough. But in this case, we hardly have time for them. Pity we can't make that announcement publicly. It'd probably save us time.”

“And trouble,” Rafe agreed.

“Yeah. Anyway, if Jamie had a lockbox under another name, she may well have worn a disguise of some kind when she visited. Just a wig, most likely, something that wouldn't have looked too phony. You probably won't have much luck showing her photo, but it's something that needs to be done. And we might get lucky.”
Rafe nodded. “We do need to do whatever we can to make sure we've covered all the bases. But I'm not holding out much hope either. Especially after finding out she was pretty good at keeping secrets.”

“Maybe a lot more secrets than we've yet discovered,” Isabel said. “I know she made very good money, but she's also invested quite a bit in properties in the area, and she lived very well. I'm thinking that maybe the S&M stuff wasn't all fun and games for Jamie.”

“Shit,” Rafe said. “Mistress for hire?”

“Lots of people, apparently, willing to pay to be humiliated. Jamie was a smart businesswoman, so why wouldn't she charge for all her talents?”

Cheryl Bayne had been working hard on her career, doing all the frequently boring and certainly fluffy junk demanded of baby reporters—and female reporters. Especially when they worked for fourth-place TV stations. Dumb filler pieces on what the society ladies were wearing this season, or the mayor's daughter's birthday party, or the baby lion cub born at the zoo.

She was really sick of fluff.

So when her producer had offered her the chance to come to Hastings and cover this story—because a woman would play better, he'd said, and she was brunette, after all—Cheryl had jumped at it.

Now she was mostly just jumping at shadows.

Presently, on this Friday afternoon, she felt relatively safe standing in front of the town hall under the shade of a big oak tree. Her cameraperson was off getting background shots of the town, but she wasn't really alone, since the area was crawling with media.

“This is getting old.” Dana Earley, a more experienced reporter for a rival Columbia station, sidled closer, studying the police department across Main Street with a slightly jaundiced eye. “Whatever they know over there, they aren't anxious to share.”

“At least the chief called that press conference yesterday,” Cheryl offered.

“Yeah, and told us squat.” Dana reached up to tuck a strand of blond hair behind one ear. She looked at Cheryl, hesitated, then asked, “Have you had the feeling you were being followed, watched, especially at night? Or it is just us blondes?”

A little relieved to be able to talk about it, Cheryl said, “Actually, yeah. I thought it was my imagination.”

“Umm. I've been asking around, and so far every woman I've talked to has had the same feeling. Including, by the way, a couple of female cops who refused to speak on the record. I'd say it was just paranoia if it was only one or two of us, but all of us?”

“Maybe it's just . . . nerves.”

Bluntly, Dana said, “I think he's watching us. And I have a very bad feeling about it.”

“Well, you're blond—”

Dana shook her head. “I just got a peek at a list of women missing in the general area. And very few of them are blondes. Watch your back, Cheryl.”

“I will. Thanks.” She watched the blond reporter walk away, hearing the hollowness in her own voice when she
added half under her breath, “Thanks a lot.”

“Jesus,” Mallory muttered.

“She wouldn't have considered it prostitution,” Isabel pointed out. “Merely a fee-for-services-provided arrangement. Especially since she was the one in charge, the one making all the rules. No emotional involvement to clutter up her life, yet she gets the satisfaction of dominating other women. Maybe men as well. We don't know all her lovers—or clients—were women, after all. We only have Emily's word for it, and even she claims she didn't look through all the photos in that box.”

“Do you believe her on that point?” Rafe asked.

“I think she saw more than she's admitted, but I didn't get a good sense of just how much.”

“Every answer we get just opens up more questions,” he said with a sigh.

Isabel, who was sitting at the end of the conference table near him, reached over and turned one of the photos so that she could study it. “Par for the course in serial-murder investigations, I'm afraid. In the meantime, does either of you have a clue where this room might be? It doesn't look like a room at the inn, and I doubt it's any other local hotel or motel. Anything about it look familiar to either of you?”

Mallory sat down on the other side of Rafe and leaned an elbow on the table, staring at the photos. “Not to me. There's not a lot there to go by. Bare paneled walls, what looks like an old vinyl floor, and a—yuck—stained mattress on a plain wooden platform. I guess comfort wasn't the point.”

“The opposite, if anything,” Isabel said with a grimace. “Have you tried stilettos? I have. It's a hideous thing to do to a foot.”

Rafe looked at her with interest. “Stilettos? My God, how tall are you in them?”

“The ones I was wearing put me at about six-four. Note the past tense. I will never wear them again.”

Curious, Mallory said, “Why did you wear them once? Or would that be sharing too much?”

Isabel chuckled. “Business, not pleasure, I promise you. Bishop believes our law-enforcement training should be varied and extensive, so at one point I worked for a while with a narc squad. Naturally, when they needed somebody to pose as a hooker . . .”

“You got the call.”

“And the makeup and big hair and skanky outfit—and the stilettos. I gained a whole new respect for hookers. Their job is hard. And I mean just the walking around on the streets part.”

Rafe cleared his throat again and tried to clear his mind of the image of Isabel dressed as a hooker. He tapped one of the photos in front of him. “Getting back to this room . . .”

Mallory grinned, but then sobered and said, “Maybe it's a basement, but look at the shaft of light on the floor; that doesn't look like it's artificial light. There's a window in that room, and not a little basement window, I'm thinking. High, though.”

“A walk-out basement could have full-size windows,” Rafe noted almost absently. “I don’t know, though, it doesn't look like a basement to me. The angle of the camera gives us a floor-to-ceiling view, and that ceiling's too high for most basements I've seen. Might even be something like a warehouse.”
“Could be. And, judging by how fixed the positioning is, I’m guessing the camera was on a tripod and taking
timed shots; neither woman is paying particular attention to it. So no third person was present. Probably.”

“Maybe the submissive isn't even aware there is a camera,” Rafe suggested.

“The submissive?” Mallory eyed him with faint amusement. “Did you take a crash course in S&M, or is the lingo
a lot more standard than I thought it was?”

“I should refuse to answer that,” Rafe said, “but in my defense I have to say we spent time about half an hour ago
gathering and downloading information on the S&M scene from Quantico. Your tax dollars at work. I am now much
more informed on the subject.”

“I'll just bet you are.”

“They sent plain facts, Mal, not pages from a magazine or some how-to manual.”

“Ah. Learn anything interesting?”

“Nothing helpful.”

“That wasn't what I asked.”

“That's what I answered.”

“Do you two do parties?” Isabel asked.

Rafe sighed. “Sorry.”

“Oh, don't apologize. In a case like this one, I'd much rather laugh when I can. The chuckles tend to be few and
far between.”

Mallory said, “We've already had a few moments of gallows humor here and there. And I have a feeling this
dominatrix stuff is going to provide a few more. Hard to take it seriously, you know? I mean, hard to imagine
somebody you knew dressing up and making another woman lick her foot. What's that about?”

“In this context, a need to be in control and a high level of insecurity. Or, at least, that's my reading of Jamie
Brower.”

“Your psychic reading?” Rafe asked.

“From what I picked up at her parents' home and from Emily, yeah. Also a fair psychological stab in the dark. I'd
like to check out her apartment, though, and try to get a better sense of her.”

“I'd rather do that than keep staring at these damned pictures,” Rafe said frankly. “I'd also rather not post them on
the board, if it's all the same to you.”

Knowing that virtually every cop in the place had access to the conference room and the boards set up with victim
information, Isabel agreed with a nod. “We'll keep them in the Eyes Only file.”

“We have one of those?” Mallory asked.

“We do now. I have a feeling there'll be more stuff for it as we go along, but for now I'd just as soon keep these
photos and Jamie's secret between us. If this particular avenue of pursuit turns out to be a dead end, I don't see any
reason for us to be the ones to out Jamie. Especially posthumously.”

“Emily will probably take care of that,” Mallory said.

“Or,” Isabel said, “she'll keep it to herself and feel superior knowing her sister's dirty little secret. Could go either
way, I'd say.”
Mallory said, “You suggested to me that Emily might have caught the attention of her sister’s killer; how serious were you about that?”

Isabel leaned back in her chair, absently rubbing the nape of her neck. “I don’t have anything concrete, no evidence to support it. Not even a clairvoyant sense, really. Emily just barely fits the victim profile; she’s blond, but on the young side for our killer. Not especially successful in any career, since she’s still in school, but she’s smart and observant.”

“But?” Rafe said.

“It’s just . . . a feeling I got in that house. Emily was actively snooping in Jamie’s life during the weeks before she was killed, and we can be reasonably sure that during that period our killer was involved in Jamie’s life, that he crossed her path. Which means he probably crossed Emily’s path as well.”

“And maybe she noticed him,” Rafe said.

“Maybe. It’s just a theory, but . . . it might not be such a bad idea to have your people keep an eye on Emily, at least when she’s out of the house.”

“Done. I’ll assign a patrol. Plainclothes or uniformed?”

Isabel debated silently for a moment. “Let’s not try to be subtle. Uniformed. Tell them to be casual but stay alert. If nothing else, focusing on the family member of a victim may lead the killer to think we’re on the wrong track.”

“Or on the right one,” Mallory murmured.

“If he is after her, yeah. And, if so, a police escort may cause him to think twice. Worth the risk, I think.”

Rafe nodded. “I agree. I’ll assign the patrol on our way out and then go with you to check out Jamie’s apartment. Mal, Hollis is at Tricia Kane’s office; why don’t you go over Jamie’s office one more time? Just to make sure.”

“Her boss is already pissed that we’ve taped the door to her office so none of his other agents can use it. Can I release it to him if I don’t find anything this time?”

“Yeah, might as well. Unless the FBI has an objection?”

“Nope.” Isabel shook her head. “But if you find anything at all that seems out of place to you, bring it back here.”

“Gotcha.”

Rafe watched as Isabel opened her briefcase and pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen. She swallowed several pills with the last of her coffee, then added cheerfully, “I’m ready when you are.”

“Headache?”

“Usually,” she confirmed, still cheerful. “Shall we?”

“It’s getting late,” Caleb Powell said.

Hollis looked up from her position behind what had been Tricia Kane’s desk and nodded. “Yeah. I do appreciate you pretty much shutting down the office for a couple of hours today so I could go through her desk.”

“Not a problem. I haven’t felt much like working this week anyway. Find anything?”

“Nothing useful, as far as I can tell.” Hollis pressed slender fingers to her closed eyes briefly in what he was
beginning to recognize as a characteristic gesture, then studied the small pile of items on the neat blotter.

“Nothing new, I’d say,” Caleb observed, wondering if she was as tired as she seemed. Telling himself he shouldn’t take advantage.

Hollis agreed with a nod. “The police have already photocopied and gone through every page of the day planner: everything in it is purely work related. What few personal effects she kept in the desk are the usual, innocuous sort of thing any woman would keep at work. Extra compact and lipstick, small bottle of perfume, emery board and nail clippers, a ripped-in-half photo of the ex-boyfriend she clearly wasn't quite ready to throw away.”

Caleb grimaced. “I caught her looking at that once or twice. She said just what you did, that she wasn't quite ready to toss it.”

“It takes time for some people to let go.”

He decided not to comment on that. “So there's nothing helpful here in the office.”

“Nothing I can see.” Hollis rose to her feet. She glanced past Caleb toward the front door and for an instant went still, eyes widening.

Caleb looked back over his shoulder, then at her. His first, instinctive reading of her posture and expression was that she had received a shock but was almost immediately back in control of whatever emotions that shock had caused.

“What?” he asked.

She blinked, her gaze returning to him. “Hmm? Nothing. It's nothing. Listen, Mr. Powell, confidentially, the focus of the investigation is going to shift back to the first victim. We believe something about that victim or that murder is most likely to help us identify the killer.”

He thought she was a little pale, but what she'd told him pushed that awareness out of his mind. “So Tricia's murder goes on the back burner.”

Gravely, Hollis said, “In the conference room at the police department where we'll work every day, there are bulletin boards sectioned, so far, into thirds. Each third is filled with photos and information on each victim. Time lines of the last weeks of their lives. Habits, haunts, events that might or might not have been important. Every day, we look at those boards. Every day, we look at the pictures of those women. And every day, we'll discuss their lives and the people who knew them and try to figure out who killed them. Every day.”

Caleb drew a breath and let it out slowly. “Sorry. It's just that... she was my friend.”

“I know. I'm sorry.” Her blue eyes gazed past him for another moment, briefly. “Just know that nobody is going to forget Tricia. And that we'll get her killer.”

“You seem so certain of that.”

Hollis looked faintly surprised. “We won't give up until we do get him. It's only a matter of time, Mr. Powell.”

“Caleb,” he said, “please. And thank you for your efforts, Agent Templeton.”

She smiled wryly. “Hollis. Especially since I'm not a full agent yet. Special Investigator is a title the SCU gives its members who lack a background in law or law enforcement. I've only been with the unit a few months.”

“But you're a trained investigator?”

“Recently trained, yeah. In my... previous life... I did something else.” Hollis came out from behind the desk, adding in a slightly preoccupied tone, “My partner, on the other hand, has a solid background in law and law enforcement, as well as years of experience, so you don't have to worry that the Bureau sent two rookies down
“I wasn’t worried, actually.” Realizing she was about to leave, and reluctant to let her go, he said quickly, “I remember you saying something about being an artist.”

“Used to be.”

“Used to be? Does a creative person ever stop being creative?”

For the first time, Hollis was clearly uncomfortable. “Sometimes things happen that change your whole life. I—uh—need to get back to the police station. Thank you very much for your cooperation, Mr.—Caleb. I’ll be in touch.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Thanks again. Bye.”

He didn’t try to stop her, but for several minutes after she left, Caleb gazed after her, frowning, wondering what had happened to change Hollis Templeton’s entire life.

“I know all about evil, Mr. Powell, believe me. I met it up close and personal.”

He hadn’t thought she’d been speaking literally.

Now he was very much afraid she had been.

5:00 PM

When Rafe and Isabel were in one of the department Jeeps and on their way to Jamie Brower’s apartment, he said, “I notice you haven’t suggested that Hollis visit any of the crime scenes.”

“Since what happened earlier, you mean?” Isabel shrugged. “You’ve obviously also noticed Hollis is a bit . . . fragile.”

“It’s a little hard to miss.”

“She has a lot of potential. But becoming a medium cost her a trip to hell you wouldn’t believe, and she hasn’t completely dealt with that yet.

“But despite being afraid, despite her not reaching out, not trying to make contact—she did. Which is an indication of just how much potential she has.”

Rafe sent his companion a glance. “You really believe there was a ghost in the room with us?”

“I believe the spirit of Jamie Brower was there, yes.”

“But you didn’t see her? It?”

“No, I can’t see the dead.” Isabel’s voice was utterly matter-of-fact. “Or hear them, for that matter. But I can sometimes feel them near me. The very air in the room changes, maybe because they aren’t supposed to be a part of this dimensional plane. You felt it yourself.”

This time, Rafe kept his eyes on the road. “My ears popped. It happens.”

“All the time,” she agreed mildly.

“Look, if Jamie was really there, why didn’t she say or do something to help us find her killer?”

“She was trying. Trying to speak to Hollis, the only one in the room with the ability to hear her. Unfortunately,
Hollis isn’t ready to listen.”

“I don’t suppose Jamie could just scribble us a note, huh? *X killed me.*”

Isabel answered the question seriously. “So far, none of us has encountered a spirit or noncorporeal force with enough focus and power to physically touch or move objects. Unless they were inside a host, of course. Or controlling one.”
He listened to the voice this time because he wanted to. Because he enjoyed this part of it so much. Watching them. Following. Learning their routines.

Hunting.

*Like the others. Just like them.*

The voice was right about that. She was just like all the rest. Laughing behind his back. So eager to tell his secrets. He had to stop her before she could do that.

*You've done three. Only three more. And then you can rest. Then you can be.*

“I'm tired,” he murmured, still watching her. “This time, I'm tired.”

*That's because you're changing.*

“I know.” He moved carefully, staying in the shadows as he followed her. This one was tricky; she was aware of her surroundings, watchful. Uneasy. They were all beginning to act that way, he'd noticed. Part of him loved that, that he made them so uneasy.

But it made things more difficult.

*You can do this. You have to. Or she'll tell. She'll tell them all about you.*

“Yes,” he murmured, easing a little closer despite the risk that she would see him. “I have to. I can't let her tell. I can't let any of them tell.”

Rafe pulled the Jeep abruptly to the curb and parked. They were still in the downtown area, not even halfway to Jamie's apartment. He continued to stare through the windshield, his rugged face completely unreadable. “A host.”

Isabel didn't have to be clairvoyant to know he had just about reached the end of his willingness to believe in the paranormal. Or even to accept that it might be possible.

Or possibly he had simply reached the end of his rope.

Hard to blame him for that.

“A host,” he repeated, his deep voice still extremely calm. “You want to explain that?”

Matching his tone, Isabel replied, “When it's a spirit, the simple truth is that some of them refuse to accept what's happened to them when they die. Whether it's unfinished business or simply an unwillingness to move on, they want to stay here.”
“I guess that explains haunted houses.” He was trying hard to keep his voice matter-of-fact.

“Well, only partly. Some houses really do contain the spirit or spirits of people who didn't want to move on. But some of what people call hauntings are just place memories.”

“Place memories?”

“Yeah. When people report seeing the same ghost repeat the same actions again and again, that's likely a place memory. A good example is the Roman soldiers so many people have seen marching on their battlefield, endlessly. Or other battlefields, like Gettysburg. We don't believe those poor men keep reenacting the battles that killed them; we believe the places remember what happened there.”

“How?”

“We can only theorize. Either because those particular areas have a specific energy of their own or possibly just the ability geographically or topographically to contain energy better than other places do. We believe that the extreme psychic—electromagnetic—energy of such horrific, tragic events literally soaked into the earth at places like that.

“And sometimes there's a buildup of pressure and those ‘memories’ are discharged in the form of energy, like static. If anybody happens to be around, especially a functional or latent psychic, what's seen is what that place remembers. An image of what happened there.”

“That actually makes a kind of sense,” Rafe said, sounding both reluctant and bemused.

“Yeah, most of this does, if you consider possible scientific explanations. Which we always do. All based on some form of energy.”

“So explain this host thing.”

“Well, like I said, some people who die don't want to be dead. If they're desperate enough, or angry enough, sometimes they're able to muster enough power to . . . find and inhabit a physical host. Another person.”

“Possession. You're talking about possession?” He was beginning to sound incredulous again.

Isabel waited until he finally looked at her, then said, “Not in the . . . Hollywood . . . sense of the word. This isn't some pea-soup-spewing demon a priest could exorcise. Often, they aren't even negative, or bad, spirits. They just want to live. It's a case of a stronger mind and spirit overpowering a weaker or otherwise vulnerable one.”

“You're telling me this has actually happened?”

“We believe it has, although I can't offer you any proof. Bishop and Miranda actually fought the spirit of an insanely determined serial killer once. Quite a story there.”

Rafe blinked, but said only, “Who's Miranda?”

“Sorry. Bishop's wife and partner. Years ago, Miranda touched several mental patients who were being treated for severe schizophrenia. She definitely felt, in each case, that there were two distinct and separate souls fighting for possession of those people. It convinced her. It convinced us, even before we duplicated the experiment and got the same results in three out of the five diagnosed schizophrenic mental patients we tested.”

“This is a little hard to swallow,” Rafe said finally.

“I know. Sorry about that.” She might have been apologizing for bumping him in a crowd.

He stared at her, then pulled the Jeep away from the curb and continued on their way. “So, worst-case scenario in a situation like that, the host goes nuts and ends up in a mental institution being treated for a mental disease he doesn't have.”
“I can think of worse things that might happen, but, yeah, we do believe that has happened. Theoretically, if the host mind and spirit were really weak, the invading spirit would just take over. You'd have a person who appeared to suddenly develop a whole new personality.” Isabel reflected, then said, “Which, I suppose, could explain teenagers.”

Rafe didn't smile. “What happens to the host’s spirit?”

“I don't know. We don't know. Withers away, maybe, like an unused limb. Gets booted out and passes on to whatever awaits all of us when we leave this mortal coil.” Isabel sighed. “Frontier territory, remember? We have a lot of theories, Rafe. We have some personal experiences, war stories we can tell. Even a few nonpsychic if not unbiased witnesses to testify to things they've seen and heard. But scientific data to back us up? Not so much. For most of us, we believe because we have to. Because it's us experiencing the paranormal. Hard to deny something when it's part of your everyday life.”

“And the rest of us have to take it on faith.”

“Unfortunately. Unless and until you have your own close encounter with the paranormal.”

“I'd rather not.”

Isabel's smile twisted a bit. “Yeah. Well, let's hope you get your wish. But don't count on it. Maybe it's just because we psychics are present to pull in and focus the energy, but people around us do tend to experience things they never would have imagined before. Fair warning.”

“You keep warning me.”

“I keep trying.”

It was Rafe's turn to sigh, but all he said was, “You made a distinction earlier between a spirit and a—what did you call it?—a noncorporeal force? What the hell is that supposed to be?”

“Evil.”

He waited a moment, then said, “Evil as in . . . ?”

“As in the force opposing good, the negative to offset the positive. As in the precarious balance of nature, of the universe itself. As in worse than you can imagine, breath smelling like brimstone, glowing red eyes, straight-out-of-a-fiery-hell evil.”

“You're not serious?”

When he glanced over at her, he found something in her green eyes older and wiser than any woman's eyes should ever have held. Than any human eyes should ever have held.

“Didn't you know, Rafe? Hadn't you even considered the possibility? Evil is real. It's a tangible, visible presence when it wants to be. It even has a face. Believe me, I know. I've seen it.”

Alan had every intention of taking the note to Rafe and the federal agents. Just not right away.

He wasn't stupid about it, of course. He made a copy and put the original in a clear plastic sleeve to protect it. And then he spent a lot of time staring at the note. The words. Trying to figure out what the author was trying to tell him.

And trying to decide if the author was the killer.

Despite his sometimes provocative attitude in print, Alan wasn't a big fan of conspiracy theories, so his natural
inclination was to believe that the note had been written by the killer. It was the simplest explanation, and it made sense to him. What didn't make sense was that someone in town knew who the killer was and had done nothing to stop him.

Unless that someone was very, very afraid.

And if that was the case . . . how could Alan flush him or her out of hiding?

It would be such a coup. And stop the killings, of course.

But how to bring that person, if he or she existed, out of the woodwork?

Musing over that question, Alan left the original of the note securely locked in his desk, but took the copy with him when he left the office—a bit early—for the day. He didn't go straight home but stopped by the town-hall building, which had become the unofficial hangout for most members of the media.

There were quite a few hanging around, but most were talking companionably, with the relaxed posture that came of having passed the deadline for the six o'clock news. The pressure was off, at least for most of them and for the moment.

Dana Earley, the only blond female in the bunch, was also the most obviously tense. Understandably. She was also the only TV reporter still present today, and kept her cameraman close.

Alan doubted it was because she liked the guy, who was skinny, clearly bored, and appeared to be about seventeen.

*Some protection he'd be,* Alan thought.

“You,” Dana said to him, “are looking far too smug. What do you know that the rest of us don't?”

“Oh, come on, Dana. You think I want a Columbia TV station to scoop me?”

Her brows disappeared up under her bangs. “Scoop you? What old movies have you been watching?”

Refusing the bait, Alan merely said, “It'll be dark soon. I think if I were a blond TV reporter, I'd want to be inside. Behind a locked door. With a gun. Or at least some muscle.” He eyed the cameraman sardonically.

“I hear you have some muscle of your own,” she retorted. “Police muscle. Sleeping with a cop, Alan?”

“If I am, it's hardly newsworthy,” he said dryly, showing no outward sign of an inward flinch. Mallory was not going to like it if this *news* was common knowledge, dammit. “Unless your station prefers tabloid gossip over substantive news.”

“Don't sound so superior. You were the first print journalist to use the phrase *serial killer,* and however you intended it, it sounded gleeful and excited in your article.”

“It did not,” he found himself countering irritably.

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“It did not,” he found himself countering irritably.

“Go back and read it again.” She tucked an errant strand of blond hair behind her ear, smiled at him gently, and wandered off toward a magazine journalist here to research serial killers.

“Here you go, Alan.”

He jumped, and frowned at Paige Gilbert, who was holding out a tissue to him.

“Jesus, don't sneak up on people. And what's that?”

“I thought you might need it. For the spit in your eye.”
For just an instant, he was blank, but then he glanced after Dana and scowled as he looked back at the radio reporter. “Ha ha. She was just being all superior because she's a talking head on the six o'clock news.”

“Not today she wasn't,” Paige murmured.

“None of us has had much to report today,” he reminded her.

“True. But you might as well have canary feathers smeared all around your mouth. Come on, Alan, give it up. You know we'll find out sooner or later.”

Alan made a mental note to stop playing poker with Rafe and a few other of their friends; obviously, his serious lack of a poker face was why he had lost so much imaginary money to them.

“I'm done for the day,” he informed Paige. “And even though this is your first really big story, if you want some advice from a veteran, you should go home and get some sleep as well. You never know when you'll get that call that pulls you out of bed at two in the morning.”

Paige gazed after him, then jumped slightly herself when Dana said at her elbow, “He knows something.”

“Yeah,” Paige said. “But what?”

The rented car she and Isabel were sharing was parked near Caleb Powell's law office, so Hollis was able to make it that far. Once locked inside, though, engine and air-conditioning running, she sat behind the wheel and watched her hands shake.

Bishop had warned her that until she learned to fully control her abilities, the door that devastating trauma had created or activated in her mind was likely to open up unexpectedly. And that the experiences were apt to be particularly powerful ones in the midst of a murder investigation when several people had died recently and violently.

But all the months spent in the relative peace of Quantico, learning how to be an investigator, learning about the SCU, plus learning all the exercises in concentration, meditation, and control, had given her a false sense of security.

She had thought she was ready for this.

She wasn't.

First seeing Jamie Brower in the conference room, and now this. Seeing Tricia Kane standing near the desk where she had worked in life, less clearly visible than Jamie had been, oddly dreamlike but obviously trying to say something Hollis hadn't been able to hear.

Why couldn't she hear them? Before, it had been a voice in her head and only the sense of a presence, at least until the very end. Not . . . this. Not these misty images of people—souls—trapped between worlds. No longer alive, but not yet gone, standing in the doorway between this life and the next, the doorway Hollis's own traitorous mind kept opening for them. Talking to her.

Trying to talk to her.

Hollis hadn't expected this.

Not this.

She didn't know how to cope with this. She didn't know if she wanted to even try to learn to cope.
She wanted to run, that's what she wanted to do. Run and hide, from the dead and from—

The ringing demand of her cell phone jarred her from the panic, and she took a deep breath to try and steady her voice before she answered it. “Templeton.”

“What happened?” Isabel asked without preamble.

“I checked out Tricia Kane's office, but—”

“No, Hollis. What happened?”

She'd already had a few unsettling experiences with other SCU members and their easy connections with one another, so Isabel's obvious awareness of Hollis's state of mind didn't surprise her all that much. It still unsettled her, however.

“I saw Tricia Kane,” she said finally, baldly.

“Did she tell you anything?” Isabel's voice was calm.

“She tried. I couldn't hear her. Like before.”

“How long did it last?”

Hollis had to stop and think about that. “Not long. Not as long as in the conference room. And not as clear. She was . . . the image was fainter. Wispy. And it didn't feel as spooky.”

“Powell didn't notice anything?”

“I don't think so.”

“You're out of the office now?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. It's getting late. Why don't you go back to the inn and soak in the tub, have a hot shower, something like that. Relax. Order a pizza. Watch something mind-numbing on TV for a while.”

“Isabel—”

“Hollis, trust me. Take the time while you can, and chill. Just chill. Sleep if you can. Don't think too much. We're just getting started here, and it's only going to get harder.”

“I have to learn how to handle this.”

“Yes. But you don't have to learn everything today. Today you just have to get some rest and get centered again. That's all. I'll be back at the inn myself in a couple of hours. I'll check, see if you feel like company. If not, that's cool, I'll see you at breakfast. But if you want to talk, I'll be there. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Don't mention it, partner.”

Rafe watched Isabel close her cell phone and return it to the belt pack she wore in lieu of a purse. They were standing in the living room of Jamie Brower's apartment, but they had barely arrived before Isabel reached for her phone, saying without explanation that she had to call Hollis.
“She was in trouble,” Rafe guessed, watching Isabel.

“She saw another of the victims. Tricia Kane. It freaked her out a bit.” Isabel shrugged, frowning slightly. “Still couldn't hear what Tricia was trying to tell her, so no help for us.”

“You knew she was in trouble before you called her. How?” Before Isabel could answer, Rafe did himself. “Connections. A psychic connection. She's your partner.”

“A connection she finds more unnerving than reassuring at this point,” Isabel said wryly. “I’m sure you can relate.” She began walking through the very nice apartment, looking around her with interest.

Rafe followed. “What do you mean by that?”

“I make you nervous. Admit it.”

“I've known you barely twenty-four hours,” Rafe retorted. “That isn't enough time to get used to a woman's perfume, let alone the fact that she knows without looking what kind of shorts you happen to be wearing.”

Isabel chuckled. “Okay, you win that round.”

Rafe thought it was about time he won one. “Is Hollis all right?”

“She will be, I think. This time. But if she doesn't get a handle on her abilities pretty fast, things are just going to get harder for her.”

“I'd think talking to dead people would never get easier.”

“No, from all I'm told, that part doesn't. It takes an exceptionally powerful medium with a strong sense of self to open that door and yet remain detached—and protected—from all the emotional and spiritual energy pouring through.”

“Protected?”

Isabel paused in the kitchen, running a hand lightly along the immaculate granite countertops. The usual small appliances were scattered about: toaster, blender, coffee maker. “She didn't cook much.”

“Not according to what her family and friends said, no. A lot of takeout. What do you mean about a medium needing to protect herself?”

“Or himself. It's not a gender-specific ability, you know.”

“I stand corrected. Are there any gender-specific abilities?”

“Not as far as we know.”

“Okay. What did you mean about the medium protecting him- or herself?”

Isabel left the kitchen and went down the short hallway to the bedroom. She stood in the center, looking around. “A medium is the most vulnerable of all psychics to what you called possession. They're the ones who open the doors angry or desperate spirits usually need in order to return to this plane of existence. And the nearest potential host when the spirit comes through.”

“Usually need?”

“We've theorized that an unusually powerful spirit could make its own doorway, if it were determined enough. So far, though, our experience has been that mediums or latent mediums provide the doorways.”

“I can't believe I'm talking about this. Listening to this.”
She looked at him, smiling faintly. “This stuff has always been with us, always been a part of our lives. For most of us, it was simply a case of not seeing what was there. Who knew there were protons and electrons until we found them? Who knew germs were responsible for illnesses until somebody figured it out? Who knew even fifty years ago that we had a chance in hell of mapping the human genome?”

“I get the point,” Rafe said. “Still, this is—or at least feels—different.”

“It's human. And one day, eventually, science will catch up, figure out a way to define, measure, and analyze, and make us legit.”

“It’s just . . . it's difficult to wrap my mind around it.”

“I know, but you have to.” Isabel walked over to the bed and rested a hand on it, frowning. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio. Get used to it. Here endeth the lesson.”

Rafe accepted the mild rebuke with a nod. “Okay. Though I do reserve the right to ask questions if anything unusual happens right in front of me.”

“I wouldn't expect anything else.”

He had to smile a little at her dry tone. “Picking up anything useful here?”

Touch me there . . . like that . . .

Harder . . .

Christ, you feel good . . .

Years of practice enabled Isabel to keep her face expressionless, but it was unexpectedly difficult with Rafe's eyes on her. He had very dark eyes, and there was something very compelling in them. She hadn't expected that.

Hadn't expected him.

“This is where she kept her sex straight. A few male lovers over the years. No women.”

“So you think the room in the pictures was hers? One of the properties she owned? A place she kept separate and secret for those . . . encounters?”

“Seems likely. She led a very traditional life here, so obviously her secret life was kept a thing apart. Really a thing apart; there are no secrets at all here. In fact, I'm more than a little surprised Emily found the photo box in this apartment.”

“Unless Jamie had lost her most recent lover and hadn't yet found another. In that case, she might have needed to look at those pictures.”

Isabel smiled. “You'd make a fair profiler, know that?”

Rafe was more than a little startled. “I was just guessing, that's all.”

“What do you think profilers do? We make guesses. Mostly educated guesses, and for some of us occasionally psychic ones, but at the end of the day they’re still guesses. Speculation based on experience, knowledge of criminals and how their minds work, that sort of thing. A good profiler probably gets sixty to seventy-five percent right if he or she is especially tuned in to a particular subject. A good psychic with solid control gets, maybe, forty to sixty percent in hits.”

“Is that your percentage?”

She shrugged. “More or less.”
He decided not to try to pin her down on that; he had a feeling it was one he wouldn't win. He hadn't known Isabel Adams an hour before reaching the conclusion that she was extremely unlikely to let slip by accident anything she didn't want him to know.

Isabel said, “We have to find the box or that room. Both, preferably. I need to know how Jamie felt about her secret life, really felt about it. And I'm getting nothing about that here.”

“So you're getting no sense of a secret hiding place my people missed?”

“No sense of anything secret. I mean at all; this lady obviously knew how to compartmentalize her life. This was her public self, what the world was allowed to see. All bright and shiny and picture-perfect. We know her public self. We need to know her private self.”

Rafe frowned as he followed her from the room. “Do you believe Jamie was targeted because of her sexual preferences? Because she was a dominatrix?”

“I don't know. It's about relationships, I'm sure of that. Somehow, it's about relationships. I'm having a hard time seeing Jamie's sexuality, or even the S&M games, as the trigger, that's all. Given his history. But it's the only thing hidden in Jamie's day-to-day life, and that means we have to be sure how much it means.”

“Makes sense.”

“So we need to find that room. And we need to find it quickly. It's been four days since he killed Tricia Kane; even if he waits a full week between murders, we only have three days to find him and stop him before another woman dies.”

And before Isabel moved up on the hit list, Rafe thought but didn't say.

“You think he's stalking her now?” he asked instead.

“He's watching her. Thinking about what he's going to do to her. Imagining how it's going to feel. Anticipating.” She was surprised that after all these years and so many similar investigations, it could still make her skin crawl.

But it wasn't just the fact of this killer, she knew that. It wasn't even what he had done to his victims. It was him. What she felt in him. Something twisted and evil crouching in the shadows, waiting to spring forward.

She could almost smell the brimstone.

Almost.

“Isabel—”

“Not now, Rafe.” For the first time, there was a hint of vulnerability in her slightly twisted smile. “I'm not ready to talk about that evil face I saw. Not to you. Not yet.”

“Just tell me this much. Does it have something to do with you becoming psychic?”

“It had everything to do with it.” Her smile twisted even more. “The universe has an ironic sense of humor, I've noticed. Or maybe just an innate sense of justice. Because sometimes evil creates the tool that will help destroy it.”

Cheryl had planned to drive back to Columbia for the night, especially after Dana's warning, but something was bugging her. It had been bugging her all day, ever since she'd noticed it early this morning.

She had her cameraman wait for her in the van and went to check it out, telling herself she'd be safe; it wasn't
even dark yet, for God's sake. Of course, telling herself was one thing, and feeling it something else entirely.

Every time the breeze stirred it felt like somebody touching her with a ghostly hand, and she caught herself looking back over her shoulder more than once.

Nothing there, naturally. No one there.

The whole thing was just her imagination, probably. Because it didn't make sense, not if she'd seen what she thought she had. Not if it meant—

A hand touched her shoulder, and Cheryl whirled around with a gasp. “Oh, Jesus. Scare a person, why don't you?”

“Did I? Sorry about that.”

“You of all people should know—”

“I do. Like I said, sorry. What're you doing out here?”

“Just following up a hunch. I'm sure the rest of you saw it, but it's been bugging me, so . . . here I am.”

“You really shouldn't be out by yourself.”

“I know, I know. But I'm not a blonde. And I hate it when something bugs me. So it seemed like a risk worth taking.”

“Just for a story?”

“Well,” Cheryl said self-consciously, “that's part of it, sure. The story. And maybe to stop him. I mean, it would be so cool if I could help stop him.”

“Do you really believe your hunch could do that?”

“You never know. I could get lucky.”

“Or unlucky.”

“What're you—”

“Not a blonde. But nosy just like they are. And you'll tell. I really can't let that happen.”

Cheryl saw the knife, but by the time understanding clicked into place in her head, it was too late to scream.

Too late to do anything at all.

Friday, 11:30 PM

Just occasionally, whenever her day had been particularly stressful, Mallory was so wild in bed that it took everything Alan had just to keep up with her.

Friday night was like that.

She held him with her arms, her legs, her body, as though he might escape her. The pillows were shoved off the bed, and the sheets tangled around them, and still they wrestled and rolled and held on to each other. They finished, finally, with Mallory on top, riding him fiercely, one hand on his chest and the other braced behind her on his leg, grinding her loins to his in a hard, hungry, rhythmic dance.

He held her hips, surging up to meet her, his gaze fixed on the magnificence of her face taut in primitive need, her eyes darkened, her lithe, toned body glowing with life and exertion.
When she finally came with a cry, shuddering, he spent in almost the same instant, feeling her inner muscles spasming, milking him dry.

Usually, at that point Mallory rolled off him to lie at his side, however briefly, but this time he held on and shifted their bodies himself so that they lay on their sides, facing each other. He kept his arms around her.

“Good,” she murmured, relaxed at least for the moment. “That was . . . good.”

Drained himself, Alan nevertheless consciously tried to control the moment, his hand stroking her back in a soothing motion, enjoying the sensation of her warm breath against his neck. “More than good.” He knew better than to comment on her passion, knowing from experience that it would only cause her to draw away, to start making excuses for leaving.

He had never figured out if it was the intimacy of the act that bothered Mallory when she allowed herself to think about it, or was reminded of it, or if it was her own lack of control that disturbed her. Either way, he was careful not to push that particular button.

He had learned.

“Long day,” he murmured finally, intentionally keeping his voice as easy and soothing as his hands.

“Very long.” She sounded a little sleepy. She moved just a bit against him, but closer, and sighed. “And a longer one tomorrow. God, I'm tired.”

He didn't say anything, but continued to stroke her back gently even after he knew she had fallen asleep. He held her close and caressed her warm, silky skin, and felt her heart beat against his. And it was enough. For now.

A storm woke him before dawn, and Mallory was gone.

She hadn't even left a note on the fucking pillow.
HE WOKE UP with blood on his hands.

Wet blood.

Fresh blood.

The pungent, coppery smell of it was thick and heavy in the room, and he gagged as he stumbled from the bed and into the bathroom. He didn't bother to turn on the light even though the room was dim, just turned on the taps and fumbled for soap, washing his hands in the hottest water he could stand, soaping again and again.

The water, first bright red and then rusty-colored, swirled around the drain and slowly, so slowly, grew fainter and fainter. Like the smell.

When the water ran clear and he couldn't smell the blood anymore, he turned off the taps. For a long moment he stood there, hands braced on the sink, staring at his shadowy reflection in the mirror. Finally, he went back into the bedroom and sat on the side of the tumbled bed, staring at nothing.

Again.

It had happened again.

He could still smell the blood, though there was no sign of any on the sheets. There hadn't been before either. There never was, on anything he touched.

Just his hands.

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and stared at his hands. Strong hands. Clean hands. Now.

No blood. Now.

“What have I done?” he whispered. “Oh, Christ, what have I done?”

Travis Keech yawned widely as he sat up in bed and vigorously rubbed his head with both hands. “Jesus. It's after eight.”

“It's dawn,” Alyssa Taylor said sleepily. “And it's Saturday, so who cares?”

“I care. I have to. I'm supposed to work. The chief said we could come in later if we've worked late—which I did last night—but we're all working overtime.”

“I suppose it's taking all of you to investigate these murders.”

“You can say that again.”
“And I suppose you've got leads to follow.”

Her voice still sounded sleepy, but Travis looked down at her with a tolerant smile. “You know, just because you're convinced I'm a yokel with straw in my hair doesn't mean you're right.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Sounding less sleepy now, she stretched like an elegant cat. The position showed him a nice expanse of bare skin already wearing a light summer tan, which really set off her gleaming dark hair and pale eyes.

