LISA JACKSON

HOT BLOODED
COLD BLOODED
SHIVER
ABSOLUTE FEAR
LOST SOULS
MALICE
DEVIOUS

KENSINGTON BOOKS

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LISA JACKSON

HOT BLOODED
The phone jangled and Sam punched the button for the speaker phone. “Hi, this is Samantha.”

“Glad I caught you in.”

She froze. Her heart missed a beat. “Who is this?” she said, but she recognized the smooth, sexy voice immediately.

“Don’t play games, Samantha. You know who I am. Are we having fun yet?”

Sam wanted to slam down the receiver, but couldn’t sever the connection, not if she ever wanted to nail this creep.

“I wouldn’t call it fun. Not fun at all.”

“I caught your program tonight.”

“But you didn’t phone in.”

“I’m calling now,” he pointed out. “I wanted to talk to you alone. What we need to discuss is personal.”

“I don’t even know who you are.”

“Sure you do, Doctor, you just don’t remember.”

“What is it you want? Why are you calling me?”

“Because I know you for what you are, Samantha. A phony.” He was getting angry now, his voice becoming agitated. “Women like you need to be punished.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s all in your past, Dr. Sam, that past you hide from the world. But I know. I was there. The wages of sin are death,” he reminded her coldly.

“And you’re gonna die. You’re gonna die soon…”
Books by Lisa Jackson

SEE HOW SHE DIES
FINAL SCREAM
RUNNING SCARED
WHISPERS
TWICE KISSED
UNspoken
IF SHE ONLY KNEW
HOT BLOODED
COLD BLOODED
THE NIGHT BEFORE
THE MORNING AFTER
DEEP FREEZE
FATAL BURN
SHIVER MOST LIKELY TO DIE
ABSOLUTE FEAR
ALMOST DEAD
LOST SOULS
LEFT TO DIE
WICKED GAME
MALICE
CHOSen TO DIE
WITHOUT MERCY
DEVIOUS
WICKED LIES
BORN TO DIE

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To John Scognamiglio, who was not only the editor of this book, but a major player in the creative process, just as he was with all my books for Kensington, especially during the writing of If She Only Knew. Always sane, with infinite patience and brilliant ideas that push me farther than I might dare to go, John has so inspired me that I’m paying him back by naming the villain in this book after him. Thanks, John!
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If I’ve missed anyone, my apologies.
Prologue

June

New Orleans, Louisiana

“You want something special?” she asked, running the tip of her tongue over her lips provocatively. He shook his head.

“I can—”

“Just strip.”

There’s something wrong with this guy. Seriously wrong, Cherie Bellechamps thought, a drip of fear sliding through her blood. She thought about calling the whole thing off, telling the john to get lost, but she needed the cash. Maybe her imagination was getting the better of her. Maybe he wasn’t a creep.

She unbuttoned her dress slowly and felt his eyes upon her, just as hundreds of other eyes had stared in the past. No big deal.

Over the noise of the city, music played from her bedside radio. Frank Sinatra’s smooth voice. Which usually calmed her. Not tonight.

A hot June breeze, heavy with the dank breath of the Mississippi, blew through the open window. It ruffled the yellowed lace curtains and cooled the beads of sweat collecting on Cherie’s forehead, but didn’t ease her case of nerves.

The john sat on a three-legged stool and fingered a rosary in one hand, the blood-red beads catching in the frail light. So what was he? Some kind of religious nut? A priest who couldn’t handle celibacy? Or was this just another weird fetish? Lord knew in New Orleans there were thousands of oddballs, all with their own sexual fantasy.

“You like?” she asked, conjuring up a slightly Cajun accent as she ran a long-nailed finger along the cleft of her breasts and pushed aside any lingering trepidations.

“Keep going.” From the stool in the little room, he wiggled a finger at her bra and panties.

“Don’t you want to?” she asked, her voice low and sultry.

“I’ll watch.”

She didn’t know how much he could see. This second-story room on the fringes of the French Quarter was lit by a single lamp, the shade covered in a black-lace mantilla so that intricate shadows played upon the walls and hid the cracks in the old plaster. Besides that, the john was wearing Ray-Bans with dark lenses. Cherie couldn’t see his eyes, but it didn’t matter. He was good-looking. Athletic. His jaw was square, his nose straight, his lips thin and secretive in a day’s worth of stubble. He wore a dark shirt, black jeans and his hair was a thick, coffee brown. Unless there was something hideously wrong with his eyes, this guy was Hollywood handsome.

And spooky as sin.

Already he’d asked her to scrub her face and don a red wig to cover her short platinum hair. She hadn’t argued. Didn’t care what got a trick off.

She flicked off the front clasp of her bra and let the scrap of red lace slide to the floor.

He didn’t so much as move. Except to rub the damned rosary beads.

“You got a name?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re not going to share it?”

“Call me Father.”

“Father like…my dad…or”—she glanced at the dark beads running through his fingers—“like a priest?”

“Just Father.”

“How about Father John?” It was her attempt at a joke. He didn’t smile.

So much for levity.
Time to end this, get paid, and send him packing. She wriggled out of her panties and sat on the edge of the bed, giving him a full view of every part of her.

Okay, so some guys got off on watching a woman strip. Some even just watched, never touched as she fondled herself, but this john was so cold and emotionless—eerily so—and what was with the glasses? “We could have some fun,” she suggested, trying to speed things up. He was well into his hour, and so far nothing much was happening. “Just you and me…”

He didn’t respond except to reach over and drop a hundred-dollar bill onto the nightstand. Sinatra’s voice was cut off as Father John switched the radio station. From “When I Was Seventeen…” through a series of beeps, chirps and static until he found the station he wanted—some talk show she’d heard before—a popular one with a female psychologist giving advice. But Cherie wasn’t listening. She was staring at the C-note on the nightstand. It was marred. Ben Franklin’s eyes had been blacked out with a marking pen, as if he, too, like the man in shades, was hiding his identity.

Or didn’t want to see.


Father John had picked her up a block off Bourbon Street, asked her for a date, and she’d looked him over, thought he’d seemed all right and named her price. He’d agreed and she’d brought him here, to the seedy apartment she and a couple of other girls kept just for this purpose. Her other life was in another parish…across the lake…and for a second she thought of her five-year-old daughter and the ongoing custody battle with her ex. No one in Covington knew she turned tricks to help make ends meet; no one could ever, or she’d lose custody and any contact she had with her only child.

Now she was second-guessing her actions. The john was too edgy, his calm masking a restlessness that was evident in a small vein throbbing near his temple and the movement of finger and thumb on the beads. She thought of the pistol she kept in the top drawer of the nightstand. If things got dicey, she’d reach over, swoop up the hundred-spot, yank open the drawer and pull the.38. Scare him off. Keep the C-note.

“Why don’t you join me?” she suggested, lying back on the chenille bedspread, smiling and not expecting him to move. God, it was hot.

“Take off my clothes.” He stood. Walked to the bed.

His command seemed out of sync, but at least it was a common one. So he was going to get down to business. Good. Voyeurs usually didn’t touch. The minutes were ticking off, but she took her time, standing so that she could slowly unbutton his shirt. She shoved it off shoulders that were muscular and a chest without any flab, just a wall of rock-hard muscles covered with dark, coiled hair. She unbuckled his belt, and he fingered the cross she always wore as it dangled just above her breasts.

“What’s that—?”

“It—it was a gift from my daughter…last Christmas.” Oh, God, he wouldn’t steal it, would he?

“You need something more.” He slipped the rosary beads over her head. Over the red wig. Yeah, maybe he was a priest. A freaky one.

The sharp beads were warm from being fondled. They fell into the cleft between her breasts. It was creepy. Too creepy. She should tell him to get out now. “There. That’s better.” One side of Father John’s mouth lifted, as if he was finally satisfied with the scenario. Ready to get down to business.

About time.

“What’s with the rosary?”

“Touch me.”

His body was perfect. Honed. Tanned. Hard.

Except for his cock. It hung limp, as if he wasn’t getting off at all.

She ran a finger down his chest, and he pulled her against him. Kissed her hard with cold, unfeeling lips and dragged her onto the sagging mattress of her iron bed. She had a rule—no lips on lips, but she let it slide, just to end this.

“That’s a boy,” she cooed, and reached for the sunglasses. Strong fingers circled her wrist.

“Don’t.”

“Afraid I’ll recognize you?” Maybe he was famous—God, he was good-looking enough. Maybe he was some kind of celebrity and didn’t want her to recognize him. Or maybe he was married. More likely…
“Just…don’t.” His grip was like steel.

“Fine, fine…whatever.” She kissed his cheek and ran her fingers along the ridges of his well-toned muscles. He moved against her and she worked hard, touching all those erotic spots guaranteed to cause an erection. To no avail. No matter how much she kissed, licked and purred, he was only going through the motions, not turned on at all.

Come on, come on, she thought, I haven’t got all night. She was vaguely aware of the radio, the psychologist, Dr. Sam, was close to signing off, giving her signature spiel about love and lust in this city on the Delta, and Father John, too, turned to listen to the radio shrink.

Maybe he was being distracted and that was the problem. She reached for the radio dial—

“Don’t touch it,” he growled, every muscle in his body flexing.

“But—”

Smack!

Blinding pain exploded in the left side of her face as his fist connected.

She squealed. Tasted the metallic flavor of her own blood. This was not good. Not good. “Wait a second, you son of a bitch—”

He raised his fist again. She saw him through a rapidly swelling eye. “Don’t mess with the radio or my shades,” he growled.

She tried to squirm away. “Get out! Get the hell out!”

He tried to kiss her.

She bit him.

He didn’t so much as flinch.

“Get out, you bastard! No one hits me. Don’t you get it? It’s over.”

“Not quite yet it isn’t, but it will be.” He pinned her to the sheets. Kissed her again. Hard. As if he was getting off on her pain. Cheek throbbing, Cherie tried to wriggle out from under him, but he held her fast with his athletic body.

She was trapped.

Frantic. Hitting him, clawing at him, shoving him.

“That’s it, you sinner, you cunt,” he growled. “Fight me.” His hands were rough. He nipped at one breast, twisted the other.

She screamed and he stopped her by grinding his mouth against hers. She tried to bite him, flailed at him with her fists, but he was strong. Incensed. Turned on. Oh, God, how far was this going to go?

Fear congealed her blood. What if he didn’t stop? What if he tortured her all night?

Pain shot up her torso as he bit her breast.

Writhing, she spied the radio, the digital display glowing over the hundred-dollar bill, Dr. Sam’s voice cool and collected and savvy.

Help me, Cherie thought, scrabbling for the drawer and her gun, knocking over the lamp, kicking wildly, feeling his suddenly rock-hard erection.

So it was rape.

He wanted to rape her. If he’d only said something, she would have played along, but now she was scared. Scared as hell.

Just do it and don’t hurt me!

He yanked her head off the pillow and she cried out just as he tightened the rosary around her throat, the sharp-edged beads slicing her skin, the dark facets winking malevolently.

Oh, God, he’s going to kill me. Fear screamed through her blood. She looked into those shaded eyes and knew it.

He twisted the rosary as he thrust deep into her. Cherie’s eyes bulged, she couldn’t breathe, her arms flailed and she scratched, but to no avail. Blackness…all around her there was blackness…Her lungs burned…her heart felt as if it would explode…Please God, help me!

He wrenched the beaded noose. She gasped. Got no air. Something rasped and gurgled inside her. Blood, oh, God, she tasted her own blood…Again…

Blackness crawled from the outside in and she thought fleetingly of her daughter…sweet, sweet baby…
He was sweating, grinding against her, his breath racing and as she let go she felt him stiffen and heard his
guttural, primal roar. Dimly over the sound of his labored breathing and the roar in her brain there was another
voice. Far away. So far away.

“This is Dr. Sam, with a final word... Take care of yourself, New Orleans. Good night to you all and God bless.
No matter what your troubles are today, there is always tomorrow.... Sweet dreams...”
July
Cambrai, Louisiana

There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home.

Now, click the heels of those ruby slippers three times and…

“That’ll be thirty-seven dollars,” the cab driver muttered, breaking into Samantha’s thoughts. He pulled the cab around the circular drive and as close to the front door as possible while she dug deep into her jacket pocket for her money clip.

“Would you mind taking the bags inside?” she asked.

The driver, twisting his head to get a better view from the front seat, slanted her a curious look. His eyes were dark. Suspicious. As if he expected some kind of come-on. Finally, he lifted a big shoulder. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” Using one crutch, she crawled out of the cab into the sultry Louisiana night. A fine, steamy mist shrouded the live oaks surrounding her rambling old house in this unique community tucked along the southern shore of Lake Pontchartrain, a few miles west of New Orleans. God, it was good to be home.

Some vacations were dreams, others were nightmares. This one had been worse than a nightmare, it had been an out-and-out disaster.

But at least she knew she would never become Mrs. David Ross. That would have been a mistake.

Another one.

A heavy breeze ruffled through the clumps of Spanish moss dripping from ancient, gnarled branches. The flagstones of the front walk, slick with rain, shimmered in the frail illumination cast from the porch light. Wet weeds that had the nerve to poke through the cracked mortar tickled the bare toe of her injured leg as she hobbled her way over the uneven stones. Sweat ran down her spine. Barely July, and the Louisiana heat closed in on her. Gritting her teeth, she hobbled up steps to the broad porch that skirted the front door and swept around all sides of her lakefront cottage. Wind chimes tinkled out their lonely tune. She propped her crutch on the arm of the porch swing, then found her spare key tucked in the cobwebs behind the shutter of one window. Quickly, she unlocked the door. As the cab driver lugged her bags, she flipped on a switch. Immediately the foyer was illuminated, two-hundred-year-old hardwood gleaming with a fine patina, the air inside the ancient house stagnant, hot and still.

The driver dropped her three bags near the hall tree, then retrieved her crutch.

“Thanks.” She handed him forty-five dollars and was rewarded with a satisfied grunt and a quick nod of his head.

“Welcome back.” Dark eyes flashed from beneath the bill of his Saints cap. “Have a good one.”

“I’ll try.” Shutting the door behind him, she pocketed her house key and called over her shoulder, “Honey, I’m home.” No response.

Just the soft ticking of the clock over the mantel and the drone of the refrigerator from the kitchen. She flipped on the switch for the overhead fan, another for the air-conditioning.

“Awh, come on…” she called into the darkened rooms. “You’re not mad because I left you here all alone, are you? You know, that’s so typically male.”

Finding the spare set of keys in the pantry, she waited, listening for the distinctive click of ID tags or the light tread of paws upon the floor. Instead she heard a soft meow and then Charon slunk out of the shadows. Pupils dilated, his eyes were as dark as his inky coat, just a tiny ring of gold visible. “Don’t tell me, now you’re going to play hard to get,” she accused as he eased around the edge of the foyer, feigning disinterest, his tail twitching. “Oh, yeah, you’re a real cool dude.” She laughed, and he sauntered closer, doing a few quick turns around her ankles and rubbing up against the fiberglass shell surrounding her left calf and foot.

“Like the cast? Compliments of that fiasco in Mexico,” she said, plucking his near-liquid body from the floor and holding him close to her chest as she scratched his chin. Charon, a stray she’d named after the ferryman in Dante’s Inferno, began to purr instantly, his aloof routine forgotten, his wet nose brushing the underside of her chin. “So
what went on here while I was away, huh? Did Melanie take good care of you? No?” Smiling, she carried the feline into the den and cracked a window, waiting for the house to cool.

She set Charon on the bookcase, where he slunk through her tomes on psychology and her stacks of paperbacks, then hopped onto the desk where her mail had been stacked neatly, sorted carefully by envelopes, junk mail, magazines and newspapers. Melanie, Sam’s assistant, who had not only watched the house and seen to Charon while Samantha was vacationing, but had commandeered her radio show as well, was nothing if not efficient.

Samantha pulled out the desk chair and plopped onto the familiar seat. She glanced around the room. It felt different somehow, but she didn’t know why. Maybe it was just because she’d been gone so long, over two weeks. Or maybe it was because she was jet-lagged and a little on edge. Though the flight hadn’t been that long, she’d spent too many hours without sleep in the past few days, and the trip had been emotionally draining.

Ever since touching down in Mexico two weeks earlier, things had started to go awry. Not only had she and David had the same old fight about her giving up her job and moving back to Houston, but there had also been the boating “accident” that had dumped both her and her purse into the shallows of the Pacific. She’d ended up with a sprained ankle and no ID—the purse had never been located. It had been a nightmare trying to get out of the country, and when she’d finally persuaded the authorities to let her back into the USA, she’d been sporting this god-awful, bulky cast.

“These things happen,” David had said with a shrug, as they’d finally boarded the 737. He’d offered her a smile and a lift of his eyebrows as if to say, Hey, there’s nothing we can do about it now. We’re in a foreign country. He’d been right, of course, but it didn’t help her bad mood and suspicion that the fishing-boat captain had been drunk or under the influence of some other drug and that somehow her purse, along with a couple of others in the tour group, had been found by local divers, the credit cards, cash and other items of value now being used or pawned up and down the west coast of Mexico. According to the captain, the tiny fishing boat had lurched, avoiding a rock—for God’s sake. It seemed implausible. A stupid mistake from a captain who daily patrolled the waters off Mazatlán. Samantha hadn’t bought it and had wanted some kind of compensation, at the very least an apology for crying out loud. Instead she’d landed in a tiny hospital with an elderly doctor, an expatriate American who looked as if he should have retired in the seventies. He probably had, or been run out of the States for malpractice.

“Sour grapes, Dr. Sam,” she chastised herself, as Charon settled into his favorite spot on the window ledge. He stared through the watery glass, his eyes following something in the darkness. Probably a squirrel. Samantha looked through the panes and saw nothing but the dark shadows of the night.

She pushed the play button on her answering machine while grabbing her letter opener and slicing through the first envelope—a bill. No doubt the first of many. The recorder went through a series of beeps and clicks before playing.

The first call was a hangup.

Great.

She tossed the bill onto the table.

The second was a solicitor asking if she needed auto-glass repair.

Better yet. She thought of her red Mustang convertible, couldn’t wait to get it on the road again. But she didn’t need a new windshield. “No thanks,” she said tearing into several letters—offers of credit cards, requests for contributions to worthy causes, the sewer bill.

Finally a voice.

“Hey, Sam, it’s Dad.” Sam smiled. “I forgot you were out of town…You give me a call when you get back home, okay?”

“Will do,” Sam said as she scanned her most recent Visa bill and was grateful that she’d called Melanie who had assured her that she would cancel all her credit cards immediately.

Two more hangups and then she heard her boss’s voice boom from the recorder. “Sam, I know you’re probably not home yet,” Eleanor said, “but call me the minute, the minute you get in. And don’t give me any crap about you not going to work because of your leg, that’s just not cutting it with me. I got your message from the hospital, but unless you’re hooked to an IV and a heart monitor and strapped to a hospital bed, I want you back at the station pronto. You got that? Melanie’s doing a decent enough job, I mean it, but since you’ve been gone, ratings have slipped and Trish LaBelle over at WNAB is picking up your market share…not good, Sammie, definitely not good. Your listeners want you, girl, and they aren’t in the mood to accept any substitutes, no matter how good they might be. So don’t you go bringin’ me some note from a hunk of a doctor, y’hear? Uh-uh. You all haul your ass down to
the station. Okay, I’ll get off my soap box now. But call me. A-S-A-P.”

“Hear that, Charon? I am loved after all,” she said absently to the cat, then felt the skin on the back of her neck prickle. Some noise, some shift in the atmosphere, some intangible thing caught her attention.

The cat sat on the sill, his body frozen except for the barely perceptible twitching of his tail. “You see something?” she asked, trying to shake off the feeling. She dropped the rest of the mail and moved to the window, searching the darkness through the steamy drizzle on the windowpanes.

The live oaks stood like bearded sentinels, unmoving dark shapes guarding her two-hundred-year-old house.

Creeaaak.

Sam’s heart nearly stopped.

Was that the wind in the branches, the house settling, or someone shifting their weight on the porch? Her throat went dry.

Stop it, Sam, you’re jumping at shadows. There’s nothing sinister here. This is your home. But she’d only lived here three months, and after she’d moved in, she’d learned the history of the house from a gossipy old neighbor across the street. According to Mrs. Killingsworth, the reason the old home had been on the market so long and Sam had gotten it far under its market value was that the woman who had previously owned the place had been murdered here—the object of an enraged boyfriend’s vengeance.

“So what’s that got to do with you?” she said now, rubbing her arms as if she were chilled. She didn’t believe in ghosts, curses or the supernatural.

The recorder spun. “Hi, Sam.” Melanie’s voice. Samantha relaxed a bit. “Hope you had a good trip. I called the credit-card companies, as you asked, and left the mail on the desk, but you’ve probably found it by now. Charon was a pill while you were gone. Really out of sorts. Even sprayed on the piano, but I cleaned it up. And the hair balls. Gross. Anyway, I bought you a quart of milk and some of those fancy French vanilla coffee beans you like. They’re both in the fridge. Sorry to hear about your leg. What a bummer. Some romantic getaway, huh? See you at the station, or you can call if you need anything.”

Sam hobbled back to her chair. She was imagining things. Nothing had changed. She glanced at the picture of David on her desk. Tall and athletic, with gray eyes and a square jaw. Good-looking. Executive vice president and director of sales for Regal Hotels, she’d been reminded more often than not. A man with a future and a quick, if cutting, sense of humor. A catch, as her mother would have said had Beth Matheson still been alive.

Oh, Mom, I still miss you. Sam’s gaze moved from the five-by-seven of David to a faded color portrait of her own family, both smiling parents flanking her in her cap and gown at graduation from UCLA. Her older brother, Peter, stood just behind her father’s shoulder, frowning, looking away from the camera, not even bothering to remove his sunglasses, as if making a statement that he didn’t want to be there, wasn’t interested in sharing any of Sam’s glory as her parents beamed beside her. Beth had believed in marriage and would want to see her daughter with an ambitious man; successful David Ross would have been just such a man.

And a man with a dark side.

Too much like Jeremy Leeds. Her ex.

She sliced open another piece of junk mail and wondered why she was always drawn to control freaks?

“Hey, Sam. Dad again,” her father’s voice said. “I’m worried about you. Haven’t heard anything since you called from Mexico trying to get out of the country. I assume you made it…hope so. So, how’re you getting along with the leg? Call me.”

“I will, Dad. Promise.”

Several other calls came through with well-wishes for her recovery. She listened to each as she continued opening the bills. Celia, her friend who taught first grade in Napa Valley; Linda, a college roommate who had settled with her cop husband in Oregon; Arla, a friend she’d kept in touch with since grade school. They all seemed to have gotten the word that she’d been hurt, and they all wanted her to call back.

“It’s great to be popular,” she muttered to the cat, as the receptionist for her dentist called to remind her of her six-month cleaning. The next call was from the Boucher Center, where she did volunteer work, reminding her that her next session was the following Monday.

She reached for the final envelope—plain, white, legal-sized. No return address. Her name typed on a computer label. With a slit the envelope opened, and the single page dropped onto the desk.

Her blood froze.
She stared at a picture of herself. A publicity shot she’d had taken several years ago. It had been copied, then mutilated. Her dark red hair swung around a face with high cheekbones, pointed chin and sexy, nearly naughty smile, but where there had once been mischievous green eyes with thick eyelashes there were only jagged-edged holes as if whoever had cut them out was in a hurry. Across her peach-tinged lips was a single word scribbled in red pencil:

REPENT.

“Oh, God.” She pushed herself away from the desk, repelled. For a second she couldn’t breathe.

She heard a scraping sound on the porch.

As if someone had been watching through the window and was hurrying away. Footsteps.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she said, whipping around in her chair and stumbling to the window only to look out at the dark, lonely night. The tick of the clock was barely audible over the beating of her heart, and as she stared through the steamy glass, the recorder played the next message.

“I know what you did,” a male voice whispered in a low, sexy tone.

Sam spun around and glared at the machine with its flashing red light.

“And you’re not going to get away with it.” The voice wasn’t harsh, not at all. In fact it was seductive, nearly caressing, as if the caller knew her personally. Sam’s skin crawled. “You’re going to have to pay for your sins.”

“You bastard!”

Charon hissed and jumped from the sill.

The recorder clicked off and went silent. The house seemed to close in on her, the shadowy corners of the walls, darkening. Was it her imagination, or did she hear footsteps running across the yard?

She took in several deep breaths, then, using her crutch, checked all the locks on the doors and the latches on the windows. It’s a prank, she told herself, nothing sinister. In her line of work she was a quasi celebrity, one who invited the public to contact her, to help them with their problems, to get to know her. As a radio psychologist she dealt with people’s problems and phobias every night while she was on the air. And this wasn’t the first time that her private life had been violated; it wouldn’t be the last. She thought about calling the police or David or someone, but the last thing she wanted to appear to be was a hysterical, paranoid woman. Especially to herself.

She was a professional.

A doctor of psychology.

She didn’t want to risk public disdain. Not again.

Her heart thundered, and she slowly let out her breath. She’d have to call the police whether she wanted to or not. But not yet. Not tonight. She double-checked all the locks and told herself to remain calm, go upstairs, read a book and tomorrow, in the morning light, reassess what had happened to her. There was just no reason to panic. Right?

No one would seriously want to do her harm.

Repent?

Pay for her sins?

What sins?

The guy was psyching her out. Which was probably his point. “Come on, big guy,” she called to the cat, “let’s go upstairs.” It was her first night home; she wasn’t going to let some anonymous creep ruin it.
Chapter Two

“If you ask me, she’s faking it,” Melba whispered to Tiny, then gave Sam a friendly wink as Samantha hitched her way past the receptionist’s desk at the WSLJ offices a block off Decatur Street. Wasp thin, with mocha-colored, flawless skin and a thousand-watt smile that could turn to cold, angry disapproval if anyone tried to get past her, Melba guarded the doors of WSLJ as if she were a trained rottweiler. Behind her was a glass case lit by soft neon lights and filled with everything from celebrity photos and awards for the station to a voodoo doll and stuffed baby alligator, memorabilia to remind any visitor that they were definitely in the heart of New Orleans.

Sam rolled her eyes. “You’re right. I’ve been wearing this—” She tapped her cast with the rubber tip of her crutch, “—just to get out of work and gain sympathy, yeah, that’s it. And that’s why I’m popping ibuprofen every couple of hours. I kinda get off on the masochistic thing.”

“Psychobabble,” Melba accused.

“What can I say? It’s my job.” She relaxed. It felt good to be back at the station, at work. After a fitful night’s sleep, she’d woken to the new day, told herself to quit being a chicken, checked the yard for footprints, found none, then eyed the mutilated picture of herself as a professional, from a distance. She’d listened to the ominous call again and decided not to freak out. There would be time enough for that later.

Melba propped one hand under her chin. A dozen bracelets clinked and caught in the light. “You know, I have a theory about all shrinks—er—psychologists.”

“Do tell,” Sam encouraged.

“I think every one of you got into the field because of some basic character flaw. Most shrinks I know are nuts. And you radio types are the worst. I mean, who would want to sit in this damned studio all night, listening to other people’s problems, when you know you don’t help em? They just call you cuz they’re lonely.”

“Or horny,” Tiny added as he passed through the glassed-in reception area. He dropped a package onto Melba’s desk as light jazz whispered from hidden speakers.

“Right. Or horny. Get your rocks off by calling Dr. Sam at 1–800-Dial-A-Shrink, New Orleans’s own private late-night couch. Confess and be healed.”

Sam’s head snapped up. She felt the smile slide off her face. “What did you say?”

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Sam’s head snapped up. She felt the smile slide off her face. “What did you say?”

“Get your rocks—”

“No, no, what’s that about confession?”

“Well that’s what you are,” Melba said as the phone rang. “Kinda like a priest, or preacher or whatever. And this whole place turns into a late-night, high-tech confessional. Even the name of the show, honey. Midnight Confessions. Need I say more?” She punched a button and studied her glossy pink nails. “WSLJ, New Orleans’s heart of smooth jazz and talk radio. How may I direct your call?”

“Don’t mind her,” Tiny said. “You know she’s always got a bug up her butt. She loves you.”

“And it’s great to be loved,” Sam muttered, still wondering about Melba’s remarks. Maybe she was just jittery, looking for hidden meanings. She hadn’t gotten much sleep, her leg had ached while her mind had spun reviewing the damned taped message and the scarred publicity shot. Her cast had been heavy and cumbersome, making getting comfortable impossible, and so far the day had been nerve-stretching. First she’d dealt with the Cambrai police, talking to an officer on the phone, then waiting for him to show up. He’d assured her they would patrol the area more often and had taken the tape, envelope and publicity shot with him. Later, still edgy, she’d called credit-card companies to make sure they’d gotten Melanie’s message from Mexico about her lost cards, driven with difficulty to the DMV to get a new driver’s license, gone to a locksmith and asked him to come over to replace all of the locks in the house and make a duplicate set for her car. Then she’d finally stopped by the Social Security Administration to stand in line for nearly an hour to ask that a new card be issued. She hadn’t yet replaced her prescription sunglasses, but that was the last item on her list and for a while she’d settle for contacts and over-the-counter shades.

“I’ll give Mr. Hannah the message,” Melba said as she clicked off the telephone and scribbled a note. “Why we don’t have voice mail around here is beyond me. It’s like we’re in the damned dark ages or somethin’.” She glanced over at Tiny. “You’re the computer genius, can’t you hook us up?”
“I’m working on it, but it’s the damned budget.” “Yeah, yeah, always the budget, the ratings, the market share.” She rolled her expressive eyes, and her curly hair shone under the fluorescent tubes that passed for lighting in the reception area. “Well, I hate to admit it,” she said to Sam, “but, from the stack of fan mail in your cubby, it looks like you were missed.”

“Surprising.”

Another call came in, catching Melba’s attention, as Tiny walked with Sam down the central hallway known affectionately as “the aorta.” The station was a virtual rabbit’s warren, a maze of offices and hallways linked together fitfully as the ancient building that housed WSLJ and its sister stations had been remodeled over and over again in the past two hundred years, the nooks and crannies incorporated into closets, studios, offices, and meeting rooms.

“Check your e-mail as well,” Tiny advised as he stopped at the door of his office—a small room that had once been a walk-in windowless closet placed smack-dab in the middle of the offices. Inside was a single desk chair, benchlike table and laptop computer. Tiny’s only nod to decorating was a large poster of an alligator, which Sam guessed, from the multitude of tiny perforations on the slick surface surrounding the gator’s snout, Tiny used as a dartboard. Where he hid his darts was a continuing mystery that no one in the station had unraveled.

Tiny seemed to know what was going on in the station at all times. A part-time communications student at Loyola, he designed and maintained the station’s web site and was a whiz when it came to any computer glitch. In Sam’s opinion, Tiny was invaluable, if slightly out-of-sync with the rest of the world. He was still gawky, a computer nerd in serious need of braces, Scope and Clearasil, but a hard worker who just happened to have a crush on Sam. A crush she pretended didn’t exist.

“Lots of e-mail?” she asked, and the kid visibly brightened.

“Tons. All of it about the same—the listeners want you back.”

“You read my e-mail?” she asked.

The tops of his ears turned bright red. “Some of it was addressed to the station in general, but it was mainly about you and when you’d be back. I, uh, I didn’t look at any of the personal stuff.”

Oh, right, she thought sarcastically, but before she had a chance to question him, the program manager’s deep voice assailed her. “So the prodigal has returned!” Eleanor’s words ricocheted down the hallway.

A tall black woman who had brass golf balls fashioned into a paperweight that she kept forever on her desk, she strode down the hallway and smiled wide enough to show off a gold-crowned molar. “And oh, look at you…” She motioned to the cast covering Sam’s leg. “High fashion if ever I saw it. Well, come on, haul yourself down to the office, where we can talk.” She preceded Sam down the aorta and took a right near the back of the building, across from the glassed-in studio where Gator Brown was pretaping some smooth jazz favorites that he planned to play on his shift. Earphones covering his bald spot, Gator saw Sam, grinned and raised a freckled hand, never once interrupting his velvet-voiced patter as he started to play another CD for the tape.

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“Okay, so tell me,” Eleanor said, waving Sam into a chair crammed between bookcases stacked high with files, disks, tapes and books, “how long are you gonna have to put up with that?” She wagged a finger at Sam’s left leg as she sat behind her cluttered desk.

“Less than a week more, I hope. It’s just a sprain. Nothing broken. I can still work, you know.”

“Good. Cuz I want you back in that booth. Your listeners are clamoring for you, Sam, and WNAB is getting more aggressive with your audience. They’ve moved Trish LaBelle from seven to nine, to get a jump on your show, then go head to head with you when you come on at ten. I’m considering moving you up an hour, and Gator’s screaming bloody murder, claiming his audience will stop listening, that his style of jazz has to be played late at night. He’d rather you be pushed back from ten until midnight.” She reached into the top drawer of her desk and found a bottle of Tums. “And my husband can’t understand why I have high blood pressure.”

Sam wasn’t buying all the competition. “WNAB is AM, we’re FM, entirely different format, demographics and audience.”

“Not so different.” Eleanor was all business. She popped two pills. “Look, we’ve all worked hard to make this station the best, and we don’t want to lose our audience now. I don’t begrudge you your vacation, of course,” she said, holding up her hands, palms outward, “but I’ve got to be practical. It’s my job. We can’t let WNAB or anyone else muscle in on our ratings.” She managed a smile that seemed false and when the phone rang, took the call. “This is Eleanor…yes…I know.” Stretching the cord, she rolled her chair back and searched in a stack of files that was piled on top of a credenza. “Okay, let me see. Did you talk to the sales department?” Her voice was tight. Strained.
“I understand…we’re working on it. What? Yes. Samantha’s back, so late night’s taken care of…Right. Just give me a minute.” Turning back to the desk, she grabbed her computer mouse with her free hand and signaled to Sam with her eyes that the discussion was over. “Listen, George, just sit tight. I said I’d handle it.”

Samantha hobbled out of the room, but Eleanor’s voice drifted after her.

“I’ll come up with something. Yes, soon. For God’s sake, don’t have a heart attack. Just calm down. I understand.”

Negotiating two corners, Sam entered the hallway that opened to the glassed-in studios and recording rooms. She glanced through one window and saw Gator still leaning into the microphone, talking to the tape as if he were actually speaking to the audience and every listener were his personal friend. He’d cut this tape into his regular program. On the air his voice was a soft drawl, inviting, a real down-home boy. In person he was much more animated and lively. Sam waved, Gator gave her a cursory nod and she wended her way past several more studios, an editing room, the library and finally wound up at the communal office she shared with the other DJs. Her mail was, indeed, stuffed into her cubby. Remembering the ugly missive she’d received at home, she sorted through the envelopes carefully. Telling herself that the prickle of dread crawling up her spine was totally out of line, she slit open each envelope and scanned the pages.

Nothing was out of the ordinary.
Nothing was the least bit suspicious.

Offers to speak at or host charity functions, well-wishes from listeners who had found out she’d been in an accident, advertisements, more bank-card offers…nothing sinister. She’d told herself that she wasn’t going to bring up the letter and crank call to anyone at the station, but she would talk to the police again. The letter and voice on her answering machine were probably just pranks. Nothing more. Some guy getting his perverted jollies at her expense.

Then what about the footsteps on the porch?
How about the way Charon had reacted?
What about the way you felt last night, as if unseen eyes were watching your every move?

Gritting her teeth, she reminded herself for the hundredth time she was letting a couple of stupid, malicious pranks get to her. She’d dealt with crank callers before. As long as she changed the locks, fixed the faulty alarm system that had come with the house and made sure that the Cambrai police were true to their word and increased their patrols of the area, she’d be fine.

Right?

A few hours later, after most of the staff had gone home for the night, Sam was tossing the trash into a wastebasket when the click of high heels caught her attention. Turning, she spied Melanie breezing into the room. Her hair was windblown, her cheeks pink from the heat of the summer night.

“Welcome back,” Melanie greeted with a grin. All of twenty-five, Melanie had graduated at the top of her class at All Saints, a small college in Baton Rouge, where she’d majored in communications and minored in psychology. She’d worked at the college radio station, then landed a job in Baton Rouge before accepting a position with WSLJ not long after Sam had hired on. Melanie, like Sam, was one of Eleanor’s recruits.

“Thanks.”

“I’m gonna run down to the shop on the corner and pick up coffee and something totally fattening and sinful…Probably a beignet smothered in powdered sugar. Want one?”

“Tempting, but I think I’ll pass.” Sam set the mail aside and rolled her chair back from the long counter that served as a desk. “And thanks again for taking care of the cat and leaving me the coffee and milk. You’re a lifesaver.”

Melanie beamed under the compliment—in many ways she was still a kid. “Just remember that when it comes time for my review and raise, okay?”

“Oh, I get it. You bribed me.”

“Absolutely!” Melanie was blocking the doorway, a hand on either side of the jamb. In a gauzy purple dress, thin black cape, platform shoes and fresh makeup, she looked ready to go out on the town, rather than work.

“Hot date?”

“A girl can hope.” Melanie laughed and lifted one shoulder. “Maybe I’ll get lucky. And—” she held up a finger, “—no motherly advice about being careful. I’m a big girl now.”
“And I’m not old enough to be your mother.” “Then no friendly or even professional advice, okay?” Sam knew when to button her lip. Melanie’s past relationships had been less than stellar, and the girl was waiting to get her heart broken again, but Samantha didn’t argue. After all, she wasn’t exactly batting a thousand in the love department herself. “When are you off duty?”

Melanie looked at her watch. “After the show, same as you. Now, what can I get you from the coffee shop before it closes for the night? Tea? Perrier?” “You don’t have to wait on me.” “I know. It’s only because of the cast. Once you’re on your feet again, you’re on your own, so make a slave of me now, if you feel so inclined.”

“You asked for it. Okay, get me a Diet Coke.” “Will do.” Melanie glanced ruefully at Sam’s leg. “Does it itch?”

“Like crazy.”

“I’ll be right back.” She left as quickly as she appeared. Sam did a cursory look over her e-mail, her pulse elevating a bit, her palm sweaty on the mouse, but no one had sent any notes that could be construed as threatening. A few notes from fans asking about her return, two dozen jokes she deleted immediately, interoffice memos that were outdated, an offer to speak at a local charity event, another reminder from the Boucher Center about her next appointment and several quickly dashed thoughts from friends. One from Leanne Jaquillard, a seventeen-year-old girl she worked with at the Boucher Center where she volunteered.

There was nothing out of the ordinary in her letters from cyberspace. Nothing sinister. She began to relax. By the time Melanie returned sans cape, with a little bit of powdered sugar still clinging to her lips, a can of Diet Coke in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other, Sam had answered those she could, saved the ones she wanted and deleted the rest.

Thanks,” she said, as Melanie handed her the drink. “I owe you one.”

“More than one—maybe a dozen or so for taking care of that persnickety cat, but who’s counting?” Melanie took a sip of her coffee and the remaining bits of sugar vanished from her lips.

Sam pulled the tab on her Coke just as Gator poked his head into the room. “You’ve got about fifteen minutes,” he said. “I’ve got two pieces taped, then the weather and ads will follow. After that, you’re on.” He started to leave, then thought better of it. “Hey, it’s good to have you back.” There wasn’t much sincerity in his words. “Thanks.”

“So what happened?” He jabbed a finger at her cast. “It’s a long story. Basically, the captain of our fishing boat was an idiot and I’m a klutz.”

Gator’s grin was tight. Forced. “Tell me something I don’t know,” he said, then added, “Gotta run, somewhere in this city there has to be a woman dying to meet me.” “I wouldn’t count on it,” Melanie whispered as he left.

“Remind me again why I wanted to get back here so badly,” Sam said.

“He’s just pissed because they’re talking about cutting his show to expand yours. It’s jealousy.”

Sam wasn’t sure she blamed Gator. He used to be the morning DJ, was pushed to the afternoon “Drive At Five,” then eased back to the early evening. It didn’t take a crystal ball to see that he was slowly, but surely, being phased out. Right now, with the popularity of her Midnight Confessions, she took the brunt of his misaligned anger.

“I guess I’d better get back in the saddle.” Sam struggled to her feet, felt a painful twinge in her ankle and ignored it. Melanie stepped out of the doorway to let her pass. “Thanks for pinch-hitting for me while I was gone,” Sam said.

“No problem.” Melanie’s gold eyes darkened a bit. “I liked it.”

“You’re a natural.”

The girl sighed as they started down the corridor. “I just wish the powers that be recognized my talents.”

“They will. Give it time. And finish getting your doctorate. A bachelor’s degree in psychology isn’t enough.”

“I know, I know. Thanks for the advice, Mom,” she said with just a trace of envy. Melanie was great behind the microphone, she just needed seasoning, more life experience as well as the educational credentials before she could regularly hand out advice to the thirty-and fortysomethings who called in. Pinch-hitting was one thing; her own show was another.

“Any big news happen while I was gone?” Sam asked, changing the touchy subjection.

“Nothing. It’s been soooo boring around here.” Melanie shrugged and took another sip of coffee.

“New Orleans is never boring.”

“But the station is. It’s the same old, same old. There’s gossip about the possibility of WSLJ being sold to a big conglomerate or merging with a competitor.”

“There always is.”
“Then there would be major reformatting. All the DJs are freaked because they’d be replaced by computers, or syndicated programs from Timbuktu, or God knows where.” “That never stops,” Sam said.

“Right, but this time there’s more to it. George is talking about spending big bucks on more computer equipment, cutting staff, doing more of the taped stuff. Melba’s thrilled—practically orgasmic—at the thought of voice mail, and Tiny, he loves the idea. The more high-tech stuff, the better.”

“It’s the wave of the future,” Sam said cynically. Computers were rapidly replacing disk jockeys just as CDs had replaced tapes and vinyl. The library of LPs and 45s in the station was collecting dust in a locked glass case that only Ramblin’ Rob, the crusty oldest DJ in the building, played upon occasion. “I catch hell for it,” he always said, laughing, his voice raspy from years of cigarettes, “but they don’t dare fire me. AARP, the governor and even God Himself would shut this place down if they did.”

Melanie followed Samantha along the hallway. “Doing the show was the only thing that was interesting around here.”

“Liar, liar,” Melba said as she cruised past and grabbed her jacket from the rack in an alcove near the offices. “Don’t let her give you any of that bull.” Her elegant eyebrows lifted a notch. “There’s a new man in our girl’s life.”

Melanie blushed and rolled her expressive eyes. “True?” Sam asked as she turned a corner and slipped through the door to the studio. The information about her assistant wasn’t exactly a news flash. Melanie had a new boyfriend every other week, or so it seemed.

“This one’s serious.” Melba tucked her umbrella under her arm. “Believe me, the girl’s in loooove.”

“It’s only been a couple of dates. That’s all.” Melanie fiddled with the chain around her neck. “No big deal.”

“But you like him?”

“So far.”

“Do I know him?”

“Nah.” Melanie shook her head, then slipped into the adjoining booth. “I’ll start screening the calls,” she said, as Sam settled into her chair and adjusted the mike. She checked the computer screen. With a touch of her finger on the appropriate button on the monitor, she could play a pretaped advertisement, the opening music, or the weather. She placed headphones over her ears as Melanie nodded, indicating that the phone lines were working and connected to the computer.

Sam waited until the thirty-second advertising spot for a local car dealer had finished, then pressed a button and the first few notes of “Hard Day’s Night” by the Beatles soared, then faded. Sam leaned into the mike. “Good evening, New Orleans, this is Dr. Sam. I’m back. And this is Midnight Confessions, here at WSLJ. As you probably know, I was out of town for a little R&R in Mexico. Mazatlán, to be precise.” She leaned her elbows on her desk and kept one eye on the computer screen. “It was a beautiful place, very romantic, if you were in the right frame of mind, but rather than give you a blow-by-blow travelogue, I thought I’d settle in with kind of a light topic, just to get back in the swing of things.”

“As this is my first night back, I thought we’d open the discussion tonight by talking about vacations, how stressful they are, how relaxing they’re supposed to be, what’s considered romantic. Call in and tell me where you’ve been and how it turned out. In Mazatlán, the weather was hot, hot, hot, the sunsets to die for. Plenty of hot sun and sand, lots of couples strolling along the beach. Palm trees, white sand, piña coladas, the whole nine yards…”

She talked about romantic vacations for a few minutes and gave out the phone number, again asking for callers, waiting for a response. Glancing through the plate-glass window she saw Melanie, headphones in place, nodding as the phone lines began to light. Here we go.

The first caller’s name, Ned, appeared on the screen beside line one, while someone named Luanda was on two. Sam pushed the first button and said, “Hi. This is Dr. Sam. Who’s this?”

“Yeah, this is Ned.” The guy sounded nervous. “I, um, I’m glad you’re back. I listen to your program all the time, and…and I gotta say I missed ya.”

“Thanks.” Samantha smiled slightly and tried to put the guy at ease. “Well, Ned, what’s on your mind? Have you been on a vacation lately?”

“Yeah, uh, I, uh, took the missus on a trip down to Puerto Rico, it was about two months ago, and…well, it was kinda to make up…y’know.”

“Make up for what?” she asked.
“Well, I’d been seein’ someone else and me and the wife, we split for a while, so I decided to surprise her with a trip to the Caribbean, you know, to try and get things back together.”

“And what happened, Ned?” Sam asked, as the guy haltingly poured out his heart. Another midlife fling. His second, he admitted, but he loved his wife, oh, she was the best, a good-hearted woman he’d been married to for twelve years. However, his wife got even with him in Puerto Rico. Found herself a Latin lover and rubbed Ned’s nose in it. Ned was offended. What had she been thinking? The romantic vacation had turned into a catastrophe.

At least at that level, Sam could relate.

“So how do you feel about it?” she asked, and noticed that Luanda’s name disappeared from the screen. She’d gotten tired of waiting and had hung up. But someone named Bart was on line three.

“I’m hurt and mad, I guess,” Ned was saying. “Mad as hell. I spent two thousand bucks on that trip!”

“So you lost your money and your wife. Why do you think you got involved with the other women in the first place?” Sam asked.

The phone lines began to light up like a Christmas tree. People couldn’t wait to comment on Ned’s story or offer their own, asking Sam’s opinion. Kay was on two, Bart on three and, oh, there was Luanda, again, on four.

Sam talked to Ned a while, explaining about the age-old double standard, then switched to Kay, a vicious woman who was ready to rake Ned and any other cheating man through the coals several times over. Sam imagined her foaming at the mouth in her rage. From there, she listened to Bart, whose girlfriend had gone with him to Tahiti and refused to come home.

The stories, anger, laughter and despair sizzled over the airwaves. Sam interrupted the calls by playing advertising bits and updating the weather with promises of news as soon as it broke, but the time sped by and she felt more at home by the minute. Fleeting thoughts of the letter and mutilated picture she’d received faded as she talked with her listeners.

She’d been at it for nearly three hours, had finished her soft drink, was on her second cup of coffee and was close to signing off when she answered a call from someone, who the computer screen displayed as John.

“This is Dr. Sam. How’re you this evening?”

“Good. I’m good,” a smooth male voice intoned.

“What’s your name?” she asked for the viewers. “John.”

“Hi, John, what would you like to talk about?” She reached for her coffee cup.

“Confession.”

“All right.”

“That is what you call your show.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Yes, now, John, what’s on your mind?”

“You know me.”

“I know you? How?”

“I’m John from your past.”

She played along. “I’ve known lots of Johns.”

“I’ll bet you have.” Was there a hint of disapproval, or superiority in his voice? Who was this guy? Time to get on with the show.

“Do you have something you want to talk about tonight, John?”

“Sins.”

She nearly dropped her cup. Her blood ran cold. The voice—the same voice on her recorder. The blanket of security she’d felt all night unraveled. “What kind of sins?” she forced out.

“Yours.”

“Mine?” Who was this guy? She needed to get off the line and fast.

“People are punished for their sins.”

“How?” she asked, her pulse pounding hard as she glanced at Melanie, who was shaking her head. Obviously John had asked her a different question when she’d screened the call.

“You’ll see,” he said. Sam signaled Melanie, hoping the girl understood that she needed to get off the line. Fast. She was certain this was the same creep who’d left the message on her personal recorder.
“Maybe I’ll have to repent,” she said, her nerves strung tight as she stalled for time.

“Of course you will. Confession, Samantha. Midnight confession.”

Oh, God, this was the guy. “I’ll take it under advisement.”

“That would be wise, Sam. Because God knows what you did, and so do I.”

“What I did?”

“That’s right, you hot-blooded slut. We both know—”

Sam cut him off. From the corner of her eye, she saw Melanie on the other side of the glass, frantically motioning toward the clock. Only twenty seconds until her program was over. The phone lines were blinking like flash lightning. “That’s all we have time for tonight,” Sam said, trying to compose herself, somehow recalling her signature sign off. Her heart was pounding like a drum as she pressed a button to start the music that ended her show, the Grass Roots singing, “Midnight Confession.” As the first few lines of the song faded, she said, “This is Dr. Sam, with a final word…Take care of yourself, New Orleans. Good night to you all and God bless. No matter what your troubles are today, there is always tomorrow…. Sweet dreams…”

She pushed the play button for a series of commercials, shoved her microphone out of the way and rolled back her chair. Stripping off her headset, she found her crutch, climbed to her feet and, nearly hyperventilating, hitched her way out of the booth.

“How’d that guy get past you?” Sam demanded, as she and Melanie entered the hallway from their separate booths.

“He lied, that’s how!” Melanie’s face was flushed, her jaw tight, defensive. “Now, where the hell is Tiny?” She stormed up and down the hallway. “He’s got less than five minutes to set up the *Lights Out* show!” She searched the hallway with her eyes.

“Forget Tiny. What was the deal with that last caller?” Sam was shaking inside. Furious. Scared.

“I don’t know.” Melanie threw up her hands in exasperation. “He—he tripped me up. Said he had a comment about…paradise and paradise lost…I screwed up, okay? So crucify me!”

Sam cringed at Melanie’s choice of words. “Let’s keep all biblical references out of this!”

“It’s over, okay? It won’t happen again! I said ‘I’m sorry.’”

“No…you didn’t. And you fouled up. Those calls are supposed to be screened and…” Samantha let the sentence drop, realizing she was unleashing on her assistant for no good reason. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to calm down. “And I’m overreacting.”

“Amen…oops sorry. Didn’t mean to get ‘biblical.’” Melanie made air quotes with her fingers around the word, and Sam, despite her fear and anger had to chuckle.

“Forget it.”

“I’ll try.” Melanie was still searching for Tiny as she stalked along the narrow corridor, poking her head into the rooms that were unlocked and rattling the knobs of those that weren’t. “Tiny had better show up—”

“Paradise,” Sam said to herself as the impact of the caller’s words to Melanie hit her like the proverbial ton of bricks. She leaned heavily against the glass wall encasing the old LPs, Ramblin’ Rob’s shrine. “He wasn’t talking about a romantic paradise…it was a reference to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.”

“What?”

“The caller, he was referring to Milton’s work. About Satan being cast out of heaven.”

Melanie stopped dead in her tracks. “You think?” She lifted questioning eyebrows. “You mean like he’s into old literature, or something?” Clearly she wasn’t buying it.

“Yes…I’m sure. It’s all about sin and redemption and punishment,” Sam said, not liking the dark turn of her thoughts. Glancing down the hallway to her assistant, she decided to come clean. “This isn’t the first time that guy has contacted me. There was a message left on my answering machine while I was gone.”

“What?” Melanie’s thoughts of locating Tiny were momentarily forgotten. “You mean when you were in Mexico?”

“Exactly.”

“But…wait a minute. I thought you were unlisted—not in the phone book.”

“I’m not, but there are ways around that. This is a hightech world. Anyone can hack into computers, get records, anything from credit cards to social security number and driver’s licences. It wouldn’t be too tough to find a phone
number if you knew what you were doing.”

“Just like there are ways to get around the call screener here.” Melanie’s eyes clouded a bit. “I’m sorry, Sam,” she finally said. “He tricked me.” Shoving her hair off her shoulders, she asked, “So what have you got, your own personal nutcase? Oh, excuse me, I know that’s not PC these days, but this guy sounds waaaay off his rocker.” “My specialty. I’m a shrink, y’know.”

Footsteps clomped closer, and Tiny rounded the corner, nearly careening into Melanie.

“Hey, watch it,” she said, then skewered him with a typical Melanie glare. “We’ve only got a couple of minutes to start *Lights Out*. Where the hell were you?”

“Outside.”

“Jesus, you’re supposed to have the recording ready to go.”

“Don’t worry.” Tiny said over his shoulder. His coat was damp, and the smell of cigarette smoke followed him as he made his way to the booth Sam had just vacated. “I’ve got it handled.”

“You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“Why? You’re not the station manager.”

“I know, but—”

“Lay off, Melanie, I said it’s under control.” Tiny shot her a hard glare, and Melanie, always quick to anger, opened her mouth to say more, then added, “Fine, just do it.”

Sam took that as her cue to leave. She was tired, edgy and her ankle was beginning to throb. “I’ll see you both tomorrow,” she said as she made her way back to the shared office, grabbed her raincoat and new purse and headed through the maze of WSLJ offices toward the bank of elevators. Her nerves were still strung tight, and she imagined that the old building with its narrow, labyrinthine hallways, musty smell, and tiny cubicles was more sinister than she remembered. “Stop it,” she growled, as the elevator car landed on the first floor. “You’re imagining things.” At the front door she swiped her card through the automatic lock, then stepped into the humid New Orleans night.

The air was cloying, damp and sticky. Hot and oppressive. A few cars drove through the narrow streets, the smell of the river was heavy in the air, and the streetlights glistened off the fronds of the palm trees in Jackson Square. There were still people wandering the city streets, and Sam couldn’t help wonder if any of them was the caller, her “own personal nutcase,” a man whose smooth voice caused her blood to congeal.

Rather than try to walk with the damned cast the few blocks to the parking structure, Sam hailed a cab and, during the short ride, watched the pedestrians, who never seemed to disappear no matter what time of night it was.

*One of the denizens of this city seems to have a personal vendetta against you. Why, Sam? Why does he want you to repent? Who the hell is he? And more importantly, just how dangerous is he?*

She leaned back against the seat and hoped that this was the end of it. The caller, “John,” had finally made contact with her. Maybe now he’d leave her alone.

And yet as the darkened streets of the city passed, she thought of the mutilated publicity shot of herself someone had mailed to her and she knew with mind-numbing certainty that this was just the beginning.
Chapter Three

The moon was blocked by thick, night-blackened clouds. Rain slanted from the sky, and the wind kicked up, causing whitecaps to foam on the usually calm surface of Lake Pontchartrain as the summer squall passed over. Ty Wheeler’s sailboat bobbed wildly at the mercy of the wind, sails billowing, deck listing over dark, opaque water. He ignored the elements along with the certainty that he was on a fool’s mission—definitely in the wrong place at the wrong time. He should take down the sails and use the damned engine, but it wasn’t reliable, and a part of him liked daring the fates.

The way he figured it, this was his chance, and he damned well was going to take it.

Bracing his feet on the rolling deck, he stood at the helm, legs apart, eyes squinting through the most powerful set of binoculars he could find. He focused the glasses on the back of the rambling old plantation-styled home Samantha Leeds now occupied.

Dr. Samantha Leeds, he reminded himself. P H damned D. Enough credentials to choke the proverbial horse and more than enough to allow the good doctor to hand out free advice over the airwaves. No matter who it harmed.

His jaw hardened, and he caught a hint of movement behind the filmy curtains. Then he saw her. His fingers clenched over the slick glasses as he watched, like a damned voyeur, as she walked unevenly through her house. He checked his watch. Three-fifteen in the morning.

And she was beautiful—just as she was in the publicity shots he’d seen—maybe even more so with her tousled red hair and state of undress. Dr. Leeds wore a nightshirt buttoned loosely, its hem brushing the tops of her long, tanned thighs as she walked unevenly through a room lit by Tiffany lamps and adorned with a lot of old-looking furniture—probably antiques. He caught a glimpse of the cast that encased her left foot and half her calf. He’d heard about that, too. Some kind of boating accident in Mexico.

Lips compressed, he anchored the wheel with one hip and felt rain slide down the neck of his parka. The wind had snatched off his hood and tossed his hair around his eyes, but he kept the powerful glasses trained on the house nestled deep in a copse of live oaks. Spanish moss clung to the thick branches and drifted in the wind. Rain ran down off the dormers and down the gutters. An animal—cat, from the looks of it—crept through a square of light thrown from one window. It disappeared quickly into dripping bushes flanking the raised porch.

Ty concentrated on the interior of the house—through the windows. He lost sight of Samantha for a second, then found her again, bending down, reaching forward to pick up her crutch. The nightshirt rode upward, giving him a peek at lacy white panties stretched over round, tight buttocks.

His crotch tightened. Throbbed. He ground his back teeth together, but ignored his male response just as he disregarded the warm rain stinging his face blurring the lenses of his binoculars.

He wouldn’t think of her as a woman.

He needed her. He intended to lie to her. To use her. And that’s all there was to it.

But, God, she was beautiful. Those legs—

She straightened suddenly, as if she sensed him watching her.

Turning, she walked to the windows and stared out, green eyes wide, red hair tousled as if she’d just gotten out of bed, skin without a hint of makeup. His pulse jumped a notch. She squinted through the glass, her eyes narrowing. Maybe she saw the silhouette of the boat, his shadow at the helm. Eerily, as if she knew what he was thinking, she met his stare with distrustful eyes and a gaze that scoured his black soul.

Wrong.

She was too far away.

The night was dark as pitch.

His imagination was running wild.

There was a slight chance she could see his running lights or the white sails, and, if so, make out the image of a man on his boat, but without binoculars there was no way she’d be able to see his features, would never recognize him, and couldn’t, not for a minute, guess what he was thinking, or his intentions.
Good. There was time enough for meeting face-to-face later. For the lies he would have to spin to get what he wanted. For a half a second, he felt a twinge of remorse, gritted his teeth. No time for second-guessing. He was committed. Period. As he watched through the glasses, she reached up and snapped the shades of her window closed, cutting off his view.

Too bad. She wasn’t hard on the eyes. Far from it.

And that might pose a problem.

In Ty’s mind, Dr. Samantha Leeds was too pretty for her own damned good.

“…so you’re sure you’re okay?” David asked for the fifth time in the span of ten minutes. Holding the cordless receiver to her ear, Sam walked to the window of her bedroom and looked into the gloomy afternoon. Lake Pontchartrain was a somber gray, the waters shifting as restlessly as the clouds overhead.

“I’m fine, really.” Now she wished she hadn’t confided in him about the caller, but when David had phoned, she decided that he would find out soon enough anyway. It was a matter of public record, and sooner or later the news would filter across state lines. “I’ve talked to the police, and I’m having all the locks changed. I’ll be okay. Don’t worry.”

“I don’t like the sounds of it, Samantha.” She imagined the tightening of the corners of his mouth. “Maybe you should look at this as some kind of…warning…you know, a sign that you should turn your life in a different direction.”

“A sign?” she repeated, her eyes narrowing as she stared at the lake stretching from her yard to the distant shore. “As in God is trying to talk to me? You mean like the burning bush or—”

“There’s no reason to get sarcastic,” he cut in.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” She balanced her hips on the arm of a wing chair. “I guess I’m a little edgy. I didn’t sleep well.”

“I’ll bet.”

She didn’t mention the boat; she was certain a sailboat had been drifting just off her dock, that in the barest of light from the shore, she’d seen running lights and the reflection of giant sails with a man’s contour against the backdrop. Or maybe it had been her imagination running wild….

“So where are you, again?” she asked, reaching to the nightstand and retrieving a knitting needle she’d found in the closet, part of the personal items she’d inherited from her mother. Feeling a twinge of guilt, she slipped the needle between the cast and her leg and scratched. Her doctor would probably kill her if he knew, but then he was the crusty old guy down in Mazatlán, the expatriate she’d never see again if she was lucky.

“I’m here in San Antonio, and it’s a deluge. I’m standing at the window of my hotel room looking over the River Walk and it’s like a wall of water—can’t even see the restaurant across the river. The sky just opened up.” He sighed and for a second his cell phone cut out, the connection was lost, only to return. “…wish you were here Samantha. I’ve got a room with a Jacuzzi and a fireplace. It could be cozy.”

And it could be hell. She remembered Mexico. The way David had smothered her. The fights. He’d wanted her to move back to Houston, and when she’d refused, she’d witnessed a side of him she didn’t like. His face had turned a deep scarlet and a small vein had throbbed over one eyebrow. His fists had even clenched as he’d told her that she was an idiot not to take him up on his offer. At that moment, she’d known she never would.

“I thought I made it clear how I felt,” she said, watching a raindrop drizzle a zigzag course down the window. She gave up on the knitting needle and tossed it onto the bureau.

“I hoped you’d changed your mind.”

“I haven’t. David, it won’t work. I know this sounds corny and trite, but I thought you and I, we could—”

“—just be friends,” he finished for her, his voice flat.

“You don’t have to put the ‘just’ in there. It’s not like being friends isn’t a good thing.”

“I don’t feel that way about you,” he said, and she imagined his serious face. He was a good-looking man. Clean-cut. Athletic. Handsome enough to have done some print work while he was attending college, and he had the scrapbooks to prove it. Women were attracted to him. Sam had been, or thought she’d been, but in the two years they’d dated some of the luster had faded, and she’d never really fallen in love. Not that there was anything specifically wrong with him. Or nothing she could name. He was handsome, intelligent, the right age, and his job with Regal
Hotels was certain to make him a millionaire several times over. They just didn’t click.

“I’m sorry, David.”

“Are you?” he asked with a bite. David Ross didn’t like to lose.

“Yes.” She meant it. She hadn’t intended to lead him on; she’d just wanted to be careful, to make sure this time.

“Then I suppose you don’t want me to be your escort at that benefit you’ve been talking about?”

“The auction for the Boucher Center,” she said wincing when she remembered she’d brought it up to him months ago. “No, I think it would be best if I went alone.”

He didn’t immediately answer, as if he expected her to change her mind. She didn’t and the tension on the line was nearly palpable.

“Well,” he finally said. “I guess there’s nothing more to say. Take care of yourself, Samantha.”

“You too.” Her heart twisted a bit. She hung up and told herself it was for the best. It was over, and that was that.

All of her friends thought she was nuts not to marry him. “If I were you, I’d set my hooks in him and reel him in faster’n you could say prenup,” her friend Corky had confided over shrimp bisque less than a month ago. Corky’s eyes had twinkled mischievously, almost as brightly as the three rings she wore on her right ring finger—prizes from previous relationships and marriages. “I don’t know why you’re so uptight about the whole thing.”

“I’ve been married before, and I believe in the old once burned twice shy routine.”

“I thought it was once bitten.” Corky had broken off a chunk of bread as she glanced out the windows of the restaurant to the slow-flowing Mississippi, where a barge covered with gravel was chugging upstream.

“Samey-same.”

“The point is you’ll never find a better catch than David, believe you me.” Corky had nodded, her short blond curls bobbing.

“Then you take him.”

“I would. In a heartbeat. But he’s in love with you.”

“David’s in love with David.”

“Harsh words, Sam. Wait til you get back from Mexico, then you tell me,” Corky had said with a naughty smile. As if hot sand, even hotter sun, and, she implied, far hotter sex, would change how Samantha felt. It hadn’t. The sand had been warm, the sun hot, the sex nonexistent. It had been her problem, not his. The fact of the matter was that she just wasn’t in love with the guy. Period. Something about him grated on her nerves. An only child, a brilliant scholar, David was used to having things his way. And he always wanted them to be perfect.

Life wasn’t supposed to be messy, which, of course, it always was.

“All men are not Jeremy Leeds,” Corky had said, wrinkling her pert nose as she mentioned Samantha’s ex-husband.

“Thank God.”

Corky had signaled to the waiter for another glass of Chardonnay, and Sam had absentely stirred the soup while trying not to conjure up images of her ex-husband.

“Maybe you’re still not over him.”

“Jeremy?” Sam had rolled her eyes. “Get real.”

“It’s hard to get over that kind of rejection.” “I know about this,” Sam had assured her. “I’m a professional, remember?”

“But—”

“Jeremy’s flaw is he falls in love with his students and doesn’t take his marriage vows very seriously.”

“Okay, okay, so he’s yesterday’s news,” Corky had said, waving the air as if she could push the subject of Jeremy Leeds out the window. “So what’s wrong with David? Too good-looking?” She’d held up a finger. “No? Too eligible—never been married before, you know, so there’s no baggage, no kids or ex-wife.” She’d wiggled another digit. “Oh, I know, too rich…or too ambitious. Too great a job? Lord, what is he, CEO of Regal Hotels?”

“Executive vice president and director of sales for the eastern United States.”

Corky had flopped back in her chair and thrown her hands over her head as if in surrender. “There you have it! The man’s too perfect.”

Hardly, Samantha had thought at the time. But then she and Corky, friends since second grade in LA had always
had different views on boyfriends, courtship and marriage. One lunch hadn’t changed anything, and the trip to Mexico had convinced her—David Ross wasn’t the man for her, and that was just fine. She didn’t need a man, didn’t really want one right now. She shook herself out of her reverie and stared through the sweating windowpanes to the lake…where she’d imagined a mysterious man on the deck of his sailboat, binoculars trained on her house in the middle of the night, no less. She grinned at her folly. “You’re jumping at shadows,” she told herself, and with Charon trailing behind her, hitched her way to the bathroom, where she tied a plastic sack over her cast, sent up a prayer that the damned thing would be cut off soon, and climbed into the shower. She thought about David, about the man on the sailboat in the lake, about the seductive voice on the phone and about the mutilated picture of herself —the eyes gouged out.

Shivering, she turned the spray to hot and closed her eyes, letting the warm jets wash over her.
Chapter Four

“What the hell happened here last night?” Eleanor’s voice shook with rage, her face was set in a hard mask, and as she followed Sam down the aorta of WSLJ, she was hellbent for an explanation.

“You heard about the caller?” Sam set her dripping umbrella in a corner of the compact room, then placed her crutch over it.

“The whole damned town heard about the caller, for Christ’s sake. It was on the radio! Remember? Who was he, and how in the hell did he get past screening?”

“He tricked Melanie—we were talking about vacations and he said something about Paradise—”

“This much I know,” Eleanor said, her lips pursing, as Sam shrugged out of her raincoat. “I have it all on tape, and I’ve listened to it half a dozen times. What I’m asking you”—she pointed a long, accusing finger at Sam as she tucked her coat into a closet—“is do you know who this guy is and what he wants?”

“No.”

“But there’s something more.” Eleanor’s dark eyes trained on Sam’s face. “Something you’re not telling me. Does this have anything to do with your accident in Mexico?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What about your ex? I remember him from when we worked in Houston together.”

“I don’t think Jeremy would bother with crank calls. It would be beneath him.”

“But he still lives here, right? Got that professorship at Tulane.”

“Give it up, Eleanor, okay? Jeremy’s remarried—what we had was over a long, long time ago,” Sam said.

“Well, somebody around here made the calls, and I want to know who. Don’t I wish we could trace calls from here. I’ve suggested it, you know, but George is so damned tight he squeaks.”

Sam smiled with more than a trace of cynicism. “Maybe we’ll get lucky. Maybe John will call back.”

Eleanor chased her down a jagged hallway to the kitchen area, where coffee was brewing, and the lingering smell of chili from someone’s lunch permeated the air. The room was utilitarian, remodeled half a dozen times in its two-hundred-year history, with three round tables, a few scattered chairs, microwave and refrigerator. Whatever charm the area once embraced had long ago been covered with layers of Formica, vinyl, and glaring white paint. The only hint of the building’s original charm was in the French doors, surrounded by original, ornate grillwork that once opened to a small verandah seven stories above the street. Now the doors were locked and double bolted.

Sam clomped her way to the coffeepot and poured herself a cup.

“When do you get the cast off?” Eleanor asked, her temper seeming to be under control again as Sam poured coffee into Eleanor’s favorite cup, one that read, I hear what you’re saying, I just don’t believe it!

Sam wasn’t lulled into thinking the subject of the crank caller had been dropped. It wasn’t her boss’s nature. Eleanor was like a pit bull with a bone when something bothered her. She never gave up.

“I should get rid of this thing”—she lifted her leg and cast—“tomorrow morning, if I can convince the doctor that I’d be better off without this extra five pounds to lug around. I have an appointment with my orthopedic guy at eleven.” “Good.” Eleanor scooted out a chair and waved Sam into a seat. “Now, I’ve got to tell you that ever since that nutcase called last night, the station has been besieged with calls and e-mails. Be-frickin’-sieged. I mean, we’ve had listeners call in all day.” Her dark eyes gleamed as she wrapped long fingers around the chipped ceramic cup.

“George is going bananas.”

“George would,” Samantha said, thinking of the owner of the station as she slid into her chair. Tall, dark and handsome, born with a silver spoon shoved decidedly between his teeth, George was forever worried about the bottom line, about losing a dime. He would do anything to increase the audience and the ratings. Sam considered him one step up from pond slime.

Leaning on the small of her back, she cradled her cup, blowing across the steamy surface. “I guess I’d better come clean with you,” she said, wondering if she was making a major mistake.
“What do you mean?”
“Last night wasn’t the first time the guy contacted me.”
“Come again.” Eleanor’s coffee was forgotten. She pinned Sam in her gaze.
“He left me a message on my recorder; I thought Melanie would have told you.”
“She hasn’t come in yet.”
“Okay, well, he did. And then there was this letter and a marred publicity shot.”
“What letter?”
She gave Eleanor a quick update and watched as the animation left her boss’s dark face. When she’d explained about returning home and discovering the message and letter, Eleanor reached across the table and wrapped bejeweled fingers around Sam’s wrist. “Tell me that you called the police.”
“Didn’t I say I did? Don’t worry.”
“It’s my job to worry. So what did the police have to say?”
“They said they’d send more patrols around the area.” Eleanor’s eyes narrowed. “Did they come out to the house?”
“Not yet,” Sam said. “Why not?”
“I haven’t been home much.”
“Jesus H. Christ...” Eleanor sighed loudly. Her neatly plucked eyebrows slammed together. “Since the Cambrai police don’t have jurisdiction here in the city, tell me you’re going to haul your ass into my office and pick up the phone to tell them about the calls coming into the station here, cuz, honey, if you don’t, I sure as hell will.”
“I will.”
“You bet you will.” Eleanor wasn’t taking any excuses. “As soon as you finish your coffee, you use my office.”
“I’d planned to call tomorrow,” Sam said. “Why wait?”
“I just want to see if the creep calls back tonight,” Sam said. “Make sure it’s not a onetime thing.”
“I doubt it. Considering what’s gone on at your home.”
“You said yourself that the station was being inundated with calls. That should mean a larger audience,” Sam argued. “Isn’t that what we all want?”
Eleanor tapped a fingernail on her cup. “Yes, but I think you’re playing with fire,” she said, but she was warming to the idea.
“Maybe. It’s true, he’s scared me. But I’d like to find out what makes him tick. So far the threats have been pretty vague. And I’d like to find out what’s going on with him.” She finished her coffee in one swallow. “Bet my listeners do, too.”
“I don’t know about this—”
“If I get another call, I’ll run straight to New Orleans’s finest, I swear,” Sam said, raising two fingers as if she were a Boy Scout.
“Promise?”
“Cross my heart and hope to die—”
“Don’t even say it,” Eleanor cut in. “And for the record” “—she thumped a finger on the Formica table—” “I don’t like this. Uh-uh. Not one little bit.”
“Don’t like what?” a gravelly voice demanded. Ramblin’ Rob, dressed as if he were planning to attend a cattle drive rather than sit in a booth with a presorted stack of CDs, swaggered in. He smelled of smoke and rain, the brim of his Stetson dripping.
“Sam, here, wants to go on the air again without talking to the police about her own private nutcase.”
A grin stretched across Rob’s weathered features. “Not so private. Seems like half the damned city was listening to her last night from the number of e-mails. I’m surprised the cops haven’t called you.” He laid a leathery hand on Sam’s shoulder.
“I think they have more on their minds,” she said.
“Okay, okay, enough of this.” Eleanor glanced at her watch. “I’ve got a meeting in ten minutes. Just promise me you’ll be careful.”
“Always am.”

Eleanor rolled her large eyes. “Yeah, and I’m Cleopatra. I mean it, Sam, don’t bait this guy. Who knows how
dangerous he is. He could be hopped up on drugs, or have a hair trigger on his temper. Just, please” “—she spread
her hands expressively—” “take it easy.”

“I’m a psychologist, remember? I’m used to this kind of thing.”

“Yeah, right,” Eleanor muttered under her breath as she bustled out of the room.

“She’s right, kiddo.” Rob sat down. Tipped the brim of his hat back, pinned Sam with blue eyes that had seen it
all. “Don’t do anything foolish, okay?”

With mock severity, Sam said, “I’ll try my best, Cowboy Rob. Honest I will.” She said it lightheartedly, but the
truth of the matter was that she intended to be very careful with the guy should he phone in again. If she got any hint
that he was dangerous, she’d phone the police. Pronto.

That night as she walked down the hallway, a cup of coffee in her hand, the offices seemed darker than usual. The
shadows in the corners, deeper, the corridors more crooked than before. It was stupid, of course. The old building in
the heart of the city hadn’t changed at all, but despite her bold words to Eleanor earlier, Sam was edgy. She’d gone
home last night and nothing had happened. She’d thought she’d heard someone outside, but as she’d stepped onto
her back porch, she’d seen nothing through the curtain of rain and only the whistle of the breeze and the clink of
wind chimes had disturbed the night. Later, she’d spied the lone boat on the choppy waters, or at least thought she
had. She’d shut her blinds and pushed him out of her mind. What was happening to make her so jumpy?

It wasn’t as if she was alone, for God’s sake. Melanie was manning the phones, Tiny was about, making sure that
the equipment was working and that the preset programs for later in the night were ready to roll.

Nothing was out of the ordinary.

Except that someone out there—in the city—wants to scare the devil out of you.

And it was working.

Big time.

She was tense, her stomach in knots as she closed the door to the soundproof booth, slid into her chair and settled
behind the microphone.

Eleanor and George had been right, she thought as the intro music played through the speakers mounted over her
desk. The e-mail and calls the station had received in the last twenty-four hours had far surpassed any other similar
span of time. The conversation last night between Dr. Sam and “John” had spurred interest in the program, and she
could feel a new sense of electricity in the station, through the headset, in the voices of the callers as they phoned in.

“Good evening, New Orleans and welcome…” She started out her show with her usual bit. Then, knowing she
was dancing with the devil, said, “I thought we’d pick up tonight where we left off. Last night a caller phoned in,
bringing up the subject of forgiveness, repentance and sin.” Sam’s fingers were a little shaky as she leaned into the
mike. “I thought it was worth exploring tonight as well. I know a lot of you were listening, and I’d like to hear your
interpretations of sin.” The first phone line was already blinking. Lines two and three lit up almost simultaneously.
Once the program was over, Eleanor would probably kill her, tell her that she was inviting trouble, but though her
hands were sweaty and her pulse elevated, she wanted to connect with John again…to find out more. Who was he?
Why had he called? He had to be the same man who left her the voice message on her machine and was the same
guy who had sent her the mutilated publicity shot. Why was he trying to terrorize her?

The computer screen showed that Sarah was line one and Tom on two. Three belonged to Marcy. New Orleans
was eager to talk about sin, redemption, quote Bible verses and express opinions vociferously about the wages of
sin. Two men named John called—neither being the one who had phoned the night before. The hours rolled by into
morning and Sam felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. She didn’t believe he would just go away. But there
was tomorrow night.

“Take care of yourself, New Orleans. Good night to you all and God bless. No matter what your troubles are
today, there is always tomorrow…. Sweet dreams…” she said, signing off over the sound of music. She yanked off
her headset and pushed the appropriate buttons so that the advertisements would flow into the opening for the Lights
Out program, then met Melanie in the hallway.

“I guess my personal creep didn’t have the urge to call.”

“Disappointed?” Melanie asked, eyebrows elevated. “I just want to know what he’s thinking.”
“Maybe it’s over. He got his jollies last night and he’s given up…gone on to greener pastures.”

“Maybe.” Sam wasn’t convinced. In fact, silly as it seemed, she thought he was playing a game with her. That he was listening, knowing she expected him to call, and was trying a new tactic to freak her out.

“Forget him. You all but begged him to call what with the subject tonight,” Melanie said. “He’s probably bored.”

“Or he might be more cautious. He doesn’t know that I haven’t talked to the police yet. He could have thought the cops could trace the call.”

Melanie yawned. “You know, Sam, maybe you’re not as important to him as you think.” She seemed irritated, and added, “It was probably just a kid with a deep voice playing a prank.”

Sam didn’t think so.

“You really expected him to call, didn’t you?” Melanie asked, as they walked toward the locker room and Tiny, hurrying in, sped past them.

“I thought he might.”

“You wanted him to.”

Did she? That was kind of a sick thought. “I just figured he might and I could get a little insight into what it was he was talking about last night.” She leaned on one crutch as a sudden thought struck her. “What about when you were hosting the show while I was in Mexico? Did he call you?”

“Me?” Melanie laughed but the sound seemed brittle. “No way. This one, he’s all yours.”

“Maybe.”

“Samantha?” Tiny’s voice called down the hallway. “You’ve got a call on line two. Says his name is John.”

“What?” She froze for a second.

“I said—”

She twisted around and hitched her way back to the darkened studio, where line two was blinking ominously.

“It’s your guy,” Tiny whispered, though no one could hear him until she clicked on.

“Make sure you record this.” Tiny nodded, restarted the tape. Sam grabbed Melanie’s headset and leaned over the console, pushing the flickering button.

“This is Dr. Sam,” she said.

“It’s John.” His voice was breathless, yet smooth—as if he was trying to pretend a calm he didn’t feel. “Your John. I know you were expecting me to call, but I was busy.”

“Who are you?”

“This is not about me,” he said, and his calm seemed to snap.

“Sure it is. What is it you want?” A pause. “I thought you’d like to know that what happened is all because of you. It’s your fault. Yours.” Her blood turned to ice. “What—what happened?” she demanded. “You’ll know.”

Click.

“What—what will I know?” she asked. The line was dead. “Damn.” She tossed off the headset and stared at the console, willing a light to blink again. But the phone lines didn’t illuminate. In fact the room seemed strangely dark and when she looked through the glass to the studio where she worked, she saw her own thin reflection as well as the translucent images of Tiny and Melanie in the clear glass—ghosts inhabiting the empty building.

“It was him, wasn’t it?” Melanie whispered. “Oh, yeah.” Sam nodded.

“You’d better call someone.” Tiny rubbed the stubble on his chin and bit his lip as he stared at the blank console.

“The police?” she asked.

“No! I mean, not yet.” Tiny shook his head and thought so hard he squinted. “I mean, maybe you should call Eleanor or Mr. Hannah.”

“I don’t think I’ll wake George up,” Sam said, thinking of the owner of the station. George Hannah didn’t like any ripples in the water. He wouldn’t appreciate a call in the middle of the night. “I think he cherishes his beauty sleep.”

“Well, someone should know.”

“Someone does,” she said, thinking of the smooth voice without a face. He knew what she looked like. Where she lived. What she did for a living. How to contact her. And she was at a distinct disadvantage. So far she knew nothing about him. Nothing at all.
“We’ve got ourselves another one.” Detective Reuben Montoya leaned a muscled shoulder against the doorjamb to Rick Bentz’s office in the weathered stone building that housed the precinct. His black hair was glossy as a raven’s wing, his goatee trimmed and neat. White teeth flashed when he spoke, and a gold earring caught the bluish glare from the flickering fluorescents overhead.

“Another one?” Bentz glanced at the clock. Three-fifteen; he’d been on duty since 7 p.m., was about to call it a night. A fan was whirring behind him, pushing around warm air that the old air conditioner hadn’t found a way to chill.

“Dead working girl.”

The muscles in the back of Bentz’s neck tightened. “Where?”

“Around Toulouse and Decatur. Not far from Jackson Brewery.”

“Hell.” Bentz rolled back his chair.

“Her roommate came home and found her on the bed.”

“Have you called the ME?” Bentz was already reaching for his jacket.

“He’s on his way.”

“Has the scene been disturbed—the roommate, did she do anything?”

“Just scream loud enough to wake everyone in the building, but the super swears he’s closed the door and kept everyone at bay.”

Bentz frowned. “You know, this isn’t really my baby. You should call Brinkman.”

“He’s on vacation and besides he’s a dick, and that’s not meant to be a compliment.” Montoya’s dark eyes flashed. “You’ve got experience with this kind of thing.”

“That was a while back,” Bentz admitted.

“Not that long ago, and just cuz you’re not officially working homicide here, doesn’t mean jack shit, okay? Now, are you in or not?”

“Let’s roll.” Bentz was on his feet and out the door, the lethargy he’d felt seeping into his bones half an hour ago replaced by a jolt of adrenaline. Through a room filled with beat-up desks and down one flight where their boots clattered on the old metal and linoleum, they hurried into the street, where Montoya’s unmarked was parked illegally. Bentz didn’t think about the consequences. Brinkman would probably be pissed, but then he always was, and Melinda Jaskiel, in charge of the Homicide Division, had pretty much given Bentz carte blanche. Despite what happened in LA.

If she didn’t like him taking charge, she could pull him off the case and call Fred Brinkman back from Disneyland. Bentz had always believed in asking for acceptance rather than permission. More often than not it got him into trouble.

Montoya snapped on the ignition as Bentz climbed into the car. Though nearly twenty years Bentz’s junior, Montoya had earned his stripes, hurling over barriers of racism, poverty and attitude to land, at twenty-eight, as a full detective with the NOPD. He wanted to work Homicide and sometimes did a double detail just to be involved in murder investigations.

He also drove through the dark city streets as if he were at Daytona. As the police band crackled, he managed to jam a Marlboro into the side of his mouth and light up while negotiating the sharp turns and keeping the wipers at the right tempo. The misty night clung, like a shroud, to the corners of the old buildings and mingled with the steam that escaped from the manholes in the street.

Within minutes they skidded to a stop in front of the building. Montoya flicked his cigarette onto the street, where some of the beat cops were keeping a small crowd at bay and crime-scene tape was used as a shimmering yellow-and-black barricade. A couple of news vans had pulled up, and Bentz cussed the reporters under his breath. “Jesus, if they’d just give the cops a couple of hours to do their jobs before descending like vultures, it would help.”

A microphone was pushed close to his face but before the pert Asian reporter could spout her first question, Bentz
growled, “No comment,” and in tandem with Montoya took the front steps two at a time to a door tucked by the side of the deli, where a uniformed street cop let them inside.

“Third floor,” the cop muttered, and Montoya was a step ahead of him as they took the stairs to a cramped hallway that reeked of marijuana, mold and incense. People had gathered in the corridor, craning their necks, talking and smoking, all the while casting curious glances toward the door marked 3F.

Montoya flashed his badge to a cop Bentz had seen around the precinct, but then the young buck got off on showing his ID. It gave him a “rush,” the younger cop had admitted on more than one occasion. Bentz had long since given up on the authority trip. If LA had taught him anything, it was humility. There just weren’t a helluva lot of reasons to be an asshole. A cop learned more from subtlety than intimidation. Though, at Montoya’s age, Bentz, too, had thought differently.

Standing in the doorway, Bentz took one look into the tiny room and his stomach clenched. Bile rose up the back of his throat as it always did when he viewed a murder scene, but he wouldn’t admit it to a soul, and it immediately disappeared as he assumed his role as detective. He smelled stale coffee and blood, the stench of death, even in the early stages, noticeable, and heard muted conversation over a radio tuned to some soft music, an instrumental piece.

“I want to talk to the roommate,” he said to no one in particular.

“She’s in the next room—3E—pretty shook up.” The uniform, Mike O’Keefe, nodded to a door with chipped paint that was slightly ajar. Through the crack he caught a view of a pale, rail-thin woman with bags under her eyes, kinky brown hair and bad skin. Her lipstick had faded, her mascara had slid from her eyelashes to darken the natural circles under her eyes. She was smoking, swilling coffee and looked scared of her own shadow. Bentz didn’t blame her.

“Keep her there. I’ll want to talk to her.”

“You in charge?” O’Keefe asked, questions in his eyes.

“Until someone says differently.”

O’Keefe didn’t argue.

Careful to disturb nothing, Bentz walked past a small kitchen alcove where a glass pot was half-full of yesterday’s coffee and crumbs from the toaster had scattered over a counter that hadn’t seen a sponge in quite a while. The chipped sink was piled with dishes. Cobwebs hung near the ceiling light.

The living area was small, occupied almost entirely by a double bed shoved into one corner. Upon the crumpled sheets the victim lay, half-dressed in a black teddy, eyes staring glassily at the ceiling where the blades of a fan moved lazily. She was around thirty, he guessed, white, with short dark hair and little makeup. Her throat was bruised and cut with tiny nicks where blood had crusted, as if she’d been garroted by some kind of kinky noose that cut into her flesh—like barbed wire or one of those S/M dog collars turned inside out. While her legs were spread wide, her arms had been placed together, fingers interlocked, as if she were praying. The perp had taken time to pose her. Bentz’s gut tightened. “Time of death?”

“Best guess—sometime after midnight, from the looks of her. The medical examiner will know more.”

“Name?”

“Rosa Gillette according to the roommate and the super.”

“One bed? Two women?”

“They just use the place for tricks. Rosa, here, and a couple of friends. The third, a woman named, oh get this—Cindy Sweet, sometimes known as Sweet Sin—she hasn’t been located yet. They’re independents, no pimp.”

“Check this out.” Montoya pointed to a small table. Tucked beneath a candle was a hundred-dollar bill that no one had swiped. Odd, he thought. The roommate would have taken the cash or the perp would have retrieved it…then he noticed the mutilation—someone had taken a black felt pen to Ben Franklin’s eyes. It wasn’t the first time. His gut tightened.

“Look familiar?” Montoya asked, dark eyes gleaming. The kid really got off on all this cop shit.

“Yep.” Bentz nodded. There had been another murder, much like this one. The victim, a prostitute, had been strangled with some unknown noose—one that bit into her neck in a distinct pattern like this one. “The hooker near the French Quarter…A few weeks ago. Cherise Something-or-Other.”

“Cherie Bellechamps.”

“Yeah. That’s it,” Montoya said.

An odd case. A waitress and loving mother by day, a hooker at night, a woman involved in a custody suit that her
ex-husband, by default, had won. “Shit,” Bentz muttered under his breath. He’d seen enough. “Make sure nothing’s disturbed for the team. Let’s talk to the roommate.” As he crossed the hallway the ME and crime-scene team clattered up the stairs. While they entered 3E, Bentz introduced himself to the frail-looking, tense woman, who, guardedly, said her name was Denise LeBlanc and after being assured that the cops weren’t out to bust her admitted that she’d come back from a trick in the Garden District, to the apartment and found Rosa on the bed. Obviously dead. She’d started screaming, the super, Marvin Cooper, a beefy man of mixed race with few remaining teeth and a shaved head had taken charge, bolting the door and calling 911. Marvin, who occupied this studio alone, was leaning on the cabinets of the kitchen alcove, huge arms crossed over a black T-shirt while Denise chain-smoked and drank cups of coffee laced with cheap whiskey.

“I know this is tough,” Bentz said, as Denise lit a cigarette while the last was burning in an overflowing ashtray. “It’s freaky, that’s what it is. Fuckin’ freaky.” Denise’s hands were shaking, her eyes wide. “Did you notice anything missing?”

“How the hell would I know? I walked in and…and saw…Oh shit.” Her head dropped to her hands and she sobbed. “Rosa was a nice kid…She had dreams of gettin’ out of the business…oh, God…”

Bentz waited, then said, “Was anything taken? Disturbed?”

“The whole fuckin’ place was disturbed! The guy who did it is disturbed! Shit, yes, it was disturbed.” She was sobbing, and Bentz could coax little out of her.

“I just want to find out who did this to her, and you’ll have to help.”

“She’s scared out of her mind,” Marvin said gruffly. He sat next to Denise on the couch, and she curled up under one of his muscular arms. “I saw that C-note under the bedside lamp. When Denise started screamin’ I ran over there and I saw that hunderd-dollar bill all messed up. Man, whoever did this is weird, I’m tellin’ ya.”

“Did you notice anything else?” Bentz asked. “You saw the body.”

“Hell, yes, I saw her.” His lips folded in on themselves, and absently he patted Denise’s shoulder. “I saw the way that freak messed with her, leavin’ her all spread-eagled and…crap.”

“So did you see anything you thought was odd?”

“Everything, man!”

This was getting him nowhere. “What about your other roommate? Cindy. Where’s she?”

“Dunno,” Denise grumbled. “She and Rosa had a fight a week or so ago. Cindy split. Haven’t seen her since.”

“She hasn’t called?” Bentz asked. “No! Hasn’t paid her share of the rent, either. I say ‘good riddance to bad news.’ She was a real pain.”

Bentz asked more questions and didn’t learn anything new.

For the most part, Marvin’s story matched Denise’s. As the night hours crept quickly toward dawn, Montoya and Bentz interviewed the other denizens of the Riverview Apartments. They discovered that no one admitted seeing Rosa enter with any man, nor had any person noticed a lone man leave. Bentz suspected so many people came and went that unless this guy was extremely unusual, none of the tenants of the building would take note.

It was broad daylight by the time they headed back to the station. The streets were crowded with the rush of eight-to-fivers, only a few clouds drifting across the sky. Sunlight glared against the pavement and bounced off the hoods of other vehicles. Horns honked, engines thrummed and pedestrians filled the crosswalks, spilling around parked cars as New Orleans woke up. By necessity Montoya drove with a lighter foot, barely breaking the speed limit.

Once in his office, Bentz yanked off his tie and took the time to check the files of open cases. It didn’t take long to come up with the folder and computer information on Cherie Bellechamps, the prostitute who had been found a few weeks earlier. She, too, had been strangled with something causing a peculiar ligature around her neck. Cherie had been posed as well, in mock prayer in her seedy apartment. Left with a marred C-note on the bedside table, a loaded gun in the drawer, all the lights blazing and the radio playing. The crime-scene team had collected dirt, hair, semen and fingerprints. Whoever had offed Cherie hadn’t been careful not to leave other evidence.

The ex-husband, Henry Bellechamps, who lived on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain, had been the primary suspect, but with an ironclad alibi and no evidence linking him to the crime, he’d been questioned and let go. The local PD in Covington was supposed to be keeping an eye on him, but so far, nothing. Henry Bellechamps had suddenly become a model citizen.

Bentz rubbed the stubble on his chin and twisted a kink from his neck. He’d have to check the guy out, see what old Hank had been doing earlier this evening, but it was his guess that the truck driver was clean. At least as far as
the murders were concerned. And the third roommate—Cindy Sweet—he wanted to hear what she had to say, know where she’d been.

In the Bellechamps case, the crime team had collected dozens of fingerprints that had turned up some other suspects, all of whom said the last time they’d seen Cherie Bellechamps she’d been very much alive. Their alibis confirmed that they hadn’t been in the apartment at the time of death. The hair samples and blood types hadn’t matched those of the perp.

So much for a break in the case.

He glared at the computer monitor where a picture of Cherie’s dead body was displayed and posed. So similar to the dead woman tonight. The murders had to be linked. Had to. They were too eerily the same.

Wonderful, he thought sarcastically, as the fan blew hot air against the back of his neck, just what this city needs: a serial killer.
Chapter Six

“Have you met the new neighbor?” Mrs. Killingsworth asked as her dog, a tiny pug with a pushed-in snout and bulging eyes snorted and dug in one of her flower beds. “Hannibal, you stop that!” The pug ignored her and tore into a freshly turned mound of earth. “He never listens!”

A matronly woman forever working in the yard in her husband’s overalls, Mrs. Killingsworth had been pushing a load of peat moss in her wheelbarrow. She’d been headed toward the back of the house but had stopped when she’d noticed Samantha struggling to get her trash can to the curb for the next day’s pickup.

“What new neighbor?” Sam asked.

“A man around thirty-five or forty, I’d say. He moved in about a quarter of a mile down from you in the old Swanson place.” Edie Killingsworth motioned a gloved hand, indicating a spot farther down the oak-lined street. “I heard he’s leased the house for the next six months.”

“You’ve met him?”

“Oh, yes, and he’s quite something, if you get my drift.” Gray eyebrows rose over the tops of wire-rimmed glasses held in place by a chain.

The sun was intense. Bright. Edie Killingsworth’s photo gray lenses were nearly black. Hannibal gave up digging and trotted over to plop down at her feet, where he panted, showing off his long tongue.

“Something? Like what?” Sam asked, realizing what was to come as she wiped her hands on her jeans. Ever since Sam had moved in three months earlier, Edie Killingsworth had taken it as her personal mission to see Sam hooked up with a suitable candidate for marriage.

“I’d say he’s something like Harrison Ford, Tom Cruise and Clark Gable all rolled into one.”

“And Hollywood hasn’t discovered him yet?” Sam said with a grin, as Charon ducked into the thick privacy hedge that ran on either side of her property.

“Oh, he’s not an actor,” Edie was quick to correct. “He’s a writer who just happens to be handsome as the devil. And that east Texas drawl of his, my stars,” she fanned herself emphatically, as if the mere thought of this hunk caused her to melt inside.

“If you say so.”

“I know a good-looking man when I see one. And I’ll bet you dollars to doughnuts the new tenant has money, as well. Milo Swanson’s tight with a dollar, he wouldn’t rent to just anyone. You and I both know he’d charge an arm and a leg.” She nodded, the brim of her floppy hat waggling and shading her face as she reached down for the handles of her wheelbarrow. “Anyway, the man just moved in last week. You might want to go down and welcome him to the neighborhood.”

“Maybe I could whip up some Jell-O,” Sam suggested.

The older woman chuckled and waved Sam’s sarcasm away with one gloved hand. “A bottle of wine would be better.” She extracted a checkered handkerchief from one frayed pocket. “There’s a wonderful Pinot Noir from Oregon down at Zehlers—Molalla Vineyards makes it, and I guarantee it would be lots better than any flavor of Jell-O.”

“Duly noted,” Sam said, as the dog sniffed at her shoes.

“I hope so.” Edie mopped the sweat from her forehead, then picked up the handgrips of the wheelbarrow again and made her way to the back of her property. Hannibal, tail curled, trotted after her. Sam smiled. Edie Killingsworth was the one person who had welcomed her to the neighborhood only days after she’d moved in. The older woman had brought over a casserole, fruit salad and yes, a bottle of Pinot Noir in a well-used picnic basket and invited Sam to visit anytime.

Now, Sam glanced down the street to the old Swanson place, a quaint cottage in sad need of updating. A beat-up Volvo wagon sat in the drive, and boxes, broken down and flattened, had been left at the curb with a trash basket. Curious, her ankle aching, she walked past the neighboring houses, all on lots shaded by live oaks and shrubs. When she was close enough to the Swanson place, she looked past the rambling cottage to the dock and there, rising on the
swells, was a sailboat, a large sloop, its sails down. For a second she thought it looked just like the one she’d imagined she’d seen a couple of nights earlier—the one with the man at the helm in the middle of the storm.

But it had been a dark night.

Her nerves had been stretched thin.

There were lots of sailboats—thousands of them around these parts.

Even if she had seen one that night, there was absolutely no reason to think it was this one. She shaded her eyes with her hand and stared at the sleek craft as it swayed on the water. Its name, Bright Angel, had been painted near the stern, but even from a distance she noticed that some of the paint had chipped. There was a box of tools lying open on the dock as if the owner was working on the boat. So the guy drove an aging Volvo and spent his time sailing or working on his boat when he wasn’t writing whatever it was he wrote.

Maybe Mrs. Killingsworth was right.

Maybe a bottle of wine…and a Jell-O mold were in order.

“I don’t care what you say, I don’t like it.” Eleanor was reading George Hannah the riot act when Sam limped into the station the next afternoon. Soft jazz emanated from hidden speakers tucked into the neon-lit displays of Louisiana artifacts separating the reception area from the business offices and studios, but the music did nothing to soothe Eleanor. Not today. Sweeping a glance in Sam’s direction, she paused long enough in her tirade to comment.

“You got the cast off! Good. Feelin’ better?”

“Like I lost ten pounds.” Her ankle was still swollen and hurt like crazy, but at least she was cast free and only used the crutch when she really needed it. She’d had to forgo heels or even flats for running shoes, but anything was an improvement.

Eleanor, despite her foul mood, cracked a smile as the phone lines jangled. “Well, you got here just in the nick of time. I was telling George that no matter what the ratings are, I’m not interested in any kind of scandal. This guy who keeps calling you—your personal nutcase—has got to stop.”

“You heard about last night,” Sam said.

“Yeah, I heard. Tiny’s got it all on tape.” Eleanor, dressed in black, looked like the proverbial avenging angel as she paced in front of Melba’s desk. “The way I see it, we still got us a problem, here, a major one.”

In her usual unruffled manner, Melba was taking call after call while George Hannah, dressed in a natty, expensive suit, was taking his tongue-lashing like a man, hands clasped in front of him, expression respectfully solemn, head nodding slightly as if he agreed with every word spewing from Eleanor’s lips.

Melanie breezed in from outside, bringing with her the scents of expensive perfume and coffee steaming from a paper cup she’d grabbed on the way in.

“What’s weird about this is that no one else heard the conversation, none of the listeners, as he called after the show was off the air.” Melanie took a tentative sip and licked her lips. “It didn’t affect the ratings.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Eleanor took them all in with one sweeping, argue-with-me-and-you’ll-die glare. “There’s enough interest from the program the night before.”

“So we should capitalize on it,” George said, glancing at Samantha. He offered her a thousand-watt smile. George Hannah, for all his faults, was charming in his own self-aggrandizing way. And always interested in the bottom line.

Eleanor was having none of it. “Look, George, we’ve all been down that road before. You, me and Samantha. Now, I don’t want a repeat of what happened in Houston.”

Samantha froze, feeling as if every pair of eyes in the room had turned on her. For the first time the station owner looked uncomfortable.

“That is ancient history,” George said quietly, his smile fading as he, too, remembered the tragedy that had nearly destroyed Samantha’s career nine years earlier. “No reason to dredge it up now.”

Thank God, Sam thought, sensing the color had drained from her face.

“What’re y’all talkin’ about?” Melba asked as the phone jangled. “Oh, damn.” With a pissy look, she took the call. “I mean it, George,” Eleanor said, touching him on the elbow of his pin-striped suit. “We need to tread lightly. This guy sounds like a major wacko—one right out of Play Misty for Me, or Scream. It’s no joke.”

“I didn’t say it was one.” The station owner held up a hand. “I think it’s serious. Very serious.”

Eleanor’s expression said it all: she didn’t believe George for one minute. Lips pursed, she turned toward
Samantha. “Okay, so what happened with the police? You called them…right? What did they say?”

“That they were busy, that I should come in and fill out a report, that after that they’d send someone out to the house tomorrow—”

“Tomorrow?” Eleanor tossed up her hands.

“There’s something about a problem with jurisdictions because I live in Cambrai, where I received the threatening letter and a call, but I’ve also gotten calls, here, within the city limits of New Orleans. Maybe the Sheriff’s Department will have to get involved.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter which branch handles it, just make damned sure someone does! Jesus H. Christ. Tomorrow! Fine. Just…fine.” Eleanor forced herself to calm down as she moved her gaze to each and every one standing in the reception area. “In the interim we’re all gonna be real careful, you-all got me?”

“You know it,” Melanie said, smothering a smile.

“And you, don’t you get fresh with me, girl. I want you to keep track of all the calls that come in here. Make sure the computer’s got their number. Isn’t that what damned caller ID is for?”

“Yes, Mom,” Melanie said sarcastically, just as she’d done to Sam the other day. “But the call came up as an anonymous number, probably from some system that couldn’t be identified. There wasn’t anything I could do.”

“That’s the problem, you know,” Eleanor said under her breath. “I get no respect around here.”

Melba pressed the hold button. “The advertising director’s on line one, for you.” She caught Eleanor’s eye. “A Mr. Seely called, wants you to call him back.” She handed a pink slip of paper to George. “I would have directed him to your voice mail, if we had it, but since we don’t….” George lifted a dark eyebrow as Melba twisted in her chair. “And here”—she slapped a couple of notes into Samantha’s palm—“your dad phoned again.”

“We keep missing each other,” Samantha explained, noting that the second caller had been David. So he didn’t think it was over. David was like a terrier with a bone; he wouldn’t give it up for anything. And Sam was the prize. She should have been flattered, she supposed, but wasn’t.

The impromptu meeting broke up, and as Sam headed down the aorta, Melanie fell into step with her.

“What happened in Houston?” she asked in a whisper.

“It was a bad scene and a long story.” Sam didn’t want to go into it, didn’t want to remember what had happened to the scared teenager who had called in to her show asking for advice—seeking help. Dear God, the girl’s voice still haunted her dreams at night. Dark memories skated through her mind, but she wouldn’t dwell on them. Couldn’t yet face the pain, nor the guilt. “I’ll tell you about it later,” she said, knowing she was lying.

“And I’ll hold you to it.”

“Good,” she said, but knew she’d never discuss what had happened in Houston.

She made her way to her computer and read her e-mail. She sifted through the usual stuff until she came to a note from Leanne Jaquillard, reminding Sam that they had “group” at the Boucher Center the next afternoon and the center was a madhouse getting ready for the benefit. Sam typed a quick reply, saying she’d be there.

She volunteered at the center once a week, but because of her trip to Mexico, she hadn’t seen the teenage girls she counseled for the better part of a month. They were an interesting group, all in some kind of trouble, all from highly dysfunctional families, all attempting to get their lives back on track. They were some of the sweetest, most troubled and devious girls she’d ever met. Leanne was no exception. If anything she was probably the most troubled of the lot, a ringleader by nature. Street smart, undereducated, with a hard exterior that belied the frightened girl inside, Leanne Jaquillard had become the unelected leader of the group and the only member who kept in touch with Sam between sessions.

The girl was just plain needy and reminded Sam of herself at that age—the difference being, of course, that Sam had grown up in a loving, well-to-do family in Los Angeles. At any sign of trouble, Samantha’s parents had reined her in, talked with her, dealt with her rebellion and anxieties. Leanne wasn’t so lucky. Nor were the other girls in the group. Sam considered them “her girls” as she didn’t have any children of her own.

Yet, she reminded herself. Someday she would have a baby. With or without a man. She didn’t want to think that time was running out. She was only thirty-six and these days women had babies well into their forties, but the truth of the matter was her biological clock was ticking so loudly that at times she couldn’t hear anything else.

Her ex-husband hadn’t wanted children, but David Ross had. That had been one of his most attractive attributes, one of the reasons she’d continued to see him, to try and force herself to fall in love with him.

But it hadn’t happened.
And it never would.

David Ross wasn’t the man for her, and the disheartening thought was she was beginning to feel no man was.

Oh, for God’s sake, Sam, quit wallowing and don’t give up hope. You should take some of that advice you hand out so readily every night on the airwaves. She gave herself a swift mental kick and told herself she was lucky she hadn’t made the mistake of marrying David. Damned lucky.

Ty Wheeler leaned back in his chair, the heel of one boot propped on the expansive desk, ice melting in his short glass. A bottle of Irish whiskey was uncapped nearby and his old dog was lying on the rug, close enough that Ty could reach down and scratch the shepherd behind his ears. A single banker’s lamp offered dim illumination through its green shade in the shadowy cottage.

Listening to the radio, Ty sipped his drink and heard Dr. Samantha Leeds’s voice as she talked with the lonely people who called her in the middle of the night. His lips twisted. Poor sods. They all hoped she could solve some of their problems, or, failing that, allow them a connection to her.

Such as it was.

He stared through the open French doors to the lake beyond. Insects buzzed through the night, and the water lapped softly. A breeze lifted the curtains and offered some relief from the heat, but Ty didn’t much notice. His concentration was centered on the woman’s low, sexy voice wafting through the speakers of his radio.

She was talking about commitment and fidelity—favorite topics with the late-night crowd, and he considered calling the number she kept reeling off, asking her a question or two that was on his mind.

“Hello…who’s this?” she asked, and he glanced down to the desk where a publicity shot of the woman stared up at him. Dark, near-auburn, red hair, bright green eyes, perfect porcelain skin stretched over cheekbones most women would kill for. Her mouth was wide and sensual, her smile fresh, not seeming posed…but then for all he knew the shot could have been computer enhanced, airbrushed and whatever the hell else professional photographers did to make their subjects appear more good-looking than God had intended.

“Linda,” a voice raspy from years of cigarettes identified the caller.

“Hi, Linda, did you have a comment or a question?” Samantha’s voice. Sultry as a hot Delta night.

“An observation.”

“Observe away.”

Ty imagined her smiling, white teeth flashing behind full lips. In his mind’s eye he saw her eyes, bright with an intellect and depth that she often hid, preferring to disguise that side of her. But it was there. He could feel it. Hear it in the undertones of her words, sense it in her throaty chuckle, knew that it lurked just beneath the surface. There were incidents where she’d exposed herself, of course. It was her profession to probe deeply and therefore give up a little of herself, but those moments were rare in this medium of radio, and what she offered to her listeners was a kind voice, keen intelligence and startling wit, but only rarely did she bare her soul.

Not that it mattered. Not that he cared, he reminded himself. She was just part of his research; an integral part.

“I’m thinking monogamy is societal and that since we’re basically all animals, anyway, monogamy is a fallacy.”

“Is this your personal experience, or your comment on our lifestyle?” Sam inquired, egging the caller on subtly.

“Both I guess.” Linda cleared her throat.

“Do you want to expand on that?”

“I’m just saying it as it is.”

“Are you? Does anyone else want to comment on Linda’s observation. Linda, would you mind staying on the line?” Dr. Sam asked, obviously searching for some kind of controversy, the kind of thing that caused the audience to react and listen, the true reason George Hannah had hired her and put her on the air. Ty knew enough about Hannah to realize the guy didn’t give a good goddamn about the listeners— only about the numbers so that he could sell advertising space. George Hannah had learned about audience reaction to Samantha Leeds in Houston, and he was capitalizing on it. So was Eleanor Cavalier, though she was more subtle.

“Sure, I’ll hang on. No problem…” Linda was saying.

“Hello, this is Dr. Sam.”

“And this here is Mandy. Linda’s got it all wrong. Monogamy is the Lord’s will and if she doesn’t believe that she should start reading her Bible! She could start with the Ten Commandments!”
“Are you married, Mandy?”

“You bet I am. Fifteen years. Carl and me, we was high school sweethearts. We got ourselves three sons, and we’ve had our ups and downs, but we stick together. We go to church every Sunday and—”

Absently Ty stroked his dog’s broad head as he concentrated on the conversation playing through his speakers.

Dr. Sam spoke to a few more listeners and the argument about fidelity and marriage raged. He glanced at the phone, a shiny rotary relic from another century that had come with the house and sipped his whiskey slowly, letting it roll over his tongue. On the desk in front of him were dozens of notes, scattered pages filled with disjointed thoughts, facts that didn’t link together and questions circled over and over again as he’d tried to come up with answers, to write a story that had been on his mind for a long, long time. Ever since he’d been a cop in Houston.

Balanced on a corner of Milo Swanson’s desk, Ty’s laptop glowed, waiting for him to transcribe more of his notes onto the screen.

But the words hadn’t come tonight, and he knew why. He was blocked—that damned writer’s disease that assailed without any glimmer of forewarning.

There was only one way to break it.

He had to meet the good doctor face-to-face.
Chapter Seven

“I want you to check out what’s happening to Samantha Leeds.” Melinda Jaskiel handed Rick Bentz the report. “She’s a nighttime DJ—radio shrink, and she thinks she’s being harassed.”

“I’ve heard of her,” Bentz admitted. “My kid listens to her sometimes.” He was seated at his desk, chewing an old wad of Nicorette gum and wishing he could have a smoke. And a shot of Jack Daniel’s…yeah, that would be the ticket. But he wouldn’t.

“Dr. Sam, as she calls herself, doesn’t live in the city, has one of those nice places up on the lake in Cambrai. When this started a couple of days ago, she called the local PD. They were kind enough to fax over a copy of their report, and the officers in charge seem more than happy to have someone from the city help them out.”

He skimmed the pages, and Melinda, folding her arms across her chest leaned a hip against his desk. “I’d like to keep a lid on this one,” she said. “The woman’s a quasi celebrity around here. No reason to let the press get wind of it yet. They’re already sniffing around, hoping we’ve got a serial murderer on the streets. Let’s not give them anything else to stir up the public.”

Bentz wasn’t about to argue. His post was tentative at best in the department, and he was only helping out with homicide, mainly because of Melinda. He wasn’t going to blow it. He’d do whatever she asked. His duties included everything from burglary and arson to domestic violence. And he agreed with her one hundred percent about keeping the Dr. Sam story quiet. The last thing they needed was copycats calling up the station. There would probably be enough of those as there was just from her audience.

“I’ll check it out,” he said, and shoved the Rosa Gillette file aside. He’d spent the last few hours going over the autopsy report and evidence on the prostitute’s murder. She glanced down at his notes. “Don’t give up on the murders,” she said, “but do check out Samantha Leeds. It looks like she’s got herself a bona fide nutcase. I just want to make sure he’s not dangerous.” “You got it,” he said, ignoring the computer screen where pictures of the two dead women, Rosa Gillette and Cherie Bellechamps, flickered side by side.

“I know you’d rather work on this,” she said, motioning to the autopsy reports. “And I don’t blame you. But we’ve got other things to worry about as well, and the Homicide team can handle it.”

He lifted a disbelieving eyebrow. He had more experience than the other men, but didn’t say it. He couldn’t. Because once before he’d given it all up.

“Brinkman will be back soon.” Melinda peered at him through rimless glasses. Smart, savvy, forever dressed in a suit, her makeup and short hair always perfect, she was his direct superior, but never threw her weight around. She didn’t mention that without her he wouldn’t have gotten the job here in New Orleans; they both knew it. “Look, Rick, I know you’re overworked, overwrought and underpaid, but we’re short-staffed with vacations and officers out sick. I understand that you don’t like being shuffled from one area to the other, but until your next review, that’s just the way it is.” She offered him one of her infrequent smiles. “Besides, once upon a time you told me you didn’t want to work murder investigations any longer.”

“Maybe I changed my mind.”

“I hope so. In the meantime, I’d like you to talk to Samantha Leeds.”

It wasn’t a request; it was an order. He understood. But it didn’t mean he had to like it. Not when there was more important work to do—a killer on the loose.

“Montoya can help you with the legwork.”

He nodded. “You owe me one.”

“And you owe me a dozen. Payback time.”

“I thought I was past all that.” But he knew he never would be. The past had a way of hanging on, like a bad smell. You just couldn’t wash it off. No matter how hard you scrubbed. He didn’t just owe Melinda his job, but also life as he knew it.

“Okay, look,” she said, tilting her head to one side and studying him. “I’ll pass your good intentions and deeds on to the powers that be. It’ll make points.”
Bentz leaned back in his chair and offered her a half smile. “And here I thought you were the powers that be. The way people talk I figured you were some kind of goddess around here.”

Behind the fashionable lenses her eyes twinkled. She pointed a finger straight at his chest. “God. I’m God. All-powerful and without gender. It would behoove you to remember that.”

He gave her the once-over. Beneath her navy suit, she hid a toned, fit body. Nice chest, small waist and long legs. “The without gender part might be hard to forget.”

“Watch it. That could be construed as sexual harassment these days.”

“My ass. You’re the boss.”

“Don’t forget it.” His phone rang, and she added, “Fill me in once you talk to Ms. Leeds, okay?”

“As I said before, ‘you owe me.’”

“And hell’s about to freeze over.”

She walked away, and Bentz snagged the receiver from its cradle. “Rick Bentz.”

“Montoya,” his partner replied, and from the buzzy connection Bentz guessed the younger detective was talking on his cell phone while driving his unmarked. Probably pushing the speed limit. “Guess what? I got a call from Marvin Cooper, you remember him over at the Riverview Apartments where we found the last victim—the Gillette woman?”

“Yep.” Bentz leaned back in his chair until it groaned in protest.

“So he tells me that Denise, the roommate, she’s asked about Rosa’s ankle bracelet. Says she always wore one, it was a gift or something. So I hightailed it over to the apartment building and Marvin tracks down Denise and she tells me about the gold bracelet.”

Bentz rolled his chair back to his desk and, cradling the phone between his shoulder and ear, searched through the reports on Rosa Gillette. “She wasn’t wearing any jewelry,” he said into the mouthpiece as he pulled up the files on Rosa Gillette and Cherie Bellechamps. “Neither was the first one.” He double-checked the photos flickering on his computer.

“Maybe it’s nothing,” Montoya said. “But maybe not. Denise thinks maybe the third hooker, Cindy Sweet, might have ripped Rosa off. I don’t think so.”

“Our perp wouldn’t be the first guy to take home a little souvenir.” Rick zoomed in on the images of the victims, Rosa’s ankles, then both women’s entire bodies. Nope. No jewelry visible. So the killer was taking trophies. Not a surprise.

“Anything else I oughtta know? Shit!” There was a blast of a car horn over the crackle of the cell phone. “Some idiot nearly pulled into my lane. Christ, doesn’t anyone know how to drive in this town?”

“Only you, Montoya, only you. We’ll talk later.” Bentz frowned down at the report Melinda had handed him. “I’ve got to go out for a while. Jaskiel asked me personally to look in on a radio DJ who’s getting threatening calls.”

“Like you don’t have enough to do.”

“Exactly.” He hung up, spit out his tasteless gum, hankered for a cigarette and grabbed his jacket.

Sam ran her fingers over the bindings of the books she’d held on to since college. Though she hadn’t looked at the tomes in years, she kept them on the bottom shelf of her bookcase in the den, just in case. She was certain she had a copy of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* from some required English literature course she’d had to take during her years at Tulane University. “I know it’s here,” she muttered to Charon as he hopped onto her desk. Then she saw it. “Aha!” Smiling, she pulled out the hardback and tucked it under her arm. “Voilà. Come on, you, let’s go down to the dock for a little R&R.”

She stashed the receiver to her cordless phone, the book, a can of Diet Coke and her sunglasses in a canvas bag that was already bulging from her beach towel, then, wincing against the pain in her ankle, walked outside and down a brick path to the dock. The sun was high, sending rays of light glancing over the water. Dozens of boats skimmed the lake’s surface and water-skiers and fishermen were out in abundance.

Sam loved it here; the house had already started to feel like home. Though David had argued relentlessly that she could have had as much success in Houston, she loved New Orleans and this spot that she called home. For the first six months she’d lived in an apartment closer to the heart of the city. Then she’d found this cottage and fallen in love with it. Despite its morbid history. David had really blown a gasket over that one—that she’d actually bought a place
and put down roots. In a house where a murder had been committed.

A solved murder she told herself, a crime of passion.

She settled into a chaise under the table umbrella, popped her can of soda and flipped open the pages of the musty-smelling book. Maybe this was a long shot; maybe “John’s” calls had nothing to do with Milton’s epic, but she couldn’t ignore the feeling that there was some connection, if only a feeble one.

Pelicans and seagulls flew overhead, and a jet cut across the clear blue sky as Sam skimmed the text wherein Satan and his army have been thrown into hell and the fiery lake.

“It is ‘Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven,’” she whispered, reading Satan’s words from the text.

“Now, there’s a line.” She glanced at the cat stalking a butterfly that flitted out of his reach over the water. “Yeah, I know. I’m probably waaaay off base here.” Quickly scanning the pages, she wondered if she’d misinterpreted the caller’s intent when he’d phoned.

She lost herself in the words as she sipped her drink while basking in the warmth of the sun. Bees hummed, a lawn mower chewed blades of grass somewhere down the street and Mrs. Killingsworth’s pug started barking wildly, probably at a squirrel or a kid on a bike. A boat engine coughed, echoing across the water, sputtering and gasping. Sam didn’t pay any attention. Just kept reading, her mind conjuring up the images Milton had scribed over three hundred years earlier.

The sun had lowered considerably when she looked up and saw the sailboat; not just any sailboat, but the same sloop she’d seen docked at Milo Swanson’s house, the very boat she’d thought had been gliding the waters late at night, though the sails were now down and the boat was being propelled by an engine that hesitated and died, only to cough and start up again.

A man was straining at the wheel, guiding the sloop closer to the dock and for once, it seemed, Mrs. Killingsworth was right. Even from a distance, she could tell he was fit, strong, and good-looking. His shirt was open, flapped in the wind and offered a view of a broad, tanned chest gleaming in the sunlight. Cut-off jeans hung from his hips, fraying over athletic thighs that strained as he kept his footing. His body glistened with sweat. Thick, dark hair blew across a high, tanned forehead. Dark glasses covered his eyes, and sitting at his feet, nose to the wind, was a dog, some kind of German shepherd mix, she guessed.

With difficulty he guided the dying craft into Sam’s slip, then threw his line over a mooring and tied up. As if he knew her. As if it was his right. The engine gave up a final growl, then died.

Sam straightened in the chair and set her book aside as she studied an angled face with strong cheekbones and a square jaw covered with a couple of day’s worth of shadow. Nope. She didn’t recognize him as he scrambled over the deck and started working on the engine. He didn’t so much as cast a glance her way.

She pushed herself upright and got to her feet. “Can I help you?”

No response. He was too engrossed in his work.

“Hello?” She walked along the dock. The dog gave off a sharp bark and finally he glanced over his shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said, still working on the engine. “Got a problem here. Thought I could make it home, but…oh, damn.” He slanted her a self-deprecating grin, then turned his attention to the engine. “This damned thing decided to give up the ghost.”

“Can I help?”

He stared at her from behind dark glasses anchored over a slightly crooked nose. “You a mechanic?”

“I have been on a boat before.”

He considered, looked her over once again. “Sure, come aboard. But it’s not just the engine. The damned keel’s been giving me trouble, and the sails are ripped. I shouldn’t have taken her out today.” Frustration lined his forehead where thick, coffee-colored hair caught in the breeze. He straightened and slapped the boom with an open palm. “I knew better.”

Barefooted, she climbed carefully onto the deck, wincing just a bit when she put all her weight on her bad ankle. “I’m Samantha,” she said. “Samantha Leeds.”

“Ty Wheeler. I live right around that point.” He gestured to the small jetty of land, then squatted near the engine and fiddled with a wire or two. Satisfied, he tried the ignition. It ground. The engine sputtered. Wound down pitifully. Ty swore under his breath. “Look, it’s no use. Probably the fuel line. I need to run to the house and grab some more tools.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead and scowled up at the boat. “She’s not mine, not yet. I’m just trying her out.” He shook his head. “Now I know why she’s such a bargain. Bright Angel, my ass. More like
Satan’s Revenge. Maybe I’ll rename her if I decide to buy.”

Sam didn’t move a muscle. She couldn’t breathe for a second and told herself she was overreacting. It was a coincidence he’d mentioned Satan, that was all. So she was skimming through the pages of Paradise Lost, so what? There was nothing to it. Nothing.

He checked his watch, then the lowering sun. “Do you mind if I leave her here? I’ll run down and get my tools. I live just down the street, about half a mile.” He checked his watch and frowned. “Damn it all.” Glancing up at her again, he said, “I really thought I could make it back to my dock, but she”—he glared at the engine—“had other ideas. I’ll try to get back today, but, it might be tomorrow. I’ve got to be somewhere in an hour.”

“I suppose that would be okay,” Sam said, and before she could second-guess herself he was out of the boat, dog at his heels, marching toward the house.

Shading her eyes, she watched as he crossed the broad expanse of lawn, passed under one of the shade trees, rounded the porch and headed for the gate near the front of the house, as if he’d known exactly where it was.

Though that wasn’t such a big leap. The gate had to be on one side of the house or the other. He had a 50 percent chance of figuring it out. He’d just gotten lucky.

She settled into her deck chair again and opened the book, but she couldn’t concentrate and soon she heard Hannibal barking madly, then thought she heard a car pull into the drive over the rise of the wind. Slamming the book shut, she got up too quickly, felt a pain in her left ankle and muttered to herself at her own stupidity.

By the time she reached the back porch, she heard the soft peal of her doorbell and she flew through the rooms yelling, “I’m coming.” At the door she looked through the peephole and saw a tall, barrel-chested man wearing a tan jacket. His hands were jammed into his pockets and he was chewing gum as if his life depended on it. Sam opened the door as far as the chain lock would allow.

“What can I do for you?”

“Samantha Leeds?”

“Yes.”

“Rick Bentz, New Orleans Police Department.” He flipped open a black wallet that displayed his badge and ID. Gray eyes drilled into hers. “You filed a report down at the station. This is a follow-up call.”

Everything looked in order, the picture on his ID matched the face staring sternly at her, so Sam unlocked the chain and opened the door. Bentz walked in, and Sam sensed the man was keyed up. “Let’s go over what happened,” he suggested. “We can start with”—he glanced down at his notes—“the call you got at the station and, it says here you got a threatening letter here at the house. You called the local police about it.”

“And the message left on my machine while I was on vacation. This way.” She guided him into the den, handed him a copy of the letter and marred photograph, then changed tapes in her answering machine. “These are both copies. The originals are with the Cambrai police.”

“Good.”

Sam played the message that had haunted her for nearly a week.

Bentz listened hard as he stared at the publicity photo with her eyes cut out.

“I know what you did, and you’re not going to get away with it. You’re going to have to pay for your sins.” The voice she’d become so familiar with oozed through the room, filling the corners, scraping her mind.

“What sins?” Bentz asked, and a glimmer of interest sparked in his eyes as he scanned the room, taking stock, she supposed, of her small library and equipment.

“I don’t know.” Sam was honest. “I can’t figure it out.”

“And the calls to the radio station, they were about the same topic—sin?” he asked, his gaze moving over the desk and bookcase as if he were studying her den to get a better picture of who she was.

“Yes. He, um, he called himself John, told me that he knew me, that he was, and I quote, ‘my John.’ When I said I knew lots of them, he insinuated that I’d been with a lot of men and he, um, he called me a slut. I cut him off.”

“Have you ever dated or been involved with a John?”

“I’ve thought about that,” she said. “Sure. It’s a common enough name. I think I went out with John Petri in high school and a guy named John…oh, God, I don’t remember his last name in college but that’s about it. Neither one of them were more than a couple of dates and nothing happened. I was a kid, and so were they.”
“Okay, so go on. He called again?”

“Yes. The other night…it’s on tape, but it was after the show. He called in and Tiny, he’s the technician that was setting up for the next prerecorded show, took the call. The caller asked for me, said he was my ‘John’ and that he hadn’t called in earlier during the show because he’d been busy and that what had happened was my fault.”

“What had happened?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “It was eerie and sounded sinister, but then I was jumpy. I thought I might come home and find my house burned down or ransacked or something, but…everything here was as I left it.”

“You’re sure it was the same guy who called here?”

“Positive. But my number’s unlisted.”

Bentz scowled down at the photo as he leaned against a corner of her desk. “This is a publicity shot. Right? There were dozens of ‘em made. Handed out.”

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“And this is a copy from one of those.”

She swallowed hard. “I…I assume that he must have an original.”

“Why do you think he cut out your eyes?” he asked, his eyes thinning.

“To scare the hell out of me,” she said, “and, for the record, it’s working.”

“Did he ever mention your eyes or something you saw when he called?”

“No…not that I remember.”

“I’ll need a copy of the tapes from your program.”

“I’ll get them to you.”

“I’ll get the original letter, picture and message tape from Cambrai.”

“Fine.”

“But you don’t mind if I take these until I see the originals?”

“No.”

Carefully he placed the letter, envelope and picture in a plastic bag, then asked if he could look through the house. What he was looking for, she wasn’t certain, but she gave him the tour and they ended up in the living room as dusk was beginning to settle outside. She turned on the Tiffany lamp near the window and listened to the sound of crickets and mosquitoes as he sat on the couch and she took a chair on the other side of the coffee table. The paddle fan turned slowly overhead.

“Just tell me what happened, from the beginning,” Bentz said as he placed a pocket recorder on the glass top of the table.

“I already told the officer at the station.”

“I know, but I’d like to hear it firsthand.”

“Fine. Okay. Well.” She rubbed her hands over her knees. “It all started when I got back from Mexico…” She launched into her tale, told him about losing her ID in the boating accident in Mexico, again explained about the letter she received, the threatening call on her answering machine and the phone calls to the station. She mentioned that she’d thought someone had been watching her house, then dismissed it as a case of nerves. All the while Bentz wrote in a small notepad and recorded what she was saying.

“You ever get threats like this before?”

“Nothing so personal,” she said. “There are always crank calls. It comes with the territory, but most of them are screened. Once in a while somebody gets through.”

“Do you know anyone who would want to hurt you, or just scare you?”

“No,” she said, though David’s image flashed through her mind.

“What about your family?”

“I don’t have much,” she admitted. “My father’s a retired insurance broker and lives in LA in the house where I grew up. My mother passed away and my brother…well, he disappeared a long time ago. About ten years, just around the time Mom died. I…I, uh, haven’t heard from him in years. For all I know, he could be dead, too.” She linked her fingers and felt the same deep sadness she always did when she thought of Peter. As children they’d been close, as adolescents, they’d drifted farther and farther apart and as adults they’d had nothing in common.
“Names?”
“What? Oh, Dad’s is Bill, er, William Matheson and my brother is Peter, Peter William. My dad doesn’t have a middle name.”

“Address?”
She gave it to him from memory and explained that she had friends scattered all over the country, and a couple of cousins in the Bay Area near San Mateo. Other than that, she had no family to speak of.

“You were married?”
Sam nodded. “Yes. It was a long time ago.”

He lifted his eyebrows, encouraging her to continue. “I was a freshman at Tulane University when I met Jeremy.”

“Jeremy Leeds?”
“Dr. Jeremy Leeds. He was a professor. My professor. He taught, er, teaches philosophy.” And she’d been a fool to fall for him, a naive girl who’d been enamored by an unconventional teacher—handsome, a rogue, one with a brilliant mind and a sexy smile.

“He’s still there? At Tulane?” Bentz asked, looking up from his notes.
“As far as I know.” She met the questions in the detective’s eyes. “Jeremy and I don’t talk. Haven’t for years. We didn’t have children, and he remarried soon after our divorce. Other than that, I don’t know anything about him.”

“But you live in the same town,” Bentz pointed out.
“City. New Orleans is pretty big, and I left for a while. Lived in Houston.”

“Were you married then?”
“Yes, but the marriage was falling apart. I thought it might just be a separation, but it turned out differently. I stayed. We split up.” She glanced out the window, didn’t want to think about those years.

“You haven’t married since?”
“No.” She shook her head and leaned back against the cushions. Glancing at the clock near the archway leading to the kitchen, she realized Ty had left over an hour earlier. He’d said he might be back today or tomorrow. She crossed her fingers and hoped he’d be delayed because she didn’t really know how she could explain him to the policeman.

“Been involved with anyone lately?” Bentz was asking, and Sam was brought back to the inquisition.

Here we go, she thought, and realized that one of the reasons she hadn’t wanted to contact the police was because she didn’t want to involve David. “Not currently, no, but I have had a few boyfriends since I was married.”

“Anyone named John?”
“Just the ones I told you about. Years ago. No one since.”

He scratched another note as Charon wandered into the dining room from the kitchen, a black shadow that hid beneath the table and peered through the legs of the chairs.

“The cat belongs to you?”
“Yes. Three years now.”

“And the boat?” He looked through the open French doors and past the few trees to the dock where Ty’s sloop was moored, the masts visible in the gathering darkness.

“No. That’s a friend’s…well, actually a neighbor’s.” She explained, and the cop stopped writing, just stared at her as if she’d announced she’d just flown in from Jupiter.

“So he’s a stranger?”
“Well, yes, but…He said he’d come back for the boat later today or possibly tomorrow. He just lives down the street and had some trouble with the sails and his engine.”

Bentz frowned. Lines creased his forehead. “Listen, let me give you some advice, okay? Lock your doors, use your alarm system, don’t go out alone and don’t acquaint yourself with strangers. Even neighbors.” He ran stiff fingers through his hair, pushing brown curls off his forehead. He seemed about to say more, as if he intended to give her a lecture, then thought better of it. “Okay, you get the picture. Now, do you have anyone who would consider you an enemy?”

“‘Enemy’ is a pretty harsh term.”
He shrugged.
“The only person I can think of is Trish LaBelle, and I wouldn’t call her an enemy, more of a rival. She works over at WNAB, hosts a show similar to mine. There’s been talk of some kind of feud between us, but generally we just avoid each other when we’re at the same social or charity function. I wouldn’t really call her an enemy, and I don’t think she’s behind anything like this. In fact, it wouldn’t make much sense because though the calls scare the hell out of me, they increase ratings. Listeners are intrigued with it. It’s the same mentality as a crowd gathering around a building that’s on fire, or other motorists rubbernecking at an accident scene.”

“So you’re thinking that it would make more sense for someone at the station to be behind it, to try and boost ratings?”

“No way! That’s…that’s sick. Who would terrorize an employee to improve the listenership?”

“You tell me.”

“It’s not what I was thinking. It just makes more sense than blaming Trish.”

He didn’t comment, but asked, “Any other people jealous of you? Want your job? Or hold a grudge against you?”

Again, she thought of David. Damn, why did she feel that she had to protect him? “Not that I know of. Nothing recent.”

“What about the guy on the desk?” Bentz asked, as if he could read her thoughts. “You said you weren’t dating anyone, but you’ve got some guy’s picture near the computer and it’s not the same guy in the graduation shot. That one’s your brother, right?”

“Yes. Peter. The other one is a man I was dating, David Ross.”

“But you broke it off? Or did he?”

“It was my idea not to see each other anymore.”

“He go along with that?” Clearly Bentz was skeptical.

“He had to,” she said bluntly.

Bentz rubbed his chin. “But he didn’t like it.”

“No. He thinks, er, thought we should get married.”

“You were engaged?”

“No.”

“He give you a ring?”

She felt her cheeks burn. “He tried. Last Christmas. But…I couldn’t accept it.”

“So that’s when you told him it was over?”

“That’s when it started falling apart. I’d dated him for about five or six months, then decided to take the job here, in New Orleans. George Hannah had left the station in Houston and moved to New Orleans a few years ago, then convinced Eleanor, my boss, to work for him at WSLJ. It was George’s idea to resurrect the Dr. Sam show here and Eleanor agreed. Eleanor had to do some fast talking for me to join on but I figured it was time.”

“To move from Houston?”

“And to get behind the mike again. I’d given it up nine years ago, there was…a difficult incident at the station and I went into private practice for a few years, but Eleanor convinced me that I belonged in radio and the truth was that I missed it, I felt that I helped a lot of people.”

“But you gave it up for a while.”

“Maybe that was a mistake,” she admitted. “I let one bad incident sway me and I decided to give it another shot. It was time for a change in my life and I knew someone who would take over my practice, that my patients would be in good hands.” That was glossing over her rationale for leaving radio nine years ago, but she saw no reason to go into the details of that horrid time in her life right now.


“Hardly.” She still remembered the pinch of David’s lips when she’d told him her decision. His shock. It was almost as if he thought she was betraying him. “He didn’t like the idea at all, but my mind was made up, so I moved here last October and he tried to give me the ring at Christmas and then we just saw less and less of each other. Until Mexico. He bought the trip as a surprise, and I decided to go, just to see if I’d made a mistake by trying to break it off.”
“Had you?”

“No.”

“But you still keep his picture.”

Sam sighed. “Yeah, I know. It’s not that I don’t like him. I just don’t think we’re right for each other.” She caught herself and stiffened her shoulders. “I don’t think we need to get into the ins and outs of my love life.”

“Unless he’s the caller.”

“I said, it’s not him,” she reminded him, bristling. “I’d recognize his voice.”

Bentz didn’t let up. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“About a week ago,” she admitted, as Charon hopped into her lap. “In Mexico.”

“On that surprise trip?” Was there just a hint of judgment in his tone?

“Yes. I met him in Mazatlán…he thought it was going to be romantic, and as I said I just wanted to be sure I hadn’t made a mistake.” She read the questions in his eyes. “Believe me, I hadn’t. If I wasn’t sure before, I am now.”

“You didn’t mention him before.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I know, but he couldn’t have left the message or sent the letter; it was postmarked here, in New Orleans, and he was in Mexico. It wasn’t his voice on the tape. I would have recognized it, if it was. He didn’t call in, Detective.”

Bentz’s jaw slid to the side as if he didn’t believe a word she was feeding him. “I’m out here because you filed a report,” he said slowly, as if to a stubborn child. “I expect your cooperation.”

“But you’re holding back,” he accused, staring at her so intently she wanted to squirm.

“I just don’t want a big scandal, okay? I’m a celebrity of sorts around these parts, but because I’m on the radio, the general public doesn’t really know what I look like. I have some anonymity, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

He chewed on that for a while, nodded, as if he understood, and finally snapped his notebook shut, clicked off the recorder and pocketed both. “I think this about covers it, but I’ll want copies of his calls to the station and I’ll check on the phone records and get back to you.” He pushed up from the couch.

“Thanks.”

“You might want to keep a low profile.”

She nearly laughed out loud. “That could be tricky, Detective. I am a radio personality and though most people don’t recognize me on the street, some do. I’m involved in a lot of charity work. In fact the station’s hosting a big event soon for the Boucher Center. I’ll be there. I can’t exactly hole up and hide.”

“You should consider it.”

She shook her head. “We both know I can’t. Why don’t you just catch the guy.”

“We will, but in the meantime”—he glanced at the cat purring contentedly on her lap—“you might consider trading in kitty for a rottweiler or a Doberman. You know, a mean sumbitch.”

“Charon’s pretty tough,” she said, as the cat stretched and started licking himself as if to prove her wrong.

The hint of a smile touched the gruff man’s lips. “That’s good to know,” he said as she gently shoved Charon aside and walked Bentz to the door. “The department could save a lot of money by using alley cats rather than trained dogs. I’ll write up a report for the commissioner. I’m sure he’ll be in touch with the K-9 Division.”

“Glad to be of help,” she quipped as she walked him to the door.

He paused on the porch, his light mood disappearing as he stepped into the thickening twilight. “Just remember to lock your door. The caller might only be a prankster, but I doubt it. Phoning into a radio-station talk show is one thing, sending this”—he lifted the plastic bag containing her mutilated publicity picture—“is another. Whoever did this is a real sicko, and he wants to scare the life out of you.”

“I know,” she said as she shut the door and threw the new dead bolt, grateful that she’d had her locks changed and the alarm system jury-rigged. The system was old and faulty, and the alarm company had promised to install a new one “in a couple of weeks.” In the meantime she was stuck with this dinosaur.

She thought of everything that happened to her in the past few days and tried to convince herself that the person terrorizing her wasn’t out to harm her, but the truth of the matter was she was scared to death.
“...so I never see my old man,” Anisha said with a frown. She was one of the six girls who had shown up for the session and was slumped in an old easy chair, her ankles crossed, her expression dark. Nervously, she twirled a lock of curly black hair around her finger. “I guess I shouldn’t expect to.”

“Have you tried to contact him?”

“In jail?” Anisha snorted through her nose. “Why should I?” Her smile was far too cynical for her fifteen years. “I got me a stepdaddy. My third one.”

And so it went. Six troubled girls, all with problems, all with chips the size of oil tankers on their slim shoulders, all to varying degrees, trying to get their young acts together.

The session was housed in an old camel-backed shotgun house not far from Armstrong Park. It was early evening, the sun was just beginning to set. The small room was hot, the jalousie blinds half-open, allowing in the barest of breezes and the sounds of traffic from Rampart Street. The back of Sam’s blouse was sticking to her despite the fan rotating from a table in the corner.

The girls were flopped on old chairs and a couch, talking about getting back into school, or staying in, or taking night classes as some of the teenagers had babies of their own. Some brought up the benefit for the center; they were excited, they’d been asked to attend and were looking forward to it. But Leanne, uncharacteristically quiet, sat next to Samantha and brooded, as if guarding a secret, though Sam suspected it was Leanne’s way of punishing Sam for being gone for nearly three weeks.

“Is anything bothering you?” she asked the girl at a lull in the session. “Something you want to talk about?”

Leanne lifted a shoulder. She was a pretty girl with porcelain white skin, brown hair and green eyes. Right now, she was playing with the fronds of a potted fern, trying to show disinterest.

“She’s just mad cuz her and Jay broke up,” Renee, a heavyset black girl accused around a wad of gum.

“That’s not it,” Leanne shot back, but quit fiddling with the plant long enough to skewer her friend with a harsh glare. A telltale blush crept up the back of her neck to ears studded with half a dozen pieces of metal.

“She’s usin’ again,” Renee added, lifting a dark, knowing eyebrow.

“Are you?”

“Just when I split with Jay. And it was my idea.” Leanne inched up her chin insolently. “He tried to control me.”

“Cuz he didn’t want you usin’ any of that shit,” Renee said.

“Ain’t no one controls me.”

“Yeah, right,” Renee scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Sam held up a hand. “Let’s hear what Leanne has to say.”

“I don’t want to say nothin’,” the girl insisted, crossing her thin arms under her breasts and looking pointedly away from Sam. She shot Renee another look that was guaranteed to kill. “And you just shut up. It ain’t none of your business.”

“Maybe we should all think about that,” Sam cut in, diffusing the argument before it exploded out of control. “We’ll discuss it next time. Everyone think about boundaries. When do you give a friend space? When do you step in? What are the consequences? Okay?”

Grumbling, the girls shuffled to their collective feet.

“I’ll see you all next week, and if anyone runs into Collette, ask her to join.”

“Collette moved,” Renee said. “Up ta Tampa.”

This was news to Sam. All the girls were supposed to tell her if there was a change in their living arrangements, though few ever did.

Talking among themselves, the girls picked up their books, backpacks and purses, then clambered down the stairs, platform shoes stomping on the bare wood. Leanne hung back, ostracized for the moment by Renee, who, whenever Leanne was in disfavor, became the leader. Renee smiled at Sam, then sent Leanne a smug look.
“I hate that fat bitch,” Leanne grumbled.
“Can you rephrase that.”
“Treat that fat, fuckin’ bitch.”
“That’s not what I mean.”
“I know what you mean.” Leanne scowled as she snagged her purse from the couch. “But I hate her.”
“Are you angry with her or yourself?”
Leanne started for the door. “I don’t need any of this shit.”
“Yeah, I think you do.”
“But Renee’s a pig.” The girl whirled and faced Sam again. “She’s always stickin’ her nose in where it don’t belong. Rootin’ around, like my granddaddy’s old sow out in the field.” She made snorting noises to accentuate her point.
“Maybe she’s trying to be a friend,” Sam suggested.
“A friend? Renee Harp don’t know the meanin’ of the word. She’d turn on me like that.” Leanne snapped her fingers. “Besides, it ain’t none of her business. What goes on between me and Jay that’s our shit.”
“Do you want to talk about it?”
“Time’s up, ain’t it?”
Sam stuffed her notes into her briefcase. “We can talk on the way out.”
“It ain’t no big deal.” Green eyes studied the edge of the carpet, where fringe covered polished wood. There was a long pause and an even longer sigh. “I did get high,” she admitted, looking younger than her seventeen years despite her harsh makeup and too-tight clothes. “I just had a lot of pressure, that’s all. Marletta was on my case and…then Jay got pissed at me and I thought I’d show them both.”
“By smoking crack.”
“Yeah. So?” She started down the stairs, not wanting to hear a lecture, though Sam had no intention of giving her one.
“You tell me.” Sam caught up with her on the first floor, where Leanne was walking through the series of rooms to the front door. The girl shouldered it open and stepped down to the sidewalk where the heat of the day had collected.
Twilight had descended, the streetlamps were beginning to glow and the other girls in the group were already walking down the street chattering, two smoking long cigarettes. They split up at the corner, heading in different directions and disappearing along narrow streets.
“Maybe it wasn’t such a great idea to get high,” Leanne admitted as they stood beneath a streetlight. She seemed sincere as she cocked her head to look directly at Sam for the first time in over an hour.
“Just think about it. You were trying to punish your mother and your boyfriend, but who did you hurt? What did you accomplish?”
Leanne rolled her expressive eyes. “Myself, I know.” She smiled and it was a killer smile, perfect white teeth and pretty lips.
“So, how do you feel?’’
“I’m okay.”
“You’re sure?” Sam asked. There was something about Leanne that touched her. Beneath her armor of filthy language and tough attitude was a softer soul, one who sent her e-cards, a little girl trapped in a tough-looking teenage body.
“Yeah, I’m sure. For a screwup,” she said, and laughed as a pack of teenage boys sauntered by. More than one of the boys eyed Leanne. Out of habit she tossed her short hair out of her face and met the boys’ gazes with a challenging, amused grin.
“You’re not a screwup,” Sam assured her. “Remember, no negative names.”
“Right. I’m not one, but I did mess up. Big-time.”
“You took a step backward. Now it’s time to go forward again.”
“Yeah, I know,” Leanne said, but her gaze was following the boys, who had stopped two streets up to join a group of people listening to the street musicians who were performing in front of the park.
“Then I’ll see you next week.”

“Okay. Sure.” With a wave, Leanne dashed across St. Peter, pausing at the next corner to light a cigarette. She was a smart girl, whose mother, Marletta, had been arrested not only for dealing drugs but prostitution as well. Marletta, faced with losing her kids, had been clean for a couple of years, but Leanne had watched and learned from her mother. At seventeen Leanne had her own rap sheet for drugs and soliciting. Attending Sam’s young women’s group, being a part of a drug-counseling program that included routine testing and doing community service were all a part of her sentence.

Sam headed for her car but felt something, someone watching her. Assuming it was Leanne, she glanced over her shoulder, but the girl was nowhere in sight. The crowd that had paused to watch the band was increasing as the music played, people gathering around the brass ensemble that had set up near the entrance to the park. But one man stood apart from the others—a tall, broad-shouldered man in a black-leather jacket, dark pants and sunglasses despite the shadows crawling across the city. He wasn’t looking at the performers. Instead he was staring straight at Samantha. Hard. He was too far away, and it was too dark to get a good look at his features, but Sam had the sensation that she’d seen him before, perhaps even knew him.

Goose bumps rose on her flesh, though she told herself she was being silly, for as she watched, he turned his attention to the band, melded into the group of people surrounding the musicians and seemed to disappear. As if he’d never been there.

Maybe he hadn’t been looking at her, but someone or something behind her. Maybe she was letting the events of the last few nights get to her, but as she walked along the street to her Mustang, she had the very real sensation that things were only going to get worse.

The night was hot, just the way he liked it, the air heavy against his skin as he paddled through the cypress to the tiny cabin on stilts hidden here, deep in the bayou. No one knew about this place; no one could ever know. He docked and climbed up a ladder to the bleached white porch surrounding the one-room shanty. The smell of the swamp filled his nostrils, the feeling he was free here, safe, made his tense muscles relax. He loosened his fly and took a piss over the railing, not only relieving himself, but letting the other creatures of the night know this was his place. His.

He heard the bats in the trees as he zipped up. Boots ringing hollowly, he made his way inside the cabin, where he lit a kerosene lantern. The ancient wood walls, filled with knotholes and gaps between the boards, glowed warmly. Mosquitoes droned, fireflies flickered through the open doorway and the sluggish water lapped against the old pilings. Alligators and cottonmouths swam in this part of the bayou, and he felt akin to the slippery beasts, a part of this dark night, this water forest.

There was no electricity, and the old chimney had started to crumble, not that he would dare light a fire. Smoke could be seen or smelled...no, he would keep in the relative darkness, only chancing the lantern. He opened the single cupboard and peered inside. A spider scurried into a crack as he reached into a corner where a worn velvet sack lay hidden. Inside the soft folds were his treasures, items he carefully withdrew. A cross suspended from a necklace, a fine gold chain just big enough to fit around a woman’s slim ankle. An old locket from another lifetime. Just the beginning.

Carefully he placed his treasures on the rickety table next to his battery-powered radio. He surrounded the necklace, locket and ankle bracelet with his rosary, creating a perfect circle with his souvenirs squarely in its center. Then, satisfied, he checked his watch, waited forty-five seconds and pressed a button on the radio. Then she was with him. Over the hoot of an owl and crackle of static he heard the sound of the fading intro music and her voice—clear as if she were standing next to him.

“Good evening, New Orleans, this is Dr. Sam ready to take your calls at WSLJ. As you know we’ve been tackling a series of tough subjects about love, sin and redemptions. Tonight we’ll discuss forgiveness...”

He smiled inwardly. Forgiveness. She was purposely baiting him, engaging in his game. Expecting him to call. He conjured up her face in his mind, remembered seeing her only a few hours earlier on the street near the park. She must have felt his gaze, been drawn to him, for she’d looked straight at him in the twilight.

Blood pumped furiously through his body, ringing in his ears, bringing an erection.

“...let me know what you think, how forgiveness has touched your life or conversely, how it hasn’t? Is it always possible?” she asked in that smooth, coaxing, sexy voice, the voice of a Jezebel, a seducer, a whore. Sweat broke out between his shoulder blades, and he stood, walking restlessly, concentrating on the words—her words—touching
him, caressing his mind, just as if she was speaking to him. Only to him. “What is it that constitutes forgiveness and can we always give it?”

The answer was no. Some acts were too vile to be forgiven and for those there was only one answer: retribution. His cock was suddenly rock-hard, straining against his fly. He needed relief. He imagined her hands, her mouth, her tongue as he touched himself.

Dr. Sam’s voice was farther away now, muffled by the static on the radio and the buzz in his mind, but soon, oh, so soon, Samantha Leeds would understand. About forgiveness and retribution. About atonement and punishment. About paying. For her sins. All of them. He’d make her.

Just you wait, Doctor. Your time is coming. Then we’ll see what you think about forgiveness, he thought, stroking himself.

Then we’ll hear you beg.
Chapter Nine

“I don’t like it, Sam,” William Matheson was saying from his condo in Santa Monica the next morning. The phone connection was clear and her father sounded as if he was in the next room rather than over a thousand miles away. “I don’t like it at all.”

“Neither do I,” Sam admitted, balancing the receiver against her shoulder as she laced up her Nikes, “but it’s all part and parcel of the business.”

“Then give it up. Open a private practice. All this radio stuff is just fluff. Doesn’t do anyone a whole lot of good, and it sounds dangerous.”

“I shouldn’t have told you,” she said, straightening and tossing her hair from her eyes.

“I would have found out.”

“I know. That’s why I thought I should give you the straight scoop.”

He sighed, and she sensed his frustration. Life hadn’t turned out the way her father had planned. Not for him, not for his wife, or children.

“I just don’t want to see you go through a replay of that nasty business in Houston.”

“I won’t,” she said, but felt a chill deep in her heart.

“A。”She added silently as she walked from the living room into the kitchen. Goose bumps rose on her arm when she remembered the plaintive worried call from a desperate girl.

“Well, just keep it in mind, will you? I worry.”

“I know you do. Enough for both of us…or maybe enough for a small city. Don’t worry about me, Dad, I’m fine. Everyone at the station is alerted, and I’ve talked with the police. My guess is that whoever called has moved on. He had his twisted fun, and now he’s off to torture small animals or scare kids in the park.”

“It’s not funny.”

“I know, I know,” Sam said. “I was just trying to lighten the mood.”

Her father hesitated. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard from Peter.” Sam closed her eyes. Mentally counted to ten. Always. Dad always asked about her brother.

“You know you do. Enough for both of us…or maybe enough for a small city. Don’t worry about me, Dad, I’m fine. Everyone at the station is alerted, and I’ve talked with the police. My guess is that whoever called has moved on. He had his twisted fun, and now he’s off to torture small animals or scare kids in the park.”

“Of course I haven’t.”

“I didn’t expect it.” But you keep asking. After ten years. “It’s just that once you’re a parent, you’re a parent for life. You’ll understand when you finally have kids of your own.”

“I imagine I will.” Now comes the part where he tells me I’m not getting any younger, that Cousin Doreen has two kids in school and another on the way.

“You know, Samantha, just because you had one marriage already, doesn’t mean you have to swear off the institution. Your mother and I were married thirty-four years, and we experienced our ups and downs, but it was worth it, let me tell you.”

“I’m glad, Dad,” she said, though she sometimes didn’t believe him. He’d survived his son’s disappearance, his wife’s death and focused on his only daughter, one who never seemed to listen to any of his advice. “You know I love you.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart.”

“Are you still dating the widow across the hall?”

“Helen? No…well, it’s not really dating. We just play golf or bridge together once in a while.”

“Trust me, she considers it a date.”

“Is that your professional opinion?” he asked, and Sam heard the smile in his voice. For the moment, his worries about his daughter were allayed.
“You bet it is. You’ll be getting a bill.”
He laughed. “No freebies for the old man?”
“Especially not for the old man. Look, Dad, I’ve got to run, but I’ll call again. Soon.”
“Do that and, Samantha, be careful, would you?”
“Promise, Dad.”
“Good girl.” He hung up and Sam dropped the receiver into its cradle. She glanced out the window to the dock where the Bright Angel rocked against her moorings, sails down against a backdrop of blue sky. Shaking her head, Sam rubbed the tension from the back of her neck. No matter what she did, no matter how successful she became, how she proved herself, her father would always think of her as his little girl. Nor would he give up on Peter, despite the fact that whether it was a biological truth or not, in Sam’s mind, her older brother was as good as dead.

Ty showed up sometime after noon. With a heavy toolbox and a bottle of wine. “For your trouble,” he said as he handed her the bottle on her porch. Again his eyes were shaded, again he wore cutoffs, again the dog trotted after him. “I got busy and it got dark, so I didn’t come back yesterday…if I’d had your number, I would have called.”

“No problem,” she assured him, though she didn’t quite believe her own words. There was something disturbing about the man, something inertly sensual and, she sensed, dangerous.
Or was she just getting paranoid?
Had the surly detective’s warnings convinced her not to trust anyone?

As Ty skirted the house and took the outside path to the lake, Samantha stashed the bottle of Riesling in the refrigerator and caught a glimpse of herself in the cut-glass mirror of her antique sideboard. Her cheeks had colored, and she could use some lipstick but refused to stoop to primping for the guy. He was a neighbor with a boat problem. Nothing more.

Nothing.

She caught up with him on the dock. He was already working with the engine, his fingers wrapped around a wrench, his muscles straining as he twisted an old nut. “You could have borrowed those from me, you know. I do have a few things—pliers, wrenches, a hammer.”

“I suppose, but I knew these would work. Right size. They came with the boat.” Glancing over his shoulder, he offered her a half smile. “I took the tools out yesterday when I was checking for a leak. Left ‘em on my dock, then took her out for a spin.” As if he anticipated some comment, he added, “I know, not the brightest thing I’ve ever done. But I didn’t think I’d need the motor.” He winced as he gave a bolt a final twist. “You don’t have to say it. I know I’m an idiot.”

“Simple mistake,” she said.

“Simple man,” he muttered under his breath, but she didn’t believe him for a minute. She guessed there was nothing simple about Ty Wheeler; nothing simple at all. From the dock, the dog hopped lithely into the boat, took up a spot near the helm and lay down, head on his paws, brown eyes quietly assessing. Overhead, white clouds rolled slowly across a wide cerulean sky where a hawk circled lazily and the boom on the main sail slipped a little.

“Damn.” Ty glanced at the mast, then back at her. “Wanna help?”

“Sure. But I’d better warn you, I’m not much of a sailor.” Ty slanted her a look. “Neither am I.” His shirtsleeves were bunched over his elbows as he rocked back on his heels. “Think you can keep the boom steady for a couple of minutes?” he asked. “It keeps slippin’.”

“I’ll give it my best shot.”

“It’s heavy.”

“I was a weight lifter in college.”

His gaze swept up and down her body, and he swallowed a smile. “Yeah, right. I guess you never made it to the WWF, huh?”


“A killer shot at the net isn’t going to help us much. There, now hold on to this.” He placed her hands on the boom, then they both strained against the weight of it as he locked it into place once again.

“You okay?” Ty asked as he tested the lock. He pulled on the smooth wood. Sweat ran down the sides of his face, and he glared up at the rigging. The boom didn’t budge. He glanced her way. “You can let go now.”
Her arms ached a little. “Didn’t realize how outta shape I was.”

Again a quick glance down her body. “We got the job done.” He removed his sunglasses long enough to wipe the sweat from his forehead and for the first time since she’d met him she was looking into dark hazel eyes—green-brown that shifted in the sunlight. “Thanks.” He shoved the shades up to the bridge of his nose again.

“You’re more than welcome. Anytime you need to, pull in for repairs.”

White teeth flashed. “Let’s hope it’s not too often.” His gaze swept the deck of the **Bright Angel**. “Maybe God is telling me I’m not cut out to be a boat owner. You know the old saying? What’s the second happiest day of a boat owner’s life?”

“I give. What?”

“The day he buys the boat. And what’s the happiest day of his life?”

She waited.

“The day he sells it.”

She threw him a smile and motioned to the sloop. “And I always thought guys had love affairs with these things.”

“Some do. But a boat is just like a woman. You’ve got to find the right one. Sometimes you make a mistake. Other times you get lucky.” He was staring at her through the dark lenses. Hard.

“And they say men are like cars—never perfect. Never coming with all the right options.”

“And what are those?” he asked.

“I don’t think I know you well enough to say,” she teased as she climbed off the sloop. Pain shot up her bad ankle, and she winced.

“Are you okay?”

“Just an old war wound kicking up.” The pain lessened as she watched him fiddle with the engine. With pliers, wrenches and other tools she didn’t recognize, he worked on the motor, tried to start the boat, wasn’t satisfied with the sputter that commenced and leaned over the engine again. His old dog waited patiently in the shade of the wheel, brown eyes watching Ty.

Sam tried not to study the way his back curved or the fluidity of his tanned shoulders as he worked. Corded muscles flexed, then relaxed and his cutoffs gaped enough that she saw a slice of white just under his waistband.

*Don’t go there,* she silently warned herself, *you don’t even know this guy.*

But she couldn’t help noticing the way his thin lips flattened over his teeth or the narrowing of his eyes as he worked.

He tried the engine again and it sputtered unsteadily. “I suppose that’s as good as it’s gonna get until I take her in for major repairs,” he grumbled as he reached under a seat, withdrew a rag and wiped his hands. His smile was irrepressible as he slapped the boom. “Yep, one hell of an investment.”

“Could I get you anything? Some of the wine? Or a beer? If I look hard, I think I could even scrounge up a can of Coke.” Detective Bentz’s warnings about dealing with strangers and changing her locks echoed through her mind, but she steadfastly shoved the policeman’s admonishments out of her head. At least for the time being. Until she learned more about this man.

He climbed off the boat. “I’d better take a rain check.” He looked about to say something, then glanced toward the lake, where a fish jumped, silver scales catching in the sunlight, and seemed to think better of it.

“What?” she asked, intrigued.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I ran into one of our neighbors the other day, the old lady across the street.”

Sam groaned inwardly. “Don’t tell me. She thought you should knock on my door with a box of chocolates or bottle of…” She let her voice fade, remembering the Riesling cooling in the fridge. “Oh. That’s why…”

“Yep.” He raised his hands, palms outward. Sucked in his breath. “Guilty as charged.”

“And the boat?”

“Really did break down.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t fake that.”

“Well, that’s something,” she said, a little stung. Not that he’d really lied, but…

“For the record Edie told me that you were a cross between Meg Ryan and Nicole Kidman and that I’d be out of my mind if I didn’t meet you.” Sam wanted to drop right through the dock as his shaded eyes met hers. “So that’s why I pulled in here, rather than at the dock next door. I had to see for myself.”
“And?”

“Hey, anything I say now is gonna get me into deeper trouble, I think.” He rubbed the back of his neck and glanced away. “If I tell you you’re prettier than either Meg or Nicole, you’ll laugh at me and tell me to get lost. It’ll sound like a come-on line and if I say ‘Nah, the old lady needs her glasses readjusted,’ you’ll be offended. Either way I lose.”

She thought of her nosy neighbor likening Ty to Harrison Ford, Tom Cruise and Clark Gable. “Edie Killingsworth watches too many movies.”

“Nah, she’s just one of those women who can’t stop themselves from matchmaking. She was probably already working you.”

“Maybe. She told you I was single?”

“Implied as much.” He glanced at her ringless left hand. “No hardware.”

“Not for a long time. I’m divorced,” she admitted. And you?“His lips tightened just a fraction, as if he didn’t want to talk about it, as if he didn’t want to give up too much of himself. “Single.” From the boat, his dog whined. “Hush, Sasquatch, and no, I didn’t name him,” he added, as if reading her mind while thankful to change the subject. “My sister’s prize German shepherd bitch had a litter that was supposed to be purebred. However, when the pups were born, it was obvious that she had managed to jump the fence before they brought in the show dog to do the honors and father the litter. Anyway, my sister ended up with six paperless pups and I got the runt, this guy here.”

He threw a smile at his dog. “Sarah had already named him. She lives up in Bigfoot country, up around Mt. St. Helens in Washington State. That was twelve years ago.” Ty gave a sharp whistle, the dog bounded out of the boat and raced the length of the dock to stop right at his heels. His tail swept the dusty planks, his tongue lolled from his head and he panted loudly.

“Trained well,” she said, and scratched the old shepherd behind his ears. He froze. His eyes trained on the cat. His muscles quivered. Charon had been stalking across the lawn. Spying the dog, he stopped dead in his tracks at the base of a live oak tree. His black hair stiffened and he glared at the intruder with wide, unblinking eyes.

“Don’t even think about it,” Ty warned. The dog whined a little but stayed put as Charon slunk like a quick black shadow toward the safety of the hedge.

Ty rubbed the shepherd’s big head. “You’d better be on your best behavior, or the lady will throw you out.”

“What makes you think his behavior will have any influence on me?” Sam asked, surprised that she was nearly flirting with this stranger. But it felt good to laugh and talk without any restrictions, without worrying about how he would take her comments. If he didn’t like them, tough. He could be on his way. “The dog can do just about anything he wants,” she said. “You, on the other hand, need to be straight with me.”

“Always,” he said quickly. Almost too quickly. He was standing close enough that she had to crane her neck up to look at his face. Crow’s-feet bit into the corners of his eyes, and there was a small scar over one eyebrow. His skin was tanned and tight, and he looked as tough as leather. Like he could take care of himself and anyone else he wanted to.

Stupidly, her heart pounded a bit. Despite his easy drawl and good looks, he was a stranger—someone unknown, a man who appeared outwardly calm, but beneath the veneer seemed restless.

She reminded herself that somewhere lurking in the streets of New Orleans there was a man who had decided to terrorize her, knew her name, her address and where she worked. A man she didn’t know. One she wouldn’t recognize.

So who was she to say that this man, this stranger who lived down the street wasn’t the “John” who had phoned the station during her broadcast or the creep who had sent her the letter and mutilated picture?

“Edie did let it slip that you’re Dr. Sam,” he admitted. “As in Samantha Leeds, beautiful woman, great cook, and radio psychologist.”

Her nerves tightened. “So, are you in the market for a shrink?”

“Depends upon who you talk to.” That damnable smile grew irreverently. “Just don’t call my sister. She’d have me signed up for sessions for the rest of my life.” He folded his arms across his chest, stretching the seams of his shirt. “You could retire then.”

“I doubt that you need my help.”

“Is that your professional opinion?” He was toying with her. Flirting again.
“I don’t know you well enough to make an honest evaluation. But if you want to look at ink blots or talk about how your mother didn’t love you, we’d better set up an appointment.”

“I thought you only did the radio stuff.”

“I do. At least for the time being. Maybe you should tune in.”

“I have.” His shadow fell across her crown, and her pulse jumped a little.

“Have you ever called in?”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“So what do you think?” She couldn’t keep a nasty little feeling of dread from dripping into her bloodstream.

Ty scratched at the stubble that was beginning to darken his jaw. “Well, I don’t know what to make of it. Seems like a lot of lonely people just calling up to spout off about something. I think they just want to connect with another person or maybe claim their fifteen minutes of fame.”

“Fame or infamy?”

“You tell me.” He was staring at her through those dark lenses, but grabbed a plastic deck chair, twisted it around and straddled it, leaning over the back and pinning her with his hidden gaze. The breeze had died, the sun harsher now, bright beams bouncing off the water. “You seem to be the real thing.”

“How about you?” she asked “How real are you?”

“As real as it gets,” he said, as a speedboat dragging a wake board roared past, creating a wide frothy wake. Laughter rolled across the swells as the kid on the board wiped out. Quickly, the driver of the boat did a sharp 360 in order to retrieve the boy bobbing on the surface. “But then what’s real?”

“Touché,” she said, again getting a glimpse of a more complicated man than showed outwardly. The good-ol’-boy with the aw-shucks charm wasn’t cutting it. No, Ty Wheeler was more than a long, tall Texan with a sexy smile. What was worse, he was getting to her. Big-time. Though it was ludicrous, a part of her was intrigued with this man, wanted to peel off the layers, find out what was hiding beneath the easygoing veneer. But that was foolish. Playing with fire. This man was trouble. And right now she had enough trouble to last her a lifetime.

He could only be a neighbor. Even a potential friend wasn’t worth thinking about, and anything else was out of the question. Period.

If her involvement with David had taught her anything, it was that she wasn’t ready for a relationship.

Boy, are you getting ahead of yourself here…you’ve barely met the man and already you’re thinking in terms of a love interest. Get real, Sam.

“You know, usually I don’t socialize with my fans.”

“Who said I was a fan?” He cast a thousand-watt smile her way. “I just mentioned I’d listened to the show.” He inclined his chin toward the *Bright Angel* as it swayed slightly on the swells. “Maybe you’d like to take a ride with me sometime.”

“After everything you’ve told me about the boat? After I’ve helped you fix her. Call me crazy, but I don’t think so.”

“When she’s totally seaworthy.”

“And when will that be?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Probably the next millennium.”

“Call me.” She rattled off her phone number.

“I will,” he said, and stared at her a little longer through his shades. Then, whistling to his dog, he walked back to his sloop. With a final wave, he cast off, leaving Sam barefoot on the dock, arm raised to shade her eyes as she watched him motor off.

*The man’s trouble, she told herself again. If you’re smart, Sam, you’ll forget him. Right now. Before this flirtation goes any further.*

But she had the sinking premonition that it was already too late.
Chapter Ten

“So what do you think he meant, ‘It’s all your fault’?” Montoya asked as he crushed his paper coffee cup and tossed it over Rick Bentz’s desk to land in the wastebasket in the corner.

“Two points,” Rick said automatically.

“Three, man. That was a trey if I ever saw one. I parked that sucker from downtown.”

“If you say so.” Rick was flipping through the reports on Rosa Gillette and Cherie Bellechamps.

“So—what did the caller mean?” Montoya asked.

“I don’t know.” Rick scratched at his chin as he thought about his interview with the lady psychologist.

“You shouldn’t even be thinking about it, you know. We’ve got enough to handle as it is.”

“You do what Jaskiel tells me to do.” He shoved the reports aside. “Look, Montoya, you and I both know I’m lucky to have this job. That I ended up with an office is unbelievable.”

“You earned it, man. You put in your years.”

“In L.A.”

“And you got into some trouble. Big deal. The bottom line is you know your shit; otherwise, you wouldn’t be here, right?”

Montoya was right. Twenty years with the LAPD should have counted for something, but as it was he was lucky to land a job anywhere. To say the recommendations of his superiors in the City of Angels hadn’t been stellar would be a gross understatement. Everyone here knew it. Including Montoya. Not everyone understood the reasons. He cringed as he thought of them...of an unlucky boy who happened to point what turned out to be a toy gun at his partner. Bentz had reacted and a twelve-year-old was dead because of it. His family had sued, rightfully so, and Bentz had been put on probation. He might have regained his badge if he hadn’t poured himself into a bottle for a couple of years. The powers that were at the LAPD decided he was far more trouble than he was worth—a media catastrophe. “Yeah,” he said now, in answer to the younger cop’s question. “I know my shit.” All of it. And it stinks.

“So don’t give me any crap about you luckin’ out and gettin’ the job. Jaskiel hired you to work on the cases she assigns because she trusts you, and she knows you’ll work your ass off, round the clock. The way I see it, you don’t want any free time anyway. Old man like you, what you got to go home to?” Montoya asked. “Now that your kid is about off to college, you won’t have any reason to go home at night, right?”

“Kristi’s still at home,” Bentz argued, thinking of his daughter, the only family he had left in the world. Kristi’s mother, Jennifer, was dead. She’d divorced Bentz long ago and everyone thought it was the job, which was a big part of it, but there was more, of course, and Bentz was left with one great kid and a secret he’d never share. He, glanced at the double fold frame that sat on his desk. One picture was of Kristi at five, upon entering kindergarten, the other was her senior picture, taken just last September. It seemed impossible that she was eighteen and soon would be moving up to Baton Rouge. “She’s not off to All Saints until next month.”

Montoya parked a hip on Rick’s desk, picked up a letter opener and twisted it in his fingers. “So you think the stalker who’s calling the lady shrink, he’s dangerous?”

Rick considered the mutilated publicity shot, handed a copy of it to Reuben. “Looks that way.”

Montoya’s jaw tightened. “Whoever did this is one messed-up mother.”

“Yeah, if this is all on the up-and-up I’d say, ‘yeah, the guy is dangerous.’”

“But,” Reuben encouraged.

“But it could be all for show. Publicity. Ratings of the Midnight Confessions have soared since the first incident, and the station’s been in financial straits for a couple of years. George Hannah bought WSLJ, thought he could turn it around and didn’t. Maybe this is a publicity ploy.” But Rick didn’t think so.

Montoya’s face screwed up as he glanced down at the photocopy. “It’s still sick-assed shit.”

“Yes. I’m waiting for a report on the note and the picture—I got the originals from the Cambrai PD, then sent them to the lab.”
He held up the photo. “You know what this reminds me of?”

Bentz was one step ahead of his younger partner. “The hundred-dollar bills with the eyes blackened.”

“Could be the same guy.”

“I considered it. Even put it in my report, but wouldn’t he have just marked out the eyes with a felt pen—like he did on the bills?”

“You’d think…but maybe this creep is smarter than we think.”

“It’s a long shot.” One Bentz was considering.

“But a possibility, or you wouldn’t have thought of it,” Montoya said.

Bentz reached for his coffee cup. The coffee was tepid and weak. “I’m not ruling anything out.” Truth of the matter was, the photo with the cut-out eyes bothered him more than the calls to the station. He had a bad feeling about this one, real bad. Was the guy a prank or was he going to raise the stakes? And what about the psychologist? Samantha Leeds should be freaking out, not letting strange neighbors moor their damned boats at her place.

Reuben dropped the copy of the mutilated picture onto a stack of files. “So what have we got on your serial murderer?”

“A little more. Semen was left behind on both women. The lab says it’s the same blood type. Same with hair samples.”

“No surprise there.”

“And it’s the same MO, from the looks of it. Both working girls, both strangled by some kind of bumpy noose, both posed afterward. He’s not afraid to leave fingerprints around, and we can’t find a match, so he hasn’t been printed—no priors or military or job where it’s required.” Bentz tossed Montoya the file. “Also, in both instances, there were other hairs found. Synthetic. Red.”

“A wig?”

“Yeah, but it’s missing, nothing close was found in the apartments and, according to people who knew the victims, neither ever wore a red wig, not even when they turned tricks.”

“So they were wearing one at the time of death and the killer took it, is that where you’re going?”

Bentz nodded. “As if he wanted his victim to look like she had red hair.”

“Jesus. Like Dr. Sam.”

“Maybe.”

Montoya sucked in his breath. “It’s still a pretty big leap.”

“I know.” Bentz wondered if he was grasping at straws, but he couldn’t dismiss the eyes being cut out and the red hair. “We’re checking out manufacturers and local outlets who sell wigs and I’m cross-checking cases, to find out if there are any other homicides where there was a red wig involved.”

“It’s not much, but somethin’,” Montoya said, scraping the letter opener against the side of his goatee as he thought. “I checked on the ex-husband of Cherie Bellechamps—Henry? Turns out he had a life insurance policy that he’d never let lapse. Ended up with nearly fifty thousand dollars.” “Where was he when the second victim was killed?”

“In bed. At home.”

“Alone?”

“Nah, he’s got a girlfriend who swears he was with her all night, but she’s got a record. Nothin’ big. Shoplifting, DUI, possession—cocaine. Seems to have been clean in the last couple of years, since she hooked up with Henry Bellechamps. By the way, it’s not Henry or Hank, he goes with the French pronunciation. Henri.”

“Bully for him,” Bentz growled.

“Even if he had an alibi, it could have been a hit. He could have found someone to off his ex and pay off the killer.”

“Then why the second victim? To throw us off? A copycat?” Bentz didn’t think so.

Montoya’s beeper went off. He dropped the letter opener onto the stack of files on Bentz’s desk, then pulled his pager from a pocket of his black slacks. With a quick glance, he checked the readout, and added, “I’m not convinced he didn’t off his ex, but I can’t connect him with the Gillette woman. I gotta take this call. You got anything else?”

“A bit of a problem,” Bentz said, leaning back in his chair. “In the first case, the woman was raped before she
died, but with Rosa, it looks like she might have been dead first.”
“Might have been?”
“The ME’s not certain…”
“Why not?”
“My guess is that the guy did it, just as the women died. That’s his turn-on, killing them.”
Montoya’s dark eyes narrowed. “Shit.” He shoved his pager back into his pocket. “About task-force time, isn’t it?”
Bentz nodded. “I’ve already cleared it with Jaskiel and set the wheels in motion.”
Montoya scowled. “So we’ll be dealing with the Feds.” “Yep. The local guys.” Bentz forced a smile he didn’t feel. “It’s party time.”

Sitting at the scarred table, he listened to the night through the open window. Bullfrogs croaked, fish splashed, insects droned and water lapped around the poles holding up the tiny cabin, his one spot of refuge. His head clamored and he felt the need again. The need to hunt. But he had to be careful. Choose wisely.

He glanced down at his work and smiled as he picked up one of the dark beads and oh so carefully sharpened the facets with his file. It was delicate work and caused him to sweat, but it was worth it. In the end, each bead would cut soft flesh like a razor. His callused fingers wouldn’t bleed as he touched the glass, but a soft white throat would easily succumb.

He thought of the lives he’d taken, the rush of watching a woman realize she was dying, the feel of the beads in his hands as her breath left her lungs. God, it made him so hard he couldn’t think…could only hear the pounding in his brain, the thunder of lust as it ran through his blood. He relived each moment and knew he had to do it again, to keep the memories alive.

As the images faded, his hard-on softened. He turned his attention back to his work, filing, sharpening and polishing the beads until it was time for the program, then he snapped on the radio at just the right moment. The music was fading and Dr. Sam’s voice whispered over the crackle of interference.

“Good Evening, New Orleans, and welcome…” Her voice was so erotic, so sexy.
The bitch.

He stopped working for a minute, listened to the first caller’s complaints, then reached into his toolbox. He had two spools. Twenty-pound test fishing line…strong, clear, easy to string through the beads, or piano wire…even stronger, but not as flexible. The beads wouldn’t slide like liquid through his fingers, the sensation wouldn’t be so fluid. Which way to go? He’d used them both before. Neither had failed him.

Dr. Sam’s voice answered the listener’s question. She sounded so calm. Rational. Seductive. He reached down to touch himself, but stopped. He had work to do. He dropped the spool of piano wire back into the box, then tore open the packet of fishing line with his teeth. Removing the line, he pulled hard, watching as it stretched and held.

The muscles in his arms bunched. The line cut into his palm but didn’t break.
He grinned. Yes, it would do nicely.

As Dr. Sam continued her program, talking to the idiots who called her, he began stringing his sharpened beads, careful to put them in the correct order, ensuring that his rosary was perfect.

Nothing less would do.
Chapter Eleven

Melanie clicked off her cell phone and fumed as she pulled into a parking space in the lot of the strip mall. It had been a bad week. Bad. And it wasn’t getting any better she thought, slapping the dash and wishing that the damned air-conditioning in her hatchback would find a way to turn on. It didn’t and the temperature in the car was hovering somewhere near two thousand degrees by her estimation.

Her T shirt was wrinkled and clinging to her, and she was sweating between her legs. She climbed out of the car and tried not to dwell on the fact that Trish LaBelle seemed to be dodging her calls. Great. Already there was talk at WSLJ that Midnight Confessions was being expanded, but not one word about Melanie getting any kind of promotion and she deserved it.

Samantha’s job was a piece of cake. Melanie could handle it with her eyes closed. Hadn’t she proved that while Sam was in Mexico? So the ratings had dropped an iota. That was to be expected. Given enough time, Melanie was certain she could create a new, hipper audience. She was young and with it. But she needed the chance to prove herself.

She walked into the oven of a dry cleaners and gave her name to a petite blond girl with inch-long black roots, bad teeth and a permanent sneer.

So if WSLJ wouldn’t give her a job behind the mike, she’d decided to call the rival station, WNAB, where Trish LaBelle worked. Trish hated Dr. Sam. Melanie figured Trish would jump at the chance of meeting with Sam’s assistant and even offer her a job.

So far Trish hadn’t returned her calls.

Yet.

Melanie wasn’t one to give up. She’d always been a scrapper; never gotten any breaks that she hadn’t made for herself, so, if she had to, she’d damned sure make her own.

“Here ya go.” The girl hung her plastic-encased clothes on a hook near the till and Melanie handed over her bank debit-card. “Sorry. The machine’s broken. Ya got cash or a check?”

“I left my checkbook at home…” Melanie said, flipping through her wallet and seeing only two crumpled one-dollar bills. Not enough. The day was on a fast downhill slide. She felt bloated and achy; her period was due to start any time, her job was going nowhere, what little family she had didn’t give a shit about her and her boyfriend, again, couldn’t be reached.

Yep, things were rapidly going from bad to worst.

“There’s an ATM on the next block.” The twit in need of a bottle of Clairol snapped a wad of gum and waited with bored patience.

Melanie seethed. “It’s not my fault your stupid machine is messed up.”

The girl shrugged her skinny shoulders and gave Melanie a bored look that said, “tell it to someone who cares.” She held Melanie’s stare and for a second Melanie considered grabbing her clothes and taking off. After all the skirt, blouse and short jacket were hers.

As if she’d read Melanie’s mind, the clerk swept the hangers from the hook and hung them on another rail behind the counter.

“Fine.” Melanie snapped her wallet shut. “I’ll be back.” But she wasn’t going to bother today. She was too frazzled. She stomped into the blinding sun, flipped her sunglasses over her nose and slid into the sunbaked interior of her hatchback. The steering wheel was nearly too hot to handle. Twisting on the ignition, she threw the car into reverse and as the radio blared, stepped on the gas. In the rearview mirror, she caught a glimpse of a huge white Cadillac pulling out at the same time. She stood on the brakes as the boat slowly slid from its spot and an elderly man who never so much as glanced in her direction rolled slowly out of the lot.


She backed out, rammed her hatchback into first and sped out of the lot. Before the first light, she passed the old guy and resisted the urge to flip him off. It wasn’t really his fault he was old.
She hit the freeway and flooring it, opened the sunroof and all the power windows. Wind blew her hair around and she felt better. She couldn’t let one minimum-wage clerk with a bad attitude bug her. She’d pick up her clothes later. In the meantime she’d concentrate on plan B.

One way or another, she’d land a promotion and end up behind the mike. She let herself daydream a little, considered just how far she’d go. Maybe eventually television. She had the looks. A slow smile spread across her lips and she reached for the cell phone while cruising along at seventy. She’d try to call her boyfriend and plan to meet him. If she could get hold of him.

She just needed to unwind.
And he knew just how to help her.

Sam’s palms were sweaty and her heart raced, but she told herself, as she entered the booth, that she was being apprehensive and silly.

Nothing had happened.
For nearly a week.
Though each night she’d experienced the same case of nerves as she’d started her program, “John” had remained silent. Had he given up? Was he bored with his joke, if that’s what it was? Was he out of town?

Or was he waiting?
For just the right moment.
Stop this, Sam, it’s getting you nowhere. Be grateful he’s gone.

Still, she was tense as was everyone at the station in varying degrees. Gator and Rob kidded about her “boyfriend,” Eleanor stewed, Melanie thought it exciting, and George Hannah hoped that the ratings would continue to climb.

They hadn’t. Without John’s calls, the listenership’s numbers were falling back to where they’d once been, which, Sam thought angrily, had been good. George, his silent partners and even Eleanor had been satisfied.

But no longer.

Eleanor told her “Not to worry, honey. At least the pervert’s gone. That’s good enough for me. As for George, he can think up some legitimate way to attract a bigger audience. Let’s just hope John never calls back.”

Right, Sam thought, but a part of her wanted to talk to him again, if only to find out what it was that made him tick. Why he’d decided to call her. Who he was. From a psychologist’s viewpoint, he was interesting. From a woman’s viewpoint, he was terrifying.

She closed the door to the booth behind her. Slipping on the headset, she settled into her chair, then adjusted the controls, checked the computer screen and glanced through the glass window to the adjoining booth. Melanie was seated at her desk, fiddling with knobs, then gave her a thumbs-up gesture, indicating that she was ready to screen the calls for the night. Tiny was with her, taking his seat, saying something to Melanie that Sam couldn’t hear. They laughed, seemed relaxed and Tiny cracked open a can of Diet Coke.

Over the past few nights, Sam had steered the subjects of her nightly discussion away from sin, punishment and redemption and back to relationships, which, of course, was the basis for the show. Things were getting back to normal. The way they were before John had first called. So why had the electricity she’d felt every time she sat in this chair not abated, but in fact, heightened?

Melanie signaled through the glass and the intro music filled the booth. John Lennon’s voice, singing “It’s Been A Hard Day’s Night,” boomed from the speakers, then faded.

Sam leaned into the microphone. “Good evening, New Orleans, and welcome. This is Dr. Sam with Midnight Confessions here at WSLJ and I’m ready to hear what you think…” She started talking, relaxing, cozying up to the microphone as she invited her listeners to call in. “I just spoke to my dad a couple of days ago, and even though I’m over thirty, he thinks he can still tell me what to do,” she said as a way of connecting with her audience, hoping that someone would identify with her and phone in. “He lives on the West Coast, and I’m starting to feel that I should be closer to him, that he might need me now that he’s getting up in years.” She went on for a while talking about the relationship between parents and children when the phone lines started to flash.

The first was a hangup, the second a woman whose mother was suffering the aftereffects of a stroke; she was torn between her job, her kids, her husband and her feeling that her mother needed her. The third was from a hostile teenager who resented her parents trying to tell her anything. They just didn’t “understand” her.
Then there was a backlash, from parents and kids who thought the teenage caller should listen to her folks. Sam relaxed even more. Felt at ease behind the mike. Sipped from a half-drunk cup of coffee. The debate waged on and finally a woman called in on line three. She was identified as Annie. Sam pressed the button for the call. “Hi,” she said, “This is Dr. Sam, who am I talking to?”

“Annie,” a frail, high voice whispered. A voice that was vaguely familiar. But Sam couldn’t place the name with a face. She was probably a regular caller.

“Hello, Annie, what is it you want to discuss tonight?”

“Don’t you remember me?” the girl asked.

Sam felt the warning hairs on the back of her neck rise.

“Annie?”

“Annie, what is it you want to discuss tonight?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

Sam pressed the button for the call.

“Hi,” she said, “This is Dr. Sam, who am I talking to?”

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“Hello, Annie, what is it you want to discuss tonight?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

Sam felt the warning hairs on the back of her neck rise. Annie?

“I’m sorry. If you could remind—”

“I called you before.”

“Annie?”

“Annie, what is it you want to discuss tonight?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

Sam felt the warning hairs on the back of her neck rise. Annie?

“I’m sorry. If you could remind—”

“I called you before.”

“Did you? When?” she asked, but the raspy voice hadn’t stopped, just paused to draw a breath and kept right on whispering through the studio, on the airwaves.

“Thursday’s my birthday. I would be twenty-five—”

“Would be?” Samantha repeated and a chill swept through her blood.

“—you remember. I called you nine years ago, and you told me to get lost. You didn’t listen, and—”

“Oh, God,” Sam said, her eyes widening. Her heart stopped for a second in a horrid nightmare of deja vu. Annie? Annie Seger? It couldn’t be. Her mind spun wildly, backward to a time she’d tried to forget.

“Annie? Annie Seger?”

“Annie, what is it you want to discuss tonight?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

Sam felt the warning hairs on the back of her neck rise.

“Annie Seger? It couldn’t be. Her mind spun wildly, backward to a time she’d tried to forget.

“You’ve got to help me. You’re a doctor, aren’t you? Please, you’re my only hope,” Annie had confided all those years ago. “Please help me. Please.” Guilt took a strangehold on Sam’s throat. Dear God, why was this happening again? “Who is this?” Sam forced into the microphone. From the corner of her eye, she glanced at the adjacent booth, where Melanie was listening, shaking her head, her palms turned toward the ceiling, as if the caller had, once again, gotten past her. Tiny was staring hard through the glass, his eyes trained on Sam, the can of soda in his big hand forgotten.

“—and you didn’t help me,” the breathy voice accused, hardly missing a beat. “What happened then, Dr. Sam, you remember, don’t you?”

Sam’s head was pounding, her hands slick with sweat. “I asked for your name, Annie—your full name.”

Click. The line went dead. Sam sat frozen.

Annie Seger.

No! Her stomach clenched.

It had been so long ago and yet, now, sitting in the booth as she had been then, it all came rushing back, like a tidal wave, crashing through her brain, leaving her numb and cold. The girl had died. Because of her. Because she couldn’t help. Oh, God, please not again.

“Samantha! Samantha! Snap out of it!” Melanie’s voice permeated her brain, but still she could barely move. “Jesus Christ, pull yourself together!” As if from a distance, Sam felt Melanie’s hands on her arms, yanking her out of her chair, thrusting her across the small space, toward Tiny, pushing her away from the desk and the microphone. Still in shock, Sam stumbled, her ankle twisting. She snapped out of it. Realized she was here, in New Orleans and on the air. “Don’t you know there’s all this dead airtime going on? For God’s sake, pull yourself together.” Melanie was saying as she slipped on the headphones and reached for the mike. “Get her out of here,” she ordered Tiny.

“Wait a minute. I’m okay.” Sam wasn’t about to budge.

“Prove it.” Melanie glared at her and waved her into the hallway. Tiny pulled Sam out of the room as Melanie leaned into the microphone and, as she flipped it on, her voice became smooth as warm silk on a hot Louisiana night. “Please excuse the interruption, we’ve experienced some technical difficulties down here at WSLJ. Thank you for your patience. Midnight Confessions with Dr. Samantha Leeds will be back in a few minutes, after our local weather update.” Expertly Melanie pressed the buttons for the automated recording that would play the weather forecast and a couple of pretaped advertising spots.

“What went on in there?” Tiny asked, then realizing his fingers surrounded Sam’s upper arms, he let go and put a little distance between them. The hallway seemed eerie and darker than usual, the glass case holding old records giving off an odd, ethereal glow. But of course that was crazy. It was just Sam’s nerves. The corridor and record case hadn’t changed.
Drawing in several deep breaths, Sam pulled herself together. She couldn’t allow another prank to rattle her so.

“All I know,” Sam admitted, leaning against the wall. She wiped a hand over her forehead and forced some starch into her spine. Think, Sam, think. Don’t let some crank caller get the better of you. “I—I don’t know who it was. Can’t imagine who would do anything so sick, but whoever it was she wanted me to think she was Annie Seger.” Oh, God, not Annie. What was happening? The girl had been dead nine years. Dead. Because Sam hadn’t read the situation correctly, hadn’t heeded the girl’s cries for help. Sam’s head pounded, and the coffee she’d drunk earlier curdled in her stomach.

Don’t let it get to you, Sam. Don’t!

“Who was that girl on the line?”