“Oh, come on, Ally. I don't normally end up in bed with gorgeous women just hours after meeting them in our one little excuse for a bar. Unless, of course, they happen to be TV reporters from the big city and I happen to be involved in a serial-killer investigation.”

“Don't underrate yourself,” Alyssa told him. “And don't measure my morals with your yardstick, if you don't mind. I didn't set out to sleep with a cop, and I don't go after stories on my back.”

“A lot of reporters do, I hear.”

“I'm not one of them.”

The sheet had slipped to show him most of one generous breast, and Travis decided he didn't want to offend her. “I never said you were,” he protested, lying back down beside her and reaching underneath the covers. “But you could have had any guy in that bar and you came home with me. What else was I supposed to think?”

“That I thought you were sexy?” She didn't exactly pout, but her body was just the slightest bit stiff when he pulled her into his arms. “That I was bored and didn't want to go back to my hotel room alone? That I like guys in uniform?”

“Which was it?” he asked, nuzzling her neck.

“All of the above.” She sighed and relaxed in his embrace, her arms slipping around his middle and her hands sliding downward. “And you've got a cute ass too.”

He made an urgent sound, his body responding instantly to her caress, and she thought with faint, fleeting amusement that there was a lot to be said for catching a guy in his early twenties and at the peak of his sexuality.

A lot to be said.

She murmured, “I thought you had to go in to work.”

“Later,” Travis said.

It was nearly half an hour later when he finally, reluctantly pulled himself out of the bed. “I've gotta get to work. Want to join me in the shower?”

Alyssa stretched languidly. “Are you kidding? That tiny stall isn't even big enough for you. I'll wait my turn, thanks. I can shower while you're shaving.”

“Okay, suit yourself.”

Alyssa waited until she heard the water running, then slipped from the bed and gathered her scattered clothing from the floor. She had to follow a trail halfway to the front door to get it all, which amused her yet again. Her purse had been left carelessly on a chair near the front door, something that made her shake her head.

Not smart. Not at all smart.

Could be she was slipping.

“Nah,” she murmured in response to that idea.
Returning to the bedroom, she laid the clothing out on the bed and then got her cell phone from the purse. She turned it on and punched in a number, keeping her gaze fixed on the half-open bathroom door.

“Hey, it's Ally.” She kept her voice low. “I've found that source we talked about. A pretty good one. He's already told me more than he realizes. He must have had half a dozen strong drinks last night, and no hangover this morning. Oh, to be twenty-four again.”

She listened for a moment, then said, “Yes, my head hurts. Well, I had to at least seem to keep up with him, didn't I? Never mind. He's going in to work, and the plan is to get him to meet me for lunch.”

A question made her laugh under her breath. “No, I don't think there'll be any problem persuading him to meet me. And I have a . . . hunch . . . that he'll be perfectly happy to have me sticking close for the duration. So I should have a fair idea of what's going on inside the department. Yeah. Yeah, I'll check in at least twice a day, as arranged.”

10:05 AM

The third property they checked turned out to be an old commercial building off what had once been a busy two-lane highway until the bypass opened years before. Several companies had lost most of their customers, and more than one derelict office building or small store now stood abandoned and slowly falling into ruin. But a few, like the one Jamie Brower had owned, had been converted to have some kind of a useful life not dependent on passing customers.

“She was ostensibly using it for storage,” Rafe noted as they stood just inside the front door. The early sunlight slanted through the dusty front windows so that the interior of the front part of the building was easily visible to them.

“Just barely ostensibly,” Isabel agreed, looking around at a half dozen or so large pieces of old furniture in obvious need of restoration or repair, and a few crates labeled STORAGE. “Only enough stuff so that anybody looking in the front window would assume that was what she was using it for.”

“The real story is in the back,” Mallory called from a doorway about thirty feet from the front door and roughly halfway down the length of the building, where a wall divided the space. “The tools the locksmith gave us worked on this door and the rear entrance—which is conveniently hidden from the road. Great place to park your car if you don't want anybody to know you're here. And there are signs quite a few cars have been parked back there in recent months.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Hollis wondered aloud.

“It's about time we got lucky,” Rafe said as he, Isabel, and Hollis joined Mallory, all of them stepping into the half of the building that was quite obviously the reason Jamie had bought this place.

It was the room in the photographs.

“The submissive did know she was being photographed,” Rafe said, gesturing toward the camera set up on a tripod several yards from the bed platform. “There's no place in here to hide that thing. The distance and angle look just right.”

Hollis, wearing latex gloves, as they all were, went to examine the camera. “Yeah, it's set up to work on a timer. No cartridge or disk,” she said. “Whatever last photos she took weren't left in the camera.”

“No, I'd expect her to be more cautious than that,” Isabel said, looking slowly around. “The really interesting thing is the question of whether the camera was part of the ritual. If she really does have a box full of photos, as Emily said, then it's likely most if not all of her partners were photographed.”

Rafe kept watching her instead of studying the room, bothered by something he couldn't quite put a finger on. He thought Isabel was somehow uncomfortable or uneasy here. Her posture seemed a bit stiffer than usual, and something about the very calm of her features was almost masklike.
So when he spoke, it was absently. “It's all about control. And submission. Being photographed probably was part of the ritual, one of Jamie's rules. Her partners had to submit completely to her and her rules, even to the extent of having their secret needs and desires, their humiliation, recorded on film—and left in the hands of the dominant.”

Mallory had located a large built-in closet or storage area on the right-hand wall and was working on the padlocked double doors with the ring of all-purpose tools provided by the locksmith. “Just for the record,” she said, “I don't ever want to want anything that much.”

“I'll second that,” Rafe said. He was still watching Isabel, and directed his question to her. “Picking up anything?”

“Lots,” she answered. “I don't know yet how much of it will be important, though. Or even relevant.”

Her voice had been completely serene, but Rafe found himself frowning nevertheless. He glanced at Hollis and saw that she was also watching her partner intently, a crease between her brows indicating worry or unease.

Isabel walked over to the bed platform and bent slightly to place her gloved hand on the bare, stained mattress. Her face remained expressionless, though her mouth seemed to firm.

“I guess the latex doesn't interfere with psychic contact,” Rafe said.

It was Hollis who replied, “No, it doesn't seem to. Although some of the SCU psychics say it has a slight muffling quality. Like everything else, it varies from person to person.”

“Got it,” Mallory announced suddenly. She unfastened the padlock and opened the two doors. “Christ.”

“The toy box,” Hollis murmured.

Dana Earley would have been the first to admit that being in Hastings at this particular time was making her extremely nervous. It had always been easy in the past for her to blend in, become a part of the background until she was ready to step in front of the camera and report the news.

This time, she was afraid of becoming the news.

“You shouldn't be out here,” one male citizen of the small town scolded her in front of the coffee shop when she attempted to interview him about his feelings.

“I'm not alone,” Dana said, gesturing toward Joey.

The man gave her cameraman the same scornful look Alan had offered the previous day. “Yeah, well, he might drop his camera on the killer's toe before he cuts and runs, but I wouldn't count on it if I were you.”

“I resent that,” Joey said sullenly.

They both ignored him.

“You should at least protect yourself,” the man told Dana earnestly. “The police department is offering pepper spray to any woman who asks. I got some for my wife. You need to go get some for yourself.”

“What about you?” Dana asked, making a mental note about the pepper spray. “Aren't you worried the killer might start going after men?”

He glanced from side to side warily, then opened his lightweight windbreaker to show her a pistol tucked into his belt. “I hope the bastard does come after me. I'm ready. A lot of us are ready.”

“Looks like,” she offered brightly, trying not to show him how much it frightened her to see guns in the hands of
people other than the police. Especially angry and very nervous people. “Thank you very much, sir.”

“No problem. And you watch it, you hear? Stay off the streets as much as you can.”

“Yes. I will.” She watched him walk away, then stood gazing around at Main Street, where there was less than normal activity for a lovely Saturday morning in June. And where there were far too many men just like the one she'd interviewed, walking around with windbreakers half-zipped and wary, watchful expressions on their faces.

“Can we go now?” Joey whined.

“I wish we could,” Dana said, half-consciously reaching up to touch her hair. “I really wish we could. Hey—have you seen Cheryl?”

“Nah. Saw their van parked near the town hall this morning. Why?”

Dana bit her lip, hesitated, then said, “Let's head back toward the town hall.”

“Ah, jeez.”

“You're getting paid,” she reminded her cameraman.

“Not enough,” he muttered, following behind her.

“It could be a lot worse,” she told him irritably. “You could be a blond woman. The way I hear it, the surgeon wouldn't have to cut off much to make that happen.”

“Bitch,” he grunted under his breath.

“I heard that.”

He gave her the finger silently, reasonably sure she didn't have eyes in the back of her head.

“And I saw that,” she said.

“Shit.”

Inside the large storage closet of Jamie's playroom was, neatly arranged on shelves and hanging on hooks, all the paraphernalia necessary for sadomasochistic games. Whips, masks, padded and unpadded handcuffs, an extremely varied selection of dildos and vibrators, ropes, chains, and a number of unidentifiable objects, some quite elaborate.

Also a tasteful selection of leather bustiers, garters, and stockings, including, seemingly, the outfits Jamie and her partner had worn in the photographs.

“I'm no expert,” Hollis said, “but I'm thinking at least a few of those gadgets are meant to be used on a man.”

Rafe could see the ones she meant. “I'd say so. And given that, it's beginning to look more and more like Jamie was . . . an equal-opportunity mistress. She may not have enjoyed sex with men, but it looks like she enjoyed dominating them.”

“Men and women,” Hollis said. “She really did want to be boss, didn't she? I wonder what would happen if she ran into somebody who wanted to be boss even more than she did?”

“A trigger, maybe,” Isabel said in an absentminded tone.

“His trigger?” Rafe asked. “He wanted to be the one on top—so to speak—and it wasn't a position Jamie was
willing to allow him to assume?”

“Maybe.” Isabel's tone was still abstracted. “Especially if we find out the other two primary victims from the earlier murders were unusually strong women. Dominant women. That could be his trigger, his hot button. Finding himself interested in women literally too strong for him.”

“Some men just prefer their women to be sweet and submissive, I guess,” Hollis said dryly.

“Jerks,” Mallory said, then lifted a brow at Rafe. “Forensics?”

“Yeah, get them out here,” Rafe said. “But only T.J. and Dustin with their kits, not the van. I'd still like to keep this quiet as long as we've got a hope in hell of it.”

“Right.” She pulled out her cell phone.

Rafe walked over to Isabel, still uneasily sensing that something wasn't right with her. She was no longer touching the mattress but was gazing off into space with that distant expression he was beginning to recognize in her eyes. But this time she seemed to be looking so far away that it sent a chill through him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“There is,” she said slowly, “a lot of pain in this room.”

“You don't feel it, do you?”

“No. No, I'm not an empath. I feel during the visions, but not this. I just . . . I just know there's a lot of pain in this room. Physical. Emotional. Psychological.” She reached both hands up and rubbed the nape of her neck. Her hair was in its accustomed neat, high ponytail, and Rafe could see how hard she was kneading the tense muscles of her neck. But before he could ask about that, she went on in the same level tone.

“Jamie was strong. Very strong. But she'd spent her life being the good girl. Pretending to be what everybody wanted her to be. Hiding inside that shell. But this part of her life . . . this is where she could be in control. Really in control. Where she could be herself and be respected—demand respect—for who she really was.”

Hollis stepped closer, her frown deepening. “Isabel—”

“This is where she called the shots. Her partners, male or female, were never her lovers, never close to her emotionally; they were . . . validation. That she was strong and certain. That she was the one in control. They did anything she told them to do. Everything. No matter what, no matter how wild she got. No matter how much she hurt them.”

When Rafe realized that Isabel's nails were literally digging into her own skin despite the gloves she wore, he stripped his own gloves off and reached up and grasped her wrists, ignoring the again visible and audible flash that was a hell of a lot stronger than any static shock he'd ever felt. He pulled her hands away from her neck.


Rafe ignored her. “Isabel.”

She blinked, those vivid green eyes still distant but seemingly focusing on him. “What?”

“You've got to stop. Now.”

“I can't.”

“You have to. This is hurting you.” He wasn't entirely sure she knew who he was. She was looking at him, he thought, as though he were the only Technicolor object in a black-and-white universe. Puzzled and wondering.

“It always hurts,” she said matter-of-factly. “What difference does that make?”
“Isabel—”

“Bad things happened here, you know. It’s been going on for years. Years. But Jamie was always in control. She had to be. Always. At least until . . .”

She frowned. “They sold insurance here, and before that—no, after that—somebody sold bootleg whiskey out of here for nearly a year. Moonshine, just like you said. How strange. And a preacher spent some time here, a few weeks. Except that he wasn’t a preacher anymore, because he’d been caught in bed with a deacon’s wife and it hadn’t been the first time. He thought God had abandoned him, but it was the other way around . . .”

Hollis said, “Take her outside. There are too many secrets in this place. Too much pain. Too much information for her to sort through all at once.”

Rafe didn’t wait for a more complete explanation; Isabel was pale, he could feel her shaking, and it didn’t require anything more than common sense to know she was very close to some kind of collapse. So he took her outside.

Isabel didn’t really protest, although once they were outside she did mutter under her breath, “Shit. I hate it when this happens.”

He put her in the passenger seat of his Jeep and got the engine and air conditioner running, then dug into his first-aid kit and pulled out a gauze pad.

“What’s that for?”

He tore open the wrapping and reached over to place the pad against the nape of her neck, again ignoring a strong shock.

“Oh, that’s . . .” she said.

“You drew blood,” Rafe told her. “Even with the gloves on. Jesus, does this happen often?”

Isabel looked down at her hands with a faint frown, then stripped off the gloves. “Oh . . . from time to time. Bishop keeps telling me I should wear my nails short. Maybe I’d better start listening to him. Got any aspirin in that box?”

“Ibuprofen.”

“Even better. If I could have a couple? Or . . . a dozen?” She reached up to hold the pad in place herself while he got the pain reliever and then a bottle of water from the cooler he kept in the Jeep.

By the time she had swallowed four capsules, the faint scratches had stopped bleeding, and Rafe used an antiseptic pad to wipe the nape of her neck while she sat with her head bowed and eyes closed.

Every time he touched her, the shock was definite, but she didn’t react or comment and Rafe thought he was getting used to it. In fact, it seemed to clear his head.

Which was more than a little unnerving.

Her pale gold hair felt even silkier than it looked and seemed to want to cling to the back of his hand as he worked on her neck. Static, of course. Had to be. He concentrated on treating the scratches she had inflicted on herself, though he admitted silently that it took him longer than was strictly necessary.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Are you going to be okay?”

She nodded slightly, still without opening her eyes. “When the painkillers kick in. And as long as I don’t go back in there right away.”
“Isabel—”

“Look, I know you have questions. Can we save them for a while, please?” She raised her head and opened her eyes finally, looking at him. The distant expression was gone, but she looked incredibly tired. “For now, your forensics team should be here any minute; why don't you go back inside and get everybody doing their thing? Hollis may be able to help. I felt something weird in there.”

Rafe thought there had been a lot of weird in there, but all he said was, “Meaning?”

“That increasing nervousness and fear Emily had been seeing in her sister. I don't think it was just because Jamie was afraid her secret life would be exposed. I think she had another secret, a far worse one. And a much greater fear. I think something went wrong in there. I think she went too far.”

“What are you saying?” He asked the question, even though he knew what she would answer.

“Have your team look for signs of blood. A lot of blood.”

“No sign of that box,” Mallory said after both women had thoroughly searched the back room. “No sign of anything she wanted to keep hidden—outside that closet, I mean.”

Hollis nodded. “There's an attic, but it's wide open and empty.”

“Um... on another subject, I gather from your reaction that it isn't normal for somebody touching Isabel to literally strike sparks?”

“I've never seen it happen before, though I've only known her a few months.” Hollis frowned. “I was given a pretty thorough knowledge of the other SCU members, and that definitely wasn't mentioned. Could be something new for her, caused by this particular situation.”

“Or it could be Rafe.”

“Or it could be Rafe, yeah. Don't quote me on this, because I'm certainly no expert, but I guess if the right two energy signatures came in contact, there could be something like those sparks.”

“Don't tell me this is what all the poets wrote about,” Mallory begged.

Hollis smiled in response, but said, “Who knows? Maybe it's as much an emotional connection as it is literal energy fields. In any case, those two are reacting to each other, and on a very basic level.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“I have no idea. But it might explain why Isabel seems to be having a rougher than usual time with this investigation.”

“What might explain it?” Rafe asked, entering in time to hear the statement.

“You.”

“Come again?”

“Hey, I'm just guessing,” Hollis told him. “And I'm a long way from being an expert on any of this stuff, as I just told Mallory. But I was taught at Quantico that sometimes electromagnetic fields—those of individual people or places—come together in a particular way that tends to change or enhance a psychic's natural abilities. Or at least alter the limitations of those abilities. I have never seen Isabel so wide open, and as far as I can tell it's all been hits.
No misses. That is very unusual. I'm thinking that sparking thing between you two has something to do with it.”

“We can't be sure everything she's picked up is factual, not yet,” Rafe said without commenting on the sparking thing.

“I wouldn't bet against her.”

“Well, I sure as hell hope she's wrong about one thing. She thinks one of Jamie's little games got out of hand. We're now looking for evidence of a death here.”

“Shit.” Mallory stared at him. “You mean separate from our serial killer?”

“God knows. Hollis, are you getting anything?”

“I haven't tried.” From the slightly stubborn set of her jaw, it didn't appear she planned to anytime soon.

After seeing what had happened to Isabel, Rafe wasn't about to push either psychic, but he was still curious.

“Isabel never seems to try. I mean, it doesn't seem to be an effort for her.”

“It isn't. For her.”

He waited, brows raised.

After a moment, Hollis said, “You know the bit about me not being able to hear what these victims have tried to tell me? So far, I mean.”

Somewhat warily, Rafe said, “Yeah, I think I get that.”

“There's a barrier, something virtually every psychic has. We call them shields. Think of it as a bubble of energy our minds create to protect us. Most psychics have to consciously make an opening in that shield in order to use our abilities. We have to reach out, open up, deliberately make ourselves vulnerable.”

“You didn't seem to be doing it deliberately,” Rafe noted.

“I'm new at this. My control isn't as strong as it should be yet, so sometimes I reach out—or at least open a door or window in my shields—without meaning or wanting to. Usually when I'm tired or distracted, something like that. Eventually, they tell me, I should be able to shut this stuff out unless and until I very specifically want it. Most psychics can do that. Isabel is the very rare one who can't.”

“You mean—”

“I mean she lacks the ability to shield her own mind. She's always wide open, always picking up information. Important stuff. Trivia. Everything in between. All that stuff always coming at her, crowding into her mind, like the voices of hundreds of people all talking at once. It's a miracle she can make sense of it at all. Hell, it's a miracle she isn't locked up in a padded room somewhere, screaming her guts out.”

Hollis drew a breath. “When she told you she couldn't stop it, she meant it literally. She can't shut it off, ever.”

Isabel sat in the cool Jeep and stared down at her hands. Watching them shake.

“Okay,” she murmured, “so this one was bad. You've had bad ones before. You've heard all the ugly voices before. You can handle them. You can handle this.”

She heard the ghost of a laugh escape her. “But not if you keep talking to yourself.”
She laced her fingers together in her lap and raised her head, staring through the windshield at the building where Rafe and the others were.

It was where she should be, dammit, and never mind the pain. In there trying to sort through all the impressions, listening to the voices still echoing too loudly in her head. Even the ugly ones. Maybe especially the ugly ones.

Doing her job.

Isabel drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to focus, to soothe raw nerves and regain control of her senses, all her senses. Control. She had to find control.

Jamie had liked controlling people.

And that preacher . . .

*God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*

*Obey your mistress! Crawl!*

*Just three quarts more, and—*

*Bones bend before they break, you know. Bones bend—*

*Blood . . . so much blood . . .*

Her shaking hands lifted to cover her face, fingertips massaging her forehead and temples hard, and Isabel drew another breath, fighting to close out the voices. Not that she could.

Not that she'd ever been able to. Still, she tried.

Concentrate.

Focus.

Don't listen to them.

*She tempted me, that's what it was. Tempted me down the road to damnation. I was weak. I was . . .*

*I can make the rope tighter. I can make the rope much tighter. You want me to, don't you? You want me to hurt you. You want me to hurt you until you scream with the pain. Bones bend . . .*

*And Bobby Grange, over to Horton Mill, he wants enough to fill a keg. Must be having a party, I guess. Guys like him keep me in business, that's for sure. And it ain't my business, what else they do. It just ain't any of my affair.*

*It wasn't my fault! She tempted me!*

*Do you know what happens when you feel all the pain you can feel? When your nerve endings are hot and raw, and your voice is gone from screaming? Do you know what it feels like to go beyond pain? Let's find out . . .*

*Bones bend before they—*

*Isabel.*

*Iss . . . a . . . belll . . .*

Her hands jerked away from her face, and Isabel stared all around her, a bit wildly at first. There it was. A different voice. Male. Powerful. Crouching in the darkness . . .
But . . . there was no one. No one. Her head was pounding, her heart pounding, and the voices were only whispers now. Only whispers, none of them calling her name.

“Okay,” she said aloud, shakily, “that was new. That was different.”

That was terrifying.
T.J. MCCURRY FINISHED SPRAYING an area of the floor about two feet from the bed platform and said, “Kill the lights.”

They had already draped the high window, so when T.J.’s partner, Dustin Wall, turned off the lights in the room, they could all see the eerie greenish-white glow.

“Bingo,” Dustin muttered, and began photographing the evidence.

T.J. said, “Lotta blood here, Chief. There are some older spatters in other areas of the room, especially there around the bed, but here's the only place where somebody bled like a stuck pig.”

“Bled enough to die?”

In the glow of the Luminol, T.J.’s round face looked peculiarly gaunt. She shrugged and looked down at the old vinyl floor covering. “Somebody's done a fair job of cleaning, but you can see how strongly the Luminol is reacting. I’m betting that when we pull up this floor covering, we'll find even more soaked into the concrete underneath. This is the old style of vinyl that was put down in tiles, not in a solid sheet, so the blood would have found all the crevices.”

“T.J., did somebody die here?”

“You know I can't be absolutely certain about that, Chief. But if you want an educated guess, I'd say somebody did. Either that or a lot of somebodies bled a little bit here at different times—which, given the obvious purpose of the room, is entirely possible. We'll sort it out, get a blood type or types for you, DNA if you want.”

“I want. Especially since I don't have a body.”

Dustin said, “The state crime lab has cadaver dogs, if you want to start looking.”

“Not yet. Not without more information. As edgy as this town is, the last thing we need is to have people and dogs out looking for another body, unless we're very sure one is actually out there.” Rafe didn't say anything about psychic help, and he didn't look at Hollis, who was standing only a couple of feet away from him. “T.J., can you tell me if there's a blood trail out of this place?”

“I'll work on it. Dustin, do you have the shots? Then let's get the lights back on so we can see what we're doing.”

Rafe left her to it, admitting silently that he was relieved when the lights came back on. He'd seen Luminol used before, and it always struck him as chilling. Invisible to the eye until the chemicals in the Luminol reacted with it, the blood was a silent, ghostly accusation.

He joined Hollis, saying, “Would I be out of line in suggesting that Isabel go back to the inn and call it a day?”

“Arguable point, I suppose, but she won't go, so it hardly matters.”

He sighed. “You people are a very stubborn lot.”

Hollis didn’t ask whether he meant FBI agents or psychics; she knew the answer to that one. Instead, she said,
“There are only a handful of team leaders in the SCU, agents Bishop trusts to head up investigations. Isabel is one of them, and has been from the beginning.”

“You said it was a miracle she hadn't gone insane.” Rafe kept his voice low.

“Yes. But she didn't go insane, that's the point. She is an exceptionally strong lady. She lives her life and she does her job, whatever the effort or the cost. What you saw happen in here is a rare thing, but similar things have happened before. It hasn't stopped her in the past, and this won't stop her now. If anything, the strong connection will probably make her even more determined to put all the puzzle pieces in place and get this killer.”

“He's gotten away from her twice before,” Rafe said, more to himself than to Hollis.

But she nodded. “Yeah, it's personal. How could it not be? It was her best friend he killed ten years ago, in case you didn't know that. She and Julie King grew up together, practically sisters. Isabel was only twenty-one when it happened, in college, trying to decide what to do with her life. Taking the most amazing variety of subjects, like classical Latin, and computer science, and botany. Nerdy stuff.”

Hollis shrugged. “She was drifting, mostly. Getting by with good grades because of a good mind, not effort. Sort of . . . shut in herself, detached, uninvolved. From all I've been told, Julie's murder changed her completely.”

“That isn't what . . . triggered her psychic ability?” It wasn't really a question.

“No. That had already happened.” Hollis didn't offer to elaborate.

Rafe wasn't surprised. “But her friend's murder more or less started her life as a cop.”

“I'd say so. In the beginning, she just wanted to find out who had killed Julie. That's what motivated her, what began to shape her life and future. By the time he surfaced again in Alabama five years later, she had a degree in criminology under her belt and worked for the Florida State Police. She apparently did routine searches of law-enforcement databases on her own time, waiting for the killer to strike again. Just after he killed the second victim in Alabama, Isabel took a leave of absence and turned up there. That was when she met Bishop.”

“And turned in her state badge for a federal one.”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Rafe drew a breath and let it out slowly. “So now she uses her knowledge, training, and psychic abilities to try and ferret out killers. Especially this one. Tell me something, Hollis. How many more times can she go through what she did in here before it breaks her?”

“At least one more time.” Hollis grimaced at his expression. “I know it sounds harsh. But it's also the truth; we take this stuff one . . . experience . . . at a time, and none of us can be sure when the end will come. Or how.”

“Wait a minute. You're telling me you guys know this stuff you do is going to kill you one day?”

“I'd call that a radical interpretation of the text,” she murmured.

“Hollis.”

“We're not the only stubborn ones, I see.”

“Answer my question.”

“I can't.” She shrugged, more than a little impatient now. “Rafe, we don't know. Nobody really knows. We're all checked out medically after assignments, and the doctors have noted some changes in some agents. They don't know what that means, we don't know what it means. Maybe nothing.”

“Or maybe something. Something fatal.”
“Look, all I can tell you is that for some agents, there's a price for using their abilities. Some, like Isabel, live with pain most of the time, usually headaches. Some finish up assignments so exhausted it takes them weeks to fully recover. I know one agent who eats constantly during a case, and I mean constantly; it's like her abilities cause her metabolism to shoot into high gear and she has to fuel her body continually in order to do her job. But there are other agents who never seem affected physically by what they do. It varies. So, no, I can't tell you using our abilities is going to kill us one day. Because we just don't know.”

“But it's possible.”

“Sure, it's possible, I guess. It's also possible—more than possible, really—that we'll be killed in the line of duty by a regular old bullet or knife or explosion of some kind. The risk comes with the job. We all know the potential hazards, believe me. Bishop is very careful to make certain we understand what we might be risking, even if it's only a theoretical possibility. Anyway, Isabel made the decision that was hers to make, to use her abilities this way. She's been doing it for years, and she knows her limits.”

“I don't doubt that. What I doubt is that she'll stop before those limits are reached.”

“She's dedicated” was Hollis's only response.

“Yeah, I get that.”

“You face risks in your job. Why keep doing it?”

Rafe didn't answer, just shook his head and said, “T.J. and Dustin will be a while, and there's really nothing more you and Isabel can do here. Is there?”

It was Hollis's turn to avoid the direct question. “We can go back to the station, work there while you guys finish up here. Get the information on the two previous series of murders posted on the boards.”

“Good idea,” Rafe said.

Hollis took the first chance she got to call in, which turned out to be about an hour later, when Isabel left the conference room to make copies of a stack of paperwork.

The number was still a bit unfamiliar, but her cell phone's address book had been carefully programmed, so it was easy to find the number and make the call.

As soon as he answered, Hollis said, “I didn't like doing that. Isabel's business is her own. She wouldn't talk about me behind my back, not that sort of personal stuff.”

“He needed to know,” Bishop said.

“Then Isabel should have been the one to tell him.”

“Yes, but she wouldn't. Or, at least, wouldn't tell him right now. He needs to know now.”

“And why is that, O wise Yoda?”

Bishop chuckled. “I'm guessing ‘Because I say so' is not going to be a satisfactory answer for you.”

“I didn't accept that even from my father; it definitely won't work for you.”

“Okay. Then I'll tell you the truth.”

“I appreciate that. The truth being?”
“The truth being that certain things have to happen in a certain order if we're to avert a catastrophe.”

Hollis blinked. “And we know that catastrophe lies ahead because . . . ?”

“Because some of us occasionally catch a glimpse of the future.” Bishop sighed. “Hollis, we can't fix everything. We can't make the future all bright and shiny just because we know before they happen that there are troubles and tragedies waiting there for us. The best we can do sometimes, the absolute best, is to chart a careful path somewhere between bad and worse.”

“And that path requires that I spill part of Isabel's story to Rafe.”

“Yes. It does. This time. Next time, you may be asked to do something else. And you'll do it. Not because I say so, but because you can trust in the fact that Miranda and I would never do anything to injure or betray any member of the team—even to save the future.”

Hollis sighed. “I wish that sounded melodramatic, but since I know the stories and I've seen a few things myself, I'm afraid it's the literal truth. The saving-the-future business, I mean.”

“We have to do what we can. It's seldom enough, but sometimes the right word or the right information at the right moment can change things just a bit. Shift the balance more toward our favor. When we can even do that much. Sometimes we can't interfere at all.”

“Going to tell me how you know that this is one of the times you can interfere?”

“Miranda sees the future and takes me along for the ride. Sometimes we see alternate futures; that's when we know we can change things. Sometimes we see only one future. We see what's inevitable.”

“That's when you know you can't.”

“Yes.”

“And the future I just changed by telling Rafe some of Isabel's past?”

“Was a future in which he died.”

“So why hasn't her cameraman reported her missing?” Isabel asked Dana Earley.

“I think he's ashamed of himself. Apparently, she told him to wait in the van while she went to check something out. He claims he doesn't know what. Anyway, she hadn't been gone ten minutes before he was asleep. And he didn't wake up until Joey and I banged on the side of the van about half an hour ago.”

“That's a long nap.”

“He says he's been running short on sleep for days. Probably true; a lot of our technical people get fascinated with their toys and keep the weirdest hours you can imagine.”

Isabel frowned. “You've checked with her station, with the other media people across the street?”

Dana nodded. “Oh, yeah. The last anybody saw of Cheryl was just before dark last night. Dammit, I warned her to watch her back, brunette or not.”

“Why?”

“Because I think the spotlight on a small town like Hastings can get pretty uncomfortable, and I wouldn't be
Isabel rested a hip on the corner of an unoccupied desk, where the conversation was taking place. “That’s not a bad theory, assuming he isn’t too far gone to think logically. Off the record.”

Dana nodded again, this time somewhat impatiently. “And I’m no profiler, but I’d expect him to target somebody who doesn’t fit his clear preferences so far, just to make a statement.”

“You’re not the one I want, but you’re in my way. Nobody’s safe,” Isabel murmured. “Go away.”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Thanks for filing the report, Ms. Earley.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help look for that kid—”

“The best way you can help her and us is not to get yourself added to our missing-persons list. Don’t go anywhere alone. I mean anywhere, unless it’s into a locked room you know damned well is safe. Pass the word to the other journalists, will you?”

“Will do.”

“Male and female journalists,” Isabel added.

Dana nodded wryly and left.

Isabel remained where she was for several minutes, frowning at nothing. She was tired. Very tired. And worried.

If this bastard had grabbed a brunette journalist, had been angry enough to stray so far from his preferences, then why hadn’t Isabel felt it?

“What’s wrong with me?” she murmured.

There was no answer, except for the feeling she had of something crouching in the darkness. Watching. Waiting.

When Rafe walked into the conference room just before four that afternoon, he wasn’t especially happy to find Alan Moore there with Isabel.

“Hollis and Mallory are out running down a couple of leads,” she told him, without going into detail. She seemed none the worse for what had happened in Jamie Brower’s secret playroom, though something about her eyes told him she was still suffering a pounding headache.

Rafe nodded without commenting on either her info or his own hunch, and said to Alan, “Please tell me you have a reason other than idle curiosity for being here.”

“My curiosity is never idle.”

“I should have warned you about him, Isabel. You can only believe about half of what he says. On a good day.”

“See, this is what happens when you grow up with a guy who becomes a cop,” Alan said. “He turns into a suspicious bastard right before your eyes.”

“Not without reason,” Rafe retorted. “You’ve been a pain in my ass since I was appointed.”
“I've been doing my job.”

Isabel intervened before they could begin rehashing past offenses, saying, “Alan received something a bit unexpected in yesterday's mail.”

Rafe stared at Alan. “And you're just now bringing it in?”

“I've been busy.”

“Alan, one of these days you're going to go too far. Consider this a warning.”

Despite the calm tone, Alan was perfectly aware that his boyhood friend was deadly serious. He nodded, not really having to fake the sheepish expression. “Noted.”

Without commenting on the byplay between the men, Isabel handed Rafe a single sheet of paper in a clear plastic evidence bag. “I've already checked it. No prints, except his.”

The note, block-printed yet virtually scrawled in a bold, dark hand on the unlined paper, was brief.

```
MR. MOORE, THE COPS HAVE GOT IT ALL WRONG. HE ISN'T KILLING THEM BECAUSE THEY'RE BLONDES. HE'S KILLING THEM BECAUSE THEY'RE NOT
```

“Not blondes?” Rafe said, looking at Isabel.

“Yeah, but they were,” she said. “At least, Jamie and Tricia were natural blondes; Allison Carroll used hair color.”

“But she—” He stopped himself.

Isabel finished the comment for him. “She matched top and bottom. But the lab results are in, and they say she used hair color. It's not all that uncommon for a woman to dye her pubic hair, especially when the change is so drastic and she's at a stage in her life when looking good naked is a major goal. In any case, Allison's natural hair color was very dark.”

Rafe met Alan's interested gaze, and said, “This is off the record, you realize that?”

“Yeah, Isabel's already warned me. Giant red federal warning, accompanied by flags, stamps, sealing wax, oaths of secrecy, and appropriate threats of being transported to Area 51 and turned into a lab rat.”

Isabel smiled but said nothing.

“Just as a point of interest,” Alan commented, “Cheryl Bayne is a brunette.”

“Cheryl Bayne,” Isabel said, “is missing. As are others on an unfortunately lengthy list. We don't know that anything has happened to any of them.”

“Yet.”

“Yet,” she agreed.

Alan eyed her, then continued, “Anyway, when all is said and done and you've got the guy, I reserve the right to inform the public that I was contacted by the killer.”

“Were you?” Isabel murmured.

“Third person,” Rafe noted, studying the note. “He isn't killing them because they're blondes. This could have been written by someone who knows the killer. Knows what he's doing.”
“Or maybe,” Alan offered, “he’s schizophrenic and believes it’s not really him killing these women.”

“You just want this to be the killer,” Rafe said in an absent tone.

“Well, yes. This story could be my Watergate.”


“It could make my career,” Alan insisted.

“Yeah?” Isabel was politely interested. “And do you happen to remember the name of the journalist who was supposedly contacted by Jack the Ripper?”

Alan scowled. “Shatter a man’s dreams, why don’t you?”

“Do you remember?”

“It was over a hundred years ago.”

“And the most famous serial killer of modern times. Countless books have been written about him. Movies made about him. Theories as to his identity endlessly debated. And yet the name of that journalist doesn’t exactly spring readily to the tongue, does it?”

“Do you know it?” Alan challenged.

“Oh, I don’t think it’ll ever be definitively solved. And I don’t believe it should be. Some things should remain mysteries.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

“Yes, I do. We should never, ever believe life—or history—holds no surprises for us. That way lies arrogance. And arrogance can blind us to the truth.”

“Which truth?”

“Any truth. All truth.” Her voice was solemn.

Alan sighed and got to his feet. “Okay, before you start calling me Grasshopper, I’m going to leave.”

“I’m sure I have a pebble around here somewhere, if you want to stay and test your readiness,” Isabel said, still solemn.

“Somehow, I don’t think I’m fast enough,” Alan said, not without a note of honest regret. He offered them both a casual salute, then left the conference room, closing the door behind him.

“Good job of distracting him,” Rafe said.

“Maybe. With any luck he’ll spend at least the next few hours on the Internet or in the library reading up on Jack the Ripper—just so he can tell me the name of that journalist the next time I see him. It’ll occupy his mind a little while.” She leaned back in her chair and rubbed the nape of her neck with one hand, frowning slightly.

“Still got that headache?”
“It comes and goes. So far, there's no sign of Cheryl Bayne; her station has backed up Dana Earley's missing persons report with one of their own. And Hollis and Mallory are checking out the rest of the properties owned by Jamie Brower.”

“You still want to find that box of photos.”

“I want to find whatever is there. Speaking of which, your forensics team confirmed blood in Jamie's playhouse, I gather. A lot of blood.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you were right about that. And a faint blood trail to the door. T.J. figures the body was wrapped in plastic. I'm guessing it was put into a car and hauled somewhere. They're going over Jamie's car now, but we didn't find anything when we checked it bumper to bumper after she was killed.”

Isabel shook her head. “She wouldn't have panicked, and she was too smart to transport a body in her own car. It would have been her playmate's car. And I'm betting she got rid of it afterward. Very rid of it. Like maybe sank it to the bottom of one of the lakes in the area. With or without the body inside.”

“That,” he agreed, “is all too likely.” He hesitated, then added, “Did you pick up anything from Alan?”

“No, he's a very closed book. Not uncommon for a journalist; they keep a lot of secrets, as a rule. Most of us find it difficult to read them, even the telepaths.”

“You think his guess about the killer being schizophrenic was right?”

“I think it's at least as likely as any other theory we have. Maybe more than likely.” She drew a breath and spoke rapidly. “One school of thought proposes four different types of serial murderers: visionary, mission-oriented, hedonistic, and control-oriented. The mission-oriented is out to eliminate a particular group he feels is unworthy of living. Common victims for this type of killer are those easily categorized: prostitutes, the homeless, the mentally ill. Or—plumbers.”

Rafe blinked. “Plumbers?”

“I'm just saying. Mission-oriented serial killers target groups. Unless our guy is out to kill all women, or at least all successful women—a task even a madman would have to find daunting—then I don't believe he's mission-oriented.”

“Sounds logical to me. Next?”

“The hedonistic killer is after pleasure or thrills when he kills. He may get his jollies from the kill itself, from the arousal and gratification of what's basically a lust murder; he may enjoy the planning stages, the stalking of his prey. Or he may find pleasure in the consequences of the kill if, for instance, he gains a kind of freedom by killing family or people he perceives as tying him down somehow.”

“Control-oriented type?”

“His thing is having power over the victim, especially the power of life and death. If he rapes, it's for control and domination, not thrills. And this type generally doesn't kill his victims immediately. He likes to torture, both physically and psychologically. He wants to draw it out, savor his power over them, watch their helplessness and terror.”

“You must have hellacious nightmares,” Rafe said.

She looked at him with a little half smile. “Oddly enough, no. My nightmares tend to come while I'm awake.”

Rafe waited a moment, giving her an opening, but it was obvious she didn't intend to take it. “So our guy is not likely to be control-oriented, or at least not driven by that, since he doesn't waste any time at all in killing his victims. And the visionary type of serial killer I'm assuming is the nail Alan may have hit on the head?”
“Umm. Alan . . . and the note sent to him.” She tapped a red fingernail against the plastic-sleeved note Rafe had placed atop the stack of papers on the conference table in front of her. “This makes me wonder, it really does. If it's not purely a ruse designed to throw us off track—and we have to assume that's at least possible—then this note could tell us a lot about our killer. I'll need to make a copy for us and send the original to Quantico, by the way. The handwriting experts may be able to tell us something. As for what the note says . . .”

“He wants us to stop him?”

“If we accept this as written, and as written by the killer, then some part of him does. The sane part.” Isabel paused, frowning. “The least common type of serial killer is the visionary, someone who sees visions or hears voices commanding him to kill.”

“As in Son of Sam.”

“Yeah. He usually attributes the voices to God or some kind of demon and feels himself helpless to disobey them. He's not in control, the voices are. They tell him to kill, who to kill, when to kill. Maybe why those particular people have to be killed. He may hear the voices from childhood, or it may be a sudden psychosis brought on by stress or trauma. Some people believe a chemical change in the brain is responsible, but, as I said, we don't know a whole hell of a lot about how the brain really works.

“In any case, the visionary killer feels he's controlled by something alien, something that is no part of himself. Sometimes he ignores or fights the voices or visions for years before they finally overpower his will. Bottom line, he's a puppet with someone else—or something else—pulling his strings.”

“Okay,” Hollis said, studying the notes in her hand and then looking up as Mallory pulled the police Jeep to the curb and parked. “This should be it. Last place on Jamie's list of properties.”

“What're we expecting to find here?” Mallory wondered, eyeing the boarded-up front window of what had once, years before, been a gas station. “According to her broker, Jamie planned to sell this place.”

“Yeah, but he also said that wasn't the original plan. She bought this property meaning to raze what's here and build a nice little place to fit in with the boutiques popping up at this end of town. It would have vastly increased the value of the property. Then she very suddenly decided to just sell out.”

“But she made that decision about several of the properties we've looked at. And the broker didn't say suddenly, he said somewhat unexpectedly.”

“Somewhat unexpectedly about three months ago. Isabel says that fits the time frame; it's when Jamie started showing signs of nerves. Deciding to unload so much of her property virtually all at once even if it meant taking a loss was out of character, and when people do things out of character there's usually a good reason behind the actions.”

“Like she accidentally killed a lover, maybe. But what was the plan after she sold out? Did she mean to get her hands on all the cash she could so she could leave town?”

“Could be. Isabel thinks there's a possibility.”

“Then why are we checking out these places? She wouldn't have hidden the photo box—or any other keepsake—in a place she was going to sell. You don't think we're going to find a body in there?”

“Well, you know as well as I do, the state crime network coughed up a list of at least three women of roughly the right age reported missing in this general area at about the same time Jamie got nervous. The police in each district believe all three women did not leave of their own free will, which makes homicide at least a possibility. And . . . if things did get out of hand in one of Jamie's little games, she had to do something with the body.”
“Hide it in a building she owned herself and was planning to sell?”

“I wouldn’t call it a smart thing to do. Unless she figured out a way to completely destroy the body or completely hide it even if the building came down. Or unless she planned to be far away and living under an assumed name or something by the time anything was discovered.”

“Interesting possibilities,” Mallory agreed. “Okay. Grab your flashlight and let’s check it out.”

Isabel turned her gaze to the bulletin boards across the room, which had, Rafe noted, acquired what looked like canvas drop cloths that could be conveniently lowered to cover the boards whenever unauthorized persons were present.

The cloths were lowered now, presumably because Alan had been in the room.

Absently, she said, “Mallory thought the drop cloths would be a good idea, so she fixed them. We can keep the boards covered most of the time, unless we’re in here working. Less chance of too much information leaking out.”

“Isabel? Could a visionary killer gain control over his voices for years between killing sprees? Could he live normally during those years?”

“That would be . . . unusual.”

“But would it be possible? Could it be? Are we dealing with a killer who really isn’t responsible—at least legally—for what he’s doing?”

“That might depend on the trigger—and the reason or reasons behind all this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the human mind, the human psyche, is a very complicated beast. Generally speaking, it knows how to protect itself, or the most fragile aspects of itself. If he’s hearing voices or seeing visions, and they’re commanding him to do things utterly alien to his nature, then sure—he could forget about them the moment the voices or visions stop.”

“For years on end?”

“Maybe. And then something happens in his life to trigger this psychosis, and his sick and twisted alter ego comes out to play.”

“For six weeks. Six women. Six murders.”

“The number, the time period, both have to be relevant, either tied to an event somewhere in his past or tied to the psychosis. To his voices.”

“Which is your guess?”

Isabel thought for a moment, then said, “Childhood. The majority of the traumas that affect us most deeply occur in childhood. It’s when we’re most vulnerable.”

“What about the idea that he’s schizophrenic?”

“There are schizophrenics able to function, with medication and other treatment. No pharmacy within a hundred miles has filled a prescription for the sort of medication that would be needed.”

Rafe lifted his brows. “Already checked that out?”
“Well, the profile noted the possibility of schizophrenia, so it seemed prudent. An inquiry from the Bureau tends to carry a bit of weight, and since we weren't asking for specific patient information or identification, all the pharmacies were happy to cooperate.”

“Okay. So we can be pretty sure he isn't being treated for schizophrenia.”

“Which doesn't rule out him having it. Or that he's getting psychiatric treatment without medication. We haven't checked with doctors.”

“Because they wouldn't disclose the information.”

“Not willingly. They have a responsibility to report it if they believe a patient has committed or is about to commit a violent crime, but that sort of treatment can take years before the doctor truly begins to understand his or her patient.”

“And understand what the voices are making him do.”

“Exactly. In any case, my guess is that our guy isn't getting treatment of any kind. Whether he's aware of being sick is an open question; whether he knows what he's done is another one. From the information we've gathered so far, there's just no way to be certain.”

“Earlier, you said some schizophrenics were, literally, possessed by another person, another soul trying to take over. Is that possible in this case?”

Isabel shook her head. “So far, we've never encountered a person in that condition who wasn't in a mental institution and under restraints or drugged into a stupor. We don't believe such a person could function normally under any conditions—far less something like this. There's just too much violence going on in the brain itself to allow even the appearance of normalcy.”

“And our killer appears normal.”

“Yes. No matter how screwed up his childhood may have been, or how many voices he might be listening to, he's able to function normally to all outward appearances.”

After a moment, Rafe said, “I think I'd prefer an evil killer who knows exactly what he's doing, sick as it is. At least then it would be . . . ”

“Simpler,” she agreed wryly. “Black and white, no shades of gray. No agonizing over who or what is really responsible. No reason to hesitate or regret. But you know as well as I do that it's seldom that easy.”

“Yeah. As Hollis said, the universe never seems to want to play it that way. Listen . . . we aren't talking about a psychic killer, are we?”

“Christ, I hope not.” With a sigh, she returned her gaze to his face. “True visionary killers are delusional, Rafe. They believe they hear the voices of demons or the voice of God. They're being commanded to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do, for reasons the sane among us would find completely nuts. They aren't psychic; what they're experiencing isn't real except inside their own twisted minds.”
IT HADN'T TAKEN ALAN long to find the information he was looking for on Jack the Ripper, and he was somewhat chagrined to see just how much information was readily available via the Internet on the case.

Just as Isabel had said.

She hadn't exactly thrown a gauntlet at his feet, but Alan nevertheless felt challenged to somehow best the federal agent. And Rafe, of course. It would be nice, he thought, to get the upper hand with Rafe.

Just once, for Christ's sake.

The problem was, Alan hardly had access to the sort of databases of information the police and feds could command. But there was one thing he did have, and that was knowledge of this town and its people.

The question was, could he use that?

He wasn't able to speak to Mallory as he left the station, since she wasn't there, so he didn't know whether to expect a visit from her tonight. After last night, he figured he probably wouldn't see her for days; whenever she showed him any signs of vulnerability—falling asleep in his arms would definitely be listed in that column, he knew—she tended to retreat for a while both literally and figuratively.

In any case, he had learned the hard way not to plan his days or nights around her. He got in his car at the station and checked his watch, debating silently, then started the car.

It was time he tapped all his sources.

4:45 PM

Rafe had a hunch Isabel's explanation contained a but, so he asked. “But?”

“But . . . we've encountered serial killers before who also happened to be psychic, so the two aren't exactly mutually exclusive. In fact, some researchers believe that serial killers and psychics have something in common: an unusual amount of electromagnetic energy in the brain.”

“What means?”

“What means we are or could be kindred spirits, scary as that sounds. The excess energy in a psychic seems to activate an area of the brain most people don't appear to use, an area we believe controls psychic abilities. The energy in a serial killer tends to sort of go wild, building up in different areas of the brain, especially in the rage center, and since it has no way to be channeled, you end up with synapses misfiring right and left. Burned-out or overloaded areas of the brain could trigger the compulsion to kill.”

“So that's one theory.”

“One of many. And that theory holds something else to be a possibility. That a serial murderer can also become psychic. Which comes first in that case, the psychic ability or the insanity, is still an open and much debated question.”
“Does it matter?”

“Well, yeah, for some of us.” Her voice was light. “I hear voices, Rafe, remember?”

“Voices you don’t attribute to God or a demon. Voices that don’t command you to kill.”

“Not even on the worst day yet, I’m happy to say. So far, so good.” She shook her head slightly. “But returning to the point—a psychic killer is possible.”

“Would you know? I mean, could you tell if that were the case?”

“Not necessarily. Psychics can often recognize each other as psychic, but not always.”

“Shields,” he said, remembering what Hollis had told him. “Yet another instance of the mind protecting itself.”

“Hollis said she mentioned that.” Isabel didn’t seem disturbed by it. “And it is one reason we don’t always recognize each other. Also, nonpsychic people frequently develop shields of their own, for privacy or protection, especially in small towns where everybody tends to know everybody else’s business. It’s a lot more common than you might think. Hell, I could talk to the killer every day, never knowing he’s the murderer and never picking up psychic ability—or psychotic voices in his head.”

For the first time since he’d returned, she sounded tired, and it made him say, “How close are Mallory and Hollis to finishing up?” He was about to suggest calling one of them, but Isabel automatically used a more direct line of communication.

“They are . . .” She frowned, concentrating. “. . . at the last property on the list, I think. What used to be a gas—” Her face changed, tightened.

Watching her, Rafe was conscious of the same uneasiness he’d felt in Jamie’s “playhouse.” She was somewhere else, somewhere distant from here. He wanted to reach over and touch her, anchor her here somehow.

She came abruptly to her feet. “Oh, Christ.”

“You know, for a gas station, this is a huge building.” Mallory’s voice echoed.

They were in the rear area, which was divided into at least three separate rooms, all apparently cavernous; the one they were presently exploring had a concrete floor and high windows so dirty they admitted almost no light. Rusted pieces and parts from old cars still hung on hooks and racks on the cinder-block walls, and piles of junk lay everywhere.

Every time Mallory moved the beam of her flashlight, it seemed to catch something metallic and glare back at her, like something springing out of the shadows.

Unsettling.

“Tell me about it. I’m guessing it didn’t start out life as a gas station.” Hollis pointed her flashlight into a dark corner and jumped when an unexpectedly shiny chrome bumper glinted brightly. “Jesus.”

Mallory jumped in the same instant, but in her case it was because something skittered across her foot. “Shit. I hate rats, but I hope that’s what just ran across my foot.”

Hollis didn’t care for rats herself, but she was standing before what looked like a solid steel door that held her interest at the moment. The door was padlocked. “Never mind the rats. Take a look at this.”
Mallory joined her. “I can’t never mind rats. I hate rats. And I’m going to throw these shoes away. Yuck.” Her flashlight beam joined Hollis’s. “Is that a new lock?”

“I’d say so. Hold on a minute.” She juggled her flashlight briefly before tucking it under her arm as she dug into the waist pack she was wearing. She put on a pair of latex gloves, then produced a small, zippered leather case.

Mallory watched with interest. “Burglar’s tools? You didn’t bring those out at Jamie’s playhouse.”

“I didn’t have to, you had the locksmith’s tools.” Hollis smiled suddenly. “I’ve been hoping there’d be an opportunity for me to try out my lock-picking skills. They haven’t been field-tested yet.” She selected a couple of tools and bent to begin working on the lock.

“You learned this at Quantico?”

“From Bishop. It’s sort of fascinating which skills he determines to be most important to a new agent. Handling a gun without shooting myself in the foot and with reasonable accuracy—check. Being able to use a form of autohypnosis and biofeedback to focus and concentrate—check. Ability to talk to the dead—a major plus. Being able to pick various and sundry locks—check. Or, at least, so I hope.”

Mallory laughed under her breath. “You know, I’d really like to meet this Bishop of yours. He sounds like a very interesting man.”

“He certainly is. Damn. Shine your light right here, will you?”

Mallory complied.

“Wait—I think”—There was a soft click, and Hollis opened the padlock with a flourish. “Ta-da. What do you know, I can do this. I wasn’t at all sure I could.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” She put away the tools, then had to put her shoulder against the door to push it inward. And the moment it was open a few inches Hollis immediately stepped back. “Oh, shit.”

The two women looked at each other, and Mallory said, “I haven’t had the misfortune to stumble across a decomposing human corpse, but I’m guessing that’s what one would smell like. Please tell me I’m wrong.”

Breathing through her mouth, Hollis said, “I’m pretty sure that’s what it is. Part of the training I got was a visit to the body farm—where students and forensics specialists study decomposition. It’s not an odor you easily forget.”

Mallory stared at the partially open door. “I’m not looking forward to seeing what’s inside there.”

“No, me either.” Hollis eyed her. “Want to wait and call in reinforcements?”

“No. No, dammit. With a padlocked door and that smell, there’s obviously nothing dangerous in there. Nothing alive, I mean. We have to open the door and look, make sure it’s not some dead animal in there. Then call it in.”

Hollis braced herself mentally and emotionally—and did her best to shore up her psychic shields. Then she and Mallory shouldered the door all the way open and stepped inside.

“Jesus,” Mallory whispered.

Hollis might have echoed her, if she could have forced words past the sick lump in her throat.

It was a bare room, for the most part, with only a few shelves along one wall to show it had been used at least once for storage. The high windows admitted just enough illumination, from the southwestern corner of the building and the hot sun low enough in the sky, to provide mote-filled beams of light focused on the center of the room.

On her.
One end of a thick, rusted chain was wrapped around a steel I-beam overhead, while at the other end of the chain a big hook jutted from between her rope-bound wrists. She dangled, literally, from the hook, her feet several inches above the floor. There was nothing beneath her except rusty stains on the concrete.

Thick, dark hair hung down to mostly obscure her face. The clothing she had worn, a once-demure blouse and skirt, had been shredded, but very neatly, methodically, almost artistically. The material provided a fringe that almost hid what had been done to her body.

Almost.

“Jamie didn't do this,” Mallory whispered. “She couldn't have done this.”

“Nothing human could have done this,” Hollis responded, her own voice thin. “It’s like he was curious to see what color her insides were.”

Mallory backed out of the room, gagging, and Hollis didn't have to follow to know the other cop was throwing up everything she'd eaten today.

Her own stomach churning, Hollis reached for her cell phone, her gaze fixed on the dangling and decomposing body of a woman who'd been gutted like a fish.

6:00 PM

The medical examiner for the county, Dr. David James, was a normally dour man, and a scene like this one didn't make him any more cheerful.

“She's been dead at least a couple of months,” he told Rafe. “The fairly cool, dry conditions in here probably slowed decomp a bit, but not much. I can't be positive, of course, but from the bruising on her neck I'm guessing strangulation, probably with a rope of some kind. Whoever cut her did it postmortem, probably days afterward; there was almost no bleeding from those wounds.”

“Anything missing?” Rafe kept his own voice as level as the doctor's, but it required a tremendous effort.

“I'll be able to tell you more when I get her on the table, but it does look like one kidney is gone, some of the intestines, part of her stomach.”

“Christ.”

“Yeah. I may be able to get you prints from her, and it looks like she's had some dental work done, so we have a fair shot at an I.D. if she's one of the missing women on your list. Get this guy, Rafe. What he did to the other women was bad enough, but this . . . He's worse than a butcher.”

Rafe didn't comment on the doctor's assumption that the same killer was responsible for this woman's death. “We're doing our best.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.” Dr. James hunched his shoulders a little, weariness in the gesture. “My guys are standing by to bag her as soon as yours are finished.”

“Right.”

“I'll get the report to you ASAP.”

Rafe watched the doctor make his way back toward the front of the former gas station, then returned his gaze to the activities in the back room. T.J. and Dustin were working methodically, their faces grim. Off to one side, Isabel stood with Hollis as they studied the dead woman.

If he'd been asked to guess, Rafe would have said that Hollis was feeling queasy and Isabel was exhausted. He
was pretty sure both hunches were on the mark.

Mallory joined him in the doorway and nodded toward the federal agents, saying, “They still believe she was one of Jamie's playmates, the one accidentally killed.”

“But they don't believe Jamie did this,” Rafe said, a statement rather than a question.

“No.”

“Which begs the question . . .”

“Who did. Yeah. Didn't Doc say she died two months ago at least?”

Rafe nodded. “Before the murders started. Isabel?”

She and Hollis immediately walked over to join them at the doorway.

“The doc says she didn't bleed to death,” Rafe said to Isabel without preamble.

She nodded. “Yeah, I missed that one. I'm guessing the lab work from Jamie's playhouse will come back showing several people bled in that spot over a long period of time. Some of her clients, probably, but others as well. There might even have been a murder there a long time ago.”

“That blood trail to the door,” he noted.

“Possibly. Or one or more of Jamie's clients.” Isabel shrugged. “In any case, I missed.”

Mallory said dryly, “All will be forgiven if you just help us get this bastard.”

“Was this his trigger?” Rafe asked.

“I don't know,” Isabel replied.

“An educated guess?”

“If you want that . . . then maybe. Maybe he saw this woman die accidentally at Jamie's hands, and maybe it pissed him off. Or maybe he got his hands on a cold body and wondered what a warm one would feel like. Or maybe she was just a toy he played with because she happened to be handy.”

“You're not picking up anything?” He kept his voice low.

She grimaced slightly. “Lot of old, old stories; this building has been here a while. Arguments, mostly, but . . .”

Whispers.

_Jesus, George, we have to do it in the backseat?_

_I told you I can't afford a motel room._

_Yeah, but . . ._

_Hide the stuff inside the hubcap. I'm tellin' you, the cops'll never find it here . . ._

_That Jones bitch wants her car done by tomorrow or she won't pay . . ._

_You're fired, Carl! I'm fucking sick and tired of . . ._

_Bones bend before they break._
She's all colors inside.

Isabel.

Isss . . . a . . . bellll . . .

“Isabel?”

She blinked and looked at Rafe. “What? Oh. Just old stuff, mostly. But he was here. A day or two ago.”

“How do you know that?”

There was no way Isabel was going to tell Rafe that their killer had been looking at this poor woman and thinking about what he wanted to do to Isabel.

No way.

So all she said was, “He . . . looked at her. Thought about how she had deserved to die because she was bad.”

Rafe frowned. “Bad?”

“I get the sense he saw her with Jamie. Watched them. And what they did together bothered him on a very deep level. Sickened him, believe it or not.”

Something in the dark, crouching, waiting.

Watching.

Isabel shivered. “It feels cold here. Really cold.”

He was a little surprised. “Cold?”

“Yeah.” Her arms were crossed beneath her breasts, the gooseflesh on her skin actually visible. “Chilled, cold. Like a gust of icy air blowing through me. Yet another fun new experience.”

“You said you weren't an empath.”

“I'm not. I have no idea why I'm beginning to feel things rather than simply know them. Until now, feelings, sensations, only came with visions. Now . . .” She shivered. “No visions. But, man, I'm cold. I'm thinking that's not normal for June, never mind it not being normal for me.”

“Maybe you're coming down with something,” Rafe suggested prosaically.

“I sort of doubt it.”

“It's just in here?” Hollis asked.

“Seems to be. Outside, I was fine.”

“Then you should be outside.”

“We both should,” Isabel said. “You feel the cold too.” She gestured slightly, and they all saw the goose bumps on Hollis's bare arms.

Rafe looked at both agents, then said to his detective, “Mal, would you mind staying to supervise until T.J. and Dustin are finished and the body is removed?”

“No problem.”
“Thanks. I'll be right back.” Rafe gestured slightly, and the two other women walked with him toward the front of the building. “It's after hours for most of the businesses around here, so there's not too much traffic in the area, but I've posted a few of my people on the block to stop the curious from gathering. Or, at least, from gathering close by.”

When they stood out on the sidewalk, Isabel could indeed see both uniformed cops and passersby at a perimeter about half a block away.

“Great,” she muttered. “Well, at least the icy breeze stopped blowing.” She rubbed her upper arms briefly with both hands, relaxing visibly.

To Hollis, Rafe said, “I gather you didn't pick up anything helpful in there either?”

“No.”

He couldn't tell whether it was because there'd been nothing for her to pick up or because she hadn't tried. He decided not to ask.

“I was about to suggest we call it a day before Hollis and Mallory found the body. It still sounds like a good idea. First thing tomorrow we'll have a preliminary forensics report, and if I know Doc we'll have the postmortem as well. We'll have a decent shot at making an I.D. of the body, and we can start trying to piece together what happened to this lady. Between now and then there isn't much we can do. Except get some rest for tomorrow.”

“I will if you will,” Isabel said.

He eyed her, but before he could say anything, Hollis was speaking calmly.

“I, for one, would just as soon start fresh tomorrow. I want to shower about six times, watch something funny on television, and maybe call my mother. If I ever feel like eating again, I'll order a pizza. You two want to be gluttons for punishment, have at it. I'm going back to the inn.”

Isabel grimaced slightly. “A shower definitely sounds like a good idea; nobody wants to smell like death. But I'm way too restless to call it a day.” She looked at Rafe, brows lifting inquiringly. “Buy you dinner?”

He checked his watch but didn't hesitate. “I'll pick you up at eight.”

“See you then.” Isabel walked with Hollis back to their rental and got in the driver's seat. Hollis got in beside her and didn't say anything for about half a mile.

Then she spoke slowly. “He's blocking you, isn't he? No—he's shielding you.”

Isabel gave her partner a surprised glance, then fixed her gaze on the road again. “Bishop said you picked up on things quickly. Once again, he wasn't wrong.”

Absently, Hollis said, “You relax a bit whenever Rafe is nearby, as if some of the strain is lifted. Maybe I see it because I used to be an artist. It started in Jamie's playroom, didn't it? When he put his hands on your wrists.”

“Yeah.”

“You felt something?”

“The shock first. And then a muffling quality. Didn't shut out the voices, just... quieted them a bit, as though I were suddenly insulated. Just enough for me to notice. Out in the Jeep, when he was putting disinfectant on my neck and sitting so close, the voices were barely whispers. When he left to go back inside, they got louder again.”

“And just now, back there?”

“If he was within five feet of me, all I heard were whispers. Creepy whispers, but whispers. And felt that
“goddamned icy breeze; he doesn't seem to have had any effect at all on that.”

“So what does it mean?”

“I don't know. I seem to have been saying that a lot today. I don't like saying it, for the record.”

Hollis looked at her. “What do you hear now?”

“Usual background hum. Like listening to a party in the next room. That's normal.”

“Headache?”

“Dull throb. Also normal.”

“Rafe shielding you—is it getting stronger as time goes on?”

Isabel shrugged. “Hard to say, since it just started hours ago. I'll have to wait and see. It could get stronger. Or it could go away entirely. God knows.” She smiled suddenly, wryly. “But if it turns out he can silence the voices, if only for a while, I may just have to move in with the man. Or at least take vacations with him.”

“It would be nifty to have that quiet place to go to from time to time,” Hollis said seriously. “A refuge.”

Shaking her head, Isabel said, “Something else you'd better catch on to: the universe never offers something for nothing. There'll be a price tag. There always is.”

“Maybe it's a price you can pay.”

“And maybe it's a price he'll have to pay instead of me. Or would, if we went in that direction. It's the sort of thing the universe demands. Cosmic irony.”

“Doesn't seem fair. And you don't have to remind me that the universe isn't about fairness.”

“No, it's about balance.”

“Then maybe that's what Rafe is, for you. Balance. Maybe the universe is offering you a refuge because you push yourself so hard.”

“Yeah, and what's it offering him? A clairvoyant, career-driven federal agent who reads up on serial killers for fun, travels all over the country on a regular basis to get shot at and talk about serial killers, not to mention meeting a few of them in deadly situations, and, oh, by the way, hasn't had a successful romantic relationship in her entire adult life?”

“Great breath control,” Hollis murmured. “The meditation exercises must really work.”

Ignoring that, Isabel said, “I'm fairly sure Rafe hasn't pissed off the universe enough to be offered that little balance for his life.”

“Maybe there are qualities in you he needs for his own balancing act.”

“And maybe,” Isabel said, “it's just a chemical or electromagnetic thing. Energy fields, nothing more. Basic science, emotions and personalities not involved.”

She didn't have to be psychic to know she was being warned off, so Hollis didn't say anything else until her partner pulled the car into the parking lot of the inn. And then all she offered was a mild “I hear there's a surprisingly good Mexican place here in Hastings. You like Mexican, don't you?”

“I do.”

“And does Rafe?”
Isabel hesitated, then said with clear reluctance, “Yes. He does.”

As both agents got out of the car, Hollis said, again mildly, “Handy to already know so much about him. Likes and dislikes, habits, background. Sort of shortens the getting-to-know-each-other dance.”

“For me. Not for him.”

“Oh, I don't know about that. I have a hunch Rafe Sullivan already knows most of what he needs to about you. Except for one thing, I guess. And sooner or later, you're going to have to tell him.”

“I know,” Isabel said.

Special Agent Tony Harte scowled at the window as lightning flashed, then said, “Why is it that we always get the lousy weather, you want to tell me that?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Bishop responded absently as he worked at his laptop.

“This is not lucky. This is The Universe Hates Me. Me, personally. Who got a flat tire in the rain last night? Me. Who got grazed by a bullet when a pissed-off guy who wasn't even our suspect got even more pissed off and started shooting? Me. Who had to observe what was without doubt the most gross autopsy on record? Me.”

“Who has to put up with your bitching? Me,” Bishop said.

“And me,” Miranda said as she came into the room. “What's he going on about now?”


“Persecution complex.”

“Yeah, that was my diagnosis.”

“You two are not nearly as funny as you think you are,” Tony informed them.

“Neither are you,” Miranda said, then smiled. “Kendra will be fine, Tony.”

“I hate it when you do that. Here I am, working up a really good, strong mad to let off steam, and you pat me on the head—metaphorically—and tell me, there, there, sit down and be a good boy.”

“I did no such thing. I just said Kendra would be fine. And she will.”

“She's in Tulsa,” Tony said witheringly. “Setting aside the deranged killer she's looking for, they have tornadoes out there. Did you see today's weather?”

“Must have missed it.” Miranda sent a glance toward the window, where another flash of lightning showed the heavy rain battering Spokane. “There was so much weather here that I didn't bother.”

“There's a storm cell,” Tony fretted. “Big, nasty one. Bearing down on Tulsa.”

“Tony. Kendra will be fine.”

He eyed her cautiously. “Are you just saying that, or do you know?”

“I know.”

Looking up from his laptop, Bishop said mildly, “That's breaking the rules.”
“You really want to listen to him bitch for the next few hours?”

“No.”

“Well, then.”

Tony was staring at Bishop in some indignation. “You knew? You knew Kendra would be fine and just sat there without easing my mind?”

“I thought you wanted to let off steam.”

“There wouldn’t have been any steam to let off if you’d told me Kendra would be all right. Dammit.”

“See what you started?” Bishop said to his wife.

“Sorry. I just came in for—”

Whatever she’d come in for, what she got was a vision.

Even though he was relatively accustomed to seeing it happen, Tony nevertheless felt a little chill go through him as both Miranda and Bishop paled and closed their eyes, perfectly in sync. He waited, watching them, his own extra senses telling him this was a strong one, a painful one.

Finally, they opened their eyes, each reaching up to massage one temple. Miranda sat down across from her husband, and they looked at each other, both wearing an expression Tony had never seen before.

It caused another chill to go through him.

“We can't interfere,” Bishop said. “We've done all we can do.”

“I know. She'd probably ignore a warning anyway.”

“Probably. She's stubborn.”

“That's one word for it.”

Tony cared about all the members of the SCU, not only his absent fiancée, and he was anxious. “What is it?” he demanded. “What did you see?”

Slowly, still gazing at her husband, Miranda said, “If it's literal and not symbolic, then Isabel is about to make a choice that will change her life. And put her on a very, very dangerous path.”

“What's at the end of the path?”

Miranda drew a breath and let it out slowly. “The death of someone she cares about.”
CALEB HEARD THE NEWS about a fourth woman's body being found when he stopped by the coffee shop for a cup to take home. The girl behind the counter—he couldn't figure out how on earth they could be called “sales associates” when they worked in a coffee shop—was only too happy to fill him in on the latest details while she prepared his latte.

Gory details.

“And you know the worst part?” she demanded as she put a lid on the cup.

“Somebody died?” he suggested.

She blinked, then said anxiously, “Well, yeah, but I heard she'd been dead for months.”

Caleb resisted the impulse to ask what the hell difference that made. Instead, he said, “And the worst part is?”

“She was brunette,” Sally Anne, sales associate for the coffee shop and a brunette herself, whispered.

“Ah.”

“So none of us is safe. He's not just going after blondes now, he's—he's going after the rest of us.”

Caleb paid for his coffee and said with ruthless sympathy, “If I were you, I'd leave town.”

“I might. I just might. Thanks, Mr. Powell. Oh—can I help you, ma'am?”

“One iced mocha latte, please. Medium.”

Caleb turned quickly, surprised to find Hollis there. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She looked tired and also more casual than he'd yet seen her, in jeans and a black T-shirt that demanded to know if the hokey-pokey was really what it was all about.

“You're not still working?”

“No, we've pretty much called it a day.” She shrugged. “Can't do a lot in the way of investigating the body Sally Anne just told you about until we get forensics and a postmortem.”

Something about her wry tone made him say, “You didn't expect the news to not get around, did you?”

“No. But this town sets the land speed record for gossip, I've realized that much. The unfortunate thing is that it tends to be so damned accurate.”

“I'll say. I didn't grow up here, but when I started my practice fifteen years ago, it took less than a week for everyone in town to know that my parents were dead and my younger brother had gotten his girlfriend pregnant and married her literally at the business end of her daddy's shotgun.” He paused, then added, “I told no one, absolutely no one.”

Hollis smiled slightly and paid Sally Anne for her coffee. “They do seem to find out what they want to know.
Which begs the question . . .

“How can a killer walk among us, unseen?”

“Oh, not that question. Killers always have walked among us unseen. No, the question I’m asking myself is: how is it possible that a woman’s decomposing body hung inside a derelict gas station less than three blocks from the center of town for months without anybody noticing?”

Sally Anne uttered a choked little sound and rushed toward the back of the shop.

Hollis grimaced. “Well, that was definitely indiscreet. To say the least. I must be more tired than I thought. Or, at any rate, that’ll be my story.”

Caleb shook his head slightly. “Look, I know you’ve had a hell of a day, but can we sit down here and talk for a while? There’s something I want to ask you.”

She nodded and joined him at one of the small tables by the front window.

“Have you eaten?” Caleb asked. “The sandwiches here aren’t bad, or—”

Hollis shook her head, almost flinching. “No. Thank you. I’m reasonably sure the coffee will stay down, but only because I was practically breast-fed the stuff. I’m not planning to eat anything for the foreseeable future.”

It was Caleb’s turn to grimace. “So I take it Sally Anne’s gory details about the body were on the mark?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I’m sorry. That had to be rough.”

“Not destined to be one of my more pleasant memories. But I was warned what to expect when I signed on for this gig.” She sipped her latte, adding, “You wanted to ask me something?”

“Why did you sign on for this gig?”

Surprised, Hollis said, “I . . . didn’t expect a personal question.”

“I didn’t expect to ask one,” he confessed.

She smiled. “I thought lawyers always rehearsed what they said.”

“Not this one. Or, at least, not this time. If it’s too personal, we can forget I asked. But I’d rather not.”

“Why so curious?”

Even experienced as he was at reading juries, Caleb couldn’t tell if she was stalling or really wanted to know. “That explanation would undoubtedly involve a lot of me backpedaling and trying to justify my curiosity to myself, let alone you, so I’d just as soon skip the attempt. Let’s just say I’m a curious man and leave it at that.”

She gazed at him for a long moment, blue eyes unreadable, then said in a queerly serene voice, “I was assaulted. Beaten, raped, stabbed, left for dead.”

Not what he had expected. “Jesus. Hollis, I’m sorry, I had no idea.”

“Of course not, how could you?”

He literally didn’t know what to say, and for one of the very few times in his life. “That’s . . . why you became an agent?”

“Well, my old life was pretty much in tatters, so it seemed like a good idea when I was offered a chance at a new
“I was able to help—in a small way—stop the man who had attacked me and so many other women. That felt good.”

“Revenge?”

“No. Justice. Going after revenge is like opening a vein in your arm and waiting for somebody else to bleed to death. I didn't need that. I just needed to . . . see . . . him stopped. And I needed a new direction for my life. The Bureau and the Special Crimes Unit provided that.”

Tentatively, because he wasn't sure how far she would be willing to go in talking about this, he said, “But to devote your life to a career that puts you face-to-face on a regular basis with violence and death—and evil? How healthy can that be, especially after what you've gone through?”

“I guess it depends on one's reasons. I think mine are pretty good, beginning with the major one. Somebody has to fight evil. It might as well be me.”

“Judging by what I've seen in my life, it'll take more than an army to do it. No offense.”

Hollis shook her head. “You don't fight evil with an army. You fight it with will. Yours. Mine. The will of every human soul who cares about the outcome. I can't say I thought much about it until what happened to me. But once you've seen evil up close, once you've had your entire life changed by it, then you see a lot of things more clearly.” Her smile twisted, not without bitterness. “Even with someone else's eyes.”

He frowned, not getting that last reference. “I can understand feeling like that after what you went through, but to let it change your whole life—”

“Af ...
“Yeah. And have any of them?”

Ginny shrugged. “It’s sort of hard to say. Everybody’s jumpy. Two or three said they’d gotten the feeling of being watched at least a couple of times in the last few weeks, but even they admitted they weren’t sure of anything. Of course, now that I’ve brought up the subject, everybody’s talking about it, the guys too.”

Mallory sat down at her desk and rubbed her eyes wearily. “Well, hell. Dunno if that helps.”

“We’ll all be alert, anyway. Have you talked to the FBI agents about it?”

“Not yet. Need to, though, I suppose.” She sighed. “The dairy farmer’s wife; she turn up yet? And what is her name, anyway? Helton. What Helton?”

“Rose Helton. Not a sign of her. And we still have two other women reported missing in Hastings during the past month, not counting that news reporter who vanished last night. Sharona Jones and Kate Murphy. Plus the dozen or so missing from the general area outside Hastings in the same time period.”

“I know Sharona—she doesn’t fit the profile, she's black. She's missing?”

“Well, her boyfriend claims she is. But her dog is also missing, as well as her car and a lot of her clothes, and her mother says she's always wanted to see the world, so we're thinking she might have upped and left.”

“If Ray Mercer was my boyfriend, I'd up and leave too.” Mallory sighed again. “Still, we have to make sure, so keep everybody on it. What about Kate Murphy?”

“More troubling, in that she does fit the profile. Late twenties, blond, successful; she owns one of those new little boutiques on Main Street. Was doing pretty well with it too. Didn't show up for work on Monday, so her assistant manager has been running the shop.”

“We've checked out her house or apartment?”

“Uh-huh. No sign she's been taken—but no sign she left voluntarily either. Her car is in its slot at her condo, and far as we can tell it's clean. Haven't found her purse or keys, though. She didn't—doesn't—have any pets, and no family in Hastings. We're trying to track down relatives now.”

“And still no sign of Cheryl Bayne.”

“No. The station in Columbia has sent another reporter, this one male, to cover this new . . . angle.”

“How caring of them.”

Ginny nodded. “Yeah, even the other reporters are being pretty scathing about that.”

“While doing their own reports.”

“Uh-huh.”

Mallory shook her head in disgust. “Okay. Let me or the chief know if anything changes.”

“Right.”

When she was alone again, Mallory sat for a moment with her elbows on her desk and her hands cupping her face, fingers absently massaging her temples. She should stay, but Rafe had made it plain she was to go home as soon as the body had been taken from that old building and the forensics team finished.

Both of which had been done.

Mallory was tired but also curiously wide awake. She didn't want to go home. Didn't want to be alone. She wanted something to get the image of that poor woman out of her head.
With only a slight hesitation, she picked up her phone and called Alan's cell. “Hey, are you home?” she asked without preamble.

“Headed that way. Pulling into the parking lot now, as a matter of fact.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Nothing you could truthfully define as food,” he replied. “There was something a charitable person might have called a sandwich hours ago, but it may have been just a figment of my imagination. Are you offering?”

“I'm offering takeout Chinese. I'll even pick it up on my way to your place. Deal?”

“Deal. Stop for wine if you feel like that. My place is dry as a bone. Oh—and I have a splitting headache, so if you could pick up some aspirin as well? I don't think I have any.”

“Okay. See you in a few minutes.” Mallory hung up, telling herself this wasn't a bad idea at all. So what if she had spent most of the previous night in his bed? It didn't mean anything. It didn't have to mean anything. Alan could be an amusing and entertaining companion, and he was good in bed.

Very good, in fact. And she couldn't deceive herself into believing she wasn't looking forward to a little body-on-body comfort, because she was. Two clean, healthy, sweaty bodies tangled together in the sheets sounded like a dandy way to affirm that both of them were alive.

Alive. Not hanging from a beam like a weeks-old gutted fish. Not lying in a boneless, bloody sprawl in the woods off some highway. Not laced into an impossibly tight leather corset and smothered with a hood while a woman with a whip and chains tortured—

“Christ,” she muttered. “I've gotta get out of here.”

It took a few minutes, of course, to do what she had to in order to leave for the night, but she took care of things quickly and bolted before anyone could come up with anything that required her continued presence at the station.

She called and ordered the food on her way to the restaurant, so it'd be ready and waiting for her, and did stop for wine even though she wasn't usually much of a drinker. She even remembered Alan's aspirin. Still, it was barely half an hour after she talked to him when Mallory entered his apartment with one bag full of little cardboard cartons and another holding the wine and aspirin.

“You look jumpy as hell,” he commented as soon as she walked through the door.

“It's a jumpy time.” Mallory knew the way to the kitchen, of course, and lost no time in getting the wine out and hunting through his cupboards for glasses. “Jesus, Alan, not a single wineglass?”

“Housewares aren't a priority with me. Sue me.”

“My life has come down to drinking wine from jelly glasses. Could this day get any better?”

Alan had swallowed several aspirin dry, then began setting out the cartons on his breakfast bar, where they normally ate. He paused to look at her intently. “I heard. Couldn't have been much fun, finding that body.”

“No.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.” She poured wine into one of the glasses and immediately took a swallow. “I intend to drink at least half this bottle, part of it while I shower away the assorted smells of today, then choke down some shrimp and vegetables. After that, unless you object, the plan is to adjourn to your bedroom and fuck like bunnies. Possibly all night. Unless you still have your headache, of course. Tell me you won't.”
“I expect the aspirin to work any minute,” Alan replied. “And that plan suits me just fine.”

The Mexican restaurant wasn't crowded despite the fact that Saturday night was usually one of the busiest. As the owner had told them mournfully when he escorted them personally to a cozy table back in the corner, people were going out less at night since the murders had started. And after what had been found today, undoubtedly most of his usual patrons were home with their doors locked.

So if Rafe and Isabel didn't have the restaurant to themselves, they did have their own secluded corner of it. With quiet music playing in the background and an attentive but unobtrusive waiter, they were almost in their own world.

Almost.

“You still believe Jamie didn't mutilate Jane Doe?” Rafe asked as they were finishing up the main course. They had been talking generally about the murders and the investigation, both with too much experience as cops to allow either the clinical details of brutal death or the bloody images they had seen all too recently to affect their appetites. And both shying away from anything more personal.

“I'm positive. My guess is, he was watching Jamie and saw her put the body into the trunk of Jane Doe's car. I don't know if she drove the car to wherever she planned to leave it, or if he did—and when she came back either to the playroom or to the car for some reason and didn't find the body, that was when she really freaked out. In any case, I think he put the body in that old garage. And amused himself with it.”

“That's sickening,” Rafe said.

“Definitely. He's very twisted, our boy.”

“So his reasons for picking Jamie as his first victim in Hastings were probably twisted as well.”