“Annie Seger was a girl who called into my program a long time ago when I was working in Houston.” It seemed like it was just yesterday. Sam remembered pushing the button, answering the call and listening as a teenager hesitantly explained that she was pregnant and scared to death. “Annie phoned in several nights in a row, asking for advice.” Inside Sam cringed when she remembered the girl’s calls. At first Annie had seemed scared, but no matter what Sam offered as advice, she rejected it, claimed she had no one to talk to, no one to confide in, not her parents, not her pastor and not even the father of her baby. “I tried to help her, but she ended up committing suicide.” Sam pushed the hair off her face and saw the pale shimmer of her reflection in the window of the booth. Beyond the glass Melanie sat at her desk, talking into the microphone, controlling the show. It all seemed surreal, being here late at night in the dim hallway, remembering a time she’d tried so hard to forget.

You think it was your fault she killed herself?” Tiny asked.

“You think it was your fault she killed herself?” Tiny asked.

“Annie’s family blamed me.”

“Annie’s family blamed me.”

“Very.” Sam rubbed her arms and tried to grab hold of her composure. She had a show to do; a job to finish. She saw Melanie tear off the headset and roll back the chair. Within seconds she flew out of the room. “You’ve got sixty seconds before you’re back on the air,” she said to Sam. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Sam admitted. Dear God, I’ll never be okay again. She started for the booth. “But I’ll wing it.”

“Eleanor’s on line two. She wants to talk to you.”

“You tell me,” Sam snapped. “You’re supposed to be screening the calls.”

“You tell me,” Sam snapped. “You’re supposed to be screening the calls.”

“I have been! And I recorded her request. She didn’t talk in that stupid falsetto voice, either, she just said that she had a problem with her ex-mother-in-law and wanted your advice.” Melanie glowered at her boss. “So are you going to pull yourself together and take charge or what? Otherwise, I’ll take over.” Her voice softened slightly and her defensive attitude slipped away. “I can do it, you know. Easy as pie. Tiny can run the call-in booth. Just like when you were in Mexico.”

“I can handle it, really. But thanks.”

“I can handle it, really. But thanks.”

Melanie flashed a smile that seemed to hide some other emotion. “I’m a shirrtail relation to Jefferson Davis, you know.”

“I’ve heard.”

“I can step up to the plate if I have to. It’s in my genes.”

“Well, thank God for your genes, but I’m okay.” Sam wasn’t going to let another prank call spook her out of her job. “I’ll handle it. You two”—she motioned to Tiny and Melanie—“just screen the calls and tape ’em. We’ve only got another fifteen minutes. Tell Eleanor to sit tight.” She adjusted her headphones and pulled the microphone close
to her mouth, adjusting the angle as the advertisement for a local dot com company faded.

“Okay, this is Dr. Sam, I’m back in the saddle. Sorry for the interruption. As you probably already heard, the station’s experiencing some technical difficulties tonight.” It was a bald-faced lie, and she probably lost a few credibility points with her listeners, but she couldn’t deal with the issue of Annie Seger right now. “Okay, so let’s pick up where we left off a few minutes ago. We were talking about our parents interfering in our lives, or needing us, or telling us what to do. My dad is the greatest, but he can’t seem to accept it that I’m a grown woman. I’m sure you’ve had similar experiences.”

The phones lines were already blinking like mad. If nothing else the crank calls were drawing interest. The first caller, on line one, was identified as Ty.

A lightning quick image of a tall man with a killer smile and flinty, unreadable eyes seared through her brain. Her stomach tightened, though she told herself the caller wasn’t necessarily her new neighbor. “Hello,” she said, “this is Dr. Sam, who’s this?”

“Ty,” he said, and she felt a mixture of relief and wariness as she recognized his voice. She wondered why he’d been listening to her program, how he’d managed to be the first caller after the woman who had claimed she had been Annie had been on the line.

“What can I do for you, Ty?” she asked, and tried not to notice that her palms were suddenly damp. “Are you having trouble with your parents? Your kids?”

“Well, now, this is a little off tonight’s subject. I was hopin’ you could help me out with a relationship problem.” “I’ll try,” she said, silently questioning where this was leading. Was he telling her that he wasn’t available, that there was already a woman in his life? Then why the flirting just the other afternoon? “What’s the problem, Ty?”

“Well, I just moved into a neighborhood and I’ve met this woman that I’m interested in,” he said in his soft drawl, and some of her apprehension fled.

“Is the feeling mutual?” Sam couldn’t help but smile.

“Oh, yeah, I think so, but she’s playing it pretty cool.”

“Then how do you know she wants to get to know you better? Maybe her being cool isn’t an act.”

“That’s what she wants me to believe, but I can see it in her eyes. She’s interested, all right. More than interested. Just too proud to admit it.”

Samantha’s grin widened, and heat washed up the back of her neck. “She’s that transparent, is she?”

“Sure is, only she doesn’t know it.”

Great. “Maybe you should tell her.”

“I’m givin’ it some serious thought,” he said slowly, and Sam’s heartbeat accelerated into overdrive. She wondered how much of the undercurrents in the conversation Melanie and Tiny were hearing…or for that matter, if everyone tuned into WSLJ caught the subtleties.

“But prepare yourself, Ty, this woman might not be as captivated with you as you’d like to think.”

“I guess I’ll just have to find out now, won’t I? I’ll have to make a move.”

Oh, God. Her lungs tightened. “That would be the logical next step.”

“But you and I both know that sometimes logic doesn’t have a whole lot to do with what happens between a man and a woman.”

Touché. “So what are you going to do, Ty?”

There was just a half a beat of hesitation.

“I’m going to find out just what the lady likes,” he drawled, and Sam’s mouth went dry.

“And how’re you going to do that?” Rapid, sensual images of Ty Wheeler with his broad shoulders, dark hair and intense eyes flitted through her mind. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him, to touch him, to make love to him.

His laugh was deep. “I think I can figure it out.”

“So you’re going to try and take your relationship to the next level?” she asked, her throat tight.

“Definitely.”

“When?”

“When it’s least expected.”
“Then you’d better not tip your hand.” She was having trouble breathing.
“I won’t.”
“Good luck, Ty,” she said.
“Same to you, Dr. Sam. Same to you.”
Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely hear herself think and as she saw other phone lines blink to life she wondered if any of her listeners had caught the undercurrents of the conversation.
“Thanks for calling in, Ty.” She forced herself to check the display board and saw that the calls were stacking up like jets over O’Hare.
“Anytime, and, oh, Dr. Sam?”
“Yes?”
“Sweet dreams.”
Ty’s voice had been as low and sexy as a Delta night.

Samantha’s mouth was suddenly desert-dry and she was tongue-tied for the first time in all her years of radio. Heat rushed up her neck, and she tried to get her bearings. “The same to you, Ty,” she finally managed, her voice sounding throatier than usual. “Sweet dreams.” Quickly, before she lost her train of thought completely, she pressed a button, read the computer screen and said, “Hello, this is Dr. Sam, you’re on the air.”

“Hi, this is Terry…hey, who was that guy you were talking to? Do you know him?”

Sam sent a scalding glance toward Melanie. Wasn’t she screening the calls, for God’s sake. “Did you have a question about a relationship?”

“And that Annie, earlier. What was that all about?”

Melanie was shaking her head.

“I don’t know. Now, did you have a reason to call?”

“Well I was gonna ask about how to handle my teenage son.”

“What about him?”

Terry turned her attention back to her boy, but as soon as the next call came in, it was back to questions about Annie. The phone lines never quit blinking. The questions about who the breathy girl on the phone kept coming. Finally, the show was over. As the first stains of “Midnight Confession” played, Sam finished the show with her signature sign off, “…there is always tomorrow. Sweet dreams.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she clicked off her microphone, ripped off her headset, and stormed out of the studio to the glassed-in room where Tiny and Melanie were gathering up the paperwork and resetting the equipment for the *Lights Out* program.

“I thought you were screening the calls,” she charged.

“I was. You should have heard what came in here.” Melanie threw her headset onto the desk. “It was a nightmare.” The tech room was dark except for a desk lamp, the colored lights of the equipment and recessed bulbs over a bank of computers and recorders.

“She’s right,” Tiny said, rushing to Melanie’s defense. “No one wanted to discuss anything but Annie.”

“Or Ty. There were a couple callers who asked about him.” Melanie tossed her blond curls from her face. Sweat sheened on her face. “I tried, Sam. It’s not easy sometimes.”

Sam cooled off. It wasn’t Melanie’s fault that the woman pretending to be Annie called in. “Did you keep track of all the calls?” Sam demanded.

“Every last one of “em,” Tiny assured her as he tapped two fingers on a lined sheet of paper on the desk he was sharing with Melanie. “Right here on the log. I wrote down the telephone number and the name, if it was available. Some of the calls came in anonymously, of course. If they’re initiated from a company with a private phone system, then caller ID can’t identify them.”

“Then what good is caller ID?” Disgusted, Sam leaned over the desk, her eyes scanning Tiny’s log.

“It’s a start. And we’ve got most of “em. Here.” Tiny spun the lined paper around, then rolled his chair over to the bank of recording equipment and computers to finish arranging the presets for the next three hours. Sam’s gaze raked over the sheet covered with Tiny’s cryptic scrawl. As he’d said, every telephone call was listed. Beside the names were numbers and in some cases notations. Samantha ran her finger down the list, came to the name Annie, where there was a number and an identification name of a pay phone.

Of course. Whoever had phoned in was too clever to call from a private residence. “I’ll need a copy of this ledger.”

“For the police?” Melanie zipped her briefcase.

“And myself.”

“What was that all about in there?” Melanie asked, hitching a thumb at the darkened studio. Through the window, faint light shimmered from the streetlamps three floors below, throwing in relief the equipment in the booth,
microphones on long, skeletal arms bent at odd angles, and the desk surrounded by banks of levers and dials. It seemed sinister somehow. Evil. But that was ludicrous.

Melanie broke into her thoughts. “Come on, Sam, who was that Annie girl who called? She acted like she knew you, and you freaked out.”

“Play back her request. When she called in. Before you connected her to me. You said you taped it.”

“Yes, but—”

“I’ve got it,” Tiny interjected. “Just give me a minute…. Here we go—”

A woman’s voice came on after Melanie answered. “This is Annie. I would like to talk to Dr. Sam about my mother-in-law. She’s interfering in my marriage.”

“Hold on. It’ll just be a minute,” Melanie had assured her, and then the breathy, accusatory call.

Sam’s skin crawled.

Tiny stopped the playback, but cast a look over his shoulder, checking Sam’s reaction. “Who is she?”

“I don’t know who the caller really was, but she wasn’t Annie Seger.” Who would call in and pretend to be Annie Seger and why would anyone dredge that entire tragedy up again? “But—I know this sounds weird, but I think I’ve heard her voice, but it’s not quite right…I can’t place it.” She closed her eyes. Who, Sam, who would do this to you?

“Another one. Like the calls from that John guy,” Tiny surmised.

“Oh, this is different,” she said, thinking back to those horrid, lonely nights when Annie Seger had called in to the station in Houston, when the show’s ratings had skyrocketed, when Dr. Sam’s name had become a household word, when a young, pregnant girl had taken her life. Had it been neglect on her part? Had she read the situation wrong? Had there been any clues that Annie had been suicidal? How many times had she asked herself those same questions? How many nights had she lain awake, replaying the desperate phone calls in her mind, feeling guilt settle over her like a shroud, wondering if there was anything she could have done to help the girl.

“Of course it’s different. The caller was a woman this time.” Melanie looked from Sam to Tiny, who was frowning as he adjusted the volume of a prerecorded track. Then Sam realized Melanie didn’t know the story, had been in the booth when she’d told Tiny about Annie Seger.

“Samantha said the woman was pretending to be a girl who had called in while she was in Houston and the kid ended up dead,” Tiny said, as if making sure he’d gotten all the details straight.


“Beyond sick.” Tiny folded his arms over his chest. “My speciality,” Sam pointed out, finally recovering a bit of her composure. “Remember, I’m a shrink.”

The phone jangled, and they all jumped. Line two flashed impatiently. “I’ll get it. It’s probably Eleanor.” Sam punched the button for the speaker phone. “Hi, this is Samantha.”

“Glad I caught you in.”

She froze. Her heart missed a beat. “Who is this?” she said, but recognized the smooth, sexy voice immediately. John.

“Don’t play games, Samantha. You know who I am.”

“You’re the one who’s playing games.”

“Am I? I suppose I am. Are we having fun yet?”

Sam wanted to slam down the receiver, but couldn’t sever the connection, not if she ever wanted to nail this creep. Motioning frantically to Tiny and the recorder, she kept talking. “I wouldn’t call it fun, John,” she said, hoping that Melanie and Tiny would catch on. “Not fun at all.”

“I caught your program tonight.”

Spurred into action, Tiny pressed the right buttons and gave her a quick nod as the recorder began taping. Melanie stared at the speaker phone as if mesmerized.

“But you didn’t phone in.”

“I’m calling now,” he pointed out in his well-modulated voice.

Had she heard it before? Had he called her without claiming to be John? Was it someone she knew? Think, Sam,
“I wanted to talk to you alone. What we need to discuss is personal.”

“I don’t even know who you are.”

His chuckle was deep and rumbled through the room.

Melanie bit her lip.

Tiny’s eyes bulged behind his glasses.

The booth seemed close and dark and dangerous, the sound emanating from the speaker pure sin. Sweat prickled on Sam’s scalp.

“Sure you do, Doctor, you just don’t remember. Aren’t you putting two and two together yet? You with your degree and all…”

“What is it you want?” she asked, taking a seat and staring at the speaker as if she could will a vision of his face to appear. “Why are you calling me?” She could barely think, but she knew she had to keep him on the line. She grabbed a pen from a cup on the desk, flipped over the log and scratched out a quick note—CALL POLICE—that she shoved under Melanie’s nose.

“Because I know you for what you are, Samantha. I know that you’re a hot-blooded cunt. A phony. That degree you’re so proud of isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on.” He was getting angry now, his well-modulated voice becoming agitated. “Women like you need to be punished.” His words reverberated through the speaker more rapidly, as Melanie hurried out of the room and into the studio next door. Through the glass window, Sam saw her hit the lights and pick up the headset. She glanced over her shoulder and nodded as she punched a free line, quickly dialed and nodded back to Sam and Tiny. The corresponding light for line three flashed to life.

Keep him on the line, Sam, just keep him talking. Maybe he’ll slip up. Maybe the police will arrive, maybe there’s a way to trace the call.

“You’re a whore, Dr. Sam,” John charged. “A fifty-dollar-an-hour hooker!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Try to remain calm. Keep him on the damned line. Find out more about him, record it for the police. Her palms were sweaty, her heart thundering.

“It’s all in your past, Dr. Sam, that past you hide from the world. But I know. I was there. I remember when you were out selling it on the streets. You’re a hooker—a fake—and you’ll pay. The wages of sin are death,” he reminded her coldly. “And you’re gonna die. You’re gonna die soon.”

She swallowed back her fear, her fingers clamping around the pen in her hand. Who is he? Why is he so angry? What does he mean he “was there.” Where, damn it? “Why are you threatening me, John? What did I ever do to you?”

“Don’t you know? Don’t you remember?” he nearly yelled.

Annie’s words earlier—Don’t you remember me?

“No. Why don’t you tell me? Where did we meet?” she said, her voice somehow steady though she could barely breathe. Her skin was hot, her insides cold as death.

John didn’t say a word. That was creepier still. Knowing he was there, listening, not speaking. Through the glass window, Sam caught Melanie’s gaze. She was talking and nodding, gesturing with her hands as if the police could see through the phone lines.

“John, are you still there?”

“Are you on a speaker phone?” he asked suddenly. “It’s echoing.”

“Listen, John, why are you calling me—” The phone rang loudly and line four flashed impatiently. Sam ignored it. “What is it that you want from me?”

“You are, you lying cunt. You’re on a speaker. I thought I told you I wanted this to be personal!”

“It is, believe me. Now, tell me, John, what is it you want from me?”

“Retribution,” he said. “I want you on your knees. I want you to beg for forgiveness.”

“For what?”

But the line went dead. As if he’d heard the incoming call and gotten scared. “Damn,” Sam swore, trembling inside. Feeling weak. Vulnerable. Violated. Don’t let him do this to you. Don’t let him get to you. But the hatred she’d felt, the rage he had against her was horrifying.

“I got it all,” Tiny assured her, as she hit the button for line four.
“WSLJ.”
“Dammit, Sam, is that you? What the hell’s going on over there? You were supposed to call me back.” Eleanor’s voice bellowed from the speaker phone. “Are you all okay?”
“We’re fine.”
“That was some weird stuff on the phone tonight,” Eleanor said. “I couldn’t believe it when that girl saying she was Annie Seger called.” There was pause as Eleanor drew in a breath. “Sam, tell me you’re okay.”
“I think I already did.”
“Yeah, but I remember what happened. I was there, y’know. In Houston.”

Suddenly self-conscious that Tiny was hearing every bit of this conversation, probably was recording it, Sam cut Eleanor off. “Look, we’re all tired. Let’s not go into it now. I’ll come into the station early tomorrow and we’ll talk. There are other things we’re going to have to go over.”
“Other things?” Eleanor’s voice was instantly wary.
“The other prank caller, the guy who calls himself John, phoned in after the program again. I just hung up.”
“After the show? What’s that all about?”
“I don’t know, but it’s the second time he called once the program’s gone off the air. As if that somehow makes it more personal, I guess. The first time he said he was busy, and I was to blame. This time he didn’t offer up any excuses for not calling during the show, got really upset when he realized I was using a speaker phone and became threatening. Tiny’s got everything on tape. We’ll listen to it tomorrow.”
“I don’t like it, Sam. Not at all.”
“Neither do I.”
“We’ll have to call the police again.”
“Melanie just did.” She glanced through the window and saw Melanie nodding, still gesturing as she talked into the microphone. “It’s handled.”
“My ass! This has gone way too far, you hear me. Way too far. Now, I don’t want any of you walking outside alone tonight, okay? Go in a group to the parking garage. Be sure Tiny’s with you or take a cab. Y’all hear me?”
“Loud and clear,” Sam said, as Melanie hung up in the other room.
“I’m serious, Sam. I don’t like this garbage.”
“Me, neither.”
“You tell the police they’d better figure out how to catch this bastard, or they’ll have to deal with me.”
“That’ll get them shivering in their boots.”
“Hey, I have no time for jokes. This is serious.”
“I know, Eleanor.”
“Good.”
“And tomorrow, we are gonna get to the bottom of it. All of us. Tiny, Melanie and you are to meet me in my office at one in the afternoon.” She let out a breath. “Mother of God. Be careful. I’ll see ya tomorrow.”
“We’ll be there,” Sam said, and hung up as Melanie charged into the room.
“The police are on their way.” She glanced at the speaker phone. “Did he say anything else?”
“The guy’s a maniac,” Tiny said. “It was weird. Beyond weird.”
“You’ve got that right.”

Rubbing the back of his neck anxiously, Tiny added, “I’d better go down and wait for the cops.” He grabbed his jacket and backpack, was searching for his pack of Camels as he walked out the door.
“What now?” Melanie asked.
“We wait. For the police.”
“I know, but I don’t think they can do anything.”
Sam wasn’t going there, wasn’t going to give in to her own thoughts that John would somehow escape being found out and apprehended by the police. “Let’s just hope they catch this guy and soon.”
“And if they don’t?” Melanie asked.
Sam didn’t answer. Didn’t want to think about it, but the caller’s threats echoed through her mind as surely as if
he was whispering in her ear.

_The wages of sin are death, and you’re gonna die. You’re gonna die soon._

He was sweating.

His blood pounding, the heat of the night heavy and damp.

The conversation burning through his brain as he walked briskly from the phone booth along St. Charles Avenue.

Through parked cars he jaywalked, crossing the streetcar rails and hurrying past the universities—Tulane and Loyola, side by side, brick-and-stone structures that appeared in the dim light of the security lamps as fortresses, castles built in honor of almighty academia. His skin prickled as he glanced at the buildings. He could smell the sweet seductive scent of young minds. Just as his had once been.

College.

Philosophy.

Religion.

Where he had learned the truth; where he had understood his mission. Where it had all begun.

Oh, his mentor would be proud.

A few students wandered the great expanse of lawn talking, laughing, smoking, probably getting high. Warm light glowed from some of the windows, but he barely noticed as he ducked through the shadows, half-running, his heart pounding, her words ricocheting like hot bullets through his brain.

_Why are you threatening me, John? What did I ever do to you?_

She didn’t remember.

Didn’t recall the horror that had changed his life—ruined it.

Rage screamed through his blood, and he broke into a jog, running faster toward the heart of the city, toward the siren song of Bourbon Street, where he could blend into the crowd that forever walked the city streets, where he could hide in the throng and yet be nearer to her.

_What did I ever do to you?_

Soon she’d know.

Soon she’d understand.

It would be her last thought before she died.
“…if you think of anything else, let us know,” one of the two officers who took Sam’s statement said, as he and his partner left the kitchen of WSLJ, where Sam, Melanie and Tiny had given their statements. Tiny had been in and out of the reception area, checking the prerecorded program, making sure that everything was running smoothly.

“God, I’m glad that’s over.” Melanie grabbed her purse and briefcase. “What a marathon.”

“They’re just being thorough.”

“Think they’ll catch anyone?” Tiny asked as he rummaged in the cupboards, found a bag of popcorn and set it inside the microwave.

“I can only hope,” Sam said around a yawn. Bone-tired, she didn’t want to think about either of the callers for the rest of the night. It was nearly three in the morning. All she wanted to do was drive home, fall into bed and close out the world. Her head was beginning to ache, her ankle starting to throb.

“I think that popcorn belongs to Gator,” Melanie said, as Tiny pushed the timer.

“He’ll never miss it. Are you guys all right to walk out of here alone?”

“We’ll manage,” Sam said dryly. She couldn’t imagine Tiny as any kind of a protector. “Come on, let’s go, Melanie.” She gathered her things and the popcorn kernels started exploding over the hum of the microwave. The smell of butter filled the kitchen as she and Melanie made their way downstairs and outside the building.

Ty was waiting for her. Parked illegally in front of the station at three in the morning, he leaned one jean-clad hip against the fender of his Volvo and stared at the door of the building as Sam and Melanie stepped into the warm summer night. His arms were folded over his chest, and even in the watery light from the streetlamp she noticed his jaw was dark with a couple days’ worth of beard. He was dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and leather jacket. Reminiscent of an older, more jaded James Dean. Great, she thought sarcastically. Just what I need. And yet a tiny thrill of anticipation swept through her.

The smell of the river was close, the air heavy, the sound of a lonesome saxophone echoing over the quiet hum of what little traffic there was, and a man who had been a stranger little more than a week before was waiting for her.

Ty pushed himself off the car. “I thought I’d come down and see that you were okay.”

“I’m fine. Just dead on my feet,” she said, but couldn’t help feeling a little glow of warmth for him.

To Melanie, he said, “Ty Wheeler. I’m Sam’s neighbor.”

Sam belatedly found her manners as a car cruised past. Through the open window the sound of heavy bass thumped from huge speakers. “Oh, right, Ty, this is Melanie Davis, my assistant, Melanie, Ty. He’s a writer who owns an old dog and buys broken-down sailboats.”

Melanie gave him a quick once-over and offered a curious, friendly smile. “A writer? Like a journalist?”

“Nothing so noble, I’m afraid,” he drawled. “Novels. Fiction.”

“Really?” Melanie was impressed. “You’re published?”

Ty’s smile flashed white in the darkness. “Hopin’ to be.”

“What’s your book about?”

“Kind of a Horse Whisperer meets The Silence of the Lambs. It’s got a farm theme running through it.”

“Give me a break,” Sam said, and Melanie chuckled.

“Actually, I thought I’d come down and see that you” —he touched Sam on the elbow—“were all right.”

“Right as rain,” she lied.

His fingers tightened before he dropped his hand and again she felt that ridiculous little glow. “So where’s the car?”

“About two blocks over.” Despite all her talk about feminism and being a strong single woman, she was more at ease having Ty with them and rationalized that it wasn’t necessarily because he was a man, but that there was greater safety in numbers.
“You’re the Ty who called in earlier tonight,” Melanie guessed, and Sam could almost see the wheels turning in her assistant’s mind as she remembered Ty’s questions about pushing a relationship to another level. “Oh…I get it.” Her eyes twinkled in the weak light.

“Yes, I did call in,” he admitted. “Didn’t like what I was hearing on the airwaves, so I phoned the station to change the tone of things. After I hung up, I decided maybe Samantha would like a ride home. When I got here I saw the police car.”

Melanie didn’t comment, just lifted a curious eyebrow as if trying to get a bead on Ty’s connection to Sam.

“I think I’d better drive,” Sam said. “I don’t want to leave my car here and then not have a way into the city tomorrow.”

“I’d drive you,” he offered, but Sam didn’t want to bother him, nor be dependent.

“And I’d feel better having my own wheels.”

“What you want.” He shrugged. “But I’ll walk you to your car and you can drive me back to mine.”

“You really don’t have to,” Sam said, but Melanie had different ideas.

“Hey, he came all the way down here in the middle of the night to see that you were safe. Give the guy a break. Let him walk you—us.” She sounded almost envious, and Sam wondered where her boyfriend was, the one she never talked about. Maybe they’d broken up. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time Melanie had fallen head over heels in love only to change her mind a few weeks later.

“I’d feel better about it,” Ty said, as he fell into step with them. “As I said, I was listening to the program and caught that weird call. From Annie—whomever she was. It freaked you out.”

“That wasn’t the half of it.” Though Sam would have preferred to tell Ty about “John’s” call later, at another time, Melanie was fairly bursting at the news and couldn’t hold her tongue. As they passed the wrought-iron fence encircling the thick shrubs of Jackson Square, Melanie eagerly explained that “John” had phoned the station once Sam had signed off.

“So he’d rather talk to you alone,” Ty said solemnly as they crossed in front of St. Louis Cathedral. Lamplight splashed against the white facade. Three sharp spires knifed into the blackness of the night sky, reaching upward to heaven, the cross atop the highest steeple barely visible as it pierced the inky heavens. “What does he want?”

“Retribution,” Melanie said.

“For what?” Ty’s jaw tightened.

Sam shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Your sins.” Melanie was reaching into her purse, jingling coins as she searched for her keys. “He’s always talking about your sins. It’s like he’s some…priest or something.” They reached the parking structure just as Melanie extracted her key ring. A dozen keys jangled. “I’m here on the first floor.” Unerringly she zeroed in on her little hatchback and unlocked the door. “Want a ride up?” she asked.

“I’m just on two.” Sam didn’t need her assistant acting as if she were a wimp, and said sarcastically, “I think I can make it.”

“I’ll walk her,” Ty added, and though apart of Samantha still wasn’t sure about her new neighbor, she really didn’t think he would do her any harm. He’d had plenty of opportunities when they were alone and no one had known they were together; it seemed unlikely, even if he was the caller, which she doubted, that he would risk attacking or kidnapping her when Melanie had seen them together. Besides, truth to tell, she felt safe with him…comfortable.

“Fine.”

Melanie was in her car in seconds. She switched on her headlights and engine, then backed out of her spot. Waving with one hand, she honked her horn, and it echoed loudly as she tromped on the gas. The little car zoomed to the exit in a cloud of exhaust.

“Flamboyant, isn’t she?” Ty observed, as they took the stairs.

“And melodramatic and extremely efficient.”

Sam’s red Mustang was the only car parked on the second floor of the gloomy lot. Half of the security lamps were burned out, the few remaining concentrated around the elevator and stairs.

“Right out of a Hitchcock movie,” Ty said, his booteheels ringing on the dirty concrete.

“That’s a little overly dramatic, don’t you think?”
“I just hope you never walk here alone,” Ty said, scowling.

“Sometimes. But I’m careful.”

His gaze swept the empty spaces. “I don’t like it.”

She bristled a bit. She hardly knew the guy. He didn’t have to automatically step into the role of protector, or big brother or whatever. “I can handle myself.” Oh, yeah, Sam, like you handled yourself when the woman claiming to be Annie phoned in. You lost it, Doctor. Big-time.

“If you say so.”

“I’ve made it this far.” She already had her handbag open and had found her keys—the duplicate set she’d had made since her trip to Mexico. “Look, I appreciate your concern. Really. It’s…it’s nice, but I’m a big girl. An adult.”

“Is that a nice way of saying ‘get lost’?”

“No!” she said quickly. “I mean…I just don’t want you to feel obligated somehow, or that you need to take care of me because I’m one of those pathetic, weak, porcelain-doll kinds of women.”

One side of his mouth lifted. “Believe me, that’s the farthest thing from my mind.”

“Good. Just so we understand each other.”

“I think we do.” He stepped closer, and she smelled the scent of his aftershave, saw the way his eyes had darkened with the night, noticed that he was staring at her lips. Oh, God, was he going to kiss her? Her skin tingled at the thought of it, her silly pulse kicked up a notch, and as he leaned closer she braced herself, only to feel his lips brush chastely against the side of her cheek. “Take care,” he said, then stepped away as she unlocked the car door and swung it open.

Her heart was pounding. Her mind leaping ahead to vibrant images of deeper kisses, of bodies touching, of skin rubbing against naked skin. She started to slide behind the wheel seat when she noticed the piece of paper…an envelope on the bucket seat. “What the devil—?” She picked it up, saw her name scrawled across the envelope and without thinking, slid out the card. “No,” she whispered as she read the words.

The inscription, Happy 25th Birthday had been circled in red, then slashed through the middle at an angle.

Sam dropped the card as if it burned her fingers. She felt the blood drain from her face.

“What is it?” Ty reached bent down and picked up the folded sheet. “Jesus, what—?” He opened it and saw a single word spelled out in red letters: MURDERER. “How did this get into the car?”

“I—I don’t know.” Sam closed her eyes for a second. Remembered the horror that had happened in Houston, the girl who had killed herself. Her head pounded, and she sagged against the back fender.

“Are you okay?” Ty’s arm was around her shoulders. “This has something to do with the woman who claimed she was Annie. She said something about it being her birthday Thursday.”

“Yes. Annie Seger.” Who would do such a thing? Why? It had been nine years. Nine years. She shivered inside. “I don’t get it. Why is someone trying to terrorize me?”

“And how did they get into your car. It was locked, right?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

He looked over the window and door, pointed out the scratches on the paint. “Was this here before?”

“No.”

“Looks like it was forced. Does anyone have a spare key?”

“My extra key is at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean,” she said shaking her head. “I lost the entire set when I was in Mexico.”

“So you only have the one key.”

“I had a duplicate made. It’s in my drawer at home.” Some of her fear was seeping away as she stared at the scratches on the door and realized Ty’s arm was around her. “David had one, but he gave it back while we were in Mexico—it was in my purse when it went overboard.” There were questions in Ty’s eyes, and she added, “It’s a long story.”

“You don’t think this David had a copy made?”

“He wouldn’t do that,” she said, but heard the doubt in her words. “Besides, he’s in Houston.”

“You think.”
“He’s not a part of this,” she said, shaking her head emphatically, as if to convince herself. Clearing her throat, she stepped out of Ty’s embrace. She didn’t need to be falling apart and into his arms. Her knees were no longer weak, and the horror she felt was slowly being replaced by anger. She couldn’t, wouldn’t let some anonymous creep threaten her or ruin her life. “It’s…it’s over between David and me. Has been for quite a while.”

“Does he know it?”

“Yeah.”

Ty’s jaw slid to one side as if he didn’t quite believe her, but he didn’t argue the point. His gaze swept the deserted parking structure before returning to Sam. “Who’s Annie Seger?”

“A girl who called in to my radio program in Houston. Nine years ago.”

“She’s the same one who phoned you tonight?”

“She claims to be.”

“But Annie’s dead,” he deduced. “And this pervert, whoever he is, blames you? Is that what you think?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “It must be the guy who calls in…John or whatever his real name is. He’s always talking about sin and retribution, that I’m guilty of some crime, although lately he’s acted like I was a prostitute or something. It…it doesn’t make any sense, doesn’t hang together. Tonight when he phoned in after the show, he told me I was going to die.”

Ty’s eyes narrowed. “So he’s escalating. His threats are more specific.”

“Yes.”

“Damn.” He raked stiff fingers through his hair. “So you think he called in, pretended he was a woman…is that it…or that…or that he has an accomplice and…that this is what? Some kind of conspiracy to scare the hell out of you?”

“I—I don’t know,” she admitted and again felt weak, an emotion she detested.

“We have to go to the police.”

“I know,” she said, hating the thought. She was bone-tired and wanted nothing more than to fall into a long, hot bath, towel off and fall into bed to sleep for about a billion hours.

“Let me call.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. Sam braced herself for another ordeal. How many times had she already been questioned? Four times? Five? She was beginning to lose count.

And the stalker was still at large. She rotated the kinks from her neck as Ty talked to the dispatcher, who promised that the officers who had been at the station less than half an hour earlier would meet them at the garage.

The two uniformed cops made it in fifteen minutes, driving to the parking garage with their siren wailing and lights flashing. They asked questions, checked out Sam’s car, put the card in a plastic bag and called for other officers to dust the Mustang for fingerprints as well as check the interior for other evidence, then looked over the structure of the vehicle to ensure that it was safe to drive.

By the time all the officers had finished and driven away, it was after three.

Ty’s mouth was a thin, hard line. “I think I should drive you home.”

She was touched, but shook her head. “Don’t be ridiculous. I can drive.”

Ty wasn’t having any of it. “Listen, Samantha, whoever did this is sick. We both know that. He broke into your car tonight, right? What’s to say that he didn’t tamper with it? Drain the brake fluid, or plant a bomb or—”

“The police checked it.”

“They can miss things.”

“I don’t think so, and I’m not going to start jumping at my own shadow. I can’t live my life scared. If I do, I lose, Ty. He wins. That’s what he wants. To scare me to death. Make me nervous and edgy. He’s playing a psychological game with me, and if he killed me, it would be over. And tampering with the car is too…impersonal. This guy calls me up, he sends me letters, he lets me know he’s around. He didn’t like it when I was on the speaker phone. He wants to be intimate with me. To be personal. To get into my head. I know it. I feel it.”

“And do you ‘know’ or ‘feel’ that he could be a killer? For God’s sake, Samantha, he’s threatened to kill you.”

Sam was thinking hard now, rubbing her arms despite the heat, biting her lip and starting to understand the man who called himself John. “I know,” she admitted. “But it won’t be until I’ve repented, not until I understand the sins I’ve committed. He’s into some kind of religious thing—sin, retribution.”

“You can’t take the chance. Isn’t this enough proof that the guy’s unhinged, that he’s going to do you major
harm?” Ty asked. “He’s accused you of murder. He’s spouted a lot of biblical mumbo jumbo, maybe he believes in
the old ‘An eye for an eye,’ type of retribution.”

“But not yet.” As weary as she was, she was certain that she wasn’t in immediate danger. John wanted to terrorize
her. He got his thrills by trying to scare her out of her wits and then communicating with her. He wanted her to beg
for forgiveness. She glanced at her car. “Don’t worry, I—I’m going to be fine. I’m starting to understand him.”

“Believe me, no one understands this creep. Come on, let me drive you home.”

“It’s nice of you, really, to be so concerned, but I’m okay. A big girl, you know,” she said, though she wasn’t
certain she meant it any more than she thought it was a good idea to let Ty take on the role of bodyguard. She barely
knew the guy. He seemed sincere enough, and she had a sense of safety around him, but his timing, showing up
when she’d started getting the prank calls made her second-guess his motives. God, she hated this…this newfound
fear. John had stripped her of her independence, but she intended to fight back.

“Okay, then I’m going to check out the car again, and I’ll follow you. All you have to do is drive me to my car,
and I’ll make sure you get into your house all right.”

“Promise?” She was too tired to argue any longer. What would it hurt for him to see her to her house? It wasn’t as
if it was out of his way. “Fine. If that’s what you want.”

“It is. Now, I don’t suppose you have a flashlight.”

“Ask and ye shall receive,” she said, and opened the trunk.

“Not funny, Sam.”

“Oh, ye of little faith and humor.” She pulled out an emergency roadside kit—flares, matches, reflective signs and
a flashlight. For the next few minutes Ty checked under the hood and the body of the car, lying on the grimy
cement, shining the flashlight’s small beam across the wheel axles and exhaust system. He tested the lug nuts on her
wheels and looked over the ignition and steering column. By the time he’d finished his forehead was damp, sweat
running down the sides of his face.

“I guess there’s only one way to find out for sure,” he said and snagged the keys from her hand. “Stand back.”

“No way. I’m not going to let you—”

“Too late.” He slid into the bucket seat. “Back off in case I get blown to smithereens.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Humor me—the one of little faith and humor—okay?”

“You’re impossible.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Seeing that he wasn’t about to budge, she backed up a few steps, her stomach tightening. He jabbed her key into
the ignition, twisted and the Mustang’s engine caught on the first try, firing to life. Ty stepped on the throttle,
gunning the engine. Exhaust spewed out of the tailpipe, the roar of six cylinders deafening. But there was no
explosion. No flying glass. No twisting of metal.

“I think it’s okay,” Ty said through the open window. “Hop in.” Leaning over he opened the passenger door. Since
there was no changing his mind, she crossed the short span of grease-dappled concrete and climbed into the
passenger side of her car.

“You don’t have to baby-sit me,” she said, as he drove down the ramp to the first floor and out into the street,
where streetlights glowed watery blue and there was little traffic.

“Is that what I’m doing?” He slanted her a glance as he slowed for a traffic light and her heart nearly stopped.
There was something about him, something she didn’t quite understand that warned her to be wary, yet she couldn’t
resist him, couldn’t help but trust him. As the interior of the car glowed red in the reflection of the stoplight, she
catched his eyes, saw promises in his gaze she didn’t want to understand. “I’m baby-sitting?” he asked again.

“Seems like.” Forcing her accelerating heartbeat to slow, she held up one finger. “You called the station after I got
the weird call from Annie.” Another finger jutted upward as the light changed and she watched his profile—strong
jaw, deep-set eyes, high forehead, bladed cheeks, razor-thin lips. In an instant she wondered what it would feel like
to kiss him...to touch him...The car shot forward, and she realized she hadn’t finished her thought. “You waited for
me at the station door.” A third finger joined the first two as Ty rounded a final corner and pulled into a spot behind
his Volvo. “You walked Melanie and me to the parking garage.” Her pinky straightened. “You checked out the car
and drove me here. And”—her thumb raised and she splayed her fingers in front of his face as her car idled—“and
you’re going to follow me home.”
He grabbed her hand. Hard warm fingers wrapping around hers. “And,” he vowed solemnly, “when we get back to your place, I’m gonna walk you inside.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I want to, okay?” His eyes, dark with the night, held hers and his fingers tightened. “I would never forgive myself, Samantha, if something happened to you. Now, we can sit here and argue semantics all night, but I think we should go. It’s late.”


One side of his mouth lifted. “I’m holding you to it.” Then he was out of the car, jogging to the Volvo, and sliding inside. His brake lights flashed as Sam crawled over the gearshift and landed behind the steering wheel. After she adjusted the position of her seat, she punched the accelerator, watching in her rearview mirror as the Volvo pulled away from the curb and followed her.

Ty Wheeler seemed to have appointed himself her bodyguard.
Whether she wanted him to or not.
Chapter Fourteen

On the way home Sam punched the first button on her radio, caught the end of the *Lights Out* program and drove through the deserted streets toward the lake and the small community of Cambrai. She met a few cars, the oncoming headlights bright, but, for the most part, her attention was focused in the rearview mirror and the twin beams from Ty’s Volvo. What was he thinking? Why was he making her problems his? What did he want from her? She turned onto her street, and she couldn’t help but second-guess him. Did his boat really break down?

“Stop it,” she growled as she pulled into her driveway and pushed the button on her automatic garage-door opener. She was tired, her nerves shot, paranoia taking hold. As the garage door cranked upward she pulled inside. It had once been a carriage house but had been converted to house a horseless carriage sometime in the nineteen twenties. Later a breezeway had been added, attaching the garage to the kitchen. As she climbed out of the car, Ty’s car wheeled into the drive. He was out of his car in seconds and following her into the house.

“No arguments,” he advised when he noticed she was about to protest. “Let me check the place out.”

“It’s been locked.”

“So was the car.”

He walked ahead of her through the door and strode along the glassed-in breezeway as if he’d done it all his life. Inside the house, Sam shut off the alarm that she’d activated for once. She’d forgotten it time and time again, just wasn’t used to setting it. Thankfully, tonight, the troublesome thing seemed to be working, but Ty wasn’t satisfied. he walked slowly through the kitchen and dining area where, perched on one of the chairs, Charon watched with wide, suspicious eyes.

“It’s all right,” she mouthed to the cat.

With Samantha on his heels, Ty did a room-by-room search of the house. He didn’t bother to ask her permission as he opened doors to cupboards and closets, even tested the locked trapdoor of the crawl space tucked under the stairs. Then he took the steps two at a time to the second floor. Without a word he walked into the guest room, with its lacy curtains, daybed and antique dresser, through the shared bath and finally ended up in her bedroom.

Following after him, she felt uneasy and exposed. Naked. All the private corners of her living space bared. He slid one glance at the oversize canopy bed, then proceeded into the walk-in wardrobe where her clothes, shoes and handbags were strewn haphazardly.

Within seconds he emerged. Sam was leaning against her armoire. “Satisfied?” she asked. “No bogeymen?”

“No so far.” He tested the lock on the French doors leading to her balcony, gave the lever a shake, then grunted as if he finally was convinced that the house was safe. “Okay…so I guess I can give you the all clear.”

“Good.” She stretched and started for the door, but Ty didn’t follow.

“Why don’t you tell me about Annie Seger?” he asked, leaning against one of the bedposts. “I know you’re tired, but it would help me to know why someone is blaming you for her death.”

“That’s a good question.” Sam shoved her fingers through her hair and thought for a second. “I can’t really tell you the answer as I don’t understand it myself.” She lowered herself into the rocker by the French doors and wrapped the faded afghan her great-grandmother had knitted decades ago around her shoulders. Ty had been kind to her, interested. The least she could do was try and explain. “I was hosting a show like the one I’m doing now, only at a smaller station. I’d only been out of college a while and was separated from my husband, so I was on my own for the first time in my life, and the show was enjoying quite a bit of success. Jeremy, that’s my ex, thought it was going to my head, and tried to make it an issue, like the catalyst for the divorce, but it was more than that. A lot more.

“Anyway, things were going relatively well.” She remembered how each day she would push thoughts of Jeremy and the divorce from her mind, tell herself she hadn’t failed, that the marriage had been destined to fall apart, then drive to the station and bury herself in her work, listen to the callers, try to sort things out for others as she hadn’t been able to for herself.

“One night, this girl calls, says her name is Annie, and that she wants some advice.” Samantha remembered the girl’s hesitancy at first, how embarrassed she’d seemed, how frightened. Pulling the afghan closer around her neck,
Sam said, “The girl, Annie, was scared. She’d just found out she was pregnant and couldn’t tell her parents because they would flip—maybe turn her out, that sort of thing. I got the impression that they were very strict and religious, that their daughter being unwed and in a family way would be socially unacceptable.

“I suggested she talk to a counselor at school or her pastor, someone who might be able to help her and guide her in her decision, someone she trusted.”

“But she didn’t?” he asked, still leaning against the bedpost.

“She couldn’t, I guess. A few nights later she called back. More scared than ever. Her boyfriend wanted her to get an abortion, but she didn’t want one, was adamantly against it for personal as well as religious reasons. I told her not to do anything she wasn’t comfortable with, that it was her body and her baby. Of course, as the audience is hearing this, the phone lines are lighting up like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Everyone had an opinion. Or advice. I asked her to call back when I wasn’t on the air, that I would give her the names of some counselors and women’s services where she could get one-on-one help.”

Sam let out her breath slowly as she remembered those painful days. “Maybe I wasn’t the best one to be giving out advice at the time,” she admitted, thinking back to that black period in her life. “I’d only been in Houston a few months, and the reason I got the job is that the woman who was hosting the program had quit. I was only supposed to be a temporary fill-in, but audience response was great, even if the pay wasn’t, so they offered me a raise, and I stayed on.”

She rolled her eyes at her own naïveté, pushed back with her toe and began slowly rocking. “Even though we were on the road to divorce anyway, my husband didn’t like it. I was in the limelight for once, not him, and it eroded the marriage all the faster I think. I wasn’t going to give up the job and within weeks—possibly days—he found someone else...or, more likely, he’d been seeing her all along, but that’s another story,” she added, surprised at herself for confiding so much. “We were talking about Annie Seger. The upshot was that Annie ignored my advice, never called after hours, but phoned in every other night or so. And the audience went crazy. People started phoning in like mad. Everyone from the president of the local chapter of Right to Life and several youth ministers to someone from the local paper. The thing just kept getting bigger and bigger. Mushrooming. I had lawyers calling me with offers of money, couples wanted to adopt Annie’s baby. Young mothers called, women who’d suffered abortions or miscarriages or marrying the wrong guy because they were pregnant and had been forced to get married by their folks. It was a circus. And in the middle of it was a lonely, scared sixteen-year-old.”

Sam shivered, remembered being seated at a windowless booth in the heart of the station, taking the calls, wondering if Annie would phone in again. George Hannah, the owner, had been beside himself with glee at the ratings, and Eleanor, too, had reveled in the increased listenership. “Everyone at the station was thrilled. We were beating out the rival station, and that was what mattered. Ratings were through the roof, by God! And the bottom line looked good.” Sam couldn’t hide the sarcasm in her voice.

But, aside from all the hoopla, Annie had been desperate. And Samantha had failed her. Even after all of these years, Sam still felt the girl’s despair, her fear. Her shame.

“I tried to get through to her, but she couldn’t find the strength to confide in anyone close to her. She had family but seemed terrified of them. Couldn’t or wouldn’t talk to a school counselor or anyone from her parish. She became angry with me, for some reason. As if I were to blame. It was awful. Just...awful.” Sam drew in a long breath and said, “Then, after the seventh or eighth time she’d called in, about three weeks after the initial time she’d contacted me, she was found dead. Overdose and her wrists slit. Her mother’s prescription for sleeping pills and about half a fifth of vodka along with a pair of bloody gardening shears were nearby. There was a suicide note on her computer. It said something about Annie being ashamed, feeling alone, not having anyone to confide in, not her parents, boyfriend or me.”

Sam remembered seeing the front page of the paper the next day with Annie Seger’s face in black and white. A pretty, privileged girl, captain of the cheerleading squad, an honor student, dead by her own hand.

A girl who had been pregnant.

And alone. Someone who had reached out for help and gotten nothing.

The girl’s high-school picture had made Annie seem more real, more helpless, more tragic to Sam. Annie had been so damned young. Sam had been devastated and the images of the smiling girl in the black-and-white photo of the paper still haunted her. “I quit the job after that. Took some time off and spent it with my dad. Went into private practice in Santa Monica. It was all Eleanor could do to persuade me to get behind the mike again and host another program.” She plucked at the afghan with her fingers. “And now it’s all happening again.”

“So Thursday would have been Annie’s twenty-fifth birthday?”
“I guess.” Sam lifted a shoulder. Felt cold to her bones. Tightened the blanket around her though the temperature in the room was probably over eighty degrees. “I just don’t know why anyone would bring it all up again.”

“Neither do I,” he said, and held her gaze for a second longer than necessary. “Listen, if you hear or see anything that bothers you—anything at all—give me a call.” Pulling a pen from his pocket, he crossed to the nightstand and wrote on the notepad by her phone. “Here’re my numbers— home and cell. Don’t lose ‘em.” He tore off the top page, walked to her chair and handed her the information.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” she said, and had to stifle a yawn.

Ty glanced again at the bed with its fluffy duvet, decorative pillows and slatted canopy. “Go to bed, Champ. You’ve had a long day.”

“Very long,” she agreed, thinking it had lasted forever. To her surprise, Ty reached forward, pulled her, afghan and all, out of the chair and drew her into the circle of his arms.

“You will call me,” he said, leaning down so that his forehead touched hers.

All thoughts of sleep vanished. The cozy room with its sloped ceiling seemed to shrink. Become warmer. “If it comes down to that.”

“Even if you just get scared.” With one strong finger he lifted her chin. “Promise.”

“Oh, sure. Scout’s honor,” she agreed, her heart drumming wildly. The scent of old leather mingled with a lingering trace of after shave and that pure male scent she hadn’t smelled in a long, long time.

“I’ll hold you to it.” He glanced down at her mouth and in a second she realized he was going to kiss her.

Oh, God.

Her throat went dry, her skin tingled in anticipation. As if he knew exactly what she was feeling, what kind of response he’d already evoked from her, he had the audacity to smile, that irrepressible, cocky, half grin that made her breath stop.

“Good night, Sam,” he said, and he brushed a kiss across her forehead before releasing her. “You keep your doors locked and give me a call if anything bothers you.”

You bother me, she thought, as he released her and walked out the door. Damn it, Ty Wheeler, you bother the hell out of me. Two hours later Ty flipped through his notes as he sat at the keyboard, the dog at his feet, the windows open to let in the breeze. Ice cubes melting, a drink sat on his desk, nearly forgotten as he flipped through his notes on Annie Seger. He knew the info by heart, yet studied it as if he’d never heard Annie’s name before.

Which was ridiculous, as he was related to her in a roundabout way.

His third cousin. Which was the reason he’d been thrown off the case.

He perused the yellowed newspaper clippings, reading over the facts that he’d memorized long ago:

Too frightened to tell her parents that she was in a family way, she’d sought solace in a local radio psychiatrist, Dr. Samantha Leeds, and couldn’t heed the doctor’s advice. She’d felt she had nowhere to turn, and when the father of her child had told her that he didn’t want to raise a family, she’d gone into her bedroom, turned on her computer, written a note and when sleeping pills and vodka hadn’t done the trick, slit her wrists.

It had been a scandal that had rocked a wealthy section of Houston. Soon, the Dr. Sam show had gone off the air but not because of poor ratings. Contrarily, the popularity of her program had soared to new heights and her fame, or infamy, had skyrocketed.

But Samantha Leeds hadn’t been able to live with herself, or so it seemed. She’d quit the show and the radio station and gone into private practice until the past six months, when the same people who had worked with her in Houston had lured her to New Orleans.

Ty took a sip of his drink. Crushed the ice between his teeth.

He remembered the entire scenario with Annie Seger. He’d been one of the first to arrive at her house and had witnessed the devastation of not only her, but her entire family.

Annie had been a pretty girl with a few freckles dusting her nose, short reddish hair and blue-green eyes that had sparkled in life.

A waste.

A shame.

Carrying his drink, Ty walked outside to listen to the lapping of the lake against the dock. Sasquatch followed him outside and, nose to the wind, trotted off the verandah to the yard, where he lifted his leg on a stately old live oak.

Crickets chirped and a solitary frog croaked as his dog wandered between the trees and sniffed the ground. Ty
glanced at the *Bright Angel*, sails down, gently rocking against her moorings. Somewhere far off a siren wailed plaintively, muted by distance. Far into the horizon the first gray light of dawn was breaking.

Ty thought of Samantha Leeds, only a quarter of a mile away.

A beautiful woman.
An intelligent woman.
A damned fascinating woman.
A woman he imagined he could make love to over and over again. Telling himself he was a fool, he fantasized about what it would be like to take her to bed, to feel her ragged breath as she lay beneath him, or the feel of her skin, soft as silk, against his body.

No doubt about it, she was getting to him.
And he was letting her.
Which was a colossal mistake.

He tossed back his drink and whistled to the old shepherd as he walked into the house.

The last thing, the very last thing he could do was lose his sense of purpose; his objectivity. He’d made a promise to himself and no one, especially not Annie’s radio-psychologist was going to stop him.

"*Why didn’t you help me, Dr. Sam. Why?*" The voice was young and frail and seemed far away, through the patchy fog and dense trees. Samantha followed the sound, her heart pounding, her breath tight as she tried to peer through branches dripping with Spanish moss and blocking her view.

"Annie? Where are you?" she called, and her voice echoed through the woods, reverberating loudly.

"*Over here…*"

Sam ran, tripping over roots and vines, squinting in the darkness, hearing the sounds of the freeway in the distance over the lonely hoot of an owl. Why had Annie lured her out here, what did she want?

"I can’t find you."

"Because you’re not looking hard enough."

"But where…?" She broke through the trees and saw the girl, a beautiful girl with short red hair, big eyes and fear cast in her every feature. She was standing in the middle of a cemetery with headstones and raised coffins, a filigreed iron fence separating her from Samantha. In her arms she held a baby wrapped in tattered swaddling clothes. The baby was crying, wailing horridly, as if in pain.

"I’m sorry," Sam said, walking along the fence, searching for a gate, trying to get closer. "I didn’t know."

"I called you. I asked for your help. You turned me away."

"No, I wanted to help you, I did."

"Liar!"

Sam dragged her fingers along the posts, hurrying faster, trying to gain entrance, but no matter how many corners she turned, how far she ran through the rising mist and shadows, she couldn’t find the gate, couldn’t get close, could never reach the girl and the baby whose muffled cries tore at Sam’s heart.

"Too late," Annie said. "You’re too late."

"No, I can help."

She saw the girl move then and shake out the blanket. Sam screamed as the folds opened and she expected the baby to be tossed onto the ground, but as the worn blanket unfolded, it was empty, the baby having disappeared.

"Too late," Annie said again.

"No. I’ll help you, I promise," she said, breathing hard, feeling as if her feet were cast in concrete.

"Don’t…” a male voice warned.

Ty’s?

John’s?

She whirled but couldn’t see anything in the black woods. "Who are you?" she cried, but no one answered.

Somewhere far off someone was singing “American Pie.”

The fog grew denser. Sam ran faster. Her legs felt like lead, but she had to reach Annie, talk to her, before…
before what?

Sam’s eyes flew open.

The clock radio was still playing the last chords of the song that had followed her through the dream.

Sunlight streamed through the French doors and overhead the paddle fan stirred the morning air in her bedroom.

She was home. In her bed. Safe.

The dream faded into the dark recesses of her mind where it belonged, but she was in a sweat, her head pounding, her heart racing. It had been so real. Too real. And she knew it would be back.
Chapter Fifteen

“We need to talk,” Eleanor said. Seated at her desk, she waved Sam into her office. “Sit down, oh, just a minute.” As Sam took a chair on the opposite side of the desk, Eleanor reached for the phone, punched a number, and said, “Melba, hold all my calls, would you? Sam and I don’t want to be interrupted except for Tiny and Melanie. They’re supposed to be here in”—she glanced at her watch—“about fifteen minutes. Send them back right at one, okay? Fine.” Dropping the receiver into its cradle, she turned her attention toward Sam. “There’s some weird stuff happening around here.” Folding her arms across the ink blotter covering her desk, she leaned forward. “I listened to the tape of last night’s show this morning. And I had Tiny add in the last call from your friendly stalker. Okay? Then I talked to George and eventually the police, one of those officers who came by last night. But now, I want to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. What do you think’s going on?”

“Other than that someone’s trying to terrorize me.”

“One person?”

“Or two,” Sam said, “though I doubt there’s some big conspiracy out to get Dr. Sam.”

“Okay, so why would anyone bring up Annie now?”

“I don’t know.” Sam glanced out the window to see blue sky and rooftops. “It’s been so long. I was hoping it was all behind me.”

“You and me both.” Eleanor sighed, then took off the back of her earring. “So let me get this straight. The woman who calls herself Annie calls while you were on the air, then once you’ve signed off, about half an hour later, this creep ‘John’ phones again. They’ve got to be related.”

“I agree—he seems to think I’ve sinned, that I need to repent and now I know why. He’s blaming me for Annie’s death. But they didn’t come from the same phone. The call from the woman was labeled by caller ID as a pay phone downtown in a bar, and John’s call was again from a different phone booth, in the Garden District. The police are checking into it.”

“So you think this John-person conned some woman into calling you or that he disguised his voice, right? I think the police can check that sort of thing. I’ve told George that we need to tape all incoming calls, not just those on your program. There’s no problem there,” she added, wincing as she adjusted the diamond stud in her earlobe. “Except that George is thrilled with the ratings. Just like in Houston. More listeners have tuned in on the nights John calls and the nights thereafter.”

“Wonderful,” Sam said sarcastically. “Maybe we should find a couple more psychos to call in.”

“I don’t think that’s in George’s plan. But he does have a point. The e-mail we’ve been getting backs up his theory. The result is,” she said, lines furrowing across her smooth brow, “that George is seriously considering expanding your program. Not just Sunday through Thursday, but including Friday and Saturday nights as well.”

“So much for my social life, right?”

“We’d work it out—initially it would be your baby, of course, but then we could incorporate guest hosts or pretaped segments, or figure out which nights were the most popular.”

“You’re for this?” Samantha asked.

“I’m for anything that keeps the ratings up as long as it doesn’t prove dangerous. Now, so far, I don’t like what the caller’s saying. Not one bit. And this business about Annie Seger, I don’t get it.” Her dark eyes flashed. “For the record, I don’t like it either. I want security beefed up and you to be doubly careful and we’ll play this by ear. Let’s just give it a little time.”

“Okay, but there’s something else you should know.”

“Oh great.” The lines over her eyebrows deepened. “Now what?”

“I received a greeting card last night.” Sam described the birthday card. “It was in my car.”

“Inside your car? But didn’t you lock the doors…?” she asked, then waved off her own question. “Of course you did, you’re not an idiot. As I said I already talked to the police last night, but I want to know what you think. What the hell is this all about?”
“I don’t know, but I intend to find out,” Sam said. “I’ve already talked to the police.”

“You had a busy night last night,” Eleanor observed. “I’ll tell George I want a guard not only at the front door of the building, but here, on the premises, at all times. No two ways about it. Until this all dies down. It’s one thing for the nutcase to make calls to the station, another one to threaten you personally.”

The intercom line beeped and Eleanor took the call. “Send ‘em back, and thanks, Melba,” she said. “Tiny and Melanie are gonna join us. Maybe they have a different spin on this.”

Within minutes, there was a sharp rap on the door. Melanie breezed in, with Tiny dragging at her heels.

They dropped into a short couch wedged between a file cabinet and a bookcase.

“Oh, Sam’s filled me in on what happened last night, but I’d like your impressions.”

“Sam’s got a maniac stalking her,” Tiny offered, rubbing his hands together nervously and avoiding Sam’s eyes. “I think he’s dangerous.”

“Even so, he could be dangerous. I listened to the tapes three times, and I think Tiny’s right. This guy is definitely off-balance. I want everyone to be extra careful. Don’t go out alone at night.”

“It seems he’s just targeting Sam.”

“So far,” Eleanor said. “Because it’s her show, but it’s personal with him.”

“And a game,” Samantha added. “Tiny’s right, the guy could be dangerous, but Melanie’s got a good point. The creep is getting his jollies by scaring me.”

“Be careful. Get a watchdog, carry Mace, don’t go out at night alone, check your car before you get in. Whatever it takes until we find who the son of a bitch is.” Eleanor’s dark eyes focused on each of them. “I already talked to George about adding security and upgrading our equipment so that we can trace our calls—so far I haven’t heard back. I don’t even know if it’s possible. But, if we have to call in the police or hire a private detective or whatever, I’m willing to do it. This has got to be monitored.”

“You mean stopped,” Sam corrected.

“Of course. Stopped.” Eleanor pointed a polished nail at each of them. “And I want to hear about it the second something out of the ordinary happens. Don’t wait until the next day, you call me directly. You all have my cell number. You can catch me anytime.”

The phone rang, and she glanced at her watch. “Damn. Well, I guess we were finished here anyway. I just hope we don’t have any more trouble. We’ve got that charity gig coming up—for the Boucher House and we’ve invited all the media. I wouldn’t want them to get wind of this.”

“We are the media,” Sam reminded her.

“You know what I mean.”

The phone jangled again and Eleanor reached for the receiver.” The meeting was over. Tiny and Melanie had already made good their escape. Sam was halfway to the door when she heard her name. “Wait—Sam—” Eleanor called after her.

Samantha looked over her shoulder as Eleanor ignored the third ring.

“You get in touch with the police again and you put the fear of God into them, y’hear? Tell the officer in charge he’d better nail this sucker’s butt or else there’s gonna be hell to pay!”

“Oh, that’ll make things move along faster,” Sam mocked.

“It damned well better.”

“Isn’t this your radio shrink?” Montoya asked, flipping a copy of a report across Rick’s desk. The air conditioner was on the blink, the office an oven. Bentz had propped a fan on the credenza behind him. It droned and swiveled, pushing hot air around the room.

“My what?” he asked, then caught sight of Samantha Leeds’s name. “Shit.” Bentz glanced up at Montoya who smelled of cigarette smoke and some cologne he couldn’t name. Even in the sweltering heat Montoya looked cool in his black shirt, matching jeans and leather jacket while Bentz was sweating like a pig. “More trouble?”

“Looks like.” Montoya paused to straighten a picture of the skyline that Bentz had mounted over a cabinet as Bentz scanned the report.

“Seems like her personal pervert hasn’t disappeared. Not only called the station, but left a threatening note in her
“Was the car impounded?”

“Nope.”

“Well then not?” Bentz growled.

“It was dusted there.”

“And?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Bentz wondered, opening his drawer for a piece of gum and thinking it was time to give up on trying to quit.

“Because you’re used to the way things work around here.” Montoya reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a cassette. He dropped a cassette onto the desk, right in front of Bentz’s half-drunk can of Pepsi and the photos of Kristi. “Here’s the tape of last night’s show. The upshot is that last night, she got a couple more calls.”

“From the guy calling himself John.”

“And a woman—a dead woman.”

“I heard that one my self,” Bentz admitted, leaning back in his chair and still hankering for a smoke. “Annie.”

“You tuned in?” Montoya’s grin stretched from one side of his mouth to the other. He was obviously amused at the thought of Bentz sitting by the radio, phone in hand, ready to call dial-a-shrink.

“Yeah, I’ve listened every night, ever since I interviewed her. No one named John called last night.”

“Wrong. The pervert did call in. But it was after the show went off the air. It’s on the tape. The technician, Albert AKA Tiny Pagano, caught it on that tape.” He motioned to the cassette on Bentz’s desk.

“Just what we need.” Bentz had hoped Dr. Sam’s personal nutcase had given up his threatening calls. From the looks of the report, he’d been overly optimistic. “How’d you get a copy of this?” He found the gum and popped a piece into his mouth.

“From O’Keefe. He was one of the officers on duty last night and knew you were assigned the case. He and another guy interviewed Dr. Sam at the station, then were called to meet her at the parking garage because of the note in her car. According to O’Keefe the doc was pretty shook up.

“Do you blame her?”

“Hell, no.” Scratching thoughtfully at his goatee, Montoya asked, “So what do you make of it?”

“Nothin’ good.” Bentz chewed on the flavorless piece of gum. “Annie Seger. Who the hell is she?” he asked.

“Don’t know. I suppose we should leave it to the harassment boys. It’s really not your case. No one’s dead.”

“But.”

“I figured you’d have that attitude.”

“Thanks.” He had more work to do than time to do it; not only was there a possible serial killer on the loose and now the FBI was involved, but there were the usual number of homicides to investigate as well—domestic disputes turned bad, drive-bys, gang-related, sour drug deals, or people just pissed off at each other and ready to pull out a gun or knife.

Montoya produced a pocket recorder and played the tape where it was marked, the first call being the one from the girl claiming Dr. Sam had killed her, the second from the stalker. Rick heard Annie’s breathy voice again, then John’s smooth, suggestive tone, his icy calm that slowly eroded as the conversation with Dr. Sam progressed.

Montoya snapped off the recorder as a wasp slipped through the window screen and buzzed angrily at the glass.

“I’d say John’s not giving up.”

“And the threats are more pointed.” Both recordings left Bentz with a bad feeling—a real bad feeling. The wasp made the mistake of coming close and he swiped at it angrily. He missed and the angry insect danced against the filmy glass of the window in a desperate attempt at freedom.

“Definitely more pointed.” Montoya found a rubber band on Bentz’s desk, drew back and let it fly. Snap! The wasp dropped dead to the floor. “Do you think they’re related—the call from Annie, then the one from John?”

“Could be.” Almost had to be. Bentz didn’t believe in coincidence. “Unless one triggered the other—the girl heard John’s call and thought she’d come up with something of her own.”
“So she just knows about Annie Seger.”
“Someone does.”
“Okay, so what was that crap about Dr. Sam being a hooker? A working girl? Does that make any sense?”

Bentz chewed his gum thoughtfully. “We’ll check it out. I want to know every day of Dr. Sam’s history, who she is, what makes her tick, why she decided to become a radio shrink. I want to know about her family, her boyfriends, this”—he pulled a file and checked his notes—“David Ross, a guy she went to Mexico with and every John, Jack, Johnson, Jackson, Jonathon, Jay, any man she’s ever dated that could be the caller.” The phone rang loudly. Bentz made a grab for it, but as his fingers grazed the receiver, he stopped short.

The woman they’d been discussing, the radio-shrink herself, appeared in the outer office. From the look in her eye he was willing to bet that a bad day was just about to get worse.
Chapter Sixteen

Bentz braced himself.

Samantha Leeds was marching through the desks sprinkled outside his door and heading toward his office.

Dressed in a skirt that buttoned up the front and a sleeveless white blouse, she was a good-looking woman, and the set of her jaw suggested she wanted answers and wasn’t going to leave until she got them.

“Detective Bentz,” she said as she swept through the door. Layered reddish hair bounced around a heart-shaped face with cheekbones most models would kill for. Green eyes zeroed in on Bentz and didn’t let go.

Montoya gave her a quick once-over, and, apparently liked what he saw. He’d been about to leave, but now resumed his spot near the file cabinet as she gave him a cursory glance, then leaned across Bentz’s desk.

“Can I talk to you?” Sam demanded. “Now?”

Bentz’s phone rang again.

“Yeah. Just hold on a sec.” He held up one finger and took the call. It was a short conversation from someone in the lab about the type of fibers found on the bodies of the two prostitutes—what manufacturer used the synthetic material for the wigs, specifically the red wigs that were missing from the murder scenes. The report was being faxed to Bentz, and the technician confirmed that the hairs were identical. As every piece of evidence had confirmed they were dealing with one killer and two victims. So far. The Feds would go nuts. He hung up and focused his attention on the woman standing in front of his desk. She was trying to look cool and composed, but she was nervous as a cat. Her fingers fiddled with the strap of her purse, and she shifted from one foot to the other.

“Have a seat,” he offered, then motioned to Montoya. “My partner. Detective Montoya. Reuben—Dr. Leeds, A.K.A. Dr. Sam.”

Samantha eased into one of the worn chairs on the far side of the desk.

“Pleased to meet you,” Montoya oozed, slathering on his Latin charm.

“Thanks.” She nodded. “I assume you were told about what happened last night.”

“Just got the report.”

“What do you think?”

“That this guy isn’t going to give up. That he’s got a real vendetta against you.” Rolling his sleeves over his elbows, he asked, “What do you think?”

“I think whoever sent the card thinks I killed Annie Seger and that the caller who identifies himself as John is somehow linked to Annie—though I don’t know how. She is dead, you know.”

“Tell me about her.”

Samantha took a minute, leaned back in the chair and cradled her purse in her lap. “I hosted a similar program in Houston nearly ten years ago. A girl who said she was Annie phoned in. She was sixteen, pregnant and scared out of her mind. I tried to help, to steer her in the right direction, but…” Samantha paled and looked out the window. One of her hands fisted, then slowly opened. “I wish…I mean I had no idea how desperate she was and…” Sam’s voice trailed off for a second. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat before she controlled herself. “…Annie swore she couldn’t confide in anyone and…she killed herself. Obviously someone blames me.”

“And last night someone impersonating Annie called your program,” Montoya said.

“Yes.” Sam fiddled with the gold chain surrounding her neck, avoided Bentz’s eyes for a second. “It wasn’t Annie, of course. I…I went to her funeral, I mean…I was asked to leave, but Annie Seger, the Annie Seger who called me in Houston nine years ago is definitely dead.” She blinked hard, but didn’t break down.

“You were kicked out of the funeral?” Bentz asked. “The family blamed me.” He reached for his pen. “The family?”

“Her parents, Estelle and Jason Faraday.”

“I thought her name was Seger.”

“It is—was. Her mother and biological father were divorced.”
Bentz made a note and caught a glimpse from Montoya as the sound of a truck rumbling by on the street below rumbled through the small room. “What about her father?”

“I—I don’t know. I mean, I did some research after the fact…oh, God, I think he lived in the Northwest somewhere.” Her eyebrows drew together, and her smooth brow furrowed.

“His name?”

“Wally…Oswald Seger, I think. Something like that.” She managed a tight, humorless smile. “I knew all this stuff nine years ago. In fact I fed on it. Tried to make some sense of it, but then…well, I decided to let it go.”

Bentz didn’t blame her, but it all had to be dragged up again; whoever was terrorizing her had made sure of that.

“You have notes? Names, addresses, anything?”

She hesitated, her eyes thinning. “I think so. I saw the box of notes and tapes and all when I moved. I almost threw it out, but packed it away in the attic with the Christmas ornaments and old tax records. I can get it for you.”

“That would help. Call me when you find it, and I’ll have someone pick it up. I’d like to see anything you’ve got.” He made a note and asked, “What else do you remember about Annie? Did she have other relatives and friends?”

“A brother. Ken, no…Kent.”

“And the boyfriend? The father of her baby.”

“Ryan Zimmerman, I think. He was a couple of years older. A big athlete, I think, but I really can’t remember.” She shook her head. “I’ve spent a long time trying to forget.” Lines of strain evident around her eyes and mouth. The doc was putting on a pretty good show, but the harassment and threats were getting to her. She was sweating, and the dark smudges beneath her eyes indicated she hadn’t slept much in the last couple of days.

“I heard the tape,” Bentz said. “John referred to you being a prostitute again. What’s that all about?”

“He’s sick.”

In an instant, she was out of her chair and leaning over the desk, her hands flat on a stack of letters and files. The defeat he’d witnessed seconds ago had disappeared. Two spots of color tinged her cheeks. “I thought I’d already made this clear!” she said, her green eyes snapping fire. “I have never, not one second in my life been a prostitute of any kind…” Her words faltered, and she closed her eyes as if to pull herself together. Bentz’s gut tightened. He saw Montoya tense as well. They’d hit pay dirt. He felt it. “Listen,” she said quietly, her face now draining of all color. “I have never sold myself for any amount of money, but there was a time when I was in college where, for a research paper, I got to know a couple of streetwalkers…here, in New Orleans. I went out with them, saw how they made their money, the kind of men who tried to pick them up, how they discerned a good trick from a bad, the whole psychology of the street life. It wasn’t just about prostitution but the subculture of the city at night.” She slowly sat down and looked straight at him. “But I don’t see what that would have to do with anything…”

“You did this for a class?” Montoya cut in, obviously doubting her.

“Yes!” She whipped her head around. “I got an A.”

“Any way we can verify that you were enrolled?”

“Look, I didn’t come down here to be humiliated. If you doubt me you could check with my professor…oh, God.” She bit down hard on her back teeth and looked up at the ceiling as if searching for cobwebs.

“What?”

“He’s my ex-husband,” she admitted and gave her head a little shake. “I, uh, was his student. But you can call him. Dr. Jeremy Leeds at Tulane.”

“We’ll look into it.” She seemed suddenly tired, nearly wilted in the chair. As if her outburst had taken all the fire out of her. But she’d get it back. Bentz knew people, and this woman, he was certain, was a fighter.

“Who knows where you park your car?”

“Everyone at the station. We all use that garage. And…some of my friends, I guess. It wouldn’t be hard to figure out as it’s the closest garage to the building where I work, and my car is pretty distinctive, a 1966 Mustang.” Her fists curled in her lap. “Look, Detective, last night I was scared out of my wits,” she admitted. “And I don’t like the feeling.”

“I don’t blame you. If I were you, I wouldn’t go out alone, and I wasn’t kidding about changing the locks and getting a rottweiler. Maybe even a bodyguard.”
She was standing now, her backbone stiff again, her temper snapping. “A bodyguard?” she repeated. “That’s rich. You know, it really ticks me off that this guy is winning, that he knows where I live, where I work and what I drive. I shouldn’t have to change my lifestyle because of some creep.”

“You’re right, you shouldn’t have to, but you do,” Rick said evenly, holding her gaze, hoping to get through to her. “In my opinion, Ms. Leeds, this guy is dangerous. He’s escalating his threats, becoming bolder and since we don’t know who he is and what makes him tick, you have to be extremely careful and take extra precautions whether you like it or not. I’ll call the PD in Cambrai and make sure your street is patrolled frequently and we’ll take care of the neighborhood of your offices when you’re at work. We’ll try to nail this guy’s ass, but we can’t do it without your help, okay?”

“That’s why I’m here,” she said.

“And we’ll do the best we can.”

“Thanks.” She stood, offered both him and Montoya her hand, then, swinging the strap of her purse over her shoulder, she walked out the door, unaware that Reuben was watching her hips sway beneath her skirt or the fact that she slightly favored one leg.

He gave off a soft whistle. “If she decides she needs a bodyguard, you let me know cuz I would loooove to guard that sweet lady’s ass.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Bentz said dryly, and wondered at the connection of the caller to a dead girl in Houston. “Let’s find out everything we can on Annie Seger. Who she hung out with, where she lived, her family, boyfriend, the whole nine yards. Check out everyone associated with Dr. Sam.” He tapped a pencil eraser on the edge of the desk. “This case is getting weirder by the minute.”

“Maybe it’s supposed to,” Reuben offered, scratching at his goatee as he stared thoughtfully at the path through the desks Samantha Leeds had taken.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve tuned in, haven’t you? Aren’t you interested?”

“It’s part of the case.”

“I know, I know,” Reuben said, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully, “but I’m just willing to bet that ratings are up on Dr. Sam’s show, and that’s got to be good for business. So bring on the weird. In fact the weirder the better.”

“You think it’s a setup?”

“I think it could be.” He flashed his sly smile. “It’s just like those tell-all television programs where the host introduces a normal-looking couple, then brings out the chick the guy is cheating with and the two women get into it…it’s all set up ahead of time. It has to be, and the audience and viewers get into it. The next thing you know, another guy comes out—the husband’s brother or sister and it turns out the wife has been banging him…or her. Now the audience is in a frenzy.”

Bentz leaned back in his chair, holding the pencil in two hands, rolling it in his fingers. “You figure Dr. Sam is in on it?”

“Maybe, maybe not. She seems genuinely scared, but then she might be a trained actress; she’s on the radio for Christ’s sake. But this happened before and the same team worked with her, right? George Hannah and Eleanor Cavalier for starters? Maybe there are others. I’ll bet next week’s paycheck that someone at the station knows what’s going on and that there’s money involved.”

“You always think money’s involved,” Bentz grumbled, though, he’d had similar thoughts himself. He’d met George Hannah, thought the guy was a pompous ass at best, a downright cheat at worst. The station manager, a sharp black lady, was known as a ball-breaker, and Montoya was right, they’d both worked with Dr. Sam in Houston—that much Bentz did know. He cracked his knuckles and thought. What bothered him most was that he had a gut feeling that somehow the guy who called in to Dr. Sam in the middle of the night was connected to the murders of the prostitutes. There wasn’t much to go on—just the hair from red wigs, so like Samantha Leeds’s, the photograph with the cut out eyes, like the blackened eyes on the hundred-dollar bills. Not much at all.

“And I’m right,” Montoya was saying. “99 percent of the time in these types of crimes, money changes hands.”

“Why then would John call after hours? What good would that do? No one heard him.”

“It could be all part of the scam, let that leak out to the press that the stalker has been calling not only during the program but after, and if the doctor isn’t in on it, she’d be even more freaked out. The nutcase is making it personal.” That stuck in Bentz’s craw, but he couldn’t argue the logic. “Then prove it,” he said to Montoya, and the
cocky young buck threw him a self-assured I’m-a-bad-ass smile.

“I will.”

*Morons.*

*The police were morons.*

_Didn’t they get it? Didn’t they see a connection? Couldn’t they put two and fucking-two together?*

Outside the cabin bullfrogs croaked. The steamy bayou night floated in through the open windows and the cracks in the walls. He slapped at a mosquito as he read the article on his most recent killing, buried deep in the paper, about as far from front-page news as it could get.

No word had leaked to the press about the murders being linked, yet he’d been careful to leave all the clues…_fuck it_, he thought, clipping out the pathetic article with his knife, making sure he cut straight, leaving some margins, as moonlight sliced through the rising mist, filtering into the tiny room to add an opalescence to the light of his single lantern. He was hot. Uncomfortable. Restless. He’d have to do something more to get their attention. And it was time. He glanced through the window, saw the shadow of a bat as it flew by, and felt his heart rate accelerate.

His breathing was shallow as he switched on his radio and heard the familiar strains of “Hard Day’s Night” playing over the static, and then her voice. Low. Sultry. Sexy as hell.

“Hello, New Orleans, and welcome. This is Doctor Sam at WSLJ, and it’s time again for *Midnight Confessions*, a program that’s as good for the heart as it is for the soul. Tonight we’ll be talking about high school. Remember? For some of you it’s going on right now, for others it’s been a while, maybe longer than you want to admit.

“Nonetheless, we’ve all experienced going to high school either private or public, run by the church or the state. And we all felt peer pressure and the urge to rebel, experienced the sweet pangs of first love and the sting of rejection.

“Remember your first day of school? How nervous you felt? How about the first time you saw your high-school sweetheart? Your first crush? Your first kiss…and maybe a whole lot more. Tell me about it, New Orleans… Confess…”

Blood thundered through his brain. High school? The cunt wanted to talk about _high_ school? And first love?

Sweat broke out over his forehead and slithered down his spine. He walked to the cupboard and as he pinned his trophy—the minuscule scrap of newsprint—inside the door, he conjured up Dr. Sam’s face.

Perfect white skin, hair a deep, dark red, full lips that covered a razor-sharp tongue and eyes the color of jade. And just as cold. God, she was a turn-on. And a bitch. He listened to her voice, luring the innocent to call in, to confess, to ask her for advice.

“Who’s on the line?”

“This here’s Randy.”

_You and me both_, he thought, his erection pressing hard against the fly of his jeans.

“What’s going on, Randy?”

“Well, uh, high school was a big deal for me. I was a football player, down in Tallahassee and, um, I met my wife there. She was the homecomin’ queen and man, she was purty. I never seen a woman so purty as Vera Jean.”

_Oh, yeah, yeah, so who cares?_

“And what did you do about it?”

“I married her, that’s what I did. Thirty-five years now. We got us four children and two grandchildren with another on the way.”

“So high school was a good experience for you?”

“Yes’m. It sure was. But fer my kids, it was a different story. The oldest he got involved with drugs, the second, well, she did all right I guess, but the third. She got herself in a family way as a junior and the boy was a no’count. Wouldn’t marry her.”

“How’s your daughter today?” Dr. Sam asked, as if she cared, as if she could offer some advice.

His lip curled. He had two hours, then he’d call. Give a warning…_yeah, tell her it was about to come down_. And then he’d hunt.

Another woman would do tonight, he thought as he listened to her voice and wanted to jerk off. If only he could be with her. He touched himself briefly, the tips of his fingers brushing against his fly, but no…not this way…not until the time was right. There were things he had to do. Wrongs he had to right. Women…all those women who
reminded him of Annie, lying, whoring cunts and the one man he had to deal with, a man who had betrayed Annie. Judas! You, too, will pay. Rage seared through his blood and screamed through his head as he heard Dr. Sam’s voice.

Blood pounded in his ears as the low, dulcet tones of her voice reached out to him, from the city, across the swamp.

And he couldn’t have Dr. Sam—not tonight. The timing wasn’t right. And he had something else planned for her, a surprise. For Annie’s birthday. If all went according to plan, Dr. Sam would find his special present tomorrow night He only wished he could see her face when she got his gift, but he couldn’t risk it. He’d have to wait. Until just the right moment.

But soon…Oh, God, it had to be soon…Lust, anger, revenge and need, his need was so great. His cock throbbed. He’d have to substitute again…find another whore to quiet the rage that tore through his soul, to sate the need coursing through his veins, to sacrifice.

He knew he was a sinner, but he couldn’t help himself…His blood was on fire.

He reached into his pocket and drew out his special rosary. The sharp beads glittered in the light from the lantern, winking at him, promising him they would do his bidding.

Then he fell on his knees and began to pray.

As Dr. Sam spoke to him through the little radio, he fingered the sharp beads and whispered, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit…”


Chapter Seventeen

Sam nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw the man on her porch. Then she realized it was Ty. She hadn’t expected to see anyone, but smiled to herself. There was something right about him reclining on the front-porch swing, jean-clad legs outstretched, a bottle of beer cradled between his hands, his face cast in shadow where the weak light of the single bulb on the porch didn’t quite reach. He seemed at home there. Calm. Rocking gently to the music of the wind chimes and cicadas. And yet there was a restless quality to him, a darkness she didn’t understand, a danger that lured her as much as it frightened her.

“Don’t make more of it than it is,” she muttered to herself, but her heartbeat kicked up a notch as she pressed the electronic opener and nosed the Mustang into the garage.

So what does he want, she wondered as she switched off the ignition and tossed her keys into her purse. Why is he here? What does he expect?

No, Sam, what do you expect?

Her throat went dry and for the briefest of seconds she wondered what it would be like to kiss him. To touch him. To... Don’t go there. You don’t know him well enough. There’s something he’s not telling you, something he’s hiding, something dark. It’s the middle of the night, for crying out loud. Why is he waiting for you alone? This is no good. No good! But a drip of anticipation ran through her blood.

Silently arguing with herself, she slid out of the car, walked through the breezeway and into house, where Charon greeted her by crying and rubbing against her legs. “I missed you, too,” she said to the black cat as she tossed her purse onto the counter and quickly disengaged the security alarm. Carrying the cat, she walked to the front door and slid the bolt.

Ty was still on the swing, eyes in shadow. He glanced up at her, and she felt a tingle—like the cold breath of winter—against the back of her neck. “You’re beginning to make a habit of this,” she said, as Charon, sensing freedom, scrambled from her arms and dashed across the porch.

“Is that bad?” he drawled.

“No, Sam, what do you expect?”

Her throat went dry and for the briefest of seconds she wondered what it would be like to kiss him. To touch him. To... Don’t go there. You don’t know him well enough. There’s something he’s not telling you, something he’s hiding, something dark. It’s the middle of the night, for crying out loud. Why is he waiting for you alone? This is no good. No good! But a drip of anticipation ran through her blood.

“Is that bad?” he drawled.

“Could be.”

The swing creaked as he pushed himself to his feet. Intense hazel eyes caught in the pale light. “Maybe I find you irresistible.”

“And maybe that’s a line out of a bad movie.”

“Is it?” One dark, nearly sinful eyebrow raised. He finished his beer in one swallow as the wind chimes tinkled softly.

“I think you can do better,” she said.

“Maybe you give me too much credit.”

“I’m sure I do.”

“That could be a mistake.”

“Probably.”

Leaving his empty bottle on the rail he walked to the door where Sam stood, arms folded over her chest, one shoulder propped against the jamb. The faint odor of musk tickled her nostrils. Night-darkened eyes regarded her slowly and she felt a nervous sheen of perspiration on her skin. He leaned closer, placed his bent arm over the top of hers on the doorframe. His nose was nearly touching hers, his breath warm against her face. “You know, I just thought I’d make sure you got home safely. Most women would want to thank me.”

“I’m not most women,” she reminded him, but her heartbeat skyrocketed.

“No, Sam, you’re not.” He was close enough that she could feel his heat. Her heart pounded wildly, and she read the dangerous promises in his eyes. His gaze fell to the open collar of her blouse, as if he could see her pulse jumping in the hollow of her throat. “That’s probably why I’m here.”

“A knight in shining armor—is that what you’d have me believe.”
His chuckle was low and sexy. “Never.”

“So your intentions aren’t chivalrous?”

He snorted. “Who says I have intentions?”

It was her turn to cock a disbelieving eyebrow. “Peddle that to someone who believes it. What would you have done if I hadn’t shown up here?”

“I would have checked with someone.”

“Who?” she asked, and noticed his smile grow slowly from one side of his beard-shadowed jaw to the other. “Whoever I had to.”

Was it the night with its full moon and hot breeze, or was it something else, something more primal, something within, that made her wonder how it would feel to have his skin rub against hers, how she would respond to the feel of his hands on her body? Or was it because she needed to escape the craziness that had become her life, the fear and tension that had become her companions in the last few weeks. Or…was it more basic? Was it simply that she’d been without a man for a long time, and she craved a man’s touch? Or that something deep within her, something she didn’t want to examine too closely, was attracted to secretive men with an edge?

“The least you could do is invite me in,” he suggested, his voice low.

“I’m considering it.” She was aware that he was the barest of inches from her, too damned close. “If you behave.”

“Sorry, darlin’, but that’s a promise I just can’t make,” he drawled, and deep inside she quivered. What would it be like to make love to this man, to lie in his arms, to wake up with morning dancing in his eyes and desire running through his veins? Her throat caught.

“I think I owe you a glass of wine. It only seems fair to open the bottle and share it with you since you brought it over.”

“I’m all for fairness.”

She stepped out of the doorway, and he followed her to the kitchen, where she found the unopened bottle of Riesling in the refrigerator.

“Need help?” he asked, as she kicked off her shoes and snagged the corkscrew from a drawer.

“Not me, I was a Girl Scout.”

“Where they taught you to uncork a bottle of wine.”

“And I’ve got the merit badge to prove it.”

“I think you’re mixed up. Boy Scouts get merit badges. Girls get brownie points.”

“A lot you know,” she grumbled. She pulled hard. The cork and corkscrew released from the bottle with a soft pop. She twirled the corkscrew in her hand, blew across the end and tucked it into her belt as if it were a six-gun.

“Very funny.”

“I thought so,” she said over her shoulder as she stretched to reach the wineglasses in a tall cupboard. _One glass, just have one glass_, she told herself as she poured, all the while aware of Ty standing behind her, one shoulder propped against the door to the breezeway. “Here.” She handed him one of the stemmed glasses and took the other for herself.

“What should we toast to?” he asked, one dark brow lifting.

“Better days,” she suggested.

“And nights.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “And nights.” She touched the rim of her glass to his. She sipped her wine and watched as he took a swallow from his glass, noticed the way his Adam’s apple worked over the open collar of his shirt, remembered all too vividly the sinewy muscles of his arms and chest.

What was she thinking? Why was her mind running to thoughts of hot kisses and hotter caresses? She didn’t know this man. Couldn’t trust him. Shouldn’t be thinking about making love to him, for God’s sake. And yet as she finished her wine, she knew that he cared enough to wait up for her, he cared enough to show up at the station and drive her home safely, he cared enough to risk his own life.

If he’d wanted to harm her, he’d already had plenty of opportunities.
“This is all getting to you,” he said as if reading her mind.  
“I suppose.”

“It would get to anyone.” Hazel eyes held hers, and she noticed the striations of green and brown in their depths. “Come on,” he said, removing the corkscrew from her belt. “Let’s forget this for a while.” Linking his fingers through hers, he grabbed the neck of the bottle with the hand holding his glass and propelled her through the living room.  

“Hey, wait…where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see. Hold this.” He handed her the bottle and glasses, unlocked the French doors and led her outside to the backyard.

Moonlight spangled the dark water of the lake and cast a silver glow on the grass, shrubs, trees and the masts of Ty’s sailboat. Of course. His car hadn’t been parked in the driveway and Sam had thought he’d walked to the house. Instead, he’d used the boat.

“Wait a minute, what have you got in mind?” she asked, as he took hold of her hand again and pulled her toward the dock.

“You took a rain check, remember?” he said, jogging. Barefoot, she had to run to keep up with him. “I think it’s time I collected.”

The *Bright Angel* loomed before them. “And I think you’re nuts.”

“Your professional opinion, no doubt,” he said, as they reached the dock, and he helped her onto the sloop.

“No doubt.” This was just plain crazy. And wonderful. As she clutched the glasses and bottle to her chest, he untied the moorings, started the engine, switched on the running lights and pulled away from the dock. In deeper water he unfurled the sails.

“Isn’t this illegal?” she asked, as the sails snapped and billowed in the wind. The sloop cut through the water, and the shore slipped away, blending into the darkness, a few sparse houselights glowing warm and bright.

“What? Isn’t what illegal?” He was squinting into the darkness, hands on the wheel, legs braced on the deck.  

“Sailing at night.”

“Don’t know. But if it is, it shouldn’t be.”

She inched forward and was standing next to him at the helm, the breeze fingering through her hair as the prow of the boat cut through the dark water. It was exhilarating and freeing after all the nights alone, the hours she’d spent worrying and tense. Stars winked bright in the blackened heavens, and the water stretched endlessly as Ty worked the wheel, making sure the sails caught the wind, the boom moving as he constantly loosened and tightened the lines.

“Is this how you live your life?” she asked, as he turned into the wind.

“What do you mean?”

“Not playing by the rules.”

“Maybe I play by my own.”

“That’s ducking the question.”

“Maybe.”

He swung the wheel around, and the boat shifted, spray flying in the air, Sam nearly losing her balance. His shirt flapped in the breeze, and she was reminded of the night she’d been certain he’d sailed near her house, that he’d been peering through her windows.

He found a spot in a dark cove where he dropped anchor and lowered the sails. Stars twinkled brightly, the moon shone a watery blue. Sam reminded herself that they were completely alone. One man, one woman. Practically strangers.

*No one knows you’re here. No one knows you’re with Ty.* Somewhere from the shore an owl hooted over the breeze. “Maybe you should tell me about yourself,” she suggested.

“And bore you to tears?”

“I won’t yawn.”

“Promise?”

“Scout’s honor,” she said, holding up two fingers as the breeze tugged at her hair.
“Right. The Girl Scouts.” He chuckled. “As I said, it’s a long and boring story.”

“Something tells me that nothing you’d say would bore me.”

He laughed and the sound was low and sexy as it echoed across the water. “You just want me to spill my guts so you can psychoanalyze me.”

“No way. I’ve had enough for the night.” She leaned against the mast. “It’s your turn. You know a lot about me. Probably more than you should. Let’s even the score.”

“And I would do that by spilling my guts,” he said, sipping from his glass and gazing at her with those intense eyes.

“That’s right. Tell me all,” she said boldly, grabbing hold of the boom with one hand and leaning closer to him. “Including your deepest, darkest secret.”

He slid her a glance. “Is this like Truth or Dare?”

“The kids’ game,” she said, remembering back to when she was fourteen with Peter and a couple of his friends sleeping outside on the trampoline, a flashlight spinning between them, the unlucky victim having to either tell the truth about a very deep secret or accept a dare from the other players and do something awful the other kids came up with. “Yeah, it’s kind of like that,” she said, “so shoot.” She twirled her half-empty glass in the moonlight.

“I choose ‘dare.’

“You can’t.”

“Sure I can.” His gaze held hers. “I chose ‘dare.’”

She felt a wicked little shiver of anticipation as water lapped at the sides of the sloop.

“Dare me to do something rather than tell the truth.” Even in the darkness she saw the challenge in his eyes and despite the rational side of her mind telling her she was making a mistake of monstrous proportions, she took a gulp of her wine, and said, “Okay, I dare you to tell the truth.”

“Uh-uh-uh. That’s cheating. You lose your turn.” He finished his wine and closed the distance between them, the toes of his shoes nudging against her bare feet.

“Wait a minute, that’s not how we played,” she objected, but felt his arm slide around her waist. “I can’t lose a turn.”

“My boat,” he said. “My rules.” Through the cotton of her blouse she felt his hand splay over the small of her back. Heat seeped through the fabric, and she was suddenly having trouble drawing a breath. He was too close, his touch far too sensual. She was out in the middle of a vast lake, and no one knew where she was. Yet she couldn’t resist him. “It’s how I used to play the game,” he whispered, his lips close to her ear. “So tell me, Samantha. Truth or dare?”

“I—I don’t know…” Her heart was racing, her blood on fire.

“Sure you do.”

She swallowed hard, knew the wine was affecting her. “Okay…dare.”

“I dare you to kiss me.”

“Oh, God.” The arm around her tightened, pulling her close as the boat rocked gently on the water and the masts creaked overhead.

“That’s right, kiss me,” he commanded, his breath hot against her neck. “And don’t stop.”

“Ever?” Sweat collected on her forehead.

“Until I say.”

“I don’t know, that could be dangerous.”

“Definitely,” he promised. “I’m counting on it.” His mouth was so close it touched her hair. Her knees turned liquid.

“But—”

“Shh. No questions. I said ‘dare,’ and dare it is.” The hand at her back yanked her hard against him, forced her hips to his and she felt his erection hard and straining against his fly, pressed firmly against her mound.

She licked her lips and he caught the motion. Though their mouths had not yet touched, she knew that she
was going to do just as he asked. “Come on, Sam,” he said, and her skin tingled. “I dare you. Kiss me.”

Water lapped. The wind sighed. Dark desire stole through her veins. She leaned forward. Closing her eyes, she wrapped her fingers around his neck, drew his head down to hers and molded his mouth to his. She parted her lips and he groaned, moved against her, pushing his legs between hers, stretching the seams of her skirt as his tongue plunged past her teeth.

He was hard, and hot, his muscles straining as he kissed her.

_Don’t do this, Sam, don’t go this far…you don’t know him…_

He found the curve of her neck and nipped.

Inside she pulsed, wanting, feeling the buttons of her blouse slipping open, the air against her bare skin, the feel of his lips and teeth against her breast as his hands slipped beneath the waistband of her skirt, probing, touching, hot fingertips against her bare skin.

She throbbed for him, her fingers scraping off his shirt, her hand on the fly of his jeans as he pulled her onto the deck. He was breathing hard, his hands and lips everywhere, and she couldn’t stop.

A dim thought that he could be the person terrorizing her sizzled through her mind, but was quickly gone, lost in his musky scent and the taste of salt upon his skin. His hands were everywhere, stripping, touching, caressing, finding erotic spots on her body she hadn’t known existed.

“_You want me, _” he said, as her fingers slid down the tense hard muscles of his arms.

“No…” she could barely get the words out as he unhooked her bra and slid it off her shoulders. “You…you want me.”

“Mmmm.” He kissed her breast, his teeth scraping her nipple. She writhed. Perspiration covered her skin.

“You want me.”

“No—”

“Yes.” He lowered his lips, kissed the other nipple. Harder. Nipping. She arched again, felt the warm moistness between her legs.

Squirming beneath him, hot and wanting, she closed her eyes. Her blood thundered, her body ached for him.

“That’s my girl,” he whispered, one hand sliding beneath her skirt to her calf.

“Oh, God,” she cried, as he kissed her abdomen and his fingers caressed her calf, climbing higher, past her knee, bunching her skirt as his tongue rimmed her navel. She couldn’t breathe, could only arch, anticipating, wanting, pulsing for him.

“That’s it, Samantha,” he whispered into her ear.

“Let go, I’m here,” he promised, his words pressed against her skin, her fingers holding his head fast as he reached the elastic of her panties and pushed them to the side, giving him just enough room to probe with his fingers.

“Oooh,” she whispered, clawing his hair. “Ohhhhh, Ty.”

“That’s it, Samantha.”

She moved with him, lifting her hips, gasping for air.

Still touching he lifted his head and found her lips, kissing her hard as his fingers worked their magic. Faster. Deeper. Harder.

“I don’t think…I…1…”

She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t think, and she ached for more…so much more. “Ty…Oh, God…Ty…” She moved with him, kissing him, clinging to him, her fingers digging into his bare back as the first explosion came in a blinding rush. She convulsed, but he didn’t stop, kept kneading her, didn’t allow her to relax. The heat built again. Hotter.

“You want me,” he whispered into her ear.

“Yes. Damn it, yes.” She scrambled at the fly of his jeans, yanked hard. With a series of pops the denim parted. He groaned as her fingers surrounded him. He kicked off his shoes and Levi’s in a swift motion, then pushed her legs apart with his knees.

“You…you want me…” she said, looking up in the darkness, barely able to make out his face in the starlight.
“More than you’ll ever know, darlin’.” His mouth cut off any other thoughts as he thrust hard into her and held her fast, pinning her to the deck with his body, pushing against her, holding her as if he’d never let go. Heat seared through her again and again.

More, she thought wildly, I want more as the tempo increased. His breathing was as shallow as hers, his body straining, muscled thighs pressing hard. She heard a wild moan echoing through the night, not realizing it was her own voice. She collapsed, drained, and he reached beneath her, rotating until she was atop him, her flushed skin cooling as the wind touched it.

Strong hips moved beneath her. Big hands covered her breasts, kneading and moving. She caught his rhythm, pushing down on his shoulders with her palms, breathing in the fresh moist air of the lake, the heat in her building again.

The wind tore at her hair and she looked down into the dark, secretive eyes of this man who had become her lover, this man she barely knew, and her fingers clenched in his shoulder muscles.

He drew in a quick sharp breath and then stiffened within her, the cords of his neck straining, his mouth drawn back as he released. Samantha spasmed, her entire body convulsing as she fell against him, lost to the night, lost to the world, lost to this man she knew better than to trust.

God help me.
Chapter Eighteen

What have I done?

As the first rays of light streamed through the tiny porthole over the bed, Ty Wheeler called himself every kind of fool.

Samantha was lying tangled in the sheets, her dark red hair mussed, her eyes closed, her breathing regular. Sometime last night, he’d carried her to the berth. They’d made love long into the morning hours and he had short, lightning-swift images of her body, supple and lean, lying beneath him or straddling him. She’d been playful and sexy and coy as hell, a lover like no other. His skin sheened with perspiration at the thought of her, the taste of her, the pure, raw, animal she was.

And after it all, they’d both fallen asleep exhausted.

Ty had sworn to himself he wouldn’t get involved, that he had to remain objective, and yet he’d thrown caution to the winds last night and ended up in bed with her. Now, as he heated water on a hot plate, he called himself the worst kind of idiot.

She stirred, moving her lips and sighing in her sleep, and he craved her all over again.

One green eye slitted open. “What’re you staring at?” she asked, stretching lazily, pushing one fist over her head until she touched the wall.

“You.”

“And I must look like hell.” She propped up on one elbow, careful to keep the coverlet over her breasts. “What time is it?”

“Seven.”

Groaning, she said, “And we’re awake…why?”

“Because we’re in the middle of the lake and people on the shore, people who might see us are getting up. I’m making coffee.”

“Strong coffee, I hope.” she qualified.

“Guaranteed to put hair on your chest.”

“Just what I need,” she muttered.

He winked at her. “Believe me, your chest is just fine.”

“Yeah, well, about that…about last night…I think we should talk about it.”

“Women always do.”

“We have our reasons.” She shook her head. “I mean we need to discuss the fact that we didn’t exactly engage in safe sex, and I don’t know much about you. For all I know you could have a wife and a dozen kids tucked away somewhere.”

“There are no children, no wife, and not even a fiancée in my life. I haven’t been involved with a woman for over a year, and I’m clean. Believe it or not, I am usually a lot more careful myself.”

“Me too.”

“What about you?” he asked, and was surprised that it mattered, that he cared if she was in a relationship of any kind.

“I did have a boyfriend until about half a year ago, but when I moved to New Orleans, things fell apart.” She sighed and stared up at him with those incredible green eyes. “We went to Mexico together last month, but nothing came of it. He wanted to get back together, but it didn’t happen.”

“You’re sure?”

“Very.” She tilted her head to the side. “Now, was I dreaming, or did you say you made me coffee?”

“That I did. It’s instant. I can make it as strong as you want.”

“Good enough.”
“Then I think we’d better head back.” The “galley” was little more than a hot plate in this single room. He pulled out a jar of Folgers crystals and added steaming water to two cups.

“Ty—?”

“Yeah?” Pausing, he looked over his shoulder. She was still holding the blankets around herself, her shoulders bare, looking sexy as hell.

“I just want you to know that I don’t usually…” She glanced around the tiny cabin before meeting his eyes again. “…I’m not a woman who sleeps with men I don’t really know.” She shoved her hair from her face with one hand. “I don’t know what got into me last night.”

“You found me irresistible,” he said, and flashed her that devastating, irreverent smile before measuring coffee into two paper cups.

“Yeah, that’s it,” she said sarcastically but couldn’t deny the truth therein. She’d acted completely out of character—or had she? There had always been a part of her that had wanted to walk close to the edge, take a step on the wild side, be more like her brother. Peter had never played by the rules. Never.

And it had cost him.

Once their mother had died and he no longer had a source of income, he’d disappeared, only surfacing occasionally, usually broke and full of wild tales about his life that Sam didn’t believe. No one could con a person better than her brother.

She found her skirt. Wrinkled beyond repair. Too bad. Mentally chastising herself, she scrambled into her clothes. She couldn’t even blame her actions on the wine. Yes, she’d been tired, and strung tight, relieved to find him on her porch, but to just throw all her good judgment, brains and morals out the window wasn’t like her. They’d never discussed past lovers, safe sex, the emotional ties that being sexually involved with someone brings. If one of her listeners were to call in and admit that they’d fallen into bed with a near stranger on a dare, by playing some silly kids’ game not unlike spin the bottle, Dr. Sam would have read that caller the riot act.

She’d just stood and zipped her skirt when Ty turned, two cups of steaming coffee in his hands. “Here you go, Sunshine,” he said, handing her a cup. “Now, I think I’d better go topside and we’d better shove off. Oh—one more thing.” He touched the rim of his cup to hers, as if toasting. “Here’s to Truth or Dare.” Laughter danced in his eyes, and she felt a tug on her heart.

He took a sip and started for the stairs. “Maybe next time we can play Post Office.”

“Or Spin the Bottle.”

“Or Doctor.”

“You know them all,” she accused as she followed him to the deck, where the wind had kicked up and only a few rays of sunlight had pierced the thick cover of clouds. Ty worked quickly, pulling up anchor, unfurling the sails and guiding the sloop across the gray water. The ride was rougher this morning, coffee sloshed as Sam tried to drink it and maintain balance. She recognized the shoreline of Cambrai as they approached, smiled as she picked out her house with its sun-bleached dock, stately live oaks and vibrant bougainvillea trailing across the roofline over the verandah. “So tell me about your book,” she said, as he slowed and lowered the sails. “What did you tell Melanie it was? *The Horse Whisperer* meets—”

“— *Silence Of The Lambs*. It was a joke. Actually I’m writing about some cases I dealt with as a cop.”

“You were a police officer?” she asked, surprised. “In one of my former lifetimes.”

“So your book is actually true crime?” He hesitated. “More like fiction based on fact.” Easing the craft into shallower water, he frowned, and she sensed there was something he wasn’t telling her, something secret. “So, how’s it coming?”

“Okay, I guess. I’ve come across a couple of obstacles, but I’m working through them.”

Vague. “Where were you a cop?” she asked.

“Texas.”

“A Ranger?”

“Detective. Grab that line, would you?” He motioned to a coil of rope, and he set out the bumpers so that the sloop wouldn’t scrape against the wood of the dock, then tied up. “I’ll walk you inside.”

“You don’t have to. I’m fine. This is my house, and it’s broad daylight.”

“I’d just feel better about it,” he said, and was already striding toward the back porch, not listening to any arguments she could come up with. The French doors were unlocked, just as they’d left them, the alarm system not
activated. Samantha hadn’t thought about it the night before, had been too caught up in Ty and hadn’t really expected to be gone for any length of time.

She’d been wrong, she realized too late.

Charon was hiding beneath a dining-room chair, and there was something odd about the house…something that didn’t feel right.

Samantha’s scalp prickled. “Maybe I’m just tired, but I think…I mean I feel that someone’s been in here.” She caught a glimpse of herself in the beveled glass mirror over the sideboard, saw her disheveled image, realized she’d only had a few hours’ sleep. “Maybe I’m imagining things.”

Ty caught her glance in the glass. His eyes were dark; his beard-shadowed jaw suddenly rock-hard. “Let’s check.”

Telling herself she was overreacting, she checked the first floor and found nothing wrong, not one thing out of place, and yet the house had a different smell, the atmosphere seemed off. They climbed the stairs together, the floorboards creaking, the fans whirring as she stepped into her bedroom.

She sensed something wasn’t quite right…that there was something amiss, but no one was in the bedroom, nor her bath. They checked every room and closet, but the house was empty. Still.

“I guess I’m imagining things,” she said, unconvinced as they walked downstairs again and Charon slid from beneath the dining-room table.

“You’ll be okay?” Ty asked.

“Yes. Of course.” This was her house, damn it, and she wasn’t going to feel unsafe in her own home.

“Keep your doors locked, your alarm on.”

“Okay, I will,” she promised as they walked outside. The day was clearer, the clouds beginning to thin, heat intensifying and shimmering across the water.

“I’ll call you later,” he promised.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but maybe I won’t.”

She laughed, and he pulled her into his arms. Nose to nose, he said, “Just be smart, Sam.” Then he kissed her. Hard enough that she felt the scrape of his whiskers along with the warmth of his lips. Memories of the night before kaleidoscopied through her mind, and as his tongue traced her lips she sighed, then felt him shift away. “Call me anytime.”

Then he was gone, lithely hopping off the verandah and jogging across the sun-dappled backyard to the dock where the Bright Angel was tugging at her moorings. He pushed off, set sail, and, as she stood beneath the overhang of the roof, watched the sailboat disappear around the point.

Charon followed her up the stairs and waited as she showered, then followed her into the closet as she pulled on shorts and a T-shirt. She was buckling her belt and about to step into an old pair of tennis shoes when she looked through the door to her antique dresser and saw that the second drawer wasn’t quite pushed in all the way, was just slightly open, barely enough to notice.

Telling herself she was imagining things, that she’d probably just not slammed it all the way shut, she crossed the room and straightened it, then, thinking twice opened the drawer that held her slips, bras, camisoles and…teddies, except that her red teddy was missing. She only had two, hadn’t worn either in months…but the red one was definitely missing.

She knew she hadn’t taken it to Mexico and hadn’t worn it since…no, the last time she’d put it on was Valentine’s Day, as a joke, as she’d been all alone, just because it was red. So where was it? She searched all the drawers and scanned her closet again, but the teddy was definitely missing.

She bit her lip, told herself not to panic, and tried to convince herself that she’d just misplaced it.

But deep inside she knew that someone had taken it.

Heart thudding, she checked the rest of the house. Her jewelry hadn’t been touched. Her television, stereo, computer, silver and liquor were undisturbed. The only thing missing was the lacy scrap of red underwear and her blood ran cold as she considered who would want such a personal item.

No doubt it had been “John.”
Chapter Nineteen

Jeremy Leeds, Ph.D. was a prick. Bentz was sure of it as he sat in the tiny alcove that was the professor’s office at Tulane. But Leeds wasn’t just a normal in-your-face kind of prick, but a self-righteous, sanctimonious, self-serving egomaniac, the sort that smiled condescendingly as he firmly but complacently put you in your place.

Bentz shouldn’t have been surprised. Weren’t all shrinks certifiable in one way or another?

It was just damned hard to imagine Samantha Leeds being married to the guy. That thought soured Bentz’s stomach. It was something the detective didn’t want to think about too much as he eyed the crowded niche Jeremy Leeds claimed as office space. Filled floor to ceiling with shelves of books on relationships, sexuality, complexes and the like, the stuffy little room boasted one dusty window and a withering Christmas cactus that should have been thrown out a decade or so ago. Basically the office was what Bentz had expected. But the man wasn’t.

Tall and lanky, with longish hair and hawk-sharp eyes, Dr. Leeds didn’t look the part of the rumpled, eccentric college professor that Hollywood always conjured up. His steely gray hair curled a bit, but was obviously cut and styled professionally, his beard neat and fashionable, his jacket smooth black leather, his wire-rimmed glasses trendy, as they sat on the end of a straight, aquiline nose. No ratty herringbone jacket with suede patches on the elbows for this professor, and there wasn’t the hint of a pipe rack nor the lingering scent of pipe tobacco, though a glass humidor showcased hand-rolled cigars that were certainly Professor Leeds’s only visible vice.

“Like one?” Leeds asked as he noticed the detective’s gaze upon the glass.

“No thanks.”

“They’re Cuban, but don’t tell anyone. Hand-rolled. This part of the conversation is off the record, right?”

“Only this part.”

Leeds extracted a long cigar from the humidor and inhaled deeply as he slid it under his nostrils. All for effect. But the scent of aged tobacco wafted through the warm room.

Bentz wasn’t interested in the professor’s theatrics. He just wanted to get through this interview, for that’s what it was, though the spark in Jeremy Leeds’s eyes led him to believe that the doctor was enjoying the meeting, happy for the chance to match wits with a slob from the police force, playing a game.

Earlier Bentz had phoned the university, asked about Dr. Leeds’s office hours, then upon receiving the information had shown up here, unannounced. The professor had been on the phone, deep in some kind of heated conversation, but had glanced up when Bentz had filled the open doorway. Leeds, startled a bit, had ended the call quickly with “…yes, yes, I know. I said I’d get back to you, and I will.” He’d hung up, hadn’t bothered to hide his irritation, then with a dismissive wave at the telephone, had asked, “Is there something I can do for you?”

“No if you’re Jeremy Leeds.”

Bushy eyebrows had shot up.

“Professor Jeremy Leeds,” Bentz had qualified.

“I prefer Doctor.”

“I’ll just bet you do,” Bentz had thought as he’d introduced himself and flipped his ID under the man’s prominent nose.

Leeds had reached for his glasses, eyed the badge and sighed through his nose. The corners of his mouth had pinched. “Officer Bentz.”

“I prefer Detective.”

The professor’s eyes had sparked. “Fine. Detective.” He’d leaned back in his padded chair. “I suppose this is about my ex-wife. I heard that she was having trouble again.”

“Again?” Bentz asked as Jeremy Leeds indicated a small love seat wedged between a corner and the desk. Bentz had clicked on his pocket recorder and was taking notes.

“Surely you know about Houston.” Leeds didn’t elaborate, except to say, “That was a helluva fiasco, but then Samantha asks for it.” Glancing out the half-opened window, he’d knotted his mouth in irritation. “That sounds harsh, I know, but I don’t put much stock in radio psychology. It’s glitz, you know. Nothing serious. Just a medium
for a lot of people to sound off. Gives the profession a bad name. Words like ‘psychobabble’ and ‘airwave shrinks’ and all. It’s degrading and…oh, well.” He threw up his hands as if in exasperation. “Excuse me for ranting. A personal pet peeve, I suppose.” He turned his attention to Bentz and managed to smooth the lines from his brow with an easy, if false, smile. “What is it you wanted? Specifically.”

“Specifically, you’re right. I’m here about Samantha Leeds. You were married to her about ten years ago?”

“Briefly. She was one of my students and we…well, we got involved.” His smile faded and his eyebrows drew together pensively. Tenting his hands beneath his chin, he admitted, “It wasn’t one of my stellar moments, you know. I was married to my first wife, separated, of course, and…well, you’ve met Samantha. She’s beautiful. Quick-witted and, when she wants to be, charming. As things were falling apart with Louise, my wife, I turned my attention to Sam, and then, even though my first marriage was dead and I was talking to an attorney about filing for divorce, word got out, it was something of a scandal and we eloped.”

“After the divorce was final I take it?”

“Of course.” He looked peeved. “I’m not a bigamist, just…well, I have two weaknesses. One is tobacco from La Havana—Havana.” He was still holding one of his cigars as he motioned toward the humidor. “The other is beautiful women.”

“Was Louise one of your students, too?”

Leeds’s jaw tightened. “No…we’d met in grad school.”

“And you’ve married again, after the divorce from Samantha.”

Splaying his hands, Leeds said, “What can I say? I’m an incurable romantic. I believe in the institution.”

Enough with this crap. Bentz needed to get down to business. “When Samantha was your student did she ever do a paper dealing with prostitution?”

“Not specifically prostitution,” Leeds corrected. “It was about the psychology of the streets—what makes people turn to selling their bodies or drugs, that kind of thing.” His eyebrows elevated. “And it was an excellent paper. As I said, Samantha’s incredibly bright.” He rubbed his chin, then folded his glasses and set them on the desk. “It’s too bad it didn’t work out.”

“What?” Bentz had a guess but he wanted it clarified.

“The marriage.”

“Why didn’t it?”

Again the catty smile. “I could say we grew in different directions.”

“But I wouldn’t buy it.”

“She followed her career.”

“And you found someone else?” A trace of irritation marred Jeremy Leeds’s otherwise complacent expression. “Man is not by nature a solitary creature, Detective. I’m sure you know that.”

“So you’re sorry that you aren’t still married to Samantha.” The eyes narrowed, as if he expected a trap. “I just said I was sorry things didn’t work out for us.”

Bentz didn’t believe it. Not for a second. This guy was too phony. Too into himself. The man’s fingernails looked as if they’d been professionally manicured, his thick hair neat and recently trimmed, not an ounce of fat on his frame. The narrow, full-length mirror hanging near the coatrack said it all.

Bentz asked a few more questions, didn’t get a good hit off the guy, then got Leeds’s back up when he pried into the professor’s personal life, asking where he’d been on the nights that “John” had called the radio station.

“Come on, Detective. Don’t tell me you think I’m involved.” His eyebrows lifted. “If you presume to think that I had anything to do with what’s happening with Samantha, guess again, Detective. I wish her no harm. Don’t even care that she’s back here in New Orleans.”

He leaned over the desk, all personal, as if they were buddies. “Look, I admired her as a student, fell in love with her. She has charm. Charisma, for lack of a better word. And she was certainly one of my brightest students.”

“Because she got involved with you?” A muscle ticked near Leeds’s eye. “Because of her innate intelligence and inquisitive mind. That’s what attracted me to her, but, okay, shoot me for being a red-blooded male as I’d be a liar if I didn’t admit I thought she was gorgeous >and that had a lot to do with my attraction.” His smile was nearly wistful. And phony as a whore’s whisper of sweet nothings. An act. “It was over between Samantha and me a long time ago. I’m sure she’s told you as much. It’s basically by coincidence that we’re in the same city again.”
“If you say so.”

“I do.” His eyes were razor-sharp again. “I’ve never moved,” he pointed out. “I’m still with the same university. Samantha and I had separated when she took that job in Houston. I didn’t want her to leave and when she did, well, the marriage was doomed.”

“So you got involved with another one of your students.” Leeds’s grin was unabashed. “Guilty as charged.” They talked a few more minutes. Bentz learned nothing more but had the distinct feeling that though Dr. Leeds seemed irritated to have his phone call interrupted and his office hours filled up with the questioning, the professor enjoyed being a part of the investigation, that he found it amusing to be interviewed by the police. His answers were clear, but there was an edge of condescension in his voice; he, of the high IQ, disdained others not as naturally intelligent as he.

Which was pure, unadulterated bullshit. As Leeds walked him out of the office and into the revered halls of the university, he said, “Drop in any time, Officer. If I can be of help, any help at all, just let me know.” More bullshit. The guy was playing games. Bentz walked outside to the oppressive heat. Storm clouds had rolled in, blocking the sun, threatening rain. The air was thick as Bentz strode through the parking lot and wondered how the hell a classy woman like the radio-doc could have ever been married to a bastard like Jeremy Leeds Ph.D. or no Ph.D. It seemed impossible.

But then he’d never been one to figure out the male/ female attraction game. His own ill-fated marriage was proof enough of that.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, he flipped down the visor where his emergency pack of Camels was tucked. He punched in the lighter and jabbed a cigarette between his teeth as he nosed his cruiser toward the St. Charles exit of the parking lot. Kids were playing in the park across the avenue, a streetcar, windows open, ferried the curious sightseers and bored locals through the Garden District. The lighter popped. Bentz, waiting for the streetcar to pass and the traffic to thin, fired up his cigarette and drew in a deep lungful of smoke. Nicotine slipped easily into his bloodstream as passengers got off the trolley—a couple of black kids with backpacks and CD players, an elderly man in a plaid cap and a tall, dark-haired guy with wraparound sunglasses. From behind his shades he glanced in Bentz’s direction, then dashed through traffic to Audubon Park and past the group of kids kicking a ball around.

There was something about the guy that bothered Rick, though he couldn’t put his finger on it. So the commuter didn’t like cops. That wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t even uncommon. Bentz followed the guy with his eyes, smoke fogging the inside of the windshield. He watched as the man jogged across the clipped grass to the trees and lagoon beyond. The streetcar started up again, gaining speed. Bentz turned on his siren, cut across traffic and the double tracks in the median, turning toward the business district. At the sound of the siren, the jogger glanced over his shoulder, but didn’t increase his pace, just disappeared into the trees.

Probably a paranoid druggie with an ounce of weed on him.

Nothing more.

Flipping off his siren, Bentz pushed the jogger from his mind as he maneuvered through heavy traffic, all the while considering the fragments of the Samantha Leeds case. Nothing seemed to fit.

Who the hell was John?

How was he involved with Annie Seger?

Why was a woman pretending to be a girl nine years dead?

Was there a connection between what was happening at the radio station and the murders being committed in the French Quarter—or was it just coincidence? Bentz had already talked to the Feds, even phoned Norm Stowell, a man he’d worked with in LA who’d once been a profiler at Quantico when he’d worked for the FBI. Stowell’s instincts had proven to be right-on more than once. Bentz trusted Stowell’s opinion, more than he did that of the kid who’d been assigned to the case. Stowell had promised to look over the information Bentz had faxed and get back to him.

Bentz took another long drag as he braked for a traffic light near Lafayette Square. Smoking helped him concentrate, and God knew he needed all the concentration he could dredge up.

He thought of Samantha. Any man could fall for her, that much was certain. But why would she hook up and marry a snake like Leeds? And what about that ex-boyfriend of hers, David Ross, in Houston. How did he figure in? The light changed and he stepped on the accelerator. Then there was Ty Wheeler, a man Bentz felt intuitively wasn’t on the up-and-up. Something about that guy bothered him. Samantha Leeds’s taste in men left a lot to be desired. Who could explain it?
He knew from his own experience that rational thought didn’t play much of a role when lust or love was involved. Unfortunately most people, himself included, had a way of mixing up the two emotions. And that usually spelled disaster. Samantha Leeds’s love life was a prime example.
Chapter Twenty

Sam tossed her copy of *Paradise Lost* to one side of her desk. She’d spent the past two hours in the den and had managed to skim most of the text, but decided that she’d been wrong. Her belief that “John,” whoever he was, had made reference to the work hadn’t panned out. At least she couldn’t find any link. A headache was beginning to form behind her eyes as she snapped on the desk lamp. Outside, evening was stretching across the lake and her yard, shadows deepening, the twinkle of the first star visible.

So who was John? She picked up a pen and twirled it between two fingers. What did he want? To scare her? Was it all just a game to him? Or was it something deeper, did he actually mean her bodily harm? She was reaching for a text on the psychology of stalkers when the phone rang so loudly she jumped.

She caught the receiver on the second ring. “Hello?” she said, but didn’t expect an answer. Twice earlier she’d answered, and no one had responded. She’d been jumpy ever since, especially since today was Thursday, Annie Seger’s birthday.

“Hi, Sam,” a cheery voice called.

“Corky!” It was so good to hear her friend’s voice. Leaning back in her chair, Samantha smiled as she stared out the window and watched a squirrel leap from one thick branch of an oak tree to another. “What’s up?”

“I thought I’d check in on you. My mom called yesterday from LA. She’d run into your dad at the country club and he said you’d been having some trouble, that you’d hurt your leg in Mexico and now there was some kind of creep stalking you or something.”

“Good news travels fast.”

“Like the speed of lightning when my mom hears it. What’s going on?”

Sam sighed, imagining her friend’s face and wishing Corky lived closer. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got some time to kill, so talk.”

“Remember, you asked.” Sam brought Corky up to date, telling her about John, Annie, the phone calls, the mutilated picture.

“Mother of God, Sam, and the girl’s birthday is today?” Corky asked, and Sam imagined the concern in her friend’s eyes.

“She would have been twenty-five.”

“Maybe you should hire a bodyguard.”

“It’s been suggested,” Sam said dryly. “As well as upgrading my cat for a pit bull.”

“How about moving in with David?” Sam sighed through her nose and glanced at the framed photograph of David still sitting on her desk near the answering machine. Handsome, yes. Husband material—no. “Even if David lived in New Orleans, it wouldn’t happen.” To prove her point to herself, she grabbed the damned picture of David from the surface of her desk and shoved it into the bottom drawer of the desk. “It’s over.”

“But you went to Mexico with him.”

“I met him there and it turned out to be a nightmare. After everything, I’ll be lucky if David and I end up friends. The odd thing about it is that police even think he might have something to do with the calls I’ve been getting.”

“David Ross?” Corky laughed. “No way. Obviously they don’t know the guy.”

“And he’s in Houston.”

“Okay, so not David. How about someone else? Come on, Sam. Don’t you have some big, strong friend who could move in for a while?”

Ty Wheeler’s image came quickly to mind. “No. Besides, I don’t need a man to—”

“What about Pete?”

Sam glanced at the photograph of her graduation, her parents and her brother. “You’re kidding, right? No one’s seen Pete in years.”

“I have. I ran into him the other day.”
“What?” She couldn’t believe her ears. “You’re talking about my brother?”

“Yes.”

“But…but…” A dozen emotions ripped through her and tears sprang to her eyes. Until that moment she didn’t realize that she’d thought it a very real possibility that he’d been dead. “I’m sorry, Corky, but this is huge. He doesn’t even bother to call on Christmas or Dad’s birthday…is he okay?”

“Looked fit as the proverbial fiddle.”

“So why hasn’t he called, where has he been, what’s he doing?”

“Hey, whoa. Slow down. One question at a time,” Corky said, and Sam forced herself to rein in her galloping emotions.

“Okay, you’re right,” she said. “Let’s start over. Where did you see Pete?”

“Here in Atlanta at a bar. Last weekend. I couldn’t believe it.”

Me, neither. Sam’s chest tightened. “How was he?”

“Good, he looked good. But then he always looked good. Even when he was using.” There was a pause, and Sam picked up the snapshot of her family. Peter, taller than the rest of the family, seeming aloof and disinterested in his black leather and dark glasses. You insensitive bastard, she thought unkindly. How many times had her father called and asked about him. A hundred? Two?

“He seemed to have cleaned up his act,” Corky offered. “But he didn’t leave me with a number or even tell me how to reach him. I told him he should call you, and he said he’d think of it.”

“Kind of him,” Sam said.

“Hey…give him a break. I don’t think his life has been all that wonderful.”


“If you say so.”

“I do, but okay, I’ll admit it. I’m an incurable romantic.”

“And always getting yourself into trouble.”

Corky laughed. “Yeah, I suppose. Especially with good-looking men.” She sighed loudly. “If it wasn’t long-distance, I’d be calling in to your show all the time, begging you for advice with my love life.”

“Sure you would,” Sam said, but laughed. God, she missed Corky. And in some ways, she missed her brother.

“Unlike you, I haven’t given up on love.”

“Unlike me you’re not a realist,” Sam countered, as Charon hopped up on her lap and began to purr.

“Pete asked about you, Sam.”

“Did he?” A dozen emotions rifled through her, none of them particularly good. Samantha still had issues with her brother. Big ones. “What about Dad? Did Pete ask about him? You know, Dad hasn’t heard from him in years.”

“Well, no, he didn’t bring up your father.”

“It figures.” Sam felt a stab of disappointment which was totally uncalled-for. Why in the world was she ever-hopeful that her brother would develop some conscience about family ties? “So what’s Pete doing?” Sam asked. “To support himself, I mean.”

“I’m not sure. He said something about working for a cell-phone company, putting up towers all around the Southeast, but I had the feeling that the job was over. He was living here, in Atlanta, but acted as if he was going to be moving…Uh-oh, I’ve got another call coming in, I’ve got to take it as I do work on commission, you know, but I wanted to tell you that I’m going to be in New Orleans in a couple of weeks. I’ll call with the details as they come in. Gotta go.”

“Bye—” Before the word was out, Corky had clicked off and Sam was left with a dead line. Staring at the picture of her small family, she hung up and tried to shake off the shroud of depression that always clung to her when she thought about her brother. Or her mother.

Deep down, though she knew it was time to let go of the old feelings, Sam still blamed Peter for taking her mother away. Picking up the snapshot, she traced the contours of her mother’s face with the tip of her finger and felt the old sadness well up as it always did when she thought of her mother. It hadn’t been long after the picture had been taken that Beth Matheson had been killed senselessly, in an automobile accident that could have been avoided.
“Oh, Mom,” Sam swallowed hard. It had been so long ago on that rainy night in LA when, frantic to find her son, Beth had climbed into her sedan and driven off. Not two miles down the road, she’d hydroplaned, hadn’t been able to stop for a red light and been killed instantly by another driver turning in the intersection.

All because of Pete’s love affair with cocaine.

Addiction, Sam reminded herself, trying to diffuse some of the rage that sometimes overcame her when she thought of her mother’s premature death. Peter was an addict. It was a disease. Beth Matheson had been careless and had not only died herself that night, but the driver of the van that had hit her was in the hospital for six weeks.

Water under the bridge.

Sam replaced the photograph. She should call Corky back and try to track down Pete. For her father. For you, too, Sam. He’s your only brother. You have to get over faulting him.

But he never calls Dad. Nor me. Acts as if his family doesn’t exist.

Rather than dwell on a brother who didn’t care if she thought he might be dead, Sam reached for the phone again. From memory, she dialed David’s work number and was informed that he was “out for a few days.”

Wonderful. It wasn’t that she wanted to talk to him, she just wanted to assure herself that he wasn’t involved in any of the calls to the station or the calls here at the house. Not David, she told herself. The first call came in when you were in Mexico. He was there.

It’s not David. The police are barking up the wrong tree.

Still, she dialed his home number, waited until the answering machine clicked on and hung up. So he wasn’t in Houston. So what?

She couldn’t sit around and wonder what he was doing. He was out of her life, and she didn’t have to remind herself that she wanted it that way. Things were better without. She’d never really loved him, but when she’d first met him, he’d seemed the right choice for a husband and father of the children she’d wanted.

Thank God she’d woken up before she’d given up on love and married him because of his suitability. “You’re as bad as Corky,” she muttered at herself. She turned to her computer and accessed her e-mail. Most of it didn’t interest her, but she saw another electronic missive from the Boucher Center and found a note from Leanne.

DS—

Things aren’t going great here. Mom’s mad all the time and Jay won’t call me back. I think I need to talk to you about something. When you have the time, call or e-mail me.

“Oh, honey.” Sam fired off a quick note, suggesting they meet for coffee, then tried Leanne’s home number. It rang busy, so she couldn’t leave a message. Leanne had e-mailed her before with similar missives, but Sam had the feeling the girl was in some kind of trouble. Maybe she’d call into the show tonight.

Just like Annie Seger did?

“Stop it,” she muttered out loud. She was just anxious because it was Annie’s birthday, and she’d gotten the threatening calls and notes. It had nothing to do with Leanne’s plight.

Telling herself she’d call Leanne later, Sam nudged Charon off her lap and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Inside her closet, she parted her long dresses, then bent down and opened the door to the attic hidden under the eaves. Flipping on the light switch she heard an angry hum, then saw the hornet’s nest tucked into one corner of the sloped ceiling. Shiny black bodies reflected the light of the single dusty bulb as they crept over the thin paper of their home. Besides the hornets, she spied spiders skulking in cobwebs that draped from the ancient, exposed rafters. She wondered about bats, saw some droppings but no furry little winged bodies hanging upside down. The attic smelled of must and mildew—this was no place for her important papers. She’d have to build cabinets in the den or second bedroom. Gritting her teeth she crawled carefully across the rough plank flooring and glanced down at the dust…was it disturbed? The top of the boxes…it seemed to be cleaner than it should, as if someone had wiped them to look at the tags…but…She shook her head. What was wrong with her? No one had been in her attic and the boxes were relatively clean because she’d sorted through them six months ago, when she’d hauled them to the attic. She’d been in here six months ago—no one else had.

And yet she couldn’t ignore the niggle of doubt that crept through her mind. Had someone been in her house? She bit her lip and silently told herself to be rational.

Carefully, she read each label, sorting through boxes of old tax records, school papers, reports and patient files until she found the box with Annie Seger’s information in it. Dragging the crate into the closet, she heard the hornets buzzing. One mad insect followed her through the long skirts of her dresses, landed on her head and as she swatted
at him, stung her on the side of the neck.

“Damn.” She shut the door to the attic, latched it firmly and carried the box into the bedroom, where she dropped it unceremoniously on the floor. Her neck throbbed. She’d have to do something about the nest and soon before the hornets found their way into her closet, bedroom and the rest of the house.

In the bathroom, she doused a washcloth in cold water, then using a mirror inspected and washed the sting. A red welt had already risen on her skin and the only medication she had in the cupboard was years-old calamine lotion which she dabbed on the side of her neck. “Stupid thing,” she muttered and heard Mrs. Killingsworth’s dog start to bark. She walked toward the front of the house to investigate and heard footsteps on the front porch. Expecting to hear the doorbell chime, or a rap of knuckles on the door, she started downstairs.

The telephone rang and she yelled, “Just a minute,” in the direction of the door as she dashed into the den.

She swept up the receiver before the third ring. “Hello?” she called into the mouthpiece. No answer. “Hello?”

Again no response. And yet someone was on the other end of the line. She was certain of it. Could sense that someone was there.

“Who is this?” she said, irritation and a drip of fear in her voice. “Hello?” She waited thirty seconds, then said, “Look, I can’t hear you.”

Was there someone breathing on the other end or was it a bad connection? It didn’t matter. Without saying goodbye, she hung up and tried to convince herself it was nothing.

Or was it?

She checked caller ID.

Unavailable.

Just like the calls to the station.

Don’t even think that way. It was a bad connection. Whoever it was will call back.

She walked into the foyer to the front door and realized that the bell had never rung, nor had anyone knocked. Odd.

She looked through the peephole, and through the fish-eye lens saw no one.

Leaving the chain in place, she opened the door a crack and snapped on the exterior light.

The porch was empty. Her wind chimes jingled in the breeze. Across the street Hannibal was staring at her house and putting up a ruckus, barking his fool head off.

Unhooking the chain, she stepped outside. She was alone. But the porch swing was swaying. As if someone or something had pushed it.

Her heart froze. She scanned the front yard and drive. “Hello?” she called into the coming night. “Hello?”

From around the corner there was a noise—the scrape of leather on aging planks. Or her imagination?

Heart hammering, she walked to the corner of the porch and looked along the side of the house where the porch fell in shadow. Aside from the patches of light thrown from the dining-room window, the night had closed in.

Squinting, she was certain she saw a movement in the hedge separating her house from the neighbors, but it could have been the breeze filtering through the leaves or a squirrel scrambling over the branches, or even a cat slinking through the shadows.

You’re losing it, Sam, she thought, turning back to the front of the house. You’re imagining things.

But the old porch swing was still rocking slightly, mocking her as it swayed, and the sense that she wasn’t alone, that hidden eyes were watching her made her skin prickle. Who? she wondered as she walked inside and locked the door firmly behind her. The phone shrilled and she started.

Get a grip!

She let it ring again. And again. Heart hammering, she picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“Hello, Dr. Sam,” John’s voice intoned and she leaned against the desk for the support. “You know what day this is, don’t you?”

“It’s the twenty-second.”

“Annie’s birthday.”

“So you say. Who was the girl who called in the other night?”

“Have you thought about your sins? That you should repent?”
“Repent for what?” she asked, sweat dripping down her back. She glanced out the window, wondered if he was outside, if it was his footsteps she’d heard on the porch, if he was calling from a cell phone. She stepped to the window and drew down the shade.

“You tell me.”

“I’m not responsible for Annie’s death.”

“Not the right attitude, Sam.”

“Who are you?” she demanded, her muscles tense, her head pounding. “Have we met? Do I know you?”

“All you need to know is that what happens tonight is because of you. Because of your sins. You need to repent, Sam. Beg forgiveness.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, suddenly cold as death.

“You’ll see.”

“No—Don’t—”

Click. The phone went dead.

“Oh, God, no!” Sam wilted into her chair. Dropped her head into her hands. She’d felt the evil in his voice, the cruelty. Something was going to happen. Something horrid. And she was to blame.

Pull yourself together. Don’t let him beat you down. You have to stop him. YOU! Think, Sam, think. Call the police. Alert Bentz. And then do whatever you can.

She dialed the police in New Orleans and nearly went out of her mind when she was told Rick Bentz would be paged and he’d have to call her back. “Tell him it’s an emergency.” She insisted before hanging up. What could she do? How could she stop whatever evil John had planned? She jumped when the phone rang again, picked up the receiver, expecting another threat.

“Hello?” she said, her knees nearly giving way.

“This is Bentz. I got a message you called about some emergency.”

“John just called me,” she said. “Here, at the house.”

“What did he say?”

“He wanted me to repent, that if I didn’t, I would pay for my sins, the same old thing, but then he added that if I didn’t something bad was going to happen. Tonight. And it would be my fault.”

“Son of a—wait a minute. Let’s start over. Slowly. I don’t suppose you taped the conversation.”

“No…I didn’t think of it. It was over too quickly.”

“Tell me everything that’s gone on,” he suggested and she obliged. She didn’t leave out a thing, mentioning that she’d gotten several hangups, that she’d thought her red teddy was missing, that she felt the house was being watched. Bentz listened and gave her the same advice as he did before, to be careful, lock her doors, get a watchdog, keep the alarm system on. “…and you might want to consider staying with a friend. Just until this is over.”

She hung up, feeling a little better. But she knew she couldn’t sit around and wait for John to make good his threat. No way. She had to figure out who he was.

Before it was too late.

“…You want me to wear those?” the girl asked, staring at the man she’d picked up near the river and motioning to a wig of long red hair and a lacy scarlet teddy, both of which were dangling from his fingers.

“That’s right.” He was calm. And weird. And the sunglasses covering his eyes only made it worse.

She’d turned a few tricks before, when she’d been desperate and she’d been asked to do some sicko stuff, but this seemed more bizarre than usual.

But then what did she know? She just wanted to get through it and get the cash.

He walked to the window and made sure the shades were drawn in this crummy little hotel room, a room he wasn’t happy about paying for.

He’d been hyped up, and the scratch on his face bothered him. He kept looking in the mirror tacked to the back of the door and tracing the welts with his fingers, welts she’d made.

She’d been sitting on a bench in the park, near the wharf, watching the boats chugging along the lazy river. Deep in thought, wondering what she was going to do, she hadn’t heard him approach. He’d appeared out of nowhere. The park had been nearly deserted when he’d propositioned her. She’d explained that she didn’t have anywhere they
could go and he’d gotten pissed off. She’d thought it was finished. But he’d been persistent.

He’d offered a hundred bucks.

She would have taken fifty. So he’d brought her to this smelly little room just outside of the Quarter. She’d been second-guessing herself ever since his requests. But it was good money. What did it matter if she had to put on a red teddy and cover her own short carrot red locks with this longer, red/auburn wig? The sooner she did as he asked, the sooner she’d be on her way to score some crack. So okay. It was no big deal. She’d done worse things than wear some other woman’s things. She wondered if the teddy belonged to his wife or his girlfriend. Just what kind of freak was he in his dark glasses?

So now he was looking at her again with those dark, hidden eyes. Worse yet he rubbed a rosary between his fingers, and that really creeped her out. She wasn’t particularly religious, but she’d been brought up in the church, and it seemed morally wrong, just plain spooky, that he’d brought the rosary along. Sacrilegious.

But…whatever. She needed a hit. And she’d get it. If she could just get through the next half hour or so. She glanced at the bedside table. Saw the hundred-dollar bill. It was weird, too. Blacked-out eyes on Ben Franklin.

The John was fiddling with the radio on the bedside table, pushing buttons and glowering at the electronic display until he found a talk station, one she recognized. She swallowed hard as she heard Dr. Sam’s voice.

“Can’t…can’t we listen to music?” she suggested, feeling a new stab of guilt. It was as if Sam was in the room with them.

“No.”

“But—”

“Just get dressed,” he ordered, his lips compressing, his thumb and finger rubbing the rosary as if his life depended upon it. The dark glasses and scratch on his cheek convinced her to shut up.

Sliding out of her platform sandals, she stood barefoot on the worn carpet near the bed, then wiggled out of her tube top. In a few minutes this would be over and then she could leave.

Dr. Sam’s voice floated through the speakers, “So let’s hear about it, New Orleans, tell me about the love letters or the Dear John letters you’ve received.”

The guy froze. Muttered something under his breath, then whipped around glaring at her. He didn’t say a word as she kicked off her shorts and struggled into the lacy teddy. Adjusting the straps, she thought fleetingly that the guy was handsome in an eerie way. She’d concentrate on that, his good looks, and wouldn’t listen to Dr. Sam. She’d pretend. Just like she always did and she’d just get down to business, get him off and then be on her way. Stuffing her hair under the wig, she angled up her chin and looked at him defiantly.

“How’s that?”

For a moment he just looked at her, studying her like one of those fruit flies under a microscope in that stupid biology class she’d flunked. She tossed her head and the long hair of the wig swished against her shoulder blades.

“Perfect,” he finally said with the hint of a smile, “Just perfect.”

He approached her and touched her ear, playing with the series of earrings running up from her lobe. Good. He was finally going to get down to it.

He nuzzled her neck and she forced out a moan she didn’t feel, just to get it over with. Lolling her head back and closing her eyes as if she was really getting hot, she sensed something odd, something cold slide over her head to circle her neck.

What was this shit? She leaned back away from him and realized that the rosary was around her throat, the sharp beads tight against her skin.

“No, oh, God, no. Please, somebody help me!”

Her lungs were on fire. She thought she would burst.
Please, please. Help me. Please someone, hear what’s going on in here and help me!

She flung a fist at the glasses and he jerked back his head. She saw her own terror twice in the dark lenses as the distorted reflection of her face came into view. She was going to die, she knew it. And the baby within her, the one she hadn’t wanted, it was going to die, too.

He twisted around to her backside, and she felt a second’s relief. Her knees buckled. She gasped. Tried to run. She dragged in one final breath. Tasted blood, stumbled forward, half-believing she could escape.

Then he wrenched the unholy noose again.
Chapter Twenty-one

“That’s a wrap,” Melanie said as the strains of “Midnight Confession” faded and an advertisement for an e-commerce started rolling.

Shoving her chair away from the desk, Sam let out her breath. She’d been nervous during the show. Edgy. Certain “John” would call again, that he’d only phoned her at the house to prove that he could. To scare her. But he hadn’t called in.

But he’d been listening. Waiting. Knowing he was stretching her nerves to the breaking point. After the phone call at her house, she’d decided to bait him. Her program tonight had been about communications, specifically love letters, Dear John letters and even threatening notes though she hadn’t mentioned the card she’d received in her car.

Listener response had been hot, but “John” hadn’t phoned in…yet…There was still time. He’d proven that before when he’d called in after her program had aired.

Though it was after midnight now. Technically Friday—the day after Annie Seger’s birthday.

She turned off her equipment, studied the unlit phone-line buttons for a second, then met Melanie and Tiny in the hallway.

“No weirdos tonight,” Tiny observed.

“So far,” Sam agreed.

Tiny shoved his glasses onto the bridge of his nose. “You’re disappointed, aren’t you? You kind of get off when he calls.”

“Get off?” Sam repeated, her temper sparking. “No…but we can’t find him if he hides.” She didn’t add that she wanted to lure him out, hook him, reel him in and then see that he never terrorized anyone again. Yes, in a perverse way, she wanted to know what made him tick, but more than that, she wanted him off the streets, away from the phones and out of her life.

“Do you think he’d really call in again after hours?” Melanie asked as she searched in her purse and came up with a tiny box of Tic-Tacs. “Wouldn’t that be pushing his luck? I mean, he’s got to have figured that you’ve been to the police by now. He doesn’t know that they aren’t tracing the calls—or that we aren’t.” She plopped half a dozen tiny mints into her palm and tossed them into her mouth.

“Maybe the guy knows what a cheap-ass George Hannah is,” Tiny grumbled, then waved his hands in the air. “I didn’t say that, okay? I don’t want to hear about it in the next staff meeting.”

“It’s what we were all thinking anyway,” Melanie said, yawning, as she held up the near-empty plastic box of mints in offering. “Anyone?”

“I’m good,” Tiny said, declining.

“If you say so.”

Sam shook her head. “No, thanks.”

Melanie yawned again. “God, I’m dead tonight. Anyone want to split a Diet Coke?” She was already heading down the hallway toward the kitchen.

“I’ve still got some.” Tiny turned back to the booth to set up Lights Out.

Sam was right behind but had one ear open, listening for the phones. “No caffeine for me,” she said to Melanie. It was one o’clock on Friday morning; Sam’s shift was over for the week, and she couldn’t imagine working on the weekends as well.

“Would you mind loaning me a buck for the machine?” Melanie asked as they rounded a corner and passed by a wall lined with pictures of local celebrities who had been interviewed at WSLJ.

“After you took care of Charon and the house while I was gone? I think I can manage.”

“Good.”
Sam found her wallet and handed Melanie a bill as they neared the kitchen. The first strains of soft instrumental music wafted through the hallways. Lights Out had begun and the phone hadn’t rung. “Has Eleanor mentioned anything about running Midnight Confessions seven nights instead of five?” Sam asked, trailing after Melanie.

“I heard it through the grapevine around her. Gator’s not too happy…” Melanie’s voice faded. “What in the world…Maybe you shouldn’t come in here.” Melanie stopped dead center in the doorway and was staring to her left, toward the French doors. The dollar bill that Sam had given her had fallen to the floor.

“Why not?” Sam craned her neck to look over Melanie’s shoulder.

Her blood ran cold at the sight of the cake—iced in white frosting and supporting about two dozen red candles. “Jesus.”

“This has something to do with that Annie girl,” Melanie said, swallowing hard.

Sam pushed past her and strode to the table. Her head was pounding, her heart pumping wildly. “Who did this?” she asked. “Who got in here and planted this thing?”

“I…I…don’t know.”

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ANNIE blazed across the white icing in red letters while the candles were burning, red wax dripping down the sides of the cake like rivulets of blood, smoke twisting upward from the tiny flames.

“Is this someone’s idea of a joke?” Sam asked, glaring down at the concoction. She counted. Twenty-five candles. One for every year of Annie Seger’s life and death. “Did you do this, Melanie?”

“Me? Why? Are you nuts?” Melanie shook her head. “I—I’ve been in the booth all night. You know it. You were there…” Her face crumpled in on itself, and she blinked as if she might cry. “…How could you even think—”

Sam wasn’t listening. “Tiny!” Sam yelled, storming to the corridor, her blood pumping hard, anger, disgust and shame spurring her to the booth where Tiny was adjusting the volume and the pretaped program. He looked up, saw her and held up a finger to keep her quiet and at bay. Her fists clenched and it was all she could do not to burst into the glassed-in room and rip him up one side and down the other. By the time he lumbered into the hallway, her fingernails had dug into her palms and she was livid. “You look like you could spit nails.”

“I can,” she bit out furiously. “I found the cake.”

“The cake,” he repeated dully. “What cake?”

“Annie Seger’s birthday cake.”

“Her what? The girl who called in the other night? What the hell are you talking about?” He seemed genuinely perplexed.

“Don’t you know?”

“For God’s sake, Sam, you’re talking like a lunatic.” His face was red now. Anger? Shame? Regret?

Melanie had followed Sam halfway down the hall. “I think you’d better see for yourself.”

“Jesus Christ, now what?” Lips compressed, beads of sweat appearing on his pockmarked skin, Tiny strode through the maze of hallways and into the kitchen. Sam was right on his heels, following him step for step. Around the corner, into the kitchen, to stop dead in his tracks. “What the—Shit.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Sam said.

“But who would do this? How could they?” he asked, turning. His skin had paled, leaving the red blotches of his acne even more pronounced.

“My guess is it’s either you or Melanie. No one else is here.”

“Except the security guard,” Melanie put in.

“He doesn’t even know me.” Sam wasn’t buying it, though, for the life of her, she couldn’t figure out why either Melanie or Tiny would want to sabotage her this way. Melanie was her assistant and friend, a person she’d trusted to look after her job, house and cat while she was away and Tiny was half in love with her from the minute she’d walked into WSLJ. He was too smart to be reduced to schoolboy antics to garner her attention.

But then who?

Melanie said, “The guard could’ve been put up to it.”

Tiny seemed genuinely disgusted. “Are you accusing me, Sam? You really think I’d do something like this to…to…you?” he asked, a wounded look crossing his eyes behind his thick glasses.
“I don’t know.” It did seem far-fetched. Irrational. If whoever was behind it had wanted to rattle her…
mission accomplished.

“And Gator was here not an hour ago, and so was Ramblin’ Rob. I saw him at the record case looking for
some moldy-oldy to play tomorrow,” Tiny said.

“The boss was here earlier, too. I saw George in his office, on the phone,” Melanie added.

“Great.” So half the staff could’ve done the job.

“Don’t you trust me?” Tiny asked. His lips folded in on themselves, and he glared at Sam as if she was
named Judas.

“Of course.”

“Then knock it off.” He looked like a wounded bear.

“And don’t look at me,” Melanie said, backing up, palms outward. “I’ve been with both of you all night.”

Tiny shook his head and held up a finger. “You took a break.”

“To go to the bathroom, for God’s sake!” she said. “For the first time in my life I wish George was perverted
enough to have some surveillance cameras installed.”

“You and me both,” Sam said, then felt the tickle of a breeze against the back of her neck and noticed the
muted sounds of the city filtering into the room—traffic, a solitary trombone, the wind sighing through the
palms in Jackson Square. Heart in her throat, she walked to the French doors that opened onto the unused
balcony. They were unlocked, just slightly cracked. “Someone was in here,” she whispered, goose bumps rising
on her skin. “They came through here.” She pushed the doors open and the sound of traffic and voices drifted
in with the warm breath of the wind. Laughter and the moan of the trombone.

“They? You think it was more than one guy?” Tiny asked, following her onto the balcony.

“I wish I knew,” she whispered harshly, crooking her neck to see around the corner of the building and
searching the night-dark streets of New Orleans. Who had broken into the office and how had he done it?
Wrapping her fingers around the decorative railing, she stared across the square to the cathedral, splashed with
light, the clock face glowing as bright as a full moon, the tall spires black and jutting toward the dark sky. In
front of the cathedral was the park, where palm trees blocked her view of the statue of Andrew Jackson and his
rearing horse. The park was supposed to be empty now, pedestrians were locked away from the circular
sidewalks at night. Had her tormentor scaled the fence, and was he lurking there, hiding in the shadows,
watching her now with hidden eyes?

Despite the humidity, she felt cold from the inside out. “You bastard,” she whispered, her eyes scouring the
depths of Jackson Square before she swung her gaze south, past the stately old buildings, along the narrow
streets to the levee and the dark river beyond. Was he skulking in a doorway, secreting himself on a small
terrace such as this, taunting her silently with his presence.

“I’m calling the security guard,” Melanie said from inside the building.

“Good.” Sam’s gaze swept the railing and floor of the never-used balcony. In the weak light she saw nothing
other than pigeon droppings and dirt. “I’ll phone Eleanor on another line. If I don’t, she’ll be ticked. You”—she
turned and pointed a finger at Tiny’s chest—“phone the police and make sure that Lights Out is on track—and
that no one else calls in.”

“You really think ‘John’s’ gonna call again, don’t you?” he accused hotly. Was there just a hint of jealousy
in his voice?

She glanced at the table where the cake was still displayed. “No, Tiny,” she admitted, walking inside and
staring down at the rapidly burning candles. “I think he already did.” Bending down, she blew out every one of
the twenty-five damning flames just as the phone jangled.

Sam jumped.

“I’ll get it,” Melanie said, but Sam was already halfway to the nearest phone available, at the front desk. Line
one was blinking wildly.

Bracing herself, Sam leaned over Melba’s desk and grabbed the receiver. She punched the button. “WSLJ.”

“Samantha?”

She nearly wilted at the sound of Ty’s voice. “Hi,” she said, rounding the computer extension and falling into
Melba’s chair. It was so good to hear from him. “What’s up?”

“I wanted to see that you were okay,” he said. “I listened to the show and wondered if you’d like me to pick
you up.” At that moment the security guard, a beefy man of about thirty-five, with a shaved head and beginning of a pot belly, walked through the door. “I’ll be fine,” she said into the phone. “We did get a little surprise down here, and I was about to call the police.” Quickly she told him about the birthday cake.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“I’m fine.” She nodded toward the guard. “I’m sure Wes will walk me to my car.”

“Wes, my ass. What good was he when someone broke in? Why didn’t he hear it? Why the hell didn’t the alarms go off? You wait for me and yeah, call the cops. Pronto. I’m on my way.”

“You don’t have to—”

He clicked off, and the light for line one died. “You’d better check out the kitchen,” she said to Wes as she hung up, and then it hit her. Ty had called on line one. Because that was the number listed in the book or available from Directory Assistance. If line one was in use, the calls automatically switched to line two, then three and four depending upon how busy the lines were. Calls could stack up while waiting for a response.

But John had phoned in on line two, even when none of the other lines were busy. Somehow he knew the number. Either he’d been in the building, worked for the phone company, had access to the phone records or he worked at WSLJ.

A cold drip of fear slid through her blood. Was it possible? Was someone at the station responsible for the terror? How else would the cake be left in the kitchen? Either John or an accomplice knew the ins and outs of this old building, understood how WSLJ ran, and had a personal vendetta against her.

Who?
George Hannah?
Tiny?
Melanie?
Eleanor?

She trusted every one of them. And those she knew less well, Gator and Ramblin’ Rob, some of the technicians and salespeople, even Melba. They were all part of her family here in New Orleans.

But one of them hates you, Sam. Enough to scare the liver out of you. She stared at the phone, quiet now, no lights blinking in the semidarkness. The pictures of celebrities, the framed awards, the voodoo dolls and baby alligators all backlit in glowing neon seemed macabre tonight.

Whoever it was who meant to terrorize her had done a damned good job.

Until she found out who was behind the bizarre events of her life in the last few weeks, she’d never feel safe here again.
Chapter Twenty-two

This is your fault.

Ty ignored his conscience, but guilt settled deep in his gut as he opened the door to his wagon and whistled to his dog. He couldn’t help think that somehow he trip-hammered someone’s interest in Annie Seger. He’d done some research, knew the story inside and out, but he couldn’t figure out how his writing a book about the case could ignite anyone’s interest.

No one knew about his project aside from his editor, agent and himself. He hadn’t even been honest with Sam, and when she found out she was gonna be angry as hell.

Sasquatch barked loudly from inside the house, causing a ruckus.

“Be good,” Ty warned as he slid behind the wheel and rammed his keys into the ignition. He hadn’t intended to touch off a new crime spree, nor had he intended to get involved with Sam, though he’d planned on meeting her from the start.

Throwing the car into drive, he gunned the engine and flipped on the headlights. The street was deserted, Sam’s house dark, a light glowing on Mrs. Killingsworth’s porch.

His idea of getting to know Samatha Leeds and in the process learning what she knew about the case had backfired big-time. Before he’d even started, whoever the hell John was had started calling into Midnight Confessions. And then this latest bit—with the breathy-voiced girl claiming to be Annie. What the hell was that all about? Who was she?

He slowed for a stop sign, then took the corner, heading through the outskirts of the tiny lakeside community of Cambrai and rimming the lake, heading toward the bright lights of the city, visible in the distance.

The names of people connected with Annie Seger swirled through his head—her mother, Estelle, a cold, religious bitch if ever there was one and Wally, her natural father, a man who drifted from job to job. Then there was her brother, Kent, a year and a half older and not as popular as his sister. She’d been raised by Jason Faraday, her stepfather, an ambitious, driven, A-type doctor, and her boyfriend had been Ryan Zimmerman, a boy who’d fallen from being an A student and captain of the lacrosse team into partying and drugs. Annie’s purported best friend had been Priscilla “Prissy” McQueen, a backstabbing self-indulgent teenager who’d had a crush on Annie’s boyfriend.

He wheeled around a corner and saw the city limits of New Orleans loom in front of him. He reached for his cell phone and punched out a number he knew from memory. It was time to call in the cavalry, much as he hated it.

Otherwise, someone was going to get hurt.

Brrring.

No, Bentz thought, his eyes opening to his dark apartment. Not now.

The phone jangled sharply again.

Rolling over, he glanced at the clock and groaned. Two-thirty in the damned morning. He’d been asleep less than two hours. No doubt it was bad news. No one called in the middle of the night just to chat. Snapping on the bedside lamp, he snagged the receiver before the damned telephone could ring again. “Bentz,” he said, wiping a hand over his face, trying to wake up.

“Looks like we got ourselves another one.” Montoya sounded much too alert for this gawd-awful time of day.

“Hell.” Bentz swung his legs over the side of the bed. His mind instantly cleared, and he thought about the warning Samantha Leeds had received. “Where?”

“Near the Garden District,” Montoya said, giving off the address. “Second floor.”

“Same MO?”
“Similar. But not identical. You’d better get over here.” Montoya rattled off the address.
“Give me twenty minutes. Don’t let anyone disturb anything.”

“Would I?” Montoya asked before clicking off, and Bentz wondered why he hadn’t been called first. He hung up, grabbed a pair of jeans he’d thrown over the end of his bed and kicked his shoes from beside the dresser. He didn’t bother with socks and yanked on a T-shirt. In one swoop he gathered his keys and ID, then grabbed his shoulder holster and Glock from the bedside table. Stuffing his arms through a jacket and shoving a Saints cap on his head, he took the stairs to the front door of the apartment building.

Jesus, it was hot. At two-thirty in the morning. Not the dry heat of the desert but that moist, cloying warmth that brought a sweat to his skin at seventy degrees. He jogged to his car, unlocked it and had fired the engine before he strapped on his seat belt.

Another woman dead.
Silently he berated himself. He shouldn’t have paid so much attention to Dr. Sam and the damned threatening notes. Not when there were murders being committed. Murders he needed to solve.

*But killings that just might be connected to the radio shrink.*

His tires squealed as he took a corner too fast and he clicked on the police band, only to hear that there had been trouble down in the French Quarter. He heard the address and recognized the building. Realized it housed WSLJ. Was certain the trouble involved the lady shrink. His gut tightened. John had warned her, then struck again.

This was turning into one helluva night.
He drove like a madman, found the address Montoya had given him and parked between two cruisers. The night was sticky, not much wind. Sweat ran down his back as he wove through the crowd that had already gathered around the grand old house cut into individual apartments.

On the second floor, he found the apartment and stepped inside.

The place was already crawling with the crime-scene team. A police photographer was taking pictures of the dead woman as she lay facedown on the carpet. She was naked, and her head had been shaved, nicks visible beneath the dark stubble covering her skull. A thick braid of shiny black hair was twined in one of her hands and an odd, sweet smell accompanied the usual stench of death. Her skin was smooth, a soft mocha color.

With one quick look, he knew they had another killer on their hands. “This is all wrong,” he muttered to himself, his gut tight, his jaw clenched as he viewed the latest victim stretched out on the area rug.

“You’re telling me.” Montoya slid past the photographer and had heard Bentz’s observation.

Bentz squatted down, balanced on the balls of his feet. He touched the skein of hair wound through her fingers. It was oily. Smelled faintly of patchouli. As in Kama Sutra. What the hell was that all about?

“Who’s the victim?” Rocking back on his heels, Bentz glanced up at Montoya.

“Cathy Adams, according to her driver’s license, but she was sometimes known as Cassie Alexa or Princess Alexandra.”

“Working girl?”
“Part-time prostitute, part-time student at Tulane, parttime exotic dancer down at Playland.”

He knew the place. An all-nude “dance club” on Bourbon Street.

Straightening, Bentz surveyed the room. Neat. Tidy. Furniture worn, but clean. A few pictures on the wall. Martin Luther King Junior was positioned above a tattered recliner and directly above her head, a colored portrait of Christ gazed down on her. “This her place?”

“Yeah. According to the landlord she had been sharing this place with a boyfriend, who the landlord thinks might have doubled as her pimp, but the guy—Marc Duvall—moved out about three weeks ago after they had one of their usual knock-down-drag-outs. Same old, same old, she calls 911 but by the time the officers show up, she’s calmed down and even though she’s got one helluva shiner, won’t press charges, claims it was all a mistake. He gets hauled in, but he makes bail. Anyway she gave Marc his walking papers, he skips out, and no one’s seen him since. The landlord has had it and served Cathy an eviction notice. I’ve got an APB out for Marc, but my guess is he’s not only out of town, but probably the country.”

Bentz was still surveying the crime scene. “Whoever did this isn’t our boy,” Bentz said, sensing he’d just stepped into an unfamiliar evil. Again he bent down for a better view of the victim. She’d been strangled, from the looks of the bruises on her neck, but the ligature was different from the other victims.
“I know. More upscale neighborhood. No mutilated C-note, no radio playing, garrotted by something
different.”

“All the other victims were white,” Bentz muttered. “But she was a prostitute, and she was killed in her
apartment, and she was posed,” Montoya pointed out. That much was true. No one would have fallen on the
floor completely facedown, arms outstretched over her head, legs together, toes pointed, a thick braid of her
own hair twined in her fingers.

“Differently. She was posed differently.” Bentz thought hard as he stared at the smooth mocha-colored skin
of Cathy Adams. He wondered about the woman—did she have children? A husband tucked away somewhere?
Parents still alive? His jaw hardened. “Check on the next of kin, friends, family, boyfriends other than Marc.
Find out what else she was into. Talk to the other girls and the owner of the club.” Montoya nodded, frowned
down at the victim. “Maybe our boy’s escalating or mutating. Maybe that’s why the signature’s changed.”

“It’s too different, Reuben.” Bentz didn’t like the turn of his thoughts. “I’ll bet we’ve got ourselves another
bad guy. If nothing else, a copycat.”

“Two?” Montoya reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of Marlboros. Shook one out. Didn’t
bother to light it. “No way. They’re not that common—what? Maybe 10 percent of the serial-killer population.”

“Somethin’ like that.”

“What are the odds of that happening?”

“Not good, thank God.” And yet…Bentz’s gut told him differently as he walked through the rest of the small
apartment, away from the cloying smell of patchouli.

The bedroom was as tidy as the living room, the bedclothes not even mussed. The bathroom filled with
women things— hose hanging from the showerhead behind a clear curtain, shampoo and conditioner on the
edge of the tub. Using a handkerchief he opened the medicine cabinet behind the mirror and found tubs and jars
of makeup, some over-the-counter meds, Band-Aids and tampons. The only nod to her profession was an open
box of condoms next to the Alka-Seltzer. No prescription medications. No evidence of illegal drugs.

Clean towels were in a small cupboard, and her cleaning supplies were under the sink.

Bentz, satisfied that he’d seen enough, walked to the front door, where a small crowd had gathered around
the uniformed cops keeping the curious at bay. “I want this place swept clean,” Bentz said to the woman in
charge of the crime-scene team.

She shot him a put-upon look. “Like we usually leave evidence for the cleaning people. Give me a break.”
Bentz held up a hand. “Sorry.”

“Just give us some room here, okay? The sooner we’re done here, the sooner you’ll have your report.”

“You got it.” He and Montoya eased out of the room and through the small crowd that had collected in the
hallway. “Have everyone here questioned.”

“I’m already working on it.” Montoya was nothing if not efficient. “So far no one claims to have seen
anything out of the ordinary.”

“I want to see the statements ASAP. And call the lab. Have them put a rush on this. Double-check that they
look for hairs from a wig, and cross-check any semen, blood or hair samples with what we have on file on the
pending cases, and even the solved ones—not just murder but any rapes or assaults in the past five years.”

“A pretty tall order,” Montoya griped as they eased through the small group that had gathered in the hallway.
One cop was questioning the residents, the other keeping them outside of the crime scene.

“Not so tall. We’ve got computers and the FBL.” He rubbed the back of his neck and glanced back toward
Cathy Adams’s apartment. “Where are the Feds?”

Montoya’s grin was wicked. “Guess I neglected to call them.”

“There’ll be hell to pay.”

“As you said, this isn’t our boy.” He clenched the cigarette between his teeth and searched his pockets for his
lighter.

“Yeah, but they’ll want to know about it.”

“I’ll give ‘em a personal report in the morning.”

“You do that,” Bentz grumbled, as they walked down the stairs. He didn’t like dealing with the Feds any
more than Montoya, but he wasn’t going to buck the system. And there were some good agents, guys he could
work with. Like Norm Stowell when Stowell had been with the bureau. “How come you were called first?”
Bentz asked. “I wasn’t.” Montoya found his lighter and clicked it to the end of his cigarette as they reached the first floor. “I was at the station writing up a report for you on the associates of Annie Seger.” He sucked hard on his filter tip then exhaled a cloud. “I left a hard copy of the report on your desk and was about to go home when the call came in. I took it, drove over here, then phoned you.” That explained it.

Montoya added, “When you get a chance, you might want to take a look at the report. Annie Seger wasn’t your typical prom queen.”

“I don’t imagine.”

“And there’s a couple of other things. Samantha Leeds’s old man—the guy she was married to?”

“Doctor Leeds.”

“Yeah. He’s still around; still teaches over at Tulane. On wife number three, and that seems to be falling apart.”

“I’ve already had the honor of meeting him,” Bentz muttered, remembering the jerk. “Helluva guy.”

“I figured. But there was a couple of things I hadn’t counted on. Check out the good doctor’s patient list—it’s only a partial, of course because of the doctor-patient confidentiality code, but the Houston PD were able to piece together some info.”

“I’ll look at it.”

“I’m sure you will.” Montoya took a drag and then shot a plume of smoke from the side of his mouth. “Then check out to see who was first officer on the scene the night Annie Seger died.”

“Someone we know?”

Montoya’s eyes glinted as they always did when he’d uncovered a particularly unusual piece of information. “You could say that.” He shouldered open the door.

Outside, a crowd had gathered—the night people who wandered the streets, interested neighbors, people who listened to the police band and got their kicks out of being a part of the action.

Serial killers were known to watch the results of their havoc. It gave them a rush to watch the police try to find clues they’d endeavored not to leave behind. Some even had the balls or were nuts enough to try and keep up with the investigation, to come forward and offer “help.” Wackos.

A news van was parked on the other side of the yellow crime-scene tape, and a sharply dressed woman reporter was talking with her cameraman. She looked up as Bentz ducked under the barrier. Without missing a beat, she kept her conversation running and made a beeline for Bentz. The guy holding the shoulder camera was right on her tail.

“Here comes trouble,” Montoya stage-whispered, “all gussied up in designer labels.”

“Detective,” the newswoman called, not bothering to smile. “I’m Barbara Linwood with WBOK. What’s going on here? Another murder?” He didn’t respond.

“I mean, I’ve heard some of the people here talking. The victim is rumored to be a prostitute and there’s been several women killed lately—all prostitutes. I’m starting to think we have a serial killer running rampant in New Orleans.” Her expression was expectant, eager. She wanted a serial killer to be stalking the streets of the Crescent City. She wanted the story. Again he held his tongue and his pager went off. “Come on, Detective. Give me a break here. Was another woman killed? A prostitute?” A breath of wind teased at her hair, but she didn’t notice as she stared at Bentz intently.

“We have a woman dead,” he said, “and we’re in the first stages of the investigation. I have no statement to make at this time.”

“Enough with the company line.” She was a quick woman, about five-three, with sharp features, heavy makeup, and a persistent streak. She wasn’t just zeroing in on Bentz but included Montoya in the conversation. “If there’s a serial murderer in our midst, lurking in the streets of New Orleans, the public has the right to know. For safety’s sake. Can’t you give me a quick interview?”

Bentz glanced at the camera hoisted on the cameraman’s shoulder. He hadn’t said a word, but the red indicator light was glowing brightly. “I think I just did.”

“Who was the victim?”

“I’m sure the department will issue a statement in the morning.”

“But—”
“There are rules to follow, Ms. Linwood. Next of kin need to be notified, that sort of thing. That’s all I can say right now.” He turned his back on her, but silently admitted she had a point. A monster was stalking the streets of the city, maybe more than one, and the public needed to be aware.

“What about you?” she asked Montoya, but got nowhere. Reuben might want to talk to the TV people and grab a little glory, hell the guy loved that part of the job. But he wouldn’t risk that kind of trouble from Melinda Jaskiel or the DA. Montoya was too savvy and ambitious to blow it.

From the corner of his eye, Bentz saw Montoya disentangle himself from the newswoman and jettison his cigarette onto the street.

Bentz walked past a couple of cruisers with their lights flashing to his own car, where he checked his pager and called in to the station. The message was simple. There had been more trouble over at WSLJ. Dr. Sam had received another threatening message—this time in the form of a birthday cake for Annie Seger planted in the kitchen at WSLJ. Someone was really trying to rattle the radio shrink’s cage.

“Hell.” Bentz threw his car into drive and tore off. He rolled the windows down, let the warm Louisiana breeze flow through the interior as he headed toward the business district, leaving the stately old homes behind. Whoever the hell this John was who was harassing Samantha Leeds, he had one perverted sense of humor. All in all, it was a damned nightmare. Was it a coincidence that the prostitute was killed on Annie Seger’s birthday? Was there a connection between the murders and the threats being aimed at Samantha Leeds? Or was he grasping at straws?

He blew through a yellow light near Canal Street and slowed down. Just because a murder was committed the same night Dr. Sam received an ugly prank didn’t mean squat. And there was no hundred-dollar bill with the eyes blackened, which seemed a very frail link to the mutilated publicity shot Samantha had received. All the references to sin and forgiveness didn’t have anything to do with the murders...there was no radio tuned into the Lights Out program...no, he was just tired…

And yet his mind wouldn’t let go of the possible link. He was missing something, he was sure of it. Something obvious. He wheeled around a corner when it hit him like a fist in the gut.

Not Lights Out. The program before it. His hands gripped the wheel. That was it. The time of deaths were earlier, before the bodies were discovered and he’d bet a month’s salary that the program that had been on when the women were killed was Midnight Confessions.

Why hadn’t he seen it before?

The perp offed the women while listening to Dr. Sam.

“Son of a bitch,” he growled, but felt that surge of adrenaline that always sped through his bloodstream when he was close to cracking a case. This was it. The link. And the red wig. Because Dr. Sam was a redhead. Holy shit, how had he missed that. He drove to the station, nosed his car into a parking spot and headed upstairs. He wasn’t officially on duty until later this afternoon, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. The questions and half-baked theories spinning through his brain would keep him awake for hours.

There was just enough sludge in the bottom of the coffeepot for one cup, so he poured himself a mug and carried it to his desk. He didn’t bother with the harsh fluorescent tubes overhead, but switched on his desk lamp, then settled into his old chair and flipped on his computer screen. With a few clicks of the mouse, the crime-scene photos of Rosa Gillette and Cherie Bellechamps were displayed side by side.

They had to have been killed by the same guy. Both women had been strangled with a strange noose, the cuts on their necks, identical. Both corpses had been left with the radio playing, the bodies posed as if they were praying, both sexually violated, both left with a mutilated hundred dollar bill.

None of which had occurred tonight with Cathy Adams.

And Cathy had been killed on Annie Seger’s birthday. Big deal. Lots of people were born on July 22. It meant nothing. Nothing. There was no link.

And yet…

He’d wait for the report on the latest victim. In the meantime, he flipped through his in-box. Lying on top were several neatly typed pages compliments of Reuben Montoya. Bentz scanned the notes on Annie Seger quickly, then read it over a second time. Montoya was right. Annie Seger wasn’t what he’d expected. Her parents Estelle and Oswald Seger had divorced when Annie was four and her older brother, Kent, was six. Estelle had remarried practically before the ink on the divorce papers had dried. Her new husband and Annie’s stepdaddy was Jason Faraday, a prominent Houston physician. Oswald, “Wally,” had all but disappeared from
his children’s lives when he’d moved to the Northwest, somewhere outside of Seattle. According to the court records, Wally had forever been delinquent in his child-support payments, only coughing up when Estelle had sicced her lawyers after him.

So much for the *Ozzie and Harriet* type of family. Bentz took a swallow of his coffee and scowled at the burnt, bitter flavor.

Leaning back in his chair he propped his heel on a corner of the desk and flipped over the pages. Montoya had been thorough, piecing together info from the high school Annie had attended. If her report cards and the school yearbook were to be believed, Annie Seger had been an excellent student, a popular girl, a cheerleader and member of the debate team. According to a file the Houston police had composed from interviews of family and friends, Annie had gone through several boyfriends before linking up with Ryan Zimmerman, who had been captain of the lacrosse team before he’d run into trouble with drugs and the law and had dropped out of school.

A stellar choice for the father of her child. Bentz frowned as he read on.

Suddenly the popular teen was alone and pregnant. In apparent desperation she’d called Dr. Sam a few times and soon thereafter had ended her life in her plush bedroom over nine years ago. There were pictures of Annie—one in her cheerleading uniform in mid-jump, pom-poms clenched in her hands, another of her vacationing with her family, her, her mother, stepfather, and brother in hiking shorts and T-shirts, posed along the ridge of a forested hill, and of course, the crime scene, where she was slumped over her computer, wrists slashed, blood running down her bare arms and onto her keyboard, a tragic mess that was in stark contrast to what he saw of the rest of the room—the neatly made bed covered with stuffed animals, the plush white carpet, the bookcase where a stereo system was stacked between the paperbacks and CDs.

Bentz glanced up at his desk and stared at the bifold frame of the pictures of his own daughter. He couldn’t imagine losing Kristi. She was the single most important thing in his life; his reason for staying off the bottle and making something of himself.

Frowning, he turned the page and found a partial list of Dr. Sam’s patients. Only five were listed. The one that jumped out at him was Jason Faraday, the physician who just happened to be Annie Seger’s stepfather.

“Son of a bitch,” Bentz muttered, his mind racing. Samantha Leeds had never mentioned that Faraday had been her patient, but then she wouldn’t. Couldn’t. There were laws about that sort of thing. He swilled the end of the coffee and flipped to the final page.

Montoya’s notes said that Estelle and Jason Faraday had divorced sixteen months after Annie’s death. Estelle still resided in Houston, in the very house where her only daughter had taken her life. Jason, however, had left Texas and moved to Cleveland, where he’d remarried and had two young children. Phone numbers and addresses were listed.

Montoya had done a helluva job. True to his word Montoya had listed all of the officers of the Houston PD who’d been involved in the case. The first officer to arrive at the scene had been Detective Tyler Wheeler.

“Well, I’ll be goddamned.”

Bentz read Montoya’s final note.

Detective Wheeler’s involvement in the Annie Seger suicide hadn’t lasted long. He’d been removed from the case immediately as he’d admitted that he was related to the victim. Annie Seger had been Tyler Wheeler’s third cousin on her father’s side.

Bentz’s gut tightened.

Detective Wheeler had resigned his post.

His current address was Cambrai, Louisiana.

Just down the road from Dr. Samantha Leeds.

The neighbor who was always hanging around.

Coincidence?

No way in hell.

How did a cop with over ten years’ experience under his belt give it all up and end up here with a pansy-assed job of being a writer? And why the hell had he ended up down here, in Louisiana, cozying up to Samantha Leeds?

Bentz figured it was time for a stakeout.
Chapter Twenty-three

“I’m taking you to my place,” Ty said, as they drove out of the city, leaving WSLJ, the police, the damned cake and all the craziness behind. It was late, and Sam was bone-weary. She hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before as she’d been with Ty on the boat and after the shock of the birthday cake and the interrogations by the police, her nerves were strung tight as bowstrings.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, too tired to really get into an argument. “I’ve got an alarm system and a watch cat.”

“Seriously, Sam. Just for tonight, since it’s Annie Seger’s birthday.”

“Yesterday was,” she corrected, rolling down the window and letting in the night air. They were driving around the black expanse of Lake Pontchartrain, and the breeze was gratefully cool, the night finally calm.

“Humor me. For one night. Stay with me.” He touched the back of her hand and her stupid skin tingled.

“Fine, fine,” she agreed, rubbing her neck where the hornet had left his mark. It was beginning to itch like crazy. “I don’t suppose you’ve got anything for a headache?”

“At the house.” He glanced in her direction. “I’ll take care of you,” he promised, and she was too damned sleepy to remind him she could take care of herself. What was the point? Besides, she was certain whoever was terrorizing her was connected to the station. Someone had unlocked the door to the kitchen to leave the cake and whoever was calling in, trying to freak her out, knew the number for line two. A number not listed in any phone book nor available through directory assistance.

No, it had to be an inside job, and that thought chilled her to the marrow of her bones. Shivering inwardly she wondered which one of her coworkers would go to such lengths and for what purpose? Certainly not Gator; he was worried enough about losing some airtime if her show was expanded. Though he might want to scare her out of a job, he wouldn’t want her program to become too popular. Nor would any of the other DJs, though Ramblin’ Rob was devious enough to do this just for the hell of it. For a few laughs at everyone’s expense. The crusty DJ could have learned about Annie Seger easily enough, the story was common-enough knowledge because George and Eleanor had been in Houston. Maybe that was what had triggered it, someone like Rob finding out about the problems in Houston and exploiting them.

To what end? To drive you crazy? To get you to quit? To make you look like a lunatic? Or to lure in a bigger audience.

Then why the mutilated picture and calls to her house? Why the note left in her car? Or John’s calls after the program was over. How would those actions promote more listeners?

They wouldn’t, Sam. You’re running down a blind alley. There’s something more, a link you’re missing. So what was it? What?

Her headache growing worse by the second, Sam closed her eyes and leaned back against the headrest. She couldn’t think about John, the calls or Annie Seger any longer. Not tonight. But tomorrow, when her head was clear and she’d caught up on her sleep...then she’d figure it out. She had to.

Ty flipped on the radio and they listened to the end of the prerecorded *Lights Out* program, instrumental renditions of familiar songs, guaranteed to put you to sleep, all engineered by Tiny, the nerd who knew the station inside and out. While Tiny attended Tulane, Eleanor had offered him a full-time position.

So what about him, she wondered as the Volvo’s tires sang against the pavement and the engine hummed. Maybe Tiny wasn’t as innocent as he appeared. Or what about Melanie? Lord knew she was ambitious enough and sometimes she seemed secretive, then there was Melba, over-educated and underpaid...or someone in league with Trish LaBelle over at WNAB? It was no secret that Trish wanted Sam’s job...Stop it, Sam, you’re not getting anywhere, she thought, turn off the noise. As an instrumental version of “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” played, Sam was vaguely aware that they were entering the Cambrai city limits. It was good to be with Ty, to relax, to be able to trust someone. She opened her eyes just a crack, enough to see his strong profile, bladed cheekbones, dark expression as they passed beneath streetlamps or the headlights of a few oncoming
cars illuminated the Volvo’s interior.

It was odd to think that she’d known him only a few weeks and smiled to herself to think how pleased Mrs. Killingsworth would be that her matchmaking had come to fruition. He slowed and cranked the wheel as they turned down the street rimming the lake.

They passed her house, the windows dark, no sign of life within. She nearly changed her mind, and invited him to stay with her and Charon and the hornets, then smiled to herself. Soon enough it would be dawn, but tonight she’d stay with Ty and exhausted as she was, she felt a little tingle of anticipation at being alone with him. She’d thought about their lovemaking often during the day, too often. It seemed so natural to be with Ty. So right. And yet she warned herself that she had made bad decisions in the past, poor choices when it came to men. And he was a virtual stranger to her—what did she really know about him except that he’d shown up at about the same time someone had started terrifying her? And her emotions for him were way out of line.

She couldn’t, wouldn’t fall in love again. Not with Ty. Not with any man. She’d learned her lesson. Or so she told herself as he parked the car and walked her into his cottage—a little house with few furnishings other than a desk, sectional and television. Sasquatch stretched and sauntered up, tail wagging and Ty let the shepherd out through the back door.

“Hungry?” Ty asked Sam.

“Dead would be a better description.”

He whistled to the dog, then helped Sam up a short flight of stairs to the loft, where a king-size bed was pushed beneath windows overlooking the back of the house. Moonlight glinted on the lake and the smell of water drifted in on a warm, Louisiana breeze.

“You know, I don’t really think my being here is a great idea,” she said.

“Why not?” He’d already kicked off his shoes.

“I might do something I shouldn’t.”

His grin was wicked as he lifted her chin and stared into her eyes. “A guy can only hope.”

“You’re impossible.”

“I try,” he admitted, drawing her into his arms and kissing her until she couldn’t think of anything but making love to him.

Don’t do this again, Sam! Think. Use your head. How do you know you can trust him?

She couldn’t. She knew that much, but she couldn’t fight the need to lose herself, to close out all the fear and pain, to trust someone—if only for a night. What could it hurt? She closed her eyes and they tumbled onto his bed, into his world, not knowing what that world was made of. Truth? Lies? Deceit?

What does he want from you?

She didn’t know, didn’t want to question anything as she closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck. His lips were hot, his tongue insistent and she eagerly parted her lips and kissed him open mouthed as his fingers bunched the fabric, strong fingertips molding around a buttock and probing in her cleft, forcing her closer still, creating a heat and electricity that sparked through her.

She ached deep inside and had trouble catching her breath. Her heart pounded and her blood raced as his fingers bunched the fabric, strong fingertips molding around a buttock and probing in her cleft, forcing her closer still, creating a heat and electricity that sparked through her.

She wanted him; God knew she wanted him and the moan that escaped her was just the beginning. One of her legs curled around his and he lifted his head to stare deep into her eyes.

“As I said before, you want me,” he said as the breeze, sifting through an open window tickled the back of her neck. “And I want you.”

“Do you?” she breathed, perspiration dotting her skin, heat building deep within. The fingers over her buttocks clamped tight.

“What do you think?”

“I—I think I’m in trouble.”

“We both are,” he whispered against the shell of her ear and her skin rippled with goose bumps. “Oh, darlin’ we both are.”

He tumbled backward onto the bed and his lips claimed hers again. Fierce, hungry, hard, he kissed while his
hands worked at the fastenings of her skirt and blouse. Knowing she was giving in to a passion she should deny, she pulled his shirt over his head and skimmed the ropey muscles of his arms. In the half light she saw his face, intense, wicked, downright sexy as he removed her blouse then kissed the tops of her breasts as they spilled over the lacy cups of her bra.

Beneath the flimsy fabric her nipples hardened and the need within her throbbed. “I knew it would be like this with you,” he said as he shoved the strap of her bra off her shoulder and warm air brushed against her suddenly bare nipple.

“Like—like what?” she whispered as he bent his head. She felt the gentle scrape of his teeth on her tender flesh, the tickle of the tip of his tongue.

“Like this,” he said, breathing hard and suckling as his other hand delved beneath the waistband of her skirt, grazing her navel in its quest.

Her legs parted as if of their own accord and she writhed anxiously, wanting, needing, consumed by an ache that seemed to pulse.

He unhooked the clasp at the waistband and the zipper hissed downward as, with both hands, he scraped her skirt and panties over her hips and down her thighs and off her feet. Then she was lying beneath him, her blouse crumpled beneath her, her bra half off, her skin bare.

He lowered himself further, lips touching and tasting, tongue exploring the contours of her skin, his breath moving the curls at the apex of her legs. She closed her eyes, lost herself in pure sensation. He parted her legs, touched her, played with her, tasted her and she writhed, fingers curling in the bedspread, hot images flashing through her mind, desire running rampant.

Don’t let him do this to you…don’t let him make you vulnerable, but she couldn’t stop. The wanting was too intense, the fire in her blood too hot. She felt the pressure building, the ache, and all thoughts converged on that one spot, the center of the world seemed to pulse where his skin touched hers, hotter, higher, faster…her mind spinning until the universe cracked. She bucked, cried out and he held her fast, two strong hands on her legs until she fell back against the bed, panting, her body enveloped in sweat.

“Ohh,” she sighed, breathing hard as the warm glow of satisfaction wound over her. “Ty…What about…you?”

Lifting his head, he winked at her. “We’ll get to that.”

“Now?” she asked, her voice soft. “Oh, yeah, now.” He stood on his knees. “Trust me, I’m not letting you off the hook. I’m not that noble.”

“Noble?” she repeated, then laughed as the wind sighed through the open window. “I didn’t think so.”

“What did you think?” He swung a leg over her and straddled her. “Tell me.”

Sam stared up at him, this man she’d taken so readily for her lover, this stranger who could make her ignore all her doubts, make her cast aside her worries about him. And yet what did she know of this man? His smile was pure sin, his beard-shadow dark, his hair mussed as he held her gaze. Bare-chested, muscles gleaming with sweat, his jeans slung low on his waist, he placed his hands upon her breasts and squeezed. “What?”

“Oh, that you were…” He was kneading her breasts, scraping his thumb over her nipples, turning her on again, so soon. She had trouble collecting her thoughts. “That you were…dark and dangerous.”

“I like that.”

“That maybe I shouldn’t trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“But that…that I found you…”

“Irresistible?”

“Damningly so.”

“Then I guess we’re even,” he said and reached for the top button of his jeans. He slowly slid the top button out of its hole. Samantha stared, her throat tightening as he flipped his wrists and a series of seductive pops echoed through the loft. She bit her lower lip as he slid his jeans downward and kicked them off.

“See…not noble at all,” he insisted, lowering himself onto her and kissing her on her belly before inching up to her breasts.

Again the heat. The damned, moist, all-consuming heat between her legs. Again his tongue tasting and exploring, sliding ever upward, leaving a moist, hot trail upon her skin. “No woman has the right to look as
good as you do, you know?"

"Is that right?" She had to force the words out. "Oh, yeah."

"Maybe I should say the same about you that no man should be allowed to do the things you do to me."

His laugh was a throaty growl. "Flattery will only get you into trouble."

"As if I'm not in enough already."

"A little more won't hurt," he said as his lips found hers and his tongue plunged into her mouth. He pushed her knees apart and, as he kissed her, thrust hard into her. Deep. Deeper, pushing against her, then slowly easing back.

Her arms wrapped around his head and she lifted her hips, wanting more of him, aching to be with him, closing her eyes to the night and the threats surrounding her. Tonight, oh, God, tonight she would just let go.

"That's a girl," he said and plunged deep again, and again and again, breathing hard, sweating, his heart pounding as rapidly as her own. She moved with him, forced her anxious lips to his, arched her back and heard his breathing accelerate, felt each of his sinewy muscles tense as he thrust into her and she let go, her body convulsing, her mind splintering. Ty let out a primal roar as he fell against her, clinging to her, holding her close, his body damp, the moonlight streaming through the open window. Sam sighed, her breath ruffling his hair and knew that she was losing herself in this man, this dark, interesting, stranger, a man she wasn’t sure she could trust.

Sam was asleep. Dead to the world. In his bed.

Moonlight streamed through the open window, playing upon her face, and Ty was struck by the unlikely thought that he cared about her far more than he should, maybe was even falling in love with her.

You poor, sick, S.O.B. He’d used her. And in so doing, he’d put her in jeopardy. Plain and simple. There was no reason to sugarcoat it. He’d considered her a means to an end, and now he felt like a heel. Carefully he extracted himself from her arms. She moaned in her sleep and rolled over, never once opening an eye. The bed was rumpled, the pillows mussed, the room smelling faintly of her perfume and sex. He hadn’t intended to make love to her, but hadn’t been able to stop himself. That was the problem—he, who’d always been careful when it came to women, a man who protected his own best interests as well as his heart, lost it when he was around her. Just plain lost it. He studied the lines of her face, the sweep of her eyelashes, the way her lips were open just enough for shallow breaths.

Tearing his eyes away, he reminded himself that he had things to do, things she was better off not knowing about. His conscience nagged him a bit as he stepped into a pair of shorts and didn’t bother with a shirt.

The digital readout on the clock showed it was four-thirty in glowing red letters. With the ready excuse of taking Sasquatch outside should she waken, he hurried stealthily down the stairs, the dog at his heels.

Without making a sound he opened the door to the street and saw no one in the bluish illumination from the street-lamp. The night was still, that time of day before dawn when the entire world was asleep. The morning newspaper hadn’t been tossed onto his driveway, nor were there any patches of light glowing from the houses lining the street. No A-types were out jogging for their morning exercise, no cars cruising along the narrow road. In this section of Cambrai, it was still late night.