“Well, it may have been about Jamie being a dominatrix rather than a lesbian. Her wielding so much power over other women, power he wanted and didn't have. Maybe sheer jealousy was the trigger. Or envy. Maybe he couldn't stand the fact that she could control the women in her life.”

“And he couldn't control the women in his.”

“Maybe. Or it could have been the fact that her partners came to Jamie, willingly put themselves into her hands, submitted to her. And no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get that response from women. Ironic, really. He always goes for the smart, successful ones, the ones least likely to allow themselves to be dominated in a relationship, and yet to dominate women is what he desperately wants.”

“So for him it really is the unattainable.”

“Unless his taste in women changes, yeah.” Isabel's voice was wry. “He'll never get what he wants—except by killing them. It's only when they're dying and then lifeless that he's the one in control, stronger than them.

“In killing Jamie, he could have achieved a particular sort of satisfaction, because she was a dominatrix. For the first time, he was able to dominate a woman whose specialty was dominating others. Even if he had to kill her to do it.”

“She possessed traits he wants to destroy?”

“That's usually the case with a sexual sadist.”

“But not this time? Not our guy?”
Isabel frowned. “Targeting the breasts and genitals is a classic sign of a sexual obsession. But this guy, our guy, the sense I get is that he seems to be . . . punishing them for being women. So maybe he is trying to destroy the feminine traits in his nature. Or maybe he's furious with them because they're too female for him, literally too much woman for him to handle.”

“And that isn't a sexually driven motivation?”

“Not really. More a question of identity. His.”

“This is fascinating,” Rafe said.

Isabel stared at him for a moment, then sat back in her chair with a sigh. “See, this is why my social life sucks. I always end up talking about killers.”

“My fault. I did ask.”

“Yeah, but the subject sprang to mind. Doesn't say much about my sex appeal.”

Rafe eyed her. “It says we're in the middle of a murder investigation. And so.”

“That's a handy excuse. Can't you tell when a woman is fishing?”

“You're not serious? Isabel, you have to know you're gorgeous.”

“My mirror tells me all the pieces fit together nicely, but that doesn't mean I'm your type. Lots of men prefer petite redheads, or very slender brunettes. Or—women who don't carry guns and know a dozen different ways to really hurt a guy if he pisses her off.”

He had to laugh. “I admit that last bit is enough to give any man pause, but you don't see me taking to my heels, do you?”

“No, but since we sort of have to work together—”

“We don't have to go out to dinner together. Isabel, I'm here because I want to be, period. Just for the record, I don't prefer petite redheads or slender brunettes. And I never figured you for the insecure type.”

“And here I was thinking I was coming on too strong.”

Their attentive waiter appeared to clear the plates and take their order for coffee and dessert, and Rafe waited until he'd gone again to respond to her somewhat mocking comment.

“So what happened today?”

Isabel blinked. “You know what happened today.”

“What don't I know? What's got you so rattled that you're pushing yourself to . . . make a different kind of connection with me when you're not sure it's what you want?”

“Who says it's not what I want?”

“I do. Hell, you do. Look at your body language, Isabel. As soon as you decided to end the shop talk and get into more personal territory, you leaned back. Away from me. That's not as good as a sign, that is a sign. Your words say you're interested, but your body says stay away.”

“Dammit,” she muttered. “What was that I said earlier about you making a fair profiler? I'm changing my assessment. You'd make a very good one.”

“So I'm on target?”
“Well, let’s just say you’re not far off it. I am just not very good at this sort of thing.”

Rafe had to smile at her disgruntled tone. “You’re a very confident woman, Isabel—almost always. Very sure of yourself. But right now, at this moment, you’re scared. Why?”

She was silent, frowning down at the table.

“Something happened. What was it?”

“Look, this investigation is . . . different, that’s all. Odd things are happening. My abilities seem to be changing. And I don’t quite know what do to about it.”

“Have you reported this to Bishop?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because . . . I don’t know why not. Because I want to figure it out for myself.”

“And making a move on me seemed like a good way to do that?”

“Stop rubbing it in.”

“What?”

“My failure.”

Dryly, he said, “Who says you failed? Isabel, I realized I wanted you sometime yesterday. Early yesterday. Or possibly about ten minutes after we met. I also realized it was going to hellishly complicate the entire situation, so I’ve been doing my best not to think about it.”

“Maybe thinking about it would be good,” she said earnestly. “And doing something about it even better.”

“You’re still leaning back in your chair,” he pointed out.

“I can lean forward.” But she didn’t. She frowned again, honestly baffled.

“See?” Rafe said. “Conflicting signals. Even consciously, you’re not sure what you want.”

With a sigh, she said, “Trust me to find myself attracted to the one man who isn’t willing to take what he’s offered, no questions asked. Keep this up, and I’ll have to start believing in leprechauns. And unicorns.”

“Sorry about that. But I’m not a kid, Isabel. I’m a twenty-year veteran of the sexual wars, and I’ve learned a few things along the way. One being if you’re going to get involved with a complicated woman, you’d better damned well know what the complications are. Ahead of time. Before you trip over them.”

“That does sound like bitter experience.”

“It was. Not bitter, really, but I learned a hard lesson. And it’s more or less my own fault. You said the sort of energy that makes you psychic is something you have in common with our killer; well, I have something in common with him too. I like strong women. With strong, I’ve discovered, comes complicated, which can cause problems. Unless I know about the complications going in.”

“Okay. Well, I hear voices. There’s that.”

“Uh-huh. And?”

“I need coffee in the morning before I’m human. And cornflakes. I like cornflakes. I take really hot showers,
always, so I tend to steam up the room. I hate silence in strange places, so I travel with a sound machine. Ocean waves. I have to have air-conditioning on full blast even in the dead of winter to sleep well. Oh—and I hate moonlight shining in the bedroom.”

“Isabel.”

“Not those sorts of complications, huh?”

“No.”

“Dammit.”

“If I were a profiler,” he said slowly, “making an educated guess, I'd say that your breezy manner and humorous attitude cover up a lot of pain. And I'm not talking about the headaches your voices give you. That evil face you saw—it really did change your life, didn't it?”

Their waiter placed coffee and dessert on the table and went silently away again, and still Isabel said nothing. She picked up a spoon and poked at her dessert, then put it down again.

“Still not ready to tell me?” He fixed his coffee the way he liked it, his gaze remaining on her face, trying to make his own posture and expression as relaxed and unthreatening as possible.

She sipped her coffee, then grimaced and dumped cream and sugar in before trying a second sip.

“Isabel?”

 Abruptly, as if against her will, she said, “It was beautiful.”

“What was?”

“The face evil wore. It was beautiful.”

It was late when Ginny left the police station, much later than usual for her. And after talking to the other women and hearing how jumpy they were, she made a point of walking out to her car in the company of a couple of male officers who were also leaving. Though none of the guys had said anything openly to the female officers, Ginny had noticed that in the last week or so all the women had an escort coming or going.

She doubted any of the women were complaining. She certainly didn’t; anytime she was outside alone, she tended to spend a lot of time looking back over her shoulder and jumping at shadows.

By tacit consent, neither of the men left her until her car was unlocked, the door open, and the interior light showing them all an empty, unthreatening little Honda.

“Lock your doors,” Dean Emery advised.

“You bet. Thanks, guys.” She got in and immediately locked the doors and started the car, absently looking after them until both reached and safely entered their own cars.

Not that the guys had to worry, really.

So far, anyway.

Ginny was hardly a profiler, but she did have a semester of Abnormal Psychology under her belt, and she vividly recalled the section about serial killers, especially since it had given her nightmares for weeks.
Very few serial killers murdered both men and women. There had been killers who targeted both male and female children or young people, but when the targets were adults, they were almost always one sex.

A homosexual serial killer targeted men or young males, and a heterosexual killer targeted women or girls, as a rule. Though some homosexual killers, or men who were insecure sexually and feared they might be homosexual, had been known to target women out of sheer rage. They didn't want to be whatever they were, and they blamed women for it.

The very rare female serial killers went after men, or apparently had so far—except in the rather frighteningly common cases of women poisoning children or other family members, when they tended not to differentiate between the sexes.

Have some soup, dear. Oh, it tastes funny? That's just a new spice I'm trying out.

Jesus.

The things people got up to.

Ginny pulled her car out of the lot and headed for home, still pondering, mostly because her mind refused to let go of the subject.

What did he look like? Did she pass him on the street every day? Did she know him? He was strong, very strong; the medical report on Tricia Kane said that he'd driven a large knife into her chest to the hilt.

Ginny shivered.

What kind of rage did it take to do something like that? And how had Tricia aroused it in him? Just by being blond and successful? Just by being female?

Just by being?

When Ginny had colored her bleached hair back to something approximating its natural dark brown a week or so before, not a soul at the station had laughed or even commented, and her friends said it was wise of her. No reason to take stupid chances, after all, not when she was a cop in the thick of things.

Her mother had been visibly relieved.

Her father had said at least it made her look less like a whore.

As she pulled her car into the driveway, Ginny felt all her insides tighten. He was home, and judging by the crooked way his car was parked, he had, as usual on a weekend, spent the afternoon drinking.

Shit.

Still in the car, she removed her holster and locked it securely away in the glove compartment. When she got out, she locked the car up as well.

She never took the gun with her into the house. Never.

It was too tempting.

She went up the steps and used her key to let herself in, silently telling herself for the hundredth time that she had to get her own place, no matter what. And soon.

“Hey, little girl.” His voice was slurred, his mouth wet. “Where you been?”

Her own voice deadened, Ginny replied, “At work, Daddy,” and pushed the door closed behind her.
ISABEL LOOKED AT RAFE with a faint smile. “You didn't expect that, did you? That evil could be beautiful.” She wondered if he understood. If he could even begin to understand.

“No.”

“Of course not. It should be ugly, that's what everyone expects. Red eyes, scaly flesh, horns and fangs. It should look like it was born in hell. At least that. At least. It should breathe fire and brimstone. It should burn to the touch.”

“But it doesn't.”

“No. Evil always wears a deceptive face. It won't be ugly, at least not until it really shows itself. It won't look like something bad. That would be too easy to recognize. Too easy for us to see. Because the important thing, the thing evil does best, is deceive.”

“And it deceived you.”

She laughed, the low sound holding no amusement. “It wore a handsome face, when it first showed itself to me. A charming smile. It had a persuasive voice, and it knew all the right words to say. And the touch of it was kind and gentle. At least in the beginning.”

“A man. Someone you cared about.”

Isabel crossed her arms beneath her breasts, unconsciously adding yet another barrier between them, but she continued speaking in a toneless voice.

“I was seventeen. He was a little older, but I'd known him all my life. He was the boy in the neighborhood everybody depended on. If an elderly widow needed her yard mowed, he'd do it—and refuse payment. If anybody needed furniture moved, he'd offer to help. Stuck for a baby-sitter? He was there, always reliable and responsible, and all the kids—all the kids—adored him. The parents trusted him. Their sons considered him a buddy. And their daughters thought he walked on water.”

“Deceiving everyone.”

She nodded slowly, her gaze fixed on the table now, eyes distant. “The weird thing is, after taking all the time and trouble to deceive everybody around him for such a long, long time, when it came right down to it, it didn't take much at all to start revealing the beast inside.”

Rafe was very much afraid he knew where this was going, and it required an effort to hold his voice steady when he asked, “What did it take?”

“No. Just that. Just one little word.” She looked up, focused on him. “That was the beginning. He asked me to a school dance, and I said no.”

“What did he do, Isabel?”

“Nothing then. I told him I didn't feel like that about him, that he was more of a brother to me. He said it was a shame, but he understood. A few days later, I saw him in the bushes outside my house. Outside my bedroom. Watching me.”
“You didn't call the cops,” Rafe guessed.

“I was seventeen. I trusted him. I thought he was just . . . taking the rejection badly. Maybe I was even a little bit flattered on some level of myself, that it mattered so much to him. So I just closed the curtains. And kept them closed. But then he started . . . turning up wherever I was. Always at a distance. Always watching me. That was when I started to be . . . just a little bit afraid.”

“But you still didn't report it.”

“No. Everybody loved him, and I think I was half afraid nobody would believe me. I confided in my best friend. She was envious. Said he had a crush on me, and I should be flattered.” She laughed, again without humor. “She was seventeen too. What do you know, at seventeen?

“I tried to feel flattered, but it was getting more and more difficult to feel anything but scared. I could take care of myself, I knew self-defense, but . . . there was something in his eyes I'd never seen before. Something angry. And hungry. And I didn't understand why, but it terrified me.”

Rafe waited, unable to ask another question. He wished they were somewhere more private yet had a strong hunch that, if they had been, Isabel wouldn't have been willing—or able—to confide in him about this. He thought she needed the insulation of a semipublic place for this. There were people here, even if not close by. Food and music and an occasional quiet laugh from another part of the room.

Normality here.

He thought Isabel was afraid she wouldn't be able to hold it together enough to talk about this if they were alone. Either that or she had chosen, quite deliberately, to tell him this without even a shadow of intimacy. With a table between them in a public place, where the ugliness could be softened or blurred or even discarded at the end with a game shrug and a bland But it happened years ago, of course.

Depending on his reaction to what she was telling him.

Depending on how well he held it together.

“Of course, it wasn't talked about so much in those days, stalking.” Her voice was steady, controlled. “I mean, that was something that happened to celebrities, not ordinary people. Not seventeen-year-old girls. And certainly not involving boys they'd known their whole lives. So when I finally did tell my father, he did the logical thing in his mind. He didn't call the police—he confronted the boy. Very reasonably, no yelling, no threats. Just a friendly warning that I wasn't interested and he should, really, stay away.”

“His trigger,” Rafe muttered.

“As it turned out, yes. My father couldn't have known. Nobody could have known. He'd hidden his true face all too well. If my father had gone to the police and everyone had taken the threat seriously, maybe the ending would have been different. But after it was all over, they told me . . . it probably wouldn't have. Delayed things, maybe, but he hadn't actually done anything, and he was such a good boy, so they couldn't have held him for long. So it probably wouldn't have changed anything if I had acted differently, if my father had. Probably.”

“Isabel—”

“It was a Wednesday. I came home from school, just like always. Rode with a friend, because my father didn't believe I was old enough to have a car yet. She let me out, and then she headed home while I went into the house. As soon as I closed the front door behind me, I knew something was wrong. Everything was wrong. Maybe I smelled the blood.”

“Oh, Christ,” Rafe said softly.

“I went into the living room and . . . they were there. My parents. Sitting on the couch, side by side. They were holding hands. We found out later from the note he'd left that he had forced them in there at gunpoint. Sat them
down. And then he shot them. Both of them. They hadn't even had time to get really scared; they just looked . . .

surprised.”

“Isabel, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

She blinked, and for just an instant her mouth seemed to quiver. Then it steadied, and she said calmly, “The story
could have ended there. If it had, maybe I wouldn't have come out of it psychic. I don't know. Nobody knows.

“But that was really just the beginning. I turned—to run or call the police, I don't know. And he was there. He
said he'd been waiting for me. He had the gun, a silenced automatic; that's why the neighbors hadn't heard. I was too
scared to scream at first, too shocked, but then he told me he'd kill me if I made a sound. So I didn't. All during those
hours, all night long, I never made a sound.”

Rafe wished he could drink. He wished he could stop her from finishing the story. But he couldn't do either.

“Looking back, knowing what I know now, I think if I had made a sound he might not have gotten so crazy. I
think that's what maddened him, that no matter what he did to me, he couldn't get me to scream. Or even to cry.
Without even understanding how or what it would mean, I was taking away his power.

“He—right there on the living-room rug, in front of my dead parents, he tore my clothes off, and he raped me,
holding the gun jammed against my neck. He kept saying I was his, I belonged to him, and he'd make me admit it.

“He did things to me I didn't even know were possible. I was just seventeen. Just a kid, really. I was a virgin. I'd
never had a boyfriend serious enough to—to do more than kiss. I wasn't ignorant about sex, but . . . I couldn't
understand why I didn't die, why what he was doing didn't kill me. But it didn't. I bled. And I hurt. And as the hours
passed, the beautiful face he'd worn for so long got uglier and uglier. He started cursing me. Hitting me. He took the
gun and—hurt me with that too.”

She drew a breath and let it out slowly. “Cracked ribs, a fractured jaw and wrist, a dislocated shoulder. Too many
bruises to count. Raw inside. At the end, he was sitting astride me, both hands holding my head as he slammed it
against the floor, over and over again. Screaming that I was his and he'd make me admit it.”

Isabel didn't shed a tear, but her eyes were very bright, and her voice was very soft when she finished. “And his
touch burned. He had red eyes, and horns, and scaly flesh, and his breath smelled of brimstone.”

Travis was more pleased than he wanted to admit—or show her—when he found Ally waiting for him outside the
police station after work. Waiting on the hood of his car, actually, and wearing a very short skirt.

“You shouldn't be out alone this time of night,” he told her, trying not to stare at long legs that looked great even
under garish outside lights.

She lifted an eyebrow at him, amused. “I'm in a brightly lit parking lot. At the police station. Other than being
inside the building, I doubt there's a safer place right now.”

“Maybe not. Some of our female officers think they've been watched, maybe even followed.”

“Really?” She slid off the car's hood and shrugged. “Well, I'm not a blonde. And I can take care of myself.”

“It might not be just blondes, you know. Or didn't you hear about the body we found today?”

“I heard. Also heard she'd been dead a couple months or thereabouts. So maybe it was a different killer.”

Travis didn't want to admit that he wasn't so close to the inner circles of the investigation that he was up on the
latest theories, so he merely shrugged and said, “Still, we've got other women missing in the area, and not all of
them are blondes. You really should be careful, Ally.”

“It’s so sweet that you’re worried about me.”

He grimaced. “Don’t make it sound like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re amused. I’m not some toy you’re playing with, Ally. Or, if I am—”

“If you are, what?” She stepped closer and slipped her arms up around his neck.

“If I am . . . then tell me before I make a goddamned fool of myself,” he said, and kissed her.

She laughed. “Believe me, sweetie, you are not a toy. I like my men with plenty of muscle and minds of their own. You fit that bill, right?”

“I’d better.”

“Great. And now that we both understand that—how about a drink or two to unwind after a tough day?”

He groaned. “I’ve gotta be up at the crack of dawn. Why don’t we just pick up a pizza on the way to my place?”

“Or we could do that,” Ally agreed. She smiled at him and kept smiling as he put her into the passenger seat of his flashy sports car and went around to the driver’s side.

She wondered how soon she could find a few minutes alone to call in and report what Travis knew.

Before he figured out what she was up to.

Without a word, Rafe placed his hand on the table between them, palm up.

For the longest time, Isabel didn’t move. Then, finally, at last, she leaned forward and put her hand in his. The shock this time was almost a crackle, as if it should have been white-hot and burned them. But it didn’t. It just felt warm, Isabel thought.

He said, “I can’t even begin to imagine how you survived that. And then to survive, sanity intact—only to find yourself hearing voices. That’s what happened, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “The worst of it, at first, was that I was in the hospital with my jaw wired shut.” A shaky little laugh escaped her. “Left-handed, and it was the left wrist that was fractured. So I couldn’t even write to the doctors and tell them what I was hearing. I just had to lie there and listen.”

“A combination of the head injury and the other shocks and trauma. That woke up your latent abilities.”

“With a vengeance. At first, I just thought I was going nuts. That he had damaged my mind even worse than he had my body. But slowly, while I healed physically, I began to realize that the voices were telling me things. Things I shouldn’t have been able to know. A nurse would come in to check on me or whatever, and I’d know she was having trouble in her marriage. Then later, I’d hear her out in the hallway talking to another nurse—about having trouble in her marriage. Things like that. Sometimes voices, as though another person were saying something to me conversationally, sometimes . . . I’d just know.”

“And when you could finally speak again? You didn’t tell anyone, did you?”

“Not even the trauma expert—shrink—I saw for nearly a year afterward. I went to live with an aunt while I
finished high school. Another school, needless to say. In another neighborhood.”

“Where no one knew.”

Isabel sighed. “Where no one knew. My aunt was very kind, and I loved her, but I never told her about the voices. At first because I was afraid they'd lock me up. Then, later, when I began reading up on what little information I could find on psychic abilities, because I didn't think anyone would believe me.”

“Until you met Bishop.”

“Until I met Bishop. By then, the only thing I was sure of was that there had to be a reason I could do what I did, a reason why I heard the voices. A reason why that evil hadn't been able to destroy me, hard as it tried.”

“A reason you had survived.”

“Yeah. Because there had to be a reason. They call it survivor's guilt. You have to get through that, find some purpose in your life. Figure out how you lived when those around you died. And why. I didn't know those answers.

“I drifted through college until my friend was killed. Julie. She died horribly, suddenly. There one day, gone the next. Before I could even begin to grieve for her, more women were dead and their killer had vanished.”

“The second traumatic event in your life,” Rafe said. “And the second time you encountered evil.”

Isabel nodded. “I hadn't seen it coming then either, that was what hit me hardest. These voices that told me things never told me I was going to lose my best friend. That was when I decided to become a cop. I still didn't know how to channel or use the voices—or how to keep myself from being locked away in a padded cell somewhere if I did. But I knew I had to try. I knew I had to look for that evil face. And destroy it when I found it.”

Dana had finally grown tired of Joey's whining and sent him back to Columbia—but she had also ordered him to make the drive back to Hastings on Sunday morning. And when he whined about *that*, she reminded him that news was a twenty-four-seven business and if he didn't like it he could go use his supposed camera skills elsewhere.

As for Dana herself, she had elected to keep her room at the inn. There were several women staying there, including the federal agents, and it felt safer there.

If anywhere could feel safe in Hastings.

Dana didn't apologize even to herself for being so jumpy, especially since Cheryl Bayne had disappeared. If this maniac was killing anybody who got in his way, anybody who offered a threat to him . . . then Dana now had two strikes against her. She was blond and she was media.

It was enough to make any woman jumpy, and never mind the additional worry of too many guys prowling around town with guns stuck in their belts, also jumpy as hell—

“Hi.”

Dana nearly came out of her skin. “Christ, don't do that!”

“Sorry.” Paige Gilbert shrugged apologetically. “Like you, I just came out for ice.” She was holding an ice bucket in one hand.

Dana looked at her own bucket and sighed, continuing around the corner of the hallway to the alcove where the ice machine lived on this floor of the inn. “Why're you staying here?” she asked the other woman. “You live in Hastings, don't you?”
“I live alone. So I thought I’d stay here at the inn for the duration.”

Dana scooped ice, then eyed Paige. “But you aren’t a blonde.”

“Neither was—is—Cheryl Bayne. And then there’s the body they found today.”

Wary, Dana said, “I know they found one. Been dead a while, I heard.”

“Yeah.” Paige scooped ice into her bucket and straightened, adding, “My sources claim she was brunette.”

“Brunette.”

“Yeah.”

“Did your source also say she was . . . tortured?”

“Mangled.”

“The difference being?”

Paige hesitated, then said, “Tortured means she was alive when it happened. Mangled means she was dead.”

“Oh, shit.”

“I've got a bottle of scotch in my room. Want some?”

Dana didn't hesitate. “Bet your ass I do.”

Rafe didn't push his luck by asking too many questions. He knew Isabel had been exhausted even before the evening began, and by the time she'd confided the unspeakable tragedies in her life, it was obvious what she needed more than anything was sleep and plenty of it.

So he took her back to the inn, some instinct urging him to maintain the physical contact between them as much as possible. He was still holding her hand when they walked up the steps to the wide, old-fashioned porch.

Absently, she said, “This place couldn't decide what it wanted to be when it grew up—a bed and breakfast or a hotel. I've never seen a hybrid quite like it.”

“Rocking chairs on the front porch, but no central dining room,” he agreed. “Strange. But nobody has to share a bathroom, and there's cable.”

Isabel smiled faintly, looking at him in the yellow glow of the front porch lights. “I think Hollis and I, and a few of the news-people, are the only guests.”

“Hastings was never a favored tourist destination, just a little town on the way to Columbia. Nothing much to see. But if we manage to stop this guy here, before he slips away again, I have a feeling it'll put us on the map. For all the wrong reasons, unfortunately.” His fingers tightened around hers. “Isabel . . . that first evil face you saw. He killed himself, didn't he? After he thought he'd killed you.”

She nodded. “Left that note I mentioned earlier, explaining what he’d done and why. Then blew his brains out. They found his body draped across my bed. How did you know?”

“Because you never went after him. Once you healed and before your friend was killed, if he hadn't already been dead, you would have gone looking for him.”
“Maybe.”

“No maybe about it. You would have.”

Her smile went a little crooked. “You're probably right. And I probably would have gotten myself killed doing it. Anger and vengeance as motives never offer a happy ending. So it's all for the best that he did the job for me, that evil is as self-destructive as it is destructive. Tips the scale a bit toward the good guys on those rare occasions when evil consumes itself with little or no help from us.”

“That balance thing.”

“Yeah. That balance thing.” She looked down at their clasped hands. “Rafe . . . what happened to me is something I recovered from, eventually. Physically, even psychologically. I've had a few relationships in recent years. Not very successful ones, but that's probably due as much to my dedication to my job as to any lingering . . . emotional scars. Or maybe it's the voices that men along the way haven't been able to deal with. I do come with lots of baggage.”

“You don't want me to be afraid to touch you.”

“Stop being so perceptive. It's unnerving.”

Rafe smiled. “The only thing I'm afraid of, Isabel, is that you still don't know what it is you want. From me. For yourself. And until you do, taking the wrong step could be the worst possible choice. For the record, I don't think either of us is the type to consider a quick roll in the hay as a great way to de-stress.”

“No.”

“And neither one of us is a kid. At our age, we should know what we want—or, at least, know what we're risking by getting involved with each other.”

Isabel eyed him, not without a certain humor. “I've always been impulsive as hell. Jump, then look for a place to land. Obviously, you look before you jump.”

“They do say opposites attract.”

“They certainly do.” She sighed. “You're right, I don't know what I want. And I have been feeling rattled all day because of the changes in my abilities. Not the best time to make this sort of decision, I guess.”

“No. But for what it's worth . . .” He leaned over and kissed her, his free hand lifting to the side of her neck, his thumb stroking her cheek. There was nothing especially gentle in the action, nothing in the least tentative; he wanted her, and left her in no doubt of that fact.

When she could, Isabel said, “Okay, that wasn't fair.”

Rafe grinned at her and stepped back, finally releasing her hand. “See you tomorrow at the office, Isabel.”

“Bastard.”

“Night-night. Sleep tight.”

“If you say don't let the bedbugs bite, I'll shoot you.”

Rafe chuckled and turned away.

She stood there on the porch and gazed after him until he returned to his Jeep, then shook her head and went into the inn's lobby, still smiling.

“Good evening, Agent Adams,” the desk clerk said cheerily.

Isabel glanced back over her shoulder at the mostly glass front door and very well-lighted front porch, then at the
The clerk's face. She looked like the soul of discretion.

Which undoubtedly meant she was already making a mental list of people to call with the latest tidbit of gossip.

Sighing, Isabel said, “Good evening, Patty.”

“We provide a continental breakfast on Sunday morning, Agent Adams. From eight to eleven. In case you and your partner didn't know that.”

“I'll be sure to tell her. Have a nice night, Patty.”

“You, too, Agent Adams.” She sounded consoling, sympathetic, obviously since Isabel was going to bed alone.

Isabel escaped up the stairs, hoping that glass front door was, at the very least, soundproofed. She stopped by Hollis's room and knocked softly, reasonably sure her partner was still up but not sure she wanted company.

But Hollis opened the door immediately, saying, “I actually ordered a pizza a couple of hours ago. And ate some of it. Does that mean I'm taking a step closer to becoming accustomed to dead bodies?”

“It means your own body is healthy and needs sustenance, mostly,” Isabel replied, stepping into the room. “But, yeah, it's a good sign you can handle the more gross aspects of the job. I'd put it in the plus column.”

“Good. I need more checks in the plus column. I was beginning to feel horribly inadequate.” Hollis invited her in with a gesture, adding, “I have an extra Pepsi here. Or did you get enough caffeine with dinner?”

“Enough. Plus, I really need a good night's sleep.” Isabel frowned slightly, but said, “The plan is to meet up at the station by nine-thirty. Patty, downstairs, says the inn offers a continental breakfast on Sunday morning. We can go down between eight and eight-thirty, if that's okay with you.”

“Sure.” Hollis studied her thoughtfully as she went to sit on her bed beside a closed pizza box. “You look sort of . . . disconcerted. Rafe?”

“He's a little more complicated than I bargained for,” Isabel admitted, wandering around the small bedroom somewhat restlessly. “Even the clairvoyant stuff I picked up didn't warn me about that. Dammit.”

“You told him?”

“My horror story? Yeah.”

“And?”

“He . . . handled it really well. Didn't freak out, didn't act like I was suddenly a leper. Compassionate and understanding and very discerning.” She frowned again and added in a dissatisfied tone, “Also a cautious man.”

Hollis grinned. “Wasn't ready to just jump into bed, huh?”

“Now, what makes you think—”

“Oh, come on, Isabel. As soon as we talked earlier, I could see the wheels turning. You saw a potential emotional complication looming and, characteristically, your response was to charge toward it head-on. If he was going to be a problem in any way whatsoever, you intended to deal with it now. Whether he was ready or not.”

“Why is everybody else suddenly so perceptive as to my motives?” Isabel demanded. “I'm supposed to be the clairvoyant one. Look, I wasn't after a one-night stand. Necessarily. It's just . . . things are simpler when the physical stuff is out of the way, that's all.”

Shaking her head, Hollis said, “Well, now I can understand why your past relationships weren't entirely successful, if that's your attitude about sex. Just something to get over and done with?”
“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did. You’re a lot of things, Isabel, but subtle isn’t one of them. You probably as good as told the man
you wanted to sleep with him so you wouldn’t be distracted having to think about it anymore.”

“I was not that blunt.”

“Maybe not, but I’m sure he got the gist of it.”

Isabel sat down in the chair in the corner of the bedroom and scowled at Hollis. “The SCU therapist says I have a
few emotional issues about giving up control.”

“No, really?”

“It's not a big thing. I just . . . prefer to make the first move whenever possible.”

“Because the last guy you allowed to make the first move turned out to be a twisted, evil bastard. Yeah, I get that.
I imagine Rafe gets it as well.”

“I don’t like having transparent motives,” Isabel announced. “It makes me feel naked.”

Hollis smiled. “Don’t snap at the messenger. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

Isabel sighed. “It’s about control. I know it’s about control. Even after all these years, I can’t help feeling . . . wary.
Not of men in general, just of men who might—possibly—mean something to me. Especially if they’re obviously
very strong men. Don’t you? We both went through similar experiences, after all, and yours was just a few months
ago.”

“I had Maggie Barnes,” Hollis reminded her. “That empathy thing of hers did a dandy job of taking away a lot of
the pain and healing the trauma. Even though what happened to me was just months ago, it feels more like years.
Decades. Distant, unimportant, almost as if it happened to someone else. Almost. Do I know if I can feel a normal,
healthy desire for a man? No idea. Not yet anyway. Haven’t met a man I felt that sort of interest in so far.”

Isabel lifted an eyebrow. “You seemed a bit drawn to Caleb Powell, I thought.”

“A bit,” Hollis admitted with a shrug. “But . . . a big-city-caliber attorney lives and works in a small town for a
reason. He wants a simple life. Had one, too, until a lethal killer began stalking his nice little town, and his employee
friend was horribly murdered. Now, like it or not, I’m part of that gruesome series of events that’s turning his
simple, peaceful existence upside down.”

“You’re one of the good guys.”

“Yeah, points in the positive column for that. But not enough to balance it, I’m afraid. Especially since I have my
own horror story.”

“Did you . . .”

“Tell him? Yeah. I met him in the coffee shop earlier, by chance, and we talked for a while. He asked questions,
so I answered them. He didn't take it all that well. Sort of freaked, actually. In a very quiet, controlled, lawyerish
kind of way. But I saw his face. And he certainly didn't offer to drive me home.” Her smile was wry. “It was the eye
thing that finally got to him. Up until then, he was more or less okay, but that was a bit too much to take.”

“Hollis, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don't worry about it. Some things aren't meant to be, you know? I mean, if he couldn't accept a little thing
like an eye transplant, then it's a cinch he'd never be comfortable with me talking to dead people.”

“No, probably not.”
“Some people just . . . can’t think outside the box. You're lucky Rafe can.”

Isabel was frowning again. Her head tilted a bit, the frown deepening. Absently, she said, “Yes. Yes, I guess I am. The psychic stuff doesn't throw him at all, and he was more than okay with the rest.”

“So if you can just deal with these control issues of yours, and always assuming we get this killer before he decides to add you to his blonde collection, maybe the universe really is offering you something special. A man who knows what you've been through, what you are, and doesn't mind all the baggage you have to drag around with you.”

“Maybe.”

“At least accept the possibility, Isabel.”

Isabel blinked at her. “Sure. Yes. I can always accept possibilities.”

It was Hollis's turn to frown. “Are you thinking about the long-term complications of him being settled here and you at Quantico?”

“No. I haven't gotten that far. I mean, I haven't really looked past now.”

Hollis studied her. “So what's bothering you?”

“It's just . . . I'm tired. Really tired.”

“I'm not surprised. You need a good night's sleep.”

Still frowning, Isabel said, “I know I do. I can't remember ever being this tired. So that's probably why, right?”

“Why what?”

Softly, Isabel said, “Why I don't hear the voices. At all.”
GINNY HUNG UP the phone and frowned at the clock on the wall. Three times. Three times she'd tried to call Tim Helton, hoping his wife might have come home and he just hadn't thought to report in.

It was after ten-thirty; dairy farmers got up at dawn, she knew that much. Even on Sundays. And Tim Helton wasn't a churchgoer. Maybe he was out with his cattle. Except he'd given her his cell-phone number and said he always kept it with him. And a body would think he'd be eager to hear whatever the police might have to say about his missing wife. Unless she'd come home.

Or unless he knew she wasn't going to.

Travis wasn't at his desk, so Ginny couldn't ask him, as she usually did, what she should do. This would have to be her call, her decision.

Surprising herself somewhat, Ginny didn't hesitate. She got to her feet and headed for the closed door of the conference room.

Rafe shut the folder and shoved it toward the center of the conference table. “Okay, so neither the post nor any forensic evidence gathered at the scene has told us much more than we knew yesterday.”

Mallory said, “Well, the doc's sure she wasn't bound in any way when she died, and there are absolutely no defensive wounds, so we can reasonably infer she didn't put up a fight.”

“Yeah,” Rafe said, “but if she was one of Jamie's partners, submissive might have been her natural state.”

“So she wouldn't necessarily have fought an attacker,” Isabel agreed. “Still, strangling is up close and personal; if somebody was very obviously trying to kill her, the reflexive survival instinct would have kicked in. At the very least, we should have found some skin cells underneath her fingernails. The fact that we didn't lends weight to the idea that she didn't realize what was happening to her until too late.”

Hollis said, “And our killer uses a knife, he doesn't strangle. So that's another argument for an accidental death at someone's hands, probably Jamie's.”

Mallory added, “Especially since forensics found bits of that old linoleum floor covering embedded in the vic's knees, which places her in Jamie's playhouse and in a kneeling, possibly submissive position. Which is, at least, more tangible evidence to confirm what we were pretty sure of but couldn't have proven in court—that this woman was one of Jamie's partners.”

“An unlucky one,” Rafe noted. “According to the info we have on the S&M scene, strangulation to the point of unconsciousness is fairly common. Supposedly intensifies orgasm.”

“Another thing I don't want that much,” Mallory murmured.

Rafe nodded a wry agreement, but said, “We'll probably never know why Jamie went too far, if it was anger or
just a . . . miscalculation. But we need to I.D. this woman. Notify her family.”

Isabel said, “A forensic dentist at Quantico is comparing her chart to those we have from women reported missing in the area; we should know in the next hour or so if there's a match.”

“But we didn't have charts for every woman,” Mallory reminded her. “Either they used dentists we haven't been able to track down, or no dentists. Lots of people are still scared of sitting in that chair.”

“And none of the missing women had ever been fingerprinted,” Rafe added.

“Is getting an I.D. even going to help us?” Hollis wondered. “I mean, it's closure for her family, which is great, but what's it going to tell us?”

“Maybe if she was a regular client of Jamie's,” Isabel said. “We can talk to her relatives and friends, check her bank accounts, hopefully find a diary or journal if we're very lucky. But, yeah, I know what you mean. It's not really likely to put us any closer to the serial killer. Or help us identify and protect the woman he's undoubtedly stalking even as we speak.”

“And we're running out of time,” Mallory said.

There was a moment of silence, and then a somewhat timid knock at the door preceded Ginny's entry into the room.

“Chief, excuse me for interrupting—”

“You didn't,” Rafe told her. “What's up?”

“I've been trying to call Tim Helton, just to check if his wife came home, and I can't get an answer. He doesn't go to church and by all accounts almost never leaves the farm. He should be there.”

“If he's out in his barns—”

“He gave me his cell number, Chief, and he said he always wears it clipped to his belt. I tried the house number, too, but there was no answer. And just the machine at the dairy number. It's like the place is deserted out there.”

Isabel said, “I don't much like the sound of that. If this killer is escalating, there's nothing to say he might not have decided to change his M.O. and kill somebody in or near her own home. Or just come back later and take out the husband as well.”

“What worries me,” Rafe said, “is that Tim Helton is the type to get his gun and go looking himself if he feels the police aren't doing enough to find his wife. The detective I sent out there to talk to him said he was angry and just this side of insulting about our efforts so far.”

“He has a gun?”

“He has several, including a couple of shotguns and rifles, and his service pistol. He was in the army.”

“That's all we need,” Isabel murmured. “A scared and pissed-off guy with a gun—and the training to use it.”

“No sign of his wife?” Rafe asked Ginny.

“Not so far. Or any hint from anyone who knew her that she might have gone somewhere on her own. In fact, everybody says the opposite, that she was a homebody and quite happy at the farm.”

“Solid marriage?” Hollis asked.

“By all accounts.”

“No children?”
“No.”

Isabel drummed her fingers briefly on the table. “I say we go check it out. There isn’t much we can do here for the present, with no new information to go over. And we need to find Tim Helton, make sure he’s all right—and not conducting his own manhunt.”

Rafe nodded and looked at Ginny. “Anything new on any of the other missing women?”

“Not so far. Still nearly a dozen unaccounted for, if we go back a couple of months and take in the thirty miles or so surrounding Hastings, but only a handful even come close to fitting the profile. The reporter, Cheryl Bayne, is still missing; we tried the dogs, and they lost the trail a block or so from the van.”

“Where, specifically?” Rafe asked.

“Near Kate Murphy’s store. She’s the other woman missing from Hastings. We’re drawing blanks everywhere we check in looking for both of them.”

“Okay, keep at it.”

As the young officer turned to go, Isabel said, “Ginny? Are you okay?”

“Sure.” She smiled. “Tired, like everybody else, but otherwise okay. Thanks for asking.”

Isabel held her gaze for a moment, then nodded and smiled, and Ginny left the conference room rather quickly.

Absently, Rafe said, “You know, Rose Helton doesn’t fit the profile in one very obvious and possibly important way.”

“She’s married,” Isabel said. “So far, in all three series of murders, he’s only gone after single white females.”

Slowly, Hollis said, “I wonder what would happen if he found himself interested in a married woman? Would he see the husband as a rival? Would that make the chase—the stalking—even more exciting for him?”

“Could be.” Isabel rose to her feet.

Mallory got up with the rest, but said, “Since Kate Murphy and Cheryl Bayne are also still missing, I think they should be up there on the priority list too. If you guys don’t mind, I think I’ll run through the info we have on them and see if I have some luck in either finding them or at least ruling out a voluntary absence.”

“Good idea,” Isabel said. “The reporter especially worries me; if he’s killing to scare off the media or to make a point, then all bets are off. It would mean he’s changed in some fundamental way, and we have no way of knowing how or why.”

“Or who he could decide to target next,” Hollis added.

He wished he could stop the voices. The other things, the other changes, he could deal with. So far, at least. But the voices really were driving him mad. It had become harder and harder to shut them out, turn them off. They told him to do things. Bad things.

Things he’d done before.

Not that he minded doing the bad things. That was the only time he felt real, felt strong and alive. Felt free. It was just that his head hurt all the time now because of the voices, and he hadn’t slept through the night since . . . he couldn’t remember when.
The whole world looked surreal when you couldn't sleep, he'd discovered.

And blondes were everywhere.

Tempting, aren't they?

He ignored the question. The voice.

They're just asking for it. You know they are.

“Go away,” he muttered. “I took care of the other one. The one you said nearly found us. Leave me alone now. I'm tired.”

Look at that one on the corner. If she swung her ass any harder she'd dislocate it.

“Shut up.”

Don't forget what they did to you. What they're doing to you. Even now, they're corrupting you.

“You're lying to me. I know you are.”

I'm the only one who's telling you the truth.

“I don't believe you.”

That's because they've twisted your thinking, those women. Those blondes. They're making you weak.

“No. I'm strong. I'm stronger than they are.”

You're a wimp. A useless wimp. You let yourself get distracted.

“I'm not distracted. She has to be next.”

The other one's more dangerous. That agent. Isabel. She's different. She sees things. We need her out of the way.

“I can do her later. This is the one I have to do next.”

This one can't hurt us.

“That's what you think.” He watched as she came out of the coffee shop and continued along the sidewalk, an iced mocha in one hand and her list in the other. She always had a list. Always had things to do.

He wondered idly if she had any idea the last item on today's list was to die.

11:00 AM

On their way to the dairy farm, Hollis said, “If Rafe hadn't had to stay at the station a few more minutes to deal with a call, would you still have suggested separate vehicles?”

“Probably.”

“Still no voices, huh?”

“No. I thought getting away from everybody might help, but it didn't.”

“Was anything different when Rafe was close by?”

“No. Just silence, same as when he isn't close by. Exactly the way it's been since last night.” Isabel glanced at her partner, mouth twisting slightly. “I'd thought the peace and quiet would be nice. I was wrong. This just feels . . . bad.
Not natural. I even miss the damned headache. A part of me has suddenly gone deaf, and I don't know why.”

“It must have something to do with the sparking thing between you and Rafe, right?”

“I don't know. As far as I can remember, nothing like this has happened to any psychic. I mean, our abilities can change, but this drastically and suddenly to a reasonably stable and well-established psychic? Not without some . . . trigger. Some cause. It just doesn't make sense.”

“You still haven't called Bishop?”

Isabel shook her head. “They're wrapped up in their own investigation out there and don't need a distraction.”

“You just don't want him to pull you.”

“Well, yeah, there's that. I don't really think he would, not at this stage, but he worries whenever any of us have problems with our abilities. Unforeseen problems, I mean.”

Hollis hesitated, then said, “How can you be sure this is an unforeseen problem? I mean, Bishop and Miranda see the future on a fairly regular basis. What if they saw this?”

Isabel considered it, then shrugged and said wryly, “That is more than possible. It wouldn't be the first time they'd seen something ahead in the road for one of us—and just let us stumble forward blindly. Some things have to happen just the way they happen.”

“Our mantra.”

“More or less. You know, I half expected Bishop to call last night, since he always does seem to know whenever something's gone wrong. So maybe this isn't as wrong as I feel like it is. Or maybe he knows and also knows I have to figure out my own way through it.”

“Are you going to tell Rafe?”

“Sooner or later I'll have to. Unless he picks up on it himself. Which is also possible.”

“Yeah, he's very . . . tuned in where you're concerned. I mean, it's obvious. I think he knew before I did in Jamie's playhouse that it was going to be too much for you. He kept watching you.”

“I know.”

“You felt that even with all the voices coming at you?”

“I felt it. Him. He wanted to protect me. To keep me from being hurt.”

Hollis lifted both eyebrows. “And now you don't hear the voices. You're protected from them. Coincidence? I sort of doubt it.”

“Rafe isn't psychic. He couldn't have done this.”

Hollis thought about it, then shook her head. “Maybe not consciously, even if he's a latent. But what if it's a combination of factors?”

“Such as?”

“Such as his desire to shield you and the way his and your electromagnetic fields react to each other. It really could be pure basic chemistry and physics, at least the beginning of it.”

Isabel frowned. “Even without a shield of my own, I had the training in how to use one. I know how to reach out, break through a barrier. I know what a shield should be, even if I've never had one. This . . . doesn't feel like a barrier. It's not something I can control.”
“It's new. Maybe you have to get used to it before you can. Or maybe . . .”

“. . . it's not mine to control,” Isabel finished.

“If Rafe is a latent, or was, it could be his to control. You didn't pick up any sense that he might be when you first read him?”

“No.”

“Nothing unusual at all?”

“No. At least . . . He's very strong. And not very easy to read except for surface, trivial things. I didn't get the sense he was blocking me, but at the same time I felt there was a lot of him I just couldn't get at.”

“Didn't you tell me his grandmother was psychic?”

“Yeah.”

“Then if I remember what I was taught in the training sessions, there's a better than average chance he could be a latent.”

“In our experience, yes. It often runs in families.”

“Isn't that the most likely explanation for all this? That he is, or was, a latent and that the way you two reacted to each other somehow activated it and made him a functional psychic, even if only on an unconscious level?”

“So far, everything we've seen and experienced tells us that activating a latent ability requires a traumatic event.”

“Maybe Rafe will add something different to that experience.”

“Maybe.”

“You could ask him.”

“Ask him if he's psychic? Oh, he'll love that.”

“If he is, and functional, he needs to know. He needs to begin learning how to control what he can do. Especially since he may be shielding you. That urge to protect you may have him wrapping you in psychic cotton wool. A nice respite for you, at least in theory, but we do need your abilities to help us find and catch this killer.”

“Tell me something I don't know.”

Hollis pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head and studied her partner thoughtfully. “Maybe when you and Rafe connected, you did it in an unusual way, something every bit as direct and potent as actual physical contact—and magnified by sheer power. That sparking thing we all find so fascinating. Maybe it created a link between you.”

“It didn't create a shield. I've told you, at first it was just a slight and gradual muffling of the voices. It wasn't until last night that the voices suddenly went silent.”

“It was sudden? You didn't tell me that. Can you remember exactly what was happening when you lost them?”

Isabel had to think about it, but only for a moment. Slowly, she said, “Actually, it's so clear I don't know why I didn't notice it at the time. Because I was so tired, I suppose. I thought it was that. And the relief.”

“Relief?”

“That he didn't draw away. I told him all about my chamber of horrors, and he didn't draw away. In fact, he reached out to me. Physically. And that's when the voices went silent.”
“Travis, any luck reaching Kate Murphy's sister in California?” Mallory asked.

Without needing to check the notes on his legal pad, Travis shook his head. “Nada. It's awfully early on a Sunday out there, so you'd think she'd be home, but if so she isn't answering her phone.”

“Machine or voice mail picking up?”

“No, it just rings.”

“Shit. I thought everybody had voice mail.”

“Guess not.”

“Well, keep trying.” Mallory headed back toward her own desk, pausing as she passed Ginny to ask, “Still nothing new on Rose Helton?”

“I finally got hold of her brother in Columbia, and he says last he heard, Rose was happy on the farm with Tim. No family occasions or visits to other relatives that he knows of. He didn't even know Rose wasn't home. Until he talked to me.”

Mallory grimaced. “I hate it when that happens. When we're following up leads or looking for them—and shatter somebody's day, possibly their life, with news they really don't want to hear. That is never fun.”

“I'll say. Oh—and for what it's worth, it doesn't seem to have even occurred to Rose's brother that her husband might have had something to do with her disappearance.”

“That might be worth a lot. Relatives often know, even if only subconsciously, if there's trouble in a marriage.”

“He obviously thinks not. In fact, he asked immediately if we thought it was this serial killer, even though Rose isn't really a blonde.”

“Come again?”

“Apparently, the last time he saw Rose at Christmas, she was blond. Trying it out, he said.”

Mallory was frowning. “That isn't in the report.”

“I know. When Tim Helton gave us a description of his wife, he said brown hair. Just that. The photo he gave us shows a brunette. And none of the people we've talked to in the area described her as blond.”

“But she was blond last Christmas.”

“According to her brother.”

“Shit. Does the chief know?”

“I was just about to call him. He should be getting to the Helton farm any minute now.”

“Call him. He needs to know Rose Helton just moved a step closer to the victim profile.”

The Helton dairy farm seemed as deserted as the main house when Isabel and Hollis parked their car near the gates
to the barn area and got out. Standing at the front bumper of the car, Isabel absently checked her service weapon and then returned it to the holster at the small of her back.

Automatically, Hollis followed suit.

“Storm's coming,” Isabel said, pushing her sunglasses up to rest atop her head as she looked briefly at the heavy clouds rolling in. The day had started out hot and sunny; now it was just hot and humid.

“I know.” Hollis shifted uneasily. Storms always made her feel especially edgy. Now, at least. It made her wonder if Bishop had been entirely joking when he'd once told her that some people believed storms were nature's way of opening up the door between this world and the next—like a steam valve relieving pressure.

“And this place feels very deserted to me,” Isabel added, looking around restlessly.

“'You're not picking up anything at all out here? I mean, it's not just no voices, is it? It's nothing the usual five senses can't get?’

“Just the usual five. I'm getting nothing, no sense of anything that isn't visible to me. Dammit. I can't even tell if Helton is anywhere near. He could walk up behind me and I wouldn't feel it. And I've been able to feel that since I was seventeen years old.”

“Don't worry, I'm sure it's temporary.”

“Are you? Because I'm not.”

“Isabel, even without the psychic edge, you're a trained investigator. You'll just have to . . . use the usual five senses until the sixth one comes back.”

Eyeing her partner, Isabel said, “Do I detect a certain satisfaction in your voice?”

Hollis cleared her throat. “Well, let's just say I don't feel quite so useless as I did before.”

“Fine pair we are. Two psychics who can't use their abilities. Bishop couldn't have seen this one coming.”

“Look, we're cops. Federal agents. We'll just be federal agents and use our training to look for Helton,” Hollis said practically. “When Rafe gets here.”

Isabel looked around her, frowning. “Where is he? Rafe, I mean. And is it just my internal silence, or is this place way too quiet?”

It really was peculiarly still, the hot, humid air surrounding everything in a heavy, smothering closeness.

“Pretty quiet for a working dairy farm, I'd say. But it's just a guess on my part.” Hollis studied the cluster of outbuildings and surrounding pastures. “Maybe all the cows are out in the fields. That's the deal, isn't it? They're milked in the morning, then go out and eat grass all day?”

“You're asking me?”

“Somebody told me you rode horses, so I just figured—”

“What, that I'd know cows? Sorry. You get milk from them; that's all I know.” Isabel drummed restless fingers on the hood of the car. “Time to be a federal agent. Okay. We checked the house first and got no answer at the door. At either door. Both doors are locked, and we have no probable cause to enter.”

“Can we enter the barns without cause?”

“Being federal agents, we have to walk carefully, at least until Rafe gets here; under the mantle of his local jurisdiction, we can do more.” Isabel eyed the cluster of buildings. “The barns that are open are fair game, I'd say. That big central barn looks closed up, though, at least on this end.”
Before Hollis could comment on that, they both saw Rafe's Jeep turn in at the end of the long driveway.

“No luck at the house?” he asked as soon as he got out of the vehicle.

“No,” Isabel replied. “And haven't heard a sound out here. Is this normal?”

“Well, I wouldn't call it abnormal. The cows will be out in the pastures, so the barns would be quiet. Helton runs this place on his own except for the crew that comes to pick up the milk, and part-time afternoon help, so he has plenty to do around here most of the day. Have you tried yelling for him?”

Without a blink, Isabel said, “We thought your bellow would carry farther.”

Rafe eyed her for a moment, then cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled out Helton's name.

Silence greeted the summons.

“Okay,” Rafe said, “let's start looking around, before it gets even hotter out here.”

“Private property, even if it is a business,” Isabel reminded him.

“Yeah, but we've got cause with the wife missing and Helton out of touch. Judge'll back me up on that.” He led the way, opening the gate at the end of the drive and allowing it to swing back as they passed through and headed for the cluster of barns and other buildings just a few yards away.

A slight breeze disturbed the heavy closeness of the humid air, giving them all a sense of relief from the heat—and offering a rather ripe olfactory experience.

“I love the smell of manure in the morning,” Isabel said. “Smells like . . . shit.”

Rafe had to laugh, but said, “Looks like he stopped in the middle of unloading a hay shipment.” There was a half-ton truck parked alongside the largest, closed barn and facing in the opposite direction, with its tailgate down and a great deal of loose hay piled all around it. A number of bales of hay remained stacked in the bed of the truck.

“I'll check out the cab,” Isabel said, and crunched her way through the hay toward the front of the truck.

Hollis was about to say she'd head in the opposite direction and see if the other side of the barn was open, but something about the way Rafe was looking after Isabel made her pause. Just for something to say, she asked, “Why would he have stopped in the middle of unloading?”

“Maybe that's when he realized his wife was missing. He might have been too distracted since then to worry about unloading hay.” Rafe frowned as he looked at her, and lowered his voice when he added, “What's wrong with Isabel?”

“What makes you think something's wrong?” Hollis countered, stalling.

Rafe's frown deepened. “I don't know, just something . . . off. What is it?”

*Something off. Something turned off. Did you do it?*

But she didn't say any of that, of course. Already regretting that she had allowed this, Hollis said as casually as possible, “You'll have to ask her. I should check out the other side of the barn, I guess, and see if there's a door open.”

After a moment, Rafe said, “Okay, fine.”

Hollis took a step away, then turned back with a genuine question. “Is it just me, or is there a weird smell around this building? Doesn't smell like manure now that the breeze has shifted. Sort of a sweet-and-sour odor.”

Rafe sniffed the air, and his rugged face instantly changed. “Oh, no,” he said.
“What?”

Before either of them could move, the barn doors burst outward, and a thin, dark man in his thirties stood there between them, one shaking hand pointing a big automatic squarely at Rafe.

“What?!”

“Goddamn you, Sullivan! Bringing feds out here!”
ALYSSA TAYLOR KNEW damned well there was no good reason for her to hang around near the police station on a Sunday morning. No casual or innocent reason, that is. She couldn't even pretend to sit nonchalantly in the coffee shop near the station, since it wouldn't open until church let out.

She had toyed with the idea of going to church, but Ally found she couldn't be quite that hypocritical.

She also half-seriously feared being struck by lightning if she crossed the threshold.

“You're lurking, too, huh?” Paige Gilbert, who Ally knew was a local reporter for the town's most popular radio station, leaned against the other side of the old-fashioned, wrought-iron light post, as seemingly casual as Ally.

“I bet we look like a couple of hookers,” Ally said.

Paige eyed Ally's very short skirt and filmy top, then glanced down at her own jeans and T-shirt, and said, “Well . . .”

“Catch more flies with honey,” Ally said.

“I'll just watch them flit past, thanks.”

Ally chuckled. “Travis likes my legs. And it's such a little thing to make him happy.”

“A very little thing,” Paige murmured. “How's the pillow talk?”

“I don't kiss and tell.”

“Except on the air?”

“Well, we all have our boundaries, don't we?”

Paige half laughed and inclined her head slightly in a sort of salute. “You're good, I'll give you that much.”

“I usually get what I go after.”

“Didn't Cheryl Bayne say something like that?”

“She wasn't careful. Obviously. I am.”

“Speculation seems to be she stuck her nose in where it didn't belong.”

“Occupational hazard.”

“For us too.”

Ally shrugged. “My philosophy is, no sense being in the game unless you're willing to play all-out. I am. Like I said, I usually get what I go after.”

“You get any news on the body they found yesterday?”
Ally's internal debate was swift and silent. “Not a blonde and not a victim of our serial killer. The theory is, she died by accident.”

“And hung her own body in that old gas station?”

“No, our resident ghoul probably did that. A nice toy for him, already dead and everything.”

“Yuck.”

“Well, we knew he was sick and twisted. Now we know he's an opportunist too.”

Paige frowned. “If she wasn't one of his victims, how did he get his hands on her?”

“The mystery of the thing. I'm going to go out on a limb and say she had a connection to either him or one of the victims.”

“What kind of connection?”

“Dunno. Friend, family, a lover in common—something. She died by accident, he saw or knew and took advantage of the situation.”

Paige was still frowning. “There's got to be more to it. How, exactly, did she die?”

“That I don't know. Yet.”

“Is it true she'd been dead a couple of months?”

“About that.”

“Then she died before the first victim did. Maybe he liked playing with a dead body so much he decided to make a few of his very own?”

“Maybe.”

They stood on either side of the lamppost, leaning against it, and gazed across the street at the town hall. The downtown area was practically deserted. It was very quiet.

“I sort of wish I'd gone to church,” Paige said finally.

“Yeah,” Ally said. “Me too.”

Rafe wore his weapon in a hip holster, with the flap fastened; there was no way he could get to it; Hollis, like Isabel, wore her holster at the small of her back, also out of reach. Both she and Rafe stood frozen, their hands a little above waist height with the palms out, by training and instinct showing this dangerously unstable opponent the least threatening posture possible as his gun wavered between them.

“Tim, settle down,” Rafe advised calmly.

“Rose said she'd had enough,” Helton said, his voice as shaky as his gun hand. “That's it, that's why you're here. She told you. She come and told you, and now you've brought the feds out here.”

From her angle, Hollis caught only a glimpse of what she knew Rafe could see more clearly: Isabel, at the rear bumper of the hay truck. Like the other two, she had frozen the moment the doors had burst open, but unlike them, she wasn't visible to Tim Helton.
Unfortunately, he wasn't visible to her either, since the heavy barn door shielded him from her view.

Worse, she was standing knee-deep in brittle, noisy hay; any movement at all would draw his attention and take away whatever hope she had of surprising him.

Standing still, Isabel silently drew her weapon and held it in a practiced, two-handed grip, thumbing off the safety.

Then she looked toward Rafe and Hollis, brows lifting in a silent question.

“Tim, we haven't heard from Rose,” Rafe was saying, still calm. He kept his gaze fixed on Helton, though he could see Isabel from the corner of his eye. “That's why we're here, to look for her.”

“Liar. I heard them talking out here a while ago—they're feds. Both of 'em. You bring feds out here and think I don't know why? What am I, stupid? Where's the other one? You tell her to come out, Sullivan, and I mean quick. You know I ain't afraid to use this gun.”

“Tim, listen,” Rafe said. “Aspice super caput suum.”

Helton blinked in confusion. “Huh? What'd you—"

The crack of Isabel's pistol was loud, but before Helton could do more than twitch in surprise, the hay bale that had been hanging several feet above his head crashed down, knocking him to the ground—and out cold.

Rafe immediately moved forward to get the unconscious man's pistol, calling out, “Got him, Isabel. Nice shot.”

She came around the barn door even as he finished speaking, crunching through the hay, pistol lowered but ready, and said, “Dead-eye Jane, that's me.”

Hollis was staring up at the loft door and the winch designed to lift heavy bales of hay inside the building. “I'll be damned. With the barn painted that wheat color, I didn't even notice that up there.”

“Neither did I,” Isabel said. “Good thing Rafe did. I gather all this was about moonshine, of all the ridiculous things?”

Rafe nodded. “He's got a still in there. You can smell the stuff. Or, at least, Hollis could. I didn't notice when we got here, unfortunately.”

“Easy to smell now. On him. He reeks.”

“Yeah, he's drunk. Probably since he noticed his wife was missing, and possibly what drove her to leave him. I don't know how long he's been selling bootleg whiskey, but it's obvious he's been drinking and otherwise using it for years.”

“Mallory's tractor story,” Isabel said, realizing. “He blew up his own tractor using moonshine instead of fuel.”

“Right. I really should have remembered that before bringing two feds out here. With that level of paranoia and the amount of raw alcohol in him, he could have shot all three of us and not felt a twinge of regret about it until he sobered up.”

“I'm confused,” Hollis said. “What did you say to him?”

“Not to him. I told Isabel to look above his head. I knew the only clear shot she had was the winch or rope.”

“Nice you trusted me to hit either one,” Isabel said, then frowned at him. “But how in hell did you know I'd understand classical Latin? I didn't tell you that.”

“No, Hollis did, sort of in passing. I remembered because it so happens that I took it in college as well.” He sent a sidelong glance at Hollis. “A fairly nerdy thing to do, I admit, but it has been useful here and there.”
“Especially here,” Isabel said. “Another few seconds, and this lunatic would have shot one of you. Probably killed you.”

Hollis uttered a shaken laugh and, when the other two looked at her inquiringly, said, “Okay, now I’m a believer.”

It was nearly five that afternoon when Rafe came into the conference room and found Isabel, for the first time that day, alone. He closed the door behind him.

Sitting on the table studying autopsy photos of the woman found hanging in the old gas station, she said, “Please tell me we finally have an I.D. on her.”

“Word just came in from Quantico. They think her name is Hope Tessneer. Age thirty-five, divorced, no children. The dental records are a close, but not exact, match. The record we gave them for comparison is at least ten years old.”

“So there’s a good chance it’s her.”

“A very good chance. Mallory’s talking to the sheriff’s department in Pearson now. That’s another small town about thirty miles from here. We’ll know more when they give us all the information they have, and when they talk to her family and friends. We do know that Hope Tessneer worked as a real-estate agent.”

Isabel looked at him, frowning. “A possible connection with Jamie. How they met, maybe.”

“Could be. She’s been missing almost exactly eight weeks, according to her boss. He wasn’t all that worried, because she had taken off without warning or explanation at least twice in recent years. Said she wouldn’t have come home to a job either time except that she was the best sales associate he had.”

“Then she knew how to please people, how to give them what they wanted. That fits.”

“For a submissive, you mean.”

“Yeah. And a good fit for Jamie. Somebody like that might have been a longtime partner. Someone who wasn’t just submissive but really trusted Jamie. It could help explain the lack of defensive wounds.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Still frowning, Isabel said, “I wish we could find that damned box of photos.”

“We can’t even check for more safe-deposit boxes in the other banks in the area until tomorrow morning.”

“I know, I know. I just think it’s important. We need to see what’s in that box.”

“Agreed.” Very deliberately, Rafe took a chair on the side of the table where she was sitting. “On another subject . . .”

Her frown vanished, and she smiled. “Where the hell am I, and how do I get to Detroit?”

He smiled slightly in response. “Are you a Richard Pryor fan, or do you just know that I am?”

“Both.”

“Any more one-liners you want to throw at me?”

“No. I’ll be good.”
“Just tell me what's going on, Isabel.”

She closed the autopsy file and set it aside, then drew a breath and let it out slowly. “The short, perfectly truthful version is, I don't know what's going on.”

“And the long version?”

“I'm not picking up anything from anyone. I don't hear any voices. All my extra senses closed up shop last night, and I think it has something to do with you. And I don't know what the hell is going on.”

5:10 PM

Mallory hung up the phone and rubbed the back of her neck as she looked at Hollis, who was perched on the corner of her desk. “They'll get back to us once they've interviewed Hope Tessneer's family and friends. But just from the information they already had on her bank accounts, it looks like she'd been paying for something about twice a month for the last year or so. Checks made out to cash, and cashed by her.”

“For how much?”

“Always the same amount. Fifteen hundred.”

Hollis raised her eyebrows. “I guess Jamie's services didn't come cheap.”

“I guess not. If we're right about all this, that's an extra three grand in undeclared cash Jamie was pulling in per month—and from just one client. Who knows how many regulars she had?”

“Where the hell did she hide all that money?”

“There has to be another bank. No unexplained deposits show up in any of the accounts she kept at two banks here in Hastings. Her salary, declared income from real estate and other investments—all documented, everything on the up-and-up. The public part of her life was squeaky clean.”

“And the secret part was buried deep.”

“I'll say. Buried deep and probably under an alias, at least financially; it's obvious she's been hiding at least some of her financial dealings for a long time, maybe years. Hell, her other bank or banks could be out of state. Or out of the country.”

“If so, we may never find them. We've got people set to start checking out all the other area banks tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. With pictures of Jamie and the information that she could have been disguised and using an alias.”

“And it seemed like such a nice little town,” Hollis said.

Mallory leaned back in her chair with a sigh. “I always thought so.”

“You grew up here, I think you said.”

“Yeah. Well, from the time I was about thirteen. Both my parents and a brother still live in the area. I thought about leaving when I was in college, but . . . I like it here. Or did. Never knew how many people kept nasty secrets until I became a cop.”

“It's been an eye-opener for me too,” Hollis confessed. “Still, this sort of thing has got to be unusual for small towns. I mean, a dominatrix practicing her . . . art . . . for paying clients, while also working as a top real-estate agent?”

“If it's not unusual, I'm moving.”
“I don't blame you a bit for that.”

“You know, she picked a good public job to hide a private second one,” Mallory mused. “Real-estate agents often keep erratic hours, so nobody would question if she wasn't in the office at any given time. She could probably meet clients day or night, accommodate their schedules easily.”

“And since she was the dominant,” Hollis said, “she could probably take on as many clients as her energy allowed. No need to take a day or week off now and again to allow those ugly bruises and burns to heal. Or whatever else there might be. She'd be the one dealing out the punishment. Jesus.”

Hearing the distaste in the other woman's voice, Mallory grimaced in agreement. “A very twisted way to find pleasure, if you ask me.”

Ginny joined them in time to get the gist of the conversation, saying, “The things people get up to behind closed doors. We've found Rose Helton.”

“Alive and well, I gather?” Mallory said.

“Definitely alive. I'd say pissed rather than well. When I told her that her husband was sleeping it off in a cell after having waved his gun around at the chief and two federal agents, she said she hoped the judge would throw away the key.”

“Where is she?” Hollis asked.

“In Charleston, with a college friend.”

“She went to college?” Mallory asked in surprise. “And still married Tim Helton?”

Pronouncing the words carefully, Ginny said, “She said it had been a cosmic karmic mistake. And that she'd already filed for divorce and wasn't coming back here. And, oh, by the way, in case we hadn't found it, there was also a still in an old shed in the back pasture.”

“We found it,” Hollis murmured.

“Everybody said they were so happy.” Mallory shook her head. “Christ, you really don't know about people.”

Hollis said, “Well, anyway, we can cross her off the missing list.”

“One less to worry about,” Ginny agreed.

“How's the rest of the list coming?” Mallory asked her.

“No change. No sign of Cheryl Bayne. Plus, we still have several women missing in the general area, and nothing new on Kate Murphy.” Ginny sighed, clearly weary. “It's like she disappeared into thin air. She fits right in with the other victims too.”

“But not Cheryl Bayne.”

Hollis said, “I think Isabel's probably right about Cheryl. If the killer got her, it wasn't specifically because she was—is—a reporter, but because she somehow got too close. Or he was afraid she had. And if so, it's only going to get more difficult to even try to predict what he might do next.”

“But it's going to get more difficult,” Mallory offered wryly.

It was Hollis's turn to rub the back of her neck. “And there's something else. Isabel's the profiler, but I've got to say, if Kate Murphy is a victim, why haven't we found her? So far, the rule's been that if he kills them, he does it quick and leaves them out in the open where they're easily found. Assuming he has killed again, or that he has Kate Murphy, why would he change his M.O. now?”

“Except kill,” Mallory offered wryly.
“Our patrols are checking out every highway rest stop,” Ginny said. “Most of them two or three times a day.”

“Maybe we’ve spooked him,” Mallory suggested. “He could be killing and leaving the bodies in places we aren’t keeping under observation.”

Hollis glanced toward the closed door of the conference room. “Maybe it’s time we discussed that possibility.”

Mallory didn’t move. “Rafe had a sort of determined look on his face when he closed the door. I’m not so sure I want to be the one to disturb them.”

Hollis continued to look at the door intently, focusing, tentatively trying out the spider sense. After a long moment, she said, “Um . . . let’s give them a few more minutes.”

“You’re serious?” Rafe leaned forward and touched her hand, not even reacting now to the spark.

Isabel looked down at their hands for a moment, then back at his face. “Entirely serious. For the first time in more than fourteen years, there’s silence in my head.”

“That’s what’s been wrong all day.”

“That’s it,” she said, unsurprised that he had noticed. “The question is: why?”

They both looked down at their touching hands, and Rafe said, “Frontier territory, huh?”

“Yeah. Scary, isn’t it?”

“Today, looking at the wrong end of a gun being waved around by a paranoid drunk, was scary. This? This is just a very interesting turn my life has taken.”

“You’re a very unusual man,” she said.

“Which is probably a good thing,” he said, “considering that you’re a very unusual woman.”

There was a part of Isabel that wanted to shy away, to pretend he hadn’t said that or that she hadn’t understood what he meant. But Isabel didn’t let herself shy away, or draw away, or back away. Whatever this was, it was something she had to deal with.

“Rafe, do you realize what this could mean?”

“Static electricity is more important than I thought it was?”

“Electromagnetic energy. And, no, not that.”

“Then I don’t have a clue what this could mean. Or even what this is.”

“Hollis and I have a theory.”

“Which is?”

“The theory is, my abilities are still with me, it’s just that now there’s something standing between me and the great wide world out there.”

“You’re not saying—”

“We think it might be you.”
“You are saying.” He frowned at her. “Isabel, how could it be me? I'm not psychic. I wouldn't even know how to be psychic.”

“We think that might be the problem.”

Rafe waited, brows raised.

“When a latent first becomes a functional psychic, there's an adjustment period. The psychic isn't in control of his or her abilities from the get-go. I mean—look at Hollis. She's been a medium for months and still can't open and close that door at will. It takes concentration, and focus, and practice. A lot of practice.”

“I'm not psychic.” He said it with more wariness than uncertainty.

“Your grandmother was.”

“So?”

“So sometimes it runs in families. Your chances of being a latent psychic are much higher than average.”

“I still don't—”

“Look. There was a connection between us from the beginning. Call it an attraction, a sense of understanding, simpatico, whatever. It was there. We both felt it.”

“I felt that, yes.”

“We feel it now,” she said, admitting it.

Rafe nodded immediately. “We feel it now.”

“And there's the sparking thing. I told you that was something new for me.”

“Electromagnetic energy fields. Basic science.”

“Yeah, but the way those fields were reacting to each other and the strength of that reaction was something different. Something that might have affected my abilities.”

“Okay. But—”

“Rafe. There was this connection, this . . . conduit between you and me. Maybe the energy opened it, or maybe . . . maybe the energy opened it. And then when I told you about what had happened to me, you reached out. Through the conduit. You wanted the pain to go away. And it did.”

Rafe spoke very carefully. “How could I have done anything to . . . put your abilities in a box?”

“Actually, that's a very good description,” she noted.

“Isabel.”

“Okay. One of the things we've discovered is that the subconscious is often more in control of our abilities than the conscious mind is, especially in a newly functional psychic. One theory is that it's because these are very old abilities—not new ones. They were born out of instinct, when primitive humans needed every possible edge just to survive.”

“Makes sense,” Rafe said.

“Yeah, it does. And if you subscribe to that theory, it also makes sense that our subconscious minds—the deeply buried, primitive id—would not only be able to master psychic abilities but would do so immediately and skillfully. To that part of us, being psychic would be perfectly natural.”
“My id put your abilities in a box?”

Thoughtfully, Isabel said, “Has it occurred to you that we have very strange conversations?”

“Constantly. Answer my question.”

“Yes. More or less. Rafe, your nature is very protective, and even though you like and respect strong women and are perfectly able to work alongside us on equal terms, deep down inside, you will always want to protect anyone you . . . care about. That is your instinctive response.”

“Anyone I care about.”

“Yes. And, obviously, the more you care, the more . . . passionate . . . your feelings are, the stronger your protective instincts will be.”

His mouth twisted slightly. “Want to stop tiptoeing around that part of it and just say it?”

“Do I have to?”

“We might as well get it out into the open. This is happening because I’m falling in love with you.”

Isabel had to clear her throat before she could say, “With or without my extra senses, you keep surprising me. That is very disconcerting.”

“What would you have said? That I had a crush on you?”

“Well . . .”

Dryly, he said, “We're talking about my feelings here, Isabel, not yours. I am not trying to corner you, not even asking how you feel about me. So you can stop backpedaling.”

“I was not—”

“But I’m guessing honesty on my part is important right now, since I may be—unconsciously—affecting your abilities. Yes or no?”

She cleared her throat again. “Yes. We think so.”

“Okay. So despite the reasonable and logical certainty of my conscious mind that you can take care of yourself, and today’s ample demonstration that you can also take care of me if the occasion demands, my subconscious thinks you need a shield.”

“Apparently.”

“And gave you one.”

“That’s the theory.”

“How?”

“That part’s a little fuzzy.”

“Meaning?”

“We haven't got a clue.”

“Shit.”

Isabel had to laugh at his expression, even if the sound held virtually no humor. “Frontier territory, remember?
We don't know how it happened, I don't know how it happened, but it's the only thing that makes sense. I'll tell you now, if we both survive this, Bishop is going to want to study us. Because as far as I know, this has never happened before.”

“Never mind Bishop. What do we do about this? You need your abilities, Isabel. Hell, I need your abilities. If we don't stop this bastard, he'll murder at least three more women. And you're on his list.”

“A fact that makes me far more uneasy today than it did yesterday.”

“Because yesterday you had an edge none of the other women did. You believed you'd see him coming,” Rafe said.

It's time.

He tried to ignore the voice this time, because there were people around. People who'd hear.

Wimp. You really aren't a man, are you? You're worse than a neutered dog, following them around, sniffing at them, unable to do anything else. That's it, isn't it? No balls.

His head hurt. The voice echoed inside, bouncing off his skull until he wanted to pound it against a wall.

You know who they are now. The three that matter. You know them.

Yes, he knew them. He knew all of them.

And you know they'll tell.

“But not yet,” he whispered, fearful of being overheard. “They won't tell yet.”

That agent will. That reporter will. And the other one, she'll tell too.

He didn't say it out loud, because he knew people would hear, but it was the other one that worried him most. The other one wouldn't just tell.

She'd show.

She'd show it all.

Isabel nodded slowly. “Even though twice before in my life I've been blindsided by evil, I believed I'd see it this time. I believed that this time . . . I'd fight it face-to-face. For some reason, I was sure even before I got here that that's how it would end.” She hesitated, then said, “I need to do that, you know.”

“Yes. I know.”

Isabel was very much afraid he did know. Almost unconsciously, she drew her hand away from his and leaned back a bit, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. “So we need to figure out how to undo this,” she said. “How to take away the box, or at least punch a hole or two in it so I can reach out and use my abilities.”

After a moment, Rafe leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together over his middle. “Whether you're right about it or not, the only thing I know about psychic abilities is what you and Hollis have told me. So all I can
contribute is willingness to try . . . whatever you think I should try.”

She nodded, but said, “Before we try anything, we need to be sure. Sure that psychic ability has been triggered in you and you're a functional psychic.”

“I'm beginning to have fewer doubts about that.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Because as soon as we stopped touching, your voice became a little muffled.”

“As if there's . . . something between us.”

Rafe nodded.

“Psychic cotton wool,” Isabel said. “That's what Hollis called it.”

He looked at her in silence for a moment, then shook his head slightly. “Brave new world. Not something I expected to be part of.”

“No. Me either.” Before he could say anything to that, she added, “Anyway, we need to know for sure.”

“How can we find out?”

Very casually, Isabel said, “It just so happens that there's a telepath in town. A telepath with the ability to recognize another psychic at least eighty percent of the time. That's the highest percentage we've ever found.”

“A telepath,” Rafe said. “SCU?”

“Yes.”

“Undercover, I gather.”

“Bishop often sends in a secondary agent or team to work behind the scenes whenever possible. We've found it a very effective method of operation.” Her tone was a little wary now, and she watched him uncertainly.

“Waiting for me to blow my stack?” he asked.

“Well, law-enforcement officials we work with tend to get a little upset when they find out they've been left out of the loop. Even for a very good reason. So, let's just say it wouldn't surprise me if you did.”

“Then,” Rafe said, “your senses really are in a box. And I'm not just talking about the extra ones.” His voice was very calm, almost offhand. He got to his feet. “When do I meet this telepath?”

Isabel checked her watch. “Forty-five minutes. We'll have to leave in thirty to make the meeting.”

“Okay. I'll be in my office until then.”

She watched him leave the room and continued to gaze at the open doorway until Hollis appeared just a minute or two later.

“Isabel?”

“The thing that actually scares me,” Isabel said as though they were continuing a conversation begun sometime before, “is that I have this uneasy feeling he's at least three steps ahead of me. And I don't understand how he's doing that.”

“The killer?”
“No. Rafe.”

Hollis closed the door behind her, then came in and sat down at the conference table. “He's still surprising you, huh?”

“In spades. He just never reacts to things the way I think he's going to.”

Mildly, Hollis said, “Then maybe you're thinking too much.”

“What do you mean?”

“Stop trying to anticipate, Isabel. Instead of thinking about everything, why not try listening to your instincts and feelings?”

“You sound like Bishop.”

Hollis was a little surprised. “I do?”

“Yes. He says I only get blindsided when I forget what my senses are for. That I have to accept and understand that what I feel is at least as important as what I think.”

“More important,” Hollis said. “For you. Especially now, I imagine.”

“Why now?”

“Rafe.”

Isabel frowned and looked away.

“He reached out to you, Isabel. You wanted him to. You let him. But you couldn't reach back. You weren't quite ready to take that chance.”

“I've known the man a grand total of about four days.”

“So? We both know time has nothing to do with it. You and Rafe connected in those first few hours. You were wide open because you always are—or were. He was definitely attracted and unusually willing to open himself emotionally, or so it seemed to me. Jesus Christ, Isabel, you two strike sparks when you touch. Literally. Are you telling me you can't see a sign from the universe that clear?”

“We're going over old ground here,” Isabel said tightly.

“Yes, but you keep missing the point.”

“And what is that?”

“Those control issues of yours. You can be flip about them if you want, but we both know they're at the heart of this entire situation.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You came into this as confident as always, sure of yourself and your abilities. In control. I don't know, maybe you were a little more vulnerable than usual because it's this particular killer, this old enemy, that you were after. Or maybe that had nothing to do with it. Maybe it was just a case of right place, right person—and really lousy timing.”

“I'll agree with that much, anyway,” Isabel muttered.

“Doesn't really matter. The fact is, you found yourself losing control, and not just of your own emotions. Your abilities were suddenly different. You were so wide open you didn't have a hope in hell of being able to even filter
all the stuff coming at you. You could do that before, I'm told. Filter what came through, exert a kind of control over it even if you couldn't block it out. But once you got to Hastings, once you connected with Rafe, you didn't even have that.”

“What happened here was nothing that hadn't happened before, as far as my abilities go.”

“No, but the scale of it was different. You've already admitted that much yourself.”

Reluctantly, Isabel nodded.

“And there he was, so close. Too close. All of a sudden, you got very spooked. So you opened the door to your chamber of horrors, thinking that would drive him away and things could get back to normal. But it did just the opposite. It brought him even closer, and it strengthened the connection between you two. So much so that he was somehow able to use it himself, even if only unconsciously.”

Hollis shook her head slowly. “I guess it was easier for you to just let him be the one in control for a while. Let him do what he wanted to do, needed to do. Protect you, shut out all the pain. Even if it meant shutting off your abilities and blinding you to the evil you know is almost close enough to touch.”
THE POUNDING IN HIS HEAD was almost as rhythmic as his heartbeat, as though his very brain pulsed inside his skull.

The imagery pleased him briefly.

The pain made him reach for yet another handful of painkillers. He’d considered going to a doctor and getting the stronger prescription stuff but was wary of doing anything that might call attention to himself.

That bitch agent, it might occur to her that the change kept him in pain most of the time, and she might start calling doctors, checking for just that.

No, he couldn’t take the chance.

But he had a hunch that all the painkillers on top of not being able to eat much these days might be causing other problems. There was a new pain, deep in his gut, a burning. It got better when he was able to eat something, and he knew what that meant. An ulcer, probably.

Was that part of the change? Was it intended that his own digestive acids—helped along by handfuls of painkillers—would eat through the lining of his stomach?

He didn't see how that would help him become what he had to be, but—

*It's punishment, wimp.*

“I haven't done anything wrong.” He kept his voice low, so nobody else would hear.

*You're dragging your feet. You haven't done that agent. You haven't done the reporter. Or the other one. What're you waiting for?*

“The right time. I have to be careful. They're watching me.”