Sasquatch nosed around the front yard and Ty walked to the end of the drive, stopping near the magnolia tree that guarded his mailbox. Heavy leaves blocked the shimmering light from the streetlamp, creating an even darker shadow around the bole of the tree. Ty waited, his eyes straining in the darkness, his ears tuned for even the softest of sounds.

He heard nothing, but a few seconds later a figure emerged from the dense shrubbery. Dressed in black, shoulders hunched, expression hidden in the night, Andre Navarrone seemed to blend into the shadows.

"Helluva time to be out," he whispered.

"Couldn’t be avoided." Ty glanced back at the house, then to the man he’d known over half his life, another cop turned private investigator. Navarrone’s tenure with the Houston PD had been short and infamous. He’d never quite learned that the tactics he’d learned in the Gulf War as a special agent couldn’t be implemented in the city. So he’d gone independent. Which was perfect.

Ty stared straight into his friend’s eyes. “I need your help.”

“I figured that much. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have called.” Navarrone’s smile was a wicked slash of white.
He didn’t ask what Ty wanted, but then he never did.
And he’d never failed.
Yet.

Sam rolled over and sensed that something was different. Wrong. She wasn’t in her own bed…no, now she remembered. A contented sigh escaped her lips, and she smiled. She was with Ty, though she’d argued against it. Images of their lovemaking flashed behind her eyes. The feel of his warm skin, the taste of him, the way he knew just how to touch her…. She reached behind her and felt cool sheets against her fingertips, just sheets. No skin or muscle or bone.

Rolling over she blinked and pushed up on an elbow. Sure enough she was alone. There was an impression where his body had so recently been, but it was cool to the touch. Maybe he’d gotten up to use the bathroom, or get a drink or…the dog. That was it. He’d taken the dog outside.

In the darkness, she found her slip and wiggled into it. She heard his muffled voice through the open window, a hushed whisper and she imagined Ty was encouraging Sasquatch to hurry and do his business. But as she peered out the window, she saw no sign of dog or man on the stretch of lawn between the house and lake. Curious, she walked downstairs where a banker’s lamp, left on as a night-light, gave off a soft green glow over a wide desk and allowed her to move through the rooms without switching on any other lights.

In the kitchen she splashed water from the tap over her face and finger-combed her hair, then looked out the window toward the street. Nothing. But he had to be near. She didn’t believe that he would leave her alone now, not after he’d driven into town like the cavalry and made a big point of her not staying in her house alone. On top of all that she’d heard his voice—was certain she had. She scoured the darkness and, from the corner of her eye saw movement. Sasquatch rounded the corner of the house and was trotting to the end of the driveway only to sit at the base of the tree and look up expectantly. Another movement and the shadows came to life. She caught a glimpse of a man beneath the tree…no, there were two of them. Two. One of the men had to be Ty—otherwise the dog would react differently.

Samantha bit her lip. Ty and who? A man he’d slipped out of bed to meet. A man he hadn’t told her about. Squinting hard, she leaned over the sink and stared into the night where moonlight dappled the ground and two men huddled.

She gripped the edge of the counter. One of the men was Ty. So who was he talking to so quietly at this hour of the morning? What was so important as to prod him from bed and out into the night? Dark suspicions nagged at her brain. Hadn’t the police insinuated that no one was to be trusted, especially men she hardly knew.

But Ty had only seemed to have her best interests in mind. He’d shown up at the station, not once but twice, when he suspected she might need him. He’d insisted upon driving her home, on checking out her house, on seeing that she was safe. That was why she was here tonight. Right?

Or had it all been an act?

She considered walking out the door and demanding answers, then told herself to hold tight and have faith. That whatever he was doing, it was on the up-and-up. She shouldn’t second-guess him, should wait for him here in the house, and when he deigned to return she could ask him what was going on.

No way. She was too wound up, too on edge. Her mind was racing with all kinds of reasons for him to have left her alone in his bed—none of them good. Suddenly keyed up, she couldn’t imagine trying to fall back to sleep; nor was it her nature to docilely wait and let some man determine her fate.

She walked into the living area, intent on flying up the stairs to the loft, throwing on her clothes and storming back to her house where she belonged, but on the way to the stairs she passed his desk and laptop computer with its screen saver of brightly colored pipes. She paused, tempted to sneak a peek at his files. Edging toward the desk, she told herself she was breaking a trust, but decided she had to know the truth. There was a reason he’d slipped out of the bedroom, and she’d bet she wouldn’t like it.

She leaned over the keyboard. In a matter of seconds, she’d opened his word processing program. There flickering on the screen were file numbers that corresponded to chapters and research information.

What had he said about it? What was his joke to Melanie? That it was kind of like The Horse Whisperer meets Silence of the Lambs?

She clicked onto the first chapter.
Her heart dropped.
The title of the book loomed at her:
*Death of a Cheerleader: The Murder of Annie Seger.*
“Oh, God,” Sam whispered, her gaze raking down the page.
*Murder? But Annie Seger committed suicide.*

Sam’s blood turned to ice. How did Ty know anything about it? Where did he get his information? She skimmed the first few pages, her fingers shaking as she scrolled down.

Her heart twisted when she realized how deeply he’d deceived her.

How was he involved in all of this? Oh, God, could he be behind the person calling in—was he John… no, she couldn’t, wouldn’t believe that. But there had to be a connection. “You miserable son of a bitch,” she muttered, thinking about their lovemaking. The heat. The intensity. The passion.

The lies.

*Why didn’t he confide in you?*

*Why did he have to lie?*

*You slept with the man, Sam. Made love to him.*

Her stomach clenched. Bile crawled up her throat.

*What the hell was his game?*

*If he’d wanted to do her harm, he’d had dozens of opportunities.*

*God in heaven, was it possible? Had she nearly given her heart to a man who had been tormenting her from a distance?*

She didn’t have time to print out the chapters, she had to leave. Now. Before he realized that she was on to him. She had to grab her purse and…the disk! The one in the computer. Proof that Ty wasn’t who he said he was. Information on Annie.

With fumbling fingers she pushed a button, extracted the disk and scrambled out of his chair. She tripped on the way back to the loft, dropped the damned disk, and slid her hands over the carpet until she located it again. In the half-light, she dashed up the remaining stairs. She had to hurry. She didn’t know how long his meeting with the man in the street would take, but she assumed it would be over soon.

In the loft she didn’t risk turning on a lamp, but searched the darkness for her clothes and purse. She didn’t bother dressing, couldn’t find her belt, didn’t care. But her purse… with her keys…where was it? *Where?* Heart thundering, throat dry, she combed the loft using only the moonlight filtering through the window to aid her vision and running her fingers over the edge of the bed and the floor. She found her bra…Ty’s wallet…but no handbag.

*Think, Sam, think. Where did you put it?*

Her mind turned backward. She remembered Ty showing up at the radio station and how relieved she’d been to see him. Then there was the ride in his car here. She’d argued against not staying at her own house, but he’d been adamant and she’d been too damned tired to argue. He’d insisted she’d be safer with him and she’d reluctantly agreed.

What a joke!

Then there had been the lovemaking.

Her heart nearly stopped when she remembered how he’d touched her, kissed her, brought her to the edge over and over again. Dear Lord, she’d been such an idiot for the man.

How eagerly she’d tumbled into bed with him. How close she’d come to handing him her heart…but she couldn’t think of that now. She nearly tripped over one of her shoes, then felt around on the carpet unable to locate its mate. Where the hell was her purse with her keys and ID? She’d carried it into the house and once inside, Ty had kissed her and helped her up the stairs…without the damned handbag.

Through the open window she heard the sound of footsteps crunching on gravel.

*Damn. He’s on his way back inside.* She had to escape. Couldn’t feign sleep and pretend nothing was wrong. Leaving the shoe, her heart pounding triple time, she crept down the stairs, nearly stumbling on the bottom step. She was sweating, moving through the unfamiliar house. In the dim light from the banker’s lamp, she saw her purse on the kitchen table. She grabbed the bag but didn’t dare take a chance on looking outside again.
Bare feet skimming across the carpet, she hurried to the back of the house and flipped the bolt on the French doors. Quickly she slipped outside where a verandah and small patch of lawn separated her from the lake. If worse came to worst, she could climb the fence to the neighbor’s yard or swim around the point or…

She sprinted across the cool flagstones and scurried down three steps. Moonlight played upon the dark water and the sloop tied to the dock. If she knew anything about sailing and had his keys, she could take off in the boat. She ducked along the edge of the lawn, near the shrubs, toward the dock. There was a muffled “woof” from the edge of the house.

*Please, God, no.*

“Sam?”

His voice came out of nowhere.

Sam froze.

“What’re you doing up?”

Biting her lip, she slipped the computer disk into her purse and turned to the house. Wearing only a pair of dark shorts, Ty was leaning over the railing and staring straight at her.

Busted.

“Sam?”

She let out a long breath. “To tell you the truth,” she said, “I’m escaping.”

“From—?”

“You tell me,” she said, not closing the distance. “What are you doing up at this hour and don’t give me some ridiculous excuse about walking the dog, because it won’t wash with me. I know better.”

“I was meeting with a friend.”

“Who just happens to be walking down the street at 4 a.m.? Right.” She couldn’t hide her cynicism. “Come on, Wheeler. You can do better than that.” Still clutching her clothes, she added, “Look, I don’t know what’s going on here, but I think I’d better leave. This is…this is getting too crazy.”

He straightened and the moonlight hit him full in the face. God, he was handsome. “I suppose it is,” he agreed, and plowed a hand through his hair, pushing it off his forehead. “I have a confession.”

She didn’t move. His words seemed to echo across the yard and ricochet through her brain. “You know, those aren’t exactly the words I want to hear right now. I’ve heard way too much about confession, sin and repenting in the last few weeks to last me a lifetime.”

Ty’s jaw slid to one side. “Then how about an explanation?”

“That would be a real good idea,” she said. “Real good.” She waited for a few seconds before he finally started to speak.

“The truth is that I knew about Annie Seger a long time before I met you.”

“No kidding,” she remarked. She would have appreciated his admission more if she didn’t think he already knew she’d poked through his computer files. “You know, Ty, you could have told me.”

“I was going to.”

“When?” she said in absolute disbelief. How stupid did he think she was? “Were you going to confide in me before or after hell freezes over.”

“Soon.”

“Not soon enough,” she said, her temper flaring. “Don’t you know what’s going on here? Haven’t you been paying attention? The calls I’ve been getting from ‘John’ and the message from ‘Annie’ and the damned birthday cake and card—for God’s sake, Ty, just when were you going to break the news to me? After it was too late and this nutcase made good his threats? Or maybe you’re involved in a more personal level. Maybe you know John.”

“No,” he cut in angrily, but something else darted through his eyes, an emotion akin to guilt. Sam felt dead inside. Cold. How could she have trusted him? What was it about her that she always chose so poorly when it came to men. For a bright woman, she was a disaster in the love department. She’d thought Ty Wheeler was different, but he, like her ex-husband and last boyfriend was little more than a user, another great manipulator. “Or maybe you are John.”

He was taking the stairs from the porch and starting across the lawn. “You don’t believe that.”
“I don’t know what to believe,” she said in absolute despair.
“I’m sorry, Sam. I should have told you sooner.” He was close to her now, too close.
“Now there’s an astute observation.” She managed to stiffen her spine. “Look, this is all very…edifying, but I’m going home.”
“Not yet.” Reaching forward, he wrapped strong fingers over her arm.
“Excuse me?” She flung off his arm. “What do you think you have to say about it?” She tried to pass him, but he grabbed her again and this time her attempts to rip her arm from his grasp failed. “Let go, Ty.”
“Just listen to me.”
“Why? So I can hear more lies? Forget it!” She started toward the house, and he, still holding her arm, walked with her.
“You need to know what’s going on.”
“Like you’re going to tell me? Give me a break. The only reason you’re confiding in me now is that you know I saw you with the midnight stalker or whoever he is out in the street and that I peeked into your computer records and found out you weren’t leveling with me. Now, let go of me, or you and I are going to have this conversation at the police department. Got it?”
“Just wait.” Rather than release her, his fingers gripped all the harder. “I think you owe me the chance to explain.”
“I owe you nothing.” She couldn’t believe the man’s gall. They were up the stairs and on the verandah. “The way I see it everything you said to me from the first time I saw you is a lie. As a matter of fact, I’m pretty damned sure that the disabled boat”—she cocked her head toward the Bright Angel creaking against its moorings—“was a setup.”
“I like to think of it as an excuse.”
“Semantics, Wheeler.”
“There are things you should know.”
“No kidding. Let’s start with how you’re involved with Annie Seger.”
“I’m her third cousin,” he said, without batting an eye. Or releasing his grasp. “And I was the first police officer on the scene the night she was found. I got thrown off the case because I was related to her. I’ve always thought the investigation was botched, and Annie’s father wants me to prove it.”
“Her biological father,” Sam clarified, trying not to be intrigued. For all she knew he was peddling her a new cartful of lies.
“Yeah. Wally. He never bought the fact that she committed suicide.”
“So he thinks she was murdered? Why?”
“That’s what I’m trying to find out.”
“So what about all this other stuff?” Sam demanded as she threw open the French doors and walked into his living room. “What about the calls to the station and the damned cake and the threats?”
“I can’t explain them, nor can I explain who’s behind all this, but I’m afraid that I somehow triggered all this, that I’m to blame. I’m afraid that somehow someone found out I was working on the book, maybe through my research, or a leak. Someone in the agent’s office or the editorial staff…I don’t know. At least not yet.” His lips flattened over his teeth in silent rage. “But it seems more than coincidental that when I start working on this book about Annie’s death, which happened nine years ago, you start being stalked.”
“So that’s why you’re hanging out with me, the reason you’ve been around? Out of guilt? My God, Ty, you didn’t have to sleep with me to keep me safe or to ease your guilt, for crying out loud!” She yanked her arm away from him. She had to get away. Now.
“I didn’t hang out with you because of guilt.”
“Like hell.” Angry tears burning the back of her eyes, she stomped through the house. Don’t break down, she told herself. Whatever you do, Sam do not break down.
He was right on her heels. “Just slow down and listen for a minute.”
“I think I’ve heard enough.” She was up the stairs and inside the house. His house. She started for the front door. “I didn’t mean for us to get involved.” Whirling, still holding her purse and her clothes, she nailed him in an uncompromising glare. “But we did, didn’t we?”
“That’s the problem.”

“The problem? For crying out loud, Ty, the problem isn’t that we got involved, the problem is that it was all based on a lie! I’m outta here—”

“You can’t.”

“Of course I can. What are you going to do about it? Keep me here. Hold me prisoner? Kidnap me, for God’s sake?”

“You need my help.”

“What? No way. You’ve got it all wrong. I think you meant to say that you need my help. The other way around.”

“Sam, listen to me. There’s a nutcase out there, a very serious nutcase. For some reason he’s targeted you. It could be because I started poking around and somehow, inadvertently gave him ideas. It could be he was involved in Annie’s death, or in her life, or he could just be some wacko off the street who read about the story and is trying to make some kind of name for himself. It could even be all a fraud.”

“A fraud?” she repeated.

“To boost ratings. I wouldn’t put it past George Hannah or Eleanor Cavalier.”

“I don’t see where you’re in any position to call anyone else a fraud. Face it, one minute you’re upstairs in bed with me and then the second I fall asleep, you’re out in the street talking to some man in the middle of the night. Who was that guy?”

“A friend.”

“I didn’t think he was an enemy.”

“A friend who’s going to help us.”

“Believe me, Ty, there is no “us.”” She walked out the door in a huff. It was only a quarter of a mile and the eastern sky was lightening and a few birds were chirping. If she had to walk barefoot and in slip, so be it. She had to get away.

Before she did something foolish like trust him again. “The problem is, Sam, I’m afraid I’m falling in love with you,” he said, and his words grabbed hold of her heart and wouldn’t let go. She forced herself to turn and face him again.

“Well, you should be afraid, Ty. It would be a horrendous mistake,” she said, anger pushing out the words as she stared hard at him. “Don’t fall in love with me, because I damned well will never return the favor!”
The problem is, Sam, I’m afraid I’m in love with you.

“Yeah, right.” Another lie.

Sam’s head thundered from lack of sleep, her bad ankle had begun to throb again and her feet were dirty and sore as she stormed toward her house. Fired by her fury at Ty’s deception and thankful no one was up, that none of her neighbors witnessed her dishabille, she strode down the street. The stars were fading, the sky turning a soft lavender as dawn broke.

Ty’s final words wouldn’t stop reverberating through her aching head, but she wasn’t going to allow herself to believe them. Not for a minute. Words of love had been her downfall in the past, and Ty’s admission that he thought he was falling for her was another lie, a last-ditch effort to control her, nothing more. The way Sam figured it, Ty Wheeler was willing to stoop so low his nose would scrape the ground, all for the sake of his book on Annie, hence his career and fame. His interest in Sam was all predicated on his book. Nothing more.

“Bastard,” she ground out.

All she wanted to do was push thoughts of him out of her head, strip out of her damned slip, and shower away all memories of the man and his lovemaking. That she would miss, blast it all to hell. Ty Wheeler was the best lover she’d ever had, hands down, so to speak. Not that she’d had that much experience, but in her limited scope, Ty was the best. The way he found that special spot on the nape of her neck and kissed her there while feathering his fingers over her nipples.

“Stop it,” she muttered. So he knew how to take a woman to bed. Big deal. That certainly wasn’t the most important quality in a man, though it was right up there. Ty Wheeler and his acumen in the lovemaking department certainly kept her longing for more. “So forget it. It’s over.”

There will be someone else.

She wasn’t convinced that there would be, but she couldn’t let her mind wander down that dangerous road. She had too much to do. She had to clear her head and start figuring out who was trying to terrorize her. Ty Wheeler and his sexy body be damned.

As she reached the edge of Mrs. Killingsworth’s property she resisted the urge to look over her shoulder to see if he was still standing at the edge of his drive watching her march self-righteously down the street. While wearing only her slip. Thankfully she hadn’t run into anyone, not even the paper carrier.

Until she reached her property.

A white mid-sized car was parked in the middle of her circular drive, and David Ross sat on her porch swing, leaning forward on his elbows, his hands clasped between his knees as he watched her approach. His face was covered with a day’s worth of beard, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep or alcohol or a combination thereof, his tie loosened around his throat, his once-pressed shirt wrinkled, his slacks looking as if he’d slept in them. Dark hair was unruly, as if it had endured hours of being pushed away from his face.

“Where the hell have you been?” He pushed himself to his feet. “What the devil happened? You look like…” He took in her state of undress and the wad of clothes she was carrying. “…like…like you’ve had a bad night.”

That’s putting it mildly. “I did.”

“Where were you?”

Sam groaned inwardly at the prospect of dealing with him. She wasn’t in the mood for this. Why now? she thought as her toe caught on the edge of a flagstone. Gritting her teeth, she climbed the steps to the front porch. “I was at a friend’s. Let’s just leave it at that, okay?”

“A friend’s?” David repeated before his eyes narrowed in understanding. His lips tightened, turning white against his dark beard shadow. “Why don’t my keys work?”

She slid him a glance that warned him not to mess with her. “I changed the locks because the police suggested it, because of the threats I’ve been getting.”

“You’ve gotten more?” he asked, and some of his hostility turned to concern. Deep furrows lined his brow. “You
didn’t tell me.”

“I can handle it.”

“Are you sure?” He waited as she scrounged in her purse and found her keys. “This sounds serious, Sam.”

About as serious as it gets, she thought but wasn’t about to confide in him. She didn’t need his overly dramatic concern, nor an inquisition. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.”

“I figured that much. The question is Why?” She twisted the key in the lock, pushed the door open with her shoulder, then walked quickly inside to shut off the alarm before it started blasting and waking up the entire neighborhood.

“We need to talk, Sam. Face-to-face.”

“You should have called.” She dumped her clothes on a chair in the living room as Charon trotted from behind a potted palm to look up and cry at her as he rubbed her bare legs. “In a minute,” she said to the cat, then skewered David with her gaze. “Look, I don’t know what you expected showing up here, but this isn’t a great time for me.”

“I just wanted to see you.” He’d followed her into the living room and was standing next to her, close enough that she smelled the lingering scents of last night’s cigars and alcohol. “Is that such a sin?”

Every muscle in her body froze. “What did you say?” she asked, and when he tried to touch her shoulder she drew away.

“You’re overreacting, Sam. This is David. You trust him. You nearly married him, for God’s sake, and here you are thinking he’s somehow related to John and Annie Seger and all the crap that’s gone on around here. You’re losing it, Sam, losing it. David’s just here being David.”

“It’s too late to get back together,” she said, and bent over to scoop up her cat and hold him close. Stroking Charon’s black fur, she shook her head. “I think you should leave, David. Whatever you hoped would happen isn’t going to. We’ve been through this before. It’s over.”

“But what about your car? I looked in the window of the garage. It’s not here.”

“I left it downtown.”

“From your friend’s house.”

She bristled. “I’m not in the mood for a lecture.”

“This friend sent you home without your shoes…?” he asked, and she saw from the change in his eyes that he was beginning to put two and two together. “But what about your car? I looked in the window of the garage. It’s not here.”

“I left it downtown.”

“Then spent the night with your friend.”

“What was left of it, yes.”

“I don’t think I like this.”

“You probably don’t. But it’s not your business.” She shoved a lock of hair from her eyes. “You’re not my keeper, David. That was part of the problem with us, remember? Your control issues?”

“I’ve been working on them.”

“Good.” She didn’t think she needed to explain anything else, but David wasn’t taking the hint to leave and before she could be more pointed and tell him to take a hike she heard the familiar rumble of an engine. Stupidly, her pulse jumped. Through the open door, she watched as Ty’s Volvo appeared.

Great. Just what I need. Another male who thinks he knows what’s best for me.

But she wasn’t surprised. She’d figured that the minute she was out of his sight, he’d climb into his car and track her down. He’d only let her leave because he was giving her time to cool off. In one respect she was flattered, in another ticked off. After all, the truth of the matter was that he was a liar and a user and all things bad that were
male.
“Who’s he…?” David asked as Ty cut the engine. Before Sam could respond, he said, “Oh, I get it.”
“Yes. My friend.”
David’s expression turned hard as nails. “It sure didn’t take you long, did it?” he accused.
“Don’t even say it.”
Ty climbed out of the car and strode up the walk. He’d taken the time to throw on a T-shirt and damn it all, he
looked good. And intense. Sam bristled, ready for another confrontation, one she didn’t need. She met Ty at the door
and Charon, quick to sense his escape, scrambled out of her arms. The cat leaped onto the porch before rocketing
into the bushes.
“You don’t know how to take ‘no’ for an answer do you?”
“No.” His hazel eyes sparked and a cocksure smile spread from one side of his beard-shadowed jaw to the other.
Bastard she thought again, but held her tongue. His eyes lingered on her lips for just a second, then he glanced over
her shoulder and something changed in his expression; the playful look was replaced by challenge. Obviously he’d
seen David.
Here we go, she thought and made quick introductions and both men were tense, sizing each other up. “David,
this is Ty Wheeler.” Sam wished they’d both just evaporate. There was way too much testosterone floating around
for this hour of the morning. “Ty—David Ross.”
Ty extended his hand. David pretended it didn’t exist. Great.
“I’ve known David for years,” she added, stepping out of the doorway and waving Ty in. “And Ty is the friend I
was telling you about,” she said to David. She saw no reason to hide where she’d been. Besides, David needed a
dose of reality. A big one.
Opening the hall closet, she found a raincoat and threw it on. “I’m going to make coffee. If either of you want a
cup, great, but I’m going to warn you both that I’ve about had it with anyone telling me how to run my life.”
David was right on her heels as she made her way to the kitchen and opened her pantry door. “I want to talk to
you alone,” he whispered.
“There’s no reason.”
“If I flew all the way here to talk to you. The least you could do—”
“Don’t go there, David,” she warned, holding up a finger to cut him off. Pulling out a bag of ground coffee, she
nudged the pantry closed with her hip, and added, “I already told you that if you’d planned to see me, you should
have called. End of story.” She poured the coffee into the basket of the coffeemaker and filled the glass pot with
water out of the tap.
Ty was leaning against the counter, legs outstretched, watching the interplay between David and her with intense
eyes.
“This is nuts,” David said. “What do you know about this guy?”
Good question. “Enough,” she lied, and she saw Ty’s lips twitch.
“But with all the trouble you’re having down at the station, don’t you think you should…cool it…or check him
out?”
“I think I’ll handle it my way.”
The skin over David’s cheekbones tightened, and every muscle in his body seemed tense. Rigid. “That’s the
problem, Sam. You always do things your way.”
“Because it’s my life.”
“Fine. If that’s the way you want it, then—”
“It is. It works for me.”
She snapped on the coffeemaker as David, his face flushing, turned on his heel and stormed out of the kitchen.
Italian shoes pounding on the floorboards he stomped through the foyer. The front door banged shut behind him.
“Don’t say a word,” Sam warned as the coffeemaker started to gurgle and sputter. “Not a word. I’m not in the
mood.”
“Far be it for me to comment on your taste in men.” His hazel eyes sparked in amusement.
“Exactly. Now, I’m going upstairs to clean up and when I come down, if you’re still here, you can tell me all you
know about Annie Seger.” She leveled him a stare guaranteed to melt steel. “No more lies, Ty,” she said. “I’m tired of being played for a fool.” With those final words hanging in the air, she flew up the stairs to her bedroom. The box she’d hauled out of the attic was still where she’d left it on the foot of her bed. All her notes on Annie Seger were inside.

Could she trust Ty? she asked herself, and the answer was a resounding “no.” Then again, she’d slept with him, spent hours with him, didn’t believe for a second that he’d do her physical harm.

But he’s a liar. Out for his own gain. He didn’t tell you about Annie. He used you.

All for his book.

That was his motive. He wasn’t out to scare her or harm her…he was out for personal gain.

“Aren’t we all?” she asked, yanking off her slip and reaching past the curtain to turn on the spray of her small shower. Within half a minute she’d stepped inside and felt hot rivulets massage her muscles and run through her hair. She wanted to live in that tiny tiled cubicle, but couldn’t waste the time, not with Ty downstairs. She shampooed, rinsed and was toweling off five minutes after turning on the hot water. There were still drips on her skin as she pulled on a pair of clean shorts and pulled a T-shirt over her head. Sliding into thongs, she ran a comb through her wet hair and ran a tube of lipstick over her lips. Voila. Good enough.

Seconds later she was down the stairs and found Ty in the kitchen toasting bagels and scrambling eggs. “You didn’t have much to work with,” he apologized.

She hadn’t eaten since yesterday.

“Hey, anytime someone cooks for me, I don’t complain. No matter what it is.”

“Good, cuz although I am a master chef, I do need utensils and just the right ingredients.” He placed a bowl of grated cheese, onions and milk in the microwave.

“Oh, cram it, Wheeler,” she said, smiling despite herself. She grabbed a butter knife and leveled it at him as she found a carton of cream cheese in the refrigerator, “And just remember you’re not off the hook. I’m still mad at you.”

“I figured.”

She waggled the knife in his direction. “This lying stuff is bad news. Very bad news.”

“I won’t do it again.”

“You’d better not, or I might be inclined to use this weapon where it would do the most good.” She flipped the butter knife in the air and caught it on the fly.

He laughed out loud. “Okay, now I’m scared.”

“I thought so.” Why couldn’t she stay angry with him?

The eggs were sizzling in the pan, and he stirred them with a wooden spoon. “We’re about done, here,” he said. “I thought we could eat outside.” He hitched his chin toward the back verandah.

“And then you’ll spill your guts about Annie Seger,” she surmised, leaning a hip against the counter and watching him play the part of the domestic in his shorts and T-shirt that was stretched across his shoulders. She took in his narrow waist and the backs of his legs—well muscled, tanned, covered with downy hair. Whether she liked it or not, Ty Wheeler got to her on a very basic level.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know,” he promised, and she remembered his claim that he’d feared he was falling in love with her.

“Anything?” she teased and he sent her a sizzling look over his shoulder.

“Anything.”

Her throat went dry just as the bagels popped in the toaster and the microwave dinged.

“Why do you think Annie Seger was murdered? The police have claimed that she committed suicide,” Samantha said, pushing her plate aside. She and Ty were seated at the glass-topped table under the porch overhang, and she’d waited until they’d finished eating before bringing up the question that had been pulsing through her mind for hours.

A hummingbird was flitting between the blossoms of the bougainvillea and sailboats skimmed across the lake. Somewhere down the street a lawn mower roared while overhead the wake of a passing jet was dissipating into the cloudless sky.

Ty rested a heel on one of the empty chairs and frowned. “So you haven’t had time to read my computer disk
yet?” Before she could protest, he said, “I know you took it, and if you’d read through the research, you’d understand.” He leaned over the table, closer to her. “Annie Seger was despondent, yes, and she had been drinking—she’d gone to a party and some kids had witnessed it. She’d had a fight with her boyfriend, Ryan Zimmerman, probably over the baby and what to do about it. There were witnesses who’d said as much. Annie had even had her friend Prissy drive her home that night. When she got there, the house was empty. She’d tried to call you again, but hung up before she’d gotten through, and that’s when things get blurry. Did she sneak into her mother’s bathroom and steal the sleeping pills? Did she go out to the garage and find the gardening shears and then go all the way upstairs, write the suicide note and slit her wrists at the computer? Could she have, considering how much booze was already in her system?”

“That’s how I thought it happened.”

“That’s the way it was supposed to look,” Ty said, “and it’s the easiest explanation. But there were other footprints on the carpet. The maid had vacuumed while Annie was out and there were deeper impressions on the plush pile—a bigger foot.”

“Weren’t there tons of people at the scene? Police and emergency workers?”

“Of course and Jason, the father, said he’d come into the room to check on her. Since he found the body, no one thought anything of it.”

“A big footprint on the carpet. That’s not much to go on. In fact it’s nothing,” she said.

“I know. And there was potting soil from the gardening shed on the carpet, but not on any of Annie’s shoes.”

“Still thin.”

“How about this then? Her fingerprints were all over the gardening shears, true, but she was right-handed. It would seem that she would have slit her left wrist first, made the deeper cut. Instead it was just the opposite.”

“You think.”

He nodded.

“Ty, this isn’t enough to write a book about or argue her suicide,” Sam pointed out as she watched Charon slink through the shrubs. Absently she rubbed her neck, scratching at the bump left by the hornet’s sting. “Why would anyone want her dead? What’s the motive?”

“I think it has to do with her baby.”

Samantha’s stomach clenched. As horrid as it was to think that Annie ended her life, the thought of her baby dying as well was even more painful.

“I don’t think she would have killed the baby. Her boyfriend wanted her to get an abortion; she refused. It was against her morals. Against her faith. She was raised Catholic, remember. Killing herself and killing the baby were both mortal sins.”

“But she was despondent. You said so yourself.”

“But not suicidal. That’s a big leap. There’s more. The baby’s blood type. No one paid attention, but Annie Seger’s baby couldn’t have been fathered by Ryan Zimmerman. The blood type proves it.”

Sam felt the hairs on the back of her arms lift. “You think someone killed Annie because she could point the finger at them?”

“Possibly. Maybe a married man. She was underage. The law would charge him with statutory rape if the guy was older. Or it could have been someone in her own family. Incest. Or her boyfriend could have come unglued and killed her in a fit of jealousy. That’s the part I haven’t figured out yet.” He leaned back in his chair, his gaze holding hers. “But I will,” he promised, “And while I’m doing it, I’m gonna figure out how this all ties in with the calls you been getting at the station. Somehow ‘John’ is connected to this thing. ‘We’ve just got to find out how, and then nail his ass.”
Chapter Twenty-five

“…it’s definitely not the same guy unless you’ve got a split personality,” Norm Stowell said from his cell phone somewhere in Arizona. Bentz wasn’t surprised. He’d already decided he had two killers on his hands. He glanced at the pictures on the computer screen in his office and could split the two cases right down the middle. Norm was still talking. “MO will evolve, we know that. As the killer learns what will work for him, he makes subtle changes in his approach or access route, but his signature remains constant. You’ve got two guys out there. One’s pretty messy—is careless with his clues, doesn’t seem to worry that you’ll nail him with his hair or fingerprints or semen, but the other guy—he’s clean. Neat. Careful. Definitely two perps.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Bentz said as he shoved a report on the wig fibers to one side of his desk. “I’ll fax you my profile of your killers when I get home, and for the record, I’m sending a copy to the field agent. Seems your partner hasn’t been forthright with the Federal boys, and they’re none too happy.”

“I’ll talk to him. Montoya’s a little green, but he’s good.”

“If you say so.” Norm wasn’t impressed, but then little did impress him. He was jaded far beyond his years—a short, stocky man who had never given up his allegiance to the crew cut he’d gotten at boot camp at Fort Lewis over thirty years earlier.

“So here’s what you’ve got to look for in the guy who’s killed Bellechamps and Gillette. He’s a white man, probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He must not have a prior as you said he’s careless with his fingerprints, body fluids and hair. If that’s the case, something triggered him to start killing, some emotional trauma. He’s got a job, but it’s not very grand, and he’s smart enough, but is from a highly dysfunctional and probably abusive family. He’s got a feeling of abandonment or deep-seated hatred of some woman in the family, probably a mother or stepmother or older sister or grandmother. He could have been sexually molested, and in his history he has arson and cruelty to animals or smaller children. He was probably a bed-wetter in grade school and something’s happened to him recently, something major that triggered him killing. Maybe he lost a job, or a girlfriend, or has been cut off from his family, which could likely be the major source of his income.”

“A gem of a guy,” Bentz muttered into the phone.

“And dangerous as hell. He could live alone, or he could be married, or have a girlfriend, but whoever he’s living with, she’s in danger. This guy’s escalating, Rick. You might have to let the public know what’s going on for safety’s sake and because someone out there might know a guy who’s been acting weird lately—usually anxious. He could be pouring himself into a bottle or abusing drugs. Besides that, if he’s involved with a woman, she should know about the danger to her. If she knows what he’s doing, and we both know that a lot of women who are emotionally trapped in bad relationships will even be a part of their man’s crimes. Anyway this woman has probably seen his violence or suffered from it herself. Potentially she could be his next target—unless we get her to turn him in.”

Bentz thought the odds of that were somewhere between slim and none, and closer to none.

“As I said, this is just the high points. I’ll fax you what I’ve come up with, then get to work on your second guy.”

“I’d appreciate it, Norm. Thanks,” Bentz said, and hung up, his worst suspicions confirmed. Two monsters were on the loose in New Orleans, killers with no conscience, murderers who hated women. He flipped through the computer files again, checking open cases that hadn’t been solved, ones that had bizarre elements. There were several that stood out, the most grotesque being the case of a woman who had been burned to death, her body then dumped at the feet of the statue of Joan d’Arc near the French Market last May 30. It had been macabre and surreal, thathorridly charred body lying facedown on the grass, and reminded the press and police that St. Joan herself had met a similar fate.

Sometimes he wondered why he kept at this damned job.

Because someone has to nail these guys, and, for the most part, you’re good at it, you sick son of a bitch.

He found a half-full pack of Doublemint gum in his top drawer and jammed a stick into his mouth, then walked to the window and looked outside to the street below. Cars spewed exhaust as they crawled down the narrow streets, and people crowded the sidewalks, but Bentz hardly took any notice. He yanked at his collar. Sweat plastered his
shirt to his back. He didn’t hear the hum of computers or conversations of the outer offices though his door was ajar. No, he’d blocked out the noise of the station and the scene below as he considered the prospect of two serial killers in the city, at least one of which was connected to the terrorization of Dr. Samantha Leeds. Some way. Somehow.

He didn’t have any concrete evidence, no tangible link, but the knot in his gut told him whoever was calling was somehow involved with the murders. The mutilated C-notes so like the ruined publicity shot of Samantha Leeds, the radios tuned to her program at the time of death, the fact that the women who’d been killed were hookers and John had accused her of prostitution, but why sin? What redemption? What the hell did it have to do with Annie Seger, for crying out loud?

He walked to the tape recorder on his credenza and pushed the play button so that he could hear for the hundredth time some of the calls, particularly the one from the woman who called herself Annie…he’d played it over and over, as had the lab, and he’d come to the conclusion that the call from Annie had been prerecorded. There hadn’t been a live person on the phone. The woman proclaiming herself to be Annie hadn’t answered Sam’s questions directly, but only paused between her own statements…As if someone had anticipated what Dr. Sam would ask on the show that night. As if a woman was involved in this mess.

But who?
Someone who knew Annie Seger?
Someone connected to Dr. Sam?
Someone working with “John”?

And how had the call gotten through the screen at the radio station before being played on the air?

He snapped his gum, reached in his back pocket and found his handkerchief, then ran it over his forehead and mopped his face. How the hell did Montoya wear leather jackets in this weather and manage to keep his cool? The day was sweltering. Unforgiving. Intense. Bentz needed a beer. A sixteen-ouncer—ice-cold in one of those frosty mugs, yeah that would do the trick. And a pack of Camel straights. That old ache for booze and nicotine haunted his blood and he chewed his gum furiously as he walked back to his desk, where copies of telephone records were strewn.

The billing that interested him was from Houston, a cell phone registered in the name of David Ross. Not only had he called Sam’s home number, but the station as well, on a few of the nights that “John” had phoned, but his cell number had a block on it and his name had never shown on caller ID. Just his number. But those calls hadn’t even gotten through, not according to the station records. He must’ve called, then chickened out…or decided to use a pay phone. Ross had also been in New Orleans a couple of times in the past few weeks…but Samantha had insisted her love affair with the guy was over.

Maybe he didn’t like it.
Maybe he was getting back a little retribution.

The phone jangled. He grabbed the receiver. “Bentz.”

“Looks like we got another one,” Montoya said, his voice serious. “I’m driving over to a hotel on Royal, the St. Pierre. The story is that we’ve got another Jane Doe, strangled with a series of weird cuts on her neck. The maid let herself in with her key, ignoring the Do Not Disturb sign as it was after checkout time. The guy who rented the room is gone, but we might have gotten lucky because the clerk working the desk last night remembers him. I’m on my way to the St. Pierre now. I’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Bentz said, and slammed the phone down. Maybe they were finally catching a break.

Sam was nervous as she walked into the den. The edge that she’d felt after taking “John’s” last call had never quite left her. She was missing something, something important, a clue as to his identity.

Earlier, Ty had taken her into New Orleans to retrieve her car, followed her here, then made a quick trip home to pick up Sasquatch and his laptop computer. Now, he was seated on the couch, computer glowing on his knees, his notes splayed upon the coffee table. While the television flickered with images of the noon news, and his dog lay near the French doors, he started sorting through the box of Sam’s old, musty folders that he’d brought down from upstairs.

TGIF went through her head as it was Friday, her weekend, and she didn’t have to work at the station again until Sunday night. Nonetheless she was burdened with the feeling that something bad was going to happen or had happened. “John’s” warning replayed through her head: All you need to know is that what happens tonight is because of you, because of your sins. You need to repent, Sam, beg forgiveness.

So familiar, so direct. He’d called her Sam.
At first she’d thought he’d meant the damned cake, that he was just trying to freak her out, but as she’d remembered the tone of his voice, the cold warning, the pure evil of his threat, she was convinced that there was more.

But nothing had happened.
Yet. Nothing’s happened yet.
This is just the calm before the storm.

She tried and failed to take heart in the fact that Annie’s birthday had come and gone. If the cake was the worst that had happened, she should be relieved. But she couldn’t shake the eerie feeling that the cake was just the tip of the iceberg.

In the den, she sat at her desk and noticed Charon cowering on the top of the bookcase, eyes round.
“Sasquatch is okay,” Sam assured the cat. “You’ll get used to him.”

Just like you’ll get used to having Ty around? Remember, he lied to you from the git-go, and now he’s pursuing this half-baked theory of his.

She crumpled a wad of paper and tossed it at the cat, who couldn’t help himself and swiped at the “toy.”

Ty was convinced that Annie Seger had been murdered and the killer had gotten away with it. Sam wasn’t so certain.

Could the Houston police have been so wrong? So negligent? Or had they covered up? It seemed unlikely, and even if Annie’s murder had “slipped through the cracks” nine years ago, how did “John” and the call from the woman posing as Annie link to the past? Why was this all happening now?

Could it have been someone in the station trying to rekindle interest in a nearly forgotten case, all for publicity? Was someone at the station involved, or had one of the employees inadvertently passed along information about the phone lines into WSLJ?

Stop this. It could be anyone. A phone company employee, or someone who had worked at the station in the past, or any guest or repairman or visitor who just looked the system over when Melba’s back was turned. Someone else might have stumbled across the number. With all the computer links and technoknowledge available, any nutcase could have figured out the phone-line numbers. It’s not that big of a deal.

Scraping back the chair from her desk, she reached for the phone. She needed to call her father and tell him that Corky had seen Peter, that her brother was alive, and seemingly clean and sober.

This is Peter’s responsibility, her voice nagged, but she didn’t care. She wasn’t bailing Peter out, as she might have been accused in one of the upper-division psychology courses she’d taken. This was real life, and her father deserved to have his mind put at ease about her brother. After talking to her dad she’d call Leanne Jaquillard.

She’d picked up the receiver and had started to dial before noticing that the answering machine light was flashing. Her stomach knotted. She hadn’t picked up her messages in nearly two days. Had she somehow missed another call from John? Another threat? She pushed the play button and heard a hangup. “Damn.” Then another click. Her skin crawled. It was “John,” she was certain.

A second later Leanne’s voice came through the small speaker. “Hey, Doctor Sam, I was wonderin’ if we could get together? I need to talk to you about somethin’ and it really can’t wait until group. I mean…I want to talk to you about it alone, if that would be okay? Call or e-mail me if you get this.”

Click.

The machine stopped.

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. There were no other messages, no contact from “John.” She switched on her computer, checked her e-mail, and found yet another note from Leanne asking her to call.

Charon hopped onto Sam’s lap and she stroked the cat out of habit. Something was weighing heavily on Leanne, she thought. The girl had never before called her at home. Quickly, she looked up Leanne’s phone number on her computer screen, then picked up the phone and punched out the numbers. “Be home,” she said, picking up a pencil and tapping the eraser end on the desk as the phone rang.

On the fourth ring a woman answered, “Hello?” Sam recognized Leanne’s mother’s irritated voice, and she braced herself.

“Hi, this is Samantha Leeds, Leanne’s counselor at the Boucher Center. Is she in?”

“No, as a matter of fact, she isn’t. That little fart didn’t bother comin’ home last night. I was just about to call the police and report her missin’, but I imagine she’ll come draggin’ in later this afternoon.”
Sam bristled and tapped the pencil again. The cat jumped off her lap and slunk cautiously out of the den. “Leanne left me a couple of messages, and I’d like to get in touch with her.”

“You and me both. I should have been at work two hours ago, and I ain’t got no one to watch Billy. That’s Leanne’s job when she ain’t in school. I’m tellin’ you this is the last time she pulls this kind of stunt on me. I was up half the night worried about her.” There was an edge to Marletta’s voice, a fear that she couldn’t quite mask. “She’s usin’ again, I swear. God, don’t you discuss this with her in that stupid group she goes to?”

“What we discuss doesn’t leave the room,” Sam said, trying to remain patient and worrying about the girl. “Well it ain’t doin’ any good, now, is it? Otherwise, she’d be home.”

“Does she do this often?”

“Much as she can.”

“But you might call the police.”

“What for? Ennytime I do, they jest give me the run-around. I’ve called too many times already and then Leanne she strolls in here like it ain’t no big deal. I’m sick and tired of chasin’ after her.”

“Still—”

“It’s not yer problem.”

Sam wasn’t sure about that. She dropped her pencil onto the desk. “Just tell her I called.”

“Yeah, yeah, if she ever shows up.”

“Thanks,” Samantha said, and hung up. Her heart twisted for Leanne. The kid had just never had a chance, with no father and Marletta for a mother. Sam decided that she’d call back tomorrow, just in case the message didn’t get through, then typed a quick e-mail to ensure the girl knew Sam was trying to reach her. She then dialed her own father, who, she decided for about the thousandth time, was no less than a saint. When he didn’t answer she felt a second’s disappointment but left a message.

“Hi, Dad, it’s Sam. You’re out, probably with the cute widow, right? Well, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do and call me when you get the chance. I just want you to know that Corky ran into Peter, and he’s doing great. I haven’t talked to him, of course, but I thought I’d pass on the word about brother dear. Call when you’ve got a chance, okay? Love ya!” She hung up in frustration, then heard Ty’s voice from the living room.

“Samantha—I think your cop’s on television.”

“My cop?” she said, walking into the living room, where Ty was standing, the remote in his hand, watching the television. Detective Rick Bentz filled the screen. A reporter was interviewing him as he and his partner were exiting a huge house in the Garden District. While the reporter tried to ask questions, Bentz kept muttering “no comment.”

“What is it?”

“A murder, apparently,” Ty said as the reporter stared into the camera.

“…so that’s it. Another woman murdered. Another one linked to prostitution. The question that has to be asked is are the killings linked? Do we have a serial killer, here, in New Orleans? It’s starting to look that way.”
“Bentz has been busy lately,” Ty observed as he clicked the remote and the image on the television faded.

“Criminals don’t have weekends off,” she said, bothered by the report. The possibility of a serial killer was sobering and reminded her that there were other problems beside hers in the city. “So what have you found out?” she asked, motioning toward the notes, pictures and files spread over the coffee table.

“Not much more than I knew before.” He rubbed the back of his neck as if his muscles were strained. “I’ve got a partial list of people who were acquainted with Annie, what they’ve been doing for the past nine years and where they are now.”

“That’s a start. Tell me about them.”

“Okay.” He walked back to the couch, sat down and leaned over the coffee table to his computer. Squinting, he clicked the mouse and said, “Oswald—Wally, Annie’s father, is still up in the Northwest…in…Kelso, Washington—that’s Washington State.”

“I know where it is. He’s the guy that asked you to look into this.”

“Yep, good old Uncle Wally. As mismatched with Estelle as he could be. She was white-collar society, he, strictly blue-collar. One job to the other. I never could figure them out, but they were young when they hooked up and she got pregnant with Kent, so, they got married. Then, of course, divorced when the kids were young and Estelle found someone more suitable in Dr. Faraday. Wally never remarried, lives alone in some kind of modular home park and works for a logging company.” Ty glanced up at Samantha. “Since he wanted me to investigate what happened to his daughter, I don’t think he’s a viable suspect, but I haven’t ruled him out completely. Stranger things have happened.”

“I guess.” Samantha rounded the couch and leaned over the back, reading the computer screen over Ty’s shoulder, her head next to his.

“Estelle is still living in the house in Houston where Annie died. She’s never moved, never remarried, doesn’t even date, spends a lot of time volunteering at the church and lives off of what she got from the divorce and her investments. A shrewd lady, Aunt Estelle. She’s parlayed a sizable inheritance into a small fortune. In our one phone conversation, she agreed to be interviewed for the book as long as I see her in person. I’m not exactly at the top of her favorites list but not persona non grata either. She doesn’t want Annie’s story told, but since it will be, she’d like to tell her side of it.” One side of his mouth lifted. “She’s a controlling woman, and my guess is that if she talks to me, I’ll take her version of what happened as gospel and print it verbatim.”

“Which you won’t.”

“Of course not. The truth is the truth. You can color it any way you want, even try to whitewash it, but it’s still the truth. Estelle is a great manipulator, but I’ll be hell to control.” He slanted a look over his shoulder. “It will be interesting to see what she has to say.”

Sam remembered the cold, dry-eyed woman who wouldn’t allow Sam to attend the graveside service for her daughter. Tall and graceful, with upswept blond hair and pale blue eyes, she’d looked down her straight nose at Samantha at the gates to the cemetery. “Please,” she’d said, “this is a private ceremony. Just family.”

“Just came to pay my respects,” Sam had replied, her heart wrenching with guilt, as if she somehow could have counseled the girl, somehow gotten through to her, somehow prevented this unthinkable tragedy.

“Don’t you think you’ve done enough? My family has been devastated by this, and it’s your fault. If you had helped her—” Estelle’s cool facade had shattered and her lips had begun to tremble. Tears had filled her ghostly eyes, and she’d blinked rapidly. “You just don’t understand…Please…It would be best for everyone if you left.” Beneath her foundation makeup, Estelle had paled. She lifted a trembling hand and wiped beneath her eyelids, careful not to muss her mascara. “I—I can’t deal with this right now.” She turned to a lanky man with thinning brown hair, tanned skin and grief-stricken expression. Sam had recognized him as Estelle’s husband, Annie’s stepfather, Jason Faraday. “This is so awful, “Estelle said as the man leveled Sam a look that begged her to back off. “I…I don’t want that woman here.”

“Shh. Don’t worry,” he’d whispered, wrapping a protective arm over her thin shoulders. “Come on.” He’d
shepherded Estelle toward the freshly turned mound of earth in a green expanse of lawn dotted with headstones, family plots and vaults.

Sam had gotten the message. A few weeks later, the sympathy card she’d sent to the family had been returned unopened.

“Good luck talking to her,” she said now, shaking her head to dislodge the painful memory. “I don’t think Estelle had anything to do with Annie’s death. In fact I’m not sure it wasn’t suicide. The police did check it out.”

“I was there, remember? On the force. Kicked off of the case because I was related to the deceased and because I was pretty vocal that I didn’t like the way the investigation was being handled.”

“You still haven’t convinced me that Annie was murdered. I mean the Houston police force is pretty good.” She crossed her arms over the back of the couch as he scrolled down.

“Bear with me.”

“Fine.”

“This is where things get interesting,” he said. “Jason and Estelle divorced less than a year after Annie’s death. As soon as it was legal, Jason remarries a nurse from his office staff, sells his part of the partnership in the group where he worked as a surgeon and he and the new missus pull up stakes and move to Cleveland. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “But get this, he’s been in New Orleans more than once in the last few months. His new wife’s sister lives in Mandeville, just across the lake, and he’s had a couple of conferences here.”

“Wait a minute. This doesn’t make sense. You think a killer got away with murder, and now, nine years later, he’s calling me, wanting to dredge it all up again? Why? There is no statute of limitations. Remember, whoever ‘John’ is, he blames me for Annie’s death. If he killed her, why blame me, why not let well enough alone and allow everyone to think that Annie killed herself. If what you’re saying is true, he went to great pains to make it look like she committed suicide. Why stir things up now? It doesn’t make sense.”

Ty looked up at her. “We’re not dealing with a sane man, though, are we? The guy who’s been calling you, he’s got all sorts of hangups about sin and repentance and atonement. My guess is that something triggered his need to call you and bring the Annie tragedy back into the limelight. Maybe he heard you on the radio show or maybe something happened in his personal life. We already know he’s screwed up about God and punishment and sin. He snapped, Samantha.”

She still wasn’t buying it, but played along. “Okay, just for argument’s sake, let’s say you think the killer could be Jason Faraday.”

“One possibility. He split from Estelle fast and practically gave her everything in the divorce, then pulled up stakes and got the hell out of Dodge so to speak. He started a new life for himself with ties down here.”

“Who else?” She picked at the dying fronds of a Boston fern.

“Annie’s brother. Kent and she were pretty close. They’d lived through their parents’ divorce and their mother’s remarriage. Kent was pretty messed up after Annie died. He didn’t work, didn’t go to school and suffered from some kind of depression. All this time his mother’s second marriage was breaking up. He was the man of the house and during that time he was committed to a private mental hospital for a while, one in Southern California, Our Lady of Mercy.”

“Catholic? For rich kids, right?” she asked, noticing how his dark hair curled at the nape of his neck.

“Troubled kids.”

“But it was run by the Catholic Church.”

“Estelle’s a devoted member of the church, so her kids were raised that way.” He slanted her a look. “It’s not a sin you know.”

“I do know. Guess how I was raised?” she asked, walking into the kitchen and dropping the brittle fronds into the trash.

“I don’t have to guess. It’s all in my notes.” “Oh, right. You know, Ty, I should be ticked off about this. It’s called invasion of privacy, I think.” She was dusting her hands as she padded back into the living room and resumed her position leaning over the back of the couch.

His smile wasn’t the least bit abashed. “So I’m a bastard, what can I say?”

“Add in insufferable, bullheaded and inflexible.”

“Your kind of man.”

“In your dreams.”
“There, too,” he admitted, sending her a hot glance that caused a catch in the back of her throat. Things were moving quickly, probably too quickly. Right now her life was turned inside out, she needed room to breathe, to think, to figure out why some twisted man was tormenting her. It wasn’t the time to get seriously involved with anyone and yet…and yet…

She cleared her throat and picked at a piece of lint on the back of the cushions. “You were telling me about the members of Annie’s family,” she reminded him.

“And I had a thought.” Rotating his head to look her square in the face, he said, “You know, since you’re a hotshot celebrity-psychologist, maybe you could make inquiries to the hospital about Kent, find out about his depression and illness.”

“I’m a psychologist, not psychiatrist…big difference in the medical world. They like that MD tagged onto the end of your name.”

“This is a mental hospital, they’ll take you seriously.”

“I think I’m known in the medical community as an ‘entertainment shrink.’ That doesn’t sound too serious to me.”

“You lived in the area?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “The last I heard one of my college friends is practicing there.”

“So, you’ve got an in.”

“Patient files are still confidential.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything illegal,” he said, but the undertones in his voice suggested otherwise. “Just see what you can find out about Kent.”

“So you can print it in a book. I think that’s more than illegal. Unethical and morally corrupt might be thrown in.”

“Anything you find out, I won’t use.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Look, I’ll call my friend, but that’s all. This is strictly, strictly off the record.”

“Absolutely.”

“So tell me more about Annie’s family. The brother, Kent, where is he…no wait, he’s here, isn’t he?” she guessed. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be so interested. He’s in New Orleans.”

“Close enough. Baton Rouge. He’s finally gotten his act together and finished school at All Saints College. He graduated in general studies, worked at the college part-time, though his mother supported him all the way through school.”

“Is he married?”

“No Kent. He goes through girlfriends like water. Broke up with the last one at the end of May, though he’s probably dating again. He always seems to have a woman.”

“And a job?”

“He works part-time through a temp agency. I think Estelle is still paying most of the bills.”

“You’ve done your homework,” she said, feeling edgy. He snorted a laugh. “It’s called research when you’re an adult.”

Could Ty possibly be right? For years Samantha had believed that Annie Seger had taken her own life and now, if his theory was right, everything she’d believed had changed and the horror of the past, the secret guilt for Annie’s death that she’d tried so hard to bury, was back again, stronger than ever.

“John’s” calls are proof enough of that. She rounded the couch, and straddled an overstuffed arm. “So you really think a member of her family is responsible for her death? Her father or stepfather or brother?”

“I’m not limiting the suspects to her family. But I’m sure it’s someone she knew. It could have been her boyfriend. Ryan Zimmerman lives in White Castle, just up the Mississippi a few miles. His schooling was interrupted, just as Kent’s was, and he went through a period where he was drugged-out all the time. Eventually, through drug treatment, he went back to school and finished Loyola, no less. Transferred in from a smaller school in Texas.”

“You’ve talked to him?”

“Not yet. I’d originally thought I’d start with the smaller players in all of this, get their interpretations of the people closest to Annie, so that I didn’t tip my hand. Maybe had a little deeper insight, but now, I’m not so sure.”

“Because of the calls I’ve been getting.” “Yeah.” He plowed his fingers through his hair and scowled, obviously
angry with himself. “I worry that somehow I started this ugly ball rolling, and you got in its path.”

“But then, again, maybe you didn’t. There’s no use in dwelling on that. Tell me about Ryan. What about his love life?”

He checked the computer, but Sam guessed he knew all this information like the back of his hand. “Ryan got married last year…but he separated about three months ago. She’s a local girl he met while going to school. She wants a divorce, he’s against it.” Ty’s gaze held hers. “He doesn’t believe in divorce, it’s against his faith.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“It’s not all that surprising,” Ty pointed out. “Annie and Kent are from the same family. She met Ryan through the church, and, let’s face it, Catholics are a distinct minority in Texas unless you happen to be a Mexican-American.”

“So, Ryan got married in the Catholic Church and less than a year later his wife wants a divorce. Why?”

“I’m still working on that. It could be his lack of ambition. He’s got a teaching degree but still drives a truck.” Ty moved the mouse around. “But I spoke to a couple of other girlfriends he had who have insisted that he never got over his first love.”

“Meaning Annie,” Sam guessed, cold inside as she slid onto the cushions from the arm of the couch.

“Right. She stole him from her best friend, Priscilla McQueen, another cheerleader.

“This sounds like it’s out of Peyton Place. What happened to her?”

“Prissy still lives in Houston. Married now and has a baby. Her husband works for an oil company.”

“You’ve got this all on computer?” she asked, motioning toward the laptop.

“And on disk as well.”

“Okay, so I’m trying to make sense of all this. You think that Ryan wasn’t the father of Annie’s unborn baby, and you know this because of blood types.”

“Right again.”

“So who is?” She nestled into the corner of the couch and twisted so that she was able to place her bare feet against his jean-clad thigh.

“There’s the catch. Since there are no DNA tests, it could have been any of several of the men or boys involved in her life. The baby’s blood had a RH positive factor, and because Annie’s RH factor was negative, the father’s had to be positive. Ryan Zimmerman’s is negative. But Annie’s father, her brother, her stepfather all are positive, like the baby. I checked—have a friend in the Houston PD who somehow got hospital records. So the baby couldn’t have been Ryan’s.”

“I get it.” Sam curled her toes into the fabric covering Ty’s thigh. “Both my brother and I are positive, because Dad is. But Mom was negative and she had to get an injection after Peter was born and again after me so as to prevent problems with any future pregnancies.”

“This doesn’t narrow the field a lot,” Ty said, wrapping his fingers over her toes. “Most of the population is positive.”

Sasquatch wandered up and Sam reached down to scratch him at the base of his ears, but her thoughts were on Ty’s theory and how it all connected. “I wonder if ‘John’s’ positive or negative—or what his type is. Don’t the police have that information?”

Ty sent her a smile that was nearly sinister. “I’m already working that angle. I don’t think they’d give it to me outright, so I’m doing ‘research’ through a friend—the man you saw me with last night.”

“He’s going to get the information for you?”

“I’m counting on it.” He turned off the computer. “While I’m in Houston, interviewing Estelle.” He slid her a glance. “

“Don’t suppose you want to come along?”

“I think it would be better if I didn’t.” Sam remembered Annie’s cold, grief-stricken mother. “I don’t think my presence would be appreciated. You might get more information from her one on one.”

“I could use the company,” he said, linking his hand with hers and tugging her closer to him. He nuzzled her cheek. “We could have some fun.”

It was tempting. “No doubt, but I have things I’ve got to do here.”

“Like?” He slung his arm around her shoulders.
“Catch up on my sleep for one. Someone’s been robbing me of it.”

“Are you complaining?” His lips were warm against her skin, and she felt the rush of heat she always did when he touched her.

“Complain? Moi?” She feigned innocence. “Never. But I do have things I need to do. You work on your end of this case, and I’ll try to start figuring out the other.”

“Meaning ‘John.'” His smile fell away, and the arm he’d wrapped around her shoulders tensed.

“To start with. How does he know the number for the second line? He called in after hours, line one—the one listed in the phone book—was free and yet he dialed in on line two.”

Ty’s jaw hardened. “You think he’s someone who works at the station?”

“I don’t know, but it’s definitely a possibility.”

“Have you told the police?”

“Not yet. I didn’t want to say anything last night because I didn’t want to freak out anyone who was working there.”

“Or tip them off,” he said. “Neither Tiny nor Melanie could have called in.”

“But they could be working with an accomplice.” She shook her head. “It’s possible, yes…but I don’t know why they would. More likely it would be George Hannah or someone who would directly benefit from the increased listenership. Melanie wants my job, whether she admits it or not. She’s always hoping I’ll retire or move on, so she would prefer it if my audience fell off and she could step in…well, that’s a little far-fetched. And Tiny…the guy’s got a major crush on me. I know that sounds vain, but it’s true.”

“I believe it,” Ty said.

“Neither of them would want to hurt me. We’re too close.

I’m thinking that someone at the station inadvertently gave the number to a friend or acquaintance.”

“But on purpose,” Ty added, his lips compressing. “There’s still the very strong possibility that ‘John’ is someone who works with you.” He gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze, but the look in his hazel eyes was deadly. “And if the son of a bitch has any connection to the station, trust me, we’ll get him.”
Chapter Twenty-seven

“Take a look at her neck,” Montoya was saying as he squatted next to the victim in the seedy hotel room. She was posed, just as the others had been, hands folded in prayer, legs splayed. “Same markings as the others, but check this out,” he pointed to a spot just above the hollow of her throat. “There’s something different here, another mark, like something was dangling from the chain like it had a tail…See here…maybe a medallion or a charm or a cross. You know, like she was strangled with her own necklace.”

“Or his,” Bentz said, his gut twisting. “He brings his own special noose.”

“And he took a trophy. See her left ear—all the metal—the earrings? One of them is missing.” “Was the radio on?”

“Oh, yeah. Tuned into WSLJ.”

Bentz glanced at the night table…saw the hundred-dollar bill with the black eyes. All part of the sicko’s signature, but what did it mean? Why was Ben Franklin blinded? So he couldn’t see? So he wouldn’t be recognized? “Time of death?”

“We’re guessing around midnight. The ME’s on his way, and then we’ll have a better idea.” Montoya clucked his tongue. “She’s younger than the rest.”

She’s younger than Kristi, Bentz thought, his jaw clenching. This dead girl, hooker or not, was someone’s kid, someone’s friend, probably someone’s sister and quite possibly someone’s mother. His jaw was suddenly so tight it ached. What kind of bastard would do this?

“She’s a local girl, been picked up for a few priors.” He handed Bentz a bag with the victim’s ID. “And check this out…” Through the plastic, Montoya shuffled the girl’s driver’s license, social security card and a few photographs until he came to a worn business card. “Isn’t this what you’ve been looking for?”

The card was stock for WSLJ radio station, personalized in one corner for Doctor Samantha Leeds, host of Midnight Confessions, AKA Dr. Sam.

“Hell,” Bentz said, glancing back at the body on the bed. The crime-scene team was vacuuming, and the photographer was snapping pictures of the area.

“You were so damned sure there was a link…well, it looks like you were right,” Montoya said. “Somehow this girl knew the radio shrink.”

Which wasn’t good news. Bentz was working on a theory, one that he wasn’t certain held any water, but an idea that wouldn’t go away. What if the killer wasn’t choosing victims at random any longer, what if he was escalating, the crimes getting more frequent, what if he was moving to his primary target…what if his intent was to kill Samantha Leeds?

That’s not the way it usually worked; but this case wasn’t usual. The guy wasn’t tipping off the police or the newspapers or trying to gain some glory, except to call Dr. Sam…. He wasn’t the usual creep…. Bentz glanced at the ligature around the victim’s neck and felt like there was something important in the spacing of the marks surrounding her throat, something he should understand.

“Didn’t you say the hotel clerk got a look at the guy?”

“Yeah.” Montoya was moving out of the way of the photographer. “She’s in the hotel office right now.” He flipped out his small notebook. “Her name is Lucretia Jones, has worked here about nine months, and already gave a statement to the first officers on the scene. I asked her to stick around cuz I figured you’d want to talk to her.”

Bentz nodded. “Anything else?” “We’ve got the original registration he signed as John Fathers.”

“He gave an address?”

“Houston.”

Bentz glanced at Montoya. “Anyone check it out?”

“Fake. He had the street right—Annie Seger’s street—but there’s no such number.” Montoya’s gaze met Bentz’s as they walked into the outer hallway, where a few curious bystanders were craning their necks. “I’d say the address is another damned good link.”
For once Bentz wasn’t glad to have his gut instincts proved right. “Didn’t John Fathers have to give a driver’s license, offer up some kind of ID?”

“Apparently not. Just anted up with cash—a hundred-dollar bill for a forty-nine-dollar room. No luggage. It’s really not a big deal in a hotel like this. It’s all pretty common—guys pick up a hooker, and they rent a room. No one asks any questions.” They paused in front of the elevator. Montoya pressed the call button.

“You said the clerk’s in the office?” Bentz asked. “Let’s see what she has to say.”

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped into a cramped car which deposited them into a once-far-more elegant lobby that was now shabby at best. The chandelier, a glimpse of a more prosperous time, was dusty, with many bulbs dimmed, the potted plants near the doors drooping, the carpet threadbare, with a vacuum cleaner left unattended in one corner. What had been genteel eighty years earlier was now downright shabby, a musty, dark alcove with a desk that hadn’t been replaced in the past century or two.

Two women in matching black skirts, jackets and white blouses, were working behind the desk, peering at computer screens that seemed out of place in the ancient building. A heavyset guy who could have been a bellman or a janitor was slurping coffee in the doorway leading to a back room. Bentz flashed his ID, explained what he wanted and the taller of the two women motioned both Bentz and Montoya around the desk. “Lucretia’s back here,” the receptionist said. “But she’s already spoken to one of the officers.”

“This’ll just take a minute,” Bentz assured her, as she led them down a short corridor to a brightly lit room, where a computer hummed, a table complete with coffee rings dominated the middle of the room and an old couch was pushed against a wall near the microwave and refrigerator. A rail-thin black girl sat drinking a can of diet cola. Her eyes, large to begin with, were huge today, as if she were scared, and seemed to bulge from a head supporting hundreds of tiny braids that were all pulled together at her nape.

She stood as he entered, and the receptionist explained who they were. Bentz waved her back to the couch and took a seat in a folding chair. Montoya lingered in the doorway.

“You were on duty last night?” Bentz asked, and she nodded quickly.

“Yes.”

“And you took the registration for the guest who rented the room where the murder victim was found?”

“Oh-huh. I, um, I already gave the card he filled out to the other officer.”

From the corner of his eye, Bentz saw Montoya nod slightly, indicating the police had already retrieved the registration form.

“So you got a good look at the guy as he registered last night,” Bentz asked.

“Yes.” Lucretia nodded, her tiny head bobbing beneath all that hair.

“What can you tell me about him?”

“Just what I told the other cop—er, officer. He was about thirty, I’d guess, and tall and big—not fat, but…strong-looking, like maybe he lifted weights or something, a white guy with real dark hair—almost black and…he was wearing sunglasses, real dark, which was kinda different and strange but then…” She shrugged her thin shoulders, indicating that she’d seen it all.

“Anything else?”

“Oh, yeah. I remember noticing that his face was scratched, like someone had raked a set of fingernails down his cheek.”

“You remember anything else, what he was wearing?”

“Black—all over, I mean, a black T-shirt and jeans and a leather coat, I thought that was kinda odd cuz it’s so hot, but then he had on the shades as well. But he…he gave me a weird feeling.”

“ Weird, how?”

She glanced away. “There was something about him, something…oh, this sounds so strange, but he seemed kinda dangerous, but kinda cool in a way. He carried himself all tall and like he knew what he was doin’. I don’t know how to explain it. I was nervous, probably because of the glasses, but he smiled and it wasn’t cold or weird or anything, it was a good smile. Real bright. Kinda reassuring.” She stared at the half finished bottle of cola in her hands. “I shoulda trusted my first instincts.”

The poor woman was beating herself up because of the dead girl. “You can help us now, Lucretia,” Bentz said, leaning forward on his elbow, hands clasped between his legs, gaze holding hers. “I’d like you to come down to the station and describe the man to a police artist, who will draw your guy and then have a computer enhance it, make it
look more real. It would help a lot."

She blinked her too-big eyes. "Sure. Anything." "Good." Bentz felt a surge of adrenaline. He was getting closer to
the guy, sensed he was closing in on the son of a bitch—hoped to living hell that he could stop the bastard before he
struck again.

Estelle Faraday had aged. The past nine years coupled with her grief and hours spent playing tennis under the
relentless Houston sun had robbed her of the vitality Ty remembered. She’d invited him to sit outside in a wicker
chair, under the overhang shading her private verandah. Fans twirled overhead, two steps down a wide pool
stretched to a fence guarded by shrubbery. A statue of the Virgin Mary, her arms spread wide, was flanked by terracotta pots filled with petunias, their pink-and-white blossoms offering bright splashes of color. A maid had brought iced tea and lemon cookies, then disappeared through glass doors into the huge, two-storied stucco house in this upscale neighborhood. The cookie plate hadn’t been touched, ice was melting in tea glasses sweating in the heat.

“I think you should understand,” Estelle said, the diamonds in her tennis bracelet sparkling on her slim wrist, “that
the only reason I met with you face-to-face was to ask you not to write your book about my daughter.” The lines
around her mouth grooved deep. “All it would do is cause the family more pain and embarrassment, and personally,
I think we’ve all suffered enough.”

“I think it’s time to write the truth.”

“Oh, save me, Tyler!” She slapped her hand onto the table. “This isn’t about the truth, and you know it. It’s about
money—some trashy pulp fiction, no, I stand corrected, trashy true—and I use the term loosely, believe me—true
crime novel. You and that sleazy agent of yours are only interested in titillation and innuendo. You’re going to take
your own family’s tragedy and turn it into a profit, so don’t go there on that lofty, false high road of yours. You’re
not here in the interests of serving the truth, you’re only trying to pad your wallet. I’m sure that Wally is in on it,
too. He never gave his daughter the time of day while she was alive. I had to force him into court to pay his measly
child support, so Wally only wants to find a way to make a buck.”

“If you say so.”

“We both know it.”

Ty wasn’t going to let her rile him. He’d known this wasn’t going to be a walk in the park. “I would think you’d
want to know what really happened to Annie and her baby. Your grandchild.”

A dark shadow crossed those opalescent eyes, and she looked away, training her gaze on the smooth, calming
surface of the pool. “It doesn’t matter,” she said in a harsh whisper. “They’re both gone, Tyler.” “I think Annie was
murdered.” “Oh, God.” She shook her head. “There’s always been talk about it, of course, but that’s foolishness.
The truth of the matter is that Annie was a very confused and scared girl. Too frightened to come to me.” Her voice
cracked and her chin wobbled slightly. “I have to live with that, you know. That my own daughter turned to
radio psychologist who probably didn’t even have a degree…” Estelle’s fist opened and closed, manicured nails digging into her palm. “She called that…that…disk jockey instead of confiding in me.”

“I know this is difficult.”

“Difficult? Difficult?” Facing him once again, she skewered him with eyes filled with hate and self-loathing.
“This isn’t difficult, Ty. Difficult is going through a divorce and facing the ostracism of church and family. Difficult
is watching your parents fail and die, difficult is dealing with a child whose heart has been broken by their negligent
father. Annie’s suicide wasn’t difficult. It was hell.”

“If she was killed, don’t you want her murderer found and brought to justice?”

“She wasn’t murdered.”

“I have evidence—”

“I’ve heard the theories before about some grass or dirt on the carpet and the gardening shears and…and…the
way the cuts on her wrists…it’s nothing, nothing! Please, for God’s sake, Tyler, don’t do this, don’t make the family
suffer any more.” She looked suddenly very old in her perfect makeup and expensive white-and-gold tennis warm-up,
and for a second Ty doubted his own mission.

“Who was the father of Annie’s baby?”

“I don’t know.” Her lips pursed. “That awful boy she was dating I assume—the druggie.”

“No, Estelle. The blood types don’t work.”

Two tiny grooves appeared between her eyebrows. “Then I don’t know.”

“Sure you do.”
“I already told you my daughter didn’t confide in me. Maybe she...maybe she told that radio person.”

“No—you know. Was it your husband?” Her face turned ashen as she gasped. “No…” “Your son?”

“Are you out of your mind? This is my home. You have no right!”

“I’m warning you. If you think you’re going to drag my daughter’s name through the mud, sully her reputation and destroy what’s left of the dignity of this family, you’ll be sorry.”

“I just want the truth.”

“No you don’t. You want to twist the facts to sell a book. “’ Her nostrils flared in haughty disdain. “So noble of you.”

“Jason divorced you. Moved away. Kent had a breakdown, had to be sent to a private mental hospital. Ryan sank into drugs and depression.”

“All the dirty little details for a trashy novel or a television movie of the week. I should never have talked to you, never allowed you into my house,” she said, emotion causing her voice to falter. “Don’t you understand? Annie’s dead...my baby is dead,” Estelle said softly. “Nothing is going to change that. You’re not going to bring a killer to justice...oh, no, all you’re going to do is inflict more pain and suffering on a family you’re not a part of, so don’t give me altruistic explanations, because I don’t believe them for a moment.” She gathered herself and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the glass-topped table. “If you persist in this...this witch-hunt, I will stop you in the courts. Defending yourself will cost you a fortune, one I doubt you have. No publisher will take on your project for fear of a lawsuit. I’ve already spoken to my lawyer, and he’s ready to file a suit blocking publication. He mentioned words like ‘extreme distress, emotional trauma, punitive damages, civil action and libel’ to the point that no publisher in their right minds would ever buy your trash. I think it would be best for you to leave now.”

It was Ty’s turn to lean forward. Looking over the two untouched glasses of iced tea, he asked, “You can threaten me all you want, Estelle. You can use all kinds of legal mumbo jumbo and spend thousands of dollars on the best lawyers in the country, but it’s all just thick smoke and mirrors. I’m not backing down, no matter what skeletons come dancing out of your closet. Something’s not right about your daughter’s death, and we both know it.” He stood and looked down on her, watching as her spine stiffened. “The difference is that I want to know what happened to Annie, and you don’t. Because you’re frightened of the truth. Why is that? What is it that scares you so badly?”

“Get out,” she said weakly.

“I’m going to find out, one way or another, you know.”

“Get out, or I’ll call the police,” she said. “I don’t think so, Estelle. I’m willing to bet that the police are the last people you want poking around in this. But it’s too late, because, whether you like it or not, the truth about Annie’s death is going to come out.”

“Go to hell,” she said, standing.

He flashed her a humorless smile. “Something tells me I’m on my way.”
Chapter Twenty-eight

“Does this guy look like the guy who grabbed you in the park last night?” Bentz asked.

He slid the computer-enhanced artist’s sketch across his desk to the girl, Sonja Tucker, seated on the other side. She’d filed a report early this morning that she’d been attacked late at night by a “guy in sunglasses,” and when Bentz had learned about it upon his return from the St. Pierre, he’d called and asked her to come back to the station, so here she was, looking nervous, a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Tulane University who was going to summer school and probably was lucky to be alive today.

“It could be,” she said, picking up the composite and studying it closely. She’d told the officer downstairs that she’d been on her way to a masquerade party last night. Dressed to look like a prostitute, she was waiting for the streetcar when a man had accosted her, propositioned her and hadn’t wanted to take “no” for an answer. He’d gotten pushy, tried to grab her and she’d responded by scratching him down the side of his face, then kicking off her high heels and running like hell through Audubon Park, hiding in some bushes near the zoo and learning the valuable lesson of life in the city.

Right now she looked scared as hell.

“It was dark,” she said, chewing on her lower lip.

“But—you got a look at him?”

“Kinda. There was a streetlamp, but he was wearing dark glasses and needed a shave and…” She stared long and hard at the composite and her fingers shook enough to cause the paper to tremble in her hands. Her skin was pale as death. “This looks kinda like him,” Sonja finally said, seeming to draw strength in her convictions as she stared at the computer-generated image.

“And he was a stranger to you?”

“Yes, oh, yes. I, uh, I never saw him before. I think I would have remembered him.” “Why?”

Again Sonja stared at the picture. “This sounds funny, I know. But he was handsome, kind of…in a dark, well, dangerous way. But then…well…then he started forcing me to go with him and he didn’t look so good.”

“Would you recognize his voice?”

“Uh—maybe. I don’t know.” Her confidence escaped her again.

Bentz was undeterred and pushed the play button on the recorder he’d positioned on his in box. Several tapes of “John” calling into Midnight Confessions had been spliced together and his low voice filled the room.

The girl shook her head, her ponytail wagging behind her, her eyebrows pulling downward. “I—I don’t know. It could be…Play it again.”

He rewound and pushed the play button.

Sonja worried her lower lip, and her features drew together as she concentrated. “It sounds a lot like him. I—I’m just not sure.”

The same response he’d gotten from Lucretia, the desk clerk at the St. Pierre. Bentz was more frustrated than ever. The picture that the artist had come up with was too generic, could be just about any white, dark-haired guy who kept himself in shape.

“You could have told me about him?”

“No, it was dark and over quickly. I reached for his glasses and he freaked. Like maybe he has weird eyes or something…I don’t know.” Sonja lifted a shoulder. “He tried to pull me down the street and I kicked his shin and scratched him and got away. I, um, guess I was lucky, huh?”

“Very,” Bentz said solemnly.

She cleared her throat. “He killed some other girl, didn’t he?”

“We think so, yes.”

“And he was threatening Dr. Sam, the radio psychologist on that tape.”

“Yes.”
“God, I wish I could help.”

“You already have,” he said, standing. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She gathered up her backpack, but took one last look at his desk. “Is that, is that your daughter?” she asked, motioning toward the bifold picture of Kristi.

“Yeah.” Bentz smiled. “One was taken a long time ago, when she was just going off to school, and the other one is her graduation picture. Taken just last year.”

“She’s very pretty,” Sonja offered.

“Takes after her mother.”

“Nah.” Sonja wrinkled her pert, freckled nose. “She looks a lot like you.” And then she was gone. With one of those coiled plastic key rings wrapped around her wrist and her backpack slung over one shoulder, she clomped out of his office in platform sandals. She was right about being lucky, Bentz thought. Sonja Tucker had been just minutes short of death the night before. One girl’s luck had been another girl’s doom. Losing Sonja Tucker had forced the monster to hunt someone else. His prey had turned out to be Leanne Jaquillard. Was it a coincidence that Leanne was connected to Samantha Leeds? Sonja Tucker had sworn not to know Dr. Sam, and though she’d listened to the *Midnight Confessions* program a couple of times, had never called in. Not so the victim.

Leanne and Dr. Sam knew each other well.

He rubbed the kinks from his neck and plotted his next move. First they’d make the public aware there was a killer, second they’d put a trace on any call that came into the station. Now that there was a viable link from the killer to Dr. Sam, they had to protect her. They’d watch her house night and day and go through the damned list of people who knew Dr. Sam and Annie Seger.

He gazed down at the composite picture of John Fathers, whoever he really was. Square jaw, cleft chin, high cheekbones, thick hair with a prominent widow’s peak and dark glasses covering his eyes.

And scratches running down his left cheek where Sonja’s nails had scraped off his skin. “Who are you, you bastard?” he asked, glaring at the composite they would distribute to the media. He thought of the men in Samantha’s life—David Ross, Ty Wheeler, George Hannah—all tall, in good shape, with dark hair and sharp features. The computer operator had taken off John’s three-days’ growth of beard, had removed the glasses and substituted potential eyes, had even changed the hairstyle and cut…yet it was all just a crap-shoot. “And who’s the woman who called in and pretended to be Annie?” Bentz muttered.

The picture with its hidden eyes seemed to mock him. What was with the dark glasses and the blacked-out eyes on the hundred-dollar bills? And the strange ligature around the victims’ necks? What was all this garbage about sin and redemption?

Bentz made a note to go over the whereabouts of any man associated with Samantha Leeds who had been in the area since she’d returned from that trip to Mexico…the trip where she’d lost her ID, her purse, her keys. The trip where she’d decided to call it off for good with David Ross.

He was missing something, he knew it. Something obvious. *Think, Bentz, think!* Who was in Houston nine years ago? Who was here now? Why did anyone want the Annie Seger suicide dredged up again?

He considered Ty Wheeler, who had inserted himself into Samantha Leeds’s life after the Mexico trip. From all reports, he and Samantha were now lovers. That stuck in Bentz’s craw. He didn’t like the guy. Didn’t trust him. Wheeler had admitted to writing a tell-all book about Annie Seger’s death, had even come up with a theory that she’d been murdered rather than committed suicide, but in Bentz’s estimation, it was all hype. The Houston PD had ruled suicide and that was good enough for him. Wheeler was just out to make a quick buck.

He took a couple of calls, received a fax of crime-scene evidence and wasn’t surprised the hairs from a red wig had been found in the hotel room. A few minutes later Melinda Jaskiel appeared in his doorway.

“Tell me what you think about the murders,” she suggested, folding her arms over her chest and leaning a shoulder against the doorjamb. From the outer office the sound of voices, phones and clicking of computer keys could be heard.

“I think we’ve got one sick sumbitch on our hands, possibly two.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Bentz expanded on his theory and brought up Norm Stowell’s report, which Melinda had already perused. They talked in generalities for a while, then came back to the murder of Leanne Jaquillard.
“So the girl’s mother has been notified?” Bentz asked as he glanced at pictures of the latest victim strewn upon his desk.

Melinda Jaskiel nodded, picked up one of the shots, and scowled at the death scene. “I’m talking to the press in an hour. It’ll be short and sweet, but I’m going to confirm that we have a serial killer on our hands, warn women to lock their doors and stay inside or only go out at night in large groups. We’ll distribute the composite drawing and tell the public that they need to be wary, that the killer is escalating and that anyone close to him, a girlfriend or a wife, could be in danger. You know, the same old drill. We’ll hold back key evidence, information that only the killer knows so that any nutcase who comes in and confesses will have to prove that he’s legit. Otherwise, we’ll get any idiot who wants a chance to claim a little infamy in here spilling his guts. I’ve talked to the FBI. Everyone on the task force agrees.”

“You’re not going to mention the link to Dr. Sam and Midnight Confessions?”

“Not yet. Have you spoken to her?”

“I’m on my way out there. Just waiting for Montoya. I thought it would be better if we do it in person, at her place. From what I understand she was pretty close to Leanne Jaquillard. The kid was part of a weekly group session for troubled teens that Samantha Leeds holds at the Boucher Center.” Bentz rolled back in his chair, and it creaked in protest. “I guess she had some family trouble. No dad and a mom who’s a real piece of work.”

“I talked to Marletta Vaughn,” Melinda said flatly. “Not exactly June Cleaver.”

Bentz smiled grimly at the comparison. “You know, the last time the creep called Samantha Leeds at the station, he threatened her. He told her…wait a minute I want to get this right.” He rolled back to the desk and held up the finger of one hand while he flipped through pages in his notebook. “Oh, here we go…he said, and I quote, ‘All you need to know is that what happens tonight is because of you. Because of your sins. You need to repent, Sam. Beg forgiveness.’”

He pushed the notebook aside. “Even though we found the other victim—Cathy Adams—on the night of Annie Seger’s birthday, it seemed to be coincidence, not related. Another perp altogether, so I was hoping the birthday cake left at the station was all that would happen. But I was wrong. Turns out this girl”—he thumped a finger on the picture of the latest victim—“Leanne Jaquillard was murdered by the guy who registered as John Fathers, who, I believe is the ‘John’ who calls Dr. Sam at the station. It all fits, Melinda.”

“Okay, so if you’re right, and this is all tied together, that ‘John’ and our killer are one and the same,” Melinda said, “how do you explain the call from the woman who claimed she was ‘Annie’?”

“I’m still workin’ on that, “Bentz admitted.

“Do you think it’s someone so devoted to this ‘John’ that she would do his bidding?”

“Or it could be someone who hates Samantha Leeds. Someone who’s jealous of her, either personally or professionally, or someone who thinks she was wronged by her, as if she took away an old boyfriend, say the first Mrs. Jeremy Leeds or maybe the current one who doesn’t like her husband’s ex’s getting so much attention, a coworker she’s stepped on while climbing to the top, or a rival like Trish LaBelle over at WNAB, the rival…I’m not sure.”

“Or ‘John’ could have paid someone,” Melinda thought aloud. “You think the call from Annie was recorded, right? So he could have hired a woman off the street to make the tape and say she was Annie.”

“Now you’re sounding like Montoya. With him every crime is about money.”

Jaskiel curved an eyebrow upward. “It usually is you know, Rick. Not all of us are noble idealists.”

“None of us are,” he corrected her. “Not around here.”

“No?” She laughed and seemed suddenly more feminine, less imposing. “Maybe you’re right, but it seems to me I’ve heard the hoofbeats of Rocinante echoing through the halls, and they usually stop right about here.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?” Montoya asked as he breezed in, looking cool as ever despite the heat.

“Never mind,” Bentz said.

Jaskiel threw Montoya a look. “Don Quixote’s steed.” “Jesus, how do you know this shit?” Montoya asked. “I read,” she replied. “And this is something you should remember, it’s part of your Spanish heritage.” “Yeah, like I care.”

Bentz explained, “And she does crossword puzzles and watches Jeopardy.”

“When I have the time. Speaking of which”—she checked her watch—“I’d better get ready for the fourth estate.” She flashed them her most-practiced smile. “Wouldn’t want to keep them waiting.”
“Better you than me,” Bentz said, as she disappeared.
“You ready to rock’n’roll?” Montoya asked.
“Just about.” He handed Montoya the composite.
“This our man?”
“In theory.”
“Shit, he could be anyone.”
“I’m having the computer tech take some photos of the men in Samantha’s life and Annie Seger’s life, those with type A blood, which, unfortunately is most of them, then I’m going to have the computer compare them. It should narrow the field.”
“Let’s hope,” Montoya said without a lot of enthusiasm.
“Let’s go.” Bentz snagged the paper from Montoya’s hand, then reached for his sidearm and his jacket. He wasn’t looking forward to telling Samantha Leeds about the dead girl, but it was better she hear it from him rather than on the five o’clock news.

Priscilla McQueen Caldwell wasn’t happy to see him, not one little bit.
Ty didn’t care. He figured that as long as he was in Houston, he should check out everyone associated with Annie Seger. Many of her friends had moved away, but Prissy was still in town, living less than a half hour from the airport, and Ty was standing on her front porch while the late-afternoon sun beat against his back. “I don’t know why I should talk to you,” she told him, blocking the doorway to the interior of the small bungalow littered with toys. Over her shoulder he caught a peek of a playpen and infant swing, but no baby. Probably napping.
“I’m just trying to find out about Annie. You were her best friend. You knew that she was pregnant, and you probably knew that the baby wasn’t Ryan Zimmerman’s.”
“What does it matter now?” Prissy asked, the screen door propped on one shoulder.
“I think she was murdered.”
“There have been those old rumors flyin’ around for years, but nothin’s ever come of’ em,” Prissy said, squinting up at him. Wearing a pink shorts outfit, sandals and a necklace with a gold cross, she was a pretty, petite woman with honey-colored hair scraped back in a ponytail. “You know it’s funny, first Ryan calls out of the blue, and the next thing I know is you’re here on my doorstep talkin’ ‘bout Annie.”
“Ryan called you?”
“Sure he did. Didn’t you know? He and I were going together when Annie set her sights on him, and that was that.” The corners of her pert little mouth turned down. “That’s the way it was—whatever Annie wanted, she got.” Prissy folded her arms over her chest and inside a baby began to fuss.
“But you still remained friends.”
“Well, not right off, but eventually. Ryan got into drugs and turned away from the Lord.”
“So you gave him to Annie with your blessing.”
“I didn’t give him anything. But it turned out okay. I met Billy Ray in church and we just hit it off. Got married after I graduated.” She checked her watch. “Now, lookit, I don’t want him know in’ I talked to you. He didn’t like it much when Ryan called, and he’s got hisself a temper.”
“Why did Ryan call?”
Priscilla rolled her expressive eyes. “Well, that just about took all. He wanted me to meet him somewhere—come down to New Orleans. He and his wife broke up and he lost his job and he was lonely and wonder of wonders, he thought of me.” Her smile was cold. “Now he needs me. I told him to forget it.”
From the interior a baby started to cry.
“Uh-oh, Billy Jr. is wakin’ up. I really got to go.”
“Did Ryan leave a number?”
“Nah. I think he was rentin’ some motel by the month until he could get hisself on his feet…but I’m not sure ‘bout that.” The baby began to wail. “Look I gotta see to him.”
Ty grabbed her hand. “You would be doing Annie a favor if you could help me out with this,” he insisted. “Who was she involved with besides Ryan.”
“I really don’t know. It was some big, dark secret,” Prissy said. “I thought it probably was some married guy, like
a friend of Dr. Faraday’s, because she was real worried about it and then she got pregnant and couldn’t tell her folks. They would’ve killed her.” Just as the words left her tongue, Priscilla seemed to realize what she’d said. “Oh. I didn’t mean they would really kill her, but you know, Estelle would have had a fit.”

The baby began to wail loudly, and Ty released Prissy’s hand. “If you ever want to talk about this, give me a call.” He slipped a card from his wallet and tried to hand it to her, but she wouldn’t take it.

“I won’t,” she insisted. “Look, Annie was my friend, okay? I liked her a lot, even though she ticked me off about Ryan. But as far as I’m concerned, she got real messed up, couldn’t face her parents or Ryan about the baby and committed suicide. I won’t call you. Ever. Billy Ray wouldn’t like it.”

She slipped inside, and Ty left his business card tucked in the frame of the screen door. There was a chance that she’d change her mind, though he thought it was mighty slim.

“But you haven’t actually spoken to Peter or seen him,” Sam’s father said.

He’d returned her call, but his voice sounded defeated and tired.

Inwardly she cringed as she cradled the receiver between her head and shoulder, then opened a can of cat food and scooped out the tuna/chicken feast for Charon, who was crying loudly and swarming around her bare feet. “No, I haven’t personally talked to him yet, Dad, but the fact that Pete sat down and had a conversation with Corky is encouraging.”

“I would love to have a word with him,” William Matheson said wistfully.

You and me both, Sam thought, but bit back her anger. “Let’s think of this as kind of a breakthrough,” Sam said, accentuating the positive. “No one that I know of has seen or heard from him in years, and he actually approached Corky in the bar.” That was stretching the truth a little. Corky hadn’t said that Peter initiated the conversation, but her dad needed encouragement. “Now, listen, if I hear anything else, I’ll let you know.” She rinsed the empty can in the sink, then tossed it into the trash.

“I suppose I could check with Information in Atlanta. They might have his number.”

“They might.” She didn’t think so.

“But it’s probably unlisted. It was when he was living in Houston.”

Sam froze. She’d been pulling the trash from beneath the sink, but now she slowly straightened. “Wait a minute. When was he in Texas?”

“Years ago. I had that private investigator looking for him and he found him down not far from where you were living at the time.”

“Are you telling me that Pete was in Houston and you knew about it but you never told me?”

“I’m not sure it was him, it could have been another Peter Matheson. I never got through, and you…well, you were going through so much with the divorce and that Annie Seger mess.”

Which is happening again.

“I didn’t think you needed the added stress of knowing that he was in the same town and never called. Besides, as I said, I’m not even sure it was Pete. The pictures I saw of him weren’t that good, and he was always looking away or wearing a hat or sunglasses or something.”

“He was there when I was? And you didn’t tell me…Jesus, Dad, even if it wasn’t the right Peter Matheson, don’t you think you should have let me know?” She couldn’t believe her father’s duplicity. This was just so unlike him. “In all these years, whenever you and I talked you always asked about Peter and never once mentioned that he could have been in Houston.”

“What would have been the point?” her father asked, his voice bristling defensively. “Whether he was fifty miles from you or five hundred or five, what difference did it make?”

“Dad,” she said firmly, “I wasn’t even sure he was alive.”

“Neither was I. As I said, I’m not even sure it was our Pete.”

Our Pete. He hasn’t been our Pete in years. But there was no reason to argue. Sam quieted her hammering heart and finished the phone call. Her father was right. So what if Pete had been in Houston? He didn’t know Annie Seger…couldn’t have. She was just a high-school kid, and Houston was a huge metropolis that stretched for miles and was filled with hundreds of thousands of people.

But, if Pete had been in town, why hadn’t he contacted her? With all the publicity about the Annie Seger suicide and the phone calls to the station, he certainly would have known Sam was not only living there but in the middle of the controversy and tragedy of Annie’s death. Where was Peter when the press was hounding her, when the police
were questioning her, when Annie’s family was accusing her of everything from making a public mockery of their young daughter’s problems to greed to malpractice?

It might not have been him, she told herself, as Charon hopped onto the kitchen table and began washing his face. But there was a chance Peter had been there, just as he’s surfaced once again, nine years later, when Annie Seger’s name had come up again.

There was just no point in thinking of what-ifs and what-might-have-beens. She was replacing the handset into the recharger when it jangled in her hands, startling her.

“Probably Dad apologizing,” she told the cat. “Now, get down!” She pushed a button on the handset and brought it to her ear. “Hello.”

“Samantha.”

“John’s” cold voice caused her blood to congeal.

Stay calm. Find out more about him. “Yes,” she said, and glanced through the kitchen window. Across the street Edie Killingsworth was digging in her yard and Hannibal was romping through the grass, as if nothing evil, nothing sinister were happening. “Why are you calling me at home?”

“There’s something you should know.” Oh, God. “What’s that, John?” she asked as she saw a police cruiser roll into her drive. If she could just keep the stalker on the line.

“I just want you to know that I kept my promise.”

“Yes,” she said, and glanced through the kitchen window. “I just want you to know that I kept my promise.”

“I made a sacrifice. For you.”

“A sacrifice. What sacrifice?”

Click.

The phone went dead.

“What sacrifice?” she screamed again, fear shooting through her. “What the hell are you talking about, you bastard?”

But he was gone.

“Damn!” She slammed the receiver into its cradle. Through the window she watched Detective Bentz and his partner Montoya climb out of their cruiser. Their faces were set and hard as they walked toward the front door. She flew into the foyer, threw the bolt, and stared at the two men as they climbed onto her porch.

“What’s happened?” she demanded, looking from one sober face to the other.

“I’m afraid we’ve got some bad news,” Bentz said, and she could barely hear him over the hammering of her heart. “It’s about one of your clients, a girl by the name of Leanne Jaquillard.”

“No,” she whispered, her knees starting to fail her, her lungs squeezing tight. She propped herself against the doorframe, and the noises she heard, Bentz’s voice, Hannibal’s yapping and a mockingbird singing seemed far away, from a distant place, hardly audible over the buzz of denial echoing through her brain.

“She’s dead,” Bentz said. “Murdered last night.”

“No!” she said, destroyed inside. “Not Leanne. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t.” Tears flooded her eyes and her fists clenched in impotence.

“We think she was killed by the same man who’s killed two other women, the man who phones you at the station and calls himself John. Ms. Leeds? Samantha…are you all right?”

“No,” she forced out again. “He just called. That murdering son of a bitch just called and told me he’d made a sacrifice, that it was my fault for not atoning…oh, God, no, no, no!” she said, fighting the urge to break down altogether, sobbing within.

“There’s more,” Bentz said kindly, touching her arm, gently guiding her back into the cool foyer.

“No…no…” Leanne had tried to contact her, had even called. “It can’t be. She called here, she was looking for me…I can’t believe, I mean, there must be some mistake.”

“No mistake,” Bentz said, as Montoya closed the door behind him, shutting out the blistering sun and sultry heat.
“You said there was more,” Sam said, wrapping her arms around her middle.

“Yes. She was pregnant.”

_Just like Annie._ “Oh, God, no…not again…” Bentz drew in a deep breath as Sam sank onto the bottom step of the stairs. “She was wearing a red teddy when she was murdered. You said you were missing one, that it could have been taken, so I’d like you to come down to the station and see if it’s the same.”

Sam dropped her head in her hands and let the tears drizzle down her cheeks. Leanne was dead. And she hadn’t been able to reach her, hadn’t been able to help. “John” had murdered the girl, as well as others.

Bentz sat on the step next to her. “Are you all right? I know this is a shock, but I’m sure your life is in danger, and I wanted to warn you. Samantha, do you understand, this man is dangerous. He’s killed three women, possibly more, and we think that you might be his ultimate target.

” At that moment the phone began to ring.
“Answer it,” Bentz said, and Sam forced herself to her feet. The policemen followed her into the kitchen as she picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Sam?”

“Ty.” She nearly dissolved into a puddle on the floor and sank against the kitchen counter.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it? Sam?”

“It’s Leanne…one of the girls I work with. He killed her, Ty, and he called me and told me he’d made a sacrifice and the police are here…and I have to go down to the station and…” She took a deep breath, tried to pull herself together.

“Stay put,” Ty said. “I’m still in Houston, but I’m on my way to the airport. I’ll be back in a few hours. The police are there? Stay with them, don’t go out. Jesus Christ, I should never have left. He killed the girl?”

“And some others, I…I haven’t talked to the detectives yet, they just got here,” she said, regaining a modicum of her equilibrium. “But Leanne…oh, God…and she was pregnant…just like Annie.”

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, and then swore again. “Hang on, Sam, I’m comin’ home. Just hang on.”

“I will,” she said before hanging up and turning to find both police officers looking uncomfortable and out of place in her kitchen. “Now…could you please…just tell me what’s going on?” She swiped the tears from her eyes, but still felt numb inside. Leanne…oh, God, how could he have killed Leanne?

They sat around the small kitchen table and Bentz explained his theory that John was a serial killer, that somehow he was linked to Annie Seger, that Sam was his ultimate target. “We’re not here to scare you, just tell you what’s going on. I’ll talk to the Cambrai police about extra patrols, we’ll have someone watch the house and the station and we’ll put tracers on all the phones, here and at the office.” Guilt crossed his dark eyes. “We should have done it earlier, but we hadn’t connected him to the murders. We have two eyewitnesses, one a hotel clerk, the other a girl we think he tried to assault who got away. They came up with a description.” He reached into his pocket, unfolded a piece of paper, and slid it across the table. “Do you know this man?”

Staring at the sketch, Sam felt cold as death. The drawing was clear, but the features weren’t defined. “What’s that?” she asked, pointing to marks on the drawing of the suspect’s left cheek. “A scar?”

“Scratch marks. The potential victim who got away clawed at him.”

“Good,” Sam said as she stared at the composite. “I—I don’t think I know this man,” she said, slowly shaking her head. “This guy could be anyone.”

“With Type A positive blood. We’re double-checking.” Charon, eyeing the detectives warily, had hopped onto Sam’s lap and she petted him absently as they talked. They questioned her about phone calls, had she seen anyone lurking around? Had she been approached? Was her alarm system working? Did it scare intruders off, or was it connected with a service? All the while the sketch was on the table, staring at her through dark glasses. He seemed familiar and yet not.

Once the preliminary questions were over, the detectives offered to drive her into New Orleans, to the station to view and possibly identify the red teddy, the single garment Leanne was wearing when she was killed. It made Sam sick to think of it, to imagine that she had anything to do with Leanne’s death. She imagined the girl’s terror, her fear, her pain.

If only she could have interceded, taken Leanne’s calls for help, she thought again as she sat in the back of the cruiser. Montoya drove. Bentz, one arm over the backrest, twisted so that he could see Sam. The air conditioner roared, and the police radio crackled.

“We think he dresses them up to look like you,” Bentz said, as Montoya drove around the edge of Lake Pontchartrain. Through the window, Sam glanced at the darkening water. A few sailboats were visible, the first stars were winking high overhead and the calm water seemed somehow foreboding and dark. Sinister. Like the evil that lurked in all the shadows, the evil that was somehow linked to her.
“We’re confiding in the media, handing out composites and descriptions, hoping someone will recognize him. We won’t mention you or the calls to the station, nor will we bring up anything about Annie Seger or Houston, but we hope to flush him out.”

“Or drive him to kill again.”

Bentz didn’t say a word.

“He will anyway,” Montoya offered as he switched lanes. “We have to stop him before he does,” she said, as the lights of New Orleans glittered ever more closely. Montoya was a lead-foot; the cruiser sped past other vehicles driving into the city. Sam hardly noticed. “We have to do anything we can to end this.”

“That’s the idea,” Bentz said, and stuffed a stick of gum into his mouth. “The department’s doing everything in its power—”

“Screw the ‘department,’” she bit out. “How many women are dead? Three, you said, maybe more? Because of me and my show and God only knows what else? The ‘department’ hasn’t saved any lives so far, right?” She was thinking hard. “And I’m the connection to him? Then we should use that. Try to reach him through my program.”

“This is a police matter.”

“Like hell, Detective. This is personal. To me. ‘John’s’ made it personal. He’s called me, sent me threats, broken into my house and now he’s killed someone I care about. It’s personal to me.” By the time Montoya had parked on the street and Bentz had shepherded her into the building and up a set of back stairs to his office, she was furious. At the killer, at the police, at herself and at Leanne for going with the creep. Why had she decided to hook again? Turn a trick?

She tried to reach out to you, Sam, but you weren’t there for her, were you? Just like you weren’t there for Annie, and now she and her baby are dead. Dead! Because you weren’t there.

She marched into Bentz’s airless office and waited while he unlocked a cabinet and retrieved a plastic bag. Inside was her red teddy. There was no doubt. She recognized the pattern of lace that covered the breasts, saw the remainder of the tag that she’d cut off when she’d first purchased the flimsy garment, and felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach.

Leanne had been wearing it when she’d died. Why? Oh, poor confused baby. Leanne had only been a teenager.

But someone had stolen the teddy from Sam’s house. Probably on the night she’d been with Ty on the boat. Who had walked in and taken something so personal? Leanne? Or “John”? Or an accomplice?

She sank into one of the visitor’s chairs in the hot little office and felt as if the blood had been drained from her body. “It’s mine,” she whispered, dry-eyed, but screaming inside. No, no, no! Leanne, please…Dear God, let this be a nightmare. Let me wake up!

“He’s getting closer to you,” Bentz said, and she shuddered inside. “But we’re going to get him.”

“I believe you.” She met the detective’s determined gaze with her own. “Let’s find that son of a bitch, toss him into jail and throw away the key.”

“That’s too good for him.” Bentz walked to the fan behind his desk and switched it to its highest setting. “In this case I’d like to see him drawn and quartered.”

“But first we have to catch him,” Montoya pointed out. He rested a hip on the edge of Bentz’s desk and leaned closer to Sam. “For that, we’re gonna need your help.”

“You’ve got it,” Sam said, her jaw setting. “I’ll do whatever I have to.”

The bitch had scratched him.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror he’d nailed over a basin on a stand. Sure enough, despite two days’ growth of beard, the wound was visible, three distinct gouges from the cunt’s claws. He shouldn’t have let her escape. That had been a mistake, one his instructor would never have made.


But he felt desperate. Angry. Restless. He glanced around the cabin, his only real home now, not much by his old standards, and yet a place where he felt he belonged. Only on the bayou did he feel some peace, some respite from the thrumming in his brain.

He’d grown up privileged and somehow ended up here…cast out of his own family…he thought of his mother…his sister…his father…shit, he didn’t have a family anymore. Hadn’t for years. He was on his own. Even his mentor had abandoned him, the very man who had helped him deal with the monster within him, the one who had shown him the way….
Yes, he was truly alone.

If Annie had lived…

Whoring cunt—she deserved to die. She asked for it…Betrayer…Jezebel…How could she have been with another man?

He reached into his shaving kit and found a tube of salve and a small bottle of face makeup. After coating his wounds with the ointment, he carefully dabbed concealer over the discoloration on his skin. Squinting in the light from his lantern, he added mascara to his beard-stubble until the wounds weren’t visible.

A low moan from the corner caught his attention. He looked over his shoulder to the corner cot and saw his prisoner. A pathetic specimen, bound and gagged, drugged into oblivion, only roused when it was necessary for the victim to realize the magnitude of their sins.

Haunted eyes opened, blinked, then, as if unable to accept their fate, closed again.

Father John looked into the mirror again, stared into his own gaze and inwardly cringed. His eyes had seen too much, and now accused him of crimes he’d committed, sins that he could never repent. And yet the thought of those sins…the hunt…the capture…the terror of his prey…and the ultimate bloodlust…the kill…brought a rush to his veins, a tingle of anticipation flowing through his blood.

He reached into his pocket and found his special rosary…cool, cold beads, sharp against the pads of his fingers and thumb. Such a wicked, lovely weapon, the symbol of good and purity and capable of such a hellish death. That’s what he liked about it—the cruel irony of it.

He thought of the women he’d killed…Annie, of course, but that was before he’d learned from the master, before he understood his mission, before he’d perfected his method and employed his treacherous, beloved noose. He’d watched her blood flow, so slowly it seemed now…and then there had been the first whore…the hunt…the capture…the terror of his prey…and the ultimate bloodlust…the kill…brought a rush to his veins, a tingle of anticipation flowing through his blood.

He thought of the women who had paid for Samantha Leeds’s sins. The first victim had been random, the hooker who had been hanging out on Bourbon Street, luring men, offering up her body…and it had been such a rush, such a turn-on to watch the terror in her eyes when she’d realized he was going to strangle her with the rosary.

But the best, the very best, had been the Jaquillard girl. He hadn’t meant to kill her that night—but the other one, the bitch he’d found near the universities, the girl dressed like a hooker who had clawed him had gotten away had left him empty.

Then he’d set his sites on the Jaquillard girl, followed her. It had seemed fitting that the girl closest to Samantha die on Annie’s birthday. It was only after the frustration of losing one victim that he’d taken the streetcar to Canal Street, walked to the Jaquillard girl’s apartment and waited for her in the dark. She’d left the apartment after nightfall and had walked to the river, looking edgy. He’d followed her, approached her as she’d sat on the bench looking at the dark, slow-moving water of the Mississippi. She’d been lost in thought, but eager to score some quick money when he offered the deal.

The rest had been easy. As easy as stealing Sam’s teddy had been.

He wondered how Dr. Sam had taken the news about the girl…they’d been close, he’d seen them together, heard from his source that Leanne Jaquillard had been special to Dr. Sam. Oh, he would have loved to have been a fly on the wall when Dr. Sam found out about Leanne’s death.

Samantha would have known, deep down, that the girl was dead because of her.

He remembered the kill. How she’d begged.

His blood turned hot.
Molten.
Roared through his veins.
His cock pressed hard against his pants as he thought of Samantha with her red hair and green eyes. Soon he would have the pleasure. He reached down, felt himself, closed his eyes and imagined taking Leanne Jaquillard’s life—

His cell phone rang jarring him out of his fantasy, causing the pathetic worm on his cot to jump. Angrily, he crossed the stark living area and picked up. “Yeah?”

“Hi!” Her voice was perky, expectant. He smiled. She was a pretty thing and ambitious, willing to do just about anything he wanted. “I’m not working tonight and I thought maybe we could get together.”

“Maybe,” he said, glancing at his rousing victim. Time for another dose. Sleeping pills that he’d stolen in Houston.

“There’s a new restaurant on Chartres. I read about it in the paper. Authentic French cuisine, but then that’s what they always say. Or we could eat in… I’d even cook.”

He thought about the hunt, about snuffing out Leanne’s life, and he grew hard again. This woman, too, though she didn’t know it, would feel the sweet torture of his glittering wreath surround her long neck.

“Let’s go out,” he said, wanting the feel of the night to close in on him, hoping to get lost in the crowd, to blend in to the heated throng pulsing down Bourbon Street. “I’m in the mood for jazz. I’ll meet you.” He glanced at his watch. “At ten o’clock. Corner of Bienville and Bourbon.”

“Can’t wait,” she said, and hung up.

Neither can I. He looked around his cabin, the souvenirs he carried with him from a happier time oh, so, long ago. Pictures of Annie, pictures of Samantha, ribbons and athletic trophies—a tennis racquet, set of golf clubs, lacrosse stick, fishing rod and skis. Reminders of what his life was and could have been.

But you’re a sinner.

He knew that much. Didn’t need to remind himself.

Tonight he’d lose himself in the crowds. Drink. Do some coke if he was lucky enough to score. Blend in with the masses and later… later… he’d come back here, to this dark place where no one could hear a scream, and make his prisoner beg for the mercy of death.

He had work to do. Tonight he would begin to set his plan into motion. He glanced at his moaning victim and grabbed the syringe from his shaving kit. The prisoner saw him coming, started making little choking, gasping sounds beneath the gag and scooted away. But there was no where to turn. His prisoner’s hands were tied behind the captive’s back and the legs were shackled. Terror rose from bulging eyes and his prisoner’s head whipped back and forth, spittle darkening the gag.

“It’s either this or the gators,” Father John said as he found his captive’s left arm and jabbed the needle deep.

“And the gators are too good for you.”

The prisoner started to weep.

Pathetic. It would be so much easier to kill his victim now… but that would ruin everything.

“Shut up,” he said and the prisoner mewled. Dr. John kicked hard, in the shins, landing a steel-toed boot against a bare leg. “Shut the fuck up.”

His captive became soundless, but the tears still streamed. John grabbed the prisoner’s hand, clamped his fingers around the prisoner’s finger and stripped off a ring. Unable to conceal his smile, he opened the cupboard where he stored his treasures, the trophies from his kill and added the band with its single winking stone. The prisoner started screaming behind the gag again, but one look ended the screams.

Good.

Father John forced his thoughts to his ultimate victim.

Dr. Sam.

But not through the airwaves.

In the flesh.

Such sweet vengeance… he had great plans for her. He’d bring her here, make her see the error of her ways, keep her alive until she begged his forgiveness.

And then, when he was tired of the game, he’d kill her with the rosary.
Deftly he made the sign of the cross, then reached for his Ray-Bans.
“You’re not staying here.” Ty was adamant as he strode through the open door, and Sam flung herself into his arms. “Come on, darlin’ let’s get you somewhere safe.” He kicked the door shut and it was all she could do not to fall into a thousand pieces as she clung to him.

“It’s just so awful. The same thing happening all over again,” she said brokenly. “Leanne…oh, God, she was pregnant. Just like Annie.”

“Shh. It’s going to be okay.”

“It’ll never be okay, Ty. Never.” His arms tightened. His lips pressed against her forehead, then her eyes. “Sure it will…you just give it time.”

“There is none. That—that monster is out there.”

“We’ll get him. I promise.” He kissed her tearstained cheek, then finally her lips. His lips were as strong as his words. “You just stick with me. Things will work out fine.” She wanted to believe him. Oh, God, she wanted to believe him. But the nightmare wasn’t over yet and despite his platitudes, she doubted anything would ever be the same.

“Now, tell me what happened,” he said, pulling her into the den, one arm around her shoulders.

Sam drew in a ragged breath. “It was awful.” He guided her to her desk chair, and while she sat in front of the flickering computer screen, he rested a hip on the desk and listened.

She explained what she’d done while he was away, what she’d accomplished, how she’d failed. She’d tried to reach her friend who worked at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, but it was the weekend, so she had to leave a voice mail message. She’d also attempted to get in touch with Leanne, but, of course, that had been fruitless, the poor thing was already dead. Twiddling a pencil and feeling cold to the marrow of her bones, she explained about her call about her brother, then the horrid, mind-numbing phone conversation with “John” just as the police arrived with the news that Leanne Jaquillard had been murdered by a serial killer.

“Jesus,” Ty said. “I should have been here.”

“You couldn’t have stopped it. No one could have.” She dropped the pencil and slumped in her chair. “God, I’m exhausted.”

“I’ve got just the thing.” He walked into the kitchen where she heard him rummaging through the cupboards, then twist on the faucet. Water ran. A few seconds later he reappeared with a glass. “Here.”

“Thanks.” She took a sip, placed it to her head and she explained about the trip to New Orleans and the police station. “Ever since Detective Montoya dropped me off, I’ve been here, going through my textbooks and the paperbacks I’ve collected over the years on criminal psychology, psychosis, and dysfunctions of serial murderers.

“A lot of good that did.” She took another long swallow from the glass. “I was so stupid. So naive, no, so arrogant. I thought I was beginning to understand it. I really believed this was all just a sick game to John. Oh, I knew he had a violent streak, that was evident in that first cut-up picture he sent me, but I had no idea, I mean, I didn’t think for a minute that…that he was a killer.” She closed her eyes for a second, trying to pull herself together, to push out the cacophony of guilt that blared in her brain.

“We’ll find him.”

“But who is he? I’ve been trying to figure it out. The police have semen samples and they’re comparing them to anyone associated with the women who were killed, with anyone associated with Annie and with anyone associated with me, but it’s going to take time.”

“I have some of that information. Remember? Because of Annie’s pregnancy.” Ty reached for the phone. “What’s the name of the detective?”

“Rick Bentz.”

“I’m going to call him and tell him everything I know, offer my files, tell them what I’ve found out and try and convince them that this all started with Annie Seger. Whoever killed her is the man they’re looking for.”

“They might believe that Annie committed suicide.”
“Then I’ll just have to convince them otherwise,” he said. “Do you have a direct line to Bentz’s desk?”

“His card’s on the refrigerator.”

Ty wasted no time. He walked into the kitchen and punched out the numbers to the New Orleans PD. A few minutes later he’d connected with Bentz and was explaining his theory about Annie’s death.

Meanwhile Sam made coffee. She had to keep busy, to keep going, to push back the demons in her mind that told her she was responsible for Leanne’s death.

Not just Leanne, but others. At least two more women.

“John,” whoever the hell he was, stalked women, hunted them, killed them.

*Because of you, Sam. Because of some great injustice you inflicted upon him when you didn’t help Annie Seger.*

**NO WAY!** Don’t buy into his sick, convoluted thinking. He’s twisted, Samantha, twisted. Now, get a grip on yourself and think. Use your brain, use your knowledge. *Figure it out. Who is he?*

Stiffening her back, she pulled herself together and, as the coffee perked, she half listened to Ty’s conversation, but found a pen in her purse and grabbed a tablet she kept by the phone for messages.

Who had been in Houston at the time of Annie Seger’s death?

She started with herself and just wrote the names as they came to her: George Hannah, Eleanor Cavalier, Jason Faraday, Estelle Faraday, Kent Seger, Prissy McQueen, Ryan Zimmerman, David Ross, and Ty Wheeler. And Peter Matheson…Don’t forget that your dear, disappearing brother might have been in town. Inwardly she winced. *Not Pete—please, not Pete.* She put a question mark by Peter’s name, then crossed out all the women—they could be accomplices, true, but not the actual murderer. From Ty’s notes she knew that Jason Faraday and Kent Seger had O positive blood. So did Pete. She didn’t know about Ty, or George Hannah, or David, but she crossed Ty’s name off the list. He wasn’t the killer. Nor was her brother. Pete had never met Annie Seger.

*How do you know, Sam? You haven’t seen him in years. You didn’t know he was in Houston, did you?*

She wasn’t even sure he’d been there…no, not Pete…memories of the dark-haired brother who had taken delight in besting her, outracing her on bicycles, out swimming her when they went to Lake Shasta, outskiing her when their parents had hauled them to the mountains…she remembered his easy smile, mischievous green eyes, so like hers, and the way he always enjoyed beating her at every game, until he’d slid into a world dominated by cocaine and crack and any other drugs that offered a quick buzz, a new high.

*Just like Ryan Zimmerman.*

But Pete would never…

She left his name on the list just as she heard Ty hanging up.

“What did he say?” she asked, still staring at her notes.

“To keep my nose clean, basically. I don’t think he trusts me.”

“I don’t think he trusts anyone.”

“Comes with the territory.” Ty stared over her shoulder and read her notes. “Narrowing the field?”

“Trying.”

“Same thing the cops are doing.” Leaning over her back, so that his chest brushed her shoulders, he stretched his arm toward the table and pointed to his name. “Why did you strike me off the list?”

“Because you couldn’t…wouldn’t do it.” With a final sputter and the ding of a soft bell, the coffee announced it was ready. Sam ignored it.

“That’s true, but you’re basing your choice on emotion rather than fact,” Ty pointed out.

“You want me to put you back on the list?”

“I just want you to think clearly.” Straightening, he scrounged in her cupboard and eventually pulled out two mismatched mugs.

“What about ‘gut instinct’? Isn’t that what you cops call it?” She tossed down the pen. She didn’t have enough information on any of these people to make a stab in the dark, much less an educated guess as to their guilt or innocence.

“I’m not a cop, not anymore, and I consider gut instinct, the way I think about feminine intuition. It has its place,” he said, pouring them each a cup and placing a chipped mug she’d gotten from her mother years ago on the table in front of Sam.
“Thanks.” Staring at the list of possible suspects, she sipped the coffee, but found it didn’t start to warm the chill deep inside her. Nothing could. Not until the monster was caught.

She stared at the tablet’s lined page. One of the men on her list was the killer. She was sure of it. But who? George Hannah? Nah—killing would be too messy; he wouldn’t mess up one of his Armani suits.

*Remember—the killer calls on line two; he must be associated with the station. You might not know George as well as you think.*

She went to another name. Ryan Zimmerman? What did she know about Annie’s boyfriend—only that he was an athlete who had spiraled down into the drug scene and eventually pulled himself together?

Kent Seger? Another mystery, but a boy with a history of depression and mental problems after his sister’s death. She made a note to call Our Lady Of Mercy again.

What about Jason Faraday—the stepfather who left the family and remarried quickly? What was his story? She tapped her finger near his name.

“Mark him off,” Ty said, as if reading her mind. “The killer had to have left fingerprints behind. Jason Faraday was in the army, did a hitch in Vietnam. If he were the guy, the police and the FBI would already have arrested him.”

She crossed out Annie’s stepfather.

“I, too, was fingerprinted,” he added, “which is why you should have struck my name. Not because of any emotional attachment.”

“Details, details,” she said, but the joke fell flat. They were both too tired, too mentally exhausted for levity. She leaned back in her chair and wearily pushed her hair from her eyes, felt the drizzle of sweat on her scalp. How could she be so hot on the outside and cold as death deep in her soul?

“Come on, let’s go to my place,” Ty said. “You need to rest.”

“I can’t leave. John might call back again. I have to be here.”

“Or he might show up,” Ty reminded her. “The killer had to have left fingerprints behind. Jason Faraday was in the army, did a hitch in Vietnam. If he were the guy, the police and the FBI would already have arrested him.”

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“Come on, let’s go to my place,” Ty said. “You need to rest.”

“I can’t leave. John might call back again. I have to be here.”

“Or he might show up,” Ty reminded her. “I’d feel better if you packed a bag and stayed with me. He obviously got in once before. Maybe more often, you don’t know, but somehow the Jaquillard girl ended up in your lingerie. Someone took it from the house, Sam. He comes and goes at will.”

“We left the door unlocked,” she reminded him. “That’s when it happened, and it’s safe now. I’ve got the alarm system, the police are outside and the phone lines are tapped. Any calls will be traced. Besides, don’t you have your friend, that private investigator lurking around?”

“Andre, yes, but—”

“Don’t argue. I think John will call here again, Ty, and I hope he does. This time the police will trace his call, this time I’ll be ready.”

Ty’s eyebrows pulled together. He obviously wasn’t convinced. “What if John decides to pay you a personal visit?” “I thought I just said the place was staked out.” “That’s not a guarantee that he can’t slip by. You know, he’s literally gotten away with murder so far.”

“I know, but…” she said turning her head coyly and touching the buttons on his shirt. “I was hoping you and Sasquatch would stay with me. Bodyguard and alarm dog.”

“So now you’re pulling out the feminine wiles arsenal?”

“I’m just trying to convince you,” she said, stung that he’d seen through her ploy. Then again, she’d been foolish to use it. “I just want to be here, okay?” He frowned darkly and seemed about to argue again, but she placed a finger to his lips, shushing him.

“Please, Ty, we’ve got to do everything we can to catch this creep. Before he hurts someone else.”

“That’s what I’m trying to prevent,” he said, “because I’m afraid you’re the next target.”

“Then stay with me.”

“All right, but if there’s the hint of trouble, we’re outta here.”

“It’s a deal.”

Frowning, he finished his coffee in one gulp. “Let’s go down to my house. We’ll pick up the dog and a change of clothes and then, if you’re so damned hell-bent on spending the night here, we’ll come back.”

“I am,” she said, slipping into a pair of flip-flops and carrying the mugs to the sink. She set the alarm, locked the door and followed Ty to his car.
The night was dark and humid, clouds blocking the moon. Insects hovered near the porch light and crawled on the windows. Along the street a few neighboring houselights burned and through open windows came the muted sounds of televisions, dishwashers, music or conversation. She wondered if she’d ever feel safe here again, would ever open her windows and let in the breath of wind, listen to the sounds of crickets, or would she forever be paralyzed, locked up tight.

*Don’t let John do this to you,* she warned herself, *don’t let him win. Find the bastard.*

Several cars were parked along the street, some she recognized, others she didn’t.

Ty must’ve noticed her checking out the vehicles. “The second one on the left. That’s the unmarked,” Ty said. “Your private bodyguards.”

“You can tell?”

“I was a cop, remember?”

“Yeah,” she said, climbing into the Volvo and slamming the passenger door shut, “but the truth of the matter is that’s about all I do know about you. The rest is pretty vague.”

He flashed her a disarming smile as he eased the car around her circular drive and nosed onto the street. “Hey, I’m an open book. What do you want to know?”

*In for a penny, in for a pound,* she thought, fiddling with the strap of her seat belt. “First off, I assume there is no Mrs. Wheeler?”

“Just my mother. Lives in San Antonio. A widow.” From the sideview mirror, Sam saw the unmarked pull into the street. Headlights flashed on.

“Not too subtle, are they?” Ty glanced in the rearview mirror. “I was married a long time ago. High-school sweetheart who didn’t like being married to a policeman. We were divorced before we had kids, and I’ve never seen the need to walk down the aisle again.”

“What about girlfriends?”

“One in every port,” he teased, then sobered, the dash lights reflecting in his eyes. “I really haven’t had the time. Anything else you want to know?”

“Probably, but I’ll worry about it later.”

Cranking the wheel, he turned into his driveway, then pulled the keys from the ignition and cut the engine. Sam reached for the door handle, but he grabbed her arm, stalling her. “Look, Samantha, I know we haven’t known each other all that long, and I’ll admit that my reasons for meeting you weren’t on the level. I lied to you, and we both know it. It was a mistake, believe me. I just never intended to get involved with you. But I’m not hiding anything, all right? There’s no deep, dark secret I’m keeping from you. If I had this all to do over again, hell, I would have been straight with you from the beginning, but that’s not the way it worked out.” He pulled her close and dropped a chaste kiss on her lips. His breath was warm against her face. “Trust me, darlin’, okay? I’ll do anything to get you out of this mess. Anything.” He traced the line of her jaw with a finger, then let his hand drop. “I feel like it’s my fault this is all happening to you, to the other women.” Pain crossed his eyes and tugged at the corners of his mouth. Cords stood out in the back of his neck. “I swear to you…I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe. I mean it. Just... have a little faith.”

Her throat closed as she stared into his night-darkened eyes. He seemed so sincere, so determined. So guilt-riddled. “I do,” she said, but stopped herself from admitting more, that she was afraid she was falling in love with him, because it was foolish. The words would have sounded silly and trite, and the truth of the matter was, she couldn’t trust her own emotions.

Headlights flashed as the unmarked drove slowly past. “I think we’d better get going,” Ty said as he released her.

Together they walked into his house and it seemed to Sam like eons since she’d stormed out the other night, angry with him for lying to her. Oh, Lord, so much had happened since then and yet it had only been a few days ago.

*A few days ago when Leanne had still been alive.*

Heart heavy, she followed him to his loft and dropped onto a corner of his bed as he threw a change of clothes and shaving gear into an athletic bag. Thoughts of Leanne Jaquillard darkened her mind. If only she could have helped. If only she’d returned Leanne’s calls earlier. If only...oh, Lord, she couldn’t keep doing this. Hands clasped between her knees, she stared at the carpeting and felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. “I feel like that if I would have talked to her, if she and I had met somewhere, this could have been prevented,” she said.

Ty caught her reflection in the mirror over his dresser.
“John...He told me that he’d made a sacrifice for me. He killed her...because of me...and...she’d tried to reach me and I wasn’t there for her.”

Ty zipped the bag, then dropped to a knee in front of her. With a finger, he lifted her chin, forcing her gaze to his.

“You don’t know that. Chances are you both would be dead right now. Come on, Samantha, don’t do this to yourself. It’s a terrible tragedy, God knows, but don’t blame yourself.”

“You’re a great one to talk. Didn’t you just take a serious guilt trip when we were in the driveway?”

“But I pulled out of it.”

Tears filled Sam’s eyes all over again. “She was killed because she knew me. If she hadn’t...”

“Don’t go there, Samantha, please,” he said softly. “What we have to do now, you and I, is get the guy. It’s what Leanne would want.”

“It’s what anyone would want.”

Blinking, she pulled every ounce of gumption she could find deep within. “You’re right,” she said with renewed conviction. “Let’s go get him.”

“Oh, we will,” Ty promised as he reached into a top dresser drawer and pulled out a pistol.

Every muscle in Sam’s body went instantly rigid. “A gun? You’ve got a gun?”

“I thought we’d established that I was with the Houston police? Don’t worry, I’ve got a license. It’s legal.” He found a clip on a shelf in his closet and snapped it in place. Flipping on the safety, he slid the pistol into a shoulder holster, strapped it in place and whipped on a jacket. “Just in case.”

“I don’t like guns, not any kind of guns,” she argued.

“And I don’t like men who kill women to get their jollies. If anyone tries to harm you, they’re gonna be sorry.” She thought he was teasing, trying to lift her spirits, but she caught the hard glint in his eye and knew he was serious. Dead serious.

So if this guy’s “the one” as you told Sam, then why is he so elusive? Melanie asked herself as she dialed her boyfriend’s number and leaned back in her bathtub. It was the middle of the night. So why wouldn’t he be home? Maybe he just turned off his cell so that he wouldn’t be awakened at hours like this.

Or he might be with another woman.

That thought was like a knife twisting in her chest.

God, Mel, you’ve got it bad.

As she watched a drop of water hang on the faucet, she waited, knew he wouldn’t answer and that she’d leave her third message on his cell phone. What was it about him that she found so darkly irresistible?

“Leave a message,” the recorded message advised her.

“Hi, this is Melanie again. Just wondering what you were up to.” She tried to keep her voice light, but inside she felt like an idiot. She was chasing him, just as she had a dozen other good-looking guys who’d mistreated her in the past. There was something wrong with her—she didn’t have to have studied psychology to recognize that she always went for the wrong type—but still, she couldn’t seem to break herself of the habit. “An addict,” she told herself as she set the handheld on the counter and closed her eyes. She’d added bath crystals and drew in the scent of their fragrance as steam rose toward the ceiling. “You’re a love slave. Just like your mother and your sister.” Every woman in her family had endured the thoughtlessness of the men. Her mother had been married half a dozen times and never found happiness, her sister was still married to the jerk who beat her when he got drunk and she, the independent one, always chased the tall, dark and dangerous ones.

Things would get better...though. Tomorrow she’d call Trish LaBelle again over at WNAB. She hadn’t gotten through yet, but Melanie wasn’t giving up. Not on her boyfriend and not at a better job—either at WSLJ or a rival station.

It was time to move up in the world. She smiled. Imagined herself behind the microphone hosting Midnight Confessions. The two weeks Samantha had been in Mexico had been the best of Melanie’s life...as she’d essentially become Dr. Sam, even spending her late nights in Sam’s house. She’d met her boyfriend only a week or so before and they’d really clicked...she remembered how he’d loved her in Sam’s big bed and even now she quivered with anticipation.

Yes, she thought, slowly lathering her body, things were going to change for the better. Melanie would make it happen. One way or another.
Rick Bentz stared out the bug-spattered windshield as Montoya ignored the speed limit and flew down the highway.

“Don’t you think it’s odd that there are three guys missing?” Bentz asked, drumming his fingers on the armrest. The car was hot and smelled of stale smoke. “All three of them are connected with Annie Seger or Samantha Leeds and they all lived in Houston when Annie died.”

“Everything about this damned case is strange.” Montoya had been smoking. He flipped his cigarette butt outside and rolled up the window, giving the air conditioner a chance to cool off the sun-baked interior of the unmarked cruiser.

They were driving back from White Castle, where they’d talked to Mrs. Ryan Zimmerman, a sharp-tongued woman who had no kind words for her husband.

“I shoul’d a listened to my folks and never married him,” she’d said in all her self-righteous fury. “He’s no good. I don’t know what I was thinking. And now he’s lost his job. Just didn’t show up one day. How’s that for irresponsible?”

She’d sat in the living room of her condominium surrounded by boxes, evidence that either she was moving out or giving Ryan the heave ho.

“Why are you askin’ about him, anyway?”

When Montoya had explained that he was a “person of interest” in the murder of Leanne Jaquillard, she’d changed her tune and attitude faster than you could blink. “Ryan would never do anything like that. I mean he’s big and physical and has a temper, but he’s no killer,” she’d insisted.

Montoya had been patient and explained they just wanted to talk to her husband, but Mrs. Ryan Zimmerman decided to clam up and told them to go away. If they wanted to talk to her again, she’d said, she would insist that a lawyer be present.

“So Zimmerman’s gone. No forwarding address, no job,” Montoya commented as he soared past an eighteen-wheeler zinging down the highway. Bentz scrabbled in his shirt pocket for a nonexistent pack of cigarettes. He had to settle for a hit of nicotine from the last piece of gum in his pack. Montoya flipped on a pair of wraparound sunglasses. “And Kent Seger’s MIA as well. Just up and left All Saints with no visible sign of income.”

“Yep.” Bentz winced as Montoya began to pass a sedan with an old man huddled over the steering wheel, his gray-haired wife so small she was barely visible in the passenger seat. Something bright flashed from inside the car, something blinding that dangled from the rearview mirror. Bentz flipped down his visor.

“And then there’s Samantha Leeds’s brother,” Montoya ranted on. “He’s dropped out of sight as far as the family was concerned, but, low and behold, he was working in the very town where his sister was a DJ, right during the thick of things. Seems a little too convenient to me. Maybe there’s something to Wheeler’s theory that Annie Seger was murdered.”

Bentz had to admit it had some merit, but he lost track of the conversation when Montoya pulled ahead of the sedan and Bentz recognized the object that had been blinding him. A rosary was looped around the sedan’s rearview mirror and the clear, glittering beads were refracting the hell out of the intense sunlight.

“I’ll be damned,” Bentz said as Montoya whipped across the lane to make his exit. “Did ya get a look at that?”

“At what? The Taurus?”

“No, I’m talking about what was in it. That old couple had a rosary tied to their rearview mirror.”

“So? They probably had a plastic Jesus, too.” Montoya braked for a stop sign. The unmarked car shuddered to a stop. He wasn’t getting it.

“A rosary,” Bentz repeated. “With beads spaced in a distinct pattern…”

“What’re you talkin’ about? So the beads are spaced for the damned prayers, yeah I know…” His voice faded, and he sent Bentz a look of disbelief. “You don’t think our guy used a rosary as a garrotte, do you?”

“I think it’s worth checking out.”

“So what does this mean…that the guy’s some kind of priest?” Montoya let a flatbed pass.

“Probably not. You can get those things anywhere, probably even on the Internet.”

“What at Catholics R Us?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of www.rosary.com.” The light changed.

“Holy shit,” Montoya muttered, gunning the engine. The cruiser shot forward. “This is really sick stuff.”
Amen, Bentz thought, but didn’t say it.
“You know I can’t divulge patient information, Samantha,” Dania Erickson said in that well-modulated I-know-better-than-you voice Sam remembered from her days sitting through psych lectures at Tulane. Sam had finally caught up with her old nemesis. Finally, the “doctor was in” at Our Lady of Mercy in California and not happy about being disturbed.

Tough, Sam thought as she held the receiver of the phone in the office she shared with the other DJs to her ear and stared at the composite drawing of the killer, a flat image that stared up at her through dark lenses. Music from a prerecorded program, some kind of soft jazz, played through the speakers, and the buzz of conversation drifted in through the open door.

Dania had always had something to say back in those days at Tulane, had always tried to ingratiate herself with the teachers, including Dr. Jeremy Leeds, who had ended up as Sam’s husband. Sam suspected that her marriage had always rankled Dania, and now Dania wasn’t giving an inch. Sam and Dania had been playing phone tag for nearly a week and had finally connected, not that it was doing any good. “Anything I have is privileged information.”

“I realize that, but there’s a serial killer on the loose here in New Orleans. The police have linked him to Annie Seger, Kent’s sister. He could be a murderer, Dania.”

“Doesn’t change anything, you know that. I did treat Kent years ago, after his sister’s suicide, but other than that, I can’t divulge any information. It could cost me my job.”

“We’re talking about women’s lives.”

“I’m sorry, Samantha. Truly, but I can’t help you.” With that she clicked off and Sam was left holding the receiver of the phone.

“Great,” Sam muttered. It was Thursday afternoon and in less than half an hour she was supposed to attend a special staff meeting. Everyone at the station was on pins and needles. The police had installed taps and tracers on the phones, the staff was warned not to say a word about a link between Dr. Sam’s Midnight Confessions and the serial killer, but somehow the word had leaked out. As if she were Pandora and had set Chaos free, the city blamed her for the monster who was stalking its streets.

WSLJ had been besieged with calls. The press wanted interviews. Listeners demanded information. The phone lines never stopped flashing.

George Hannah was thrilled. The audience for Midnight Confessions had grown seemingly exponentially overnight. It was the one show to listen to, part of daily conversation at Café du Monde over beignets and café au lait, or the buzz in the bars on and off Bourbon Street, or part of the evening news or water-cooler conversation in the business district. Cab drivers, oil workers, bartenders, accountants, college kids—they all had an interest in Midnight Confessions. Samantha Leeds, AKA Doctor Sam was the Big Easy’s newfound celebrity, more infamous than famous. Yes, George Hannah was beside himself, and the rumors of his selling the station for an obscene sum ran rampant down the “aorta” and raced through the crooked hallways of the station.

Eleanor was worried sick. She wanted to cancel the show. Popularity was all well and good, but this insanity was too much.

Melba couldn’t keep up with the phone lines.

Gator was sullen as opposed to Ramblin’ Rob’s amusement at “the whole darned thing. You’ve created a damned sideshow, Sam, my girl,” he’d said early in the week as he’d clapped her on the back and laughed so hard he’d ended up in a coughing fit that sounded as if his lungs were about to explode.

Tiny was run ragged and Melanie, looking tired, complained of being overworked, needing a raise and wanting a bigger part of the show—better yet, her own show would be nice.

Sam had been offered a job at another radio station in town and some kind of media agent in Atlanta had phoned her, suggesting that there were bigger markets, that she might want to move to New York or LA.
Which wouldn’t be a bad idea, considering. If she moved back to the West Coast she could be near her father. And thousands of miles from Ty. That thought made her wince. She’d come to love him, there was just no doubt about it, and in the past couple of weeks he’d become an integral part of her life—him and that big, slow-moving dog of his—had moved in for the most part. She didn’t kid herself that he loved her; no, he was protecting his interests and absolving some of the guilt he felt because he was certain he’d stirred up this whole mess.

All in all, Sam’s life had become a madhouse.

And a killer was stalking the streets.

A killer who had remained silent for nearly a week.

But he hadn’t gone away, Sam was sure of it. He was biding his time, watching, ever-present, ready to strike again. She sensed it every time she picked up the phone, every instant she pressed one of the blinking lights on her console, every night when the sun went down.

It was just a matter of time.

Sam had attended Leanne Jaquillard’s funeral, a small event with most of the girls from the Boucher Center in attendance. Leanne’s mother, Marletta, had been in the tiny, hot chapel near the river, and when Sam had tried to give her condolences, Marletta had turned a cold shoulder. Marletta hadn’t been as openly hostile as Estelle Faraday had been years before at Annie Seger’s funeral, but the message was the same: Marletta blamed Samantha for her daughter’s death. In this case Sam couldn’t argue. If Leanne hadn’t known her, chances were she’d be alive today.

The police had thought the murderer might attend the funeral and they’d had undercover cops inside the church and hidden cameras taking pictures of the small group of mourners.

John hadn’t made an appearance.

Or no one saw him.

In the meantime Sam spent days poring over her notes, her nights in Ty’s arms. They made love as if each night would be their last, and Sam wouldn’t let herself think where the relationship would lead, if anywhere. It was doomed, started on lies, based on a mutual need to bring the killer to justice.

In her waking hours, when not preparing for the show and coming up with topics she hoped would entice John from hiding, she’d read through the information Ty had gathered on his family, inhaled everything she could about serial killers and the psychology of murder, then trying to make sense of the clues she had as to “John's” identity and his motivation. And what was with the dark glasses? Did he always wear them? Was it part of his disguise? Sam had a theory.

She dialed the police station, left a message for Bentz and before she was finished checking her e-mail, received a call back.

“This is Rick Bentz. You called?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Sam said, “I want to run something by you.”

“Shoot.”

“From the minute I received that publicity picture of me, the one with the eyes cut out, I had this feeling that whoever sent it to me was trying to give me a message, not just terrorize me, but I thought there might be some sort of subliminal information that even he might not realize he was passing along.”

“Such as?”

“That he didn’t want me to see him, or recognize him, that...there was some symbolism with the eyes being mutilated.” She picked up the composite picture sitting on the desk. “And both eyewitnesses said the guy was wearing sunglasses, even though it was night, right?”

“Yep.”

“At first I thought it was just part of his disguise, but maybe there’s another message here—that he can’t stand to see what he’s done, that he doesn’t want to witness his own act.”

There was a pause. Bentz was mulling it over.

“And then he calls and there’s all these religious references, and one of my first thoughts was that he was making reference to John Milton’s Paradise Lost. He calls himself John, which could be anything from John Milton to John the Baptist, that part I’m not clear on.” She stared at the computer drawing. “I had discarded the idea, but now I’m not so sure. Somehow I think he’s referring to himself as Lucifer, that he was somehow...
thrown out of heaven or paradise and even though he’s blaming me, I’d guess he’s blaming himself.”

“This is your theory?” he said.

“Part of it, yes. I do have a degree in psychology,” she said, bristling. “A doctorate. I’m not your usual dial-a-shrink.”

“Hey, I didn’t say you were wrong. I’ll give it some thought. And meanwhile, you keep safe. This guy’s not done.”

“George should have canceled this.” Eleanor eyed the crowd packed into the courtyard of the old hotel. Palm trees glittered with thousands of lights, huge pots were filled with fragrant blossoms, and mannequins dressed in differing costumes loitered through the hallways, courtyard and hotel lobby. While waiters served champagne and hors d’oeuvres on large trays, music from a jazz combo positioned on the second of three balconies filtered over the crowd.

Champagne flowed from an ice sculpture of the station’s logo and George Hannah, smooth in his tux and practiced smile, was in his element, working the crowd, shaking hands, making small talk, looking, as ever, for investors for WSLJ.

“He couldn’t have canceled,” Sam said, “it was too late. This had been planned for months.”

“Then he could have done it up right. Found a decent place to have it, even rented one of the plantations for the night. This place is falling down.” Eleanor’s dark eyes flashed as she gazed up at the stucco walls and terraced rooms with their green shutters and filigreed railings. There were cracks in the plaster, some of the paint peeling.

“It’s being renovated,” Sam pointed out, searching the crowd for Ty. “I’ve seen work crews coming and going all afternoon while we were setting up.”

“This hotel should have been demolished fifty years ago.”

“It’s part of New Orleans history.” Sam knew the reasons they’d chosen this smaller hotel. It had character, was situated in the French Quarter and was cheap. George had worked a deal. Which was good for the Boucher Center, who would reap the benefits. Yes, they’d had some complications from the work crews who were restoring and renovating the old rooms, but the hotel staff had bent over backward trying to accommodate the crowd and the workmen had cordoned off the reconstruction areas.

Conversation buzzed throughout the courtyard as the music played. Samantha managed to keep her cool, though she caught surreptitious glances cast her way from some of the guests. She understood why. Her name had been in the papers and on the local news, tied to the series of killings and the maniac who called her. She thought of Leanne. How the girl had looked forward to this event and now was dead. Sam’s heart wrenched. Guilt weighed heavily on her mind. If only she’d called Leanne back sooner, if only she’d read her e-mail, if only… John hadn’t known about her. Her jaw set.

How had John known how close she’d been to Leanne. Who the hell was he? Someone close to her? Who?

Someone she considered a friend. Through an arbor, she saw Gator lurking near the bar and tossing back one drink after another. Tiny, looking awkward in a too-small tux standing away from the crowd while nervously smoking a cigarette. Ramblin’ Rob was schmoozing with a local television hostess and Melanie, in gold lame and five inch heels, was keeping a close watch on every move George Hannah made.

Renee and Anisha, dressed up in high heels and long dresses, practically beamed as they, along with the directors of the center, explained about the programs to the guests who inquired.

**Leanne should be here.**

Sam tried to ignore the guilt that had been her constant companion since the girl’s death.

*She’s dead because she knew you. Murdered by a psychotic maniac.*

“Don’t go there,” Eleanor advised as if reading her mind. She, too, was looking at the knot of people collecting around the table for the Boucher Center. “I know what you’re thinking. You couldn’t help it.”

“I don’t know. I think that if I would have responded to her, called her back sooner or did something different, she would be alive today.”

“Don’t beat yourself up.” Eleanor advised, though she looked nervous and drawn despite her makeup, jewelry and shimmering black dress. She’d insisted upon plain clothes policemen and Bentz had agreed. Hotel security was supposed to be mingling through the crowd and yet Sam had the sinking sensation that if John wanted to be here, he would be. The composite picture in the paper wouldn’t be a deterrent, if anything, she
thought, trying to second guess him, the fact that the police had some idea of what he looked like would present
a challenge. She spotted Bentz, tugging at the collar of his white shirt, looking uncomfortable standing guard in
one doorway. Across the courtyard, Montoya was leaning against a pillar and surveying the crowd.
“Try to enjoy yourself,” Eleanor advised.
“You, too.”
“I’ll smile if you will,” Eleanor said and managed to do just that as George Hannah approached and
introduced her to some parish officials.
Sam forced a grin even though she noticed two people she would rather avoid. Her ex-husband was parting
the crowd and heading in her direction while Trish LaBelle was holding court near the bar.
“Samantha!” Jeremy called and she gritted her teeth as he reached her and brushed a familiar kiss across her
cheek.
“Don’t,” she warned. “Why not?”
“Just don’t.” She saw a flash of anger in his eyes and something else, something darker. “It makes me
uncomfortable.” Where the devil was Ty?
“A kiss on the cheek? After what’s been going on with you? For the love of Christ, Sam, I would have
thought you would take any friend you could get.”
“I have to draw the line somewhere.”
“So you start with ex-husbands?”
“I only have one,” she reminded him sharply as he snagged a glass of champagne from a tray.
“So far.”
“Ever.”
“You know, Sam, in my professional opinion, all this bitterness indicates that you’re still not over me.”
“Can it, Jeremy. That’s a crock. You and I both know it. Now, what is it you want? Didn’t you say
something about there being something going on with me? What’s that?” The combo, joined by a smoky-
voiced singer, lit into a slow rendition of “Fever.”
“You’ve collected a stalker. One who might be a serial killer. It’s been reported on the news and in the
papers. Why do you think there’s such a big turn-out tonight?”
She felt suddenly sick inside. Maybe because she was too close to her ex-husband, or maybe because she’d
thought the same thing herself. The people weren’t here to support the charity event so much as gawk at her.
Jeremy sipped from his glass and waved at someone across the sea of guests. “At least you’ve got what you
always wanted,” he said. “Fame, or, well infamy and that’s good news not only for you, but the station as
well.”
“Good news? Women are dead, Jeremy. As in never coming back. I don’t know how anyone could construe
that as good news.” With that she turned and slid through a group of women who were talking local politics.
Samantha wasn’t interested but she did want to escape Jeremy.
“Are you okay?” Melanie’s voice caught up with her. Turning, she found her assistant staring at her. “You
look like you’ve seen a ghost.”
“Just the ghost of marriage past and believe me, it was hideous,” Sam replied.
“So where’s the new man in your life—Ty?” Melanie asked.
“Hopefully on his way.” From the corner of her eye, Sam caught a glimpse of George Hannah locked in an
animated conversation with Trish LaBelle. Melanie was watching the scene as well and her expression
hardened just a bit. “What about you? Where’s the new boyfriend?”
“Busy,” Melanie said with a sigh. “As usual.”
“I’d like to meet him.”
“You will…sometime,” she said vaguely just as Ty appeared beneath the arched entrance and Sam felt her
pulse jump just a bit. He spied her and made a bee-line in her direction. Gone were the disreputable jeans and T
shirts, in their stead was a black tuxedo.
“Time for me to disappear,” Melanie said with a trace of envy. “The he-man cometh.” She slipped past a
huge pot overflowing with heady blossoms, then edged around a mannequin dressed in antebellum splendor
just as Ty reached Samantha.
“Sorry I’m late. I got held up. Navarrone. The guy’s timing leaves a lot to be desired, then traffic was a bitch.” He caught the stem of a wineglass balanced upon a tray carried by a slim, bored-looking waiter.

“I managed to survive without you,” she teased.

“Did you? Hmm.” His eyes held hers for just an instant. “And here I thought you’d be pining away for me.” A slow, sexy smile crawled across his face.

“Dreamer.”

The band struck up another song but it faded quickly, as if the speakers had suddenly given out. Few people noticed as conversation droned, but Ty glanced up at the balcony. “Technical problems,” he said watching as the bass player fiddled with the amplifier.

“Shouldn’t be. Half the people in the station can handle this kind of equipment. Rob, George, Melanie, Tiny, even I know how to work the basic stuff.”

A few more people seemed to notice that the music had stopped and Eleanor headed toward Tiny, gesturing toward the second story. Tiny turned for the stairs but not before a screeching of a microphone, feedback of some sort, caught all the guests’ attention.

“What the devil?”

Music began to play, but not from the band, no it was the first chord of “A Hard Day’s Night.”

“Oh, no,” Sam said, her heart thundering.

The music played and faded quickly, then Sam’s voice filled the tightly packed arena. “Good evening, New Orleans and welcome to Midnight Confessions…”

“Did you tape this?” Ty demanded.

“No.” She saw George Hannah stop talking and Eleanor chase after Tiny. The courtyard was instantly quiet.

“…tonight we’re going to be discussing…” then Sam’s voice faded. She felt two hundred pair of eyes upon her. “…sacrifice and…retribution…”

He’s taped together some of my shows, she thought, her heart racing wildly, her eyes scanning the crowd. He was here. She knew it. But where? She searched the entrances and balconies…where the hell was he?

Tiny was climbing to the balcony and Eleanor had turned her attention toward Sam. Marching through the crowd, she glared at Sam. “Did you know anything about this?”

“No. She saw George Hannah stop talking and Eleanor chase after Tiny. The courtyard was instantly quiet.

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Tiny was climbing to the balcony and Eleanor had turned her attention toward Sam. Marching through the crowd, she glared at Sam. “Did you know anything about this?”

“Of course not.”

“Get her out of here,” she ordered Ty.

“This is Midnight Confessions and so I invite you to call in…what’s on your mind, New Orleans? Let me know…”

“What the hell’s going on?” George was looking straight at Eleanor. “Is this someone’s idea of a sick joke?”

“You tell me,” Eleanor shot back as Bentz, talking into a walkie talkie, joined them.

“Find out where he’s broadcasting from,” he said, snapping off the handset and glaring at Eleanor. “We’ll need to get everyone out of here—I’ve got backup coming and we’ll usher everyone into the parking lot across the street.”

George stepped forward. Got in the detective’s face. “You can’t have our guests treated like cattle!”

“Have you ever sacrificed yourself?”

“Watch me.” Bentz snapped his fingers to a uniformed cop. “I want the names and addresses of everyone who walked into the building in the last week. I’m talking construction crew, hotel staff, guests, delivery men, anyone. Now, let’s get going.” Already people were moving toward the doors.

Bentz’s radio crackled and he snapped it on. “Okay, I’ll be there.” He snapped the handset off and explained. “Looks like we found the source.” He started toward a stairwell and Sam was on his heels. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, “Police business. You stay.”

“No way. This is about me.”

Bentz whirled. Sweat dotted his brow and his face was florid. “You’ll damned well do what I say. Until I find out that the scene is safe and secure and the crime-scene team has had a chance to check it out, you stay here.” He glanced at Ty. “Make sure she obeys.”

He turned again and left Dr. Sam sputtering. Damned fool woman. Didn’t she know how dangerous this was? He took the steps down to a basement room where several cops were standing guard.
“This it?”

“Looks like,” one of the plainclothes cops said. “An old storage room, had been cleared out for the construction.”

But it wasn’t empty tonight. A tape player connected to wires running into the walls was on the floor and seated in a folding chair in the middle of the room was a mannequin, stripped naked, wearing only a Mardi Gras mask, a red wig and a rosary knotted around her throat.

“Jesus,” Bentz whispered as he stepped into the dank room. Using gloves he removed the red wig, then the mask. “Holy shit.” The mannequin’s eyes had been blackened and gouged to resemble the mutilated bills.

Bentz was certain Samantha Leeds would be next.
Chapter Thirty-two

Nearly a week later, Sam was at her desk in the station, reading her ever-expanding e-mail and trying to survive the aftershocks of the party. The police had no suspects, though most people thought someone posing as a construction worker could have entered the building. One of the mannequins had been taken from the floor and stashed in the basement and someone with a rudimentary knowledge of the PA system had jerry-rigged the tape player into the amps. The police had questioned everyone in attendance and all the hotel and construction workers. Ty had been second guessing the police and holing up with Navarrone while Sam had spent every waking minute poring over texts on serial killers, psychotics, anything that would pertain to John. Rick Bentz had stepped up the security around her, both in the city and at her home.

Yet John had remained silent. Never once calling the station. Never taking credit for his actions.

She shivered as she thought of the mannequin with its blackened, sightless eyes and nude body. It had been left as a personal message to her.

A threat.
Or a promise.

And the ratings for *Midnight Confessions* continued to soar through the roof. George Hannah was beside himself and the police had been hinting that the entire scene had been staged, a ploy by the owner of WSLJ to increase the audience.

Sam didn’t think so, though she was nearly certain two forces were at work. The monster whose objective was to kill and someone else who liked to play head games—or was it one person with a split personality? Someone here at the station who was connected with Annie? For God’s sake, who?

She heard footsteps in the hallway. A minute later Melanie popped her head into the office. “Show time,” she said, her long curls catching in the light. “It’s time for”—Melanie wiggled two fingers of each hand and lowered her voice for emphasis—“the meeting.”

“What’re you doing here at this time of day?” Sam asked, pushing her dark thoughts aside. “I came here because I was called in, but don’t you have a social life?”

Melanie grinned widely. Her gold eyes twinkled. “I’ve got a great social life.”

“The new mystery man?”

“Mmmm.” With a Cheshire cat smile she couldn’t contain, Melanie nodded. “I think he might just be ‘the one.’”

“This sounds serious,” Sam observed.

“I’m keeping my fingers crossed and all my toes!” Melanie was practically beaming, and Sam was reminded that she was barely twenty-five.

“So who is the guy? Anyone I know?” Sam asked.

Melanie shook her head, but a naughty glimmer shone in her gold eyes. “Nah.”

“So when do I get to meet him?”

“Soon,” Melanie said quickly. “I’ll bring him around. Now, you’d better get to that meeting. Boy George doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Don’t let him hear you call him that.”

“Never,” Melanie swore.

Sam wasn’t looking forward to the meeting. Something was up. She felt a new sense of anticipation crackling in the air. Sam had the sneaking suspicion that the popularity of her show, nefarious as it was, would be the topic.

Since the party, WSLJ had been besieged with phone calls from the press wanting interviews, and, moreover, the calls to Sam’s program had doubled and tripled. New Orleans was electrified by the show, hundreds of heretofore disinterested listeners sought Samantha’s counsel and wanted to hear their own voices echoing over
the airwaves. Others sought their own form of infamy, phoning in, pretending to be “John” or another nutcase. Copycats were slinking out of the city’s narrow, dark alleys in droves.

Melanie was going nuts screening the calls, and Detective Bentz had ordered a double-blind. Any and all calls received from 9 P.M. to 2 P.M. were put through a second screen. Melanie screened the calls before a policewoman assigned by Bentz would answer as if she were Dr. Sam. Every phone call was taped and could be traced.

And so far John had remained silent.

The police were confident he would be caught, but even the press releases and the composite computer sketch of the suspect had yielded no arrests. John seemed to have gone underground and, to be honest, the drawing was a little too much like everyman. Any twenty-five to thirty-five, six-foot man with a decent build and dark hair was a potential suspect.

“So put in a good word for me,” Melanie said with a smile. “You know, tell George that I’m your overworked, underpaid, highly educated and very loyal assistant who’s willing to sell her soul for a shot at her own program.”

“I’ll remind him,” Sam said dryly as she walked into one of the larger rooms in the station, the library really, but one Ramblin’ Rob referred to as the “Bored Room,” whenever George, the sales force, and any other execs held a meeting.

“Samantha, come in, come in,” George said, as Melanie closed the door behind her.

Dressed in a gray business suit, white shirt, and splashy tie designed by Jerry Garcia, George sat at one end of the table, Eleanor, a dour expression on her face, sitting at his right arm. A few folders and notebooks were scattered on the table. “No reason to beat around the bush,” George said as Sam pulled out a chair directly across from him and settled into it. “I’m looking to expand your show.”

“For the record, I’m not in agreement,” Eleanor countered. “I think it would be a mistake. George here is looking at ratings, advertising dollars, the bottom line, but I think there’s more to it than that.”

“Of course there is.” George slid Sam his most disarming smile. “I’m not oblivious to the down side of what’s going on, but I think we should take advantage of the situation.”

“You mean exploit it,” Eleanor said, her dark eyes flashing. “This isn’t a ‘situation,’ it’s a damned nightmare. Sam’s gotten her house broken into, threatening letters and calls not to mention that damned cake or the mannequin at the party for Christ’s sake. And now we know that the guy who’s behind it is a murderer, a butcher, a serial killer! This isn’t about ratings as much as it is about terrorization. If I were you, I’d be thinking about pulling the plug on the show, at least temporarily, until this all dies down. I wouldn’t be considering expansion. This joker out there means business. He calls in on line two—as if he’s got a list of our private numbers. He calls in after hours. He goddamned murders women.”

“Prostitutes,” George qualified.

“Women,” she shot back. “You might have noticed the police crawling all over this place because a serial killer is somehow involved. And you want to profit from this—to expand hours?” She skewered him with one of her Eleanor I’m-not-taking-any-of-this-nonsense looks. “What we need here is increased security and I’m not talking about the rent-a-cop you hired. For the time being we’ve got the police, and they’re tracing calls, but we need to make sure some of the security measures they’ve employed aren’t temporary. I want a permanent system to trace calls and every lock on this building changed. The way I figure it, a few weeks ago someone got in the kitchen through the balcony. The police agree. So we’ve put a new lock on that door, but what’s to say he can’t get back in? I mean we’re talking about a murderer, for God’s sake!”

She took a breath.

George leaned back in his chair and threw down his pen. “That’s what I love about you, Eleanor, always stressing the positive.”

“There isn’t anything positive about this.”

“But it’s what the audience wants.”

“To hell with the audience. I’m talking about the safety of our—employees.”

George rolled his lips over his teeth and sucked in his breath. “Samantha, maybe you could help me out here. I’m talking about increasing your audience, expanding the show to a full week and making it worth your while. I’m talking increasing from here in New Orleans to every major market east of the Rockies.”
Sam lifted a brow.

“Okay, maybe that’s an exaggeration, but it could be a goal.”

“Jesus H. Christ, do you know what you’re saying?” Eleanor asked.

“You know, Eleanor, I don’t pay you to argue with me.”

“Like hell you don’t. That’s exactly why you pay me. To keep your goddamned feet on the ground. To keep you in touch with reality.”

“Okay, so I’ve got it. Your point’s well taken, duly noted, but I still think we need to take care of this opportunity. We’ll double the security, change the locks, have escorts walk Samantha to her car or drive her home, whatever it takes. Of course the safety of the staff comes first.”

Eleanor leaned back in her chair and folded her arms over her ample chest, but she didn’t argue, just said, “Make sure you mean it, George, that this isn’t just lip service.”

“It isn’t. I swear.”

She didn’t comment.

“Look,” Sam said, deciding to nip this in the bud, “Personally I’m not ready to expand to seven days a week, if that’s what you’re thinking. “She was run ragged as it was, and the thought of seven nights behind the microphone was too much—even temporarily. “Not unless you hire someone else to share the load.”

“Melanie could do it. With a little seasoning, I suppose,” Eleanor offered up, though she was obviously lukewarm to the idea.

“Not Melanie.” George shook his head. “We lost listeners when you were on vacation.”

“Well, someone.”

“No one can take your place. The audience identifies with you, Sam. I know it would be longer hours, a big commitment on your part, but I’d make it worth your while—a significant raise and bonus if the expanded hours worked, after that you could share the booth with someone…maybe even Melanie or Ramblin’ Rob or Gator, until the audience trusted them and they could wing it alone a few nights a week.”

“Rob and Gator aren’t psychologists,” Sam argued. “They’re radio personalities. The show would lose credibility.”

“Okay, so what about Trish LaBelle over at WNAB? I’ve heard rumors that she’s not happy with her format. She might be interested.”

“Trish LaBelle,” Sam repeated, stunned. Trish’s style was harsh. Judgmental. She called it, “shooting from the hip” or “telling it like it is.” But Sam thought she went too far, humiliated the listeners who called in, ridiculed their problems with her snide sense of humor.

Eleanor clucked her tongue. “No way would Trish LaBelle be second fiddle to anyone. Not in a million years. Besides that the woman’s poison. I don’t like her style. No siree, that’s one can of worms I don’t want to open.” She skeweder George with a harsh glare. “And don’t give me any of that you’ve ‘heard rumors’ garbage. I know you’ve talked to her, that this is already in the works.”

The corners of George’s mouth tightened. “I have to do what I think is best for the station.”

“Then you’d better start by making sure your employees are safe.”

“I already said I’d handle that, and I offered the job to Sam, but she doesn’t want a seven-day-a-week job. We just went through our options with people already on staff, but”—he turned his palms toward the recessed lights and spread his fingers—“Samantha doesn’t think they’re professional enough, that they don’t have the right degrees.”

“They don’t,” Sam agreed.

“So I suggested Trish.”

“She doesn’t either,” Sam said quickly. “She’s got a sociology degree with a minor in psychology.”

What little was left of George’s smile disappeared. “Okay, but that’s good enough for WNAB, and I think it’s good enough here. What Trish LaBelle does have is AM listeners who might follow her and switch to FM here with Midnight Confessions. I think the two of you could make a powerhouse team. Now, you can go it alone, or take on Trish as your partner.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Eleanor cut in. “You make it sound like this is a done deal, that Trish is already on board.”
“Not yet, but I’m negotiating with her. It all depends on Sam, but one way or another, we’re going to capitalize on the success of *Midnight Confessions*. You, Samantha, have to decide whether you’re dedicated enough to run it alone, or if you can share the limelight with Trish.” He leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table. “One way or another, we’re expanding the format to include weekends.”

“So this meeting wasn’t about options,” Eleanor said, her feathers way beyond ruffled. “It was just a formality.”

“And it’s over.” He rapped his knuckles on the polished surface of the table to accentuate his point. “Let me know what you want.” Standing abruptly, he tugged on his tie, then strode out of the room.

Eleanor sighed and threw up her hands. “Sometimes I wonder why I stay.”

“Oh, God, then we’re all in trouble.”

“I’ll be back tonight,” Sam said, checking her watch. She had hours before the show and a million errands to run. She didn’t expect to run into Melanie lurking in the lobby of the building.

“Well?” Melanie asked, as they passed the security guard and walked into the blazing afternoon sun.

“What’s up?”

“They’re thinking of expanding the show.”

Melanie’s grin was instantly wide, lighting up her whole face. “I knew it! That’s great news! So—how are they going to do it? Longer hours, more days a week?”

“More days, but it’s still up in the air.”

“But you can’t possibly handle it all yourself.”

“I told them as much.” Sam scrounged in her purse, found a pair of sunglasses and shoved them onto the bridge of her nose.

“What about me? Did you put in a good word?” “That I did, but…well, George has some ideas of his own.”

“Ideas?” the girl said, stopping short, suddenly deflated. “Oh, shit, I knew it. He’s going to give the show to someone else isn’t he?” She kicked at a pebble lying on the cobblestones of the street and sent the stone hurtling against a trash barrel. “Son of a bitch. Son of a friggin’ bitch!”

“Maybe you should talk to Eleanor,” Sam said, surprised at Melanie’s vehemence. Disappointment she understood, but this was out-and-out rage.

“After all I’ve done, all the hours I’ve worked, the damned sacrifices I’ve made!”

Sam’s heart nearly stopped at the term. “Sacrifices?” she repeated, telling herself she was being overly sensitive. “But it’s your job.”

Melanie didn’t hear her; she was already striding back to the building in her three-inch platforms and gauzy print dress, muttering under her breath, “This is the last friggin’ straw. I’ve had it.”

Leaning back in his desk chair, Bentz looked at the pathetic man before him.

David Ross was scared. Nearly shaking. “I think I need a lawyer,” he said, sweat beading on his brow, his hands clasped so tightly, his knuckles showed white. His hair was unruly, his shirt wrinkled. He looked like he hadn’t slept in two weeks.

“You came on your own volition.”

“I know, I know.” Ross swallowed hard. “I just didn’t know it would go this far, I mean…” He closed his eyes and gathered himself. “I’m worried about Samantha Leeds. I am, er, was her fiancé. And…well, we had a falling-out, tried to patch things up in Mexico and it didn’t work. I was kinda desperate and I did some things I shouldn’t have.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a set of keys and a wallet. “These were returned to me while we were in Mexico—I don’t even know if everything’s there, but I didn’t return them to Sam and when this trouble started, I kept everything figuring that she would get scared, come running back to me and…well, it didn’t happen and I guess I didn’t know Samantha as well as I thought I did.” His smile trembled. “She’s tough. Anyway…” He cleared his throat. “…I knew that someone was harassing her, I heard about the calls and, I admit, I thought about it myself, even dialed her show a couple of times, but never had the nerve to
go through with it. I figured she’d recognize my voice, y’know."

“Sure,” Bentz said, trying to figure out just what it was that made David Ross tick. He chewed his gum slowly and waited. He knew the guy wasn’t the killer—the blood types didn’t match and Ross didn’t look a whole lot like the composite, not really. But the guy had some guilt he wanted to heave off his chest, and Bentz was ready to listen.

“Anyway, I was hoping she’d come back to me and it all backfired and now…now there’s a killer on the loose and I’ve heard that he might be the same guy who’s calling the show…and that someone Samantha knew was murdered. I, um, I’m scared.”

“So you’re turning yourself in because you forgot to give an ex-girlfriend back her keys?” Bentz leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk, on top of reports that would make the likes of David Ross piss his pants.

“I just want to clear my name.”

“Does it need clearing?”

Ross’s face flushed. “I didn’t need to come down here. Matter of fact, maybe it was a mistake,” he said, growing some balls. “But I wanted to set things straight.”

Bentz believed him. The only way David Ross was a part of the murders was if the setup had been murder-for-hire, if he were the guy someone pulling the strings, a man using the killer as his puppet, but serial killers didn’t work that way—no the actual kill was the thrill, and if it was murder-for-hire the other women wouldn’t now be dead, and Ross wouldn’t have shown up with evidence. He wasn’t “John” the Rosary Killer as Bentz had come to think of him. Not only had one of the mannequins at the Boucher Center party been wearing a rosary but sure enough the ligature around each victim’s neck was the same pattern as the beads on a rosary and the strange mark on Leanne’s Jaquillard’s throat was probably a crucifix. “Anything else you want to tell us?” he asked Ross.

“Yeah. Get him, okay?” Ross’s nostrils flared as if he smelled something bad. “Arrest the bastard or kill him, but get him off the streets. Before he gets to Samantha.”

“That’s it. I quit!” Melanie announced, unable to keep the tremor from her voice. She was so mad, so damned mad, and as she stood in front of Eleanor Cavalier’s desk, she could barely keep from shaking.

“I’ll call you back,” Eleanor said, then hung up and turned her dark eyes on Melanie.

“Sit down and let’s talk about this. You can’t just up and quit, you know. You’re required to give two weeks’ notice and—”

“No way. Not after the way I’ve been treated. When I took this job I was told that there was room for advancement, that with my degree and background in psychology, I’d be in line for my own program.”

“Someday,” Eleanor said, again waving her into the chair on the opposite side of the desk. Like she was going to try and placate her. “It could happen.”

“Could,” Melanie repeated with a snort. “Could! Jesus, Eleanor, I’ve got a bachelor’s degree and I know all the technical stuff inside and out, as well as Tiny, for God’s sake! And didn’t I take over for Samantha when she was gone. Was I so bad?”

“No, of course not.”

“And who do you call when she’s sick? Huh? Me.” She curved her thumb at her chest and shook it. “Oh, what’s the use? I’m outa here!” she said, and whirled on her heels, nearly careening into Ramblin’ Rob in the middle of the aorta. The old coot had, no doubt, been eavesdropping. Well, he made her skin crawl. Come to think of it, everyone did. George Hannah was an old lech and Gator, well, he had his own private agenda. Melanie didn’t want to think what kind of pervert he was, what he did behind closed doors, but she could just tell. His eyes…they creeped her out. Come to think of it, she didn’t know why she hung out here and she’d been talking to Trish LaBelle, maybe she could get a job over at WNAB. Yeah, that was it. Then she wouldn’t have to put up with lumbering Tiny. God, he was worthless, nearly drooling every time he was around Samantha.

She walked to the stairs and thundered down the steps, her hair flying, her temper escalating as she thought about how much she’d given to this damned station, how much of her life she’d poured into Midnight Confessions. Of course, no one knew just how creative she’d been. Not only had she been the dutiful, Johnny-on-the-spot employee, always wearing a smile, always busting her butt for everyone else, but she’d done a little extra, given herself a little more edge toward Sam’s job, or so she’d thought.
Shouldering open the door to the stairs, she flew by that fat slob of a security guard and, for once, didn’t bother to wave. If the old fart really knew what she was about, how she’d plotted Dr. Sam’s demise, only to have it blow up in her face.

Stepping onto the street she felt a blast of hot air and scrambled in her purse for her shades. Jesus, it was hot, maybe she should move to another city, a cooler one, less muggy…but she couldn’t. Not yet. She’d gained a reputation around town.

One you might just have crammed down the toilet by not giving your notice.

Harsh sunlight glinted off the pavement as she headed toward the parking garage where her little hatchback was waiting, all the while considering the unfairness of what had happened.

No one at WSLJ could understand how much she’d given, how much she’d sacrificed, how much she’d plotted her career path.

She cringed just a bit remembering just how far she’d gone. But then, she’d been given her opportunity on a silver platter when Sam had asked Melanie to watch her house and her cat in Cambrai.

Melanie had jumped at the chance. Once Sam was on her way to Mexico, Melanie had become ensconced in the cozy house on Lake Pontchartrain. While there she’d snooped through “the doctor’s” things, even found the files on Annie Seger in that creepy, bug-infested attic. When Melanie had been alone, she’d tried on some of Sam’s clothes.

Melanie had felt decadent and wild and had invited her new boyfriend over to christen Sam’s bed. She’d worn one of Samantha’s nightgowns, a lacy white thing with thin straps, then lit candles around the room. What had happened afterward had been an orgy the likes of which she’d never seen since and made her ache inside as she sat in the car. Just being in Samantha’s big four-poster had seemed to turn her boyfriend on. Also, the knowledge that Melanie had whispered into his ear, that a jealous lover had been rumored to have killed his girlfriend in that very house had seemed to give her lover a rush.

Later, when Melanie had told him about Annie Seger, he’d hatched a plot that had been daring and dark—just like him. He’d encouraged Melanie to gaslight Sam, to leave the note in her car, to rig up the mannequin at the benefit for the Boucher Center, to disguise her voice and create a tape saying she was Annie—they’d even taped the recording on Sam’s machine, with one of her blank audio tapes. Later he’d played that tape when he’d called in. The result had freaked Sam out.

Oh, yes, he’d been good. He’d urged Melanie on, advised her that to get ahead, she would have to sacrifice and use any means possible to attain her ultimate goal. Though she’d been a little unnerved by his calls as “John,” she’d known he’d done it out of love for her, so that Sam would quit and Melanie would be promoted to hosting Midnight Confessions.

Only it hadn’t happened. Sam had hung in with the station and the program, largely through Melanie’s efforts, had increased its audience. Dr. Sam’s star had soared into the stratosphere, to the point that the powers that be at WSLJ wanted Sam to expand the program without promoting Melanie at all.

Shit.

It was not only unfair, it was stupid. Melanie could handle Sam’s job with her eyes closed. She was younger, smarter, and willing to do whatever it took to promote herself and the show.

Sweating profusely, she marched over the hot sidewalk, then jaywalked to the parking structure. Bee-lining to her car, she ignored the dirt and oil that had collected on the concrete floor. Inside, the hatchback was an oven. Melanie didn’t care. Rolling down the driver’s window, she blew out a breath of hot, angry air. She needed advice, solid advice, from someone who cared about her, about her career, about her needs.

There was only one person.

She grabbed her cell phone, and punched out the autodial for her boyfriend’s cell phone. She’d talk to him, explain what was going on, and maybe he’d calm her down. They could get together and celebrate her newfound freedom.

Maybe, if she was lucky, she’d even get laid. He’d been a little lax in that department lately. She figured it was from the coke, but tonight she might get lucky.

Waiting for the connection, she fingered her keys and eyed the replica of a Louisiana license plate emblazoned with her name. Her boyfriend had given it to her after borrowing her car when she’d first met him. She fingered the raised letters as he answered.

“Hello?” His voice was a balm.
“Oh, God, I’m glad I caught you.” Fighting tears of frustration, she added, “I’ve had a helluva day and I just quit.”

“What?”

“The station’s expanding the show. Midnight Confessions will be aired every friggin’ night of the week, but they don’t want me to host any of it. Oh, no, it’s either Dr. Sam or no one.” She leaned back against the seat. “It sucks.”

“Then you did the right thing.”

“I hope so. I’m calling WNAB right now.”

“Why don’t you wait on that? I’ll come pick you up and we can go out? What’d’ya say?”

“I might be lousy company.”

“I doubt it.” He laughed. “You know, I have just the thing to get you out of your bad mood.”

“What’s that.”

“A surprise.” His voice was low. Sexy.

She felt a thrill. The dark side of him appealed to her. “Will I like it?”

“Let’s put it this way, it’ll be a night you remember for the rest of your life. I promise.”

Standing in front of the statue of Andrew Jackson, Father John clicked off his cell phone. He smiled to himself. Things were progressing perfectly…almost as if divine intervention had been involved.

Through his Ray-Bans he watched a mime entertaining passersby just outside the gate to the park. He'd witnessed Melanie marching out of the building housing WSLJ, had expected her to call and had known that she’d want to see him. But then she always did. For all her bristly, independent exterior, she was really weak and needy, a single girl who was estranged from a family in Philadelphia. An easy target.

Absently he stared at St. Louis Cathedral. Its white walls were nearly blinding in the fierce sunlight, its high spires and dark crosses knifing in Christian defiance against a clear cerulean sky. Inside were the devoted. Or the curious.

Yes, he thought as he strolled along the path toward one of the wrought iron gates guarding the small park, Melanie Davis had been more than accommodating and now her purpose had been fulfilled. She’d aided and abetted him in reaching his ultimate goals without realizing exactly who he was. She’d been so willing, so easily manipulated, an oh, so willing pawn. He’d sought her out upon learning that she was working at the radio station as an assistant to Dr. Sam. He’d approached her in a bar on Bourbon Street and charmed her. Within days, he’d uncovered her weakness, brought to light her incredible ambition, and he’d used it against her. To his advantage. For Samantha Leeds’s downfall.

It had been so simple.

But then it always was, he thought, as he walked past the mime’s open suitcase with its paltry few dollars. A flock of pigeons scurried and fluttered out of his path.

As easily as he’d uncovered Melanie’s weakness, it had been far simpler to figure out his prisoner’s need. His captive had developed a hunger for any chemical that could be swallowed, snorted, smoked or shot into the body, and Father John had willingly fed that craving, offering up substances that debilitated the body and left it weak. That was the secret, the key to success, to find one’s enemies’ weaknesses, unearth their appetites and feed their ravenous addictions, all in the guise of being helpful.

He turned from Decatur onto North Peters Street, increasing his pace. Night would soon fall. He welcomed the darkness, looked upon it with anticipation, for tonight Melanie Davis was to pay for her sins.

Walking past the Old French Market, he headed for the river, drinking in its heady, dank smell. He reached into his pocket, touching his sacred weapon, feeling the sharp tensile strength of the holy noose, knowing it wouldn’t fail him. His heartbeat quickened as he crossed the streetcar tracks, then made his way up the grassy rise. Atop the levee he viewed the slow-moving Mississippi. God, she was magnificent. Wide. Dark. Ever moving. Seductive.

For a second he closed his eyes and let his thoughts tumble ahead. To the coming night. To Melanie Davis and his plans for her. His fingers tangled in the rosary—sweet, sweet instrument of death to those who sinned.

At this moment Melanie was expecting the surprise of her life.

What she didn’t know, was it would be her last.
Chapter Thirty-three

“Somethin’s up,” Montoya said, edgy and nervous, his black hair gleaming under the harsh lights of Bentz’s kitchen, where three rosaries were lying on the table beside a plastic tub and various dishes, saucers, plates, even old margarine containers held a few glittering beads.

“What’s up? What do you mean?” Bentz picked up one of the beads and rolled it in his fingers. Plastic, the facets rounded.

Montoya reached into the fridge and grabbed a bottle of near beer. “You got anything stronger?”

Bentz shook his head. “If you want booze, there’s a tavern two blocks down.”

“You’re off duty.”

“I’m never off duty,” Bentz grumbled.

“Shit.” Montoya eyed his partner’s half-drunk cup of coffee on the counter, the near-empty glass pot pushed against the stove where a stale loaf of bread and a container of lite peanut butter was testament to Bentz’s dinner. Montoya twisted off the cap of the bottle. “This is un-American.”

“No fat, no booze, no nicotine. It’s about growing older.”

“You’re barely forty, for Christ’s sake…just don’t tell me there’s ‘no sex,’ okay, cuz I don’t wanna hear it.”

Montoya kicked out one of the kitchen chairs and took a seat. “And what’s this?” He motioned to the table where Bentz was conducting an experiment.

“What’s it look like?” Bentz asked.

Montoya swilled half his bottle. “A damned campfire project.”

“Guess again,” Bentz said.

“Oh, okay, I see the rosaries. This is about the weapon the killer uses. I thought we already established that. We checked the wounds, saw that this sick-assed creep strangles his victims with a rosary. Hell, he left one on the mannequin at the party. So he’s a wacked-out Catholic. There are enough of them out there.”

“Watch it.” He pinned Montoya in his glare. “I’m one.”

“Hey, me too, me too…well, I was.”

“You will be again,” Bentz predicted. “We all go back.”

“Another aging thing?”

“Yeah. Now, take a look. This one’s a duplicate of the one we found wrapped around the mannequin’s neck.” Bentz wrapped the first rosary with its clear beads around his hands. Then he placed both hands in a big plastic tub and gave a little tug. Beads split off, singletons, those in segments, all flying into the plastic vessel.

“Not too strong,” he observed. “Not meant to be used as a weapon.”

“We knew this, too.” Montoya reached into the tub and picked up three beads held together by thin wire.

“Okay, so where did he buy the superstrength version?”

“I’m betting he didn’t.” Bentz held one of the beads up to the light, stared into the clear facets. “My guess is that he made his own. Selected really sharp beads, sharp enough to cut skin, strung ‘em together with some heavy-duty wire and probably prayed as he counted off the Hail Marys and Our Fathers.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just use a rope or the wire?”

“Not symbolic enough. Our boy gets off on all of this…there’s all sorts of undercurrents here…you know, I’m starting to think Samantha Leeds knows what she’s talking about. She suggested the killer made some kind of reference to Paradise Lost. I think I’d better pick up a copy.”

“I might have the Cliff’s Notes,” Montoya admitted, and when Bentz started to smile, “Hey, I had a lot of shit to get through in college. So I used the notes and the Internet. It saved me a bundle on books.”

Bentz dusted his hands and reached for his coffee cup. “You said somethin’ was bother in’ you.”

“Yeah. I’ve been tryin’ to track down the two guys from Houston—Annie Seger’s boyfriend and her brother.
They’re both supposed to live around here, right—one in White Castle, the other in Baton Rouge? Both have jobs and they’re both AWOL. Missing in action. Why?” He took another swallow from the alcohol-free beer and made a face. “I hate to say it, but I’m startin’ to buy into Wheeler’s theory that it has something to do with Annie Seger’s death. Maybe she didn’t commit suicide.”

“You think John killed her?”

“Yeah,” Montoya said, “and I think he’s either Kent Seger or Ryan Zimmerman.”

“Okay, then what about motive?” Bentz flashed him a mirthless smile. “And don’t try to sell me that it’s all about money, cuz I’m not buyin’.”

“Me neither. Not this time. But there’s something we don’t know about Annie Seger,” Montoya said, then drained his bottle and set it on the table near the tub of glittering rosary beads, “but we damned well better find out.” He climbed to his feet and asked, “Where the hell are Zimmerman and Seger?”

“Good question.” One Bentz couldn’t answer. Yet.

“I’ve got a bad feelin’ about this.”

“Just now?” Bentz snorted. “I’ve had a bad feelin’ all along.”

Voice mail picked up. Ty didn’t even get a chance to talk to Estelle Faraday. He just had to leave a damned message. Again. “Estelle, this is Ty Wheeler. I’ve talked to the police here in New Orleans and given them all the information I have. If you haven’t put two and two together yet, it looks like the serial killer here is somehow tied to Annie’s death. Family secrets be damned, Estelle. People are dying. If you know anything about this and are holding back evidence, you’re guilty, and the police will charge you with the appropriate crimes. This is serious. You can either talk to me or the New Orleans Police Department, but if another woman dies, I will personally hold you responsible. You’ve got my number.” He slammed the receiver down and walked into his living room. He’d dropped Sam off at the station an hour earlier, and her program was due to hit the airwaves in an hour.

He flipped on the radio, listening to the tail end of Gator Brown’s program. Hot jazz flowed through the speakers, the kind of music that wound Ty up rather than calmed him down. But, then, tonight he was restless. On edge. Feeling the electricity of the storm rolling in. He checked his watch. Navarrone was supposed to meet him, share information with him.

But he hadn’t shown up yet. Not that Ty was worried about him. Navarrone was a creature of darkness, felt more comfortable in the camouflage of the night after years of working with the CIA.

Whistling to his dog, Ty walked outside, felt the wind kicking up and watched the Bright Angel bob against her moorings. The moon was blocked by clouds, and the heat was oppressive. Muggy. He felt as if he was wearing a second thick, damp skin.

He thought about John, lurking somewhere in the depths of the city. Waiting. Ready to pounce.

So where are you, you son of a bitch, Ty wondered, as Sasquatch sniffed around the shrubbery. And what the hell are you doing tonight?

Estelle Faraday sat by the pool in the darkness. The water glowed a bright aquamarine, compliments of a single, flat submerged bulb. A tall, glass pitcher of cosmopolitans was sweating on the table and her stemmed glass, nearly drained of the pink concoction she’d claimed as her most recent favorite drink, was in one hand. It tasted more bitter than usual, tainted, but she didn’t care. What possibly could be wrong with vodka? Sipping her drink, she tried to drive the demons from her head.

But they were still there, relentless, clawing and screaming at her brain.

She’d feared it would come to this, prayed that her worries were ill founded, but she knew now they weren’t. Ty Wheeler’s urgent messages on her voice mail convinced her. He wasn’t going to give up. She’d suspected as much when he’d shown up here in Houston. Even so, she’d threatened him, foolishly hoping that he’d back off.

Instead, he’d called her bluff.

But then, he hadn’t been the first.

Oh, she’d been so naive, she thought as the night closed in and she remembered her daughter—bright, beautiful, and attracted to the wrong kind of boys…not just the wrong kind, but boys she should never have been with.

And she’d gotten pregnant by one. It seemed a legacy in this family, a damning genetic flaw she’d passed on
to her daughter.

Tears of regret and shame filled Estelle’s eyes. She sipped her bitter drink, and when the glass was drained, poured another and swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. No one was home. She was alone. Again. Even the maid had taken the night off to be with her children and grandchildren.

Dear God, how had she ended up alone? she wondered fuzzily. She’d had it all when she was younger. Good looks, money and a future as bright as a newly minted silver dollar. But she’d been headstrong and wanted to show her snobby parents she could make her own decisions.

She’d never loved Wally. She knew that now. She’d probably known it then, but he was a good-looking, witty boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Never mind that he hadn’t gone to Yale or Harvard or even Stanford, oh, no, he hadn’t even taken night courses at the local junior college. He’d been raw and wild and spent all his time working on motorcycles. But, in the beginning, he’d been kind to her at a time when kindness was as rare as a torrent in the desert.

Estelle had found Wally deliciously different. Her parents had been horrified. She’d never intended to marry him, of course, but circumstances had changed her goals.

“Don’t kiss boys, Estelle,” her mother had warned her often enough when Estelle started high school. “It’s the devil’s doing. Remember there are only two types of girls—bad and good. You’ll never have any self-respect if you do any of those nasty things. Trust me. Be a good girl. You’ll never regret it.”

But Estelle kissed plenty of boys and nothing bad had happened. In fact she’d liked kissing, especially when a boy pressed his tongue into her mouth. Oh, how she’d replayed those intimate kisses over and over in her mind. Though she’d felt a little naughty when her dates had progressed and boys had pawed at her, worming their fingers into her bra cups and stroking her breasts, she’d also liked the feel of her blood running hot, of that darkness between her legs aching. And when a boy had reached beneath her skirts and panties and touched her in that private spot, she’d tingled and gotten moist and wanted more. She’d acted like an animal, gasping and grinding her hips and wanting. She’d read about passion for years, hiding under the covers with a flashlight and feeling her face heat while between her legs she’d felt that funny, achy feeling that left her yearning for more and finally, as she began making out with boys, she realized there was a way to assuage that need.

So when she began to experiment and allowed a boy—after the fifth or sixth date and promises of love, of course—to touch her, she’d known it was a sin, one she couldn’t really confess to the priest, but she couldn’t stop herself. She enjoyed it, craved it, thought depraved thoughts about it and wanted it all the more. Unlike her mother’s dire predictions, the boys were so attentive, so eager to kiss and touch her, so ready to tell her how beautiful she was, how they loved her.

Stupidly she’d believed them.

She’d lost her virginity at sixteen to a boy her mother had thought was the perfect match and afterwards, he’d never taken her out again, never called, and bragged to his friends about his conquest. Her mother had continually asked about Vincent, what had become of him, why she wasn’t going out with him and she’d felt the first realization of what her mother had professed.

From then on, every boy wanted to do it with her. When she’d rebuffed them, they’d gotten angry, reminding her that she’d spread her legs for Vincent Miller.

In some respects Estelle had enjoyed scandalizing her mother. Until she’d relented and done it with a boy she really liked and turned up pregnant. Abortion was out of the question, and as she was a minor, she’d let her mother talk her into lying about “taking a semester abroad at a private school” when in reality she only went as far as Austin, where she gave the baby up for adoption.

“It’s the kindest thing,” her mother had insisted, and Estelle had made the single biggest mistake of her life. She’d gone away, had the boy, and watched as the doctor who’d delivered her firstborn had regarded her with cold, judgmental eyes and handed the squalling infant to a nurse who had whisked him away.

Foolishly Estelle had blamed her mother and upon returning to Houston found Oswald Seger. At least Wally had been kind. Considered her feelings. Hadn’t pushed her, and when they had finally gone all the way, he’d called the next day and sent her a single red rose that she still remembered.

Wally had exhibited a romantic side, along with his love for all things mechanical, and as soon as she was eighteen, they’d eloped.

Kent had been born ten months later, Annie in the next couple of years. Her horrified parents had cut her off, only to reclaim her at the birth of their grandson. And the rest, as they say, had been history, a history she’d
rather forget. She realized when the kids were little that she’d never be happy with an oil worker for a husband, that Wally’s fascination with motorcycles and boats was coupled with his inability to balance a checkbook or save a nickel.