*I knew I wouldn't be able to count on you to keep it together. You're paranoid now.*

“No—”

You are. All you should be thinking about is what those women have done to you. Those bitches. You know what they've done. You know.

“Yes. I know.”

Then there's nothing else to think about, is there? Nothing else to worry about.

“I just have to kill them. All six of them. Just like I did before.”

Yes. You just have to kill them.
“I'm not that self-destructive,” Isabel said.

“You're that scared.”

“And you know that because of your degree in psychology?”

“I know it because I was brutalized too.”

After a long moment, much of the tension drained visibly from Isabel and she said, “Yeah. We belong to a very select club, you and I. Survivors of evil.”

“It doesn't have to be a lifetime membership, Isabel.”

“Doesn't it?”

“No. And if you let it be, then you let him win. You let evil win.”

Isabel managed a faint smile. “If this is what Maggie Barnes did for you, then I wish I'd had her around fourteen years ago.”

“What Maggie did for me,” Hollis said, “was put me in the same place you're in now. As if years have gone by. The memories are still there, the pain is only an echo—and the scars are fear. I can be more objective than you because I'm not the one falling in love.”

“And if you were?” It was a tacit admission.

“I'd be scared to death.”

“I'll remind you that you said that.”

It was Hollis's turn to smile faintly. “Believe me, I'm counting on you to help me through, if it ever happens.”

“The blind leading the blind.”

“You'll have figured things out by then. You'll have to. As our esteemed leader says, the universe puts us where we need to be. You obviously need to be here, now. With Rafe.”

“And a killer.”

Hollis nodded. “And a killer. Which is why I think you can't try to ignore or deny your own feelings. Not now, not this time. You don't have that luxury, not with a killer in the equation. You need your abilities at full strength, plus whatever Rafe brings to the relationship.”

In a slightly suspicious tone, Isabel asked, “Did Bishop tell you anything else about what's happening here? I mean, aside from having you give Rafe just the information he needed to keep that little confrontation at the dairy farm from having a tragic ending?”

“No, but I've been thinking about that.”

“I'm almost afraid to ask.”

“Oh, it's nothing definitive. You know how Bishop and Miranda are when it comes to seeing the future. Maybe they did see this and knew that Rafe needed to be part of it; maybe that's why they made sure he'd survive Helton's drunken paranoia. But even if they did, they'd hardly tell me anything about it.”

“Probably not,” Isabel agreed wryly. “They feel very responsible for what they see and the actions they take or don't take, so they don't say a whole lot about it to the rest of us.”

“One of these days,” Hollis said, “I'd love to talk to them about the whole philosophical question of playing God.”
“Good luck.”

Hollis smiled faintly, but said, “Getting back to the point I wanted to make, I think there’s a very simple reason why you and Rafe reacted to each other so instantly and on a basic chemical and electromagnetic level.”

“I guess you're going to tell me even if I don't ask.”

“Yes. It’s that balance thing the universe tries to keep going. In your case, you needed something outside yourself to be whole, balanced. And so does he. I think you two were meant to be a team, Isabel. Just like Bishop and Miranda. The two of you together are potentially . . . greater than the sum of your parts. A perfect balance, something the universe keeps aiming for and so often misses.”

“Hollis—”

“I don't know why I believe that, but I do. Maybe it's the sparking thing. Or just the way you talk to each other, as though you've been close for years. All I know is that I believe what I believe. And I think the only difference between you two and Bishop and Miranda is that it took them years and a lot of tragedy to figure things out.”

“What makes you think I—Rafe and I—can get there any faster or easier?”

“You do. You charge at things head-on, Isabel. It's your instinct as sure as Rafe's instinct is to protect. So stop holding back. Stop being afraid. Trust yourself.”

Easy for you to say.”

“Yeah, it is. Like I said, I'm not the one falling in love and trying to cope with all this. But the universe put me here for a reason, too, and maybe it wasn't to talk to dead victims. Maybe it was to talk to you. Maybe it's not time for me to learn to control my abilities.”

“That's a handy excuse,” Isabel said, not unkindly.

“You don't have to worry that I'll stop trying.” Hollis grimaced slightly. “Okay, you don't have to worry that I'll keep on not trying.”

“I was beginning to wonder.”

“I know I need to learn to control this. And I know I won't be able to if I don't start trying. So I will. You have my word on that. My abilities might be the only edge we've got in this. Especially if it's going to take time for you and Rafe to get this shield thing figured out.”

“The thought had occurred.”

“So we both have a lot of work to do. And Rafe'll have to get a crash course in being psychic.”

Isabel sighed. “Well, after my last little discussion with him, Rafe may not be all that willing, no matter what he said. I don't need any extra senses to know he was not happy with me.”

“If I have to say it again, I will. Subtle is not your strong suit, pal.”

“It comes of being a platinum blonde almost six feet tall,” Isabel said wryly. “Like being a neon sign in human terms, at least according to what the therapists say.”

“Since you've never been able to melt into the background physically . . .”

“Exactly. Another reason I—to use your phrase—charge at things head-on. Usually. Everybody tends to be watching me, might as well give them something to see. Never really got much of a chance to practice subtle.”

“It shows.”
“Yeah, I'm getting that.”

“Mmm. In any case, I've got a strong hunch that Rafe will meet you halfway even if he is pissed at the moment. But only halfway. You're the profiler, so consider this: what is it you have that Rafe needs to balance himself—and vice versa? And I'm not talking about the shield thing. Emotionally. Psychologically.”

“You obviously think you know the answer.”

“Yeah, I think I do. I also think it's something both of you will have to figure out for yourselves.”

“Jesus. You really are beginning to sound like Bishop.”

Hollis considered a moment, then said, “Thank you.”

Shaking her head, Isabel checked her watch, then got herself off the conference table. “I'm taking Rafe for his . . . psychic litmus test.”

“Say hello for me.”

“I will. In the meantime, the focus of the investigation needs to be on locating that box of photographs and the missing women, and trying to figure this bastard out before he kills another one. In other words, same old, same old.”

Hollis nodded, then said, “This morning, you asked Ginny McBrayer if she was feeling okay.”

“Yeah.”

“You saw the shiner, didn't you? It got more obvious as the day wore on, despite her attempts to cover it up.”

Isabel sighed. “She did a good job with the makeup, which makes me think it's not the first black eye she's had to hide. What do you know about her home life?”

“I asked Mallory, casually. Ginny still lives at home, with her parents. She's trying to pay off college loans and save for a place of her own.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Mallory didn't know. But I can ask Ginny outright. I'm not especially shy.”

“I noticed that.” Isabel thought about it, then nodded. “If you get the chance, do. She may think we're butting in to something that's none of our business, but there's a lot of tension in this town, and borderline situations can get pushed over the edge really fast.”

“An abusive boyfriend or parent could get worse.”

“Much worse. Besides, she's got a lot on her plate as a young officer, especially right now, and stress can cause different reactions in people. Like the rest of us, she takes her gun home with her.”

“Oh, hell. I hadn't even thought of that.”

“Let's hope she hasn't either.”

“So, are you still mad at me?” Isabel asked Rafe as they got into her and Hollis's rental car.

“I wasn't mad at you.”
“No? Then I guess an arctic cold front swept through the conference room despite all those walls. I nearly got frostbite. Amazing.”

“You know,” he said as she started the engine, “you don’t talk like any other person I’ve ever met.”

“One of a kind, accept no substitutes.”

He looked at her, one brow rising. “Where are we going?”

“West. That little motel on the edge of town.”

“Great. The only motel in Hastings that charges hourly rates.”

“Oh, I doubt anybody will pay attention to us going in, if that’s what you’re worried about. I took Stealthy 101 at the Bureau.”

Rafe’s mouth twitched. “You don’t play fair either.”

“Well, at least we both have our little tricks. You can kiss me until my knees get dizzy, and I can make you laugh even when you’re pissed.”

He laughed, but said, “I was not pissed. Just . . . annoyed. You are a very difficult woman, in case no one has ever told you that.”

“I have been told, as a matter of fact. It doesn’t seem to help, knowing about it. Sorry.”

He turned slightly in his seat to watch her as she drove, but let a few minutes pass before saying, “Dizzy knees, huh?”

“Oh, don’t say you didn’t know.”

“I knew there was some effect. That was the only reason I didn’t get pissed in the conference room when you were so busy backpedaling.”

“You weren’t supposed to see me backpedaling. Hollis says I don’t do subtle real well.”

“You don’t do subtle at all.”

“Then I’ll stop trying, shall I?”

He grinned. “So you do have a few buttons.”

Isabel got hold of herself. Or tried to. “Apparently. Look, it’s not all that much fun to keep hearing how blatant you are. I’m an almost-six-foot blonde, which makes me real visible; I’m a clairvoyant without a shield—usually—which makes me a high-wattage receiver for an amazing range of trivia that tends to come at me like painful bullets, and now I find out I might as well be wearing my heart on my sleeve. Just look for my picture beside the word obvious in the dictionary.”

“You do defensive very well.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Rafe chuckled. “You’ll feel much better when you just admit it, you know you will.”

“I don’t know how I’ll feel. And neither do you.”

“You’re wasting a lot of energy, I know that. Want to talk about our primitive instincts? You’re a fighter, Isabel; backing away from this isn’t doing anything except keeping you rattled and off balance.”
“All of a sudden everybody has a degree in psychology,” she muttered.

“Just tell me this much. Is it going to make a difference, finding out whether I’m psychic?”

Isabel knew that was a serious question and answered it seriously. “You mean will I love you more if you can provide a shield for me? No. Being shielded for nearly twenty-four hours has taught me I’d rather be without one. I mean, nice place to visit now and then, but I really do feel like I’ve suddenly gone deaf, and I don’t like it.”

“So if I am psychic and have somehow put a shield around your abilities, you’re going to run to the ends of the earth to escape it?”

“I didn’t say that. And no. We’ll just figure out a way for one or both of us to control the damned thing, that’s all. Having psychic abilities never makes life easier, but the whole point is learning to live with them.”

“So you’ll love me either way?”

Isabel opened her mouth, then closed it. She allowed the silence to lengthen for a moment before saying, “You’re very tricky.”

“Not tricky enough. Apparently.”

“Here’s the place.”

Rafe smiled slightly but didn’t say anything else as she pulled the car into the motel’s secondary drive and around to the back of the building.

It was a somewhat seedy motel, an L-shaped single floor, and the neon VACANCY sign was flickering on the point of going dark. Only two cars were parked at the front; around the back there were half a dozen more scattered vehicles.

Isabel parked the unobtrusive rental beside a small Ford with a dented rear bumper, and they both got out. She went immediately to the room in front of the Ford and knocked quietly.

The door opened. “What, no pizza?”

“I forgot,” Isabel said apologetically, stepping into the room.

“You owe me one. Hey, Chief,” Paige Gilbert said. “Come on in.”

“We’re just concerned,” Hollis told Ginny quietly.

The younger woman shifted a bit in her chair at the conference table, then said, “I appreciate that. I really do. But I’m fine. In a few more months, I’ll have enough saved to move out on my own.”

“And until then?”

“Until then I’ll just stay out of his way.”

“Like you did last night?” Hollis shook her head. “You’ve had enough training to know better, Ginny. He’s mad at the world and you’re his punching bag. He won’t stop until somebody makes him.”

“When I move out—”

“He’ll go back to beating your mother.”
“I didn't tell you that.”

“You didn't have to.”

Ginny slumped in her chair. “No. It's textbook, isn't it? He's a bully who beat her up until I got old enough to intervene, and now he hits me. When I'm not fast enough to stay out of his reach, that is. Usually, he's so drunk he passes out or knocks himself out trashing the house, at least now that he's older.”

“Your mother?”

“I haven't been able to talk her into leaving him. But once I'm out, I think she'll go live with her sister in Columbia.”

“And what will he do?”

“Go down the drain, probably. He hasn't had a regular job in years because of his temper. He's stupid and sullen and—like you said—mad at the world. Because, of course, it's not his fault that his life sucks. It's never his fault.”

“It isn't your fault,” Hollis said. “But when he goes too far and assaults someone else, or drives drunk and causes an accident, or does something else stupid and destructive, you'll blame yourself. Won't you?”

Ginny was silent.

“You're a cop, Ginny. You know what you have to do. Press charges, see that he's locked up or forced into some kind of treatment program, or whatever it takes to defuse the situation.”

“I know. I know that. But it's hard to . . .”

“To take it all public. Yes, it is. Maybe one of the hardest things you'll ever do. But doing it will take away his power. It's his shame you'll be showing the world, not yours. Not your mother's. His.”

Biting her bottom lip, Ginny said, “It's mostly the guys here that I think about. I mean, I took the training, I know self-defense, and still he hits me. So what're they going to think? That I'm some weak little girly-girl who needs them to protect me all the time? I wouldn't be able to take that.”

“You might get that reaction at first,” Hollis admitted. “Not because they think you aren't capable, but because they wouldn't have become cops if they didn't want to help people. Protect people. Especially one of their own. But you'll show them, in time. Earn another marksman's medal or another belt in your karate classes, and they'll notice.”

“How did you know—”

“A little birdie told me.” Hollis smiled. “Look, the point is that you have friends. And they'll be supportive. But this is not the time to back off, to avoid taking action against your father. With this killer on the loose, everybody's on edge and in full defensive mode. If your father pushes anybody the wrong way, he's likely to provoke a situation with a tragic outcome.”

“You're right.” Ginny got to her feet and managed a smile. “Thank you, Hollis. And thank Isabel for me, will you? If you hadn't said something, I probably would have let this go on, and God knows what might have happened.”

“You have friends,” Hollis repeated. “Including us. Don't forget that.”

“No. No, I won't. Thanks.” She went quietly from the conference room.

Hollis sat there frowning in silence for a moment, her gaze fixed on the bulletin boards covered with photographs and reports, then reached for her cell phone and punched in a number.

“Yeah.”
“I know this isn't a good time,” Hollis said, “but when you've finished up there, ask Rafe about the McBrayer household, will you? He might know just how volatile Hank McBrayer is, how dangerous.”

“She's going to press charges?”

“I think so. And I have a very bad feeling about how he might react.”

“Okay. Keep her busy there, if you can; she might feel the need to go confront him before she takes official action.”

“Shit. Okay, I will. Oh—and we've got a small lead on Kate Murphy; after the latest round of radio announcements asking for help, a witness came forward to report he thinks he might have seen her getting on a bus the day she disappeared. We're checking it out.”

“Good. It'd be nice to know we aren't looking for another body. Yet.”

“I'll say. How's it going there?”

“I'll fill you in when I get back.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Tense is the word I'd use. Talk to you later.”

“Is who going to press charges?” Rafe asked as Isabel ended the call.

“Tell you later.”

He frowned at her. “I am not tense.”

Isabel lifted both brows at Paige.

“He's tense,” Paige said.

Rafe, sitting on one of the two rather unsteady chairs near the front window, rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the two women warily. “I'm still trying to deal with you being a fed,” he told Paige. “And the fact that you've been here longer than Isabel.”

Isabel shook her head. She was sitting in the other rickety chair, both of which faced Paige, who sat on the bed. “I'm still pissed at Bishop for that part of it. All the time I was arguing with him about sending me down here, and he already had an agent in place—and had sent her here right after the first murder, even before you asked for a profile.”

“Not much gets past him,” Paige reminded Isabel. “Neither of them has said, but I get the feeling he and Miranda keep an eye on any investigations that might even possibly involve any of the killers in our cold-case files. Hell, Kendra probably wrote a program for them purely to do that—scan all the police and law-enforcement databases looking for specific details or keywords.”

“He might have told me,” Isabel said.

“And he might have told Hollis why she was supposed to make sure Rafe knew you understood Latin. Of course, if he had, then she might have been self-conscious about what she was doing, and Rafe might have picked up on the wrong part of the conversation, and you might never have had to bring him to me to find out if he's psychic because he'd be dead.”
“If my vote counts,” Rafe said, “I vote we let Bishop continue to do things his own way.”

“Okay, point taken. But Hollis is right: one of these days, one of us is going to have to sit down and have a long talk with Bishop and Miranda about the philosophical and actual consequences of playing God.”

“Later,” Rafe said. “Can we please do what we came here to do and find out what’s going on inside my head? How do we find out, by the way? And does it involve something unspeakable like . . . chicken entrails?”

“What have you been reading?” Paige demanded.

“Well, since nobody offered me a copy of the psychic newsletter . . .”

Isabel frowned and looked at Paige. “Isn't that a joke Maggie uses sometimes?”

Paige nodded, her gaze thoughtfully fixed on Rafe. “Yeah. He's very plugged-in. Aside from Beau, I've never met anybody else who could do that. He's sort of picked up the rhythm of the way you talk too.”

“Yeah, I noticed that.”

“Ladies, please.” Rafe was beginning to look profoundly uneasy.

“Oh, you're psychic,” Paige said matter-of-factly.

Rafe had braced himself to be told that, but the abruptness and utter calm of the disclosure threw him more than a little. “You don't have to touch me to make sure?”

“No. I'm not a touch telepath, I'm an open telepath. All I have to do is focus on someone and concentrate. If I can read them at all, I know right away. I can read you, and you're psychic.”

“I am?”

“You are.” Paige looked at Isabel. “I was pretty sure he was, at that news conference before you showed up on Thursday. When you walked into the room, I was positive.”


“I'm not surprised,” Paige said frankly. “The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. It was like an electrical current was let loose in the room.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” Isabel demanded. “Then would have been nice, but when I called you today—”

“I reported in to Bishop on Thursday, and he told me to wait. That you and I shouldn't have any contact at all until you called me. On Sunday.”

“He knew I'd call today.”

“Apparently, yes.”

“At least tell me he didn't give you a whole list of things to say to one or both of us.”

Paige grinned. “No. He just said you'd call, and it would be safe for us to meet, that I should follow my training and instincts. So that's what I'm doing.”

Isabel was looking thoughtful, her irritation with Bishop a fleeting thing. “Wait a minute. Rafe was already a functional psychic before I came into the room?”

“Yeah, but not consciously.”

“Then the original trigger was—”
“Dunno. It had to be recent, and probably some kind of emotional or psychological shock.”

Slowly, Rafe said, “I don’t recall anything like that happening. My life was very ordinary until all this started. Having a serial killer loose in my town was a shock, I admit, but nothing I’m not trained to deal with.”

“Could have been some kind of subconscious shock, I suppose, though that’s really rare. We’re usually completely aware of the jolts we get through life. Whatever it was, I can’t get at it; it’s behind his shield.”

Isabel rubbed her forehead briefly. “Okay, let’s try something a little easier. What happened when I came into the room that day?”

Readily, Paige said, “As near as I can tell, you were the catalyst. Or it was a combination of the two of you in close proximity for the first time. On a purely electromagnetic level, it was like energy going to energy. I felt it come through the room between you. Jeez, I could almost see it.”

“And what did that do to Rafe’s abilities?”

“Same thing it did to yours. Started to change them.”

“Wait a minute,” Rafe said. “Change them from what? And into what?”

“Here’s where we get into educated guesswork,” Paige told them. “From what I was getting before Isabel walked into the room, I think your natural ability would have been precognition.”

“Seeing the future?”

“Like your grandmother,” Isabel said. “She had the sight.”

Rafe leaned forward, elbows on knees, and frowned at Paige. “But I’m not precognitive now?”

“No, not actively. When Isabel walked in, everything changed. Her energy added to yours closed that door and opened another one.”

“I’m afraid to ask,” Rafe said.

“I’m not,” Isabel said. “What’s behind door number two?”

“Clairvoyance.”

Startled, Rafe said, “Like Isabel?”

“Yeah, except that as we all know you have a shield. Dandy one, as a matter of fact. So dandy you’ve got it wrapped around both of you.”

“How is that possible?” Isabel demanded. “He’s not consciously controlling any of this.”

“That’s how it’s possible.” Paige eyed Rafe thoughtfully. “In case you don’t know this, your conscious mind is always second-guessing your hunches and instincts. For most of your life, I gather.”

He nodded without comment.

“Well, your instincts are fighting back. Once your abilities became functional, your subconscious took them over. With a vengeance.”

Isabel frowned. “Wait a minute. If this shield of his is so powerful it can even enclose my mind—”

“Then how am I able to read him? It’s because he’s doing all this at a subconscious level. Just beneath his conscious mind is a solid wall.” Paige lifted her brows at Isabel. “Same one that’s just beneath your conscious mind. It’s really no wonder you can’t hear the voices anymore.”
With a sigh, Isabel said, “You know, Bishop was right—as usual, damn him—to send Hollis with me. She’s been pretty much on the mark about all of this.”

“Yeah, the rookies often are. Sometimes knowing just the basics can offer you more room to speculate and the imagination to do it,” Paige said. “The rest of us tend to get tripped up by our own assumptions.”

“I’m still trying to figure out the basics,” Rafe told them. To Paige, he said, “So I’m not stripped naked to you, just down to my underwear.”

“Pretty good analogy.” She smiled. “And accurate, as far as it goes. I’m not picking up thoughts from you—I mean clear thoughts like sentences. It doesn’t work that way for me. You could be calling me rude names in your head or worrying about some deep dark secret you don’t want anybody to know, and I wouldn’t necessarily read either.”

“Because you specialize in reading psychic ability in other minds?” he guessed.

Paige nodded. “Exactly. My own energy seems to be tuned for that, picking up on that particular frequency. So I usually know if somebody else is psychic, how they’re psychic, and what’s going on in that area of their minds. But the human brain is vast, mostly unmapped terrain, and the larger part of it is as alien to me as it is to most everybody else.”

Rafe shook his head as he sat back in his chair, but said, “Okay, how do I control this?”

“Simple. Get your conscious mind in control.”

“And you’re going to tell me how to do that?”

“Wish I could. Sorry. This is the sort of thing almost every psychic has to figure out more or less alone. The only advice I have to offer is that you two work together on it. Clearly, you’re meant to.”

It was Isabel who said, “So tell us why.”

Paige didn’t hesitate. “Do me a favor and hold hands for a minute.”

Rafe looked at Isabel, then held out his hand. With only a slight hesitation, she put hers in it.

At the spark, Paige’s eyes widened. “I’d heard about it but not seen it. Interesting, to say the least.” She frowned, obviously concentrating.

But then something really weird happened.

While Isabel and Rafe watched in fascination, Paige’s shoulder-length dark hair began to lift and stir as though a breeze had wafted through the room. There was a soft popping and crackling, and a low hum began to fill the silence.
HOLLIS LOOKED UP as Ginny stuck her head in the conference room to say, “Caleb Powell is here to see you. Should I show him in here, or to one of the offices?”

“In here, I guess. Thanks, Ginny.” Hollis went to cover the bulletin boards, then returned to a chair on the far side of the table. She was more than a little surprised that he wanted to see her at all; to seek her out here at the police station, and on a Sunday, definitely made her wonder.

Especially after their last meeting.

“Hi,” Caleb said as he came in. He didn't shut the door behind him, and Hollis didn't suggest that he do so.

“Hi yourself. What's up?” With a gesture, she invited him to sit down on the opposite side of the table.

He hesitated, then sat down. “I wanted to apologize.”

“For what?”

“You know. I acted like a jerk when you told me about your eyes.”

She couldn't help but smile. “You didn't act like a jerk, you were just a little unnerved. I can hardly blame you for that, since I am too. And I've had months to get used to them.”

“Still, it was a lousy way for me to act. I'm sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

Caleb moved half-consciously in his chair. “Then why do I get the feeling I've damaged . . . something . . . beyond repair?”

Having watched Isabel and Rafe circling each other like a couple of wary cats, Hollis was in no mood to play games. “Caleb, you seem like a nice guy, with a nice, satisfying life here in Hastings. And I hope that after we've done our job and gone away, you get your nice little town back again. I hope we can offer you some sense of closure in Tricia's death by finding the animal who killed her.”

“But?”

“But nothing. There isn't anything else. There never was, really.”

“There might have been.”

Still being honest, she said, “I sort of doubt it. Not because of anything you said or did, but just the timing.”

“And there's no use even trying?”

“I think . . . that right now my life and your life are so different we could never even find a bit of common ground to stand on. Honestly. You don't know me, Caleb. The little bit you do know is just the tip of a pretty dark and unsettling iceberg.”
He leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “Yeah, I was afraid you'd say something like that.”

“Admit it. You're relieved.”

“No. No, not relieved. In fact, I have the distinct feeling I'm missing out on something I'll regret one day.”

“Nice of you to say so.”

He smiled a bit ruefully. “Look, there's something else I came here to tell you. Show you. Something that could possibly be related to Tricia's murder.”

Hollis had no problem in shifting from the personal to the professional—which told her a lot. “What is it?”

“I found something in the desk. My desk, not hers. It was in a drawer I never use because it's in an awkward position in the desk layout, and apparently she'd been using it to store work-related things she no longer used. Mostly old notebooks. I went through all of them, and they were all the shorthand notes she'd taken. Dictation, notes about schedules and appointments, that sort of thing.”

“What was unusual about that?”

“Nothing. But when I was going through the last notebook—which was actually the one that had been on top, by the way—a slip of paper fell out. I'm guessing it was something she wrote down during a phone call, and the date puts it just before the murders began.” He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, adding, “My prints are all over it, but I figured it didn't really matter. It's clearly a private note, since it doesn't match anything in my schedule, and I doubt it has any value as evidence—except to maybe point the investigation in a different direction.” He placed the small piece of paper on the conference table and pushed it across to her.

Out of habit, Hollis nevertheless used the eraser of the pencil she was holding to draw the paper closer so she could study it. “Looks like her handwriting,” she said.

“I'm no expert, but I've seen a lot of her handwriting over the years. She wrote that. Plus, that's the sort of doodling she tended to do when her mind was on something else.”

The “doodles” were clear enough. A little cat face; a couple of hearts with arrows through them; stairs leading to nowhere; a sun setting off the edge of the paper with its rays beaming; a female eye, with long lashes and carefully detailed iris; and two circles connected by a series of smaller circles.

The paper was clearly from a notepad; it was a neon green, and across the top was printed: *It works in practice, but not in theory.*

“There were other notepads like this one in her desk,” Hollis remembered. “The kind with preprinted cartoons or funny sayings on them.”

“Yeah. She said they lightened up the serious tone of a lawyer's office, but she only used them for personal or throwaway notes.”

Hollis nodded, and studied what Tricia had written in the center of the notepad.

\[ \text{J.B.} \\
\text{Old Hwy} \\
\text{7:00 5/16} \]

It was followed by two large question marks.

“Did Tricia know Jamie Brower?” Hollis asked.
“She never mentioned it, if she did.”

“How did she react when Jamie was murdered?”

“Shocked and horrified, just like the rest of us.” Caleb frowned. “She did take a few vacation days unexpectedly, now that I think about it.”

“Did she leave town?”

“She said she was going to. The time off was because her sister had had surgery, and Tricia needed to go to Augusta and help take care of the kids.”

Hollis pushed the note to one side and hunted through the folders stacked on the table until she found the one she wanted. She looked through several pages, frowning, then paused. “Okay. According to her sister’s statement, at the time of Tricia's death she hadn't seen her in more than three months. I thought I remembered reading that.”

“Tricia lied to me?” Caleb was baffled. “Why? I mean, it's not like I even asked her why she needed the time off. She had so much vacation and sick time accumulated, I remember telling her to take a week or two if that's what she needed. But she came back to work about . . . four days later.”

Hollis looked through the folder for several more minutes, pausing here and there, and finally closed it. “We've backtracked every victim's life for about two weeks prior to their murders, which means we have information that starts tracking Tricia just a few days after Jamie was killed.”

“So you don't know if she was here in town or went somewhere else.”

“No. Shouldn't be too difficult to find out, though. Her apartment manager has been very cooperative, and Tricia was a friendly neighbor, so her neighbors noticed her.”

“A lesson to all of us not to become too isolated, I guess.”

“One way to look at it.” Hollis hesitated, then said, “Did Tricia ever show up to work with unexplained bruises or burns, anything like that?”

“No. I told you her former boyfriend showed no signs of abusing her. I never saw a bruise, and since she seldom wore makeup I think I would have noticed.”

“True enough.” Hollis smiled. “Thanks for bringing this in, Caleb.”

He took the hint and rose to his feet. “I only hope it turns out to be helpful.”

“I'll let you know,” she promised. “That closure we were talking about.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” He hesitated just an instant, then turned and left the conference room.

Hollis was just about to call Ginny in and find out if the younger officer wanted to share a pizza and do some brainstorming when she felt a sudden chill, as if someone had opened a window into winter.

She watched gooseflesh rise on her arms and had to force herself to look up, toward the doorway.

Jamie Brower stood there.

“Oh, shit,” Hollis murmured.

She wasn't solid flesh, but neither was she a ghostly, wispy thing; she was definitely clearer and more distinct than Hollis had yet seen her. In this form, anyway.

Her expression was anxious, worried; Jamie said something—or tried to. All Hollis heard was that peculiar hollow silence.
“I'm sorry,” she said, trying to hold her own voice steady. Trying not to feel terrified. “I can't hear you.”

Jamie moved a step closer to the table and Hollis. Or rather—and very eerily—floated closer, since she didn't seem to actually take a physical step.

Again, she tried to say something.

This time, Hollis could—almost—hear something. Like a quiet voice speaking from the far end of a huge room.

She focused, concentrated. “I can just barely hear . . . Try again, please. What do you need to tell me?”

Jamie's mouth moved as she tried to communicate, the intensity of her need so obvious that Hollis could literally feel it, like something pushing at her.

Unnerved, Hollis lost both concentration and the desire to keep trying. “I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, but I just can't hear you,” she said, her own voice unsteady now.

An expression of pure frustration crossed Jamie's lovely face, twisting it, and she threw up her arms in the gesture of someone reaching the end of her limits.

Half the folders on the conference table spewed their contents into the air.

When the rain of paper and photographs had ended, Hollis found herself sitting in the middle of a mess.

Alone.

Ginny came into the room a moment later, looking around in surprise. “Hey, it looks like somebody lost her temper.”

“Yes,” Hollis said. “Somebody did.”

“Okay,” Paige said, “getting creeped out here.”

Isabel and Rafe looked at each other, then stopped holding hands.

Paige reached up to smooth down her hair, and they could all hear the crackle. “Jesus,” she muttered. “I'm going to have to write a detailed report on this one. It's the first time that my ability to tap into other psychics' abilities actually manifested itself physically.”

“Some psychic abilities do manifest themselves physically,” Isabel reminded her.

“Yeah, but not many. I know your visions do that. Have you had one of those, by the way?”

“Not since I've been in Hastings.”

“I wonder if you could now.”

“I don't know. I assume not, since the visions are just another aspect of the clairvoyance.”

“And both are boxed up inside a shield that might as well be Fort Knox.”

“You're serious? It's that tough?”

“And then some. Bishop had me test his and Miranda's shield once, and it hit about eight or nine on our scale. Of course, we don't know how consistent that sort of ability is; it may vary widely according to the circumstances—i.e.,
why the shield is being used by the psychic at that particular moment. When we did the test, they weren’t especially motivated or feeling driven to protect themselves. If they had been . . . who knows?”

It was Rafe who said, “So if the reasons were powerful enough, or the—the psychic desperate enough to protect himself or herself from some perceived attack, then the shield would be even stronger than . . . normal.” He felt odd just using the word—hell, any of these words. But Paige was nodding, again matter-of-factly.

“The human mind has a hundred ways to protect itself, and it’ll use whatever it can whenever it has to. Fear creates energy, just like any other strong emotion does, just like psychic ability itself does. A psychic’s mind virtually always uses that extra energy for some kind of wall or shield.”

“Except for Isabel.”

Isabel shrugged. “We've never been able to figure out why my abilities won't shield themselves.”

Rafe looked at her oddly. “No?”

“No.” She frowned at him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason.” But when he looked back at Paige, he lifted his brows slightly.

“Even those of us with extra senses can be incredibly blind to some things,” she said. “Keep doing that, by the way. It's working.”

Isabel looked from one to the other of them, baffled. “What's he doing?”

“Reaching through his shield.”

“He is?”

“I am?”

Paige nodded. “I'm sure you'll both figure it out. Problem is, there's this killer, which doesn't give you a whole hell of a lot of time in which to do it.”

“Any advice?” Isabel asked wryly.

“Yeah. Hurry.”

Hollis propped her elbows on the table and pressed her fingers against her eyes. “God, I'm tired. What time is it, anyway?”

“Nearly nine,” Isabel told her. “I was ready to call it a day hours ago.”

Rafe looked at her but didn't say anything, just as he hadn't said much since they'd left Paige at the motel. Isabel had filled the silence—and possibly tried to distract him—by briefly discussing Ginny's situation, a matter Rafe was kicking himself for having completely missed and one he wasn't at all sure how to handle.

Oh, yeah, he was psychic. Sure he was.

In any case, Isabel had offered a few suggestions, and Rafe was more than ready to accept her counsel and approve her plan. He just wished she was as forthcoming with advice regarding this peculiar new ability he supposedly had.

Hell, she hadn't even mentioned it since they'd left the motel, and that bothered him more than he wanted to
admit. He knew Isabel was dealing with issues of her own at the moment, and he knew he was a complication in her life. He was even reasonably sure that the simplest thing he could do would be to leave her alone to sort out what she had to.

But as Isabel herself had said, the simplest thing wasn't always the smartest thing.

So what was the smartest thing?

Studiously not looking at him, Isabel said, “Okay, we're agreed that the note doodled by Tricia Kane suggests she was one of Jamie's clients.”

“More than suggests,” Hollis said. “The only thing on that old highway of any interest is Jamie's playroom.”

“Agreed, but that doesn't mean Tricia was a client. We don't know why she was meeting Jamie. Hell, maybe she was painting her.”

“There were no sketches of Jamie or anybody who looked like her among Tricia's work. Besides, do you really think Jamie would commission a painting of herself in full S&M ensemble?”

“No.”

“Then what other reason could they have for meeting there?”

“Maybe Tricia was interested in buying the building. It was one of those Jamie planned to sell after what happened with Hope Tessneer.”

“We checked that out,” Mallory said. “At least as far as we could. Jamie kept her official appointments in her date book, and that included appointments to show her own properties during the last couple of months. No appointment listed for May sixteenth.”

Rafe spoke finally, saying, “Odds are, Tricia was a client. Or a potential client. You did say at least one of Jamie's partners could have been from Hastings.”

Isabel nodded. “I did say that, yes.”

Hollis looked from Isabel to Rafe curiously. There had been no opportunity to discuss what they had found out from Paige, since both Mallory and Ginny had been in the room and other officers had come and gone fairly steadily, but it didn't take a sixth sense to feel the tension between them.

Hollis had been debating whether to tell them about the visitation from Jamie, though she had pretty much decided just to tell Isabel later, when they were alone. After all, it wasn't as though she could provide anything new in the way of information or evidence.

Rafe said, “Then Tricia might have been a regular.”

“Another Hastings blonde with a secret sexual life?” Isabel leaned back in her chair with a sigh. “And it seemed like such a nice little town.”

“I said the same thing,” Hollis murmured.

“It was a nice little town,” Rafe said. “And will be again. Just as soon as we catch this bastard.”

“And all we've got to help us catch him,” Isabel reminded the group at large, “is a fairly useless profile and what we know about the victims.”

“You haven't revised the profile as you've gotten deeper into the investigation?” Rafe asked Isabel almost idly.

“Not really. This guy leaves so little behind that the only real thing we have to study are the victims he kills. All single white females, all smart and savvy, all successful. Beyond that, and until now, all we really had connecting
them was the color of their hair. Cheryl Bayne's disappearance puts the importance of that into question—definitely.”

“But even before then,” Mallory said, “we found Jamie's secret. And her secret playroom.”

Isabel nodded.

“Which could have been an aberration as far as the victims go, having absolutely nothing to do with the killer or his motivations. But then Hope Tessnee's body turned up, having very likely been a . . . toy . . . for our killer after she died, probably accidentally, and probably at Jamie's hands. Connection. And now this note, which is a pretty fair indication that Tricia Kane was or planned to become involved in Jamie's S&M games.”

“Another connection,” Rafe said.

“But there is absolutely no sign that Allison Carroll led anything but a perfectly traditional sex life. Also no sign that she even knew either of the other victims.”

Rafe shook his head. “Maybe we missed something. Or maybe there was nothing there to miss. Maybe she was as good at keeping secrets as Jamie was. As Tricia was.”

“Regarding Tricia, there were no regular withdrawals from her bank account in the last few months,” Mallory noted. “But that isn't to say she might not have sold some of her sketches or paintings for cash. A couple of her friends mentioned that she'd sold things to them. She could have paid Jamie without leaving any trace of the money.”

“Yeah,” Isabel said, “but how did she find Jamie? I mean, how did she know the services were available? I doubt Jamie advertised in some bondage magazine.”

“Word of mouth?” Rafe suggested. “A referral from another client? All these women had something to lose in the sense of not wanting their . . . extracurricular activities to be made public. Jamie could have been pretty sure of their silence.”

“Still, she would have wanted to have control”—Isabel broke off with a frown, then continued. “Wait a minute. The photos we have show Jamie unmasked. What if that's the reason Emily took those particular photos? Because they were the only ones that showed Jamie's face?”

Finishing her supposition, Rafe said, “What if Jamie was always masked when she met clients? Except for the client she trusted, the one in the photographs?”

Mallory said, “According to all that info you guys got from Quantico on the S&M scene, that actually makes sense. For the submissive to not know who was dominating her—or him, I guess—could be an important part of the experience. For some of them, it might even be necessary that they not know the identity of their . . . mistress.”

“We have got to find that box,” Isabel said. “And I want to talk to Emily again first thing tomorrow. The patrol's still watching her, right?”

Rafe nodded. “When she's out of the house, they follow; when she's home, as she was last time I checked, I have a squad car parked across the street from her house. If anybody asks, they're under orders to say they're making sure none of the media bothers the family.”

“Good cover story,” Isabel said.

“And plausible. Since Jamie was the first victim, the family really has had to put up with a lot of media attention. Allison and Tricia didn't have family in Hastings, so nobody can really know if those families are being watched as well.”

“Hey,” Ginny said suddenly, “did you guys take a good look at these doodles?”
“I was just looking at the time and place of the appointment,” Hollis admitted, unwilling to explain that images often blurred or faded oddly when she looked at them, particularly those drawn two-dimensionally on paper.

“What'd we miss?” Rafe asked his young officer.

Ginny hesitated, then pushed the note across the table to him. “Look at that doodle on the right. The two circles connected with a sort of chain.”

Rafe had to look for a moment before he realized what he was seeing. “Jesus. Handcuffs.”

“It's about time you got off,” Ally told Travis. “I didn't have to hang around the police station waiting for you, you know. I do have other offers.”

He grinned at her. “Then why didn't you accept any of them?”

“You're getting too goddamned cocky, I'll tell you that much. Here I am, wandering around downtown on a Sunday evening when the only other women out are brave, and needless to say brunette, hookers—”

“I think those are other reporters, Ally. Hastings doesn't have hookers.”

“You sure about that?”

Recalling a certain trip to a certain house when he was about sixteen, Travis felt his face heat up. “Well, not streetwalkers, anyway.”

“Don't tell me, let me guess. Your old man took you to a cathouse for your first sexual experience.”

“He did not.” Travis sighed. “My brother did.”

Ally slid off the hood of his car, laughing. “You should send her flowers on every anniversary, pal. She done you proud.”

“Thank you. I think.” He pulled her close for a long kiss, then said, “Dammit, Ally, it really bothers me that you're wandering around town alone, never mind after dark, especially since Cheryl Bayne disappeared. It's been nearly a week since the last murder; we know we're running out of time. Every other woman in town is jumpy as hell, and you're breezing around like nothing can touch you.”

“I'm not blond.”

“We don't know he's just after blondes. Cheryl Bayne wasn't—isn't—blond. Besides, the other times, he went after brunettes and redheads.”

“Other times?”

He grimaced. “You didn't hear me say that.”

“Look, I promise I won't report a word until you say it's okay. Scout's honor.”

He stared at the fingers she held up. “That's a peace sign, Ally.”

“Well, I was never a scout. But that doesn't mean you can't trust me to keep quiet—until I get the word it's okay to report.”

He took her arm and escorted her around to the passenger side of his car. “I say we pick up a bag of tacos and head for my place.”
“Tacos at this hour? God, you have a cast-iron stomach, don't you? Besides, didn't I see a pizza delivery to the station a couple of hours ago? The poor guy was staggering under the weight of those pizza boxes.”

“One of the feds offered to buy,” Travis said. “Naturally, we took her up on the offer.”

“And you're still hungry?”

“Well, that was a couple of hours ago.”

“But tacos? On top of pizza?”

“It's Sunday night in Hastings, Ally; we don't have a lot of choices here.”

She sighed and got into his car, waiting until he was behind the wheel to say, “Okay, but only on the condition that you fill me in on the investigation so far.”

“Ally—”

“Look, either you trust me by now or you don't. If you don't, please be kind enough to drop me off at the inn.”

“So that's it? I talk or it's over?”

“Come on, Travis, give me a break. We're not lovers, we just roll around in the sheets together and have a good time. It's fun and we both enjoy it, but I haven't heard a suggestion that we start picking out china patterns. You're not going to take me home to Mama, and we both know as soon as this maniac is captured or killed, I'm outta here. Right?”

“Right,” he said grudgingly.

“So don't get all indignant with me now. I'm having a good time with you, and that's cool, but I also have a job to do. Either I get what I need from you, or I start looking someplace else.”

“At least you're up front about it,” he muttered.

“I am nothing if not totally honest,” she said, lying without a blink.

He eyed her for a moment and then started the car. “Ally, I swear, if you air one single word—or even tell your producer—before I give the okay, I'll figure out a way to throw your ass in jail. Got it?”

“Got it. No problem. So who's Jane Doe, and how did she die?”

“Hope Tessneer, and she was strangled. She lived in another town about thirty miles away.”

“And turned up dead here because . . . ?”

“Beats me. I think the chief and the feds know more than they're saying, but they ain't sharing. At least, not with me.”

Accurately reading the tone of his voice, she said, “They've brought somebody else into the investigation?”

“Into the inner circle, anyway.” He shrugged, trying hard for indifference. “Ginny McBrayer seems to be in their confidence, or at least of the two agents. Figures. You females always stick together.”

“Please don't make me call you a sexist pig,” Ally requested dryly.

“I'm not. And that's not what I mean. Women talk to each other in ways men just don't. That's all.”

Ally looked at him with faint respect. “We do, actually. I'm surprised you noticed.”
“I keep telling you I’m not an idiot.” He sent her a glance, smiling oddly. “You really should pay attention, Ally.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I guess I really should at that. Where’re we going, Travis?”

“The taco place. If I’m going to spill my guts, I'm going to need sustenance first.”

“I really wish you’d used a different phrase,” Ally said. “Really.”
I

SABEL STUDIED THE NOTE and then nodded, passing it on to Hollis and Mallory. “It looks like a sketch of handcuffs to me. Sort of stylized, the way an artist would maybe do it, which could be one reason we missed it. Nice catch, Ginny.”

“I should have caught that,” Hollis said, more to herself than to the others, and in a tone that struck her own ears as wistful.

“You’re just all a little preoccupied,” Ginny murmured.

“Good thing you aren’t,” Isabel told her. “Okay, a paralegal might have doodled handcuffs, I suppose, but having them on this particular note has got to mean something more than absentmindedness. It’s one more indication Tricia Kane was involved, or looking to get involved, with Jamie Brower.”

Hollis said, “Any chance Jamie might have trusted Tricia with that box we so badly want to see?”

Isabel started to reply, then looked at Rafe. “What do you think?”

“I’m not the profiler.”

“Off the top of your head. What do you think?”

“No,” he heard himself reply, and frowned as he went on slowly. “Jamie wouldn’t have trusted that box with anyone else—unless it was the partner who saw her unmasked.”

“Very good,” Isabel said. “And my feeling as well. That box is either stored somewhere Jamie considered safe, or kept by someone she really, really trusted. And we know by now that she didn’t trust many people.”

Hollis produced the Eyes Only file and opened it to study the photographs. It didn’t take long for her to reach a conclusion and close the folder. “This isn’t Tricia Kane. For one thing, she had a couple of moles on one arm that would have shown up in the photos. For another, unless the photos were taken months ago, there wouldn’t have been time for her hair to grow out.”

“But you can’t see her hair in the photos because of that hood,” Ginny objected. Then she blinked. And blushed. “Oh. That hair.”

Isabel smiled at her. “Why don’t you go make a few copies of Tricia’s note so we can bag the original. And then I really do think we all need to call it a day. Start fresh in the morning.”

As soon as Ginny was out of the room, Isabel said to Rafe, “I’m going to go talk to her. Be right back.”

“Okay.”

“Did I miss something?” Mallory wondered when Isabel had gone.

“We’ll be arresting Hank McBrayer,” Rafe told her. “Assault charges filed by his daughter.”

Mallory looked blank for a moment, then scowled. “Son of a bitch. I’d heard talk, but Ginny never said anything.”
“Most victims of abuse don't,” Hollis said. To Rafe, she asked, “Is Isabel going to try to convince her to stay in a hotel tonight?”

“She's going to try to convince her to let you two and a couple of officers go back to her house with a warrant for her father's arrest and get him out of there tonight.”

“Can we do that?” Mallory asked.

“Yes. I called the judge from the car. The paperwork's almost ready.”

Mallory was still frowning. “Why Isabel and Hollis? I mean, why not just send a couple of our officers? I'll volunteer. Since I hate bullies just on principle, I'd love to accidentally break McBrayer's arm while he's resisting arrest.”

“So would I,” Rafe said. “But it was Isabel and Hollis who realized what was going on and talked to Ginny about it, and Isabel and I both feel Ginny will be more comfortable if they're along for the arrest.” He hesitated, then said, “Plus, I think Isabel has something else in mind.”

Hollis looked at him. “Do you, now? Like what?”

“Assuming he's sober enough to listen, I think she intends to take him down a peg or two. Without laying a finger on him.”

“If anybody can,” Hollis said, “it's Isabel. Guys look at that beautiful face and centerfold body, all that blond hair, big green eyes all wide and innocent, and think they know exactly what she is. Boy, do they get a surprise.”

“I certainly did,” Rafe murmured.

“Speaking of which,” Hollis said. “Are you?”

He didn't have to ask what she meant. “Apparently.”

Hollis whistled. “Dunno whether to say congratulations or sorry about that.”

“I'll let you know when I figure out how I feel about it.”

Mallory said, “Hello? What's going on? Are you what?”

“Psychic.”

She blinked. “You're psychic?”

“So I'm told.”

“How could you be and not know?”

“The short answer,” Hollis said, “is that he always was, but it was an inactive ability, so he wasn't aware of it. I think we talked about latents when we first got here. Rafe, as it turns out, was a latent. Something happened to activate his abilities.”

“What?”

Hollis lifted her brows at Rafe.

“Damned if I know. She—I was told it could have been some kind of subconscious shock, which I suppose it had to be since I don't recall any consciously shocking or traumatic events in my life recently. Other than this killer.”

“No bump on the head?” Hollis asked. “Concussion?”
“No,” he said. “Never, in fact.”

Mallory eyed him somewhat warily. “So what can you do?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot. Yet, anyway. The consensus seems to be I am—or will be—clairvoyant.”

“Like Isabel? Just knowing stuff?”

“More or less.”

“And that doesn't scare the shit out of you?”

“Did you hear me say it didn’t?”

“No.”

“Well, then.”

Mallory leaned back in her chair, tipped her head back, and addressed the ceiling—and whatever lay beyond. “A few weeks ago, I led a perfectly ordinary existence. No killers. No spooky psychic abilities. Nothing on my mind more weighty than which kind of takeout I wanted for my supper. Those were the days. I'm sorry now I didn't appreciate them.” She sighed and looked at the others. “I must be paying off karma for a really, really bad decision in a former life.”

“You must be?” Rafe shook his head.

Isabel returned to the room before the discussion could continue, saying, “We have a slight change of plan. Hollis, we’re going to swing by Ginny's on the way back to the inn and pick up her mother; both of them will be staying there tonight.”

“Hank's out on the town?” Rafe guessed.

“Yeah. Seems he often spends Sunday afternoons and evenings drinking in an undisclosed location with others of . . . like temperament.”

Rafe sighed. “Yeah, we have a few basement bars in the county. Unlicensed, unregulated, and highly mobile. They tend to change location more often than they wash the glasses.”

“Well, apparently Mr. McBrayer has a semiregular habit of drinking all evening and passing out somewhere between the bar and home. Or at the bar, sometimes. In any case, he seldom makes it home on Sunday nights. But on the off chance that tonight would be one of those nights, I've persuaded Ginny to get her mother and come stay at the inn.”

“I’ll have all the patrols keep an eye out for him tonight,” Rafe said. “If they don't spot him, we'll catch up with him tomorrow.”

“Good, thanks.” Isabel frowned slightly.

“I've also arranged to have all single female officers escorted home and their places checked out before they lock up for the night,” Rafe said. “And each is under orders to wait for two male officers to meet them tomorrow morning, if they're on duty, to be escorted back here.”

“You’re reaching through again,” Isabel said.

“I am?”

“I was just thinking about Mallory's report that some of the female officers feel they've been watched or followed and wondering what we should do to help protect those most likely to be at risk if it's our killer—the single ones in the right age range. Don't tell me you read that on my face. I may not be subtle, but I'm not a damned billboard.”
Mallory looked at Hollis, who shrugged.

“They've got me, too, this time.”

Rafe hesitated, then shrugged. “You looked worried; I wondered why; I knew.”

Isabel frowned again. “Okay. Now I’m worried about something else.”

Peculiarly enough, Rafe found this answer coming as easily as the one before had, just knowledge in his mind. “Sorry. Since neither one of us knows who the killer is, I don’t have a solution for your worry.”

“It was,” Isabel said, “more fun being the clairvoyant one.”

“Yeah, I can see how it would have been.”

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Not all of it. Just . . . some of it.”

“I know gloating when I see it. I don’t need extra senses for that.”

“Good thing too. Since yours are all boxed up, I mean.”

Straightening her shoulders, Isabel said, “I’m leaving now. We’re going to borrow a patrol to go with us just in case Hank McBrayer shows up unexpectedly while Ginny and her mother are packing overnight bags. If that’s okay with you, of course.”

“Fine,” Rafe said, his tone as polite as hers.

“Great. We’ll see you guys bright and early in the morning. Hollis?”

Her partner rose obediently and followed her from the room. As she passed Rafe, Hollis murmured, “You’re a lot smarter than you look.”

“Christ, I hope so,” he responded, equally low.

When the two agents had gone, Mallory looked at Rafe. “Do you know what I’m worried about?”

He frowned at her. “No. Not a clue.”

“So it only works with Isabel?”

“Apparently. So far, anyway.”

“Um, then I’m worried about two things.”

“What’s the other thing?”

“We’ve now got an awful lot of people watching an awful lot of women while we try to anticipate this killer’s next move; what worries me is that he may have changed the rules.”

It was nearly midnight when Emily Brower’s bedside phone rang, and she was more than half asleep when she fumbled hastily to answer it before it could wake her parents.

“Yeah. Hello?” She listened for several minutes, then said sleepily, “Okay, but—now? Why now? Yeah, I
understand that, but—Right. Right, okay. Give me ten minutes.”

She cradled the receiver, then pushed back her covers and sat up, muttering, “Shit, shit, shit.”

It didn't take her more than a couple of minutes to exchange her sleep shirt for jeans and a T-shirt and slide her feet into a worn and comfortable pair of clogs.

Her parents slept like the dead, especially these days with the aid of various sedatives, so she didn't hesitate to leave her bedroom and walk down the lamplit hall, down the stairs, and out the front door, snagging her car keys from the foyer table.

She wasn't surprised not to see the customary patrol car parked across the street, since she'd heard it fire up its sirens and speed away sometime before her phone had rung. An accident somewhere, she assumed.

And, anyway, the reporters always left by dark or shortly after, so there was no good reason for the patrol car to stay out there all night. She'd meant to call the police station and ask the chief or one of the agents about it but kept forgetting.

Shrugging off the question, Emily got in her car and backed it out of the driveway. She knew the way, of course, and hadn't thought much about it until she was almost there. But by the time she parked her car off the side of the road and got out, she was beginning to feel more than a little uneasy.

She got a flashlight from the glove box and carried it to light her way, feeling a surge of relief when she reached the clearing and the light turned the shadowy outline of a person into someone she knew.

“I don't understand what I can show you out here,” she said immediately. “And this is creepy, in case you hadn't realized it. We might not have been close, but still—this is where my sister was murdered.”

“I know, Emily. She was quite a woman. Very intelligent. It's a pity you aren't.”

“What?” Emily moved her hand, the flashlight's beam cutting through the hot, humid night. And that was when she saw the knife.

She tried to scream, but only her killer heard the bloody gurgle that emerged as she was nearly decapitated.

**Monday, June 16, 7:00 AM**

When the phone rang, he rolled over in bed and had the cordless receiver in his hand even before his eyes opened.

And even before his eyes opened, he smelled it.

“Yeah?”

“We've got another one, Chief.” It was Mallory, her voice bleak.

Still holding the receiver to his ear with his left hand, he held out the right one and stared at it in the early-morning light streaming into his bedroom.

His hand was stained with blood.

“Where?” he asked.

“Isabel was right when she said he'd probably start taunting us. He used the same place. As far as I can tell from the report that came in, the victim is exactly where Jamie Brower died. I'm on my way there now.”

“Who is it? Who's the victim?”

“It's Emily. Jamie's sister.”
“Goddammit, where was the patrol watching her?” Rafe demanded, sitting up in bed.

“They were pulled away from her house last night at about eleven-thirty and were only away a couple of hours. A traffic accident with fatalities.”

Rafe drew a breath and let it out slowly. “Which takes precedence over watchdog duty.”

“Yeah. As per standing orders.”

He shoved the covers away and got out of bed, heading for the bathroom. “Have you called Isabel?”

“Not yet. I only took the report instead of you because I went into the office a bit earlier than usual. I couldn't sleep past six, so I just came in.”

“I thought I ordered you to accept an escort.”

“You suggested, just like you suggested it for Stacy, the only other female detective in the department. We both passed. She's a black belt, and I can take care of myself. And neither one of us is a blonde. You want me to call Isabel?”

“Yeah. Have them meet us at the scene. I'm on my way.”

“Right.”

He turned off the phone and literally dropped it on the bathroom rug, immediately turning on the water and washing his hands in the hottest water he could stand.

Again.

Jesus Christ, again.

The gnawing fear that had been with him for so long was less acute this time, and he understood why. Because this morning he knew something he hadn't known all the other mornings.

This morning, he knew there was something new and unfamiliar going on in his brain, and it wasn't homicidal madness.

It was psychic ability.

*You could be calling me rude names in your head or worrying about some deep dark secret you don't want anybody to know, and I wouldn't necessarily read that either.*

Deep, dark secret. That's what it had been all this time, a secret fear buried so deep he had almost been able to forget about it during the bright, sane light of day. Almost.

He was no killer. He knew that. He *had* known that all along, even with the fear that something inside him might have been capable of such acts.

But if he was no killer, then why had he been waking up with blood on his hands for nearly three weeks?

Yesterday morning, he hadn't had a clue. This morning . . .

Rafe thought he was beginning to understand what was going on—though he only had a hunch as to why. And he thought he understood why his shield was so strong that it not only enclosed Isabel but also blocked her.

Gripping the sides of the sink, he stared into the mirror at his unshaven face and haunted eyes. “I have to be able to control this,” he murmured.

Because he couldn't keep blocking Isabel, not even to keep her from knowing his secret fears, his self-doubts and
uncertainties, all the demons a man carried inside him if he lived long enough and saw too much. In shutting that
away from her, he had both shut her out and imprisoned her.

Imprisoned her abilities, the extra senses that could be all that was standing between her and a killer.

Isabel stood just inside the area blocked off with yellow crime-scene tape, her hands on her hips, grimly studying the
clearing.

“Jesus, I don't know where to start,” T.J. said as she and Dustin arrived with their crime-scene kits.

“Follow procedure,” Isabel advised.

Eyeing the ME, who was examining the body, Dustin said, “Even Doc looks queasy. And he was a state medical
examiner, until he got tired of the parade of bodies.”

T.J. murmured, “Bet he's sorry he chose Hastings to finish out his professional life.”

“I'm having second thoughts myself,” Dustin told her.

“I know what you mean. Come on, let's get to work.”

Hollis joined Isabel as the two technicians moved away, saying, “Sorry about that.”

“Don't be. I lost my breakfast the first three times I was called to an early murder scene.”

“I'll remember that. Next time. I thought I could handle something like this, especially after a couple of weeks of
classes at the body farm. But, Christ . . .”

“Yeah, he made a real mess this time.” Isabel half turned as Mallory joined them. “I'm betting her car's clean,
though.”

Mallory nodded. “Looks like it. It'll be towed back to the station so T.J. and Dustin can go over it thoroughly, but
the only difference I noticed is that she didn't leave her purse in it.”

Isabel said, “If the doctor confirms that she died around midnight, then she'd have had to leave her house just after
the patrol was called away for that accident. Maybe she left in a hurry and didn't even bring a purse.”

“Had to be to meet someone,” Hollis said. “You're a twenty-something blonde in a town where twenty-something
blondes are being killed, including your own sister, and you go out alone near midnight? She was either very stupid
or really trusted whoever she went to meet. Or both, if you ask me.”

Isabel looked at Mallory. “When we were in her home, I didn't get any sense of a steady boyfriend.”

“Far as I know, she didn't have one. Dated, but never anybody serious.”

Hollis shook her head. “Who could she possibly trust enough to meet, around midnight, at the scene of her sister's
murder?”

“And why?” Isabel mused, frowning. “The only reason I can think of is that someone must have told her she
could help by coming out here so late. That there was something out here she needed to see, and after dark. If that's
true, I can't see any possible answer as to who called her out here except—”

“—a cop,” Mallory said. “Has to be.”

Hollis looked around at the police technicians and the dozen or so uniformed officers searching the area
surrounding the crime scene and in various positions between this clearing and the rest stop at the highway, which had also been roped off, and sighed. “Great. That’s just great.”

“We still can’t rule out some other authority figure,” Isabel reminded them. “For that matter, we can’t rule out a member of the media. Who’s to say some reporter didn’t offer Emily a nice big chunk of cash to meet out here where her sister was killed? And being here well after dark was the only real guarantee a passing patrol wouldn’t see them, since we’ve had all these areas under watch. Her car was well off the road and behind that thicket, so either the killer moved it there afterward or told Emily to park there to avoid being seen by a passing patrol.”

“But a reporter? For a story?” Hollis said. “That’s sick. Would Emily have gone for something like that?”

“To step out of Jamie’s shadow? I’m thinking yes.”

“That might explain this,” Mallory said, “but what about the other victims? Could a reporter have lured them out of their cars and into the woods?”

Hollis said, “You know, maybe we’re making a giant assumption that he does it the same way every time. He could be gearing his approach to each woman individually. Isabel, you and Bishop both believe he has to get to know his victims. Maybe this is why. To find the right bait for each catch.”

Isabel looked at her for a moment, then said, “If you ever feel useless in an investigation, remember this moment. Damn. Why didn’t I see that?”

Hollis was pleased, but nevertheless said, “You’ve had a lot on your plate.”

“Still.” Isabel took a step toward the body, then stopped and turned back. The other two women also turned to watch as Rafe approached them from the highway. He looked grim, and on a face as rugged as his, grim was an expression to make even the bravest soul take a step back.

Isabel met him halfway.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “I got held up at the station.”

“What else has happened?” she demanded, reaching out without thinking to touch his hand.

His fingers immediately twined with hers. “The accident that pulled the patrol away from the Brower house,” he said. “There were two fatalities.”

“I’d heard that much.” She waited, knowing there was more.

“Hank McBrayer was one of them,” Rafe said flatly. “He was driving too fast, drunk, and apparently crossed over the center line. Hit the oncoming car head-on. The other victim was a sixty-five-year-old grandmother.”

“Jesus,” Isabel said. “Poor Ginny. This is going to eat her alive.”

“I know. I’ve got the department counselor with her and her mother now.” He glanced past her at the taped-off crime-scene area.

“He was incredibly vicious this time,” Isabel warned. “He cut her throat, probably first, and with enough force to nearly sever her head. And then he started to enjoy himself.”

Without releasing her hand, Rafe continued toward the crime scene. “Has the doc offered his preliminary report yet?”

“No, but I think he’s about to.”

They ducked under the tape that Mallory and Hollis automatically held up for them.

“If nobody minds,” Hollis said, “I think I’ll stand right here. I’ve seen all I want to.”
Nobody objected, and as they walked toward the body, Isabel murmured, “Hollis is dealing with her own guilt. She saw Jamie again, last night in the conference room, obviously desperately trying to say something.”

“And Hollis couldn't hear her.”

“No. At the end, Jamie was so frustrated she apparently focused enough energy to scare the hell out of Hollis by scattering half the paperwork on the table across the room.”

Rafe looked at her, frowning. “I seem to remember you telling me something like that would be unusual.”

“Oh, yeah. Jamie was a very strong lady. And she was trying very, very hard to communicate. She must have known her sister would be the next victim. Which is another indication to me that Emily knew something dangerous to the killer.”

“You don't believe she was killed just because she fit the victim profile?”

“No. She was too young, I think. Not successful enough for his tastes. I also think she would have died no matter what color her hair was. Emily snooped in her sister’s life, and it got her killed.”

“And we still have a reporter missing.”

“Who may also have found out something dangerous to the killer,” Isabel said.

They stopped several feet from where Dr. James was still examining the body, and Rafe muttered an oath as he saw her up close for the first time.

Isabel didn't respond to that. Neither did Mallory. There wasn't much they could say.

Emily Brower lay sprawled out almost exactly as her sister had lain and almost exactly three weeks afterward. The slash across her throat was so deep the white vertebra of her neck was visible, and the gaping wound had literally drenched her in blood. Her once-pale T-shirt was soaked with it, and her blond hair lay in a pool of congealing blood and dirt.

“You were right about the escalation,” Rafe said, his deep voice raspier than normal. “That son of a bitch. Sick, evil, twisted animal . . .”

The killer hadn't just murdered Emily, hadn't just repeatedly stabbed her breasts and genitals as he had the previous three victims. It looked as if he had stabbed her once in each breast—but had twisted and turned the knife as though trying to bore holes through her body.

And rather than stabbing her genitals through her clothing, he had pulled her jeans and panties down around her ankles, pulled her knees up and pushed them apart, and used the knife to rape her.

“If it helps,” Isabel said, holding her voice steady, “she never felt that. Never knew about it.”

“For her sake I'm glad,” Rafe said. “But it doesn't help.”

Dr. James straightened and came to join them, his face very, very tired. “Anything you need me to tell you that you can't see for yourself?” he asked wearily.

“Time of death?” Rafe asked.

“Midnight, give or take a few minutes. She died almost instantly with both the jugular and the windpipe slashed. Blood gushed like a fountain, the last few beats of her heart pumping it out as she fell. He didn't touch her face, but he used something heavy to crush her skull in two places once she was on the ground.”

“Why?” Mallory wondered, baffled. “She was already dead, and he had to know it.”

“Rage,” Isabel and Rafe said in almost the same breath.
She added, “He had to make certain she couldn't see him. Couldn't see his sexual failure.”

“He knew before he tried that he'd fail,” Rafe said.

Isabel nodded. “He knew. Maybe he's always known.”

The doctor looked at them rather curiously but continued with his report in a monotone. “She fell backward, and he didn't move her much. Spread her arms out to the sides, judging by the abrasions I found on the backs of her arms. Fanned her hair out and then pressed it into the pool of blood around her head. God knows why. I don't.”

“What else?” Rafe asked.

“What you see. Did his best to gouge out her breasts, then brutalized her with the knife. It was a big knife, and it did a lot of damage. If I had to guess, I'd say he drove it between her legs at least a dozen times.”

“Excuse me,” Mallory said in a very polite tone. She walked to the edge of the clearing, lifted the crime-scene tape and ducked underneath it, and took several steps beyond, then bent over and vomited.

“I plan to get drunk,” Dr. James announced.

“I wish I could,” Rafe said.

The doctor sighed. “I'll write up the preliminary report when I get back to the office, Rafe. You'll have the rest when I get her on the table. It's going to be a long day.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Doc.”

When the doctor walked away, Rafe said to Isabel, “I'm not getting anything but rage here, and just the vaguest sense of that, not even enough to be sure it isn't my imagination—or the training telling me to draw logical conclusions from what I'm seeing here. I don't know how to reach for anything more. You have to do it.”

“I can't. I'm not getting anything either. Silence. Like you, I know he was furious from what I'm looking at, not from anything I hear or feel.”

“We need more, Isabel.”

“I know that.”

“We have to stop him here and now. Before he goes after anybody else. Before he comes after you.”

“I know that too.”

_You have to do her. The first chance you get, you have to do her._

He tried to ignore the voice, because it wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. All it was doing was making his head hurt even more.

_She knows. Or she will soon. And he's helping her know. Look at them. You understand what's happening, don't you?_

“No,” he whispered, because he didn't, he really didn't. All he knew was that his head hurt and his gut, and it had been so long since he'd slept that he'd forgotten what it felt like.

_They're changing._
An icy jolt went through him. “No. I'm changing. You said. You promised. If I did it. If I killed them before they told. You promised.”

Then you'd better do her. Kill her. Before they finish changing. Or it'll be too late. Too late for you. Too late for both of you.
IT WAS NEARLY NOON by the time T.J. and Dustin had done their work and the ME's people had removed Emily's body from the scene. The search of the area had produced nothing, not a scrap of anything that looked even remotely like evidence. There were still officers at the highway keeping the media and the curious away from the scene, but most of the other cops had returned to regular duties.

Isabel had spent the morning prowling the area, restless, watchful, making what she knew was a futile effort to reach through the barrier Rafe had created. To protect her.

She didn't think the irony was lost on either one of them.

“Anything?” Hollis asked as they studied the now empty crime scene.

“Nada. You?”

“No. And I am trying.” Hollis shrugged. “But from what you've said about her, I doubt Emily's is the sort of spirit we could expect to gather enough energy to come back. As for Jamie . . . I didn't hear her when it mattered.”

“Don't beat yourself up about it. I'm not exactly firing on all cylinders myself.”

“Is that why the watchdogs?” Hollis asked with a slight sideways movement of her head toward an area between them and the highway.

Isabel sighed. “The taller one is Pablo. The other one is Bobby.”

“Pablo? In Hastings?”

“Struck me too. But, hey, melting pot.”

“I guess.” Hollis studied her partner. “So when Rafe went to break the news to Emily's parents, he left two of his uniforms watching you.”

“They're not to let me out of their sight. I heard Rafe tell them so. He made damned sure I heard him tell them so.”

“Well . . . you could be next, Isabel.”

“I can't work hobbled,” she said irritably.

“Then take the hobbles off,” Hollis suggested mildly. “And I don't mean the watchdogs.”

“Don't start spouting Bishop stuff at me, all right? I'm not in the mood. It's hot, it's humid, there's a storm building, and all I can smell is blood.”

Hollis grimaced. “Yeah, I was going to ask—how do we turn the spider senses off?”

“We don't. Once you learn to enhance, the increased sensitivity is pretty much always with you. There are a few team members who have to focus and concentrate, but for most of us it's just there. Like raw nerves.”
“That might have been mentioned before I was taught how to enhance.”

“Talk to the boss, not me.”

“You really are in a rotten mood, aren't you?”

Isabel pointed to the blood-soaked ground several yards away. “This should not have happened,” she said. “I should have seen it coming.”

“You did. You warned us Emily was a possible victim, and Rafe did everything he could to protect her. It's not your fault or his that a drunk caused a fatal traffic accident.”

“That's not what I mean. I should have been . . . tuned in. I should have been listening. Instead, I did just what you said I did—I let Rafe take control. I let him build this shield around my abilities. I went from needing to have absolute control over everything in my life to just . . . handing it over to him. Why in God's name did I do that?”

“You didn't hand over all control. You just let him shut off your abilities.”

“Why?”

“Maybe to find out if he could.”

Isabel stared at her, baffled. “Okay, if that's Bishop stuff, it doesn't make sense. I mean even more than his stuff sometimes doesn't make sense.”

“You're a strong woman, Isabel. You don't want to be dominated, but you do want to be matched, if only subconsciously. I think you felt Rafe reaching through this link you guys have, and I think you needed to know, before you decided whether to commit yourself, before you could take that leap of faith, just how strong he was.”

“And now that I do know, O wise one?”

Hollis smiled faintly at what was only a token stab at mockery. “Now you know he matches you. He has as much strength of will as you, possibly as much psychic ability as you, and is certainly as stubborn as you.”

“So?”

“So stop fighting him. You haven't said, but I'm willing to bet Paige told you that the two of you would have to work together to control his shield.”

“Rookies,” Isabel muttered.

“I'm right.”

“Yeah.”

“Then I'd say there's one last little bit of control you'll have to give up. You'll have to stop trying to control the relationship. To guide, or aim, or shape it—whatever it is you've been trying to do since the moment you met Rafe. If you'll forgive the cliché, we don't master love, it masters us. The more you struggle against it, the tighter those hobbles are going to be.”

“This should not be about my relationship with him,” Isabel said in a last-ditch effort. “Four women are dead in Hastings, five if you count Hope Tessneer, and more are missing. It can't all hinge on my love life, it just can't.”

“Human relationships are at the heart of everything, you know that. You said yourself they were at the heart of this case. It's about relationships, you said.”

“Maybe I didn't know what I was talking about.”

“You knew. You know. Relationships matter, Isabel. History's been changed by them, armies toppled, societies
rebuilt.”

Isabel was silent, frowning toward the bloody ground.

“They have power. Human relationships have power. Family. Friends. Lovers. The closer and more intimate the relationship, the more power it can and does generate. Use that energy. And use it wisely.”

“To break through Rafe's shield?”

“No. To make it your own.”

“Got it?” Rafe asked, meeting up with Mallory in the bullpen at the station.

“Yeah, not that it's helpful. The call Emily received was from a pay phone in town. One of the few remaining pay phones in use.”

“Doesn't miss a trick, our guy.”

“No. I've got T.J. checking out the phone, but I'm betting she'll either find a million prints or none at all.”

“I'll cover that bet. Come on, let's get back out to the scene.”

“Isabel and Hollis still out there?”

He nodded, leading the way from the station. “Pablo and Bobby are keeping an eye on them.”

“I'll bet Isabel loves that.”

“Frankly, I don't give a shit how she feels about it at this point. She's a target, and I have a strong hunch she's next on his hit list.”

Mallory looked at him curiously as they got into his Jeep. “Why?”

“Word's getting out. I've had at least two calls from media and one from the town council today asking if it's true we've got a psychic investigator working the case.”

“Lovely.”

“And the reporter who replaced Cheryl Bayne was one of those calls; he's looking to make a reputation for himself, and it's obvious. His predecessor missing and a psychic working the case? Sounds like a dandy story to him.”

“He's going to broadcast that?”

“On today's six o'clock news, he says.”

“Shit.”

Rafe shrugged. “At this point, I don't think he'll report anything the killer doesn't already know. That's what worries me. If I were him, the killer, I'd go after Isabel, and I wouldn't wait a week to do it. I'm assuming he's thinking the same way.”

Mallory sighed and said, “Safe assumption, probably. Plus, if Isabel's right and he really did kill Emily because she knew something rather than because she was one of his blondes, then he could have been—for want of a better word—unsatisfied by the murder.”
Rafe muttered a curse under his breath and increased the Jeep's speed. He didn't say anything else until they reached the informal rest area and pulled off the highway. Ignoring the questions called out to him by several members of the media still braving the hot day hoping for a photo or a news bite, he headed toward the clearing, relaxing visibly when he saw Isabel and Hollis.

“The phone call?” Isabel asked as the two cops reached the agents.

“No joy,” Mallory reported. “Pay phone.”

“And there won't be prints,” Isabel said with a sigh. “He's using gloves. Not latex, I think, which is odd.”

“What do you mean?” Rafe asked.

“Well, latex gloves leave you with a much more tactile sense of what you're touching, you know that. And since they're form-fitting, they don't get in the way.”

“No, I mean how do you know he isn't using latex gloves? We haven't found a sign either way at any of the crime scenes.”

“I touched them,” Isabel said slowly, surprised that she only now remembered that.

“Excuse me?” Mallory's voice was very polite.

Isabel realized she was being stared at, and shook her head. “Sorry. I forgot none of you had seen it here. Or even knew, I guess. I wonder why I forgot that part?”

“What part?” Rafe asked with visible patience.

“I told you that sometimes, rarely, my abilities manifest themselves physically in a vision. During one of those, I am the victim. I feel what he or she feels, and I usually come out of it covered in blood. Blood that fades away completely after a few minutes.”

“I'd call that creepy,” Mallory said.

“Yeah, it's not much fun.” Isabel shrugged. “Anyway, what really brought me to Hastings is that I had a vision while Tricia Kane was being killed. I felt what she felt. And when he drove that knife into her chest for the last time before she died, her hands reached up to touch the knife—and touched his hands. He was wearing gloves. Not latex gloves, but thick leather gloves, like working gloves. His hands were big, or at least that was the sense I got.”

“And you're just now telling us this?”

“I'm just now remembering.” Isabel frowned. “I guess the voices crowded it out. Maybe that's one in the plus column for your shield.”

Thunder rumbled just then, and they all glanced upward at the threatening sky.

Half under her breath, Hollis muttered, “Oh, God, I hate storms.”

“We're about to have our crime scene washed away,” Rafe noted. “Weather's calling for heavy rain today and tonight, with and without thunderstorms.”

Isabel hesitated, looking at him. “I've tried,” she said. “I've tried all morning to pick up something, and I can't. I can't break through the shield.”

“Stop trying to break through it.” He held out a hand to her. “Work with me, not against me.”

“Rafe—”

“We don't have the luxury of time, not that we ever did. We can't afford to wait any longer. Like it or not, this is
“Should we leave?” Hollis asked, indicating herself and Mallory.

“No,” Isabel said, then hesitated, recalling what had happened with Paige, and added, “But you might want to step back a little bit.”

Both women did, watching the other two warily.

Slowly, Isabel reached out her own hand and felt the spark, felt his fingers closing around hers.

“I wish we had more time,” Rafe told her. “I wish we had the luxury of dinners and movies, and hours of talking to each other about what matters to us. But the truth is, we don't have that time. We need every possible tool we can get our hands on—or our minds wrapped around—and we need it now.”

“Yes. I know.”

“You're next on his list. You know that too.”

Isabel hesitated again, then nodded.

“Paige said we'd have to work together. That it would take both of us to figure out how to use this shield.”

“Yes.” Isabel looked at their hands for a moment, suddenly realizing something. “You're right-handed; I'm left-handed.” Those were the hands clasping.

“Like closing a circuit,” Rafe said slowly. “Or maybe . . . opening one. All this started when I held your wrists. Both of them.”

“Alan, why on earth would I trust you?” Dana Earley demanded.

“Because you want a good story, you want to find out what happened to Cheryl Bayne, and you don't want to be the next blonde on the menu.” He paused. “Probably in that order.”

Dana didn't bother to be indignant. “So you found out that I have police sources in Alabama you want me to tap, and in exchange you'll share information you got from your own sources in Florida.”

“Yes. Look, you're TV and I'm newspaper; if we work this right we can both be heroes.”

“Or one of us could be dead. Like me. Alan, if Cheryl is dead it has to be because she got too close. I'm not so sure I want to get too close to this guy, story or no story.”

“Which,” Alan said, “is why we have to move fast.”

“Jesus. I know I'm going to regret this.”

Isabel turned slightly so that they were facing each other, glanced down at the bloody ground where the horribly mutilated body of a young woman she had both liked and felt sorry for had so recently lain, and her mouth firmed.

“We should be somewhere else,” she said.

“No.”
She looked at Rafe.

“We should be here. We need to be here, Isabel.”

“What?”

“Because two women died here. Because evil did what it wanted to do, needed to do, here.”

The sound of thunder grew louder, more ominous.

“It’s disrespectful. Let the rain wash away her blood.”

“That isn’t the investigator talking,” he said.

Isabel smiled wryly. “No. It isn’t. I liked her, you know. She felt isolated and misunderstood—and I could relate. I’m sorry she’s dead.”

“I know. So am I. But the only thing we can do for her now is stop her killer before he does that to someone else.”

*Before he does it to you.*

Isabel could almost hear his words in her head. Or maybe she did hear them. Whichever it was, she knew he was right. “Yes,” she said.

“The universe put us here. And it put us here, and now, for a reason. Remember what you told me? We leave footprints when we pass. Skin cells, stray hairs. And energy. He left his energy here, and recently. He left his hate, and his anger, and the stamp of his evil.”

There was a flash in the distance, and Isabel said, almost to herself and with a touch of fear in her voice, “I can smell it. But it’s lightning, not brimstone.”

His fingers tightened around hers. “Is it? You said you had to face it this time. Confront it this time. That ugly face evil always hides behind something else. You have to face it. But, Isabel, you won’t do it alone. Not this time. Not ever again.”

She drew a breath and let it out slowly. “I didn't expect that. I'm not quite sure how to deal with that.”

“The same way you deal with everything else,” he said, smiling faintly. “Head-on.”

“Before the storm gets here.”

He nodded. “Before the storm. Before the rain washes away the blood, and the lightning changes the energy here. The energy in this place—his and ours, even anything left of hers—is what we need to help us take the next step. There’s nothing disrespectful about that. It’s doing our job. It’s fighting evil the only way we can.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I’ve been paying attention.”

Isabel hesitated only another instant, then held out her right hand. “Okay. Let's see where the next step takes us.”

He put his left hand into her right one.

Hollis said, at the time and long afterward, that there should have been something, some outward sign, to indicate what turned out to be a most astonishing event. But, outwardly at least, there was nothing. Just two people facing each other, holding hands, their faces calm but eyes curiously intent.

Mallory took a step closer to Hollis, murmuring, “I get the feeling I've missed something important.”
“Beats the hell out of me,” Hollis told her. “I mean, I know it has to do with this shield of Rafe's, but I have no idea what they're trying to do about it.”

“Get rid of it, maybe?”

“No, from what Isabel told me, that would probably not be such a good idea.”

“Why not? I mean, if it's blocking her voices?”

“I don't know. She said something about their combined energy being too strong, especially now when it's new and not under their control. That bad things could happen if they just . . . let go of it.”

Mallory sighed. “I long for the days when all we had to deal with was trace evidence, footprints, the occasional half-blind or very stoned eyewitness . . .”

“Yeah, I imagine that was easier. Or simpler, at least.”

“I'll say.”

After several minutes of silence except for the growing intensity of the thunder rumbling overhead, Hollis ventured a step closer to Isabel and Rafe. “Well?”

“Well, what?” Isabel asked in perfect calm without turning her head.

“What's happening?”

“Good question.”

Hollis looked at Mallory, then back at the other two. “Guys, come on. People are beginning to stare. Pablo and Bobby look real nervous. Or real embarrassed, I'm not sure which. What's happening?”

After a moment, Isabel turned her head to look at Hollis. “I don't want to sound like a country song, but I can feel his heart beating.”

“I know she didn't eat breakfast,” Rafe said, also looking at Hollis.

“And he's uneasy because—” Isabel turned her head abruptly to stare at Rafe. “Jesus, why didn't you tell me?”

“You know damned well why I didn't tell you,” he replied, meeting her gaze.

“It was your abilities manifesting themselves physically. Which, remember, is a rare thing but not unheard of. In your case, probably caused by guilt because you believed you should have stopped him after the first murder. The blood of the innocent, literally on your hands.”

“I realize that. Now. Before we talked yesterday, the possibilities were a lot more creepy.”

“So that's why you were blocking me. That was the part of you I couldn't get at?”

“I'm guessing yes. Isabel, I was waking up with blood on my hands every morning and had no idea where it had come from. Women were dead. Other women were missing. You were offering me theories of a serial killer who could be walking around most of the time not knowing he was a murderer. So I was afraid I was blacking out.”

“And killing blondes? I could have told you there wasn't a chance in hell of you doing that.”