Fortunately she’d met Jason Faraday…well, she’d thought it was fortunate at the time. Now, as she finished her third cosmo and the alcohol seeped into her system, she wasn’t so certain. There were other secrets, ones she’d never looked at too closely, ones that haunted her days as well as her nights. She couldn’t survive another scandal…there had been far too many.

Head spinning, she gazed at the pool. Into its clear liquid depths. Into the aquamarine seduction of the smooth water. Nearby stood the statue of the Virgin. Pale in the thickening dusk, her arms spread wide, welcoming, inviting.

Tears slid down Estelle’s cheeks as she finished the pitcher, downing the last of the liquor in one long, biting swallow. She stood and her knees buckled slightly. Her head spun, but she knew what she had to do as she approached the edge of the pool. She thought of those people she’d loved, oh, so foolishly; those she’d lost. All her children. They were gone to her. She’d given them all away, in one form or another, and one had become a horrible monster. What kind of mother are you?

She kicked off her sandals, then wove her way around the pool to the deep end where the light was the brightest. God the drinks had been strong…almost as if they’d been doctored, but that was impossible.

Unless…no…her last visitor wouldn’t have put anything into the bottle of Absolut. Of course not. Not that it mattered. Not now. Her toes curled over the warm tile lip. She teetered, held steady a second, her mind blurry. Her unsteady gaze fastened on the statue of Mary—Holy Mother—Blessed Virgin. “Forgive me,” Estelle whispered, then closed her eyes and fell forward.
Chapter Thirty-four

“What do you mean, Melanie’s not showing up?” Sam demanded as she made her way to the booth later that same night. She’d spent the day going over the minutiae of Annie Seger’s life and had found no further clues to figure out who John was. Aside from the police department, Ty’s associate, the never-seen Andre Navarrone, was also trying to piece together the puzzle. Before the killer struck again.

“Just what I told ya,” Tiny said, with a shrug. “Melanie’s not coming back. Ever. She got real mad today and stormed into Eleanor’s office and quit. Eleanor’s fit to be tied because Melanie didn’t even give her two weeks’ notice.” He offered a sloppy smile. “Go figure.”

“What about the policewoman?”

“She’ll be here, I think, but until then, it’s just you and me, babe.”

“Babe?” Sam repeated, her nerves already past the fraying point. She whirled on Tiny, and it was all she could do to keep her voice level. “Did you call me babe? Listen, Tiny, I want you to do me a favor, okay? Don’t ever call me ‘babe’ or ‘chick’ or ‘broad’ or any other of those derogatory male terms again.”

“Geez, I meant it as a compliment.”

“Well, geez, it’s not one, okay?” she snapped, then noticed the wounded look in his eyes and felt immediate remorse. “Oooh, guess I’m a little more stressed-out than I realized. Sorry. You just hit a hot button with me.”

“Yeah, well, I won’t do it again,” he said, obviously still smarting as he headed into the booth beside hers. Sam glanced at her watch and figured she had just enough time to call Melanie and point out that she was needed before she was on the air. Rather than disturb the setup in her booth, she found a free phone at Melba’s desk, dialed and waited, looking over the various and grotesque objets d’art backlit by wavering neon.

“Come on, come on,” she said, glancing at her watch again. Melanie’s answering machine picked up. “Hi, I’m out…you know the drill, leave a message after the tone.”

The machine beeped.

“Melanie? Melanie…are you there? It’s Sam. Come on and pick up, would ya? We could use some help down here. Please. Melanie? Melanie…” The receiver was picked up.

“Mel—”

Then it was slammed down.

Samantha jumped and decided it was no use. Melanie was ticked, and there was no changing her mind. Not tonight. Obviously she had a point to make. Hurrying back to the booth, Sam nearly collided with the policewoman, Dorothy, carrying a paper cup of coffee as she rounded a corner.

“Oops…” She managed not to slosh. “Years of practice,” she explained, then added, “I heard we’re on our own tonight.”

“Come on, come on,” she said, glancing at her watch again. Melanie’s answering machine picked up. “Hi, I’m out…you know the drill, leave a message after the tone.”

The machine beeped.

“Melanie? Melanie…are you there? It’s Sam. Come on and pick up, would ya? We could use some help down here. Please. Melanie? Melanie…” The receiver was picked up.

“Mel—”

Then it was slammed down.

Samantha jumped and decided it was no use. Melanie was ticked, and there was no changing her mind. Not tonight. Obviously she had a point to make. Hurrying back to the booth, Sam nearly collided with the policewoman, Dorothy, carrying a paper cup of coffee as she rounded a corner.

“Oops…” She managed not to slosh. “Years of practice,” she explained, then added, “I heard we’re on our own tonight.”

“So I’ve been told.” Sam had reached her booth and was opening the door. She glanced into the neighboring area and saw Tiny already at his desk, headphones in place.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dorothy said as she held her cup in one hand and opened the door to the booth with the other. “I know the drill, and between you, me and Tiny, we’ll do fine.”

“I hope so,” Sam said, wishing Melanie weren’t so mercurial and stubborn. Despite her flaws, Melanie was always interesting, usually upbeat, and forever hatching one ambitious plan after another. That was her problem, Sam thought, the girl was too ambitious for her own good.

As soon as she closed the door of her booth behind her, Sam shoved all lingering thoughts of Melanie aside. She had work to do. And a plan. One she hadn’t shared with Ty or Eleanor or the police, one she wouldn’t try unless she felt safe. But she was convinced that nothing could happen to her. Ty drove her to and from the station, the house was locked, the alarm in place, and here at work, the security guard and police were everywhere.

But she had to reach John, to help the police catch him before he found his next victim.
Adjusting the mike and headset, she double-checked the sound levels and made sure the computer display was working properly. At a signal from Tiny in the adjoining booth, she heard the intro music and waited until the last words faded. Then she leaned into the microphone. “Good evening, New Orleans, this is Dr. Sam with Midnight Confessions, a talk show as good for the heart as it is for the soul. Tonight we’re going to talk about sacrifices,” she said, the topic she thought would most compel John to call. “We all make them. Every day. Usually for a person we love, or the boss, or for something we want. It’s all a part of life. But sometimes we feel that we sacrifice too much, that we give and give and give, and it’s not appreciated, never enough.” Already the lights on the console were flashing. One, two, three and four, blinking as she talked. From the corner of her eye she saw Tiny and the policewoman, talking, nodding, screening the calls. The first name appeared on the screen. Arlene.

Sam punched the line. “This is Dr. Sam,” she said. “Who’s this?”

“Hi. I’m Arlene.”

“Welcome to the show, Arlene. I assume you called in because you have some personal experience with or an observation about sacrifice.”

“Yes, yes. That I do. I’m a mother of three children...” Arlene started expounding about giving everything for her kids and unconditional love while Sam read the other names leaping on the screen. Mandy was on two, Alan on three, Jennifer on four. The show was half over. So far John hadn’t taken the bait.

Sam hoped it was only a matter of time.

“You want me to pretend to be Dr. Sam?” Melanie asked and rolled her eyes at her boyfriend. Still angry over what had happened at the station, she’d already downed two glasses of wine in rapid succession and now was standing in the kitchen alcove of her studio apartment, slicing limes and mixing drinks. Her boyfriend, dressed in black jeans, matching T-shirt and bulky leather jacket was pacing from one end of the room to the other. He seemed nervous tonight and that same little tingle of excitement that she always experienced around him was heightened tonight. She didn’t know a lot about him but considered him the ultimate bad-boy, an irreverent man who didn’t give a damn about what people thought or social convention.

The Chardonnay was having some effect. She was less tense, her muscles melting a bit, the knife a little awkward in her usually deft fingers.

“I think it would be an interesting game,” he said, looking through her window and adjusting the shades for more privacy.

“Oh, I forgot you’re into games.”

“Isn’t everyone?”

“No...not really.” She squeezed some lime juice into a couple of old-fashioned glasses already swimming with gin and tonic water. “You know, you can ditch the shades. It’s night.”

“My eyes are giving me trouble again.” “Oh.” She kept forgetting that he had some condition that didn’t allow his pupils to dilate properly and he was always trying to filter out excessive light. But here, in the apartment, she’d turned down all the lamps and only a few candles burned. “Whatever you want.” She was in no mood to argue. In fact she was starting to mellow out and she thought what might really help was a long night of lovemaking. Sneaking a surreptitious glance at her daybed, she imagined him naked with her, driving into her in that same furious way he had in Sam’s bed weeks ago.

“Whatever you want,” he repeated. “Now those are interesting words.” He grinned that killer smile of his. Her heart raced as he looked at her. Definitely a bad boy. Not the kind to bring home to Mom and Dad. Not suitable marriage material, but she didn’t care.

“As far as I’m concerned everyone at WSLJ including their resident radio shrink can go screw themselves. I’m done with them. There are plenty of jobs in this city. I don’t have to put up with the shit they shovel down there.”

“Of course you don’t.” He crossed to the stereo system where he flipped a switch and Samantha’s voice immediately came through the surround-sound theater system she’d installed herself.

“So is sacrifice a good thing? Is it necessary?” Dr. Sam was asking the audience.

Melanie thought she might puke. How had she put up with that self-righteous bitch for as long as she had?

“She’s still trying to lure John into calling,” Melanie said.

“I’ll bet he bites.” He flipped the blinds shut.
“Serve her right if he did. He freaks her out, you know?”
“I suppose.”
“Oh, yeah.” She carried the drinks across the small room. “Maybe I should call in—no, no, better yet, you call in. You do a wicked impersonation of John. Sometimes I think…I mean, I know this sounds crazy, but sometimes I wonder if you are him?”
“Wouldn’t you be scared if I was?” He was staring at her intently.
“Spitless. That guy’s weird and now…now they’re linking him to some murders. But it’s just kinda coincidental that he started calling about the same time that we started pranking Dr. Sam and dredging up all that stuff on Annie Seger.” She handed him one of the drinks. “It just makes me think.”
“Not bad thoughts I hope.” Sipping from his glass, he looked at her through those darned glasses, the same kind that were drawn on the composite drawing of the killer. Was it possible? No way.
“Sometimes I think you play head games with me,” she said, taking a big gulp of the gin and tonic. “You like to scare me. It turns you on. You want me to think you might be that nutcase that calls in.”
“Didn’t I just say we all play games?”
She giggled. Took another long swallow, started to feel a little more tipsy. Free. Unbound. Maybe leaving WSLJ was a good thing. She waggled a finger at his nose. “You always turn the tables on me.”
“And you like it.”
“Yes,” she said, wrapping one arm around his neck and staring up at him. “Yes, I do.”
“So do I.” His voice was so low and sexy, a soft Texan drawl she found titillating. “So, indulge me…just sit here and pretend that you’re Dr. Sam, doing the show.” He motioned toward her daybed.
“And who will you be?” she asked as she heard some whiny voiced woman through the speakers. The caller was complaining about taking care of her elderly parents. Oh, can it, Melanie thought.
“Who will I be? John, of course.” “Of course,” she said dryly, then muttered under her breath. “I guess I shoulda seen that one comin’.”
“So—is that what she’d be wearing?” he asked, pointing toward her shorts and halter top.
“This? The snooty-nosed doctor from LA? No way.”
“Then change.”
“What?”
“Complete the fantasy.”
“I don’t want—”
“Come on, Melanie. Indulge me. Indulge yourself.” She liked the thought of that and with only a few niggling doubts, she walked to the closet alcove and pulled out a khaki wrap-around skirt and white sleeveless blouse—it was sooo Dr. Sam. Stepping into the dressing area by the bathroom she tore off her clothes, hesitated at her underwear, then stripped it off. If she wanted to get laid tonight, she figured she’d better grab his attention. Fluffing her hair, she walked around the divider and found him holding both drinks.
“I freshened yours,” he explained handing her the glass, then clinking the rim of his to hers. “To leaving the past behind,” he said.
“Especially WSLJ.” She took a long swallow and wrinkled her nose. The drink tasted a little off.
“Don’t you like it?” he asked and she didn’t want to hurt his feelings.
“It’s…it’s a little strong.”
“I thought you were in a party mood.”
“I am,” she said, her head spinning slightly, her lips mushy. She was getting drunk and fast, but then she hadn’t eaten much and she’d had two…and was it three glasses of wine before her first hard drink and now…“Maybe I should sit down.”
He smiled. “Whatever you want. Now…how about pretending you’re Dr. Sam.”
Boy, he just wouldn’t give up tonight. But what did she care. Melanie gave him a naughty look, then lifted the receiver of her cordless phone and lowered her voice to a deep, heavy, whisper, “Good evening, New Orleans, this is Midnight Confessions, and I’m your host, Dr. Sam. Tell me whatever you want to, pour your heart out, confess all your sins and—”
“Wait a minute,” he cut in.

“Why?” Boy, her head was spinning. “Isn’t…isn’t this wha…what you wanted?”

“Just about. But it could be better.”

“Better?” she said and her tongue was thick. Too thick. She couldn’t talk, couldn’t really think straight.

“You need this.”

“Wha—?” she said but saw him reach inside his jacket and pull out a long red wig. “Oh…” she thought of Samantha Leeds’s dark red hair. “Do I really need to…?”

“Yes, Samantha, you do.”

“But my name’s Melanie…” He was reaching over, pulling her hair up to the top of her head and he was pushing a little too hard. “Ouch. Wait…I’ll do it…” she said but couldn’t get her hands to obey her mind. This was so weird. She was drunk…no beyond drunk…as if…as if she’d taken something…as if someone had slipped her a mickey…as if…

“There,” he said and she saw that his face was flushed, sweat was dripping down beneath the edges of his dark lenses. “That’s more like it.” He looked at her appraisingly with a cold leer that sent a shiver through her heart. “Now…listen…”

He’d turned his head toward the speakers as if mesmerized. “But I thought you wanted me to—”

“Shut up! What I want is for you to shut up!”

“Wait a minute.” Why was he being so mean to her? Unbidden, tears filled her eyes.

“Hey…shhh…” he said, more kindly and he leaned over her, kissed her. She felt better though her head was whirling. “Why don’t you strip, Sam.”

“I’m not—”

“It’s all a game.”

Oh yeah. Now she remembered. She fumbled with the buttons of the blouse and felt his hands take over.

“You have to repent.”

“Wha—?”

“For your sins.”

Her blouse was open, exposing her bare breasts.

“See…you’re a slut, Samantha.”

“But I’m not—”

She was vaguely aware of something being draped over her head, hard, cool stones—a necklace surrounding her throat. In the background over the buzz in her brain she heard Dr. Sam talking about sins and sacrifice and—

The necklace tightened, cut into her skin. “Hey!” Her mind was foggy but this seemed wrong. “You’re hurting me.”

He cinched the noose tighter and she couldn’t speak, couldn’t scream. This…this was going too far. Stop it! I can’t breathe! She tried to scream but no words came and her fingers scrabbled at her throat, trying to pull the horrid necklace away. This was no game, she realized. She caught a glimpse of John’s face, his teeth bared, his lips pulled back like a horrid beast, his eyes hidden by black glass.

Don’t! Please! Oh, God, all the fears that had been nagging at the back of her mind, all the worries that she’d steadfastly tamped down erupted. He’s John. The caller. The murderer. He’s going to kill you! He planned it all along.

But…but…her lungs ached, her flesh burned. She tried to gasp, came up with nothing. She kicked and clawed and fought, but he was strong, so damned strong.

“That’s it, New Orleans, come on, talk to me, tell me of the sacrifices you’ve made…” Dr. Sam was saying as if from a distance, her voice far away…

Father John twisted his nasty weapon, gritting his teeth, staring into gold eyes that had trusted him. Foolish, foolish girl, he thought as her struggling subsided and she lay limp, devoid of life, the sinner’s soul purged from her body. His hands ached, the knuckles white from the effort of snuffing out her life.

The blood was rushing through his head, the thrill of the kill making him hard, his ears attuned to the last
rattle in her chest and the melodic voice of his next victim, the one woman yet alive he wanted...*Your turn's coming, Dr. Sam...so very soon and I've got something special planned for you.*

He released the rosary and slowly began stripping the skirt from Melanie’s body. He was hard. Hot. Aching. Samantha’s voice warmed his blood, stirred his lust. As he mounted the dead woman, he closed his eyes. He was with Samantha. Body and soul. They were in her bed, that fabulous canopied bed, just like with Melanie when she’d gone down on him, placing her lips around him, there, in Samantha’s private room with the smell of her everywhere...he’d been so close to her then, would be again soon. Even closer. Her message tonight about sacrifice was meant for him.

Only for him.

She was ready, he knew it. She would atone for her sins and then she would sacrifice herself. To him.

Ty glanced at his watch. There were only forty-five minutes of Sam’s program left, and it was time to leave. But Navarrone hadn’t shown up yet. He finished his drink and reached for his shoulder holster.

“And so you think sacrifice is just a part of life?” Sam was saying to a caller, which made Ty all the more anxious. What was she doing, egging the killer on?

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m sick of everybody whining about it,” a nasal-voiced man said.

Through the open window Ty heard the distinctive yap of Mrs. Killingsworth’s dog putting up a ruckus.

Sasquatch had been lying on the rug near the door. He got to his feet, ears pricked forward. A low rumble came from his throat.

“It’s okay,” Ty said, walking to the sliding door and slipping outside, where insects thrummed and the radio was muted. But something wasn’t right. He felt it as surely as the hot breath of the wind. Squinting, he stared into the darkness toward the boat. He thought he saw a shadow move, but told himself he was imagining things.

He couldn’t wait any longer. Not if he wanted to make sure that Sam got home safely. He heard her voice, still answering questions and giving out advice over the airwaves. “Come on,” he said to the dog, the hairs prickling on his arms as he reached for his pistol and shoulder holster. “Let’s go.” He was out the door when he saw the dark figure move from out of the shadows.

He reached into his shoulder holster, his fingers wrapping around his pistol. “Navarrone?”

“Yeah.” Andre met him at the Volvo.

“You bastard, where the hell have you been?”

“I think I know who the killer is.”

Sam glanced at the clock. The show was nearly over. She’d waded through the calls, one after another, waiting, listening, handing out advice, her muscles tense, her nerves stretched like piano wire.

So John hadn’t called while she was on the air. That wasn’t really a surprise. He could call later, or when she was at home.

“So you wouldn’t sacrifice for anyone,” she was saying to a woman who had identified herself as Millie when, in her peripheral vision, she saw Tiny waving frantically, pointing at her computer. She glanced down. John’s name came up on line three.

“I did enough of that while I was married,” Millie was saying. Sam had to keep her on the line, keep her talking, so that if John was listening to the show he’d know that she was tied up. Meanwhile, his call would be traced.

“What about if you remarried?”

“That’ll be a cold day in hell,” Millie said with a snort.

*Don’t stop, Millie. Keep talking,* Sam thought, sweating as she watched line three blink. The trick was to take his call before he gave up in frustration. He had to know that the call would be traced, so he was probably timing the call. “Thanks for calling in,” Sam said, as the policewoman stood in the window between the booths, using hand signals to remind Sam to take the call and somehow see that John was intrigued enough with the conversation not to hang up. She punched line three. “Hello, this is Dr. Sam. You’re on.”

No one answered.

“Hello? This is Dr. Sam,” she said again, hearing the dead air space. “You’re on the line now.”

She waited again, the buttons for line three continued to flash, the caller hadn’t hung up.
“Can you hear me? Did you want to talk about sacrificing?” she asked, trying to fill the dead air. “Hello? Caller are you there?” She looked through the glass to the policewoman, who held up a finger, punched line three so they didn’t lose the call and pointed at Sam to answer another line.

Sam went on to the next call, a girl named Amy, all the while aware that line three was still lit, that John’s name was still on the computer screen, that he was out there somewhere, listening to the show and attempting to make contact.

*What if he was killing someone right now? That’s what he does, Sam. He murders women while listening to your show. That’s what he did to Leanne, to the others. Right now he could be taking the life of…*

She saw Tiny standing in the window, waving frantically, and she realized that she’d missed something, that Amy had hung up. “Excuse me,” Sam said into the microphone. “It seems that we’re experiencing some technical difficulties here at WSLJ. We have a couple more minutes, so please call in.” Line one began to flash. The name on the computer screen was John.

He’d called back. She punched the button. “This is Dr. Sam and you’re on *Midnight Confessions*. Who’s this?”

“You know who I am, Samantha. I’m John, Father John, and I know all about sacrifices. In fact, I’ve just made another.”
Chapter Thirty-five

“Hello?” Sam’s voice sounded frantic on the airwaves.

Ty’s heart nearly stopped. He stepped on the accelerator, but then slammed on his brakes as traffic was snarled within the city limits. “Do you hear that?” He shot a glance at Navarrone.

“It’s Kent Seger. He’s called in.”

“John? Are you on the line? This is Dr. Sam.”

Ty pounded a fist on the steering wheel, grabbed his cell and punched auto dial.

“Hello?” Sam was saying.

Click.

“He’s gone,” Navarrone said, as Ty waited for someone from WSLJ to answer his call. What had Sam been thinking, baiting Seger like that. Ty’s guts clenched at the thought of Kent being near her, even talking to her.

“Come on, come on,” Ty growled into the receiver as he maneuvered down a side street. It was late, a Thursday night, traffic usually thin, but not tonight. Testily, he shot Navarrone a glance. “You’re sure the killer is Kent Seger? Not Peter Matheson or Ryan Zimmerman?”

Navarrone met his glance with one of his own, silently asking Ty if he’d ever failed him. “It’s Seger. Has to be. Matheson doesn’t live around her. Zimmerman’s got a different blood type from the killer. That leaves Annie’s brother.” No one was answering at the station. Ty was beginning to sweat.

He’d never known Navarrone to be wrong, but there was always a first time. “What the hell’s wrong with traffic?” Sirens screamed through the night. Cars pulled over as two police cars and an ambulance, lights strobing, sped past.

The phone clicked in his ear. “WSLJ.” A woman’s voice he didn’t recognize. Probably the cop assigned to the station.

“This is Ty Wheeler. I need to speak to Samantha Leeds.”

“Sorry. The show’s over,” a woman said.

“She’s a personal friend.”

“The show’s over.”

“Hell, just tell her I’m on my way.”

The line went dead.

Something was wrong.

Sam stripped off her headset and pushed the button to play “Midnight Confession” signifying that the show was over. As the first notes were audible, she shoved back her chair and flew out of the booth.

Dorothy Hodges was already in the hallway.

“We’ve got him!” the officer told her. “I just got a call from Detective Bentz. The phone booth we have listed on caller ID is only a few blocks from here, on Chartres. That’s where John called from. There’s already a unit on the scene. Others are on their way. Including Detective Bentz.” Her eyes were bright with victory.

“That bastard’s ass is grass.”

“About time.” Tiny was standing in the doorway to the booth, a portable headset around his neck.

“Let’s go,” Sam said, starting for the door.

“No way.” The policewoman turned instantly sober. Into cop mode. No more easy smiles. “Both of you stay here. This is police work.”

“But—”

“I’m serious,” Officer Hodges insisted.

Sam couldn’t believe it. “But I’m the reason he’s being apprehended.”
“And you’re the reason he started this in the first place.” The cop leveled a finger at Sam’s chest. “Bentz thinks you were the ultimate victim, so you just sit tight until all this goes down. He’s not apprehended yet.” Dorothy wasn’t budging an inch and acting like she suddenly saw Sam as the enemy. “And, just so you understand me, I’m telling Wes to make sure no one comes in or out. Got it?”

“No way.”

Officer Hodges’s eyes narrowed. “Listen, Ms. Leeds, your life has been threatened by the very guy we’re trying to run to the ground, so you sure as hell will stay here, or I’ll cuff you and take you down to the station.”

“But I’d be with you.”

“What you would be is in the way. Now stuff it,” the woman said, and she took off, leaving Sam and Tiny standing by Melba’s reception desk.

“She’s right,” Tiny offered. “Besides, I can’t go anywhere, I’ve got to stick around for Lights Out.”

“I don’t.”

“So you’re going to be crazy instead? Come on, Dorothy’s right. You’d better stay here, Sam. At least until that boyfriend of yours shows up. He just called, talked to her—” he said, hitching a thumb at the cop’s retreating backside. “He’s on his way.”

Sam gritted her teeth and checked her watch. It irritated her to sit around and wait. John had contacted her… this was about her, and not only did she want to witness him being unmasked and apprehended, but she was still keyed up. This didn’t seem right. It was almost too easy. He was smarter than this, or at least he had been. Why would he risk everything by staying on the line tonight, toying with the police when he had to have known that the lines were tapped and the call was being traced. No, something was wrong about this, definitely wrong.

And Ty was late.

She glanced at her watch. This wasn’t like him.

“So you’re telling me that Ryan Zimmerman was adopted,” Ty said to Navarrone as he nosed his Volvo into a parking space half a block from the radio station. “And that his biological mother is Estelle.”

“That’s about the size of it. She got pregnant before she married Wally. The family hushed it up, said she was going to some fancy boarding school, when she was really giving up the baby through a Catholic hospital. It turns out he was adopted by a couple from Houston who end up living in the same school district where Estelle raised her own kids. She wasn’t aware that Ryan was her son, of course, not until Annie started dating him and bringing him around, and somehow Annie let it slip that Ryan was adopted.

“He looked enough like the father of the baby she’d given up that Estelle started doing some checking. Hired a PI. That’s who I got the info from.” He glanced at the building housing WSLJ. The PI also found out something else.”

“The name of the other guy Annie was involved with,” Ty guessed.

“Yep.”

“Worse news.”

“It seems that Annie was doin’ it with both brothers.” Though he’d almost figured it for himself, Ty felt a moment’s shock. He’d been reaching for his keys. Stopped. “Both?”

“Well, she only thought she was screwing one…and she wasn’t happy about it, but when she went to her mother saying Kent was sexually molesting her, Estelle wouldn’t believe her. Refused.”

Ty felt bile rise in the back of his throat. “Great mom.”

“One of the best,” Navarrone agreed.

“So Kent was Annie’s baby’s father?”

“Looks that way.”

“No wonder Estelle didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Who would?” Navarrone reached for the door handle. “I’ve already talked to Bentz about this. Everyone’s on the same page.”

“Listen to this,” Montoya said, gunning his car around a corner as the police band crackled. “There’s been an accident…”

Bentz was way ahead of him. “On the same block where the phone booth that John called from. What the
“What’s going on?” The words had barely gotten out of his mouth when they turned onto Chatres and saw the crowd that had gathered. An ambulance was on the scene, lights flashing red and white, pedestrians clustered on the sidewalks and on the street. Traffic was at a standstill.

Before the cruiser had come to a full stop, Bentz was out of the vehicle, his Glock in one hand, his badge in the other. Uniformed and plainclothes cops were keeping a crowd at bay but the curious couldn’t help but stop and stare. The night was hot. Breathless. Bentz slapped at a mosquito as he eyed the accident scene where a minivan with a shattered windshield and a dented bumper was stopped. Crumpled in front of the damaged vehicle a man was sprawled on the street. Two emergency workers were huddled over him, taking vitals, but, to Bentz’s way of thinking, it didn’t look good.

A few feet away the driver was crying and wringing her hands. A frantic woman with wild eyes was shaking her head, giving an officer her statement. “. . . he just came out of nowhere,” she was saying, obviously in shock, but otherwise seeming unhurt. “He was stumbling and reeling and I slammed on my brakes but . . . but . . . oh, God, I hit him. First the bumper then he rolled over the hood to the windshield. He flew off when I stopped. Oh, Lord, it was awful. Just awful.” Another woman, probably a passenger in the rig as both doors were open, was trying to console the driver, and the cop was listening intently, but the driver was barely in control, ready to fall into a million pieces. “He’s not dead is he, please . . . don’t tell me . . . he can’t be dead.”

“I saw the whole thing,” a man standing between two parked cars piped in. Wearing a baseball cap, T-shirt and sloppy shorts, he added, “It’s like what she said. This guy, he just came running into the street all weirded-out, kind of mumbling and half-running, like he didn’t know where he was, and she nailed him.” The driver gasped at his choice of words, and the witness said, “Oh, sorry, but he was really out of it. It was like . . . like he didn’t even see her. Maybe he was drunk. Or stoned.”

“You got an ID?” Bentz asked one of the attendants.

“Not yet. We’re trying to keep him alive.”

The driver gave a little squeak.

“Let’s try to stabilize him and get him out of here,” the same emergency worker said. “Get the stretcher.”

“I’ve got the wallet,” his second attendant cut in. “I was lookin’ to see if he had any allergies.” He handed the wallet to Bentz, who flipped it open. A Louisiana driver’s license issued to Kent Seger was the first piece of ID. “Well, hello John Fathers,” Bentz muttered to himself, looking over the rest of the items in the wallet. Nothing out of the ordinary. Seven dollars, a social security card, student ID for All Saints College, a Visa card and a single photograph . . . one of Annie Seger.

“You find anything else?”

“Yeah, look . . .” one of the attendants, said, withdrawing a long chain of beads. “Looks like this guy was a priest or somethin’. He’s got himself a rosary.”

“That he does,” Bentz said. “Bag it, would ya?”

“Yes.” In a second he was holding the plastic bag and staring down at the barely breathing body of Kent Seger. To Bentz’s trained eye, it looked like the guy was a goner. Which wasn’t a shame.

Bentz decided the owner of the minivan had done the city a favor. A pair of shattered sunglasses had fallen onto the street, plastic lenses splintered against the curb and the half-dead man lying on the cobblestones, could very well have posed for the artist’s sketch of John Fathers. His face was cut and bruised, his eyes closed, but the resemblance was there.

Good riddance, Bentz thought.

“Hey, over here!” Montoya waved Bentz toward a phone booth, where the receiver had been left dangling, the blazing lights of the ambulance casting the glass walls of the booth in eerie light. “Take a look at this.”

Bentz felt the tightening in his gut—that same premonition that he wasn’t going to like whatever it was Montoya had found.

“This is it, you know,” Reuben said as Bentz walked past a few gawkers and smelled the sweet, pungent odor of marijuana. “This is where John made his last call to the radio station.”

“The guy’s ID says he’s Kent Seger.”

Montoya’s eyes narrowed. He glanced at the accident scene. “You thought Kent Seger was John, didn’t you?”

“He was one of the suspects. Just one. Kent Seger’s blood type is the same as John’s, and I got a call from a
guy named Andre Navarrone less than an hour ago. He has an interesting theory that he says he can back up. He thinks Kent Seger was sexually abusing his sister, Annie, ten years ago in Houston. Navarrone thinks that Annie was pregnant with Kent’s kid. It’s his contention that Kent killed Annie, but transferred the blame to Sam. He also figures that something triggered this rampage—maybe the fact that his mother finally cut him off financially, or maybe just hearing Dr. Sam’s voice on the radio again. That squares with what Norm Stowell said.” Bentz took another look at the accident scene. “Looks like we may never know for certain what pushed him over the edge.”

“He left something,” Montoya said.

“What?”

“I don’t know…looks like a recorder, one of those handheld jobs.” Carefully Montoya used his handkerchief and picked it up. Beneath the recorder were a set of keys.

“What the hell are these?” Bentz’s sense that something was wrong heightened. Using the same handkerchief he’d used for the recorder, Montoya picked up the keys.

“You think they’re Kent’s?”

Bentz glanced from the phone booth to the ambulance as it began to roll through the crowd, lights flashing, siren wailing, then back to the keys.

“I doubt it…Look at this.” Under the streetlamp he spread the keys with one of his own. The key ring was shaped in the form of an oversize heart. “Unless I miss my guess, these keys belong to a woman.”

“Who?”

Bentz flipped through the keys carefully until he found a miniature Louisiana license plate with the raised letters spelling Melanie.

“Shit,” Montoya whispered. “Dr. Sam’s assistant.”

A rock settled in the pit of Bentz’s stomach. “According to Dorothy Hodges, Melanie Davis got pissed and quit the show today. Didn’t show up for work.”

Montoya’s jaw tightened. “Maybe because she couldn’t.”

“Maybe.” Bentz whipped out his cell phone, called the dispatcher and ordered a unit sent to Melanie Davis’s home. “I want the officers to call me back as soon as they locate her,” he said. “Page me.” He clicked off, then gazed at the recorder still sitting on the tiny shelf in the phone booth. “Let’s see if John left us a message.”

Careful not to wipe any prints off the recorder, Bentz pressed the play button with one of his keys. The tape started instantly and over the commotion outside the booth a woman’s breathy voice was audible from the single speaker on the tiny machine.

“This is Annie and I’d like to speak to Dr. Sam about my ex-mother-in-law. I was hoping she could help.” Then a long pause and finally, in a higher-pitched voice, “Annie,” and a pause. “Don’t you remember me?”

“He did tape her,” Montoya said, as another pause ensued.

“I called you before…. Thursday’s my birthday. I would be twenty-five.”

“Son of a bitch,” Montoya muttered as they listened to all of the tape, hoping that at the end of the short one-sided conversation they would hear more and clear up the woman’s identity, but the rest of the tape was blank. “Do you think that Melanie was involved, that she’s the person on the tape, that she screened her own damned call?” Montoya asked, pulling at his goatee.

“It would explain a lot, wouldn’t it? Someone was working on the inside, unlocked the door for the cake to be delivered, gave out the private number.” Bentz ached for a smoke. “Why aren’t they calling me back?”

“You think she’s dead.”

Bentz nodded curtly. “There’s a damned good chance.”

“Shit.” Montoya glared through the smudged glass of the phone booth to the street and the dented minivan. “So you think John left all this stuff here and when he was running away he got hit?” Montoya asked.

“What?”

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“Shit.” Montoya glared through the smudged glass of the phone booth to the street and the dented minivan. “So you think John left all this stuff here and when he was running away he got hit?” Montoya asked.
It was short and simple. Bentz’s jaw grew tight. His gut twisted. He hung up and swore, then met the
questions in his partner’s eyes. “Melanie Davis is dead. Strangled. Odd ligature around her neck. Probably a
rosary.”
Chapter Thirty-six

Sam stroked Charon’s black coat as she sat in the deck chair and twilight darkened the sky. So it was over. Finally. But the effects would last forever. So many people she knew were dead, the last being Melanie Davis…the woman the police decided had posed as Annie. The story was still fragmented, but it seemed that Melanie had been dating Kent Seger—he’d been the new boyfriend, “the one” she’d told Sam about.

“It makes you wonder,” she said to the cat. Kent was still barely alive, under police guard at the hospital, and the press was everywhere, trying to get a story. Sam had taken her own phone off the hook and refused to answer her door. She needed time to pull herself together, to sort things out, to figure out what she was going to do with the rest of her life.

If Kent survived, maybe they’d learn the answers and he’d go to prison forever; if he died, the world was probably better off. Sam had never really believed in the death penalty but when she thought of the women he’d killed, starting with his own sister and unborn baby, she decided he deserved whatever fate God or the courts meted out. It was lucky that he’d been caught, but the drugs in his system, a combination of angel dust and crack, had made him hallucinate and reel into the path of an oncoming car after getting off the phone with Sam.

Which was odd. He didn’t sound out of control when he’d called. But then he hadn’t said much.

She stretched the muscles in the back of her neck and watched a butterfly flit over the grass near the water.

So what about you, Sam? What’re you going to do?

Maybe she should take the job in LA. “How about that,” she said to Charon, who arched his back under her fingers. “You could be a Hollywood cat.”

She would be closer to her father—away from all the pain here. Through it all, she hadn’t heard from Peter. She’d half expected to get a call from him when the news had broken, but there had been no messages either here or with her dad. Some things just didn’t change.

Could you possibly leave Ty?

Her heart filled at the thought of him. Shading her eyes with her hand, she stared out at the lake and saw his boat, the Bright Angel, skimming across the water. She should have gone with him, she supposed, but she needed a little time alone, to think, and he’d just decided to pick up Sasquatch from his house and bring him back by boat. They planned to cook dinner together, right after she took a shower. She smiled a little as she saw Ty’s dog sitting nose to the wind on the deck.

It had only been eighteen hours since she’d signed off the air last night, and in that time her life had changed. Melanie was dead.

Like Leanne.

Like Annie.

Like all the others who had the misfortune to run into Kent Seger.

Her heart ached for the ambitious girl who had, the police suspected, gone along with Kent in the hopes of somehow snagging Sam’s job. Melanie had always been too ambitious, and in the end it had cost her. She stood and waved and Ty, from the helm, waved back. Had it only been a few weeks since she’d thought she’d spied the Bright Angel bobbing on the night-darkened waves, a dark stranger at her helm?

Several publishers had shown some interest in Ty’s story, and his agent was shopping the idea around. There was talk of an auction.

A lot had happened in the span of eighteen hours.

Carrying Charon, Sam walked into the house, locked the door from habit, and climbed the stairs to her bedroom, leaving the door ajar so that the cat could go in and out rather than cry and paw at the door. A pair of Ty’s slacks were slung over the end of the bed. He hadn’t moved out yet, and Sam wasn’t sure she wanted him to. They were good together, she told herself as she stripped out of her sundress and underwear, made her way to the bathroom and turned on the shower’s spray. Through a window she’d cracked to let out steam, she heard the familiar sound of Hannibal barking—ever ready to start a ruckus—ever vigilant for squirrels or all manner of other critters. She
flipped on the radio to WSLJ and heard the rough sound of Ramblin’ Rob’s voice as he told the audience that he was going to check the library and come back with a Patsy Cline hit. The first caller to name the year the song was popular would receive a WSLJ mug.

Sam wrapped a towel over her head, then stepped under the pulsing spray. Closing her eyes, tried to chase the demons away. How could she have not known that Melanie was jealous of her? How had she worked with the girl night after night and even trusted her to watch her house and cat…and David? His betrayal was worse. He’d planned to use the situation with “John,” hoping to force her back into his arms. She’d even gotten a call from her ex—Jeremy Leeds, Ph.D., telling her he was sorry for what she was going through.

She doubted Jeremy had ever been sorry in his life.

She lathered her body, hearing Patsy Cline’s clear melancholy voice over the spray. But the worst was Kent Seger, a man obsessed with his sister and then Samantha. He blamed Sam for taking Annie’s life, but had actually killed his sister, making it look like a suicide, because he was jealous of Ryan Zimmerman, a boy he didn’t know was his half brother.

Sick, it was all sick.

Rinsing, she thought of Estelle, found yesterday morning facedown in her pool, unable to face another scandal. Her first husband, Annie’s father Wally, had been shocked when Ty had called him. He blamed himself.

A lot of people around here were taking long guilt trips these day.

Twisting off the spigots, she heard the back door open. Ty must’ve docked. She whipped the towel off her head and stepped into her robe. “I haven’t started dinner yet, so pour yourself a drink,” she yelled down the stairs as she cinched the belt and glanced out the window where, on the horizon, she saw the familiar masts and sails of the Bright Angel.

But that was impossible. Why would the sloop be in the water when she was certain she’d heard a door open? A locked door open. The hairs lifted on the back of her neck. “Ty?” she called, and told herself she was being a fool. Kent Seger was in the hospital, barely clinging to his life. Her brother and Ryan Zimmerman had been cleared of any crimes. And besides, no one was in the house but her.

Then she heard the footsteps. Heavy and quick, mounting the stairs. Oh, God. Her heart pounded. Panic rose in her throat. She glanced through the window, saw the sailboat heading inland, Ty at the helm, Sasquatch at his side. Hissing, Charon streaked through the open bedroom door and slunk under the bed.

Sam searched the room wildly for a weapon—the window. If she could just flag Ty down. She flung the sash open and heard the door creak.

“You bitch!”

John’s voice. No!

“Ty!” she screamed, then turned as the intruder reached her—a tall man in dark glasses and a cold, angry leer.

“Who are you?”

“Your worst nightmare,” he said, and she noticed a handkerchief in his hand.

A sickly smell surrounded him. “Get out!” she yelled, her blood cold as ice. She searched wildly for a weapon and saw the lamp. Before she could grab it, he was on her. Holding her fast, trying to force the horrid gag to her face.

She kicked, clawed and screamed, fought like a tiger, but he was so big that he wrapped an arm around her and pushed the cloth into her face. She couldn’t breathe, the smell, that horrid smell of ether, filled her nostrils and burned down her throat. Her eyes watered, she coughed, couldn’t breathe.

The smell was overpowering.

She tried to scream but dragged in more of the drug. Blackness pulled at the edges of her consciousness. She clawed at his face and he laughed. The darkness came and went. Her arms and legs were so heavy, she couldn’t keep her eyes open and the fight left her.

She saw his smile and from the corner of her eye the twinkle of light, blood-red light cast by a string of beads.

“We’ve got the wrong guy!” Bentz stared at the medical chart hanging from the end of Kent Seger’s bed, then swore a blue streak. A uniformed guard was posted at the door of this private room, plainclothes officers situated at other points in the hospital, but it didn’t matter. The guy in the bed with all the tubes and wires poking in and out of his damned body wasn’t Kent Seger.

“The wrong guy?” Montoya was eating from a bag of chips he’d bought at a machine in the cafeteria.

“Look at his blood type.”
“But—”
“I don’t know who the hell he is but the guy’s not Kent Seger and he’s not John. It was a setup.” Bentz was running out of the room. “Stay put,” he told the guard. “Don’t let anyone in or out. Not even a doctor.”
“But—”
“Why the hell didn’t anyone check his blood type?” Bentz yanked his cell phone from his pocket and found the nearest exit. Montoya was only a step behind.
“So who is he?” Montoya asked as ran to his car and reached inside for his cell phone.
“It doesn’t matter. What does is that our boy is still on the loose.”
Bentz punched out the numbers for the dispatcher. “Call the Cambrai police. Send someone out to Samantha Leeds’s house on Lake View Drive, pronto.” He climbed behind the wheel.
“I’ll drive,” Montoya offered.
“No way. You’re too slow. Get in.”
Montoya hadn’t even strapped himself in when Bentz switched on the ignition and floored it, driving like holy hell through the parking lot and flipping on his siren as the cruiser bucked onto the street. He tossed Montoya the cell phone.
“Call Samantha Leeds. Tell her what’s up.”
While Montoya tried to get through, Bentz was on the police band, instructing other units on what was happening.
“No one answers,” Montoya said.
“Damn it all to hell. Then try Ty Wheeler…at home or on his cell. Call information, just get the hell through!”
He took a corner too fast and the tires squealed. The drive to Cambrai usually took twenty minutes. If he was lucky, he could make it in fifteen.
He only hoped he wasn’t too late.
Ty saw Sam in the window. She was waving. No…she flung the sash open and called to him. Then he saw the shadow—someone was in the bedroom with her. Someone dressed in black. Someone wearing dark sunglasses. She was struggling. Screaming. Being attacked right before his eyes. And he couldn’t reach her. Knowing he’d never make it in time, he lowered the sails, started the engine and pushed the throttle open full bore.
He stared at the window, caught only glimpses of a horror he’d thought was behind them and knew that the monster was loose. Somehow the animal had escaped, and he was killing Samantha right in front of Ty’s eyes.
“You won’t get away with it, you bastard,” Ty vowed, his hands gripping the wheel, the sloop cutting through the water. “I’ll kill you first.”
It was dark…so dark—she could tell even though her eyes were closed. And there were sounds…strange sounds…a deep rumbling hum. Her head pounded.
She wanted to fall back to sleep, but something forced her to inch open her eyelids. The darkness persisted. She felt motion and realized she was moving, but…Her head ached and she felt like she might throw up. Where was she? She tried to sit up and felt woozy. For a second she thought she might pass out again and then she started to remember. Flashes of bright images. She’d been in her bedroom and she’d been attacked by a man in dark glasses…oh, God…John, somehow he’d escaped.
She felt with her hands, took in deep lungfuls of air and smelled gasoline. She was riding in something, the trunk of a vehicle…no, there was too much room…she was in the bed of a pickup with one of those canopies over it, and John was driving, taking her somewhere…but where?
He slowed and her heart, already racing miles a minute, went into overtime. She didn’t doubt for a second that he was going to kill her. He just wanted to do it privately, so he could have more time. She thought of his victims, the torture they’d been through and knew she would endure the same hideous pain.
If she could only get her bearings, and think…this was a truck…there could be tools. He turned quickly and she slid to one side…rolling against the wheel well, hanging her head again. Think, Sam, think, where’s he taking you? Somewhere remote. But he usually kills women in their rooms with a rosary…the police had finally made some of the details of the crimes public. She felt around, her fingers sliding over the bed of the truck until she came upon something…a toolbox. Could she be so lucky? She tried to open it, but it was locked. Don’t panic, just think. She tried to force the lid open, but it wouldn’t budge.
Tires crunched on gravel. The truck was barely moving now. The tire jack! Where was it? Could she pry it loose?
She went over every inch of the bed and along the wheel wells. All she found was a fishing rod. Nothing heavy. Just bamboo. Locked in place along one side of the canopy. Damn!

The truck slid to a stop. She weighed her options. She could spring at him when he opened the back, but he’d probably be expecting that, no, it was better to play as if she was still unconscious and then if he tried to slip anything over her head, she’d react.

It was all she could do to lie still, to try and relax, to make it look like her muscles and bones had melted when she was really so tense she was having trouble breathing.

The engine died.

Oh, God, help me.

She heard the creak of the driver’s door open, then the sound of footsteps crunching gravel.

Stay calm. She lay still, breathed slowly, closed her eyes but didn’t squeeze them, appeared to relax when all of her nerve endings were stretched taut.

The back of the truck opened, warm fetid air wafted in and the sounds of bullfrogs croaking and insects thrumming through the night met her ears.

Bayou country. Oh, God they’d never be found.

“You awake yet?” he said in his seductive tone. “Dr. Sam? He wiggled her bare foot, a hot hand on her toes. She didn’t react. “Hell, wake up would ya?” His voice was more agitated. Still she didn’t stir. “You’d better not be playin’ possum.” He tickled the bottom of her foot and she forced herself to stay limp. “Come on.” He pulled her out of the back of the truck and she slumped against him, her legs dragging. It took all of her willpower not to kick him, but she let her toes scrape against the ground. He packed her across the gravel road for a few feet before the crunching beneath his feet changed to a hollow ring, like boots on bare wood.

She slitted her eye open just a bit and caught a glimpse of the bleached boards of a dock.

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“No way in hell, she thought as he began untying the small boat from its moorings. She needed a weapon, any kind of weapon. As his back was turned she let her eyes open just a hair and began to search the sides of the tiny craft for something...anything. Through the slits she noticed a fishing creel tucked under the bench but that wouldn’t do...then she saw the oar. If she moved quickly, she could reach it, whack him on the back and slide into the swamp.

In that split-second she thought of the creatures of the bayou—alligators, snakes, bats...but which was worse? Nature or this unnatural monster? Her mind was still fuzzy. Sluggish.

He began to shove off.

Now!

She sprang, stumbled, grabbed the oar and swung hard.

Crack!

He roared in pain, stumbled forward. She whacked him again, but he turned on the third attempt.

“You bitch.” Grabbing her makeshift club, he ripped it from her hands. “You stupid, stupid cunt!” He lunged at her and she dived over the side. Thick water submerged her and she tried to swim, but she was caught. He’d snagged the hem of her robe, dragging her back. She tried to loosed the knot of the tie, but it was cinched tight. Wet.

Swearing loudly he yanked her backward to certain death. She kicked, tried to hold her breath, worked the damned knot, but she was losing ground. His fingers scraped against her ankle.

No! No! NO!

Her lungs were aching, her head cloudy, her fingers fumbling with the damned tie.

He pulled hard. Again reached for her leg. She kicked. The knot came free. Driven by terror she slid out of the robe’s arms and dived fast. Deep. Swimming naked through the thick water far under the surface. Her lungs burned but she ignored the fire, kicking hard, sliding farther from the dock until she thought she would explode.
In a splash, she broke surface, barely twenty feet from him. Gasping for air, she dived again, but not before he cast the beam of a spotlight upon her and spun the damned boat in her direction.

How could she outmaneuver him? How could she save herself? She dived into the sluggish, murky water again, kicking hard, swimming blindly away from the light. Faster, Sam, go faster. Get away! Her lungs were about to burst when she scraped her fingers on the roots of a cypress tree and pulled herself to the far side. Slowly she surfaced and took in long, deep breaths while trying to remain silent and get her bearings. God help me, she thought desperately, then knew she had to help herself. No one was out here. This was pure, raw, Louisiana wilderness.

She had to escape somehow or kill him.

Either way would do.

Naked and shivering, her head finally clearing, she could barely hear over the drumming of her heart and had trouble tamping down the sheer panic sending adrenalin through her blood. She felt something slippery brush against her leg, but she didn’t move, didn’t cry out, didn’t dare. The smell of the swamp was heavy in her nostrils, the feel of the sultry air cool against her skin. She heard the sound of his oars slicing through the water, watched as the spotlight flickered on, then quickly off again, teasing her, causing her pupils to dilate and narrow, making it more difficult to see.

“You’re not going to get away, you know,” he drawled, his voice low and sexy and far too close. Where was he? Where?

Then the light flared again barely five feet away. Silently she slid under the water, swam stealthily beneath the lily pads and surfaced in a grove of tall, skeletal trees and flattened against one bleached cypress.

“You can’t last long. The gators will get you. Or somethin’ else. Come on out, Samantha,” his voice was coaxing, meant to be seductive over the drone of insects, but she heard the edge of frustration in his words, the hint of his psychosis. “You started this, you know. You told Annie to confide in someone and she told Mother.” He clicked his tongue. “Mother didn’t believe her, though. No, she didn’t think I would actually fuck my little sister.” He laughed. “And Annie…she liked it, whether she admitted it or not. She got wet for me…just like you’re going to.”

Terror struck deep in her heart. She had to get out of here. Now. Before he found her. Before exhaustion overtook her. Before her luck ran out. She managed a peek around the bole of the tree and caught a glimpse of the outline of his truck, the metal shining in the moonlight. It was her only chance.

Noiselessly Sam slipped beneath the surface again. She swam silently away from his voice, toward the dock. Had he left his keys in the truck’s ignition? Or had he pocketed them? Had he locked the doors?

She needed some means of escape, some kind of transportation. How far could she get, naked and barefoot? Just swim. Get to the shore. Get away.

Her lungs were burning, threatening to burst as she propelled herself through the slimy duckweed. Finally, she surfaced, silently dragging in air.

The spotlight flashed on.

The beam caught her square in its hideous brilliance. Somehow he’d been tracking her and realized she’d double back to the dock!

Quickly she slid underneath the water again, swimming frantically, seeking cover beneath the dock, and surfacing on the far side. Peering over the edge of the rotted wood, she saw the spotlight glowing eerily through the rising mist. The boat hadn’t moved. Was it possible that she’d lost him? Would he give up so easily? Not unless she’d hurt him when she’d hit him with the oars.

Carefully she edged toward the shore and saw a flash through the trees—headlights? Her heart leapt. Was it possible? Oh, God, could someone be traveling down these deserted roads? Could she be somewhere near a main road? She moved more quickly, her toes searching for purchase in the muddy bottom. Again she felt something brush against her. Fish? Alligator? Snake?

She stepped forward.

Steely fingers clamped around her ankle.

No!

Oh, God, he’d found her. She kicked but it was no use.

He was on her then. His hard body bent on dragging her under. He’d left the spotlight turned on and let the boat drift as he’d slipped under the surface and swum unerringly to her.

The hand was a manacle, pulling her under, into deeper water. She thrashed and kicked, gasping for air. Her heel
connected with something solid. He burst to the surface and dragged her with him. “You fucking bitch,” he swore, naked from the waist up, his skin white in the dark night, the dark glasses gone and wide eyes with pale irises glowering down at her. “You’re gonna pay,” he said, water dripping from his dark hair and down his face. He was standing, his head above water, she, shorter, couldn’t touch ground. Angrily, he yanked her down, jerked her under the surface. She gasped, caught a mouthful of stagnant water and came up coughing and spitting.

Kicking and slapping, she aimed for his testicles, but he pulled her under again. Again she gulped water. She bobbed up. Gasped. Coughing, sputtering, choking. He grabbed her hair with his free hand. “Now Dr. Sam, repent,” “Wh—what?”

“Repent for your sins.”

He dunked her again, holding her down in the sluggish water, robbing her of air until she couldn’t breathe, saw images in the darkness, murky shapes moving near his legs.

With a hard pull, he yanked her up and she could barely move. “Go ahead play dead. See what good it does you,” he said, and dragged her closer to the shore. Her toes touched now, and she tried to run, but he held her fast and fumbled beneath the water, reaching into his pocket, withdrawing his wicked weapon. In the darkness she saw the beads—his rosary.

She struggled, but it was no use. He was so much stronger. So much bigger. Knew the swamp. If only she had a weapon, a stick, a rock, anything! In the distance she saw headlights, growing nearer, flashing through the trees.

“Say your prayers, Dr. Sam,” Kent ordered as he slipped the noose over her head. The beads were cold as death. Sharp. Hard. Brittle. He twisted the garrote, and she gasped. Pain seared through her neck. He leaned forward. “Repent and kiss me, you miserable bitch,” he ordered, and she lunged forward, teeth bared, and bit hard into his cheek.

He yowled, let go for just a second and she swam under the dock, tore the wicked rosary from her neck and came up on the other side. She heard him splashing behind her, but she swam to the boat, grabbed the spotlight and moved it frantically toward the headlights cutting through the darkness. She heard a car’s engine, the grind of tires spinning on gravel.

Her feet touched and she started for the shore, hoping that whoever was coming could reach her in time. “Here!” she screamed. “Help!” But Kent was behind her and lunged forward just as the car ground to a stop.

Doors opened. Two men and a dog flew out of the car.

“Police, Seger! Give it up!” a voice boomed.

Kent’s hand clamped over her shoulder. She dived into the shallow water.

Crack!

A rifle report echoed through the bayou.

Kent squealed and fell back into the water. Splashing. Flailing. His blood flowing into the dark ripples. “God damn it,” he cried, but his voice was fading, gurgling.

Gasping and shaking, Sam lunged toward the shore, frantically slogging through the water lilies and vines, sobbing and shaking, certain he would reappear and drag her under again.

“Samantha!” Ty’s voice rang across the swamp, through the trees.

Sam nearly crumbled into a thousand pieces.

“Here!” she tried to scream, but her words were only a whisper. She pushed herself forward, feeling as if she was running in slow motion.

She saw him silhouetted by the headlights, racing toward her, the dog at his heels. She started sobbing wildly and couldn’t stop when he wrapped his arms around her and held her body to his. “Sam…Sam…oh, God, are you all right?”

“Yes…no…yes…” She was holding him, trying to regain some kind of composure and falling into a million pieces.

“Over here,” Ty yelled, turning his head toward the sniper. “Bring a blanket.” He turned back to her. “Jesus, Samantha, I shouldn’t have let you out of my sight. I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry…what the hell have you got?”

Only then did she realize she was still holding the damned rosary. As if it were truly evil, she let it slide through her fingers to drop onto the soggy ground. She was trembling and shivering and on the verge of passing out. Through her fog, she felt someone throw a blanket over her nakedness and realized it was Detective Bentz.
“I’ll need some kind of statement,” he said, averting his eyes as she wrapped the thin blanket around her.

“Later,” Ty said.

In the distance she saw other headlights.

“The cavalry,” Bentz explained, as an owl hooted from a nearby branch. “I figured we could use some backup.” He looked at the swamp and reached into the pocket of his jacket, retrieving an unopened pack of cigarettes. “I suppose I should go retrieve the son of a bitch,” he said. “Right after I have a smoke. If I’m lucky, maybe the gators will do my work for me.” Then he lit up and, gun still in hand, slowly walked onto the dock, searching the dark water while the tip of his cigarette glowed red in the misty darkness.

“How—how did you find me?” Sam asked, her mind still foggy.

“Navarrone knew that Kent had a place here—the only thing his mother had given him when she cut him off. Basically we got lucky.”

“Lucky? I was hoping you would say it was all because of brilliant police work.”

“There was a little of that, but luck played a major part.”

“That’s so reassuring,” she said, shaking her head and holding the blanket tight around her shivering body.

“It’s meant to be.”

“God help us.” She felt the streaks of mud on her skin and saw, in the headlights, drips of red. Blood. Not hers but Kent’s. Diluted with swamp water, but still running down her legs. Shuddering, she wiped the vile fluid from her skin. “Can we get out of here?” she asked.

“You bet.” Ty whistled to the dog and kissed the top of her head. “Let’s go home.”
“So it’s ‘case closed.’” Montoya said as he walked into Bentz’s office and sat on the corner of his desk. Ever cool, Montoya was in his signature leather coat, some dark slacks and a white T-shirt. He’d traded in the goatee for a moustache and instead of one earring, he sported two.

Through the open window, the sounds of the night seeped into the building—a solitary riff from a saxophonist, the hum of traffic, the buzz of laughter. It was night in the city of New Orleans.

“The case is closed except for the fact that we never found Kent Seger’s body.”

“You figure he got out alive?”

“With all those gators? Nope.” Bentz leaned back in his desk chair and found a piece of gum in his desk. “I think he got what he deserved.”

“You give up smokin’ again?”

“For the time being.”

“Probably a mistake.”

“Probably.”

“So what’s happening with Dr. Sam?”

“All good things,” Bentz said with a grin. He’d talked to Dr. Sam and was surprised at how well she’d survived her ordeal. She was one tough cookie and now she was calling the shots. “The way I hear it she’s got a new assistant and refused to expand the program to seven days a week. George Hannah’s going along with it, because he’s afraid to lose her. And he would. There are other bigger stations who would hire her in an instant. One as far away as Chicago.”

“So why’s she stayin’?”

“One reason is Ty Wheeler.” Reaching behind him, he flipped on the fan and the hot air blew from one end of the tiny office to the other.

“Thought you didn’t like him?”

“I don’t. Anyone who gives up being a cop to write books is a candy-ass.”

“Or smart. You let him and that dog ride with you,” Montoya reminded him.

“The dog, I like.”

“So Kent Seger was just one messed-up mother.” “Yeah, I’ve seen some hospital records. Depression, drug use, violence.”

“And what about Ryan Zimmerman?” Montoya asked. Bentz frowned. “He’ll probably try to patch things up with his wife if he ever gets out of the hospital. The story is that he ran into Kent one night in the bars—he’d just lost his job and been kicked out of the house. Kent was an old friend, or so he thought and Kent was connected, had a virtual candy store of drugs. They hooked up and once Ryan was out of it, Kent took him hostage. Held him hostage. Tortured him in that lair of his.” “The one Navarrone discovered.”

“Yeah. Where we found the trophies.” Bentz chewed hard on his gum. Seeing the jewelry had gotten to him—everything from earring studs to ankle bracelets and a locket with Kent and Annie’s picture inside—probably taken off his sister on the night she’d died, though no one had mentioned it. The way Bentz figured it, Kent had swapped Ryan’s picture for his own. The world was no worse without Kent Seger.

“So Zimmerman’s sworn off drugs, for good, or so he claims. You can’t trust junkies,” Bentz said. “The combination of drugs Kent gave him the night Melanie was killed messed him up bad enough that Kent had no problem setting him up. Kent made the call to the station the night Melanie was killed, then pushed Zimmerman into the street. He just happened to get hit by the car. That wasn’t necessarily planned. If the hospital hadn’t pumped his stomach, he would have died.”

“As would have Samantha Leeds.”

Bentz scowled. “She nearly did anyway.” He glanced out the open window to the city lights and remembered how
Kent Seger had gotten past her security, with the one key she didn’t duplicate when she changed the locks, a small key she’d rarely used, the one to the trap door under her stairs. All Kent had to do was slip under the verandah, make his way to the trap door and let himself into the house. Easy as pie. What a bastard. And his body had never been recovered from the swamp, as if the dark vile water had claimed one of its own.

Montoya leaned against the file cabinet and crossed his booted feet in front of him. “So what happened to that brother of hers. Pete or Peter or whatever he went by? I thought he might have been involved.”

“From all I know he’s as elusive as ever. Hasn’t surfaced. He worked for a cell phone company for a while, but quit his job. No one’s heard from him. Not Sam, not her father, not even the damned IRS.”

“What’s up with that?”

“Maybe he’s just a private person.”

“Or a junkie.”

“A lot of those out there.” Bentz glanced into the night. “My guess is that Samantha and her father won’t hear from him until the coroner comes knocking—if then.”

“So that’s it,” Montoya said.

“The case is closed.” “There’re a few loose ends,” Bentz allowed. “I still want to talk to some people who conveniently dropped out of sight when the bodies started piling up. Roommates, exes, pimps and the like, but I think they’re all clean, probably just had other issues with the law that they didn’t want to go into and decided it was time to disappear.” He thought of Marc Duvall, the pimp and Sweet Cindy AKA Sweet Sin, to name a couple persons of interest who had conveniently turned up missing. Sooner or later he’d track them down. Especially Duvall. “But yeah, for all intents and purposes it’s over.”

“Good.” Reuben snapped to attention. “Then we’re done. Right? Maybe you should celebrate with one of those near-beers.”

“We still have a couple of murders that haven’t been solved,” Bentz reminded him, and glanced at the computer screen where images of two dead women, one Jane Doe burned and left in front of the statue of Joan of Arc, the other, Cathy Adams, the stripper/student/prostitute who had been found with her head shaved in her apartment.

So close in age to his own daughter. The only kid he’d ever raise. That thought bothered him, but, hell, it was working out. She was a great kid. A great kid.

“We’ll figure the other murders out,” Montoya said, never doubting himself for a minute.

“I hope so.” But Bentz wasn’t convinced. In his gut he knew another serial killer was stalking the streets of his city. Another sick bastard with strange rituals. A signature? God, he hoped not. Maybe the two cases on his desk weren’t related. And yet…he sensed they were.

Damn it all to hell.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m definitely celebrating tonight. Definitely.”

“Probably a good idea,” Montoya agreed.

“A damned good one. Hey—what time is it?” He looked at his watch, a knock off of a Rolex, then walked over to the file cabinet and switched on the radio just as the first few strains of “A Hard Day’s Night” faded away and Samantha Leeds’s sultry voice floated from the speakers.

“Good evening New Orleans, this is Dr. Sam at WSLJ. You’re listening to Midnight Confessions, and tonight we’re going to be talking about luck…”
Dear Reader,
Okay, the truth of the matter is that I loved writing HOT BLOODED. I mean, I really loved it! Maybe it was the romance and the intrigue of the city of New Orleans, or maybe it was the characters who became a part of my life for so many months, or maybe I just can’t let go. Whatever the reason is I decided to write a companion book to the first story. And that was just the beginning.

COLD BLOODED is the next thriller in what has become a series of books surrounding the characters of Detective Rick Bentz and Reuben Montoya of the New Orleans Police Department. Once again, I adored writing it. Basically COLD BLOODED picks up where HOT BLOODED left off.

Remember the murders that Bentz and Montoya hadn’t quite figured out at the end of HOT BLOODED? Well, they get their chance in COLD BLOODED, and boy, do they have their work cut out for them.

Another signature killer is on the loose in New Orleans. Women from all walks of life are being stalked, then ritualistically killed. This time the killer is very clever, leaving behind few clues. For some reason the victims seem to trust or know the man who cruelly takes their lives.

The press is going wild with the story and some of the people you met in HOT BLOODED reappear. There are a host of new characters as well, including Olivia Benchet, a woman whose dreams remarkably re-create the murders. The police write her off as a nut case, but Rick Bentz sees a connection. Not only does Olivia, a descendent of a voodoo priestess, have incredible insight into the murders, she also is the first woman in a long time who has interested Bentz. Pretty, smart, and outspoken, she’s obviously terrified of her visions.

The story really heats up when Olivia turns to a local priest for comfort, and an old secret that has plagued Bentz for years resurfaces.

Everything Rick Bentz believes in, everything he holds dear is suddenly at risk, thrust into horrifying, mind-numbing danger. Olivia Benchet and his own daughter, Kristi, become targets, and he has to face the toughest, most diabolical adversary of his career. It’s up to him to stop a COLD-BLOODED killer.

Putting an end to the terror running through the narrow streets of the city becomes Bentz’s personal mission. Even if it means compromising his career.

I hope you pick up a copy of COLD BLOODED and the other books in the series. They are, in sequence, HOT BLOODED, COLD BLOODED, SHIVER, ABSOLUTE FEAR, LOST SOULS, MALICE, and DEVIOUS, which is scheduled to be released in April of 2011! Each of the books brings Montoya and Bentz face to face with twisted killers bent on destruction. In SHIVER, Montoya meets Abby Chastain, the one woman who turns his world around. The mystery surrounding her and her mother’s death draw him into a world of smoke and mirrors.

Each book has its own story and DEVIOUS, the most recent, is not only set in New Orleans, but has roots deep into the heart of the history and culture of the city where a young, beautiful novitiate who is about to take her vows at St. Marguerite’s Cathedral is brutally murdered. At the stroke of midnight, as Sister Camille takes her last dying breath, she prays for forgiveness, and knows the sins of her past will come back to haunt all those she holds dear.

DEVIOUS is a story where nothing appears as it should, and once again Detectives Montoya and Bentz must solve the crime and understand the twisted, vile mind of a killer whose crimes seem all too familiar. To learn more, just turn the page to an excerpt from DEVIOUS!

As I said, I hope you like HOT BLOODED and all the books in the Montoya/Bentz series. You can read excerpts and learn more about the books through my Web site at www.lisajackson.com or through facebook, where I have a fan page that keeps everyone up to date on upcoming books, contests, and events.

Keep Reading!
Lisa Jackson
LISA JACKSON

COLD BLOODED
IN SEARCH OF A KILLER

“I thought I explained all this,” Olivia said. “I’ve been in to the police department before. No one took me seriously. Just like you.”

“Try me,” Bentz suggested. “Just tell me what you saw.”

‘Well … where to begin? I’d have these nightmares, more fragmented than this last one, but intense. It wasn’t a vision of someone being violently murdered like last night … but rather short images, every other day or so, of a victim being left to starve to death. She … she was trapped somewhere like a crypt of some kind and she was screaming and crying. And I felt him. His presence.”

“The killer?”

“Yes. Whoever abducted her and left her to die would come and visit her, shine a flashlight into her terrified eyes, then leave. So I only got glimpses of where she was being held, only quick images of the surroundings. Anything else?” she asked.

“Yeah, a couple of things. I’ll want a list of everyone you know. Family, friends, anyone you work with or see at school.”

“You think my friends are involved.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know who is, but if I take what you’re telling me at face value, then somehow you’re connected with the killer … right? There’s something between the two of you … I mean, I assume that’s the way it works.”

She nodded. “Sometimes …” She let her voice fade away and didn’t go on.

“Sometimes what?”

“It sounds so crazy, but sometimes I get this feeling … it’s like crystals of ice over the back of my neck, and I feel that he’s close … closer than I ever imagined …”
Books by Lisa Jackson

SEE HOW SHE DIES  
FINAL SCREAM  
WISHES  
WHISPERS  
TWICE KISSED  
UNspoken  
IF SHE ONLY KNEW  
HOT BLOODED  
COLD BLOODED  
THE NIGHT BEFORE  
THE MORNING AFTER  
DEEP FREEZE  
FATAL BURN  
SHIVER  
MOST LIKELY TO DIE  
ABSOLUTE FEAR  
ALMOST DEAD  
LOST SOULS  
LEFT TO DIE  
WICKED GAME  
MALICE  
CHosen TO DIE

Published by Zebra Books
To Robin Rue, agent extraordinaire—thanks for all!
First and foremost I would like to thank the City of New Orleans Police Department for their help and courtesy, even though I bent the rules a tad to accommodate this story.

I would also like to thank the following individuals who offered their support, knowledge and expertise, without whom this book would not have been written. Thanks to Nancy Berland, Nancy Bush, Matthew Crose, Michael Crose, Alexis Harrington, Mary Clare Kersten, Carol Maloy, K.C. McNeeley, Arla Melum, Ken Melum, Ari Okano, Betty and Jack Pederson, Sally Peters, Robin Rue, Jon Salem, John Scognamiglio, Larry and Linda Sparks, Laura Stanulis, Mark and Celia Stinson, and Jane Thornton. If I’ve missed anyone, my apologies.
He saw her.

Half-running, head bent, fingers clutched at the hood of her coat, she hurried through the darkness to the small church.

From his hiding spot beneath the magnolia tree, The Chosen One waited. His blood began to sing through his veins as he crouched in the darkness, every muscle tense, nerves strung tight as piano wire.

How easy it would be to catch her. In three swift strides he could be upon her and drag her away. While her father waited inside. That particular thought appealed to him, was warm seduction.

But it wasn’t her time, he reminded himself. There were others.

She paused beneath the overhang near the front doors, tossing off her hood and shaking her hair free. Long and wavy, the strands gleamed a tempting red brown in the lamplight. The Chosen One swallowed and felt the first stirring between his legs.

He wanted her.

So badly he ached.

Just looking at her, his senses were heightened. He heard his heart beating, felt his blood pulse through his veins, smelled the heavy odor of the Mississippi River winding dark and slow through the town where traffic whined on slick streets and sin was waged at every corner.

As she disappeared through the doors, he edged deeper into the dense foliage of the grounds to his hiding spot near the flawed stained-glass window. A tiny panel of glass had been removed and replaced by a small clear pane, giving a perfect view into the nave. Crouching, The Chosen One peered through this portal and he watched as she walked down the aisle, genuflected, then slid into the pew to take her seat next to her father.

The bastard cop.

They exchanged a few words before she planted herself next to him.

Once seated, she fidgeted in the pew. Looked bored. As if she’d rather be anywhere than at evening mass with her father. She flipped her long hair this way and that, glanced at the others as they entered, slumped onto her lower back to bite at one fingernail as dozens of candles burned.

The Chosen One let his gaze move to the cop.

The enemy.

He was a solid man, over six feet. His jaw was square, his eyes deep-set and world-weary, showing his forty-plus years. Rick Bentz was a detective whose tarnished reputation had been polished to a recent sheen, his past sins forgotten if not forgiven. In his black suit and starched shirt, he appeared more uncomfortable than his daughter, definitely out of place in the house of God.

As well he should be.

Tugging on his tie, Bentz leaned closer to the girl and whispered into her ear. Immediately she stopped biting at her nails and straightened in the pew. She folded her arms over her abdomen defiantly and inadvertently raised her breasts, making them plump a bit at the neckline of her dress. White supple flesh against turquoise silk.

The Chosen One imagined what was hidden beneath that smooth fabric … rosebud nipples, virgin skin, and lower, a dark nest of curls the same reddish brown as that luxurious tangle of copper that tumbled to her shoulders.

He thought of her as the princess.

Her father’s pride and joy.

Athlete, scholar, and … a little naughty. Rebellious. It was there, in her eyes. He’d seen it before. Heard it in her deep, sexy laughter.

She glanced toward the window with her wide green eyes. The Chosen One froze in his hiding spot.
Her mouth pulled into a tiny, defiant pout.

His cock responded. Just a little twinge.

He imagined what those lips might do with the right sort of prodding … Closed his eyes, felt the cool caress of the rain running down his neck as his fingers strayed to his crotch.

His erection stiffened to full mast. Hard. Throbbing. Anticipating.

*Soon, Princess*, he thought. *Soon. But I must take care of the others first. Then it will be your turn.*

*Be patient.*

*Beep! Beep! Beep!*

His eyes flew open at the sound of his watch’s timer. He clicked off the alarm and bit back a swear word. That was careless. Unlike him. Angry with himself, The Chosen One took one last glimpse of the church’s interior and found the princess still staring at the window. As if she knew he was there.

Quickly he ducked from beneath the tree and jogged through the curtain of rain. He’d stayed much too long. Furious with himself, he picked up his pace, long legs sprinting easily across the wet lawn to the corner, where he turned down a narrow alley, ran three blocks, then doubled back to a parking space in front of an abandoned, boarded-over building that had once been a garage.

He was sweating, not from exertion but anxiety as he climbed into the older car with its tinted windows. He stripped off his running clothes and gloves, then folded them neatly into a leather duffel.

Soon it would be time.

Soon Rick Bentz would feel the pain of losing that which he held most dear.

But first Bentz needed to know what was at risk; he had to feel real fear—a dark, gnawing dread that would eat at him when he realized that everything he did, everywhere he turned, every place he’d once held sacred, would no longer be safe.

A smile crept across The Chosen One’s jaw as he withdrew a towel from his bag. Quickly he swiped the rough terry cloth over his face and neck. Then he took the time to check the rearview mirror. Blue eyes stared back at him. Hungry eyes. “Bedroom eyes,” he’d been told by more than one woman who was foolish enough to think he could be seduced.

But … beneath his gaze he caught the merest glimmer of a shadow, something wrong, out of sync in the reflection. As if someone were watching him. He snapped his head around, stared through the foggy rear window to see if the mirror’s reflection had caught someone peering into the car. He squinted through the raindrops and fog of condensation.

Nothing moved outside.

There was no one around on this deserted street. And yet he felt … a connection somewhere. This wasn’t the first time; he’d sensed a presence on several occasions. Each time the feeling became a little more certain, a tad more intense. Sweat rolled down his temples. His heart hammered wildly.

*Paranoia … that’s what it is. Stay cool. Keep focused.*

There was no one in this desolate part of town, no one who could possibly see through the smoky glass windows of the sedan on this gloomy night.

He had to calm down. Be patient. Everything was coming together.

Rick Bentz’s worst nightmare had already begun. He just didn’t know it yet.
Chapter One

“You need a woman,” Reuben Montoya observed as he pulled the police cruiser into the lot of Bentz’s apartment.

“Good. Maybe I could borrow one of yours.” Bentz reached for the handle of the door. What he didn’t need was any advice from a young cop with more balls than brains as evidenced by the earring winking in Montoya’s ear and the neatly trimmed goatee covering his chin. The younger detective was smart as hell, but still a little wet behind the ears. And he didn’t know when to keep his nose in his own business.

“Hey, I’m a one-woman man these days,” Montoya insisted and Bentz snorted.

“Right.”

“I mean it.” Montoya slammed the cruiser’s gearshift lever into park, then reached into his jacket pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

“If you say so.”

“I could set you up.” Montoya was a young cop, not quite thirty, with smooth bronze skin, a killer smile, and enough ambition to propel him out of his poor Hispanic roots and through college on an athletic scholarship. Not only had he kicked the living hell out of a soccer ball, but he’d made the dean’s list every semester and then, upon graduation, with his future as bright as the damned sun, he decided to become a cop.

Go figure.

Montoya shook out a filter tip, lit up, and blew a cloud of smoke. “I know this nice older lady, a friend of my mother’s—”

“Can it.” Bentz shot him a look meant to shut him up. “Forget it. I’m okay.”

Montoya didn’t back off. “You’re definitely not okay. You live alone, never go out, and work your tail off for a department that doesn’t appreciate you. That’s your life.”

“I’ll bring it up when I’m up for my next raise,” he said and climbed out of the passenger seat. It was a cool night; the wind rolling off the river had a winter edge to it.

“All I’m sayin’ is that you need a life, man. Your kid’s gone off to school and you should have some fun.”

“I have plenty.”

“My ass.”

“ ‘Night, Montoya.” He slammed the door of the Crown Vic shut, then made his way into the building. A woman. Yeah, that would solve his problems. He grabbed the evening paper and his mail on the ground level, then climbed up the stairs to his second-floor unit. What did Montoya know?

Shit. That’s what the kid knew: shit.
Bentz had learned long ago that women only added to his problems; and he’d learned from the master.
Jennifer.
Beautiful.
Intelligent.
Sexy as hell.
His wife.
The one woman he’d given his heart to; the only woman he’d allowed to break it and break it she had. On more than one occasion. With the same damned man. He unlocked the door and snapped on the lights.

Hurt me once, shame on you.
Hurt me twice, shame on me.
Tossing his keys onto the desk, he shed his jacket and yanked off his tie. God, he could use a beer and a smoke. But not a woman. Trouble was, he’d sworn off all three. No messages on the answering machine. Montoya was right. His social life was nil. He worked out by pounding the hell out of a boxing bag that hung in
the second bedroom, didn’t even belong to a bowling league or golf club. He’d given up sailing and hunting years ago, along with high-stakes poker and Jim Beam.

Rolling up his sleeves, he walked to the refrigerator and stared at the dismal contents. Even the freezer, where he usually kept a couple of those frozen man-sized microwave meals, was empty. He grabbed a can of nonalcoholic beer and popped the top, then clicked on the TV. A sportscaster started rattling off the day’s scores while highlights flashed in rapid-fire images across the screen.

He settled into his recliner and told himself that Montoya was way off base. He didn’t need a social life. He had his work and he still had Kristi, even if she was off at school in Baton Rouge. He glanced at the telephone and thought about calling her, but he’d phoned last Sunday and had sensed she was irritated; hated him intruding on her newfound freedom at college, acted as if he was checking up on her.

He turned his attention back to the tube, where highlights of Monday night’s Saints game was being replayed. He’d grab a sandwich at the local po’boy shop two blocks over then open up his briefcase and catch up on some paperwork. He had a couple of reports to write and he wanted to pull his notes together; then there were a few open cases that were going stale; he’d need to look them over again, see if there was anything he missed the first, second, third, and fourth times through.

He had plenty to do.

Montoya was wrong. Bentz didn’t need a woman. He was pretty sure no one did.

Olivia didn’t like the lawyer. Never had. Never would. She couldn’t imagine how her grandmother could have trusted anyone so obviously crooked. Ramsey John Dodd, who liked to be called RJ, was as oily as Grannie Gin’s fried chicken and twice as plump. “… so the estate’s all wrapped up, the taxes and fees paid, all the heirs having gotten their disbursements. If you want to sell the house, now’s the time.” From the other side of his oversized desk in this hole-in-the-wall he called an office, Ramsey John tented his pudgy hands together and patted his fingertips. Behind him, trapped between the blinds and the only window in the airless office, a fly that should have died days ago buzzed in frustration, banging against the glass.

“I’m still not sure about moving.”

“Well, when and if you decide, I could put you in touch with a good real estate man.”

“I’ll just bet you could.”

“Wally’s a real go-getter.”

“I’ll let you know,” she said, standing abruptly to end the conversation and help disguise the fact that she was lying through her teeth. She wouldn’t give any associate of RJ Dodd the time of day much less any business.

He shrugged the shoulders of his too-tight suit as if it were no matter, but Olivia sensed his disappointment. No doubt he would have gotten a kickback for any referral that panned out.

“Thanks for all your help.”

“My pleasure.”

She shook his sweaty palm and dropped it.

Her grandmother could usually smell a con man six miles away. How in the world had she ended up with this snake? Because his services come cheap, was the obvious answer. Aside from that, RJ was a nephew of one of Grannie’s friends.

“Just one thing that troubles me,” RJ said as he forced himself from his squeaky chair.

“What’s that?”

“How come you ended up with the house and contents, and your mama, she only got the insurance money?”

“You’re the lawyer. You tell me.”

“Virginia would never say.”

Olivia offered him a weak smile. He was fishing and she didn’t understand why. “I guess Grannie just liked me better.”

His fleshy jaw tightened. “That could be, I suppose. I didn’t know her very well, just enough to figure out that she was an odd woman, you know. Some people around these parts claim she was a voodoo priestess. That she read fortunes in tarot cards and tea leaves and the like, you know. ESP.”

“Well, you can’t always believe what you hear, can you?” she said, trying to change the subject. It touched a
“They say you inherited it.”

“Is that what you want to know, Mr. Dodd? If I’m psychic?”

“It’s RJ,” he reminded her, grinning and showing off the hint of a gold molar. “No reason to get your back up. I was just makin’ conversation.”

“Why don’t you ask my mother about all this?”

“Bernadette claims she didn’t inherit the gift if that’s what you want to call it, but that you did.”

“Oh, I see … it skips a generation. Of course.” Olivia smiled at him as if to say only an idiot would believe such prattle. There was no reason to confirm or deny the rumors. She knew only too well how true they were. It just wasn’t any of Ramsey Dodd’s business. She hoped it would never be.

“Listen,” he suggested, stepping more agilely around the desk than a man his size should have been capable of. “A word of advice. Free.” He seemed to drop his usual pomposity. “I know your grannie thought a lot of you. I also know that she was … an unusual woman, that because of her visions, she was considered odd. Some people trusted her with their lives. My aunt was one of ‘em. But others, they thought she was into the dark arts or crazy or both. It didn’t make her life any easier, so if I was you, I’d keep my mouth closed about any of that vision shit.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Do that … It would have behooved your grandmother.”

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“Nope. That’s it. You take care.”

“I will. Thanks again for all your help.” She stuffed the manila folder he’d given her into her backpack.

“It’s been a pleasure workin’ with you. Now, if you change your mind about Sellin’ the place, just give me a jingle and I’ll have Wally call ya …”

She didn’t wait for him to escort her to the door, but showed herself out through the paneled reception area where a single secretary was poised at a desk situated on a shabby carpet that stretched between three offices, two of which looked vacant as the name plates upon the doors had been unscrewed, leaving telltale holes in the thin veneer. Grannie sure could pick ‘em.

Outside, she crossed a parking lot where the potholes had been patched and climbed into her truck. So RJ knew about her trips to the police department. Great. It was probably all over town, would probably get back to her boss at the Third Eye and even to the University, where she was taking graduate classes.

Wonderful. She rammed the old Ford Ranger into gear and roared out of the lot. She didn’t want to think about the visions she’d had, the glimmers of evil that she sometimes felt rather than saw. Disjointed, kaleidoscopic shards of horrid events that cut through her brain, made her skin rise in goose bumps, and troubled her so much that she’d actually visited the local police.

Where she was considered a nutcase and had been practically laughed out of the building.

Heat climbed her neck at the thought. She flipped on the radio and took a corner a little too fast. The Ranger’s tires screeched in protest.

Sometimes being Virginia Dubois’s granddaughter was more pain than it was worth.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” the naked woman whispered, unable to speak loudly, unable to scream because of the tight collar at her neck. On her knees, chained to the pedestal sink, she obviously didn’t begin to recognize the magnitude of her sins or the reason that she was being punished, that he was actually saving her.

“Tell me,” The Chosen One whispered. “What sins?”

“For … for …” Her terrified eyes bulged and blinked as she tried to think, but she wasn’t penitent. Just scared. Saying what she hoped would convince him to set her free. Tears streamed down her cheeks. “For all my sins,” she said desperately, trying to please him, not knowing it was impossible; that her destiny was preordained.

She was quivering with fear and shivering in the cold, but that would soon change. A bit of smoke was already beginning to waft into the tiny bathroom through the vents. Flames would soon follow. There wasn’t much time. “Please,” she rasped. “Let me go, for the love of God!”
“What would you know about God’s love?” he demanded, then, tamping down his anger, he placed a gloved hand upon her head, as if to calm her, and from somewhere outside, through the cracked window he heard a car backfire on the wintry streets. He had to finish this. Now. Before the fire attracted attention. “You’re a sinner, Cecilia, and as such you will have to pay for your sins.”

“You’ve got the wrong woman! I’m not … her … I’m not Cecilia. Please. Let me go. I won’t say a word, I promise, no one will ever know this happened, I swear.” She clutched at the hem of his alb. Desperate. And dirty. She was a whore. Like the others. He turned his attention to the radio sitting on the windowsill and swiftly turned the knob. The sound of familiar music wafted through the speakers, fading to the sound of a woman’s sultry voice.

“This is Dr. Sam, with one last thought on this date when John F. Kennedy, one of our finest presidents, was killed … Take care of yourself, New Orleans. Good night and God bless. No matter what your troubles are today, there’s always tomorrow … Sweet dreams …”

He turned the dial, switching stations, and heard the static and chirps of announcers’ voices until he found what he wanted: pipe organ music. Full. As if echoing in a cathedral.

Now it could be done.

As the whore watched, he withdrew his sword from behind the shower curtain.

“Oh, God. No!” She was frantic now, pulling at the chain as the collar tightened even further.

“It’s too late.” His voice was measured and calm, but inside he was shaking, trembling, not with fear but anticipation. Adrenalin, his favorite drug, sang through his veins. From the corner of his eye he noticed flames beginning to lick through the screen of the vent. The time had come.

“No, please, don’t … oh, God …” She was clawing at her tether now, vainly trying to hide behind the pedestal as the collar tightened, her wrists and ankles bleeding and raw from her bonds. “You’ve got the wrong woman!”

His pulse throbbed, pounded in his brain. For a second he felt a tingle against the back of his neck, like the breath of Satan. He glanced at the mirror, searching the shimmering surface, looking beneath the reflection of his own image, his face hidden in a tight black mask, but feeling as if someone were watching through the glass. Witnessing his act.

But that was impossible.

Sweat slid into his eyes as he lifted his sword so high his arm ached. Smoke burned in his lungs. Blood lust ran through his veins as he grabbed a fistful of hair in his free hand. He stared down at her perfect neck surrounded by the choke collar. He was hard between his legs, his erection nearly painful. Oh, how he would love to thrust into her body, to taste of her before absolving her of her sins. But that was not his mission. Denying himself of such wicked pleasure was his own act of martyrdom.

“For your sins, Cecilia,” he said, biting out the words as ripples of pleasure passed through him, “and in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I commit your soul to God.”
Chapter Two

“No!”

Olivia’s eyes flew open.

Her own scream echoed through her small bedroom. The dog gave up a sharp “Woof!”

“Oh, God, no.” Her heart was a drum, her body drenched in sweat, the vivid dream lingering as clearly as if she’d just witnessed a murder. Again. Oh, God, it was happening again.

The vision was so damned real. Her nostrils still stung from the smell of smoke, her ears rang with that eerie pipe organ music, her mouth was dry as cotton, her throat raw from her scream. A blinding headache started at the base of her skull and moved upward.

She glanced at the clock. Three-fifteen. Her hands shook as she pushed the hair from her face.

At the foot of the old bed, her grandmother’s mutt lifted his head and was staring at her. Yawning, he emitted another warning bark.

“Come here, you,” she said, patting the pillow as Hairy S stretched. He was all scraggly bits of fur, mottled gray and brown with splotches of white, heavy eyebrows that hinted of some schnauzer hidden back in his bloodlines. He whined, then belly-swamped up to the pillows next to her. Absently, she pulled him close, needing something to cling to. She ruffled his coarse coat and wished she could tell him it would be all right. But it wouldn’t. She knew better. She buried her face in his fur and tried to calm down. Maybe it was a mistake … maybe it was just a dream … maybe … no way. She knew what the images meant.

“Crap.”

She scooted up to a sitting position. Calm down. But she was still shaking, the headache beginning to pound.

Hairy S wriggled out of her arms.

“Damn you, Grannie Gin,” she muttered as the sounds of the night floated in through the open window, the rustle of the wind moving through the trees underscored by the hum of traffic, eighteen-wheelers on the distant freeway.

Dropping her head into her hands, she massaged her temples. Why me? Why? The visions had started at a young age, before she could really remember, but they had been less defined then, and rare. In the off-and-on-again times when her mother had lived with them, the times between husbands.

Bernadette had never wanted to believe that her daughter had inherited her grandmother’s psychic gift.

“Coincidence,” Bernadette had told her child often enough, or, “You’re making this up. It’s just a cheap attempt to get attention! Now, knock it off, Livvie, and quit listening to Grandma. She’s touched in the head, you know, and if you aren’t careful … You hear me?” she’d said sharply, shaking her daughter as if to drive out the monsters in her brain. “If you aren’t careful, you’ll be touched too, not by some ridiculous gift of sight as Grannie claims, but by the devil. Satan never sleeps. Do you hear me? Never.”

Once Bernadette had pointed a long red-tipped nail at the end of her eldest daughter’s nose. They had been in the kitchen of this very house where the smells of bacon grease, wood smoke, and cheap perfume had adhered to pine cabinets yellowed with age. A fan had sat near the ancient toaster, rotating on the corner of the countertop and blowing hot air around the tiny, sparse room.

As Olivia recalled, Bernadette had just gotten off the day shift down at Charlene’s restaurant at the truck stop near the Interstate. She was standing on the cracked linoleum floor in bare feet, a white blouse, and the ever-present black skirt of a waitress. One strap of her bra was visible and a tiny gold cross hung from a chain around her neck and lay nestled in that deep cleft between her breasts. “Listen, child,” she’d said seriously, her expression intense. “I’m not kidding. All this mumbo jumbo and hints about voodoo are just bullshit, you hear me? Bullshit. Your grandma has delusions of being some damned voodoo priestess or some such nonsense, but she’s not. Just because way back when there was some octoroon blood mixed in with the rest, doesn’t make her a … a … damned fortune teller, now, does it? She’s not a psychic and neither are you. Okay?”

Bernadette had straightened, adjusted her short black skirt, and sighed. “Course it doesn’t,” she’d added,
more, it seemed, to convince herself than Olivia. “Now, go outside, will ya, ride your bike or skateboard or whatever.” She picked up an open pack of Virginia Slims on the counter, shook out a cigarette, and lit it quickly. With smoke seeping out of her nostrils, she stood on her tiptoes and reached into an upper cabinet, where she pulled out a fifth of whiskey.

“Mama’s got herself a whopper of a headache,” she’d explained as she found a short glass, cracked ice cubes from a plastic tray, and poured herself a healthy drink, which she’d explained was her reward for a hard day’s labor while enduring the leers, winks, and occasional pinches at the truck stop. Only after taking a sip and leaning her hips against the counter did she look at her daughter again. “You’re an odd one, Livvie,” she’d said with a sigh. “I love ya to death, you know I do, but you’re different.” With the cigarette planted firmly between her lips, she’d reached forward and grabbed Olivia’s chin, moving her head left, then right. Narrowed eyes studied Olivia’s profile through the smoke.

“You’re pretty enough,” Bernadette finally allowed, straightening and flicking ashes into the sink, “and if you use your head and don’t go spouting off all this crazy talk, you’ll land yourself a good man, maybe even a rich man. So don’t go scarin’ ’em off with all this weird talk, y’hear me? No decent man’ll have you if ya do.” She’d rolled the drink in her hands and watched the ice cubes clink together. “Believe me, I know.” A sad smile had curved her lips, which showed only a hint of lipstick applied much earlier in the day. “Someday, honey, you’re gonna git yerself outta this dump”—she fluttered her fingers to take in all of Grannie Gin’s cabin—“and into a fancy house, just like Scarlett Damned O’Hara.” She managed a wider grin, showing off straight, impossibly white teeth. “And when you do, you’re gonna take care of your mama, y’hear?”

Now, thinking back, Olivia sighed. Oh, Mama, if you only knew.

Olivia would have done anything to make the demons in her mind be still. But lately, those dreams she’d repressed had come back with a vengeance. Ever since she’d returned to Louisiana.

She had to do something about the visions. She had to do something about tonight.

The woman’s dead, Olivia. There’s nothing you can do for her and no one’s going to believe you. You know that. You’ve tried to contact the authorities before. You’ve tried to convince your family, your friends, even your damned fiancé. No one believed you then. No one will now.

Besides, it was a dream. That’s all. Just a dream.

Slowly she edged off the bed, dragging her grandmother’s quilt with her, then unlocked the French doors to the verandah. The dog trotted after her as Olivia stepped into the cool winter of early morning, the floorboards smooth beneath her bare feet. The bayou was quiet, mist rising slowly, huge cypress trees guarding the sluggish waters that lapped near the back of the house. She leaned a hand against the rail, worn smooth by the touch of human hands over the past hundred years. Some creature of the darkness scuttled through the brush, rustling dry leaves and snapping thin branches on its way into the swamp. Goose bumps sprouted on Olivia’s arms. As she gazed across the still, dark waters, she tried to shake the dream from her mind, but it remained steadfast, clinging with razor-sharp talons, digging deep into her brain, refusing to be dismissed.

It was more than a nightmare.

Olivia knew it with horrid certainty.

It wasn’t the first time she’d “witnessed” someone’s death. They had come and gone over the years, but whenever she was here, in this part of bayou country, the visions had preyed upon her. It was one of the reasons she’d stayed away so long.

Yet, here she was. Once again in Louisiana. And the nightmares had already begun, back with a blinding, soulscraping fury that scared her to death. “It’s your fault,” she muttered as if Grannie Gin, bless her voodoo-lovin’ soul, could hear her.

Olivia’s fingers gripped the railing. As clearly as if she’d been in that minuscule bathroom, Olivia saw the murder again. Smoke rose as the masked priest lifted his sword and swung downward, not once, but three times….

Olivia squeezed her eyes shut, but the vision wouldn’t go away. A priest. A man of God!

She had to do something.

Now.

Somewhere tonight a woman had been murdered. Violently.

By rote Olivia sketched a quick sign of the cross over her chest. She rubbed her arms and pulled the quilt more snugly around her as a soft November breeze sighed through the trees overhead and the dank smell of the
swamp filled her nostrils. She couldn’t pretend this hadn’t happened even though no matter what, no one would believe her.

Turning quickly, she hurried inside, Grannie’s quilt billowing after her. Hairy S was right on her heels, toenails clicking across the hardwood floor as she made her way to the desk. Flipping on a small lamp, she scrounged through the dusty cubbyholes, discarding pens, note cards, thimbles and rubber bands until she found the scrap of paper she’d been looking for, a tattered piece of newspaper. It was an article that had been in the Times-Picayune after the latest rash of murders in the Crescent City had occurred. According to the report, a detective by the name of Rick Bentz had been instrumental in solving the bizarre killings. He’d been the man who had discovered the link in the crimes and how they were related to Dr. Sam, Samantha Leeds, host of the talk-radio program Midnight Confessions.

The same radio show Olivia had heard tonight in the vision.

She shuddered as she scanned the article she’d torn from the paper months ago.

Bentz and his partner Ruben Montoya, were given credit for breaking the “Rosary Killer” case where several prostitutes had been killed by “Father John,” a man who had stalked the city of New Orleans a few months back. Father John. The killer who was obsessed with Dr. Sam and her radio show, a sadist who would demand his victims don red wigs so that they would look like Dr. Sam, a murderer who scripted the dialogue for his victims, insisting they repent for their crimes … just as she’d seen the priest in her vision demand his victim’s pleas for mercy and forgiveness.

Her blood turned to ice.

First a man calling himself Father John and now a priest.

She had to talk to Detective Bentz. ASAP. No one else at the police station had even listened to her—just written her off as a lunatic. But then, she was used to the ridicule. Maybe Rick Bentz would be different. Maybe he’d listen to her.

He had to.

She dropped the blanket and reached for her jeans and a sweatshirt she’d tossed over the bedpost and grabbed a bottle of ibuprofen from the night table. She downed four tablets dry and hoped they’d take the edge off her headache. She had to think clearly, to explain …

Slinging the strap of her purse over her shoulder, she slid into a pair of moccasins and flew down the stairs. Hairy S scrambled after her. But as she dashed past the bookcase in the alcove near the front door, she felt a draft—a whisper across her skin, something evil.

She stopped short. Glanced out the window. The dog growled, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. Again, through the open window, she heard the rustle of dry leaves, a gust of wind through brittle branches. Was it her imagination or was someone outside … lurking in the darkness?

Fear pulsed through her blood. She moved close to the window, peered through the mist and darkness, but saw no one. The night was suddenly still, the rush of wind having died.

She slammed the window shut, locked it, and snapped the blinds closed. This was no time to get spooked. But at the bookcase she felt it again, that icy sensation.

You’re overreacting. Stop it, Livvie!

Her breath was shallow, the hairs lifting on the back of her arms, as if there were someone in the room with her. She caught her reflection in the mirror mounted next to the bookcase and shivered. Her hair was wild and uncombed, her face pale beneath a few freckles, her lips bloodless. She looked as scared as she was.

But she had to go…. She dug into her purse and grabbed her key ring, held the longest and sharpest key in her fingers as if it were some kind of weapon, then headed for the front door. Hairy S followed after her, his tail between his legs.

“You have to stay here,” she insisted, but as she opened the door, the scrappy little mutt streaked through, tearing through the fallen leaves to her beat-up truck. Olivia locked the door behind her, checked over her shoulder, and jogged to the driveway, where the dog was whining and jumping against the cab of her pickup. “Fine, get in.” She opened the driver’s side and Hairy S hurtled inside. He took his favorite spot on the passenger’s side of the bench seat, propping his tiny feet on the dash, his tongue lolling as he panted. “This isn’t a joyride,” Olivia said as she backed into a turnout, the beams of her headlights splashing over the face of her little cabin. She saw no strangers lurking in the shadows, no dark figure hiding behind the wicker furniture on the porch. Maybe her vivid imagination had run wild again.
It had to be.

Still her heart pumped wildly.

She shoved her old Ford Ranger into gear. With a rumble, the pickup shot forward, turning up gravel in its wake. The lane was long and wound through stands of cypress and palmettos, across a small bridge and onto the main road.

New Orleans was a good twenty-minute drive. She pushed the speed limit. But she didn’t want to bother with any other police officer, no other detective. No. She wanted Bentz. It was too early for him to be on duty. But she’d wait. As long as it took.

As the road turned south, she noticed a glimmer of light that grew into a faint glow on the horizon, an orange haze that was visible through the thick stands of cypress and live oak.

Her insides twisted.

_The fire._

Dear God.

She knew before the firemen or the police that somewhere in that hellish inferno was the body of a woman; the woman she’d seen in her vision.
Chapter Three

“Uh-oh.” Reuben Montoya’s voice held the knell of doom.

Bentz looked up from his stack of paperwork as Montoya, carrying two paper cups of coffee, slipped through the open door of his office.

He handed Bentz one of the cups, then leaned a hip against the file cabinet of Rick Bentz’s office. In his trademark black leather jacket and black jeans, he let his gaze wander back through the half-open door, past the maze of cubicles and desks in the outer office, to the stairway.

“What?” Rick asked from behind the desk and a mountain of paperwork that never seemed to diminish.

Crime was big business in New Orleans.

“Trouble.”

“Trouble.”

“No, you don’t understand, the resident nutcase is here again.”

“Again?” Bentz repeated, looking out the door to see the object of Montoya’s interest, a petite woman with wild gold-colored curls, smooth white skin, and attitude written all over her. In faded jeans and a New Orleans Saints sweatshirt that had seen better days, she was charging straight toward Bentz’s office.

“She’s been calling Brinkman, claims she’s a psychic and that she sees murders before they take place,” Montoya explained.

“And Brinkman says?”

“What he always says. ‘Bullshit.’ He doesn’t believe in any of that crap.”

At that moment, she barreled into the room. Her cheeks were flushed, her pointed chin set in what Bentz took as angry determination. Her eyes, the color of fine malt whiskey, bored straight through him.

“Detective Bentz?” she asked without so much as a glance in Montoya’s direction.

“Yeah. I’m Bentz.”

“Good. I need to talk to you.”

By this time Bentz was half standing. He flipped a hand at Montoya. “And this is Detective Reuben Montoya, my partner.”


Bentz lifted a brow. Diego? Since when? Oh … Since a beautiful female entered the room. Montoya might have referred to this woman as a nutcase but he was interested in her—of course he was—it was the younger man’s MO whenever a good-looking woman was nearby. Regardless, apparently, of her mental condition. And in spite of his talk the other night of being a one-woman man. Montoya’s male radar was always on alert.

She barely gave Montoya a second glance as Bentz offered his hand. “I read about you in the Times,” she said.

Great. Another citizen who thought he was a damned hero. To her credit, her gaze leveled straight at Bentz and she didn’t give Montoya’s flirtation a passing glance. Her grip was surprisingly strong as she gave his palm a hand shake then released her fingers. “You can’t believe everything you read.”

“Trust me, I don’t.”

He waved her into a chair. “So what’s on your mind?”

“A murder.”

At least she didn’t beat around the bush. He pulled a legal pad from beneath a pile of half-finished reports.

“Whose?”

“A woman.” She fell into a chair and he noticed the smudges of exhaustion beneath her eyes, the little lines pinching the corners of her mouth. A faint scent of jasmine entered with her. “I don’t know. He called her Cecilia but she said that wasn’t her name and … and she never told him what her name was.”
“Told who?”

“The killer,” she said, staring at him as if he were as dense as granite.

“Wait a minute. Let’s start over,” he said. “You witnessed a woman being killed, right? You were there?” he asked.

She hesitated before answering. “No.”

“No?”

“But I saw it.”

Wonderful. Just what he needed to start the day right. Bentz clicked his pen. “Where did the murder take place, Miss—?”

“Benchet. I’m Olivia Benchet, and I don’t know where it happened … but I saw someone, a woman about twenty-five, I’d guess, being killed.” Olivia’s face paled and she swallowed hard. “She … she had shoulder-length blond hair, blue eyes, a few freckles, and … and kind of a heart-shaped face. She was thin, but not skinny … in … good shape as if she worked out or … oh, God.” Olivia closed her eyes, took in a deep, shuddering breath, then slowly let it out. A second later her lids opened and she seemed calmer, in control. Again the scent of jasmine teased his nostrils.

“Wait a minute. We’d better back up. You heard him say her name and you saw him kill a woman, but you weren’t there?” Shit. Montoya had called this one, and the Cheshire cat smile beginning to stretch across his chin indicated he knew it.

“That’s right.”

“Was it on film?”

“No,” she said, then rushed on, “I think I should explain something.”

That would be a good start. She leaned forward in her chair, and then, as if trying to grasp something, anything, she opened and closed her hands. Here it comes, Bentz thought. The part where it all falls apart but she tries to convince us that this outrageous story is true. She was, no doubt as Montoya had explained, a bonafide nutcase.

“I’m able see some things right before or as they’re happening. In my mind. Even though I’m not there. I know it sounds bizarre, even crazy, but it’s true.”

“You’re a psychic.” Or a psychotic.

“I don’t know if you’d call me that. I think of myself as having a little bit of ESP.”

“A little bit?”

“It comes and goes. Last night, while I was sleeping, this was very real. I mean, I was there.”

Hell, this just got better and better. She’d been asleep. Great. “So you were dreaming.”

“It was more than that.”

“And all of your dreams, do they come true?”

“No. Of course not!” She threw her hands into the air. “I already told you I know this sounds nuts, but just hear me out, okay? And please, don’t make any judgment calls. I’m telling you these ‘dreams,’ if you want to call them that, are different. I can’t explain it. They’re beyond real. Beyond surreal.”

I’ll bet. Bentz rubbed the back of his neck as he studied her. She was so earnest. She wasn’t lying. Whatever it was she was peddling here, she believed every word of it.

“I woke up and I could still smell the smoke, feel the heat, hear her cries for help. I mean, I was there. Not physically, but …”

“Spiritually?” he offered.

Montoya suggested, “Mentally. Or telepathically.”

“However you want to explain it,” she said, starting to sound irritated.

“I can’t.”

“I know. Neither can I,” she admitted.

Because it’s inexplicable.

“I know … I mean, I understand that you’re used to working with facts. Cold, hard evidence. I don’t blame you, but surely you’ve worked with psychics or people who have a different level of sensitivity, or psychic
prowess. I’ve read about police departments using psychics to help solve particularly difficult cases.”

“That’s when they run out of that hard evidence,” he said to her, “when they actually have a dead body or missing person and have exhausted all other conventional avenues.”

“There’s nothing conventional about this.”

“Amen,” Montoya said and she tossed a sharp look over her shoulder.

“My grandmother, she had the same gift, but not my mother.” Her lips twisted into a wry, self-deprecating smile. “Lucky me,” she said. Her smooth forehead was suddenly lined, her eyebrows pulled together, and she leaned back in her chair as if exhausted.

“It’s genetic?”

“I don’t know how it works, okay? That’s just what happened in my family. And it’s not always at night, in dreams. Sometimes it can happen in the middle of the day, driving down the Interstate.”

“Could be dangerous.”

“That’s right, it is. And it’s … a royal pain telling people about it and trying to make them understand. To believe.”

“It’s a big leap for most of us mere mortals,” Bentz agreed.

Behind her Montoya tried to keep his expression bland, but there was a glimmer in his dark eyes as he took a sip of coffee. He didn’t say it, but I told you so was written all over him.

“I already admitted that I know it sounds crazy,” she said, as if she, too, felt the skepticism in the small room. She seemed so small and out of place in the station where, though it was barely eight in the morning, the place was a beehive of activity. The door to Bentz’s office was ajar and through the opening he caught glimpses of officers and civilians, heard snatches of conversation and muffled laughter, watched as more than one suspect was dragged to a desk for a statement. But this woman didn’t belong here. Whatever she was, it wasn’t a cop, a criminal, or, he suspected, a valid witness.

Slumping down in the chair, she rubbed her shoulders as if she were cold to her bones though the room was stuffy, hot enough that he’d cracked the window open. The sounds of the city waking up wafted inside—pedestrians walking and talking, the tires from passing cars whirring, engines rumbling, and pigeons cooing and flapping their wings from an upper ledge. She ran long fingers along her jaw. “I shouldn’t have come here,” she said as if to herself. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me … but I had to try.”

“Detective Montoya, maybe you could scour up some coffee for Ms. Benchet?”

“I’m fine—” she protested, but Montoya was already out the door.

Olivia leaned forward, as if now that they were alone she could confide in him. “You have to believe me, Detective Bentz. A woman was murdered early this morning. Brutally. I saw it.”

“But you weren’t there.”

“No, no, in my mind’s eye.”

“While you were sleeping,” he pointed out.

“It wasn’t a dream!” she said emphatically, not so much angry as desperate. “I know the difference.” Montoya, carrying a paper coffee cup, slipped into the room again. “The priest tortured her and—”

“Priest?” Montoya repeated as he handed her the cup. Some of his cocksure bravado slipped. “A priest was the killer?”

“Yes. He was dressed in robes. Vestments.”

Bentz scowled as he understood why she’d singled him out. He set the pen on his notepad and leaned back in his chair. “Let me guess. You read about Montoya and me solving the other case this past summer, so you thought that we’d be able to help out. Because we’re kind of experts on the whole Catholic-homicide thing and you’ve seen a priest.” He tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“I hoped so,” she admitted, and she looked so guileless he had the unexpected urge to believe her. But he knew better. “Oh, I get it,” she said, and those amber eyes sparked as the light dawned. “You actually think I read about the serial killer last summer, and because I didn’t have anything better to do, I just bopped down here with a wild story about a priest to try and stir things up, right? To gain some attention, my ‘fifteen minutes or seconds of fame?’”

He didn’t reply.
“Oh, give me a break. Who would do that? Come on!”
“Ms. Benchet—”
“Don’t patronize me, okay, and it’s Olivia. Let’s get that straight, right now. I realize my story sounds hideous, and believe me it was, but I witnessed the murder, as surely as if I was in that tiny bathroom.”
“A bathroom?” Montoya interjected again.
“That’s where it happened. Where a priest, a man who was supposed to have dedicated his life to God, killed a woman he had chained to a sink.”
Montoya arched a brow. “So, Ms. Benchet—Olivia—you’d recognize the killer?”
“No.” She shook her head and bit down hard on her lip. “He was wearing a mask—like a black ski mask that covered his entire head.”
“Now we’ve got a priest in a mask,” Bentz repeated.
“Yes!” Her eyes flashed angrily.
“And this murder that you witnessed though you weren’t there, happened in a bathroom?”
“I told you the woman was chained to the sink and—” She shuddered. “God, it was awful. The flames were coming in through the vent and he didn’t seem to care; it was like he expected the fire somehow, but that wasn’t enough.”
“Not enough?” Bentz asked, dreading what was to follow.
“No. He had a sword,” she whispered, visibly shaking and squeezing her eyes shut as if to close off the memory. “He swung down three times at her bowed head.”
“Jesus!” Montoya muttered.
Tears formed in Olivia Benchet’s eyes and she blinked several times. Either she was one hell of an actress, or she really believed her own lies. “It—it was horrible. Horrible.”
Bentz glanced at Montoya as he found a box of tissues and handed it to Olivia. She pulled out a couple and looked embarrassed as she wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry.”
“Don’t even think about it,” he said. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but one way or another, Olivia Benchet was at the end of her decidedly frayed rope. He decided to go by the book and take her statement formally. Just in case. Crackpot or not, she was scared to death. “Let’s start over. I’ll tape this if that’s all right with you.”
“Please … fine … whatever.” She waved her fingers as if she didn’t care what he did, then sipped her coffee as Bentz found his recorder, put in a fresh tape, and pressed the record button. “November twenty-second, this is an interview with Olivia Benchet. Detective Rick Bentz and Detective Reuben Montoya are with the witness.” Angling the microphone so that she could speak into it easily, he said, “Now, Ms. Benchet, please spell your name for me and give me your address….”
As the tape whirred and he took notes, Olivia cradled a cup of coffee and spoke in soft, calmer tones. She told him she lived out of the city, in bayou country, gave him her address and phone number along with the name of the shop where she worked—the Third Eye, just off Jackson Square. Before moving to Louisiana a few months back to care for her ailing grandmother, she’d lived in Tucson.
With Bentz’s prodding she repeated much of what she’d already said, and as Montoya watched, Bentz scribbled notes, listening as she explained her “vision” only hours earlier, that she was certain she’d “seen” a priest who had chained a naked woman to a sink in a smoky room and that the woman had repeatedly begged for mercy.
Olivia’s voice was a low whisper, nearly a drone, almost as if she was in some kind of trance, detached from Bentz’s small office with its piles of files, overflowing wastebasket, and dying Boston fern littering the floor with dried, curled fronds.
“… after he was certain that the radio was playing the right song, some kind of hymn, then he used the sword,” she said, describing again that he’d swung three times. “I sensed he was in a hurry, probably because of the fire or a fear of being caught, but after he was finished, while the flames were beginning to come up from the vent, he took the time to dig into his pocket. He pulled a chain or a necklace of some kind and hung it over the shower head. The radio was playing some weird music and the smoke was so thick I could barely see, but I think he stripped off his robes and left them there.”
“So he was naked?” Montoya interjected. He was leaning against the door frame, his arms folded over his
chest, his forgotten cup of coffee in one hand. “You could see identifying marks. Like tattoos or birthmarks or moles …”

“He wasn’t naked. He was wearing something like a wet suit or one of those tight biking suits, all black.”

“And a ski mask that covered his entire head.”

“And gloves?” Montoya asked.

“Yes.” A muscle worked in her jaw and she glanced through the open window. “I think … I mean I got this eerie feeling … that somehow he knew, or he sensed, that I was watching him.”
Chapter Four

A nutcase. Pure and simple. He hated to think of it of her because she seemed so convinced of what she’d seen, but Bentz decided Montoya was right. Intriguing as she was, Olivia Benchet was certifiable. Pretty—with her wild light brown hair and full lips—but certifiable. Sitting across from him, alternately seeming small and vulnerable, then angry and tough, always animated, she was desperate for him to buy into her story.

So far he wasn’t.

“This priest-slash-killer. How did he know you were watching him? Did he see you?” Reuben asked.

“I don’t know. I can’t explain it, but I swear he looked at me.”

Montoya persisted. “How could he see you? You weren’t there, right? You were at your grandmother’s house … this was kind of like a foggy dream.”

“There was smoke but I could see through it. I felt like I was staring through glass or clear plastic, a window, maybe …” Letting out a discouraged sigh, she set her unfinished cup of coffee on the desk, then pushed her unruly hair from her eyes. “I realize you don’t want to believe me, that it would be easier if I just disappeared, but I know this happened.” She leveled her gaze at Bentz. “I’d bet my life on it.”

Bentz glanced down at the legal pad in front of him. He heard the sounds of phones ringing, conversations buzzing, keyboards clicking from the outer office and felt like he was wasting his time, but decided to hear her out. “Okay. So go on. You said the priest took off his clothes. What happened then? Where did he go?”

“He left. Went out the door of the room.”

“Didn’t you follow him?”

“I don’t think I could have. It doesn’t work like that.”

“What does it work like?”

“I wish I knew. I usually just get glimpses. Pieces that I have trouble putting together. This was much more complete, but … but then … I woke up.”

Convenient, Bentz thought, but didn’t comment, and when he did speak, tried to keep the skepticism from his voice. “Do you remember anything else? For example, was there anything distinguishing that would help us locate the house or apartment where this happened?”

“The building was on fire,” she snapped. “I’d think that would narrow the search down a little.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. “You’re sure it was in New Orleans?”

“The radio was playing. I recognized one of the programs. So it was in the vicinity, I think, and … I can’t explain it, but it felt like he was in the city or nearby … oh, God.” She sighed and shook her head. “You still don’t believe me, do you?”

“I’m just sorting through what you’re saying, trying to get to the facts.” Whether she intended to or not, she was bothering him, getting under his skin. So sure of what she’d seen one minute yet admitting that she sounded like a loon the next. One second on the verge of tears, the next mad as hell. He had a dozen questions, but didn’t want to overwhelm her. And if she was lying, he relied on the old adage: Give her enough rope and she’d hang herself.

“So,” Bentz said gently, “all you know is that someone was murdered, nearly beheaded, by a priest you can’t identify, in a building you can’t describe, but you somehow think it happened here. In New Orleans.”

She looked at her hands. “Yes. I—I can’t tell you where specifically. But I do know it happened this morning.”

“Because that’s when you were dreaming.”

Her cheeks flushed. “No … I assume the visions occur simultaneously with the act, but I’m not certain about it. However, as I mentioned earlier, Detective, there was a radio in that damned bathroom and the host of the late-night program, Midnight Confessions, Dr. Sam, was talking about it being a significant day in history, the day President Kennedy was assassinated. That’s today, the twenty-second.”
“Sure is,” Montoya said.
“So is that significant?”
“I don’t know!”

“Look,” she said, pointing a finger straight at him, those gold eyes snapping fire, “I’ve been in before. I’ve talked to Detective Brinkman and he just blows me off every time, but when I read about you two, I thought maybe you’d be different. That you might help me. That somehow you could find a way to prevent what happened last night from happening again.”

“If something happened.”

“It did, Detective. I swear on my grandmother’s grave.” Her face was flushed with color, conviction setting her jaw.

“Except that maybe you just had a bad dream.”

“No way in hell. I know the difference.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” he asked, and she let out a long, protracted sigh.

“No. Not that I can think of. Not now.”

Time to end this. He managed a smile he didn’t feel. “Look, Ms. Benchet—Olivia—there’s not much I can do. I can’t very well start a murder investigation without a body, or at least a report of a missing woman matching your girl’s description. You haven’t given me much to go with here other than you had a pretty bad nightmare.”

“Pretty bad?” she repeated. “Pretty bad? I don’t make it a habit to run to the police station every time I have a nightmare. The least you can do is check it out. Start with the fire.”

From his position near the file cabinet, Montoya scratched at his goatee. “There was a fire. An old house, not far from City Park, off of Esplanade, I think.”

Bentz glared at his partner. “How do you know this already?”

Montoya flashed his practiced grin. “Ear to the ground, eye on the sky, nose to the grindstone.”

Head up the ass, Bentz thought. Sometimes Montoya’s practiced cool bugged the hell out of him. “Anyone inside?”

“Don’t know. When I heard about it, they were still hosin’ down the place.”

Bentz swung his gaze back to Olivia. “Okay. We’ll check it out.”

“Good.” Her gaze centered on his, but her shoulders relaxed a bit, as if she were relieved. “Look, I know you’d like to write me off as a crazy person, but don’t, okay? Please.”

He clicked off the recorder and stood, signifying the interview was over. “Thanks for coming in. As I said, we’ll look into it and let you know if we find anything.”

“That’s all I can ask.” Reaching into her purse, she withdrew her wallet, unfolded it, and pulled out a business card that read:

Olivia Benchet
Owner
The Crystal Prism
Collectibles, New Age, Spirituals

The phone number and Tucson, Arizona, address had been scratched out and a local number inserted. She slid the card across his desk, past the bifold picture frames where two photographs of his daughter, Kristi, smiled up at him.

“She’s pretty,” Olivia observed, glancing at the pictures. “Yours?”

“Yeah.” He picked up the card. “Look, I’m gonna tell you straight out, Ms. Benchet. All you’ve brought me is something that looks a helluva lot like a wild goose chase, but if I hear anything, if there’s any reports of a missing woman who matches your description, if … any bodies are found in a fire … I’ll be in contact with you.”

She nodded, hesitated, and seemed to be struggling with something more. Montoya observed it too, because in his peripheral vision Bentz noticed his partner straighten slightly and say, “You’ve got something else on
Glancing from Montoya to Bentz, she said, “No doubt you'll talk to Detective Brinkman about me. Check me out and I don't blame you, I would, too. So here's the deal; I'm sure the murderer’s struck before. I—I didn't have the kind of clear vision I had last night—the visions were much more fragmented. Pieces of glass rather than a whole window. But I sensed, and I can’t explain why, that this man—this priest—has not only killed before, but that he’s on some kind of mission. A vendetta. He won’t quit until he is stopped. There have already been several victims—two, maybe three … or more. I’m not as clear as to what happened to them, but they died. Cruelly.” She bit at her lower lip, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “Something’s very wrong in this city. Evil. Last night I saw the whole thing and it was hideous. This mission of his, it’s not finished yet. In fact, it’s probably just started.”

Bingo. Bonafide lunatic. Bentz had heard enough, but Olivia Benchet glanced at the photos of his daughter again. In the first picture Kristi wasn’t quite six, grinning widely enough to show that she was missing a front tooth as she entered kindergarten. The other taken just last year was of a pretty, composed seventeen-year-old. She smiled softly, but there was just the hint of defiance in her hazel eyes, a bit of a challenge in the tilt of her chin—the promise of rebellion yet to come.

“You’re a father, Detective Bentz, and some monster is out there killing women in this city. How would you feel if the killer zeroed in on her?” She motioned to the double-fold pictures. “That girl he killed last night is someone’s daughter, possibly someone’s sister or mother.” Those whiskey-gold eyes beseeched him again. “I hope you’ll call me when you find out I’m telling you the truth because there’s a chance that I can help.”

He rounded the desk and pushed the door open further, signifying she should leave. “We’ll get back to you if anything comes up.”

“I asked you not to be condescending,” she reminded him, her lips pinching at the corners. “I can’t read your mind, thank God, but I’m pretty good at seeing what’s in your eyes.” She swung out the door.

“Ouch,” Montoya said as she walked out. More than one officer turned a head to watch her swing by in her tight hip-hugging jeans and sweatshirt. Her back was ramrod stiff, her chin held high. Bentz never took his eyes off her, but she didn’t so much as glance over her shoulder and he hated the fact that he still smelled a tinge of her perfume.

Montoya let out a long, low whistle. “What a piece of … work.”

“Yep.” Bentz fingered the card she’d left him and watched as she disappeared down the stairs. He gave himself a swift mental kick. He wasn’t a horny kid anymore. Not like Montoya. Sure, she was an attractive woman, but big deal. They were a dime a dozen. And not all of them were prancing around with a significant amount of screws loose. He tapped the edge of her business card against the calluses of his other palm.

“Just another beautiful looney tune,” Montoya said thoughtfully. “We’ve got our share down here.”

“Amen to that,” Bentz said. “But she’s been in Tucson for a while.”

“Hey, they’re not hurtin’ in the weirdo department, either. Isn’t that where they see all the damned UFOs?”

“Roswell, New Mexico.”

“Close enough.” Montoya zipped up his leather jacket, then flipped the collar to cover the back of his neck. “Too much desert sun if you ask me.”

“I didn’t.”

Montoya ignored the comment, downed the dregs of his coffee, and crushed the cup in his fist. “Their brains get baked. You’ve seen those cow skulls. The sun does that. Strips the bones bare of any flesh or gray matter.”

“Even if they’re alive?”

“It starts slow.” Montoya flashed his killer smile again as he tossed his empty cup into the trash.

“What time was that fire?” Bentz asked, wishing he could just dismiss Olivia Benchet.

“Early this morning. Three or four.”

That jelled with Olivia’s story. Midnight Confessions, Dr. Sam’s popular talk show, had been expanded on some nights of the week. She now signed off at three on Friday mornings.

“A priest,” Montoya muttered under his breath. “I don’t think so.”

Neither did Bentz. Even though he had his own bone to pick with the Catholic Church and one priest in particular. The guy was a bastard, but as low as he would stoop in or out of his fancy vestments, the good father wouldn’t commit murder. Bentz was convinced of it.
The phone jangled and he moved back to the desk, grabbing the receiver. “Bentz.”

“Yeah, Rick. It’s Stan Pagliano.”

The hairs on the back of Bentz’s neck rose. He played cards with Stan every six months or so. Stan was a single dad, too, with a daughter Kristi’s age. And he was with the New Orleans Fire Department. “What’s up?” He rounded his desk, stretching the cord tight.

“I’ve been workin’ half the night. We had ourselves a bad one not far from Bayou St. John. Small house. By the time the first call came in, it was too late.”

“Someone inside?”

“Yeah. What’s left of her … Well, we think it’s a woman. Hard to tell. Not much left. The ME and the crime scene team are here, but I thought you might want to poke around. The deal is this, Rick, this isn’t someone who fell asleep in bed while smokin’ a damned cigarette. Looks like arson and there was a woman trapped inside; she was chained to the sink, man. Her hands and feet were chained there. She had something around her neck, too, and the body’s burned bad, but it’s—it’s—her head.” He let out a breath and Bentz knew what was coming. “It was nearly severed. Sick stuff.”

Bentz’s skin crawled. He glanced at the door, wishing he could call Olivia Benchet back into the room.

“There are some other things, too. The crime scene team will get it all, but it might not hurt for you to take a look before everything’s bagged and tagged.”

“I’m on my way,” Bentz said. His gut clenched tight as Stan rattled off the address. He hung up and was reaching for his jacket when his eyes met Montoya’s. “There was someone killed in the fire over by Esplanade. Probably a woman. Burned beyond recognition, her hands and feet chained to the sink, her head nearly severed.”

“Holy shit,” Montoya muttered, sucking in his breath.

Bentz stuffed his Glock into his shoulder holster. “Precisely.”
Kristi Bentz dragged her body from the Olympic-sized pool. Two miles. The longest she’d swum in six months and it felt good. She grabbed her towel from the hook over the benches against the wall and breathed deeply. Her nose was filled with chlorine, her ears plugged though she heard the echo of voices of the few other swimmers out this early. Ms. Carter, a masculine-looking swim coach wearing sweats and a whistle, was patrolling the area, padding in plastic slip-ons along the concrete siding, picking up kick boards and a pair of goggles that had been left.

Mist covered the windows, but through the foggy glass, Kristi noticed that students were hurrying to their classes, cutting across the quad by the athletic facility. She glanced at the clock.

Shit. It was seven forty-five. If she didn’t hustle, she’d be late to her first class. Dripping, she reached for a towel and noticed something out of place in her peripheral vision, something dark through the windows. She turned, got a glimpse of a figure through the foggy glass—a man about six feet tall, peering inside. So why didn’t he just walk through the door?

And what did she care? So what if the guy was looking? He was probably some guy getting his jollies out of watching girls in swimsuits. A lame nerd who didn’t have the guts to ask a girl out.

Pathetic pervert.

She wrapped the towel around her, hurried into the locker room and took a quick, hot shower. The voyeur pushed out of her mind, she changed into jeans and a sweater. Quickly she snapped her hair back in a ponytail, slapped on some lipstick and mascara, then hauling her backpack, jogged across campus. Most of the kids who were awake at this hour had already disappeared into the lecture halls. Only a few were hurrying along the concrete paths crisscrossing the lawns between the ancient brick buildings. She glanced past the library to Adam’s Hall where she had English with Dr. Northrup back to back with Psychology with Dr. Sutter, both of whom were odd ducks in her estimation. They were so … intense. Northrup thought Shakespeare was a God, for Christ’s sake, and Sutter gave out tons of homework. Tons! If only she’d registered early and gotten into classes by some of the easier professors, but, as usual, she’d signed up late and ended up with Northrup, Sutter, and Dr. Franz, another gem of a professor. Talk about a nutcase!

She jogged down a path to her favorite class. Philosophy of Religion. But it wasn’t the subject matter that interested her, or the curmudgeon of a professor—Dr. Zaroster. God, he was as ancient as the books he taught from, but his T.A. Brian Thomas, a grad student. Now he was a reason to get up early and never miss a class. If Dr. Sutter or Dr. Franz had T.A.s like Brian, maybe she wouldn’t oversleep or skip class.

Kristi smiled at the thought of Brian. He’d showed her special attention during a couple of discussion groups and she’d been flattered. Tall, with thick hair and a body to die for, he’d flashed a shy smile in her direction more often than not. She’d caught him watching her upon occasion during the lectures, then quickly look away when she glanced in his direction. As if he didn’t want her to see him.

Well, it hadn’t worked. She hurried into the lecture hall and walked down the steps to take a seat in the front of the auditorium. Zaroster was just opening his book. The cranky professor shot Kristi an irritated glance.

**Big deal. So she was a minute or two late. She ‘d wanted to make an entrance.** So Brian would notice … only … he wasn’t in the cavernous room. Kristi pulled out her notebook and paper. Others were already writing furiously; a couple even had palm pilots and were furiously entering data. Zaroster’s high-pitched voice started filling the cavernous room as he flipped through the pages of some musty old tome.

She hazarded a glance around the room and then she saw him. At the back of the lecture hall, in the top row, handing out some kind of quiz. She must’ve missed that part by coming in late.

Oh well … she’d wing it. How tough could a quiz on the Buddha be?

She looked over her shoulder and caught Brian looking at her. She smiled, and to her surprise, he smiled back.

Oh, God. Her heart did a major flip. She felt the color rush up her face and she glanced down for just a second. Caught her breath. He was so much older than she was—probably closer to thirty than twenty.
So what? Who cared?

And what about Jay?

She felt a moment’s guilt. Jay was her boyfriend. Or had been. But since she’d left New Orleans and started college, their relationship had turned rocky. She glanced at the ring on her finger. A promise ring. The kind you get before you get engaged. It seemed foolish now. Adolescent.

She worked it off her finger as old man Zaroster droned on, then slipped the simple silver band into her pocket. Then she hazarded one last glance over her shoulder. Brian was only two rows above her, still handing out the tests. His eyes didn’t meet hers again, but she wasn’t worried. Sooner or later he’d ask her out. She’d bet on it.

The air smelled bad.

Smoky and damp, filled with the scent of wet ashes and charred wood.

Bentz glowered at the crime scene where a burned-out shell of a house smoldered in the morning light. Roped off by yellow tape, saturated by the firemen’s hoses, a few blackened timbers remained standing around the smokestack of a crumbling chimney. In the yard, half a dozen crepe myrtles and live oak trees had been singed, matching the seared siding and roofs of neighboring houses.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he stared at the soggy, smelly mess. The crime scene staff were already working, carefully sifting through the rubble, a photographer and vidiographer scanning the site, preserving a visual image of the remains. Uniformed officers were keeping out the curious, and department vehicles, some with lights flashing, were parked across the street, closing access. One news crew was still filming; another was already packing up a van to leave.

Good. The press was always a nuisance.

The deceased had already been examined, photographed, and taken away in a bag. Bentz had taken a look and nearly lost the contents of his stomach. He’d witnessed a lot in nearly twenty years of being a cop, but what had happened to this woman was up there with the worst he’d seen.

One fire truck remained. Several police cars and a police van were parked at odd angles around the perimeter of the site. Some of the neighbors were still hanging around, asking questions, or talking among themselves as a wintry sun peeked through a bank of thick gray clouds layering over the city. Bentz had talked to a couple of the officers and the ME and was still trying to piece together how in the hell Olivia Benchet had called this one.

Right on the money.

As if she’d been here. Bentz found a pack of gum in his pocket and removed a stick of spearmint from its wrapper. What the hell was with that woman? If she hadn’t been here, in the room or looking through a window, how could she have known what had happened in the house?

Stan Pagliano walked up. His face was smudged with soot and dirt, the lines webbing across his forehead appearing deeper than usual. “Man, this was a nasty one,” he was saying, “but then they all are.”

“What happened?” Bentz had heard the story from one of the cops on the scene, but wanted Stan’s assessment.

“From what I understand, a neighbor got up to go to the bathroom, looked out the window, and saw the flames. By the time he called it in, it was too late to save the house. The first truck got here within three minutes, but by then the whole house was fully involved. We were lucky to save the surrounding property.” He motioned to the single-story homes, most of them identical shotgun doubles with decorative supports, hip roofs, a door on each side, and narrow windows in between. “Near as we can tell, the fire started in a closet in the back, one that housed an old furnace … and for some reason the fire moved from the firebox through one of the vents, almost as if it followed a trail of something slow burning to the bathroom … strange.” His dark eyes met Bentz’s. “But then there was the victim—chained, for Christ’s sake. Chained. What kind of sick bastard would do something like that?” He reached beneath his sooty yellow slicker and found a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He shook one out and offered a filter tip to Bentz, but much as he craved a smoke, he shook his head.

“Oh, yeah, you quit, right?” Stan flicked his lighter to the end of his Winston and inhaled deeply. “You know, Bethie always tried to get me to quit, for years. All that shit they hear about secondhand smoke in school, then just last summer she dropped her purse and guess what fell out? A half-pack of Marlboro lights.” He said this through a cloud of smoke. “Go figure.”

“They start to grow up and realize that we’ve been lyin’ to ‘em half the time,” Bentz said, watching as
Montoya talked to several people clustered around the street. The neighbors.

“Ten to one the victim was young. Not much older than Beth Ann or Kristi, unless I miss my guess,” Stan said, and Olivia Benchet’s words burned through Bentz’s mind: You’re a father. Detective Bentz … How would you feel if the killer zeroed in on your daughter?

“Hey, Stan, over here. Give a hand, would ya?” another fireman called from the remaining truck.

“Right there.” He took a long drag, then nodded to Bentz. “Talk to ya later,” Stan said. “And Rick—”

“Yeah?”

“Nail this shit head, would ya?”

“You got it.” Bentz watched Stan jog toward the truck.

Montoya had finished with the neighbors. Skirting the crime scene, he wended his way through the parked vehicles, then leapt over a puddle on the street. “What’s the ME have to say?” he asked.

“He’ll send us a report, but from what he observed, it looks like our ‘witness,’ if that’s what you want to call her, definitely knew what was going on.”

“Makes ya wonder, doesn’t it?” Montoya observed.

“I think we’d better check her out, front, back, sideways, and inside out.” He stuffed his fists into the pockets of his slacks. “There’s more to her story.” Frowning, considering Olivia Benchet and how downright determined and innocent she appeared, he wondered what he’d dig up. Probably nothing he’d like. “I’ll talk to her again, and you, check out her background. The grandmother, mother, boyfriend, if she’s married, how many times, where she went to school, all that stuff.”

“You got it.” Montoya gave a quick nod.

“So what did you find out? Any of the neighbors see anything?”

Montoya snorted. “Not much. No one remembers anything suspicious, or if they did, they’re keepin’ it to themselves. Aside from the guy takin’ a leak in the pink house, there”—he gestured to a shotgun house next to the one that had burned—“none of the neighbors so much as looked out their windows until they heard the sirens. Then they smelled smoke and noticed that the neighborhood was glowing like a damned nuclear explosion.” He shook his head, disgusted. “The neighbor who noticed the fire, Elvin Gerard, he saw the flames, woke up his wife, Lois, and called nine-one-one. End of story. Except that he claims the house was a rental duplex, but it had been empty for a month or so. Both sides of the unit vacant.”

“But someone was there tonight.”

“Yes.” Montoya flipped open a little notebook. “According to Gerard, the house had been owned by an elderly couple, the Jalinskys. First he died, then the wife within the year. Their kids inherited it and rented it out through a local management firm, Benchmark Realty. No one’s been there, except someone from Benchmark showing it to potential renters and a janitorial company that cleaned up the mess from the previous tenants.”

The firemen were beginning to retrieve the hoses, the neighbors were disbursing, and even the last television crew was packing it in. A police officer was taking down the barricades on the street and waving cars with rubbernecking drivers through.

“I’ll check with Benchmark, get a list of who’s been asking about the place,” Bentz said. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. Maybe. The only break we’ve got is one of the neighbors pulled out his video camera and caught the fire on film just as the fire department arrived.”

“You get the tape?” Bentz was interested.

“Yep. The guy was only too happy to oblige.” Montoya reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a cassette. “I think we’ll have to suffer through the Hendersons’ trip to Disney World, but after that we can take a look at the fire.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and see something on the tape,” Bentz said, not believing it for a moment. The killer would have been long gone by the time the groggy neighbor had focused on the inferno, unless the murderer had gotten his rocks off by sticking around to view the havoc wrought by his work. It happened upon occasion and then the police got lucky. But it was a long shot. Right now, the most serious link they had to the crime so far was Olivia Benchet. Bentz’s eyes narrowed on the soggy mass that had once been a house and thought about Olivia Benchet’s bizarre story—a naked chained victim, a priest with a radio and a sword, and the anniversary of JFK’s assassination.

“I’ll check with missing persons, see if we can figure out who the victim is, then talk to Ms. Benchet again.”
“You’re not buying the ESP-voodoo thing.” Montoya swallowed a smirk.

“Not yet.” They started walking to their Crown Victoria. “We’ve got to figure out what makes her tick. You talk to Brinkman. Pull out anything he’s got on her, no matter how insignificant. He must have notes or a file or something. And see if she talked to anyone else, here in the city or in the surrounding parishes. She acts like there are other murders, so check around and I’ll contact the FBI. They can put it through their computer.”

“They’ll want another task force, if this is linked.”

“Fine.”

“I didn’t think you liked working with the Feds.” They dodged a few remaining firemen and thick hoses.

“Nah. That’s not it. Long as they don’t get in my way.”

They reached the cruiser and Bentz slid into the passenger side. He wasn’t going to leave any stone unturned when it came to the psychic—just what the hell was her angle?

“So, maybe we should check out the local priests,” Montoya suggested as he climbed behind the steering wheel.

“Maybe. And while we’re at it, maybe we can find one with a rap sheet for arson and murder,” Bentz joked.

Montoya snorted a laugh as he started the car. “The nutcase’s vision was right on the money, wasn’t it?”

“Either that or she was involved.”

“Ya think?”

Bentz shook his head as he conjured up the desperation in Olivia’s eyes, the genuine fear in her expression, the way her teeth sank into her lower lip and worried it when she was telling her story. “I don’t know what to think.”

Montoya backed up and jockeyed the Crown Vic between the other rigs. “If she was involved, why come to us? Nah, that doesn’t wash.”

Bentz didn’t think so either, but weirder things had happened. He wasn’t leaving anything to chance. “We’ll see.”

“Yeah, I’ll check with DMV, Vital statistics, the SSA.”

“Once I get the preliminary information on her and the ME’s report, I’m going to have another chat with her.”

“Man, she really nailed this one. I mean nailed it. Ten to one we find a burned-out radio and some necklace on the shower head, just like she said.” Montoya’s dark eyes held his for a second. “Somethin’s up with that woman.”

#x201C;It sure is, Diego.”

“Hey, that’s what I go by these days,” Montoya shot back as he turned off the side street.

“Why?”

“My heritage.” He patted the video sticking out of his jacket pocket.


“It just sounds good, don’t ya think?”

“Whatever.” Bentz didn’t care. Chewing his tasteless gum, Bentz glanced at the video cassette and wondered what it would show. Probably nothing. Unless the tape caught the image of a fleeing suspect, or someone in the crowd of curious onlookers at the scene whom none of the neighbors recognized, and who might be the killer watching the aftermath of his destruction. Or possibly one of the neighbors himself. Either way, Olivia Benchet was the best lead they had.
Chapter Six

The phone was jangling as Olivia opened the front door. Dropping her bag on the kitchen table, she swept up the receiver while Hairy S streaked into the living room. “Hello?” she said, cradling the receiver between her shoulder and ear as she unwrapped the cover to the bird’s cage. Green feathers ruffled as Chia, the parrot, gave off a sharp whistle.

“Livvie?” Sarah’s usually upbeat voice was soft. Sober. That could mean only one thing. Trouble with her husband. Again. Leo Restin had a problem with fidelity. A major problem. Monogamy wasn’t in the man’s vocabulary. He just couldn’t seem to keep his hands off other women. He’d even had the nerve to come on to Olivia, his wife’s business partner, a few months back. Leo’s unwanted attention was one of the reasons that had propelled her from Tucson. She’d told him to back off, threatened to confide in Sarah, but he just pressed on. Insufferable jerk.

“What’s up?” Olivia asked with a wink at Chia.

“It’s Leo.”

Big surprise.

“He’s disappeared again.”

That usually meant he was with a woman. Olivia wrapped the cord of the phone around her hand and stared out the window to the mists rising off the bayou.

“He just doesn’t give up, does he?” She didn’t respond. “You know what you should do, Sarah.”

Sarah sighed. “I don’t believe in divorce, Olivia. I know it’s crazy, but I still love him.”

“He’s using you.”

“I just have to wait until Leo grows up.”

That could well be forever. “He’s thirty-five,” Olivia pointed out. “How long do you think it’ll take?”

“I don’t know, but I really love him,” she said. Her voice wobbled a bit. “I know, I sound pathetic, like one of those loser women who puts up with everything because she loves the jerk. But I really do care about him and … and you don’t know what he’s like when there’s no one else around. He can be so sweet.”

“That’s why so many women fall for him.”

Sarah sucked in her breath.

“Sorry—I couldn’t help it,” Olivia said quickly. “I hate to see you keep getting hurt. If you keep letting him, he’ll keep doing it.”

“I know, I know, but nobody in my family gets divorced. I’d be the first one in my direct lineage.”

“Did all the others put up with this kind of garbage?”

“I guess. I don’t know. I grew up believing that everyone got married and lived happily ever after. Oh, they might fight and yell and even break up for a while, but in the end, it all worked out.”

“Fairy tales.”

“Divorce isn’t easy.”

“It shouldn’t be. Getting married should be harder.”

Sarah chuckled. “Yeah, maybe. So how’s it going there?”

“Not great,” Olivia said, but didn’t explain about her vision. Sarah, despite her flirting with New Age religion, had solid roots in Catholicism. Another lapsed believer, but one, Olivia sensed, ready to return to the fold. Wasn’t she one herself? “It’s not going to be as easy as I thought to sell this place.” She glanced around her grandmother’s cabin with its gleaming wood walls and floors shining with over a hundred years’ worth of patina. Tall windows with narrow panes offered a spectacular view of the bayou. The insulation was practically nil, the plumbing and electricity added decades after the original construction and now were outdated and probably dangerous. “I have a lot of work to do before I put it on the market and then I’m not sure I want to.
It’s been in my family forever.”

“So you haven’t decided if you’re going to stay in New Orleans?”

“I know I’ll stick it out until I finish my master’s. Then, who knows?”

“Still working for that little store in the square?”

“Part-time. Around school.” She leaned a hip against the counter and thought of the eclectic clientele of the Third Eye. Located in a cubbyhole across from Jackson Square, the store boasted an inventory of everything from dried alligator heads to religious artifacts. New Age to voodoo with a smattering of Christianity in between. “How’s business in Tucson?”

“Great,” Sarah said as if she meant it. “I met with a new artist who’s going to display her things in the back nook. Consignment, and I’ve got a couple new lines of crystal pendants that are selling like crazy. But I miss you. It’s not the same.”

“Didn’t you hire someone?”

“Oh, yeah. I hired a girl, not a partner. A girl with tattoos on her arms and not just rings in her nose and eyebrows, and wherever else she can find a tiny fold of skin, but safety pins! Can you imagine? She looks like she should be working for a tailor, not a New Age shop.”

Olivia laughed. For the first time that morning. “Careful, Sarah, your parochial school roots are beginning to show.”

“Forbid the thought.”

“Next thing I know, you’ll be wearing a plaid skirt, blazer, and knee socks to work.”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.” Olivia glanced at her grandmother’s tattered cane rocker at rest near a pot overflowing with the shiny leaves of an ever-growing jade plant.

“Oh, I’ve got a beep, I’d better go….”

“Talk to you later,” Olivia said, knowing that Sarah was eager to get off the phone and check the other line.

Sarah, the eternal optimist, probably thought the caller would be a recalcitrant Leo, tired of the new woman and ready to crawl back on his hands and knees, to beg forgiveness from his loving saint of a wife.

Hairy S gave off a bark and twirled in tight little circles at the back door. “Wanna go out?” Olivia asked as she swung the door open and the dog scurried outside. Storm clouds gathered on the horizon and the air was sticky with the threat of rain. The dog ran the length of the porch to disappear into a thatch of tall grass and cypress, sniffing the ground searching for squirrels or possum or whatever marsh bird he could scare up.

Olivia’s stomach rumbled. It was ten in the morning and she’d been up for seven hours, existing only on coffee and adrenalin. She opened the refrigerator and scowled at the lack of groceries—two eggs, a chunk of cheese, a half-loaf of bread, and a bottle of catsup. “Omelette time,” she remarked, as she heard Hairy S pad inside. “How about you?” She opened the pantry, where a half-full bag of dog chow was tucked beneath three shelves of canned peaches, apricots, and pears that her grandmother had preserved. At the thought of the old woman, Olivia felt a pang of sadness. It was just damned hard to lose someone who loved you so unconditionally.

After measuring a cup of dry food into Hairy S’s dish, she added parrot seed to Chia’s cage and stroked the parrot’s smooth green feathers. “Isn’t she beautiful?” Grannie had asked when she’d first brought the bird home. “They’re messy as all get-out, I know it, but Wanda owed me some money and offered me Chia. I couldn’t resist.” Grannie’s eyes had twinkled and Chia had been a member of the family ever since.

“Grannie was right, you know. You are beautiful,” Olivia told the bird, who stretched her brilliant wings and picked up some of the seeds in her dish.

Olivia turned on the radio and stuffed two slices of bread into the toaster. As the dog made short work of his breakfast, she fired up the stove and whisked the eggs together. Patsy Cline sang about love lost. Great. Just what I need to hear. What an upper, she thought as the eggs began to bubble and she grated the wedge of cheese. The final notes of the song began to fade, and “Ramblin’ Rob,” the deejay, cut in to give some story about the old country classic recorded shortly before the star’s death. His deep, baritone voice slid easily out of the speakers and he spoke as if he knew all of his listeners personally. Which Olivia liked.

In the few short months she’d been back in Louisiana, Olivia had come to recognize some of the local newscasters and deejays. The radio station she listened to more often than not was WSLJ, the same station
where Samantha Leeds aka “Dr. Sam” dispensed her nightly advice to her callers, the same station she’d “heard” last night during the vision.

The damned vision.

She felt that same icy presence rush through her soul each time she thought about that horrifying murder. So don’t. Don’t think about it. But even as she was mentally reprimanding herself, a jagged memory of the victim begging for forgiveness skittered through Olivia’s brain. Distracted, she slid her knuckles along the side of the grater. “Ouch. Damn.” Blood oozed up from her skin and quickly she sucked on her fingers, then turned on the faucet and let cold water run over her hand. “I’m an idiot,” she muttered at Hairy S. “Truly an idiot.”

The truth of the matter was Olivia was troubled because she couldn’t put the nightmare behind her. She’d hoped talking to the police would help. But Bentz’s blatant doubts had stopped her cold. She’d thought, from reading the article in the paper, that he might be different, more receptive, but he’d been nearly as bad as Brinkman. “Jerk,” she muttered.

Maybe Bentz’s doubts are well founded. Maybe it was all just a dream, a really horrible, bad dream.

“Yeah, and maybe I’m the Queen of England,” she growled as she wrapped a paper towel around her fingers and managed to sprinkle a handful of mozzarella onto the eggs.

The toast popped.

Olivia slid the slices onto a plate and was reaching for the tub of margarine when she heard the newscast. “… a three-alarm fire last night took the life of one woman who has yet to be identified. The blaze broke out near three this morning near Bayou St. John …”

Olivia sank against the counter and listened to the short bit of information. The press had only the basics. A fire. A woman dead. Suspected arson. Nothing about homicide. Nothing about a murderer escaping into the night.

But Rick Bentz knew.

And he’d be calling.

She didn’t have to be a psychic to know that much.
Chapter Seven

The real estate management firm wasn’t much help. Bentz stopped by after grabbing his own car at the station only to learn that Oscar Cantrell, the owner of Benchmark Realty, was out. But the secretary, Marlene, a spacey brunette in red plastic-rimmed glasses, assured Bentz that the house where the fire had taken place had been vacant since September when some students at Tulane University had skipped out on several months’ rent.

“It’s always a crap shoot when you rent to college kids,” Marlene confided, and added that the five boys who had rented both sides of the building had turned out to be partiers. They’d done some damage to the house which the cleaning and security deposits hadn’t covered. Now the owners, a brother and sister who lived in separate states, were thinking about selling.

Marlene had talked a little breathlessly, all the while chewing gum and gesturing wildly with her hands. “We handle everything as the owners are out of state. Wes, that’s the brother, he lives in Montgomery, and Mandy—she’s married and her last name is Sieverson now—she’s in Houston. They can’t get along to save their souls.” She popped her gum. “Mandy, she wanted to upgrade the place—it was really two units, you know, but Wes didn’t want to put a dime into it.” Dark, heavily penciled eyebrows rose above the thin red rims, as if she were about to impart the wisdom of the ages. “His mother wasn’t even cold in her grave when he called up and asked about selling the place. He was pretty adamant, let me tell you, but Mandy wouldn’t go along with it. She’s married, as I said, and she wants to keep the house for an investment—you know, fix it up. But with Wes, now that’s a different story. He went ballistic when those last tenants skipped out, let me tell you. Had himself one tremendous hissy fit and wanted the boss to make up the difference.” She rolled her eyes and clucked her tongue. “Oh, yeah, like that was gonna happen.”

“I’d like a list of anyone who’s been interested in the house since it’s been vacated as well as anyone you hired who did the work to repair the place.”

“No problem,” Marlene assured him as her fingers flew over the keyboard of her computer. “It’ll be just a sec. We keep a log on each property— kinda like a diary, you know.” An ancient printer chugged out a few pages in counterpoint to her rapid gum chewing, and within minutes, the secretary, far more efficient than she’d first seemed, handed him the printout.

She answered a few more questions, but aside from being a purveyor of all kinds of gossip, when push came to shove, Marlene wasn’t a helluva lot of help. Bentz made a note to check out the owners and their recent travel schedules, just to make sure they hadn’t blown into town and had decided to torch the place for the insurance money.

Except that an insurance fraud didn’t begin to explain why some woman had been tortured and killed in the house. Stan Pagliano’s words played over and over in his mind. “Her hands and feet were chained … but it’s her head … it was nearly severed.”

Later, Stan had asked him what kind of sick bastard would commit such a horrendous crime.

Bentz didn’t know.

But there was someone who might.

Olivia Benchet. The lady had called this one, right on the money.

“I’m tellin’ ya, she’s a nutcase pure and simple,” Brinkman said when Bentz caught up with him in the hallway near one of the interrogation rooms. “I talked to her twice and each time she came in with these cockamamie, bullshit stories about murders she’d seen, visions about someone being killed. But she couldn’t give me anything concrete. No body. No murder scene. No damned smokin’ gun. Nothin’. If ya ask me, and seein’ as you tracked me down, then yeah, you did, she doesn’t have all her wheels on the pavement … and she might just be ridin’ a unicycle.”

Bentz wasn’t in the mood for bad jokes. As they walked to the stairs, weaving their way past a group of uniformed cops, he said, “I just want to see the reports. This time there was a body and a murder scene, and if
not a gun, a sword, for cryin’ out loud.”

“I heard about that one. Over off Esplanade, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“Christ. And she called it?” Brinkman shook his head. He was bald, a horseshoe of black hair surrounding a freckled bald spot, the lights over the staircase gleaming on his pate. They climbed the stairs, their shoes ringing on the steps as a couple other cops descended. “Brutal.”

“So why do you think she’s come in with bullshit before and then came through this time?”

“Dumb-ass luck? Hell if I know.” Brinkman walked through the doors to a reception area surrounded by offices. “But I have to admit, I was curious about her. She seemed so certain she was right. So I did some checkin’, called around. Turns out she comes from a long line of crazies. Her grandma claimed she was a voodoo priestess or some such shit just because she was an octoroon, and her mother’s been married four or five times, and then there’s the father, who’s spent most of his life in the State Pen in Mississippi—

“Hang on. What’s that all about?” Bentz asked as they reached the doors on the second floor.

“You didn’t know? Old Reggie Benchet iced a man,” Brinkman said, shoving his glasses up to the bridge of his nose, a smile creeping across his lips as he realized he’d imparted new information. “It’s all in my report. Reginald Benchet got out earlier this year.”

“And?”

“Far as I know, he’s kept his nose clean.” Brinkman smiled. “A real model citizen. Found God, or somethin’. I’ll send the info to you and then you can decide how much of Olivia Benchet’s story you believe. If she knew what was happenin’ when the girl was offed, I’d bet she was in on it … nah, she doesn’t seem like the murderin’ type. Oh, I got it.” Brinkman snapped his thick fingers. “She saw it. In a dream.”

“That’s what she says.”

“And you buy that? If so, I got some land in Florida—”

“Forget it, Brinkman. Just send me your notes,” Bentz said, irritated. He didn’t buy the vision theory either, but he couldn’t believe that the woman was in on the murder in any way, shape, or form. “Maybe we should give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“Oh, Christ, now you’re soundin’ like one of them damned bleedin’ hearts.” He shook his head and snorted. “Just when I was beginning to think you might be a decent cop after all.”

“Just get me the report,” Bentz snapped.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.” The Chosen One knelt at the altar and saw his own distorted visage in the shiny surface of the chalice. Candles burned and flickered, and through the walls of his drafty sanctuary he smelled the river. Musty. Damp. The current moved restlessly and would not be deterred. They had a lot in common, he and the Mississippi. They both held secrets beneath their surfaces, secrets that would never be revealed.

“I am prideful, Father, and I …” He swallowed hard, knew he had to admit his horrid sin. “I … I’ve lusted after those women, and though I feel your power, Father, my … my flesh is weak. So weak. I pray for your strength and your forgiveness …”

He closed his eyes, listened, and through his straining ears he heard the voice of God meting out his penance. After whispering a nearly inaudible “Amen,” and deftly making the sign of the cross, he stood and slowly walked to the closet where his albs hung … one less today. His favorite. Left to burn. Because of the whore.

Her picture was there as well. He took it from the closet and carefully taped it on the calendar he kept on the wall, carefully covering the space for the date, November twenty-second, the Feast Day of Saint Cecilia. Ah … she’d been so trusting … until it had been too late. He didn’t think of that now. Couldn’t. He had penance. He strode back to the closet.

With gentle fingers, he slid the vestments aside and turning the combination lock, opened his most private of places, the spot where he kept all that was valuable and worldly to him. He added a long lock of golden hair to his other treasures, other bits of hair and fingernails, then sifted through the medals and chains until his fingers encountered the weapon.

Ah.

A tiny, featherlight whip with sharp stones embedded in the ribbon-like lashes, sparkling gems that cut with
razor-sharp slits, nice, neat little cuts that barely scraped the surface, not enough to cause much bleeding, just enough to create sufficient pain to remind him that he, like all mortals, was born in original sin.

The Chosen One slipped out of his clothes and, naked, knelt at the altar once again, bowing his head, murmuring a prayer of atonement.

Not for the killing. Now he understood. That had been necessary. As always. God’s will. Even the violence, had it not been preordained? Had he not followed the Holy Father’s commands to rid the earth of the vile sinners on the day God had selected?

Yes, but he’d felt lust, that vibrant raw hunger that even now stole through his bloodstream. Hot. Dark. Wanting.

He could not be weak. He drew in a deep breath. Readied himself. Held his weapon high, then cracked his wrist.

Slap!
The leather fingers bit into his shoulder and he stiffened.
Pain, glorious pain, swept through him. His blood rushed through his veins. Heat centered in his groin.
He drew back the whip and snapped his wrist again. Slap!
The sharp little stones stung. Like the bite of a hundred wasps. He sucked in his breath. Felt the ooze of a bit of blood. Enough to wash him of his sins.

Again. He flicked his hand. Hard.
Slap!

His erection began to throb. Painfully. Deliciously.

He thought of the woman. The way her pale curls fell upon her smooth white neck. Cecilia. Whore. Daughter of Satan. She was so fine … her body perfect … that smooth neck beckoning … for his blade, or his mouth? He imagined mounting her as she knelt, her body quivering, her lips begging forgiveness, his teeth catching hold of her nape as he thrust inside her. Hot. Moist. Slick. Even now he envisioned her heavy breasts hanging downward, rosy nipples nearly scraping the floor. How he would have liked to have stroked them, pinched those nipples, heard her cry out as he plunged deeper inside her.

Sinner! Defiler! You are weak with your want of her!

He cracked the whip harshly.
Slap!

Pain tore through his flesh. He sucked his breath through his teeth.

Again! The leather fingers sizzled in the air.

Slap!

His body jerked.

Yes! The whore deserved to die.

He drew back. Braced himself. Cocked his wrist.

Slap!

Tears ran from his eyes as he felt the holy light bathe him. He would fight his lust, his weakness, and he would kill again to rid the earth of Satan’s whores. It was God’s will.
Chapter Eight

Olivia heard the crunch of tires on the drive and glanced out the window facing the lane just as Rick Bentz stretched out of his cruiser. Even beneath the moss-bearded oaks, he appeared the big man that he was, muscular, nearly stocky, with deep-set eyes and an I’ve-seen-it-all expression. He was wearing a jacket that fit loosely around his waist but stretched over his shoulders, casual slacks, and a white shirt. And a shoulder holster. She caught a glimpse of smooth leather and the butt of a gun.

Some women might find him handsome, she thought grudgingly. He had a certain appeal with his square jaw and thick brown hair. His face was lined and craggy enough to be interesting, the bit of gray at his temples not unattractive. But besides the gun, it was the glint in his flinty eyes and the set of his jaw—all hard-edged determination—that reminded her he was a cop.

And off-limits.

Not that she was looking. But she’d noticed he didn’t wear a wedding ring and she’d read somewhere that he was divorced, and that his ex-wife had died.

She’d sworn off men after the last near-miss at the altar. Besides, Bentz wasn’t her type.

She opened the door before he knocked, and Hairy S rounded the corner from the kitchen to start barking like crazy. “Stop it!” Olivia commanded, and the dog, for once, actually shut up. Olivia met Bentz’s eyes. “You found her, didn’t you?”

“We found someone.”

Oh, God. Deep inside she’d harbored the tiniest shred of hope that she’d been wrong. That, as this detective had thought, she’d just experienced a really bad nightmare. But of course, even that iota of hope had been misguided. “It’s the woman I told you about. The one in the fire.”

“I’d like to talk to you about her.”

“About time.”

She pushed the door open further and the dog bolted through.

“Thanks.” Hands in the pockets of his slacks, he walked into her house, his gaze skimming over the bookcase, potted plants, lumpy couch, and scattered chairs. “We’ll have to backtrack some, go over some of the things you said earlier.”

“No problem. I’ve got most of the afternoon, then I’ve got to meet my professor around four.”

“That late on a Friday?” He seemed even bigger in the kitchen, taking up space in this little cabin with its low ceilings and yellowed pine walls. Pushing six-two or -three, he ducked around a hurricane lantern that hung from the ceiling, a fixture Grannie Gin had refused to replace just in case the electricity was ever cut off. From her cage, Chia shrieked as she moved from one end of her perch to the other, warily eyeing the intruder.

“Hush, Chia!” she ordered. “Another of my grandmother’s orphans. Chia doesn’t like to go unnoticed. Has to have her say.”

“Typical female.”

“What?” Olivia’s eyes narrowed.

“It was a joke,” he explained.

“A poor one.”

“Right. So, you have to meet with your professor later.”

“Yes. Dr. Leeds at Tulane.”

She felt it then, as surely as if she’d turned on the air-conditioning, the atmosphere in the room got suddenly colder. It was as if Bentz’s sense of humor evaporated.

Something glinted in his steely eyes.

“You know him?” she asked.

“We’ve met.” From his pocket he withdrew the same small recorder he’d used earlier. “This shouldn’t take
too long.” He set the recorder on the kitchen table, where a Thanksgiving cactus was trying to bloom. Speaking into the small microphone, he said that he was continuing the interview, gave the date and time, and after spelling Olivia’s name, indicated that he was in her house with her. But he didn’t sit down at the table, instead stood resting his hips on the counter.

“You said you moved back to Louisiana recently. When was that? Last summer?”

“Yes. I came in late July when my grandmother got sick.” She pointed to one of the framed photographs she’d hung on the wall near the back porch.

“This is a picture of us. A long time ago.” In the shot, Grannie, gray hair braided in a single plait, was swinging a bare-footed Olivia off the ground. Olivia was dressed in ragged shorts and a T-shirt, had been around five at the time, and her head was thrown back in pure delight. Sunlight streamed through the trees and dappled the dry grass. In the background a hedge was in full bloom, showing off pink blooms, and the only dark spot in the photo was the hint of a shadow creeping from the bottom of the frame.

Bentz noted it as well. “Who took the picture?”

The muscles in the back of Olivia’s neck tightened. “My father. One of the few times he deigned to show up.”

“He didn’t raise you?” Bentz asked.

She took in a deep breath. “My father? He wasn’t exactly the Ward Cleaver type of model dad. He didn’t hang around much. For the most part, Grannie Gin raised me.” She didn’t like talking about her family. “Dysfunctional” didn’t begin to describe it. “Oh … I’m sorry … could I get you some coffee … or, God, I don’t think I have anything else.”

“Only if you want it.”

“Desperately,” she admitted. “This is … nerve-racking.”

To her surprise, he actually smiled, showing off just a hint of white teeth. “I know. Sure. Coffee would be great.”

She knew he was just trying to calm her, but that was fine. She needed to be calm. Standing on her tiptoes, Olivia stretched to reach onto the top shelf of one of the few cupboards, the one where she kept the “good” dishes she never used. Bentz came to the rescue and retrieved two porcelain coffee cups.

“Thanks.” She set the cups on the counter and checked the glass pot of hours-old coffee still warming in the coffeemaker. “Okay … you asked about my family, which isn’t my favorite subject. My grandfather was killed in the war. My grandma never remarried. She spent most of her time taking care of everyone else.”

“Who’s everyone else?”

“Basically me. My mother when she was around. My sister, Chandra, until she died. She was only two. Wading pool accident,” Olivia said, using the same phraseology she always did when anyone asked about her family. Accident. So simple. But it hadn’t been. Maybe death never was.

“Where’s your mother now?”

“Good question.” She poured the coffee. “Actually, I think she’s in Houston with her husband, Jeb Martin, who, for the record, is a real SOB.”

“You don’t like him.”

Lifting a shoulder, she said, “He’s as good as any of them, I suppose, but no, I don’t like him, and I really don’t see what all this has to do with what happened this morning.”

“Maybe nothing. But it’s not every day someone charges into my office claiming to witness a murder the way you did.”

She didn’t argue. At least he was listening. She handed him a cup. “I’ve got milk, no sugar.”

“Black’s fine.”

“I inherited this house and haven’t decided how long I’m staying.”

As the tape recorded, Bentz walked to the window and stared at the bayou, sunlight filtering through the trees, murky water stretching away from the cabin and small yard. “What about your father?”

She closed her eyes. May as well get it over with. “I haven’t heard from him in years. He … he’s in jail—prison in Mississippi, I think. The last time I saw him, I was in grade school.” She expected more questions about her father, but thankfully he let the subject drop.
“So what about Tucson?”
“What about it?”
“Why’d you leave?”
“I thought I explained that. My grandmother was sick, and I’d already applied for grad school. I got accepted at Tulane, and I decided it was fate, or destiny, so I moved back. My partner bought out my interest in the shop.”

The dog whined at the door to the porch and Olivia cracked it open to let him in. Hairy S shot through, a streak of scraggly fur. “My grandmother’s,” Olivia explained before Bentz asked. “I inherited him. Hairy S … named after Grannie Gin’s favorite president, only spelled a little differently.”

“Not much of a watchdog.”
“Au contraire, Detective. This guy’s tough as they come, aren’t you?” she asked, scratching the dog’s ear.
“I usually advise a rottweiler or pit bull.”
“Thanks, but I’ll keep Hairy.”
“And the bird.”
“Definitely the bird.”

He glanced around the little house. “You’re a long way from the neighbors and you have pretty damned scary nightmares. Aren’t you afraid? You reported that you sensed the killer caught a glimpse of you somehow. It’s so isolated out here. Aren’t you nervous that he might come after you?”
“I don’t think he knows who I am.”
“Yet.”

She remembered the feeling that someone had been watching her through the windows, the cold sensation that had run through her blood. “I try not to live my life in fear. I’ve got the dog, my grandmother’s shotgun, and I keep the place locked. I’m careful,” she said. “You have to remember. I grew up here. It’s home.”
“A security system wouldn’t hurt.”
“Maybe you’re right,” she agreed. “I’ll think about it.”
“Think hard.” Bentz scooted out one of the cane-backed chairs at the small table. “Okay, let’s talk about last night,” he suggested, retrieving a small pad from his jacket pocket. “Can anyone confirm that you were here?”

“Here, at the house … no … I was alone … hey, wait a minute,” she said, disbelieving. “Now … what are you saying? Do I need an alibi?”

“Do you?”
“No. I’m the one who brought this to you, remember? I just told you I live alone. With my dog.”
“I’m just establishing what happened. You went to bed as usual and …”

“And I was asleep for about three hours, I guess.” She glared at him as she took a chair on the opposite side of the table. “Look, I don’t know how to explain it, okay? I used to get these … dreams or visions as a little kid … things that were happening … but it wasn’t all the time and it was … different, I suppose.” She glanced out the French doors and frowned. How many times had she tried to explain what she saw? How many times had she been disbelieved or laughed at or called a freak? Rick Bentz, detective or not, was just the same as all the others she’d tried and failed to convince.

Gray eyes assessed her.
“I came to the station to try and help you. I assume you’re here for the same reason, that after you found that woman, you actually want my help. I can’t tell you any more than I already did.”
“What about the killer? Tell me about him.”
“I’ve thought about that,” she said, trying to tamp down her anger. The nerve of the man, even to suggest … She took a deep breath and told herself to just get through this. “As I said, he was dressed like a priest and kept demanding that the girl confess her sins. But I’m not sure he really was a priest, I mean, there’s no way I could know if he actually took vows.”

“You didn’t see his face because of the mask, but you heard his voice.”
“Yes. Over the organ music that was playing from the radio.”
“Would you recognize his voice if you heard it again?”
“I don’t know,” Olivia admitted, thinking hard. “He whispered.”

Furrows deepened in Bentz’s brow. “How tall was he? Could you tell when he stripped off the vestments? What size of man?”

“He was fit … athletic-looking. Probably around six feet, but that’s just a guess. It didn’t seem that he had much body fat, but he wasn’t rail-thin either. He didn’t look like a long-distance runner. Maybe it was the outfit, but I thought … I had the impression that he was built like a skier or maybe a swimmer because he had wide shoulders but a narrow waist and hips.”

“You said you thought he looked at you.”

“Yes. He looked up and stared hard.”

“But you weren’t there,” Bentz clarified, finally picking up his cup and taking a swallow.

“No—it was as if he sensed me.”

“So you have some what? Telepathic link to him?”

She shook her head. “I wish I knew or understood it … but when it happens, I get a headache and afterward I’m exhausted.”

“How many times has this happened before?”

“Several,” she admitted. “But never this clear. Never so vivid.” She sipped her coffee, but didn’t taste a drop.

“What color were his eyes?”

“I didn’t see a color,” she said with a sigh. “The room was smoky and he was squinting …”

Bentz looked annoyed. “So even though you had some kind of view of him, you don’t remember anything that could distinguish the priest in a crowd.”

“No.” She gritted her teeth. “Bit back the sharp retort that formed on her tongue because Detective Bentz was going through the motions but he still didn’t believe her. “You think I’m making this up.”

A muscle worked in his jaw. “It’s all pretty farfetched.”

“Then how could I know this much?”

He leaned forward, and for the first time she noticed the striations of color in his gray eyes, the brackets deepening at the corners of his mouth. “That’s the question, isn’t it? How do you know this much?”

“I already told you, Detective, but obviously you don’t trust me. You seem to think I was somehow involved in this macabre murder and then I was stupid enough to run to the police station so that I could be ridiculed and then found out!”

“That’s pretty farfetched, too.”

“Then why’d you come all the way out here?”

“I’d like to get to the truth.”

“Believe me, not any more than I would,” she shot back, angry. What a fool she’d been to think he might actually believe her. That he’d see the evidence and trust her.

A muscle throbbed in Bentz’s temple. “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“Is there anything else you’d like to ask me?”

“That should do it, but I might have more questions later.”

“Of course.” She couldn’t keep the sarcasm from her voice even though she told herself not to bait the man. He clicked off his recorder and slid it into his pocket. “If you think of anything else—”

“Trust me, you’ll be the first to know.”

He flipped his notebook closed.

“You know, Bentz, I was hoping that you would believe me.

“Whether I believe you or not isn’t the issue,” he said as he kicked back his chair. “What does matter is if you can give me information so that I can catch this sick bastard. Before he strikes again. Maybe you should time your visions a little better. Like before something happens. Rather than afterward. Now, that would help.”
Chapter Nine

“Okay, let’s fire this baby up,” Montoya said as he slipped a cassette into the small television/VCR that sat on the end of one filing cabinet in Bentz’s office. As usual, he was wearing his trademark leather jacket and smelling of smoke. “This is a copy of the Hendersons’ video of the fire. I had it converted from the camera disk onto video tape and a CD so that we can play it on the computer. The original’s in Evidence.”

Bentz climbed out of his chair and rounded the desk as Montoya pushed the appropriate buttons and images of the fire flashed onto the screen. The tape was shaky and blurry in spots as the cameraman panned the street. Neighbors and gawkers had gathered. Bits of conversation and gasps punctuated the sounds of street traffic, as clusters of people stood gaping at the house. With a crash of breaking glass, a window exploded. “Jesus!” the cameraman yelled as flames licked skyward from the roof. “Monica, for God’s sake! Keep the kids back … I said … no, get them in the house. Now! They can watch the tape later. Move it.” Some younger voices complained and a baby cried, but the cameraman kept his lens trained on the conflagration. Black smoke billowed upward as sirens screamed. The camera moved to catch a fire truck with its lights flashing as it roared up the street. It was followed by another truck, a rescue van, and police cars. Rescue teams spilled from the vehicles. “Get back,” policemen yelled as firefighters trained hoses onto the building. “Can you get inside … Here …” Stan Pagliano’s voice yelled from a distance. Bentz watched the firefighters push through the door to battle flames and check for survivors.

His jaw tightened when he thought of the woman trapped inside … chained to the damned sink. Firemen rushed and barked orders, cruisers with their lights flashing parked at the perimeter of the roped-off area while the crowd of onlookers grew. Here we go, Bentz thought as he stared at the indistinct images.

“Oh, those two …” Montoya said, pointing to an elderly man and woman. “They’re the Gerards. They called in the fire. Live next door and that one”—he indicated a bald man in his early thirties—“lives on the next street …” There was a family huddled beneath one of the trees, and a tiny frail-looking woman with her dog. There were other images as well, mostly indistinct as the cameraman focused his lens on the burning house.

“Not much here,” Montoya said, sipping coffee from a paper cup as he stared at the indistinct images.

“Wait.” The camera panned the crowd again to show a group of teenagers, three boys and a girl staring at the flames, then knots of the curious huddled together in the shadows. “Rewind it,” Bentz growled as he caught an image just outside the light of one of the street lamps, too far in the shadows to be illuminated by the hellish reflection of the fire. Montoya pushed the rewind button, then hit Play again. The images moved on the screen. “Stop. There.”

Montoya froze the picture. The frame was fuzzy, but there was a lone person, barely in the shot, too blurred to tell if it was a man or woman. “What about that guy?” Bentz pointed to the screen where the shadowy figure lurked beneath a tree.

“What about him?”

“He’s the only one in the crowd who’s not with someone else. He’s alone. Standing off by himself.”

Narrowing his eyes at the small screen, Montoya said, “There could be others with him who were just out of the shot, though.” He pointed to the screen. “See there to his left. Someone could be just out of the frame, someone Henderson didn’t catch on the video.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“And there could be more people on the other side of the street that Henderson didn’t catch on film.”

“But we’ve got this guy. Mark that frame. Have it enlarged and refocused if possible to try and get a sharper image.” Bentz squinted, staring hard at the murky figure. Could this be their guy? Could they have gotten that lucky? He didn’t believe it; couldn’t trust luck, but right now, it was all they had. “While you’re at it, have every frame that shows any of the bystanders blown up, too. Our guy will try to blend in, not look out of place.”

“I’ll get paper and digital copies.” Montoya hit the play button again and they watched the rest of the tape in silence. There wasn’t much more. Carl Henderson had trained his viewfinder on the blaze and the subsequent
shots were of firemen with hoses trained on the house and huge geysers of water arcing over the roof, attempting to douse the flames.

When it was over, Montoya punched the tape from the player and pocketed the cassette. “I’ll get the pictures to you ASAP. Did you talk to our star witness again? The nutcase?”

“Olivia Benchet? Yeah.” Though Bentz agreed that Olivia was certifiable, it rankled him to hear Montoya voice his thoughts.

“So what’s her story?”

“She’s back in Louisiana because her grandmother died a few months back. Olivia moved here to be with the old lady when she got sick. The grandma kicked off and Olivia stayed on. She’s working on her master’s at Tulane.”

“What does she study? Voodoo? Isn’t that what the grandma was into?”

“Close enough. Psychology.” Bentz had already done his research on her, checked with the University, gotten a copy of her transcript and schedule of classes from a somewhat reluctant registrar.

“Psychology? Another one? I thought we were finished with shrinks after closing the Rosary Killer case.”

“Mental illness seems to be going around these days.”

“So what’s wrong with Prozac? Forget talkin’ to some shrink. Just take a pill. It’s a helluva lot easier.” Montoya adjusted the collar of his jacket. A diamond stud glittered in his earlobe. Damned dandy, that’s what he was. “If you ask me, they all got into the profession cuz there’s somethin’ not working in their own brains. They go visit a psychologist, find out they like lyin’ on leather sofas and talkin’ about themselves, and before you know it, we got ourselves a glut of head doctors hangin’ out shingles or giving out advice on the damned radio. Jesus, just think of it. A shrink who thinks she has”—he stopped to make air quotes with the fingers of both hands—‘visions.’ That’s heavy. Worse yet, she had a grandma who was a voodoo priestess—isn’t that what she said? That’s what we need right now. Next thing ya know there’ll be a murder, some kind of sacrifice with a bunch of dead chickens.”

“Don’t even go there, okay?” Bentz said, irritated.

“Yeah, well, just you wait.”

“Get this. One of her professors is Dr. Jeremy Leeds.”

“No shit?” For once Montoya was struck dumb. “It’s a small world.”

“Sometimes too small.”

“You got anything on her?”

“Some. Preliminary stuff. I’ve done some checking and I have Brinkman’s notes.” Bentz took his chair again and flipped through the reports he’d gathered so far. “The student info at Tulane checks out. Looks like she’s never been married, but came close. She left a guy at the altar and split to Tucson about six years ago. The guy, Ted Brown, was pissed, chased her down, then married someone on the rebound. That lasted less than a year.

“Ms. Benchet hasn’t been in trouble with the law except for a couple of speeding violations and some kind of animal rights sit-in in Phoenix a few years back.” He glanced up at Montoya. “I’ve already called the Tucson authorities. Figured they might know something, but either she didn’t have these visions in the desert or she never bothered telling the police.”

“So she goes West and they stop.”

“Or she keeps ‘em to herself.”

“Not her MO,” Montoya said, leaning a hip against the desk. “What else?”

“She worked odd jobs to put herself through college, anything from waitressing to an insurance company claims clerk. Does art on the side. She sold her New Age gift-slash-art business in Tucson to her partner. When she came back here, it was a natural that she landed a job at this touristy-crap New Age shop called the Third Eye on Jackson Square.”

“So she claims to hate these visions that she inherited from her grannie, but she keeps hanging out with the New Age and spiritual stuff.” Montoya grimaced. “It doesn’t wash. And neither does her not bein’ married or at least shackin’ up with some guy. A good-lookin’ woman like her? What’s up with that?”

“Don’t know.”

“You didn’t ask?”
“Nope,” Bentz said. “I didn’t have the info on the first trip down the altar until I looked through some of Brinkman’s notes.”

Montoya lifted a brow. “I thought her eligibility state might be the first thing you asked her. I saw the way you looked at her today. Couldn’t take your eyes off her and I don’t blame you, she’s one fine-lookin’ lady. And that ass—”

“I was looking at her because she came in here peddling some pretty off-the-wall stuff that just happened to be right on,” Bentz cut in.

“If you say so, man,” Montoya said, his grin spreading wide in a way that irritated the hell out of Bentz.

“Get over yourself, Diego. She’s a nutcase.” But deep down, the younger cop was right. They both knew it. There was a lot about Olivia Benchet that just didn’t fit together. She was an enigma. An interesting puzzle. He’d left her house but he hadn’t been able to push her out of his mind. All day long as he tracked down clues to the murder near Bayou St. John as well as dealt with the other cases demanding his attention, the anger that sparked in her gold eyes and the desperation that etched her features had stayed with him. When he’d returned here, he’d read through everything Brinkman had tossed his way and done some more checking himself.

She was a crackpot, all his instincts told him so, and yet she believed her own lies or illusions or whatever the hell they were.

And though he didn’t know quite why, he wanted to believe her as well. Maybe it was because they had nothing else to go on. He didn’t see her as being involved in the murder and arson, so what did that leave? That she was telling the damned truth.

He found an opened pack of Juicy Fruit and unwrapped a stick, doubled it over, and jammed it into his mouth. It wasn’t the same as a smoke, but it would have to do. For now. “There’s something else in Brinkman’s report. I’m not sure it has any relevance. Olivia’s old man has done time at the Mississippi State Pen. Assault. Murder Two. A business partner who supposedly cheated him.”

Montoya gave a long, low whistle. “And he’s out now?”

“Yeah, just last January after serving twenty-two years. Time off for good behavior.”

“Jesus H. Christ. Not exactly Ozzie and Harriet. You ask her about it?”

“Not yet. Thought I’d do some research first. She alluded to the fact that she hadn’t seen her old man in a long time.”

“Yeah, because he was in stir,” Montoya commented. “Man. Where is he now?”

“In Lafayette. Working at a car wash and checkin’ in with his parole officer like clockwork.”

“A model citizen.”

“You got it. But we’ll check him out. Put him at the top of the ‘persons of interest’ list. Find out if he’s got an alibi.”

Montoya reached for his cigarettes, thought better of it, and stuffed the pack back into his pocket. “This keeps gettin’ weirder and weirder. But yeah, let’s have a talk with her old man. Find out if she’s telling the damned truth.

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“According to her, none of them were as clear as this one. We didn’t go into the other cases today, but you can look over what Brinkman has. Something about a woman in a cave with hieroglyphics. Here.” He fished out Brinkman’s notes and tossed them to Montoya.

The phone jangled and Bentz grabbed the receiver before the second ring. “Bentz.”

“Hey, Dad.”

Kristi’s voice always made him smile. “Hey, kiddo—what’s up?” He held up an index finger, signifying to Montoya that he’d be a minute. Montoya gave him an exaggerated wink, as if he were talking to some “hot babe,” but got the message and, taking Brinkman’s report with him, slipped through the partially opened door.

“I just wanted to check in,” Kristi was saying. “I’ve got an hour before my next class and I thought I should call and give you the rundown. My last class before Thanksgiving will be over Tuesday at four, so you can pick me up anytime after that.”

Bentz flipped through his calendar, surprised that the month was getting away from him. “I could be there by six, maybe sooner if I turned on my lights and siren.”

“Oh, that would be a great idea,” she mocked. “You really don’t have to drive up and get me, you know. I
can find a ride."

“I want to, honey. It’s not a problem. Baton Rouge isn’t that far. Besides I’d like another look at the campus I’m paying for.”

“But if you’re busy …” Her voice trailed off.

He glanced at the pile of paperwork on his desk, the bulletin board on the wall behind him with shots of the victims of homicides yet to be solved. “I’ll be there,” he said automatically before picking up on the fact that she might be giving him a hint. Rather than an out. Leaning forward, he glanced at the pictures of her as a child and, now, as a woman. “You still want me to come get you. Right?”

“Well, yeah, of course, but it’ll be kinda crazy up here with everyone leaving for Thanksgiving and all. And I’ve got some stuff I’ve got to do at the house that might hold me up. I figured coming up here might not be your thing.”

“Or your thing,” he said, recognizing a touch of resentment in her voice. He’d insisted she rush and pledge a sorority house. He wanted to know that she’d have a built-in support system at All Saints College, that she wouldn’t be pressuring him to let her lease an apartment at the age of eighteen. He wanted her to grow up, he was trying to let go, but he wanted her to be safe. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the latest grisly crime scene with a mutilated woman. He knew as well as anyone how dangerous the world could be. That’s why he’d spent an arm and a leg on tae kwon do and firearm lessons.

“Yeah … well, I just thought I’d check in.”

“I’ll see you next week.” He offered her an olive branch. “If it works better for you to ride down with friends, just let me know.”

“Okay, but …” She sighed loudly and he imagined she was shoving a tangle of red-brown hair from her eyes. “… here’s the thing. There’s this girl Mindy and she got all excited. Her mom’s single, and oh, guess what? She just happens to be a cop and she’s coming to pick up Mindy. They’re going out to dinner before driving back to Shreveport. So, of course, Mindy thinks it would be waaay coooool if you two hooked up.”

“But you don’t think so?”

“Mindy’s a dweeb. And her mom’s a detective. God, can you imagine? The two of you?”

Bentz laughed. “Don’t worry, I’ll come up and it’ll be just you and me. Tell Mindy that I have to get back right away or that I’m already involved with someone … or something.”

“You? Involved? You mean like with a woman? In a relationship?”

“Yeah.”

“But … you’re not.”

“How do you know?”

There was silence on the line, then a little nervous laughter. “Oh, yeah? Right. And when would you have time for a relationship? Give me a break, Dad, you are like married to your job.” She chuckled and the sound reminded him of her mother’s laugh—deep-throated, kind of naughty.

Jennifer Nichols’s laugh had caught his attention when he was little more than a kid himself, barely out of high school, and it had never let go. He’d thought she was beautiful with her long, dark hair, mischievous eyes and sassy tongue. They’d been attracted to each other immediately, their affair torridly passionate. She’d had a temper, but he was a man who could handle her moods and when he’d proposed barely five months after meeting her, she’d accepted. She’d expressed a few doubts about marrying a cop and imagined she could convince him to go to law school; he’d thought he could tame her reckless spirit. They’d both been wrong. He’d sensed it at the wedding, seeing her walk down the cathedral aisle in her lacy white dress barely nine months from the day he’d first seen her. Her veil hadn’t been able to hide the imperious lift of her chin and as awed as he’d been by her, he’d sensed theirs wouldn’t be an easy path. But he hadn’t cared. He’d loved her too damned much. Even through the bad times. Even when she’d betrayed him….

“What woman would want to get ‘involved’ with a homicide dick?” Kristi demanded.

“You don’t think your old man has a social life?”

“I know he doesn’t.”

“Then maybe I should meet your friend’s mother.”

“Yeah,” she tossed back at him. “That would be good, Dad, real good.” She snorted. “Save me,” she muttered, then caught her breath. “Damn it all.”
“What?”

“I forgot my stupid term paper! It’s back in my room on the other side of campus. Shit. I gotta go, Dad.” The line went dead and Bentz didn’t hang up for a second. He glanced at her graduation picture smiling at him from the desk frame. She’d grown up fast. Faster than most. Kristi had seen far too much in her eighteen years, been robbed of some of her innocence at a tender age. And it was his fault. His and Jennifer’s.

What kid wouldn’t have a chip on her shoulder after going through what Kristi did? Not only had she buried a mother and watched her old man pull himself out of a bottle, she had to deal with the fact that both her parents had lied to her from the get-go.

Not exactly *Ozzie and Harriet*, Montoya had remarked. Didn’t he know that there was no such thing?
Chapter Ten

Melinda Jaskiel, his immediate superior and the reason he had this job with the department, breezed in. Melinda was usually all business. He’d never seen her in anything but a suit. With her hair cropped short, rimless glasses, and a no-nonsense attitude, she was professional to the letter. Middle-aged, divorced, and physically fit, she handled the men she oversaw with an iron fist hidden within a kid glove.

“Tell me about the murder off Esplanade.” She folded her arms over her chest and leaned a shoulder against the door frame. “I read the preliminary report on this one and heard a rumor that you have an ‘eye’ witness who wasn’t there.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“So—what do you think? Does this woman really have visions? ESP?”

“She seems to have firsthand knowledge of what came down. I think it was more than a lucky guess.”

One side of Melinda’s lips pulled upward. “Always the master of understatement, aren’t you, Bentz?”

“You know it’s my personal mission to serve, protect, and filter out the crap.”

“And you’re doing a fine job of it,” Jaskiel assured him.

“I don’t put much stock in psychic mumbo jumbo. ESP usually means Easy Sucker Punch or Exceptional Shit Pile.”

“Maybe you should try to keep an open mind, okay? There are cases on record where psychics did actually help the police.”

“Yeah, I know,” he admitted grudgingly. He’d had a partner in L.A. who worked with a psychic. The woman had helped him with a couple of cases but hadn’t been able to predict that a kid would point a toy pistol at him one night and Bentz, thinking the twelve-year-old intended to shoot, had taken him out. Nope, the damned psychic hadn’t said a peep before the tragedy. Bentz had ended up on probation, then promptly decided Jack Daniels was his best friend. His job in the City of Angels ended. He’d been lucky Melinda Jaskiel had seen something in a broken-down cop and hired him when every other department in the country had decided he wasn’t worth the trouble. “You know what they say is the problem with having an open mind?”

“That your brains will fall out? I’ve heard that one, Rick.”

Bentz smiled. “I was going to say people might accuse you of being a pansy ass and not having an opinion.”

“I doubt if that’ll be your problem.” She shook her head. “And since when do you care what people think?”

His grin widened and he winked. “Not people, Jaskiel. Just you.”

“Save that for someone who’ll believe it. So how’re you handling this?”

He gave her the rundown, everything from the vision, to the videotape, to the information from Benchmark Realty and Brinkman’s reports on Olivia’s previous visits to the Department. “Olivia Benchet knows more than she should. It makes me wonder why”—he held up a hand—“except that, of course, she’s a psychic and just happens to ‘see’ murders.”

Melinda sent him a withering smile. “So does the lady have an alibi?”

“Just her dog and he’s not talkin’.”

“Seriously.”

“She was home in bed. Asleep. The vision woke her up.”

Melinda thought a second. Couldn’t seem to put her mind around it. “I assume you’re checking her out.”

“Done deal.”

“Okay, so keep me posted on the case. When you see the evidence report and the ME’s report, let me know.”

She started out the door, but thought better of it. “And, Bentz, don’t pull any of that rogue-cop crap on me, okay? We need to play this by the book.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”
“My ass.”

“And it’s a nice one,” Bentz said.

“Careful. There is such a thing as sexual harassment these days.”

“You love it and you know it,” he said. “Besides you’re the boss.”

“Keep that in mind. Now, let’s give the witness in this case, Ms. Benchet, some credibility. Okay? It’s odd
and she could be jerking our collective chains, but just maybe she does have some kind of visions. Look into
it.” Jaskiel patted the door frame, then left.

“You got it,” Bentz muttered under his breath. So he was supposed to believe whatever Olivia Benchet
peddled his way? He was supposed to buy that she had some psychic experience. How? Was she connected to
the killer? The victim? The house where it happened? Why did she “see” this particular murder? Why not
others? Did she confess to the priest? Or maybe he confessed to her. What the hell was the connection? Bentz
stretched out of his chair and scratched his chin. Keep an open mind. Shit. He didn’t know if he could. Believe
that a woman actually “saw” a murder miles away?

That would be a trick.

So Bentz doesn’t believe you. So what?

Not exactly a surprise, is it?

Olivia’s grip tightened on the steering wheel of her truck as she wound her way into the Garden District on
her way to the University. She’d hoped that Detective Bentz would trust her, that he would sense she was
desperate, but of course, he was just like all the others. Men, she thought disgustedly as she stopped, waiting to
turn into the University while the streetcar clacked past. No, that wasn’t fair. She’d run into her share of women
skeptics as well. Starting with her mother.