“Well, I was . . . afraid to ask.”

“Guys,” Hollis's voice was just this side of strident.

Isabel looked at her partner, frowned slightly, and then let go of Rafe's hands. “Oh. Sorry. We were . . .
somewhere else.”

“I noticed. Where were you?”

“In a galaxy far, far away,” Rafe murmured.

“You really are beginning to talk like me,” Isabel told him.

“I know. Spooky, isn’t it?” He took her arm and guided her toward the yellow crime-scene tape on the highway side of the clearing. “I say we head back to the station before the heavens open up.”

Hollis and Mallory went with them, wearing almost identical expressions of baffled interest.

“Blood on your hands?” Mallory said to Rafe. “You were waking up with blood on your hands?”

“Yeah, for the past few weeks.”

Hollis muttered, “Man, have you got a great poker face.” And waited until they were outside the crime scene to add, “If somebody doesn’t tell me, right now, what’s going on—”

“I’m not so sure I can.” Isabel shook her head. “All I really know is that everything’s different.”

“Different how?”

“The voices are back. But . . . very, very quiet. Distant.”

“What about Rafe's shield?”

“It’s still there. Here. I think we punched a couple of holes in it, though. I told you I wasn’t sure I could explain.”

“And I should have listened,” Hollis said.

Addressing his patrolmen, Rafe said, “You two can take your lunch break and then head back to the station; unless you hear otherwise, follow your assignments on the board for the rest of the day.”

“Right, Chief.”

“Yes, sir.”

“No watchdogs?” Isabel asked.

“I’m your watchdog,” he replied. “Mallory, if you’ll ride back with Hollis?”

“Sure.”

By the time they reached the parked vehicles, they saw that the media had vanished, along with any curious passersby.

Isabel said, “Did the weather happen to mention that the storms today and tonight could be mean ones? The sort to keep golfers off courses and reporters with electronic equipment indoors?”

Rafe nodded. “We’re not in the Southeast's tornado alley, but close enough.”

Isabel didn’t say anything else until they were in the Jeep heading back to town, and then her voice was tentative. “Back there at the scene when we . . . did whatever it is we did, I got a flash of something. That box. The box of photographs. We have to find it. The answer is in there, I know it.”

“If it's in a bank under an assumed name—”
“I don't think it is. I think we've missed something.”

Rafe frowned as thunder boomed again. “We’ve checked all the properties she owned.”

“Have we?” Isabel turned in her seat to look at him. “Jamie had a secret life. A secret self. And she hid her secrets very, very well. What if, once Hope Tessneer died, Jamie decided to bury all the secrets for good?”

“We found her playhouse,” Rafe reminded her.

“Yeah, but Jamie didn’t count on dying herself. I think if she’d been granted just a little more time, we wouldn’t have found anything but an empty storage building there. And nothing at all of her secret life.”

“Wouldn’t she just have burned everything? I mean, if she had wanted to destroy the evidence of that other life.”

“She didn’t want to destroy it. Destroy the strongest part of herself? No way. It would have been like cutting off her arm, or worse. She wanted to bury it. To put it where nobody but she would ever find it. Look, when Hope’s body turned up missing—and I'm still convinced the killer took it from wherever Jamie had put it—she had to know someone else knew about the death. She had to be afraid that at best the body would turn up and it would be traced back to her, or—possibly worse from her point of view—that someone could be planning blackmail.”

“So,” Rafe said, “she would have wanted to remove any possible evidence of their relationship.”

“Of all her secret relationships. If we found one, we’d find them all; that’s what she would have thought. So she started to move, and fast. Listed her properties for sale, maybe started shifting money she wasn't supposed to have, between accounts we weren't supposed to know about.”

“We've got people checking area banks today.”

“Maybe they'll at least find evidence of those secret accounts. But I don't think they'll find the box. I think Jamie was planning to leave this place, or at least go on a long vacation somewhere until Hope's body turned up and she could determine whether she was going to be suspected of murder.”

“And spent the final days of her life trying to erase or hide all the secrets,” Rafe said.

“Exactly. I think she found or created a place to bury the Mistress for Hire. The box of photos went there right away, especially since she must have suspected Emily of snooping. The stuff in her playhouse would have followed, but the killer got to her first.”

“Okay,” Rafe said. “I'll buy the theory. But how do we find out where this hiding place is? We've tapped every source we have, short of going door to door and asking every soul in Hastings. What else can we do?”

Isabel drew a deep breath. “We ask the one soul who knows.”

The heavens took their own time in opening up. By three that afternoon, it was twilight, with a hot wind blowing gustily and thunder rolling as though it had miles and miles to go. Flashes of lightning provided eerie strobelike images of very little traffic on Main Street, and clusters of media camped all around the town hall across from the police station. Print media, at any rate; most of those with electronics to consider had, as Isabel predicted, wisely chosen to remain indoors.

“You can feel the nerves,” Mallory said, gazing out the window of the conference room. “Even the reporters. I don’t have any extra senses, and I can feel it.”

“Extra senses make it worse,” Hollis told her. She was sitting at the conference table, both elbows propped on it and her hands cupping her face. “My head is throbbing in the weirdest way.” She yawned as if to clear her ears.
“And I feel like I'm going up in a plane.”

“Not the best time to try a séance, I guess.”

“God, don't call it that.”

“Isn't that what it is? Technically, I mean.”

“I don't know, but I can't help feeling a stormy afternoon spent summoning the dead just can't be a good plan.”

“We're not doing it in a haunted house.”

“Oh, goodie, one for the plus column.” Hollis sighed.

Mallory turned her back on the window and half sat on the sill, smiling faintly. “You two are unconventional investigators, I'll give you that much. But, then, this hasn't exactly been a conventional series of murders. If there is such a thing.”

Before Hollis could respond, Travis rapped on the open door and said, “Hey, Mallory, Alan Moore is here. He says it's important, and since the chief and Agent Adams are out in the garage with T.J.—”

“Send him in. Thanks, Travis.”

Since the bulletin boards were already covered, neither woman had to move, and Mallory remained at the window as Alan came in. She said, “The chief of police has no comment for the media. Didn't you hear him on the front steps a couple of hours ago, Alan?”

“I did,” he replied imperturbably. “Which is why I went back to my office. Where I received two bits of news I thought I'd be gracious enough to share with the police.”

“I think he rehearsed that,” Hollis said to Mallory.


“First, Kate Murphy called a friend who happens to work at the paper. Seems she left town in a hurry—and on a bus—because she got a threatening call from an ex-lover and panicked. Especially with blondes getting killed in Hastings.”

Mallory said, “We haven't found a sign of a lover in her past, and we've looked.”

“Yeah, but this is about ten years ex. Even she admits the panic was somewhat extreme.”

“Sounds like it,” Hollis murmured. “Not that I can really blame her.”

“Anyway, she's safe,” Alan said. “She claims she left a note for her store's assistant manager but hadn't had a chance to call until today. I think she's about four states away, but she refused to say where.”

Mallory shook her head. “One less on the list, thank God. And thank you for sharing. What's your other bit of news?”

“This.” He produced a folded paper from his pocket and unfolded it on the conference table. “Probably no prints other than mine, since there weren't any on the last one.”

“Envelope?” Mallory asked.

He pulled that out of a different pocket. “I figured it'd be worthless for prints, too, considering how many people handled it. The postmark is Hastings. Mailed Saturday.”

Hollis leaned a bit sideways to read the note, brows lifting. “Well, well.”
Mallory joined them at the table to study the message. Like the previous note to Alan, it was block-printed yet virtually scrawled in a bold, dark hand on the unlined paper.

THEY WERE GOING TO TELL.
HE KNEW THEY WERE GOING TO TELL.
THEY WEREN'T WORTHY OF OUR TRUST.
NEITHER IS SHE.
NEITHER IS ISABEL.
“DUSTIN FOUND IT,” T.J. reported. “He knows cars better than I do. Since it's a guy thing and all.”

Rafe said, “So the cruise control was engaged. McBrayer was drunk; he could have done it accidentally.”

“Dustin says he couldn't have. Something about the way the cruise button is on the wheel. Of course, the wheel is mangled as hell right now, but he swears it's a safety issue or something.”

Isabel straightened after looking into what was left of Hank McBrayer's car, and said, “Dustin thinks somebody else set the cruise control?”

T.J. shrugged. “I admit I thought it was pretty far out. But we checked the rear end of the car, which is mostly intact, and found signs of a jack. Lift the rear wheels off the ground, put it in gear and push the accelerate button on the wheel, set the cruise control, and, when you're ready, shove the car off the jack. The marks on the car are consistent.”

“There would have been tread marks on the road at the point it came off the jack,” Rafe said.

“Dustin's out now, backtracking from the scene of the so-called accident. We also found a bit of rope on the front floorboard. I'm thinking it was used to tie off the steering wheel to keep the car going in a straight line. And if that's not enough, I'm pretty sure the headlights were off.” She shook her head. “A nice, neat little way to kill somebody. With McBrayer reeking of alcohol and enough in his blood to knock out a squad of marines, who would suspect it was anything but an accident?”

“Good work,” Rafe told her. “You and Dustin.”

“Thanks. I'll tell him you said so. And I'll send up the report when he gets back and I finish up with the car.”

As they left the basement garage of the police station and headed upstairs to the offices, Isabel said, “A diversion. That accident happened only a couple of miles from the Brower house; the patrol on watch outside would have been the closest squad car.”

“I wonder if he aimed McBrayer's car at one he could see coming or just trusted to luck he'd hit something or someone eventually?”

“I don't think our boy trusts much to luck,” she said. “Finds a dark, straight stretch of road in a little-frequented area, sets up the car with McBrayer passed out inside. And waits until he sees headlights. By the time the other driver even saw the car coming at her, it was too late.”

“The pay phone he called Emily from was only a few blocks from the scene of the—accident. He probably waited for the patrol car to pass him, then called her.”

“I have the feeling that killing two more people just so he could lure Emily out was another of his taunts: Look at me, look how clever I am.”

“You don't think it was a personal grudge against McBrayer?”

“No, I think he was convenient. From what I got talking to Ginny last night, her father's Sunday-night binges were hardly a secret around here. The killer found McBrayer, maybe even followed him to one of those basement bars
you talked about. Then all he had to do was wait for his mark to pass out or be thrown out.”

“And use him as a tool to get what he wanted. Emily.” Rafe grasped her arm to stop her as they entered the hallway leading to the conference room. “Tell me something. Truthfully.”

“Sure, if I can.”

“He'll come after you next.”

“Maybe. Probably. Especially if the news breaks that I'm psychic. He'd view that as an increased threat, I think.”

“Will he wait a week?”

Isabel hesitated, then shook her head. “I'd be surprised if he did. Emily was damage control; she knew something he didn't want her to tell. Or at least he believed she did. I'm guessing something about that box of photographs.”

“But you he wants.”

“Even without the psychic nudge, yeah. Me and the last blonde on his list, whoever she is. And he's moving faster, getting sloppy. We shouldn't have found jack marks on that car, far less a bit of rope that didn't belong in it. He's feeling pressure, a lot of it. Whatever is driving him is driving him hard.”

Rafe hesitated, but they were alone, and he finally said, “Whatever happened earlier did open up the shield for you, didn't it?”

“A bit. But the voices are still distant.” She looked at him steadily. “There's still a part of you I can't get at.”

“I trust you,” he said.

“I know. You just don't trust you.”

He shook his head. “I don't get it.”

Isabel had to smile. “I'm not surprised. See, I think I figured out something. We both have control issues and we both know it. The difference is, I don't trust someone else to run the show, and you don't trust yourself to.”

“That's a control issue?”

“Yes. I have to learn to let go, to trust someone else without giving up who I am. And you have to learn to trust yourself in order to be who you need to be.”

Somewhat cautiously, Rafe said, “Are you channeling this Bishop of yours?”

“I know how it sounds, believe me. Why do you think I've been fighting this so hard? But the truth is, neither one of us has enough faith in ourselves.”

“Isabel, that sounds to me like something that will take time to get itself resolved. We don't have time.”

Isabel began moving down the hallway toward the conference room. “No, we don't. Which is why we'll have to take care of our issues on the fly.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“Don't worry. If there's anything I've learned in the last few years it's that we can make giant leaps when we have to.”

“That's the part that worries me,” Rafe said. “Why we might have to.”
“Alan, I don't have time for this,” Mallory told him as they stood just inside the foyer of the police department.

“Make time,” he insisted. “Look, Mal, I know you don't want us publicly linked, but I've been doing some digging, and there's something you need to know.”

Warily, she said, “About the case? Then why tell just me?”

“Call it a good-faith gesture. I could have put it in today's paper, but I didn't.”

After a moment, she said, “I'm listening.”

“I know there were two other sets of murders, one five and one ten years ago, in two other states.”

“How did you—”

“I have sources. Never mind that. I also know that the FBI has sent investigators back to those towns to ask more questions.”

Mallory hesitated, then said grudgingly, “We don't have the reports yet.”

“There hasn't been time, I know. But one of my sources had occasion to talk to an investigator from the second series of murders.”

‘Had occasion? Alan—”

“Just listen. The investigator said there was something about the first murder that bugged him. It was just a little thing, so minor he didn't even put it in any of his reports. It was an earring.”

“What?”

“They'd found her body out in the open, of course, the way all the others would be found. But the investigator checked out her apartment. And when he searched her bedroom, he found an earring on her dresser. Never found a match for it.”

“So? Women lose earrings all the time, Alan.”

“Yeah, I know. But what bugged the investigator was that the victim didn't wear earrings. She didn't have pierced ears.”

Mallory shrugged. “Then a friend must have lost it.”

“None of her friends claimed it. Not one. A valuable diamond earring, and nobody claimed it. It was an unanswered question, and it bugged him, has ever since.”

Patiently, she said, “Okay, he found an earring he could never explain. How do you expect that to help us?”

“It's a hunch, Mal, and I wanted to let you know I was following it up. I've already talked to a friend of the second victim in Florida, and she claims to have found a single earring among her friend's things. I have somebody checking out the Alabama murders too. I think it has something to do with how he got the women to meet him.”

“Alan—”

“I'm going to check it out. I'll let you know if I find anything.”

Mallory thought he said something else, but a crash of thunder made it impossible to hear whatever it was, and a moment later he was gone.

She stared after him.
“It’s no use,” Hollis said finally. “I don’t know if it’s the storm or me, but I just can’t concentrate. And the energy of you two is not helping. If anything, it’s hurting.”

“We were with you the first time you saw Jamie,” Isabel reminded her. “Right here in this room.”

“Yeah, but it was before you two started seriously sparking,” Hollis reminded her.

“Just tell me we don’t have to hold hands or light candles,” Mallory begged, pulling another folder toward her and looking through it with a frown.

Hollis shook her head. “What I’m telling you is that if Jamie is hovering anywhere around a doorway, it isn’t mine. Or I can’t open the door. Either way, it’s not going to happen today.”

Rafe leaned back in his chair, saying, “Look, there has to be another way to do this. Plain, old-fashioned police work. If Jamie had a secret place, there has to be a way for us to find it.”

Hollis said, “And we need to do it before the six o’clock news. But no pressure.”

Mallory said, “Reports coming in from all area banks have been negative. Nobody has recognized Jamie’s photo or her name, and there’s no way for us to guess what alias she might have used. If she’s been socking away money for years with her little S&M sideline, she’s had plenty of time to construct a really solid one we may never find. And I can’t find anything about stray or missing jewelry, so I think Alan’s off track with that one.”

“It’s that note I don’t like,” Rafe said.

“It doesn’t change anything,” Isabel said. “We knew I was on his list.”

She pulled the note toward her and frowned down at it. “Our trust. They weren’t worthy of our trust.”

“Maybe he really is schizophrenic,” Mallory said.

“Yeah, but even so, the first note made a clear distinction. He wasn’t killing them because they were blondes. This note links the one who wrote the note and the killer. They weren’t worthy of our trust. If he’s schizophrenic, then I’d say he’s on the edge of a major identity crisis.”

“He didn’t have one before?” Hollis murmured.

“I don’t think he knew he had one. I mean, I think there was a part of him listening to whatever it was urging him to kill, and another part of him that had no idea that was happening.”

“A split personality?” Hollis asked.

“Maybe. They’re a lot more rare than people realize, but it is possible that’s what we have in this case. One part of his mind, the sane part, may have been in control most of the time.”

“And now?” Rafe asked.

“Now,” Isabel said, “I think the sane part of his mind is getting lost, submerged. I think he’s losing control.”

“It’s all about control.”

“No, it’s all about relationships. It’s still all about relationships. Look at this note. He believes these women have violated—or, in my case, will violate—his trust. There’s a secret he’s protecting, and he’s convinced the women he kills threaten to expose that secret.”

“So they know him.”
“He thinks they do.”

Rafe looked at Isabel steadily. “Then he thinks you know him.”

“I think I do too.”

The looming storm only fed their sense of urgency, at least in part because it seemed to surround them all day long without actually hitting Hastings. Tree limbs were blown around, power crews were kept busy repairing downed electrical lines, and thunder boomed and rolled while lightning flashed in the weird twilight.

It was as if the whole world was on the verge of something, hesitating, waiting.

By five o'clock that afternoon, they had paperwork scattered across the conference table, pinned to the bulletin boards, and stacked on two of the chairs. Forensics reports, background checks on the victims, statements from everyone involved, and postmortems complete with photographs.

And still they didn't have the answers they needed.

When Travis came in with the last batch of reports from area banks, Mallory groaned. “Christ, not more paper.”

“And not even helpful,” he told her as he handed the notes to Rafe, then leaned his hands on the back of an unoccupied chair. “Nobody recognized the name or photograph of Jamie Brower—except to say they'd seen her picture in the newspapers and on TV.”

Isabel waited out another rumble of thunder, then said, “We need a fresh mind. Travis, if you wanted to bury a secret someplace you could be sure it wouldn't be found, where would you put it?”

“In a grave.” He realized he was being stared at, and straightened self-consciously. “Well, I would. Once somebody's buried, they're not often dug back up. So why not? It'd be easy enough to strip the turf off a grave, bury whatever it was I was trying to hide between the surface and the casket—assuming it was the right size—then cover it back up and re-lay the grass. As long as I was careful, nobody'd even notice.”

“Son of a bitch,” Rafe said.

Isabel was shaking her head. “Why isn't he a detective?”

Travis brightened. “I was right?”

“God knows,” Hollis said, “but you're sending us in a new direction, so I say good for you.”

“Hey, cool.” Then his smile faded. “We got lots of cemeteries in Hastings. Where do we start looking? And what're we looking for, by the way?”

“We're looking for a box of photos,” Rafe said, feeling the younger cop had earned the knowledge.

Isabel added, “And it has to be connected with Jamie Brower. We need to know where any deceased family or friends are buried.”

“I'll go back to my phone,” Travis said with a sigh. “Start calling all the local clergy and asking them. I do not want to have to call the Browsers directly, not today. Or tomorrow, or next week.”

“Yeah, let's avoid that if possible,” Rafe told him.

When he'd gone, Isabel said, “You really should promote him.”
"He was on my short list," Rafe said. "The only reason I've hesitated is because he's currently sleeping with a reporter who isn't quite what she appears to be."

Hollis asked, "What is she?"

"According to my sources, she works for the governor's office, and is sent in quietly during tricky investigations to keep an eye on local law enforcement. So we don't do anything to embarrass ourselves. Or the state attorney general. They're keeping a very close eye on this investigation."

"That shows a distressing lack of faith," Isabel said, but without surprise.

Mallory was looking at Rafe with lifted brows. "You know that for a fact."

"Yes," he replied with a faint smile. "I keep a fairly close eye on my people."

Mallory stared at him, then said, "Oh, don't tell me."

"You and Isabel have something in common. Neither one of you is as subtle as you think you are."

"I resent that," Isabel said.

"Besides," Hollis said, "Alan Moore is the one who isn't subtle. Even I picked up on it."

Mallory got to her feet with great dignity. "Being outnumbered by psychics is hardly fair. I'm going to use the computer in the other room. Excuse me."

"I think we pissed her off," Hollis said absently as she opened the local phone book to begin making a list of churches and cemeteries.

"She'll get over it," Rafe shook his head. "Although I don't know if Alan will. Never seen him fall so hard before."

Isabel pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Mallory doesn't strike me as the settling-down type."

"I don't think she is. I also don't think Alan has realized that yet."

"It's always about relationships," Hollis murmured, with a sidelong glance at Isabel.

Ignoring the glance, Isabel said, "We need to go back through every piece of paper associated in any way with Jamie's life and death and check out the names of all family and friends."

"Chicken," Hollis said.

"We have more imperative things to think about," Isabel told her. "Like finding that grave."

Rafe said, "You think it's there, don't you? You think Jamie buried that box in somebody's grave?"

"I think it makes sense. She was burying a part of her life, so why not put it in a grave? And I'm betting it won't be a family grave, but the grave of someone else who was important to her. A teacher, a mentor, a friend. Maybe her first lover."

"Male or female?"

"At a guess, female."

"That does help narrow the field."

"Let's hope it narrows it enough."
Of all the family and friends who had died during Jamie's life, Isabel considered three women the most likely candidates for Jamie's burial of her secrets. One was a former teacher that friends reported Jamie had seemed especially close to, one was a close friend from high school who had been killed in a highway accident, and the third was a woman who had worked in Jamie's office, dying young of cancer.

Three women, three cemeteries.

“I think we should check these out before the storm breaks,” Isabel told Rafe.

Rafe wanted to argue, but he was reluctant to put off doing anything that could help them catch the killer before he took aim at his next target. Isabel.

And before the press took aim at her.

“It'll be faster if we split up,” she was saying. Since she had already told him privately that she wanted to stick close to Hollis because her partner seemed to be so affected by the tension of the storm, Rafe didn't object when she added, “Hollis and I will take Rosemont.”

“You'll also take Dean Emery,” he added. “There's only one entrance to Rosemont, and it's fenced; he can stand by at the entrance while you two find the grave. Mallory can take Travis along to Sunset.”

“And who will you take to Grogan's Creek?” Isabel asked politely.

“I might take the mayor,” he answered wryly. “I need to stop and see him before he blows a fuse.”

Mallory said, “We're doing all this on the way home, right? Because I'm beat.”

Rafe nodded. “Check out the cemeteries, phone in reports—once you're out of the storm, that is—and then head home.”

“Got my vote,” Isabel said.

Twenty minutes later, Hollis was saying, “You had to pick the largest cemetery, didn't you? The one with all the tall monuments and acres of graves.”

“And don't forget the pretty little chapel with the stained-glass windows,” Isabel reminded, raising her voice a bit as the wind tended to snatch at it.

“I just wish the place had a caretaker on duty to point out Susan Andrews's grave,” Hollis said, pausing to squint at a headstone. “Because unless . . .”

“Unless what?” Isabel asked, half turning to look at her partner.

Hollis would have answered, but she was hardly aware of Isabel in that moment. The sounds of the wind and the thunder had retreated into that peculiar hollow almost-silence. Her skin was tingling. The fine hairs on her body were stirring. And in the strobe flashes of the lightning, she could see Jamie Brower several yards away, beckoning.

“This way,” Hollis said.

Isabel followed her. “How do you know?” she demanded, raising her voice again to be heard over the rising wind.

“It's Jamie.” Hollis nearly stopped, then hurried forward. “Dammit, it was her. But I don't see her now.”

“Where was she?”
“Somewhere in this area.” Hollis jumped as thunder crashed, feeling her skin literally crawl. “Have I mentioned how much I hate storms?”

“You might have, yeah. This area? We'll find it.” Isabel paused as thunder boomed, and added, “Unless we get struck by lightning, that is. I just think we need to do this now. And if you saw Jamie, that makes it even more imperative, I'd say.”

Hollis didn't argue, just began checking the headstones in the area, flinching with every crack of thunder and flash of lightning. “I hate this,” she called to her partner. “I really hate—”

“Here.” Isabel knelt by a simple headstone with the name Susan Andrews engraved on it.

“It doesn't look disturbed,” Hollis said, then swore under her breath as Isabel dug her fingernails into the turf and neatly lifted a perfectly square section.

“You'd think it would have rooted by now,” Isabel said, folding back the turf. “It's tight, but not that difficult to pull up.”

Hollis knelt on the other side of the grave to help. “A very neat section just at the headstone. Now I'm glad we brought the shovel Dean had in the cruiser's trunk.”

“I'm an optimist,” Isabel said, unfolding the small emergency shovel.

Hollis sat back on her heels suddenly. “You knew we'd find it, didn't you?”

“I had a hunch.”

“You heard a voice.”

“A whisper. Help me dig.”

“We should call Dean,” Hollis said, but it was only a minute or two before the shovel scraped across something metallic and they were able to drag a small box about twelve inches square and five or six inches deep from its resting place at Susan Andrews's headstone.

“I think we'd better take this back to the station to open it,” Isabel said, the reluctance in her tone clear despite the gusty wind and rumbles of thunder.

“You just forgot to bring your lock-pick tools,” Hollis said, a little amused. “Need help carrying that?”

“No, I've got it. You get the shovel, will you, please?”

As they started back across the cemetery, Isabel carrying the box and Hollis the shovel, the latter stopped suddenly.

“Shit.”

Isabel stopped as well, following her partner's gaze. “What? I don't see anything.”

“Jamie. She's—”

At first Isabel thought the rumble of thunder had drowned out whatever Hollis had been saying, but then she felt a sharp tug at the small of her back and whirled, instinctively dropping the metal box, filled with the sudden cold certainty that she had been blindsided again.

A flash of lightning brilliantly lit the scene before her. Hollis falling on the ground with blood blossoming on the back of her pale blouse. Mallory standing hardly more than an arm's length from Isabel, a big, bloodstained knife in one black-gloved hand and Isabel's gun in the other.
“You know,” she said, “I'm really surprised you didn't pick up on it. All those vaunted psychic abilities, yours and hers. And Rafe's, I suppose. It was so clear, and none of you saw it. None of you saw me.”

Rafe was able to soothe the mayor's worries, but just barely enough to allow his own escape. He headed toward Grogan's Creek church and the cemetery behind it, a name neatly printed on a piece of paper tucked in his pocket.

But when he reached a stop sign, he found himself hesitating, looking not east toward Grogan's Creek, but west toward Rosemont.

There was no reason to worry, of course. She could take care of herself. Besides which, she wasn't alone. Hollis was with her, and Dean.

He started to turn the wheel toward the east, then hesitated again. “She's okay,” he heard himself say aloud. “She's fine.”

Except that his gut said she wasn't.

His gut—and the blood on his hands.

Rafe stared at the reddish stains, shocked for an instant because it had happened so suddenly.

But then, just as suddenly, he knew the truth. He understood what it meant.

And he knew Isabel was in deadly danger.

He turned the wheel hard, heading west, and reached for his phone to call Dean.
“MALLORY—”

“You still don't get it, do you? Mallory doesn't live here anymore.”

Gazing into eyes that looked dead and empty even when the lightning flashed in them, Isabel fought to keep her voice calm. “So who are you?”

With an amused little chuckle, Mallory said, “This isn't some split-personality deal, you know. That's a bunch of bullshit, what you read in the books. I was always the stronger one. Always the one who had to take care of Mallory, clean the messes after she screwed up. Always. We were just twelve when it happened the first time.”

“When what happened?” Was Hollis alive? Isabel couldn't tell. And what had happened to Dean?

“When I had to kill them. Those bitches. All six of them.”

“You were— Why? Why did you have to kill them?”

“Are you stalling?” Mallory asked, interested. “Because Rafe isn't coming, you know. Nobody is coming.”

“Well, then,” Isabel said, her mind racing, “it's just you and me. Come on, impress me. Show me all the signs I should have seen along the way.”

“The only thing you and that Bishop of yours got right was gender. Male.”

“Trapped in a female's body?” Isabel was deliberately flippant. “I think that's been done.”

“Oh, no, I was male first. Always. I kept telling Mallory, but in the beginning she wouldn't listen. And when she did listen, she got confused. She thought she was a lesbian.”

Recalling the riot of emotions and hormones of adolescence, Isabel said, “When she was twelve?”

“Those girls at camp. In her cabin. There were six of them, all giggly and girly. The one who slept with Mallory started touching her one night. And Mallory liked it. It made me sick, but Mallory liked it.”

“So what happened?”

“I heard them the next day. All six of them, giggling and looking at Mallory. They knew. All of them knew. The one who'd touched her had told the others, and they were going to tell too. I knew they would. They'd tell, and everybody would know Mallory wasn't normal.”

“What did you do to stop that?”

“I killed them.” Her voice was eerily Mallory's and yet . . . not. Deeper, rougher, harder.

Isabel told herself what she smelled was the lightning, not brimstone. But she knew the truth.

Nothing this side of hell smelled quite like brimstone.
Except for evil.

“See, they weren’t supposed to take the boats out onto the lake, not without one of the counselors. But I made Mallory talk them into it. So they took a boat out, way out, and I made sure there were no life jackets. And then I turned the boat over. None of them made it to the shore, but I got Mallory there, of course. So sad, those other girls drowning like that. Mallory was never the same afterward.”

Rafe found Dean Emery slumped over the wheel of his cruiser. He knew nothing could be done for him, but he called for backup and an ambulance, then hurried through the gates of the cemetery, gun drawn, reaching out desperately with every sense he possessed, old and new.

To hell with the goddamned shield.

Mallory shrugged. “That was when her parents moved here to Hastings. So nobody would know what had happened and she could get over it.”

“But she didn’t.” Isabel was dimly aware of the voices, whispering louder, but the thunder and her own fixed concentration on Mallory kept them distant.

“No, not really. She was afraid to have girl friends after that, so all her friends were boys. She played sports, got tough, learned to take care of herself. So I didn’t have to worry about her.”

“When did that change?”

“You know when it changed, Isabel. It changed in Florida. Mallory was in college in Georgia, but she transferred to a college in Florida to take a few courses one semester.”

“There was a redhead,” Isabel said. “She was attracted to a redhead, wasn’t she? A woman. Were they lovers?”

In the eerie twilight, Mallory’s mouth tightened. “That bitch. She got Mallory drunk and slept with her. And in the morning, she acted like it was nothing. But I knew. I knew she’d tell. I knew she’d tell her redheaded friends. So I had to take care of them, of course. All six of them, just like before.”

Isabel didn’t waste her breath with any reasoned argument. Instead, she said, “We wondered why the women were going with . . . him. Why they didn’t feel threatened. It was because Mallory was a woman.”

“It’s not my fault if people don’t look beneath the surface.” She—or he—laughed.

“Mallory didn’t know what you were doing, did she?”

“Of course not. She wouldn’t have been able to hide our secret. I had to do that. And I had to protect her. When she got abnormal that way.”

“What about the women in Alabama?” Isabel asked, only vaguely aware that the wind was gusting wildly now. “The brunettes? Mallory got involved with a brunette woman?”

“She was staying with a cousin over there. Just for a couple of weeks. But that was long enough. Long enough to start mooning over that dark-haired bitch. I didn’t even wait for that to get started. I just took care of it. I got rid of her. And the rest of them. The other five.”
“The ones who would have told?”

“Of course.”

“How did you know they would have?”

“Oh, don't be stupid, Isabel. I always knew who'd tell. As soon as I saw you, I knew you would.”

“But Jamie was first, wasn't she?” Isabel asked. “Jamie was the one who caught Mallory's eye.”

“I thought she was over it,” the thing inside Mallory said. “She was involved with Alan, she was—was normal. But then she talked to Jamie about buying a house. And she felt . . . that . . . again. That longing. That desperation to be touched like that. By her.”

“They became lovers.”

“Lovers? What they were doing had nothing to do with love. Mallory thought she deserved to be punished, because she'd lived when the other girls had died. So she let Jamie punish her. And take pictures of it. But I made her stop. I made her go back to Alan.”

Realizing, Isabel said, “And you made her forget. Always. You made sure that her attraction to other women was . . . like a fantasy to her. Didn't you?”

“It was an aberration. She didn't need to remember that.”

Isabel nodded slowly. “That's why Mallory never reacted to anything we found out about Jamie. As far as she knew, as far as she could remember, they'd never been involved.”

“I protected her. I always have.”

“So you sent her back to Alan. Then you watched Jamie for a while, didn't you?”

“So sick. Ugly. And she was mad at Mallory for not wanting to do those things anymore. That's why she got too rough with her next lover and killed her.”

“Hope Tessner.”

“I decided to scare Jamie before I got rid of her. Besides, I was curious. So I took that one's body and hid it. It was fun to watch Jamie panic. Of course, she was thrilled when Mallory called her. Thrilled to meet her. And, you know, she didn't struggle at all. Isn't that interesting? Supposedly all dominant and powerful, and she died with hardly a whimper.”

“But you killed her too quickly,” Isabel pointed out, glancing toward the box she had flung aside. “You didn't know where she'd hidden the photos. The proof of what she and Mallory had done together.”

“I thought they'd be in her apartment. But they weren't, of course. I didn't know where they were.”

Isabel swallowed. “Until Emily?”

“Well, you told me to put her on the list, Isabel, didn't you?”

The sick sensation in Isabel's stomach churned even more. “I did?”

“Sure. You told me she might have seen something. Might know something about her sister's killer. And she'd seen the photographs, of course; I knew that as soon as she handed over the ones with Jamie and that other bitch. I didn't think she'd seen Mallory's, but I couldn't be sure. So I had to get rid of her.”

“Blood on my hands,” Isabel murmured.
“You and Rafe, both so guilty. I think part of him knew all along. I could feel it, even though Mallory never did. I think that's what made him psychic. You said the trigger had to be a traumatic shock, didn't you?”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

“Poor Rafe. He couldn't consciously believe Mallory could do anything like that. Not his friend and fellow cop Mallory. But I think he noticed something there where Jamie died. I'm not sure what; I'm very good at cleaning up after myself. Whatever it was, it told him Mallory had been there. So he knew. Deep down, he knew.”

“And woke up with blood on his hands.” Isabel drew a breath. “He'll know for sure now. Both Hollis and me dead, probably Dean, too, and you—Mallory—still alive. He'll know.”

“No, see, you still don't get it. The change is finally complete. I got tired of only coming out sometimes, of being asleep inside Mallory so much of the time. So I've been taking over. More and more. Mallory's gone now. She's never coming back. And after I've taken care of you, I'll leave.”

It was true, Isabel realized. She looked at the shell that had once held the personality, the soul, of a woman she had liked very much, and knew without doubt that Mallory Beck was gone. She had started going away when six little girls had died on a lake, and over the years more and more of her had fallen away.

Until now. There was only this. This evil thing that had lived deep inside.

Isabel knew.

This was the evil that had killed Julie. The evil Isabel had sworn to destroy. Crouching in the darkness. Waiting to sprint.

Wearing the face of a friend.

He/she glanced down at Hollis, faintly dissatisfied. “She's not blonde. Neither was that stupid, nosy reporter.”

“Cheryl Bayne. She's dead?”

“Of course she's dead. Little twit hadn't even realized, but I think she'd seen me slipping into the gas station a couple of days before your partner and I found the body. It bugged her enough to send her snooping around the place, but I don't think she even knew what she was looking for. Until she found it, of course.”

“What did you do with her body?”

“A cop to the last, aren't you?” The thing inside Mallory laughed. “They'll find her, eventually, at the bottom of a well. I didn't have time to play with her, you see. I had to get busy. Because she wasn't a blonde. But you are, and you'll make five.”

Isabel knew she didn't have a hope of getting to her calf holster and second gun. Not without a distraction. But even as she thought of that, her mind was suddenly clear and calm, and she was aware of a strength and utter certainty she had never felt in her life.

She wasn't alone.

She would never be alone again.

“Mallory.” Rafe was there, stepping from behind a tall monument at a right angle to the women, his gun extended in two steady hands.

“Didn't you hear me, Chief?” The black-gloved hand cocked Isabel's pistol and held it aimed at her heart. “Mallory's gone. And I'll kill Isabel if you so much as twitch.”

“You'll kill her anyway,” Rafe said.
“Go away like a good chief and I might let her live.”

“Evil,” Isabel said, “always deceives. That's what it's best at. That's why it wore the face of a friend this time. And that's why we can't let it walk away alive.”

The thing wearing Mallory's skin opened its mouth to say something, but the wind that had been steadily gaining strength abruptly sent a gust of hot air through the cemetery, and the birch tree beside the chapel flung one of its broken branches through a stained-glass window.

The crash was loud and sudden, and Isabel instinctively took advantage of it, throwing herself sideways to the ground even as she reached for the gun strapped to her calf.

The black-gloved hand started to follow Isabel's path, finger tightening on the trigger, but the evil inside was just a split second slower than Rafe's training and instincts.

His shot spun Mallory around so that his/her gun was pointing toward Rafe.

Isabel's shot finished it.

The storm, uncaring of both human living and evil dying in its path, roared louder and louder as it finally made up its mind to hit Hastings.
"YOU'RE A HARD WOMAN to kill," Isabel said. Hollis raised both eyebrows at her. "I'm not saying it like it's a bad thing."

Looking at Rafe, Hollis said, "You realize what you're letting yourself in for? She can't not be flippant."

"I know. It's a character flaw."

"I resent that," Isabel said.

"You shouldn't. It happens to be a flaw I enjoy."

"Oh, well, in that case."

Hollis shifted slightly in the hospital bed to get more comfortable. Or try to. "I'm just lucky you two managed to stop Mallory's evil twin before he could finish me off."

They all found it less painful to refer to the creature they had destroyed there at the end as Mallory's evil twin—a phrase naturally coined by Isabel. Not that it could be anything but painful, especially for Rafe.

Or Alan, who was still bewildered and in shock.

"What I can't figure out," Isabel said, "is what he planned to do once he left Hastings. He really was trapped in a woman's body—and had been since the male personality split off from Mallory when she was twelve."

"A sex-change operation?" Hollis suggested.

Rafe said, "I don't think so. I think he saw a male when he saw himself."

"A very confused male," Isabel pointed out. "He wanted Mallory to be involved with men, not women. But I'm willing to bet he would have been angry and insulted to be called homosexual."

"Didn't Bishop offer a theory?" Hollis asked. "I seem to recall a discussion going on over my mostly unconscious self a couple of days ago."

"We had to talk about something," Isabel told her. "The doctors said you were pretty out of it."

"I was. Mostly. But I remember Bishop and Miranda being here. And talking, like I said. What was the theory?"

"That Mallory's evil twin was delusional. We haven't really gotten past that part."

"It's complicated," Hollis agreed.

"She—he—was right about me, anyway," Rafe said. "I had seen something unconsciously when we were at the first murder scene. From the corner of my eye, I suppose. I'd seen Mallory touch Jamie's hair. Something about it, about the way she did it, was like a red flag."

"And a subconscious shock," Isabel said. "The hardest thing to accept about evil is that it can wear a familiar face."
He was very good at hiding."

“Until Mallory did something he couldn't accept,” Rafe said. He sighed. “Just . . . thinking of her dying inside all
those years, bit by bit. I keep thinking I should have known. Should have been able to help her.”

“Nobody could help her,” Isabel told him quietly. “Nobody was there when that boat overturned and six little girls
drowned. Nobody but him. Mallory was doomed from that moment.”

“And too many other women along with her,” Hollis said. “Plus Ginny's father, and that poor older lady, and
Dean Emery. And God knows how many others would have died if you two hadn't stopped it.”

“It doesn't feel very heroic, what we did,” Rafe said.

Isabel smiled at him. “It seldom does. Evil leaves so much destruction behind it that it's like a train wreck. You
don't think about what was saved ahead on the tracks, just the devastation of the crash.”

“And yet you're inviting me to jump on the train with you.”

“Well, I'm sort of committed. To the journey, I mean. It's not something where you can just get off at the next
station.”

“Excuse me,” Hollis said, “but are you two still speaking in metaphors?”

“You noticed that?” Isabel said earnestly.

“It amuses her,” Rafe said.

Hollis shook her head. “One for the books, you two. I bet Bishop can hardly wait to get you up to Quantico.”

“There was an invitation,” Rafe admitted. “He didn't mention trains, though.”

“So, did you accept?” Hollis asked.

“What do you think?”

“I think . . . that the SCU just took on a whole new dimension.”

“How about that?” Isabel said. “And she's not even precognitive.”
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