It was late afternoon, shadows lengthening over the nearby colleges of Tulane and Loyola. She parked in a
designated spot, then jogged to the psychology department. Images of Detective Bentz chased after her, but she
was determined to push his handsome, craggy face, and all thoughts of the murder aside. At least for the
moment. She made her way up a flight of stairs to the office of Dr. Jeremy Leeds, her professor and, she
thought, noting the irony, the ex-husband of Dr. Sam, the radio psychologist at WSLJ. Olivia didn’t much like
the guy; he seemed pretty stuck on himself, but as he was her assigned counselor, she had to put up with him
for a year or so.

No one was seated at the secretary’s desk, so she wended her way through a labyrinthine hallway and
knocked on the door to Leeds’s private office. No answer. She tried again, her knuckles, where she’d scraped
them earlier on the cheese grater, aching a little. “Dr. Leeds?” she said just as she heard footsteps rounding a
corner.

“Olivia! Sorry I’m late.” His smile was wide. Apologetic. In his mid-forties, with strong features, a long,
straight nose and a neatly trimmed beard, he shoved open the door and held it for her. His shoes were polished
to a gloss, his casual jacket looking as if it had cost a small fortune. Natty was the word that came to mind
whenever she thought of Dr. Leeds. Well, ‘natty’ and ‘fake’; there was just something about him that didn’t ring
true. Nothing she could put her finger on, but something. ‘I had to run down the hall to catch a colleague, Dr.
Sutter, before he left for the day. He’s only here part time and it’s the weekend, you know, so I was fortunate to
grab him.” Leeds was patting down his pockets for his keys and rattling on, as if he were nervous. “Dr. Sutter
and I are offering a two-day seminar in the spring you might be interested in. You’ve heard of him? Ah!” Leeds
found his key ring as Olivia lifted a shoulder. All she knew about Sutter was by reputation, that he was a
difficult taskmaster. Leeds inserted his key into the lock. “Anyway, he and I started talking, and well, I guess
I’m playing the part of the absentminded professor.”

She didn’t think so. Jeremy Leeds was sharp as a straight-edged razor. There was something too smooth
about him. Cold. She felt it now, just being near him.

“Come on in.”

She took a chair near a small window and flipped open her folder of notes, all of which she’d taken before
last night. Before, she was certain, her life had changed forever. Dr. Leeds slid into his chair on the other side
of the desk—as tidy as Detective Bentz’s had been cluttered. A calendar sat on one corner, a humidor of cigars
on the other. The room was small and compact, with a smattering of degrees and artwork hung on the walls.
“So, what have you got there?” he asked, indicating her work. “A premise for your thesis?” He slid a pair of
wire-rimmed glasses up his nose.
“Just the germ of an idea.”

“Oh?” He was interested. His eyebrows lifted. “Did you want me to go over it?”

“Actually I just wanted to run some thoughts by you. It’s not on paper yet.”

“Of course.” He leaned back in his chair, tented his fingers, and waited.

“I’d like to do my thesis on aberrant psychology as it applies to religion.”

“Really?” His smile faded.

“I’m thinking of the psychology of prayer and penitence as it applies to Judeo-Christian theology.”

“That’s quite a mouthful. Don’t you think it would be better suited if your area of expertise was theology or philosophy?”

“I think I could make it work. And it’s what interests me,” she added, not inclined to explain any further.

“You offer undergrad classes on aberrant psychology and criminal psychology and I thought I’d sit in, if that was okay.”

“Yes, yes, that’s not a problem.” He nodded, turning the idea over in his mind. “Tell you what. Go ahead and run with this, but bring me a written proposal, an outline of your thesis, and we’ll go from there. How does that sound?”

Just peachy, she thought, but said, “Great. I’ll call and we’ll set up an appointment.”

“Good, good.” He stood—ever the gentleman—and she left feeling that at least one small detail of her life was back in place. She’d been struggling with a concept for her thesis. If nothing else, the murder last night had sharpened her focus.

She hurried downstairs and outside, where the shadows had turned to dead-on night. Though it wasn’t quite five, darkness had blanketed the city and street lamps were glowing, giving the grounds an eerie feel. Olivia had always thought the massive limestone facade of Gibson Hall looked as if it belonged to part of a medieval castle, and now, in the darkness with the first few drops of rain beginning to fall, it seemed more imposing than ever.

Crossing the thick grass, she headed for the parking lot, found her truck, and slid behind the wheel. She wasn’t alone. Other students hurried by, but somehow tonight, after the events early this morning, she felt isolated. Detached. She plunged the key into the ignition and pulled out of the parking space. Knowing she was probably making a huge mistake, she drove deeper into the city. For a macabre reason she didn’t understand, she felt compelled to drive by the scene of the crime.

Just like the killers are supposed to do.

Traffic was messy. It had begun to rain in earnest and huge drops fell from the sky, pelting the streets and running down the windshield so fast that the wipers could barely slap them away. Taillights glowed red, seeming to smear through the glass as she wound her way to the other side of Canal Street and through the French Quarter, where umbrella-wielding pedestrians filled the sidewalks and sometimes spilled into the streets. She turned on the radio. WSLJ was playing jazz and it grated on her nerves. Maybe it was just from being overly tired and wrung out, but she couldn’t stand the thought of vocal interpretations and riffs. She found a country station and cranked up the volume.

Better to listen to pining and heartache.

Yeah, right. She clicked off the radio.

On the east side of City Park she squinted at the street signs until she found one she recognized, then rolled down the narrow street until she came to the charred, burned-out building. Not much was left, she thought as she pulled close to the curb and climbed out of her little truck.

Crime scene tape roped off part of the yard and all of the debris and ash. Her shoes were no match for the water rushing through the street, and the jacket she kept in the cab had no hood. Nonetheless, she threw it over her shoulders and waded across the street to stare at the soggy, blackened rubble. Rain peppered her face and ran through her hair as she remembered the vivid scene from her vision. The victim—that horrified blond woman—had died horribly here, somewhere in the burned shell of a house. At the hands of a priest.

Shivering, she whispered, “Who are you, you bastard?” She’d thought if she came here, actually stepped onto the soil where the horrid event took place, she might get a glimmer, a flash of him, might feel him again and gain some clue to his identity. Traffic crawled behind her but the rain muffled much of the city’s noise as it poured from the sky and dripped off the surrounding trees.
She closed her eyes. Listened to her own heartbeat. Felt something. A prickle that brought a slight chill, as if the killer had passed her on the street. “Come on, come on,” she said, her eyes still closed as she turned her face skyward, felt the harsh wash of rain and strained to see something, to hear something, to smell—

“See anything?”

She nearly jumped out of her skin. Fists clenched, she whirled.

In the sheeting rain, Detective Bentz was standing less than a foot away from her.

“Oh, God, you scared me,” she said, her heart pounding in her ears, adrenalin rushing through her bloodstream. “But … no … I don’t see anything but rubble.”

He nodded. Wearing a baseball cap with the symbol for the New Orleans Police Department emblazoned upon it and a water-repellant jacket, he asked, “What were you doing? Just now.”

She felt foolish. Embarrassment washed up the back of her neck. “It was just an exercise. I thought maybe if I actually came to the scene of the crime, I might get more of a sense of him.”

“The killer?”

“Yeah.” She glanced at the Jeep double-parked on the street. “Did you follow me here?”

“Nah. Headin’ home. Thought I’d swing by. Maybe see somethin’ or get a glimmer—a hunch—of what went on now that it’s quiet here. Kinda like you were doin’.” He gave her a quick once-over. “You’re getting wet.”

She smiled. “Now I know why you’re a detective. It’s your keen sense of observation.” Raindrops caught in her eyelashes and dripped from her nose. “There’s just no gettin’ anything past you, is there?”

“I like to think not,” he said but gave her the barest of smiles, one that seemed genuine and she’d begun to realize was rare. “How about I buy you a cup of coffee … or dinner, before you get completely soaked?”

“What … like in a date?” she blurted out before thinking.

Of course not, Livvie. Don’t be a goose! Cripes! A date? What kind of romantic ninny are you?

She swiped at the rain running down her cheeks. “Or as in you want to pump me for more information because you’ve finally figured out that I’m the best resource you’ve got?”

“What you want to call it. I know a place where you can get great Cajun shrimp and those spicy curly fries,” he said, twirling a finger. “It’s a hole-in-the-wall, but has great food.”

She couldn’t believe he was serious. “I really didn’t figure you for a curly fry kind of guy.”

“And you claim you have ESP. Only goes to show ya.”

“Bentz, are you trying to flirt with me?”

His smile fell away. “Just trying to get you out of the downpour so that you would talk to me.” He was all business again. Kind of gruff. As if she’d inadvertently tromped all over his male ego. Funny, he didn’t seem to be the kind of man who had an ego problem … but then he didn’t seem like the kind who would go for the damned curly fries, either.

“Okay. Where to?”

“I’ll drive.” He ushered her to the Jeep and she told herself that she was making another incomprehensible mistake.

“I could follow you.”

“There’s not much parking around there.”

“Fine, whatever.”

He opened the door to his Jeep and she slid into the passenger seat. It looked pretty much like every other four by four on the road, no police-issue shotgun at ready, no wire mesh or glass separating the front seat from the back, no handcuffs dangling from the glove compartment. But there was a slicker in the back with the police department logo, and of course, he was armed with a handgun.

He drove through the rain-washed city streets with the expertise of someone who maneuvers cars through tight spots all the time. They cruised across Esplanade and into the Quarter to St. Peter, where he forced the Jeep into what appeared an impossibly small space. “It’s not The Ritz.”

“Good. Cuz I’m not dressed for it.”

They ducked under a dripping awning and into a narrow restaurant that smelled of grease and spices. Behind a long counter cooks sweated over boiling pots of shrimp and sizzling baskets of french fries. Bentz led her to a table near the back, past a bar where bottles of beer were packed in metal tubs of ice. He held one of the café
chairs for her where, from her vantage point, she could see a glass door that opened to a rear courtyard at the back of the restaurant.

Bentz settled into a café chair on the opposite side of a red-checked tablecloth, and as the waiter appeared said, “We’ll have a double.”

“A double?” Olivia repeated.

“I always eat the same thing. You’ll like it.”

“I don’t get to choose?”

Bentz grinned. “Next time you pick.”

As if there was going to be a next time. “Okay.”

“You want somethin’ to drink? Beer?”

“Sure. A lite.”

“And my usual,” he said to the waiter, who even with his shaved head, didn’t look old enough to serve anything remotely alcoholic but returned within seconds with two opened bottles. Bentz’s boasted zero percent alcohol.

“Still on duty?” she asked.

“Always. Cheers.” He tapped the long neck of his bottle against hers, then took a long swallow.

“So what is it you want to know, Detective?” she asked over the clink of flatware and buzz of conversation.

“You’re not assigned to tail me or anything like that, are you?”

“Not exactly.”

He took a long swallow from his bottle and in the soft lighting from a kerosene lantern with a red shade, he looked less formidable than he had earlier; more approachable. He was good-looking in a rough-hewn way and he had a decent smile beneath those dark eyes.

“I was told to keep an ‘open mind,’ that’s how it was phrased, about you. So when I ran into you at the crime scene, I thought I’d try to do just that. Listen to what you have to say.”

“And figure out what makes me tick?”

Again the flash of that enigmatic smile. “Somehow I don’t think that’s possible.”

From somewhere behind her there was a crash of glass and metal hitting the hard brick floor.

“Oops,” Bentz said, raising his thick eyebrows. She looked over her shoulder and saw a tray of broken glass, cutlery strewn helter-skelter, foaming beer running in rivulets through the cracks in the floor, and dozens of prawns, shrimp, and crawfish sliding under tables and between customers’ feet.

“Watch out, they’re escaping,” Olivia whispered and Bentz laughed.

A stricken waitress from whose fingers the tray had obviously tumbled was gasping in horror as the bartender, a big black man, tossed her a towel and a busboy hurried to a closet to retrieve a mop and bucket.

“Smooth move,” Bentz muttered, amused.

“The girl is traumatized.”

“She’ll get over it. I did the same thing once. My first job. In high school. I not only dropped a tray of drinks, I splashed them over six patrons at the country club. Every one of those ladies was dressed in silk, I think. Anyway, that was my first and last day there. God, I’d forgotten about that.” He took a swig from his bottle.

Olivia didn’t want to think of Bentz as a butter-fingered teenager, or anything other than the detective he was. “From bus boy to cop in two easy moves?”

“Not quite.” His lips pinched a little. “I’ve had my share of missteps along the way.”

He didn’t elaborate and Olivia couldn’t help but wonder if the reason he was drinking nonalcoholic beer had to do with one of those missteps. The waiter brought a double order of shrimp—served in buckets—along with two massive baskets of fries. The shrimp were blazing red, the fries, as promised, were spiraled and covered with some kind of hot salty spice. Bentz dumped his shrimp onto his paper-covered tray, cracked off the shrimp’s head, peeled off the shell and legs, then tossed the waste into his bucket as he plopped the meat into his mouth.

Olivia followed suit, her fingers smearing with the liquid from the shrimp and staining from the spices and grease from the fries.
As Bentz promised, the food was fabulous. Maybe there was more to this man than first met the eye. Maybe the gruff detective hid a more refined soul—oh yeah, right, tearing a crustacean apart with bare hands hardly suggests any sense of sophistication. Face it, Livvie, he’s a bruiser. All brash, suspicious, male cop. Remember that. He still thinks you were somehow involved with that murder. He just hasn’t figured out how. He believes in what he can see, touch, hear, and smell … Don’t trust him for a second!

“So, tell me about this ‘gift’ you’ve got,” he suggested as he finished his first near-beer and the waiter set two more bottles onto the table. “When did it kick in? Right from the beginning? I mean were you born with it, or did something, some incident, start the ball rolling?” He cracked the back off a shrimp.

“You mean like was I dropped on my head as an infant? Or did I faint in high school and wake up suddenly able to see events that weren’t happening to me?” she asked.

“If that’s what happened.”

“It’s not,” she snapped, her temper rising. “It’s just what most people expect to hear.”

“Hey, whoa,” he said, lifting a hand. “I didn’t mean to push any hot buttons.” He seemed sincere and she felt a little foolish for jumping off the deep end.

“Sorry … conditioned reflex. It’s hard to explain, but yes, I had this as a kid. Right from the get-go. Grannie Gin told me it was a gift and my mother told me it was all in my head, that I should keep quiet about it. I think she grew up embarrassed by her own mother’s gift. People would come over and Grannie, even though she was a vastly religious woman, would read tarot cards and tea leaves and all that stuff. Bernadette, that’s my mother, thought it was weird, which, I guess, it was. It always just seemed a part of my grandmother and I understood it, just not why it happened to me, too.”

“You don’t like it, but you work with all that New Age and voodoo stuff.”

“I know. It’s like I hate my gift but I have this weird, almost macabre fascination about it.”

“Brinkman mentioned you’d come in and talked to him about other murders.”

“So you talked with him.”

“Had to. That a problem?”

“No. Not at all.” She’d picked up a shrimp but dropped it back into her bucket. “I thought I explained all this. I’ve been in to the police department before. No one, especially Detective Brinkman, took me seriously. Just like you.”

“Try me,” he suggested and, when she hesitated, peeled another shrimp. “Tell me your side of it. Firsthand.”

“It’s in Brinkman’s reports, I’m sure.”

“But I want your perspective.” He leaned back in his chair, wiped his mouth, and stared at her. “No recorders. No notes. Just tell me what you saw.”

She hesitated.

“Come on, Olivia. You started this,” he said, and she noticed how his hair fell over his eyes and how tiny crow’s feet fanned from his eyes, as if he squinted a lot. A thoughtful man.

“You’re right. I did. Okay … Well … Where to begin? Let’s start with last summer, that was the most recent. I remember it because it happened around the time my grandmother died. I was flying back and forth from Tucson in those weeks and each time I got to Louisiana I’d have these nightmares, more fragmented than this last one, but intense.” She studied his reaction. There was none. He ate, listened, sipped from his bottle, and didn’t reach for a notepad or pen. Maybe he thought she was making it up. Maybe he was actually starting to believe her.

“Go on,” he urged. “What was the dream about?”

“It was different in that it recurred. Very faint when I was in Tucson but extremely vivid when I was back here. It wasn’t a vision of someone being violently murdered like last night … but rather short images, every other day or so, of a victim being left to starve to death. She … she was trapped somewhere like a crypt of some kind and she was screaming and crying. There were symbols on the walls, pictures of blurry images and writing … some kind of inscription that I couldn’t make out. She was getting weaker every day, I could sense it. And I felt him. His presence.” Olivia held Bentz’s stare. He’d quit eating, was just watching her intently, as if looking for a crack in her story, a lie.

“The killer?”

“Yes. Whoever abducted her and left her to die would come and visit her, shine a flashlight into her terrified
eyes, then leave. So I only got glimpses of where she was being held, only quick images of the surroundings. He … he left a vial there … I think, probably to taunt her. It could have been water, or maybe something she could take to end her life quickly, but it was just out of reach. She, too, was chained.” Inside, Olivia shivered. “Last night the woman died violently, but this one was just the opposite, at least in the beginning … In some ways it seemed worse … a horrid waiting game where the victim was left in the dark to starve to death or die of thirst.”

“Which she did.”

“Yes … but … and this image is vague, but I think there was more. It was around the end of July or first of August. I know because Grannie was getting really sick. I flew to Tucson, closed up my apartment, and drove back here all in the span of five days. In that time things shifted. I had images of something more hideous.”

“What?”

She drew in a deep breath. “I think the girl was eventually … beheaded.”

Bentz’s lips flattened. “Like the one last night.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Like the one last night.”

Bentz didn’t know what to think. Was the woman completely off her rocker? Seriously mental? Or was there something to all this voodoo/psychic mumbo jumbo. She looked so damned normal as she sat across the table from him, her damp hair curling tighter as it dried, her fingers greasy from the food, her eyebrows knitted, her lips pulled into a tight little knot. But it was her eyes that got to him, her steady gaze that defied him to believe her, the haunted shadows just beneath the surface. “Could you draw the symbols for me?” he asked.

“No from memory, no, but I wrote them down. Any night that I had that particular nightmare, I scribbled down what I remembered. They’re at home. I could drop them by Monday, on my way to work.”

“How about I get them from you tomorrow?”

“It’s a long drive.”

He offered her a smile and motioned for the waiter, indicating he wanted the check. “I’m a bachelor. The only thing I was going to do was watch football and do laundry.”

“Fine,” she said. “Whatever.” She picked up a prawn and he watched as she peeled it and plopped it into her mouth. “Anything else?” she asked, licking the butter from her lips and it almost seemed like a come-on. Ridiculous. But there was something about her, something a little bit naughty, that fascinated him. Just like Jennifer.

“Yeah, a couple of things. I’ll want a list of everyone you know. Family, friends, anyone you work with or see at school.”

“You think my friends are involved.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know who is, but if I take what you’re telling me at face value, then somehow you’re connected with the killer … right? There’s something between the two of you … I mean, I assume that’s the way it works. It’s not a lightning bolt from heaven, and you don’t see random murders being committed. You think what you view is the work of one man.”

She nodded. “Sometimes …” She let her voice fade away and didn’t go on. The sounds of the restaurant seemed more intense. Waitresses calling out orders, conversation, the faint sound of Dixieland playing from concealed speakers, the rattle of trays of dishes.

“Sometimes what?”

“It sounds so crazy, but sometimes I get this feeling … it’s like crystals of ice drizzled over the back of my neck, and I feel that he’s close … that somehow I’ve trod in his footsteps …” She must’ve read the doubt in his eyes, because she reached for her beer and took a long swallow. “I told you it sounded whacked out.”

“But it could help. Think about it. Who would be the connection? How the hell does this telepathy or whatever it is work?”

“All I know is that it’s more intense since I came to New Orleans and the murders are happening here, so it has to be someone close by.”

“Agreed,” he said, and though it took a lot to scare Bentz, he felt a frisson of dread; whoever the killer was, there was an element of the intangible at work and that made him all the more dangerous.

Bentz paid the check and gave her a ride to her car parked near the charred ruins. The rain had stopped, but the crime scene was gloomy and dark. “You said you stopped by here in the hopes that you could sense what
had happened, right?”

She nodded as she climbed out of his Jeep. Bentz pocketed his keys and leaned a hip against the fender.

“So … are you getting anything?”

“It’s not quite the same as a radar signal,” she said, but walked closer to the tape, staring at what had been a cozy little duplex. “No … nothing.” She shook her head and frowned. “But if I ‘get anything,’ I’ll let you know. Thanks for dinner.”

“My pleasure,” he said automatically and she looked up at him sharply, silently accusing him of the lie.

“It was business for you, Detective Bentz, and I have a feeling that it always is with you.” She climbed into her truck, fired the engine, and tore off down the narrow streets, the taillights of her pickup winking bright red in the night.

Bentz eased behind the wheel of his Jeep and switched on the ignition. He could follow her. Make sure she was going home. He thought he might just do that. Why not? Jaskiel had authorized it, and even though he was off duty, he could spare a few hours.

He wheeled away from the curb. What bothered him about the tail wasn’t that he was following her, but that he was more than curious. More than interested because of the case. She was sexy as hell. And an oddball. A kook. A whacko.

But she knew more than anyone else about the killing. Like it or not, he had to believe her.
Chapter Eleven

The phone rang. Once, twice, three times. Jangling through Kristi’s groggy brain. From beneath the covers of the bed in her dorm room she groaned; she didn’t want to wake up. She glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty. On a Saturday. What kind of idiot would be calling now. Dad, she thought, burrowing under the covers and letting the answering machine pick up. “Hi, this is Kristi. You know what to do,” her recorded voice intoned.

After a beep, she heard a moment’s hesitation, then a deep voice. “Hi, I hope I’ve got Kristi Bentz. This is Brian Thomas. You might not remember me, but I’m T.A. for Dr. Zaroster and—”

Kristi shot out of bed. Grabbed the phone. “Hi,” she said breathlessly. “I know who you are.” God, who on campus didn’t? Don’t get your hopes up, he’s probably calling to tell you that you flunked the quiz on the Buddha yesterday. “So you were screening your calls.” “No, um, I was … well, if you want to know the truth, I wasn’t up yet, but I am now.”

“Out late?” he asked and she kicked herself.

“Of course, but I was studying in the library.” She giggled and fell back on the bed. They both knew it was a lie, but she didn’t want to admit that she’d been to a frat party and had drunk more than she should have. As it was, her head ached and her mouth was cotton-dry. “What’s up?” Around the headache she tried to sound cheery.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out.”

Her mouth fell open. She sat bolt upright. He wanted a date? A date? Her heart was about to leap out of her chest, but she told herself to sound cool. If that was possible. She’d told herself he’d call, but she hadn’t expected it so soon. Her silly heart began to pound wildly.

“Look, I really shouldn’t because you’re a student in Zaroster’s class, but I figure what could it hurt?”

“Exactly!”

“But if this makes you uncomfortable, you know, because I’m the T.A.—”

“No! I mean that’s not it. I’d love to go out with you.”

“Good.” He sounded relieved.

“So where? When?”

“Tonight. Around seven. Dinner and a late movie. Whatever you want. If you’re not busy.”

She couldn’t believe her good luck. A date with Brian Thomas! She’d had a major crush on him since the beginning of the term. “That would be great.”

“I’ll pick you up … You’re at Cramer Hall, right?”

“How did you know—?”

“We at the Theology Department are all-knowing,” he said, joking. “It comes with the whole God-like territory.”

“Right,” she mocked.

“Actually I have authority. I looked it up in your records. You’re a DG.”

“Yeah, I pledged Delta Gamma,” she admitted, but he knew more than he should and it bugged her. Maybe she should have been flattered by him nosing around in her records, but she wasn’t. “I, um, thought all that stuff was pretty secure.”

“It is, but some of us, the privileged, know the codes.”

“Oh, yeah?” He wasn’t even a professor. It didn’t seem right somehow. “You’re one of the privileged?” Man, he sounded kinda stuck on himself. And she thought he was shy. It occurred to her that it might not even be Brian on the other end of the phone, but some creep who’d figured out that she had a crush on him. Brian had always seemed cooler than this.

So who would it be and why would he have access to your student records?
“I’ll see you at seven.” He was so sure of himself.

“Okay—”

He clicked off and she fell back onto the bed with a huge smile on her face. She couldn’t believe that he’d actually called. He’d seemed so reserved in class. Serious. And yet on the phone …

She glanced over to the bulletin board tacked onto the wall above her desk. In one corner was a picture of Jay and her, just last year, at their high school senior prom. She was wearing a long black dress, he was dressed in a tuxedo. He was bending her backward, one of her legs was kicked out and a long-stemmed rose was clutched between her teeth as they mugger for the camera. She’d sworn that night that she loved him. And she did. Or he had … but he’d stayed in New Orleans where he planned to eventually take over his father’s roofing business. For now, he was on the crew, tarring roofs, nailing asphalt shingles, starting at the bottom. He wanted her to quit college and marry him, but she’d begged off, knew she was too young for that kind of commitment.

Since then, their relationship wasn’t what it had been.

She’d considered breaking up with him, just hadn’t gotten around to it, wasn’t sure it was the right move. But this morning’s phone call changed everything.

She threw off the bedclothes and noticed that her roommate Lucretia was already gone, the top bunk evacuated. As usual. Lucretia was a bookworm of the highest order, always freaked out about this test or that. The hours she wasn’t in the library studying, she was here, cracking the books. She never went out. Never. It was like she was in jail or something.

Stretching, Kristi considered working out in the pool before she had to do her duties at the sorority house, then she really did have to hit the books; she had a paper due in Sutter’s class, and she didn’t dare turn it in late—that guy was way too intense; sometimes she caught him staring at her as if she were a puzzle, a psychological enigma. It was almost as bad as Dr. Northrup. Now that guy was just plain weird. He watched her, too. As if he expected to catch her cheating or something. It made her skin crawl. She groaned because there was probably going to be a quiz in Northrup’s class today. But after that… She glanced at the clock again and grinned. Nine hours from now she’d be in heaven.

True to his word, Bentz showed up around two in the afternoon. Olivia was trying to sweep up bird feathers and seed, when she heard Hairy S suddenly going berserk and yapping his fool head off. Leaving the broom and dustpan propped against the back door, she walked through the kitchen and peered through the windows. Bentz’s Jeep rolled down the lane. Leaves scattered in the afternoon sunlight and clouds shifted above the trees. The dog wouldn’t let up for a second.

“Hush!” she ordered, but Hairy S jumped at the front door and barked wildly as Bentz cut the engine and unfolded himself from the rig. Olivia barely recognized him. Gone were the slacks, crisp white shirt, tie and jacket. Instead he wore beat-up jeans, a sweater and athletic shoes. His hair ruffled in the wind and he looked more like a dad going to his kid’s soccer game than a world-weary cop.

As Bentz climbed the two steps to the front porch, Olivia scooped up a yapping and snarling Hairy S, then opened the door.

“Doesn’t he ever calm down?” Bentz asked.

“Not until he gets to know you.” Hairy’s eyes were trained on Bentz and he was wiggling like crazy, yapping and growling as if he were about to tear the detective limb from limb.

“And how long does that take?”

“Longer than a couple of days. Same with Chia, so I wouldn’t be putting your nose too close to her cage.” Hairy S was still barking. “Knock it off!” she ordered, and the dog, chastised a bit, satisfied himself with a growl of disapproval. Olivia put him on the floor and he started sniffing the hem of Bentz’s jeans. “He’s all bark and no bite.”

“But not the bird.”

Olivia smiled. “You can test her if you want.”

“I think I’ll take your word for it.”

“That’s probably a wise choice. So, is your laundry all done?” she asked, unable not to needle him.

“Yes.” He flashed a smile—one of those rare, genuine ones that lit up his eyes. “I even managed to unload the dishwasher, too. But damn, I just didn’t have time for the vacuum.”
“Very funny.”
“I thought so.”
She couldn’t help but return his grin. “I’m surprised you didn’t bag out, that you didn’t find something better to do.”
“I think I just ran through my list of options.”
“What about fishing or hunting or golfing … You said you were going to watch football—”
“I listened to the game on the way over. LSU needs help.”
“Don’t they always?”
“Uh-uh-uh. You’re talkin’ to a die-hard fan here.”
“I’ll remember that. Come on in.” They walked to the kitchen and she felt a little more at ease with him in her house. Maybe it was because he was dressed-down, or because the visit wasn’t official, or maybe she was just getting used to him. It was hard to imagine that less than forty-eight hours ago, he was just a name on a piece of newsprint. Now he was this … presence in her life.

*Oh, get over yourself. He’s a cop. Doing his job. End of subject.*

“So—the inscription?” he asked, leaning a jean-clad hip against the counter.

“Oh, right. Up in my room. Just a sec.” She sprinted up the stairs to her bedroom. Hairy S, ever faithful, galloped ahead. In the drawer of her night table she withdrew two sheets of paper, one with a list she’d compiled last night of everyone she knew who lived within fifty miles and the other she’d taken from her computer’s printer the last night of the dreams when she awoke to find Grannie Gin had died. On another page, she’d written the strange markings that she’d seen in the vision. Now, her good mood evaporated as she glanced down at the meaningless symbols and letters and she felt that same chill she always did upon reliving the vision.

“Don’t even go there,” she told herself as she hastened out of the room and down the stairs with an excited mutt leading the way.

“Loyal, isn’t he?” Bentz observed.

“Very.” Unlike the men I’ve known.

“Here’s the symbols and a list of my friends and family.” She handed him the sheets and he was instantly absorbed, scrutinizing the hieroglyphics as he dropped into a chair at the table.

“So this is what was written in the crypt when you had the dreams?” he asked.

“What I could remember when I woke up, yes.” She walked to a spot behind him where she could look over his shoulder, and as she stared at the symbols and letters, she shivered, remembering all too clearly the victim’s plight. “Go over it again, would you?”

“Sure. What I can remember. But those dreams, if you want to call them that, weren’t as vivid, at least not at first.” Yet she recalled them clearly. With the same bone-chilling intensity as the last. “It was basically the same dream over and over, with just slightly different variations.” She rubbed her arms and glanced through the window. Winter sunlight pierced through the filigree of naked branches, to spangle the dark water, but the day seemed suddenly frigid and lifeless, filled with shadows that shifted and distorted, always changing. How many times had she thought of the terrified woman trapped in a living tomb? How many nights had the image become a nightmare that she saw over and over again? “The most awful dream was when I think he actually killed her. It was the same night my grandmother died. August eleventh.

“I reported this all to Detective Brinkman for all the good it did.” Her eyes held his for an instant, then she glanced away. “Same old story. No body, no missing persons, no witnesses … just me. The lunatic.”

“Is that what you are?” he asked.

A small smile lifted one side of her mouth. This time when her gaze found his, she wouldn’t let it falter.

“What do you think?”

When he didn’t answer, her smile twisted into a self-deprecating smirk. “Let me guess. That I’m not playing with a full deck? I’m a bottle short of a six-pack? That the gates are closed, the lights flashing, but a train ain’t coming? I’ve heard ‘em all. You have to believe, Detective Bentz, I’m not one of those idiots who tries to make a scene with the police just to get some attention. And you know it. Because that girl in the house the other night was murdered just the way I told you she would be. And there was at least another one. Maybe more. Someone was left in the dark with those”—she pointed to the paper spread in front of him—“those damned
markings!"

“Okay, okay. Let’s start over. Calm down, okay. I’m sorry. I’m here, aren’t I? Listening to you. Trying to make some sense of it.”

Her blood was still boiling, but she nodded, tried to rein in her temper.

“Okay … so what do you make of these?” he asked, picking up the sheet and indicating her sketches. “I saw this in Brinkman’s report, but they didn’t mean anything to me. Chicken scratches. What do you think?”

She leaned over his shoulder and silently cursed herself for catching a waft of his aftershave. Pointing a finger at the symbols, she said, “I’m not sure what they mean. Remember, I caught only glimpses of these things as a light—probably the beam of a flashlight—swept the room.” She stared at the images she’d memorized. “I think the first one is an anchor and those”—she moved her finger to indicate a group of pointed lines—“those three are probably arrows—one with an arc over it, like it’s supposed to be a bow or something or on fire. At least that was the impression I got.” She touched the next image. “This is some kind of flower, I think, but the rest … I don’t know. This”—she indicated a group of letters with her fingertip—“is the inscription, but I only caught quick looks at the letters and I tried to write them down in the order they were scratched onto the walls of the tomb but they were just flashes, glimpses, all that I could remember.”

She read the strange message she’d tried to decipher a hundred times before: LUM … NA … PA … E … CU … FI


“Some of the letters are missing,” she said, “and I’ve tried a million times to fill in the blanks. Luminary, luminous … Napa—like Napa Valley in California … I don’t know. It could be a foreign language or part of an acronym or … anything. Maybe even gibberish. Maybe it was written on the wall before the woman was held captive, maybe it has nothing to do with her. I don’t know.” She gazed over his shoulder at the partial words and they made no more sense to her than they did the first time she’d seen them. Squinting, she leaned forward for a closer look, her breasts brushing the back of his sweater until she felt the muscles of his back tense. Realizing just how close she’d gotten, she quickly stepped back, breaking contact.

Embarrassed, she pulled out a chair and dropped into it. She motioned toward the sheet of computer paper. “It’s like one of those word-jumble puzzles in the Sunday paper. Except you can’t go to page fifty-one and find the answer.”

His eyes narrowed a fraction. Not a hint of a smile. All business again. “Mind if I take this? It’s clearer than Brinkman’s copy.”

“Go ahead.”

“Any other visions?” He was staring at her as if trying to sort out the lies from the truth, the smooth sanity from any shards of craziness.

“Off and on.”

“All different?”

“Yes. Nothing as clear.”

“Done by the same guy?”

“I … I don’t know … But it seems that way as I obviously don’t visualize every murder committed, not even some that happen in my town, but I see some, Detective Bentz, and they’re so clear they literally make my skin crawl.”

Nodding, he flipped to the second page and scanned it quickly. “Names, addresses, and phone numbers.” He glanced up. “I’m impressed.”

“I’m determined to catch this bastard.” She leaned back in the chair. “So … are you going to keep following me? Like last night.” She’d seen his Jeep in her rearview mirror as she’d driven home last night.

“Maybe I just wanted to see that you got home safely.”

“And maybe that’s a cop-out. Literally.”

His jaw slid to one side. “Okay, I’ll level with you.”

“That would be a plus.”

“I did want to see where you went and there’s something else. I’m starting to believe you and I’m starting to get worried. I wasn’t kidding about an alarm system and a Rottweiler.”
“So now you’re going to be my own private bodyguard?” she asked, tilting her head and trying to figure him out.

“I think my boss might have some issues with that although you’re pretty damned valuable—with this gift and all.”

“And all, Detective Bentz?”

He folded the paper and slid it into the pocket of his jeans. “You can drop the ‘detective,’” he said.

“And call you what?”

“I go by Rick but most people refer to me as Bentz.”

She realized this was an olive branch of some kind and figured she could use all that was offered. “Okay, Bentz, only if you call me Livvie or Olivia. I answer to both.”

“It’s a deal.”

“So you finally believe me?” she asked and he slanted her half a smile.

Something flickered in his gaze. “Let’s just say I’m keeping an open mind.”

“And it’s killing you.”

His grin stretched wider. “It’s not what I’m known for.” He pushed himself to his feet. “Thanks for your help,” he said as they walked through the house and onto the front porch. Hairy S streaked off, whining, hot on the trail of some invisible creature. “I’ll let you know if we find anyone trapped in a crypt somewhere.”

“I hope to God you don’t,” she said, “but I know someone will. Someday.”

“Maybe by then we will have caught the guy.” He hesitated and for a second she wondered if he was going to shake her hand, give her a hug, or kiss her. Instead he just inclined his head. “I’ll let you know.”

Olivia watched as he strode to his Jeep and got in. He backed the four-by-four into the turnaround by her truck, then waved and drove off, his rig bouncing down the rutted lane and out of sight behind the thick stands of cypress and oak. Leaning a shoulder against the door frame, she wondered how long he’d last, if indeed he would keep that open mind, then told herself it didn’t matter.

The visions came to her.

She was the one who had to figure out where they came from. Otherwise she’d never convince anyone to take her seriously. She wrapped her arms around her middle and wondered why it was so damned important that Rick Bentz trust her. After all, he was just another cop who’d seen it all. So what if she saw something deeper than the crusty, no-nonsense exterior he put forth? What did it matter that she noticed how wide his shoulders were and the way his jeans hugged his hips? Who cared that there was a deeper, more complicated side to the man than first met the eye? She couldn’t afford to find him attractive. Getting involved with him would be a major mistake. Major.

Nor could she sit around and wait for Rick Bentz or anyone else from the police department to take her seriously. She’d have to find some more proof or a link or something. Before the killer, whoever the bastard was, struck again. She decided to start with St. Luke’s.
Olivia pulled on the parking brake and looked through her windshield at the church. It was larger than she'd expected, a whitewashed building with arched stained-glass windows, a single spire, and a bell tower separated from the rest of the church as it rose toward the gray cloud-covered sky. She'd chosen St. Luke's because of its proximity to the French Quarter. A few blocks off Esplanade, the two-hundred-year-old bastion of Catholic faith was the closest church to the crime scene. It seemed the logical place to start when one was looking for a murdering priest.

“A fool’s mission,” she told herself as she got out of her pickup and cinched the belt of her coat more tightly around her middle. She hoped that somewhere in St. Luke’s offices, or the vestibule, there might be information, pamphlets about the church, its priests and staff and hopefully something about the other churches in the city.

It was Saturday. No one was hanging around in the vestibule. She tested the main doors and they opened easily. Inside, the building was vast but inviting. The ceiling was two full stories above the tiled floor and decorated with painted inlays framed in gold. The nave was lit by dim lights and dozens of candles, their flames flickering against the rough masonry walls. Most of the dark pews were empty, only a few devout individuals inside.

Olivia paused to stare at the altar and felt something. A need. An ache to believe. She’d never been particularly religious, but had tagged along to mass at her grandmother’s prodding. “When your troubles are too much,” Grannie had said, clutching Olivia’s hand, “it’s time to talk to God. To visit His house.”

Yet she was here not to pray, but to pry.

She made a quick sign of the cross and began her search, looking for the church office or a rack containing information about when the services would be held. If she didn’t find what she wanted here, then she’d visit St. Louis Cathedral by Jackson Square. It was the oldest and most famous in the city, and it was half a block from the store where she worked. If all else failed, there was the Internet.

Father McClaren watched the woman hurry into the vestibule and felt a forbidden emotion he quickly tamped down. She was windblown, her curly hair unruly and damp, her face flushed, her perfect lips turned into a pout. She crossed herself as if anxious or troubled and she seemed out of place with the regulars, the parishioners who made their daily pilgrimage to the church. Even in the half-light he noticed that her eyes were a unique gold color, that her teeth worried a pouty lower lip. She seemed as if she were searching for something. Or someone.

Another lost soul who stopped long enough to sign the guest register he and Father O’Hara had placed near the front doors.

“Can I help you?” he asked, approaching.

“I think I’d like to speak to a priest.” She was slightly breathless and he noticed a few sparse freckles across the bridge of her nose.

“You think?”

“Yes. No. I mean I’m sure I want to.” She seemed a little rattled, but he was used to that.

“I’m a priest,” he said, and she looked at him as if he had claimed he was from outer space or that she thought he was trying to pick her up in a bar. “Really. Father James McClaren.”

Obviously she wasn’t one of the flock.

“Oh.” Her eyebrows knit, and she still hesitated, almost as if what he’d told her was somehow a bit frightening. Strange. “I didn’t think you were allowed to wear jeans in church,” she clarified, still eyeing him with what? Suspicion?

“It’s probably not a great idea,” he admitted, indicating the faded Levi’s, “but I was just cutting through on my way to the cloister. I didn’t think anyone would catch me and I’m pretty sure God won’t mind.”
She lifted an eyebrow. Obviously he wasn’t what she’d expected. But then he never was.

“Are you here for reconciliation?” he asked, motioning to the confessionals positioned near the altar. “Father O’ Hara is officially on duty and I’ll round him up for you.”

“No,” she said suddenly. “I’m not here to confess anything, I just need to talk… to someone.” She stared steadily at him with those whiskey-colored eyes surrounded by thick dark lashes and mounted over cheekbones that didn’t quit. She was, all in all, a gorgeous woman.

Women were the bane of his existence. Especially beautiful ones.

“Could I talk with you?” she asked, seeming to overcome her reticence a bit. “I mean, when you’ve got a minute.”

“How about now?” He wanted to think that it was his sense of purpose, his calling, his pact with God and Church that made him accept her offer, though at the back of his mind he knew there was another reason, not quite as honorable, at play. “I’m not in that much of a hurry.” He touched her lightly on the arm and pointed her in the direction of the courtyard. “We can talk now if you’ll put up with me playing handyman. There’s a clog in one of the downspouts in the cloister and the regular guy is laid up with the flu. Just give me a minute.”

Olivia decided to trust him even though she felt a little nervous. Hadn’t she just witnessed a physically fit priest killing that poor woman?

You can’t distrust every athletic-looking minister you run into. What would be the chances that this priest was the ogre of your vision?

Besides, she just wanted to talk to someone about her gift and the burden that came with it. She had no intention of telling the priest about the murders or that she’d seen another man of the cloth killing an innocent woman, but she wanted to touch the Church in some way, to speak to a man of God, to make a connection.

Father James guided her past the last row of pews and through a door to the cloister, where the covered porch surrounded a square of marble and a center fountain and marble sculpture of the Virgin and baby Jesus. Cold wind swept across the open area and dark clouds hovered above the city.

“This’ll just take a minute,” he said as he unlocked a door and retrieved a broom, pair of gloves, bucket, and ladder from the closet. As she watched, holding her hair from her eyes, he positioned the ladder near a corner of the roof where a downspout spilled into a gutter. Donning the gloves, he climbed onto the ladder and pulled soggy leaves and debris from the gutter. “Messy business,” he said, and shoved the handle of the broom into the downspout. “But then God’s work is never done.” He looked down at her and smiled. It was a great smile. White teeth against late-afternoon beard-shadow in a square jaw that could have been taken from the Marlboro man. The guy was way too handsome to be a priest.

She had a twinge of déjà vu, as if she’d met him somewhere before. A silly idea. This guy, she would have remembered.

He finished with the gutter and she tried not to notice how the fabric of his jeans tightened over his butt as he climbed down and folded the ladder. What was wrong with her? Her libido, so long dormant, was suddenly all too alive. For all the wrong men.

“If you’re too cold, we can go inside, but I like it here. Outside, but sheltered. Something closer to God about it.” He snapped the ladder closed and placed it, bucket, and gloves into the closet.

“If the priest business ever slows down, you can always get a job as a maintenance guy,” she observed as he locked the door.

He laughed and rammed a stiff set of fingers through his near-black hair, pushing it off his forehead. “Not exactly a higher calling. So, tell me what’s on your mind?”

“You won’t believe it.”

“Try me.” Again the smile. “I’ve heard it all.”

“Okay,” she said as they walked the perimeter of the courtyard, under the overhang. The smell of the Mississippi wafted over the two-hundred-year-old walls of the church. “My name is Olivia,” she said. “Benchet. I moved here a few months ago to be with my grandmother before she died. I inherited her house and something else. It’s a gift, they say, kind of like ESP.”

“Kind of?”

“I see things, Father. Sometimes ugly things.” She stuffed her hands into her pockets and wondered how much she should confide. Dry leaves danced across the stone floor of the cloister. “Sometimes things that make
me doubt my faith." She slanted him a glance, but he was looking straight ahead, his brows knit, his nose a little red from the cold.

"We all have doubts now and again," he said. "Even priests."

"Do priests sin?" she asked.

"What do you think?" he asked and his lips tightened a fraction. "Unfortunately we are human."

She wondered. The man she saw in her visions wasn't human at all. He was hideous. A beast. The embodiment of evil. All dressed up in fine vestments. The clouds opened up and poured rain from the sky and the thick drops tumbled down the sloping roof to gurgle in the eaves.

"So you believe that I have this ‘sight’?"

"God works in mysterious ways."

"Come on, that’s not an answer."

"No, I guess it’s not. Kind of an overused cliché." He stopped at the door to the chapel. "How about this? I think there are gifts God bestows upon all of us. Some we can see, or touch, or prove, if you will. Others are intangible, but gifts nonetheless. We’re lucky if we recognize what we’ve got."

"What if I consider my particular gift a curse?"

"Then you should try to look at it another way. Turn it around. God wants us to use whatever gifts he bestows upon us to benefit mankind and to glorify Him. I bet if you look hard enough you can find something positive in your sight."

"That’ll be tough."

"I’m sure you can do it," he said with an encouraging smile that touched his eyes.

If you only knew. She was tempted to confide in him, to tell him what she’d seen, but thought better of it.

"I’ll give it a shot," she promised, wondering if she was lying to a man of God. "So, are you and Father O’Hara the only priests here, at Saint Luke’s?"

"For the moment. Sometimes we have visiting priests who conduct the service. And for the record, it’s Monsignor O’Hara. Sometimes he’s a little fussy about that.”

"Oh. I’ll try to remember. So do you know other priests in New Orleans, the ones who work in different parishes?"

"Of course." He smiled as if amused. "Why?"

"Just curious," she said, and that really wasn’t a lie. As much as she wanted to trust this man of God, she knew that if she confided the horrid truth to him, she was bound to alienate him. Right now, she just needed a friend in the Church. Someone she could talk to. "Thanks for your time." She offered her hand.

He wrapped chilled fingers around her palm. "Come back anytime you have questions, Olivia. And… you might want to attend mass once in a while. Talking with me is fine, but maybe you need to speak to the Father directly."

"I can do that from home, can’t I?"

"Of course, but God’s house is a welcome home." He smiled and she felt better. "Here." He reached into his pocket and withdrew his wallet. From inside he pulled out a business card. "You’re welcome to come, to call me anytime and the door to St. Luke’s is always open." He pressed the card into her outstretched hand. "I’ll look for you."

Don’t hold your breath, she thought, turning the card over.

"Don’t tell me … you didn’t know priests carried business cards. Or use e-mail, right? Well, not all do. I find it just makes things easier. And making business cards with a computer is a snap."

She laughed, feeling more at ease, then tucked the card into her purse. "Thanks."

"Don’t thank me. There’s a higher power at work here." Father James held the door for her and watched her cross the parking lot to a red truck. She was an interesting woman. Troubled. Beautiful. And she’d lied to him. Well, if not lied at least hedged: he saw it in her eyes. He wondered why, but he tried not to judge. Never. For there was no man who should judge another.

He’d learned long ago that judgment should be left to God.

Didn’t he know himself what it was to sin?

What it was to feel the pull of evil?
How hard it was not to transgress?

He’d have to be careful, he thought, remembering how easily sin had come knocking on his door, and how quickly, eagerly, he’d opened it. He’d promised God as well as himself that he’d never unlock it again. He hoped he hadn’t lied.

The Internet was a bust. Olivia clicked off her laptop and rubbed the kinks from the back of her neck. Seated on her grandmother’s old couch in the living room, she picked up her now-cold cup of tea, and frowned. Well, what had she expected? That all the priests in the state of Louisiana would have their pictures and personal bios on a website? WWW.WeAreSouthernPriests.com? And even if she had found photos and personal tidbits on the web, what would that prove? She couldn’t pick the guy out of the crowd anyway. And maybe he wasn’t even a priest. Maybe he’d just donned an alb that he usually saved for Mardi Gras. One that he let burn in the fire.

That made more sense.

“Give it up,” she told herself, and carried her cup into the kitchen to deposit it in the sink. It was late afternoon, the sun sinking fast, darkness shading the bayou. The rain had let up, but the clouds still rolled across the sky, making the day dreary and glum. Hairy S was curled on a rag rug near the back door. He looked up and thumped his tail on the floor before yawning broadly and resting his chin on his paws again. Chia whistled softly, then tossed water from her dish over her head.

Olivia glanced at the caned-back chair where Rick Bentz had sat only hours before. The big man with the world-weary expression until he smiled, and then, look out. He transformed into a handsome, if determined male with intelligent eyes and a cutting sense of humor. She liked that. He could take it as well as dish it out.

An interesting man, but off-limits. He was a cop; his interest in her was purely professional and he thought she was a crackpot. She could read it in his eyes.

Then there was Father James McClaren. Hollywood handsome with intense blue eyes and just enough gray at his temples to make him interesting. Talk about off-limits! He was a priest, devoted to God and a life of celibacy. What a waste, she thought, remembering him climbing the ladder and the way her gaze had strayed to his buttocks and thighs …

“You’ve been alone too long, Benchet,” she groused at herself, disbelieving. Lately her libido seemed to be making up for lost time. She, who after the last broken engagement had sworn off men for good. And now she was thinking ludicrous, sexy thoughts about two men she could never even date, much less have a future with.

“Bentz is right, you’re a maniac,” she muttered.

Hairy S jumped to his feet and growled.

“What?”

He began barking crazily and scrambled to the front door, making enough racket to raise the dead in the surrounding three parishes.

“Cut it out!” Olivia ordered and followed him to the front door, half expecting to hear the peal of chimes. She smiled inwardly. It had to be Bentz. Back with some clue or question.

But as she looked out the window, she saw no one. Hairy was still barking, jumping up to the window, acting as if there was someone on the other side of the door.

The hairs on the back of Olivia’s arms rose. She moved, angling herself so she could look down the length of the front porch through the window. But she saw nothing. Not even a shadow. She thought about her grandmother’s shotgun tucked into the closet under the stairs. “Just in case,” Grannie had said. “I’m ashamed to say it, but I don’t trust ‘em like I used to.”

Me neither, Olivia thought now. Remembering Bentz’s warning, she went to the closet, pulled out the gun, and finding a box of shells on the shelf over the coats, loaded the darned thing, throwing the bolt. Then, telling herself that she would call the security people first thing Monday morning, she walked to the front door and cracked it open. Outside there wasn’t a sound. Not a sigh of wind, not a croak of a bullfrog, not the hum of insects. The world was still. As if everything had come to a halt. She stepped onto the porch and Hairy S, sticking closer to her, began to growl, low and deep, as if he were afraid.

“It’s all right,” she said to the dog, but even to her own ears the words sounded false. Hopeful. Founded on nothing.

He whimpered.

“Come here.” Picking up the dog from the worn porch boards with her free hand, Olivia stared into the
twilight. Shadows seemed to shift or was it a trick of the fading light? The air was cool and still, the clouds overhead barely visible but motionless. She curled her fingers into the scruff of fur at Hairy S’s neck and he whined, shivering. “Let’s go inside,” she whispered and backed into the house, locking the door firmly behind her, wondering if she’d ever have the nerve to actually fire the gun.

She wasn’t one to be scared. Living alone wasn’t usually a problem, but tonight she wished she had someone with her. Someone big, strong, and unafraid. Rick Bentz’s face flashed through her mind. He was big. Strong. Determined. And he wore a sidearm. Then there was James McClaren. He had God on his side. Definitely better than a weapon.

“Fool,” she muttered, shaking her head at the turn of her thoughts. Was she so desperate for a man, she wondered as she tucked the shotgun into the closet. Never. She wasn’t going to buy into that relying-on-the-stronger-sex theory. She had only to look at the men in her own life—her father, the con, or her fiancé, the cheat. There had been other boyfriends, all short-lived, all of whom had some major flaw that she hadn’t been able to see herself living with or compromising over. Not that all of the men she had dated had declared their undying love for her—well, other than Ted. But she just plain wasn’t interested.

But now?

What’s with thinking about the cop and the priest? You, Olivia, need some serious counseling. Serious. She glanced at herself in the mirror mounted over the bookcase near the front door. She felt it again.

That stark coldness. Like black ice, deceptively benign, it lured, created a false sense of security. She saw beyond her own reflection and into the darkness … heard the sounds of the night, felt a pulse … an ache … a blood lust that ran through her veins …

“Oh, God,” she whispered, shivering as she recognized the scent of the hunt, the black adrenalin rush at the thought of the kill. Her heart pumped wildly. Her pulse pounded in her ears.

“No … no …” Her knees went weak and she leaned against the table, felt the worn edges of her grandmother’s Bible with the tips of her fingers. But her eyes stared deep into the glass and saw only the Stygian night.

Through the monster’s eyes.

He was hunting again.
Chapter Thirteen

“Bastard,” Kristi hissed, looking at the clock in her dorm room. Seven thirty-five and no sign of Brian. She’d dressed in black hip-hugging jeans and a red sweater that showed off just a hint of her abdomen if she reached her hand over her head, and had spent nearly an hour with her makeup and hair, which was about fifty minutes more than she usually allowed. And he was standing her up.

Glowering at the telephone, she willed it to ring. “Come on, come on.”

Lucretia walked into the room carrying a Coke and a white sack from the local fast-food Mexican spot, located just a block off-campus. Black corkscrew curls bounced around her face. “You’re still here?” she asked, sloughing off a jacket that was already dripping onto the carpet. “I thought you had a hot date.”

“So did I.”

“No show?”

“Not yet.”

“Maybe you should call him and see what’s up. Does he have a cell phone?” She opened the bag, peered in, and withdrew some kind of taco wrapped in brightly colored paper.

“I don’t know. I don’t have his number,” Kristi said, frowning. She’d checked caller ID, but Brian’s last call had come in as an anonymous call, which made the service that her paranoid cop of a dad insist she have absolutely worthless.

“Maybe he got sick,” Lucretia suggested as she unwrapped a soft taco and took a bite.

And maybe he just set you up. He probably could tell that you had a crush on him and he was just playing with you—a silly little freshman interested in a thirty-year-old grad student on his way to his doctorate. Face it, Kristi, he’s not going to show. “Then he could have called.”

“Well, it’s not that late. Maybe he just got detained. Traffic or … I don’t know …” Lucretia drank from her Coke and sat on her desk chair.

“He still could have phoned,” Kristi said, burned.

“Well, then he’s a jerk. And you should probably stick with Jay anyway. At least he loves you.”

That much Kristi knew. “Jay’s good, but he’s kinda boring.”

“But he’s true-blue.”

Which you’re not, Lucretia didn’t add, but Kristi read it in her eyes. Lucretia had dated only one boy in her life and she stuck to him like glue. They went to different colleges, rarely saw each other, spent hundreds of dollars on phone cards, but stuck it out. Lucretia spent every weekend that she wasn’t with her boyfriend in this cracker box of a room, studying night and day.

Which, in Kristi’s opinion was zero fun. Probably less than zero.

“Oh, by the way. Someone else called.” She searched her desk and found a tiny scrap of paper. “A guy named Willie Davis.”

Kristi groaned. “He’s the kid I told you about. The guy who always sits behind me in Psych and I can feel him staring at me.” She took the piece of paper from Lucretia’s hand and wadded it in her fist. “He’s harmless, but I’m not interested. He’s a nerd, but he likes me. The only thing good about him is that Dr. Sutter seems to have a thing against him. He’s always calling on Willie in class and that takes the pressure off me.” She tossed Willie’s name and number into the trash. “If he calls again, tell him that I’m out, or that I dropped out or to drop dead or any of the above.”

“I’m sick of lying for you.” Lucretia shook her head. “You deal with him.”

“I will,” Kristi snapped, irritated with Lucretia and especially with Brian. The jerk. Why the hell didn’t he show up? Irritated, she grabbed her jacket. “I’m going out.”

“Without Brian?” Lucretia’s eyes rounded as she took another bite from her taco.

“Yeah, without him.”
“But you shouldn’t go out alone, Kristi. The sorority’s rules are—”
“Meant to be broken. I’m leaving. Alone.”
“But … But what should I tell him if he calls?”

To go screw himself. “That I’m out,” she said as she took off, pushing her arms down the sleeves of her jacket and hurrying down the hall to the stairwell. She heard a phone ringing as she reached the door to the stairs, but she wasn’t about to turn around and run down the hall and see if it was for her. If he called, fine. He could live with the fact that she wasn’t about to sit around for any boy.

Not even if he was the sexiest guy on campus.

He watched from the shadows. Saw her shoot out of the glass doors of Cramer Hall and across the street toward the quad. She was perfect, with her long, athletic legs and tight, swimmer’s body. Her hair streamed behind her as she jogged, glinting with just a hint of red in the blue haze of the security lamps. And she was alone. Just as he’d hoped.

Kristi Bentz was soon to become St. Lucy.

If he could wait that long.

A fine mist shrouded the grounds, rising up from the grass and bushes, creating a dense, shifting curtain, and clouds blocked any moonlight.

He wanted her. Tonight. December thirteenth seemed much too far away.

Silently following the same path she’d taken, keeping a safe distance behind her hurried steps, he thought of ways to take her … to keep her until the perfect time … to prolong the thrill. He could stalk her, capture her, and hold her for just the right moment. The day of her salvation was preordained. December thirteenth, still over three weeks away. Could he wait that long? Would the sacrifice of another satisfy him, for there was one before her. But this one … she was the one he wanted. The fact that she was Bentz’s daughter, the princess, only added to the intensity of his need.

He slid through the shadows.

She would be a match for him. Unlike the others, the cop’s daughter had spirit and fire. He imagined what he would do to her. Surely God would forgive him one transgression, surely he would be absolved for touching her … feeling her soft, supple flesh and hard muscles … He’d watched her in the pool, cutting through the water, turning, and later, in those perfect moments when she’d climbed out of the water and snapped the bottom of her swimming suit over her tight buttocks, he’d glimpsed the curve of her rump, eyed the length of her leg, observed her shaking the water from her hair.

His cock stiffened, rising and wanting. Was she a virgin? Or was she tainted? Another whore? Would he be the first, were he to break his vows and mount her?

The thought of shackling her, of keeping her, of touching her and teasing her, made him groan. This is not part of the plan. She’s not the one. Not yet. But he couldn’t resist. She was a siren, a Jezebel, and he was weak … so weak.

She dashed along an alley separating the fraternity and sorority houses, then crossed a street and didn’t stop for another block. He kept after her and watched as she rounded a corner to follow the seduction of neon lights sizzling in the window of a popular spot where college kids tended bar and rarely checked the patrons’ IDs.

One sign was the name of a popular beer written in pulsing blue script; the other was a pink martini glass complete with olive, tipped invitingly. Beckoning.

She walked brazenly into the bar though she was underage and her father was a cop. Yes, she was bold.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” he whispered, his pulse pounding, his erection stiff. “Naughty, naughty.”

She never so much as looked over her shoulder.

He followed her in.

Bentz ignored the open pizza box. He’d eaten three slices while watching ESPN and downing a beer—or what he now referred to as a beer. But his mind was still on Olivia Benchet and the case surrounding the Jane Doe in the fire.

He’d contacted the Lafayette Police. They were supposed to be questioning Reggie Benchet. When they rounded him up, they’d call. So far nothing.
Bentz had given up trying to figure out the meaning of the symbols that Olivia Benchet had scribbled on the paper, and he’d faxed them to a cryptographer who worked for the department. He’d taken a copy of the list of her friends and family and given it to a civilian staffer, but he was going through it himself anyway, acquainting himself with the people with whom she was close.

Resting a heel on his coffee table, he glanced at the screen, then back to the papers spread on the couch beside him. He knew psychics who had worked with the LAPD. But they worked from being at the scene, or working with items of clothing or the habitats of suspects. Never had he dealt with someone who’d actually seen through the eyes of the killer. Or through a mirror or reflective surface, a macabre takeoff on the magic mirror in Snow White. Damned weird.

It didn’t make sense. Yet he believed her. There just wasn’t any logical explanation. His television was on low as he was catching the latest basketball scores, but he concentrated on the list. Her family was odd and he was double-checking the whereabouts of her father. An ex-con on parole after serving time for murder was a pretty big red flag. Then there was the ex-boyfriend, Ted Brown, now divorced, working for the railroad and living across the river in Gretna. He’d had a few brushes with the law. Officers had been called out to his apartment three times for domestic squabbles. Twice with his wife and once with a girlfriend. Supposedly he’d been brandishing a knife, but the charges had been dropped each time.

“Nice guy,” Bentz observed, wondering how Olivia could have come close to marrying the jerk. Ted Brown warranted being checked out. Spurned ex-lovers tended to be hostile and nasty.

Bentz wondered if Olivia still talked to Brown. Saw him? Was close to him? Was it enough of a connection if he was the killer? That was what bothered Bentz: the damned connection. What was it that linked Olivia Benchet with the killer? Who the hell was he? How did she see him, and did it work two ways? Why didn’t she see his face every waking moment, why just the killings? Was the killer in tune with her? Did he know her name? She was a threat to him. If he knew who she was, she was potentially in serious danger. Serious.

He clicked his pen nervously. Didn’t like the train of his thoughts. He saw the mother’s name. Bernadette Dubois Benchet Martin. He circled her name because it wasn’t complete. According to Brinkman, Bernadette had been married “five times” so there were a few husbands missing. He’d have to check that. And what about the kid who’d drowned? The sister, Chandra?

Bentz had added three deceased people to Olivia’s list. Chandra and her grandparents Virginia and Montcliff Dubois. There were another set of grandparents he hadn’t tracked down, uncles, aunts, and cousins that he intended to call. Any blood relative, though why he thought there might be a genetic connection to the killer, he wasn’t sure. It just made some kind of sense to him.

What about half-brothers? Half-sisters? If Bernadette had been married so often, surely Olivia had a couple of half-siblings tucked away. And Reggie could have spread his seed around. He could have any number of offspring.

Shit. The list could go on forever, and Bentz wanted to nail this guy by his balls before he hurt anyone else. Before he figured out that Olivia Benchet was witnessing what he was doing.

Thoughtfully, as the sports anchor switched from basketball to football stats and the Saints’ chance at the Super Bowl, Bentz drew a question mark by the name of Chandra, Olivia’s only sibling. Something wasn’t right there. Call it a hunch or intuition; he sensed there was more to the story.

As there was with the burned house where the victim was found. The department had started sifting through people who had inquired about the duplex, but so far nothing had clicked.

They needed a break and soon.

His pager beeped. Bentz looked down at the readout and recognized Olivia Benchet’s number. He tensed. She wouldn’t call unless it was important. Unless it was trouble. In one motion, he hit the mute button on the TV and grabbed the cordless phone and punched in her number.

She picked up before the second ring. “Hello?”

“It’s Bentz.”

“He’s hunting again,” she said and her voice was shaking.

“What?” Bentz was on his feet, reaching for his jacket, sidearm, and keys.

“I … I felt him again. And he’s hunting. Right now.”

“Where?”
“I don’t know,” she admitted, her voice tight. “I just caught glimpses. But he’s out there tonight and he’s following some girl. I couldn’t see her face. It was too damned dark, but … oh, God, he wants her. He’s conflicted about taking her tonight or waiting. I don’t know what that means, but I’m afraid he’s going to kill her tonight. Unless we can stop him.”
“Make sure your doors are locked tight. I’ll be right over. As soon as I’m on my way, I’ll call back on the cell.” Bentz was already out the door as he hung up. Before he reached the first floor of the apartment building, he’d strapped on his shoulder holster and jammed his arms through the sleeves of his jacket.

Shouldering open the door, he dashed to his parking space and was on the street within five minutes. He placed a quick call to Montoya, left a message, then tore up the streets to the freeway. Once heading out of town, he dialed Olivia. “It’s me,” he said as he blended into the thin stream of Saturday night traffic. “Now, start from the beginning. Tell me what you saw.”

“I was here alone and … I just looked into the mirror, and it sounds crazy, I know, but I was suddenly not seeing my reflection, but something beneath it. It was like I was looking through another set of eyes. His eyes.”

She sounded calmer than when she’d first called him, but she was still frightened. He listened to what happened, told her to hang tight, and floored it.

Her house was usually more than half an hour away. He made it there in twenty minutes, his Jeep bouncing down her lane as his tires flung mud from the rutted lane. Leaves danced across his windshield and across the swath of his headlights. His chest was tight, his mind racing. A few days ago, he wouldn’t have given the woman the time of day and now he was driving like a maniac, worried sick for her safety, assuming what she was seeing was the truth.

Through the trees he saw her cottage, warm patches of light glowing through the windows. As the Jeep slid to a stop, she flipped on the porch light, flung open the door, and the dog shot out to bark, run in circles, and lift his leg while she stood on the porch. Bentz’s pulse, already pounding, skyrocketed. God, she was beautiful with those long legs and wild hair and worried eyes. He unfolded himself from the car, jogged to the porch, and as he clambered up the two short steps, she flung herself into his arms.

“Thanks for coming,” she said, smelling of jasmine, and he held her for a minute, longer than he should have.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes … I think so … come in.”

He let his arms drop and noticed that she flushed a bright shade of scarlet, as if she was embarrassed by her emotional display. She whistled to the dog, who sped into the house and made a beeline for the kitchen. Olivia locked the door, then motioned toward a short bookcase with a worn, leather-bound Bible sitting on the top shelf. Mounted on the wall over the bookcase was a mirror with a beveled edge and dark frame. “This is where I saw it,” she said, looking into the glass and swallowing. Bentz, standing behind her, saw nothing more than their reflection, him standing over half a foot taller than she.

“And now?”

“Nothing. Just you and me.” Her eyebrows drew together. “But it was dark,” she said, and reached to the wall to switch off the overhead light. Instantly the tiny hallway darkened. Again they gazed into the mirror, and Bentz heard her swift intake of breath, watched as she stared into the mirror. She tensed, and he touched her lightly on the shoulder, hoping to offer her strength and support. “There’s nothing …” she said at last, relaxing. “Nothing.” She shook her head and sighed. “I should have known, this isn’t something that I can call up, it just happens.” She shoved her hair from her eyes and caught his gaze in the darkened glass. “I’m sorry. You came all the way out here for nothing.”

“Maybe not. Let’s go over it again. Maybe if you talk it through, show me exactly what happened, we’ll learn something.” He offered her a bit of a smile and she turned, her arm brushing his chest, the scent of her perfume tantalizing.

“If you think so.”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Neither do I,” she admitted. “I guess we may as well give it a shot.” She started up the stairs and Hairy S sped up ahead of her. “I was up here.”
The old steps creaked as he climbed. All the while he tried not to watch her round little rump as she ascended or the way the denim stretched tight over her buttocks. He forced his eyes to the upper floor, which consisted of a short hallway, small bath, and two bedrooms tucked under the eaves. He caught a glimpse of the larger room that faced the rear of the house. A four-poster sat in the middle of one wall and French doors led to a verandah. The rest of the furniture consisted of a bureau and desk. Olivia led him to the other bedroom. It was smaller and cozy, filled with a twin bed, a small sofa, a bureau, and a desk where a laptop computer was set up. Textbooks filled a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. “I was here. Doing some research,” she explained, “and nothing seemed out of the ordinary, then I went downstairs …” Again he followed her, this time watching her sun-streaked hair bounce as she made her way to the first floor, “… and as I passed by here …” She looked into the mirror again, her fingers reaching forward as she touched the cover of a Bible resting on the top of the short bookcase. “… I felt something.” She shivered as if experiencing a chill. This time he didn’t touch her, but let her gaze into the glass, to recreate what she’d felt, to try and reconnect with the monster who was stalking the streets of New Orleans.

He didn’t know when he’d started believing her, but against his deep-rooted skepticism she’d found a way to convince him that somehow, some way, she had a connection to the killer.

It was his job to figure out how.

“I don’t feel him,” she whispered. “He’s gone.” Shaking her head and sighing, she turned to face Bentz. “But I did. Tonight. I felt him tonight.”

“I know.” He looked into her eyes and something deep inside him shifted. A wall he’d worked so hard to erect began to crumble. She was so earnest here in the half-light that filtered into the hallway from the living room. Her gold eyes were clouded with worry, the skin over those high cheekbones stretched taut with concern.

“You believe me?”

“I believe you saw something, yes. I don’t know what it was or what it means or how it happens, but in some way, Olivia, I think you’re linked to the murderer.”

“Dear God,” she whispered. “How?”

“That’s what we’ve got to figure out.” He wanted to comfort her. To wrap his arms around her and hold her tight. To press a kiss upon her crown and even brush one across her lips. But he didn’t. Despite his conflicting emotions, he restrained himself. He was too involved as it was.

To his surprise, she took the initiative and, standing on her tiptoes, pressed a featherlight kiss against his cheek. “Thanks for coming,” she said hoarsely then, as if embarrassed all over again, cleared her throat. “Have a seat,” she said, gesturing to the living room. “And I’ll buy you a beer.”

Hairy S hurried down the steps. Bentz settled for some kind of flavored coffee and sat on one corner of the couch while Olivia curled up in the other corner. The dog hopped onto the cushion between them and circled three times before plopping down. Bentz asked dozens of questions. She answered, but he learned nothing.

“You have no idea who he is or the identity of the woman he was chasing?”

“No … I only saw her back, but she was jogging and I got the impression she was young. He followed her through some alleys that I didn’t recognize, past huge, well-kept mansions and across a busy street toward a business district. Again, I didn’t recognize anything,” she admitted, concentrating. “The woman hurried into a bar and I caught a glimpse of neon lights—a pink martini glass.”

That was something. But not much. “There are hundreds of bars around here.”

“I’m not even sure it was New Orleans.”

“So … I only saw her back, but she was jogging and I got the impression she was young. He followed her through some alleys that I didn’t recognize, past huge, well-kept mansions and across a busy street toward a business district. Again, I didn’t recognize anything,” she admitted, concentrating. “The woman hurried into a bar and I caught a glimpse of neon lights—a pink martini glass.”

That was something. But not much. “There are hundreds of bars around here.”

“I’m not even sure it was New Orleans.”

“Then where?”

“I don’t know.” They sipped coffee and he asked her question after question, trying to make her think about the vision, about her family, about her “gift.” He got nowhere. His cell phone blasted and he picked it up.

“Got your message,” Montoya said. “What up?”

Bentz explained and Montoya swore under his breath. “So it looks like we’re gonna have another one.”

“Let’s hope not. She didn’t witness a murder this time. Just a hunt.”

“That’s enough,” Montoya muttered. “Has she ever seen a hunt before?”

“No. I asked her that.”

“So now she’s getting more peeks. Maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe she’ll pick up on something before he strikes again.” Montoya was finally buying her story as well. But then he had to. It was all they had to go on.
Bentz hung up, asked a few more questions, and assuring himself that she had calmed down and that the house was secure, decided he had to leave. “Call me anytime,” he said as he walked to the door.

One side of her mouth lifted. “I will.”

“And really, get an alarm system.” He reached for the doorknob, then hesitated. “I’d feel a lot better about it.”

“Are you worried about me, Detective?” she asked, amused.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Because I’m the only witness you’ve got?” She was teasing him, flirting with him.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said, and watched as she raised a dubious brow. “That and the fact that I’d hate to see anything happen to that cute ass of yours.”

She laughed. “What about the rest of me?”

“Goes without saying.”

“You’re a real charmer, aren’t you, Bentz?”

“I try my best.” He opened the door, hesitated again, and then, knowing he was making one of the worst mistakes of his life, muttered, “Oh, hell,” and grabbed her again. She let out a gasp as he bent down, kissed her hard, and lifted her off her feet. She was breathless as he set her down. “Don’t mess with me, Benchet,” he said with a wink. “And lock the damned door behind me.”

Olivia was left with her head spinning. She watched him climb into his Jeep, then closed the door and threw the dead bolt. Sagging against the aging panels, she wondered why she’d baited him, why she’d flirted with him.

Because you’re lonely and scared, and Rick Bentz is sexy as hell. She heard the sound of his Jeep’s engine roar to life then fade as he drove off. The house seemed suddenly emptier. No longer cozy.

You can’t be falling for him, she told herself. No way. No how. It’s just that you’re terrified and he’s a big man, a strong man, someone you can lean on.

That had to be it. And yet when she touched her lips with her fingertips, she relived that breath-stopping kiss and realized with a sense of doom that she was lying to herself.

If she didn’t watch it, she’d imagine herself in love with Detective Rick Bentz and that would only spell disaster.

Kristi was midway through her second beer and pissed as hell. She’d found some friends in the bar and pretended that she wasn’t mad, but she was, and when she saw Brian wending his way through the tables to their booth, she turned and made a point of staring out the window.

“Don’t look now,” Marianne whispered from the other side of the booth as she took a drag on her cigarette, “but I think someone’s here to eat some crow.”

“Good. I hope he chokes on the feathers.”

“Give the guy a break. Hear what he has to say,” Jennie said, grabbing a handful of pretzels.

“Kristi?” Brian’s voice was deep. She felt his fingertips on her shoulder and jerked away. “We need to talk.”

Still steamed, she angled her face toward him and sipped her beer. “About?”

“Why I was late.”

“You weren’t late. You didn’t show.”

“I did. Just about five minutes after you left, according to your roommate. I figured I might find you here.”

“How?”

“It’s the local hangout.” He was leaning over slightly. His face was wet. He smelled of musky aftershave and rainwater. “My car broke down.”

“You could’ve called.”

“The battery ran down on my cell. It died when I called roadside assistance for someone to come jump me.”

“There are pay phones.”

“I didn’t think I’d be that late.” He glanced past her to her two friends, who were swallowing smiles and staring at him unabashedly. “Come on … let me take you to dinner.”

“I think I’d better stay here.”
He gave her the ghost of a smile. “You’re really going to make me suffer for this, aren’t you?”
“You deserve it.”
“Just give me a chance to make it up to you.”
“I don’t think so.”
Marianne stubbed out her cigarette. “Give the guy a break, Kristi.”
Kristi’s eyes narrowed on her friend.
“Tell ya what,” Brian said, “I’ll take you on at pool or darts. Your choice. If I win, we go to dinner.”
“And if I win?” Kristi asked.
“Then you choose the punishment.”
“That might be dangerous,” she teased, warming up. He was just so hot. “I have a pretty wild imagination. You could be humiliated.”
Something sparked in his sexy eyes. “Then maybe I should lose on purpose,” he said and she laughed.
“Okay, you’re on.” She drained her beer and felt a little lightheaded as she got to her feet.
“Watch out,” Marianne warned. “Kristi’s really good.”
“So am I,” Brian assured her as she made her way to the dart board and grabbed a handful of darts.
She had the weird sensation that someone was watching her, someone besides her girlfriends. She glanced around the bar and saw no one really staring at her. Oh, there were a couple of guys playing pool who glanced up and winked at her and she was afraid the bartender was studying her as if he suddenly questioned her fake ID, but no one sinister. Still, she couldn’t shake the eerie sensation. “But there is one thing.”
“Yeah?”
Brian clamped steel-tough fingers around her wrist. She hadn’t realized until then how much bigger he was than she. “One rule.”
“So now there are rules? Great. Okay, what is it?”
“If I lose, and I don’t intend to, you can’t ask me to change your grade in Zaroster’s class. I like you, but I’m not going to screw up my life over this, okay? You’re on your own in philosophy.”
“Oh, darn, and I thought this was my big chance to score an A.”
“I mean it.”
“Fine, but anything else goes?” she asked and his fingers loosened a bit, the tips rubbing against the inside of her wrist.
“That’s right,” he said, that wicked light in his eyes flaring again. “Anything at all.”
Chapter Fifteen

Bentz spent Sunday morning working on the case. He’d checked with the department, and though there had been a gang-related knifing on the waterfront, and a hit-and-run out by the airport, no one had reported another murder that would suggest Olivia Benchet’s private killer was on the loose again.

But then she hadn’t witnessed a murder, only someone stalking a woman.

He’d also run down some leads, called people who had viewed the house on Bayou St. John where the murder had been committed and checked the people visible on Carl Henderson’s video against the list of witnesses who’d viewed the fire. Three people on the video, a young couple and the guy in the shadows, hadn’t been identified. Everyone else was accounted for.

The Lafayette Police had talked to Reggie Benchet and were faxing a report, but so far, there was no indication he’d been in New Orleans during the time of the last killing—they were still checking his alibi.

Bentz had created a list of sign companies specializing in neon lighting and another of bars in the area. Maybe someone would remember a pink martini glass, though Olivia’s recent vision had nothing to do with any murder.

So far.

Then there were the churches and the priests who officiated. He had lists of those as well.

Tired of the paperwork and trails leading nowhere, he took a break and worked out in the back bedroom. Stripped to his boxer shorts, he pounded the hell out of a punching bag. It worked his muscles, relieved stress, and had peeled off about fifteen pounds in the past six months. He was getting so goddamned healthy he could barely stand himself.

No booze.
No cigarettes.
No women.

Unless he counted Olivia Benchet, whom he’d known only a few days and had kissed once. It was a helluva kiss. But it wasn’t exactly a relationship.

Sweat began to run down his back. He was living the life of a bloody priest. Montoya had accused him of having no social life and the truth of the matter was the young buck was right. “Hell,” Bentz growled and pummeled the bag until his muscles screamed and he was soaked. Breathing hard, he leaned against the bag and let it rock slowly as he caught his breath. He glanced around Kristi’s room. Aside from the punching bag, it was just as she’d left it with its double bed, aqua-colored spread, and matching curtains. It smelled dusty and unused and he decided he’d go the distance and vacuum and dust, maybe even have a bouquet of flowers on the bedside table waiting for her. He looked at the spot and frowned when he noticed the photograph of Jennifer, still at the side of Kristi’s bed.

Taken years before, faded slightly, the shot was a picture of the two of them. Kristi had been around seven at the time and the picture had been taken by one of Jennifer’s friends as mother and daughter had climbed off a roller coaster. Their faces were flushed, their hair wild, their eyes alight with the thrill of the ride. Funny, he didn’t feel the old anger anymore, just a deep sadness with a bit of an edge. Their marriage had been doomed, of course, from the onset. Jennifer had been miserable married to a cop, who had been overly ambitious and spent long hours away from her. He’d sensed something had been wrong from the get-go, but had thought things would smooth out. He hadn’t read the warning signs, until she, tearfully and eight month’s pregnant, couldn’t keep up the charade and explained that the baby wasn’t his.

God in heaven, he’d never known such pain. And when he found out who the son of a bitch was who’d impregnated his wife …. no wonder he’d begun to drink. Oh, sure, he’d claimed Kristi, had determined from the moment he’d set eyes on the baby in the hospital that he would raise her as his own, but the seeds of distrust had been planted deep. The marriage had disintegrated to a hollow shell of what it should have been. Bentz had spent long hours at work or at a bar near the precinct in L.A. He’d told himself he was doing the right thing, but now he wasn’t so sure. He’d never forgotten his wife’s betrayal, never really forgiven her. Not even after her
death. Now, however, he could put that rage into perspective, tuck it away. It didn’t matter much anymore. Jennifer was dead and Kristi, left without a mother, felt all the more abandoned, all the more rebellious toward him.

But maybe that rebellion would mellow now that they weren’t living under the same roof. If they both didn’t let their tempers and sharp tongues get the better of them. He walked out of her room, closed the door and headed for the shower. Yeah, he thought, he’d definitely spring for the flowers.

In the meantime he had work to do.

Business was slow at the Third-Eye on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Olivia waited on a few customers, restocked shelves and dusted some of the artifacts before stringing gold tinsel along the shelves and cupboards housing the stock. Glassy-eyed alligator heads stared at her, candles, virgin wicks unburned stood at attention and mirrors reflected her image as she climbed onto a small step stool, draping the glittery tinsel. New Age prisms sparkled, books collected dust, and voodoo dolls hung suspended from the ceiling along with Christmas ornaments. Religious artifacts were tucked into drawers or cubbyholes of the antique desks, tables, armoires, and sewing machines that served as display cases. “Eclectic” didn’t begin to cover the merchandise offered for sale.

At four o’clock Tawilda, back from a cigarette and coffee break, urged Olivia to “take a load off for a few minutes.” Tawilda was a reed-thin African-American woman. She wore vibrantly colored saris and slipped matching beads onto the tiny braids clustered in her long hair. With a model’s high cheekbones, and a series of bracelets running up one arm, Tawilda was as exotic as some of the merchandise. “I can handle things for a few minutes. Go get yourself some fresh air, girl,” she insisted as she swept through a curtain of beads hanging in the doorway to the back rooms. A minute later she returned without her coat and purse. The beads danced again. “Go on. Git. I can handle things here.”

Olivia needed a break.

“I’ll be back in fifteen.”

Tawilda waved an elegant hand. “Knock yerself out. Make it twenty or twenty-five. Ain’t nobody shoppin’ here today. It’s not like I’m gonna be swamped or nothin’.”

“If you say so,” Olivia grabbed her jacket and purse and headed outside. Across the street was Jackson Square. A spiked wrought-iron fence surrounded the manicured grounds where paths converged at a statue of Andrew Jackson. Olivia wasn’t interested in the park. Instead she tightened the cinch of her jacket and walked swiftly to St. Louis Cathedral. Only a few pedestrians were out and a stiff breeze rolling off the Mississippi was colder than usual. Pigeons scattered and a lone trombone player, his case lying open, played something bluesy on the street corner.

The cathedral with its three imposing spires knifing sharply into the darkness was not only a grand, imposing structure but the oldest active cathedral in America, a building that had been rebuilt twice and was, Olivia felt, the center of Catholicism in the Crescent City.

She walked inside, where tall arches and stained glass surrounded the nave. She gazed at the altar and blended in with a handful of tourists who milled just inside the door. A sprinkling of the pious or troubled knelt in the foremost pews, their heads bent as they faced the altar. A tall man in an overcoat brushed past her and their eyes connected for a second.

“Leo?” Olivia called as he hurried by. Was Sarah Restin’s missing husband here, in New Orleans? No way. She took a step to follow him, but he was out a side door in a flash.

“Livvie?” she heard faintly.

Olivia froze at the sound of her mother’s voice. But that was impossible. Bernadette was in Houston.

A light touch on her sleeve and she nearly catapulted out of her skin. She glanced back to see the woman who had borne her, paler than she remembered, wearing a cape that reached her ankles and spike-heeled boots. Bernadette’s hair was tucked beneath a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses covered her eyes.

Olivia was stunned. She hadn’t seen nor heard from her mother since Grannie Gin’s funeral.

“What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Bernadette replied, slightly out of breath. “I stopped in at the shop and that black girl said you’d just left. I ran to catch up and I was lucky enough to see you walk through the front doors, so I hurried to catch you.”
“But why … ?”

“Come on, let me buy you a cup of coffee or something.”

“Mom, I have to go back to work.”

“The other girl said she’d watch the store. Really, Li wie, it’s important.” It had to be. Otherwise she wouldn’t be here. Bernadette inclined her head toward the front doors and Olivia walked into the square with her mother, a woman she barely knew, didn’t understand, and wasn’t sure she liked. As far as love went, well, that mother-daughter thing was a little nebulous. She felt the chill of the winter wind and it settled deep in her soul. As much as Olivia had wanted and tried for her mother’s approval as a child, disavowed it as a teenager, ached for it as a twenty-year-old, she now realized and accepted that Bernadette Dubois Benchet and whatever other names she’d tagged on, didn’t have the capacity to give nor, probably, receive unconditional love. It was a concept Bernadette just didn’t understand.

They found a café that served coffee and alcohol around the clock. A jazz man was seated in the corner, playing a guitar and harmonica simultaneously, his notes soulful. From the heart. Bernadette took off her hat and hung it, along with her jacket, over the top of the post separating the booths, then slid onto the bench opposite her daughter. In the flickering light from the hurricane lantern on the table, her long dark hair took on a burnished, coppery color. The sunglasses remained.

“How are you, Livvie?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“School going well?”

“As well as can be expected. How about you?”

Her mother’s smile was faint. “I suppose. I, uh, I know how close you were to your grandmother and I wonder how you’ve been doing since she’s been gone.”

“I miss her.”

“I know.” Bernadette nodded. “Believe it or not, I do, too. She was … a character. All that silliness with the tarot cards and mind reading or whatever it was.”

A waiter appeared and they ordered café au lait and beignets. “I don’t have much time.”

Bernadette nodded, rolled her lips over her teeth as if now, when she finally had Olivia’s attention, she wasn’t quite sure if she should confide in her. “What were you doing in the cathedral?”

“Looking around.”

“I don’t remember you as being particularly religious.”

“Maybe I’ve had a change of heart,” Olivia said as the waiter carried a wide tray to their booth. She didn’t elaborate as they were served. Only when the waiter had deposited their coffee and a basket of beignets covered in powdered sugar on the table did she ask, “What’s on your mind, Bernadette?”

Olivia’s mother took in a deep breath. Her fingernails tapped on the tabletop. “I heard from your father.” Her voice was a whisper, and tiny lines dared pinch the corners of her mouth.

The sperm donor. Great. Olivia stiffened at the very thought of the man who had sired her. “Oh, yeah? What did he want?” She picked up her cup, took an experimental sip as the jazzman concluded his set, and several people clapped. “Let me guess. Money.”

“Well, that, too. There’s always that.” Bernadette picked up a pastry and tore it in two. “But this time there’s more. He wants to see you.”

Olivia nearly choked on a swallow. “Give me a break.”

“It’s true. He called last week sometime.”

“I thought he was still locked up,” Olivia said bitterly. That her father was a felon and that she hadn’t been told still bothered her. She’d found out from a “friend.” Connie Earnhardt had only been too happy to let it slip when they were in high school. Grannie Gin and Bernadette had thought it best to let Olivia think Reggie Benchet was in the Armed Forces somewhere on the far corners of the earth instead of in the Mississippi State Penitentiary. Incarcerated for armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder.

“He’s been out since the first of the year. He called me a few months ago. Jeb found out and there was hell to pay.” Her glossy lips turned down at the corners, and in the soft light Olivia noticed that her mother wore more makeup than usual, a thicker coating of base and powder, probably in deference to her age. As beautiful as she was, Bernadette couldn’t stop the footsteps of Father Time from marching across her skin and leaving
footprints of wrinkles and age spots upon her face.

Picking at her beignet, Bernadette said, “Reggie disappeared again for a while, but now he’s back. He’s called three times in the last two weeks and he insists he wants to see you. You’re all he has left now.”

“Forget it.” Olivia shook her head, pushed her coffee aside. “He dumped you, me, and Chandra, killed someone, and ended up in prison, for God’s sake. He made a mess of his life. I’m not interested. Believe it or not, I’ve got my own life. There are things I’ve got to do.”

“So that’s why you were at St. Louis Cathedral?”

Olivia couldn’t confide in her mother. She had as a child and Bernadette’s reaction had only made things worse. “Everyone needs a little faith sometimes,” she hedged and glanced at her watch. “I really have to go.”

“Well, okay … but I think you should know that I gave Reggie your number.”

“You did what?”

“He has the right to know,” Bernadette said stubbornly, raising her chin a bit. “He is your father.”

“You just wanted him off your back.”

Bernadette stiffened, and though Olivia couldn’t read the expression in her eyes because of the sunglasses, she expected anger was flaring in those green orbs. “He did his time and paid his debt to society. He has the right—”

“What about mine, Bernadette? What about my rights?” she demanded. Then she shut up. This was a no-win argument. Reining in her fury, she changed the subject. “So what’s with the dark glasses, Mom? It’s twilight, and if you haven’t noticed, this restaurant isn’t exactly well lit. Why are you wearing shades?”

The corners of her mouth pinching, Bernadette ignored the questions. As if they hadn’t been asked. Finally she sighed. “I guess I should have expected this reaction from you. I’d thought, no, hoped that maybe you’d grown up, Livvie. I guess I was wrong.”

Way to go, Mom, Olivia thought. She remembered the way her mother had always argued, forever on the attack. To Bernadette’s way of thinking, a best defense was a strong offense. “I don’t know why I wasted my time. Well, I told you about Reggie’s request. Now it’s up to you.”

“You have to admit he hasn’t been exactly a stellar dad.”

“Fine. We both know that. I passed along the message. That’s all I needed to do.” She stood abruptly and fished in her purse for her wallet.

“I’ll get this,” Olivia said, but Bernadette was having none of that today. She found a twenty-dollar bill and dropped it onto the table. “There’s one other thing, Olivia,” she said icily. “You may as well know, I’m leaving Jeb.”

She shouldn’t have been surprised, as her mother not only had horrid taste in men, but felt compelled to marry them, then divorce when the blush of love subsided. Olivia suspected that Bernadette thought that if she had the right partner she could find a fairy tale romance complete with happy ending, but so far all her princes had turned out to be frogs. Or worse. Ogres. “That’s probably a good idea.”

“I … I hope so.” Bernadette was standing now but some of her fire seemed to have been doused.

“Is there a reason?”

“We … we don’t get along.” Her lower lip quivered in a distinctly un-Bernadette-like fashion. “And it’s gotten worse. He found out that I lied about how much my inheritance was.”

“Why did you keep it from him?” Olivia asked, not wanting to know the answer.

“So I could have something. Something of my own.” Bernadette swallowed hard, then tucked her hair into her hat again. As she did, the candlelight shifted and Olivia thought she saw a blemish under the thick layer of powder on Bernadette’s cheek. A bluish smudge.

“Mom?” Olivia asked, dread mounting.

Bernadette’s head snapped up sharply at the familiarity. It had been years since Olivia had referred to her by anything other than her given name. “What?”

“What’s going on?” Olivia stood and focused hard on the discoloration beneath Bernadette’s makeup. A bruise. As if Bernadette had banged her head against something.

Or been hit.

“Take off your glasses.”
“No. Not now.”

Olivia did it for her. Though Bernadette backed away, Olivia snagged the frames and pulled them from her mother’s face. “Oh, God, he hit you,” she said angrily. Bernadette’s eyes were swollen, the whites reddish, black circles beneath them.

“I’ll be all right.”

“Are you crazy?” Olivia exploded. “You’ll never be all right. That son of a bitch should be in jail. It was Jeb who did this, right? That’s why you’re leaving him.”

“I have to go now,” Bernadette said. “And you’re late for work.”

“Screw work!”

Her mother started to walk away, but Olivia grabbed her elbow. From the nearby tables and booths, patrons stared at them, conversation died.

“This is assault, Bernadette. You have to go to the police. You have to report him, make him stop. I know a cop who—”

“I’m not going to the police, Livvie.”

“But that bastard—”

“Shh! This is my problem. I’ll handle it,” Bernadette said, slipping the shaded lenses onto the bridge of her broken nose again. “You just worry about your father, okay? Don’t cause a scene!” Yanking her sleeve away from Olivia’s fingers, she hurried, head down, through the glass door.

“Is everything all right?” a nervous little man with a pencil-thin mustache asked from a nearby table. He was blinking rapidly.

“Fine. It’s fine,” Olivia said, though she didn’t believe a word of it. Nothing was right tonight. Nothing at all.
Chapter Sixteen

The library was nearly empty, only a few students hunched over books on Sunday night. Just the die-hards. Or those without somewhere better to go, Olivia thought as she shut the reference book and stretched her spine. She’d closed up the shop at six then driven to the campus, where she’d spent the last three hours studying and trying to forget her visit from her mother, attempting to convince herself that whatever problems Bernadette was having with her current husband, she couldn’t help.

Or could she?

Had her mother come not to tell her about Reggie, but to try and mend what seemed impossibly tattered mother-daughter fences? *You didn’t even give her a chance,* her mind nagged, guilt storming through her soul. *Catholic upbringing. Compliments of Grannie Gin.* Bernadette certainly didn’t have much to do with it.

Pausing at the desk to check out two books on the psychology of sociopaths, she remembered the last time she’d seen her mother. At Grannie Gin’s funeral.

It had been a muggy day, the kind when hot air seemed to adhere to her skin. Bernadette had been distant, but that wasn’t unusual as she’d sat through the mass. She’d listened to the service, dropped a rose on Grannie’s casket, shown up at the house where the few members of the family, distant cousins for the most part, and some friends had gathered, but she’d kept mostly to herself, chain-smoking on the back porch and sipping from a never-finished drink of Jack Daniels. She’d seemed lost in thought, and the few times Olivia had approached her, she’d been subdued, tears slowly tracking from beneath her black veil.

Now, Olivia realized, she’d never taken off her hat or the lacy veil for fear that a bruise might show through.

Again Olivia felt a pang of guilt as she walked, keys clutched in one hand, outside to her truck. The night was cool, winter threatening to grasp hold of the Crescent City. There were only a few students crisscrossing the campus, knots of kids in two-or threesomes hurrying along the walkways. Olivia was the only person walking alone, she realized, and for the first time in her life, it bothered her. Not just because of the cool, dark night and the recent dreams, but because she was unconnected, flying solo when most of the world was coupled up.

Which was ridiculous. She had only to look at her mother, or her friend Sarah, or remember Ted, the man she nearly married, to realize how much better off she was alone. The only two men she’d found remotely interesting in the past couple of years were a world-weary cop and a priest, both, she guessed, who carried a ton of baggage with them. What was wrong with her?

*It must be the holidays. Everyone gets a little nuts during the holidays. Isn’t that when the most suicides occur?*

She turned the collar of her jacket up and heard the sounds of a stereo playing from one open dorm window and laughter from another.

*So what if you’re alone? And why do you always pick men who are unavailable? Off-limits? Because you don’t want to get involved, not really. You know, Livvie, you might just be a candidate for a psychological study … or the subject of one of those trashy afternoon talk shows. “Women who love men who can’t love them because they’re already married to their careers.”*

“Idiot,” she muttered as the path cut through a copse of trees. It was darker here and she was alone. All of the other students had disappeared into the buildings on campus. *So what?* She hurried along the path.

Click, click, click.

A noise came from behind her.

Her heart squeezed. It’s nothing. Just your overactive imagination.

She glanced over her shoulder to the darkened shrubbery flanking the buildings. No one.

Stop it, she told herself. No reason to be jumpy.

But she heard the noise again and her heart began to thud. She started to run.

“Hey! Watch out! On your right,” a gruff voice yelled.
She leapt to the left, out of the thicket to the parking lot. From the darkness a bicyclist blew past her in a flash of silver spokes and glossy helmet reflecting in the blue light from the security lamps. *Click, click, click,* the cyclist shifted gears and was swallowed by the night.

So that was it! A sound she’d heard hundreds of times.

*You’re losing it, Benchet,* she thought, relieved as she spied her pickup, the only vehicle in the lot right where she’d parked it. She jogged across the pockmarked asphalt, unlocked the truck, and slid behind the steering wheel. *Get a grip!* She fired the engine and gunned it, toppling the sack of groceries she’d picked up earlier. “Great.”

A few minutes later she was on the freeway heading out of the city. She turned on the radio and heard Trish LaBelle’s voice giving out advice over the airwaves. Trish had been with WNAB before joining the staff at WSLJ. Her program was in the early evening, about over now, Olivia thought, then there was Gator Brown’s light jazz, which led into Dr. Sam’s popular late-night advice program. Trish’s format was different. She pretaped questions from viewers, then interspersed the questions and answers with music that seemed to fit the mood.

Olivia listened for a few minutes, but as she stared through the windshield, she thought of Bernadette’s message that Reggie Benchet wanted to see her.

Why would her father want to connect now, after all these years of no contact? Why? She drove in silence, by rote, maneuvering her Ranger off the freeway. Rain began to fall, the drops flashing in the glare of her headlights. She barely remembered her father; didn’t want to start a relationship now. Lost in thought, she drove down the winding country road and stopped only to pick up the mail at the end of the lane. What would she say if Reggie Benchet called her? What was there to say? As she drove on, her truck’s headlights flashed against the stark trunks of the giant cypress and oaks surrounding the cabin, and as the truck crossed the small bridge to her grandmother’s cottage, she caught her first glimpse of the little house she’d called home all of her growing-up years. A home devoid of a father, and often as not a mother.

But she’d had Grannie. And God, how she missed that little scrap of a woman.

She parked, picked up the strewn groceries, and tossed them into the paper bag with her mail. As she walked to the front door, she could hear Hairy S barking his fool head off. Tonight she didn’t care that he was acting like an idiot as she unlocked the door and made her way inside.

She was still caught up in the events of the past couple of days. Rapid-fire thoughts burst through her mind. Images of the blackened shell of a house where the girl was killed, of a priest with a long sword, of Father James stretching upward on the ladder, of her mother’s bruised face. And then there was the kiss she’d shared with Bentz in this very house, a long, passionate kiss that had touched her heart as well as curled her toes.

Dear God, she was a hopeless romantic. He was a cop, for crying out loud, a homicide dick who looked at her as some kind of freak.

She set the mail on the dining room table, then greeted Hairy S properly, petting him and scratching him behind his ears as he twirled in frantic little circles at her feet. “Need to go out?” she asked as she hung up her coat. The dog yipped. She opened the French doors off the small kitchen. Barking madly, he raced outside, across the porch and into the shadows, hot on the trail of a squirrel or possum or heaven-only-knew-what-other swamp critter. “Avoid the gators, would you?” she called after him, then winked at Chia. “He’s an idiot, isn’t he?”

The parrot squawked and hopped from one perch to the next in her tall cage. Her eyes dilated and retracted above the bright band of red and gold over her beak.

“We women, we’re a whole lot smarter,” Olivia said as Chia made a cooing sound, ruffled her feathers, and showed off her black tongue. “A whole lot.”

Yeah, right. *Then why the confusion over the men in your life?*

Rather than listen to the nag in her head, Olivia played her telephone messages. The first was from the contractor she’d contacted about the alarm, promising to be out and give her a bid in an installation the Monday after Thanksgiving. The second was Sarah again.

“Olivia. When you have a minute, would you give me a call? I, um, I still haven’t heard from Leo and I know it’s only been a couple of days since I talked to you … He’s probably okay, but damn it, I found a woman’s earring in my bed … can you believe that, in my bed? Crap. What a jerk! You’re right about him … I know it, I know it, I know it.” Olivia’s heart sank. She heard the pain in Sarah’s voice. The humiliation. “Well,
um, just call me when you get a chance, okay?”

After Sarah’s call, there was a long hesitation on the phone, as if whoever had called didn’t know what to say, but then he eventually hung up. It was odd, she thought and replayed it again … was there music in the background … a song she recognized? Yeah … something from her past, a Springsteen song … then she recognized it. *Tunnel of Love*. Ted’s favorite.

“Damn,” she said, her skin crawling. Could her ex-fiancé have really tracked her down? She thought of him, how angry he’d been with her, how he’d followed her to Tucson only to finally give up. After she’d threatened him with a restraining order.

She ignored the call and went on to the next, a message from Dr. Leeds’s secretary asking for a date when she could meet with him again. The last call was from Detective Bentz asking her to call him at the station in the morning. His message was all business, but she smiled at the sound of his voice and pushed aside the eerie feeling that the earlier unspoken message had left. “Silly girl,” she told herself and called the station only to be told that he was gone. She considered trying to locate him at home or his cell, then thought better of it. She glanced at the clock. It was too late to catch anyone at the University, so decided to phone the psychology department in the morning, and rang up Sarah in Tucson, only to hear Sarah’s answering machine pick up. Olivia left a message, hung up the cordless phone, and in the porch light, saw the dog jumping crazily at the back door. “I’m coming,” she said, reaching for the door handle and letting him inside. “Hungry?”

Hairy S danced at his dish. She poured some fresh kiblets into his bowl, then unpacked her groceries and threw a frozen dinner into the microwave.

“Turkey à l’ orange,” she said to the dog. “Only six grams of fat.” Hairy, nose buried deep in his dish, made no indication he’d heard a word. What a day, she thought, as the microwave dinged and she gingerly took off the plastic wrap as orange-smelling steam wafted up. A can of diet cola and her meal was complete. She glanced at the photo of herself and Grannie Gin, the one she’d pointed out to Bentz. She’d been so carefree then, hadn’t really needed a father. She hadn’t yet been to school, hadn’t suffered the embarrassment of not knowing him, hadn’t borne the indignity of learning, compliments of Connie Earnhardt, that he was in prison in Mississippi.

Olivia had only vague images of the sperm donor and those, she was certain, were due to the few old snapshots she’d seen of a man in a sailor’s uniform, a handsome, athletic man who had swept Bernadette Dubois off her seventeen-year-old feet. It had been a whirlwind romance and the details were sketchy. Virginia Dubois hadn’t approved and Olivia, barely in high school, had caught snatches of conversation she wasn’t supposed to hear. While lingering at the foot of the stairs, her ears straining, her fingers curled over the railing, she’d listened over the thudding of her heart.

“He left you, don’t you remember that?” Grannie Gin had demanded while frying bacon. The hickory-smoked scent wafted through the dining room as the strips sizzled noisily in the pan. “And you were pregnant.”

“He didn’t know …” Bernadette had protested, sobbing. “I didn’t tell him.”

“And that was a good thing. The truth came out early enough. I said it then and I’ll say it now, Reginald Benchet is no-count and never will be.” Grannie Gin had sighed heavily. “You’ve got one child left, Bernadette,” Grannie had said and added a handful of onions into the hot grease. Though Olivia couldn’t see what was happening, she smelled the onions, had witnessed the ritual dozens of times. The slices hit the pan with a grease-splattering hiss. “You’d best tend to Livvie. Forget Reggie. He was bad from the day he was born. Branded by the devil, I tell ya. I knew his mother and his grandmother. Both loose women with the morals of alley cats and his daddy … pure evil.”

“You don’t know anything of the sort,” Bernadette had argued, then blew her nose.

“I do. I’ve seen what that man can do.”

“How … oh, for the love of God, don’t tell me you had one of your visions about him.” There was a break in the conversation when all Olivia had heard was the sputter of the grease cooking and a woodpecker tapping on some part of the house. She’d bit her lower lip and watched the lace curtains in the dining room flutter with a breeze. “That’s it, isn’t it?” Bernadette had accused. “You think you’ve seen something when really you’ve just dreamt it up. That’s crazy talk and we both know it. And it’s bad for Livvie. You’re filling her head with all this nonsense and now she’s started mumbling about seein’ things … like she saw her sister die before Chandra drowned. That’s your fault, you know.”

“The child might have the gift.”

“The gift, the gift, forget the damned gift. It doesn’t exist and I’m sick to death of hearing about it. And let’s
face it. Livvie claimed she’d seen Chandra die because she killed her.”

“Hush! That’s nonsense.”

“It is not. They were fighting, weren’t they? Livvie was older. Bigger. She pushed Chandra back in the wading pool and … and … my baby drowned. Right out there,” she’d said, her voice elevating an octave. Olivia, tears filling her eyes, had known her mother was pointing a long, accusing finger past the back porch to the yard. Even a few years later, the scene was as fresh as it had been on the day when the “accident” had happened and she could still see Chandra’s face beneath the water. Grass and dead yellow jackets and crickets had floated on the surface and Chandra’s wide blue eyes stared upward past the scum. She’d fallen into the pool, hitting her head and Olivia hadn’t been able to save her.

“Enough!” Grannie said harshly. “It was an accident. You remember that.”

“And you blame me. Because I was asleep. God, Mama, don’t you think I know that you’ve blamed me? I see it every time I look into your eyes.”

“You weren’t just asleep. You were passed out. Olivia tried to wake you … Oh, well… what’s the use? It’s over and done. Just don’t blame Livvie, whatever you do. And if she claims she has the sight, then I believe her.”

“She just says it to please you. It’s crazy talk and I don’t want her to hear any more about it, do you hear me?” Bernadette insisted. “Do you know how awful it was growing up being called the daughter of the crazy woman? Do you? The kid whose mother could tell the future for a lousy two bucks? People think you’re a lunatic, and I don’t want my daughter exposed to it. You quit fillin’ her head with all these foolish notions, y’hear.”

“Then you start actin’ like a mother. Take care of her. Quit runnin’ around with every man who looks your way.”

“I’m not gonna listen to any more of this.”

“And keep your pants up and your legs crossed.”

“Mama!”

There was a pause. Olivia’s fingers had ached from clutching the banister so hard. “Just protect Olivia,” Grannie had said as the scrape of her cooking fork sounded against the cast-iron pan. “Keep her away from Reggie. Don’t let him come ‘round here.”

“He won’t. We’re divorced.”

“And you’re engaged to another man; you’d best not forget it.” Olivia imagined her grandmother pointing the blackened tines of her bone-handled fork at her daughter. “I’ll do what I think is best for Livvie. Until you prove that you’re a decent mother.”

Silently swiping at her tears with the back of her hand, Olivia had crept up the stairs and buried herself deep in the covers of her bed. She’d never seen her father after that. Nor much of Bernadette after she’d remarried.

So why the visit today, she wondered now.

After cleaning the few dishes, she whistled to Hairy S and headed up the stairs to the second bedroom, the one she’d slept in growing up. The single bed with its saggy mattress was still in place, tucked under the sloped ceiling, and the fold-out couch her mother used when she stayed was on the opposite side of the room. A bureau with a round mirror stood between the hallway door and the closet and a desk was pushed beneath the single window near a bookcase. It was the desk she’d used growing up, and with the addition of a file cabinet, it now was home to her laptop computer and printer.

She sat at the computer and intended to study; she had two classes in the morning, the last until after Thanksgiving, but as she pulled one of her textbooks from the small bookcase, she felt a chill, deep in the marrow of her bones, the same horrid coldness she’d experienced the night the girl had died. And the other night.

Oh, God, was he doing it again? So soon? She swallowed back her fear and glanced out the window to the dark night. A tiny sliver of moon, visible through the leafless branches of the trees, hung low in the sky. Maybe she was mistaken … she didn’t actually “see” anything, no, this was just a feeling, a dark sensation that crawled across her skin. Movement. That was it. She felt him. He was moving.

And hunting again.
The darkness closed in on him and like a creature of the night, his senses became sharper. Keener. The Chosen One heard his own heartbeat, smelled the scents of perfume and stale smoke lingering in the damp air, felt the sharp pang of blood lust coursing through his veins.

Find her. Take her ... it's time.

Running on silent footsteps he loped across the wet grass of the campus and heard the strains of jazz emanating from an open window in one of the dorms. Knots of students tarried together and the sweet smell of marijuana settled in the dark alleys. He rounded a corner to a more secluded part of the campus, a back alley that was sometimes used by students rushing into the city.

He felt inside his pocket, assured himself that his weapon was at his fingertips and a smile slid over his mouth. A stun gun. Silent. Quick. But not deadly. So perfect for abduction. He knew she should be coming this way. Had overheard her conversation in class.

But the killing couldn’t be here ... no ... He needed privacy, time to create the ritual. His mouth went dry at the thought and his crotch tightened, a hard-on swelling even as he ran. Just the thought of it ... watching her beg for mercy, pleading with him when he knew that her fate was sealed.

He saw her in the distance.

Alone.

Head bent against the rain and wind.

His fingers surrounded his little weapon as he crept through the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment. He licked his lips and reminded himself to be patient. He couldn’t make a mistake. Not tonight.

Not ever.

After all, he had a pact with God.

She looked up as he approached. Smiled in recognition. Started to speak as he pulled the gun from his pocket and shot. She gasped. Her purse dropped to the ground. He grabbed it and caught her before she fell. Her hood slid off and her black hair framed her ghost-white face. “What—?” she whispered hoarsely. “No—” She could barely catch her breath.

He grinned as he swept her easily into his arms and carried her to his older car. “Be quiet, Catherine,” he whispered, “or I’ll have to punish you again.”

“No—I’m not—”

He set her down and gave her another long, hard jolt. She cried out, but he picked her up again. “I mean it. Behave.” She was whimpering now. Scared. Would probably piss all over his trunk.

He opened the latch and the lid sprang open. She was fighting him with what little strength she had and it only served to make him harder. He thought that just this once he could allow himself the pleasure of her, but knew that God would disapprove.

He had to remember his mission.

“Don’t,” she cried and he zapped her one final time, lusting after her as her body convulsed, showing off her white neck. She would make the perfect sacrifice. He slammed down the lid of the trunk.

God would be pleased.

“Hey, man, don’t you ever go home?” Montoya asked, slipping his arms through the sleeves of his black leather jacket as he passed by Bentz’s office. “It’s Sunday night.”

“Don’t you?” Rick leaned back in his desk chair and it creaked in protest. He had the window cracked open. The sounds of the city, horns blaring, voices filtering skyward and a mournful tune from a saxophone slipped inside.

Montoya flashed his knock-'em-dead smile and strolled into the room. He set a hip on the corner of Rick’s desk. “Not unless I have to. I’m a player.”

“You’d like to think so.”

“Hey, I know it.”

Cocky son of a bitch. Make that young, cocky son of a bitch. He’d learn. Montoya was a good cop, but he was still green enough to think that he could change the world, that what he did mattered, that justice would always be served. He was clever enough, downright smart. The problem was Montoya still had more balls than brains. “If you say so. I thought you had a steady these days.”
“I do,” Montoya said with a grin. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t look, does it?” He glanced at his watch.
“Why don’t you call it a night? I’ll buy you a beer. Even the alcohol free shit, though I don’t know why you bother.”

“And make you keep the ladies waiting?” Bentz arched a knowing eyebrow. “I’ll take a rain check.”

Montoya clucked his tongue as he headed for the stairs. “You’re missin’ out,” he called over his shoulder as he disappeared.

“So be it.” Rick glanced at the computer screen glowing on his desk. He had several cases he was working on, one where a battered woman had grabbed her husband’s hunting rifle and opened up on him rather than subject herself to another beating and another arson case where one of the owners died in the blaze. Then there was the knife fighting between gang members that left one dead, the other barely hanging on.

But Bentz had put those cases out of his mind for the moment. Because as he’d skimmed the evidence report on the Jane Doe in the fire one more time, something had clicked. A sharp little spark in his brain. He remembered what it was that had been nagging at him.

The saint’s medals.

This wasn’t the first homicide scene where a chain with a medal had been left. There had been two others that he remembered, perhaps more that he didn’t yet know about. He typed in a case file on his keyboard and within seconds crime scene photos of the recent victim flickered on the monitor. His jaw tightened as he stared at the nude body of a woman not much older than his own daughter. The victim had been found in her apartment in the Garden District. Her date of death July twenty-second. Her name had been Catherine Adams, if you went by the DMV or Social Security Administration, but she’d also been known as Cassie Alexa or Princess Alexandra. It all depended if you knew her as a pretty, part-time student at Tulane, or a sexy exotic dancer down on Bourbon Street, or as a hooker. No matter what the name, she’d been murdered. Strangled. And posed. Lying facedown on an area rug, her arms stretched outward, her head placed near a wall that was decorated with a picture of Christ, her toes pointed to an opposing wall where a portrait of Martin Luther King hung. Her head had been shaved, a skein of her own hair wound through her fingers, her mocha-colored naked body reeking of patchouli.

At the top of his list of suspects was Marc Duvall, her boyfriend/pimp who’d been known to knock her around and blacken her eyes upon occasion. He’d skipped town and probably the country. Just disappeared into thin air. Or was dead himself.

The other case was even more sketchy. Another Jane Doe. Her body burned beyond recognition and left at the statue of Joan of Arc in the Quarter. So far no one had been able to identify the charred remains found on the last day of May. He flipped the images on the screen, and as hardened as he was, the sight of the blackened, disfigured body laid at the feet of the magnificent statue of St. Joan astride her horse bothered him.

He wouldn’t have thought that the two were connected except for one single piece of evidence linking them: the small chain with a saint’s medal dangling from it. Left at the scene.

Three dead women.
All killed differently.
But all left with a saint’s medal near their bodies.
A coincidence?

Bentz didn’t think so. He hadn’t linked the two murders this summer. They hadn’t matched the signature of the Rosary Killer and there wasn’t much that connected them … He hadn’t thought about the medals because he’d thought they were personal items; they didn’t match. But he’d blown it. The link had been there all the time. And now there was a third. Much as it sickened him, he was certain a serial killer was stalking the streets of New Orleans again.

The press would eat it up, but the public had to be warned and the FBI notified, its computer records searched for other murders, not just localized in the New Orleans area, that were similar.

He knew the question that would be on everyone’s mind.

Was the Rosary Killer resurrected?
Or was the city being stalked by a whole new sicko? One connected in some strange way to Olivia Benchet?
Chapter Seventeen

The evidence report and Medical Examiner’s report were waiting on Bentz’s desk Monday morning. Sipping from a cup of coffee hot enough to scald his lips, he sifted through the pages as carefully as the crime scene team had combed the scene. What he read didn’t surprise him. Basically, after he sorted through the medical terms, he concluded that the victim had died because someone had tried to hack her head off. The ME had decided, because of the way the bone had been cut, that there had been more than one blow to the back of the neck with some kind of long-bladed knife, machete, or sword.

Just like Olivia Benchet had maintained. Which, he supposed, squinting, shouldn’t surprise him.

What kind of monster was on the loose? He’d seen violence in his days with the LAPD, even more so here just this past summer. The Rosary Killer had his own special brand of cruelty and he certainly had ties to the Catholic Church … but he was dead. Bentz had taken care of that himself.

Or so he’d thought.

The body had never been recovered from the swamp where he’d been shot. Maybe the bastard had resurrected himself somehow.

“Son of a bitch.” The thought of “Father John,” as he’d called himself, resurrecting himself wasn’t pretty. But what was happening here wasn’t “Father John’s” MO. This was different.

And what about Olivia’s far-fetched story of a woman entombed, then beheaded? Another nightmare? He didn’t think so. He’d even copied the page of notes Olivia had given him and along with people within the department had, against rules, shown the weird notations to a friend of his who’d once worked for the CIA and who loved codes, puzzles, cryptograms, crossword puzzles, any word game imaginable. Bud Dell was as likely as anyone to crack it although guys in the force were working on it as well.

So far, Bud and the others had come up with nothing.

The phone rang. He answered on the second ring. “Detective Bentz.”

“It’s Olivia,” she said and he couldn’t help but smile. “You called last night.”

“Yeah. Just checkin’ on you. Everything okay?” Leaning back in his chair, he stretched the phone cord taut.

“No more visions?”

“No last night.”

“Good.”

“I was afraid you’d found another victim.”

“No,” he said and conjured up Olivia’s face.

“Good. So you were just checking up on me?”

“You’ve been pretty spooked lately. And yeah, I just wanted to see that you were all right.”

“Oh …” She hesitated. “Thanks.”

“You call if there’s anything, anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, okay?”

“I will,” she promised, still obviously taken aback by his concern, then recovering, managed a quick “Take care,” and rang off. Bentz looked at the receiver in his hand. What the hell was going on with him? He’d called her yesterday because he’d felt compelled to talk to her, to make certain she was all right. He didn’t like her living alone in the middle of the damned bayou with only that silly excuse of a dog for protection. She was seeing some very weird shit and he was afraid that somehow, some way her life might be in danger.

Maybe Kristi was right. Maybe he was just another paranoid cop, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that Olivia, because of her connection with the killer, was in the crosshairs of peril.

And what the devil was that connection, he wondered for the dozenth time as the phones rang in the outer office. Cops, suspects, and witnesses talked while keyboards clicked as information was entered into computers. How did Olivia know the killer—she had to know him, didn’t she? He scratched his chin thoughtfully. She’d sworn another person was being hunted, but hadn’t seen another killing. But there were
clues—the damned martini glass sign in the bar still nagged at him. How did it all piece together?

Maybe it didn’t. Maybe his sudden faith in her visions wasn’t founded. Oh, hell, what did he know? This case was getting to him. The phone call to Olivia Bentz was proof enough of that. It had been above and beyond the call of duty and certainly out of the normal set of rules he’d established for himself.

Hell, he was getting personally involved with her and that was sure to be a mistake.

He read through the evidence report again and stopped midway down the page where a chain was listed, a small chain, not the large one used to tether the victim, but a tiny linkage with a medal swinging from it. The saint’s medal. The lab had worked on it and determined that it was of St. Cecilia. It had been left at the scene, charred and swinging from the showerhead, just as Olivia had said it had been. Cecilia. As in the woman’s name, according to Olivia Benchet.

He double-checked. Sure enough, the saint’s medal found on the victim near the statue was of St. Joan of Arc, that made sense, but the one found with Cathy Adams in the Garden District was of St. Mary Magdalene. Different. What was that about all? He also noted something he’d missed before: that each woman seemed to have one spot on their heads shaved. He hadn’t made the connection as Cathy Adam’s entire head had been shaved, but now, in reexamining the ME’s report, it seemed odd that both women had lost nearly a square inch of their hair before their bodies had been burned. Either the murderer had done it himself, taking a trophy, or they both belonged to some weird cult, which was unlikely.

Something niggled at the back of Bentz’s mind, something important, though he couldn’t quite retrieve it. It had to do with the rosary killings … what the devil was it?

The phone rang and he lost the thought, caught up in a conversation with an assistant D.A. about a knifing down by Canal, not far from the casino. What had happened to Cecilia would have to wait.

Kristi dropped her backpack onto the floor. She’d already gone to her early-morning swim—earlier than usual—and she needed the next half-hour to get ready to see Brian again in Zaroster’s class, then she had to study. She had a test in Psych tomorrow, and a paper due in English, no doubt a quiz in bonehead math and a paper due in Philosophy all before she left for Thanksgiving.

And … more importantly … she was supposed to meet Brian again. He’d been very adamant that they spend Sunday studying as he wanted to see her tonight before she left for home.

She couldn’t believe how they’d clicked the other night—well, after she’d gotten over being pissed and beaten him royally at darts. She wondered if he’d let her win and she should’ve insisted he be her slave or something for the payoff. Instead she’d settled for an expensive dinner and told him that he still owed her … At that point he’d suggested “double or nothing” and she’d leapt at the chance to best him. That was the problem with her—the athlete within loved to compete. Besides … double or nothing with no rules, that sounded pretty interesting … even dangerous.

He was different from any of the boys she’d dated. Lots more mature, deep, even pensive. They’d spent most of Saturday night together, talking, drinking, and making out. She’d found out that he’d grown up somewhere around Chicago, had gotten his undergraduate degree at Notre Dame, and had come to All Saints for graduate work. He was a complex man, not a simple boy whose only aspiration was to get married, have some kids, preferably boys who could play football, and someday own his father’s roofing business.

She’d outgrown Jay; that much was obvious.

But she doubted she’d ever outgrow Brian. He was so … mature … so … experienced. She tingled at the thought of how he’d kissed, like it would be the last one he’d ever experience.

Kristi smiled at the thought as she pulled off her T-shirt and caught a glimpse of her torso, clad only in a black bra, in her mirror.

Not too bad, she thought, swinging around for a full view.

She’d like to have bigger boobs, of course, but then she wasn’t into plastic surgery or hormones, so for now, she’d content herself that she had a tiny waist and a flat abdomen. Though her shoulders were wider than most girls’, probably from years of swimming, and she weighed a few pounds more than the average in her sorority house, she looked pretty damned good. All muscle. No fat. Athletic. Besides, she thought, the whole waif-like anorexic look was overrated and the way some of the girls attained it through cigarettes, uppers, and cocaine wasn’t for her. Not that she didn’t like a drink or two and had been known to smoke weed once and again, but she just didn’t want to get into that whole drug scene. She’d experimented enough in high school and given her dad a good bunch of his gray hair while trying ecstasy and hallucinogenic mushrooms.

Well, what could you expect, when you’re a teenager and you find out that your dad’s not really your dad
and your mom … Don’t even go there. It’s over and done. Rick’s a good guy. A real good guy and you know it now. He is your dad. He’s always been there for you. Always. Even though he knew you weren’t really his kid. Frowning at the path of her thoughts, she concentrated on her image in the glass and liked what she saw. She tossed her head, letting a sweep of red-brown hair fall over one side of her face as she’d seen models do in the shampoo commercials on TV.

Again she smiled. Her hair was long, layered and a thick burnished mahogany. She’d sprung for highlights this fall so the strands gleamed red in the sunlight and Brian loved it. He’d buried his face in it several times when they were making out Saturday night and he’d told her how beautiful it was. She’d let him take off her top and his fingers had caressed her breasts in a way that made her hot when she thought of it. Feather-light touches that created all sorts of conflicting emotions … She wanted to do it with him, but she hadn’t. Knew better.

*Good old Catholic upbringing,* she thought. Though her father had been lax about taking her to church, when her mother had been alive, Kristi had been enrolled in parochial schools and never missed mass or Catechism or youth instruction. And yet Jennifer herself hadn’t adhered to the sacrament of marriage, now, had she?

At least not according to Rick Bentz, who had decided, when she’d graduated from high school that she needed to know the truth. So he’d laid it out to her, explained why the marriage had gone sour, that her mother had been involved with the man who had sired her. Not just once. Oh, no. Jennifer had slept with the guy way back when Kristi had been conceived, broken off the affair, then started up again, nearly fifteen years later, just prior to her death.

Kristi hadn’t wanted to believe that Rick Bentz wasn’t her father. But once she’d seen the evidence herself, in the form of a letter Jennifer had written two days before driving off the road and into a tree, she’d been convinced. The letter had been addressed to Kristi, but Bentz had decided his daughter should be spared the truth until she graduated from high school, so he’d hidden it away for over four years.

Bastard, she thought, angry all over again.

Swiping tears from her eyes, she remembered every word on the single yellowed piece of paper. The lines that burned in her mind still brought tears to her eyes.

*I’m so sorry, honey. Believe me when I tell you that I love you more than life itself. But I’ve been involved with the man who is really your father again and I’m afraid it’s going to ruin my marriage and break Rick’s heart…*

“Thanks, Mom. Thanks a lot.” Kristi sniffed loudly. Wouldn’t break down. She was convinced Jennifer had committed suicide. She’d loaded herself up on pills and driven off the road two days after her husband had caught her in bed with another man. In Kristi’s estimation Jennifer had taken the coward’s way out by writing the damned letter and getting behind the wheel.

Ever since she’d found out the truth at the beginning of last summer, Kristi had been mad as hell at her mother, at the man who had raised her and at the goddamned son of a bitch who couldn’t keep his hands off of Jennifer, the man who had spawned her. Pathetic, that’s what it was. Pathetic.

Kristi didn’t want to think about it right now. Well, really, not ever. She’d taken enough psychology already this term to recognize that she was in denial big time, but she didn’t care. She’d rather concentrate on Saturday night and Brian. After a bad start, the date had been wonderful, she thought.

Yanking a sweater over her head she wished she wasn’t going home to New Orleans for Thanksgiving. Not that she wouldn’t have an okay time with her dad, but their relationship had been rocky for years and now she had someone new. A real boyfriend. An older man.

Wouldn’t her overprotective father flip when he found out? She pulled her hair through the neck hole of the sweater and couldn’t help but grin. She still liked jerking the old man’s chain.

So what would happen if when he came to pick her up, she’d have him meet Brian and then blithely announce she’d invited Brian for Thanksgiving? He didn’t seem to have anywhere to go; at least she thought he didn’t. But then she didn’t know much about him other than he taught at the college and was working on his doctorate.

So dinner tonight with Brian, and later … who knew? A naughty smile caressed her lips. She couldn’t wait!

“Check this out,” Montoya said as he swaggered into Bentz’s office just before ten. His Cheshire cat smile was stretched wide, his earring winked in the fluorescent lights suspended overhead, and his black leather jacket gleamed as if it were brand new.
"What?" Bentz was on his second cup of coffee waiting for a callback from the Covington Police. A secretary for an insurance company was missing. Her boyfriend, Dustin Townsend, had called earlier; no one had seen Stephanie Jane Keller since Friday afternoon when he’d driven her into town. According the Townsend, Stephanie was five foot six inches, about a hundred and twenty pounds, and played tennis regularly. Blue eyes, blond hair. He’d sounded upset on the telephone, frantic with worry, and reluctantly given Bentz the name of Stephanie’s dentist. The department had formally asked for the dental records, which had been faxed and were now being matched. Townsend himself was on his way, agreeing to bring pictures of Stephanie with him.

“I’ve got some interesting information on Ms. Benchet,” Montoya announced, swinging a leg over the corner of Bentz’s desk. The muscles in the back of Rick’s neck tightened. “Well, really on her old lady. Bernadette Dubois … She’s been married five times and that doesn’t count a misstep or two with engagements that didn’t pan out. Not too shabby for a woman who’s barely in her fifties. There was Olivia’s father, Reggie Benchet.”

“The felon.”
“Ex-con.”
“Still a felon in my book,” Bentz said.

“Yep. Assault. Resisting arrest. Murder two. A few other things. A helluva guy. Anyway, Bernadette had the good sense to divorce him after a couple of kids. But he’s just the first. She has a string of husbands. She left every one of them. And she’s working on her most recent. According to court records, she’s already filed papers against the current Mr. Bernadette, a guy by the name of Jeb Martin. He works for an oil company in Houston. They got married about four years ago and apparently wedded bliss didn’t last long. Martin’s got a nasty temper when he drinks—been arrested several times.”

“Sounds like a pattern.” Bentz knew his partner was leading up to something.

“Well, number one and number five are alike and the third husband, Bill Yates, the trucker, I think he was a rebound thing. Only lasted eighteen months. Number four was Scott Lafever, a musician who didn’t live through his last OD. But here’s the kicker. Guess who was the second husband?”

“The one right after Reggie Benchet?”
Montoya nodded, then dropped the bomb. “Our good friend, Oscar Cantrell.”

“The owner of Benchmark Realty?” Bentz asked.

“One and the same.” Montoya, obviously pleased with himself, stroked his goatee. “I don’t know about you, but I think there might be a connection there, seeing as Oscar’s management company rented the house where one of our Jane Does was killed.”

“Maybe we should have a talk with him.”

“I tried. Already called his house—no answer, just a machine—then I rang up Benchmark a few minutes ago and talked to Cantrell’s secretary, I think you met her.”

“Marlene Something-or-Other.”

“Anderson.”

“Right. The talker,” Bentz said, remembering the chatty brunette with the wild glasses.

“That’s the one. She claims he’s still away on business and will be out until after the holiday weekend. Oscar Cantrell isn’t due back into town until next Monday.”

“She can’t get hold of him?” Bentz asked, disbelieving. “Doesn’t the guy have a cell phone?”

“You’d think. I tried to sweet talk her and, when that didn’t work, strong arm her a little, but she wasn’t having anything to do with it. Got snippy.”

“Snippy? With you?” Bentz grinned. That he would like to have seen. Most women melted like butter in the hot sun when Reuben Diego Montoya turned on the charm. Maybe there was more to gossiping Marlene Anderson than met the eye.

“Hard to believe, but it happens,” Montoya grumbled.

“So the connection is that one of Olivia Benchet’s short-term stepfathers owns the house where the murder took place?”

“Got anything better?”

Bentz’s stomach burned fire. He reached into the top drawer of his desk, found a bottle of Turns, and shook
out the last two tablets. He plopped them into his mouth and chewed. “Don’t know. I’m waiting for a possible ID on the Jane Doe.” He gave Montoya a quick rundown on Stephanie Jane Keller. “... the boyfriend should be here soon. With pictures.”

“In case we have to reconstruct?”

Bentz nodded, but he had something different in mind. A test. For Olivia. He’d get snapshots of a dozen women in the department, add in Stephanie’s photo, and see if Olivia could pick her out of the photographic “lineup.” Though he was beginning to buy into her claims of ESP, the pragmatic, real-cop side of him was still having trouble accepting it.

“You think the boyfriend could be involved?” Montoya asked.

“Always a possibility. If the Jane Doe does turn out to be Stephanie Keller, then we’ll check out the boyfriend, her family, other friends and acquaintances and see if other than being killed by the same murderer, she has any connection to Cathy Adams.”

“And Olivia Benchet.”

“I’ll check that out, too.”

“Thought you might.” Montoya’s dark eyes narrowed. “You know, Bentz, if you weren’t such a hard-ass, I’d think you might have a thing for our resident kook.”

“I swore off women long ago.”

“Oh, right.” Montoya nodded. “Because of your ex-wife. Man, that lady must’ve done a number on you. What was it? Did you catch her doing the wild thing with someone else?”

Bentz didn’t reply.

“That’s it, isn’t it? Who was it?”

“It’s ancient history. What happened occurred a long time ago,” Bentz said, unwilling to dredge up all the muck again. It had been over eighteen years and when he stopped to think about it, how Jennifer had admitted that the child she was carrying wasn’t his, how it had hurt like hell, he figured she’d only told him because he might find out if the baby needed blood work. There had been problems with the pregnancy and Jennifer, always one to overplay everything, had thought the baby might need surgery and her blood would be typed and it might not match Rick’s. So she’d told him the truth and vowed she’d broken off the affair, that she loved Rick, that she wanted to make the marriage work, that the man who had sired the baby didn’t want the child, couldn’t support it, and the affair was over almost before it had begun. Bentz had been blindsided and nearly poured himself into a bottle, but he’d stuck around and never once regretted claiming Kristi as his own.

“Look,” he said to Montoya. “What happened to me doesn’t matter anymore.”

Montoya snorted. “Then why haven’t you hooked up with another woman?”

“Maybe I’ve been too busy.”

“With what? Work? Christ, Bentz, we all need a social life.”

“Do we?” He leaned back in his chair until it creaked.

“Yeah, and don’t give me any garbage about you bein’ too old. I know better.”

“You don’t know Jack shit.”

Montoya clucked his tongue. “You need to get out more, Bentz. You really do.”

“You get out enough for both of us.”

“Not anymore. Nooooo,” he said with a wink. “I told you. I’m a one-woman man these days.”

“Oh, right.”

“It’s true. I’ve met a fine woman. Afiiiiiiinnnnne woman.”

“You meet one every week.”

“This one’s different.”

“Until next week.”

Montoya scoffed, but didn’t continue the argument. “Okay, so now that you think we’ve got a serial killer in our fair city, what about the media?”

“Jaskiel’s working with the public information officer. There should be a press release and conference later today.”
“You gonna be there?”

“Not unless I’m asked. Jaskiel will take care of it. She’ll make sure the public gets the right information.” They didn’t have to discuss the fact that, though the public would be warned about the killer and some of the information would be released, the police department would keep back important pieces that only they and the killer would know in order to catch the right culprit and flush out any mental cases who might claim to be the killer just for some sort of attention. Leaning forward, Bentz tapped his pencil on the desk. “So what’s new with the video of the fire?”

“The lab’s still working on it. I’ve seen pictures. So far nothing. But the guy who took the film, he wants to make sure he has the rights to it. You know, if it becomes valuable to the case.”

“And what? The Enquirer wants a copy?”

“I think that’s his major concern, yeah. There’s been talk on the street about a serial killer and Henderson is all of a sudden thinking he might have something as valuable as the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination.”

“Great. Didn’t he sign a release?”

“Sure, but now he’s hired himself an attorney. After the press release, I’m sure he’s gonna make a lot more noise.”

“Let him,” Bentz grumbled just as the phone shrilled. Bentz picked up before the second ring. “Bentz.”

A secretary informed him that Dustin Townsend wanted to see him. “Send him up,” Bentz said and within five minutes a distraught man appeared in his doorway. Townsend was somewhere around thirty. Prematurely balding, he carried the start of a beer belly. His eyes were bloodshot and he appeared nervous. “Can you tell me anything?” he asked after quick introductions were disposed of.

“They’re checking the dental records now.”

“Oh, God, it can’t be Stephanie,” he said, his face ashen, his chin not quite steady. “I mean, I saw her Friday afternoon. No … there’s got to be some other explanation.”

“I hope so,” Bentz said and didn’t glance at Montoya. How many times had they heard the same fears expressed by disbelieving family members? Unfortunately every victim had family and friends, lovers, parents or children, someone who cared. “Is that the picture of Stephanie?” he asked, indicating a small sack clutched in Townsend’s fingers.

“Oh … yeah. I, um, I brought a few.” He offered Bentz the bag. Complete with a full set of fingerprints. Should they need them.

“Thanks. Why don’t you show me what’s inside?”

Townsend was more than willing to fan out three pictures of a gorgeous, vibrant-looking girl. One where she was standing in hip-hugging jeans and a tank top; another where she was dressed in shorts and a sleeveless top, her hair scraped back in a knot on her head, her face speckled with sweat, a tennis racket held loosely over her shoulder; and a third that was a glamour-type head shot with Stephanie looking over her shoulder, her eyes slumberous and sexy.

“She’s pretty.”

Townsend nodded and sat on the chair in Bentz’s office, his hands clasped between his knees, his voice low as he answered enough questions to convince Bentz that he was either innocent or a damned good liar. He left half an hour later and Montoya shook his head and reached into his pocket for his pack of cigarettes. “I don’t think he’s our guy.”

“Me, neither. But check his alibi. He said he dropped her off at a car dealership where she was having some work done on her Taurus, then she was going to her night class at Loyola and she planned to spend the weekend with friends. The friends said she didn’t show up and they eventually tracked down Townsend. He called the police in Covington yesterday and that’s where we are. Her car’s in the shop, just as he said. The owner remembers her. That’s all we know. I’m getting a list of the other people enrolled in the class from the University and I’ve already got a call in to her professor to try and figure out who last saw her alive. It shouldn’t take too long to have the dental records prove whether or not she’s our Jane Doe.”

“And if she is?”

“Then we’ll take a harder look at the boyfriend.” Bentz reached for his jacket as Montoya slid a filter tip from the pack. “I’m going to check at Loyola. If the Jane Doe is Stephanie Keller, then two of our victims
attended college and the universities butt up to each other.”

“He’s picking off coeds.”

“So he could go to school at one of the universities himself,” Bentz said. “Or works there.”

“Loyola—Catholic?”

“Yep. It merged with the Jesuit College of the Immaculate Conception over a hundred years ago. It’s supposed to be the largest Catholic University in the South.”

“And Tulane.”

Bentz shook his head. “Originally a medical school, now lots of business.”

“How do you know these things?” Montoya seemed amazed. He was usually one step ahead of the game, at least when it came to what was happening within the department, but Bentz invariably dug deeper on the crime scene stuff.

“I checked. The minute I heard that another victim might have been a student, I did a little research. It’s all here.” He flipped a copy of a text on New Orleans across his paper-strewn desk.

“Maybe. In the meantime I’ll see what I can dig up on Oscar Cantrell and Bernadette Dubois.”

“Let me guess,” Montoya said as he started for the door. “Another interview with the visionary.” His dark eyes gleamed.

“I figured I’d show her pictures of this girl and some others—see if she can pick Stephanie out as the victim she claims to have seen. I’ll make copies on my way out. You got a better idea?”

Montoya’s grin grew. “Nope. I think it’s a damned good plan.” He crammed the cigarette into the side of his mouth. “Damned good.”
Chapter Eighteen

The bell over the shop door tinkled. Olivia was stocking shelves in the back room. She shoved a box of aromatic candles onto a stack, then swept through the beaded doorway to find Bentz making his way along a narrow aisle filled with baskets of incense, bath beads, and candles.

“Early Christmas shopping?” she asked.

He glanced at a five-inch crystal pyramid. Next to it was a tiny Japanese sand garden. On the next table was a tiny waterfall. “I think I’ll pass.”

“I can get you a deal on slightly used tarot cards,” she teased, unable to stop from baiting him as his shoulder brushed against a silver star that was part of a wind chime set. The chimes pealed softly over the background of sitar music piped in from the speakers mounted on the highest shelves.

“Another time.”

“I take it this isn’t a social call,” she said, reading the serious expression in the lines of his face. Suddenly she understood. “You caught the guy,” she guessed, crossing her fingers and hoping against hope.

“Nothing like that, but we did get a possible ID on the body.”

“Who?”

“I can’t say. Not until we know for certain and the family’s been notified.”

“Then why are you here?” she asked and stupidly, for a split second, she wondered if he’d come to see her, and her heartbeat increased. She remembered the kiss they’d shared in her house and she wondered if it had affected him as much as it had her.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a manila envelope. Within were color copies of snapshots of half a dozen women, all between twenty-five and thirty-five, some smiling, some not, all seemingly fit and all attractive. He handed the pictures to Olivia.

“Are all of these women missing?” she asked, horrified. Oh, God, please say that the monster hasn’t killed them.

“No. I just wondered if any of them looked like someone you’ve ‘seen’ in your visions.”

“What?” she asked, then understood. “Oh, I get it. You’re testing me, right?” She was disappointed. “Always the skeptic, aren’t you?”

“Gotta be.”

“I suppose.” She flipped through the pictures, studying each face and stopping when she came to a tawny-skinned woman with a wide smile in a bikini. “I… I feel like I’ve seen her before,” she said, confused. “But she’s not the one … oh, God.” Her heart nearly stopped as she gazed at one of the snapshots of a girl holding a tennis racquet. Cold recognition swept over her. “This one,” she whispered, dropping the rest of the snapshots as if they burned her fingers. “This is the woman he called Cecilia. I’m sure of it.” In her mind’s eye, she again saw the brutal images of the woman kneeling, begging, desperately clutching the priest’s robe. Olivia’s knees turned to water and the contents of her stomach curdled. She took in a deep breath and sagged heavily against the counter.

Bentz was quick. He grabbed the crook of her arm. “Steady,” he said as the door opened and Tawilda, lugging a shopping bag, stepped inside.

“Hey! Livvie, are you okay?” she asked, bustling down the aisle, the bracelets circling her wrist jangling. “Who the hell are you?” Dark eyes flashed at Bentz.

“It’s okay. He’s—”

Bentz flashed his badge. “Rick Bentz. New Orleans Police.”

“Police? What happened? Did we get robbed or somethin’?” Tawilda asked.

“Ms. Benchet is helping us with a case.”

“What case?” Tawilda’s eyes were round. Then they narrowed on Olivia. “You didn’t tell me anything about...
a case. What’s goin’ on?”

“She’s not at liberty to discuss it now,” Bentz said. “In fact, it would really help out if you could tend to the
store while I speak with Ms. Benchet for a few minutes alone.” He glanced at Olivia. “I’ll buy you a cup of
coffee.”

Olivia pulled her arm out of Bentz’s grasp.

“Is she bein’ arrested? Don’t you have to read her rights to her or somethin’?”

“She’s not being arrested,” Bentz said.

“It’s all right, Tawilda.” Olivia forced a smile. “But if you wouldn’t mind, I think I need to talk to him.”

“I do mind. I mind that you didn’t tell me about this,” Tawilda snapped. “I knew something was up with you,
girl. You’ve been acting strange for the last couple of days and I thought it might have somethin’ to do with
your mama comin’ to town, but it’s more than that, isn’t it?” She gave Bentz the once-over with her dark eyes.

“Oh, go on.” With a shooing motion of her long fingers, she gestured for Bentz and Olivia to go out the door.

“I’ll handle things here, it’s about time for you to be off anyway. Now, you do whatever it is you have to, just
don’t you be holdin’ out on me, y’hear?”


“You owe me a million, but who’s countin’?”

“You are. Every single one.”

“Well, maybe.” Tawilda rolled her eyes. “And I intend to collect.”

“You will,” Olivia insisted, then said to Bentz, “Give me a minute to get my things.” She ducked through the
beaded archway and into the back rooms to the office, where she located her purse stuffed inside a closet. In
one motion, she tugged her jacket from a brass hook and stuffed her arms down the sleeves. Finger-combing
her hair, she made her way past boxes of inventory yet to be catalogued and stocked, then rattled the beads as
she returned to the front of the store.

Bentz was waiting at a display of dried alligator heads sporting Santa caps. “The perfect gift for that hard-to-
buy-for someone,” Olivia quipped as he held the door open for her. Along with a blast of cold air, two middle-
aged women bustled into the shop.

“I’ll remember that on Christmas Eve when I go shopping. Aunt Edna’s a bitch to buy for. I’d been thinking
along the lines of chocolates or a new pair of slippers but I bet what she’d really like is the gator head with the
red hat.”

“Wouldn’t anyone?” Olivia stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jacket. The smell of the river was thick,
the wind blowing across its muddy depths cold and raw. “So were you trying to lay a trap for me?” Olivia
asked as they walked toward Decatur Street. The sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians bustling in and out
of the shops and restaurants facing the streets. Cars, trucks, and carriages drawn by mules filled the streets. On
one corner a street mime was standing motionless. In front of him an upturned hat, sprinkled with a few dollars
and coins, was an open invitation for donations.

“I just wanted to see if we were on the right track.”

“That girl, the one with the tennis racquet, is the one.”

“And the other one? How do you know her?”

“I don’t. Not really,” she said, thinking hard. Tiny pictures of the woman, cracked shards, cut through her
brain. “The image I got of her wasn’t as intense, but I feel like I’ve seen her before. And yes, in my dreams.
Last summer, when I was here taking care of Grannie, I think. I had several nightmares. About her. It was in
bits and pieces, but… I’m sure she’s the woman. Someone was shaving her head … and positioning her … and
choking her.”

Bentz guided her into a café that boasted strong coffee and even stronger drinks. They took a table near the
window where the street was visible through the glass and a candle was flickering in a small hurricane lantern.

“Was the same guy you saw the other night, the priest, was he choking her?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “As I said, I only saw bits and pieces.”

“And the guy in the cave with the woman who was left to starve?”

“I already told you, I’m not sure.” She shook her head as a waitress took their orders for coffee then moved
to the next table. “It must be. But I don’t remember a priest … just … there was something the same about it …
besides the terrified woman, there was… a necklace or chain. Like the one I saw the other night, the one the
priest left over the showerhead.” She shuddered at the intense memory, the scent of fear and smoke. She glanced at Bentz across the table, his features shadowed in the dark room, warm candlelight playing upon his skin. His eyes were a dark gray. Intense. Suspicious and yet … there was another emotion in their steely depths. She hadn’t remembered the connection of the chain at the time, but now it seemed important. “You have to believe me, Bentz. I’m not making this up. I couldn’t.”

“I know.” He nodded as the coffee was deposited.

“What’s her connection? It can’t be that she actually has ESP or whatever you want to call it, so she must have some other way of knowing what happened at the murder scene. Right?”

“Right on the money.”

“So you’re wondering, Bentz? Did I pass? The pictures. Did I pick out the right ones?”

He nodded over the clink of spoons swirling in cups and soft conversation. “So now you’re wondering, Bentz? What’s her connection? It can’t be that she actually has ESP or whatever you want to call it, so she must have some other way of knowing what happened at the murder scene. Right?”

“It’s crossed my mind,” he admitted and her temper snapped.

She shot to her feet, banging the table and sloshing coffee from her cup. “Well, when you figure it out, would you let me know? It would help me out, too. I wouldn’t feel like I was going out of my mind.”

“You’re not,” he said. “Please. Sit down.” He motioned toward the other side of the booth and reluctantly she took a seat again. “There’s something else I want to talk to you about.”

“What?” she asked and sensed she wasn’t going to like the subject matter. She dabbed at the spilled coffee with a napkin.

“Your mother.”

“What about her?”

“She was married to Oscar Cantrell.”

Husband number three. “She was married to a lot of people,” Olivia said, then immediately regretted her flippant tone. “Okay, right, she was married to Cantrell for a while.”

“You ever meet him?”

“At the wedding, but that was it. My mother and I aren’t particularly close. I thought I told you all this.” She dropped the wet napkin onto the table.

“Bear with me,” he said and she got the impression he was leading up to something; something she wouldn’t like. “It turns out that the house where the last Jane Doe was killed the other night is owned by some people who live out of state. They rent it through a management company, Benchmark Realty.”

She waited but he didn’t elaborate. “So?”

“Benchmark Realty is owned by Oscar Cantrell.”

“What?” she whispered, disbelieving. “Do you think he’s involved?”

“We’re checking,” Bentz said, not elaborating.

“As I said, I met Oscar at the wedding. He was short, maybe five-six or -seven, and he wasn’t built like the man I saw.”

“He could’ve lost weight.”

This sounded all wrong. She remembered Oscar. A teddy bear of a man with a big nose, red cheeks, and a quick, wide smile—the salesman’s salesman. A far cry from the intense, reined-in anger she felt in the murderer. “Why would Oscar use a place that could be so easily traced to him? That would be stupid.” She was certain Oscar Cantrell wasn’t the suspect. “Doesn’t he have an alibi?” She looked at Bentz, who was sipping his coffee and studying her over the rim.

“We’re checking that out.”

“My mother wasn’t married to him but about two years, I think. Maybe two and a half on the outside, so if you think that there’s a connection to me through Oscar, you’re barking up the wrong tree. As I said, I only met him once.”

“You ever meet any of his family? A brother? Father?”
“No. During the time that Bernadette was married to Oscar, I lived with my grandmother.”

“Did they have any children?”

“No! I don’t have any half-siblings. I only had my sister and she died years ago.”

He nodded, as if he understood, but Olivia saw the shadows in his gaze. “What is it?” she asked. “You don’t believe me?”

“Just trying to piece this all together.”

“Don’t you trust anyone?” she demanded. “What is it with you, Bentz? Are you so jaded from your job that you can’t believe anyone or is it more than that? Did something happen to you personally?”

His lips twitched. “Why don’t you tell me? You’re the psychic.”

That did it. He’d been hard-nosed from the minute he’d stepped into the shop. Suspicious all over again. “I’m outta here.” She snagged her purse from beneath the table.

“Wait a minute,” he said as several heads swiveled from the nearby booths.

“Forget it. I’m sick to death of being second-guessed. I know this doesn’t make a lot of sense to you, okay? It doesn’t make any sense to me, either. But there it is. I thought … I mean … didn’t you say that… Oh, hell, it doesn’t matter!” She huffed off and wondered why she bothered trying to explain anything to the bull-headed cop. She heard him slapping bills onto the table and felt his arm on her as she reached the front door.

“Olivia—”

“Can it, Bentz. Whatever it is you want to say, just can it. I’m not interested. I’ve done my part, my good citizen bit, and I’ve suffered enough of your disbelief and suspicion and your insults. Enough already.”

“You can’t blame me for being skeptical.”

She spun on him, bumping into his chest. “I can and I will. Take me at face value or leave me the hell alone.” She was overreacting, but she didn’t care. Who the hell was he to second-guess her? To mock her? She expected more from him, to open up to her, to even go so far as kiss her, for God’s sake, then the next thing she knew they were back to this, the hard-nosed cop with all the questions.

She darted across the street, dashing through traffic, hearing a horn blast as she jaywalked. She half-expected Bentz to pursue her and slap a ticket on her, but she made it back to the shop without being accosted and didn’t bother looking over her shoulder to see if he was still standing on the other side of the street staring after her.

It didn’t matter.

Because the feelings she had for him, the desperation she felt to make him believe her, not just to solve the crime, unfortunately, but for personal reasons she had no right to feel, were ludicrous. She was being a fool. Of the highest order. A fool of a woman over a man.

That, she told herself, was going to stop. Pronto.

The Chosen One was restless. Edgy. Irritated as he paced in his chapel. He’d read the accounts of the fire in Bayou St. John. No mention of the sacrifice. Just a victim who’d died in the blaze. As if she’d accidentally succumbed to the flames.

Ahh … Cecilia. What a beauty she was.

The police were withholding evidence, of course, but they were morons. Cretins. He’d watched them arrive, a pathetic group and they hadn’t yet connected his “crimes.” That’s what the imbeciles would call them—crimes. Like he was a common criminal. They had no idea of his mission, that what he was doing was God’s work. And he was far from finished.

No amount of prayer could calm him. He reached into his closet to his private cache and fingered the pieces of fingernails and toenails, the tiny trophies he’d taken and he relived each encounter. Closing his eyes, aware that his cock was stiffening, he saw himself in the mirrors he’d set upon his altar, the way he’d been able to see his victims’ fear and his own mastery in the reflective glass, the way they’d begged. He’d ached for each of them, suffered the torment of wanting to claim their blasphemous, heathen bodies. The Jezebels had been so outwardly innocent, so inwardly evil. There were so many of them.

One more important than the rest. The cop’s daughter. That one was personal. Smiling, he thought of her … soon … soon.
Deep in the recess he found the braid, the one he’d so carefully woven, strands of different colored hair winking in the light from his candles … brown, black, blond … but no red. A flaw. One he would have to correct. He rolled the plait between his fingers, imagined each terrified face of the whores, remembered cutting a lock of hair first, while they still believed they would live, while they were sending up prayers of repentance for crimes they didn’t believe they’d committed, then tucking the trophy under his neoprene suit, close to his body. Foolish cunts. Daughters of Satan. Whores each and every one.

Slowly he parted his bath robe, letting it fall open. His cock was hard. Throbbing. Standing at attention. He dragged the braid across himself, feeling the light caress, as soft and teasing as a harlot’s lips. He stiffened, sensing the driving need to release. His blood pounded through his veins, thundered in his ears, ached in his groin. Oh … for just the touch of one mouth upon him … one evil kiss … He felt the need to touch himself, to let go, but he didn’t. No. He would not give in to the base desire to relieve himself.

Instead he imagined the whores’ faces. Beautiful. Seductive. Wicked. Tear-stained in fear, begging him to let them service him, bargaining for their wretched lives. He smiled. Sweat ran down his back and face. They were his in death. Did they not know he’d saved them? Martyred them?

But he needed another … a soul to save … another Jezebel to add to his harem of the dead… one more lock to add to his braid … tonight.

He had the place. It was ready, a crude altar, but a place of sacrifice nonetheless. Hidden. Dark. The weapon waiting.

The time had been preordained. He looked at the calendar. November twenty-fifth, the feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria, patron saint of maidens … of philosophers … of preachers … of students … how fitting … oh, yes, it would be perfect.

It had to happen tonight. Before the stroke of midnight. God was waiting.
Chapter Nineteen

Olivia had trouble shaking off her confrontation with Bentz. What was it about the man that made her so crazy? What did she care what he thought? She locked up the shop and was going to pick up her things when the phone rang. The recorder would pick it up, of course, but being as it was near the holidays and all, she plucked the receiver off the phone and said, “The Third Eye. This is Olivia. How can I help you?”

There was silence, but she knew that someone was on the other end.

“Well, that’s the problem, Livvie,” he said and the use of her nickname in his thick southern drawl gave her the creeps. “I’ve been away a long time and I had plenty of time to think. To reassess my life. I didn’t call you right away, didn’t contact your mother, didn’t even come to your grandmother’s funeral even though I read her obituary in the paper. I thought I’d give us all some time to get used to the idea that I’m a free man.”

“I’ll never be used to it. Why would that make any difference?”

“Because I’ve changed, Livvie. I spent a lot of time alone, and a lot of time reading, reevaluating, even philosophizing. I’ve let Jesus into my life, into my heart, and I’ve not only paid my debt to society, but I’ve repented for my sins and taken Jesus Christ as my personal savior.”

“That’s good …” she said, winding the cord around her fingers and wishing there were some way to break the connection. She didn’t need a father now, not the kind of father Reggie Benchet was.

“You bet it is. And I’m going to prove myself.”

“How’s that?”

“By doing the Lord’s work. Spreading His word. I’m a minister now, Livvie, and now that I’m on the outside it’s time to visit my daughter. You’re the only child I’ve got left, you know. I’ve lost the others. When a man spends as much time as I did in prison, he learns what’s valuable in life. And it’s family, Olivia. Family and God.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for this,” she said. “In fact, I know I’m not.”

“Give it some thought.”

Not hardly. “I will,” she lied.

“The Lord be with you, Livvie.” He hung up before she did. Olivia closed her eyes for a second. He’s your father, her mind nagged, but she wasn’t buying it. “He’s the sperm donor. Nothing more.” But he’s changed. Turned over a new leaf

Something else she wasn’t buying. From what she’d heard about Reggie Benchet, she’d learned that he was a con artist of the highest order, someone who could talk the skin off a rattler. She didn’t want anything to do with him.
Yeah, and what if he gets sick and has no money… what then? You are flesh and blood. His only kid.

She decided she needed help sorting this all out. After finishing locking up, she reached in her purse, pulled out her wallet, and found the card Father James McClaren had pressed into her hand when she’d found him at St. Louis Cathedral.

“This is a surprise,” James said, and he meant it as he looked up from his desk. The secretary had left for the day, as had Father Roy, and now he was faced with Olivia Benchet again, the beautiful woman with the tangled hair and enigmatic eyes. He’d thought about Olivia more than once in the last couple of days. More than he should have. And his thoughts hadn’t been pure. Far from it. But that was his personal cross to bear, the demons he had to fight.

“I want to talk to someone,” she said, hesitating in the doorway.

“Come in … please …” He stood and pointed at one of the two side chairs on the other side of the desk. They were wooden, their seats smoothed and polished by fifty years of backsides of the troubled, the cursed, or the penitent. “You’re here to see me?”

“Yes.”

“As a priest?”

She hesitated as she sat and he noticed the curve of her calf peeking from beneath a slit skirt. Quickly, he looked away, to the window and the naked branches of the oak tree that were visible in the blue illumination from nearby street lamps. A crow was sitting on a lower limb, his head tucked beneath his wing. “Yes, and, well … I haven’t been to mass in years.”

“Maybe that’s the problem.” He offered her a smile and noticed her lips twitch.

“If so, it’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

“What’s going on with you, Olivia?”

Again there was a moment’s hesitation. She worried her lower lip as if deciding just how much she could confide. “I think I should start with my family,” she said, then found his eyes again. “That alone could take days.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Why don’t you begin and we’ll see where it takes us and how long. I’ve got all night.”

“Even men of God need to sleep,” she said.

“What’s troubling you, Olivia?”

*What isn’t?* she thought, but said, “I guess I felt compelled to seek some kind of counseling because of my father. I’ve never really known him; he and my mother were divorced when I was a toddler, and for most of the remaining years he’s been in prison. For murder.” Father James didn’t so much as flinch. “But he got out earlier this year, I guess, I didn’t know. My mother told me just recently and now he wants to meet me. He even called and claimed he’s a changed man, that he’s reformed, a minister of some sort, and the simple truth is I really don’t want anything to do with him.”

“But …” he encouraged.

“But even though I think of him as just a sperm donor, the truth of the matter is that he is my flesh and blood. I’m his only living child and my good old Catholic guilt is rearing its ugly head. He mentioned that I was all he had left.” And there was something about the way he’d said it that had bothered her; something was off.

Father James was listening hard, his square jaw balanced on the knuckles of both hands, his blue eyes focused on her. His jaw was dark with beard-shadow and he wore a black shirt and a stiff white cleric’s collar. He was just too damned handsome to have given his life to God. There was something about him that reminded her of someone, but she couldn’t put her finger on who that could be. Probably some television or B-movie Hollywood hunk who never made much of a name for himself.

He just didn’t look the part of a priest. Though he wore cleric’s garb and sat in this ancient room with its wide, polished desk, an open Bible in one corner, an arched window offering a view outside the vestibule, Father James McClaren looked as if he belonged on a soccer field or guiding a white-water rafting trip or standing on the bridge of a sailboat.

As if he read her mind, he smiled, showing off straight white teeth. “I guess I should tell you to search your heart, look into your soul, find the courage to forgive your father for his sins against you.”
“Turn the other cheek and avert my eyes to all he’s done?”

“He’s paid his debt to society. His punishment has been complete in the eyes of the law, so that leaves what he did to you, which, essentially is abandon you and your mother, the embarrassment to you.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t mean to trivialize it. There’s nothing trivial about abandonment, especially to a child. I’m sure the ramifications to you and your mother were devastating. And even though you’re an adult, it doesn’t mean that the pain will just vanish. You can say you don’t care, that you’re over it, that it was probably for the best, but the scars run deep and are painful. And when the pain is revisited as it is now that your father has contacted you again, it’s like the scab over those old wounds is being picked at. It stings. Threatens to bleed again. Burns. Brings back old, wretched memories that we’d hoped and prayed were long forgotten.” He didn’t smile as he looked at her, and Olivia was suddenly aware how dark the room was, that aside from the weak light from the street lamp outside, the only illumination in the room was from a banker’s lamp with its dim bulb and green shade.

The corners of the office seemed to shrink, the atmosphere thickening.

Father James said, “I can’t tell you what to do, Olivia. I can only suggest that you pray and talk it over with God. See what He says.” He spread his hands wide. “That’s probably not the answer you were searching for, but it’s the best I’ve got.”

“Is it?”

“Tell you what. Why don’t you go home and think about it? Do some soul-searching, then come back in a couple of days and we’ll discuss it again.”

“And in the meantime? If he calls again?”

“Do what your heart tells you.”

“What if my heart tells me to call him every name in the book?” she asked and he grinned.

“Just make sure it’s this book.” He thumped two fingers on a corner of the Bible resting on his desk.

“Is that what you’d do?”

“It’s what I’d try to do.” He sighed through his nose. “You know, I wear this collar”—he touched the white ring at his neck—“but it doesn’t mean I have all the answers. I’m just a man.”

“And here I thought you were touched by God.”

“I guess I’m supposed to say we’re all touched by the Father.” He quirked an eyebrow. “I suggest you speak with Him. And then listen. He will respond.”

She wasn’t so sure, but she didn’t argue. After all, she’d come here for Father McClaren’s counsel. The least she could do was hear him out. “Thank you for your time.”

“My pleasure,” he said and the twinkle in his eye and warm handshake across the desk told her that he meant it. “Here, let me walk you out.” He rounded the desk, touched the crook of her arm as he opened the door, then crossed the vestibule to the front doors. Dozens of votive candles were flickering in the dim nave, and a few lights glowed, shining from the exposed beams and reflecting on the stained glass windows. “Perhaps I’ll see you at mass this Sunday,” he suggested as he shouldered open the door and a cold breeze gusted inside, sending the tiny flames of the candles dancing wildly.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

He touched her hand, his fingers brushing the back of her knuckles. “Call me after you talk with God.”

She glanced into his eyes … blue … intense … sexy. At odds with his soft-spoken piety. “I will,” she promised and he stepped away from her, though she felt his gaze as she bundled her jacket around her and skirted puddles to reach her truck. As she climbed inside and slid behind the steering wheel, she saw him lift a hand and she waved back, then shoved her key in the ignition, pumped the gas, and twisted her wrist. The old engine ground for a second or two and she hesitated, then gave it another try. The tired motor sputtered to life and she wheeled out of the parking lot, the truck bouncing over potholes.

Her heart was pounding way too fast.

Because Father McClaren had touched her. Not her skin. But deeper down. To her soul.

“Don’t even think about it,” she warned as she looked into the rearview mirror. She couldn’t let herself be attracted to a priest. Nor a cop. Two men who were off-limits. Way off-limits. Maybe that was her problem, she thought as she accelerated onto the freeway. Maybe she was only interested in men who weren’t safe; men she
couldn’t possibly be involved with.

So why didn’t you confide in Father McClaren about your visions? Why not trust him? Are you afraid he might think of you as another nutcase like Bentz does?

Large drops of rain started to fall, splattering on her windshield. She turned on the wipers and knew she couldn’t talk to the priest. Not yet. She’d look like a fruitcake. He already knew about her ex-con of a father, and soon, no doubt, she’d explain about her often-married mother, so right now she wouldn’t bring up a grandmother who practiced voodoo along with Catholicism, nor would she mention the fact that she witnessed murders through visions in her mind … at least one of which had been committed by a priest.

He’d write her off for good if she mentioned that little fact.

So, for now, she’d hold her tongue.
The names of the saints ran through Bentz’s head.

*St. Cecilia.*

*St. Joan of Arc.*

*St. Mary Magdalene.*

Each one different. Each one immortalized on a medal that was purposely left at the scene of the crime.

Why? Bentz wondered as his computer spewed out pages of information on each of the martyred women. What was the significance? Pivoting in his desk chair, he picked up the first page on St. Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, poets, and sinners. He skimmed the account of her life as a Roman girl, then came to the part about her death. His nerves tightened. Cecilia or Cecil was sentenced to death for refusing to repudiate her Christianity. She was supposed to die from suffocation in her bathroom by furnace fumes, and when that didn’t work, she was to be beheaded by three blows to the neck, which again failed, and she survived for several days after the attack.

“Jesus,” he whispered as he thought of the similarities to the woman’s death in Bayou St. John—the smoky bathroom and then her head nearly severed from her body, in three blows according to the ME as well as Olivia Benchet. The sick bastard who did this was copying the punishment meted out against St. Cecilia—the name Olivia had heard him whisper in her vision.

An eerie sensation swept over Bentz’s skin.

He knew that Joan of Arc died from being burned at the stake and the Jane Doe had been horridly burned before her body had been dumped at the statue of Joan in the French Quarter.

But what about Mary Magdalene … that part didn’t quite fit. He didn’t have a record of Mary Magdalene’s death, but he did know that she was a sinner—presumably a prostitute—as was Cathy Adams, who was found dead in her Garden District apartment. Cathy’s head had been shaved, and the smell of patchouli oil had been present. He read the account of Mary Magdalene’s life and how it was recorded in the New Testament by St. Luke that she wiped Christ’s feet with her hair and anointed him with ointment.

Bentz felt that eerie sensation again.

Had the killer turned this story of Jesus into something grotesque?

The phone rang. It was the ME in the morgue. “The dental records of the victim from the fire in Bayou St. John match with Stephanie Jane Keller,” he said, though Bentz had already convinced himself that the girl who died in the fire was Dustin Townsend’s girlfriend.

“You’re certain?”

“A hundred percent. She had a lot of dental work done a few years back. I’ve checked the X-rays and talked to the dentist. She’s your girl.”

“Thanks.” Bentz hung up and tapped his pen on a legal pad situated near the phone. He felt sick inside. He’d seen grizzly deaths—more than he wanted to count—but these killings were so macabre and hideous, gruesomely executed by some kind of weird zealot. A priest? No way.

“So think, Bentz. Think.” Stop him before he strikes again.

What did the three women have in common aside from being murdered in a bizarre fashion?

They all appeared to be under thirty. Two of the three were white, though Cathy Adams was racially mixed. The killer had jumped racial lines, which was odd in and of itself. But not unheard of. He made a note.

Okay, what else?

Until he found out who the Jane Doe left at the statue of Joan of Arc was, he had only Cathy Adams and Stephanie Jane Keller to compare lifestyles and acquaintances and their pasts. They both had boyfriends, though Cathy’s hadn’t been heard from in months. Marc Duvall, Cathy’s pimp/boyfriend, had blown town around the time of the murder and was still a suspect.
Both of the identified victims had lived alone, Cathy in the Garden District of the city, Stephanie in an apartment in Covington, less than a mile from her boyfriend’s house. Cathy was a part-time student at Tulane and an exotic dancer. Stephanie was a secretary for an insurance company and took night classes at Loyola.

Which was next door to Tulane University.

A connection? Or a coincidence?

Bentz made it a personal code not to believe in coincidence. He made another note and wondered about the remaining Jane Doe. Another student at one of the universities in the Garden District?

Olivia Benchet’s a graduate student at Tulane.

His jaw tightened. He didn’t like where this was leading. The thought that Olivia might be in contact with the killer scared him. Big-time.

So what about the priest?

The priest only Olivia saw—and that was in her “vision.” Don’t go jumping off the deep end here, Bentz. You need more facts to believe that a priest would kill these women.

It didn’t make any sense. He scanned his notes again, the ones he’d taken during the interviews with Olivia. He stopped when he came to the sheet of paper with the weird letters and symbols. His eyes narrowed as he thought. Another saint? Or was that stretching it too far … grasping at straws? Why would a priest kill women and make them look like martyred saints? That didn’t make sense. And why would Olivia be able to see him killing the women? How? What was the connection? Bentz was missing something … something important.

He ran a hand over his face, heard the hum of computers and buzz of conversation in the outer office, and glanced back on his notes on St. Cecilia once again. The same stuff. Except … His gut clenched as he noticed the feast day. November twenty-second. He caught his breath. The day Stephanie Jane Keller was murdered.

The killer had done his work on November twenty-second not because it was the date of the JFK assassination, but because it was the feast day of St. Cecilia.

“Son of a …” He flipped through his pages on Joan of Arc. “Feast day… May thirtieth.” The Jane Doe was found at the foot of the statue of Joan of Arc on May thirty-first. But she could have been killed before midnight, May thirtieth, her feast day. Burned at a damned stake? Where? “Shit.” What kind of sick mind were they up against?

And when would he strike again? Jesus, if Bentz remembered correctly, from his days of Catechism, it seemed there was a feast day celebrating some saint’s life every time you turned around.

Sweat broke out on his forehead. That meant there wasn’t much time.

If you’re right, his mind warned. You could be connecting dots that don’t exist.

Like hell. He knew he was right. The demented bastard was using the holy days for his gruesome work.

Suddenly Bentz wanted a drink. And a smoke.

He opened his desk drawer and scrounged for a piece of tasteless nicotine gum. It wasn’t the same; didn’t give him the hit a Camel straight did, but it would have to suffice. For now. A drink was out of the question.

Grabbing his jacket, ID, and shoulder holster, he logged out and told a secretary if Montoya showed up he needed to talk to him. Then Bentz hit the rain-drenched streets, paging his partner himself from his cell phone as he unlocked his Jeep. He decided to drive to the one spot in the city that he’d managed to avoid for a long, long while.

Jaw clenched, mind racing with more questions than answers, he cut across town, impatient with the clog of traffic. Ironic that a place he’d shunned was now so damned important that he’d abuse the speed limit to get there. The wipers slapped a torrent of rain from the windshield and the police band crackled, though only if Satan himself was found in New Orleans would Bentz be deterred.

A final turn and he saw the church. A place of faith. His parish, if he had one. Since moving to New Orleans, he’d been here about five times. Always with Kristi. On Christmas, sometimes Easter. Never in between and sometimes he’d skipped a year. It all depended on how he felt about God at the time the holiday rolled around. He parked on the street and stared up at the tall spire of St. Luke’s Church. Illuminated by lights on the ground, the steeple rose into the night, seeming to knife into the clouds, unbent by the rain.

It was ironic, he thought, that James had ended up here.

What were the chances?

Unless James had requested the transfer.
Wouldn’t that beat all? He’d wondered half a dozen times why his half-brother had transferred to the Big Easy.

Bentz pocketed his keys, didn’t bother turning up his collar, and made a dash for the front doors. Someone had told him long ago that God was patient. He hoped to hell it was true.

The woman was a problem. A serious problem.

The Chosen One sensed her presence, knew that it was only a matter of time before she led the police closer to him. He knew her name. Olivia Benchet … a self-proclaimed psychic. As was her grandmother, a backwoods voodoo priestess. But then The Chosen One knew all about Virginia Dubois.

He’d done his research. It was necessary to understand one’s enemies. How else would one prevail?

Standing in the shower’s hot spray, he sneered when he thought of the police. Simpletons. Idiots. With all of their sophisticated equipment and computer links, and manpower, they were still running around in circles.

He’d listened to the press conference that was meant to warn the constituents of the city about a homicidal maniac; he’d heard that there was a task force in place and that more details would be released when they were available.

Which was a joke. The police didn’t dare tip their hands and tell too much about what they’d found for fear of a copycat killer, or someone confessing to the crime who had no part of it.

So they were careful.

And stupid.

He held a razor and shaved himself carefully. First one thin blade, then another, and finally a third, so that there was no margin for error. The razors were sharp, honed with precision, and they gently caressed his skin, removed all trace of his hair. He worked his way downward from his hairline, slowly over his face, then his neck and chest and underarms, anywhere there was a hint of body hair. He was careful in that sensitive area surrounding his scrotum and took his time with his legs and feet, watching the dark stubble swirl down the drain in an eddy of lather.

He’d installed a full-length mirror next to the shower, and through the steamy glass doors, he saw his image—bare and clean, white skin red from the hot spray, nary a single hair visible, just rippling muscles beneath taut skin, compliments of a rowing machine, a cross-country ski machine, and weights that he used in his daily regimen. The hair on his head was wet and he considered removing it. He should shave it down to nothingness as one single strand left at a scene would undo him. But a significant change in his appearance would raise suspicion, and in truth, pride and vanity won out over caution. For now, the hair would stay. He combed the wet strands from his face, slicking them to his head. Someday, perhaps …

As he stepped out of the shower, he didn’t towel off but let the cold air evaporate the moisture on his skin. He’d found his next victim. Oh, there were many to choose from; so many sinners, but this one, the redhead, would do nicely. He’d been watching her for weeks, wondering if she was worthy of the sacrifice, and when he’d spoken to her, he’d known then. If she only knew how he was going to transform her soul. Barefooted, he crossed the smooth wood floor to his closet and reached inside for the medal, a very special medal suspended from a fine chain.

St. Catherine of Alexandria.

He felt his blood begin to heat at the thought of his mission. Tonight … before midnight. He imagined her pleading for her life, praying and supplicating, crying and repenting, offering herself to him … No matter what she bartered with, no matter how desperately she begged, her blood would flow,

He looped the chain over his wrist and glanced in the mirror again. Tonight would be good. Yes. Another sacrifice.

But then he would have to reassess. Because the granddaughter of Virginia Dubois, daughter to the slut Bernadette, could ruin things for him.

Unless she became one of the martyred.

He smiled at the thought. She had to die. She was a threat and he had personal reasons to end her life, reasons she couldn’t yet fathom. There were others slated to be sacrificed first, of course, but… his schedule could be rearranged to allow for this special rite.

Saint Olivia. It had a nice ring to it.

A very nice ring.
Chapter Twenty-one

“There’s someone to see you … a police officer,” Wanda, the church secretary, said as she tapped on the door to the office while simultaneously pushing it open.

Father James McClaren looked over the tops of his reading glasses and read the curiosity in the uplift of Wanda’s white eyebrows. Thin and wrinkled with eyes that appeared owlish behind her glasses, she licked her lips nervously.

“His name is … what?” She turned and James heard a deep voice that he recognized instantly. “Oh yes … Detective Richard Bentz,” she said, looking at Father McClaren again.

James’s chest tightened. The soft classical music he’d been listening to seemed to fade. What would bring his half-brother here? Only the direst of circumstances. Kristi. James’s mouth went dry. “Send him in,” he said, turning away from his computer screen. Next week’s sermon would have to wait.

As Wanda stepped aside to let Bentz enter, James steeled himself. Any conversation with Bentz turned into a confrontation.

“Father,” Bentz said with a nod and James, standing, forced a smile.

“Thank you, Wanda,” James said, slanting a glance at the woman still hovering in the doorway. She got the hint and slipped outside. The door shut with a soft thud. James extended his hand across the desk. He relaxed a little. If something was seriously wrong with Kristi, it would have been evident in the lines on Bentz’s face. As it was his half-brother looked worried, but not filled with despair or grief. “Long time, no see. How’re ya, Rick?”

Bentz took his hand in a bear-like clasp that was as brief as it was strong. “Okay.” He settled into one of the visitor’s chairs and James remembered how much, as a boy, he’d looked up to his older brother. How close they’d been. As children, Rick had always been there for him. While growing up, Bentz had shown him how to throw a baseball, shoot a twenty-two and sneak booze from the old man’s liquor cabinet. Rick had scoffed at James’s piety, and once taken on Freddy Mason when Freddy and some friends had picked a fight with James in the school yard, calling him a sissy and a “Mama’s boy.” Rick had knocked Freddy flat, then, when the older boys had left with their tails tucked between their collective legs, Rick had turned on his half brother and kicked James’s butt from one side of Orange County to the other. He’d told James that Freddy had been right. James was a “Mama’s boy” and all that candy-assed stuff about God and Church had to be hidden away or he’d get into big trouble. It was time for James to fight his own battles.

The next week James had asked Rick to show him how to box and in the next year, after growing six inches and putting on thirty pounds, James had been able to stand up for himself. They’d been tight way back when and James had always felt awe for his stronger half brother; a kid who’d grown up not knowing his own father, a policeman shot in the line of duty.

Even so, eventually James and Rick had taken far different paths and eventually James had betrayed his older brother. And he’d been paying for it ever since.

Now, he dropped into his worn desk chair.

“How ‘bout you?” Rick asked without so much as a smile, as if he didn’t really give a damn. “You okay these days?”

“Can’t complain.” Drawing in a tight breath James asked a question that had been on his mind for months. “How’s Kristi?”

“Fine.”

“In school?”

“Yeah.” Bentz’s eyes dared him to go further.

He took the challenge. “Up at All Saints?”

“That’s right.”

“She doin’ okay?”
“As I said, ‘fine’.”

“Coming home for Thanksgiving?” James asked, eager for any little tidbit of information about the daughter who had believed he was her uncle until a few months ago.

“Yeah.” A muscle worked in the side of Bentz’s face as if he, too, were remembering the scene after he’d handed Kristi the condemning letter, then left a message on James’s answering machine explaining that he’d finally told her the truth. James had hoped for some kind of bonding, a healing, and he’d been sorely disappointed. Kristi had summarily rejected him, and told him to “Fuck off” when he’d called. The short, furious, one-sided conversation still rang in his ears.

“Don’t you ever call me, okay? You’re a goddamned hypocrite and I don’t want you praying for me, either, just leave me the hell alone!” she’d cried and slammed down the phone. He had prayed for her. Hours. Hoping she would see him. Speak with him, let him explain … If she only knew how much he loved her, had loved her mother, maybe more than God. When Jennifer had admitted that she was pregnant with his child, he’d offered to quit the priesthood, had been willing to take the heat of his brother’s wrath, God’s fury, even to accept the specter of being ex-communicated, but she’d refused … She couldn’t accept the scandal, so they’d covered up the truth for a while. Now, he tapped his desk, feeling shame. Feeling that same familiar guilt.

Rick was still glaring at him. “I didn’t come here to talk about her,” he said tersely.

James nodded, trying to ignore that particular pang of emptiness whenever he thought about Kristi. “I know. And I guess I’m glad. I was afraid something was wrong with her when you showed up.”

“This isn’t about her.”

“All right, but…” He opened his hands and wondered how to ever bridge the gap between them. Through God, he’d told himself over and over, but for some reason the Father hadn’t seen fit to mend their small family. And that, too, was James’s fault. For he’d never forgotten Jennifer and years after Kristi was born, he and the mother of his child had sinned again. He cleared his throat. “I was worried … You know, she won’t respond to my letters or my e-mail.”

“Then leave it be, James,” Bentz said, his lips compressed.

“But—”

“I said ‘leave it’; if she wants to contact you, she will. Until then you just leave it alone.”

“I’ve prayed and—”

Bentz snorted, the way of nonbelievers but even so, James felt no sense of superiority in his faith. It was prideful, of course, to feel that smugness. And a sin. Even those who desperately needed God’s love sometimes rejected James’s attempts to lead them to the Father. For those who couldn’t find that faith, he felt despair, and, in some cases, unfortunately a sense of superiority. However not today. Not when it came to Kristi. James couldn’t rely on his faith for he’d transgressed so badly, wounded his brother so bitterly, that God seemed to have shunned helping him. Rick Bentz had, at one time, been his role model, the older brother James had looked up to and emulated.

But that was before James had met Jennifer. And the weekend that had changed their lives forever.

God help him.

“I’m here on business,” Bentz said, getting down to it as he leaned over the desk. “Here’s the deal. We’ve got another sicko loose, a serial killer.”

“I saw it on the news.”

“Yes, well, there are certain things I can’t talk about, of course, things that we’re keeping from the public, so I guess I’m here as a … penitent or confessor or whatever it is the Church calls it these days.” He made a brushing motion with his hand, as if it was of no consequence. “I just want to make sure that if I talk to you, it’ll go no further, right? This is between you, me and God.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” Rick was dead-serious and James recognized the look. He’d seen it in the past. The grim, focused expression had always been a part of Bentz whether he donned it before a boxing match in high school or right before his fist had crashed into James’s face and broken his nose. James hadn’t seen it coming. But he hadn’t known that Jennifer had confessed to Rick that she was carrying his half-brother’s child. That one blow had been symbolic of the rift that was to come. James had tried to reconnect with his half brother, to play the role of uncle to his own child, but Rick had only grudgingly allowed it, probably for the sole purpose of hiding the
painful truth and to protect Kristi.

"Then, yes. You can trust that this will go no further."

Again the corners of Bentz’s mouth tightened, but he didn’t comment on trusting his half brother. “The killer has struck three women that we know about, potentially more. The women have a couple of things that link them, but one of the strongest is that I think they were all murdered on a Saint’s feast day.”

“What?” James didn’t think he’d heard correctly.

“It seems they were killed on the feast day purposely. There are clues to back this up.”

“Dear God,” James whispered, sketching a quick sign of the cross over himself. “But if that were the case then there could be dozens … or hundreds of victims.” He pointed to the calendar hung over his desk. “Look at today. It’s the feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of maidens and philosophers and students and preachers.”

“Damn.” Bentz glared at the calendar, then asked, “How did she die?”

“Horribly. Well, all the martyrs did … Here …” He swiveled in his chair and searched the bookcase behind him before he found the heavy book he wanted; one devoted entirely to the saints. What Bentz was speculating was heinous; crimes not only against the victims but the Church itself. To think someone would misconstrue the veneration of those canonized and twist it into murder was unthinkable. Twisted and evil.

As he slid a pair of reading glasses onto his nose, James flipped open the book, scanned the chapters and, thumbing quickly through the pages, found what he was looking for. “Here we go.” He pushed the open book across the desk.

The color drained from his half-brother’s face. “Tortured by being strapped to a spiked wheel.”

“That was the idea, yes.”

“Jesus,” Bentz whispered, his eyes scanning the page. “Her bonds were miraculously loosened and the spikes flew off to kill the onlookers.”

“And when that didn’t work she was beheaded.”

Bentz nodded slowly, his gaze glued to the text.

“It’s said that her blood flowed white. Like milk.” James scratched his neck beneath his clerical collar. “And all because she committed the sin of converting people to Christianity.” Folding his hands, James leaned over his desk. “If you have a killer who is copying the murders of the saints, you’re going to be very busy, I’m afraid. And he won’t be satisfied killing only women. Men and children as well will be at risk. There are hundreds of saints … thousands.” Inwardly James shivered. He skewered his half-brother’s gaze with his own.

“This is unthinkable.”

“A lot of unthinkable acts have been performed in the name of God.”

“I know.”

Bentz flipped through the tome, the lines of his face deepening as he scanned the thin pages. “Do you mind if I take this? I’ll return it.”

“If it will help. Of course.”

“Thanks. Now, I’ve got something else I hope you can interpret.”

Reaching into his pocket, Bentz withdrew copies of the notes Olivia had taken after her nightmares or “visions” surrounding the woman chained within a crypt. “Does this mean anything to you?” he asked. “Could those notations have anything to do with one of these saints?”

He tapped the book with two fingers.

James adjusted his reading glasses. At first the letters and symbols meant nothing. “Is there anything else you can tell me about it?” he asked, studying the symbols.

“Yeah … if it’s connected with a saint, the feast day would have been in summer, I think. Probably August. Maybe July.”

“Philomena,” James said as the letters began to connect. He picked up the book again, but he knew before he thumbed through the pages what he would find. “LUMENA, PAXTE, CUMFI. It’s Latin, but mixed up. Supposedly these words were found inscribed in red on the tomb of Saint Philomena. When the tiled letters were changed around a little bit, the message read, ‘Pax tecum, Filumena,’ or ‘Peace be with you, Philomena.’ ”
“What about the symbols?” Bentz asked.

“On the tiles of the tomb.” James glanced down at the text. “I suppose they’re open to interpretation, but the tomb of this Roman girl was found in 1802. It’s thought that aside from the letters, the inscriptions on the tiles were of a lily, a palm, the arrows, anchor and a scourge, see here—” he pointed to the crude drawings. “That’s the lily and it means she was a virgin. The palm is symbolic of being a martyr and the weapons depict the tortures she went through.” He pointed to the arrows. “Even these squiggly lines over the arrow are supposed to represent fire, but of course, that’s speculation as nothing is recorded about her. She was also found with a vial of dried blood, presumably hers, within the tomb.”

“Her own blood? Why?”

James shrugged. “That’s the mystery of Philomena. Not much is known about her or who she was. Though she’s got a loyal following, the Church has wavered, even suppressing her feast day in the early sixties, I think. She’s gained favor again, at least with some of her supplicants, those who invoke her name in every sort of need.”

“She performs miracles?” Bentz asked, obviously skeptical.

“That’s right.” James handed the pages to his half-brother. “She was recognized as a saint solely upon her powerful intercession.”

“You mean she grants prayer requests?”

“Yes.”

“Has she ever granted one for you?” Bentz asked as he stood and folded the well-worn piece of paper into his pocket.

“I’ve yet to ask.” Again James slid the book across the desk. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Yeah.” Bentz started for the door. “Pray.”

“I always do.”

That stopped him cold. He looked over his shoulder and pinned James in his harsh glare. “I’m okay, James. I don’t need your prayers except about this case.”

“Old habits die hard.” James rounded the desk. “Let me know if there’s anything else I can do.”

“I will.” Bentz’s hand was on the doorknob.

“And would you please tell Kristi that … that I wish her well?”

Every muscle in his half-brother’s body tensed. He rounded. “What good would that do? She knows the truth, that you’re more than her uncle, okay. She gets it. Let her deal.” He turned then and torment shadowed the anger that snapped in his eyes. “It’s hard enough for a kid to learn that the man who raised her isn’t her father. Then add to it that the real father turns out to be an uncle who just happens to also be a priest. That’s a helluva lot for a kid to take, don’t you think?”

“Yes … I know … I mean …” The old anguish tore at James’s soul. “I’ve told you I’m sorry. I’ve talked to God. If I could do everything over …”

“What? You wouldn’t have gotten it on with my wife? You wouldn’t have gotten her pregnant? Kristi wouldn’t have been born?” Bentz raged, then stopped suddenly and the cords in his neck became less visible. “Forget it, James. And next time, let me do the praying. How about that? I’ll pray for you, okay? I think you need it a helluva lot more than I do.”

With that he swung out of the door, nearly knocking over Wanda who just happened to be hovering nearby. James let out his breath, made the sign of the cross and sent up another prayer for forgiveness …. as he had each and every day for the past eighteen years.

But his half-brother was right. Had he not been seduced by Jennifer, Kristi would never have been born and that, in and of itself, would have been the greatest sin of all. He’d been a seminary student when he’d met his brother’s wife. He’d let down his guard one weekend during a time Rick and Jennifer had briefly separated. He could still remember the taste of saltwater on her skin, the feel of hot sand against his back on the beach near Newport … Those memories had been with him for years and when she’d offered herself again, years later, when her marriage was on the rocks and she could no longer take being tied to a cop who’d mistakenly shot a kid close to Kristi’s age and had begun pouring himself into a bottle … James had tried to console her and had ended up making love to her in the marriage bed she shared with his half brother.

Unfortunately Rick had chosen that afternoon to stop by the house.
Within a month Jennifer Nichols Bentz was dead. Had she killed herself? James suspected as much, though her death was ruled an accident. But the antidepressants, the booze, the clear weather conditions didn’t explain why her car left the road and slammed into a tree.

James’s throat thickened. No wonder his brother hated him. Kristi was right. He was a hypocrite who should have walked away from the priesthood. Instead he’d spent the past eighteen years begging God’s forgiveness.

But you couldn’t leave her alone, could you? You couldn’t resist. And she died. God punished not only you, but your brother and your daughter.

There was a light tap at the door and he looked up, expecting that Bentz had left something and was returning for it. Instead, Monsignor O’Hara swept in. He was a tall, graceful man, soft-spoken, but with a bearing that set him apart from his peers. Wearing a plain alb, he shut the door softly behind him. “Is everything all right?”

What a joke. Nothing was right. “I suppose.”

“Mrs. Landry said the police were here.”

Of course. Wanda Landry had felt compelled to spread the word. She was a gossip; a pious gossip, but a gossip nonetheless and she seemed to take particular delight in the troubles of others. James suspected that she was involved in the prayer chain primarily to learn of bad news and pass it along. “It was only one policeman who happens to be my half-brother.”

“Oh.” The monsignor frowned thoughtfully. “I didn’t know you had any family around.”

“We’re not close.” And whose fault is that?

“Maybe that will change,” the monsignor said.

“Perhaps.” James didn’t elaborate. He figured that his family was his business. Bentz’s father had been a policeman killed in the line of duty. His wife had married his partner, who had treated Rick as if he were his own flesh and blood. However, he’d left the boy with the surname of his biological father—a gift and, perhaps, in retrospect a burden.

“So there’s no trouble?” O’Hara asked, a guarded smile stretching across his strong jaw. Though in his fifties, Monsignor O’Hara worked out regularly. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on the older man’s body. He seemed a sincere, if distant soul though James realized that he knew little of the man with whom he’d been partnered for several years.

“No trouble.”

“Good … good … I’ll see you later.” As if he really didn’t want to hear any bad news, the monsignor lifted a hand and hurried out of the office to leave James alone, sitting at the desk in the green glow of a banker’s lamp as the notes from a lonely cello wafted through the empty office. He tried to pray and found no solace in speaking with God. Walking to the window he looked out at the dark, gloomy skies. The wind was beginning to pick up and a branch from the magnolia tree near the front of the building was banging against the church again, as if God were rapping on the walls, reminding him that He was watching. He knew.

James leaned his forehead against the glass and tried to conjure up the monster stalking the streets of the city. A man killing women in the ways some of the saints were martyred. Ugly. Twisted. Who would think of such a thing? And, for God’s sake, why?

He suspected there was a lot more his half-brother hadn’t told him; he could feel it as he stared into the dark night. And the threat was extreme for Rick to have sought him out.

Or perhaps God was trying to talk to James. There was a chance that God had directed his half-brother to the church, to him, to show James that he was needed. He walked to the bookcase again and found another, well-worn volume on the saints. In this one the pages were so thin they were nearly translucent.

Resting his hips on the edge of the desk, he shuffled through the pages and caught glimpses, images of the portraits of the saints. Painted by the masters, the women who had been canonized appeared virtuous, kind and flawlessly beautiful, the kind of woman any man would want….

Like Olivia Benchet.

Why couldn’t he put that woman out of his mind? A dozen times over since their last meeting, James had thought of her, evoking her image and entertaining thoughts decidedly unworthy of his calling.

He looked down at the book again. Olivia was as beautiful as any of the pictures in this ancient tome.

Stop it!
He snapped the book closed but even as he did, he wondered if he would ever see Olivia again. His pulse quickened at the thought of another encounter no matter how brief. She was innocence tangled with sweet, sinful seduction, one of the few women who were able to breach the solid and sanctimonious wall he'd constructed around his heart.

He knew he was good-looking. He'd been told often enough. The jokes that he was wasting his inherent masculinity didn't go unnoticed; some women had speculated that he was gay. Then there were the others, the vulnerable. In his role of advisor and counselor to those in pain or grieving, he'd been given ample opportunity to break his vows of celibacy. Young widows looking for strength and comfort, women who'd been rejected by boyfriends and spouses and were searching for someone to prove they were still attractive, other pushy little flirts who just looked upon him as a challenge, a notch in their garter belts. At each door of temptation, he'd stopped short, steadfastly resisting. Even when the temptation of the flesh had been so strong that he'd spent hours alternately dousing himself with cold water and kneeling on the cold stones of his altar, praying for the strength to resist the invitations thrown his way. In each and every case he'd succeeded.

Except with his brother's wife.

Even now, he closed his eyes and felt shame.

Until a few days ago he'd been prideful enough to think that he could no longer be swayed from his vows of celibacy.

And God had proved once again that he was a weak and frail man.

For that was before he'd looked into the liquid-gold eyes of Olivia Benchet. And now, he feared, he was doomed to sin again.
Chapter Twenty-two

“… that’s right, Saint Philomena. August eleventh,” Bentz was saying into the receiver of his cell phone. “See if any coeds from any of the universities were reported missing about that time.” God, he hated to think about the connection between the women. College girls. Like Kristi. And she wasn’t that far away. It scared the piss out of him.

“I’ve already started looking,” Montoya reported, his voice as clear as if he were sitting in the passenger seat of the Jeep instead of on his own cell phone. “But you really think this is tied into feast days?”

“I’d bet my dad’s service revolver on it.”

“Damn.”

Bentz had spent the last three hours, ever since leaving St. Luke’s, running down leads in the Stephanie Keller murder. Now, he was driving into the Quarter. “I talked with the mechanic who saw Stephanie Jane Keller after the boyfriend dropped her off. He was clocked in until nine—they work late—and was home by nine-fifteen to be with the wife and kids. He remembers nothing except that she was in a hurry to get to class. But she never made it, according to her professor. So far, the mechanic was the last one to see her alive.”

“Shit.”

Bentz’s exact thought. “I’ve called some of her friends. None of ‘em think she was going anywhere but to class and that gels as her books and notebook for that class weren’t in her car or her apartment. I talked to the team that went through her things. Her friends check out, too, and the last guy she was involved with before Townsend was a guy she worked with, but they broke up because he got transferred to Boston. His alibi checked out, too.”

“Great,” Montoya muttered, his voice muffled as if he were drawing on a cigarette. “What about her car?”

“I’ve got people going over it now. Vacuuming, dusting for prints, even looking for blood.”

“Maybe we’ll learn something.”

“I doubt it,” Bentz said. “My guess is the guy waited until she was walking the five blocks from the dealership to the university and grabbed her, or maybe even offered her a ride. I think he knows the victims. It would have been someone she trusted. I’ve got a class list and I’m having everyone called to see if they remember if she made it to class. No one takes roll, y’know.”

“Too bad.”

“Yeah.” Bentz glared into the night.

There were still no more clues on the death of Stephanie Jane Keller and each hour that passed made it less likely the crime would be solved. Where had Stephanie met her attacker? What had happened? How had she been transported to the shotgun house in Bayou St. John? “Keep me posted,” Bentz said. “I’m stopping by WSLJ, just to see that no one’s getting any crank calls. Then I want to double-check this saints’ feast days angle—see if anyone was reported missing from the surrounding colleges on feast days in the summer or early fall.”

“You still think the Rosary Killer is back?” Montoya asked.

“I don’t know. But I don’t like the connection between the murders and the Catholic Church. It’s too much like *déjà vu*. I mean, what are the odds? Serial killers are pretty damned rare and this guy’s leaving his calling card.”

“The signature is different,” Montoya reminded him, then swore as a horn blasted through the receiver.

“I know, but I’m saying if it’s not the same guy, then there’s a chance it’s someone he knew.”

“What?”

“A mentor or something.”

“Hey, whoa—not you think you’re going off the deep end here?”

“Maybe, but it’s just a gut feeling that there wouldn’t be two serial killers in the same town, connected
somehow to the Church, who didn’t know each other.”

“It’s not like they belong to the same country club.”

“No? Well, run it by the profiler and the FBI and tell the people who are trying to crack the damned code about St. Philomena.”

“You got it. Jesus! That prick cut me off!” There was a muffled sound. Something harsh, then he was back. “Hey, Bentz, guess who I got a call from today?”

Bentz cranked the wheel and crossed two lanes. “I give, who?”

“Marlene, Oscar Cantrell’s secretary. Remember her? I guess my little talk earlier today about obstruction of justice got through to her. Anyway, she gave me Cantrell’s cell number. I left a message with him. So far he hasn’t returned my call.”

“Try again.”

“Oh, I will,” Montoya said. “I’ll let you know what the guy says. You know, Bentz, if someone’s killing women on saints’ feast days, we’re screwed. There’s another one of those damned feasts every time you turn around.”

“Then we just have to stop him,” Bentz said as he saw the building housing WSLJ and parked in a loading zone. It was after hours and he really didn’t give a shit. He rode up the elevator and was met by a security guard, a reminder that not too long ago this very station had been terrorized by a crazed killer fixated on Dr. Sam.

“Visiting hours are over,” the security guard said gruffly, but Bentz flashed his badge.

“I’m looking for Samantha Leeds.”

“She’s not here,” the beefy guard insisted, not budging an inch.

“It’s all right, Charlie,” a voice behind the guard announced and Bentz looked over the stocky man’s shoulder to spy a wisp-thin woman with short black hair and sharp features. “I’m Trish LaBelle, Detective. I recognize you from your picture in the paper.” She glanced at the guard. “He’s the policeman who cracked the case of the Rosary Killer,” then back to Bentz, “Sam’s not scheduled to come in until eleven. Is there something I could help you with?” Trish offered a smile. “You know, Bentz—why? Does this have to do with the Rosary Killer?” She snapped her fingers. “His body was never found, was it?” Before he could answer, her mind was racing with lightning-bolt speed. “That’s it! You think the Rosary Killer has resurrected himself.” Rather than seem horrified at the proposition, she was curious. “Please, Detective, I’d love to interview you.”

“Not right now.”

“How about in a couple of nights? We’d need to advertise it on my program and Dr. Sam’s, of course, and even a couple of spots during Gator’s and Ramblin’ Rob’s programs.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Please, give it some thought.”

“Would you tell Samantha that I was here?”

“Deceptive Bentz!” a sultry female voice exclaimed, and he turned to find Samantha Leeds shaking out her umbrella. She straightened, tossing her red hair from her face. A smile curved her lips and she winked at her own joke.

“Very funny,” he said, forcing a smile.

“I thought so. But it’s good to see you.” Her green eyes sparked. “What’s up, Detective? Hoping to get some free on-the-air advice?”

“Maybe later,” he said, then cut to the chase. “I need to talk to you, if you’ve got a minute.”

“Always for my favorite cop,” she quipped. She led him through the maze-like innards of WSLJ, past rooms of sound equipment and glassed-in studios until they reached a small lunchroom. Dropping her bag onto a round table, she settled into one of the plastic chairs. “So, seriously, before we get down to business, tell me how’ve you been?”

“Can’t complain.”
“No?”
“What about you?”
“I guess I can’t complain, either. I’m getting married,” she said with a wicked grin. “Next month. You’ll be getting an invitation.”
“I thought you’d sworn off men.”
“I had. Then I met Ty. What can I say?”
“My guess is you’ll be saying ‘I do.’”
She leaned back in her chair. “That’s what happens, you know, just when you’re ready to give up on the opposite sex, you meet someone. Watch out. It’ll happen to you.”
He thought about arguing and decided against it. “I’ll take your word on it. After all, you’re the shrink. How’s Ty?”
Her grin widened. “Just finishing his book on the Rosary Killer. He plans to ship it to his agent next week.”
She sighed. “Then he can get his head into the wedding, but you didn’t come here to find out how many bridesmaids I’m having or if the reception should be catered. What’s going on?”
Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on the table. “I was wondering if you’ve gotten any more weird calls.”
“You mean weirder than usual,” she said with a shake of her head. “People who call up at two or three in the morning aren’t your usual nine-to-fivers.”
“I mean along the lines of the calls last summer from Father John.”
“No.” Her expression became instantly sober. “Why? Should I have?”
“I hope not.” He outlined what he could about the recent series of murders and noticed that Trish LaBelle was hovering near the doorway, taking in every word. He decided to ignore her as he explained, “The MO and signatures are slightly different from Father John’s, but I just have the feeling there’s a connection. Serial killers are rare and now we’ve got a second one within six months of the first. Even overlapping. It’s beyond unlikely.”
“So you think that someone is copycatting?” she asked, her smooth brow wrinkling.
Trish quit lurking and stepped into the room. “He thinks Father John might not have died in the swamp.”
“Nice,” Samantha muttered and Bentz remembered there was no love lost between the two women. They’d worked at rival stations with their call-in programs and then, just last summer, Trish had jumped ship and joined WSLJ. Bentz suspected they hadn’t warmed up to each other.
Trish ignored Sam’s sarcasm. “I have to tell you, Detective, I find all this macabre stuff fascinating.”
“You didn’t live it,” Sam said, but Bentz’s eyes had narrowed on the thin, sharp-featured woman.
“Do you?” he asked. “Really find it interesting?”
“Mmmm.” She crossed her slim legs and leaned forward to place an elbow on the table and rest her chin on her palm, using her half-turned body to cut Samantha out of the conversation. “The truth is, I’d love to spend some time with you, Detective Bentz, visit the crime scenes, watch you sift through clues, you know, try to catch the bad guy, that sort of thing.”
“It can be gruesome. Grown men have been known to lose their lunches at some of the scenes.”
“I think I could handle it,” she said, her eyebrows quirking upward, a coy smile tugging at her lips. She was practically begging for an invitation to be a part of the investigation, even flirting a little to get what she wanted. Which wasn’t lost on Samantha. Bentz considered the charred, mutilated body of the last victim and was willing to bet two weeks’ pay Trish LaBelle would faint dead away if she was ever to see a dead body. “It would be interesting and informative. I’m sure I could work it into my show somehow.”
“I don’t think so.”
“I’d call Eleanor Cavalier. I’m sure she’d approve it.”
“Don’t bother with the program manager.” Time to nip this in the bud. “It’s not gonna happen. There are rules about that kind of thing.”
Trish was undeterred. “I’ve read about you, Bentz. You’re not exactly one who plays by all the rules.”
“He said ‘no,’ Trish. Take a hint,” Sam cut in.
Little lines appeared between Trish’s eyebrows. “Look, I want to interview him on my program, okay?”

“Whatever.” Sam looked at Bentz.

“I haven’t committed,” he said as he stood, concluding the short interview. “Phone me if you get any disturbing calls.”

“Should she be scared?” Trish asked.

“Everyone should be scared,” he said. “I’m not saying that the killer is the same guy, but I’m not sure about that. What I do know is that he’s out there, he’s dangerous, and unless we catch him, he’s not going to stop.” Sam grew sober and she rubbed her arms as if reliving the terror she’d survived just this past summer. Even Trish seemed more thoughtful, but she wasn’t one to give up easily.

“This is just the reason you should come on to the show,” Trish insisted. “To warn the public.”

“The department’s already made a statement.”

Trish wasn’t about to be derailed. “I know, but you’d reach more citizens. We could do the interview and parts of it could be replayed during the day, even on Sam’s program. WSLJ has a lot of listeners.”

“Then they’ll hear it on your newscasts.”

“Some of them don’t hear the news. You’ll reach a lot more people this way.” She was on a roll now, her hands moving expressively as if she could convince him by the sheer amount of her gestures or coy smiles. “You’d be doing the city a favor, Detective. Just say you’ll think about it.”

“Okay,” he agreed as he stood. “I’ll think about it. But don’t hold your breath. And Samantha, if you get any calls that make you nervous, let me know.”

“If she did that, she’d be out of a job,” Trish joked.

Sam ignored her. “You’ll be the first to know,” she promised. “Thanks for the warning. I’ll tell Ty you’ll come to the wedding.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he said as he left but he knew it was a lie. His experience with marriage had left him the ultimate skeptic. Much as he wished Samantha and Ty Wheeler the best of luck, he just didn’t have any faith in the theory of wedded bliss.

Olivia climbed out of the bathtub. The room was steamy and warm as she towel-dried, buffing her skin before she smoothed oil over her body, rubbing deep into her muscles. It had been a long day. Draining. Emotional. She replayed the scenes with her mother, with Bentz, and with Father McClaren through her tired mind and couldn’t find a way to stave off a headache that had been pounding the edge of her brain for the past couple of hours. She’d popped four ibuprofen, then soaked over half an hour in the tub, waiting until the hot water had begun to cool slightly, hoping to ease the strain out of her day and keep the migraine at bay.

It wasn’t working. As she slid her arms into the sleeves of her robe, she caught her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was piled on her head, wet tendrils framing her face. Mist clouded the glass, distorting her image. Condensation began to run in sharp rivulets, cutting through the fog and giving her a clearer picture of not only her own reflection, but of something darker in the glass, something murky beneath the surface.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, her heart nearly stopping.

Not again.

She caught a glimpse of a large wooden wheel, like an oversized wagon wheel with spikes. It turned slowly then disappeared in the mirror’s foggy surface. Olivia’s stomach clenched. “No … no …” A woman’s tortured face came into view. Olivia jumped back so far she hit the towel bar on the wall behind her. The woman in the vision was screaming, her eyes bulging in fear and pain. Blood matted her dark hair.

Olivia was shaking.

The wheel spun, dancing in and out behind the curtain of condensation on the glass. Olivia’s skin prickled. She could barely breathe. Her headache thundered, roaring through her brain. Transfixed in horror, she stared at the mirror.

As some of the condensation evaporated, Olivia caught a better view of a dark place, a cavernous area. She heard tortured screams and water dripping over the creak of ancient gears, then saw the horrendous implement of torture. The woman, stripped naked, was splayed upon the wheel and strapped down. Sharp spikes drove into her body as she struggled and the hideous wheel slowly rotated.

“Don’t, please don’t!” she shrieked. “Let me go … Please … Have mercy …”
Olivia’s headache hammered.
“Help me … someone, for the love of God, please, help me …” Her voice shook, reverberating in Olivia’s brain, pounding with the pain.

“Let her go, you bastard!” Olivia cried.

Then she saw it. Glinting in the damp reflection. A curved sword, its wicked blade catching in some weak, flickering light.

“No! No!” The woman shrieked. “How can you do this to me? I trusted you. Please, please, I’ll do anything.”

The blade sliced down.

“Stop!!” Olivia snagged a towel from the rack and rubbed frantically at the condensation, swiping away the fog, staring into her own horrified eyes. If she could see more, find out where this was happening … but the image had changed, the woman’s tortured face fading into the shadows to be replaced by a clearer image, lying just beneath her own reflection. Her heart froze for she was certain she was staring into the face of pure evil. Shrouded in a tight black mask, ice blue eyes found hers and held …

Then she heard her name. As clearly as if he’d spoken it. Olivia.

“Jesus.” She took a step backward again.

Saint Olivia.

“No!” She flung herself at the mirror. “Who are you, you bastard?” she cried, smashing her fist against his masked face. Glass splintered. Shards rained into the sink and onto the floor. Her own image was distorted and fragmented in the remaining pieces still mounted upon the mirror’s frame. “You sick, sick son of a bitch.” Pain screamed through her hand. “Who the hell are you?” she cried, sobs welling up from deep inside. “Who, damn it?”

Outside the bathroom door Hairy S was barking wildly, clawing at the panels.

Blood dripped and splattered against the glittering slivers in the sink.

Her head raged. The dog howled miserably. Through it all Olivia was left with the tortured image of a woman strapped to a revolving wheel of pain.

“God help us,” Olivia whispered, tears running down her face. “God help us all.” She stepped back against the wall and somehow opened the door. Sliding down the wall, she let her tears flow freely.

Hairy S whined. She picked him up and buried her face in his unruly fur. What was she going to do? How could she stop this? How? “Damn it all to hell.” She ran a hand over her face, swiping at the tears, smearing blood over her cheeks and onto the dog.

Something had to be done … and soon.

The bastard had killed tonight.
And there would be more.

Saint Olivia. She’d heard her name as surely as if he’d said it. He meant to kill her. She was sure of it. In some hideously painful manner, he was going to murder her.

Unless … oh, God … unless she found a way to stop him.
Chapter Twenty-three

Bentz was on the road again and talking on his cell phone. He’d caught up with Norm Stowell. So far the conversation wasn’t settling well.

“You’ve got yourself a problem,” the profiler said from somewhere in Arizona. He, too, was on a cell phone and at times the connection sputtered. “Most serial killers start off at a slower pace, they relive the crime for weeks, maybe months before they feel the need to hunt again,” Norm told him as Bentz accelerated around a flatbed with only one taillight. “Then as time goes on, the reliving isn’t enough of a rush and the killer starts shortening the time between the kills. Escalating. But you’ve got something different at play here. If you’re right about the connection to the saints’ feasts days, your killer has a green light. Any female saint’s day will do; he’ll work it into his plan.”

Bentz didn’t want to believe it. “But the killings take planning. There are props involved, the scene is staged. And he’s got to lure the girls to come with him or convince them to let him in. He takes incredible risks. Take the fire off of Esplanade. It could have been seen earlier by a neighbor out walking his dog. Bingo, the suspect would have been nabbed. Then there was dumping the Jane Doe at the foot of the statue on a main street in the middle of town, for Christ’s sake. That was pretty damned cocky.”

“He’s taunting you. ‘Look what I can do. See what I can get away with.’ He wants you to search for him. He likes the publicity, the feeling of being smarter than you. He could be close to someone on the force. Look for a guy with some kind of security or police background.”

“The witness says he’s a priest.”

“Not one of the usual kind,” Stowell reminded him. “See if you can find any priest with a link to the police. And don’t forget that this guy thinks he’s on some kind of mission from God. He’s empowered. He thinks God is in his corner, so he feels invulnerable, which means there’s a better chance that he’ll slip up.”

“Let’s hope.” Bentz maneuvered past an eighteen-wheeler that was throwing up road scum. He flipped on his wipers.

“I have a feeling this guy gets to know his victims. That’s part of his game, his thrill. Somehow he gets them to trust him. There wasn’t any evidence of forced entry with the girl in the Garden District, was there? My guess is that he’s charming, they trust him, they allow him to get close, and he starts thinking of them in terms of a saint, or making them a saint. You said the two victims you’ve identified are part-time students? That’s the link. These aren’t random women he happens to see. He interacts with them before the kill. Gets them to trust him. All the while he’s literally charming their socks off when he’s really setting them up. No sign of sexual contact?”

“No so far.”

There was a long silence when he heard only the wheels of his Jeep turning and the rumble of the other traffic.

“That’s odd. Probably has to do with the priest-celebacy thing. Or he’s impotent. But usually the kill will get the killer off. I assume you’ve checked with the local universities.”

Bentz’s fingers clenched the steering wheel in a death grip. His stomach burned at the thought of college coeds being hunted and tortured. An image of Kristi shot through his mind and his gut ached even more. “We’re trying to find out if the two victims knew each other, took any classes together, ever met. They went to schools that are right next to each other, so the population mixes quite a bit.”

“What about the boyfriends?”

“One skipped town months ago, the other has an alibi.”

“Air-tight?”

“We’re lookin’ for a leak. So far he seems on the up and up.”

“Double-check him. Especially if he’s a white male probably between twenty-five and thirty-five, someone who has a history of violence, maybe trouble in grade school and high school, possibly arrests for cruelty to
animals and arson, trouble with women … there should be something on him.”

“We’ve got it covered.”

“Good. I’ll fax you what I’ve got.”

“Thanks.” Bentz switched lanes and Stowell rang off. Bentz didn’t feel any better than he had when he’d left St. Luke’s. It had galled him to face his half-brother again, but he’d known James would see him, would try to help. The sanctimonious bastard. Other than Kristi, Father James McClaren was Bentz’s only living relative aside from a few second and third cousins scattered across the country. And James was the one man who had knifed him in the back. More than once.

Within minutes, as he worked the Jeep onto the exit ramp only a few miles from Olivia Benchet’s house, the phone rang sharply. “This is Bentz.”

“It’s Olivia. I need to see you,” she said, her voice frantic and breathless. “He’s doing it again.”

Bentz felt cold as death. He’d expected the call, had even been heading to her house because he’d known the killer would strike on the feast day of Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Or any other saint’s day. “I’m already on my way,” he said. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank God.”

“Hang in.” He clicked off and punched the accelerator. “God damn it!”

The streets were empty in this desolated part of the parish. He blew through one stop sign, then took a sharp corner to the country road that wandered through the bayou. It was dark, the moon shrouded, a damp wind whipping through the stands of oak and cypress that rose like ghosts from the land and water. His Jeep sped across a long, low bridge but it wasn’t fast enough. The terror in Olivia’s voice spurred him on. He nearly missed the turnoff, but cranked hard on the wheel. The four-by-four shuddered, slowing as he took the corner too fast and cut through the trees of the Benchet tract. Leaves scattered as the Jeep flew across the small bridge near Olivia’s cottage.

He stood on the brakes.

The front door of the house flew open.

He sucked in his breath.

Backlit by the lamps of the cabin, she stood in the doorway, a fluffy white robe wrapped around her body, her hair as wild as ever. His heart jolted. He knew then that in a few short days he’d started to fall for this fruitcake of a woman with her bizarre claims of visions and some kind of weird ESP. He experienced the unlikely feeling of coming home. Hell, he hadn’t had a real home in years.

Bentz was out of the truck in a heartbeat, running. Her stupid dog charged out of the house.

“He’s out!” Olivia raced toward him and seemed oblivious to the mud and wet leaves. “Thank God you’re here,” she cried, hurtling into his open arms. He caught a glimpse of tear tracks glistening on her cheeks the second before she buried her face in his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck. Instinctively he held her close, smelling the scents of jasmine and lilac over the rush of the wind and the dank smell of the swamp. Her breasts crushed against him. Her hair was damp. No makeup on her face. She clung to him, shaking. He suspected she wore nothing beneath the chenille housecoat, but he didn’t let his brain wrap around that image for but a second.

“I saw him. Again. And he was killing a woman … on a wheel with horrible nails in it… Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God,” she cried, her fingers clutching his collar as if she’d never let go. She was breathing with difficulty, fighting sobs, hiccupping with fear. “And then, and then, I think he had a sword … he …”

“Shh.” Bentz held her awkwardly at first, his hands seeming too big to cradle her small body. What was he doing? This was all wrong.

But as she molded to him and the wind sighed through the trees, he loosened up. One hand went to the back of her neck, the other the small of her back. For an instant he wondered what it would be like to make love to her and he remembered kissing her not all that long ago. It seemed only natural to touch his lips to her crown, to feel her soft breath against his bare neck. She turned her face up to stare at him, and it was all he could do not to kiss that sexy, provocative, and definitely frightened mouth. “Come on, let’s get you inside.”

“I—I’m sorry,” she said, as if suddenly realizing what she’d done.

“It’s all right. Really.” He managed a bit of a smile then whistled to the dog, who found a new interest in the hem of his pants. Bentz draped a steadying arm across her shoulders as they climbed the steps.
“God, I hate that.”
“What?”
“Everything.” She shot a look up at him as they walked through the open door. “But you know, playing the role of the wimpy, weak female.”
“You were scared.”
“I was terrified out of my wits. Still am,” she said, but the tears had subsided and the hiccups had disappeared.
“I think you’d better tell me about it.”
Hairy S, snuffling and snorting, trotted into the house. Bentz closed the door and locked it. He followed Olivia into the kitchen and noticed a thick bandage on her right hand, the drops of blood staining her robe.
“What happened?”
“I wish I could say I cut myself shaving,” she said, her lips trembling into a smile. The joke fell flat. She blinked hard, still fighting tears. “But I smashed my fist into the bathroom mirror.”
“On purpose?” He couldn’t believe it.
“Yes. It’s stupid but I wanted to strike out, to hit that son of a bitch and I …” She stopped and dropped into a chair at the table. The robe gaped open, but she seemed unaware that Bentz could catch more than a glimpse of her breasts. He forced his eyes back to hers. “I guess I should start at the beginning,” she was saying as she stared through the windows into the gloomy night.
“That would be good.”
“It was about an hour ago, I guess. I was taking a bath. It had been a helluva day … Well, you know, you and I had our fight and then my father called—”
“Reggie Benchet phoned you?” he repeated, warning bells going off in his mind. Father or no, the guy was an ex-con. A felon.
“Yes. It’s stupid but I wanted to strike out, to hit that son of a bitch and I …” She stopped and dropped into a chair at the table. The robe gaped open, but she seemed unaware that Bentz could catch more than a glimpse of her breasts. He forced his eyes back to hers. “I guess I should start at the beginning,” she was saying as she stared through the windows into the gloomy night.
“That would be good.”
“It was about an hour ago, I guess. I was taking a bath. It had been a helluva day … Well, you know, you and I had our fight and then my father called—”
“Reggie Benchet phoned you?” he repeated, warning bells going off in his mind. Father or no, the guy was an ex-con. A felon.
“Yeah and … well, I had to deal with it. It was weird. I hadn’t said one word to him since I was in grade school. It was a short conversation and then I tried to spend some time studying, get my mind off of him. It didn’t work, so I was planning to take a bath and crash early, but just as I was stepping out of the tub, I glanced in the mirror and I saw her and that … that hideous wheel.” Rubbing her arms, she launched into her story of the vision, a chilling reenactment of the death of St. Catherine of Alexandria. Olivia rubbed one temple with her good hand. Her face was drawn and her eyes seemed unfocused, as if she were seeing the vision being replayed in her mind. “… and there was nothing I could do,” she finally said, again the tears beginning to flow. “I feel so useless.”
He placed a hand on her shoulder and she lifted one of hers to touch his fingers. “If it’s any consolation, I want you to know that I believe you. I understand about the killings.” Her fingers tensed as he explained about the pattern that was developing, how the killer was murdering the victims in accordance with the deaths of venerated, martyred saints on the days of their feast. “So we’ve now got St. Joan of Arc, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Cecilia, all of whose bodies we’ve recovered.”
“You mean there could be more?” She paled.
“No. But you mentioned the woman who was left in a crypt. I think she was playing the role of St. Philomena. Now, we’ve got a new one, the one tonight.”
“Catherine of Alexandria.”
He frowned. “We don’t know how many others are involved or how long he’s been on his killing spree.”
“Oh, God,” she whispered, swallowing hard. “How many saints are there?”
“Too many.” He snorted. “I never thought I’d say that.”
She glanced up at him, her eyes troubled, her eyelashes still damp with tears. “What kind of perverted bastard would do this?”
“That’s what we have to find out.” He tightened his grip on her hand. Attempted to be reassuring. “We’ll find him, but I’m going to need your help.”
“I’ll do anything.”
He managed a smile. “I know. Let me make some phone calls.” He checked his watch. It was late, after eleven, but he rang up Montoya and the precinct, leaving messages, then walked upstairs to the bathroom. Bits
of glass were everywhere—counter, sink, and floor. Blood splattered the basin and tiles. “Looks like a war zone,” he joked.

“I was angry,” she admitted. “And scared. He was looking at me—straight at me in the mirror—and he could see me, I think, as surely as I could see him.” She located a broom and dustpan. Together they cleaned up the mess.

When they were downstairs again, Olivia made tea … some kind of ginger-smelling stuff that tasted like flowers. He didn’t complain, just sipped it and wished it were a beer. They sat at the small table in her kitchen, the bird making soft noises, the dog settled onto a rag rug as she told her story, over and over again. Bentz asked a dozen questions. She didn’t always have answers but he was certain she’d seen another murder. Four days ago he would have scoffed at the idea, but today he took her word as gospel. It was after one when he scraped back his chair. “I’d better get going. Can you think of anything else?”

“Just that his eyes are blue. Icy, intense blue,” she said, suddenly remembering.

“You would recognize him?”

“No, as I said, he was wearing the ski mask again.”

“The eye color is something.” Of course he could wear contacts.

“And he knows my name.”

“What?”

“I heard him … you know, in the vision, he looked straight at me and it was as if I heard his voice or his thoughts, but he called me Olivia. Saint Olivia.”

“Christ,” Bentz swore, then glanced through the windows to the darkness of the bayou. Gloomy. Isolated. Murky. If the murderer showed up here, no one would see him. And he knew who Olivia was. “You know, If you don’t mind, I think I’ll stick around here until it gets light.”

She hesitated. “Of course … I mean that would be fine … but I didn’t mean to give you the impression because I was upset that I’m some kind of frightened helpless female all alone—”

“You get that security system yet?”

“No—not until after Thanksgiving but—”

“Then I’m staying.”

“But—”

“It’s not that you’re a frightened female, okay? Though you should be. It’s because your life is in danger. I’ve already had the department okay a bodyguard.”

“I don’t live in the city.”

“We work with the Sheriff’s Department, and besides, maybe I want to hang out here.” He drew in a breath, saw the questions in her eyes, and decided to come clean. “I was harsh on you. Not only when you first came into the station but when we were at the café. I’m sorry. I made a mistake.”

“Yes, you did,” she said, obviously not giving him an inch on that one. “A major mistake. But I’m over it.”

Was she? She managed a smile. “Apology accepted. And you don’t have to stay. Really. I’ll be fine here.”

“Well …” He slanted her a smile as a breath of wind rattled a shutter. “Maybe I’d like to stay,” he said and something sparked in her eyes. Something interested and slightly wicked. Something he didn’t want to see.

“That’s different. Probably a lie. But different.”

“Go to bed, Olivia. I’ll hang out on the couch.”

She shook her head. “I’ve got a spare bedroom. Come on. It’s late.” She snapped off the lights and started for the stairs. “If you can ignore the junk.”

“Don’t worry about a mess,” he said, double-checking that the doors and windows were locked. “You should see my place.”

“Maybe I’ll get the chance someday.”

He didn’t respond as he followed her up the stairs and decided this was a mistake. Another one. He was batting a thousand tonight. This house was too cozy and she looked and smelled too damned inviting.

Inside the spare bedroom-cum-office, she tucked away some textbooks and leaned over the bed, plumping the pillows. He tried not to notice the roundness of her rump beneath the robe and ignored the fact that his cock twitched.
“There ya go,” she said, turning to face him, her face flushed. “Sleep well.” Standing on her tiptoes, she placed a chaste kiss upon his lips.

That was all it took. He could have resisted an overt comeon; he’d had more than his share of women trying to reach him at a sexual level, but this … cheekiness … her playful smile and the light dancing in her eyes, the challenge he saw on her face, was his undoing. He grabbed her and, as she gasped, kissed her. Hard. His lips covered hers without a question of his intention.

And she responded. As if she’d been waiting for him to make the first move. She sighed softly, opening her mouth, and his tongue slid easily between those firm lips. The twitch in his pants became a rock-hard erection and all thoughts of keeping her safe, of being vigilant, of catching a twisted killer before he struck again, slipped into the nether reaches of Bentz’s mind.

Her fingers slid down his back, rubbing his muscles through his shirt, and all the while he kissed her, he walked her back to her bedroom with its old-fashioned four-poster, only stopping when the back of her calves met the mattress.

He fingered the knot of her robe and the belt loop opened. With one hand he reached inside, scraping the side of her body, tracing the curve of her ribs, waist, and hips. His cock strained. She kissed him as if she would never stop, and a low little moan escaped her throat.

His blood pounded through his brain and he wanted this woman. Fiercely.

Don’t do it, Bentz. Don’t!

His mind was a nag.

He ignored it.

With the flat of his hand, he moved to the front of her, to the mound between her legs, her curls bristly beneath the pads of his fingers. Her breathing escalated as his fingers splayed, gently asking. If she pushed him away now, he’d be embarrassed but he could leave.

The air in the room was thick with the unspoken question. Her flesh quivered against the callouses in his palm as he pressed the heel of his hand to her bare skin, gently rubbing.

She moaned again.

Inviting.

Still he hesitated. One hand at the back of her neck, holding her head to his, the other moving in slow, sensual circles against her abdomen. His damned cock ached.

“This could be dangerous,” he whispered in the darkness.

“I—I know.”

“I don’t know how I’ll feel in the morning,” he admitted, forcing out the words.

“Neither do I.”

He kissed her again and she placed her hand on his fly. With a groan, he used his weight to push her onto the mattress and they fell together, kissing, touching, tugging at the clothes that kept them apart.

Her skin felt like silk; she smelted of jasmine and lavender. Her lips tasted of ginger. Her tongue flicked and played with his.

Pushing her robe off her shoulders, he kissed the column of her neck, then lower to the circle of bones at her throat. She bucked. Her fingers scraped off his shirt and tore open his fly. Frantic and wild, her hands caressed him. The room blurred, walls and windows becoming indistinct. His pants and boxers were pushed over his hips and he buried his face in her breasts, kissing, teasing, sucking, while his hands explored all of her.

Oh, God, if they didn’t slow down, he’d come before she was ready. He grabbed her hands. “Take it easy, Livvie … we’ve got all night.”

Olivia sighed. The want in her pounded through her brain. She couldn’t think, could barely breathe as he touched her, kissed her, moved with her. The world swayed and rocked. A part of her knew she was making a horrid mistake, that with the morning light would come embarrassment, or shame, or recriminations. But for tonight, she just wanted to lose herself in this man. Did she love him? Of course not … she barely knew him and yet she wanted him so desperately. It had been so long … so, so long … She was hot, burning inside. Like hot wax, she was melting. His lips pressed urgent kisses to her breasts, his lips playing, his teeth nipping.
Just a tiny hint of pain with the pleasure. Sweat drizzled down her back and her heart was pounding wildly as he kissed her. She clung to him, her fingers raking down the sinewy muscles of his back. She wanted more. So much more … all of him.

Tough, hard hands stroked her hips, pushed open her thighs and then, finger by finger, worked their way into the deepest part of her. She was moving against him, wanting more as he touched her intimately. She bucked, crying out. “Oh, oh, God …”

“That’s it, Livvie,” he whispered into her skin. “That’s it.”

Her fingers dug into his hair and she felt spasm after spasm hit her, propelling her to the edge, taking her higher only to slow just at the brink.

“Ooohh … nooo … More …” she cried and he slid atop her, muscular thighs parting her knees, strong, sturdy body rising above her, barely visible in the darkness, as he pushed, slowly at first, deep into her. She was wet. Hot. Anxious, and as he thrust, she lifted her hips, meeting him. She moved to his rhythm, the room seeming to melt away, the universe centering in the single spot where they were joined, her body throbbing with want.

He was gasping, his skin slick with sweat as he gathered her in his arms, cried out. A second later she spasmed, jerking with the orgasm, calling out his name as he fell upon her. “Rick … my God … sweet heaven …”

She gasped for breath. Her arms held him tight. Tears ran from her eyes. Not from sorrow, or shame, but at the release. For a few seconds they said nothing. The night, thick and warm, wrapped around them as their breathing finally slowed.

“So,” he said and she heard the smile in his voice. “Was it good for you?”

“Oh, I suppose it was good enough,” she teased and they both laughed.

“You don’t have to prove anything to me, Bentz.”

“But maybe I have to prove it to myself.”

“So now you think you’re a triathlete.”

“Marathon man?”

“Let’s see.” His lips found hers again, and this time when they made love, it was slower, the pace calmer, the urgency replaced with expectation. He brought her to the same dizzying heights as before; they weren’t frantic, but just as intense and hot… inside she melted like butter and lost herself as he joined their bodies, pulling her atop him, moving beneath her, holding her hips firmly as she found the perfect spot. Her breathing was shallow, her blood hot, her skin on fire until at last she exploded only seconds before his own violent release.

“Oooh, darlin’,” he sighed.

As she gasped for air, he pulled her downward, holding her close.

“Better …” she whispered. “Next time—”

“Next time? Oh, hush, woman.”

She cuddled into his arms and didn’t move. Just felt his lips brush against her forehead as his breathing slowed. She was certain she’d regret this in the morning, but for now, she didn’t care.

“We shouldn’t …” the woman with wild sun-streaked hair and gold eyes said. “We can’t.” She was walking fast along a path through a sunlit field, a diaphanous dress swirling around her legs and hugging her torso. Her breasts were visible beneath the sheer cloth, her dark nipples inviting. She wore no bra. No panties. Nothing under the sheer, shiny fabric.

James was so hard he ached. “I know … but … with you it’s different.”

“You’re a priest.” She pointed to the collar surrounding his throat. He tried to rip it off. And failed. It was all he was wearing. Just the collar. Otherwise he was naked as the day he was born. The sun felt hot upon his bare skin, and the long, dry grass in the field brushed against his legs.
She started to run away. Grasshoppers flew out of her path. He chased her.

“But I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“Love?” She threw back her head and laughed, didn’t seem to care that he was naked and hard as he chased her up a small rise. “You love God. Just God.”

He caught her at the crest of the hill and dragged her to the ground. Still laughing and breathing hard, she looked up into his eyes. “We shouldn’t,” she said again, but there was sexy, naughty invitation in her eyes. “It’s a sin, you know.” Doubts chased through his mind, his vows mocked him as he pushed the flimsy fabric up her legs and smelled her sweet woman-scent.

Somewhere a bell began to ring.

He was stretched out over her, his cock hard and wanting.

The bell pealed again, more urgently. He looked up to see a bell tower … sun-baked stucco with a red tile roof … pigeons flew around the tall spire where a cross, aflame, pierced the cloudless heavens. But the tower was empty. No bell was swinging from the cross-beams.

“Please …” the woman whispered and he looked down to see that her face had changed. She wasn’t Olivia any longer. Jennifer Bentz was lying beneath him. Naked. Her body shimmering with perspiration, she was staring up at him, begging him to enter her.

Brrriiiinnnnggg!

James’s eyes flew open.

Sweat drenched his body. The dream began to recede and he breathed hard. Dear Father, what had he been thinking? He was still hard, still ached, and the image of Olivia Benchet, naked beneath the flimsy dress, was imprinted into his brain.

The phone shrieked again.

He fumbled for the receiver. What time was it? He glanced at the clock. Two-fifteen in the morning. What in the world? Someone must’ve died, or been in an accident. “This is Father McClaren,” he mumbled, snapping on the light and realizing he was holding the handset upside down. He flipped the receiver and rubbed his face with his free hand.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

The voice was male. A whisper.

“What?” Someone wanted to give confession? Now? Or maybe it was a crank call. Kids. It had happened before. He blinked hard, tried to push the remnants of his vivid dream from his brain.

“Tonight I have taken a life,” the raspy voice said again.

“Excuse me?” James said, certain he hadn’t heard right and sat bolt upright in bed.

“For God. In the name of the Holy Father. A sinner has been redeemed and now, because of me, has become a saint.”

“You’re confessing to me?” James asked, the sweat on his body now chilled as he realized the person on the other end of the phone was serious. Dead serious. “You murdered someone?”

“This is my reconciliation. It is between you and me and God,” the muffled voice declared and James nearly dropped the phone. A chill, cold as Satan’s heart, stole through James’s blood.

“Wait a minute—”

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”
Chapter Twenty-four

Morning light was filtering through the windows.
And the bed was cold.
Empty.
Olivia stared at the ceiling and bit her lip.
What had she done?
Flashes of the night before ran through her brain. Vibrant, erotic images that made her blush as she lay in her bed. She’d slept with Bentz. Made love to him. More than once.
What had she been thinking?
That’s the problem, you idiot, you weren’t thinking. Not for a minute!
She cringed. What a mistake!
But there was nothing that could be done about it now … What was done, was done. She couldn’t change last night and didn’t know that she would if given the chance. And the experience was definitely worth it. Definitely.
The aroma of hot coffee wafted up the stairs and she heard the muffled bang of a cupboard being shut. So he was still here. That was good.
Right?
Searching, she found her robe, a pool of white chenille, on the floor. Just where she’d tossed it. Good Lord. Shoving her arms through the sleeves, she wrapped the white terry cloth around her naked body and, cinching the belt tight, hurried barefoot down the stairs. She caught her reflection in the mirror near the front door and cringed, then finger-combed her hair as best she could with her good hand as she walked into the kitchen. Coffee brewed in the maker and a copy of a large book lay open on the table. The French doors were flung open, allowing drifts of cold morning air and the smell of smoke to seep into the room.
Bentz, wearing last night’s clothes, was staring at the mist rising off the bayou. The fabric of his shirt was stretched taut over his wide shoulders as he leaned over the rail. In one hand a half-smoked cigarette was burning.
“Good morning,” she forced out, squaring her shoulders. She was slowly unwrapping the cover to Chia’s cage. The bird made a noise and ruffled her brilliant feathers as she stretched her legs. “Good morning to you, too,” she added as Chia hopped from one perch to the next.
Bentz turned to face Olivia. His expression said it all.
Her heart dropped.
Regret was evident in the lines around the corners of his mouth and his gray eyes were wary. Suspicious again. “Mornin’.” He managed a bit of a smile. “Coffee’s on.”
“I saw.” She folded the cover, felt like a fool, and motioned toward the cigarette. “I didn’t know you smoked.”
“I don’t.” He glanced down at his hand, lifted a shoulder, then took a long drag.
She didn’t ask the obvious question as she tucked the cover onto a shelf.
“I keep a pack in the Jeep and in the drawer at the station just in case.” Smoke drifted from his nostrils.
“In case?”
“In case I really need one.” He tossed the butt into the swampy yard, where it sizzled and died.
“For days like today?”
“Yeah. Especially days like today.” He looked up at her again. “Besides, I had to go to the Jeep for that.” He pointed at the thick volume on the table.
“What is it?” She eyed the book.
“A listing of all the saints.”

“I see.” The tome was open to a page on Bl. Olivia. “Oh.” Her throat constricted. There wasn’t much information, just that for her faith and preaching she’d been imprisoned and avoided being burned to death by converting her would-be executioners. Eventually she was beheaded. Olivia shuddered and leaned against the table. In her mind’s eye she saw the wicked, curved blade that had been used against the poor woman in her vision. “What a way to start the morning,” she said.

“The good news is that her feast day isn’t until June tenth.”

“Why is she Bl. Olivia, not St. Olivia?”

“I don’t know. She’s listed as a saint. And there’s another. Saint Oliva, no second ‘i’ in the name.” He sorted through the pages until he came to the one in question. Olivia read about St. Oliva. There wasn’t much. Just that she was a martyr and executed. Her feast day was March fifth.

“So now I know when he’ll try to kill me,” she mocked. “Great.”

“Not necessarily. I’ve thought about it. The murderer’s MO is to name the victims after the saints, regardless of their given names. So he could change your name to some saint whose feast day is a lot closer.” He looked at her with disturbed eyes. “And some of ‘em are pretty damned gruesome.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you were a real upper in the morning?” she muttered, refusing to be freaked out. “Please have a cup of coffee or something. I don’t need this.”

“It’s not a joking matter.”

“I know. I know.” She wrapped her arms around her middle.

“You’ve got to be careful.”

“I am,” she said but the look he sent her said otherwise. Chia squawked from her cage and Olivia thought about the night before. About sleeping with a cop. About, if she allowed it, how she could lose her foolish heart to this man. “Okay, you’re right,” she said, sighing as she leaned against the edge of the table.

“Good.” He plowed stiff fingers through his hair. “I called a friend of mine. Ole Olsen. He owns a security company and owes me a favor. His crew will be out this morning.”

“I already have a guy who’s coming next week.”

“Cancel it. Ole’ll do a good job for you and it won’t cost you any more than what you were gonna pay.”

“Must be quite a favor he owes you,” she said, bristling a little at the way he thought he needed to take charge of her life.

“Enough of one.” He paused before adding, “Look, about last night…” His voice trailed off as if he expected her to jump in. No way. She wanted to hear what he had to say.

“What about it?”

He shoved his fists into the pockets of his slacks. His lips compressed. “I think you should know that I make it a personal rule not to get involved with anyone I work with, either at the department or on the case.”

“I think you just broke it.”

“Yes.”

“But you won’t again?”

“No. It was a mistake.”

“Oh, riiiiight. Boy, Bentz, you’re a real charmer.”

Refusing to be baited, he went on, “I just wanted you to know. In case … well …”

“In case I’d developed some twisted romantic notion about what happened between us?” she offered.

His jaw clenched. “What happened between us won’t be repeated.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a challenge.”

Bentz shook his head. “I can’t let my emotions cloud my judgment.”

“Is that possible?” she asked, moving toward him, closing the distance. “Do you have emotions?”

He sliced her a hard look. “I have to get downtown.”

“Duty calls?” It sounded harsher than she meant it. She did know what he meant, but she couldn’t shake off the sting of his rejection with just a dismissive shrug of her shoulder.
“That’s right. It does.” His skin grew taunt over his cheekbones. “Thanks for—”

“Don’t!” she cut in, lifting a hand as if to ward off a blow. “Just leave it, okay? I’m a big girl. An adult. This isn’t an adolescent crush or some fascination I have with you being with a cop, okay? I just want you to understand that. Last night just happened.” He lifted a bushy eyebrow as if he didn’t believe a word of the garbage she was peddling.

Neither did she. She’d never been into one-night stands and had practiced a rather short and broken chain of serial monogamy since her first real boyfriend her senior year in high school. But she wasn’t going to let him know that. Not right now. “Okay, you’ve got that off your chest. I get it.” With a toss of her head, she plunged her fists into the pockets of her robe.

“You’re pissed.”

“Yeah, a little. It’s just that… well, I’m not into casual sex.”

“Neither am I.”

“But I’m not willing to throw last night in the trash just because it doesn’t fit in with my book of professional etiquette.” She angled her face up at him and his eyes held hers a second too long.

“I just need to keep everything in perspective. Last night, I lost control. It’s not like me.”

“Maybe it is like you and you just won’t admit it.”

He looked at her so sharply, she knew she’d hit a nerve.

“Someone really did a number on you, didn’t she?”

“It’s irrelevant.”

“Bull. In case you didn’t notice, I was there last night,” she said, advancing on him, holding up her bandaged hand and jabbing a finger at his chest. “And I was paying attention. You’ve got walls built up around you, Bentz. Huge stone walls piled way high, and I’m willing to bet that when anyone starts pulling those stones away, breaking down the walls, you either build ‘em up again real fast or you run.”

“As I said, it doesn’t matter.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” She was angry and couldn’t rein it in. “Maybe last night just happened, or maybe it was supposed to happen. Who knows? It all depends upon your cosmic view or lack thereof. But I don’t remember asking you for any declarations of love or commitment or anything of the kind, so don’t act like I’m some poor, wretched little woman whose heart has been broken. Okay? I’m just saying that we shared something. If it was one time, fine, I can handle that, but don’t pretend you’re taking the higher ground because of some professional purpose because I’m not buying it.”

He hesitated. A muscle worked in his jaw. “What is it you want from me?”

“Honesty.”

“Women never want honesty.”

“What archaic planet are you coming from?” she demanded, burned. “Most women want honesty, Bentz, and I just happen to be one.”

“Then here it is. Short and simple. I can’t get involved. With anyone. Last night was a mistake. Not yours. Mine. While I’m on this case, I can’t let you …”

She arched an angry eyebrow. “Do what?”

“Get too close.”

“What about after the case is closed?”

“I don’t know,” he said and deep furrows etched his brow.

“Nothing will change,” she said, starting to understand him and what all this denial was about. “You still won’t let me or any female ‘get too close.’ ”

“Maybe you listen to too much Dr. Sam.”

“And I’m sticking with my theory that someone really did a number on you. Let me guess … your ex-wife.”

Bingo. His eyes narrowed just a fraction.

“I think we’d better leave her out of this,” he said, the corners of his lips tight. He picked up the book on saints and tucked it under his arm.

She wasn’t finished. “Let’s get something straight. I’m not the kind of woman to sit around and wait. Believe
it or not, I, too, have a life.”

“That’s good.”

“You bet it is.”

He hesitated, muttered something under his breath, and started for the door. “I’ll call you … I mean, if anything else comes up, and I expect the same from you.” The dog was at his heels.

“Absolutely.” Silently counting to ten, Olivia walked Bentz to the front of the house and, while she was at it, pushed aside most of her anger. Rejection wasn’t the end of the world and she’d suffered enough of it in the past. Why should Rick Bentz prove to be different than the other men who had left her?

_You called him. You invited him upstairs. You wanted last night to happen. You knew the chances. Don’t be a child._

Clearing her throat, she said, “Look, I didn’t mean to come off as the bitch of the century. Thanks for telling me how you felt and … thanks for coming over last night. I, um, I was kind of a wreck.” She managed a thin smile.

“No one blames you for that. What you saw would have shaken anyone up. I’ll talk to the Sheriff’s Department; there will be extra patrols and you”—he pointed an accusing finger at Hairy S—“be a guard dog, okay? Not a yapping idiot but a real, bonafide guard dog.”

Hairy’s tail slid between his legs and his head lowered as he cowered behind Olivia. “He’d rather be a thief. He likes to steal things and hide ‘em.”

“Wonderful. He’ll be a lot of help, that one will,” Bentz muttered under his breath as he opened the door, then paused as the moment stretched out awkwardly between them. “Take care, okay?” Bentz brushed his knuckles under her chin and her stupid heart lurched. “I’ll be in touch.” He stepped onto the porch, jangling the wind chimes with his shoulder as he took off at a jog to his Jeep.

Standing in the doorway, Olivia watched him swing into his rig, sketch another wave to her, then throw the SUV into gear and tear out of the drive. Leaves and mud scattered in the Jeep’s wake. She should’ve thought good riddance, but didn’t.

With the tips of her fingers, she touched her chin where Bentz’s knuckles had scraped the underside of her jaw. The gesture had been his way of being tender and yet not getting close.

Which was a crock.

The kind of mixed signals she didn’t need.

She watched as the Jeep disappeared through the trees. The guy was a cop who’d seen way too much. He’d lost whatever ability he’d had to reach out and connect with another person years ago. He was not the kind of man she needed in her life!

So what if he was good-looking? Handsome men were a dime a dozen. Big deal that he was incredible in bed. One had to wonder where he’d picked up that particular skill. It didn’t matter that he’d come rushing over here the minute she was upset. After all, it was his job, wasn’t it?

So she’d slept with him and made love to him with wild abandon. People did it every night of the week.

But not you, Olivia. _This is new ground for you. Virgin territory. You are an idiot. You take so many risks with him. Physical risks, emotional risks. You have no idea if he’s involved with some other woman. Just because he’s not married doesn’t ensure that he doesn’t have a girlfriend tucked away—or maybe two or three._

No, that part she didn’t believe. Bentz didn’t have time for a woman. Not just her, but any woman.

His Jeep was long out of sight as she shut the door and the house seemed suddenly lonely. Cold. As if it had lost some vitality. “Stop it,” she growled at herself as she started up the stairs to change. She was halfway up when the phone rang. Down she went. Robe billowing, she flew into the kitchen and nearly yanked the receiver out of the base. “Hello?” she said, half-expecting to hear Bentz’s voice on his cell phone. Maybe he forgot something …

“Oh, I actually caught you. I thought if I called early I might,” Sarah said breathlessly.

“What’s up?” Olivia asked, though she knew that, of course, the call would be about Leo. She reached into a cupboard and found a package of sunflower seeds, which she used to fill one of Chia’s dishes.

_Leo’s in New Orleans._

_What?_”

“That’s right, he called me last night, wouldn’t say where he was, but I had caller ID installed last week and saw the area code.”
“What’s he doing here?”

“I have no idea … well, I have one, but I don’t like it. He was at a convention in Nashville last year and ever since then he’s been distracted. Spends a lot of time on his e-mail. When I went to log on to check it, I couldn’t get in. He’s changed his friggin’ password. I’ve been trying to break into it, but so far no luck.”

“Why’d he call?”

“I don’t know. At first I thought he just wanted me to know that he was okay, to put my mind at ease, but now … well, I found his strong box and broke the lock.”

“What did you find?” Olivia asked, not really wanting to know.

“Bank statements for an account I didn’t know he had and … a first draft of some legal papers. Divorce papers,” she said and her voice wobbled. “I can’t believe it, Olivia, after all these years and all his cheating now he thinks he can divorce me? No way … no … freakin’ way.”

“Oh, Sarah, I’m sorry,” Olivia said and she was. She hated to hear the pain and despair in her friend’s normally upbeat voice. But she hated Leo Restin for what he was doing to his wife. Olivia wanted to say that divorce might be the best thing, but held her tongue; Sarah was too raw, would argue it to the death.

“Yeah, me too.” Sarah’s voice cracked with emotion. “I was wondering, how would you feel about a houseguest? Oh, me … not Leo.” She laughed a little through her tears. Sarah knew how Olivia felt about her husband; Olivia made her position clear often enough. “We could have Thanksgiving together.”

“While you track down Leo?”

“I’d take a break for dinner,” Sarah kidded, with a hoarse chuckle. “Unless you have other plans. I mean, oh, God, I didn’t think that you might be going somewhere or be with someone else.”

“Don’t worry about that part of it. I don’t have anything going.” Leaning her head against an upper cupboard, Olivia twisted the phone cord in her fingers and thought of Rick Bentz. She wondered, foolishly, how he would celebrate the holiday. Not that it mattered one little iota. Then she remembered the man in the cathedral. “You know, I think I may have seen Leo—oh, God, was it just yesterday?”

“Where?” Sarah’s voice grew tight.

“St. Louis Cathedral.”

“Are you kidding? Leo hasn’t been to mass in years.”

“Maybe I’m mistaken.”

Sarah explained, “Leo was so pissed when they threw him out of parochial school, he’s never been back to church.”

“He went to Catholic school?” Olivia asked, surprised as she glanced at the window to watch sunlight filter through the trees.

“For a couple of years. He played football and they loved that, but… well, he got caught getting high on the school grounds and was expelled. Even then he was getting into trouble, not playing by the rules. But I thought he was the greatest.” She laughed but the sound was hollow. “Stupid, huh?”

“We all do stupid things when we’re in love.” She thought fleetingly of Rick Bentz again and reminded herself she wasn’t in love with him, would never be in love with him, and to forget any idea of the kind. “So he gave up on the Church?” Olivia asked, her mind beginning to wrap around an idea that was absolutely appalling. Leo, the ex-Catholic. Maybe he’d gotten all screwed up along the way. He was an athlete—a football player and a bow hunter, about six foot three with blue eyes and, from what she’d seen in his dealings with his wife, a cruel streak. But a sadistic murderer? No, she couldn’t imagine it.

“Almost completely. Had a real fit when I insisted we get married by a priest. I thought he was gonna call the whole thing off. It was a big scene, but eventually, he agreed. I think there was something else that happened, something bad, but he never talked about it and I didn’t pry.”

“He’s your husband,” Olivia pointed out and thought about seeing Leo in the cathedral. He was in New Orleans. Could have been for a while. Had a grudge with the Catholic Church … and he had a temper. But that was a long way from murder. A long way, she reminded herself as she found a mug in the cupboard and, cradling the receiver between her shoulder and ear, poured coffee.

“I know he’s my husband. Even so, we all have secrets, don’t we?” Sarah observed darkly, then added, “So how about it. Want company?”

“Are you kidding? Of course I do. You’re welcome to stay here but I just don’t know if I’d try to track down
Leo if I were you.”

“We’re still married,” Sarah reminded her. “Remember the vow about ‘till death do us part’?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m working real hard on it.”

Olivia braced herself for another session about Sarah’s marriage, the kind of conversation where Sarah complained about Leo yet swore she loved him. But instead of launching into that tired old song and dance, Sarah rattled off the time she’d fly in and told Olivia she’d rent a car and drive to the cottage on the bayou, didn’t want directions, and promised to call Olivia from her cell when she touched down. “I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“You got a ticket?”

“That I do. And it only cost me two arms and one leg. I still can hop,” she joked.

“I guess I’d better see if I can find a turkey and some cranberries.”

“And sweet potatoes. I make a killer sweet-potato pie,” Sarah said before hanging up. Olivia’s spirits lifted a bit. She hadn’t looked forward to spending Thanksgiving alone, and though she thought Sarah’s hunt for her husband was a fool’s mission, at least she’d be with her friend for a few days. Taking a sip from her mug, Olivia felt the coffee warm a path to her stomach. Maybe Sarah and her problems would make her forget about Rick Bentz.

Maybe.

Then again, maybe not.

Bentz wasn’t a man easily forgotten.

And one thing was certain—nothing would put her completely at ease and let her forget that there was a sadistic killer on the loose; a murderer who knew her name. She looked at the picture of her and her grandmother. Oh, Grannie, if only you were here now, she thought as she stared at the old photo where Grannie Gin was swinging her off her feet. The hot day. And the shadow. Dark, a somber reminder of the man who had taken the snapshot. Your father.

Her hand was beginning to throb and something niggled at the back of her mind, something that had been bothering her ever since Reggie had called … what was it? What had he said that didn’t ring true. What?

They had been talking about the fact that he wanted to see her. He’d been adamant. Determined. What had he said?

“You’re the only child I’ve got left, you know. I’ve lost the others …”

That was it! Others. Plural. He wasn’t just talking about Chandra. He’d fathered more kids, some she obviously had never heard of. When? With whom? Had he married again or were they the results of affairs? Who were they? Or had he just slipped up?

Maybe it didn’t matter. He’d said they, too, were gone. She shivered when she remembered his words.

I’ve lost the others.

How? Because they were estranged from him? Cradling her cup, she walked closer to the picture, stared at the shadow looming in the foreground. Was it possible his other children, too, were dead?

Imbeciles!

Ignoramuses!

Absolute morons!

The Chosen One added the new lock of hair to his braid as he listened to the news on the radio, a smarmy air-wave personality who thought he had all the answers and even had the gall to make some inane jokes.

The Chosen One didn’t know who was more pathetically stupid—the police or the press. To compare him to the Rosary Killer. How insulting. Father John had been nothing but an apprentice … and a foolish one at that. He’d gotten caught.

Deftly The Chosen One went about his task, sitting on a stool near the window, winding the strands, mixing a new lock of shiny black hair with the others. His fingers tangled and stroked in the hair. He closed his eyes, willed his temper to subside. A thrill swept through him as he thought of the last sacrifice and his blood heated. She’d been so willing and then, when she’d awakened to find herself strapped to the wheel, her terror had been
complete. “Saint Catherine …” But her blood hadn’t flowed white as he’d expected; as had been preordained.

He’d wanted her. So badly. His lust had been excruciating as he’d watched her scream and rotate slowly on the wheel, spinning closer to him and then away, her eyes bulging with terror, her face white from the pain … he’d longed to lie down with her, to feel the spikes, to somehow thrust into her as the wheel turned and creaked. Yes … that was what he’d wanted, the pain and the lust combined. To enter her body as she screamed and he felt the pressure of those sharp spikes.

He was drained. His head pounded. The aching was with him more each day, it seemed, a dull thud that increased as the hours passed. A sacrifice always hyped him up before, during, and immediately after the rite, but later, after reliving it for hours, he was exhausted.

The WSLJ announcer was still blither-blathering on about a serial killer stalking the city. Two victims had been identified as coeds from Loyola and Tulane. So the police were beginning to discover that there had been earlier sacrifices … good, good … it had frustrated him that they hadn’t connected his earlier work.

Identification of the venerated dead had been bound to happen. The police knowing his method and the dates he would kill might make hunting more difficult … but he’d prepared for this. He’d already chosen his next victims … women who needed to be released from their earthly bonds. Twining his fingers in his braid, he walked to the altar, genuflected, and then gazed at the wall where he’d made his offering. It was a beautiful collage of pictures of those saints he’d chosen to be a part of his work. Each image of the saints, a picture of an old portrait of a beautiful young woman with a shimmering halo, would be covered with a newer picture, a photograph he’d taken … Several were already covered with a new image. St. Joan of Arc, beautiful little Philomena, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Cecilia, and now St. Catherine of Alexandria.

But there were so many more. Kristi Bentz would be a perfect St. Lucy, but what of St. Olivia? The feast day was too far away … certainly he could redeem Olivia Benchet by renaming her … that was it. He glanced at his large book, sitting upon a table with the pair of pinking shears he used to clip the pictures from the pages. Yes, that was it, he’d find another worthy daughter of God …

“Detective Rick Bentz of the New Orleans Police Department …”

The Chosen One’s head snapped up at the mention of Bentz’s name. He glared at his tiny radio and his lips curled. Bentz had robbed him of his pupil; the only person The Chosen One had trusted with his secret. Father John. Now presumed dead. At Bentz’s hand.

But Bentz would suffer and suffer well.

The Chosen One stood and let his robe slip to the floor. Slowly and delicately he slid the braid over his nakedness. Staring at his collage, he saw the faces of his victims as the plait slithered silently over his muscles.

They were all beautiful, all bright, all worthy of sainthood.

His breath was coming in uneven gasps. He was rock-hard, his cock throbbing. He tied the braid around it, imagined a dozen sets of hands and luscious lips upon his skin, teasing, taunting … promising sinful delights.

He grew light-headed, swallowing hard as he remembered their terror, how they’d begged. He conjured up Kristi Bentz’s face … oh, yes … she would be heaven, but no longer would she be enough. No … he had others to redeem. With a grim smile, he thought of Olivia Benchet.

She should thank him for her redemption.

Because she was a daughter of the whore.
“Okay, so what have we got?” Melinda Jaskiel demanded of Bentz and Motoya. “The press is clamoring for more information, the chief is all over me, wondering what the hell we’ve got going with another serial killer, and I’m speaking with the head of the task force and the FBI in”—she checked her watch—“twenty-three minutes.”

“I’ve talked to the head of the task force and Tortorici with the FBI,” Bentz said. It was about two in the afternoon, he and Montoya were sitting in Jaskiel’s office, and he’d spent all morning working on the case, shutting his mind down whenever his thoughts strayed to last night with Olivia Benchet.

“Do we think there’s any chance this is the Rosary Killer?” Melinda asked. She stood in her crisp navy blue suit, hips and hands resting against the edge of her neat-as-a-pin goverment-issue desk. Bentz and Montoya were seated in front of her in the two visitors’ chairs. There were a couple of photos of her parents and two daughters displayed upon her credenza and a crystal vase of ever-changing fresh flowers sat on one corner of the desk. Aside from those little touches, her nameplate, and a few awards displayed on the wall behind her chair, the office could have belonged to anyone. Well, anyone who was a neat freak.

“I’ve talked to the FBI and Norm Stowell … who’s an ex-profiler.”

“Outside the department?” Behind her lenses, her eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, and—”

“Hold on, Rambo. We’re playing this one by the book.”

“Of course we are,” Bentz said, giving her the acknowledgment she needed should there be a problem. “It doesn’t look like this is the Rosary Killer. His signature, the way he displays the bodies, is too different. He’s more brutal. Violent. Not the same guy.”

“But you think this has to do with saints being killed?”

“Martyred female saints,” Bentz said and shifted in his chair. The more he considered the fact that women were being butchered in the manner in which saints had been killed, the more nervous he felt. Some of the women had gone to college and his own daughter attended All Saints—with a name like that it was bound to attract the attention of the killer, even if it was in Baton Rouge.

“All martyrs?”

“Yeah. That narrows the list a little. There are hundreds of Catholic saints and we don’t know which ones he’ll choose, but they seem to be the ones with bizarre, violent deaths.”

“I assume there were a lot of those.”

“Amen,” Montoya muttered and fanned a list of pages he’d taken off the Internet. “We know about St. Cecilia; Stephanie Jane Keller was killed the same way—beheading with three strokes of a sword, after torture, and we know about St. Joan of Arc and the Jane Doe found at her statue around May thirtieth, the feast day for St. Joan, though we don’t know where the victim was burned at the stake; Cathy Adams was different, we think she was portrayed as Mary Magdalene as she was killed on the feast day of July twenty-second.” Montoya handed a few of the pages to Jaskiel.

As she skimmed the material, her expression tightened with each page. “This is worse than the last one.”

Bentz had to agree. “We think there might be other deaths, two for certain.”

“Because?” Jaskiel asked, and when Bentz hesitated, she nodded. “Oh, I get it … because Olivia Benchet has ‘seen’ ——Jaskiel made air quotes with her fingers—“the deaths.”

“She’s been right on so far.” Montoya was still scanning the pages in his hand.

“We’re checking missing persons all across the state, especially at the campuses here in town. Stephanie Jane Keller and Cathy Adams went to school part time, one at Tulane, the other at Loyola.” Bentz hated the connection. He reminded himself that the killer was stalking coeds here in New Orleans, not in Baton Rouge where Kristi was attending school. But didn’t most serial killers move? Find new hunting grounds? “Olivia Benchet is in the master’s program at Tulane. We’ve contacted the local schools, not just the college campuses
but the local school districts and private schools, parochial schools, boarding schools, just to put the administrators on alert. They’re advising the students to be aware, be extra careful, stay in groups, double-lock doors, stay in at night, the whole nine yards.”

“Do you think that Olivia Benchet, our star witness if you can call her that, is connected to the victims because she’s going to grad school?” Jaskiel’s eyebrows drew into a thin continuous line.

“Maybe, but she didn’t know either of the victims,” Bentz said.

Montoya nodded. “And we’re checking out Oscar Cantrell, he was a stepfather, one in a long line, to Benchet. His company, Benchmark Realty, is the management company for the duplex that burned down … he had access.”

“Did he know the victim?”

“Not that we can establish.”

“We still need to interview him,” Bentz said and glanced at the clock. “He was out of town for the holiday, tried to pull a disappearing act, but we got hold of him through his secretary, and rather than deal with the police in Dade County, he’s elected to return for an interview.”

“Any chance he’ll skip out?”

“We’ve got a man making sure he’s on the plane. I’ll meet him at the airport,” Bentz said.

“What about witnesses? Anyone see anything? I mean, witnesses other than the psychic.”

“Nothing that makes any sense.” Bentz shook his head. “And the last person to see Stephanie Jane Keller alive was the mechanic where she dropped off the car. He’s clean, as is her boyfriend. Townsend’s got an alibi we can’t break, willingly took a lie detector test, and passed with flying colors. He’s not our guy. As for her car —so far no clues.”

Montoya added, “I’ve had a picture of the one guy we can’t identify who was caught on video at the scene, but even with computer enhancement, we can’t place him. At least not yet. We’ve already checked out the whereabouts of the owners of the house that burned, the brother and sister who inherited the place. Looks like they’re clean, alibis are strong. The brother is probably doing cartwheels for the insurance money. He was working late that night; got the company records and surveillance cameras to prove it. The other owner, his sister, is devastated—loved the place where she grew up. She was home with the husband and kids the night of the murder.”

“All the information?” Montoya summed up.

“Somehow the killer had access,” Melinda said.

“We’re still trying to track down Reggie Benchet.” Bentz’s thoughts were dark when it came to Olivia’s father. “He’s connected to Olivia Benchet, who somehow sees the crimes; he’s done time for murder, he’s on the streets again, and he found religion while he was doing time.”

“And probably a few more tricks of the trade. You know those guys,” Montoya said. “Send ‘em to prison and they learn all the latest scams from the population.” He snorted. “Rehabilitation, my ass.”

“Have you spoken to his parole officer?” Melinda asked.

Bentz nodded. “So far Reggie’s been minding his Ps and Qs.”

“My ass,” Montoya muttered again.

“The Lafayette Police have interviewed him. I thought I’d stop by today as I’m heading up to Baton Rouge and it’s not too far out of the way. Reggie Benchet has recently tried to get into contact with his daughter …” Bentz hesitated, thought about what Olivia had confided and figured what the hell. Jaskiel deserved to know all the information. “Olivia called me last night.” He explained in detail about what she’d seen, how overwrought she’d been. “It upset her so badly she broke the mirror and cut her hand. She was certain that the killer she saw in the vision knew her name. She somehow knew he was thinking of her and he called her St. Olivia.”

“Damn it,” Jaskiel muttered.

“You sure she’s not making some of this up?” Montoya wasn’t buying this new wrinkle in the case.

“She was terrified. Believe me.”

Frustrated, Jaskiel slapped the papers she’d been holding on the edge of the desk. “Okay, check out the father. And see that Olivia Benchet has someone watching her and her house round the clock.”

“Already done. The FBI authorized it,” Bentz said, expecting her to give him a tongue-lashing for not going through the proper channels. Instead she nodded.
“What about the other two killings that you think might have happened?” Melinda asked. “The ones that Olivia Benchet has seen.”

“Last night was the feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria. She was put on a spiked wheel, it broke, and she was beheaded.”

Jaskiel’s jaw hardened. “Like the last one.”

“Yeah.”

“The same killer?”

“We assume.”

“So now you’re a believer?” Melinda asked, a thin eyebrow rising over the tops of her rimless glasses.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I guess I am. She claims she saw another murder. A woman entombed and tortured, left to starve to death. Take a look at this.” He handed her a page on St. Philomena, complete with the notes Olivia Benchet had taken. “Now, either she’s a scholar of the martyred saints and is jerking our chains, adding extra cases to mess us up, or she’s the real thing.” An image of Olivia’s terrorized expression as she’d flung herself into his arms last night flashed through Bentz’s mind. “I’m betting that she’s for real.”

“All right.” Creases furrowed Jaskiel’s brow as she checked her watch again. “So you’re working with the task force and the FBI.”

“Yeah. It’s tough with the differing jurisdictions, but we’ve got to think that maybe our guy did the same thing in another state. A guy on the force is attempting to cross-reference violent, unsolved cases, committed around the time of some of the saints’ feasts days, but even with the FBI and their computers, it’ll take time.”

“Which we don’t have.”

“And luck,” Bentz added. “So far that’s been in short supply, too.”

Montoya snorted. “I’m checking with the sword manufacturers. We’ve got the weapon from the fire at Bayou St. John, no prints, of course, but it’s not that common of a sword. My guess is that it was bought secondhand at one of those gun/ammo/weapon shows. Probably not traceable. But we’re checking with the local dealers.”

“What about the priest connection?”

“So far nothing, just Olivia Benchet’s word on that. We’re sifting through all the evidence left at the scene, but since everything was burned, it’ll take time. We don’t have fiber samples. Nor anything under the victim’s fingernails. I’m afraid our guy got away clean,” Bentz admitted.

Lines of frustration tugged at the corners of Jaskiel’s mouth. Her fingernails drummed against the lip of her desk. “He’ll slip up. He’s got to. When he does, we’ll nail his hide. In the meantime, how do I explain that to the press?”

“Just as long as the lack of attention doesn’t push him into killing again. That would be damned hard to explain to the public.”

“Maybe he’ll tip his hand if we play it cool,” Bentz suggested. “Sometimes when a serial killer doesn’t get enough attention, he becomes bolder. Contacts the police. Is frustrated by the lack of attention.”

Melinda straightened. “Just as long as the lack of attention doesn’t push him into killing again. That would be damned hard to explain to the public.”

“So what’re you going to do for Thanksgiving?” Kristi asked as she sat in the commons, sipping a Coke while trying to decide if she wanted to “do it” with Brian Thomas. God, he was hot. Dark hair, intense blue eyes, and that secretive air that she found dangerously exciting.

“You mean besides giving thanks?” He shoved his tray aside and leaned his elbows on the scarred table. His class ring glinted under the overhead lights.

“Yeah, besides that.”

He was teasing, she saw it in his eyes.

“I think I’ll really celebrate by grading papers.”

Kristi groaned. “Doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“No? You wouldn’t get turned on by essays discussing the philosophical and political implications of the Catholic Church in Rome during the—”
“Oh, save me,” she said, rolling her eyes. “No, that wouldn’t turn me on.”

“Then what would?” He reached across the table and grabbed her wrist, his fingertips grazing the inside of her arm. He rubbed gently and Kristi’s heart jolted. “Why don’t we find out?”

“No?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’ve got class in half an hour, but later… I’ve got a bottle of wine. It’s cheap, but effective. Or we could head over to The Dive.”

Kristi sighed. “I think I’ll have to take a rain check. I’ve got to meet my dad later. He’s picking me up after my last class.”

His smile was wicked. “Can’t you call and tell him to postpone it a day? Make up some excuse, like you have to study.”

“He knows me better than that,” she said as he slowly let go of her wrist and the warmth that had invaded her blood and tingled deep between her legs subsided a bit. She chewed on the red and white straw. “He lived with me for eighteen years, remember.”

“Maybe you’ve turned over a new leaf.”

“He wouldn’t believe it. He’s a cop. A detective,” she admitted, something she was loath to do. Most boys who heard her dad was on the force, split. Without a second glance. They didn’t want to get involved with the daughter of a cop and risk that kind of trouble. It didn’t matter if they were into booze, dope, or shoplifting, any little thing and they found a way to leave Kristi behind.

Brian, however, didn’t so much as flinch. “Your dad doesn’t trust you.”

“He doesn’t trust anyone, and it’s only going to get worse now. I read in the papers that they think there’s another serial killer in New Orleans. Dad’s gonna freak. Just watch. He’ll want me to move home, or install a security system in my room, or carry a gallon drum of mace around.”

Brian laughed, though his smile didn’t quite touch his eyes. “He’s paranoid.”

“Yeah, he is. He sees all the bad stuff on the streets and it makes him crazy.” She mashed the straw between her teeth. “Lucky me, huh? What about your mom and dad? You never talk about them.”

His smile seeped away. “Not much to say.”

“No home to go to.”

“Oh, come on,” she said, thinking he was teasing before she noticed the tightening in the cords at the back of his neck. “Your dad doesn’t trust you.”

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“You’re not going home for Thanksgiving.”

“No home to go to.”

“Oh, come on,” she said, thinking he was teasing before she noticed the tightening in the cords at the back of his neck. “Are your folks divorced?”

A muscle worked in his jaw. “Just from me.”

“What do you mean?”

“They cut me off when I was eighteen. I got into some … trouble and they couldn’t deal with it.”

“What kind of trouble?” she asked warily. The noise from the kitchen, the rattling of trays and flatwear, and the hum of conversation from nearby tables seemed to be suddenly muffled and distant. Brian glanced down at the table, his fingers, anywhere but her eyes.

“Come on, give. I told you about Dad.”

“This is different.”

“All I have to do is call my dad and he can do a research number on you like you wouldn’t believe.”

He tensed. Blue eyes flashed and narrowed on her. “You’d do that?”

“Nah … but I could. Come on,” she said and reached across the table to link her fingers with him. “What happened?”

“It was a long time ago,” he admitted. “Ancient history.”

“I won’t hold it against you.”

One of his eyebrows lifted in disbelief. “You don’t know that.”

“Is it that bad?” she asked and the look in his eyes made her catch her breath.

“You tell me. A girl … a girl I dated for six months accused me of rape.”

“What?” She wished she’d never asked. Her heart sank. Rape? Jesus! She drew back her hand and his lips twisted as if he’d expected her to recoil.
“Statutory rape,” he clarified. “But still rape. I was eighteen, she wasn’t quite sixteen. It was bullshit and the charges were dropped. I was completely exonerated, completely, but my parents never believed in me or trusted me again. We had one too many fights about it and they threw me out of the house.”

“Just like that?”

“Why bother with me? They had five more to deal with. I was the proverbial black sheep. My old man and I never got along. Not even when I was a kid.” He rattled his glass and threw back what little drink was left.

Stunned, Kristi folded her arms around her middle. She’d suspected he had a wild side, a dangerous edge, but this was wilder and more dangerous than she’d expected, and for the first time since meeting Brian, she wondered if she was getting into something that was way over her head. “So, after they kicked you out, what did you do?”

“The Army for a couple of years, since I was never charged with a crime. But I couldn’t see myself as a lifer, so I got out and thought I’d go to the seminary.”

“As in becoming a priest?” she whispered, thinking of the times they’d made out, how passionate he was, the feeling of urgency she’d sensed in him as he’d touched her and kissed her and stroked her. A priest? “Aren’t they supposed to be celibate?”

“Yeah.” He nodded, lightening up a bit. “That was a problem. It was a short-lived ambition, believe me. So I went to college, spent a couple of years working at a job I hated, and ended up here in grad school.”

“How old are you? Forty?”

He laughed. “Nah. I work fast. I’m thirty-one.”

She gulped. Thirty-one? That was ancient. But that wasn’t the worst of it. She was stuck on the rape and his time in the seminary. “You don’t seem like someone who could buy into the whole married-to-God thing.”

“We all go through different phases, especially we old guys.” There was a bite to his words. A sting. As if she’d wounded him.

“I didn’t say you were old.”

“Except that you thought I was forty. Anyway, when I went to the seminary, I was just trying to sort things out. I think I was looking for a family. A place to belong … oh, who the hell knows? Or cares.” He wadded up his napkin and threw it on the table, but his black mood was returning. Storm clouds gathered in his icy eyes.


“And that’s what makes you special, Kristi.” He offered a tentative smile. “Are you sure you can’t get out of leaving today? I’m sure you and I could have a lot of fun.”

“No doubt about it,” she said and was tempted to call her dad and make some excuse about having to stay in Baton Rouge for the holiday, pretend she had to write a term paper or something. “But I really have to go home.”

“Isn’t there any way you could stay?” His hand was so warm.

“Welll … I do have a test in Dr. Northrup’s class and a paper due for Dr. Sutter.”

“Psych?”

“101.”

“I had Sutter as an undergrad.” Brian frowned. “He didn’t like me much.”

“Really? Why wouldn’t he like you?”

Brian pulled his hand away. “He thought I stole some of my theories off the Internet. It was bullshit and I told him so.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. He couldn’t prove it. But he looked like an ass. I can still see him in front of the class, his face red, a tic near his eye. I think it bothers the shit out of him that I’m back.”

“And you like that?”

“He deserves to be knocked down a peg or two. Pompous ass!”

She hesitated, but saw the hint of pride in the set of his jaw. “Soooo … did you?”

“What? Steal? Plagiarize? No way.” He snorted as if the idea were absurd. “If I would have, it would have screwed up everything. My plans, my life, my chance of ever teaching.”
“But only if you got caught,” she said, unable to stop playing devil’s advocate as she shook her cup, rattling the ice before taking a big swallow. All the while she watched him.

“You think I’d cheat?"

“I don’t know. Would you?” she asked and noticed that her heart had started drumming and she was actually sweating a little, as if she were afraid of his answer. Why in the world did he affect her like this?

“No. If you ask me, Sutter was out to get me.” As soon as the words were out, he seemed to want to call them back. “I guess I sound paranoid, huh? First my parents, then Dr. Sutter. Watch out, the world has it out for Brian Thomas.”

“Is that what you really think?”

“Nah.” He lowered his voice as a busboy cleared a nearby table. “What I really think is that I wish you’d stay here for the weekend so we could get to know each other a little better.”

“We’ll have time later.”

“If you say so.” He leaned back in his chair and she felt all the intimacy they’d shared evaporate. He suddenly seemed so alone and aloof. The fact that he had no family, that he’d been rejected by his own folks, really got to her, but she couldn’t ditch out on her dad.

Or could she?

Maybe there was a way after all.

“I gotta go,” he said with a glance at the clock over the register, where a couple of kids were paying for sandwiches. “Damn. I’ve got five minutes to get across campus.” Kicking back his chair, he was on his feet.

She didn’t want him to leave, not when she felt that he was angry with her. Not that she’d done anything wrong. She knew he was trying to manipulate her by laying the blame for his misery, his aloneness, at her feet and she didn’t want to buy into it, but she really liked him. “So, I’ll see ya when I get back.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, distracted as he grabbed his backpack and started for the door. Then, as if realizing how he harsh he sounded, he backtracked the few steps, leaned down, and whispered in her ear, “And when you do get back, you’d better be ready.”

A tingle slid down her spine. “For what?” she asked. His grin was slow and decidedly sexy. “You tell me.”
“Do I need an attorney?” Oscar Cantrell demanded. Face florid, unlit cigar clamped in his jaw, he strode out of the airport. He was mad as hell and belligerent as all get-out.

“You tell me,” Bentz suggested.

“You chargin’ me with something?” Cantrell, a short man with an oversized belly, straw hat, and narrow sideburns, sent Bentz a look guaranteed to wither a lesser man. Bentz didn’t give a damn. Let him stew. He’d met Cantrell at the gate, flashed his badge, and escorted the shorter man to his Jeep. “Nope. Just have some questions for you.”

“Hey, I’ve got my own car here.” Cantrell shifted his carry-on bag from one hand to the other. “I don’t need a ride.”

“Humor me. I’ll bring you back.”

“Son of a bitch,” Cantrell muttered, shifting his carry-on bag from one hand to the other. But he didn’t argue. The road map of veins discoloring Cantrell’s cheeks and nose turned a brighter red as he reluctantly climbed into the backseat of the rig.

Bentz fired the engine and glanced into the rearview mirror. “Tell me about your ex-wife.”

“So which one?”

“Bernadette Dubois.”

Cantrell snorted and moved his cigar to the corner of his mouth. “Saint Bernadette,” he said and Bentz stiffened.

Saint Bernadette? “Is that a special name you have for her?”

“Yeah, right. You ever meet her?” Cantrell asked, and when Bentz shook his head, added, “Well, she’s bad news. Big time. A beautiful woman. Downright gorgeous and a manipulator. Always wants more than a man can give. The kind of woman that is nothing but trouble.” He threw himself back against the seat. “Sheeeet, is she in some kind of trouble with the law?” he asked. “Is that what this is all about?”

“I just want to ask you some questions.”

“What?”

“The fire at the rental property you manage over at Bayou St. John.”

“I figured.” Cantrell was looking out the window, chewing on his cigar, watching the scenery as Bentz headed into the city. “I didn’t know nothin’ about that. Nothin’. Ask my secretary. I’ve been out of town. With … with a friend. You can call her.”

“I will,” Bentz said, but figured Cantrell was leveling with him. Probably another dead end. “You know her kid?”

“The girl? Olivia? Yeah, I met her a time or two.” He took off his hat and swabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. “Her other daughter died, y’know. I don’t think she ever got over it. Felt some kind of guilt. She was nappin’ when the kid fell into the pool. Drowned. Bernadette, she blamed the older kid, Olivia, for the baby’s death, but deep down I think she felt guilty. Hell, with that woman there was lots of guilt goin’ on.”

“Is that right?” Bentz hadn’t expected Cantrell to be so candid. Cantrell stuffed his hanky into his pocket. “How so? Why all the guilt?”

“Hell if I know. Her dad was dead, her mother half-crazy with all that talk about voodoo and crap. No wonder she was messed up. It probably started with the baby.”

“Olivia?”

“No.”

“Then the girl who drowned? Chandra?”

“For Christ’s sake, no,” Cantrell was irritated. “I’m talkin’ about the first baby.”
Bentz felt something snap in his brain. He glanced in the rearview mirror again.

“The first one?”

“Yeah, her son … I think it was supposed to be some big secret, but one night we were drinkin’ and she got drunk—more wasted than I’ve ever seen her. All of a sudden she starts yammerin’ about her son. She wouldn’t stop bellyachin’ about how she got herself in a family way and had to give up her baby. The old lady, Virginia, Bernadette’s mother, she wouldn’t have it no other way. She insisted upon it.”

“Who was the father?”

“Benchet, of course. That’s what all the fuss was about. The old lady had Reggie Benchet pegged. Knew he was no-account.” Cantrell’s lazy gaze met Bentz’s in the mirror. “Helluva thing. After that one night, she never brought it up again. Neither did I. Didn’t figure it was any of my business, but the thing is, I don’t think she ever told Reggie.”

“But she confided in you?” Bentz wasn’t buying it.

“The demon rum loosened her tongue. Man, that woman was on a supersonic guilt trip. If you ask me, that’s when it all started. Giving up that baby.”

“When what started?”

“The craziness … it runs in the family, y’know.” He yanked his cigar from his mouth and punctuated the air with it. “The old woman had it and passed it right down the line. Virginia to Bernadette to Olivia … all beautiful women, all not quite right, a little off, sexy as hell, lookers, I tell you, and charming, in a way, but … Not your normal woman, if you know what I mean.”

Unfortunately Bentz did. He only had to think of last night to remind himself.

Olivia worked a few hours at the Third Eye in the morning, then met Ole Olsen and his crew back at her cabin.

Holed up in the second bedroom, she tried to study while the workmen traipsed through her house, running wire, barking orders, turning off the electricity for a while, and then testing alarm bells. She sat on the daybed flipping the pages of research books, occasionally being interrupted by someone tapping on the closed door, then sticking his head inside to ask a question or two. Her concentration was shot. Not that it wouldn’t have been anyway. The night with Bentz seemed now surreal, their fight this morning just another disjointed piece in the jigsaw puzzle that was her life.

Once the electricity was flowing again, she forgot her thesis for a while and logged on to the Internet, where she spent two or three hours researching the lives and deaths of some of the saints. She’d wanted to tell Bentz he was barking up the wrong tree, but as she read about the saints he’d mentioned and remembered the women who had been killed, she was certain there was a link.

But what? Why these saints and why was she involved?

By the time most of the work crew had left, it was nearly dark and she was equipped with a basic security system that would activate whenever it was engaged and a door or window was opened. “So you’re saying that I’ll never be able to sleep with the windows ajar?” she asked Olsen, a tall, Nordic-looking man with a broad face and a shock of short white hair.

“Oh, yeah, you can turn off certain areas of the house, but I wouldn’t recommend it. See here—” He showed her the control panel, and explained about motion detectors and alarms and lag time between setting the thing and activation starting.

“So … when the motion detector is on, the dog’s got to be locked in another room.”

“Unless you want this to happen.” With a press of the button, he activated the alarm and a series of ear-splitting shrieks began blasting through the house. Hairy S whined. Olivia learned very quickly how to shut it off.

“Sometimes I hate high-tech,” she grumbled.

“Me, too.” Olsen grinned and showed off one gold-capped tooth. “But then I remember it’s my bread and butter. I shouldn’t complain too much.” He left her with his business card, a thick instruction and warranty booklet, and a surprisingly small invoice, which he explained was compliments of Detective Bentz. “We go back a few years,” he explained. “Helped my kid when she was messed up with drugs. Now, you call me if anything goes wrong, y’hear?” he’d said as he’d ambled out to his truck. “Anything ?-tall. Bentz said to take care of you and I aim to please.”
“I’m sure I’ll be able to handle it,” she assured him and waved before walking into her newly protected house. She wondered what Grannie Gin would have thought.

Probably that she was foolish. She could almost feel Grannie Gin rolling over in her grave and muttering, “Lawsy-Moley, what’s got into you payin’ for all those fancy bells and whistles. Trust in the Lord, Livvie, and learn how to use a shotgun. That’s all the protection anyone needs.”

“No true, Grannie,” Olivia whispered as she sat at the kitchen table and thumbed through the instruction booklet. “Not true? -tall.” The dog whined and she scratched his ears, then, unable to get past page seven of the booklet, she left it on the table and started for the living room. From the corner of her eye she saw Hairy leap into the chair she’d recently vacated, steal the pamphlet, and hightail it into the laundry room.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she warned, chasing after the dog and wresting the booklet away before he could bury it in his blankets with his other treasures. “I might need this.” She tucked the pamphlet into a kitchen cupboard and started through the archway to the living room.

As she did, she felt it—a shifting in atmosphere.
Inside the house.
Like a cold, brittle wind.

“No,” she said, her heart drumming. He couldn’t be at it again. Not after last night. A cold needle of fear pierced her brain. Glancing in the mirror mounted over the bookcase, she half-expected to see the priest’s masked face again, to stare into his cruel blue eyes, but only her own reflection stared back at her, a pale, wild-haired woman who appeared as world-weary as she felt. It was a haunted look. Tortured.

Hairy S whined, but he didn’t run to the door or the window as he usually did if he heard something outside. Instead he cowered near her, shivering, as if he sensed some evil presence here, within the core of the house.

“Sssh. You’re all right,” she said, picking him up and holding him close. “We’re safe.” But he trembled in her arms and scrambled to get down. She set him on the floor and he ran, toenails clicking on the hardwood, to stand in the archway to the kitchen, turn around, and stare back at her. “Hairy, you’re fine.”

He whined plaintively.

“Oh, you can be such a goose sometimes,” she said, but couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was horribly, horribly wrong. And not just in her visions, but here in her home. She thought of Grannie Gin’s words, her faith in God. Grannie’s religion had been skewed a bit, a blend of healthy Roman Catholicism flavored with a sprinkling of voodoo. But harmless. Grannie had found solace in the Bible. This Bible that sat on the top shelf of the short bookcase. The thick, leather-bound volume that had been in the family for ages and rested beneath the antique oval mirror.

Hairy barked and backed up.

“Stop it.”

But he wouldn’t quit and was barking madly as she opened the Bible. It fell open to the Twenty-third Psalm. Grannie’s favorite. Olivia read the familiar passage, and remembered Grannie whispering it to her at night when she tucked her into bed:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

Olivia blinked back tears as she thought of her grandmother and how the old woman had pushed Olivia’s hair out of her face as she’d whispered the words. Funny, she’d never read this Bible herself; it had been solely Grannie’s domain.

Hairy growled. Obviously the passage wasn’t calming him down. “Heretic,” Olivia teased and set the Bible down, but the front flap sprung open to a page where generations of Dubois had taken the time to record every birth, marriage, and death in the family for the past hundred and twenty years. Grannie Gin had been as careful as her mother-in-law and the woman before her.

Olivia traced her finger down the page, saw where her mother had been born and the mention of three other children Grannie had birthed only to bury as none of the others had lived over a week. Bernadette had been the exception—strong where all of Grannie’s other children had been born weak.

Beneath her mother’s name were the listing of her marriages and the children Bernadette had brought into the world.

Olivia stopped short.

Her index finger was poised over the page. There she was, listed by her birth date. Chandra’s short life had
been recorded as well. But the entry above her name was the one that stopped her cold.

*Baby boy.* No name. Listed as Bernadette’s son, the father being Reggie Benchet. If it was correct, this nameless brother was barely a year older than Olivia.

*A brother?* She’d had a brother? What had happened to him?

Her head pounded. She searched the notes, thinking she missed something important, but there wasn’t a record of the child’s death. It couldn’t be. She’d never heard his name; he was never mentioned.

As if he had never existed.

*Was it a mistake, a nameless baby written in the wrong spot? But no … the listing was in her grandmother’s hand. Grannie wouldn’t have made that kind of error.*

*So if he hadn’t died, where was he?*

She felt that chill run through her blood again, and when she glanced into the mirror, she saw the hint of something beneath her own reflection, a shifting shape with no real form.

She dropped the Bible. Backed up. Nearly tripped over her own feet.

*Her heart was a terrified tattoo, her hands sweating.*

*Deep in the reflection she caught a glimpse of something rare. Something deadly. Something evil.*

She backed up and told herself that she was allowing the dog’s weird behavior to put her on edge. But the hairs on the back of her arms had lifted and her heart was jack-hammering. *Get a grip, Olivia! You saw nothing, NOTHING. You’re letting your imagination run away with you.*

Taking several deep breaths, she hurried to the phone, found her address book in the top drawer, and ran her finger down a page where numbers had been erased and crossed out. Finally, she located Bernadette’s number.

She dialed quickly, tried to fight the rising tide of panic that was overtaking her. Bentz had said there had to be a connection between her and the killer. Something in her genes … could it be? Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God.

The phone rang. Once, twice, three times.

“Answer, damn it!”

*After the fourth ring, voice mail picked up and she was instructed to leave a message.*

*What could she say? “Bernadette … this is Olivia. Would you please call me when you—”*

*“Livvie?”* her mother’s voice cut in and Olivia’s knees threatened to give way. She braced herself against the counter. “What a surprise.”

“I need to talk to you.”

“As long as it’s not a lecture about my husband. I was considering leaving him, but Jeb and I are trying to work things out.”

*“Are you era—”* Olivia bit her tongue and slowly counted to ten. “You know how I feel about that,” she said, “but it’s not why I called.”

There was a long, strained pause and Olivia wondered how she could ask the next question, how she could accuse her mother of harboring a lie for over thirty years.

“I was going through the Bible,” she said, “you know the one. It belonged to Grannie.”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s the weirdest thing. I never knew there was a page dedicated to all the births and marriages and deaths in the family.” Was it her imagination or had she heard Bernadette’s swift intake of breath?

*“Is there?”*

*There was just no way to sugar-coat her question. “I noticed that Chandra and I were listed as your children, but we weren’t the only ones. There was a mention of another child. A boy. Not named and born about a year before I was. My older brother.”*

No response.

*“Mom?”*

A pause and then a long sigh. “Livvie, this is none of your business.”

“I had a brother and no one told me and it’s none of my business?” she repeated, aghast. “Of course it’s my business.”
“What does it matter now?”
“Bernadette … he’s my brother. Is he still alive?”
Nothing.
“Is he?” Olivia demanded again, blood thundering in her head, her fingers clenched over the receiver so tightly they ached.
“I … I don’t know.”
“Why not?”
“It’s complicated.”
“For the love of God, Bernadette! Where is he? What the hell happened? Who is he?”
“I said I don’t know,” Bernadette snapped, then lowered her voice. “I was young, barely out of high school. Not married … back then it was not so accepted to have a child out of wedlock. Not like today. I had to tell my mother and she … she arranged a private adoption. I don’t know his name, what happened to him. Nothing.”
“But—” Olivia leaned against the wall. Her head was spinning with the lie. How many more were there?
“As far as I’m concerned, that baby never existed,” Bernadette insisted but her voice shook with emotion. “I don’t expect you to understand, Livvie, but I damn well expect you not to judge.”
Olivia gasped. “I didn’t mean … I just want to know the truth.”
“The truth’s very simple and pretty common. I got pregnant while I was still in high school and your father was … Well, he’d shipped out and I wasn’t married, so I gave my baby up and I really haven’t looked back. I didn’t want to. I suppose these days you would call it denial, but there it is.”
And it explained so much.
“The only people who knew were your grandmother and me. It was a private adoption. I don’t even know the attorney who handled it or the name of the family who adopted him. I didn’t want to know then and I don’t want to know now. I didn’t tell your father.”
“He’s not my father.”
“Now who’s in denial?” Bernadette threw out. “Leave it be, Olivia. So you have a brother somewhere, what do you care?”
“Aren’t you even curious about your son?”
“No, Livvie, I’m not. Now leave it alone.”
Olivia couldn’t. One way or another, she thought, hanging up, she’d find out who the hell her brother was. Even if he turned out to be a vicious killer.
Seated at his desk in the station, Bentz glanced at his watch and swore under his breath. He had just enough time to get to Baton Rouge and pick up Kristi. Aside from the suggestion that “Saint Bernadette” had adopted out a son sired by Reggie Benchet, Bentz had learned nothing from Oscar Cantrell. Whatever love the man had once felt for his ex-wife had been killed when Bernadette had started “fucking around” on him. “She was a real slut. Couldn’t keep a zipper up to save her life. ‘Course that’s what had attracted me to her in the first place, but I expect a wife to save it for her husband. Sheeiiit, she’s a piece of work, Bernadette is,” Cantrell had concluded.
Bentz figured there was more to the story, but so far hadn’t sorted it out. And now he was late. He threw on his jacket, slid his Glock into its holster, and wended his way through the desks scattered throughout the department.
“Bentz!” Penny, one of the receptionists yelled. “I’ve got Montoya on the line. He says it’s important.”
“Tell him to call me on the cell.” Bentz was already halfway down the stairs. By the time he’d reached his Jeep, his cell was ringing like crazy. “Bentz,” he said into the headset as he strapped on his seat belt.
“We found her.” Montoya’s voice was cold as death.
“What?” Hand over the steering wheel, Bentz froze. “What do you mean? Where?”
“That’s just the half of it,” Montoya said solemnly. “She isn’t alone.”
Talk about a bad day #x0021;

This had to be the worst, Kristi thought as she came up with some bullshit answer for the last question on her essay test. This was supposed to be English 101. It was supposed to be a snap. But Dr. Northrup was rumored to be the hardest professor in the English Department, a real perfectionist, and in Kristi’s estimation, a prick. He was too precise, too wound-tight. He even dressed the part in his natty suits and perfect hair. She doubted he was more than thirty-five but he seemed older. Harder. Jaded.

Deciding she’d done the best she could, she carried her test paper to the front of the room and dropped it into the half-filled basket on his desk. He was putting on his coat and glanced up at her as she passed. “Going home for Thanksgiving?” he asked.

Kristi was dumbfounded. The entire term he hadn’t so much as called on her. Nor had he uttered one word to the kids who had dropped off their exams before she had.

“Yes.” She nodded and hitched her backpack onto her shoulder. “Today.”

He flashed a bit of a smile, though it seemed pasted on, as if he did it because it was expected. It wasn’t real. But then, the guy was as phony as a three-dollar bill. “Have a nice holiday, Ms. Bentz.” He turned to give his T.A. some instructions.

“You, too,” she muttered, starting for the door. She didn’t even think he knew her name. Wasn’t thrilled that he did. The guy was more than a little weird, kind of stuck on himself. It was as if his Ph.D. made him something special, something that should be revered.

It was stupid, in her opinion, and way beyond odd, but then all her professors were a little off. As she pushed the door open and stepped into the cold November day, Kristi wondered if all the teachers at All Saints were weirdos. Or had she just lucked out this term and gotten all the eccentrics?

Rain was pouring from the dark sky. Drops peppered the ground, hitting hard enough to splash and puddle. As she had for three days running, Kristi had forgotten her umbrella. Silently calling herself an idiot, she turned the collar of her jacket up and started cutting across campus, ducking her head against the sheets of cold drops and running through the gloom. Only a few other kids were making their way down the narrow paths that rimmed the tall brick buildings and bisected the lawns of the University. Nightfall was supposed to be several hours off, but the afternoon was dark as twilight.

She jumped over a puddle on the path, began jogging, and thought about her professors. Dr. Zaroster in Philosophy was a nervous, demanding man who barked orders at Brian and looked upon his undergraduate students with an air of superiority—not unlike Northrup.

Perhaps that better-than-thou attitude came with the territory of succeeding in academia.

Kristi’s professor in bonehead math, Ms. Wilder, wore tons of makeup and too-tight sweaters, but other than that seemed okay. Dr. Sutter in Psychology tried to appear laid back, but there was something about him that made her think he wasn’t quite as relaxed as he tried to appear. He seemed edgy at times. And he’d pulled her aside once to tell her that her paper hadn’t been up to what he knew she could do. “I’m certain if you spent a little more time doing research, you would surprise yourself.” Oh, yeah, like how did he know? Just because he had a doctorate in psychology … could he psychoanalyze a person on the spot? Then there was Miss Pratt, the PE teacher. A dyke. No two ways about it. Pratt kept trying to convince Kristi to try out for the swim team, but Kristi couldn’t shake the feeling that the PE teacher was hitting on her. Sometimes Kristi even thought Miss Pratt was a guy. It was just kind of creepy the way she was always hanging out at the pool or in the locker room, making herself appear busy but actually watching everyone and everything that went on around the physical education facilities.

Kristi had never been self-conscious about her body, had stripped and showered for her gym classes without any hang-ups, but Miss Roberta Pratt changed all that. The dyke made her nervous.

Crap. Everyone did these days.

And now Dad was gonna be late. He’d called her on her cell phone and made some excuse about a major
break in a case, even offered to have someone pick her up.
As if!

The guy her father had in mind was probably a cop friend and would have rolled up in a department-issued cruiser. Oh, yeah, that’s the image she wanted to portray around campus! Sure, announce to the world that she was a cop’s daughter!

She died a billion deaths just thinking about it. She’d told Bentz she’d wait. He’d promised he’d be only “a couple of hours” late. Whatever that meant. She’d lived with him too long to believe it.

She’d already decided she wasn’t going to wait around forever. If her dad didn’t show up in a reasonable time period, she’d give Brian another call. That thought made her smile. Taking a sharp left at the statue of St. Mary in the middle of the quad, she thought she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. Someone else was running to get out of the rain. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw no one. The campus was practically deserted.

Kind of creepy in the gloom.

Oh, get over it.

She took a shortcut through the library, taking the steps two at a time and shoving open the old glass doors. Normally packed, the library was now a ghost town with only a handful of students sitting at the old oaken tables or perusing the stacks. The lights were dimmed, it seemed, the entire building desolate.

She hurried outside and crossed the wet lawn to Cramer Hall. Again, she thought she heard someone behind her, another set of footsteps making a mad dash in the rain. Once more, she looked over her shoulder. This time she saw someone in the shadows, a tall man lagging behind. He seemed familiar, someone she should know, but it was too dark to make out his features and he disappeared through the dense curtain of rain—turning his face away as she looked in his direction.

For a heartbeat Kristi wondered if he’d been following her on purpose. But that was ridiculous. Who would be chasing her in this downpour?

You’re as paranoid as your old man! For God’s sake, the guy behind you was just running like mad to get out of this miserable weather. There’s nothing scary about that. Get over yourself!

For a second she thought the guy might have been Brian—his build was about right—but then why wouldn’t Brian try to catch up with her? Why would he turn away and head into the shadows? No, that didn’t make any sense.

And where was Brian anyway, she wondered, more than a little irritated. Pushing open the door, she tried not to be angry. There was probably a perfectly good reason why he hadn’t returned her phone calls.

“Jerk,” she muttered under her breath.

Running up two flights of steps, she swabbed the rain from her face, then yanked her cell phone from her pocket. She flipped it open. Nope. No one had called, not since her dad had phoned to tell her he was running late.

Great.

The door to her room was open and Lucretia was lying on her bottom bunk, flipping through a new copy of Modern Bride. Kristi recognized the magazine and wanted to puke. All Lucretia ever did was study and dream of graduating so she could get married. Rather than make a nasty comment, Kristi bit her tongue and began peeling off her wet jacket and jeans. “Anyone call?” she asked, squeezing the water from her ponytail as she searched her microcloset for something dry to put on.

“Yeah. Jay.” Lucretia was sipping a Diet Coke and munching on Cheetos as she eyed a page displaying several different elaborately decorated cakes.

Kristi cringed.

“He wants to know when you’re getting home.”

“You talked to him?” Kristi asked, catching sight of her reflection in the mirror. Her skin was red from the cold, her hair starting to frizz. “Why didn’t you let him leave a message?”

“I didn’t think, just picked up the phone without checking caller ID.” At Kristi’s sour expression, Lucretia rolled her eyes. “Sorry. But he still thinks he’s your boyfriend, you know. I didn’t think it was that big of a deal.” She lifted a dismissive shoulder as she crunched another Cheeto. “He wants you to call him back.”

“I think I’ll wait until I get home.”
“Whatever.” Disinterested, Lucretia licked the cheese from her lips.

“Anyone else?”

“Nope.” Lucretia looked up with that smug expression that really got under Kristi’s skin. “No one. Not even Brian.”

Kristi didn’t comment, but she couldn’t wait to go home and get away from her holier-than-thou roommate. Lucretia didn’t smoke, drink, do drugs, or even listen to any music other than some Christian station. Just dreamed of being a wife and mother. Boring. Checking her watch Kristi wondered when the hell her dad would show up.

Bentz parked on the outside of the gate. As he climbed out of his Jeep, he flashed his badge at a deputy from the Sheriff’s Department who was standing guard. Beyond the sagging old fence was an abandoned grist mill.

Montoya had been talking to other officers. He “broke away from the cluster standing in the rain, and waved Bentz in.

“What’ve we got?” Bentz asked.

“Two Jane Does. Both dead.” Montoya was sucking hard on a cigarette. His jacket was shiny with rainwater, his features stretched taut in the gathering darkness. Twilight had descended rapidly in this farming community an hour out of the city. The rain didn’t let up, just kept pummeling the ground and running off the bill of Bentz’s Saints’ cap. “I got a call from a friend of mine in the Sheriff’s Department and drove over,” Montoya said, “A couple of kids found the bodies.” He motioned to two boys huddled with an officer and an older woman.

“What were they doin’ here?”

“Huntin’, though that was behind their mother’s back.” Montoya blew out a stream of smoke. “They got more than they bargained for.”

Bentz glared at the mill. The building looked like something straight out of an old horror flick. The windows were boarded over, the cement walls blacked with age. Vines and brambles crawled toward the roof while moss dripped over what remained of the eaves. Part of an old mill wheel sat unmoving in a stream that angled into the darkness.

“Who’s the owner?” Bentz asked.

“We’re still digging, but the sheriff thinks the mill’s owner lives out of state.”

“He got a name?”

“We’re still checking. Locals refer to this place as ‘The Old Kayler Place.’ Someone named Kayler with roots in the Civil War owned the land a hundred and fifty years ago. The name stuck. The mill came along later but hasn’t been operational for a generation or two, probably closed up around World War II sometime. The nearest neighbors are half a mile away.”

“Convenient.”

“And not as dangerous as the shotgun house off of Esplanade.”

“Or an apartment in the Garden District.”

Bentz swept his gaze over the exterior again. The place was already crawling with law enforcement personnel. Klieg lights trained bluish illumination on the crumbling walls. Beams from hand-held flashlights bobbed and cut through the shadows as officers, searching every inch of wet, soggy ground, moved slowly through the tall grass, scrub oaks, and brush.

“Did you question the kids?” Bentz asked, sending a glance at the boys.

“Yeah. They don’t know much.”

“I’ll want to talk to them once I’ve gone inside.” Bentz looked back at the mill. Yellow tape surrounded the building. “The scene’s been preserved?”

“Best as they could.”

“No ID on the victims.” It wasn’t a question.

“Never that easy,” Montoya said. “At least not with this killer. We’ll take prints and pictures, blood, and we’ve always got dental records.”

Bentz hiked his collar against the rain. “Let’s see what’s inside.”
“It ain’t pretty.” Montoya ground out his smoke, picked up the butt, and stuffed it in his pocket.

Bentz braced himself as he walked past two detectives who were searching the muddy lane for tire tracks. Another was sweeping the area with a harsh, intense light.

“You’re pretty sure it’s our guy?” Bentz asked.

“No doubt.” They walked through a sagging doorway and the stench of death hit Bentz as hard as a fist to the gut. Fetid and rank, the smell was overlaid by another strong odor, the metallic scent of fresh blood.

Inside, rats scurried out of their path and Bentz clenched his teeth as he got his first view of the scene. His stomach tried to revolt, just as it always did. He fought the urge to vomit and forced himself to study the area.

In the center of a large room the murder had taken place. A woman’s nude, decapitated body was still strapped to a grotesque, spiked wheel. Blood covered the dirty floor and atop a long workbench, posed upon an overturned, rusted bucket, was her head. Her eyes were closed, a piece of bloody hair missing. “Jesus,” Bentz whispered as he spied a chain encircling the stump that had once been her neck. The thin chain draped over the pail. A medal dangled from the fragile links.

“Let me guess. St. Catherine of Alexandria.”

“Yep.”

Bentz’s back teeth ground. “Hell.”

“Our man is one sick, sick bastard,” Montoya said over the hum of a vacuum that was being wielded by a member of the crime scene and was used to suck up and trap potential evidence. A photographer snapped still shots of the body and surrounding area from all angles. Another photographer used a video camera. Flashes of light strobed, offering glimpses of musty interior walls veined by black rivulets, stains from years of rainwater and filth seeping through the roof.

“Homey, huh?” Montoya mocked, his own gaze traveling over the scene. “You think he could pick anyplace more macabre?”

“Not if he tried, which, I think he does.”

Montoya was squatting now, staring at the plywood wheel. “Someone had to make this gizmo,” he said. “It’s nothing you can pick up at the local five-and-dime.”

“Or on ebay.”

“So either our killer has a workshop and a truck to haul this thing, or he built it here, or he bought it from someone who has a talent for creating instruments of torture.” Montoya leaned farther down and rotated his head, shining the beam of his flashlight on the underside of the wheel.

“I’m betting he built it here. It’s isolated. He cut some thick plywood, drilled a few holes, put in the biggest spikes he could find, and mounted the whole damned thing on a revolving turret of some kind.”

“It looks like an old wheel balancer, you know the kind they use in garages when they’re putting on tires.”

“So you just give it a push and it starts spinning.” Bentz joined Montoya as the younger cop illuminated the underpinnings, which included an axle screwed into a concrete block. Metal arms supported the blood-stained plywood. Bentz’s jaw tightened. “So he’s a handyman.”

“How do you know about this kind of thing?”

“Because I built one that was similar. Instead of spikes, mine had pegs and was used for a school carnival when Kristi was about ten. The kids spun the wheel to try and win some kind of cheap prize, you know whistles, balloons, toy trucks, and all that useless crap.”

“Like on The Price is Right.”

“Well, yeah, but it was called The Wheel of Fortune.”

“Vanna would be proud.”

“If you say so,” Bentz said, not cracking a smile. “But here we’ve got the goddamned Wheel of Pain.”

“Built by a handyman priest.”

“Who can get his hands on old garage parts as easily as saints’ medals.” Bentz straightened and noticed a large mirror hung on the far wall. The glass was smooth and unbroken, without much dust on the surface. Unlike every other surface in the room. Everything else was covered in a thick, grainy layer of grime. “What’s with this?” he asked, but as the words left his mouth, he knew. “Our boy likes to watch himself while he’s working.”
“Shit.” Montoya scoped out the scene. “You’re right. He’s a damned egomaniac.”

“Or Narcissus. Has it been dusted for prints?”

“Of course,” a woman officer said, her feathers ruffling a bit as if Bentz had indicated she and the rest of the team were lax. Wearing latex gloves, she was carefully going over every surface. “Everything has.” She muttered something under her breath about “big-city cops” and went about her business.

Bentz didn’t let her get to him. “Let’s try to find out who manufactured the mirror,” he said to Montoya. “Maybe we can come up with someone who purchased something like this in the last month or so—same with the parts on the wheel over there and with the medals. Some of the saints are pretty common, but where would a guy get a St. Catherine of Alexandria medal?”

“Over the Internet or in one of those stores that sells religious crap, probably.” Montoya rubbed his goatee. “And the wheel mount. Maybe a garage is missing one. But it looks old, not like the ones that are hooked to computers that they’ve got today.”

“Not every garage in Louisiana is computer friendly. Unless it’s been filed off, that piece of equipment should have some serial numbers we can trace.”

Bentz scanned the scene once more and noticed a thick pool of blood beneath the wheel, one where there was more blood splattered than around the rest of the perimeter. Obviously the victim had been at that spot in her rotation, right in front of the mirror, when the killer had sliced off her head. Just so the sick bastard could watch himself as he slashed down with his blade. He probably got off on the image.

Again Bentz felt the urge to toss his dinner, but swallowed hard. “Any sign of a weapon?”

“Not that we’ve found so far.” Montoya was still sweeping the mirror with the beam of his flashlight, its bright glare reflected harshly in the glass.

“You said there was another victim.”

“Oh, yeah …” Using the bright beam to point to a doorway, Montoya led Bentz through a short, dark hallway to another much smaller silo-like room, originally, Bentz guessed, used for storage.

“Jesus!” he whispered as he spied the victim.

Chained to one chipped wall were the remains of a woman, no doubt the woman who had been sacrificed last summer on the feast day of St. Philomena, though her body was so decomposed no one would be able to visually ID her. What parts of her the rats and other scavengers hadn’t eaten or dragged away, the heat and maggots had taken care of. Bentz held a handkerchief to his face. This was the crypt Olivia had seen, the tomb.

Once again the victim’s head had been severed and it, like the head in the other room, rested atop a rusted bucket. A tiny chain with a medal dangling from what had been her neck glittered in the beam of the flashlight.

The cornerless room was just as Olivia had described, the writing on the wall in big block letters: LUMENA PAXTE CUM FI. Around the letters were the symbols that his brother had explained, the arrows, palm, lilies, anchor, fire, and a scourge.

“Peace be to you, Philomena,” Bentz muttered.

“Hardly,” Montoya said, scratching his goatee. “The letters are written in what looks like blood, rather than the red paint that was described in the book on saints that I read. My guess? The victim’s blood. If what Olivia Benchet says is true, that our man kept the victim here for a long period, then he had to cut her and get blood from her body in order to write his message and fill that.” He pointed to a small pottery vial left on the floor.

Bentz had to agree.

“And get this, the head’s been messed with.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been moved. We’re working on the theory that it fell or was dragged off the bucket, probably by some animal. There’s a disturbance in the dust on the table, some blood and hairs and pieces of dried flesh, but it looks like the head was returned to its original resting spot on the pail. Probably by the killer. He must’ve come back here to build his wheel or drag the latest victim here and checked on his earlier work. Then put things back the way he wanted them.”

“The way he wanted us to find them,” Bentz added.

“Exactly. This prick is proud of his work. Thinks he’s a damned artist.”

Bentz didn’t like it. Didn’t like it at all. It was as if the killer were mocking them, taunting them. “Hell.” He glanced around the room, searching for the mirror. It didn’t take long, but in this case he found not one, but five
narrow full-length panels mounted on one curved wall. “Someone took his time. Look. The spaces between the mirrors are precise, the alignment perfect.”

“The guy wants things just so.”

“And to see himself in 3D.”

On the wall directly opposing the mirrors the victim’s chains had been bolted into a thick wooden post. “This is why Olivia only saw fragments,” Bentz said. “I thought it was because she was in and out of Louisiana, because she was so far away, but her images were split.”

“Because of the curvature of the wall. He couldn’t get a big panel that would fit.”

“Son of a bitch.” Bentz eyed the thin strips of reflective glass. “Let’s check with the manufacturer and distributor, then any outlet in the state or over the Internet. It would be odd for an individual to buy five identical mirrors. We’ll go back to summer. Before August eleventh. Maybe we’ll get lucky,” he thought aloud, for the first time sensing there might be a way to track this guy down. “We’ll cross-check anyone who bought mirrors, saints’ medals, priest vestments, ski wear, tools, and weapons.”

“That’ll be easy,” Montoya remarked.

“Maybe easier than you think,” Bentz said as they made their way through the short hallway and larger room to the outside. The rain was sheeting, glistening in the beams of the klieg lights and headlights from the surrounding vehicles. “The FBI should be able to help.” He glanced at Montoya. “Where the hell are they?”

Bentz strode to the cruiser where the kids who’d found the bodies and a woman pushing forty were huddled beneath a couple of umbrellas. In hooded sweatshirts, jeans, and hiking boots, the boys looked scared to death.

“Kenny and Donny Sawtell,” Montoya introduced, “and their mother, Linda. This is Detective Bentz.” Montoya motioned to the older of the two brothers. “Why don’t you tell Detective Bentz what happened?”

The boys, around eleven and twelve, were white as sheets. They seemed as worried about talking to the cops as they were scared by the gruesome scenes they’d viewed. The older one, Kenny, did most of the talking, but Donny backed him up, for the most part nodding. The story was simple. The boys, who lived about three miles down the main road, had been out hunting behind their mother’s back. Packing twenty-twos and following Roscoe, the family’s dog, they’d tracked a deer through the woods to the old mill, where they’d ignored the “No Trespassing” sign and slipped through a hole in the fence. Roscoe had smelled something, so they’d broken into the building, thinking it would make a “cool” fort or hideout. Then they’d been scared out of their wits. They’d run home, told their mom, and Linda had called the local authorities.

“You’ve been here before?” Bentz asked and both boys shook their heads vigorously. Despite the umbrella and hoods, rain dripped down their noses.

“We never crossed the road before,” Kenny asserted and Donny nodded his agreement. “Not up here anyways….”

“Never poked around the old mill?”

“No, sir.”

“So you’ve never seen anyone else around here, cars or trucks, maybe ones you don’t recognize, or maybe some you did?” Again, in unison, the boys shook their heads. Bentz lifted his eyebrows. “What about you?” he asked the mother.

“Never. I rarely come down this way. It’s not on any of the routes I take to work or to the boys’ school.” Her hair was beginning to frizz in the rain and she had an arm around each of her son’s shoulders. As if she were afraid he was going to haul them both into jail for trespassing. “I’m usually going east or south. Not north. And even if I take the main road, I don’t go by here.”

Bentz believed her. The turnoff to the mill had to be a quarter-mile off a country road that angled away from the main highway. The mill was so far off the beaten track, probably no one but the old-timers in the local populace knew about it.

Except the killer. Somehow he’d found the Old Kayler Place and used it twice for his grisly work.

“Is there anything else you need?” Mrs. Sawtell asked. “The boys’ pa will be home anytime and I’ve got to get supper on. He’ll want to talk to Kenny and Donny about taking the dog and the guns out.” She sent each of her sons a stern look and her fingers tightened over their shoulders.

“No, thanks, that’ll do.” He dug into his wallet and withdrew a card. “If you think of anything else”—he
swept a finger from one kid to the other—“call me.”
“We will,” Linda promised and hustled her boys through the mud to a pickup truck parked just outside the gate.
“So what do you think?” Montoya asked.
“The kids are telling the truth. They were scared to death.”
“I’ll check on the owner of the place, and the Sheriff’s Department is already contacting the neighbors. If anyone’s seen anything, we’ll know about it.”
“But when?” Bentz wondered aloud.
“You think he’s escalating.”
“Yeah,” Bentz said, glaring at the fortress-like mill. “I don’t think there’s any question about it.”
Chapter Twenty-eight

“I’m tellin’ you I don’t know anything’ about a baby boy bein’ adopted out.” Ramsey John Dodd was adamant and began cutting out.

“My grandmother never mentioned it?” Olivia demanded, stretching the cord of the phone so she could fill Hairy S’s water dish. She wouldn’t put it past the slime-ball lawyer to lie through his teeth.

“No to me.”

“I realize you’re too young to have been involved,” Olivia said as she turned on a faucet, “but I thought she might have said something about the baby or given you the name of a lawyer she used before she hired you.”

“I don’t know if she had one.” Ramsey John’s voice was smooth as oil. “But tell you what, I’ll go over all my files and see if there’s anything in ‘em.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Olivia said and imagined the attorney leaning back in his battered chair, the heels of his shoes resting on the desk in his hole-in-the-wall of an office. “Thanks, R.J.” She twisted off the tap.

“Anytime. No problem at all.” He hung up and Olivia set Hairy’s dish out of her neck.

Then again, it could be true.

She’d gotten nowhere on her quest to find out if her brother was alive. So you’d better call Bentz. He’s a cop. He can get the information faster than you.

She reached for the phone again but pride kept her from lifting the receiver. It had only been hours ago, in this very kitchen, where he’d rejected her. One night of lovemaking … a wistful smile tugged at her lips when she thought of lying in his arms, the warmth and security she’d so fleetingly felt as he’d held her close and she’d heard the steady sound of his breathing and the strong beat of his heart.

Well, that was over. He’d made it clear.

She grabbed a broom from the closet and began sweeping the floor. The phone rang and she managed to answer it and balance the receiver between her shoulder and ear as she brushed empty shells from beneath Chia’s cage.

“It’s Bentz.” Cold. Professional. Her heart did a quick little flip before she set the broom aside. From the background noise, the hum of an engine, and the crackle of the police band radio, she guessed he was on his cell phone. “I thought you’d like to know that we found the victims.”

Oh, God. “So soon? Wait, victims? Plural?” More than one woman had been killed?

“Jane Does. But just as you described them,” he admitted, his voice a little less harsh. “One chained to the wall with the symbols around her, the other strapped to the wheel you described.”

“And both …”

“Yeah. Beheaded.”

Her stomach retched and she shot to the sink, thinking she would throw up. She should have felt a little sense of validation, that she’d been right and proved the skeptics wrong. Instead she just felt horror. Blind, mind-numbing horror.
“Both victims were in the same place,” he explained.

Her chest tightened as she remembered the women and their pain. As she kicked out a kitchen chair and dropped into it, Bentz gave her a summarized and, she suspected, sanitized version of what he’d found.

“But it was just as you described. Right on the money. Except that the crypt was really an old storage silo.”

Tears threatened. She felt weak. Helpless. All too clearly she remembered her visions, recalled the moments the women were slain. And she could do nothing but watch in horror. Her hands shook as she held the phone. Her right was still bandaged. Her mirror upstairs shattered.

“We’ll get him, Liv—Olivia,” Bentz said more kindly and her heart twisted.

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

How many more would she see tortured and killed? The tears began to flow, running down her cheeks and chin to fall to the table. “Listen. I know this is rough—”

She blinked hard. No one could understand. No one.

“—In the meantime, the department’s authorized around-the-clock security for you.” She swallowed hard, brushed aside her tears with the back of a hand. “Did Ole Olsen’s crew come over?”

“Yes.” She nodded, glancing around the kitchen, though she knew he couldn’t see her. From her perch Chia set out a high-pitched whistle. Olivia forced a smile she didn’t feel. “That wasn’t part of the system, just Chia’s comment, but believe me, I’ve literally got more bells and whistles than I know what to do with. I think I need a degree in electrical engineering just to lock this place down.”

“Just make sure you use it.”

“I will … if I can ever figure it out.” Buck up, Olivia. Sitting around crying won’t help the victims and it certainly won’t help you.

“You’re a smart woman. You’ll do fine,” he said, but she found little warmth in his compliment. Women were dying and she could do nothing. Nothing.

“Olivia? Are you all right?”

She gritted her teeth. “No, I’m not. I feel responsible for this somehow.”

“I know.”

She froze. “You know?”

“I heard that your mother had a son before she was married to your father. She gave him up. Private adoption. So far, no record of it.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” she asked, her temper instantly igniting. Maybe she didn’t know Bentz at all. She’d accepted the fact that they couldn’t be lovers. She had come to the painful conclusion that Bentz was breaking off their short-lived relationship not only because he was adhering to his sense of professionalism but also because he was just plain incapable of allowing a woman to get too close. No doubt about it, he’d been burned and burned badly. Nonetheless, he should have had the decency to tell her about her brother. “Didn’t you think I’d want to know about this?”

“That’s one of the reasons I called. I just found out this afternoon before I got called to the scene. This was my first chance to get hold of you.”

Mentally, she counted to ten. Tried to calm down. It didn’t work. “How did you find out?”

“From one of your mother’s exes. Oscar Cantrell.”

“The one who owns Benchmark Realty.”

“That’s him. Bernadette drank a little too much one night and spilled the beans. I need to talk to her.”

“You’ll be wasting your time.” Olivia leaned a hip against the table and stared outside to the verandah. A crow was hopping along the rail. “I’ve already spoken to her about my brother. She either doesn’t know or won’t say who adopted him. I don’t know if she went through an attorney or if my grandmother handled it herself.”
“The department is already searching the county and state records,” Bentz said. “As well as hospitals and clinics.”

“I don’t think Bernadette went to a hospital,” Olivia said. “My grandmother did a lot of things in her life. One of them was priding herself in being a midwife though she wasn’t licensed.”

“So you don’t think your mother even went to a doctor for prenatal care?”

“That’s very, very doubtful.”

“I’ve got to go. Someone’s paging me,” Bentz said. “But you take care of yourself. If you see anything or feel that you’re in any kind of danger, call me.”

“I will,” she promised, “but just nail this guy, okay?”

“I’m workin’ on it.”

“Make it soon, Bentz. Make it soon.”

Kristi was pissed. She flopped herself into the passenger side of her father’s Jeep and folded her arms across her chest. “Three hours,” she said as he started the car. “I waited three damned hours!”

“I called,” Bentz pointed out. “Told you I got held up.”

She glared out the window and wished her dad were anything but a homicide dick. She hated his profession. Being a cop’s kid sucked.

He pulled out of the lot next to Cramer Hall. There wasn’t much traffic on campus; most of the kids had left earlier. “I offered to have someone pick you up.”

“I could have found a ride,” she grumbled. “If you were too busy—”

“It was important.”

“It’s always important,” she threw back at him. God, why hadn’t she stayed at school? Right now she and Brian could be drinking beer, pretending to study, and kissing in his room... instead she was stuck the next five days hanging out in her dad’s apartment, dodging calls from Jay and wishing she were back at All Saints. While some kids were pathetically homesick by this time of year, Kristi was already wishing she wasn’t going home to that cracker box of an apartment that Rick swore he’d someday move from. Fat chance. He loved it there and now that she was gone... she felt a jab of guilt. He was paying for her school. Big bucks. On his salary he couldn’t afford anything else while she was in college. But she was still mad. Real mad.

Slumping down in the passenger seat, she scowled out the window. “Mom was never late picking me up,” she said and, from the corner of her eye, noticed Bentz’s mouth tighten. Just as she knew it would. Rarely did she pull out the “Mom” weapon, only when she was really, really ticked off. Today qualified, so she opened the mental drawer and found the long blade that she knew cut straight to her father’s heart. She decided to give it one little twist. “I hate it that you’re a cop. Mom did, too.”

“She knew I was going to join the force when she married me.” He switched on the wipers.

“But I didn’t have a choice.”

“None of us get to choose our parents,” he said through lips that barely moved, then slanted a glance at her as he wended his way through the narrow campus streets. “You just got lucky.”

Was he kidding? No. There wasn’t even a hint of amusement on his face. That was the problem. “Detective” Rick Bentz was always so damned serious. Could barely crack a smile; not that she’d given him any reason to lately. There had been a time when he’d been more easygoing, but that had been long ago. She felt a little bad about the way she’d treated him. Some of her anger had dissipated once she’d gotten her little digs in and she knew he was trying to be a great dad and repair some of the damage between them.

“Jay called. I think he wants you to come to his house for Thanksgiving.”

She blew out her breath. “Jay and I are breaking up.”

“Oh?” He slowed for a stop sign. “Does he know it yet?”

The ring in her pocket seemed suddenly as big as a tire from one of those monster trucks. “I was waiting to tell him in person.”

“Good idea.” He frowned, as if he’d been through something similar. Oh, yeah, right. No way. Not the man married to his job. “You might want to let him down slowly.”

Now her father was giving her advice on her love life. What a laugh! “Who are you? Dear Abby or Dr.
Sam?

One side of his lip twisted upward. “Jay’s an okay guy.”

“I thought you didn’t like him.”

“I don’t like anyone you date.”

“Don’t I know it,” she grumbled and considered telling him about Brian but he’d just get on her case about not breaking up with Jay first and he wouldn’t like it that she was seeing a guy who was around thirty. No way. Bentz would have a fit. Probably have Brian checked out through the department’s computers or, worse yet, meet him and give him the third-degree. No thank you. Time to change the subject. “So you’re working on that serial killer case, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it as bad as the last one?”

“They’re all bad,” he said and drove past the campus gates, where the traffic increased, the headlights and streetlights chasing away the gloom. “But yes, I think this is worse than the Rosary Killer.”

“Why?”

He hesitated.

“God, Dad, you can trust me.”

“It’s just closer to home. Some of the girls killed have been college coeds.”

“Yeah, I figured.” She’d known that would freak him out. “I heard some of the kids talking and the school made an announcement. We’re supposed to be extra careful.”

“You’d better be.”

She rolled her eyes, but didn’t tell him to butt out of her life. “So are you gonna get this guy?”

“You bet.”

“Then you’ll be famous again.”

“Or infamous.” He flashed her a smile as he drove through the city, gunning it as he turned onto the freeway. He didn’t even complain when she tuned the radio to “her” station instead of that crappy WSLJ that he listened to. Oldies. Jazz. Obscure music you couldn’t find on CDs and, of course, the radio talk show that he found so fascinating, *Midnight Confessions* hosted by Dr. Sam. Ever since last summer when that Rosary Killer was on the loose, her dad had been tuning in. It was weird. Kristi had first introduced him to Dr. Sam and, unbeknownst to Bentz, had even called in a few times and gotten some advice from the radio shrink.

Well, who wouldn’t, after what she’d found out about herself, her mother, the man she’d thought was an uncle, and the man who had raised her. They’d all been living a lie. It was probably why her mom had died. Why else would Jennifer have lost control of her car and crashed into the tree? She hadn’t been legally drunk—no way. Jennifer Bentz had hated excessive alcohol almost as much as she’d hated her husband being a cop. It had been a clear day. No other car involved. But there had been some traces of Valium in her bloodstream … Damn it all.

Kristi was also starting to believe that her mother had hated herself. For all the mistakes she’d made in her life. The more Kristi learned about psychology from weird Dr. Sutter, the more she was convinced her mother had been consumed with self-loathing. Why? Because she’d messed up. Gotten it on with her brother-in-law, a priest no less, ended up pregnant and then lived a lie. Who wouldn’t go nuts? Worse yet, years later Jennifer had taken up with Father James again. Like he was some kind of irresistible force or forbidden fruit. No wonder she’d been seeing a shrink and her father had poured himself into a bottle. Then there was the incident when Bentz had killed a kid he thought was going to shoot his partner. That had happened in L.A. Just like everything else.

So they’d moved east. To New Orleans. The only place her dad could get another job as a detective. Yeah, that made a lot of sense. Sometimes Kristi just wished they lived somewhere in the middle of the country—somewhere like Kansas or Oklahoma—and her mom was still alive and really into gardening and her dad sold insurance or real estate, like normal people. They would have a nice two-story house with a picket fence and a dog and a cat, and she would have an older brother to watch over her and a younger sister to confide in and fight with. There would be a patio with a barbecue and maybe one of those old-fashioned swings on the front porch and … She snapped herself out of the daydream.

Get real!
She glanced over at the man who called himself her dad. Lines of worry fanned from the corners of his eyes as he squinted against the traffic. His lips were thin and she knew he was thinking about the case. Not that she could blame him.

All in all, he wasn’t such a bad guy.

For a paranoid, recovering alcoholic, homicide dick.

The Chosen One was frantic.

His head thundered, felt as if it was going to explode.

No amount of prayer, nor flogging, could calm him.

Alone in his sanctuary, he stood naked and shaking at the small table, flipping anxiously through the pages of his book. Then, in despair, he rocked back on his heels. His heart was pounding, his head on fire. St. Olivia’s feast day was in June … no, that would never do. He couldn’t wait that long for her sacrifice and Olivia wasn’t even canonized … no, no … He began to sweat. His heart rate accelerated to a fever pitch. Then there was Oliva … feast day March fifth, no, no … The storm in his head raged and he drew in deep breaths …

Calm down.

Think rationally.

The other ones he’d sacrificed had not answered to the names of the saints whom they’d become, had they?

No. He’d had to rename them.

He would have to stick to his original method and baptize Olivia into the proper name. That was all. He was becoming confused. His mission unfocused. Sometimes he doubted himself … if only he had someone in whom he could confide. He’d had his apprentice and there had been comfort in sharing … but that was over now and he had to resort to confession … when the doubts became unbearable, he could confess and not worry about detection.

He closed his eyes and sent up a short prayer for clarity. That’s what he needed now. Ever since the last sacrifice, he’d lacked clarity. The rite itself had buoyed him to the God-like state he experienced at each sacrifice but afterward, much too soon this time, he’d tumbled down so far into the black depths of despair, even questioning his mission.

He tried recalling the act, visualizing St. Catherine of Alexandria’s face as he’d lifted his sword, but even that did not bring him to euphoria, nor arousal. Because of the woman. Olivia. She was getting nearer. He could feel her. Watching. Wanting to stop him.

This is a test. God is always giving you a challenge and you must not waver on your mission.

“Maintain,” he told himself and then, drawing deep breaths, began again, slowly turning the pages of his book, his eyes scanning each thin page. There were many saints to choose from … he just had to find the perfect one—yes, that was it, God was speaking to him. It had to be soon. Yes … yes … Here!

_St. Bibiana …_ Vivian … not so far from Olivia, many of the same letters in her name, not that it mattered, but… oh, yes … the way she was martyred. He read hungrily, already thinking of his mission. St. Vivian had been jailed in a madhouse and routinely flogged. Eventually she’d been left for the dogs … who surprisingly weren’t interested in feasting upon her.

He tapped his fingers on the page.

Obviously, those pathetic curs weren’t the right kind of dogs, nor trained properly … nor hungry enough.

He would have to do some research. In the library. Rottweiler? Pit bull? Or a hybrid with a wolf … oh, that would be a nice touch and there were those lowlifes who bred such animals, all without papers, behind the authorities’ backs … and the place, well, that was already taken care of … He had a whip … he glanced to the wall where an ancient cat-o’nine-tails hung next to a picture of the Madonna. Oh, yesssss …

The Chosen One finally found peace. His headache abated to a dull, irritating throb. His mission was clear again. He smiled and made the sign of the cross at the altar, then he found his pinking shears and began cutting out the picture of St. Vivian … beautiful… pious … smooth skinned … just like Olivia Benchet …
Chapter Twenty-nine

“I can’t believe that you actually found this place!” Olivia exclaimed, throwing open the door. It was late Wednesday morning, and Sarah Restin, two bags sitting on the floorboards, was standing on Olivia’s front porch. “God, it’s so good to see you!” Olivia threw her arms around her friend and said, “Don’t pay any attention to the dog.” Hairy S was having his usual barking fit, running in crazy circles and setting off a chain reaction of cawing and scolding from the crows and squirrels hiding in the surrounding trees.

“I said I was coming, didn’t I?” Sarah said, holding tight and sidestepping Hairy. Olivia remembered that Sarah didn’t like animals, had a particular phobia of dogs, the result of having been bitten in the leg while riding her bike as a girl. “I just lucked out and got on an early flight… a very early flight,” Sarah said, eyeing Hairy S warily.

“But you were going to call first.”

“Well, I found directions on the Internet and thought I’d take a chance! This is great,” she added. She reached down for the handle of her roll bag. “It’s so …”

“Un-Tucson?”

“Yeah, maybe that’s it,” Sarah said, taking in everything. She’d lost weight since Olivia had seen her and her hair was shorter and a deeper shade of red, but her eyes said it all. Worry lines had sprouted near the corners and bluish circles made them appear haunted. “I was going to say it was so remote and isolated … in the middle of no-damned where.”

“Home sweet home,” Olivia teased as Sarah held her at arm’s length.

“You look great.”

“You, too.”

“But you were going to call first.”

“Un-Tucson?”

“Yeah, maybe that’s it,” Sarah said, taking in everything. She’d lost weight since Olivia had seen her and her hair was shorter and a deeper shade of red, but her eyes said it all. Worry lines had sprouted near the corners and bluish circles made them appear haunted. “I was going to say it was so remote and isolated … in the middle of no-damned where.”

“Just like the bellman at the Ritz.”

“Exactly.”

Sarah managed a small laugh as she climbed the stairs and deposited her things in the second bedroom. But a few minutes later, when they were downstairs drinking coffee laced with Baileys, she slipped into her dark mood again. “If I can’t get hold of Leo, I’m going to have to get an attorney,” she admitted and looked out the window to the bayou. Sunlight battled through a thin mist rising between the skeletal branches of the scrub oak and cypress.

“You should anyway. Just to know your rights. You need someone in your corner.”

“I suppose,” Sarah said, not sounding convinced as she dropped a hand and scratched Hairy behind his ears. The dog stretched his neck, eager for the attention. “I never, never, never thought I’d be getting a divorce. It’s just not something I believe in.”

“You’ve got yourself a menagerie here, don’t you?”

“Inherited both pets. From Grannie. But you know, now I couldn’t live without ‘em.” As if he understood he was the subject of conversation, Hairy S thumped his tail against the floorboards.

“I know, but mine are harmless, believe me. Well, unless you get your nose too close to Chia’s cage.”

“No chance of that. And him?” She motioned with one finger to the dog.
“A pussycat, but don’t tell him,” Olivia stage-whispered. “It ruins his self-image and I can’t afford canine psychotherapy.”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so. Oh, crap!” Olivia glanced at her watch. “Look, I hate to leave you, but I’ve got to work a few hours at the store, then stop by the University and drop off some books at the library. I’ll be back later, probably around six.”

“I should go into town anyway. I have a receipt for a motel where Leo was staying. I think I’ll see if I can find him.”

“Are you sure this is what you want to do? I’m getting bad vibes about it.”

“He’s my husband,” Sarah pointed out and drained her cup. She set it firmly on the table, as if she’d finally made a decision she’d been wrestling with. “I’ll try to track Leo down, find out if he can look me in the eye, and then attempt to talk to him, see if we can find any way to communicate. I should be back here in a few hours. If not, I’ll give you a call.”

Short of hog-tying Sarah, locking her in her room, and appointing Hairy S to keep her from leaving, there wasn’t much Olivia could do. “Okay,” she finally agreed, “but be careful. I mean it. We’ve got another serial killer on the loose.”

“I read that in the headlines as I walked through the airport,” Sarah said. “Creepy.” But she was obviously more interested in Leo than the killer haunting New Orleans.

“I mean it. Just don’t be careless.”

“Olivia, has anyone ever told you that you worry too much?”

“No, just the opposite, if you want to know the truth. But there’s a reason for it. Somehow I’m in tune with the killer. I actually ‘witness’ him killing the victims.”

“Witness it? Jesus!”

“Yes, like I’m there.”

“Oh, you mean those visions you have … come on, Olivia.”

“I mean it, I see these things.” Something in her expression must have convinced Sarah because she quit arguing. “So you see him kill people in those visions like you got back in Tucson when you had the horrible headaches.”

“Just more intense.”

Sarah threw her a skeptical glance. “So what have you done about it?”

“Talked to the police and installed a security system.”

“No! Are you serious?”

“Yes, let me show you how it works.” She took the time to demonstrate the system and gave Sarah the code to disengage the sensors so she could get in and out of the house without setting off the alarms.

“All right. Got it,” Sarah said, though Olivia wasn’t certain. Her friend was far more interested in her husband’s infidelity than in self-preservation.

“Good. Promise me you’ll be careful. I’m dead serious. The police think I may be a target.”

“Because of some ESP thing? Oh, come on … Really, Olivia, you do worry way too much. And I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“Sarah—”

“Okay, okay, didn’t I say I’d be careful? Truly. Now, relax. We’re going to have a great Thanksgiving!” Sarah spent the next fifteen minutes “repairing the damage” to her makeup and hair while talking incessantly about how pissed off she was at Leo, then hauled her purse with her and tore off in her rental car.

Olivia was only a few minutes behind.

As she drove into the city, she wondered how much she should confide in her friend. She’d already told her about the visions, tried to warn her, but should she say more? Sarah was going off half-cocked.

And then there were other issues, Olivia thought as she melded into the traffic near the freeway. Sarah’s rental was already out of sight. Should Olivia tell her friend about her one-night with Bentz? That she had some weird kind of fascination not only with Bentz but with a parish priest? Or how about the fact that she had a full brother somewhere, one she’d never known existed?
Gripping the steering wheel more tightly and glancing at her own worried eyes in the rearview mirror, she decided to hold her tongue. Sarah wasn’t interested anyway. Olivia had warned her friend about the killer. Now all she could offer Sarah was some compassion because Olivia had a feeling that Leo Restin was going to break his wife’s heart.

Unless Olivia could stop it.

But how?

No … wait … Maybe what Sarah needed was some friendly advice, not from Olivia, but from someone she could pour out her heart to, someone she could trust, someone who could help her help herself. For the first time since getting into the car, Olivia felt better. She knew just the person Sarah should talk to. She was Catholic, wasn’t she? And there wasn’t a more engaging priest than Father James McClaren.

_Tonight I have taken a life._ The confession had been with James ever since he’d heard it over the phone two nights earlier. He hadn’t slept a wink since. Had expected the phone to ring again and that cold whispery voice to seek reconciliation.

Tired to his bones, James walked into the nave. He was troubled, oh, so troubled. He wondered if the Father’s sense of humor was so twisted and dark that He would use James’s torment, this knowing that a murderer was on the loose and communicating with James, as his own atonement for the sins Father James had committed against his brother, against his vows, and ultimately against God Himself.

James had spent hours in prayer, more hours seeking Monsignor Roy’s counsel, and he’d always received the same advice. “Talk to God, James. This is your challenge. You must uphold the faith and trust. You cannot reveal any of the supplicant’s sins. This is part of your contract with God.” Monsignor Roy had smiled kindly, but beneath his beatific expression there had been something more. Something dark that lurked beneath the surface. An intangible shape that shifted.

James had studied enough human psychology and counseled enough couples and individuals to recognize guilt and fear when he saw them. Brothers they were, walking hand in hand. Had not James himself felt their bristly, uncomfortable presence within his own soul?

He paused at the altar and looked up at the large cross where a sculpted image of Jesus hung, His crown of thorns creating spots of red blood on His forehead, the slash in His side red and oozing blood, the nails in His hands painfully depicted. “Help me,” James whispered and genuflected. “Please.” He straightened and turned, surprised to find that there was someone near the door. Not just any woman, but the siren of his dreams.

Olivia Benchet.

His heart fluttered for an instant before he reminded himself that he would never allow himself the mistake he’d made once before. She was just another member of his scattered, disjointed flock. Forcing a warm smile that belied the torment in his soul, he walked briskly toward her. “Olivia,” he said, holding out a hand. “It’s good to see you.”

“You, too, Father.” She blushed slightly and the stain of pink accented her wide gold eyes and frivolous curly hair.

“What can I do for you?”

“I need to talk to someone,” she said and some of his resolve cracked a bit.

“You’ve come to the right place. As they say these days, we’re open twenty-four seven. The Boss likes it that way.”

She smiled, showing off white teeth that overlapped just slightly. “If you’re not busy …” She glanced toward the nave and noticed the empty pews.

“I think God’s reserved this time for you. Follow me.” He led her to his office and held the door for her. “Come in. Sit down.” As she breezed past him and took a chair, he noticed a provocative hint of jasmine lingering in her wake. His jaw clenched tight and he tried vainly to ignore the scent. He knew he should round the desk and use it as a barrier between them, that he should sit stiffly away from her, but he found it impossible. Instead he slung a leg over the corner of the desk and wrapped his arms around his abdomen.

“What’s on your mind?”

“First, I was wondering … I mean are there any records within the church of private adoptions?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about a woman, not more than a girl, who gave up a baby around thirty years ago—actually I
have the date. I got it out of the family Bible.” She rummaged in her purse and handed him a slip of paper on which she’d copied down a birth date and time. “I think it would have been handled through the Church rather than the courts. Maybe even a priest on his own. It might not have been entirely legal.”

He felt his eyebrows rise. “Not legal, but with a priest?”

“Yes. Because my grandmother was involved. The baby we’re talking about is my brother. It was before … before my mother and father were married and I don’t think my father even knew the baby existed, at least not at first. Later, I think, he found out.”

“And your mother?” James prodded, watching Olivia shake her head, her blond-streaked curls dancing in the soft light from the desk lamp.

“She doesn’t know.”

“Or she won’t say. It might be that she doesn’t want to revisit that particularly painful time.” He folded his hands over one knee and tried not to notice the way her eyebrows pulled together or the way she chewed her lower lip.

“I really don’t think Bernadette knows, and my grandmother is dead. The lawyer for my grandmother’s estate is too young and didn’t act as if he had a clue.” She looked into his eyes and he couldn’t help but stare back. There was something about her—ethereal, yet oh so earthy. Forbidden stirrings heated his blood. “I don’t know where the record would be, what parish, but I think there would be a christening around that time … I think the couple who adopted him would have been very religious. Very Catholic. My grandmother was a bit of a free spirit, you might say, but she had strong roots in her faith.” He felt himself being mesmerized, thinking thoughts he shouldn’t. “I need to find my brother, Father,” she whispered, pleading. “It’s important.”

James thought of his own brother, the pain of his estrangement, how he wished he could go back to the days when they trusted each other, fought with each other, wrestled with each other. How the bond that was so strong had been broken. Because of his weakness. Perhaps God was giving him a chance to help someone else. Perhaps this was his atonement. “Why don’t I look into it?” he offered.

“Would you?” Her face was suddenly alight and his heart buoyed. “Thank you.”

“I’m not saying I’ll be successful, but I’ll give it a try.”

A smile teased the corners of her sexy mouth. “Good. Now, there’s something else I have to ask.”

“Shoot.”

“I’d like you to meet a friend of mine,” she said suddenly.

“You know priests don’t date,” he mocked, then decided he shouldn’t joke about his vows of celibacy, but Olivia’s grin only widened. She knew he was kidding. ‘Of course I’ll meet her. Name the time and place.”

“Well, she flew in this morning and she’d kill me if she found out I was discussing this with you, but she’s having marital problems. I think she needs someone to talk to.”

“Doesn’t she have her own priest?” he asked, a bit wary as he realized his main objective had little to do with the friend and a lot to do with Olivia.

“In Tucson, yes. But she’s here now and I was hoping that you would spend some time with her. Kind of like a counseling session, I guess. She talks to me but I keep telling her to leave her husband and she doesn’t want to hear it. Sarah, that’s my friend, and Leo are both Catholic and it might make her feel better to speak to someone in the Church. Someone who could put a positive spin on the situation rather than negative like me.”

“Don’t you think that’s her decision?”

“Yes, but…” She shook her head. “I thought you might be able to find a way to help her, or them, you know, make the marriage stronger, help Leo, that’s the husband, try and work things out, if that can be accomplished, but I don’t think it’s possible.” She leaned further back in her chair. “Oh, it’s a stupid idea, I suppose.”

“No, it shows you care.” He smiled. “I just don’t want this to blow up in your face. She might think you’re overstepping your bounds, that she’s being bullied or ganged up on, as if this was some kind of intervention.”

Sighing, Olivia tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair. “Maybe we could be more subtle.” She glanced up at him and he saw the gleam in her tawny eyes, knew the gears in her mind were turning. “Maybe you could just come to the house. For a visit.”

“I suppose,” he drawled, not certain he liked the way this sounded. It was too much like a pre-teen plot to suit his tastes.

“Then if she wants to talk, fine, and if she doesn’t, well, we haven’t offended her and I promise I won’t push
“... so I just don’t get it,” Jay whined and Kristi, sitting on the edge of the bed cringed as she held the phone to her ear. “Why won’t you have dinner with my family?”

“Because my dad’s alone.”

“I thought you weren’t getting along with him,” Jay grumbled.

“I wasn’t. But I’m trying.”

“I guess that’s cool. But you still could come over. We need to hook up. It’s been a long time.”

Tell him. Break up with him now.

“I miss you.” “Jay, I—”

“And I love you, baby.”
Oh, God, she felt like a heel, but she couldn’t force the words out.

“Look. We do need to talk.”

There was silence. She heard the drum of her own heartbeat.

“Jay?”

“I said ‘I love you.’ ”

“I know, but—”

“Hell, Kristi. What’s got into you? Ever since you went up to All Saints, you’ve changed. I think that place is weird, man. It’s doin’ weird stuff to you.”

“Maybe I’m just finding out who I really am.”

“Oh, that’s such bullshit and you know it. That’s what people say when they don’t want to talk about what’s really bugging ‘em.” His voice became a high falsetto. “I’m finding myself. I’m getting in touch with my inner woman. I need to have new experiences.” His voice lowered again. “I call it bullshit.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she said. No reason to deny it. “It is kinda weird up there, different from high school, but it’s supposed to be. It’s college.”

“Yeah, and so you take a couple of crap psychology and philosophy classes and now you’re so into finding yourself that I don’t even know you. Listen ... maybe we should just break up.”

“Maybe we should.”

There was a sharp intake of breath. “Jesus, Kristi, listen to us. We love each other. Don’t we?”

“I don’t know, Jay,” she admitted, leaning back on the headboard and feeling tears burn at the back of her eyes. She’d thought she’d loved him. But that was high school. Before she’d graduated. Before she’d learned that her dad wasn’t really her dad and her uncle … oh, God … She knew she’d run off to college primarily to get away from the mess. *Avoidance* and *Denial*, stuff weird Dr. Sutter talked about all the time … and Jay was right on that score. Some of the people up at All Saints—Dr. Sutter, Dr. Franz and Dr. Northrup included—were definitely beyond “eccentric.” Between them, oddball Lucretia, that nerdy Willie Davis who always took a seat behind her in Psychology and stared at her, and the dykie swim coach, All Saints had more than its share
of Looney Tunes.

“‘You don’t know,’ Jay repeated, disgust tainting his words. ‘Well don’t you think you’d better figure it out? Oh, shit. I get it. You found someone didn’t you? Holy crap, you’ve only been up there a few months and you’re already cheatin’ on me. Damn it, Kristi, what is it with you?’”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” she said, matching his anger with her own, then slamming the receiver down, standing, then giving the punching bag a quick kick. So this was the beginning of the end. Big deal. The truth was she’d outgrown Jay. It was better to let him find someone else.

Because she had Brian.

The alarm shrieked.

Olivia sat straight up in bed.

Over and over again the sirens bleated. Her dream disappeared. Oh, God, someone was really breaking into her house! She shot out of bed. Hairy S, barking angry, belated warnings, was already at the bedroom door, eager to charge into the hallway.

The gun … Shit! The shotgun was down in the closet behind the slickers and boots … oh, God, no … Her mind cleared, and over the rapid-fire screams of the alarm, she heard her name and a stream of swearing that would make a sailor blush.

Sarah!

Olivia flew out of the bedroom and down the stairs to find Sarah, reeking of gin, at the control panel for the security system. Cursing and red-faced, she was frantically pushing buttons. “How the hell do you turn this damned thing off?” she yelled as the alarm continued to shrill.

“Here …”

Someone pounded on the door. “Open up. Police!”

“Holy shit,” Sarah said as Olivia punched in the appropriate numbers and the alarm went suddenly quiet.

“It’s all right, Officer! I’m coming!” Olivia shouted just as the door splintered open and two plainclothes officers, weapons drawn, burst into the front hallway. Sarah screamed. Hairy was still barking his fool head off.

Olivia and Sarah threw their hands in the air. “It’s okay, it’s okay, she didn’t know how to disengage the security system!” Slowly, the officers lowered their sidearms.

“You’re sure everything’s all right?” the heavyset one with the crewcut asked.

“Yes! Didn’t you see Sarah drive in?” Olivia demanded, her arms coming down to her sides.

Sarah, holding one hand splayed over her heart, braced her back against the wall. “Jesus,” she whispered. “Jesus.”

“We did see her drive in. But the alarm went off. We couldn’t take a chance,” the younger one with the square jaw insisted.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Sarah demanded.

“They’re watching the house,” Olivia said, not knowing whether to be angry or relieved. On the one hand, she was furious that her privacy had been breached; on the other, she was grateful that the police were nearby in case there had been an intruder. “I told you that I could be a target for the serial killer.”

“You were serious? God,” Sarah whispered, the color draining from her face.

“We’re fine,” Olivia told the officers. “The system’s new, my friend is here visiting, and she isn’t used to dealing with this …” Olivia gestured to the control panel.

“If you’re sure.”

“I said we’re okay.” The officers helped secure the door again, though the door frame would have to be repaired, the lock replaced. Once the officers had left, Sarah followed Olivia upstairs. A few minutes later Sarah had changed into faux leopard pajamas and was brushing her teeth in the bathroom. Olivia flipped down the lid of the toilet and sat with her knees pulled to her chin.

“I nearly peed in my pants,” Sarah admitted around a mouth full of foam. “Jesus, it’s like we’re part of a stakeout.”

“It’s part of Bentz’s plan.”

“Who’s Bentz?”
Olivia hesitated. “The detective in charge of locating the killer.”

“Tell me about him,” Sarah said, her eyes narrowing as she gave her teeth a final swipe, then spit into the sink.

Olivia summed up the last week or so, giving her a quick rundown of what had been happening and how Bentz had been involved, though she sidestepped the part about sleeping with the cop. But Sarah glanced at her friend in the mirror before leaning under the tap and rinsing her mouth. “You like that guy, don’t you?” she asked, straightening.

“He’s okay.”

“No, I mean you really like him, like in a boy-meets-girl, well, more like a woman-man sort of way.”

“As I said, ‘He’s okay.’”

“Don’t bullshit me.” She turned, folded her arms over her chest. “You’re falling for the cop. My God, Olivia, are you out of your ever-lovin’ mind?”

“I’m not falling for him.”

“Bullshit! I don’t sell tons of Dr. Miranda’s Love Beads to lovesick teenagers and don’t recognize the symptoms. You’ve got the hots for Detective Bentz! Oh, no, don’t tell me you’re into handcuffs and some of that weird kind of stuff that I sell.”

“No, not that it’s any of your business. And since when are you the expert on love?”

“Well…” She sighed and shook her head. “Maybe not, considering the situation.” Ducking her head under the sink, she rinsed her mouth a final time, then wiped her lips with the sleeve of her pajamas. “So don’t try to dodge the issue, you’d like to be involved with the cop.”

“It’s not going to happen,” Olivia said, drawing her knees up to her chest and balancing her bare feet on the edge of the toilet lid. She felt like a kid at a slumber party discussing the new boy in school. “So tell me, what happened to you tonight?”

“Nothin’ good.”

“You find Leo?”

Sarah shook her head. “I think he was with her, the bitch he met at that convention in Nashville.”

“You’re sure?”

“No, but I called her.”

“What?” Olivia shrieked. Oh, no, this wasn’t good.

“Yeah, I had a couple of martinis and got up my nerve. Phoned her at her place.” She turned to the mirror and plucked an errant hair from the corner of one eyebrows.

“You didn’t.”

“Sure did. He’s my husband.” Sarah seemed proud of herself.

Olivia groaned. “I don’t think I want to know what happened.”

“I told her to back off.”

“And?”

“She hung up. I called back and the phone just rang and rang. She must’ve unplugged it.”

“You really think Leo was there?”

“Probably. The chicken shit!” Some of the starch left her spine. With a sad, humiliated sigh, she closed her eyes. “Oh, Olivia,” she said, resting her forehead on the mirror. “What am I going to do?”

“For now, you’re going to bed. It’s late. We’ll talk in the morning. Maybe things will be clearer.”

“I doubt it, but,” she said, her shoulders sagging, “I’m beginning to think you’re right. Somehow I’ve got to get over Leo. This … this emotional tornado we’re in is killin’ me.

“Then we’ll cook up a storm for Thanksgiving.”

Sarah managed a smile. “Turkey, stuffing, sweet-potato pie … comfort food.”

“And maybe I’ll whip up a surprise,” Olivia said with a wink as she snapped off the bathroom light. It was a long shot, considering Sarah’s current state of mind, but maybe Father James McClaren could help.

“You’re going to work on Thanksgiving?” Kristi groaned from beneath the covers.
“Someone has to keep the streets of this city safe for law-abiding citizens, ma’am.” Bentz was standing in the doorway of her room, staring at the lump in the middle of the bed that was his daughter.

“Save me,” she said.

“It’s just for a couple of hours.”

“Oh, yeah, right. I’ve heard that one before.”

“I’ll be back in time to get the turkey into the oven.”

“You’re actually cooking?” She lowered one edge of the coverlet and opened a bleary eye. Bentz drew in a swift breath. Sometimes, in the right light, Kristi looked enough like her mother to stop him short. “I thought we’d go out to a restaurant and a movie or somethin’,” she said around a yawn.

“Didn’t you see the turkey in the refrigerator?” he asked.

“I figured it was just for show. Like the false face of a building. That you were trying to impress me.”

“It’s the real thing, kiddo. But did I?”

“Impress me? No!” Then she giggled the way she had when she was a little girl, and the sound brought back memories of a happier time. “Well, yeah, you did, okay. I’m superimpressed. Now go, leave me alone. What time is it anyway?” She lifted her head off the pillow. “Eight-fifteen? On Thanksgiving? Are you crazy, Dad?”

“Some people think so.”

“Well, they’re right!” She pulled the blankets over her head and rolled over. “You can wake me up around noon. Maybe.”

“Count on it. You’re on to mash the potatoes.”

She groaned again as he slid out of the room and closed the door behind him. It was nice to have her back, even if she was a little grumpy. He’d missed her. When she’d lived at home, they’d fought all the time, about her curfew, her grades, her boyfriend, her attitude. She’d been quick to point out that he was far from being fault-free. His being a cop “sucked,” her having to clean up the place was part of his “medieval thinking,” her lack of a car was “the worst,” and the fact that he suspected her of having sex was a violation of a basic trust issue. When he’d left some condoms on her dresser, she’d been “grossed out” and accused him of being jealous because he “wasn’t getting any.”

Living with her the last three months had been hell.

And he missed it. He drove to the station and joined the crew that had elected to work the holiday. The first thing he saw was a report that Olivia’s new security system had gone off the night before last. The officers indicated it had been a mistake, a friend had tripped the alarm and not been able to reset it at one-thirty in the morning.

Bentz dialed her number. She answered groggily. “Hello?”

His heart twisted a little. “It’s Rick. I heard you had trouble the other night.”

“Oh … no, Sarah’s visiting … my friend from Tucson. She was out late and the alarm system got the better of her.” Her voice sounded thick, still full of sleep, and he remembered how it had been to hold her and smell her scent all night long, to hear her soft breath as she cuddled up next to him.

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“Fine … fine …” she said and explained what had happened. Her story gelled with the report and she promised that she’d get the door fixed permanently after the holidays, then later, as she sounded a little clearer, she thanked him for calling and wished him a “Happy Thanksgiving,” but he heard the change in her tone, the wariness. Somehow she’d found a way to deal with the fact that whatever they’d shared the other night couldn’t be repeated. And it bothered him. Not that he wanted her clinging to some belief that they actually could have something together, but the fact that he knew it would never work. The world seemed a little colder when he hung up and severed the connection.

Refusing to dwell on stupid romantic visions, he checked his e-mail and in-basket and made some calls, hoping to come up with an ID of either of the newly found victims.

So far, he didn’t have IDs or an autopsy report on either, but the cause of death was pretty evident and he was fairly certain that the times of death would coincide with the timing of Olivia’s visions. If they were lucky, the killer had slipped up and the crime scene team had found some evidence linking someone to the murder scene—a hair, a piece of fabric, skin under one of the victim’s fingernails, a fingerprint left carelessly, a tire track, a witness who’d seen a car or truck … anything.
They just needed a break—one tiny break. Something more concrete than Olivia’s revelations.

*Olivia.* Even though he’d called her earlier he’d tried not to think too much about her and had attempted to close his mind to all thoughts of the night he’d shared with her. Nonetheless he was worried about her and had checked to make sure that her place was being kept under police watch. He only prayed the killer wouldn’t strike again soon.

Oh, yeah, and why not?

Sipping bitter coffee, he glanced down the list he’d put together on a legal pad, a list of martyred women saints whose feast days were coming up. It wasn’t good news. In the next few weeks the calendar was ass-deep in feast days and Bentz had written down the ones that he expected would appeal to the killer.

December second, St. Vivian or Bibiana, flogged and left for the dogs; December ninth, St. Gorgonia, trampled by a team of mules, her bones crushed, her internal organs mashed to a pulp. She supposedly survived not only the trampling—oh, yeah, right—but some other form of paralysis, to end up dying of “natural causes.”

Then there was December thirteenth, the feast day of St. Lucy. Lucy had been hitched to a team of oxen who couldn’t budge her. When the oxen failed to drag her to death or pull her apart, she was tortured by having her eyes ripped out before she was set afire. Apparently she survived the blaze because she ended up being stabbed to death.


A priest?

He didn’t think so.

He shoved his notes aside. The feast days he’d pulled were only a few, those celebrating the deaths of martyrs before the middle of the December. There were more … lots more. With each day that passed.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Bentz stood and looked out the window to the gray, wet day. Pigeons fluttered and cooed, perching beneath the eaves.

In New York there was the traditional parade, while all around the country, people were hosting their families, gorging themselves, and sitting around the television to watch football.

But here, in New Orleans, there was a killer. And he was waiting, ready to strike again.
Chapter Thirty

“I told you I know nothin’ about any of these murders and I don’t ‘preciate my ass being dragged down here on Thanksgivin’.” Reggie Benchet’s eyes glittered angrily as he sat under the harsh fluorescent glare in the interrogation room. His scrawny butt was balanced on the edge of a battered chair, his elbows propped on the table. Thin to the point of being gaunt, appearing older than his sixty-eight years, he spat a stream of tobacco juice into a tin can on the floor. “Now, do I need a lawyer? You gonna charge me with somethin’ or you gonna let me walk out of here?” Pointing a gnarled finger at Bentz, he added, “I know my rights. You cain’t hold me without chargin’ me, so unless you boys come up with somethin’, I got me a Thanksgivin’ dinner to go to.”

“Where?”

“It don’t matter none, but at my girlfriend’s place.”

Bentz checked his notes. “Claudette DuFresne?”

“Yeah, but don’t you be botherin’ her now, not on the holiday. She’s got herself a bad heart and she don’t need any trouble.”

“She was arrested for selling crack,” Bentz said, flipping through a two-page rap sheet that included everything from soliciting to dealing. “Yeah, she’s a real sweethear.”

“That was a few years back. She’s cleaned herself up and taken Jesus into her heart. She’s a good Christian woman, takes care of her sick ma and works down ta the senior center in Lafayette.” He scrabbled in a pocket of his shirt and pulled out a pack of Camel straights. “Mind if I smoke?” He didn’t wait for an answer and lit up, chewing and smoking all at once. A tobacco company exec’s dream consumer.

“You found God yourself, didn’t ya?”

“That I did and you all can rest easy that I’ll be sendin’ up prayers for your souls.”

“You’re not a priest,” Montoya interjected from his spot near the door. His arms were folded over his chest, his usually neat goatee a little ratty, and he was wearing an I’m-not-buying-it expression.

“But you were Catholic?”

“Me? Hell, no. That was my wife. ‘Scuse me, my ex-wife. Bernadette.” He shook his head violently, as if he were trying to dislodge water from inside his ear. “Now there’s a woman I should never have gotten myself hitched to.”

“Let’s talk about that.”

“Ancient history.”

“You had three children with her.”

His smile faded. He spat again.

“We know that one daughter survived and another drowned as a toddler, but you had a son as well.”

“For all the good it did me. No one ever told me ‘bout the boy, y’know. I suspected, though, found some old doctor bills when I was married to Bernadette, but she always got real quiet and claimed she had a miscarriage. Years later, when I was locked up, she came clean. I guess her conscience got the better of her and she wrote me a letter, told me the boy was out there, she just didn’t know where. I did what I could from prison, which wasn’t much. Once I tried to get more information from her, then from her mother, and even from the doc. But he was dead. I didn’t get squat.”

“And that’s where you left it?”

He paused, took a long drag, then blew a smoke ring to the ceiling. “Not me. That there’s my only boy and he was took from me. Thirty damned years ago. I ain’t done lookin’ for him.”

“Maybe we can help,” Bentz offered.

“And why would you do that?”
“We’re looking for him, too.”
Reggie was instantly wary. “Why?”
“We just need to talk to him, like we’re talking to you,” Montoya explained.
Reggie’s eyebrows drew together. “I don’t see how. If you don’t know who he is, why do you need to talk to
him?”
“We think he can help us.”
Reggie wasn’t buying it. “No way—”
“I thought you wanted to see your boy. Tell us what you know.”
Hesitating, stalling for time, Reggie mashed out his Camel, leaving a piece of it to smolder. “You’ll quit
hasslin’ me then?”
“If you’ve kept your nose clean.”
“Shit, yes, I have. You talk to my parole officer. He’ll tell ya so himself.”
“So what’ve you got?”
He snorted and finally lifted a thin shoulder. “Not much. I told you that already. All I know is that Virginia
told me it was a private adoption, and by that I’m sure she meant illegal, and no one would ever find out. A
priest had handled the whole damned thing and he was sworn to secrecy. But while I was doin’ time, I
remembered another inmate who told me about a Father Harris or Henry, who got himself in a passel of
trouble. Not only was he sellin’ babies and pocketin’ the money, but he got caught with his pants down. With a
fifteen-year-old boy.”
“He was charged?” Bentz asked. Now they were getting somewhere.
Montoya’s eyes glittered in interest.
“I don’t think so. According to the inmate—Victor Spitz—the boy was paid off, the charges dropped, and the
priest was moved out of state.”
“You say his name was Henry or Harris?”
“That’s what I was told.”
“First name? Or last?”
“That I don’t know,” Reggie shook his head. “That’s all I can tell ya,” he said and checked his watch again.
“Now… I expect a ride back to Lafayette before my damned dinner gets cold and I find myself in the
doghouse.”
“You didn’t! You didn’t invite a priest to dinner,” Sarah said, horrified. She was folding bread cubes into
sautéed vegetables, turkey giblets, and oysters, all of which she claimed were part of her mother’s “famous”
stuffing. “Why?”
Peeling parboiled sweet potatoes, Olivia said, “I could lie to you and say that he seemed lonely and that I like
him and that I wanted him to feel included in some kind of Thanksgiving tradition and it wouldn’t really be a
lie, but the real reason is that I did it because of you, because you seem depressed and I thought—”
“You don’t have to say a word to him, okay?”
“Good, ‘cuz I won’t.” Sarah was livid. She stirred the giblets with a vengeance.
“I was just trying to help.”
Sarah set her mixing spoon aside and let out a long, calming breath. “Yeah, I know and I appreciate it, really,
but … I just need to talk to Leo.”
Olivia wasn’t about to argue.
Two hours later when the doorbell rang and Hairy S ran howling to the front door, she wondered if she’d
made a mistake. “Great, the priest’s here,” Sarah said, still keeping her distance from the dog. “Just what we
need.”
“You’ll like him.”
“Oh, come on …”
“Just … relax. Have a good time.” Olivia threw open the door and found Father James dressed in slacks,
casual sweater, and a bomber jacket. Bent on one knee, he eyed the damage to her lock. Beside him on the
“Have a little trouble?” he asked, looking up at her, and she was reminded that he was too good-looking to be a priest. Square jaw, thick hair, wide shoulders, and a killer smile that didn’t quite touch his eyes.

“A little. Alarm system malfunction.”

“And the door blew up?”

“Was kicked in by the police,” she said and realized he probably thought the security company had sent the cops. No reason to explain. “Come in,” she invited as, while still crouched, he extended his hand, allowing the dog to sniff it cautiously. “That’s Hairy S, he came with the house.”

“No doubt a selling feature.” Blue eyes flashed humor.

“Depends upon your point of view.”

He straightened and dusted off his hands. “I can fix that for you,” he said, motioning toward the doorjamb.

“That’s right, you’re the handyman priest. That would be great. But maybe later. Right now, come on in. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Sarah stood by the bookcase inside the front door.

Olivia motioned to her friend. “Sarah Restin, Father James McClaren.”

“You’re a priest?” Sarah was obviously skeptical as she eyed his casual attire.

“That’s right, but I left my alb in the car,” he joked and took her hand in his. “Nice to meet you.”

“You … you, too.” Stunned, she looked him up and down as Olivia ushered them into the kitchen.

Father James offered the bottle of wine. “My contribution to dinner.”

“Thanks. We’ll eat in about half an hour. In the meantime, you can do the honors.” Olivia handed him a corkscrew. He poured wine and they each had a glass. Any reservations Sarah had seemed to melt away as they talked and got to know each other. Father James carved the turkey as Olivia placed dishes on the table and Sarah lit candles. Hairy S settled into his spot near the back door, Chia chortled, and once he’d held chairs out for each of the women, Father James sat at the table, bowed his head, and said a short grace. They talked about everything and nothing and Olivia thought again what a waste it was that he’d accepted a calling with the Church. He would have made a great husband and, she assumed, would have been a fabulous father.

He joked, was effusive about the meal, and helped clear the table. After the dishes were stacked near the sink, he insisted that Olivia bring out her grandfather’s tool box, then went to work on the door.

“He’s not like any priest I’ve ever met,” Sarah said as she whipped cream for the pie while Olivia wrapped the leftovers in plastic wrap. “I mean … he looks like he should be on a soap opera, for God’s sake. He brings wine and then fixes things … and, if I didn’t know better, I think he’s got the hots for you.”

“The ‘hots’? Come on. He’s married to the Church.” Olivia felt heat crawl up her neck.

“Church-smurch, he’s still a man.” Sarah sneaked a peek past the archway and bit her lip. Over the whir of the mixer she said, “I know he was trying to hide it, but I’ll bet you the deed to the store that he would be great in bed!”

“Don’t even say it! Sarah!”

“Come on, admit it. Haven’t you ever wondered what it would be like to do it with a priest?”

“No!”

“Why? Because you’re in love with the cop?” She pulled a face.

“I’m not in love with anyone,” Olivia insisted as Chia whistled and the mixer whined. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and started to pour coffee. “So hush.”

But Sarah’s smile was positively naughty. “I’m just telling you if I was single and that man looked at me the way he looked at you over dinner, I don’t know if I could contain myself.”

“Enough!” She glared at her guest, and Sarah, rolling her eyes, turned her attention to the cream again.

“I think we’re about there … See, it’s the stiff peak stage.”

“The stiff peak stage … ?”

Sarah burst out laughing as she switched off the mixer and disconnected one of the beaters.

“You’re bad, Sarah Restin.”

“Don’t I know it?” Licking whipped cream off the beater and winking, she proved her point.
“Save me!” But Olivia laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Father James asked as he appeared in the doorway. He was wiping his hands on a handkerchief.

Both women laughed even harder.

“I think I missed the joke,” Father James said.

“It’s nothing. We were just being silly.” Olivia shot Sarah a warning glare. “My houseguest has a vivid imagination.” To change the subject, she walked through the archway and looked toward the front of the house.

“So, is my door fixed?”

“Good as new.” He showed her his handiwork and explained how he’d managed to fix the lock. “A little paint and no one will be the wiser.”

“How can I repay you?” she asked and from the corner of her eye saw Sarah lift a suggestive eyebrow.

“Dinner was a start,” he said, and one side of his mouth curved upward. “Maybe I could convince you to attend mass once in a while.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” she teased, “but sure. Maybe. Now, come on, we can have dessert in the living room. Why don’t you see if you can find something decent to listen to on the radio and I’ll light a fire?”

“Leave that to me,” he said. “Just point me in the direction of the woodshed. I was an Eagle Scout, you know.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

For the next hour, while a fire crackled in the old grate and smooth jazz compliments of WSLJ played through Grannie Gin’s ancient radio, they made small talk. Father James was as charming as ever but Olivia noticed that beneath his veneer of affability and calm, there was a hint of tension, a disturbance that was visible only upon occasion, something dark in his blue eyes.

Sarah was right. He was handsome. Even drop-dead gorgeous. Though Olivia tried to ignore the feeling, she noticed a little spark, a connection whenever he looked at her. It was almost as if there were an unspoken message in his gaze—an unasked question, one, she was certain, would scare her to death if she knew what it was.

And it bothered her. He was a priest, for God’s sake. Any bond she felt for him was unthinkable, perhaps her imagination working double time. She couldn’t think of Father James McClaren as anything but a man of God. She wouldn’t.

First the cop; now the priest.

No way. She sat on one end of Grannie Gin’s lumpy couch, he on the other. Sarah, more relaxed than she’d been since she’d shown up on Olivia’s front porch, kicked off her shoes and tucked her stocking feet beneath her as she slowly rocked in Grannie’s old swivel chair.

Olivia thought about Sarah’s observation—what it would be like to make love to a priest.

For God’s sake, it’s only been a few days since you were with Bentz.

She felt the heat wash up her face but managed to keep up with the conversation, which was turning toward Sarah and her life in Tucson. Sarah, gesturing as she spoke, explained that she and Olivia had owned a store together and it had “never been the same” since Olivia had returned to Louisiana.

This was a good time to make a quick exit and leave Sarah to talk to the priest. Olivia excused herself and started on the dishes, refusing all help in the kitchen, claiming the room was too small for more than one person and she could probably work faster by herself.

Sarah didn’t put up much of a fight, and when Olivia hazarded a glance through the open doorway, she noticed that Sarah had moved to the couch, was deep in conversation with Father James, and was dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. Good. Now, if she could make herself scarce without being obvious about it.

She washed, dried, and put away the dishes, wiped down the counters and table, even swept the floor. Over the soft hum of music, she heard Sarah talking rapidly, her words punctuated with sobs, then Father James’s deeper, calmer voice. Maybe he was helping her; getting through to her. Olivia crossed her fingers and sent up a prayer that Sarah would somehow find a way to come to terms with her marriage and Leo, the jerk of a husband.

Olivia was about to offer an after-dinner drink when the phone rang, and for a heartbeat, she thought Bentz might be calling again. “Hello?”
“Hello, darlin’.” She froze. Recognized the voice. Her heart turned to stone. What did she have to say to her father? “Just wanted to wish you a Happy Thanksgivin’.”

“The—same to you,” she managed, though she wasn’t sure she meant it.

“I don’t have time to stop by today and like as not you’ve got other things goin’ on, but someday, Livvie, we need to see each other and catch up on old times. I’m a man of God now. A minister. You can talk to me.”

“There were no old times, Reggie.” She had to nip this father-daughter thing in the bud.

“See, here? That’s ‘xactly what I’m talkin’ ‘bout. We need to bridge some rifts, darlin’.”

“Please, don’t call me that. Not ever again. You can call me Olivia.”

“Hell, that ain’t no fun.”

She was bristling now, angry that he’d disturbed her holiday. “You know, Reggie, for a minister, you swear a lot.”

“Maybe I’m from the Church of Tellin’ It Like It Is. I just called to wish you a good day.” She could tell he was about to hang up and thought twice about her harsh words. After all, it was Thanksgiving.

“Wait,” she said. “Look, I, uh, hope you have a good day, okay?” That was the best she could do.

“I will, Olivia.”

“Reggie? There’s something I want to ask you,” she said, barreling on. Since he’d called, she may as well take advantage of it. “I was digging through some things of Grannie Gin’s and I found a note that I have an older brother. Bernadette confirmed it, but she couldn’t tell me where he is or even if he’s alive. I was thinking you might know something.”

“Well, don’t that beat all? Not a word about the kid in thirty years and now twice in one day. I don’t know nothin’ more than I told that detective who had the nerve to haul me down to New Orleans on Thanksgivin’. I told him everything I know, which isn’t a helluva lot. The boy was kept a secret from me. Your damned mother, she never gave me a chance to know my own son!” He was agitated, his raspy voice strained. “Why all the interest now?”

“Because I never knew about him before.”

“What about the cop?”

“That’s between you and him,” she said. “I assume it’s about a case.”

“Hell, yes, a case. He had the nerve to ask me where I was when those women were kilt. Like I’d know! You fuck up once and the system gets ya, Li wie. I’ll never be free even though I did my time. Anytime there’s trouble, the cops, they’ll be knockin’ on my door.”

“Listen, if you track that brother of yours down, you tell him he’s got a pa—a real one—who’d like to meet him. Seems the whole fam-damn-ily is a helluva lot more interested in him than they are in his father. Goodbye, Olivia,” he said angrily and hung up so loudly Olivia jumped. Well, fine.

After replacing the receiver, she decided to pour herself an after-dinner drink. That was the way Reggie Benchet affected her. He drove her straight to the bottle. Scrounging through the cupboards, she found half a pint of Black Velvet and added a healthy shot to her coffee. “Cheers,” she muttered to herself and heard Sarah’s voice droning on over the faint sounds of jazz. Good. With a smile, she took a sip. Not bad. She hummed as she finished putting the last pot away.

The phone jangled again.

Now who? Admonishing herself for a fool, she couldn’t help but hope Bentz was calling again.

“Olivia, let me talk to Sarah,” Leo Restin said without so much as a “hi,” or “hello.” Great. “I know she’s there. She called a friend of mine last night, so get her on the line.”

“Leo—”

“Now!” he ordered. Olivia didn’t like his tone of voice. She looked at the receiver, then promptly hung up.

“Bastard,” she whispered before taking another swallow from her cup. “How do you like those apples?”

The phone rang sharply. She considered unplugging the damned thing and let Leo stew in his own juices. She drained her cup.

On the fourth ring, she answered sweetly, “Hello?”

“Olivia, don’t you hang up on me,” Leo commanded.
“Uh-oh? Not nice, Leo. You can’t boss people around.” She dangled the receiver over its cradle.

“Olivia!”

Sighing, she held the phone to her ear.

Leo was nearly choking with rage. “I want to talk to my wife, and if you don’t put her on the goddamned line, I’ll come over there and—” She dropped the receiver again and considered another drink, but the phone rang immediately. She picked it up. Before she could say a word, Leo said, “Please put my wife on the phone.” His voice was strained. He was forcing the words between clenched teeth.

“Then behave, Leo. It’s Thanksgiving,” she said.

“You have no right to—”

“Oh, ah, aahh.”

“Okay, okay. Just let me talk to her.”

Olivia was considering hanging up again when she looked up and found Father James standing in the archway, his blue eyes trained on her. “Trouble?” he asked.

“Nothing serious. Leo Restin is on the phone. Does Sarah want to talk to him?”

As if she’d been lurking around the corner, Sarah shot into the kitchen. “I thought I heard you say his name,” she charged. Her eyes were still wet, tears clinging to her lashes, but she threw Olivia a how-dare-you-screen-my-calls look and snatched the phone from her hands. “Hello?” she said brokenly, then the tears began to roll rapidly down her cheeks again. “Oh, God, Leo, where are you? I’ve been so worried …” She turned an ostracizing shoulder toward Olivia, who, shaking her head, poured each of them a healthy shot then, as Sarah whispered, sniffed, and sobbed into the phone, carried their drinks into the living room.

Hairy S, snoring softly, was curled beneath the window.

“Did you get through to her?” Olivia asked as they settled onto the couch.

Father James took a sip of his drink. “Privileged information,” he said. “Confidential.”

“I just want to help.”

“You’ve done all you can. Now it’s up to Sarah and Leo.”

“Jerk,” Olivia muttered. She wanted to confide in Father James, to tell him what a no-good, two-timing, mean-as-the-devil creep Leo Restin was, but she kept her comments to the one word. Before she had a chance to second-guess herself, Sarah swept out of the kitchen.

“I’ve got to go. Leo wants to meet.” Her eyes were bright with hope, a tremulous smile upon her lips.

Olivia was certain her friend’s heart was going to be ripped out and stomped on all over again. “Are you sure —?”

“Yes! And I don’t have any time for a lecture. I’ll tell you all about it when I get back—” She started for the staircase then thought better of it. Hurrying back to the living room, she extended her hand to the priest. “Thank you, Father,” she said. “You … you really helped.” And then she was gone, racing up the stairs, rattling around in the bathroom and flying back down again. “I’ll see you later,” she said to Olivia and then winked wickedly.

She was out the door before Olivia could clap a hand to her forehead. “This is never gonna work.”

“That’s her decision.”

“I know, I know, but she did come here, to my house, broken into a million pieces.”

“Maybe not so many,” James said and sipped from his coffee cup as the strains of an old Frank Sinatra tune filled the room. Red embers glowed as the fire hissed and sparked. The whiskey was taking effect. Olivia’s bones melted a bit and she nudged off her shoes with her toes. Looking at James seated at the far end of the couch, his long legs stretched in front of him, she felt lucky that he was there. Without his clerical collar, he seemed so real. So approachable. So downright male.

He stared at the fire, his brow knit in concentration, his jaw hard. A scholar’s mind, an athlete’s body, usually hidden beneath a priest’s vestments.

“Something’s bothering you.”

“Me?” He glanced up at her and flashed a quick smile. “Nah.”
“Yes, there is … and don’t try to deny it. I’m a little bit of a psychic, you know.” When he didn’t respond, she added, “It’s true. My grandmother used to read tarot cards and tea leaves, and even though she was a devout Catholic, she dabbled in voodoo.”

“How does one ‘dabble’ in something like that?” he asked.

“Well, voodoo isn’t all about killing chickens and pushing pins in dolls to curse people, you know.”

“I do know.” He slid her a glance. “I’ve studied all kinds of religion and theology and not just through the seminary. It’s one of my passions.”

“Any other ones?”

He chuckled. “Oh, yeah …” he said and his voice softened but he didn’t elaborate. “What about you?”

“Uh-uh. We weren’t talking about me. I said that something’s troubling you and you tried to change the subject.”

“Even priests have problems,” he admitted and she watched as firelight played upon the sharp angles of his face. Yes, there was something bothering him, a sadness he tried to hide.

“Maybe I can help.”

“You have. Already.” Edging a little closer, he took her hand in his and she was surprised to feel calluses upon his skin. “Just inviting me here, letting me be a part of your little family of friends, that helped. It reminded me of what it feels like to be a part of a family.” He held her hand a second longer than necessary, then dropped it.

Olivia’s breath caught. “I had ulterior motives because of Sarah. Besides, you have a family.”

His eyes darkened even more. “That I do.”

“Where are they?”

“Around. But… my folks are gone, one a year after the other, and I’ve got a half-brother but we don’t see each other that often.” He stared at her for a few seconds, his concentration intense, and she suspected he was waging some kind of inner battle. “I think I’d better go.” Placing his hands on his knees, he stood quickly, as if he were afraid he might change his mind. “I’m on duty later.”

“A priest’s work is never done?” she quipped.

“Amen, sister.”

They laughed and the tension between them broke; she was able to breathe again as she walked him to the door. “Thanks for coming and talking with Sarah.”

“Anytime.” His voice was soft and she knew he meant it. Maybe Sarah was right, she thought, retrieving his jacket and watching as he slid his arms through the sleeves. He looked down at her, his dark hair falling over his forehead and the intensity of his gaze damn near heart-stopping. She had the unlikely urge to kiss him goodbye, just a brush of her lips over one cheek, but she didn’t dare.

He reached into his pocket. “Oh. I nearly forgot,” he said, retrieving a folded piece of paper. “These are all matters of public record, so I’m not breaking any Church laws here, but it’s a list of the christenings during the time you mentioned. Because of the birth date, I’ve narrowed it down quite a bit. I hope it helps.”

“It will,” she promised him as he handed her the computer printout. “Thanks.”

“The least I could do.” This time she thought he might lean down and graze his lips over her temple, but he didn’t, and if he’d even considered it, he held back. “Goodbye, Olivia.” He squeezed her hand. “Don’t be a stranger. The door to God’s house is always open.” She watched as he turned his collar to the wind and jogged to his car.

James felt Olivia’s gaze. It seemed to burn right through his jacket. Gritting his teeth against the heat flooding his veins, he didn’t stop running until he reached his Chevy. Gazing into her eyes had been his undoing, and the hard-on stretching the crotch of his slacks was evidence enough of that. What the devil was wrong with him? He climbed into his four-door, started the engine and waved. As if he wasn’t thinking about jetting out of the car, running back to the porch, swooping her off of her feet and carrying her up the stairs so that he could bed her. That’s what he wanted.

To strip her of her clothes, climb atop her body and bury himself in her as deep as he could. He hazarded a last glance in her direction. She’d picked up the dog and was holding the scruffy little beast to her chest as she leaned against the siding on the porch.

It wasn’t just sex he craved. It was all of it. His heart ached. A beautiful woman, a cozy little cabin in the
woods, and a mutt of a dog. All the things he’d given up in life. For his calling. For God. Because he believed. He’d always believed and he knew in his heart that he could help others with their faith, that it was his purpose on life, God’s plan for him.

Gritting his teeth, he stepped hard on the accelerator and the car sped over a little bridge to land in the rutted, leaf-strewn lane. He couldn’t allow himself to have these doubts. Not now. Not ever. Because it wouldn’t take much to propel him into taking a step over the threshold of sin. He cranked the wheel at the main road and skidded onto the highway. Rain splattered the windshield and he began to pray.

He was losing his battle with lust.
Chapter Thirty-one

Kristi spun and kicked hard, then punched the boxing bag hanging from the ceiling of her bedroom. *Thud.* The bag took the hit. It swayed and came back for more. “Can’t get enough, eh? Ah, so!” She was covered in sweat, her hair ringing wet, but all the old tae kwon do moves she’d learned as a kid came back to her. *Just like riding a bike,* she thought.

The punching bag swung crazily; it wasn’t what Master Kim, her once-upon-a-time instructor, would have called a worthy sparring opponent, but the bag did the trick as far as giving her the workout she needed, both mentally and physically. One more spinning hook kick, then a side kick, and finally a one-step punch. “Die,” she growled at the bag.

She was almost over being mad at her dad.

Almost.

So he’d come back late from the office? So it was Thanksgiving? So what else was new? He used to drive her mother crazy—C-R-A-Z-Y—with all his cop shit. At the time, Kristi hadn’t understood it; she’d been a little kid. But she had recognized the tension that escalated between her parents whenever her dad was eyeball deep in a case. He’d never change. His work came first.

No, that wasn’t really true. She did believe that she was his first priority. If nothing else, Rick Bentz loved her whether he was her “real” dad or not. It was so weird to think that her uncle, the priest, was her biological father and Rick, the man who raised her and whom she still considered “Daddy,” was really her uncle. Sick, sick, sick. She gave the bag a couple more quick kicks then ended with a chop to the throat—well, if it had had a throat, it would have been dead!

Bentz stuck his head through the door. “Come on, Cassius, time to mash the potatoes.”

“Who?”

“Cassius Clay, you know—”

“Oh, right, Ali. The Great One.”

“No, that’s Gretsky.”

“The hockey guy.”

“Muhammad Ali was The Greatest.”

“You know too much about this shi—garbage,” she said. “Just let me run through the shower and I’ll be out.” When he looked about to protest, she pointed a long finger at his nose. “Don’t even think about touching my ‘taters, got it? I’ll be out of the shower in ten minutes. They can wait.”

Before he could put up any kind of argument, she dashed into the bathroom, locked the door and twisted on the faucet. She didn’t quite make her ten minute time frame but before a half hour was out, she’d cleaned up, thrown on her favorite sweats, snapped her hair into a ponytail and mashed the damned potatoes.

Bentz had sliced the hell out of the over-cooked turkey and though his stuffing was on the mushy side and the gravy looked like it had a serious case of acne, the canned cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie and chocolate eclairs he’d bought at the local bakery made up for it. And he’d tried. Kristi would give him that. He’d left fresh flowers in a vase on her bedside table, her favorite stuffed animal, a gray raccoon with a button eye missing had been positioned on the pillows of her bed, and he’d even managed to find two candles that he’d lit and placed on the tiny kitchen table for “just the right ambiance.” They sat with the table pushed against the wall, the three counters and sink filled with messy dishes. But it didn’t matter.

The best part was that he hadn’t touched a drop of Wild Turkey or whatever it was that he used to pour down his throat every holiday. Those were the bad times. And now she understood why. He’d drunk a lot for as long as she could remember, probably ever since finding out that she wasn’t really his kid, but then, after the accident when he’d shot the kid, he’d poured himself into a bottle … She remembered her parents’ fights, how each holiday had been a battle. Other kids had looked forward to Christmas, but she’d felt the tension building and in her pre-teen years, wanted to skip the whole thing. And then Jennifer had died. Rick had given up
drinking for good. Kristi figured he deserved an “A” for effort.

They were nearly done with the main course when he brought up all the bad subjects at once. “You talked to Jay yet?”

Kristi poked her mashed potatoes with her fork. “Yeah. On the phone. We had a fight.”

“Did you explain what’s going on?”

“Not really.” She didn’t want to think about Jay. Not now.

“Don’t you think you should?”

“I will when I’m ready, okay?” she said defensively. Noticing how his eyebrows had climbed halfway up his forehead, she sighed and set down her fork. “I’ll see him tomorrow or Saturday. I didn’t want a big scene on Thanksgiving. Why ruin the holiday?”

The lines on her dad’s forehead deepened, but he nodded, obviously trying to give her some space. “You’re right. And I should butt out.”

“No there’s an idea.” She aimed her fork at him, pointing across the table. “But I’ll talk to him before I leave.” She took a couple more bites, and decided she had to bring up Brian. Her dad was bound to find out anyway. “I guess you should know that I’m seeing someone else.”

“Someone. I figured you’d date a lot of different guys.” He cut a bite of turkey and pronged it with his fork.

“Wellll … I was supposed to be pre-engaged to Jay.”

“What that means.”

“So I wasn’t really looking, but this one guy, he’s a T.A. and don’t freak out, okay, just because he’s a little bit older.”

“How much is a ‘little bit?’ “ Bentz had stopped eating and was looking at her intently.

Maybe she should have kept her mouth shut. “A few years and it’s not serious, okay.”

“I hope not. I didn’t know T.A.s were allowed to date students.”

“It’s frowned upon if the T.A. is assigned to your class, and yes, I can guess your next question, Dad. Brian is assigned to my class, but believe me, it hasn’t affected my grade in Philosophy. In fact, you’d probably think just the opposite.”

Bentz’s frown deepened. Geez, she was blowing this!

“Omigod, don’t even go there, Dad, my grades are fine, just not stellar, okay. And Zaroster’s class is tough. Philosophy of Religion. God, why did I sign up for that one? But, really, none of my classes are a snap. It’s not like high school. Zaroster, Sutter and Northrup are three of the hardest professors on campus and I’ve got them all.”

“That’s not so bad,” he said, digging into the soggy stuffing again. “Tough is good.”

“Then how about weird? I swear I ended up with the strangest teachers at All Saints. Even Mrs. Wilder, the bone-head math teacher is kinda freaky. I bet she lives with twelve cats and knits little sweaters for them.” Kristi laughed at her own joke, hoping to derail her father, but, of course, it hadn’t worked. He hadn’t so much as cracked a smile.

“Why do you think your teachers are strange?” he asked and this time he put his fork down.

“I don’t know. They just are. Come on, think about what kind of people spend their whole lives wrapped up in one subject and being a part of academia. They’re bound to be a little off-center.” She lifted a shoulder.

“Enough with the interrogation, okay. My grades will be fine. Let’s not think about it now. It’s Thanksgiving.”

He was about to say something else, but thought better of it. “Yeah, I guess it is.” One side of his mouth lifted. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Well, I’m glad to be here, although, I gotta admit it was touch-and-go for a while. When you were late picking me up, I thought, ‘screw this, I’ll just stay here.’ ”

“Because of the T.A.? Brian?”

“He had something to do with it.”

“He got a last name?”

“Yeah, he does ….” she hesitated but decided her father with all of his police connections would find a way to dig up the information. “It’s Thomas, okay? Now, make me a promise. Swear to me that you won’t go
looking him up on the computers at work. He doesn’t need his privacy invaded. It’s bad enough that mine is.”

“It’s not—”

“Yeah, Dad, it is and not just because you’re my father, but because you’re paranoid and a cop and a single parent.”

“Paranoid?” The phone rang and Kristi jumped.

Brian was on her mind and she’d given him the number. Then again it could be Jay. She answered with a quick “Hello?”

There was a pause. “Kristi?”

“Yeah?”

“This is Uncle … this is James.”

She felt sick inside. Her biological father. The priest. Her dad’s brother. She looked over at her dad. Bentz was staring at her. “Hi,” she forced out. “How are you?”

“I just wanted to wish you a Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Oh. Right. You, too,” she said, her mind racing. How would she get him off the phone? She didn’t want to talk to him. Ever. What a creep! And to think … She didn’t even want to go there. She’d trusted him once. When she’d thought he was “Uncle James” and didn’t understand Bentz’s stand-offish attitude toward his brother, the gleam of jealousy in his eye. Now she did and she didn’t want to talk to him. Not ever. As far as she was concerned Bentz was and always had been her father. Period. He’d always been there for her. Always. Even during the bad times with his drinking, she’d never doubted that he loved her. Oh, he drove her nuts, no doubt about it, but didn’t every dad? This guy—James—he was slime spit, a real dick-head. She never wanted to set eyes on him again. But here he was on the phone, his voice so damned calm and serene, it was enough to make her want to puke.

“I’d like to see you,” he was saying. “I did talk to your dad—my brother—the other day and he suggested I not push the relationship, but I did want to say that I’m thinking of you and of him. My prayers are with you.”

“Fine. Thanks.” She hung up quickly and noticed her palms were sweaty, her heart racing and when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she saw that her skin had turned the color of chalk.

“Jay?” Bentz asked and she shook her head as she slumped into her chair.

“Father McClaren.”

“Shit! I told him not to—” Bentz caught himself.

“He just wanted to wish us both a nice Thanksgiving. You know, Dad, that shouldn’t be threatening.”

“It isn’t.”

“But it is strange. I mean, really wacked out. Swear to God, we must be the most dysfunctional family on the planet.”

He laughed and tossed his napkin onto his plate. “We’re not even in the top ten in this city. Just when I think I’ve seen it all, something else comes along. Believe it or not, our family still hovers in the normal range.”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

That was hard to believe. “That’s because all you deal with are scum bags.”

“My point exactly.”

Kristi wasn’t buying it. She helped him clear the table, then slice thick slabs of the pie, but she knew that their family wasn’t anywhere near normal. Not when her biological father was her uncle and the guy who raised her was an alcoholic cop who’d accidentally killed a kid in the line of duty, and her mother probably got loaded on downers and committed suicide by driving a mini van into a tree. No matter what Bentz said, no way did they brush normal.

He was deluding himself.

James clutched the phone for several seconds after Kristi had hung up. He replayed their short conversation in his mind. Yes, it had been brief, but then he’d expected as much. Time he told himself, it will take time.

He lived in a small house one block from St. Luke’s and he considered going over to the church early and speaking with Monsignor O’Hara. He hung up the phone.

Father James, who so many turned to for counseling, needed someone in whom to confide. He had so many
issues to deal with.

First and foremost there was Kristi. His child. How he’d once wanted to give up the priesthood, marry Jennifer, claim Kristi as his own. Failing that, at least he’d hoped for interaction with her. He could never be recognized as her father, he knew that much now, but he could still have the role of uncle … if she’d let him.

He didn’t want to take away anything from Rick. Bentz had done a fine job with Kristi. Better than fine. And raising a daughter alone was never easy.

Then there was the issue of Olivia. Dear Father, help him.

James walked to his desk and found his Bible. It had been his mother’s and he found solace in the thin pages. Where was the passage he wanted? He flipped to the Book of Proverbs just as the phone rang loud enough to startle him.

He picked up the receiver but his eyes were skimming the pages, searching for the passage that would give him peace.

“Forgive me, Father …”

James didn’t move a muscle. The midnight confessor was calling again. The clock ticked on the wall, counting off the seconds. He was sweating, his hand around the phone in a death grip. “What can I do for you, my child?” he forced out.

“I… I… must complete my mission … but sometimes I have doubts.”

“We all have doubts. What is your mission?”

“It is from God. To find the saints. To see that they make their way to heaven.”

No. This can’t be right. James sank back in his chair. Was he actually talking to the serial murderer? The killer Bentz was trying to stop? “It is not for you to decide who is to be venerated or canonized,” he said carefully.

“But God has chosen me to find them, to offer them to Him.”

The hairs on the back of Father James’s neck rose one by one. “You must’ve misinterpreted what He’s saying. It’s a sin to take a life. Remember that ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is one of the Ten Commandments. God would not ask you to sin.”

“He speaks to me, Father. He tells me who to choose. It’s His divine will. And this, my confession, is between you and me, Father. What shall be my penance?”

James’s heart was beating a fast tattoo, his mind spinning rapidly. He’d considered the question. “Your penance, my son, will be to pray the rosary and to turn yourself in to the authorities.”

There was a long pause. James would have thought that the penitent had hung up except he heard music in the background—soft choral chords. No … it was a Christmas carol, an instrumental version of “Silent Night.” His stomach turned over at the thought.

“The rosary,” the penitent finally repeated. “Pray the rosary?”

“Yes, and never kill again. Go to the police.”

“So that they can jail me for doing God’s will? So that you would not carry the burden of my confession?”

There was a hint of anger in the voice.

“So that you would not sin again. This is your penitence. You must go to—”

Click. The line went dead. James closed his eyes and dropped his head into his hands. He’d failed. The killer was certain to murder again. In the name of God. And James could do nothing about it.

Montoya was waiting for him when Bentz arrived at his office Friday morning. His expression said it all. And it wasn’t good news. Montoya looked like hell. Though he was dressed in his standard leather jacket and black jeans, his hair was uncombed, his goatee untrimmed and ragged, and his usually cocky smile was nowhere to be found.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” he clipped out.

“But—”

“I said I’m fine.” His dark eyes flashed, the set of his jaw was rock-hard, and every muscle in his body was flexed, as if he were spoiling for a fight. As Bentz hung up his coat, Montoya leaned against the file cabinet.
“Three women were called in missing Monday night. One came home—she’d just had it with her husband and
teenaged sons and took herself a little unscheduled break. The second one’s still unaccounted for, but the third
one, Leslie Franz, is probably the victim we found on the wheel. She’s married, no kids, teaches in a preschool,
but get this, her husband is a professor at Loyola.”

“Let me guess—she was a part-time student.”

“Bingo.”
Bentz’s back teeth gnashed. He thought of Kristi at home in bed. “No positive ID yet?”

“Just a matter of time.” Montoya motioned to Bentz’s computer. “I scanned the photos over from missing
persons. And she has two tattoos. One on her right ankle, the other on her left shoulder.”

“Does she?”

“Yep. A dolphin and a cross.”

As Bentz settled into his chair and clicked on the icons on the computer screen, Montoya walked to the
window, his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, his eyes fixed on the dismal day outside. Gray clouds hung
over the tops of the buildings and rain spat against the window.

Bentz found the file and opened the picture. Sure enough, St. Catherine of Alexandria smiled up at him. She
was clinging to the jib of a sailing ship, her blond hair pulled into a ponytail, her smile as bright as the sunlight
spangling the blue water. Bentz’s gut clenched. She was either the victim posed as St. Catherine of Alexandria
or she was her twin.

“Once again everyone who knows her is locked tight in alibis, at least that’s the way it seems. The husband,
Bertrand, is older, pushing fifty. Leslie is his second wife. The trophy, I guess. His first one is another
professor, up at All Saints.”

Bentz stiffened. Damn!

“That’s where he met wife number two. Leslie Jones was an undergraduate. Big scandal. Bertrand divorced
the first wife, married the second, and took a position in the Psych Department at Tulane.”

“With Dr. Leeds.” Bentz didn’t like it. Because Kristi attended classes there, because the Rosary Killer had
attended school there, and because of the name “All Saints.” Coincidence? Not hardly. He reached into the top
drawer and found a half-used package of Turns.

“When he married Leslie, Old Bert was forty-eight and she was half his age. Nasty. Nasty.”

Bentz popped two antacids and washed them down with a swallow of yesterday’s coffee. “We’ll have to
check out the ex-wife, though I don’t know how she could be involved.”

“I’ve already started. Her name’s Nancoise and she’s got credentials up the ass. All kinds of awards for
scholarship and philanthropic shit. She’s a long shot.”

“Remember the guy who wrote The Scarsdale Diet? He was shot by a scorned lover who was headmistress
of some hoity-toity school. It’s happened before. What’s the old saying, something like “Hell hath no fury like a
woman scorned?”

“Close enough.” Montoya scratched at his goatee and continued to stare through the glass as noises from the
outer office filtered in through the door, which was slightly ajar. Phones rang and conversation buzzed. Once in
a while, someone shouted.


Montoya’s jaw clenched. “Woman trouble.”

“What? That I can’t believe, Diego.”

“Believe it,” Montoya said grimly. A muscle worked near his temple, and his eyes narrowed. “That second
woman, I mentioned, the one still missing?”

“Yeah.” Bentz got a bad feeling.

“She’s my girlfriend. Marta Vasquez. I filed the report. We had a fight Monday night at my place. She never
made it home. Took off in her car like a bat out of hell. No one’s seen her or her Camaro since.” He glanced
over his shoulder and his dark eyes had lost their spark. “I was the last one to see her and I’ve got no idea
where she is, man, not one fuckin’ idea. The worst part of it is she was taking a couple of night classes at
Loyola.”

Looking up from his desk chair, Bentz waved Olivia inside. But he didn’t so much as crack a smile, and what
little spark of hope Olivia had experienced that he would be glad to see her was quickly extinguished.

“Hi,” she said just as the phone rang. He nodded at her as he grabbed the receiver. “Bentz.” His expression grew darker and he held up a finger indicating that he’d be a minute or two. Then he rotated the chair so that his back was to her, the phone cord stretched, and his end of the conversation was just quick answers. “No … not yet … waiting for the autopsy … Yeah, you’d hope, but so far we haven’t gotten lucky … ass-deep in this shit … I’ll see what I can do …”

His office looked about the same as it had the first time she’d visited him—had it been only a week ago? So much had happened. The clutter—files, mail, legal pads on which notes had been scribbled, still remained as did the pictures of his daughter on the desk. His window was cracked a bit, allowing in the noise of traffic below floating in on a cool November breeze.

“… I’ll call as soon as I hear anything. Yeah … you got it… You, too.” He spun around and hung up.

“How are you?” he asked without much inflection. She looked for warmth in his steely eyes. Saw not a drop.

“Fine.”

“Nice Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah, it was. A couple of friends came over. You?”

“Just Kristi and me. It was good. Now, what Can I do for you?”

So much for pleasantries. “I thought I’d share something.” Reaching into her purse, she pulled out the sheet of paper James had given her. “I asked a priest I know for a favor.”

One of Bentz’s eyebrows lifted. “Didn’t know you were close to any priests. The last I heard, you were having nightmares about them.”

“About one,” she corrected as she handed him the list of names. “Anyway, Father McClaren was good enough to—”

“Father McClaren?” Bentz said and his eyes narrowed harshly. “Father James McClaren at St. Luke’s?”

“Yes. Do you know him?” She was surprised.

“Kristi and I attend mass there once in a while.”

“You never mentioned that—”

“It’s not very often. How do you know him?”

“I was looking for information after the fire. St. Luke’s is the closest church …”

“Go on, what did Father McClaren come up with?” Bentz asked and the skin over his face seemed to draw tighter. It ticked her off. So they’d slept together and he decided he couldn’t handle it. The least he could do is act decently.

“It’s a list of christenings,” she explained, “all of which happened within the three months after my brother was born. You seemed so convinced that a blood relative might be involved that I thought it was worth checking out.”

“It is.” He scanned the notes. There were sixty-three names. Olivia had counted them. “Any of these turn out to be priests?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask that.”

“Does he know you’re looking for a priest who might be a killer?”

“He doesn’t know anything about the murders. I only asked him about my brother,” she said. “And we talked a little. He gave me some advice.”

Bentz lifted an eyebrow.

“About how to deal with a hard-ass cop who shuts off emotionally anytime someone gets close.”

A ghost of a smile flickered over Bentz’s mouth. “And what was Father McClaren’s advice?”

“To tell the jerk to ‘go to hell.’ ”

“That was a direct quote?”

“No. That’s how I interpreted it,” she snapped and noticed the set of his jaw shift a bit.

“Maybe he knows what he’s talking about.” Bentz’s chair groaned as he leaned over the desk. Resting his elbows on an open file, he held her gaze. “Look, Olivia. I’m sorry.”

“Bull.”
“No, I am.” For a second the facade came down and she caught a glimpse of the man beneath the tough-as-nails, emotionally detached cop. “But it would be best if we—”

“Yeah, I know. I got it the last time,” she said, standing. “I’ll let you know if I have any more visions, okay?”

“That would be good.”

“No, Bentz, it would be hell,” she said, shifting the strap of her purse to her shoulder. “Find this guy and do it fast. Then you won’t have to keep explaining to me why you can’t see me anymore.”

She reached for the door, but he was out of his chair and around the desk in one swift motion. She was pulling on the knob, but he slammed the door shut hard enough to rattle panels. The flat of his hand held the door tight in its frame. His was so close she caught a whiff of his aftershave. “Don’t,” he warned, his eyes flashing. “Don’t play any woman-games with me. We made a mistake the other night, and that’s all there is to it. I didn’t mean to let it go so far and you didn’t mean to get involved, either. It just happens sometimes.”

“No to me.”

“Well, it did the other night.”

She didn’t argue. Couldn’t.

“For that, I’m sorry. But you and I can’t let anything get started, at least not for a while. We have to be able to work together professionally. I thought I made that clear.”

“As glass,” she said.

“You’ll be able to handle it?”

“With no problem.” They both knew she was lying, but as he removed his hand and she opened the door, she added, “Call me if you ever need a psychic, okay? Because I can see into your future and it looks like it’s going to be lonely as hell.”

The dogs were howling again. Chained, muzzled, and hungry, they put up a clamor that would wake the dead. The Chosen One told himself to remain calm; no one other than himself could hear the beasts. The feast day of St. Vivian was fast approaching and then the dogs would be satisfied.

He’d bought the curs from a backwoods redneck who lived in a rusted shell of a trailer, spat tobacco juice between his front teeth, and bragged about outsmarting the law while he poached “gators,” distilled his own brand of moonshine, and sold half-breed dogs and “fightin’ cocks” to anyone who paid cash.

The deal had transpired in near darkness, the only illumination the smoky glow of the parking lights of a battered pickup and an SUV. Neither vehicle had plates. The Chosen One had unscrewed the license plates of his stolen Ford before he’d made the journey to this part of bayou country. The owner of the dogs probably just didn’t bother with legalities or the DMV. Both parties felt better not having a clear view of the face of the other, and after the cash was exchanged for “one quality male and the meanest bitch this side of Arkansas,” The Chosen One had driven the dogs here, then driven back to the college, parked the stolen car in a lot not far from where he’d found it, replaced the plates, and jogged to the spot where he’d tucked his own car. Then he’d driven back to his sanctuary.

He was proud of himself. Of his resourcefulness. He’d found the dogs through an ad in a local paper that was chock-full of cheap items for sale—everything from used mattress and springs to farm equipment and exotic pets. The animals had been described as “guard dogs—Doberman/Rottweiler mix.” They were perfect.

Except for their incessant howling from the basement. This, of course, was not where he lived; just where he spent most of his time. He lived in a cramped space only a few blocks from the college. His furnishings, books, and clothing were there. He’d left a few things strewn about to make it seem as if he entertained women in those quarters, and he found this the most exciting part for they were earrings, or necklaces, or even scarves of some of the women he’d immortalized.

Now, he untied his cincture and let his alb slide to the floor. He stood naked before the altar, but he couldn’t concentrate, the dogs were too loud. Music didn’t help and even the caress of the jeweled whip striking his flesh wasn’t enough to satisfy him. His prayers seemed empty and unanswered, and when he fondled his braid, rubbing the plait slowly between his fingers or upon his cock, he had only the hint of an erection. Closing his eyes, he conjured up the image of St. Catherine of Alexandria rotating on the wheel, her white body spinning and dripping blood, the horror upon her face as he withdrew his blade … but, no … he didn’t get hard, didn’t feel the presence of God … began to doubt.

The barking continued. If one of the beasts quieted, it seemed the other took up the call. He strode to the
landing and screamed down, “Shut up!” Spawn of the devil, that’s what the curs were. His head began to pound harder and harder with each yowl.

Perhaps he should beat them again. Take the leather straps and whip them until they turned and snarled at him. They had water and a couple of bones with tattered pieces of meat but he’d offered them no solid food. He wanted them ravenous for St. Vivian.

As his head ached, he sensed, from somewhere in the back of his brain, that he should repent. It was so confusing at times. God meant him to do His will. Yes, of course, but … the priest had insisted that he stop; that his sacrifices were a sin… but then the priest didn’t understand. Couldn’t.

Pray the rosary and go to the police.

What kind of a priest was Father James?

At the altar The Chosen One slid to his knees and bowed his head. He prayed until his knees ached, until his neck hurt, but it was no good. He needed to confess and the phone wasn’t good enough. No … he needed to visit the confessional and hear Father McClaren’s breath, feel the heat from his body through the thin partition … yes … it would be dangerous, but necessary.

God would expect no less.
Chapter Thirty-two

“… a bar in Lafayette, one in Baton Rouge, two in New Orleans, and one in Cambrai,” the owner of Nick’s Neon Lighting said from his office in Montgomery. Seated at his desk with the phone receiver wedged between his ear and shoulder, Bentz was scribbling notes. “Those are the only places I’ve sold a neon sign like the one you described, with the pink martini glass. I’d be glad to fax you over the information.”

“Do that,” Bentz said and gave him the fax number. Irritated, he plowed stiff fingers through his hair. The case was getting to him. He’d viewed every shred of evidence and was working with the damned task force but he still felt as if his wheels were spinning, they were getting nowhere.

Fast.

And now a neon sign of a pink martini glass could be linked to Baton Rouge, only a few blocks from the campus where Kristi was attending school. At All Saints. Even though there were other bars who had the same signs displayed, Bentz focused on the one in the window of The Dive. He didn’t like it. Not one bit.

As soon as he got the fax, he’d give a copy to the task force, just as he’d taken them a copy of the list of names Olivia had provided him with. The team was sorting through it, locating those infants, comparing the list to recorded births, Social Security numbers, DMV records, and arrests. They were sifting through class lists, faculty lists, alumni lists, and employee records for the colleges the victims had attended, scouring the information for a link. The FBI was comparing the murders to others in the data base in the hope of finding similarities with other crimes that had been committed across the country, just in case New Orleans wasn’t the killer’s first or only hunting ground.

The task force had established a hot line and had given more facts to the press in case anyone knew of anything suspicious.

In the matter of a week, evidence was being collected, sifted, and classified, but so far the task force hadn’t come up with dick and Bentz felt as if they were running out of time. More feast days loomed, each day bringing them closer to another murder. Loosening his collar, he read through the list of names Olivia had provided him with. The team was sorting through it, locating those infants, comparing the list to recorded births, Social Security numbers, DMV records, and arrests. They were sifting through class lists, faculty lists, alumni lists, and employee records for the colleges the victims had attended, scouring the information for a link. The FBI was comparing the murders to others in the data base in the hope of finding similarities with other crimes that had been committed across the country, just in case New Orleans wasn’t the killer’s first or only hunting ground.

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Had any of these newborns grown up to be priests? Had any attended the colleges in the area? How many now lived around New Orleans? The computers would sort this out. If there were any matches …

A secretary rapped on his door, then dropped off the fax and some mail, all of which had been opened, none of which was valuable. He skimmed the fax from Nick’s Neon Lighting, then shot a copy to the coordinator of the task force. None of the addresses for the bars was near the victims’ homes, or their places of employ, or from where they were assumed to have been abducted.

Except for The Dive in Baton Rouge. Only three blocks off the campus of All Saints College. Hell, why couldn’t he shake his bad feeling about this one? He glanced at the bifold pictures of Kristi, then remembered seeing her buried beneath the covers of her bed on Thanksgiving morning. Later he’d caught her kicking the hell out of his punching bag. At dinner she’d tried heroically to pretend that his miserable attempt at Thanksgiving dinner was fabulous.

He grinned. Kristi was right. He was paranoid. He didn’t know what he’d do if he lost her. His daughter—and he’d beat the living tar out of anyone who even suggested she wasn’t rightfully his—was the one constant in his life, the reason he’d quit booze and women.

He knew he had to let her go, and hell, he was trying. Half the time she was pushing him away, telling him to “get a life.” He glanced around the small, cluttered office where he spent more hours than he wanted to count. Case files and empty cups cluttered his desk. Pictures of grizzly murder scenes had been tacked to his bulletin board. Dust collected on the few pictures he had mounted on the walls. This wasn’t a life. When he went home, it was more of the same. Aside from watching sports or sometimes taking a few swings at the punching bag.

He threw down his pencil and closed his eyes as he leaned back in his chair. She was right. He did need something more in his life.
Something or some one like Olivia Benchet?

“Shit.” He didn’t have time for a woman. Especially not one who had somehow befriended Father James.

Why not? Hell, Bentz, she came here offering a damned olive branch and you treated her like dirt.

His jaw clenched so hard it ached. He didn’t want to think about a relationship with anyone right now, not even Olivia. When this was all over, when the madman was either dead or behind bars, maybe then there would be time for a woman in his life.

Like Montoya’s life? Bentz scowled darkly. Montoya’s girlfriend still hadn’t shown up. Disappeared without a trace.

An APB hadn’t come up with the girl or her car. And she was a part-time student.

That was the connection… but he was missing something … something important. He reached into his drawer, found a pack of nicotine gum, and shoved the tasteless stick into his mouth. The schools, it all had to do with the schools.

He picked up the information sheet he’d put together on Brian Thomas. In less than twenty-four hours, Bentz had figured out that Thomas was thirty-one, estranged from his parents, had gotten into trouble when he was younger when an underage girl had cried rape, and gone to the army as well as been enrolled for a while in a seminary.

There were too many damned red flags waving around the guy. Olivia thought she’d seen a priest behead Stephanie Jane Keller in her vision and the guy was about the same weight and height as Thomas, athletic and blue-eyed. Thomas had been trained with all sorts of weapons while he was in the military and at one time had a deluded vision of becoming a priest. His days at the seminary had been numbered and somehow Thomas ended up at All Damned Saints while victims were being slaughtered in accordance with saints’ feast days.

And what if he was the killer? Why would he be dating Kristi? Is that how the killer got to know his victims —by cozying up to them, dating them? That MO seemed unlikely and dangerous; the killer would take a big chance of being seen with the women he eventually killed. So far no one had connected the murderer with the women who had been slaughtered.

That you know of. Maybe he was clever. Maybe Thomas had dated them in the past.

There were too many damned coincidences for Bentz’s way of thinking.

Time to have a chat with Kristi’s boyfriend. Behind his daughter’s back.

“So that’s it, I have to face it. Leo wants a divorce and there’s not a whole lot I can do about it except get the best damned lawyer in Tucson… no, make that Phoenix,” Sarah decided.

She’d returned around five that morning, had slept until two, then ratted around in the bathroom for ten minutes before appearing with her two bags in the kitchen. Her eyes were puffy and she looked as if she hadn’t slept a wink, but she wasn’t crying now. She appeared calm and determined. “He wants to marry the bitch. Can you believe it? He’s”—she made air quotes with two sets of fingers—"‘in love.’ He didn’t want this to happen, you know, it just did.”

She took the cup of coffee Olivia handed to her. “It’s such bullshit. When I think of all the years I looked the other way, put up with his nonsense, figured that someday he’d grow up … Jesus, I was a fool.”

“You were married to him. Quit beating yourself up.”

“Oh, and that’s the best part. He and the bitch are already planning their wedding. As soon as the divorce is final. He’s quitting his job in Tucson, well, they’ve probably fired him by now anyway, and moving in with her. They’re …” Sarah’s chin wobbled. She buried her nose in her cup and took a big gulp. “… they’re even talking about having a baby together. Her kids are six and eight. Girls. They want a son.”

“Oh, for crying out loud. Sarah—”

A solitary tear tracked from one of her eyes and she held up a hand, palm outward. “Here’s the kicker. She’s married, too. Her husband just found out last weekend and he’s shell-shocked. Had no idea his wife was foolin’ around on him.”

“They deserve each other.”

“I know …” She set her half-full cup on the counter. “Look, I’ve got to get home. I have a lawyer to see, a store to run, a cat to adopt, and I think I’ll sign up for one of those dating services on-line.”

“Are you sure? Cats? Dating services?”
“I’m not sure about anything except that I’m through sitting around and bawling my eyes out over that loser. The cat will be better company and I’m going to meet some men, damn it. Somewhere there’s got to be a better guy out there.” Again her chin trembled and her eyes filled. “Damn it, why do I even care? Leo’s a bastard. Always was.”

“And you’re the winner. Keep reminding yourself of that … call me anytime and… are you sure you have to leave?” Olivia asked, touching her friend on the arm. “I’ve got the extra room.”

“Thanks, you’re a love, but I have to put my life back together. And you … figure it out with the cop and Father James.”

“What? I’m not—”

“Shh.” Sarah shook her head and held up a hand. “Don’t lie to me. I know you’ve got some kind of thing for the detective but I saw the way Father James looked at you.”

“If you remember, he’s a priest.”

“He’s a man who just happens to be a priest. And he’s a hunk.”

“You really have flipped.”

A sad smile twisted her friend’s lips. “Maybe I have,” she admitted. “Maybe I should amend my earlier goals. Make it that I have a lawyer to see, a store to run, a cat to adopt, a dating service to join, and a shrink to visit. Is that better?”

“Much,” Olivia said, sad that Sarah was leaving. It had been nice to have someone in the house again. They hugged and sighed, then Olivia helped Sarah stash her things in the trunk of her rented compact. A squirrel scolded them both as she drove away. Hairy S whined as the little car disappeared over the bridge and through the trees. “She’ll be back,” Olivia predicted, glancing down at the dog. “And you be good. She’s not all that crazy about you. Come on.” She whistled to the dog, who took off after a squirrel. “Hairy!”

The phone rang.

“Hairy, you get in here!”

The dog ignored her. Again the phone rang.

“Fine!” She left the door open and ran to the kitchen in time to hear her own voice on the recorder. “This is Olivia. I’m either out or—” She grabbed the receiver. “Hello?”

“Oh, hi … It’s James,” Father McClaren said and she smiled as she conjured up his handsome, if worried face. “I’m glad I caught you … I feel like a fool to admit this but I think I may have left my wallet at your house. Maybe I dropped it while looking in the toolbox or while I was sitting on the couch … I don’t remember.”

“Let me check. Hold on a minute.” Olivia did a quick search. The toolbox didn’t hold anything other than her grandfather’s assortment of screwdrivers, pliers, hammers, and wrenches, and the couch only gave up a few quarters, lint, and kernels of popcorn, but then she looked beneath the blankets in Hairy S’s bed in the part of the porch that had been converted to the laundry room and sure enough she found a slim, black leather wallet. Father James McClaren’s picture stared up at her from his driver’s license.

“Got it,” she said as she returned to the kitchen and picked up the phone again. “My dog’s a thief. I found it in his bed. I could bring it to you tomorrow. I’ve got to drive into the city anyway.”

“I’m afraid I’ll need it before then, so unless it’s inconvenient, I’d like to stop by and pick it up later. Right after mass tonight?”

“That would be fine,” Olivia said, leaning a hip against the counter and seeing Hairy appear at the back door, where he began to pound against the glass. “I was just trying to save you a trip.” She unlocked the door and cracked it open. Hairy galloped inside.

“I’ll see you later then,” Father James was saying. “How about around eight-thirty?”

“Great.”

“How’s Sarah?”

“She just left.” Olivia sighed. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you all about it when you get here.”

“See you later.”

Olivia hung up and set the wallet on the counter, where the dog couldn’t get to it. “Shame on you,” she said to Hairy S as she walked to the front of the house and shut the door. “Stealing from a priest.” That’s worse than
lusting after one. She "tsked, tsked," then fed both animals and, telling herself that she was not paying any attention to Sarah’s assessment of Father James’s feelings for her, changed into black slacks and a sweater, touched up her makeup, tried and failed to tame her hair, and spritzed on a couple of shots of perfume.

Reminding herself she wasn’t getting ready for a date, she switched on the television. The screen flickered to show an African-American newswoman standing in front of an old, dilapidated building surrounded by trees and brush. Police cars, lights flashing, were parked haphazardly around what looked to be a warehouse until she realized that she was viewing the grist mill where the most recent victims had been found.

She swallowed hard. So this was where they had died—in a desolate, crumbling building.

“… as you can see, the police are still here, searching for clues. Last night the bodies of two women were discovered by …”

Olivia, mesmerized by the report, dropped onto the couch. She’d avoided watching the news for the last few days, hadn’t wanted to dwell on the murders, but now, viewing the crumbling mill and knowing what had happened inside, she listened, transfixed, as the reporter warned the citizens about a brutal serial murderer on the loose. “… though not many details have been released, the police have issued a warning to all citizens …” Other images flashed before the scene. Photographs of the victims interspersed with footage from the archives which displayed the apartment house in the Garden District where Cathy Adams’s nude body had been found, the statue of St. Joan of Arc, and the burned-out shell of a house in Bayou St. John where Stephanie Jane Keller had been slain. “ . . . and now, here, two women found in what an anonymous source has called macabre, brutal, and ritualistic slayings reminiscent of the Rosary Killer, who prowled the streets of New Orleans just last summer.” The screen changed to footage of Bentz talking to the press. It was a hot summer day and Bentz was sweating as he answered the reporter’s questions, assuring the viewers that the Rosary Killer had been killed.

“But, Detective, isn’t it true that the killer’s body was never recovered?” a sharp-featured reporter asked.

The screen cut to the anchor desk, where a man and woman were seated. The anchorman stared solemnly into the camera. “And now the streets of New Orleans are being prowled by a serial killer again, barely six months later. Has the Rosary Killer returned? Or is this a new menace? For continuing coverage of this, and other area news, tune in at—”

Olivia snapped off the set. Seeing Bentz’s image only made her angry all over again. Yes, she understood his feelings about getting involved with her, but come on, it wasn’t as if she’d been expecting a marriage proposal. Not that she would have accepted one anyway. She had this thing about avoiding relationships that could ultimately result in marriage. Ever since finding out that her fiancé had cheated on her with her best friend, she’d decided marriage wasn’t for her—at least in the foreseeable future—and her biological clock could just quit ticking for a while.

Is that why you pick men who are off-limits?

“No,” she said so loudly that Hairy S growled. She pushed all images of Bentz out of her mind and spent the next two hours in the second bedroom, catching up on some assignments for her classes the following week, then, seeing headlights splash illumination on the lane, hurried downstairs. She threw open the door before Father McClaren had a chance to knock.

“I was expecting you,” she explained, noting that, tonight, he was wearing his clerical collar along with a black shirt, black slacks, and his leather bomber jacket.

“And you’re clairvoyant. Like your grandmother. You mentioned it.”

“Did I also mention that it’s a royal pain? Come in.” She walked him into the kitchen and handed him his wallet. With a glance at the dog, she said, “I don’t think he had enough time to do any real damage with your credit cards. But he could’ve gotten on the Internet. Let me know if you see charges for flea collars and dog biscuits and I’ll see that he pays you back.”

James actually grinned. “I’ll go over my statements with a fine-tooth comb.”

She slapped his wallet into his hand. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

He hesitated and for a second she expected him to say something clever… even suggestive. Instead, he said, “No, thanks.”

“How about a glass of wine?” she asked. She liked his company. Wanted him to hang around.

Again the hesitation in his blue eyes, the indecision. “Fine. A glass.” He glanced around the small cottage. “You said that Sarah left. As in for the night?”
“As in she flew back to Tucson.” Olivia opened the refrigerator door. “Leo wants a divorce. He’s already got wife number two all lined up.” She handed Father James the bottle and a corkscrew then found a wedge of brie and, in the cupboard, a box of crackers that were well past their pull date.

“How did she seem?” he asked as he found a couple of glasses and poured the wine.

“Better than I expected. Maybe that’s because she talked to you.”

“I doubt it.” He handed her a goblet and touched the rim of his to hers. “Cheers,” he said.

“To new friends.”

“And happiness.”

“Don’t suppose I can twist your arm and ask you to build me another fire?” she suggested. “You did such a great job last night.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” he said. “Let’s see what we can do.” Together they hauled chunks of dry oak and kindling into the living room. Olivia wadded up newspaper and Father James fussed over a “back log,” then arranged the paper and kindling before striking a match.

“Perfect,” she said as hungry flames devoured the dry tinder.

“Let’s see … give it time … sometimes it starts out fast and then dies out. You have to be careful. And patient.”

“Do you?”

“Mmm.” He slid her a look and she wondered if they were still talking about the fire.

“That’s the way it is with everything, isn’t it?”

“The good things.”

They sipped the Chardonnay, made small talk, and Father James loosened up a bit, even accepting a second glass. “You know, you could do something else for me,” she suggested and one of his eyebrows rose. Her heart nearly stopped.

Dear Lord, what was wrong with her? Why the devil was she flirting with him?

“What’s that?” he asked and the irreverent smile that teased his lips was at odds with his profession.

“Nothing that will get you into trouble.”

“Oh, darn.”

“How about helping me string some Christmas lights over the mantel?”

“And here I thought you were offering me food and drink because you enjoyed my company.”

“No such luck,” she kidded. “Now, come on, handyman, mush!” She set down her glass, rummaged in the closet under the stairs, and gently set her grandmother’s shotgun to one side so that she could pull out a box of ancient decorations.

“Isn’t it a little early?” he asked, helping her carry two cartons of lights to the living room.

“Once it’s after Thanksgiving, ‘tis the season,” she quipped and, to prove it, turned on the radio. WSLJ made a point of playing one holiday song an hour the week after Thanksgiving. Within ten minutes, before they were finished stringing the lights, a jazzy instrumental version of “Let It Snow” filled the room.

“Didn’t I tell you?” she asked as she switched off the table lamps, and other than the glow from the fire and the pinpoints of colored light draped over the mantel, the room was dim. Cozy.

“That’s not really a Christmas carol.”

“But it’s seasonal. Come on, you never hear that played in July.”

He laughed. “When I hear ‘White Christmas,’ it’s officially Christmastime.”

“But—”

“I’m not kidding.” He sat beside her on the couch and stared at the fire. “‘Frosty the Snowman,’ or ‘Winter Wonderland’ don’t cut it either.”

“Purist,” she muttered, sipping from her glass.

“Comes with the territory.” His eyes danced, reflecting the green and red pinpricks of light. “And this”—he hoisted his stemmed glass into the air—“doesn’t.”

“No?”
“Uh-uh. Definitely off-limits.” But as he shook his head, he poured them each another glass. “However, we can’t let it go to waste,” he said. “After all, it’s imported.”

“It is?”

“All the way from California. If you haven’t noticed, it’s another country out there.”

“How would you know?”

“I lived there.”

“Really.”

“Yes, ma’am. And I’ve got a secret about that time in my life.” His smile was positively seductive. She leaned back on the couch. “What?”

“It was before I was a priest.”

“Oh-oh, something dark and evil.”

“You might say.” He laughed. “Before I found my calling, I was a surfer.”

“No way!”

“Oh, yeah … you should have seen me hang ten.”

“Give me a break.” She grinned, the wine and intimate room going to her head.

“Maybe someday I’ll give you a demonstration.”

She was taking a gulp of wine but laughed so hard she choked. The thought of Father James, clerical collar in place, priestly robes flying as he crouched upon a surf board and rode the crest of a wave off of Malibu, gave her a fit of giggles. She coughed so hard she had to set her glass down. “I … don’t … believe …”

Suddenly he was holding her, patting her on the back. “Are you all right?”

“Yes … no …” she gasped.

“Olivia …” His pats were harder on her back, helping her cough. “Breathe.”

“Does … does the Pope know about the surfing?” she asked, still trying to catch her breath.

He laughed loudly, a deep rumbling sound as he pulled her close to him. “Do I detect a note of irreverence?”

“From me?” Pinning a look of shock on her face, she shook her head in mock innocence and noticed that his arms still surrounded her. “Never.”

“You are incredible,” he said, his voice a whisper as the smile slowly slid from his face and she realized how close they were, that their noses were nearly touching, that the smell of him was overpowering, that her breasts were flattened to his chest. It was crazy. And so emotionally dangerous. Stop this, Olivia. Before you do something you can’t stop. Before you make the biggest mistake of your life! But she didn’t move. Couldn’t.

She swallowed hard and his eyes flicked to her throat.

Though he didn’t open his mouth, she swore she heard him groan. “I don’t think I should be here,” he said, but didn’t let go. “In fact, I know I shouldn’t.” His words slurred a bit.

“Probably.” She sighed. “But… ?”

“Olivia, I can’t …” He stopped. As if he’d witnessed the sadness in her eyes. As if he knew exactly what she was thinking. “Oh, hell,” he ground out, then added, “Forgive me,” before he glanced down at her lips and kissed her. Hard. Without a tremor of reluctance.

Warning bells screamed through Olivia’s mind. This was wrong. So wrong. They both knew it. Hadn’t he just tried to say as much? But she kissed him back. Between the wine and the darkened room and the sense that they both needed to reach out to someone, she pushed aside all the doubts that plagued her, doubts that continued to echo through her mind.

He’s a priest, for God’s sake. And probably half drunk.

How will you feel tomorrow?

How will he?

Don’t throw away the friendship he’s offering … This is a sin, Olivia. A sin!

Think!

Her heart pounded, her skin tingled and deep inside she began to heat.

She couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to.
He was eager once he’d crossed that invisible barrier between them. His hands searched beneath her sweater, scaling her ribs, delving into her bra, kneading her breasts. She melted like butter inside, knowing she was making the biggest mistake of her life. Don’t do this, Olivia. For God’s sake, don’t!

Anxiously he pulled her sweater over her head and kissed her all over, her cheeks, her neck, the tops of her breasts. His mouth burned a scorching path, touching and caressing, his tongue was rough and wet. Her mind spun crazily with erotic images she couldn’t control.

His lips found her nipple and she dug her fingers into his thick hair, holding him closer.

He groaned as if from his very soul.

_God help me_, she thought, closing her eyes as the wicked sensations swept through her blood. She wanted him, ached for him, longed for more of his fevered touch. And she wasn’t disappointed. Sweat slid down his body as he unbuttoned the waistband of her slacks. The zipper slid down with a soft, slithering hiss. His hands scraped her clothes from her, caressing her buttocks and legs, creating a whirlpool of heat that kept building as he kissed her.

Perspiration dotted her skin and her mind was spinning.

“You’re so damned beautiful,” he whispered as he flung her panties onto the floor. She was stark naked in the half light while he was still in all of his clothes, including the white collar that announced to the world he was a priest, a celibate man dedicated to God. He must’ve noticed her gaze drop to his neck because in one swift, angry motion he ripped the collar from his throat. His lips crashed down on hers.

Closing her eyes and her mind to the thought that she was seducing him into sin, she kissed him back. Their tongues touched and collided. She yanked at the buttons of his shirt and pushed the fabric over lean, hard, sinuous shoulders. The muscles of his back were strong and she felt his erection hard through his pants. Her mind clouded and spun, she wanted him and yet… it felt wrong… and not only because of his station in life. For a blinding instant she thought of Rick Bentz and how she still felt about him. This lovemaking wasn’t the same. It wasn’t about love; it was about sex—forbidden sex, angry sex, get-back-because-she-was-hurt sex.

James kissed her hard and she tried to blot out Rick’s image—for God’s sake he’d rejected her—but when she found the zipper of his slacks, and James, breathing hard, started to guide her hand inside, she stopped.

“I … we can’t,” she said in a rush. This was so wrong in so many ways.

His eyes flared angrily and she felt like an idiot, a tease. She pulled the quilt around her as he leaned backward. “Olivia—”

“Shh … I know … I’m sorry. I didn’t mean things to go this far,” she said and fought tears. Regret tore through her as she saw the pain etched in his features. “I think, no I know I was using you. I was hurting and …” Her chin trembled. “… you know you’re just too damned good-looking to be a priest. I think the term today is ‘hottie.’ ”

He groaned, but cracked a weak smile. “Is that some kind of consolation?” he asked thickly.

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s a compliment. I care too much about you for this to happen.”

Wrapping her arms around her knees, she sighed. “Okay, so I feel like the ultimate tease here. But it wasn’t intentional. Really. I care for you. A lot. But if we took this one step further, I think—no, I’m sure, that we’ll both regret it. Maybe even before morning.”

“You’re in love with someone else.”

She gritted her teeth. “I was. Yes. No more.”

He snorted as he scooped up her bra and panties and handed them to her. “You’re kidding yourself, Olivia.” His blue eyes held hers. “You and I both know it. Now, I think we should both get dressed and I’d better leave before I change my mind.”

Grabbing his wrist, she said, “Please. I don’t think you should drive. You can stay. In the spare room. It seems kind of empty now that Sarah’s gone.”

“I don’t know…” But he hesitated. “I am a little dizzy.”

“I promise to make you the most fabulous breakfast you’ve ever eaten in the morning,” she said, wanting him to stay, to cement their friendship, so that she would know that they could get over what had just happened between them. “Boiled crawfish, shrimp omelette, biscuits with gravy … my grandmother’s favorite recipes.”
He hesitated, then glanced around the cozy room with its sparkling colored lights and the crackle of the fire. “Okay, you’ve tempted me and I can’t resist.” His eyes grew serious. “I guess I’ve already proved that.”

Wiggling into her clothes, she said, “We’re putting that behind us, right?” “Right.”

“Good.” She pressed a chaste kiss to his forehead. “Thanks, James. For understanding.”

“No problem,” he said, though she guessed it was a lie. “It’s all part of the job.”
Chapter Thirty-three

“Are you nuts?” Kristi said as she shoved her extra pair of running shoes into her backpack. “Me, not go back to school? Come on, Dad, I thought you were into me getting a higher education.” She glanced at her father standing in the doorway, his chin all rock-hard, his lips compressed. Jesus, did he always have to play the heavy? She was not in the mood for it. Her period had started this morning and she’d already had to deal with Jay. For God’s sake, he’d actually gotten red-faced and cried when she’d handed him back his ring in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen. On top of all that, Brian hadn’t called this entire four days and she had two papers due. One for Zaroster and another for Sutter. Now her dad was pulling this overprotective stuff again. She didn’t have time for any of this crap.

“I just don’t see what it would hurt if you waited a few days to go back,” Bentz said, walking into the room and looking all tough. As if that would change her mind.

“It’s college, Dad, and no, they don’t take roll, but I’ve got some assignments that are due pronto and I can’t afford to miss class. It’s not like I’m this brainiac stellar student, you know.” She zipped up the bag and glanced around her room one more time. The bed was still unmade. Just the way she’d kept it when she lived here and she knew it bugged the hell out of her father. She flipped the covers over the pillows in a halfhearted stab at straightening up, then noticed the bouquet of carnations and rosebuds, still fresh, that her father had placed in the vase on her nightstand before she’d arrived. “Look, I know you’re worried. There’s a serious bad guy on the loose, but I still have to live my life, you know.”

“I don’t think you get how dangerous this is. The creep is lurking around college campuses. There’s a connection to All Saints.”

“Is it serious? Or just a theory? I thought some of the victims went to Tulane or Loyola.”

“That’s true, but I think his hunting ground is wider.”

‘Hunting ground?’ Yuk, you try to make it sound creepy.”

“It is,” he said soberly. “I don’t have to try. These women weren’t just killed, Kristi. They were sacrificed. Butchered. The public information officer is letting out some more info on the son of a bitch, to warn the public and to ask for their help in tracking him down.”

“Good. You’ll catch him faster.” She hauled her backpack onto her shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

“I want you to have a bodyguard,” he said, trying a new tack.

“What? No friggin’ way.” But she could tell he was serious. “Think about it. I can’t have some guys following me all over campus like I’m the daughter of the president or anything. No, Bentz. It’s not going to happen. And don’t start messing with my friends, either. Doing background checks and all that shit. It’s not going to work. Come on, Dad, I’ve really got to get back to campus.” Then she saw it, a tightening in the cords at the base of his neck. “You already have, haven’t you? You’ve checked into someone— oh, no, don’t tell me it’s Brian. You wouldn’t.” She saw it in his eyes. “You can be such a bastard!”

“Did you know that he was in trouble with the law?”

“Yeah, he told me all about it. Statutory rape. And he doesn’t get along with his folks. Okay. Yeah, I know. Now, let’s go.” She stormed out of the room. “It’s time to rock ‘n’ roll.”

The dogs were driving him out of his mind. They howled from dawn to dusk and then some.

The Chosen One reminded himself that he didn’t have long to wait. December second was barely a week away … and he needed to spend that time flogging Bibiana while the dogs watched and grew hungrier.

He crossed himself at the altar and changed into street clothes, surveying himself in the mirror, smiling as he thought of his next mission. This one was more personal than the others … Bibiana … Sister… it was time to meet … How had it happened that his mother, named for St. Bernadette of Lourdes, had been such a whore? A woman capable of giving up her child, her only son, then marrying the very man who had sired that boy and having more children—girls—which she kept. Never once had she tried to contact him. Never once had she
attempted to explain. It was as if he’d never existed.

It was an outrage; a sin.

Who had the son been given to? Hayseeds! Hicks! A barren farming couple who wanted him only to put him to work, sunup to sundown, a couple whose strict interpretation of Catholic dogma had been corrupted by their need to survive. He, the son they’d wanted so desperately, had been flogged and cursed, forced into servitude, told incessantly how much he cost his parents with his parochial education which, of course, they’d insisted upon. And a strict school it had been, an institution where there had been no girls, no distractions, a school which concentrated on learning and higher education, a school where he’d excelled and managed to receive scholarships and where he’d learned that he’d had a different calling, that God had chosen him to suffer, the Father in all His wisdom, had picked him to rid the earth of sinners … first his parents, but slowly … so that it would appear natural.

First the “accident” with the tractor that had left his father a cripple. Then, over time, the slow effects of the fertilizer supplements added to his medications, swirled carefully into tall glasses of sweet-tasting, over-the-counter concoctions for everything from cough syrup to constipation remedies. His “mother” had been just as easy with her belief in “natural” herbs, pills that could be easily doctored, capsules that could be swapped all too easily. She’d been half-blind, so dependent. No one had suspected. They’d been in their late forties when they’d adopted him, and then, when he’d found his calling, when God had first spoken to him, they had already started to decline.

Freda had died in her La-Z-Boy watching Jeopardy!, Tom from a heart attack not a year later.

Simple.

Neat.

Tidy.

And just the beginning, he thought now as he heard the dogs’ howls over the soft strains of classical music. Bach. Usually calming. But not tonight.

Tonight he was restless. He needed to find Bibiana, to convince her to meet with him. She would be wary, so he would have to be careful. But then … he had just the bait.

Adjusting his jacket, he walked down the stairs to the basement where a single red bulb glowed, giving the old cement walls a faint crimson glow.

The woman laying naked in the straw was still unconscious. Her hands were bound behind her, a shackle chaining one ankle to the wall. He’d left her a bucket to use should she need to defecate and he gave her enough water to keep her alive. She was groggy still, the discoloration on her face unfortunate. He hadn’t expected her to struggle. Stupid bitch of a woman. Whore. Out drinking and flirting … a married woman. He would keep her. Alive. For a while. Until she’d lured St. Bibiana here. His hands clenched as he thought of his sister. Olivia Benchet, the privileged one.

Soon to be sacrificed.

God was waiting for her.

The dogs bayed and growled from their kennels and he noticed that their ribs were beginning to show. Drool dripped from their muzzles. He tossed them each a bone from the meat market… and they, snapping and snarling, dark eyes glittering, pounced on their morsels.

The woman moaned. He’d have to tend to her. Take off her gag so that she could lap water … stupid whoring bitch …

One eye opened, blinked, and focused for a second. She jerked away, scrambling as best she could toward the wall. Fear widened her eyes over the gag. One cur growled and the woman snapped her head, caught sight of the dogs and scrambled closer to the wall.

His cock twitched when he saw her terror. He thought of what he could make her do … the sexual acts he’d imagined … he was suddenly hard. It would be so simple to rut with her. To debase her. To show her what a filthy whore she was … but he couldn’t. It would be unclean. Unworthy.

Carnal pleasure is not part of the mission. His headache grew. The tic beneath his eye began again. His mission seemed cloudy.

Confess. You need to confess.

The prisoner’s gaze was fastened on the spasm on his face, then when he caught her looking, her eyes moved
and saw the bulge in his pants. Her terror was complete … or was it … there was something else in her eyes—a cool calculation. She was planning her escape. Even in her foggy mind. He clucked his tongue. He thought of putting her under again, then decided to let her consider her fate. One dog sent up a wild yip and she glanced over at it, new horror showing in her eyes. She hated them. And rightly so.

The Chosen One turned to the stairs and he heard her mewling behind him. Soon she would beg for her life, do anything he wanted, and he’d have absolute power over her. He turned on the third step and gazed down at the windowless cavern with its reddish light. She scooted closer, supplicating.

Yes, she was beginning to understand. He was her master. He alone decided her fate. He felt a spot of tenderness for her shackled and naked. But he had work to do. Time was passing. He felt a twinge of regret, of conscience. Sometimes his mission seemed wrong … other times he knew he was right. His head thundered. **Remember, you are the cleanser, one whom the Father has told to go forth and purge the earth from the depravity of sinning women. This is about purity. And retribution.**

The Chosen One fought the pain and doubts knifing through his brain. He needed counsel, direction. To reaffirm that which he knew to be true. He sucked in his breath against the agony roaring through his head. Unlike the sweet bite of the whip, the pleasure that the kiss of the leather straps invoked, this was sheer agony. This pain was far different. Debilitating. Blinding. He needed to talk to someone. Father James … yes …

The woman made another strangled cry and The Chosen One turned from her. Before he clicked off the light, he glanced back. She knew only fear. She had no concept that he was going to make her immortal, that she would become a saint.

His was a heavy burden. He snapped off the light and said, “Good night, Sarah.”

“… it’ll all be in my report,” Officer Calvin Smith, one of the deputies assigned to watch Olivia, was saying, “but I thought you’d want to know that besides her friend, Sarah Restin, who left and drove to the airport, Ms. Benchet has had another regular visitor. He visited her for Thanksgiving and then stayed over the next night. I wasn’t too worried about it because I saw her greet him and they obviously knew each other, but now I’m thinkin’ it was kinda odd.”

Every muscle in Bentz’s body tensed. “He stayed over?” Bentz repeated, jealousy spurting through his blood.

“Yeah, and that’s what’s odd. I ran the plates of his vehicle a little while ago and the car belongs to the Church.”

“What?” Bentz whispered, dread chasing away the jealousy. “The Church?” *No!*

“Yeah. The guy’s a damned priest.”

Bentz shot to his feet. He wanted to reach through the phone lines and strangle the man. Fear gelled in the darkest reaches of his soul. “Who?” he demanded, envisioning Olivia tied up somewhere. Tortured. Images of Leslie Franz strapped to the wheel of death and Stephanie Jane Keller chained to a pedestal sink zipped through his mind in horrid, vibrant technicolor.

“Father James McClaren.” The officer laughed. “I guess even priests have to get their rocks off sometimes.”

Bentz’s teeth ground together. “Why didn’t you call me immediately?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you know we’re looking for a priest? That the serial killer—”

“Jesus, no! I’ve been on vacation. Just got into town and pulled this duty. My partner never said anything about the suspect being a priest.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know. I’m off duty.”

“Damn it. Find out and call me back. On my cell phone. Pronto.” He gave the idiot his number. “You got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Repeat it back to me.”

Smith did. “What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Pray, Smith,” he said. “Then sit tight. I think you’ve done enough.” Swearing, Bentz slammed down the phone. He strode out of his office and flew down the steps. He was in his Jeep within minutes. Throwing the rig into gear, he closed his mind to the grotesque images that chased after him. Olivia and James … lovers … like
Jennifer and James … no way. No way! He pounded a fist against the steering wheel and snapped on his lights. Blowing through a stop sign, he considered the evidence. James? James was the killer? He was the right size, athletic, about the right age if Norm Stowell, the profiler, was to be believed and hell … he had blue eyes … didn’t he? But why would Olivia get herself entangled with a priest after experiencing the horror of her own visions? It didn’t make any sense. What had she said? That she’d gone to St. Luke’s because it was the closest church to the fire that had taken Stephanie Jane Keller’s life? That she’d asked Father James, the parish priest, to get the list of babies who’d been christened about the time of her brother’s birth?

Bentz whipped around a double-parked van. Had he been wrong? He’d assumed the killer was related to Olivia somehow, but he could have made a mistake … and now Olivia might be paying with her life! He blasted his horn when a middle-aged BMW driver cut him off.

His cell phone beeped and he picked it up, bracing himself for the worst. That there was another victim, that the son of a bitch had somehow gotten Olivia … “This is Bentz,” he snapped.

“Rick? It’s Olivia.” She sounded frightened. Scared out of her mind. Oh, God. No …

“Where are you?”

“At work … but something’s wrong … I can feel it,” she said. “He’s … he’s conflicted. Confused. The killer wants to talk to someone …”

“Who?” Relief washed over him. At least she was safe. Unharmed.

“I don’t know … but I have the feeling that he needs to unburden himself, that he will do something worse … he’s desperate.”

“Stay put. I’ll be there in five minutes.” He cranked on the wheel at the next light and nosed his Jeep toward the French Quarter.

The Chosen One slunk through the shadows of St. Luke’s. He’d walked these halls before and knew the hidden closets and doorways, the places to hide or flee if he needed to. He was familiar with the cloister and the gardens and had used the tiny clear panel in one stained glass window to view inside.

On silent footsteps, he made his way through the chancel, then, as his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, stopped short.

He wasn’t alone.

An altar boy, still dressed in cassock and surplice, had rummaged through the sacristy and was drinking the priests’ wine from a gold chalice. The hooligan had a nearly shaved head and an earring that winked in the dim light.

The Chosen One slid into a dark niche. His head was beginning to ache again. Ignore the boy. He is not part of the plan.

Or was he? Perhaps …

Blatantly abusing his privilege, the thief of about fourteen was pouring more wine into the chalice—the chalice—and then as if he had every right, took the blessed cup to his lips and guzzled wine as if he were a street wino.

Sacrilegious!

Making a mockery of all that was holy.

From his position in the shadows, The Chosen One realized that he had been drawn here not for confession, but because he had work to do. God had sent him here to punish the heretic in altar boy vestments. And … for another reason, one more intimately entwined with his higher calling. Yes … the boy would provide a distraction for the police … Perfect.

Withdrawing the small knife from his pocket, The Chosen One moved noiselessly and swiftly. The heretic, caught up in his sinful deeds, didn’t notice. Nor did he hear the click of the blade switching into place. His lips were stained from the wine, his wicked smile surrounding the cup as he thought, no doubt, of how he’d brag to his peers at school.

He wouldn’t have the chance.

The Chosen One yanked back the pagan’s head, exposing his white throat. The boy cried out. But it was too late. The Chosen One clamped one gloved hand over the boy’s mouth and used the other to slash his throat. Blood spilled. The chalice fell to the floor, rolling and shimmering in the dim lights. The boy struggled as The Chosen One dragged him through the darkened ambulatory to the altar and left him there, not only as a
sacrifice but as a warning.

Wiping his blade on the black skirt of the boy’s cassock, he smiled. This was his purpose. To rid the world of sinners. Adrenalin sang through his blood as he snapped his deadly weapon shut and slipped into the night again. Outside, breathing the heavy air scented by the Mississippi River, he realized that his headache had vanished.

“Nooo!”

Olivia’s knees buckled. She was polishing small pyramids in the Third Eye when she caught her reflection in the windowpane. But beneath her own image she noticed something darker, a distorted face, wide and evil. In her mind’s eye she saw a small, finely honed blade. It slashed down. Blood sprayed. She fell into the display, knocking over candlesticks and incense holders and picture frames.

“What the hell’s goin’ on?” Tawilda said, pushing aside the beaded curtain to find Olivia slinking to the floor, her head in her hands. “Olivia? Jesus Christ, are you okay? Do I need to call nine-one-one?” She’d already whipped her cell phone from her purse and was kneeling beside Olivia. “Honey—”

“No, I’ll be all right,” Olivia whispered, her head pounding, tears blurring her eyes. But she wouldn’t. Not as long as the monster was free.

“Well, you don’t look all right to me. You look like you’ve just seen a damned ghost. I’m callin’—”

The front door burst open, chimes tinkling. Rick Bentz took one look around, vaulted over a wagon displaying unique Christmas ornaments, and landed next to Olivia. “What happened?” he demanded.

“She collapsed!” Tawilda said. “And what the hell are you doin’ here? I thought she gave you the heave-ho.”

“Are you all right?” he asked, ignoring Olivia’s coworker.

“Yes, but he’s at it again,” she said, shaking and cold.

Bentz’s arms surrounded her and she clung to him, barely hearing Tawilda’s “Tsk, tsk, if that don’t beat all.”

“Tell me,” Rick insisted. “What did you see?”

“He killed someone. Quickly, with a knife, I don’t think it was planned.” She was breathing in gasps. “It wasn’t expected … and he … he wasn’t wearing a mask, I saw his face.” She shuddered and leaned into Bentz.

“He killed someone? What the devil are you talkin’ about?” Tawilda cut in.

Olivia hardly heard her. “But the image was distorted this time. As if he were looking into one of those fun-house mirrors … He … he had blue eyes and had dark hair and … I think.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I caught an image of a ring of some kind.”

“A wedding ring?”

“No … I mean, I don’t know … but it had a stone in it.” She was shaking. “Oh, God, I think … I think the victim was a child …” Tears ran down her face as she clung to him. “A girl in a long black dress with an apron … or …” Her eyebrows knit and she shook her head. “I … I’m not sure …”

“We’ll check it out,” he promised, wanting to reassure her. But he couldn’t. They were out of time. “Can you describe the scene?”

She nodded. “I have the feeling that it was in a church … He killed the child in a closet of some kind and then dragged her to an altar.” No, that wasn’t right, the victim didn’t have any hair. Swallowing hard, she looked over Bentz’s shoulder toward a rack of Mardi Gras beads, but he knew she wasn’t focusing on the display, that she was seeing inward, viewing the scene in her mind’s eye. “I don’t know why, but it seemed somehow familiar … but I only caught glimpses … It was violent. Brutal and the killer … the killer was enraged.” She shuddered in his arms, then, as if realizing how close they were, she seemed to gather herself and push gently away. She bit her lip. “I think this might have happened at St. Luke’s,” she said, her eyes darkened. “I caught a glimpse of bright colors, panels of color from a stained glass window I’d seen before at St. Luke’s. It was distorted, but … I’m nearly positive.”

His gut clenched. “Then I’d better go check it out.” He reached for his cell phone to call the station, but her fingers clamped around his wrist.

“I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You heard the lady,” Tawilda interjected. “Seein’ what she’s goin’ through here, I think you’d best take her along.”
“If you don’t, I’ll just follow. No!” She said as if she finally understood. “It wasn’t a dress. But a robe. Like a choir person would wear … or an altar boy.” Her eyes met his and he read the fear in her gaze, the concern. Whether she admitted it or not, she, too, thought somehow James could be involved in all of this.

And it was tearing her up inside.

So are you going to give up the priesthood? Renounce your vows? Change the course of your life forever because of one woman?

Father James reached the church and found the back door ajar. Again. Monsignor O’Hara was oftentimes careless about locking up and when James pointed out the need for security, he’d snorted the same tired litany, “The doors to God’s house are always open.” The very same quote you said to Olivia when you tried to lure her back to mass.

Olivia. His heart twisted at the thought of her. Their one night together when they’d nearly made love had been heart-wrenching, and in the morning, she’d met him in the kitchen with a cup of coffee, then, her fists plunged into the pockets of her robe, she’d apologized for making a horrid mistake, the guilt in her large gold eyes reflecting his own misery. He’d drunk the coffee, eaten the breakfast she’d made, cracked a couple of lame jokes that now caused him to wince and had walked out of the house into the wintry morning. Throughout the drive to the church he’d thought of her, never noticing the traffic nor the threat of rain.

Now, as he strode through the back door of St. Luke’s he noticed the lock hadn’t been forced. He’d have to speak to the monsignor. The “open door to God’s house” theory was a nice idea but impractical. There was always a chance for trouble, either thievery or vandalism or worse. Father James didn’t believe in inviting trouble.

Except when it involves women.

Cringing at the turn of his thoughts he walked through a back corridor and felt something amiss … a coolness to the air. He discovered that the chalice was on the floor of the sacristy, having rolled there and wine had spilled … What in the world? The hairs at the back of his nape lifted. He picked up the cup and then squatted down by the stains on the floor … wine, yes … but… the walls were splattered with purple-red drops … his heart began to pound. Not wine. Blood. Someone’s blood.

Leaping to his feet he sensed the evil still lurking in the house of God and, heart hammering, throat dry, he followed the trail of blood, red stains leading to the altar where …

“Dear Father!”

James stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes couldn’t believe the horrible sight of an altar boy lying upon the altar. Blood streaked from a crevice in the boy’s neck. James bounded down the ambulatory but as he reached the boy and saw his bloodless face, the stains over his white surplice he knew he was dead.

“Please, God, no,” he cried. The boy was Mickey Gains … a tough kid who never had much of a break in life.

James listened for the boy’s heartbeat and heard nothing. No breath came from his nostrils.

James had witnessed death before, had comforted the dying but never had he seen something so brutal or savage. Stumbling backward he ran to the church office and frantically punched out 9-1-1. Blood was on his hands, on his shirt, on the receiver as an operator answered.

“Help me,” he cried. “There’s a boy … he’s dead. Mickey Gains was murdered, here at St. Luke’s,” he yelled into the receiver. “Oh, God, send someone. Call Rick Bentz! Get Detective Bentz over here now!”
Chapter Thirty-four

Bentz’s cell phone rang when they were only five blocks from St. Luke’s.

“Detective Bentz,” he answered … then cursed vividly into the phone as he swerved in and out of traffic. “… Yeah, I’m almost there. Two minutes, tops. Call Montoya!” He hung up and swore again, his skin turning a lighter shade. With a flip of a switch, he snapped on his lights and siren. “Looks like you were right,” he admitted to Olivia though his eyes never strayed from the traffic as he barely braked for a corner. The Jeep shimmied, its tires squealing in protest when he slid around a double-parked delivery van.

“No …” She didn’t want to believe it even though she knew the truth.

“An altar boy.”

“At St. Luke’s?” Olivia slumped against the passenger door. She was numb inside. Empty. The image of the child being slaughtered burned through her mind and she felt some great responsibility, as if she could have prevented the tragedy. Tears filled her eyes.

“A child. The monster had killed a child!

“So what’s your connection to St. Luke’s?” he asked, hazarding a glance from the corner of his eye.

Her heart stopped. Guilt filled that hollow place in her soul. “I already told you that I know the priest. He’s the one who gave me the names of those boys who were christened about the time my brother was born.” She looked out the window where the streets shimmered under the glare of street lamps. St. Luke’s Church with its white-washed walls, spire, and bell tower loomed above the surrounding buildings.

Olivia had always looked to the Church for faith and comfort, a place of solace, but tonight it represented everything dark and evil in the world. Shuddering, she wrapped her arms around her middle as Bentz twisted the wheel into the parking lot, then stood on the brakes.

In the distance another siren wailed plaintively.

Bentz threw open the door, but looked back at her. “You’d better stay here.”

“But—”

“She’s with me!” he insisted and the other cop backed down. From the side of his mouth, he ordered, “Just stay inside the door and don’t touch anything.” His hands clamped over her elbow as he shouldered open the door. Inside every light was on, flooding the nave. Bentz planted her near the rack of brochures. “Don’t move,” he ordered, both his hands gripping her upper arms. His hard expression allowed no argument. He was in charge.

“But—” Her gaze drifted over her shoulder to the altar, where the EMTs were already working over the victim. A boy. In a blood-soaked cassock. Father James, his own shirt smeared with blood, was staring at the victim, his expression dark as the night outside. Her heart twisted. What was this all about?

“Don’t argue.” Bentz’s fingers tightened and she was aware of the metallic scent of fresh blood. “If we’re gonna catch this son of a bitch, you have to help me. Okay? Don’t move. Otherwise you’re outside or in the Jeep.”

“He’s gone,” one of the EMTs said, shaking his bald head as he checked vital signs of the victim. Olivia swallowed back tears while Father James whispered something then made the sign of the cross. When he looked up, his eyes found hers. Shock registered across his handsome features, then there was a hint of an emotion akin to relief. He extricated himself from the altar and started down the aisle past the empty pews.

“What are you doing here?” James’s gaze, which had been focused on Olivia, shifted slightly to take in
Bentz. He stopped dead in his tracks. As if he’d come upon an invisible barrier. Bentz’s hands released her.

“You know each other?” James asked, bewildered.

Outside, more sirens tore through the night.

“I think that’s the question I should be asking you,” Bentz said.

James’s jaw turned to stone and Olivia sensed that something more, something deeper than priest and parishioner, bound them. “Wait a minute.”

“Jesus Christ, James, you have one helluva time with your vows, don’t you?” Bentz said, pushing his nose into the priest’s face.

Olivia saw it then, the faint resemblance, the same dark hair, strong jaw, and high cheekbones, but it wasn’t just the physical, no it was more. How they interacted. As if they were related … cousins, maybe, not brothers, oh, God, no … She felt sick inside. No way. They had different last names.

“I don’t have time for any of this shit. Who’s the victim?” Bentz asked, then sent Olivia another warning glance to stay put.

“Mickey … Mickey Gains. Please don’t use the Lord’s name in—”

“And you were the one who discovered him?”

“Yes.” James shoved his hair from his eyes and pulled his gaze from Olivia. “I found him here on the altar about ten … maybe fifteen minutes ago. He’s fourteen, lives a few blocks away, his family has been with the parish for years …” Again James’s eyes strayed to her. Olivia looked quickly away, afraid her guilt would be evident. “I came in to do some paperwork and talk with God. I’ve been … I’ve been having some issues I need to deal with. I wanted to seek His counsel,” Father James explained. “And then … and … I walked through the back door and found blood and spilled wine in the sacristy. I followed the trail and found Mickey … just as he is.”

“Let’s have a look,” Bentz said, but held a hand, palm outward, toward Olivia. “If you want, Officer Clarke would be glad to see that you get home.” He motioned to a red-haired female cop who’d just walked in. Officer Clarke, obviously used to taking orders from Bentz, nodded, her hand on a cell phone.

“I’ll think about it.” Olivia was left standing in the shadows of the upper balcony, watching the two men who had become close to her—the homicide detective and the priest—as they approached the altar, then made way for the crime scene team as policemen and women arrived to seal off the area and start collecting evidence.

This was a nightmare of the highest order. The dead boy. Bentz. Father James. Rather than fight the officers, Olivia walked outside to the night and rubbed her arms as the winter cold seeped through her jacket and sweater. News crews arrived, reporters and curious onlookers collected, kept at bay by the police. Olivia stood near Bentz’s Jeep and looked down the darkened streets. Somewhere out there in the darkness a killer lurked, one who was connected to her and to the two new men in her life, two men she’d let into her heart.

“I thought we could get together tonight,” Brian said and Kristi, lying on the lower bunk, her legs stretched toward the bottom of the upper bunk, grinned. She’d been bothered that he hadn’t called for the few days she’d been back at school, distant in class, and she couldn’t help wondering if she’d done something wrong, if, over the holiday, he’d become disinterested.

Obviously she’d been wrong.

“Sure. What time?” She couldn’t wait to see him again, and all her talk to her dad about reports and papers that were due immediately was quickly forgotten.

“How about ten-thirty?”

She glanced at the clock. Nine-fifteen. “That could work.” It was kinda late and she had an early class in the morning, but so what?

“Why don’t we meet at The Dive?”

“I’ll be there,” she promised and was already wondering what to wear. Something sexy. And just in case, she’d take a shower and put on a black bra and panties … She hung up and started to hum as she rolled off her bed. Wondering vaguely if this was what it was like to fall in love, she rummaged in her closet for her favorite black miniskirt and boots. She had the perfect maroon sweater—turtlenecked and sleeveless—which would look great with a short black jacket.

She planned to knock Brian Thomas’s socks off… well, his socks and maybe a few other articles of clothing as well.
“So that’s it. All you know.” Bentz wanted to twist his brother’s clerical collar until it choked the life out of him. What the devil was wrong with James? A priest who couldn’t keep his hands off women—Bentz’s women.

Not true, Bentz, you cut Olivia loose, his conscience reminded him.

The crime scene team was still collecting evidence while Montoya was outside dealing with the press and interviewing the neighbors, hoping to find someone who had seen something. Anything.

James had repeated his story to half a dozen officers. It hadn’t changed. Bentz almost believed him. Almost. Seated here in the church office, seeing the lines of strain on his brother’s face, the torture in his gaze, the way he nervously rubbed his hands together, James seemed genuinely distraught. Not a killer.

He’s a priest, his hair is dark, his eyes are blue, and he wears a ring with a dark stone … He knows Olivia, intimately it seems, so he doesn’t keep his vows; he discovered the body and he had blood, most likely the victim’s, all over him.

“So what about your parishioners? Any one of them seem as if they’re not dealing with a full deck?”

“Several. Some, the older ones, are suffering from dementia and we have a few who are mentally challenged, but do we have anyone who I might think is deranged and sadistic, someone who could slaughter someone? No … some are odd, of course and others I don’t really know, but no, I don’t think any of them …” His voice trailed off. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Sure you would. If they were good Catholics, wouldn’t they confess to you?”

James didn’t move for a second. His lips rolled over his teeth and he twisted his ring. Bentz had hit a nerve. He waited. James finally said, “Good Catholics wouldn’t commit murder.”

“What about bad ones?”

James’s throat worked. “All of God’s children are—”

Bentz threw himself across the desk and his fingers curled into his brother’s clean shirt. The bloody one had been already taken for evidence. “Don’t give me any of that premixed, parochial pablum, okay? Not all of God’s children are good people who’ve wandered astray. Some are bad. Sick. Demented. Their wires misfunction and short-circuit. They’re bad, James. Evil. So don’t give me any of this shit! Do you know of anyone who might have killed Mickey Gains or any of the other victims?”

“I—have no proof of anything.”

“So what about insight? A gut feeling? Anything, James. We’re talking lives here; do you want to see what happened to that kid”—he used his free arm to flail it toward the door, taking in the church and the altar—“happen to someone else? You know what I think? You were the one who explained about the way the saints were martyred. I’m willing to bet my pension that it’s the same guy who was here tonight. So help me out, will ya?”

“I’m trying, but I don’t know who did this,” he said, his eyes tortured, his face suddenly a dozen years older than it had been.

“You know something!” Bentz charged, so angry spit sprayed from his mouth.

James, weighted down by some inner beast, shook his head. “I can tell you nothing.”

“You pious, hypocritical son of a bitch. People are being slaughtered! Hideously. Micky Gains out there is just the tip of the iceberg.” His fingers tightened in the smooth fabric of his brother’s shirt. “If you can, you’ve got to help me stop this!”

“I’ll do anything I can.”

“Like hell!” Bentz dropped his hand, but stayed close enough that his nose was nearly touching James’s.

“You said you had some issues with God.”

“Yes.” James licked his lips. “What issues?”

A muscle worked in James’s jaw.

“What issues?” Bentz repeated, his eyes narrowing.

“Celibacy,” he said in a low whisper.

Bingo. Bentz felt as if he’d taken a sucker punch to the gut. “Anything else?”

“Isn’t that enough?” James’s blue eyes fastened on his.
“You’re involved with Olivia Benchet.” It wasn’t a question. The room was silent for a moment. So still that the sounds of the night seemed to seep in through the closed windows.

“How do you know her?” James finally asked.

“She didn’t tell you?” Bentz’s eyes narrowed.

James shook his head, then leaned back in his chair and rotated so that he could study the window, so that he wouldn’t have to face his half-brother. “No.”

“And you didn’t mention that we were half-brothers?” Bentz had backed off, away from the desk, put some distance between them so he wouldn’t lunge at his brother again and knock him senseless. He was running on raw energy tonight—adrenalin fired by rage.

“Why would I? All she knows is that I have a half-brother who’s estranged.” His lips twisted into a dark, self-deprecating grin. “Why didn’t you tell her?”

“It never came up.”

James made a dismissive noise as the door to the office sprang open and banged against the wall with a thud. Bentz nearly jumped out of his skin as a stately older priest marched in. “What’s going on?” he asked. His eyes were an imperious blue, his voice low, angry, and laced with derision. Self-righteousness oozed from beneath his alb. “Why are the police and the press crawling all over God’s house? I got a call from Mrs. Flanders down the street saying that there was some trouble here…” His gaze landed on Bentz, who had already opened the wallet holding his badge.

“There’s been a murder, Monsignor. Here in the church,” James explained. “Mickey Gains.”

The monsignor’s legs gave way. His face turned white as death. “No … but I just saw him … he was to lock up …” His voice faded as he leaned against the wall, slammed his eyes shut, and made the sign of the cross over his chest. All of the life seemed to have been squeezed out of him. “I can’t believe it.”

“You left the doors open?” James charged.

“You know how I feel about it… Mickey? Dear God.” Blinking as if to clear his head, he sketched another quick sign of the cross over his heart as he shook his head in disbelief.

“Tell me what you know,” Bentz said and flipped open his notebook again.

“Nothing … he’s just one of the boys who helps with the services …” His voice cracked and he buried his face in his hands. “I can’t believe … not Mickey … not Mickey.” A tap on the door and Montoya poked in his head. His gaze flicked from one priest to the other. “Are you Roy O’Hara?” he asked and the monsignor nodded, then found the strength to pull himself to his full height.

“Yes, why?”

Montoya’s dark eyes met Bentz’s. “There was a case a few years back. A boy in Jackson, Mississippi.”

More blood drained from Father O’Hara’s face and Bentz made the connection. What had Reggie Benchet told him, that there was a pedophile but the charges had been dropped on a Father Harris or Henry or … could he have meant O’Hara?

“That was all a mistake,” the monsignor said but spittle seemed to collect at the corners of his mouth and his hands were shaking. “A solitary case of one boy’s malicious lies. The charges were dropped for lack of evidence. I was reassigned. To St. Luke’s.”

“Were the charges dropped because of lack of evidence or because of a payoff?” Montoya asked.

“No—the family decided the boy was lying. I’d caught him in the closet doing unthinkable things … it was all a mistake.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind coming downtown with me to make a formal statement.” Montoya’s dark gaze slid to Father James. “You, too.”

“Gladly,” James said.

Montoya escorted both of the priests outside. Bentz took in the scene one more time. He felt in his gut that this was the work of the same twisted brain who had slaughtered the women on the saints’ feast days. It had to be. Unless there was a copycat around, unless whoever had killed Mickey Gains had put together enough information from the press releases and the media information to come up with his own kind of sick, brutal crime, one similar enough to confuse the issue.

It had happened before.
Two killers involved with the Catholic Church?

Or one?

His eyes swept the nave, empty now, except for a few remaining police officers.

Bentz wasn’t religious; wasn’t really sure where he stood on God. But he’d been raised by the Church and this was his parish. As irreverent as he was, he’d come to St. Luke’s on Christmas and an Easter or two, had even attended mass once in a while in between, usually with Kristi. He’d seen two fellow officers married at the very altar where Mickey Gains had been slain. Bentz had been here once for a funeral and even been invited to a christening.

Two killers?

Bentz didn’t buy it.

Then who?

Father Roy O’Hara, apparent pedophile.

Father James McClaren, a priest who couldn’t come to terms with his vows and Bentz’s half-brother.

Brian Thomas, the boy interested in Kristi who had once been in the seminary and had a beef with the Church and his parents?

Olivia’s brother, whoever the hell he was? The genetic link that could maybe explain why she saw visions of the killings and through the killer’s eyes.

A student at one of the universities who knew the victims?

A faculty member?

Nancois Franz?

The clue was here at St. Luke’s … The killer had been here for a reason. But what?

If the murderer wasn’t the priest, then why would he be in the church? To pray? To confess? To feel the presence of God in some way? Or to search out his next victim?

Bentz craved a smoke and a drink. He needed time to sit and think, a Camel straight burning in an ashtray, a shot of Jack Daniels cooling over ice in a short glass. Nicotine and alcohol—just enough to relax him and help him concentrate … Now, as he stood in the back of the nave, his eyes narrowed at the altar and the huge sculpture of the Crucifixion rising to the cathedral ceiling. Stained glass glittered under the lights and blood stained the altar.

There had been murder.

In God’s house.

In Bentz’s city.

Why here? Why not St. Louis Cathedral? Why not some other church? There had to be a connection.

He wondered what he’d find if he tapped the priests’ phones. Rubbing his beard shadow, Bentz considered his options. He could go to the DA and a judge, but knew he didn’t have enough evidence. However, he knew how to bug a phone himself and had some equipment stashed in a back closet. It would take only a few hours. And there was his connection down at the phone company’s investigative department. Larry would help him out; had in the past. For a six-pack.

We’re going to play this one by the book, Melinda Jaskiel’s words echoed through his brain, but Bentz decided the book wasn’t helping out a whole helluva lot right now. He owed Jaskiel a lot. She’d stretched her neck pretty damned thin all so that he could land this miserable job a few years back. And he was going to pay her back by hooking up an illegal wiretap and surveillance camera, then removing the equipment, and with the information gained, force the killer’s hand. No one, except for Larry Dillis, would be the wiser. Not even Montoya. Bentz figured if he was going down, he was going down alone.

Maybe the bug wouldn’t turn up anything.

But maybe it would. As he started for the doors to look for Olivia, Bentz told himself that the wiretap wasn’t because he wanted to know what was going on between her and James. It wasn’t any of his damned business anyway. This was only about nailing the killer.

Jesus, he could use a smoke.

He walked into the night. And a madhouse. Police cars, press vans, curious neighbors, reporters with microphones, and dozens of questions were swarming in the night. Olivia wasn’t visible.
“Detective Bentz, can you tell us more about the murder?”

“The department will issue a statement later.”

“Is this the latest victim of the same killer?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is the victim another coed?”

“No comment.”

“This murder took place in a church. Could it possibly be the work of the Rosary Killer?”

Bentz paused and looked at the group of eager reporters and cameramen, none of them much over thirty, all hoping for a scoop, interested in the facts, not the victim.

“As I said, the department will issue a statement,” he said, practicing the same old litany. “I can’t comment until it does. Thank you.” Then he strode to his Jeep and found a piece of gum in his pocket. As he did, he spotted her.

Huddling in the passenger seat, Olivia watched him through the windshield. She looked exhausted. Drained. He didn’t blame her. He opened the door, climbed behind the wheel, and jammed his key into the ignition.

“Sorry it took so long. I thought Officer Clarke was going to escort you home.”

“She tried. I refused.” Her eyes snapped gold fire in the night. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me that Father James was your brother?” she demanded, and before he could answer, added, “And don’t make any lame excuse that it just didn’t come up, okay? I told you all about him when I gave you that list of names of babys who’d been christened thirty years ago.”

“I didn’t think it was important,” he said, twisting the ignition. The engine caught.

“Not important?” she repeated with a snort. “Oh, give me a break, Bentz. He’s your brother, isn’t he?”

“Half brother.” He twisted in his seat, backed up, then jammed the rig into drive. The Jeep bounced through the puddles and potholes as he wended it through the other vehicles parked haphazardly in the lot.

“Oh. Half brother. Is that why you didn’t bother to mention it?”

His frayed temper snapped. “I think that makes us even. You didn’t figure I needed to know that you were sleeping with him.”

She stiffened, muttered something under her breath, then poked a finger at Bentz’s shoulder. “It’s not your business, Bentz. You made it perfectly clear that nothing could happen between us. What I do with my personal business is just that—my business.”

“Even if you’re sleeping with a priest, a primary suspect in the case?”

“What?” she demanded, outraged. “Father James? He’s not—”

“You sleep with him and you still call him Father James?”

“I’m not sleeping with him.”

“But you did,” he said flatly.

She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. From the corner of his eye he saw her try to rein in her anger. “I nearly did, okay? Not that I need to explain myself. The whole thing was a mistake.” She folded her arms over her chest. “I seem to be making a lot of them lately.”

“That son of a bitch.” Bentz slowed for a stop sign, then took the corner.

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“No?” Bentz snorted.

“No! And nothing happened … God, Bentz, get over it! And quit trying to blame someone.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Livvie, this isn’t the first time James has had trouble keeping his vows.”

“I don’t think I want to hear this,” she said sharply, but he saw the pain in her expression and he immediately felt like a heel. “It’s none of my business.”

He had no claim on her. She was right. What happened between James and Olivia had nothing to do with him.

“Well, it was mine,” he said as he accelerated through a light just turning yellow. “I caught him in bed with my wife about nineteen years ago.”
Chapter Thirty-five

The headlines were magnificent. The Chosen One had bought copies of all the local papers and now, in his sanctuary, as he clipped them with his pinking shears, he softly sang a Christmas carol and read the bold print.

“Hark the herald angels sing …”
POLICE STYMIED IN CHURCH MURDER
“Glory to the newborn King.”
ROSARY KILLER RESURRECTED?
“Peace on earth and mercy mild.”
COLLEGE COED SERIAL KILLER BAFFLES NOPD
“God and sinner, reconciled …”
ALTAR BOY SLAIN.
“Again …” he paused, then sang to a crescendo, “God and sinner reconciled.” He liked that line in particular.

The police, of course, were idiots even if the press was giving him his due respect. Finally. Yet there had been not one mention of God’s work, of the mission. Of course they didn’t know. The police were keeping the members of the Fourth Estate sheltered from the real truth with words like “ritualistic slayings,” or “brutal murder,” so as not to bring out the copycats or those who would claim to have done the deeds for a few minutes of fame. So the press hadn’t been allowed to understand what was his mission … unless he corrected them. A letter to a newspaper or a call to a radio station … all risky, but …. perhaps … He paused as he considered the disc jockey he would call.

Dr. Sam on her show Midnight Confessions.
Perfect.

Yes … but first things first.

He had to capture his next two victims. First St. Bibiana, then St. Lucy. Time was running short and while the police were busy trying to figure out how that miserable altar boy was connected to the other murders, it was time to make his move. He just needed a little help.

Humming to himself, he walked down the stairs to the basement. Opening the door his nostrils were immediately burned with the foul stench of the dogs and fecal matter. The animals were quiet now, but as he opened the door and snapped on the red light they sent up a cacophony of howls. Worse yet, the bitch was in heat … and the male dog was more interested in breaking into her kennel than snarling at the terrified woman backed against the wall.

She looked up at him as he approached and then to the weapon swinging from his cincture, the stun gun at odds with the gold-colored cord holding his alb in place. “Would you like to get out of here, my child?” he asked in soft, dulcet tones.

She nodded wildly, her round eyes darting from him to the dogs and back to the gun.

“Well, I think it’s time. I’ve made my point. You will be obedient, now, won’t you?”

Again she nodded and he bent down to release her bonds, but as he did, he clipped a collar around her throat, the same collar that surrounded each mutt’s neck. The collars were the kind used in training dogs, each neck band equipped with metal prongs that pressed into the soft skin of the throat. Activated electronically by a remote control device he kept in his deep pockets the collars would sizzle with electricity, shocking the wearer. Should they be wet, from holy water or sweat, the shock was even more severe. With the press of a button The Chosen One could zap her or the dogs into submission.
To prove his point, he withdrew a control and aimed it at her. She withered away, shrinking into the wall, shaking her head violently and making anxious cries beneath her gag. He smiled, a faint erection beginning beneath his robes. “Trust me,” he said and pushed the button. She squeezed her eyes shut and the bitch in heat squealed and yipped as a shock went through her mangy body.

He released the button and the woman opened her eyes in terror. Tears rained from her face and she looked beyond him to the kennels where the female dog, tail between her legs looked confused and whimpered.

“Now, will you do as I say?” he asked her and there was no hesitation. He saw complete compliance in her eyes. “Good. Come along then, I have a job for you.” He released the shackles on her feet, but kept her hands restrained and helping her to her feet, urged her up the stairs. “If you do anything I don’t like, anything at all, I’ll be forced to activate the collar, and … yes, the stun gun. Remember that? You didn’t like that, did you?

She shook her head vigorously as if she remembered all too vividly how he’d approached her just after she’d returned her rental car and before she could make her way to the airport terminal.

Dressed in jeans, sweatshirt and jacket, he’d blended in, then taken out the gun and zapped her, catching her before she hit the ground and half dragging her into the car he’d stolen at the campus … just like before. It had been raining furiously and he’d used an umbrella to shield them not only from the weather but prying eyes as well. She’d only made one cry—the stun gun and his knife had convinced her to remain quiet as she’d roused. Then he’d gagged and cuffed her and brought her here.

She was a fine specimen, could probably be offered as a sacrifice. He watched the muscles of her rump—tight and rounded, as she walked up the steps. Again the pleasantly painful erection … yes, spilling her blood would be a pleasure. He stopped her in the upper hallway before she reached the entrance. No one was allowed into his sanctuary. Just God.

“Here we go.” He stood her against a curtained wall and took several pictures with his Polaroid. “Now, if you’re good … very, very good, next time I’ll let you out; I’ll have a more difficult task for you,” he said, thinking of her cell phone. “For now, though, you must go back downstairs.”

She shook her head.

“It’s only for a little while,” he assured her as the tears ran again. “And then, I’ll get you out of the basement for good. But you have to promise that you’ll help me.” She didn’t hesitate, but nodded violently. Her hands were on his sleeves, clutching at his alb, reaching for his chasuble, trying to wind her fingers into its satiny folds. “I understand,” he said. “I know this is difficult, but nothing worthwhile comes easily. There must be pain and suffering and sacrifice involved. Now … off with you.” When she started to shake her head he reached into his pocket and brought out his remote control. “Be a good girl,” he warned and she turned quickly and on dirty bare feet scrambled down the stairs. He wanted to give her one little shock, to hustle her along, but resisted.

Sarah needed to fully comprehend the difference between reward and punishment.

“… Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned …”

James felt his knees turn to water. It had been over a week since the last time he’d heard this raspy confession. “What is it, my son?” he said, forgetting all the rules, sitting on the edge of the desk in his apartment. His spine was stiff, his heart pounding with dread.

“It has been a week since my last confession and these are my sins.” James braced himself.

“For your penance say ten Hail Marys and five Our Fathers.” James’s throat was dry and his lungs so tight he couldn’t breathe. Surely the penitent had not killed again … and then he knew.

“And I broke the commandment again. I took a life.”

James’s blood was thundering in his ears. “Another one?” Father O’Hara had been interrogated, but set free as he could prove his whereabouts. The scandal had been horrible of course and he was being scrutinized by the press and the parishioners and the clergy… O’Hara’s name would forever be associated with the killing though he was innocent of the murder. However, there were other charges that Mickey’s parents’ attorney was making, claims of improper touching, sodomy and rape … and now this …

“Oh, yes … I found the sinner in the house of God.”
“The sinner?” James felt sick inside.

“The altar boy who desecrated the church,” the voice thundered. “The hooligan who stole wine and had the audacity to drink from the chalice, all in the guise of piety. Yes, I spilled his blood, gladly. Let it be a lesson to all those who defy God, who do not revere His house, who commit sins.”

The man was mad. He had it all twisted around.

“Listen, my son,” James begged, though he wanted to somehow strangle the man. Give me strength, Lord, please, let me find a way to stop him. “I, too, have sought God’s counsel. He has told me that the killings must stop, that it is not His will. No more lives be taken.”

“You?” A haughty sneer was evident in the voice. “You have talked to God?”

“Yes, many times.”

“And you heard Him speak?”

“I know what He wants and this violence is not His will.”

There was a snort. “The world is a violent place, Father. Haven’t you noticed? And the atrocities committed in the name of religion have been around since the beginning of time.”

“Then commit no more. Sin no more.”

“But I, I have actually spoken to God and heard His voice and my mission is clear. I am to make a sacrifice to Him. For the martyred saints. To reaffirm their martyrdom.”

“What?” James said, his gut clenching. Bentz had been right.

“You don’t understand, do you? I knew you had not spoken to the Father.” And then he went on and on about his mission, about how he would find the perfect person to sacrifice on the feast days, just as Rick Bentz had surmised. He hardly paused for a breath, as if he were glad for a chance to explain himself. His speech pattern was that of a lecturer … as if he were used to people listening to him, an orator. A priest? A politician? A CEO? A teacher … the coeds taken from the local campuses … a scholar?

“Have I a penance?” he finally asked.

“Of course … of course … it is the same as before. You are to say the rosary and confess to the police—”

“I’ll not be judged by mortals! My confession is only to the Father through you.”

He clicked off and James was left with the receiver to his ear. He dropped it, didn’t realize that the connection wasn’t severed, that the receiver dangled over the edge of the desk.

James sank to his knees and prayed harder than he ever had in his life.

Bentz taped the entire conversation. He felt some measure of relief that James wasn’t the killer. But hearing the bastard’s raspy voice, feeling his presence had made Bentz’s skin crawl. He didn’t waste any time, just popped a couple of Rolaids he found in the desk drawer at home, then dialed up his friend with the phone company. Maybe Larry would have some information for him. Maybe he’d get lucky.

“What the fuck is this?” Brian Thomas asked as he threw open the door to his studio apartment and found two cops on his doorstep. One had a swarthy complexion and had a don’t-fuck-with-me attitude stamped across his face, the other guy was older, tough-looking but … oh, shit, he recognized Kristi Bentz’s father from a picture he’d seen in her wallet.

“We’d just like to talk to you,” Bentz explained.

“I haven’t done anything to your daughter.”

“So you know who I am?” His smile was cold as death.

“She said you’d be calling.” He stepped back and let them into his one room. It was sparsely furnished and messy, but he didn’t really give a rat’s ass. The cops couldn’t bust him on anything. The weed he’d smoked last night was all gone, he didn’t do anything stronger, so he was home free. But he was sweating and no doubt both cops, their gazes scraping over his bookcase and … oh, shit … the bong. He’d left the bong and a six pack of empties by the bed and sure enough Bentz spied it.

His lips compressed. “We need to ask you some questions,” he said and pointed to a secondhand recliner near the window. “Why don’t you sit down?”

Brian was sweating bullets. What did the cops have on him? He’d been through this before, a long time ago, and memories of being arrested, of having his hands yanked hard behind his back as he was cuffed, of the
charges and arrest, the hours of interrogation, being fingerprinted and stripped, thrown in a locked cage with the lowlifes of the world ... Now, he gritted his teeth and tried to think. He’d done nothing wrong. They couldn’t prove anything.

“Kristi said you’d eventually come by, that anyone who dated her was subjected to some kind of interrogation.”

“Just a few questions,” Montoya said. “No big deal, man. You just stay cool and this’ll be over in a few minutes.”

“Maybe I should call my lawyer.”

“You need one?” Bentz asked, thick eyebrows lifting over suspicious gray eyes. What a piece of work.

“I don’t know, do I?”

“Not if you haven’t done anything wrong,” Montoya said and kicked out a kitchen chair. “Sit down. Relax. It’s just a couple of questions.”

_Bullshit_, Brian thought, but settled into the recliner and wondered if they smelled the wafts of burnt weed still lingering in the air. Bentz didn’t sit down. He also didn’t hide the fact that he didn’t trust Brian. Not one little bit. Obviously he didn’t like the fact that Brian was dating his daughter and for a second Brian thought about all those movies he’d seen, the bad cops who planted evidence, then threatened charges unless they could squeeze a confession from the guy. He swallowed hard. Even if he beat the charges, his career here at the University would be ruined.

It would be smarter to cooperate.

They asked him a million questions. Some of them had to do with faculty and students, but a lot of the questions surrounded Dr. Franz and his two wives. Brian had been at All Saints as an undergrad at the time and had done some work for the first wife, Dr. Nancoise Franz. They also asked him about women he’d read about in the papers, Leslie Franz, Cathy Anderson and Stephanie Jane Keller—victims of the serial killer. And they’d stared at the two swords he had mounted over his bed, then asked him about weaponry and what he’d done while in the military. He should call a lawyer; it was obvious they thought he might be connected to the killer stalking the college campuses.

Or more likely, Bentz had a hard-on for him because he was dating his precious daughter. Didn’t the cops have more important things to do than intimidate innocent people, for Christ’s sake?

They couldn’t think he was really involved? That was crazy. He didn’t know those girls.

Bentz asked him about the rape charges and about him spending time in the seminary. They even brought up the names of some of the patron saints—now what the fuck was that all about? Bentz had done enough homework to bring up the fact that before Brian had transferred to All Saints he’d spent his freshman and sophomore years at Tulane and studied psych under Dr. Leeds.

“That guy, he’s a real prick,” Brian said, wiping the sweat from his palms on his jeans. “Stuck on himself. Between him and Dr. Sutter, here, I gave up on psychology, decided to do my doctorate work in philosophy. I came up with a theory that everyone gets interested in psych because they need it themselves. They have problems, go to a shrink, get off on talking about themselves and decide they could make some money at it…” Brian shut up. Why rattle on? Years ago, when there had been all that trouble with the rape charges his lawyer had told him to answer precisely, give no more information than what was asked.

The cops left about an hour and a half after they’d arrived, thank God. Brian walked to the window and looked through the grimy panes and checked out the parking lot. Within minutes they climbed into a Jeep with Bentz at the wheel. What the hell were they doing all the way up here? How serious were they to be talking to him? An uneasy feeling crawled across his skin.

He thought about calling Kristi and reading her the riot act, but decided against it. But seeing her tonight would be out. Bentz would probably drop by and visit his daughter and he was the last person Brian wanted to run into again.

No, he needed time to think. What the hell was he doing with a cop’s daughter anyway?

Brian walked to the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. He was just twisting off the top when the doorbell rang again. Shit. Not the cops again. Please! He took a long swallow and walked to the window. The Jeep was gone. Good.

So who was ringing his door? Grinning, he thought he knew the answer.
The edge from the detectives’ visit had worn off. He’d cooled it a little with Kristi since she’d returned from visiting her dick of an old man at Thanksgiving. Not because Brian didn’t want to see her, but because he thought playing a little hard to get wouldn’t be such a bad idea. He sensed she liked a challenge, so he was going to give her one. Maybe then he’d be able to score. How would the old man like that? Huh?

The bell rang again and he yelled, “Coming!” then under his breath, “Keep your panties on.” Running fingers through his hair, he walked to the door and pulled it open. The smile plastered onto his face slid away when he recognized the guy standing in the hallway. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded a second before he saw the stun gun. “Hey—wait!”

But it was too late. He felt the blast, fell backward and watched his beer fall to the floor.

“Is he a suspect, Dad? Are you gonna arrest him?” Kristi demanded, ignoring the hot dog and Coke her dad had bought her. He and Montoya had taken her to a hasty dinner in a little hamburger shack just off campus and he’d dropped the bomb—admitted that he’d been talking to Brian. A few other students were hanging out at the counter and she hid her head, didn’t want to be seen with her dad when he was on duty.

“Let’s just say he’s a ‘person of interest.’ “ Her father was seated across the table with its fake wood top. Bentz was all business.

“ ‘Person of interest.’ What the hell does that mean?”

“That I’m going to be watching him.”

“No.” She wanted to shake some sense into her old man. “Are you trying to ruin my life? Because you are!” She shot a glance at Montoya. “He’s just hassling Brian because I’ve been seeing him, right?”

“No. The dude could be bad.” Montoya wasn’t his usual self. Seemed harder, angry. Like the case was getting to him, too.

“What happened to ‘innocent until proven guilty?’ Huh? Isn’t that what this country is all about. Jesus, Dad, give me some breathing room, okay?”

“This guy is dangerous.”

“The killer is dangerous, Dad. Not Brian. I know him. He’s not a killer.”

“Bull. I want you to come home with me. Now.” Bentz rose to his full height. “It’s not safe here.”

“For who? Everyone? Or just me? Are you going to send everyone on campus home just because you think one of the T.A.s might know something about the murderers?”

Bentz’s jaw grew tight. “No, I guess I can’t do that, but I can arrest him. There’s enough circumstantial evidence to hold him for a while,” he said, knowing that he was stretching the truth. He didn’t have anything concrete. Just a gut feeling. And the prick was seeing his daughter. But he had seen the bong and the empties in his apartment. He could bust the guy for drugs, and if he had any underage students in his apartment, for serving alcohol. “Either you come home with me, or I arrest him. What’s it gonna be?”

“You’re serious.”

“Damned straight.”

“This is so outrageous. You’d embarrass me?”

“In a heartbeat if I thought it would keep you alive,” he said.

Her chin shivered, then she clamped her jaw tight. “If you do this, I will never, never forgive you.”

He checked his watch. “You’re got one hour to turn in your papers and pack. You can drive up here every day to attend your classes. A bodyguard will come with you.”

“Like hell. I’m eighteen. You can’t force me—“The look in his eyes made her clamp her mouth shut. She was supposed to meet Brian at the library in half an hour.

Then she could explain everything, but if she capitulated all of a sudden her dad would be suspicious. “So my choice is to leave school or be humiliated to death. Either way Brian will hate me.”

“You’ll get over it.”

“You can really be a bastard, you know that, don’t you?”

He checked his watch. “You’ve got fifty-eight minutes.”

Olivia rang up the sale, quickly wrapped tissue paper around the cranberry-scented candles and handed the bag to a hefty woman with tight gray curls who smiled and wished her a “Merry Christmas.” She winked as she tucked her bag under her arm. “Less than a month away, you know. Tomorrow’s the first of December.”
“That it is, Merry Christmas to you, too.” The woman bustled out of the store, jangling the jingle bells that hung from a bright red bow that Tawilda had tacked over the door.

Olivia checked her watch … only an hour until the shop closed. She planned to spend a couple hours in the library on campus and then go home and soak in a long bath. She didn’t relish the thought of Christmas; this year would be the first without Grannie Gin and she was here in Louisiana, alone, instead of in Tucson where she’d made friends.

Speaking of which, she was getting irritated with Sarah. It wasn’t unusual not to hear from her friend for a week or two, but it wasn’t Sarah’s style not to call and tell her she’d made it home safely, that she’d really enjoyed staying with Olivia, or that she really loved Leo and couldn’t go through with the divorce. Olivia had called her friend twice, leaving messages each time.

Maybe Sarah was overwhelmed. It could be that the thought of the impending divorce coupled with the Christmas season was too much for her.

And what about you? What are you going to do for Christmas? Who are you going to spend it with?

Rick Bentz? Not hardly. Their conversations had been all business and she was still angry with him for not telling her about Father James McClaren.

What about Father James? Oh, God, she didn’t want to think about that. She’d nearly made love to him, barely a week after she’d done the same thing with his half brother. No, she was better off without a man in her life. She could make it on her own. In fact, she’d probably need years of therapy after the last two men in her life. Bentz had been bad enough, but then to nearly sleep with a priest. How desperate had she been? James McClaren was a good, kind man and she’d almost led him astray … no, she wouldn’t even go there.

Thank God they’d stopped when they had, that they’d realized before it was too late that they’d come close to making a mistake that would have ruined their lives.

The phone rang just as another customer walked through the door, jangling the jingle bells. “The Third Eye,” Olivia said, picking up the phone.

“Hi, Livvie, did you have a nice Thanksgiving?” Bernadette asked.

“Yeah, I did,” Olivia said automatically and tried to keep her cool. He mother was reaching out to her. That was good.

“Just don’t let her get to you. As opposed to me, she added silently. “So, you’re okay with the divorce?”

“Good.”

“And you?”

“It was all right … well, no, it wasn’t. Jeb and I are splitting up. I decided you were right. I don’t need this. I went to San Antonio, spent a weekend alone, and sorted it all out. I’d already filed papers a while ago, but the divorce was on hold, now … I don’t think I’ll ever marry again.”

Olivia almost laughed. “I think you’re the marrying y kind.” As opposed to me, she added silently. “So, you’re okay with the divorce?”

“Yes,” Bernadette said firmly. “And I’m hoping that you and me, we can patch things up. I haven’t been a great mother, I know that, but maybe now that you’re grown we could be friends or something.” Olivia was stunned. This was her mother talking? Self-centered Bernadette?

“That would be nice …” Olivia said then saw one of the women who had entered the store, a short, slim woman in a navy jacket, pocket a glass paperweight. “Uh … I’ve got to run, Mom.”

“Before you go—”

The shoplifter looked over her shoulder as she reached for another item, a crystal reindeer ornament, then, spying Olivia watching her, casually looked over the item and replaced it. Olivia was only half-listening to her mother. “The real reason I called is that I remembered a name associated with the adoption of my son.”

“What?” Olivia asked. Now her attention was dragged from the shoplifter.

“It was Thomas.”

“Thomas?”

“Yes, I’m sure of it. My son was adopted by a couple named Thomas.”

“Thomas who?”

“I think it was their last name … but maybe I’m mistaken …” Bernadette faltered. “I overheard your grandmother talking once and she said something about the Thomases, I think. I hope this helps.”
“It does, Mom, thanks,” Olivia said, her heart racing as the shoplifter edged toward the door. “Just a minute,” she called to the woman and dropped the receiver. “I think you may have taken some merchandise—” The woman was out of the door in a heartbeat. Olivia gave chase, but as soon as she stepped out of the store, she lost the thief in the crowd. It was dark and raining and in her navy jacket she blended into the jostling crowd. Christmas lights illuminated Jackson Square but Olivia didn’t feel the spirit. “Great,” Olivia muttered, unable to leave the shop alone. Tawilda wasn’t due back from her dinner for another fifteen minutes.

Olivia started into the store but caught her reflection in the window panes. Her hair was windblown and her face was pale. Taking a step toward the doorway, for the first time in a week, she sensed him … saw a quicksilver image behind her own.

No.

The people on the street walking by shrank, the noise of the street seemed to fade and her head began to ache. He was there, staring back at her—blue eyes and dark hair, angular features, not unlike her own, but not Father James no … and … then he turned his vision to another spot … as if someone had called his name. He focused on his quarry and Olivia saw the woman’s face. The dull ache behind Olivia’s eyes banged painfully. A young girl with long auburn hair and an attitude of confidence … a face Olivia had seen before, not in person, but framed as it was tonight, in a bifold picture sitting squarely in the middle of Detective Rick Bentz’s desk.
Where the hell was Brian? He was supposed to have met her fifteen minutes ago. Kristi stood on the porch of the library looking through the sheeting rain. It shimmered against the streets, and poured from the sky. Though barely five in the afternoon the day was gloomy and dark.

And she only had seventeen minutes before she had to hook up with her dad in front of the dorm. She’d made the date with Brian five minutes before her dad had shown up. On the phone Brian had sounded weird, like he was high, or scared, or pissed. And who could blame him? Come on. To have your girlfriend’s dad, the cop, show up and start an interrogation. Her cheeks burned at the thought of it. Sometimes she hated her dad.

He’s not really your dad, is he?

Maybe that was the problem. Anyway around it, Bentz had only messed things up with Brian even more than they were to begin with.

Ever since she’d gotten back from Thanksgiving, things had been strained with Brian. He’d been moody and uptight.

Something was eating at him. He blamed the stress of the end of the term, that Zaroster had been giving him a hard time, but Kristi sensed there was more going on.

They’d made out a couple of times, but she’d always broken it off because it hadn’t felt right. There was something missing, something she couldn’t define. She thought of Jay. He loved her. Brian didn’t. She knew it and it almost seemed as if she was … well, it seemed archaic, but it was almost as if he was using her, that she was just another conquest.

That was backward thinking. She could turn it around, consider it the other way, that he was just another notch in her garter belt. Oh, yeah, right. *Face it, Bentz, that’s not the way you’re made.* She glanced up the street and saw his car slowly approaching. He hadn’t stood her up! He was just late again. Waving, she pulled her hood over her hair and blinked against the rain as she jogged down the puddle-strewn path to the spot where he’d slowed.

“Hi!” She climbed into the passenger seat, yanked the door shut and leaned over to kiss him, but he didn’t respond, just stared straight ahead and pressed on the accelerator. Only then did she notice that there was someone in the back seat, a guy in a ski mask. Her breath stopped short. Oh, shit. There was a collar around Brian’s neck, some kind of weird-looking choker. “What’s going on?” she asked, reaching for the door as the man behind her drew his arm around to the front and pointed a gun at her chest.

“No!” she screamed, reaching for the handle of the door. Her last thought was that her dad had been right. Oh, she’d been a fool. “Don’t—”

A jolt of electricity hissed through her body.

Bentz glanced at his watch as his cell phone rang. He and Montoya were double parked in front of Cramer Hall waiting for Kristi. So far she was ten minutes late. He snapped on his cell. “Detective Bentz.”

“It’s Olivia. He’s hunting again,” she said, her words pouring out in a rush. “He’s looking for Kristi, Bentz; I saw through his eyes.” Rick went cold to the bottom of his heart.

“What the hell are you talking about?” No! It couldn’t be. Not when he was here and Kristi was in her dorm. He started running. Fast. The cell phone was pressed to his ear and Montoya was on his heels. He pushed through a startled group of girls coming down the stairs.

“I’m saying he’s after her, I think he’s gotten her.”

“No. He can’t have.” Bentz wouldn’t believe it.

“Wait a minute—” a woman behind the front desk called.

“I’m here at the dorm,” he said into the phone.

“Find her!”

“I will.”
“Bentz, there’s something else. My mother called. She said the couple who adopted my brother were named
Thomas.”

“Shit!”

“And I can identify him.” she added. “I saw his face.”

“Go to the station, have someone draw the composite and look at pictures of Brian Thomas. He’s the guy
Kristi’s been dating.” He clicked off as they took the stairs two at a time, then flipped the phone at Montoya.
“Call for a backup. Send someone over to Brian Thomas’s apartment. Olivia just identified him.” He reached
for his weapon, found Kristi’s room and pushed open the door.

“What’re you doing here?” Kristi’s roommate asked. She twisted in her desk chair.

“Looking for my daughter. Where is she?” Panic squeezed his chest.

Lucretia rolled her eyes. “Did she know you were coming? She left about half an hour ago.”

“To go where?” he demanded, his heart drumming with dread.

“I don’t know. I think she said something about the library. I think she might’ve had a date with Brian
Thomas, the T.A. You might want to warn her about that. She could get in big trouble, him being the T.A. for
one of her classes …”

He didn’t hear the rest. He was already halfway down the hall.

“No, that’s not him …” Olivia insisted, shaking her head as she stared at a picture of Brian Thomas.

“It has to be.” Bentz, seated on the other side of his desk, glared at her. The desk was strewn with files, the
bulletin board covered with pictures of the crime scenes Olivia had seen in her mind’s eye—the victims posed
as saints—Cecilia, Mary Magdalen, Joan of Arc … and the others. All brutal grisly scenes. And now Kristi was
with the killer. Olivia’s knees went weak. She sank into a desk chair.

Bentz thumped a finger onto the grainy photo and leaned over the desk. “Look again,” he ordered. “This has
got to be our guy!”

She studied the picture again. It was no use.

“I’m sorry, Rick. It’s not him. I’m sure,” she insisted, enduring Bentz’s furious glare. She recognized the fear
congealing in his expression, knew that he was dying inside, desperate to save his daughter. Olivia ached for
him. For Kristi. Even now the girl could be dead … or suffering some horrible torture. Olivia’s blood was cold
as ice water. “I wish I could help, but—”

“Then, try, damn it. Give me a name. You said your mother thought a couple named Thomas adopted the
bastard, so this is the guy!” He pounded a fist on his desk and forgotten coffee jumped out of a cup on the desk.

“Shit!” He mopped up the spreading dark stain with his handkerchief.

“Get a grip, man,” Montoya said, slipping through the doorway.

“Go to hell!” Bentz pointed a damning finger at his partner, then something snapped in his face. He crammed
the handkerchief into his pocket.

“You go first.”

“T’ll be there.”

Montoya snapped back, “That makes two of us.”

“Damn.” Sleeves rolled up, Bentz plowed his fingers through hair that hadn’t seen a comb in hours. “Take
her downstairs,” he said, motioning toward Olivia. Their gazes touched and she saw more than fear, a deeper
distrust in his eyes. “Work with the damned artist. Get me a sketch, a computer composite, anything, and get it
fast!” He glance down at the photo of Kristi on his desk. His throat worked and his shoulders slumped, but only
for a second. In the next breath he was angry all over again, the cords of his neck standing out, his lips flat
against his teeth. “One way or another, if we have to tear that school apart, we’ve got to find that son of a
bitch!” He motioned to Montoya. “Get pictures of every male over twenty who has stepped foot on All Saints
in the last year or two.” Bentz trapped Olivia in his determined stare. “Maybe you’ll recognize one of them,” he
said coldly, as if he didn’t trust her again. Just like before when she’d first entered this very office a few weeks
earlier. As he if he couldn’t stand gazing at her, he turned to Montoya. “Take her to the artist!”

The phone shrilled and Bentz rotated a muscular shoulder, effectively ostracizing Olivia as he snatched up
the receiver. She got the message: he couldn’t stand to be in the same room with her.

“Come on, let’s check with the artist,” Montoya said and she stood on wooden legs, managing to put some
starch in her shoulders as she followed him downstairs.

Three hours later after the artist and computer had come up with a reasonable sketch, she walked into the bright New Orleans night. Christmas lights glittered throughout the city, businesses were festooned with greenery, and even the police department was decorated for the holidays, but she couldn’t conjure up a bit of Christmas spirit. Not a solitary drop. She climbed into her truck, thought about going back inside and facing Bentz again, but knew she’d only get in the way. She had no more information to give him.

Hopefully he could save his daughter and locate the monster. The monster who could be your brother.

Damn it all.

Her cell phone beeped as she started the engine. She picked up and said, “Hello?” as she checked traffic.

“How’s the sketch?” Sarah asked, her voice tremulous.

“Fine,” she answered. “How about you?”

“Fine,” she lied. “But I’m…”

“Sarah!” Olivia felt a second’s relief. “Where are you? I’ve been calling and calling. I keep getting your machine.”

“I didn’t go back to Tucson.”

“What?” Sarah sounded strange. Maybe tired? Or so Olivia thought as she strained to hear her friend’s voice over the rumble of the engine, the buzz of traffic and the crackle of a bad connection. “You didn’t go back? But it’s been over a week.”

“I know. I… I thought I could work things out with Leo.”

“Wait a minute.” Olivia switched off the fan for the defrost, hoping she could hear more clearly. “You said you were going through with the divorce.”

“I was… I am… I… uh, I’m confused…” That explained the weird tone to her voice. “I hoped that you would meet me at St. Luke’s that we could talk to Father James.”

Olivia bit her lip as she thought of the priest. “Father James might not be available,” she said, cringing at the thought of the slain altar boy. “There was trouble at the church last week.”

“I know, I heard about it, but… but I’ve already spoken with Father James. He wants you to be there.”

“Does he?” Olivia was surprised. Since the night of Mickey Gains’s death they hadn’t seen each other, hadn’t so much as spoken. And wouldn’t James rather speak to Sarah alone—to counsel her one-on-one? Or was there a chance he wanted to see Olivia again?

“Please,” Sarah said, sounding desperate.

That did it. Her friend needed her. “When do you want me to meet you?” she asked.

“Soon. As… as soon as possible.” Sarah’s voice wavered, as if she were on the verge of tears. “Father James is going to the church now.”

Olivia glanced at the clock in the car. It was nearly nine and she was dead tired. But Sarah needed her; Olivia assumed the strain in her friend’s voice was because she felt foolish, that she’d hated to make the call and admit that she’d lied. “I can meet you in fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks, Livvie.”

“I’m on my way.” Olivia hung up and put her car in gear. What the devil had gotten into Sarah? Olivia had known her friend hadn’t wanted the divorce but when she’d left after Thanksgiving, Sarah had sounded so confident and sure of her decision. Maybe something else was going on. Olivia had the eerie sensation that something deeper was bothering Sarah. Or was Olivia just getting paranoid? All the murders were making her overly suspicious. Nonetheless as she turned on the fan and the window cleared well enough that she could pull into traffic, Olivia, picked up her cell phone again and punched a button. The last caller was displayed. Olivia recognized Sarah’s cell number. So now you’re second guessing your best friend—bad karma, Olivia.

She nosed her truck through traffic and tried to shake the bad feeling that clung to her as surely as if it had claws. What was it? Why did she keep thinking something wasn’t on the up and up. The trouble was Olivia had a bad feeling about everything these days. Her head still ached from the vision and she was worried sick about Kristi. She was just on edge. Jittery. That was it.

“Thanks, Livvie,” Sarah had said. Which was odd. Sarah always called her Olivia except when she was teasing her… but then Sarah obviously hadn’t been herself tonight.

She stopped at a red light and tapped her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. Where had Sarah been staying this past week? With Leo? Were they back together? Then why the hesitation and… fear, that was it, fear, in her voice. Jesus, surely Leo hadn’t beaten her… That son of a bitch!
The light turned green and Olivia tromped on the accelerator, spraying water from the puddles that shimmered on the street. Her teeth gritted at the thought of her friend’s loser of a husband. She ran the next yellow light and rounded the corner to spy St. Luke’s three blocks down. Security lamps splashed against the whitewashed bell tower and a small creche was illuminated beneath the spreading magnolia tree. Wise men, angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph and a manger with Baby Jesus lying swaddled in the straw. The church itself was dark except for a few exterior lights and a warm glow from the stained glass windows near the altar.

Despite the nativity scene, the block was desolate, the street empty, most of the surrounding houses dark. Olivia turned into the rutted parking lot and scanned the area for Sarah’s rental. No luck. Maybe she hadn’t arrived yet.

Odd. Sarah had sounded as if she was near the church or in the church … maybe she’d already turned in the car.

Climbing out of her pickup, feeling the night close in on her, Olivia pocketed her keys and avoided the puddles that collected on the uneven asphalt. She tried not to think of the last time she’d been here, of poor little Mickey Gains being ruthlessly slaughtered within the sacred walls of the church.

Cinching her jacket more tightly, she headed for the main doors. A wind, dank with the scent of the river, moaned as it cut through the surrounding trees and the iridescence from the street lamps cast the street an eerie, watery blue. The hairs on the back of her neck raised as she strode along the sidewalk, but she dismissed any sense of premonition, blaming her case of nerves on her intricate knowledge of the murders and the fact that Kristi Bentz was missing. Still, the night felt creepy and out of sync.

She was near the church doors when she heard a car on the next block. It’s engine was racing, tires humming. Sarah!

Turning, she spied a black European car fishtail around the corner, then scream to a stop in front of St. Luke’s. Goose bumps rose on Olivia’s flesh. This was wrong. All wrong. She reached for the handle of the church door when she spied Sarah seated on the passenger side, through the window facing Olivia.

“Thank God!” Olivia whispered and started for the car … but something was still wrong with Sarah. She wasn’t getting out of the Mercedes. She was leaning against the window, barely moving. Pale and thin, she looked at Olivia with haunted, dark eyes. Slowly she shook her head.

“Sarah? What’s wrong?” Olivia took two steps toward the sedan before she slid her gaze toward the driver. He had to be Father James, didn’t he? But the car—the driver shoved open the door and swung onto the street. His alb shined pure white in the dark night.

Instantly, Olivia recognized her mistake. This wasn’t James, he wouldn’t be wearing vestments. Damn. Her blood turned to ice. She stared straight into the cruel blue eyes of the killer.

“Oh, God … no …” What was Sarah doing with him? What the hell was happening? “Drive away!” Olivia screamed, suddenly propelled into motion. She broke into a dead run. He rounded the Mercedes.

“Sarah! Drive!” Damn it, why wasn’t Sarah moving?

Olivia sprinted hard. Toward the parking lot. “Help me! Please! Someone, help us!” she screamed and heard him behind her. Lightning fast footsteps, closing in, slapping the pavement. Terror spurred her forward. Faster! Faster! Run faster! She reached into her purse, her fingers scrabbling for her cell phone. Her pickup was only ten yards away. Five. Shit, he was closing in! She heard the sound of his breathing! Hard. Fast.

Run! “Help! Someone! HELP!” Not one porch light snapped on.

Her truck was so close! If she could just get inside! She glanced down at the phone in her hand. Managed to punch out 9-1-1.

“Ahh!” Pain rocketed through her body. Gasping, she bounced against the fender, then fell to the ground. Her chin bounced on the asphalt, her purse and cell phone skated away. Lipstick, pens and wallet flew into the shadows.

She’d been shot, she thought dully, aching everywhere, unable to move. The killer had shot her… at least her death would be quick … no wheel of torture or burning at the stake or beheading…. Through blurry eyes, she saw him approaching and noticed his weapon, then went weak inside as she recognized the stun gun. No bullets. Just shock. She wasn’t going to die quickly after all. She tried to scream. Couldn’t muster a sound.

“Come along,” he said in a calm, steady voice. “We have work to do, Bibiana.”

“No …” she whispered, shaking her head weakly as he snapped a collar around her neck and dragged her...
back to his car. “No, no … no …” Her fingers scraped along the uneven pavement; blood dripped from her chin and the world was spinning crazily as she tried vainly to focus on a face that was similar to her own. Her brother … So evil and vile in his white vestments. “Bastard,” she muttered. He cuffed her with the back of his hand, then yanked open the back door of his car.

In the front seat, Sarah didn’t so much as flinch. “Help—” Olivia tried to cry out. If Sarah would help, there was a chance they could overpower him, but her friend was propped listlessly against the glass of the passenger window.

She tried to kick. Missed. He clucked his tongue and shoved her into the backseat. “Bitch.” Olivia fought and was rewarded with a jolt that singed her neck and caused her body to arch. She screamed. “Be calm!” he insisted, roughly pushing her into the backseat. As she fell inside, she thought she saw something in the shadows, a movement.

Help me, she tried to yell, but no words came and pain screamed down her body.

The door slammed shut.

Her murdering bastard of a brother climbed behind the wheel and accelerated away from the church. Lying on her back on a smooth leather seat, Olivia looked through the back window of the Mercedes and through the glass to the Stygian black heavens. She knew that if she didn’t do something and soon, the monster would kill her, kill Sarah and kill Kristi.

Give me strength, she silently prayed to the dark sky. She hoped to hell that God was listening.

“I’m telling you he’s got Olivia!” James screamed to the dispatch officer. Adrenalin shot through his veins and fear clutched his heart as he drove crazily through the thick traffic on the freeway. “Patch me in or get me Rick Bentz. The killer’s got Olivia Benchet. I’m following them now … but I’m afraid he’s losing me. I’m on the freeway heading north, toward Baton Rouge!” The taillights of the Mercedes were visible in the darkness, three cars up and James lagged back though he knew nothing about tailing a vehicle … only what he’d watched on some of those police shows on television. Who knew how accurate they were?

“Sir, if you would—”

“Call Rick Bentz!” James repeated into his cell phone. “Do it now. Tell him his brother, James McClaren called and the killer’s got Olivia! He grabbed her at St. Luke’s. Her truck is still there. I’m on the 10 heading North. For God’s sake, woman, send help!”

“Sir—”

“He’s in a black Mercedes … an older model, Louisiana plates but I don’t have the number. I can’t get close enough to see.” James had walked out the side door of the church only to witness a priest dressed in a white alb stuffing a groggy woman into the car. In a split second James had recognized Olivia, then spotted her pickup in the empty lot. His own car had been parked around the corner. James had sprinted to his Chevy as he’d heard the Mercedes roar away. Muttering every prayer he could think of, James had climbed inside his car and ignored the speed limit as he’d taken off in the direction the black car had taken. By luck he’d seen the sleek car stuck at a traffic light. From there, he’d followed, his head pounding with fear, his hands sweaty over the steering wheel. “You’ve got to send someone,” he screamed at the dispatcher. “I could lose them, and whatever else you do, call Detective Rick Bentz,” he ordered as his cell phone began to bleep and sputter as the battery died. “Damn it all… Father, if you’re listening, please, help me save them. I beg of you.” He ended his prayer and slammed the phone down, then concentrated on the traffic, ribbons of red taillights in front of him, the Mercedes moving easily up the freeway.

His fingers clenched around the steering wheel in a death grip. Not Olivia, he thought frantically. Oh, God, not Olivia. Could this be his punishment? For all his sins? No … oh, God no. He made a quick sign of the cross and fought tears that burned hard against the back of his eyes. “Please, Father, take me … spare her, I beg of you … take my life first.”

She should recognize him, Olivia thought as the car turned off the smooth road to bounce through the darkness. Dried weeds brushed the sides of the Mercedes and the tires spun against gravel. Sarah hadn’t moved. The driver had been quiet and when she’d tried to open the back door several times, she’d found it locked. So who was he and where were they? She’d seen enough to know that they’d headed north toward Baton Rouge, but when he’d taken an unfamiliar exit off the freeway, she’d become disoriented in the darkness. They’d left the city lights long behind them to this desolate stretch of land … He glanced at her in the rearview mirror. She
froze. Every time he caught her moving, he did something and stinging, burning pain shot through her body, an electrical shock that made her cry out and brought tears to her eyes. She tugged at the collar, but it was locked and he was watching her in the rearview mirror, somehow able to discern any movement and shoot a jolt of electricity through her. Or perhaps he was playing with her, trying to scare her or beat her into a near-catatonic state. Like Sarah.

That was it! Mind games… learned behavior… psychology … She closed her eyes for a minute but her mind was racing in circles. She called up the names of the newly christened babies from the sheet that Father James had given her. She’d gone over them dozens of times . . . Thomas . . . Brian Thomas was the only baby listed with the last name of Thomas.

“Who are you?” she cried, her toe inching toward the door again.

Zap! Pain sizzled through her throat. She squealed.

“Ask nothing,” he commanded. “Don’t speak.”

As the car turned sharply and bounced upon a rutted road, Sarah began to mewl.

“You, too, shut up!” he growled

_Thomas_ … she went through the list again, remembering the names. Bill and Monica Trent, Seth and Rosemary Bailey, Ralph and Primrose Stafford … but … but wasn’t there a … then it hit her … _Tom_ and Frieda Sutter had christened a baby boy. Tom as in Thomas and the baby’s name had been … William, no, Warren … Warren Sutter … the name rang a distant bell. She’d heard it somewhere. Hadn’t she? Or was she imagining it? Her head pounded, her muscles were weak and she was vaguely aware that the car was slowing. Warren Sutter… Oh, God … She’d heard the name at Tulane! Hadn’t Dr. Leeds mentioned him by name when Leeds had been late for his appointment with Olivia? He’d said something about getting caught in a conversation with Dr. Sutter … her brother … a sadistic murderer. Not a priest but a professor.

Brittle grass scraped the underbelly of the car as it twisted and turned along a long, dark lane. Olivia’s heart pounded crazily. He was taking them to some remote, isolated spot—just like he did with the women found butchered in the mill. Dear God … how could she save herself? Sarah? Kristi… where was Bentz’s daughter? A dozen horrifying scenarios scorched her mind. Was she alive?

The Mercedes’s tires crunched on gravel as the car slowed, rolling to a stop. He cut the engine. It cooled and ticked, but there were other sounds as well … the low, mournful rush of the wind, Sarah’s whimpering and more … the muffled howl of dogs.

Sarah was shaking in the front seat, staring through the windshield. Obviously she’d been here for days, possibly a week, and whatever she’d seen in this building … Olivia trained her eyes on the tall structure. Dark and looming with a peaked gables, it rose from the ground, a barn with a sharply pitched roof. The baying was coming from inside and it was scaring the hell out of Sarah.

_and why wouldn’t it? Think of what this man’s capable of_  
_Olivia’s throat went dry with fear._  
_Whatever was inside the dark structure, it meant certain death._  

He’d climbed out of the car, rounded it and opened one back door. “Come along, Bibiana … or do you prefer Vivian?” he asked, then answered, “No, I prefer Bibiana. You’re home now and Lucy is waiting.”

“I don’t know any Lucy,” she rasped out, but her heart chilled. She knew what was coming.

“Surely you do, Bibiana. You’re a clever one, aren’t you? With your visions and all. You know who Lucy is, there’s no reason for denial.”

“Kristi,” she whispered, sick inside. Though she’d expected it. Bentz’s daughter. But at least she was alive.

And probably tortured. Maybe disfigured …

“I knew you’d figure it out.” Remote control aimed at her throat, he yanked first Sarah, then Olivia from the car. “Make one false step and I’ll zap you. And your friend as well. If you try to escape, the other women will suffer. Horribly.”

Olivia bit her lip. She withered inside. She knew he meant every word. But it was all too horrible. To think that Bentz’s daughter was to be sacrificed as St. Lucy … but the feast day was over a week away, nearly two. Maybe Kristi could escape before she met her horrid end. Somehow Olivia would help her get free.

Olivia’s own death was imminent, within days, she remembered, but still there was time for Kristi.

“Hurry up, Bibiana, your fate awaits. You know what that is, don’t you?”
It came to Olivia in a horrid rush. She remembered studying the martyred saints for the coming months. St. Bibiana had died monstrously, flogged until she was bleeding and then … then fed to the dogs.

She heard the howling again, a deep, insidious rumbling that echoed through the night. Terror sliced through her. She didn’t have to be told that the dogs were hungry, probably half starved.

Sarah mewled and cowered as he herded them both toward the horrid, monstrous edifice.

There was no escape. The forest closed around them, the smell of the river musty and thick. A drizzle as dense as fog collected in patches. Each time Olivia took a misstep, he blasted her and she went weak. “Move it!” he snapped, his patience worn thin. She had to get the stun gun from him and turn the weapon on him. Somehow … when the time was right. He prodded them through the door, forcing them inside a long hallway without windows. At a door at the end of a hall, the dogs were scratching and snarling.

Olivia nearly threw up.

Take him—try and overpower him. Don’t let him lock you in here or you’re dead for sure!

Her heart pounded. Her chin throbbed. She was so weak, but if she could grab his weapon.

Ignoring the stairs leading upward, Sutter pushed them forward. “Hurry up.”

Try to take him, Olivia! You have no choice. Otherwise you, Sarah and Kristi are as good as dead!

Sarah’s cries were louder. Tears ran down her face. “No … no … no …” She hung back and he shoved her hard as he opened the door and snapped on the lights.

Now!

Olivia lunged. Scratching and clawing, fighting for the control.

Sarah screamed and fell into the horrid room. “For God’s sake, Sarah, help me!” Olivia yelled.

With a yowl, Warren pushed on the remote and agony shrieked through Olivia’s body. She scratched at his eyes, her fingernails scraping skin from his cheek.

He backhanded her into the room. “You stupid, stupid cunt!”

She fell to the floor, scraping her knee. Though she didn’t move, he jolted her again. Pain ripped through her muscles. She screamed.

Again he pressed the horrid button. Her body flailed. Pain sizzled down her spine. She shrieked in agony.

Again!

“No—oooohhhhh!” She couldn’t breathe.

Again!

He didn’t stop until she was gasping and crying, her throat raw from screaming, every nerve in her body jangled as she flopped on the filth-encrusted floor. Lying on patches of straw she saw the dogs … chained but pacing near their kennels.

“Now, Bibiana, obey, or I’ll set the dogs on you,” he snarled and Olivia didn’t have any strength left to fight him. She could barely lift her head to study the cavernous room. Red illumination offered a dim view of a filthy lair, where the two dogs paced near their metal cages and a girl, naked, was chained to the opposing wall.

Kristi.

Olivia retched.

How could she possibly save them? How?

This windowless room was a grotesque torture chamber. And a horrid shrine. Mounted between hideous whips and chains and swords, in stark, blasphemous contrast, were intricate crosses, crucifixes and religious symbols, including a picture of St. Mary. As if that wasn’t enough, the room had dozens of mirrors tacked to the wall, glittering in the red light, reflecting every inch of the grotesque den. The mirrors gave her a view of herself and what was happening behind her while she watched the others … sick, oh, so twisted …

Terror, the like of which she’d never known, turned her insides to jelly. Whatever was to happen here would be horrendous.

“Where is Brian, Sutter?” Kristi demanded, straining at her shackles, her lean, athletic body tense. She was as furious as Sarah was docile. “You son of a goddamned bitch, what the hell did you do with Brian?”

“Tut, tut, Lucy, such language.” Sutter’s eyes sparked cruelly. “Never take the Lord’s name in vain,” he warned.
Oh, no—

“I’m not fuckin’ Lucy, okay—and oh!” Her body arced as he aimed a remote control at her. She fell onto dirty hay. “You bastard!” Another jolt and she jumped, screaming, “You’re an animal! Worse than an animal! Worse that your ugly dogs. You get your jollies torturing women, don’t you? Well, listen up! My dad is going to fucking kill you. Whatever you do to me is gonna be nothing compared to what he’ll do to you! It’ll be a million times worse when he gets ahold of you, you son of a bitch.”

He blasted her with the stun gun, then pressed the remote for good measure. Kristi screamed and flailed in wild agony, the dogs howled and snarled and Sarah wailed piteously.

“Shut up,” Sutter screamed. He slapped Sarah against the wall. “I’ve had it with your whining!” He pounced on her, gagged her with a piece of tape hanging on the wall and snapped a chain to her collar. His alb was now dirty and he was sweating, his skin glowing red in the light. Olivia edged toward the stairs and was rewarded with another blast from the stun gun. “Strip,” he ordered and then tore off Sarah’s clothes, literally ripping them from her body. She was terrified, screaming, and he jolted her into submission as her limbs jerked like a marionette.

Olivia didn’t move.

“I said ‘strip’,” he repeated and his gaze narrowed on her. “Or would you rather me do it for you, sister?”

Pure evil twisted his lips. Pinpoints of lust shined red in his eyes.

She had to do his bidding.

For now.

But only for now. She already felt her strength returning a bit … she just needed time to recover.

“Now!” he bellowed.

Quivering with fear, her mind racing to find a means of escape she began to unbutton her shirt. She pretended not to notice his erection, stiff and protruding against his vestment. Dirty, sick pervert, she thought, pulling her arms free of her sleeves.

She swallowed back her disgust. I’ll get out of here and I’ll take them with me, even if I have to kill you myself, she silently vowed. She couldn’t allow fear to get the better of her. She had to be sane. Think straight. Find a way to get free.
Chapter Thirty-seven

“I’ll kill him with my bare hands,” Bentz muttered as his Jeep barreled off the freeway to this godforsaken strip of brushy farmland. Flat and dark with thickets of scrub oak and pine. “If he touches so much as one hair on Kristi or Olivia’s head, I swear to God, I’ll rip his fuckin’ head off.”

Montoya glowered into the foggy night, smoking a cigarette, listening to the police band. “You won’t get the chance. I’ll blow him away, man.” He patted his sidearm. Was it enough? As smoke drifted from Montoya’s nostrils, Bentz silently prayed they could save them.

He’d heard the replay of James’s call, and police from several jurisdictions were converging on a piece of property near the river not fifteen miles from Baton Rouge. The Baton Rouge Police had been called and they’d gotten into Sutter’s home where they’d searched and come up with an address for another piece of property … one that was located on the river, an old farm that had once been owned by Tom and Freda, Sutter’s adoptive parents. But they were behind Bentz. Because of the homing device he’d surreptitiously mounted behind the rear bumper of James’s car, he was closer to the farm. He heard the other sirens, but they wailed in the distance.

He prayed that he wasn’t too late as the miles of old asphalt rolled under the Jeep’s tires.

If only Kristi and Olivia were still alive. His daughter meant everything to him ... everything. If he lost her ... his throat clogged. He’d never forgive himself. Why hadn’t he saved her when he’d had the chance? Why had he let her go back in that dormitory alone? Why, why, why? He beat on the steering wheel and Montoya flipped his cigarette through a crack in the window. Bentz told himself not to think the worst. Kristi was alive. She had to be. And Olivia. He ached when he thought that she, too, was in the monster’s clutches, maybe even dead. He’d been so cold to her earlier. Not just detached, but ruthless and mean. He’d seen the pleading in her eyes, the silent need to connect with him and he’d cut her loose. Because he was scared for his daughter. Because he was pissed that she’d been with James.

And now ... now he might have already lost her. His jaw clenched so hard it ached. His throat burned. Olivia —why hadn’t he trusted her? Forgiven her? Told her he loved her before it was too late? Now, the two women he cared about were in horrid peril. Because he’d failed to save them.

And what about James? According to the homing device James had followed the Mercedes to the Sutter farm. His life too was in serious danger. Everyone Bentz held dear was caught up in this vile mess ... their lives in jeopardy. Bentz tried not to think about the horrors the killer had committed ... the photographs that he’d mounted on his bulletin board and committed to memory, the bloody crime scenes.

“The bastard’s goin’ down,” Montoya said as they spun around a corner and a skunk, caught in the Jeep’s headlights, waddled quickly into a ditch. “And if he’s got Marta, he’ll wish he’d never set eyes on her. Or me.”

Montoya glanced at Bentz and for once there wasn’t the hint of the younger man’s usual cockiness. In the dark car, his face illuminated by the glow of the dash lights, Montoya was sober as death, his face hard with conviction. “He’s goin’ down,” Montoya vowed again. “Even if I have to go with him.”

“I’m with ya,” Bentz said and eased off the throttle as he glimpsed the turn-off for the lane leading to Sutter’s farm. His headlights flashed on a rusted, listing mailbox, its door gaping open in the rising mist. Bentz’s heart clenched as he cranked on the steering wheel.

God help him if he was too late.

“Help me, Father,” James whispered, sneaking through the wet grass and overgrown bushes that surrounded the building. Mist was his cover, fear his companion. Dogs were baying from within the tall, gloomy building. Despair congealed in James’s heart, but he forced himself toward the door, his footsteps muffled by wet leaves and bent grass. This was a test, surely. The Father was challenging his courage.

James would have the element of surprise on his side but he had no real weapon, nothing to use in a battle aside from the useless cell phone in his pocket and a bottle of wiper cleaner that he hoped to squirt in the killer’s eyes. Stupid. Another TV cop trick. But all he had.

Remember Daniel and the lion’s den.
Maybe he would find something inside to help him … a shotgun or a knife or … Could he do it? Could he take another life? It was a sin … He’d reached the door and he pushed all of his vows out of his mind. He had to save Olivia … nothing else mattered. He made a quick sign of the cross, then grabbed the door handle and pushed.

No lock held him back. The door creaked open. His muscles ached from the tension as he crept into a darkened hallway at the end of which he saw a faint red glow … a shimmering scarlet line at the level of the floor, reddish light seeping beneath another door. Noises, the dogs and voices came from within. He scanned the dark walls with the hint of visibility. He saw nothing to use as a weapon here, but there was a stairway leading upward into quiet murky darkness … Did he have time to search? Did he dare risk a few precious moments to race up the stairs and try to find something to arm himself? He had to. Otherwise he didn’t have a chance.

The dogs were baying crazily from behind the door and he knew he was nearly out of time. “Help me,” he whispered and noiselessly took the stairs two at a time.

Olivia quaked with fear as she faced her brother.

“I’ve been saving this for you,” Warren said, and pulled a nasty-looking whip which had been mounted on brackets in the wall. It was small, made of leather and had nearly a dozen wicked tips. “Know what this is?” With a flick of his wrist it cracked abominably. Sarah jumped. Didn’t cry out. “It’s a cat o’ nine tails … a perfect little whip.” Warren handled the damned weapon almost lovingly, caressing the smooth handle. “Now,” he motioned with the whip to Olivia. The tails sizzled around his hand. “Turn around and don’t move. Yes, there in front of the dogs. But don’t try anything foolish. If you do, I’ll not only have to use my stun gun again, but I’ll sacrifice your friend here. You see, I have no saint yet picked for her and so she can be eliminated anytime.”

Sarah was screaming behind the tape on her mouth now, her eyes round with panic. “Shhh…. I’m sure St. Bibiana will be a good penitent.” He hit one of the buttons on the remote control and Sarah squealed before sliding down the wall and collapsing into tears.

“You merciless bastard,” Olivia charged, unable to hold her tongue. She felt stronger now, couldn’t pretend to be meek and weak. “How can you do all this in the name of God? This is blasphemy! Heresy. Sick, twisted tripe!”

“Blasphemy?” He seemed amused.

“You dress like a priest, you spout all kinds of religious quotes, you … you hang crosses with whips and you kill innocent women and boys, butcher them. These aren’t acts for God, they’re acts against Him.”

“I save the sinners,” he said, a tic beginning near his eye.

“You save them from nothing. Nothing. You’re so sick you’ve twisted it all around in your scrambled brain,” she said, wheeling to face him. “It’s an excuse. You like to kill. That’s it. You’re so sick you enjoy the pain and the power.” The tic was working overtime now and his lip twitched. “You’re a pathetic murdering coward, hiding in vestments you didn’t earn and somehow you try to justify your sickness.”

“I speak with God.”

“Bull.”

The tic was pounding now. “I’m The Chosen One.”

“You’re a lunatic.”

“The Father speaks to me.” A twitch was moving his eyebrow and eyelid.

“You’re a freak, that’s what you are!” Kristi cried.

“Shh! Don’t!” Olivia warned. It was one thing for her to bait this monster, but she didn’t dare risk Kristi’s life.

“Protective, are you?” he asked her and she didn’t speak, afraid for Kristi’s life. Warren’s smile returned, the tic slowed. “I expected some fight in you, sister, but obviously you are smarter than I thought. Now, turn around and look at the dogs…."

She hesitated.

The Chosen One—Warren—moved a step closer to Kristi.

Quickly, Olivia did as she was told, but her mind was racing. No way would she allow herself to be filleted
for some starving mutt’s meal. In the mirror, she saw him raise his whip. She braced herself.

Crack!

Pain ricocheted through her. Nine bites to her flesh. She flinched. Bit down so she wouldn’t cry out.

“Don’t move!” he ordered.

She caught his glare in one of the mirrors.

His eyes thinned in anticipation. Again he snapped his wrist.

The whip stung again. Scorching pain erupted on her back. She didn’t so much as wince and held his glare. In the mirror she saw the pink tip of his tongue as it ran over his lips. His gaze was fastened on her bare rump and red flesh. He was a sicko. A crazy. But maybe she could use that….

Snap!

Fire ripped through her. She sucked in air through her teeth. Tears sprang to her eyes. She had to stop this. She heard something. Footsteps? Her heart leapt at the thought, but it was crazy. The dogs were barking and turning toward the door. Warren looked over his shoulder but there was silence again. She couldn’t hope for outside help.

It was up to her.

She thought quickly. How? She couldn’t just turn and run at him. But … if she could endure the pain until the right moment, if, before she was exhausted from the flailing, she could summon the courage and energy to roll into a ball and somersault backward toward him while he had his weapon raised; she could knock him off his feet, grab the stun gun and aim it at him.

Or he’d kill her.

Well, he was going to do that one way or another.

This was the only way. Their only chance. She had to try it. He would either kill her slowly by flailing her to death, try and feed her to the dogs or chain her up and leave her for another session. Either way she and Kristi and Sarah were doomed.

Smack!

The whip blistered her back like a million little knives. She jolted. Managed to stay on her feet.

“Tough one, aren’t you? A true daughter of Reggie Benchet,” he snarled and in one mirror, Olivia caught Kristi’s eye.

Look at me. Kristi! Look at me. We have to do this together.

Kristi glanced to the mirror. The male dog whined and looked at the door. Olivia thought she heard something—

Snap! The whip snaked. Pain exploded on Olivia’s back. Bright lights flashed behind her eyes. Her knees threatened to buckle. Don’t lose it, not now. But she didn’t have much time.

Sutter was sweating, his erection protruding, his concentration on Olivia’s rump.

Kristi nodded ever so slowly and Olivia gave a tiny nod back as he flipped his wrist again. Now! It has to be now! The whip sizzled through the air. It sliced into her back—burning. Olivia tucked, rolled backward and jerked upward in one swift motion. She grabbed hold of the whip.

“You bitch!” Warren, startled, took a step backward, close enough to Kristi that the girl, ready, kicked hard and upward, landing a blow to his chest.

Craaack, his ribs split.

“You pathetic cunt!” he cried, whirling.

The dogs bayed and footsteps pounded. Someone had found them!

“Down here!” Olivia bellowed. “Help!” She pounced on Sutter, but he’d managed to aim the remote. Furious, he jabbed a button.


The Chosen One buckled, dropped his remote.

The door flew open. James tumbled into the room. In one hand he held a fine whip edged in glass. His other
arm was extended, fingers splayed in supplication. “Stop! Please.” His face was pale and chalk-white as if he’d seen a horrific specter.

“What the hell?” The Chosen One was on his feet.

“You must stop! Kristi! In the name of God, this has to come to an end!”

“Help us!” Olivia screamed, then bucked as she was shocked again.

Sutter had the stun gun! She fell to the floor, twisting her ankle as she looked into the gold eyes of the female dog. “Stay,” she ordered.

The dog growled low in her throat and the male moved behind her. In a mirror she saw Warren, one arm wrapped around his broken ribs, the other holding the stun gun. “Father McClaren, put down my whip,” he ordered, but he was weakening. Spittle clung to his lip. “You made a grave mistake in coming here.”

“Help us, Uncle James,” Kristi cried.

“I will, honey.” He was walking forward slowly, his gaze steady on Warren though the dogs circled and snapped on their leashes. “I will. Please, you must stop this. I don’t know why you’re doing this, but it’s not God’s will. Release these women and repent. I will help you with the police and with the Church, but please, I beg of you, by all that is holy—”

Warren aimed the stun gun at James and pressed a finger. “What would you know of holiness, you sanctimonious bastard?” he snarled. He pressed a button. James yelped and fell to the floor.

No! He had to be stopped! Pushing herself, Olivia sprang. Her twisted ankle throbbing, she flung herself at her brother and felt the electricity before she’d landed a blow to his face. The Chosen One staggered, stumbling backward. Kristi leaped onto his back. She wrapped her chain around his neck and pulled, screaming and crying, volts of electricity streaking down her body as he pressed the gun against her thigh. Flailing, Warren slammed Kristi into a wall, his hands scrabbling for another weapon. He came up with a crucifix—a black wrought iron cross with a pointed end. James climbed to his feet, swayed and rushed Warren.

“Watch out!” Olivia screamed in horror. No—she staggered to her feet, threw herself toward the two men.

But it was too late. James wobbled forward.

“Noooooo!” Kristi cried.

The Chosen One’s hand slashed downward.

Thud! The crucifix plunged deep into James’s chest.

James jerked backward. Blood seeped around the weapon.

“No, no, no!” Olivia cried, tears falling from her eyes as she struggled to crawl to reach James … not dear James … “Oh, God, oh, God …” She inched toward him, but it was too late. Blood appeared around his lips.

“Forgive me, Father,” he whispered, then sank to his knees.

Bentz heard the screams as he threw himself out of the Jeep before it stopped rolling. He was too late! Whatever horror the monster had planned it was happening. To Olivia. To Kristi. To everyone he loved.

With Montoya on his heels and siren screaming through the night around them, he rushed the building, his weapon drawn. He couldn’t lose them. Not now. Dear God, not now. His heart was pounding, his pulse thundering. Let them be alive. And give me a clear shot. That’s all I need. Just one.

Other officers were surrounding the building but he pushed open the door and found himself in a long hallway by a staircase, and ahead, through a door that was ajar, in the blood-red glow of the lights he looked into his own personal hell.

“No!” Kristi screamed, yanking hard on the chain surrounding the prick’s neck. He’d killed Uncle James …. Oh, God … Sobbing, kicking, grief tearing her from the inside out, she wanted to kill the bastard. She would!

All the years of hatred and confusion muddled in her mind as she saw the man who had sired her collapse on the floor. He couldn’t be dead. No! No! No! Not James! From the corner of her eye Kristi glimpsed Olivia pulling a sword off the wall. She was half-dead, too. Bleeding and raw, limping. As the creep aimed the stun gun at her again, Olivia rushed forward, swung and sliced his hand, sending the gun into the deep dirty straw.

She drew back to swing at his head, but he twisted, rolling around so that Kristi, upon his back, was his shield. “Jump off!” Olivia ordered, the bloody sword still pointed at him. He backed up, using the mirror to try and skewer Kristi on the weapon. Kristi kicked all the harder. Olivia dropped the sword.

“Daddy,” she said weakly and willingly gave up her grip to crumple into a heap and start to cry. He was here to save her—to save them!

The Chosen One retrieved his stun gun and aimed it at Bentz.

“Rick, watch out!” Olivia cried.

Bentz fired.

With a horrible yelp, The Chosen One fell just as the stun gun fired. Bentz jolted, then sprang forward, blasting more shots into the crumpling man.

“Daddy … oh, Daddy …” In a heartbeat Bentz crossed the room, sweeping her off the dirty floor and holding onto her as if his life depended upon it. She buried her face in his neck and sobbed brokenly. “Uncle James… he’s dead,” she said and grief tore at her. The man she’d rejected. The uncle who had adored her. The man who had given her life and she’d been petty and mean to him. When all he’d tried to do was love her. She thought of the gifts he’d showered upon her, the kindness and patience and … and how, in the end, she’d rejected him, slamming down the phone the last time he’d called. And now … and now … she squeezed her eyes shut but that horrible moment when The Chosen One had slammed the cross into James’s chest burned through her brain. Shaking violently, Kristi clung to Bentz as if she’d never let go.

And Bentz wouldn’t let her. He held onto her and screamed orders, felt the wash of warm tears run down the back of his neck as other officers poured into the room. Olivia—she looked like she’d survive, but James … Bentz stared in horror at his brother and the horrid cross imbedded in his chest. He crawled to James while still holding Kristi. “James! Can you hear me?” he demanded, instantly on his knees.

Flashlights bobbed. The dogs growled. Policemen barked orders. Some rounded up the dogs, others searched the premises while still others checked the wounded.


Montoya, after checking for Sutter’s pulse, slid his fingers into the monster’s pockets. He found a set of keys and threw them at Bentz. “I’ll get you out of here,” Bentz promised as he unlocked Kristi’s chains and felt a rage as hot as all of hell’s fires burn deep within him as he glanced at this fetid, brutal room.

Then his eyes locked with Olivia’s as she sat crumpled in a corner. She was propped against one wall, breathing hard, naked but for some kind of dog collar and shivering. Scrapes and bruises covered her face and arms. Damn the bastard.

Kristi whimpered as her chains fell away.

“Shh … honey … it’ll be okay. I promise …” he said, knowing he lied as he made his way to Olivia. Still holding his child, he knelt and found a key that unlocked the collar surrounding her throat. “Are you all right?”

“No … yes …” She was crying too, tears glistening red from the weird light as they streaked down her face. Juggling Kristi, Bentz took off his jacket and draped it over Olivia’s shoulders. She flinched before he saw the red welts … deep cuts slicing across her back.

“That son of a bitch.”

“It’s all right,” she said, her chin quivering. “I’ll be okay.”

“I’d like to kill him all over again. He slid a finger along her jaw and swallowed hard. “I’m so sorry—”

She grabbed his fingers. “Later … now … James …” she said brokenly as an officer approached and offered a blanket which Bentz swaddled around his daughter.

Kristi sobbed as Bentz looked back at his brother where the policewoman was still working over him. But James was quivering and shaking, his face white as death.

“Shit…” Carrying Kristi, Bentz dived to the other side of the room. “James … no…” He fell to one knee. “Hang in there,” he said to his brother and yelled, “Where the hell are the EMTs?” He placed a hand on James’s shoulder. “You’re gonna be all right, James, you got that? You’re gonna be fine.”

Barely conscious, James rolled glazed eyes at Bentz. A crucifix was buried deep in his chest, blood stained his pale lips. Bentz wanted to throw up.

“No … It’s too late …” James’s breathing was ragged and slow, blood spreading across his shirt. With an odd, peaceful smile, he rasped, “No doctor, Rick. I need a priest.”
“No, don’t talk that way!” Bentz swivelled his head in Montoya’s direction. “Where’s the damned ambulance?”

“It’s here.”

“Forgive me, Rick. I wronged you,” James forced out, his voice a wheeze, a horrid rattle deep in his lungs. Then his gaze moved to Kristi. “And you, too … I… I… love you. So much.”

His eyes seemed to glaze and Bentz felt as if a thousand fingernails were scraping the inside of his soul. Images of James as a young adoring pup, the kid who always tagged after him flashed through Bentz’s mind. They’d spent so many hours while growing up talking of baseball and hunting and girls. His throat clogged. “There’s nothing to forgive, James, and you’re going to be fine.”

“But Jennifer—”

“Ancient history. And I’ve got … we’ve got Kristi.” Without James’s betrayal, Bentz wouldn’t have a daughter.

“Please … please don’t die, Uncle James,” Kristi said and a tiny, faltering smile curved James’s lips. “Daddy!”

“God is calling me.”

“Not yet! Fight, James!” Rick ordered, cradling his brother’s head, feeling James’s silky hair against his palms. “Fight, damn it! We need you. I need you. Kristi needs you! Don’t give up, do you hear me!”

Kristi was sobbing and James’s eyes closed slowly.

“I—can’t!” he rasped, his chest rattling.

“Don’t you give up! James! James! Damn it, don’t you give up!” Bentz swung his head toward the rest of the room. “Get an EMT over here! Now!” Bentz bellowed, his eyes moist as one of the dogs snapped and yipped while an officer forced it into a cage.

He couldn’t lose James. Not this way. Not at the hands of a serial murderer whom Bentz should have put away. There was so much to say, to do, so many fences to mend.

Half a dozen emergency workers lugging equipment, jogged into the room. Shouting orders, they split up to attend the fallen.

“Holy shit,” one whispered as he reached James.

“Over here, this one’s traumatized, maybe worse!” Another EMT was already with the woman chained to the wall.

“Sarah!” Olivia cried, but her friend didn’t respond.

“I’ll take care of her!” a young policeman threw over his shoulder as he unlatched Sarah’s bonds and pulled the tape from her mouth.

“This one’s dead.” A third was leaning over Warren Sutter where bullet holes riddled his alb and the pure white cloth was now stained a dark, oozing red. Bentz glanced at the man as an EMT ordered him aside and started working over James. “Out of the way. Christ, I need some help here … we’re losing this guy!”

“No,” Olivia cried. She’d managed to get to her feet and stumble across the room. Her fingers clasped a department-issued blanket around her body. “No—James!” she whispered and fell to the floor. “Please … please …” Tears rained from her eyes as she touched James’s limp hand.

Bentz’s guts twisted as James’s eyes fluttered open, just barely. “Be good to Rick. He’s a good man … you deserve someone who … who can love you … totally.” Olivia was crying openly now. “And Bentz … he … he needs … a strong woman … you.” James’s voice cracked, then faded. Kristi sent up a wail that echoed hollowly through the dank, dark chamber.

Tears streamed from Bentz’s eyes. It was too late. “Oh, Daddy, he can’t be—”

But the EMT shook his head and Bentz ached inside, guilt and anger roiling deep within. “It’s over, honey,” he whispered, fighting a losing battle with tears as he held his daughter. James’s daughter. Their daughter.

“But Uncle James …”

“Shh. He’s with God now.”

“You don’t even believe in God,” she charged. “You said so.”

“I lied.”

“Another ambulance is on its way.” Montoya clicked off his cell phone and took the time to look around the
room as if for the first time. The dogs were finally penned, but the mirrors and weapons glittered in the red light, glittering more harshly by the flashlights the officers were using. “Jesus H. Christ.”

Bentz, holding Kristi, moved closer to Olivia. She looked down at his brother and shook her head. Tears streamed from her eyes and her chin wobbled in her vain attempt to rein in her emotions. Bentz wrapped his free arm around her. “We’ll get through this. Together.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Have faith,” he said and the words struck an old forgotten chord, one he’d denied for so many years. “It was James who followed you here and called it in,” he explained. “He saved you.” His other arm tightened over his daughter. “And Kristi.”

“But how did you know where to come?”

“I bugged his house, his phone, and his car.” His admission reminded him of how he’d doubted his own brother, the anger and jealousy he’d felt toward a good, if sometimes weak man. “I’m a great brother, aren’t I?” he asked, hating his black suspicions. “I guess I don’t trust anyone.” His gaze fastened on Olivia. “But I’m working on changing that. I promise.”

In the distance, the bleat of additional sirens cut through the night. “Come on,” Bentz said to his daughter and Olivia as body bags were carried in. “It’s time for us to go home.”

“No, Dad,” Kristi said. “We have to find Brian. The … the creep’s got Brian somewhere!”

“Too late.” Montoya’s face was grim, as if he’d aged twenty years. “We already found him in the trunk of the Mercedes.”

“Is he okay—?”

“I’m sorry, Kris,” Montoya said with a shake of his head.

Kristi convulsed, screaming and kicking. “No, no, no!” Tiny fists flailed, but Bentz held on, wouldn’t let her go. “He can’t be dead. Not because of me. Noooooo!” Kristi let out a painful screech louder than either the dogs or the approaching ambulances. Guilt chasing through him, Bentz wondered if she’d ever be all right. And Olivia, what of her? She looked into Bentz’s eyes.

“Shh …” he said to his daughter. “It’s over.”

“It’ll never be over,” Kristi argued, sobbing hysterically.

“You’re right.” He held Olivia’s eyes with his as somehow his daughter seemed to get a grip on herself. Her sobs quieted though her face was wrenched in agony. “But it’ll be better,” Bentz promised, though he wasn’t sure he believed his own words. “Much better. For all of us. I swear to God we’ll all get past this. Somehow. Now, come on. It’s time to go home.”
Epilogue

“I know pronounce you man and wife. Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Tyler Wheeler.” The minister held up his hands as the couple turned and faced a small gathering of friends and family. In a long cream-colored gown, Samantha looked radiant as she walked through the guests sitting in the huge open courtyard of the St. Suzanne Hotel nestled deep in the French Quarter. Her new husband, in black tuxedo, was tall and handsome, a man whose book on the Rosary Killer would be in the stores within the next year.

The setting was perfect, Olivia thought.

It was the Saturday after Christmas and the centuries old brothel-turned hotel was still dressed in garlands and wreaths. Millions of lights spiraled through the foliage while outdoor heaters hummed as they warmed the courtyard and the friends and family of Dr. Sam and her new husband.

Olivia glanced through the jeweled fronts of palm trees and ferns to a dark sky where stars twinkled and a crescent moon hovered. Next to her, tugging at his tie, Rick Bentz watched the ceremony. It had been nearly a month since the horrid night at The Chosen One’s lair, but Bentz, true to his vow that night, was trying to make things better and giving their relationship another shot. Olivia had been a hard sell. They’d spent hours talking and she wasn’t sure she was ready to trust him again, but she did care about him; probably loved him, fool that she was. At that thought she smiled.

Things were far from perfect. Sarah Restin was in serious counseling and on anti-anxiety drugs, Kristi, too, was traumatized, but, it seemed would be able to go back to school after the winter break. Olivia had mended fences with her mother, but the specter of The Chosen One hadn’t quite died. The press kept him alive long after he should have been buried.

Slowly the case had unwound. The Jane Doe laid at the foot of St. Joan of Arc had been identified as a transient woman from El Paso. No family had come forward to claim her remains. St. Philomena had been a runaway teen from Detroit. Their IDs had been found in The Chosen One’s lair, an indecent, deranged shrine in the upper floor that had once been living quarters in the loft of the old barn. Eventually there had been a connection made to the universities as both women had at one time or another been seen by other students on the campus of All Saints. The transient had worked one week as a maid, the runaway had shown up uninvited to a party.

The only person missing was a woman named Marta Vasquez. She’d been Montoya’s girlfriend and she’d vanished. Apparently into thin air.

Bentz worried that she’d been taken by The Chosen One and killed elsewhere, her remains not yet located, but so far, thank God, no one had been able to make that link. Everything Dr. Warren Sutter had ever owned or touched had been gone over with a fine-tooth comb. Including his personal lair, the small farm in the middle of nowhere that Sutter’s family had bought years ago. He’d turned it into his sanctuary, complete with an altar. And a torture chamber.

Olivia shuddered as she thought of it. Not only had the police found a horrific calendar with Polaroid pictures of The Chosen One’s victims in the upper room, but also they discovered a closet of vestments and trophies, including an obscene braid he’d plaited from the hanks of hair he’d scalped from his victims.

Bentz speculated that the killer had found his other killing grounds by snooping around and discovering vacant buildings—even ones in the middle of the city like the shotgun house at Bayou St. John.

But Olivia didn’t want to dwell on the past. Her visions had died with her brother and she was now taking tentative steps in this new relationship with a very wary man. He seemed to have believed her that she and James, though close, had never actually made love, though she was certain, at this point, Bentz wouldn’t have held it against her if she had slept with his brother. For her part, Olivia had forgiven Bentz for pushing her away during the course of the investigation.

It was all water under the bridge.

They were starting over. Or at least trying to. She watched the dance floor and recognized the people that
Bentz had pointed out. Everyone from Samantha’s workplace, WSLJ, had attended and had blended into the sprinkling of Ty and Sam’s family, friends and neighbors. One woman had even had the audacity to bring her tiny dog—a pug named Hannibal—though he’d been kept in a kennel at the desk. Samantha’s father had given his daughter away, but, Bentz had explained after talking to the bride, Sam’s brother, Peter, hadn’t shown up, nor had her best friend, Corky Griffith, dealing with her own mother’s recent heart attack, been able to fly to New Orleans.

Nonetheless Sam was radiant; her red hair gleamed under the tiny lights, her dress sparkled and as she danced, she whispered something to her groom. Ty tipped back his head and laughed, then swung Samantha off her feet.

“We should dance,” Olivia suggested.
“I don’t dance.”
“Never?”
“Never.”
“Don’t tell me, another one of your rules.” She rolled her eyes.
“That’s right,” he said, pulling at his tie as he winked at her. “But for you, I’m willing to bend a few.” With that, he took her into his arms and warned her, “Just don’t you dare complain if I step on your toes.”
“Have I so far?” She laughed. “I have a feeling that for as long as I know you, you’ll be stepping on a lot of toes.”
“I guess you’ve figured me out.”
“Oh, Bentz, that’ll take a lifetime. Maybe two. But I’m trying. I think you just may be worth it. Maybe.”
“Has anyone told you you’re a sick woman?” he asked as he spun her with surprising agility.
“Just you, Bentz,” she said with a smile and winked at him. “Just … you.”
Dear Reader,

As you may have noticed, there are some questions left unanswered in COLD BLOODED. Rest assured they will be answered in THE NIGHT BEFORE.

THE NIGHT BEFORE is a change of pace. Once again we’re in the old South—Savannah, Georgia, but this time the heroine of the book, Caitlyn Montgomery Bandeaux, a woman who’s not known for her stability literally wakes up with blood on her hands. In fact there’s blood everywhere, in the bed, on the walls, in the bathroom …

She has only tiny shards of a memory from THE NIGHT BEFORE.. Is the blood her own? Or someone else’s? Most of the people in her large, eccentric family will be no help so she’s forced to turn to her twin sister, Kelly, a woman with secrets and desires all her own. Kelly assures her twin that everything will be all right. But Caitlyn has the feeling Kelly knows more than she’s saying—more secrets she’s keeping locked away. Afraid to confide in rugged Detective Pierce Reed or the new psychologist in town, Dr. Adam Hunt, a handsome but mysterious man who has taken over her counselor’s practice, Caitlyn has to solve the mystery alone. Is she a COLD BLOODED killer, or the victim of a morbid psychopath?

THE NIGHT BEFORE is now in bookstores, so look for it. In the meantime, visit me on the web. I’ve revamped my website and there are interactive contests and tidbits about current releases and future projects. Sign my guest book and let me know what you thought of COLD BLOODED. There’s tons of information and fun on the website—contests and puzzles that only those of you who have read COLD BLOODED—can figure out! So grab your mouse and click onto: www.lisajackson.com.

The best to all of you!

Lisa Jackson
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- Epilogue
- Prologue
Montoya had just stepped onto the porch when Abby grabbed his arm impulsively. “Detective.”
He paused. Glanced down at the fingers surrounding his forearm, then looked up at her face.
“Look,” she said, but didn’t let go. “Off the record, despite any amount of money I might inherit from Luke, he was a jerk, okay? I wasn’t in love with him any longer and I did want to get away from here, from him.” Her fingers tightened a bit. “But I didn’t kill him and I’m sorry he’s dead.” She held his gaze and inched her chin up a fraction. “And your link to the victims, through the hospital, that’s pretty damned thin.”
“Maybe the link isn’t the hospital,” he said in a low voice. “Maybe it’s you.”
“What do you mean?”
He wasn’t smiling. “Be careful, Abby. Lock your doors. Set your alarm, if you’ve got one. If you don’t, then call a security company and have one installed.”
She felt herself pale.
“You think I’m the link? Me? No.” She shook her head. “That’s crazy, Detective.”
“Just be aware.” He touched her shoulder and then he was gone, climbing behind the wheel of his cruiser and driving off, taillights disappearing at the end of the drive.
Abby shut the door and leaned against it, Montoya’s warning echoing through her mind.
She stood there, frozen, for a very long time . . .
Books by Lisa Jackson

See How She Dies
Final Scream
Wishes
Whispers
Twice Kissed
Unspoken
If She Only Knew
Hot Blooded
Cold Blooded
The Night Before
The Morning After
Deep Freeze
Fatal Burn
Shiver
Most Likely to Die
Absolute Fear

Published by Zebra Books
For Jack and Betty Pederson,
incredible parents, great friends,
and people who believed I could do anything.
Thanks Mom and Dad!
Acknowledgments

There were many people involved in getting this book to print, all of whom were integral. I want to thank my editor, John Scognamiglio for his insight, vision, input, support, and ultimate patience. Man, did he work hard on this one. As did my sister, Nancy Bush, who was not only my cheerleader and personal editor, she picked up the other balls of my life and juggled them effectively, never once losing her cool. Thanks, Nan.

Also, I have to thank my incredible agent, Robin Rue, and everyone at Kensington Books, especially Laurie Parkin, who also worked very hard on this one.

In addition, I would like to mention all the people here who helped me: Ken Bush, Kelly Bush, Matthew Crose, Michael Crose, Alexis Harrington, Danielle Katcher, Marilyn Katcher, Ken Melum, Roz Noonan, Kathy Okano, Samantha Santistevan, Mike Sidel, and Larry Sparks.

If I’ve forgotten anyone, my apologies. You’ve all been wonderful.
Author’s Note

For the purposes of the story, I’ve bent some of the rules of police procedure and have also created my own fictitious police department. This book was written pre-Hurricane Katrina, before the incredible city of New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf Coast were decimated by the storm. I hope I’ve captured the unique essence of New Orleans, what it once was and what it will be again.
PROLOGUE

Twenty years earlier
Our Lady of Virtues Hospital
Near New Orleans, Louisiana

She felt his breath.
A presence that caused the hairs on the back of her neck to lift, her skin to prickle, sweat to collect upon her spine.

She had been dragged, and barely able to move, standing in the darkness, she searched the shadowed corners of her room frantically. Through the open window she heard the reverberating songs of the frogs in the nearby swamps and the rumble of a train upon far away tracks.

But here, now, he was with her.
Go away, she tried to say, but held her tongue, hoping beyond hope that he wouldn’t notice her standing near the window. On the other side of the panes, security lamps illuminated the grounds with pale, bluish light, and she realized belatedly that her body, shrouded only by a sheer nightgown, was silhouetted in their eerie glow.

Of course he could see her, find her in the darkness.
He always did.

Throat dry, she stepped backward, placing a hand on the window casing to steady herself. Maybe she had just imagined his presence. Maybe she hadn’t heard the door open after all. Maybe she’d jumped up from a drug-induced sleep too quickly. After all, it wasn’t late, only eight in the evening.
Maybe she was safe in this room, her room, on the third floor.
Maybe.

She was reaching for the bedside light when she heard the soft scrape of leather against hardwood.
Her throat closed on a silent scream.

Scratch, scratch, scratch. The hairs on the backs of her arms rose. She heard a footstep and looked up quickly.

Was she really as sick as they said? Did she really see people who weren’t there? That’s what they’d told her, time and time again, to the point that she was no longer certain what was real and what was not. Maybe that was the plot against her, to make her believe she was as crazy as they insisted she was.

But he was always nearby. Always. She could feel him, hear his soft footsteps in the hallway, smell his scent—a mixture of male musk and sweat—catch a glimpse of a quick, darting shadow as he passed.

There was no getting away from him. Ever. Not even in the dead of night. He received great satisfaction in surprising her, sneaking up on her while she was sitting at her desk, leaning down behind her when she was kneeling at her bedside. He was always ready to press his face to the back of her neck, to reach around her and touch her breasts, arousing her though she loathed him, pulling her tightly against him so that she could feel his erection against her back. She wasn’t safe when she was under the thin spray of the shower, nor while sleeping beneath the covers of her small bed.

How ironic that they had placed her here . . . for her own safety.

“Go away,” she whispered, her head pounding, her thoughts disjointed. “Leave me alone!”

She blinked and tried to focus.

Where was he?
Nervously she trained her eyes on the one hiding place, the closet. She licked her lips. The wooden door was ajar, just slightly, enough that anyone inside could peer through the crack.

From the small sliver of darkness within the closet, something seemed to glimmer. A reflection. Eyes?
Oh, God.

Maybe he was inside. Waiting.

Go away, she tried to say, but held her tongue, hoping beyond hope that he wouldn’t notice her standing near the window. On the other side of the panes, security lamps illuminated the grounds with pale, bluish light, and she realized belatedly that her body, shrouded only by a sheer nightgown, was silhouetted in their eerie glow.

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Maybe he was inside. Waiting.

Gooseflesh broke out on her skin. She should call out to someone, but if she did, she would be restrained, medicated . . . or worse. Stop it, Faith. Don’t get paranoid! But the glittering eyes in the closet watched her. She felt them. Wrapping one arm around her middle, the other folded over it, she scraped her nails on the skin of her elbow.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

But maybe this was all a bad dream. A nightmare. Wasn’t that what the sisters had assured her in their soft whispers as they gently patted her hands and stared at her with compassionate, disbelieving eyes? An ugly dream. Yes! A nightmare of vast, intense proportions. Even the nurse had agreed with the nuns, telling her that what she’d thought she’d seen wasn’t real. And the doctor, cold, clinical, with the bedside manner of a stone monkey, had talked to her as if she were a small, stupid child.

“Be there, then, Faith, no one is following you,” he’d said, wearing a thin, patronizing smile. “No one is watching you. You know that. You’re . . . you’re just confused. You’re safe here. Remember, this is your home now.”

Tears burned her eyes and she scratched more anxiously, her short fingernails running over the smooth skin of her forearm, encountering scabs. Home? This monstrous place? She closed her eyes, grabbed the headboard of the bed to steady herself.

Was she really as sick as they said? Did she really see people who weren’t there? That’s what they’d told her, time and time again, to the point that she was no longer certain what was real and what was not. Maybe that was the plot against her, to make her believe she was as crazy as they insisted she was.

She heard a footstep and looked up quickly.

The hairs on the backs of her arms rose.
She began to shake as she saw the door crack open a bit more.

“Sweet Jesus.” Trembling, she backed up, her gaze fixed on the closet, her fingers scraping her forearm like mad. The door creaked open in slow motion. “Go away!” she whispered, her stomach knotting as full-blown terror took root.

A weapon! You need a weapon!
Anxiously, she looked around the near dark room with its bed bolted to the floor.

Get your letter opener! Now!
She took one step toward the desk before she remembered that Sister Madeline had taken the letter opener away from her.

The lamp on the night table!

But it, too, was screwed down.

She pressed the switch.

Click.

No great wash of light. Frantically, she hit the switch again. Over and over.

Click! Click! Click! Click!

She looked up and saw him then. A tall man, looming in front of the door to the hallway. It was too dark to see his features but she knew his wicked smile was in place, his eyes glinting with an evil need.

He was Satan Incarnate. And there was no way to escape from him. There never was.

“Please don’t,” she begged, her voice sounding pathetic and weak as she backed up, her legs quivering.

“No, that won’t work.”

Don’t touch me . . . don’t place your fingers anywhere on my body . . . don’t tell me I’m beautiful . . . don’t kiss me . . .

“Leave now,” she insisted. Dear God, was there no weapon, nothing to stop him?

“Leave now or what?”

“Or I’ll scream and call the guards.”

The guards,” he repeated in that low, amused, nearly hypnotic voice. “Here?” He clucked his tongue as if she were a disobedient child. “You’ve tried that before.”

She knew for certain that her plight was futile. She would submit to him again.

As she always did.

“Did the guards believe you the last time?”

Of course they hadn’t. Why would they? The two scrawny, pimply-faced boys hadn’t hidden the fact they considered her mad. At least that’s what they’d insinuated, though they’d used fancier words . . . delusional . . . paranoid . . . schizophrenic . . .

Or had they said anything at all? Maybe not. Maybe they’d just stared at her with their pitying, yet hungry, eyes. Hadn’t one of them told her she was sexy? The other one cupping one cheek of her buttocks . . . or . . . or had that all been a hoard, vivid nightmare?

Scratch, scratch, scratch. She felt her nails break the skin.

Humiliation washed over her. She inched backward, away from her tormentor. What was happening to her was her own fault. She’d sinned somehow, brought this upon herself. She was the one who was evil. She had instigated God’s wrath. She alone could atone. “Go away,” she whispered again, clawing more frantically at her arm.

“Faith, don’t, he warned, his voice horrifyingly soothing. “Mutilating yourself won’t change anything. I’m here to help you. You know that.”

Help? No . . . no . . . no, no!

She wanted to crumble onto the floor, to shed her guilt, to get away from the itching.

Fight! an inner voice ordered her. Don’t let him force you into doing things that you know are wrong! You have will. You can’t let him do this to you.

But it was already too late.

Close to her now, he clucked his tongue again and she saw its pointy, wet, pink tip flicking against the back of his teeth.

In a rough whisper, he said, “Uh-oh, Faith, I think you’ve been a naughty girl again.

“No.” She was whimpering. There it was . . . that horrid bit of excitement building inside her.

“Oh, Faith, don’t you know it’s a sin to lie?”

She glanced to the wall where the crucifix of Jesus was nailed into the plaster. Did it move? Blinking, she imagined Jesus staring at her, his eyes kind but silently reprimanding in the semidarkness.

No, Faith. That can’t be. Get a grip, for God’s sake.

It’s a painted image, that’s all.

Breathing rapidly, she dragged her gaze from Christ’s tortured face to the fireplace . . . cold now, devoid of both ashes and the mirror above it, now an empty space, the outline visible against the roseglass wallpaper. They said she broke the mirror in a fit of rage, that she’d cut herself. That her own image had caused her to panic.

But he’d done it, hadn’t he? This devil whose sole intent was to torture her? Hadn’t she witnessed the act? She’d tried to refuse him, and he’d crashed his fist into the looking glass. Mirrored shards sprayed, hitting her, then crashed to the floor like glittery, deadly knives.

That’s what had happened.

Right?

Or not? Now, feeling the blood beneath her nails, she wondered.

What’s happening to me?

She stared at her bloodied hands. Her fingernails, once manicured and polished, were broken, her palms scratched, and farther up, upon her wrists, healed deep gashes. Had she done that to herself? In her mind’s eye she saw her hands wrapped around a shard of glass and the blood dripping from her fingers . . .

Because you were going to kill him . . . try to protect yourself!

She closed her eyes and let out a long, mewling cry. It was true. She didn’t know what to believe any longer. Truth and lies blended, fact and fiction fused, her life, once so ordinary, so predictable, was fragmented. Frayed. At her own hands.

She edged backward, closer to the window, farther from him, from temptation, from sin.

Where was her husband . . . and her children, what had happened to her girls?

Terrified lowered deep into her soul. Confused and panic-stricken, she blinked rapidly, trying to think. They were safe. They had to be.

Concentrate, Faith. Get hold of yourself! Zoey and Abby are with Jacques. They’re visiting tonight, remember? It’s your birthday.

Or was that wrong? Was everything a lie? A macabre figment of her imagination?

She took another step backward.

“You’re confused, Faith, but I can help you,” he said quietly, as if nothing had happened between them, as if everything she’d conjured was her imagination, as if he’d never touched her.

Dear Lord, how mad was she?

She spun quickly, her toe catching on the edge of a rug. Pitching forward, she again caught her reflection in the window and this time she saw him rushing forward, felt his hands upon her.

“No!” she cried, falling.

Giclck cracked.

Blew apart as her shoulder hit the pane.

The window broke, shattering, Giving way.

With a great twisting metal groan, the wrought-iron grate wrenched free of its bolts.

She screamed and flailed at the air, trying to reach the window sill, the filigreed barricade that hung from one screw, the bricks, anything! But it was too late.

Her body hurtled through the broken panes, pieces of glass and wood clawing at her arms, ripping her nightgown, slicing her bare legs.

In a split second, she knew that it was over. She would feel no more pain.
Closing her eyes, Faith Chastain pitched into the blackness of the hot Louisiana night.
CHAPTER 1

Twenty years later
Cambrai, Louisiana

“I just wanted to call and say ‘Happy birthday,’” her sister said, leaving a message on the answering machine.

Abby stood in the middle of her small kitchen. Listening, she debated about picking up the phone, but decided against it. She just wasn’t in the mood. She had spent most of the day at her studio in New Orleans, dealing with kids who had their own ideas about what a Christmas portrait should be. What she needed was a glass of wine. Maybe two. Not her sister’s long-winded birthday message.

“So . . . give me a call back when you get in. It’s still early here on the West Coast, you know. I, uh, I’d like to talk to you, Abby. Thirty-five years is a major milestone.”

“I know it’s been a while.”

Abby thought as she reached into her refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of Chardonnay she’d bought nearly a month earlier when she’d thought her friend Alicia was coming to Louisiana for a visit.

“Okay . . . so . . . when you get this, I mean, assuming you’re not listening to it right now and still refusing to talk to me, give me a call, okay?” Zoey waited a beat. “It’s been a long time, Abby. It’s time to bury the hatchet.”

Abby wasn’t so sure. She turned on the faucet and heard the old pipes groan as she rinsed a wineglass that had been gathering dust in her cupboard for the past two years.

“You know, Abby, this isn’t just about you,” Zoey reminded her through the answering machine’s tiny speaker. “Of course not. It’s about you.”

It’s a tough day for me, as well. She was my mother, too.”

Abby set her jaw, reconsidered picking up the receiver, and once again determined not to. Talking to Zoey today would be a mistake. She could feel it in her bones. Digging in a drawer she found a corkscrew she’d owned since college and began opening the bottle.

“Look, Abs, I really, really hope you’re not home alone and listening to this . . . You should go out and celebrate.”

“I intend to.”

The phone clicked as Zoey hung up. Abby let out a long breath and leaned against the counter. She probably should have answered, put up with all the faddish of birthday greetings, the fake cheer, the gee-aren’t-we-just-one-big-happy-family, but she couldn’t. Not today. Because Zoey wouldn’t have let it go at that. There would have been the inevitable discussion of their mother, and what had happened twenty years ago, and then there would have been the awkward and uncomfortable questions about Luke.

She popped the cork.

It was just so damned hard to forgive her sister for sleeping with her husband. Yeah, it had been a long time ago, and before the marriage but there it was, the wedge that had been between them for five years, ever since Abby had learned of the affair.

But Zoey had dated him first, hadn’t she?

So what? Abby poured the wine, watched the chilled, cool liquid splash into the glass. Her conscience twinged a little at that, even though she knew that Luke Gierman had proved to be no prize as a boyfriend and worse as a husband. No damned prize at all.

And though Abby had divorced him, Zoey was still her sister. There was no changing that. Maybe she should let bygones be bygones, Abby thought, staring out the partially opened window where a slight breeze, heavy with the scents of earth and water, wafted inside.

Twilight was just settling in this stretch of Louisiana, the crickets and cicadas were chirping, stars beginning to wink in a dusky, lavender sky. It was pretty here, if a little isolated, a place she and Luke had planned to add on to, to become an all-American family with 2.3 children, a white picket fence, and a minivan parked in the drive.

So much for dreams.

She pushed the window open a little farther, hoping for relief from the heat.

Happy birthday to you . . .

The wind seemed to sigh that damned funeral dirge of a song through the branches of the live oaks, causing the Spanish moss to shift as dusk settled deeper into the woods. Off in the distance she heard the rumble of a train. Closer in, at a neighbor’s place down this winding country road, she heard a dog barking and through the trees she watched the ghostly image of a rising moon.

Her 35-millimeter camera was sitting on the near the back door and the dusk was so still and peaceful, so intriguing, she thought she might click off a few shots and kill the roll. The film inside the camera had been there for a long time as she used her digital more often than not. Leaving the wine on the counter, she turned on the camera and flash, then walked to the French doors off her dining room. Stepping outside, she positioned herself on the edge of the flagstones. Ansel, her cat, followed Abby outside and hopped onto a bench located under a magnolia tree. Abby focused then clicked off the last few shots of the tabby with the darkening woods as a backdrop. The cat faced away from the house, ears pricked forward, his eyes trained on the trees, his fur gilded by a few rays of a dying sun. “Hey, buddy,” she said, and the cat looked over his shoulder as she took the last couple of shots with the flash flaring in Ansel’s gold eyes. Why not have a few pictures of this, her thirty-fifth birthday? she thought as she turned to go inside.

Snap!

A twig cracked in the woods nearby.

Her heart jumped to her throat.

She spun around, half expecting to spy someone lurking in the deepening umbra. Eyes searching the coming darkness, she strained to see through the vines and brush and canopy of leafy trees. Her skin crawled, her pulse jackhammering in her ears.

But no human shape suddenly appeared, no dark figure stepped into the patches of light cast from the windows. Stop it, she thought, drawing in a shaky breath. Just . . . stop it. She’d been in a bad mood all day. Tense and on edge. Not because it was her birthday, not really. Who cared about the passing of another year? Thirty-five wasn’t exactly ancient. But the fact that this was the twentieth anniversary of her mother’s death, now that got to her.

Still jittery, she walked into the house and called to the cat through the open doors.

Ansel ignored her. He remained fixed and alert, his gaze trained on the dark shadows, where she expected a creature of the night might be staring back. The same creature who had stepped on and broken a twig.

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Ansel ignored her. He remained fixed and alert, his gaze trained on the dark shadows, where she expected a creature of the night might be staring back. The same creature who had stepped on and broken a twig. A large creature. “Come on, Ansel. Let’s call it a day,” she urged.

The cat hissed.

His striped fur suddenly stood straight on end. His ears flattened and his eyes rounded. Like a bolt of lightning, he shot across the verandah and around the corner toward the studio. There wasn’t a chance in hell that she could catch him.

“Oh, ya big pussy,” she teased, but as she latched the door behind her, she couldn’t quite shake her own case of nerves. Though she’d never seen anyone on the grounds behind her place, there was always a first time. Leaving her camera on the dining room table, she made her way back to the kitchen, where
the answering machine with its blinking red light caused her to think of Zoey again.

Abby and her sister had never been close, not for as long as she could remember.

Damn you, Zoey, she thought as she picked up her glass and took a long swallow. Why couldn’t Abby have had that special bond with her sister, that best-friends kind of thing which everyone did seem to grasp on and about? Could it be because Zoey and Abby were so close in age, barely fourteen months apart? Or maybe it was because Zoey was so damned competitive with her uncompromising I’ll-do-anything-to-win streak. Or maybe, just maybe, their antagonism was as much Abby’s fault as her sister’s.

“Blasphemy,” she muttered, feeling the chilled wine slide easily down her throat, though it did little to cool her off.

It was hot. Humid. The fans in the nearly century-old house unable to keep up with the heat that sweltered in this part of the bayou. She dabbed at the sweat on her forehead with the corner of a kitchen towel.

Should she have answered the stupid phone? Nope. Abby wasn’t ready to go there. Not today. Probably not ever.

It was twenty years ago today.

The lyrics of an old Beatles tune, one of her mother’s favorites, spun through Abby’s head. “Don’t,” she told herself. No reason to replay the past as she had for the last two decades. It was time to move on. Tonight, she vowed, she’d start over. This was the beginning of Abby Chastain, Phase II. She’d try to forget that on this very day, twenty years ago, when her mother had turned thirty-five—just as Abby was doing today—Faith Chastain had ended her tormented life. Horribly. Tragically.

“Oh, God, Mom,” she said now, closing her eyes. The memory that she’d tried so hard to repress emerged as if in slow motion. She recalled her father’s sedan rolling through the open wrought-iron gates. Past manicured lawns toward the tall, red-brick building where the drive curved around a fountain—a fountain where three angels sprayed water upward toward the starlit heavens. Abby, already into boys at the time, and thinking of how she was going to ask Trey Hilliard to Friday night’s Sadie Hawkins dance, had climbed out of the car just as her father had cut the engine. Carrying a box with a bright, fuchsia-colored bow, she’d looked up to the third story, to the windows of her mother’s room.

But no warm light glowed through the panes.

Instead the room was dark.

And then Abby had felt an odd sensation, a soft breath that touched the back of her neck and nearly stopped her heart. Something was wrong. Very wrong. “Mama?” she whispered, using the name for her mother she hadn’t spoken in a decade.

She’d started for the wide steps leading to the hospital’s front door when she heard the crash.

Her head jerked up.

Glass sprayed. Tiny pieces catching in the bluish light.

A hideous shriek rose in the night. A dark body fell through the sky. It landed on the concrete with a heavy bone-cracking thud.

Fear tore through her.

Dread rose in her throat. “No! No! Nooo!” Abby dropped the box and flew down the steps to the small broken form lying faceup on the cement.

Blood, dark and oozing, began to pool beneath her mother’s head. Wide whiskey-colored eyes stared sightlessly upward.

Abby pitched herself toward the still, crumpled form.

“Abby!”

As if from the other side of a long tunnel she heard her name being called. Her father’s desperate, tense voice. “Abby, don’t! Oh, God! Help! Someone get help! Faith!”

She fell to her knees. Tears welled in her eyes and terror chilled her to the bottom of her soul. “Mama! Mama!” she cried, until strong hands and arms pulled her struggling body away.

Now, she blinked and gave herself a quick mental shake. “Jesus,” she whispered, dispelling the horrific vision that had haunted her for all of twenty years. She was suddenly cognizant of water dripping from the faucet over the kitchen sink. Rather than shut off the pressure, she turned it on full, until water was rushing from the tap. Quickly, she cupped her hands under the stream, then splashed the water onto her face, cooling her cheeks, pushing back the soul-jarring memory and hoping to wash away the stain of that night forever.

Trembling, she snapped the dish towel from the counter and wiped at her face. What was wrong with her? Hadn’t she just told herself she wouldn’t go down that painful path again? “Idiot,” she murmured, folding the towel, noticing her half-full glass of wine on the counter, and feeling something about the memory wasn’t quite right.

“Get over yourself,” she rebuked as she picked up the glass, looked at the glimmering depths for a second.

“Happy birthday, Mom,” she whispered to the empty room, hoisting the stemmed glass as if Faith were in the room. She took a sip of the crisp Chardonnay. “Here’s to us.” Her mother had always told her she was special, that being born on her mother’s birthday created a unique bond between them, that they were “two peas in a pod.”

Well . . . not quite.

Not a long shot.

A very long shot.

“Now, please . . . go away,” she whispered. “Leave me alone.”

She drained her glass, corked the bottle, and stuffed it into the refrigerator door. She had no more time for mind-numbing nightmares, for a past that sometimes nearly devoured her. Tonight, all that was over.

Determined to get her life on the right track, she set her glass onto the counter too quickly. It cracked, the stem breaking off, cutting the end of her thumb. “Great,” she growled as blood began to surface. Just what she needed, she thought sourly. Opening a cupboard, she found a box of Band-Aids. As blood dripped onto the Formica, she undid the little carton and discovered only one jumbo-sized Band-Aid in the box. It would just have to do. Awkwardly she slipped it from its sterile packaging and wrapped it around her thumb twice.

She managed to swab the counter and toss the broken glass into the trash before walking through a mud room and slapping on the light of the garage.

There, propped against a stack of wood, was a sign that said it all: FOR SALE BY OWNER. She picked it up then carried it to the end of her long drive. She hung the blue-and-white placard onto the hooks of the post she’d set into her yard late that afternoon.

Luke Gierman, once a respected newscaster and radio disk jockey, had become New Orleans’s answer to Howard Stern as well as a chapter in her life that was finally and indelibly over. It had been more than a year since the final papers had been signed and a judge had declared the marriage officially
dissolved.

Snagging the hammer from the ground where she'd left it earlier, Abby stepped back to study the sign, to make certain it hung evenly, to read once again the words and phone number indicating that this home was on the market. She had been determined to set her life straight, had heeded what all the experts had suggested, though, in truth, she'd thought a lot of the advice had been useless. She'd tried to give their marriage a second chance but that hadn't worked. They'd split; she'd stayed with the house. Her friends had all warned her about suffering through the holidays and anniversaries and nostalgia alone, but those milestones had passed and they hadn't been all that bad. She'd survived just fine. Probably because she hadn't really handed her heart to Luke again. And she hadn't been all that surprised when his old tendencies for other women had resurfaced.

Luke would probably always suffer from an ongoing case of infidelity.

Snap!

A twig in the underbrush broke. Again! Glancing sharply toward the shrubbery, the direction where the sound had occurred, Abby expected to see a possum or raccoon or even a skunk amble into the weak light offered by the single bulb hanging in the garage.

But there was only silence. She realized, then, that the crickets had stopped their songs, the bullfrogs were no longer croaking. Her heart rate increased and involuntarily she strained to listen, to notice any other sounds that were out of the ordinary.

She suddenly felt very vulnerable in this isolated area of the road.

Peering into the darkness, she sensed unseen eyes studying her, watching her. A tiny shudder slid down her spine. She chided herself for her own case of nerves. It was her birthday, she was alone, and just thinking about her mother's death had left her edgy.

Relax, she told herself. Go inside. It's dark now and the sign is finally up.

From the corner of her eye, she caught movement in the bushes, a rustle of dry leaves. She froze, her nerves stretched taut.

A second later a dark shadow slid beneath the undergrowth. Her heart kicked hard.

Then Ansel scurried from his hiding spot beneath the branches of a leatherwood and buckthorn. At her feet, he turned, stared into the bushes from where he'd been hiding, and hissed loudly.

She jumped, startled. “For God's sake,” she murmured, putting a hand over her racing heart. “Cut that out! What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack? Well, you just about succeeded!” She reached down and tried to pick him up. “I guess you're tense, too. How about a drink? Wine for me. Fresh H₂O for you.”

Before she could grab him, Ansel raced the length of the driveway and through the open garage door. Nearly a quarter of a mile away, the neighbor's dog began putting up a racket that could raise the dead.

Anxiety ate at her. Her fingers tightened over the handle of the hammer, and ridiculously, she felt again as if someone was observing her. Don't get paranoid. Don't. You're not like your mother . . . you're not crazy. So the Pomeroy's Rottweiler was barking. So what?

Dismissing her case of nerves, she walked stealthily toward the house, her shoes crushing the first few leaves of autumn. Inside the garage, she slapped the button to close the door; then walked through the mud room to the kitchen, where Ansel was seated on the windowsill over the sink, his eyes trained outside, his tail flicking nervously.

“What is it, buddy?” she asked.

The cat kept up his tense vigil.

“You know you're not supposed to be anywhere near the counters.”

Still no reaction.

Abby stood at the sink and stared through the glass into the night. Looming black trees surrounded her small patio and garden. The window was open a bit, the sounds of the night and the breeze filtering inside.

Again the dog barked. At the same moment Abby’s cottage settled, the old timbers creaking. Unnerved, Abby shooed the cat from the ledge, slammed the window shut, and flipped the lock. Though she wasn't easily frightened, every once in a while she felt edgy, the isolation of living alone getting to her.

But that was about to change.

If she accepted Alicia’s invitation to move to San Francisco, they’d be roommates again, just like in college—except for the fact that they were both now divorced and Alicia had a five-year-old in kindergarten.

“Tempting, isn't it?” she asked the cat, who, rebuffed from his perch on the window, slunk to a hiding spot under the table. “Fine, Ansel, go ahead and pout. Hurt me some more.”

The phone rang. Still feeling guilty about ignoring her sister’s call, Abby swooped up the cordless receiver without checking caller ID. “Hello,” she answered as she walked into the living room.

“Happy birthday.”

She stopped short and her heart nearly dropped through the floor at the sound of Luke’s voice. “Thanks.”

“You're probably surprised to hear from me.”

That was the understatement of the year. “More like stunned. You were the last person I expected to call.”

“Abs,” he said, drawing her nickname out so that it was almost an endearment. “Look, I know this is a difficult day for you because of your mom.”

That was the understatement of the year. “More like stunned. You were the last person I expected to call.”

“Yeah.”

“I'm fine.” She said it with complete conviction.

“Oh. Well, that's good,” he said, surprised, as if he believed she might still be an emotional mess, falling into a bajillion pieces. “Real good.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

“Wait! Don’t hang up.”

She heard the urgency in his voice, imagined his free hand shooting out as if to physically stop her from dropping the receiver into its cradle. He’d made the same gesture every time he wanted something and thought she wasn’t listening. “What, Luke?” She was standing in the living room now, the room where they’d once watched television, eaten popcorn, and discussed current events. Or fought. They’d had more than their share of rip-roarers.

“Look, do you still have that stuff I left?” he finally asked, getting to the real point of his call.

“What stuff?”

“Oh, you know,” he said casually, as if the items were just coming to mind. “My fishing poles and tackle box. An old set of golf clubs. Scuba gear.”

“No.”

“What?”

“It’s gone. All of it.”

She glanced to the bookcase where their wedding pictures were still tucked away with the rest of the photo albums. There was a short pause and she knew she’d taken all the wind out of his sails.

“What do you mean ‘gone’?” he asked and she imagined his blue eyes narrowing. “You didn’t give my things away, did you?” His voice was suddenly cold. Suspicious. Accusing.

“Of course I gave them away,” she responded without a shred of guilt. “I gave you six months to pick up your stuff, Luke. And that was way longer than I wanted to. Way longer. When you didn’t show, I called the Salvation Army. They took everything, including the rest of your clothes and all that junk that was in the garage and the attic and the closets.”

Jesus, Abby! Some of that stuff was valuable! None of it’s ‘junk.’”
“Then you should have come for it.”

There was a pause, just long enough for a heartbeat and she braced herself. “Wait a minute. You didn’t get rid of my skis. You wouldn’t do that. The Rossignols are still in the attic, right?” She heard the disbelief in his voice. Walking back to the kitchen, she threw open the refrigerator door and hauled out the wine bottle again. “Jesus, Abby, those things cost me an arm and a leg. I can’t believe that you . . . oh, Christ, tell me that my board is in the garage. My surf board.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m pretty sure that went, too.”

“I bought it in Hawaii! And the canoe!”

“Actually I think that went to Our Lady of Virtues, a fund-raiser.”

“Our Lady of Virtues? The hospital where your mother—”

“It was for the church,” she cut in. “The hospital’s been closed for years.”

“You’ve completely flipped out, Abby,” he accused. “You’re as nuts as she was!”

Abby’s stomach clenched, but she waited. Didn’t respond. Wouldn’t rise to the bait. Pulling out the cork while cradling the phone between her shoulder and ear, she felt her injured thumb throb. She wasn’t crazy. No way. The only time she’d been close to mental illness was when she’d agreed to marry Luke. Those “I do’s” were major points in the off-your-column. But otherwise, knock wood, she was sane. Right? Despite the sense of creeping paranoia that lurked around her at times.

“This is a nightmare! A fuckin’ nightmare. I suppose you even tossed my dad’s thirty-eight?” When she didn’t reply, he clarified, “You know, Abby, the gun?”

“I know what it is.” She didn’t bother with another wineglass, just pulled her favorite cracked coffee mug from the open shelf.

“That gun was my dad’s! He—he had it for years. He was a cop, damn it, and . . . and it’s got sentimental value. You wouldn’t give it away!”

“Hm.” She poured the wine, didn’t care that some splashed onto the counter. “Kinda makes you wonder what the Salvation Army would want with it.”

“They don’t take firearms.”

“Is that so?” She took a long swallow of the wine. “Then maybe it was the nuns at Our Lady. I can’t really remember.”

“You don’t even know?” He was agast. “You gave your gun away and you don’t know who has it! Jesus H. Christ, Abby, that pistol is registered to me! If it’s used in a crime—”

“Now, I’m not sure about this, so don’t quote me, but I don’t think the Mother Superior is running a smuggling ring on the side.”

“This isn’t funny!”

“Sure it is, Luke. It’s damned funny.”

“I’m talking about my possessions. Mine!” She pictured him hooking a thumb at his chest and jabbing frantically, angrily. “You had no right to get rid of anything!”

“So sue me, Luke.”

“I will,” he said hotly.

“Look, my name isn’t U-Store-It, okay? I’m not a holding tank for your things. If they were so valuable, you should have picked them up around the time we were splitting up, or, you know, in the next six or seven months, maybe?”

“I can’t believe this!”

“Then don’t, Luke. Don’t believe it.”

“Getting rid of my things is low, Abby. And you’re going to hear about it. I think the topic of the next Gierman’s Groaners is going to be about vindictive exes and how they should be handled.”

“Do whatever you want. I won’t be listening or calling in.” She hung up, teeth clenched. She kicked herself for not checking caller ID before picking up the phone. “Never again,” she promised herself, taking another sip of Chardonnay, wishing the wine would hurry up and dull the rage she felt boiling through her blood. Luke had the uncanny ability to make her see red when no one else could. She’d half expected to feel some sort of satisfaction when he finally learned that she’d tossed out his treasures; instead she felt empty. Hollow. How could two people who had sworn to love each other come down to this? “Don’t let him get to you,” she warned herself, walking into the living room, where, despite the heat, she grabbed a long-handled barbecue lighter and started the fire.

Flames immediately crackled and rose, consuming the newspaper and kindling she’d stacked earlier. She’d always kept logs in the grate, ready to light in case there was a sudden power loss, but tonight was different. She had a ritual she’d planned long before Luke’s unexpected call. Though it was still sweltering outside, she had some trash to burn.

From the shelf near the stone fireplace, she pulled out her wedding album. Upon her friend Alicia’s advice, she’d kept the photographic record of her big day for a year after the divorce, but now it was time to do the nasty and final deed. Luke’s call had only reinforced her original plan.

She opened the leather-bound cover and her heart nosedived as she stared at the first picture.

There they were, the newly wedded couple, preserved for all eternity under slick plastic. The bride and groom. Luke with his athletic good looks, twinkling blue eyes, and near-brilliant smile, one arm looped around Abby, who was nearly a foot shorter than he, her untamed red-blond hair framing a sweltering face, her smile genuine, her eyes shining with hope for the future.

“Save me,” Abby muttered, yanking the picture from its encasement and tossing it into the fire. As she slowly sipped wine from her cup, her thumb ached, its throbbing measuring out her heartbeats. She watched the edges of the paper bake and turn brown before curling and snapping into flame. The bride and groom were mere moments away from ash.

“Save me,” she moaned, yanking the next picture from its ensheathing plastic and tossing it into the blaze.

“Save me,” she sobbed, yanking picture after picture from its protective casing.

“Save me.”

“Save me.”

“Save me.”

There were a few more pictures to toss, a few more pictures to save. But she didn’t have time to agonize over each one. She tossed them all into the flames, wishing the ash would carry them far away from her life.

“Those I do’s were major points in the off-your-column,” she mocked as the fire began to die. Finishing her wine, she silently vowed that tonight her life was going to change forever.

Little did she know how right-on her words would be.
He slipped between the boards of the broken fence and stared up at the edifice where it had all happened so long ago. A surge of power sizzled through his bloodstream as he stepped through the overgrown bushes. Moist spiderwebs pressed against his face. He inhaled the humid, dank scent of earth and decay.

Insects thrummed and chirped, causing the night to feel alive. The wan light from a descending moon washed over the landscape of broken bricks, dry, chipped fountains, and overgrown lawns.

Where once there had been lush, clipped hedges and clear ponds covered with water lilies, there now was only ruin and disrepair. The omate red brick building with its gargoyles on the downspouts and windows was now crumbling and dark, a desiccated skeleton of a once great lady.

He closed his eyes for a second, remembering the sights and smells of the hospital with its grand facade and filthy, wicked secrets. Prayers had been whispered, screams stifled, a place where God and Satan met.

Opening his eyes, he walked swiftly along a weed-choked path that was, no doubt, long forgotten.

But not by him.

Twenty years was a generation.

Twenty years was a lifetime.

Now, it was time to remember.

His jaw tightened. The ache within him heated his blood, stirring old desires, pounding at his temples.

In intricate detail, he recalled the scent of her skin, the naughty playfulness of her smile, the sweet, dark rumble of her voice, and the sexy way she walked, her buttocks shifting beneath her clothes.

Her chewing gum had been here. Beautiful Faith. Trembling Faith.

Again his memories assailed him.

Sharp.

Precise.

Not dulled by the passage of two decades.

Intricate detail, he recalled the scent of her skin, the naughty playfulness of her smile, the sweet, dark rumble of her voice, and the sexy way she walked, her buttocks shifting beneath her clothes.

His jaw tightened. The ache within him heated his blood, stirring old desires, pounding at his temples.

It had been a sin.

He shouldn’t have kissed her.

It had been a sin.

He shouldn’t have pulled her shirt down to expose her bare breasts.

It had been a sin.

He shouldn’t have lain with her, his muscles soaked in sweat, her hands gripping his shoulders as she’d cried out in pleasure and pain.

It had been heaven.

And hell.

Now, his fists balled at the agony of it all. To have wanted her so badly, so achingly, to have tasted the salt upon her skin, to have buried himself deep into the moist heat of her and then to have all that sweet, sweet paradise wrenched away so violently, had been excruciating. His teeth gnashed to the point his jaw ached.

He walked across the room, his hands at his sides, the tips of his gloved fingers rubbing anxiously together. *Faith. Oh, Faith. You shall be avenged.*
Carefully, almost reverently, he ran his fingers along the swollen wood casing of the window and looked at the spot where her bed had been. He remembered how this small room had smelled faintly of lilacs and roses, how sunshine had streamed through the tall, arched window where gauzy curtains often fluttered in the warm Louisiana breeze.

Now, the small space was bare.

He ran his penlight over the rusted grooves where the metal castings of the bed had dug into the floor. Tiny brittle carcasses and droppings of dead insects littered the floor or were caught in ancient webs. Dust covered every surface and the paint around the windows and baseboards had peeled. The floral wallpaper had faded and begun to curl away from the walls, deep brown stains running from the ceiling and down the separating seams.

So much pain. So much fear. Still lingering. His lip curled as he sensed silent recriminations where vile acts had occurred between these four walls. So many wrongs had taken place here, so many evil deeds.

Anger, deep and dark, stole through his veins.
Finally, he could right all the wrongs.
Take his own revenge.
And it would happen.
Starting tonight.
CHAPTER 2

Abby pushed the speed limit. She was running late and trying to make up time as she drove into the city.

Jacques Chastain’s personal credo ran through her head as the windshield wipers scraped rain from the windshield of her Honda. She turned on her headlights to cut through the sheets of water and the darkness of the storm.

She had tried to adopt her father’s attitude, just as Zoey had, but the truth of the matter was she’d just never been as strong as her father or older sister . . . Again, she was more like her mother, not only in looks but in temperament.

Now, however, as she eased onto the freeway toward New Orleans, she was stupidly listening to the radio and her ex-husband’s show. She’d warned herself not to, but tuning into the program was a test for her. How much could she stomach, she wondered and decided she could use a little of her father’s toughness just about now.

True to his word, Luke had centered his call-in show on bitter ex-wives, women who, he contended, had never gotten over the despair and anger of their rejection. They were “losers” in the matrimonial game, females who were desperate to marry again but didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of doing so.

She lucked out. Let out a long breath.

The wheels of her Honda slid a little as she took a corner a bit too fast. “Don’t let him get to you.” She was more angry with herself than anything else.

Her tires sang over the wet pavement. A flock of pelicans flew across the steel-colored clouds as the skyline of New Orleans became visible.

She was only listening to the program today to witness him make an ass of himself over the airwaves. Since he’d warned her in their phone conversation that he was going to take her over the proverbial coals, she wanted to hear the program herself rather than have some friend phone her with the ugly play-by-play.

For the life of her, she couldn’t figure out the appeal of his show, but supposedly his audience was growing by exponential numbers. Luke Gierman was a household name in New Orleans, his radio program soon to be syndicated, if the rumors she’d heard were true. Inwardly she groaned. She could now be humiliated not only at a local level, but nationally as well.

It was a sad commentary on the American public’s taste.

You’re tuned in, haven’t you? She chastised herself. Since the divorce, she had studiously avoided listening to Luke the Liar. In the past year, she’d only heard his rants a few times while surfing through the stations.

“Yeah, my ex is a real piece of work,” he was saying, the tone of his voice incredulous. “She makes Mata Hari look like the Virgin Mary.”

More uproarious laughter.

“You’re so funny, Luke,” Abby growled, her fingers gripping the wheel until her knuckles showed white. How could she have ever thought she loved the creep?

“...you know,” he was saying to the audience, “I think all divorced people go crazy for a while. And women are worse than men. Some of them, like my ex, become sociopaths or else extremely delusional. Paranoid.”

Maury the Moron laughed.

“You won’t believe what my ex did.”

“Here it comes. Her gut tightened. “She had the gall to get rid of everything I cared about. Guy stuff—Rossignols, no less, my golf clubs, a handcrafted surfboard from Hawaii . . . and she gave them all to the Salvation Army.”

“No!” Maury breathed into the mike. Abby pictured the short, balding guy throwing a hand over his heart in mock horror.

“Yep. And it worries me, you know?”

“Yeah, right. Abby looked in her rearview mirror, saw a cop car, and felt her heart sink. She’d been so into the show, she hadn’t known that she was speeding, but one glance at the speedometer told her that she was nearly ten miles over the limit. She slowed just as the cop hit his lights and siren. Great. Just her luck. She pulled into the right lane, searching for a place to pull over. The police car, colored lights flashing, siren wailing, screamed past.

She sucked out. Let out a long breath.

That’s what you get for listening to Luke’s stupid program!

She started to switch stations when Luke said, “Don’t get me wrong. She’s a beautiful woman. Sexy as hell. And smart. But sometimes I think she’s got more than one screw loose.”

“She married you, didn’t she?” the co-host joked, all in good fun.

“Idiots,” Abby muttered as she increased her speed.

Luke laughed. “Well, yeah, there’s that, and her mother was certifiable, you know. No kidding.”

“You cheap, sick bastard!” Abby was stunned. This was beyond low.

“Okay, how about this, and you listeners, call in and let me know if your ex has ever done anything this nuts. When I called my ex the other night to wish her happy birthday and tell her I was going to pick up the things I’d left there . . . guess what? That’s when she told me she’d given it all away!”

“Augh.” Maury was in his element, adding a little punch. “Aren’t you taking your girlfriend on that trip?”

“How much could she stomach, she wondered and decided she could use a little of her father’s toughness just about now.

True to his word, Luke had centered his call-in show on bitter ex-wives, women who, he contended, had never gotten over the despair and anger of their rejection. They were “losers” in the matrimonial game, females who were desperate to marry again but didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of doing so.

Fat women. Ugly women. Type-A bitches who didn’t know their place in the world.

She glanced down at her purse and considered grabbing her cell phone, calling in and defending herself. She’d always been able to verbally handle him, and she wanted like hell to stand up for herself and every other divorced woman or man on the planet who had dealt with a cheating, lying spouse.

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“Double-ouch.”
Abby’s hands clenched on the wheel.
Luke continued, “So the deal was, we had an agreement that she would store some of my things, including the skis, until I got a bigger place since, in
the divorce, she ended up with the house, the car, and the studio, and she had to figure out what to do with the things we didn’t need.”

“You lying son of a bitch,” Abby said through gritted teeth. She’d paid him for his share of the house and studio and he’d had the title to her car, this
little Honda, while he owned a Lexus SUV! Just about everything had been split right down the middle. She gnashed her teeth and fumed. If she had any
brains, she’d turn off the radio or find a station with smooth jazz or some calming classical music.

“So, get this, my ex claims she gave everything she was keeping for me away, including a family heirloom, which just happens to be a handgun. She
says she donated it all, lock, stock, and barrel so to speak, to a charity.”

“A charity?” More mock horror on the moron’s part.

What a crock!

“Like I’m supposed to believe that any charitable organization would take a gun. Of course it was a lie. But how safe does that make me feel? Knowing
that my psychotic ex-wife is literally gunning for me with my father’s sidearm, the weapon he was issued from the police department.”

“You’d better change your address.”

“Or start paccin’ my own heat,” Luke said as Maury cackled uproariously.

Abby couldn’t stand it another second. She scrounged in her purse, dug out her cell phone, flipped it open, and quickly dialed the station, the direct line
to the radio show.

An even-toned female voice answered the call, “WSLJ. Giernan’s Groaners.”

Abby caught herself just in time. Before she said a word, she snapped the flip phone closed. Don’t engage him. Do not let him know that you heard the
show. Do not listen to that pathetic drivl he calls entertainment or social commentary. Otherwise he wins.

Muttering under her breath, she turned off the radio in disgust, then realized she’d missed her exit off the freeway. She simmered all the way into the
city, where she was scheduled for a consultation for a wedding. Having to backtrack made her nearly ten minutes late by the time she pulled into the
driveway of a gracious two-hundred-year-old home in the Garden District. Painted a soft green, accented by black shutters, and surrounded by flowerbeds
still ablaze with color, the house stood a full three stories amid its tended grounds.

As she was climbing out of her car, her cell phone rang and she looked at the luminous display. Another real estate company. Probably the twentieth
who had contacted her since she’d placed her For Sale by Owner advertisement in the paper and hammered her sign into her yard two nights earlier.

She let the call go to voice mail, and turned the key in the ignition. Then grabbing her portfolio from the backseat, she ducked her head against the warm rain
and headed up the brick walkway to the front door to meet with the bride, groom, and no doubt the bride’s mother.

How ironic, she thought, that she’d burned her own pictures while she carefully staged, planned, and snapped pictures of dozens of other newlyweds.

Who said God didn’t have a sense of humor?

Where was he taking her?
Bound, blindfolded, and gagged, Mary LaBelle sent up prayer after prayer to God.
For help.
For freedom.
For salvation.

Tears rained from her eyes, soaking the cloth wrapped tightly over her head, and lower still onto the gag that had been thrust so violently into her
mouth. She felt as if she might retch, her stomach heaved, but somehow she managed to force the urge back. She didn’t want to drown in her own vomit.
It was dark. She couldn’t see a thing. She sensed she was in a vehicle of some kind, a truck she guessed from the ride and sound of the engine. She
hadn’t seen it, but he’d managed to push her into a cramped backseat that was covered in plastic. The driver, the guy who had jumped her from behind as
she’d been jogging on the trails of the All Saints campus, had appeared out of nowhere, leaping from behind a hedge running from the commons just as the
rain had really started to pour. Anxious to return to her dorm, Mary hadn’t seen him, had never caught so much as a glimpse of his face, just felt his weight
as he’d tackled her from the back, thrown a bag over her head, and subdued her by twisting her arm upward and dropping her to her knees. She’d tried to
scream, but he’d held a gun to her temple; she could still feel the cold round impression against her skin. She’d closed her mouth and accepted her fate.

God would save her.
He always did.
If not, then it was because He was calling her home. Her faith would sustain her . . . and yet as she listened to the tires hum against the pavement and
splash through water, she sensed that she was doomed.

Please, Father, not yet. I’m young . . . I have so much to offer. So much of Your holy work to do.

She bit back sobs when she thought of her mother and father. She loved them both so much. She couldn’t die tonight. No! She was a fighter and, though
small, was athletic. She had been on the tennis team in high school and kept herself in shape. Hence the jogging.

But as the truck drove farther into the night, her hopes died. Where was this lunatic taking her? Why had he singled her out? Or had it been random?
Had she just been in the wrong place at the wrong time? All her parents’ warnings, all their suggestions about safety, she’d ignored them because she’d
known God would take care of her. And now . . . now what?

She wasn’t naive enough not to understand what he probably wanted, that he intended to rape and kill her. And she couldn’t allow that. Wouldn’t.

Fighting tears and panic, she quietly struggled against the tape that bound her hands behind her back and held her ankles together. If she could only get
free, she’d find a way to reach over the top of the front seat and wound him, maybe strangle him with the tape he’d used to subdue her.

But murder is a sin, Mary . . . remember. And if you try to harm him, he might lose control of the car. You, too, could be injured.
So what if they wrecked, she thought wildly. And if she killed a man in self-defense, surely God would understand. Please, Jesus, please.

Even risking injury and a collision was better than what he had planned.

Mary was certain of it.
But her bonds wouldn’t move, not so much as shift a fraction of an inch, no matter how much pressure she put on them, how desperately she struggled.

Panic rose inside her.

She was running out of time. He wouldn’t drive forever. She kept at it, straining against the rope and tape while the miles, the damning miles, rolled
past beneath the wheels of this big truck. They were driving farther and farther away from Baton Rouge. Farther and farther away from any chance she
would be saved.
Fear chilled her to the bone.

Her arms ached, her legs were cramped and useless.
Mama, I love you, and I’d wanted to make you proud by joining the order.

Daddy, forgive me for being stupid and letting this maniac grab me. You warned me to always take my cell and never run after dark. You gave me a
weapon and I refused it . . . I’m sorry . . .

She felt the truck slow as he exited off a main road, probably a freeway, and so, he was, no doubt, getting closer to his ultimate destination. New terror
surged through her and she frantically tried again to slide one hand from the grip of the duct tape. Her heart was knocking, sweat running down her body,
fear sizzling down every nerve ending.
Free yourself, Mary. God helps those who help themselves!

“IT’S NO USE,” he said, jolting her. He hadn’t said a word since the attack. Not one. His voice was surprisingly calm. Steady. Creating a fear that cut straight to her heart. “You can’t get away.”

Again she thought she might throw up. Who was this madman? Why had he chosen her? His voice was unfamiliar, she thought, and yet she wasn’t certain of anything anymore. She was barely standing off full-blown panic.

“ONLY A FEW MORE MINUTES.”

Dear Father, no. Please stop this. Intervene on my behalf. If you want me with you, please let me come to you some other way, not by the hand of a sadist, not so cruelly, not by a madman.

Trembling, she thought of all the martyred saints, how horribly they’d died for their beliefs. She tried to steel herself, to find her faith. If this was a test, or truly God’s will, then so be it. She would die stoically, putting all her faith in the Father.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .

She felt the truck slow, then turn quickly, as if maneuvering off a smooth road. The wheels began to jump and shimmery, as if going over stones or cracked pavement. She strained to hear over the grudge of the engine, hoping for the sounds of traffic, for signs that they weren’t as isolated and alone as she feared. But the familiar rush of passing cars, of shouts, or horns had disappeared, and any hope she had left sank like a stone.

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus . . .

For what seemed like hours, but was probably less than five minutes, he continued to drive, and finally, at last, he braked hard and the big rig slammed to a stop. She slid forward, then back.

Her heart jammed into her throat. She began to quiver from the inside out. Terror slid through her veins.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death . . .

He cut the engine. Rain peppered the roof of the car. Mary could barely breathe. Amen.

A door clicked open and she felt the sticky heat of the night seeping into the interior as he climbed outside. She heard the squish of his boots or shoes into the mud. Heard a thump—the front seat being pulled forward?

A second later she was dragged roughly out of the car. Her running shoes sank into deep loam and she nearly fell over. The musky odor of the swamp assailed her and she thought of snakes and alligators, merciless predators who were nothing compared to the monster who had abducted her. She squirmed, trying to wrestle away.

“Stop struggling,” he yelled and she felt a new fear. If he wasn’t afraid of speaking so loudly or sharply, they were alone . . . totally alone. Oh, God, this was it! She was going to die here in the darkness, in what seemed like a bayou of sorts. “I’m cutting your feet free, but if you try to run . . .” Again he pressed the muzzle of steel against her temple. “. . . I’ll kill you.” She nearly peed in her jogging shorts. He was going to murder her anyway. She knew it.

If she got the chance, she was going to run. Better to be shot in the back than raped for hours and brutalized in a dozen sickening ways. She had to get away. Had to. The minute he cut her feet free . . .

But he had anticipated her plan. In one swift motion, he cut away the tape on her arms in a grip that was punishing and intense. Her shoulder sockets still hurt from her hands being twisted behind her back but this, his touch, was much, much worse. “Don’t even think about it,” he warned as if he sensed she was about to bolt, then applied such painful pressure to her arm that she squealed through the gag and dropped to her knees.

Another door slammed open. She heard the sound of frogs and crickets, sensed the soft dirt and leaves compact beneath her feet, felt the drizzle of warm rainwater run down the back of her neck and drip from the tip of her ponytail.

She thought she smelled a river nearby, but wasn’t certain and broke down altogether, sobbing wretchedly as she nearly stumbled against something hard and unmoving. A tree? Rock? This was a bad dream, it had to be. A horrid nightmare.

And yet she was wide awake.

“Step up,” he ordered against her ear and she obeyed, her feet catching a little as she climbed two steps, then heard him open a screen door. A key clicked in a lock. “Inside.”

Oh, dear God, this was the spot where he intended to kill her.

Her throat closed as she smelled the dry, dusty interior of this hidden place. She thought she heard the sound of frantic tiny claws, like rats scurrying for cover, and her skin prickled in newfound fear.

The screen door slapped behind her and she jumped.

She wanted to scream, to rage against him and God for abandoning her—like Jesus cried in agony upon the cross—as her kidnapper pushed and prodded her farther into a room that smelled unused, dirty, and forgotten. As if this cabin or whatever it was hadn’t been used in years. Boards creaked under her feet. Her throat was so dry she couldn’t call up any spit.

Dread inched up her spine as she heard him close the heavy door. He pushed her forward and she wondered if she’d fall off a ledge, be thrown into some dark hole, a deep exposed cellar, and be left here to die. Whimpering, barely holding on to her bladder, she stepped tenuously forward and then she heard it . . . a muffled noise, as if someone else were in the room.

She nearly passed out.

Dear God, he hadn’t brought her to a place where other men were waiting, had he? Fear pounded a new, frantic tattoo in her heart. Her stomach curled and yet she smelled something, someone else.

A mixture of sweat, musk, and cold, stark terror trembled over her skin.

She’d heard of barbaric rites against women and braced herself for whatever sick fate awaited her.

“Oh, yes, now, be a good girl,” he whispered into the shell of her ear, his hot breath fanning the nape of her neck. “Do everything just as I say and I won’t hurt you. You’ll be safe.”

She didn’t believe him for an instant.

His silky words were a trap. A trick she wasn’t going to fall for.

“Strip.”

She froze. Thought she would die sick.

He pressed the gun to her chest and she thought for a minute of disobeying, but in the end, she did what he suggested. Knowing the gun was trained on her, she pulled off her T-shirt and slid out of her shorts. Shaking, she’d never felt more vulnerable in her life. Tears ran from her eyes. Fear clenched her gut. How many people, men, were watching her? How many were going to touch her. Her stomach retched and she thought she might pass out.

“That’s good.”

She froze in her jog bra and panties.

She didn’t have to get completely naked?

“Now, put this on.” She heard a zipper hiss downward and then she was handed something soft and silky—a dress? Fumbling, her fingers nearly useless, she hurriedly bunched the smooth fabric and found a way to step into it. She didn’t know what it was, but it would cover her nakedness, and right now that was all that mattered. “Turn it around,” he ordered and blindly she gathered and rotated the fabric, then pulled the bodice of the dress upward, over her waist and higher to cover her breasts. Awkwardly, she found the long sleeves and pushed her hands through. Then he was behind her and he held one of her arms again as he slowly pulled the zipper upward where it stopped near her shoulders. His breath was hot. Nasty. Nearly wet as it touched the nape of her neck.
Now . . . if she could just find a way to stop him. But that was impossible.
Slowly, still holding her with one hand, he trailed the barrel of the gun against her skin, so that the cold metal caressed her neck.

Goose pimples rose on her skin.

If she spun around quickly now, she might catch him unaware, be able to knock the weapon from his hand, rip off her blindfold, and run like crazy. She was fast. And with the adrenalin pumping through her bloodstream, she could run five or six miles without stopping to catch her breath.

“Uh, ah, uuuh,” he murmured so close that she felt his chest against her back, his erection, through the soft folds of the dress, pressed into the cleft of her rump.

Her chin wobbled. He was going to rape her . . . and probably the silent others in the room would have their turns with her, too.

Why? Oh, Father, why?

Run, Mary! Take a chance! So what if the gun goes off?
The arm holding her shoulder snaked around her waist, drawing her tight against him. “Now, Mary,” he rasped and she nearly wilted when she realized how much she knew her name. She hadn’t been a random target. He’d wanted her for whatever evil purpose he had planned. “Here’s what you’re going to do to save yourself. Are you listening?”

She nodded, hating herself. Hating him.

“You’re going to take this gun and you’re going to shoot it into a pillow.”

What?

“That’s right. I’m going to put it into your hand, but you’re not going to turn around and kill me with it, okay? I won’t let that happen. My hand will be yours. Like this, see . . . “ He pressed the gun into her shaking, sweating hand and curled her index finger over the trigger. His strong grip guided hers, and when she tried to turn it, he forced the hand forward.

“All you have to do is squeeze.”

Her whole body trembled. This was insane. Crazy. She wasn’t going to shoot blindly into the dark. For a second she wondered if this was some nutty college prank, the kind sororities and fraternities were famous for, but she didn’t believe it. She hadn’t pledged any house on campus and was going to drop out of All Saints College soon. Besides, this overriding sense of pure, malicious evil didn’t have a drop of fun or jest in it.

It was no prank.

“Come on,” he urged, his breath whispered out in excited little bursts. She heard it again, that muffled cry—laughter? Terror? Where was it? Nearby?

Far away? Someone hiding in a closet, or watching her? One person? Two? A dozen?

So scared she physically shook, she knew that if it weren’t for the steely fingers pressed intimately over hers, the weapon in her hand would have cluttered to the floor.

If only this was a nightmare!
If only she would wake up in her dorm room!

“You’ve got five seconds.”

No! Again the muffled noise.

“Five.”

Please, Father help me.

“Four.”

Do not abandon me, I beg of you.

“Three.”

I am your humble servant.

“Two.”

Have mercy on my soul!

“One.”

He squeezed the trigger for her.

Bang! The gun blasted, jerked in her hand.

A muted squeal came from somewhere nearby.

She smelled cordite and burning material and something else . . . the stringent odor of urine?

Another tortured, strangled groan.

New terror crystallized.

Dear God, had she just shot another human being?

Please, please, no!

What was this? She started shrieking in terror behind her gag, struggling to get away, but the lunatic held her tighter, kept his hand over hers and quickly untied her blindfold.

She immediately retched, just as her abductor yanked the gag from her face.

In the glow of a single small lantern she witnessed what she’d done. A man who was vaguely familiar was seated in a chair, a thin pillow strapped around his torso. His hands were bound behind him, his ankles strapped to the metal legs of the chair. He was slumped forward, and beneath him, in an ever-widening pool, was the blood draining from his body. Feathers were still drifting toward the floor, like wispy snowflakes, slowly settling into the oozing reddish stain.

Mary lost the full contents of her stomach and she threw up on the floor and the front of the white dress he’d forced her to wear. She was crying, trembling as she watched the man die. His eyes glazed in the soft golden light, and Mary, tears tracking from her eyes, sobs erupting from her throat, was certain she saw his spirit leave his body.

Dear God, she’d murdered an innocent person, tied to the chair. She moved her gaze to focus on the small gun still clutched in her hand . . . her gun . . . the little pistol her father had given her for protection.

And with it she’d killed a man.


Just as he thought reached her, his grip on her hand tightened. “You killed him, Mary,” he said almost endearingly, as if he wanted to caress her.

She shivered, started to protest, but felt the pressure in his grip increase. He yanked her backward so that her body was pressed to the hard wall of his chest, the back of her legs wedged against his thighs and shins, her rump nestled against his crotch, his erection bulging against her cleft again. Her heart hammered wildly. Sheer terror paralyzed her.

“Killing’s a sin.” His breath was hot and silky, the air filled with his depravity. “But you know that, don’t you?”

She didn’t respond, just felt the rain of her own tears against her cheeks. It didn’t matter what she said. She was doomed. She knew it. There was no escape.

“You just sinned, Mary,” he whispered seductively and she swallowed hard. Searched desperately in her soul for her inner strength. Knew what was coming.

Father, forgive me . . .

“And we all know the wages of sin is death . . .”

Slowly he rotated her hand in his, then pushed the muzzle of her own pistol to her temple.
“Three o’clock would work out,” Abby said, cradling her cell phone between her shoulder and ear. Two days after she’d listened to Luke on the radio and made a pitch for the Nolan-Smythe nuptials, Abby was carrying a sack of groceries in one arm and her portfolio in the other. She’d spent most of the day before and the early hours of this morning at her studio in town, going through her bills and consulting with some college seniors for their graduation pictures, before stopping at the store, then racing back home.

She dropped the sack onto the kitchen counter where Ansel was seated by the window, his tail switching as he watched birds flitter near the feeder hanging from the eave. “Shoo,” she whispered as the woman on the other end of the line made arrangements to view her house.

Her FOR SALE BY OWNER sign had been up less than seventy-two hours and she’d already received several calls from potential buyers, this being the first who actually wanted to “view the property,” after hearing the price and details.

As Ansel stretched on the counter and patently ignored her command to hop onto the floor, Abby walked into the living room, where she placed her portfolio onto a gate-legged table.

“What was your name again? And your number?” she asked as she hurried back to the kitchen, retrieved a pen from her purse, and began scribbling the pertinent information onto a note pad she kept near the phone. “Okay, see you at three.”

Abby hung up and glanced at her watch. The potential buyer would be here in less than four hours.

Not that the place was in too bad a shape. Unless you spied the film of gray cat hair that clumped everywhere and collected in the corners. Despite her best efforts with the vacuum, she could barely keep ahead of the fur as Ansel was in full shed mode. “Maybe what I need is an electric razor for you rather than a vacuum cleaner for the house, hmm?” She plucked the heavy cat from his perch near the window sill and held him close to her for a second. Petting his soft fur, she whispered into his ear, “I love you anyway. Even though you and I both know that you can be a real pain in the backside when you want to be.”

He raised a paw and batting against the underside of her chin, purred so loudly that she felt vibrations from his body to hers. “It felt right to just spend a second saying stupid things to the cat.”

The last two days had been so hectic, she hadn’t had a chance to catch her breath. She’d gone from sitting to sitting and fortunately hadn’t had time to stew about Luke or his public annihilation of her character.

Abby had decided not to let Luke’s diatribe over the airwaves get to her. “Turning on the television for background noise, she listened to warnings about a tropical storm forming in the Atlantic, one poised to enter the gulf within days. After much meteorological speculation, there was a break for a commercial, and when the news resumed, Abby, swabbing a windowsill, heard a phrase that always caused her heart to freeze.

“Our Lady of Virtues . . .”

Abby’s head snapped up as she turned her attention to the little set balanced on a bookcase shelf. On the screen, a willowy reporter with perfect makeup and short dark hair stood in front of the grounds of the old hospital where Faith Chastain’s life had ended.

“. . . the hospital has been a landmark in the area for nearly a hundred years,” the twenty-something reporter was saying as wind feathered her hair.

“Building behind me has gone through several different incarnations in its long, and sometimes scandal-riddled, history.”

“Most recently Our Lady of Virtues was used as a hospital for the mentally ill, and though it was privately owned, it, too, suffered when federal funds dried up. Amid allegations of abuse and the apparent suicide of one patient, the facility closed nearly eighteen years ago . . .”

Abby’s throat tightened. She dropped the sponge and watched the news bite that seemed surreal.

Above the television, mounted on the shelves near the fireplace, was an eight-by-ten picture of her mother, smiling, dark hair pulled away from a beautiful face, no trace of the tortured soul who had hidden behind those wide, amber-colored eyes.

Swallowing hard, Abby walked to the bookcase and took the picture from its resting place. A deep sadness swept through her and she felt a stab of longing to once again see her mother’s frail smile, feel her cool hands holding Abby’s, smell the gentle, clean scent of her perfume.

“. . . scheduled for demolition, sometime next year if all goes as planned.”

Abby’s head swiveled back to the television screen. They were taping the old hospital down?

A schematic drawing of a two-story building, very similar in appearance to the old one, but newer, brighter, with more modern touches, flashed onto the screen. A woman in a white coat was pointing out pertinent information onto a note pad she kept near the phone. “Okay, see you at three.”

Her FOR SALE BY OWNER sign had been up less than seventy-two hours and she’d already received several calls from potential buyers, this being the first who actually wanted to “view the property,” after hearing the price and details.

“Coming up . . . sports,” Isely was saying, while smiling broadly into the camera. She thought he might even wink. She recalled
But her remorse was short-lived.

For now, she was keeping the gun.

She had been on moving back here.

In fact, she'd thought Seattle—with its vibrant waterfront, cooler climate, rugged snow-capped mountains within driving distance, rough-and-tumble history, and most importantly, the over two thousand miles of distance from there to Louisiana—had been a perfect place to settle down.

Well, aside from Zoey and that nasty little indiscretion with Luke. She took a long swallow from her glass.

Be fair, Abby, her conscience argued, Luke's involvement with Zoey hadn't been a little indiscretion, it had been a full-blown, heart-wrenching, mortifying affair!

“Bastard,” she growled, then drained the glass and shoved it into the dishwasher.

She should have divorced Luke when she'd learned he'd cheated during their engagement, but oh, no, she’d been stupid enough to give the marriage another chance. He'd sworn to change his ways if she'd just move with him to New Orleans.

She'd been dubious of the marriage being able to resurrect again, of course, but the temptation for a new start had been hard to resist, and at that point, she'd been foolish enough to think that she still loved her husband.

“Idiot,” she muttered under her breath, returning to the living room and the dust rag sitting on the windowsill. There had been other reasons for moving to New Orleans, or the area surrounding it. Hadn't she always promised herself that she'd return to the place where her life had changed forever when Faith Chastain had fallen to her death? Hadn't Abby decided that the only way to put the ghosts of the past to rest was to visit the hospital, take pictures of it, reexamine that night that was so fragmented in her mind?

“Of course I remember you.” Her voice grew cool. Maury the Moron.

“Look, I don’t suppose you’ve heard from Luke, have you?”

“Nia . . . yeah . . . Luke and Nia . . .”

She remembered. Didn't comment about Luke's obsession with staying in shape. It wasn't just about looking or feeling good, it was some kind of rabid mania.

I'd been an edge to Maury's voice. Worry? Panic? “He, uh, he didn't show up at the station yesterday. Missed the program completely. We had to air an old program we had on tape from last summer.”

She wasn't buying it and really didn't care. She was finished with Luke Gierman. “So why do you think I'd know where he was?”

“I don't know. I thought you might have heard the show we aired earlier this week, the one on ex-spouses.”

Maury didn't respond, but felt heat climb steadily up her neck. Bastard, she thought, imagining Luke at the microphone, spewing his lies. Her fingers clenched over the phone.

“Nia . . . yeah . . . Luke and Nia . . .”

When he trailed off, she asked impatiently, “What?”

“Nia doesn't know where he is.”

She could tell he'd been going to say something else. Whatever it was, she didn't care. “Maybe she does and she's not saying.”

“This isn't like him.” Maury sounded worried. Really worried.

Good. Let him stew about Luke's whereabouts. To her surprise, Abby didn't care about Luke's shenanigans or his love life at all. And she wasn't worried about him. Luke was known to pull all kinds of publicity stunts. He was just the kind of guy to fake his own death to give the ratings a shot in the arm. “I haven't seen Luke since last weekend when he picked up Hershey, the dog we share custody of. Sorry, I can't help you. And he'd better be taking care of my dog.”

“Oh, okay, but if you do hear from him, have him call the station immediately. The producer's ready to tear Luke a new one.”

“Okay, but if you do hear from him, have him call the station immediately. The producer's ready to tear Luke a new one.”
“Okay … so what have we got here?” Detective Reuben Montoya, in jeans, T-shirt, and a black leather jacket, stepped carefully toward the door of the small, dilapidated cabin in the bayou. Morning sunlight was crawling through the trees and brush, burning off the last of the night fog. The smell of the swamp was thick in his nostrils: slow-moving water, rotting vegetation, and something else, a stench he recognized as that of decaying flesh. His stomach turned a bit but he contained it. For the most part he’d always been able to button down his emotions, work the scene, and not lose his lunch.

“It looks like a murder-suicide.” the deputy, Don Spencer, theorized. He was short, with pale blue eyes and reddish hair buzzed into a military cut. “But not everything adds up. We’re still figuring it out. Crime-scene team’s been at it for an hour.”

Montoya nodded and looked around. Several officers had already roped off the crime-scene with yellow tape and were positioned around the perimeter of the little cabin stuck in the middle of no-dammed-where. “You the first on the scene?” Montoya asked as he signed the security log.

“Yep. Got the call into dispatch from a local—a fisherman who admits to trespassing. He was on his way to the river, noticed the door hanging open, and walked in.”

“He still here?”

“The officer nodded. “In his truck, over there.” Spencer hitched his chin in the direction of an old, battered Dodge that had once been red, but had faded after years of abuse by the hot Louisiana sun. In the bed was a small canoe and fishing gear. Montoya glanced at the cab of the truck, noticed the black man seated inside. “His name is Ray Watson. Lives about six miles upriver. No record.”

“Is he the only witness?”

“So far.”

“Have him stick around. I’ll want to ask him some questions.”

“You got it.”

Hankering for a smoke, Montoya slipped on covers for his shoes, and made his way toward the house, careful not to disturb an investigator snapping pictures of the overgrown path to the door. Weeds had been crushed, leaves pulverized, and it was evident that several sets of footprints led to the steps. Montoya made his way through the open door and stopped dead in his tracks.

“What the hell is this?” he said, looking at the crime scene and feeling his stomach clench.

Harsh lights illuminated the small room where blood, feathers, vomit, and dirt vied for floor space. The air was punctuated with the smells of cordite, blood, puke, urine, and dust. Investigators were filming and measuring, lifting latent fingerprints, and searching for trace evidence.

In the center of it all was the crime scene where two victims had died. One of the victims, a white man in good shape, who looked to be in his early forties, was lying naked as the day he was born and staring faceup. Blood had trickled from the hole in his chest, but not as much blood as Montoya would have expected. The man had died quickly.

“Jesus,” Montoya muttered.

The second victim, a young woman wearing a white silk and lace wedding gown, was lying atop the dead guy. She appeared to have fallen over him from what looked like a single gunshot wound to her head. Her long ponytail was splayed across her bare back where the neckline of the dress scooped low. Some of the blond strands were bloody and tangled from the wound at her temple.

A photographer clipped off shot after shot, his flash strobing the already macabre scene while Bonita Washington, the lead crime-scene investigator, was busily taking measurements around the bodies. Her black hair was pulled into a tight bun at the base of her skull, her eyes trained on the floor as she squatted near the vics.

“You sign the log, Montoya?” she asked. Wearing half-glasses and a sour expression, she looked up from the sketch she was drawing. She skewed him with a don’t-mess-with-me look. African-American and proud of it, Bonita ran the criminologists team with an iron fist and a keen eye.

“What do you think?”

“Just checkin’. No one gets in here without signin’ my security log. I need to know everyone who comes in here and keep a record of it.” One dark eyebrow arched, and above her rimless glasses, her intense brown eyes didn’t so much as flinch as she stared at him. “You have been known to bend more than your share of rules.” She was absolutely not taking one ounce of crap today.

“I signed in. Okay?”

“Good. Where’s Bentz?”

“On vacation with his wife. Vegas.” Rick Bentz was Montoya’s partner. Had been for years, ever since Bentz had moved from L.A. and Montoya had been a junior detective. The only time they’d not worked together was a few months when Montoya had taken a leave of absence from New Orleans to work a case in Savannah. A sour taste filled the back of his throat as he thought of those painful weeks, but he pushed any memory aside and concentrated on the here and now. And it was bad. “Bentz will be back in a few days,” he said, rubbing the goatee that covered his chin. He flashed Washington a grin.

“For now, you get to deal with me.”

“How could I be so lucky?” she said with the slightest trace of humor, then, her expression turning stern again, pointed at the two bodies with the eraser end of her pencil. “Careful where you touch, what you put down. We’re still collecting fingerprints and trace.”

Montoya shot her a look as he pulled a notepad from the back pocket of his pants. “I’ve been at dozens of scenes, Washington.”

“Okay.” She was still frowning, but gave him a quick nod as she slipped into a more codifiable mode. “I did the preliminary walk-through. Everything appears to have happened in this room. From the blood splatter and body position, it looks like both vics were killed right here.” She jabbed a gloved finger at the floor of the cabin. She was obviously convinced of where the crime had happened, but her brow was still furrowed, her frown intense.

“But it’s been staged.”

“Staged?”

“Um-hmm. What we have here is either a murder-suicide or a double murder. Haven’t figured that out yet. But I will.”

He didn’t doubt it.

“I think the man was tied to that chair over there.” She indicated an old metal and plastic dinette chair that had been shoved into a corner of the room.

“Traces of blood on it, and you can see that it was dragged through the dust . . . footprints beside the tracks. Shoes. Our boy here”—she motioned toward the dead man staring sightlessly upward, his eyes glazed, his face bloated—“isn’t wearing any. And we can’t find a pair. They’re too big for the girl, so I’m thinkin’ we’ve got a third party. A big man from the footprints around. We’ll just call him Size Twelve.”

“Yeah, the male vic is a size nine and a half, maybe a ten. This whole scene appears staged to me, but not done well enough that we wouldn’t figure it out immediately. As I said, either the killer’s an idiot, or he wants us to know that he’s behind it; he’s just showing off.”

“Don’t know. Don’t think so . . . over there in the pile? Running shorts and T-shirt. She changed. Or was changed. Premortem, the blood spatter is all over the wedding dress.”

“Beats me.” Dark lines creased her forehead and she tapped her pencil to her lips as she thought. “But whoever our killer is, he wants us to notice that the guy is stripped bare, naked to the world, and the girl is on her way to her own wedding . . . or something like that. Go figure . . .”

Montoya didn’t like what she was suggesting. He stared at the man lying faceup, the woman’s body draped over his. Something about him . . .

“You recognize the male vic?” she asked, again pointing with her pencil to the dead man with the thinning brown hair.

“Should I?”
“Lake Gierman. Local celebrity of sorts. Shock jock.”

“Gierman’s Groaners,” Montoya said, remembering the controversial radio personality. He’d never met Gierman but had seen his photo in the newspapers a few times.

“I was on him. Cash and credit cards undisturbed, or so it seems. He had two hundred and six dollars on him and a receipt from an ATM from First Congressional Bank on Decatur Street for two hundred dated the night before last at 6:36 P.M.”

“He could have been abducted about that time.” He decided to review the cameras at the bank.

“Maybe. As for her . . .” She pointed a finger at the dead woman lying sprawled on the floor. “Courtney LaBelle, according to the student identification card in her wallet. She wasn’t carrying a purse, just one of those slim card holders she’d stuffed into a small pocket of her running shorts. No credit card and only five bucks with her. But she did have a driver’s license that indicates she’s from the city, address is in the Garden District.” She clucked her tongue sadly and shook her head. “Eighteen years old.” The edge of Washington’s jaw hardened. “The ME took a preliminary look, thinks from the lividity, flaccid stage of rigor, and body temperature, the TOD was the night before last, probably between ten P.M. and three A.M. He can’t get any closer than that.”

“Not long after Gierman’s ATM transaction?”

“Yep.”

“Did she know Gierman?” Montoya said, glancing at the corpse of the girl. Her skin was waxy, her face bloated, but he guessed she had been beautiful just a few days earlier.

“That’s what you need to find out. Gierman allegedly had a thing for younger girls and she would definitely qualify.”

Montoya was already taking notes. Bonita Washington bugged the hell out of him sometimes, but she was good at her job. Damned good. Making it hard to argue with her, harder still to rib. “We got the weapon?”


He took in the floor again. Feathers, dust, mud, and blood covered the old planks. “What’s with the feathers?”

“A pillow. Probably stripped to Gierman. Maybe to muffle the sound, I don’t know, but it was left by the chair.” She pointed and Montoya examined the flaccid bag of an old stained pillowcase. A hole was blown in its center, the faded fabric and feathers within singed and darkened with blood. “Shot at close range.”

Montoya stared at the bodies, tried to imagine their places before death and how they ended up almost in a lover’s embrace.

“As I said, I’m guessing from the marks on Gierman’s legs and arms, that he was bound, maybe his ankles tied to the legs of the chair, that would match the bruising on his body. Though it’s missing now, I think there had been tape over his mouth. There are still traces of some adherent on his face.”

Montoya looked closer, noticed the flecks of grayish matter sticking to Gierman’s whiskers and cheeks. A rectangular red mark was visible against his pale skin and even his lips were raw looking, as if the tape had stuck to them before being roughly ripped away.

“They aren’t married?”

“He’s single. Divorced, I think. And I don’t know about her, but she’s got a hell of a scrape on her left ring finger. Looks like a ring was pulled off and took a lot of skin and flesh with it.”

“Jesus,” Montoya muttered, spying the girl’s bruised and raw finger.

“I guess the ‘I do’s’ didn’t go easily,” Washington muttered, a sick joke to lighten the scene.

Montoya had seen more than his share of bizarre killings since joining the force, but this was right up there with the best of them. He straightened. “Do you think this was some kind of mock wedding . . . that our killer was the preacher and the ring was forced on, then yanked off . . . did we find it?”

“No jewelry other than the necklace still on the vic.” She pointed at the intricate gold chain with its small cross of what appeared to be diamonds.

“No shoes?” he asked, noting the dead woman’s bare feet.

“Just the running shoes for both of them. For what it’s worth, it looks like they were each either on their way to or from a workout. Both were originally dressed in shorts, T-shirts, running shoes, but he”—she jabbed her pencil at the dead man—“ends up stark naked and she”—Washington indicated the dead woman—“is wearing a wedding dress. No shoes, hose, no veil, and no ring . . . Bizarre as hell if you ask me.”

“Won’t argue that.”

Washington held her notepad to her chest and tapped the eraser end of her pencil against her mouth as she stared down at Gierman. “You know, this guy pissed off a lot of people. A lot. Church groups. Parent groups. He even had the FCC on his ass. For all his popularity, he was hated as well.” Her lips folded in on themselves. “To say he wasn’t PC would be a gross understatement.”

“You didn’t like him.”

“I’d be in that category, yes, but”—she turned her gaze to the girl—“who would hate him so much as to want him dead?”

“Courtney LaBelle?” Montoya offered.

“Nah. Don’t think so. Why would a college student bring him here, hold him hostage, it looks like, then off both him and herself?”

“Sex games?” Montoya asked, noting the obvious.

“He’s naked, but she isn’t. He was tied to the chair, I think, in the submissive position.” Brown eyes looked at him again. “And the white bridal dress isn’t the usual dominatrix attire.”

Montoya asked, “How would you know?”

“Hey, Montoya, there are a lot of things about me that you don’t know. Dog collars, whips, lace-up gloves are only part of ‘em.” She flashed him a smile suggesting she was joking, then double-checked her drawing, her expression turning professional again. “I’m still banking on Mr. Size Twelve, but we’ll know more when we finish processing the scene.”

“Good.”

“So I suggest you find out everything you can about our victims.”

That went without saying, but rather than pick a fight with her, he asked, “What about the rest of the house?”

“Looks undisturbed, but we’re checking every room, including the attic.”

“The lock on the door?”

“Old and rusted. Broken. The fingerprint and tool guys are going over it.”

“Anyone know who owns this place?”

She shot him another don’t-mess-with-me look over the tops of her half-glasses. “Someone does, but it’s not me. Another thing you’d better check out.”

She began drawing again and careful to disturb nothing, he took one last look at the victims in their macabre position dead center in the middle of the small room before checking his watch, logging out, and walking outside. Though the morning air was still thick and sticky, it felt crisp compared to the stagnant, foul atmosphere inside the cabin. Picking his way around an investigator making casts of tire tracks and footprints, he headed to the old red pickup.

A barrel-chested black man was seated on the driver’s side, his radio turned on, his thick fingers tapping against the steering wheel in an impatient rhythm.

“Ray Watson?” Montoya asked and flipped his ID in front of the open driver’s window. He cast a glance at the back of the truck. Beside the canoe was a fishing creel and a few poles, tackle box, oars, safety vest, and bucket of bait. Everything was strapped down as the tailgate of the truck was open to accommodate the length of the canoe.

“That’s me.” Watson was around fifty. He had a flat face with dark skin, wide-set eyes, and teeth that, when he talked, showed off a bit of gold. A tattered Saints cap was pulled low over nappy salt-and-pepper hair. Wearing big overalls over a T-shirt, he seemed agitated and tired. On the seat next to him were a pair of hip waders, a flashlight, and a tin of chewing tobacco.

“Mr. Watson, can you tell me what you found? How it happened?”

“Not long after Gierman’s ATM transaction?”

“Yep.”

“You saw for yourself,” Watson said, his big eyes rounding. “I didn’t touch nothin’. That place”—he pointed past the bug-splattered windshield toward
the house—"is just like when I first opened the door. I came up here fishin’ like always, but this time, somethin’ looked different about the place. Just kinda . . . I dunno . . . not right. I checked, noticed the door open, and stepped inside. That’s when I saw them, the dead people.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t believe it. I mean the guy’s naked as a jay bird and the woman’s dressed up as if she’s goin’ to her own damned wedding.” He glanced away from the cabin and straight into Montoya’s eyes. “I took one look, saw that they were dead, then I came back to my car and used the wife’s cell phone to dial 911.”

“Do you know either of the victims?”
“No, sir,” he said emphatically and shook his head.
“What time was that?”
“About an hour and a half earlier,” he said, checking his watch. “Five A.M. So I can start fishing at dawn. I come early before breakfast. It was still dark when I passed by the house, but I shined my flashlight on it, like I always do, and as I said, somethin’ looked strange, gave me a weird feelin’, you know? Can’t really explain it, but I come up here quite a bit and I could tell things weren’t right. Thought I’d better check it out.”
“So that’s when you went in?”
“That’s right.” Watson’s nose wrinkled as if remembering the rank odor. “Never seen nothin’ like that before. No sir, nothing like that at all.”
“You know who owns this place?”
“Not anymore. It used to belong to a guy named Bud Oxbow, a fella I used to fish with.”
“Where’s Oxbow now?”
“Retired from the Mobile post office and moved up north, somewhere around Chicago, I think, five or six years ago. He never lived here, just came out fishin’ once in a while and hung out at Lottie’s Diner, that’s where we first got to talkin’. Had a place in Mobile where he worked.” Watson scratched his chin. “I think he told me he inherited this place from an uncle, but I can’t really say.”

Montoya ran Watson through it one more time and Watson recounted his discovery without adding anything new. He agreed that he’d be available for further questioning and would call the station if he thought of anything else that might help.

Montoya released the witness, patting the fender twice as Watson flipped on the ignition and backed down the leaf-strewn drive. The sun was climbing higher in the sky, the surrounding woods already warm, but he saw dark clouds on the horizon. After a few more minutes of talking with several of the investigators, Montoya decided he’d found out all he could here. He slid into his car and started back to the city.

It was going to be a helluva day. Two dead bodies and it wasn’t yet noon.
“Only half a mile more,” Abby promised herself as she ran along the side of the road, her heart pounding, her calves beginning to protest, the bottoms of her shoes slapping the asphalt. Sweat ran into her eyes, and though the weather had changed quickly, sunlight chased away by burgeoning, purple clouds, she had decided to chance the jog. It had been three weeks since the last time and her muscles weren’t used to the punishment. She set her jaw and kept at it.

While she’d lived in Seattle, she’d run at least three times a week, but in New Orleans with the humidity in the stratosphere, the heat oppressive, and the road on which she lived narrow enough that two cars could barely pass without one set of tires touching the shoulder, she’d found more than enough excuses to let her exercise routine slip.

No more.

Her birthday had been a milestone and propelled her into getting into a regimen again. Whether she lived here or with Alicia in the bay area, she wasn’t going to let her body slide out of shape. Too bad that right now her lungs burned and she’d developed a stitch in her side. She pushed the pain out of her mind and kept jogging until she reached the Pomeroy’s mailbox, the three-mile mark.

Slowing as she passed the massive gates, she barely cast a look through the expensive wrought-iron-and-brick barricade that shuttered Asa Pomeroy, a local multimillionaire, from the curious. Married to his fourth wife and secluded in an antebellum home reminiscent of Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, he opened his estate to the public twice a year, once at Christmas, the other time on Fat Tuesday. Otherwise, even though she was a neighbor, she’d not been inside.

She and Vanessa Pomeroy didn’t run in the same social circles.

She heard a low growl and glanced at the fence. The Pomeroy’s Rottweiler paced on the other side of the grillwork. He was a huge animal, with a head as broad as a bear’s. From the other side of the fence he barked madly, loud enough to raise the dead from here to the city.

Give me a break, Abby thought. Breathing hard, sweating so much that her hair was wet and damp tendrils escaped her ponytail to curl around her face, she walked briskly toward her own place around a curve about a quarter of a mile down the road. Her pink T-shirt was plastered to her body; even her shorts were damp with her perspiration. She tugged at the hem of the shirt and leaned over, dabbed at her face with the faded T’s hem, but as soon as she swiped away the droplets, more appeared.

She gave up and, at her own driveway, she leaned against the FOR SALE BY OWNER sign, stretching her calves and the backs of her thighs. Despite the pain, she tried to imagine that she’d actually done something positive for herself.

Maury’s call about Luke had put her on edge. What the hell was her damned ex up to? “None of your business,” she said aloud, her hands on the back of her hips as she curved her spine slowly forward, then back, feeling all her muscles stretch and relax.

She’d spent the morning doing more housecleaning, fielding calls about viewing the cottage, and had sneaked in the three-mile jog before she met with her first clients in the studio at one-thirty. After that, she had two more photography sessions and two more showings of the house. One couple had already seen it the night before and wanted a second look. The second potential buyer was a single man.

Good news.

She grabbed the newspaper from her box as Ansel, a mouse in his mouth, slunk around the corner. “Oh, geez, what have you got?” she asked, seeing that the little rodent was still alive and squirming, its beady eyes fixed in fright. “Oh, Ansel,” Abby whispered, not wanting to deal with the field mouse alive or dead. “Let him go. Now! And don’t catch him again or bring him back to me without a head! Ansel!” The cat started to dart away as she heard the sound of a car’s engine. She turned just as a police cruiser pulled into the driveway. Her heart nose-dived. What was it her father used to say? The police only stop for two reasons, neither one good.

 Either someone is dead.
Or you’re about to be arrested.

She exhaled heavily as Ansel raced around a curve about a quarter of a mile down the road, his tail held high and his ears back, not even noticing the screech of a car’s tires. Her pink and white striped T-shirt was plastered to her body.

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CHAPTER 4

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From the corner of her eye, she saw the mouse somehow wiggle free and scamper quickly through the underbrush, Ansel in hot pursuit. Abby barely noticed. She was focused on the police car and the man who was climbing out.

He was five-ten or -eleven with an athletic build, jet-black hair, and chiseled features that suggested a bit of Native American tossed into his Latino gene pool. A trimmed goatee surrounded his mouth, and in one ear, a gold ring winked in the sunlight.

“Well, Mrs. Gierman?” he asked and slid off his shades to reveal dark, intense eyes guarded by thick black eyebrows. Though he wasn’t exactly Hollywood handsome, he was good looking and there was something about him that hinted at danger. He hooked the shades on the neckline of his open-collared shirt where a few dark chest hairs were visible.

“My name’s Chastain. Abby Chastain.”

He reached into a pocket and withdrew his badge. “But it was Gierman,” he said and added, “Detective Reuben Montoya, New Orleans Police Department.” His badge, glittering in the poor sunlight, confirmed his identity.

“Are you looking for me?” she asked, bracing herself.

“Unfortunately, yes. Maybe we should go inside.”

“What is it, Detective?” she asked, then remembered the conversation with Maury Taylor the day before. Maury had been worried about Luke. And the cop had called her by her married name. It wasn’t her father, after all! “Oh, God, it’s Luke,” she whispered, her hand flying to her mouth. “What happened?”

“Ms. Chastain, he’s dead. I’m sorry.”

She let out a gasp, and though she didn’t realize it, her knees began to buckle. Quick as lightning, Montoya grabbed hold of her arm. His strong grip helped her stay on her feet.

His mind stalled. She felt disconnected. Then images of Luke flashed like quicksilver behind her eyes. Luke sailing on Puget Sound, his hair flying around his face as he tacked into the wind. Luke giving her a single rose when he asked her to marry him while they were hiking in the Olympic Mountains. Luke hurrying out the door before dawn to report the news on the Seattle radio station. Luke, disheveled, coming home late, his eyes bright, his excuses lame. Luke, drunk, telling her about Zoey . . .

Montoya’s face said it all. This was no prank, no publicity stunt set up by the master of self-promotion himself. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.
She let out her breath, shoved her hair out of her eyes, and saw that Montoya’s strong fingers were still around her arm. As if he, too, suddenly realized he was holding her upright and recognized the fact that she wasn’t going to faint dead away, he released her.

“Why did you think I was talking about Luke Gierman?”

She lifted a shoulder and silently wished their last conversation hadn’t been in anger. “Because Maury Taylor called here yesterday looking for him. Maury was worried that something bad had happened. But I blew him off. I thought it was just one of Luke’s tricks . . .” She squeezed her eyes shut and pulled in a deep breath. This was wrong. So very wrong. “I can’t believe it. There must be some mistake.”

“No mistake.” Montoya’s voice was firm, his expression convincing.

“Sweet Jesus.” Luke . . . dead? She fought a sudden rush of tears for a man she no longer loved. “What happened?” she asked, and her own voice sounded distant and detached, the words coming out right and yet seeming as if they were from someone else. He must have been in an accident . . . his damned car, that was it.

“I think we should go inside.”

“Why?” she asked and then saw something in Montoya’s eyes, something dark and suspicious and frightening. Her heart started pounding double-time again. “What happened, Detective?” she demanded, her voice stronger, her mind racing.

“Gunshot wound. Close range.”

“What?”

“He was murdered.”

“No! Wait!” She took a couple of steps backward. No, no, no! “Someone shot and killed him?”

“That’s right.”

She heard him, but the words sounded as if they’d come from a long distance, through a deep tunnel.

“Dear God. I—I thought it had to be a car accident . . .” Automatically she reverted to her youth and deftly made the sign of the cross over her chest while her brain pounded with the news and bile crawled up her throat. Rain began to fall in fat drops that peppered the ground and ran down her face.


“We don’t know yet.”

“Oh, God.” She rolled her eyes toward the sky, unaware of the raindrops splashing against her cheeks, running down her neck.

“Ms. Chastain,” he said, motioning toward the front porch. She looked up, saw the clear drops catch in his hair and trickling past his collar, darkening the shoulders of his shirt.

“Oh, yes . . . of course,” she said, finally realizing that they were both getting soaked. “Let’s go inside.” Dazed, she walked to the garage door, where she punched an electronic code into the keypad. The keypad blinked in error. She tried again. Rain was already gurgling in the gutters, gathering on her eyelashes. Again the keypad flashed and didn’t unlock the door. “Damn,” she muttered. On the third try the heavy door rolled noisily upward, and before it had settled, she ducked beneath it and led the detective inside. Dripping, she walked between her parked hatchback and shelves filled with cans of paint, gardening supplies, and bags of cat litter, then kicked off her shoes as she opened the back door. With Montoya only a step or two behind, she headed straight for the sink, twisted on the faucets, and splashed more water over her face.

Luke was dead. Dead! Oh, Jesus.

She couldn’t believe it. Everything seemed surreal, blurring around the edges. Snagging a kitchen towel from the counter, she wiped her face and all the while the words Luke’s dead. Luke’s dead. Luke’s dead! The thought pounded through her brain, creating a headache that began to throb.

“Are you all right?” Montoya’s voice was soft. As if he cared for her, for her feelings. He’d done this before. Probably dozens of times. Was used to giving out bad news. And yet his brown eyes missed nothing. Sexy and dark, they observed her every reaction. She felt it, and didn’t trust it. At all.

She exhaled a little disbeliefing puff of air. “Okay?” she repeated. “No. I’m definitely not okay.” Shaking her head, feeling her wet ponytail rub against the back of her neck, she leaned a hip against the counter for support and offered him the towel.

“No, thanks. I’m okay.”

“I can’t believe it,” she went on as she folded the towel. “I know I said that before, but it’s just so damn hard to accept.” Her heartbeat was slowing but she was still stunned beyond belief. “I mean . . . we just talked the other night.” She remembered the fight about her getting rid of Luke’s things, and her face, which she was certain had drained of all color, suddenly flushed hot. A stab of regret cut through her at the thought that their final words had been accusing and spat in anger. She refolded the towel automatically.

“What did you talk about?” From out of nowhere it seemed he had extracted a notepad.

“Okay?” she repeated. “No. I’m definitely not okay.” Shaking her head, feeling her wet ponytail rub against the back of her neck, she leaned a hip against the counter for support and offered him the towel.

“Anyway, it’s been impossible to get along.”

“You’ve got people at Gierman’s town house now.”

“I want my dog back,” she said emphatically.

“A big dog for an apartment.”

“I know, I know. I wanted to keep both the animals, but Luke wouldn’t hear of it. He was supposed to be moving into a bigger place, a house with a yard . . . soon, I think.” Her eyebrows slammed together as she tried to remember. “How do I get my dog back? I’ll drive over there now.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Gierman’s place is still being processed.”

“What? But Hershey—”

“I’ll see to it.”

“Would you?”

“Yeah. It’ll be later today.”

Something inside her sagged. The single act of kindness by this hard-edged policeman got to her. “Thank you,” she whispered, shoving a hand over her damp, pulled-back hair. She blinked and sniffed before she shed any tears. The shock of it all was settling in.

“Are there people at the town house now? Can you call and find out that Hershey’s okay?”

“I was there earlier. The dog’s fine.” His eyes held hers. “Someone from the department took her outside and walked her, then put her in a kennel, but she’s fine.” When she started to protest, he added, “Really.”

“Okay, okay. This is all just so . . . weird. Disturbing. Do you have any idea who did this?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out.”

“Where were you when you said you were processing his apartment, did someone break in?”

Her head was pounding with a million questions and she felt disengaged from her body, as if this were a bad dream, and through it all, she sensed the
herself and the confession of her true feelings felt good. “Nonetheless, I just can’t believe he’s dead.” It was her turn to stare at him. “You’re certain of this.

“The marriage was probably over before we moved here from Seattle. We were trying to make a second stab at it, but we failed.” She nodded as if to the sounds of the house, the creaking timbers, a squirrel scampering across the roof, the steady gurgle of rain washing through the gutters, more noticeable. “I’d felt for Luke died a long time ago. Sad, but true.” She looked down at her hands and gnawed at her lower lip a second. The lag in the conversation made

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they’ll have a list a mile long of people who have complained about him.”

One of his dark eyebrows quirked and she regretted her words immediately. She felt compelled to explain herself. “Listen, Detective, just because he

Or was she just imagining things? Had the shock of Luke’s death put her over the edge?

“It was almost as if staring at her so intently, he was searching for signs of deception, and in the pauses in the conversation, she thought he expected her

Abby didn’t doubt it. From the glint of determination in Montoya’s eyes, she was certain he was going to get to the bottom of Luke’s death.

“Another person was murdered, too?”

What? she asked, staring at him. “Two people were killed?”


“Nia Penne,” he responded without checking his notes. “She appears to be an ex-girlfriend. She’s in Toronto. Has been for the last week.”

“An eighteen-year-old woman by the name of Courtney LaBelle.” He paused a second, near-black eyes searching her face for some kind of reaction.

“Was she a student, a fresh-man, at All Saints College in Baton Rouge.”

“Courtney LaBelle? Had she heard the name before? Something about it teased her mind, but she couldn’t remember why.

Do you know her?”

Abby shook her head slowly, rolling the name around in her brain and coming up with nothing. Eighteen? The girl was barely an adult? Oh, Luke . . . You stupid idiot!

“Did she know your ex-husband?”

“I don’t know.” Abby was thinking hard, trying to come up with a name and face that matched, a girl they’d both known, or she’d been introduced to at parties, but that was impossible . . . the girl was just too young. “I’m sorry. Luke and I have been divorced for over a year. I don’t keep up with whom he’s dating . . . or, or even seeing as a friend or acquaintance. He has a girlfriend, Nia Something-or-other.”

“Nia Penne,” he responded without checking his notes. “She appears to be an ex-girlfriend. She’s in Toronto. Has been for the last week.”

She thought back to the phone call from Maury. That’s what he’d been going to say to her. Luke and Nia had broken up. She grimaced, remembering the panic in Luke’s friend’s voice and how she’d blown him off, certain Luke was involved in some kind of sick publicity stunt.

Abby shook her head, trying to make sense of it. “Maury didn’t tell me when he called yesterday. Maury Taylor works with Luke. He was looking for him.”

“Any particular reason he thought Luke would contact you?”

“I have no idea. He must’ve already talked to all of Luke’s friends . . . but I’m not sure of that. You’ll have to ask him.”

“I will.”

Abby didn’t doubt it. From the glint of determination in Montoya’s eyes, she was certain he was going to get to the bottom of Luke’s death.

“Did your ex-husband have any enemies?” he asked, and she looked at him as if he’d sprouted horns.

She almost laughed. “He made enemies for a living, Detective. You know that. I’m sure if you check with the station manager or producer of the show, they’ll have a list a mile long of people who have complained about him.”

“What about personal enemies?”

She shrugged and tried to concentrate, but the fact that Luke was dead, that someone had killed him, made it impossible to think. “Probably. I . . . I can’t think of anyone in particular. Not now.” And even if she had, she wasn’t certain that she would tell him. There was something about Montoya that put her on edge; something that seemed relentless and suspicious; something slightly dangerous, that suggested he knew what it meant to be on both sides of the law; and something sensual and dark, as if he might be able to guess just what made her tick. As a woman. As a suspect. And she didn’t kid herself. Ex-

wives made damned good suspects. She warned herself to tread gently, say the truth, but be careful.

It was almost as if staring at her so intently, he was searching for signs of deception, and in the pauses in the conversation, she thought he expected her to fill the space, to say something she might later regret.

Or was she just imagining things? Had the shock of Luke’s death put her over the edge?

“I really think we should call someone to be with you. A friend? Relative? Maybe a neighbor.”

She thought of Vanessa Pomeroys next door, or her sister in Seattle, or Alicia on the West Coast, or her father, or Tanisha, the student who worked part-
time in Abby’s studio in the city. “No. I’ll be fine. Really. It’s not as if I was still in love with him.”

One of his dark eyebrows quirked and she regretted her words immediately. She felt compelled to explain herself. “Listen, Detective, just because he left me for another woman, one quite a bit younger, doesn’t mean that I’m still pining for him or that I’ll break into a million pieces once you leave. What I’d felt for Luke died a long time ago. Sad, but true.” She looked down at her hands and gnawed at her lower lip a second. The lag in the conversation made the sounds of the house, the creaking timbers, a squirrel scampering across the roof, the steady gurgle of rain washing through the gutters, more noticeable. The marriage was probably over before we moved here from Seattle. Were they going to make a second stab at it, but we failed.” She nodded as if to

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“The marriage was probably over before we moved here from Seattle. We were trying to make a second stab at it, but we failed.” She nodded as if to
right? When I first heard he was missing, I thought it was a publicity stunt."

"If it is, it went seriously wrong. Luke Gierman is dead. Trust me."

A deep sadness welled inside her. As much as she and Luke had been at odds, she hated the thought that he’d been killed, his life snuffed before he reached forty.

Montoya rose and reached into his back pocket for his wallet. She watched his movement, noticed how his jeans hugged his butt, then looked quickly away. Geez, what was wrong with her? Yeah, the guy’s hips were right in her line of vision, but so what? Had Luke’s violent death kicked in her libido? That was the problem, she wasn’t thinking. Hadn’t been. Despite all her protests of being okay with the news of her ex-husband’s death, she was still in shock.

So she’d noticed the detective was sexy. So what? It wasn’t a big deal. She also knew that she couldn’t trust him within an inch of her life.

He scribbled something on the back of a card, and if he’d caught her checking him out, he had the decency not to show it. "My cell phone number," he explained. "If you think of anything else, contact me."

"You, too." She stood and took the white business card he handed her before a horrifying thought struck her. "Please tell me I don’t have to go to the morgue and identify the body," she asked, suddenly weak in the knees again.

"No. His parents are coming into town."

She nodded, didn’t want to think about her former in-laws and the grief they were enduring.

"So . . . I saw the FOR SALE sign out front. Are you getting ready to move?"

"After I sell this, yes," she said and wondered why she felt defensive about it, as if the question was one he might ask a suspect. She half expected him to wink at her and advise her not to leave town, but he dropped the subject, only asking once again if he could call someone to be with her and, when she declined, promising to return with her dog.

She walked him to the door. The rain had stopped, leaving puddles in the drive and only a few drops still dripping from the trees. From the porch she watched as he folded his muscular frame behind the steering wheel of his cruiser, his black hair shining like ebony in the dismal rays from a cloud-covered sun. He backed the vehicle out of her long drive, his tires splashing in the water that had collected, then he nosed the cruiser onto the road.

As he drove out of sight, she collapsed onto the porch, dissolving into tears that streaked down her face. It was stupid, really, she didn’t love Luke, hadn’t for a long, long time, but still, knowing that he’d been murdered, that he was gone forever, left a hole in her life.

Who had murdered him? Had he known his attacker? Had the woman pulled the trigger? Or had someone decided to kill them both?

Montoya had been a little vague about the details of the slayings, and now, after some of the shock had dissipated, she had questions, lots of them. Who had killed Luke? Granted he had dozens, maybe hundreds, of enemies, but who had been so outraged, so deadly furious, as to have shot him?

And why the girl?

Unless they were involved romantically. Sexually.

Sick as it was, she could imagine Luke being fascinated by a coed with her bright, innocent smile and young, supple body. He’d always had a thing for young women and now it may have cost him his life. How had someone overpowered him? Where had he been abducted? And why?

Slapping the stupid tears away, she forced herself to her feet and into the house. Get a grip, Abby. Pull yourself together! He was no longer your husband, and face it, sometimes you didn’t even like the guy!

With a twist of the deadbolt, she locked the front door and headed for the shower. She had to focus. There was nothing more she could do. She checked her watch. She had just enough time to clean up, swab out the tub, then face the single guy who had expressed an interest in seeing her house.

Peeling off her clothes, she headed for the bathroom. Her heart was heavy, but she gritted her teeth and told herself life went on. As bad as she felt, she wasn’t going to change her plans.

Not this time.

Her father’s mantra started all over again. When the going gets tough . . .

"Yeah, yeah, I know," she said as she twisted on the faucets and the shower spat and coughed before thin needles of hot water started spraying over her body, washing away the sweat, the tears, the shock. Adjusting the temperature, she let the water pour over her body and reached for the bottle of shampoo. For the moment she would push all thoughts about Luke and his murder out of her head.
CHAPTER 5

There was something about Abby Chastain that didn’t ring true, Montoya thought as he drove into the city. Worse yet, she was sexy as hell and didn’t seem to know it. Even without a trace of makeup, her hair scraped away from her face, exertion evidenced in the sweat that had stained her T-shirt, she pulled at his senses.

He hadn’t liked the awareness that had built within him as he’d watched raindrops shimmer in her hair, then plaster her shirt against her body. He’d caught a glimpse of her cleavage in the V-necked T-shirt, seen a raindrop drizzle its way between her breasts, noticed how her wet hair, slick and pulled back, framed a heart-shaped face, and he’d thought, stupidly and dangerously, of what she might look like coming out of a shower.

Shit.

His thoughts, though fleeting, had been totally unprofessional. Completely out of line.

He’d been too long without a woman, that was it. Ever since Marta’s death . . . Instantly his gut clenched and his fingers curled around the steering wheel. Flipping on his siren and lights, he stomped on the accelerator, as if he could outrun his thoughts, his grief.

It had been nearly two years since Marta had been killed and it was time to get over it. Maybe his interest in the ex-Mrs. Gierman was a good thing, a signal that he was back to his old self.

And yet, he had to watch his step.

Abby Chastain Gierman was off-limits. Way off-limits. Even though the evidence pointed to a man being at the scene of the crime, that didn’t mean she couldn’t be involved; if not actually having set up the crime, then a behind-the-scenes player. It didn’t seem that way, but until all the evidence was in, he wasn’t crossing anyone off the suspect list. Especially an ex-wife.

Who knew how Abby Chastain had to grudge? Angry at himself, Montoya forced himself to decelerate. He switched off his lights. Hell! What had he been thinking?

As he drove into the Garden District, his police band crackled, the windshield wipers slapping time at the pitiful rain. Checking his rearview mirror, he saw the irritation in the narrowing of his eyes. He didn’t think Abby had out-and-out lied. She seemed too smart for that. But she’d known more than she was saying. Even if he gave her a break for the shock of learning that her ex-husband was dead, she still hadn’t come clean. He could feel it.

And it dragged him out of line.

He slowed for a stoplight on St. Charles Avenue. Drumming the tips of his fingers on the steering wheel, he saw the raindrops reflect red from the signal, the only illumination in this gray, soggy afternoon. As he waited for the light to change, he watched as pedestrians with umbrellas and hats climbed off the street car and made a mad dash across the street to the cobblestoned, tree-lined sidewalks.

Students on their way to classes at Tulane and Loyola, two old universities resting side by side facing St. Charles Avenue, crossed in groups. Laughing, talking, carrying paper coffee cups and wearing backpacks, they hurried onto the paths and broad lawns of the universities that were within minutes of Courtney LaBelle’s home. If she’d decided to attend classes at Loyola, the red brick Catholic college with its turrets and crenels that resembled a medieval castle, would she be alive today? Set here in the Garden District, Loyola was within walking distance of her family. Of safety.

Seeing other young students blissfully unaware of what had happened to Courtney LaBelle, he ground his back teeth. Man, this case was a pisser.

What he needed was a smoke. Just to take the edge off his nerves. He considered stopping at the next convenience store for a pack of Marlboros. Shit, he’d love to draw in a lungful of nicotine about now. Quitting the habit was harder than he’d imagined and he remembered giving Bentz a hard time about giving up smoking a few years back. He’d accused him of being a wuss for leaning on gum or the patch or anything Montoya had considered a crutch.

Now, he understood.

Hell.

It was times like these, when he really wanted to think, to mull over his recent conversation with a witness, that he felt the urge to light up.

The traffic light turned green. The crosswalk was clear. He trod on the gas, water spraying from the Crown Vic’s tires as he hit puddles from the recent shower. His mind wandered to Abby Chastain again.

Seeing her had hit him hard.

Where it counted.

If she hadn’t been out-and-out lying, then she’d been holding something back. There was a mystery in her gold eyes, some kind of secret. She hadn’t been coy, seemed straightforward, but something was off. Or maybe he’d been distracted, surprised at how she’d affected him. He’d expected to walk up to her house, give her the bad news, watch her reaction, and find someone to stay with her, to help her get over the shock.

But that’s not what had happened.

The woman had gotten to him.

And he, blind-sided, had let her.

Petite, packed tight, curves in all the right places.

He flipped on the radio and told himself he had to stop thinking about Abby Chastain’s body. Jesus, hadn’t he learned anything in the last five years?

His guts twisted as he thought of Marta again . . . God, she’d been beautiful, with a sharp tongue and flashing dark eyes that had held him captive.

He’d thought she was the one, if there was such a thing. He hadn’t believed it before and he didn’t believe it now, but for that one short period of his life, he’d been certain that he’d wanted Marta Vasquez for his bride.

“Son of a bitch!” he growled as a guy in a red Mazda RX7 cut in front of him. Montoya slammed on the brakes. As the driver glanced in his mirror and obviously realized he’d nearly collided with a cop car, he shifted down, slowing to the speed limit, and immediately became Mr. Good Citizen, the epitome of the perfect driver. “Yeah, right,” Montoya muttered. If he had any balls, he would pull the guy over and read him the riot act, maybe scare the bejeezus out of him by slamming him up against the side of the car and pulling out his cuffs before slapping him with a ticket and a fine that would make the guy’s eyes bulge.

Montoya smiled at the thought, then checked his watch as it began to rain again.

No time to spare.

“Next time, buddy,” Montoya said as the sports car turned into a bank parking lot. With a sigh, he forced himself to concentrate on the task ahead: informing Mr. and Mrs. Clyde LaBelle that their daughter wasn’t ever coming home.

“Damn it all to hell.”

This was the part of his job he detested the most.
...I don’t know,” Sean Erwin said as he walked slowly through Abby’s house. Behind sleek black-framed glasses, his eyes darted from one side of the living room to the other as he and Abby walked toward the dining area. It was the third pass through and Sean, a tall, lean man with spiky hair, patrician nose, and thin black brows over expressive eyes, wasn’t happy. Yet he wasn’t going away. “I just don’t think this is big enough.” Tapping one long finger against his mouth, he frowned, pursing his lips as if he’d just sucked on a lemon. “I have a lot of oversized pieces. An armoire from my grandmother, an overstuffed couch, a small piano . . . and my bed is a king.” He strode quickly down the short hallway where the bathroom separated the two bedrooms. He poked his head into Abby’s room again. “No. Don’t think so. Your bedroom doesn’t look like it could accommodate my bed, the two night tables, and my dressing table.” Sighing dramatically, he pulled a small tape measure from his pocket. “I’d better take some measurements.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.” It was all Abby could do to keep her cool. While this art dealer from the city walked through her house as if he already owned it, and didn’t like what he saw, she was thinking of Luke’s murder. Somehow Sean Erwin’s furniture arrangement didn’t seem so important today. The couple who’d stopped by an hour earlier had wandered through for the second time, but hadn’t seemed all that interested either. They’d left without asking any more questions.

The phone rang and she picked up in the kitchen where Ansel was cowering under one of the chairs.

“Hello?”

“Oh my God. Tell me it’s not true!” Zoey’s voice shivered through the wires. “Tell me Luke’s okay!”

“I can’t.”

“He was murdered? He and some girl?”

Abby nodded, though her sister couldn’t see her. “I found out, less than two hours ago. A detective from the police department came by.”

“Are you all right?”

“No, but then who would be?” Abby said, trying to keep her voice low as she heard Erwin in the bathroom, opening closet doors and closing them.

“How did you find out?”

“...I work in the news business, remember.”

“But you’re on the West Coast.”

“Seattle isn’t exactly Timbuktu and we do get feeds, you know, running streams of news from all over the world. I just happened to see information about a double homicide or maybe homicide-suicide in New Orleans and then . . . then I called a local station. They said the next of kin were just being notified, but someone at the station has a contact in the department. He let the identities out. Officially, the police aren’t releasing information about who was killed until the next of kin have been notified, but I figured that was you and Luke’s parents.” She exhaled shakily. “I just can’t believe it.”

“You and me both,” Abby said.

“How’re you holding up?”

“Still in shock, but I’ll be okay.”

“You’re sure?” Zoey’s voice was filled with worry.

“Of course I am,” Abby said a little hotly. Her feelings for Luke were ambivalent, but to deny that she had any was ridiculous. She heard Erwin walk out of the bathroom and test the cupboard door in the hallway, the one that always squeaked. “Look, I’ve got to go. I’ve got someone looking at the house right now. I’ll call you back.”

“You’d better give Dad a ring. He’ll want to know. He always liked Luke.”

One of the few in the family, Abby thought, getting her teeth. “I will,” she promised just as Sean Erwin poked his gelled head into the kitchen. Tape measure at the ready, forehead creased, he eyed the doorway to the back porch. “You don’t have a pantry, do you?” he asked, oblivious to the fact that she was still on the phone.

“I’ll call you back,” she said to her sister and Erwin finally saw the receiver.

His head ducked back into his shoulders like a scared turtle. “Sorry,” he mouthed, but she was already hanging up.

“No problem.” Oh, Abby, you’re such a liar. She was irritated and couldn’t help saying, “And no, I don’t have a pantry. Nor a piano, so space for one is really a concern for me and my smaller bed works out just fine.”

He blinked as if shocked, and she decided it was a good thing that she made her living in photography rather than by trying to sell real estate. But she was steamed and Erwin’s questions seemed not just curious but kind of pointedly snarky.

“I understand,” he said, stung, “but I’m just trying to work with what you’ve got here.”

“Then go for it. But there’s only so much space unless you want to add on, or connect the main house to the studio.” She walked to the back door and opened it. Ansel streaked outside like a shot. “It’s unlocked if you want to see it, just on the other side of this porch.”

“I will. Thanks.” He hurried out of the kitchen and Abby wished he’d just go away. As much as she wanted to sell the house, today was not the day. . . oh, God, no! No! No! Not Mary. Please, please, you must be wrong!” Virginia LaBelle was trembling, her blue eyes wide, her head shaking violently from side to side as she stood next to her husband. Her face had turned white, her legs wobbled, and if not for the steady arm of her husband, she, no doubt, would have crumpled into a heap onto the glossy marble floor of her three-storied Victorian home. Tears rained from her eyes. “Not my baby,” she cried and Montoya’s guts twisted as he looked up the curved wooden staircase to the landing, where a huge gold-framed picture of a vibrant, beautiful girl had been hung. Bright blue eyes, gold hair that curled past her shoulders, dimples visible around a radiant smile. A beautiful girl. In his mind’s eye he saw the female victim with her bloated face and waxy complexion and felt sick.

“I’m sorry,” Montoya said and he meant it. This was the worst part of his job. The worst. Dealing with the dead was preferable to informing the living of the loss of a loved one. Especially a child. “Her identification said Courtney.”

She goes by Mary. Has from the time she was old enough to decide, somewhere around the fourth or fifth grade, I think,” the father, Clyde, said. Tall, with a large frame, ruddy cheeks over a short-cropped silver beard that matched his thinning hair, Clyde LaBelle aged before Montoya’s eyes. His shoulders dropped beneath his tan sport coat, the color washed away from his skin, leaving his complexion pasty, and his blue eyes, behind gold-rimmed spectacles, seemed to fade.

“Third. She had Sister Penelope for a teacher,” Virginia said, still blinking against her tears, denial etched on her face.

“You’re certain this is our child?” Clyde asked softly.

“Yes, but I’ll need someone to identify the body.”

Another piercing wail from Courtney’s mother as she lost control of herself.

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“There has to be a mistake.”

“I’ll do it.” A muscle tightened in Clyde’s jaw and Montoya witnessed him physically stiffening his spine.

“It can’t be, it just can’t be,” Virginia muttered.

“Shh . . . honey . . . shh.” He pressed his lips into her hair but he didn’t say the obvious lie of everything’s going to be all right.

Because it wouldn’t be. For the rest of their lives this well-to-do couple would mourn their daughter and nothing else would matter. Everything they’d worked for, dreamed of having—this stately old house, the tended grounds, the silver Cadillac parked in the driveway—would be meaningless.

“Perhaps you should lie down,” Clyde suggested to his wife, but she would have none of it.

Wiping at the bottoms of her eyes with a long, manicured finger, she whispered, “I want to hear what the officer has to say. It’s wrong, of course, but I need to hear it.”

“Ginny, Detective Montoya wouldn’t come here if he wasn’t certain—”
But it has to be a mistake. We both know it.” She drew in a slow, shuddering breath and extracted herself from her husband’s grip. Her legs were unsteady and she managed to stay upright, her spine suddenly ramrod straight. “Please, give me a second.” Touching her hair as if realizing it had become mussed, she walked to what appeared to be a nearby bathroom, her gold sandals clicking across the veined marble floor.

“I’m a psychiatrist,” Clyde said. “I’ll prescribe something to calm her down.” He glanced nervously at the closed powder room door. “And I’ll call our parish priest. Father Michael has a way of soothing her.”

Montoya took note of the carved wooden cross mounted above the archway that led to the back of the house. A heavy leather-bound Bible rested prominently upon a small occasional table near the foot of the staircase. The ceiling of this entry hall was two full stories, allowing the foyer to open to a gallery on the floor above where more pictures of the LaBelles’ only daughter had been artfully arranged.

The door to the powder room opened and Virginia La Belle, her makeup restored, her frosted hair no longer mussed, managed a wan smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Please, Officer, if you would follow me into the parlor.” Her voice wobbled and for a second she seemed about to dissolve again, but she tugged on the hems of her sleeves, gathered her breath, and said, “We could discuss this matter further. I’m certain that there has been a vast, horrible mistake.”

Clyde sent Montoya a look but followed his wife into a cozy room filled with peach-colored chintz, ornate antique tables, and lamps that dripped with crystal. Flipping a switch, Virginia turned the fire on, though it had to be eighty degrees in the house, then she sat on the edge of a small settee. She folded her hands in her lap and tried like hell to appear composed, to slip back into the world of Southern gentility to which, Montoya guessed, she’d been born.

“You would like something to drink? I could have Ada get us some sweet tea.”

“I’m fine,” Montoya said.

As her husband joined her, Montoya took a quick survey of the room. Over the fireplace was another huge portrait of Courtney and upon the wide marble mantle was a gallery of pictures of the girl in various phases of her life: photos of her as a toweled toddler, others in the awkward age when braces glinted in her mouth and small granny glasses covered her eyes, still other shots that were more recent, pictures of a young woman with a fresh face and placid smile.

“She’s going to be a nun;” Virginia said with a touch of pride as she fingered a diamond cross at her throat, so similar to the one found around her daughter’s neck.

A nun?

That was a curve ball Montoya hadn’t expected. Montoya eyed the mother carefully, wondering if she’d gone off her rocker. “She was going to join an order?”

“We know it’s not a common calling for a young woman these days and goodness knows her father and I tried to dissuade her.” She sent her husband a knowing glance. “We want grandchildren, you see . . .” Her voice drifted off again as she looked up at the mantel to the pictures of her only child. A single tear drizzled from the corner of her eye.

Montoya’s stomach soured. As gently as possible, he explained what he knew, what he could tell them. About the cabin. About Gierman. About the gun that had been found in their daughter’s hand. About the wedding dress.

Throughout it all, Courtney Mary La Belle’s parents listened. Raptly. Sadly. Without comment. Rain splashed against the tall paneled windows and the gas logs hissed, but Clyde and Virginia huddled together on the tiny couch, holding hands, wedding rings catching the firelight, and didn’t say a word. It was almost as if he were talking to mannequins. Only when he mentioned the pistol did the father wince and blink, guilt stealing through his eyes.

“I gave her that gun for protection,“ he whispered, his voice thick. “I never thought . . . Oh Jesus.” He buried his face in one hand and his shoulders began to shake.

Surprisingly, his wife touched Clyde’s shoulder with her free hand, as if to offer him strength.

“I shouldn’t have done it. If I hadn’t, then she might be alive today,” he said.

“Shhh. No. Clyde. Whatever happened, it’s not your fault. You’ll see. This is a mistake.” She turned her sad eyes on Montoya again. “Mary doesn’t know Luke Gierman, I’m sure. He’s the man with that horrible program on the radio, isn’t he? The one who’s being banned everywhere?”

“He worked at WSLJ. Was known as their shock jock.”

“Well, there you go. Mary doesn’t know him. Wouldn’t. And she doesn’t own a wedding gown, believe me. You’ve got the wrong girl. Someone who just happened to have our daughter’s ID with her.”

“Have you talked to your daughter in the last two days?” Montoya asked and thought of the picture he was carrying, the one of the dead girl, but he couldn’t bring himself to take it from his pocket.

“Well, no.”

“The picture on her student ID and driver’s license is of the same woman we found.”

A small high-pitched sound of protest came from Virginia’s throat.

“I could call Father Michael for you,” Montoya offered, knowing that he would get nothing more from these tortured parents today.

“No, no . . . I’ll take care of it.” Virginia offered up a tremulous smile, then walked to a desk where she picked up a phone and pushed a speed-dial button. She spoke into the phone for a few minutes and then hung up, her hand resting on the receiver a second longer than necessary, as if she was hesitant to break the connection.

“You mentioned that Courtney, er, Mary had decided to become a nun,” Montoya said as the girl’s mother returned to her spot on the settee, found her purse, and retrieved a tissue from within. “When did she decide to join an order?”

Clyde frowned. “Six, maybe eight months ago, I think.” He glanced at his wife for confirmation.

“Last Christmas.” Virginia twisted the tissue and looked out the window as if she could will her daughter to appear on the front walk. “She visited the order at Our Lady of Virtues.”

Montoya felt something inside him click.

“At least it was close by,” the mother said again and Montoya’s gut tightened. “And I guess, we have some affinity for the order. Clyde was a doctor on staff of the hospital and I was a social worker. We met there.” Her smile was quick, tremulous, and dissolved instantly. “They’re tearing down that old hospital, but the sisters are still going to live in the convent. I hear they’re going to build new apartments and an assisted-living facility, and as the nuns age, they’re guaranteed living and care expenses free-of-charge. This is after they can no longer care for themselves, or the order can’t care for them any longer.”

“You mentioned that Courtney, er, Mary had decided to become a nun,” Montoya said as the girl’s mother returned to her spot on the settee, found her purse, and retrieved a tissue from within. “When did she decide to join an order?”

“Do you know why?”

He hesitated. Tugged at his silver beard and cast a glance in his wife’s direction. “She felt as if God had spoken to her.”

“Personally?”

“Yes.” He nodded and looked away.

So would be Sister Mary, aka Courtney, might not have been so normal after all.

“I know how it sounds, Detective. I work with people who hear voices all the time—”

“Wasn’t the same!” Virginia intervened. “Mary . . . she just thought God was answering her prayers, that’s all. She wasn’t schizophrenic, for God’s sake!” Her lips pulled into a tiny knot of disapproval. “She is a normal, sane, lovable girl.”

Right. Like Joan of Arc.

Clyde slipped his arm around his wife’s shoulders.

Montoya asked, “Did she have any boyfriends?”
“Nothing serious.”
“You’re certain?”
“Yes,” The wife answered but both parents nodded.
“Could there have been someone who might have been interested in her, but she wasn’t returning the favor?”
“Mary gets along with everyone, Officer,” Virginia said. “Though she could have dated a lot of boys, a lot, she hasn’t. She’s already promised herself to God. That’s what the ring is for.”
“The ring?”
“The one she wears on her left hand,” Clyde offered and Montoya’s mind flashed to the battered and bruised ring finger of the victim.
Virginia added, “Where other girls wear their boyfriend’s class ring, or an engagement or wedding ring, Mary wears a promise ring. It’s something she picked out herself on her eighteenth birthday, the day she promised herself to the Father.”
“As in God.”
“Of course.” Virginia’s shoulders stiffened as if she were girding herself to defend her child.
Montoya didn’t know what to say. Things were getting weirder by the minute. He glanced up at the portrait again. It was a posed shot where the girl’s hands were folded over the back of a couch. Sure enough, on the ring finger of her left hand, she wore a filigreed gold band with a single square-cut red stone.
“So she wasn’t getting married?”
“What? No! Of course not.” Virginia let out a disgusted sigh.
“Did she own a bridal gown?”
“No . . . why would she? I told you, she didn’t even date!”
“Did she pick All Saints for a reason?”
Clyde said, “We did. We wanted her to be close enough to reach her, but far enough away that she would experience college life. She could have gone to Loyola, of course, the Jesuits there do a wonderful job. It’s an institution around here, I know. I even spent a few years on the staff there.”
Virginia started shredding the tissue. “Clyde felt it would be good for her to get away from under our wing, meet new people, even if she were going to join an order.” She blinked rapidly and sniffed. Her chin trembled. “Clyde wanted her to experience a bit of the world.”
Courtney’s father’s face drew together in anguish. “I just wanted what was best for her.”
“We both did.” Virginia sniffled, then dabbed at her nose.
“I understand,” Montoya said, lying because he didn’t understand it at all. These days eighteen-year-old girls didn’t run off to nunneries. Beautiful, supposedly popular girls dated boys. Unless they were gay. Then they dated girls, and if Courtney “Mary” Labelle was into girls, then what the hell had she been doing with Luke Gierman?
By all accounts the two victims couldn’t have been more unalike.
Montoya talked to the Labelles until he spied a bronze-colored sedan pull up to the curb outside the house. It was Montoya’s cue to leave. To let the grieving parents have some time alone with a priest. A tall man, maybe six-two or six-three, wearing a black suit, black shirt, and stark white clerical collar, stretched out of the car. Thick white hair, rimless eyeglasses, and a few lines on a weather-beaten face suggested he was near seventy, yet he stood straight and with a quick, sure stride he walked to the door.
The doorbell pealed in soft, dulcet tones.
Mrs. Labelle was on her feet, and once the priest entered, her tenuous facade fell completely away in a wash of tears and sobs.
Montoya was glad to get away from the perfect house, a near shrine to a daughter who wasn’t returning. He strode to his cruiser, climbed inside, and fired the engine. Before he backed into the street, he called the station on his cell phone and was connected to Lynn Zaroster, a junior detective who happened to be manning the phones.
“Hey. It’s Montoya. Can you check with the crime lab, see if there was any jewelry found on Courtney LaBelle, the female vic who was found with Luke Gierman this morning? Also, find out if Gierman was wearing any jewelry.”
“I think he was au naturel. Weren’t you there?”
“Yeah, and that’s the way it looked to me, too.” Montoya did a quick U-turn, then hit the gas. “I didn’t see that he was wearing anything, but double-check and get back to me, would ya? The girl, she supposedly never went without her promise ring.”
“Got it.”
“Is anyone still at Gierman’s town house?”
“Brinkman and an investigator from the crime-scene team.”
“Call and tell them to crate the dog. I’ll be by to pick her up.”
“The dog?”
“Yeah. Gierman’s ex wants the dog back. Seems as if she lost her in the divorce.”
“The dog?” Zaroster repeated.
“That’s what I said.”
She said something about lunatic, fanatic dog lovers under her breath, then more loudly added, “I don’t suppose you’ve heard about the calls into the radio station the other day?”
Montoya wheeled around a corner and cut through two lanes of traffic. “No. What?”
“It was the day they aired a show on vindictive exes.”
Montoya’s hands tightened over the wheel. “What about it?”
“The station keeps a log of anyone who phones in. The telephone numbers flash onto the computer display.”
“Who called?”
“Lots of people. Irate. Or ones who had stories to share with old Luke. The thing is, one of the people who phoned in hung up before she said anything.”
Montoya felt it coming.
“That caller just happened to be his ex. Abby Chastain. She didn’t bother saying anything, probably thought better of talking to her ex-husband on the air. If it were me, I would have held my tongue, too. But she had definitely been listening and I just heard a replay of the program. He reamed her, but
“Are you saying Abby Chastain might have o ffed her husband and Courtney LaBelle? No, that didn’t seem quite right. Not with the bridal gown and the size twelve shoes.
“Don’t know about the girl, but man, oh, man, that Gierman, what a piece of work. He gave his ex-wife a powerful motive. That’s all I’m suggesting.”
“Save the tape. I want to hear it.”
“Got it right here,” she said and he heard a couple of raps, as if she were patting something for emphasis.
“Has his car been found yet?”
“Not that I know of.”
“Let me know when it’s located.” Montoya said before hanging up and driving to Luke Gierman’s town house, located in the French Quarter. Gierman’s end unit was a full two stories of old, painted brick and decorated with tall, paneled windows, hurricane shutters, and fancy wrought-iron balconies. The private entrance, a small courtyard, was cordoned off with crime-scene tape.
Eying the place, Montoya pushed open the door. One of Bonita’s investigators, Inez Santiago, was closing up her evidence collection kit. She looked up at Montoya as he stepped into the foyer.
“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” she teased, her teeth flashing white against golden skin. Santiago was a looker, blessed with a dancer’s body and long, coffee-colored hair that she highlighted with streaks of red, and when she was working, scraped away from her face in a crisp, professional knot. Her eyes were green, intelligent, and didn’t miss a damned thing.

“You through here?”

“That’s right.”

“Find anything?”

“Some fingerprints, but who knows who they belong to. We’ll check them with the Automated Fingerprint Identification System and see what we come up with. Brinkman took some personal stuff, files and the computer, the trash, and the answering machine. I think we got everything we could. You can poke around all you want. Just don’t mess up anything until I get the final word from Washington.” Santiago’s smile flashed again.

Fingerprint powder was everywhere and a few drawers still hung open, but underlying what the police crime department had done while investigating, the place was neat. Tidy. Clean. “I’m here for the dog.”

“Does the dog know that? She might not approve.”

“Oh, where do you get off today?”

With a naughty wink, she said, “Wouldn’t you like to know?” She clicked her kit closed and nodded toward the kitchen. “The dog’s in there. I tried to pawn her off on Brinkman, but he said ‘no way’; seems to be paranoid around most animals.”

“He leave?”

“About fifteen minutes ago. Said to meet him at the station and you could ride up to Baton Rouge together to check out the girl’s dorm room.”

Montoya didn’t comment. He could only stand so many hours in the car cooped up with Brinkman. Today he had no choice but to put up with the irritating detective, but he couldn’t wait until Bentz returned to duty. Rick Bentz was his regular partner, and though Montoya had kidded around that Bentz was old for his years, he beat the hell out of Brinkman, the Know-It-All.

Santiago walked through the kitchen to a small laundry area, where dog dishes were placed by the dryer and a large crate was wedged beneath a closet with one of those pull-down ironing boards. Through the mesh of the crate, a brown Lab peered intently. “She’s been waiting,” Santiago said.

“I’ll bet.” Montoya squatted. “How are ya, girl?” he asked and the Lab gave up a quick yip. “Guess she wants out.” He opened the door and the dog shot from its kennel in a bounding rush of warm brown fur. Wiggling crazily, Hershey knocked over her water dish and panted expectantly, hoping for attention.

“Good thing I already processed this room,” Santiago muttered.

“You’re done, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what more Washington might want. Better get her”—she motioned to the dog—“outside quick and not just in the courtyard.”

“Got it,” Montoya agreed and then, when the dog began jumping up on him, said, “Hey, hey, slow down.” Montoya grabbed a leash hanging from a hook in the wall and snapped the lead onto the rambunctious dog’s collar. “Chill!” he ordered but the anxious Lab pulled at the tether, nearly choking herself in the process. “I think I’ll take her outside.”

“Good idea,” Santiago said with a little, mocking nod of her head. “Yep, damned brilliant, Montoya. And for the record, the command isn’t ‘chill’ or ‘calm down’ or ‘freeze.’ I think you’d better stick with ’sit’ or ‘stay,’ you know, your basic commands from Puppy 101.”

“Funny.”

“I thought so.”

“You’re just full of yourself, aren’t you? Good night, last night?”

“As a matter of fact it was,” she said, her eyes gleaming. “But not what you think. I went out on the town. With a friend. Dancing. Didn’t get home until one A.M. Innocent fun and games.” Again the smile. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Montoya. Don’t be such a guy.” They walked outside, and after the dog had relieved herself near the curb, Montoya managed to get her into the back of the cruiser.

“Better crack a window.”

“I was just about to do that,” he muttered, already opening the driver’s side, turning on the ignition, and letting the front windows down several inches. He’d parked in the shade, but the heat was still oppressive. After climbing out of the car, he rested his hips against a fender.

“Find anything interesting inside?” he asked, hiking his chin toward the courtyard.

“Not much. You were here earlier. No signs of a struggle.”

“And his car is still missing.” It was a statement, not a question. The single-car garage had been empty. Montoya had checked.

“Yep.”


“Nothing looked disturbed. In fact, the place was . . . kind of classy . . . or tasteful. You know, I’ve listened to Gierman’s show a few times and figured him for some kind of obscene slob. All his talk radio pushes the envelope. I figured he was a racist, a homophobe, a misogynist, and a card-carrying member of the NRA, but as far as I can tell from what I found, I’m probably only right about the guns.”

“So that rules out the gays and members of the NAACP as suspects,” he said, but the joke fell flat.

“He had lots of enemies.”

“So I keep hearing.”

“He incited people. Loved to feed the fire, y’know?” Her forehead wrinkled. “But maybe it was all for the show. For ratings. For the almighty buck.”

“Maybe we’ll find out.”

“Too late for Gierman. Hey, do you want me to drop the dog off?” she offered.

“I think I can handle it.”

“Oh?” Santiago looked confused for a second before her chin came up and she looked at Montoya with a slow nod. “Don’t tell me, Gierman’s ex is single and a looker? Jesus, Montoya, when will you learn?”

“Learn what?” he asked and she just laughed.

“Fine. Take the dog!” Santiago was already unlocking her own vehicle, parked at the corner just in front of Montoya’s cruiser.

Montoya ignored her comments and made his way into the town house one more time for a final quick look around the place Gierman had called home for more than a year.

Santiago was right; the place was neat, or had been before the fingerprint and trace crew had been through. Polished wooden floors, modern furniture in muted tones, and abstract art in splashes of bold color were the mainstays of Gierman’s furnishings.

Upstairs in the master bedroom, his clothes were all pressed, folded, or hung. A stack of clean laundry in one box that was filled with tie clips, cuff links, and several rings. Pictures of himself in sailing or ski gear were arranged on his dresser. Montoya recognized Puget Sound, the Space Needle on one end, a downtown skyline farther away, and a big mother of a mountain—was it Mt. Rainier?—in the background as Gierman tackled his craft into what appeared to be a bracing wind.

Because of the location and Gierman’s apparent age, Montoya figured the picture must’ve been taken in the time Gierman was either married to or courting Abby Chastain. They seemed an unlikely couple, Montoya thought, remembering Chastain’s fresh face and, despite the shock of her ex-husband’s death, her wry sense of humor. She seemed to have a genteel facade while Gierman’s was crude and crass. But then they both could be fakes.

Montoya hadn’t dug deep enough to rely on his first impressions.

Yet. The upstairs bathroom was clean, Gierman’s shaving gear neat despite the investigative team’s search. The shower stall, tub, even the toilet, had been scrubbed, either by a girlfriend, cleaning service, or Gierman did the dirty jobs himself.
Seemed unlikely.
Montoya opened a cabinet. No kinky sex magazines. Not even a single issue of Playboy. Instead Montoya found copies of catalogs from upscale furniture shops and art galleries, even the most recent issues of a skiing magazine, Golf Digest, and Men’s Health. As it appeared that Gierman lived alone, it looked like his loud-mouthed, boorish public persona was a fraud. Or more likely, he was a complex guy.

Down a short hallway of gleaming hardwood, Montoya made his way to the second bedroom, which was used exclusively as a den and workout room. No daybed or foldout couch, just a desk, computer, file cabinet, and television with a DVD and VCR and Bose music system. As Gierman had in the bedroom and the living area. A media freak. Against one wall was a set of weights and bench; in a bookcase a CD library of classical, jazz, and old rock ‘n’ roll.

Any guests had to sleep with Gierman or on the olive green couch in the living room.

Now, because of the investigation, the guts of the computer had been taken away, cords left dangling where they had once been attached to the hard drive. File drawers had been left hanging open and had been stripped of a lot of the information inside, those files now, no doubt, piled upon Montoya’s desk at the station.

Brinkman was thorough, he thought, but still a prick.

Water dripped from the old pipes.
The smell of earth seeped in past tiles and bricks that had long ago lost their seals. Without care and resealing, the ancient mortar and grout had crumbled, letting in the dank, moist scent of dirt.

He didn’t care.
It didn’t matter.
Didn’t cloud his purpose.
If he stood very still and closed his eyes, he could remember the pungent odors of antiseptic and ammonia masking the acrid human scents of urine, sweat, and fear.
Above the smells were the sounds. If he listened very carefully, straining his ears, he could still hear the hushed whispers, the muted prayers, and the soft, unending moans. Metal carts rattled, the clock struck the hour, and everywhere there was the faint sense of depravity and decay, all washed over with a gloss of wellness and sunshine and false hope.

Now, standing in the labyrinthine corridors of the basement, he imagined how it had once been. So clearly he could see the lies . . . the shining eyes, the patient smiles, the concerned knit of eyebrows, but everything had been untrue.

He opened his eyes, and spurred by all those falsehoods, those dark, hidden sins, sins his mother had warned him about, sins for which he’d been brutally punished, he slipped through the shadowy corridors and felt again that he’d finally come home, had returned to make things right.

He moved noiselessly, leaving lanterns burning at critical junctures, golden light from tiny flames washing up against what had once been gleaming, pristine walls. Now black mold was evident, dark stains encroaching on dusty, dirty squares of the tile that had covered the walls of this area of the hospital basement. This was the part that had always been locked and kept secret, a place where the light of day never shone, where few knew what travesties had occurred down here. Those who had known had held their tongues and had expected the treachery and vile acts to have been forgotten.

Oh, how wrong they were.
Nothing was forgotten.
Nor was it forgiven.
His mother had taught him these valuable lessons.
He lit another lantern and turned a last corner. With his key, he unlocked a final door and stepped into the window-less room where his belongings were stashed. He lit candles and walked to the small secretary-desk with its peekaboo cabinets. It was unlocked. Pressing a small lever, he watched as the writing table unfolded, revealing hidden little niches, perfect cubicles for secreting his treasures. From his pocket, he withdrew the ring, a tiny gold band with a winking red stone. For a second he rubbed the metal circle between his forefinger and thumb, feeling its warmth, remembering the girl who had worn it.

He let out his breath slowly, found that he’d gripped the ring so hard it had cut into his skin, and he mentally berated himself. It wasn’t time. Not yet.

Now, thinking of her warm, trembling body, he felt the need for release, for the hot, urgent ache within him to be assuaged as he grew hard again.

Ruined all his carefully laid plans.

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Now, thinking of her warm, trembling body, he felt the need for release, for the hot, urgent ache within him to be assuaged as he grew hard again.

But he knew his torment was part of his own atonement.
He let out his breath slowly, found that he’d gripped the ring so hard it had cut into his skin, and he mentally berated himself. It wasn’t time. Not yet.

Angry with himself for his weakness, he placed the gold band into a special cranny, then he removed the watch from his pocket and set the expensive timepiece next to the ring.

Perfect, he thought as the candles burned and water dripped in the hallway. This was the first step though he was far from finished. His work would take time; there were so many who had to pay. From an upper shelf, he withdrew a black bound photograph album and began flipping slowly through the pages of posed photographs, newspaper clippings, snapshots, and magazine articles.

He smiled as he stared down at the lifeless pictures and read the stories he’d memorized long ago. But his smile fell away as he came to Faith Chastain’s photograph, a studio shot in black and white that caught her looking nearly lasciviously at the camera’s eye. He touched the photograph, outlining the curve of her jaw. His chest tightened as he remembered her in life. In death.

Above the snatched the album closed and stowed it into its special slot of the desk. Then he slammed the top of the secretary closed. He didn’t have time for this. There was so much work to do.

The deaths of the other night were just the beginning.
“We’re all in shock here at WSLJ,” the disk jockey was saying, “everyone’s going to miss Luke Gierman. I mean, the guy, was like a legend around here . . .”

Oh, save me, Abby thought.

“ . . . as a tribute to Luke and the contribution he made to free speech, WSLJ has decided to replay some of his most popular shows and we’d like your opinion about which ones you’d like to hear again. You can either call in or log on to our website.” The DJ rattled off phone numbers and the website address with such enthusiasm that Abby felt sick. She clicked off the radio.

“So now they’re going to canonize him,” she said to Ansel, who was seated on the back of the couch and staring hungrily at a hummingbird hovering near the feeder. “Unbelievable. It gives a whole new meaning to St. Luke, don’t ya think?” But despite her flippant words, she felt more than a little regret about their last conversation and the fact she’d lied about his father’s gun.

“Don’t even think about it,” she chided herself just as she heard the sound of tires crunching on the drive. Ansel, no longer mesmerized by the hummingbird, hopped down from the couch and stalked to the door, only to stop dead in his tracks.

“What?” Abby asked as she looked out the window. Detective Montoya had arrived. With Hershey. Abby’s heart leapt. Damn, she’d missed that dog.

Opening the front door, she let in a rush of warm October air as she stepped outside.

Hershey was straining at her leash, kicking up leaves. Detective Montoya, rather than yank the eager dog back, was jogging to keep up with her. He glanced up, caught sight of Abby on the front porch, and flashed a smile.

A sincere smile that was crookedly boyish and caught Abby off guard.

“I think she missed you,” he said as Hershey bounded up the steps. Leaping, jumping, wiggling, and wagging her tail, she demanded every bit of Abby’s attention.

“Yeah, you’re good. You’re so, so good,” Abby assured her, petting her sleek coat and bending down to have her face washed by Hershey’s tongue. “I missed you so much, Hersh.”

The Lab barked loudly and Abby laughed. Though she hated the circumstances by which she’d inherited Hershey, she was glad to have the dog back home. “Thanks for bringing her back,” she said to Montoya as she took the leash from him.

“No problem.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t exactly live around the corner from the police station. At least let me offer you a beer or a Coke, oh, I’ve only got Diet . . .”

“Nothing, really.”

She unsnapped the leash and Hershey, spying Ansel, shot inside. “Uh-oh. Watch out.” The cat puffed up to twice his size, hissed, then took off, streaking out through the open door, across the porch, and up the trunk of a live oak. The dog was inches behind and stopped short at the tree, only to bark wildly as Ansel sat on a low branch and looked down.

Abby couldn’t help grinning. “It’s their favorite game.”

Hershey whined and barked until she caught wind of some other animal and started sniffing the bushes. “It never fails,” Abby said, shaking her head as she watched her pets. “Every time Luke brought the dog over, Hershey would go berserk and Ansel would hiss and run. The dog always gave chase and sleeping dead to the world, as if they didn’t know the other animal was in the room.” Abby shoved her hair from her eyes. “Sometimes it’s a regular three-ring circus around here.”

“Did your ex leave the dog here often?”

“Just about every weekend,” she said, thinking of the absurdity of the situation. “As much as he fought for Hershey in the divorce, the responsibility of having a dog really cramped his style. He was gone a lot between his hours at the station and his other activities.” She slid Montoya a look. “Luke was an outdoor enthusiast, and when he couldn’t be fishing or hunting, or skiing or whatever, he spent hours in the gym. He was rarely home and so the dog was in his way. But I didn’t mind, as I said, I’ve missed Hershey.” She felt an unlikely tug on her heart. “I feel badly about Luke, really. We didn’t get along very well and our last conversation . . . it was really bad, awful, in fact . . . and then he really gave me some shots on his program the next day.”

“You listened?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah. I guess I was curious, or deep down I have masochistic tendencies, I don’t know, but yes, I tuned in. It was a mistake.” She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t exactly live around the corner from the police station. At least let me offer you a beer or a Coke, oh, I’ve only got Diet . . .”

“Did it make you angry?”

“Dammed straight,” she admitted, then looked at him. “It would have made anyone angry, but no, not that you’re asking, but you’re hinting that I might have been mad enough to kill him. I didn’t.”

“What about Courtney LaBelle. Any luck remembering her?”

“No . . . But there’s something about her name that seems familiar.”

“Famous singer named LaBelle,” he offered. “And a disk jockey over at WNAB.”

“No . . . Something more.” She’d wondered about it all day, had felt uneasy ever since hearing the girl’s name. “But she’s too young, I wouldn’t have known her.”

“She went by Mary.”

“Mary LaBelle.” Abby rubbed the back of her neck and drew her lips into a knot as she tossed the name around in her head. She came up with nothing, just a vague uneasiness that she should remember something. Something important. “Sorry. It’s probably nothing.”

“You listened?”

He snorted a laugh. “I don’t know, but let’s start with a ring, you know, for his finger.”

She crossed her arms. “He never even wore his wedding band after about six months into the marriage. He had an accident when he was sailing, the ring got caught on something, or so he claimed. Anyway, he quit wearing it. Later, I figured he just didn’t want to advertise the fact that he was married. I still never got around to it.”

“Do you know if your ex wore any piece of jewelry that was important to him?”

“I’ll listen!”

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He was staring at her with those damned dark eyes that seemed to see more than she wanted him to. She felt foolish, as if she were sentimental for a marriage that had died a natural death long ago, long before the divorce proceedings had been started.

““So . . . no wedding ring or ring of any kind?”

“I never saw him wearing one.” She looked pointedly at the gold ring in Montoya’s ear. “No earrings, either, or . . . ID bracelets or gold chains . . . the only piece of jewelry, if you could call it that, was a watch. Never without it.” Her stomach curdled when she remembered the day she’d dashed outside, trying to avoid big drops of rain, to the spot where he’d parked the BMW. She’d been on a mission of mercy, to close the sun roof and to find his auto
insurance documents as there was some question about coverage on the new car. What she’d discovered, locked in the glove box of the shiny black sports car, was an expensive watch, a card signed by initials she recognized as belonging to Connie Hastings, the owner of a rival radio station that was trying to lure Luke away from his job at WSLJ, and the singularly devastating knowledge that her husband had been cheating on her. Again. Her hands had shaken as she’d read the overtly suggestive card. Her stomach had boiled with acid when she opened the padded box wherein lay the Rolex. The whole experience was tantamount to a blow to the solar plexus. She’d felt as if she couldn’t draw a breath and she’d been totally unaware that the passenger side door was still open, the warning bell dinging insistently, rain blowing into the interior, drenching her and the stupid proof of insurance.

God, she’d been such a fool. If she hadn’t been pregnant at the time, she would have divorced him on the spot. Instead she’d left the sun roof open, the card and gift on the passenger seat, the door open in hopes that the interior of the car would be ruined, the battery drained, and the precious new watch stolen. She’d vomited in the bushes, delighting Hershey, then gone inside and waited for Luke to step out of the shower.

Now, she looked up and found Montoya waiting. “Oh, well. The watch. It’s a Rolex, one that he could use scuba diving, if you can believe that. It still ran under so many pounds of pressure and could withstand decompression . . . and it was cool enough looking that he never took it off. At least he didn’t while we were married.”

“Did he have it insured?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But since you’re asking, I assume it’s missing.”

“Just taking an inventory of all of his stuff.”

“But if he had been wearing the watch, you’d know about it, right?” she asked. “You wouldn’t have to ask me.”

“We can never rule out robbery as a motive.”

“If Courtney killed him, she didn’t rob him. If it was someone else, why go to all the trouble to take them both out to the middle of nowhere?” Abby asked, angry that the detective was holding out on her. “Thieves usually rob people on the street, in a car, at work, at home. They don’t go to the trouble and time of getting two victims together to stage some bizarre murder-suicide.”

“Unless they were into it,” Montoya said.

“Is there a reason you’ve not told me more about what happened the other night?” she asked, deciding to air her worst fears. “Am I under suspicion or something?”

“Everyone is.”

“Especially ex-wives who are publicly humiliated on the day of the murder, right?”

Something in Montoya’s expression changed. Hardened. “I’ll be back,” he promised, “and I’ll bring another detective with me, then we’ll interview you and you can ask all the questions you like.”

“And you’ll answer them?”

He offered a hint of a smile. “That I can’t promise. Just that I won’t lie to you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Detective.”

He gave a quick nod. “In the meantime if you suddenly remember, or think of anything, give me a call.”

“I will,” she promised, irritated, watching as he hurried down the two steps of the porch to his car. He was younger than she was by a couple of years, she guessed, though she couldn’t be certain, and there was something about him that exuded a natural brooding sexuality, as if he knew he was attractive to women, almost expected it to be so.

Great. Just what she needed, a sexy-as-hell cop who probably had her pinned to the top of his murder suspect list. She whistled for the dog and Hershey bounded inside, dragging some mud and leaves with her. “Siri!” Abby commanded and the Lab dropped her rear end onto the floor just inside the door. Abby opened the door to the closet and found a towel hanging on a peg she kept for just such occasions, then, while Hershey whined in protest, she cleaned all four of her damp paws. “You’re gonna be a problem, aren’t you?” she teased, then dropped the towel over the dog’s head.

Abby tensed, her fingers holding the phone in a death grip.

“I caught his program the other day.”

“Pardon me?”

“I realize you and he had some unresolved issues.”

“Just taking an inventory of all of his stuff.”

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“Is there a reason you’ve not told me more about what happened the other night?” she asked, deciding to air her worst fears. “Am I under suspicion or something?”

“Everyone is.”

“Especially ex-wives who are publicly humiliated on the day of the murder, right?”

Something in Montoya’s expression changed. Hardened. “I’ll be back,” he promised, “and I’ll bring another detective with me, then we’ll interview you and you can ask all the questions you like.”

“And you’ll answer them?”

He offered a hint of a smile. “That I can’t promise. Just that I won’t lie to you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Detective.”

He gave a quick nod. “In the meantime if you suddenly remember, or think of anything, give me a call.”

“I will,” she promised, irritated, watching as he hurried down the two steps of the porch to his car. He was younger than she was by a couple of years, she guessed, though she couldn’t be certain, and there was something about him that exuded a natural brooding sexuality, as if he knew he was attractive to women, almost expected it to be so.

Great. Just what she needed, a sexy-as-hell cop who probably had her pinned to the top of his murder suspect list. She whistled for the dog and Hershey bounded inside, dragging some mud and leaves with her. “Siri!” Abby commanded and the Lab dropped her rear end onto the floor just inside the door. Abby opened the door to the closet and found a towel hanging on a peg she kept for just such occasions, then, while Hershey whined in protest, she cleaned all four of her damp paws. “You’re gonna be a problem, aren’t you?” she teased, then dropped the towel over the dog’s head.

Hershey shook herself, tossed off the towel, then bit at it, snagging one end in her mouth and pulling backward in a quick game of tug of war. Abby laughed as she played with the dog, the first real joy she’d felt since hearing the news about her ex-husband. The phone rang and she left the dog growling as she opened the door to the closet and found a towel hanging on a peg she kept for just such occasions, then, while Hershey whined in protest, she cleaned all four of her damp paws. “You’re gonna be a problem, aren’t you?” she teased, then dropped the towel over the dog’s head.

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Abby hung up. Slammed the receiver down and vowed if it rang again, she’d just let the answering machine pick up. She would screen her calls. Anyone who wanted an appointment to see the house or for a photography session would leave a message.

She stared at the phone for a second, half expecting it to ring again, then she let out a long breath. Get used to it, her mind warned her, this is just the beginning. Until they find Luke’s killer and even afterward, the press, police, and the just-plain-curious will be calling.

There was just no getting around it.

The drive to Baton Rouge was fairly tolerable, Montoya thought. Brinkman wasn’t as irritating as usual and he kept the conversation on the crime. So far the lad had come up with nothing, but Gierman’s car had been found in an alley near his athletic club, the ATM where he’d gotten money only a block away. The trouble was, according to Brinkman, no one at the club had working out. He hadn’t shown up for his personal training session nor the rock climbing he liked to do on the fake stone wall that was built into the place.

At first glance Gierman’s BMW seemed clean, but the techs at the police garage were still going slow.

“I also had a chat with the ex-girlfriend, Nia Penne,” Brinkman said, cracking his window as Montoya drove northwest on Highway 10. It was twilight, headlights punctuating the gathering darkness, the air thick with the promise of more rain.

“What did she say?”

“Mainly that Gierman was a ladies’ man. Had the old wandering eye, but she thinks he was still in love with his ex-wife all the same.” He shot Montoya a look across the darkened front seat of the Crown Victoria.

“This is the same guy who bad-mouthed her on his program.”

“Yep. That’s what she claims. I asked about it but she said his show was all an act, if you can believe it.”

Montoya didn’t.

“Anyway, if you ask me, airing all your dirty laundry ain’t exactly a way back into a lady’s good graces, or the sack.” He chuckled as he fished in his inside jacket pocket and came up with a crumpled pack of cigarettes. “Go figure.” He shook out a filter tip, rammed it into the corner of his mouth, and searched his pockets for his lighter.

Montoya didn’t have too much trouble figuring at all. He eased the car around a broad corner and decided it might be tough to get over a woman like Abby Chastain.

“I’m lookin’ into the money.” The cigarette wobbled in his mouth as he spoke. “Who gets what, assuming Gierman still has some after his divorce. Usually the wife, she makes out like a bandit.”

Montoya wasn’t buying it. However, he hadn’t gone through three divorces like Brinkman had. And he had a sense that Abby Chastain wasn’t about the money. It also, he could be wrong. It wasn’t if he hadn’t made mistakes of character in the past. “Back to Gierman. So he was a player. We already know the score, right?”

“Still lookin’ into it. Spoke with a couple of coworkers, so far everyone’s talkin’ nicely about the dead. To hear them tell it, Gierman was a helluva guy. A goddamned prince.” He sniffed, smoke curling out of his nostrils. “Nice guy, my ass. Still got a few more people to talk to. Last to see him, so far, was his sidekick, Maury Taylor, who seems genuinely upset. Could be an act.” He tossed the butt of his cigarette out the window. “Radio guys,” he said derisively. “Bunch of whack jobs.”

Montoya eased the cruiser through the crowded street where the houses became larger and grander as they approached the university. Landscaped lawns, verandahs, gingerbread accents, fresh paint, and the look of affluence surrounded the gated entrance to All Saints College.

“You know where you’re going?” Brinkman asked as they passed the unguarded gate.

“Yeah,” he said now, nodding. “Cramer Hall.”

“Still lookin’ into it. Spoke with a couple of coworkers, so far everyone’s talkin’ nicely about the dead. To hear them tell it, Gierman was a helluva guy. A goddamned prince.” He sniffed, smoke curling out of his nostrils. “Nice guy, my ass. Still got a few more people to talk to. Last to see him, so far, was his sidekick, Maury Taylor, who seems genuinely upset. Could be an act.” He tossed the butt of his cigarette out the window. “Radio guys,” he said derisively. “Bunch of whack jobs.”

Montoya nodded. “Bentz’s kid, Kristi, lived in that dorm when she went to school here.” He didn’t go into the reasons he’d been here, the terror that Kristi and her father had lived through, but Brinkman had been around at that time. Knew the score.

“Oh, yeah,” he said now, nodding. “That case with that serial killer who called himself the Chosen One or some such shit. Jesus, there was a nut job.”

“Didn’t you go to school at Cramer Hall?” Brinkman asked.

“Yeah, I did, to Brinkman, you know that?”

“I don’t think so, but I really don’t know. I’ve talked to Dr. Starr. The administration wasn’t pleased at his choice of speakers.” She slipped one of the keys into the lock of the dorm room. “As much as we preach diversity and freedom of speech and everything else, this is still a pretty conservative school.”
“We’ll need to talk to Starr, too.”

“I know. He’ll meet with you later, when we’re finished,” said with the efficiency with which, he guessed, Dean Usher tackled any assignment.

“I’ve included his cell phone number along with everything else in a file in my office. You can pick the file up when you’re through here.”

Montoya glanced at Brinkman. Maybe they’d caught a break. Usher unlocked the door and, without another word, let it swing open.

Montoya stepped inside and, for a second, felt as if he’d been propelled into another world. “What the hell is all this?” asked, flipping on the light and staring at the walls. One side of the room was painted stark white and covered with crucifixes, pictures of the Holy Mother, Mary, and portraits of Jesus upon the cross. The other side was painted black as night and was starkly bare. No wall hangings, no pictures, nothing to reveal anything about the occupant. The desk on the white side of the room was littered with Lucite cubes and framed pictures of Courtney Mary LaBelle along with an open Bible and a rosary that hung from the knob of her closet door. The other side of the room was nearly empty aside from a small printer and several books on a bookcase, novels by and others about vampires, werewolves, and the paranormal.

“I don’t get it,” Brinkman said, and for once, Montoya agreed.

“This room belongs to Courtney LaBelle”—Dr. Usher motioned toward the cluttered side of the room—as well as Ophelia Ketterling. The dean’s hand waved toward the stark black walls.

“Roommates?” Brinkman asked.

“We encourage our students to be individuals and some of them, well, they take it to the max.” To prove her point more clearly, Dr. Usher snapped down the window shade, allowing no fading light into the room, flipped on a single lamp that sat on the desk in the dark side of the room, then turned off the overhead light.

“Holy shit,” Brinkman said as the dark room transformed instantly. Instead of flat black, the wall was suddenly crawling with designs that were only apparent when the black lightbulb glowed with its eerie purple light. Weird, nearly abstract pictures of gargoyles, vampires, and creatures with long teeth, tails, and tongues appeared as if they’d erupted from the very bowels of hell. “Jesus H. Christ,” Brinkman muttered. “Would you look at this.”

“Ophelia is an art student. A talented one, though some question her subject matter.” Usher snapped on the overhead again and the grotesque images disappeared.

“How did Courtney get along with her roommate?”

“They didn’t.”

Big surprise, Montoya thought.

“Maybe not so different. Both into art, both nonsmokers, both from religious families, Courtney from New Orleans, Ophelia from Lafayette. Both their mothers went to college here, both from the upper middle class. Both went to private Catholic high schools. Yes, they’re very different, but they had a lot in common. Her smile was wan. “Obviously, it didn’t work out.”

“Can we talk to Ms. Ketterling?” Montoya asked.

“She’s downstairs in the office.”

Brinkman was already poking around. Montoya asked, “We’ll just be a few minutes.”

“Okay.”

Montoya believed it. “Then how did they get together?”

“Computer random pairing,” the dean said.

“Best part is, they are different. As different as they are?” Montoya asked.

“Not to me, nor the resident advisor,” the dean said, biting her lower lip. “It’s a fall term, actually the year has barely started. I only heard about this”—she motioned toward the black walls—“after word of the tragedy hit.” She sighed and wrapped her arms around her slim waist, the key ring jingling in her fingers. “It’s all so horrible.”

“Am I to that, Montoya thought. “Did the two girls know each other before they came to All Saints?”

Montoya asked.

“Courtney and Ophelia? Oh, no.” She shook her head.

“Then how did they get together?”

“Computer random pairing,” the dean said.

“Close enough.”

Brinkman asked.

“What a freak fest,” Brinkman muttered. “The weird art... the vampire books, the black walls. This chick is disturbed. Extremely disturbed. We might want to find out where she was on the night her roommate bit it.”

“Lots of people read vampire books. It’s cool these days.”

“Just cuz it’s considered cool, doesn’t mean it’s a good idea.”

Brinkman was already poking around. Montoya asked, “We’ll just be a few minutes.”

“What a freak fest,” Brinkman muttered. “The weird art... the vampire books, the black walls. This chick is disturbed. Extremely disturbed. We might want to find out where she was on the night her roommate bit it.”

“When did this happen?”

“Two weeks ago... when Ophelia bit.”

“Just right,” Brinkman said.

“Outside,” Brinkman finally said, “Isn’t that from an old book?”

“I think it’s ‘curiouser and curiouser.’” From Alice in Wonderland.

“Close enough.” Brinkman hooked a thumb to the dark side of the room. “And speaking of Wonderland. This chick is off.”

Then he glanced at Courtney Mary’s side. “Well, they both are.”

“Maybe that’s why the computer connected them,” Montoya said. “Yin and yang.”

“Whatever. I need a smoke.” He was already scrounging into the inside pocket of his jacket. “How about we finish here, I go outside, and I meet you in the office?”

“Works for me.”

The dog would be a problem.

They always were.

He mentally berated himself as he stood in the woods, darkness closing in, the smell of the swamp thick and dank in his nostrils. Through the dripping Spanish moss and swamp oaks and sycamore trees, he stared at the cottage with its broad bank of windows.

Rain gurgled and ran in the gutters as the wind gusted away from the house, carrying his scent in the opposite direction. From these ever-darkening shadows he could, as he had before, follow her movements as she walked through her home. He knew where she kept her hand cream, in the small shadows he could, as he had before, follow her movements as she walked through her home. He knew where she kept her hand cream, in the small shadows he could, as he had before, follow her movements as she walked through her home. He knew where she kept her hand cream, in the small shadows he could, as he had before, follow her movements as she walked through her home. He knew where she kept her hand cream, in the small...
twilight. She’d made herself a pot of coffee and was sipping from a cup as she moved from one room to the next, talking to her animals, turning on the television, working at the table where she’d laid out negatives and pictures. Though he’d barely heard the ringing of her phone, he’d watched as she’d picked up the kitchen extension and talked without a hint of a smile.

The conversation was probably about her dead husband.

Studying her, he wondered how she could have married a man as base as Gierman, a man who had publicly cheated on her and had belittled her on the air.

Mary did you a favor, he thought, remembering the feel of the gun blast in the girl’s hand as she’d killed Gierman, who had been frantic, his eyes bulging in fear, his head shaking wildly as if in so doing he could stop the inevitable.

Gierman’s body had jerked when the gun had gone off. Instantly blood had begun to pump the life from him. Yes, Mary, the virgin, had done the world a favor in taking Gierman’s life. And then she’d made the ultimate sacrifice herself. He felt a little buzz in his blood as he remembered the feeling of power, of justice, that had swept over him.

From his hiding spot he saw her breasts as she cocked her head and held the phone against her ear. Curling, red-gold hair fell to her shoulders, not the dark mahogany color of Faith’s, but just as inviting. Hot. Fiery.

He swallowed hard as rain caught in his eyelashes and dripped down his nose.

She twisted her head, as if rotating the kinks from her neck, and his erection sprouted as he looked at the column of her throat, the circle of bones at its base.

He rubbed the tips of his gloved fingers together in anticipation and licked his lips, tasting his own sweat and the wash of rainwater. God, she was beautiful. So much like Faith. For a second, he closed his eyes, let the ache within, the wanting control him; felt the rain, God’s tears wash over him, bless him on his mission.

I will not fail, he silently vowed, then opened his eyes to look at her beautiful face, but she’d moved. She wasn’t framed in the living room window any longer.

Where was she?

Panic jetted through him as he checked every window . . . no sign of her. Had she decided to step outside? But he wasn’t ready. He reached into his pocket, felt the handle of the hunting knife and wondered if he’d have to use it.

Heart pumping, his fingers surrounding the hilt, he started to move. Suddenly she appeared, walking toward the windows from an interior room near the central hallway. He relaxed a second. She was heading into the dining area, but she abruptly stopped, as if she’d heard something. She turned, her eyes staring straight at him. A frozen pulled at the corners of her mouth. Her eyebrows drew together. She walked unerringly to the window and stared into the darkness.

He froze.

Caught his breath.

Ignored the thrum through his body as she squinted, gold eyes narrowing.

She was utterly beautiful. He watched as she bit the corner of her lip, her eyes trained on the very spot where he was hiding. Had he moved? Caught her attention somehow? Then maybe it was time . . .

No, no! Stay with the plan! You’ve worked too many years to change things now. Do NOT follow your instincts. . . . not yet.

But she was so like the other one; nearly a replica of Faith. He stared straight into her intense eyes, willing her to see him. Daring her.

AbSENTLY she scratched her nape and he studied the movement, thought of the soft skin at her hairline. He considered what she might taste like, what she would feel like, face-down, unaware until his weight pressed her deeper into the mattress . . .

She moved and his inward vision died. Now, she was walking the length of the house, talking to someone, heading toward the door that led to the little walkway separating the main house from her studio. As she passed the French doors, he understood. The damned dog was trotting eagerly beside her, nose upward as if the blasted animal were listening and understanding every word. In a few seconds she’d be at the back door and would probably let the fool dog out. The stupid beast would come barking and leaping after him.

He reached into his jacket pocket, withdrew the stolen cell phone, and knowing that he’d blocked caller ID from any transmission, hit speed dial. For her number. The number he’d programed in earlier after lifting the phone out of an unlocked car. He was already moving away from the house, cutting through the heavy cypress, pines, and underbrush, not checking to see if she was going to pick up.

One ring.

Sweating, he hurdled a small log in his path.

Two rings.

Oh, fuck, was she letting the damned dog out?

Three rings.

She wasn’t answering. Damn it, she was probably already at the door. He increased his speed. Four rings.

Shit!

Click.

His heart nearly stopped.

“Hi, this is Abby. Leave a message.”

He slapped his phone shut, jammed it into his pocket, and silently raced through the dense foliage. He was swift, his body honed from exercise, but he didn’t want to blow his cover by allowing an idiot dog to find him. He’d parked the car over a mile away behind the shed of an abandoned sawmill.

Even in the gathering darkness he didn’t need a flashlight; he’d traveled this way many times. At the fence of the Pomeroy property, he slowed, carefully walking the perimeter, past a small utility gate far from the road. Breathing hard, he half expected Asa’s damned Rottweiler to charge at the fence.

Another stupid dog to deal with.

But there was no growling, no barking, no thundering paws, no snarling, drooling jaws snapping at him from behind the iron bars sealing off Pomeroy’s acres. He turned on the speed again, crossed the road, and slipped onto a deer trail that cut behind the old mill.

Minutes later he vaulted the rusted chain-link fence and landed behind the dilapidated drying shed where his truck was parked.

By the time he slid behind the steering wheel, he was soaked from running through the damp underbrush and his own sweat. His head was pounding, his breathing irregular, not from the run, but from the knowledge that he had come close to being discovered.

Not yet. Oh, no, not yet.

As he switched on the ignition, he let out his breath. Pulling out from behind the old drying shed, he flipped on his wipers to push aside the drops that had collected. He didn’t bother with headlights. Just in case anyone was nearby.

The truck bounced and jolted over the pitted road. He had to stop to open the gate, drive through, then stop and close the gate behind him again, securing the hiding place for another time. He even secured the damned thing with his own lock. He’d already dispensed with the original one by snipping it with bolt cutters a few weeks earlier.

Because this was the perfect location to hide his vehicle.

Once inside the King Cab again, he eased toward the main road and, seeing no car coming, eased onto the highway and turned on his headlights. His heart was still pounding out of control, his nerves stretched to the breaking point. He rolled a window down to help with the fog inside, then once he’d put a few miles between himself and Abby Chastain’s cottage, he switched on the radio and hit the button for WSLJ.

“. . . continuing our tribute to Luke Gierman tonight. All of us here at WSLJ, well, and I’m sure everyone in New Orleans, too, is outraged and saddened
by what happened to Luke and we urge everyone who’s listening, if they know anything that might help the police solve this crime, to call in. We don’t have a lot of details as to exactly what happened yet, but it seems that the murder-suicide theory has been scrapped, and that the police believe the double murder was staged to make it appear as if the female victim, Courtney LaBelle, shot Luke then turned the gun on herself. Local, state, and federal authorities are now searching for the killer of both Luke Gierman and Courtney Mary LaBelle. The minute we get any more information about this sick crime, we’ll let you know, of course.

“Now, we’ve got several of his personal favorite shows and we’ll run them back to back with a half an hour between each one where you, the listeners, Luke’s fans, can call in with your comments, or if you’d rather, e-mail them to the station and we’ll read them on the air. The first show will be taken from last summer, right before the Fourth of July and it will be replayed at nine P.M. . . .”

Satisfied, he snapped off the radio. The tribute to Gierman was pathetic, but it also kept the public aware of Gierman’s death and that was important. So the citizens of New Orleans were “outraged and saddened.” Good. It was time. Long past.

Tune in tomorrow, he thought as he considered his next act of retribution, his next victims.

They were out there.

Just waiting for him.
CHAPTER 7

Montoya locked the door to the dorm room, then he and Brinkman clomped down four flights to the main reception area of Cramer Hall. While Brinkman peed off to go outside and light up, Montoya found the small office behind the bank of mailboxes where Dean Usher sat behind a wide oak desk. A heavyset girl with obviously dyed black hair and a bad complexion that was partially hidden by white, ghoulish makeup glowered from a side chair. She was wearing a long black dress, black lacy gloves without fingers, black boots, and a bad attitude as she sat cross-legged, one booted foot bouncing nervously.

“Ophelia, this is Detective Montoya.” Usher looked past him to the doorway, obviously expecting Brinkman to follow. “Detective Montoya, Ophelia Ketterling.”

“Just O,” the girl corrected without a hint of a smile. “I go by O.”

Montoya took the only remaining chair, near the girl. “Detective Brinkman will be here in a second,” he explained. “But we should get started. I’ll be recording this interview. That okay with you?”

A lift of one shoulder. As if she just didn’t give a damn and was waiting for the ordeal to be over. “Whatever.”

“Good.” He set the pocket recorder on the corner of the big desk.

Dean Usher eyed the tiny machine with its slow-moving tape as if it were a rabid dog, but she didn’t argue. “Both detectives are with the New Orleans Police Department and want to ask you some questions about Courtney.”

“You mean ‘Mary,’ don’t you?” the girl shot back, coming to life a bit. “She was pretty insistent about her name.”

The dean’s irritation was visible in the tightening of the corners of her mouth. “Just answer the questions.”

“What are they?” Looking past layers of mascara, she managed to appear bored to tears.

“First of all, was she dating anyone?”

Ophelia snorted derisively and folded her arms across her chest, thus increasing her cleavage. Which, he figured, was intentional. Montoya had seen dozens of kids with the same kind of attitude as this girl, so hung up on being “bad” and “different” he could read her like a book. “No one, okay?”

“No boyfriend?”

She rolled her expressive eyes, as if she thought him a thick-headed idiot. “Not unless you count Jesus.”

“Ophelia!” the dean warned.

“Ophelia,” the girl corrected without a hint of a smile. “I go by O.”

“How’s that sit with you?”

“How do you think?” she said and Montoya noticed a small red stone pierced into one nostril as well as a necklace that was really a long leather cord that encircled her neck. Hanging from the thin, twisted strap was a tiny glass vial her neck was dark from the liquid inside.

Using the exposed fingers of one gloved hand, she plucked up the end of the necklace and held the small bottle to the light. “Are you looking at this? Wanna know what it is?” She lifted one dark eyebrow in a vampish, sexy come-on. “It’s blood, okay.”

“That’s enough!” the dean said, reaching for the recorder. “Let’s turn this off, at least for the moment.”

Using the exposed fingers of one gloved hand, she plucked up the end of the necklace and held the small bottle to the light. “Are you looking at this? Wanna know what it is?” She lifted one dark eyebrow in a vampish, sexy come-on. “It’s blood, okay.”

“How’d that sit with you?”

Ophelia actually smiled, her glistening purple-colored lips stretching. “Don’t turn it off. I want to get this over with, and for the record, we’re on the go.”

“Wanna know what it is?” She lifted one dark eyebrow in a vampish, sexy come-on. “It’s blood, okay.”

“How’d that sit with you?”

“Do you know if she met anyone?”

Ophelia thought for a moment, then shook her head. “Maybe through the church. I don’t really know. There’s a youth group and then she knew someone, a nun, I think, in an order somewhere . . . hell, what was her name? Melinda or Margaret, maybe. No . . .”

“Maria?” Montoya asked, twisting the vial in her fingers. “She was at least ten beads shy of a full rosary, to me. But if you mean did she seem any different than usual? No. She was the same. Weird and holy as shit as ever.”

“Ophelia,” the dean warned. “It’s O, remember?”

Montoya asked, “What time did she leave that day?”

Ophelia shrugged. “Maybe through the church. I don’t really know. There’s a youth group and then she knew someone, a nun, I think, in an order somewhere . . . hell, what was her name? Melinda or Margaret, maybe. No . . .”

“Yeah! That was it.”

“From Our Lady of Virtues?” He felt cold inside, cold as death.

“Could be. Yeah, maybe.” She chewed on a small black fingernail, then sighed and trained her eyes on Montoya again. “I didn’t pay a whole lot of
attention, y’know. I can’t remember.”

“And as far as you know, she wasn’t dating anyone special,” Montoya asked.

Ophelia let out a puff of exasperation. “I think we covered that. She was married to God, remember? No dates with mortal males. I guess that was out. It wasn’t an open marriage.”

Ignoring the comments, Montoya pressed on, “Did she wear a ring?”

“Oh, yeah. Always. The virgin ring.”

“What?”

“That’s what I call it. It’s what some kids do who are really into the God-thing. They get a ring, or someone important gives it to them, like, I dunno, a parent or something, and they, the girl, she, like promises not to do the wild thing, you know. Have sex? It’s like some kind of a covenant between the girl who gets the ring and God. She swears to remain a virgin until she gets married, or . . . maybe forever in Mary’s case, you know, since she was married to God and all.” Ophelia rolled both palms toward the ceiling. “What’s that all about? Virginity forever? Give me a break.” She shook her head as if riddling it of other more interesting things. “See what I mean? Mary was really, really fuck . . . messed up.”


“Yeah, I guess so,” Ophelia said dismissively. “Once, maybe, twice when she’d overheard part of his show and was”—she held up her hands and made air quotes with her fingers—“‘shocked’, by what he said. Jesus, wasn’t that the whole point?”

Montoya felt a little jolt of electricity, that bit of adrenaline rush he always experienced when he hit on the first glimmerings of a connection. “Did she know him?”

“Nah. I don’t think so.”

“Did she ever call her program?”

Ophelia opened her mouth to answer, then closed it quickly and thought for a second. “I was gonna say ‘no’ for sure, but I don’t know. She never said she called and I never heard her phone in. She wasn’t like that. Didn’t have the balls. Was kinda mousy. But hey, stranger things have happened. She could have phoned, I guess. I just never heard about it.”

“But she did talk about him?”

“Not really. Oh, wait, no . . . she maybe said something to me once, maybe twice. About him needing to find Jesus. But then, she thought everyone did, including me, so I didn’t really think too much about it.”

“But you don’t know if she ever talked to him about it?” Brinkman clarified, and Ophelia nodded.

“Let’s back up a second,” Montoya suggested. “Courtney, Mary, did go out with friends, though? She did things, had a social life?”

“I guess, if you could call it that. But it wasn’t the normal stuff. She didn’t hang out at the local pub or go to concerts or games or anything like that.”

“Isn’t she too young for the pub?” Brinkman asked and Dean Usher tensed another notch.

Ophelia sent Brinkman an exasperated, don’t-play-dumb, we-both-know-about-fake-IDs look. “She usually went to the library after we ate, then she’d jog back, change clothes, and go to the chapel for an hour or two to pray or whatever it was she did there.”

“The chapel on campus?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think she got that far that night,” Ophelia said, her foot no longer bouncing. “She didn’t come back to change like she always does and she wouldn’t have gone to the chapel in her running gear.”

“You keep tabs on her?” Brinkman asked.

And she wouldn’t have gone to the chapel in her running gear.”

“Let me get this straight,” Brinkman asked, getting right to the point.

“Only in the first year of school, and I never did anything to prevent it,” Montoya said, folding his arms over his chest. “She freaked you out?”

“O nodded. “And even of story.”

They questioned her a little more, then, after securing the file from Dean Usher of all of Courtney’s classes, they visited the chapel and met with Dr. Starr, a man in his early thirties. Fit and lean, Starr blinked as if his contacts were ill-fitting. He showed them into his tiny office, a room barely larger than a closet, which was situated on the second floor in one of the massive stone and brick buildings that surrounded the quad. There were two padded folding chairs on one side of his chipped wooden desk and on the other, a rolling executive-type chair upholstered in oxblood leather. “Please, have a seat.”

“Anyway, all that Catholic school, and I never had to go and beat the bushes to find someone to convert. Most of the kids I went to school with at St. Theresa’s were cool about it; kept all the God-stuff to themselves. No way were they out on some kind of mission to save the world. But Mary, she’s like one of those born-agains. Avid. Rabid. All of the above. So, no, I did not keep tabs on her. In fact, I tried to avoid her. She was a real freak-out. I’d already put in a request for a new roommate.”

Montoya glanced at Dean Usher, who nodded.

“Let me get this straight,” Brinkman asked, getting right to the point.

“How well did you know her?” Brinkman asked, getting right to the point.

“Enough to see that she was a talented writer. Her essays were insightful, her observations in class, deep, though theologically narrow.” He smiled and slid a glance at his watch.

“You keep tabs on her?” Brinkman asked, getting right to the point.

“Small class?” Montoya asked. “Enough that in the first few weeks of school you know all of your students?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Ophelia said dismissively. “Once, maybe, twice when she’d overheard part of his show and was”—she held up her hands and made air quotes with her fingers—“‘shocked’, by what he said. Jesus, wasn’t that the whole point?”

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“Of course,” Brinkman said, and Starr looked up at him sharply.

“I assure you, all I did was invite a speaker from a radio station.” He rearranged his pens around the ink blotter covering the wood desk. “You know, I would appreciate your keeping my name out of this investigation as much as possible . . .”

“Of course,” Brinkman said, and Starr looked up at him sharply.

“I assure you, all I did was invite a speaker from a radio station.” He rearranged his pens around the ink blotter covering the wood desk. “You know, I would appreciate your keeping my name out of this investigation as much as possible . . . I’m fairly new here and though I wanted to, you know, create some interest by bringing a radio personality to the classroom, I . . . I, well . . . I don’t need this kind of trouble.”
“We’re investigating a double homicide,” Montoya said, unable to hide his irritation. “We’re not trying to mess with anyone’s reputation, but we have a job to do and we’re going to do it.”

“I understand, but—”

“Have you had trouble with the law before?” Montoya asked and the man paled.

“A little, yes,” Starr admitted, then was quick to add, “It wasn’t anything serious. Some eco-terror stuff. I didn’t do anything, was just involved in a protest, but . . . this is a very conservative school.”

“And they don’t know?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so, no.”

“If you’ve done nothing wrong, then you’ve got nothing to hide,” Montoya said, sick of the theatrics. One of his students had been killed and Starr was worried about his reputation. What a dick.

From that point on, the interview was straightforward, and they didn’t learn anything that would help. If Starr was to be believed, and Montoya wasn’t convinced the guy was being completely honest, the professor had landed in the middle of a murder investigation through circumstance. Starr was obviously relieved when the detectives left.

As they walked across the quad, Brinkman lit up and said, “The jury’s still out on that guy. You see how he played with his pens? Nervous Nellie. Means guilt to me.”

“Of what?”

“Don’t know, but I’d like to run him in for being a pompous ass. Too bad that ain’t a crime.”

For once, Montoya agreed.

They stopped at the chapel, found the priest on duty, Father Stephen, a small, slight man with thick glasses and a hearing aid that he kept adjusting. They learned nothing more than the elderly priest thought of Mary LaBelle as a “breath of fresh air,” or a “good girl,” or any and all the antiquated clichés about young women who had chosen “a path of devotion over a more selfish and material lifestyle.”

All in all, it made Montoya’s blood boil, but he held his tongue and let the tired old man ramble on without learning much. When Luke Gierman’s name came up, Father Stephen clucked his tongue, and didn’t comment.

On the way back to the car, Brinkman muttered, “Jesus, can you believe that guy? Was he born in the sixth century or what?”

Montoya couldn’t help smiling. Maybe Brinkman wasn’t such a jerk after all, but in the car ride home, the older detective reverted to his usual, aggravating ways.

“That roommate was one weird chick,” Brinkman said as Montoya drove through the gates of the university and headed past the grand estates on his way to the freeway. The night had cleared, and he only had to use his windshield wipers sparingly when trucks drove past.

“Ophelia?”

“Oh, wait . . . don’t call her that. She’s ‘O’ and Courtney’s ‘Mary.’ Christ, doesn’t anyone use their given names anymore? Shit. Did I hear the tail end of that conversation right? She wears her own blood in a little teardrop thing hanging around her neck?”

“So she claims.” Montoya eased the Crown Vic toward the freeway heading east.

“Freakoid, that’s what she is.” Brinkman cracked his window, pulled out his pack of cigarettes. He fired up his last Marlboro and crushed the pack in his fist. “Can you imagine her bangin’ Jesus? Probably bite your damned neck just before you came!” He drew hard on the cigarette.

“She’s just a kid. Trying to get a reaction.”

“By wearin’ a fucking thimbleful of blood?” Shooting a stream of smoke from the corner of his mouth, he muttered, “Maybe she did it.”

“Killed Gierman?”

“The girl’s weird.”

“She has an alibi.”

“Yeah, freakoid friends like her.” Smoke drifted out of his nostrils. “They all could have been in on it. A cult of some kind.”

“No evidence that there was anyone there but the two vics and maybe one other person. The guy with the big feet.”

“We don’t know yet. I’m telling you that looney girl hasn’t got all her marbles. That getup. The dark lipstick, the white face, those gloves without fingers.”

“You’ve seen worse, man. A lot worse. You work in New Orleans. Haven’t you been on Bourbon Street?” Where was this coming from?

“Yeah, yeah, but this sick-o crap isn’t in the Quarter. No way, José. It’s at some frickin’ Catholic college.”

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been of the four-footed variety. Skunks, opossums, raccoons, even a rare porcupine wandered these woods.

It was ironic, she thought, because part of the original attraction of this isolated cottage had been the nature that surrounded it. When she’d first viewed the place, she’d noticed a snowy egret and minutes later a deer. She’d been sold. When they’d first bought the house, she’d sat in her grandmother’s rocker by the window, or on the back verandah, and loved to watch the wildlife, the herons and pelicans, the squirrels and deer . . . but that had been before things had gone bad, when she’d still had hope.

Well, she had no room for nostalgia.

The microwave dinged. Using a potholder, she removed the cup and took a tentative sip that nearly scalced her lips.

The phone rang again and she jumped, sloshing some of the hot liquid onto her arm. “Damn it,” she growled, dropping the cup. It shattered, shards of blue ceramic smashing against the floor. Coffee sprayed up against the cabinets and ran on the floorboards.

Hershey, tail between her legs, studied the mess and the damned phone jangled again. Abby yanked up the receiver, read the number on caller ID, and braced herself. “Hi, Dad,” she said, dabling at her sleeve with the potholder and cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder.

“Hi, honey,” Jacques Chastain’s voice was a rasp, a whisper of what it once had been, and she imagined him sitting in his chair, his oxygen tank at his side, plastic tubes running into his nose. Cancer and emphysema had slowly and determinedly taken their tolls upon his body. Surgery had removed part of his throat and chemotherapy had zapped him of his strength. He was better now, improving even, but he would never again be the tall, robust, full-of-life man he’d once been. A mountain climber, a white-water rafter, a tennis player.

No more.

“Oh, . . . well, how’re you doing?” she asked and tried to keep the catch out of her throat.

“Still kickin’, so I guess I’m all right. How about you?”

“Okay.”


“Me, too.” She ignored the red welt on her hand where the coffee had burned.

“I know things weren’t good between you, but . . . I liked him.”

“I did, too. Once.” And she felt betrayed that her father would even say the words, admit to feelings that hurt her. Jacques, always the dreamer, had thought she should have stayed married to her ex-husband, that Luke would have eventually “come to his senses” if she would have just given him another chance. Abby had disagreed. She’d been of the opinion that she should finally cut her losses. She’d tried reconciliation once. It hadn’t worked.

But then, her father had never known about Luke’s fascination and affair with Zoey. And he never would. There was just no reason to ruin Jacques’s relationship with his firstborn. Besides, as they said, it was water under the bridge now. Old, stagnant water.

“How’s Charlene?” she asked, though she’d never been close to her stepmother, a vain woman who was pushing sixty, looked fifty, and claimed to be in her “late forties.” Where nature had failed her, plastic surgeons had come to the rescue, which was no big deal if she would just own up to it. She didn’t.

“Still kickin’, so I guess I’m all right,” she said, repeating his answer.

Her father chuckled.

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These days, who cared? The woman bugged Abby.

“Char’s fine, fine. Keeping busy,” he said and his voice brightened with hope. “As soon as the doctor says it’s okay, she’s going to bring me back home.”


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“A lump tightened Abby’s throat. “And when will that be?”

“Oh, soon, I think.”

It was a lie. They both knew it. But Abby wasn’t going to call her father on it now. Let him hold on to some false hope that he would return home to be with his wife in their rambling house on half an acre in Shreveport. Why take away his dreams? Maybe there was a chance that he would get better. As she talked to him, she crossed her fingers and fought tears.

“Well, I was just checkin’ on you, honey. You let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Sure, Dad. You too.”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” she said and her voice brightened with hope. “As soon as the doctor says it’s okay, he’s going to bring me back home.”

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“Well, I was just checkin’ on you, honey. You let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Sure, Dad. You too.”

“And let me know about that funeral.”

“I’m not the one who’ll be making the arrangements. It’ll probably be one of Luke’s brothers, or his parents.”

“But they’ll call and give you the information,” he said steadfastly, as if they were all still one happy family.

“I’m sure I’ll find out.”

“Good, good. You take care, honey.”

“Will do. You, too, Dad.” She hung up depressed, thinking of her small family and how disconnected it was. Her father was alone in an assisted-care facility. She knew that each day he hoped to return home and probably never would. Zoey was in Seattle, still trying to mend fences, but thousands of miles away. Abby was here, in southern Louisiana in a house that she would soon sell so that she could move away.}

Or run away, her mind taunted.

She mopped the floor and washed down the cabinets before trying to clean the stain from the sleeve of her shirt. Impossible. The skin over her wrist hurt like crazy. She ignored the pain and, with Hershey at her heels, walked into the living room, where Ansel was dozing in his favorite spot above the couch. Abby sat on a corner of the love seat and the dog hopped up onto the cushions without waiting for an invitation.

Abby started to scold the Lab, then thought better of it. She scratched Hershey behind her ears and the dog placed her lower jaw on Abby’s leg, rolling her expressive brown eyes upward to stare at Abby’s face. “You know just how to get to me, don’t you?” Abby said and chuckled. On the nearby couch, Ansel stretched and yawned, showing off needle-sharp teeth and black lips.

Life could be worse, she thought, wondering about taking both animals to the West Coast. She glanced to the fireplace, where the ashes of her last burning were still black and curled in the charred fireplace.


It was too bad that he’d been killed, but the truth of the matter was that he’d been a louse of a husband. She wasn’t buying into the Luke Gierman local town hero.
But then, she knew better.
CHAPTER 8

“Listen to this,” Lynn Zaroster said. She was sitting at her desk in a wide room filled with cubicles where other detectives and uniformed officers were walking, talking, reviewing files, or clicking away at computer keyboards. Lynn, all of twenty-five with an athletic body, mop of short black curls, and enough idealism to right the world on its axis, hit the play button on the tape recorder that was sitting square in the middle of her desk.

Gierman’s voice boomed through the recorder. “. . . my ex claims she gave everything she was keeping for me away, including a family heirloom, which just happens to be a handgun.”

Montoya’s gut tightened. He rested a hip on the edge of Lynn’s desk and listened.

“She says she donated it all, lock, stock, and barrel, so to speak, to a charity.”

“A charity?” Another male voice, registering disbelief.

“That’s the sidekick, sometimes billed as the cohost of the show,” Zaroster clarified. “Maury Taylor.”

Gierman was raging. “Like I’m supposed to believe that any charitable organization would take a gun. Of course it was a lie. But how safe does that make me feel? Knowing that my psychotic ex-wife is literally gunning for me with my father’s sidearm, the weapon he was issued from the police department.”

Psychotic. Interesting term.

Maury Taylor suggested slyly, “You’d better change your address.”

“Or start packin’ my own heat,” Luke confided to all of New Orleans and the surrounding area as the other man in the booth with him laughed.

The program continued in the same vein until Lynn could stand it no longer. She hit the stop button and looked up at Montoya. “What a jackass,” she muttered through clenched teeth. “I’m telling you, if I was his ex-wife, I think I would have killed him and done it on the air.” She made a gun out of her right hand, extending her index finger and cocking her thumb as if it were the hammer. “Ka-pow,” she said, the “gun” kicking back as she pretended to shoot the recorder. “Just blow him the hell away.” She lifted her finger to her lips, blew across it, then faked holstering the “gun.” Frowning sourly, she added, “Good riddance.” She glanced up at Montoya. “And one more lying, cheating son of a bitch of an ex-husband would disappear. How would you like all your dirty laundry aired in public?”

“Maybe that’s why she’s moving.”

“The ex-wife?”

“Uh-huh.”

He heard steps behind him. “Great timing,” Brinkman said. “I just went through Gierman’s papers. Found his will and insurance policies. Guess who’s listed as the only beneficiary?”

The muscles in the back of Montoya’s neck tightened. Just the way Brinkman posed the question boded bad news.

“The ex-wife,” Zaroster said again, her blue eyes narrowing.

“Bingo. Give the little lady a Kewpie doll!” Brinkman’s smile was wide. “You saw the preliminary forensic reports, right?” he said to Montoya. “Looks like there definitely was a third person in the room with Gierman and LaBelle. And the blood spatter and GRS suggests that someone had his or her hand over the girl’s when the trigger was pulled. There were traces of adhesive from some kind of tape around her mouth, wrists, and legs. Bruising, too, suggests that she had been bound at one point. Someone set the whole thing up.”

“Why would Abby Chastain go to the trouble of killing the second victim? Why not just off her ex?” Montoya posed.

“To throw us off,” Brinkman looked at him as if he were thick as cement. “I’m not sayin’ she did such a good job of it, but she’s an amateur, probably doesn’t know about forensics.”

“Everyone who has a television knows about forensics,” Montoya pointed out. He climbed to his feet, so that he was eye-to-eye with Brinkman.

“I’m not talking that CSI junk that’s on TV. I’m talkin’ the real thing,” Brinkman said.

“She doesn’t wear a size twelve men’s shoe.”

“So she had help.”

“How do you know?” Brinkman asked irritably, and Lynn Zaroster lifted an eyebrow, waiting for the explanation, too. “Let’s just say, she knows her ex was set up at All Saints, and finds out who was in the class. Or maybe she thinks he was doin’ this girl.”

“The Virgin Mary?” Montoya said. “The autopsy report came back that her hymen was still intact.” Montoya was still thinking about that one. Courtney LaBelle. Ultrareligious. Went by her middle name.

“Well, the ex-wife, she doesn’t know that, does she?”

“This isn’t a woman’s crime,” Zaroster insisted. “All this staging. Nuh-uh.” She leaned back in her chair. “You know, my uncle teaches up at All Saints. Religion classes. He might have known the victim or some of her friends.”

“We were already up there,” Brinkman pointed out. “She didn’t have many friends. Just a roommate straight out of a coven.”

Zaroster looked quizzically at Montoya.

“She’s a Goth,” Montoya explained.

“Jesus, Brinkman. Have you been to the Quarter lately? Goth is like, I don’t know, real, real tame there,” She laughed. “Maybe I should ask my uncle if he knows of anyone involved in a local coven.”

“Check on vampires, too. This chick, she carries around her own blood on a necklace.”

Again the raised eyebrow. “Beyond Goth,” Zaroster said.

“Over the top,” Montoya admitted, then added, “Yeah, check with your uncle.” The more information, the better.

In the meantime he had his own relative to contact. He’d put a call into his Aunt Maria. So far he hadn’t heard back. But their weren’t exactly high-tech

Montoya snorted and ran a hand through what little hair he had left. “Talkin’ to your uncle, you’ll just be spinnin’ your wheels.”

“Mine to spin,” Zaroster shot back. “As I said, this doesn’t look like a woman’s crime to me.”

“We’re not talking about a woman. We’re talking about a pissed-off ex-wife who is set to inherit a shitload of money.” His smile was oily and smug. He cocked his head toward the exit. “Let’s have a word with the new heiress.”

So this was it. The “official” interview. Abby sat stiff-backed at her dining room table with Montoya and another detective. The first time he’d stopped by, Montoya had come alone, to tell her about Luke’s death. The second time to deliver the dog. On each occasion, he’d asked a few questions, all very casually. After all, she’d been in shock.
But now he was back and this time she sensed the gloves were off. Brinkman, the balding guy with him, didn’t even try to be friendly. His eyes were suspicious, his manner polite but cold, his expression hinting that he knew more about her than she knew herself.

All of which bugged the hell out of her.

He stood by the French doors and stared outside while Montoya sat across from her at the dining table. Separating them was a colorful centerpiece of small pumpkins, gourds, leaves, and candles. It seemed ridiculously festive and out of place, especially with a pocket recorder balanced on the edge of the table. Montoya taking notes, and the generally grim and sober tone of the conversation.

Almost accusatory.

Almost.

She shot a hard look at Detective Brinkman with his soft gut, balding pate, and hard-ass attitude. If Brinkman was what they meant by backup, she thought Montoya was better off flying solo.

That’s the weird thing. No indication that they even talked to each other.

Abby had offered coffee and now three cups sat virtually untouched as the questions kept coming. They’d already gone over all the information she’d shared with Montoya on his last visit and now were venturing into new, uncharted territory.

Abby told herself this was routine, that they were talking to anyone who had known Luke and the girl who had been with him, yet she couldn’t help feeling that she was under suspicion, that the police thought she was somehow involved in the tragedy, which was ludicrous. True, she’d lost all love and most of her respect for Luke Gierman, but she wouldn’t have done anything to kill him and she hoped Montoya, at least, knew it.

She tried not to fidget, but she was on edge, slightly intimidated by the recorder and the necessity of two men to double-team her and ask questions.

She’d thought they were about finished when Brinkman, rotating to face her, no doubt to judge her reaction, asked, “So, did you know that you were still listed as the beneficiary on your ex-husband’s life insurance policy?”

“What?” She was floored. “Life insurance?”

“That’s right. A half a million dollars.” He gave her a fake smile. “Quite a bit of cash.”

“There must be some mistake.”

“Nope. I found the policy in his personal papers and checked with the insurance company.”

“I can’t believe it.” Never in her wildest dreams would she have guessed she might receive another dime from Luke. “I guess he never got around to changing it, eh?” he asked.

“I didn’t even know he had that kind of insurance,” she said honestly. “I mean, yes, when we were first married, we each took out policies, but small ones. Term insurance.”

“So he’s still your beneficiary?”

“No. I don’t like all your insinuations.” She turned her attention to Montoya, who, for this last round, had been mostly silent. “Do you have any other questions?” she asked, and tried to hang on to her cool. Brinkman was just trying to rattle her and she knew it.

“No, that’s about it,” Montoya said.

“Good. Because I was beginning to think I might need a lawyer.”

“Hard to think it was a coincidence,” Brinkman said. “But you”—he gestured in Abby’s direction—“you never met her before.”

“That’s right,” she said evenly. “When I hung up, she glared at both men. “You seem to think that I had something to do with my ex-husband’s murder. The plain damn truth is that I didn’t and I have no idea who did. I’ve never met Courtney LaBelle, have never even heard of her. I don’t know how, or if, she knew my ex-husband. I made it a point to stay out of his business and asked that he do the same for me.”

Brinkman said, “Except you called the station the day of the program where he went off on ex-spouses.”

“No . . . oh, yes, I did call, but I didn’t say a word. Just hung up. I realized Luke was baiting me. He was really, really ticked, Detective. He’d called asking for his things and I had to tell him that I’d given them away, that I’d gotten tired of hanging on to them. After repeated attempts to get him to come and take them, I gave them all away. He was furious. The next day I heard him crucify me on the airwaves, and I did call in, but I didn’t speak to him or anyone else. Didn’t want to say anything I would regret in the long run.”

She was livid now, her cheeks burning, her old rage boiling to the surface. “What the fight with Luke on the phone and the subsequent radio show did was convince me that I needed to get the hell out of Dodge, or in this case, New Orleans. To put as much distance between my ex and myself.”

“Seems like death might do that,” Brinkman observed.

“Are you kidding? The man’s looked upon as a saint now! I’m getting phone calls from reporters day and night. People who want to talk to me to get to know and I quote ‘the real Luke Gierman.’ It’s a joke. All Luke ever wanted was to get his fifteen minutes of fame and maybe stretch them out to a full half an hour. Being killed got him what he couldn’t get while he was alive. Unfortunately, some people still think I’m the link to him.”

Brinkman snorted out a laugh. “Like Priscilla Presley is to Elvis.”

“It’s not quite the same,” she said through her teeth, trying to tamp back her temper. She knew Brinkman was goading her on purpose, hoping for a reaction, but she couldn’t help herself. “I just want to move on. To start over.”
“I thought that’s why you came back here in the first place, to return home and start fresh with the husband. You’re a local girl, right?”

She was instantly wary and looked over at Montoya. He was still seated at the table, watching her. She heard a rush in her ears. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“Grew up here, went to school here, and weren’t your parents Jacques and Faith Chastain?”

“They are my parents. My father’s still alive.” The rush was getting louder.

“And your mother?”

“I’m dead.” She skewered the fatter detective with her eyes. “But you knew that, didn’t you? You’ve just trying to bait me. Why?” She turned her angry gaze on Montoya. “What is this?”

“We found a link between the victims. Courtney LaBelle’s parents worked at Our Lady of Virtues Hospital at the same time your mother was a patient there. Clyde LaBelle was a psychiatrist and Virginia Simmons was a social worker.”

Abby gazed at him in confusion.

Montoya added, “On top of that, Courtney, who went by Mary, was only going to college to appease her parents. She’d already decided to become a nun.”

“I thought the church was struggling for people to join the orders.”

“Courtney LaBelle apparently wanted to join. She’d already talked to the Mother Superior at Our Lady of Virtues. They’re tearing the old hospital down, but the convent stays.”

“This is your ‘link’?” she asked. “The hospital? But Luke had nothing to do with it. He’d never even been there that I know of. We were married after my mother died.”

“Do you remember Courtney’s parents?” Montoya asked.

Abby shook her head. “Virginia . . . Simmons, did you say her name was?”

Montoya nodded. “No.”

“Try as she might, she couldn’t call up an image of the woman, but distorted images of the doctors at the hospital played in her mind. She remembered a tall, nearly gaunt man with a trimmed beard and oversized glasses that magnified his eyes. He always stood a little hunched and he’d reminded Abby of a praying mantis.”

“But Dr. LaBelle, I think . . . he might have treated my mother at one time.” She closed her eyes for a second, bit her lip, tried to roll back the years to the time before the tragedy, when she and her father and Zoey had visited the hospital. She remembered the angel fountain, and making a wish, catching sight of the brightly colored fish swimming beneath thick water lilies. Dragonflies, their colored fish swimming beneath thick water lilies, had flitted over the surface of the pool. Bullfrogs had croaked, squirrels scolding the old calico cat that had wandered the grounds. Older people in wheelchairs had sat on broad verandahs, or in the shade of colorful umbrella-topped tables, or beneath the fragrant branches of huge, gnarled magnolia trees.

There had been staff as well, nurses in crisp uniforms and doctors with white lab coats flapping in the breeze, stethoscopes swinging from their necks, and impatience in their gazes until their eyes landed upon her or Zoey or her father. Then a calm and warmth had appeared, the icy resolve she’d witnessed fading with a wide smile and handshake and words of encouragement.

“She’s doing fine . . . yes, well . . . one episode . . . responding well to the new medication . . . shouldn’t be too much longer . . . we have several different ways to go . . . new treatments every time we turn around . . .”

In her mind’s eye, Abby saw herself as a child, walking up the broad front porch with its terra-cotta pots overflowing with pink and white petunias and yellow black-eyed Susans. Wasps and hornets had buzzed in the eaves, and conversation had whispered across the broad, manicured lawns.

She recalled the huge door swinging open to a yawning darkness within. That’s where everything changed. Even as a young child as she’d stepped foot over the threshold, where the noises of the outside had been cordonned off, and the sunlight only filtered through windows with thick shades or the stained glass on the staircase landing, she’d felt fear. Anxiety. Sensed that something had been very wrong.

The hushed words, the prayers intoned, the soft, but certain sounds of moaning and dismay had crept through long, narrow corridors with dark, walnut wainscoting and hunter green wallpaper. The smells of urine and vomit and human decay had been disguised by antiseptic, bleach, and pine-scented cleanser, but Abby had smelled the odors that had never disappeared, had only been masked.

There had been a doctor who had treated her mother, but his name had been something else, not LaBelle. What was it? Holman? or Hellman? No, Heller! An unpleasant taste rose in the back of her mouth at the thought of him, but she couldn’t remember much. Heller had been just one of the members of the vast staff. She thought hard. LaBelle?

Abby’s insides seemed to crush in on themselves as she remembered Dr. LaBelle hurrying down the stairs, his gaze drifting to Abby, then jetting quickly away. She had a vision of him signing papers on a clipboard, what she thought was a patient’s chart, then looking up from his paperwork to talk to her father. He’d appeared impatient, as if Jacques’s questions about his wife had been asinine, or mundane, or a complete waste of time. Dr. LaBelle had carried with him the air of superiority and the put-upon tone of someone who had tirelessly gone over the same questions time and time again. He’d given the impression that he was far too busy to spend much time with a patient’s family, that he’d had more important things to do. It had been as if Jacques and his two black-eyed Susans had been merely an imposition, one more chore he’d been forced to deal with.

Now, she opened her eyes and felt a chill as cold as December settle in her stomach.

“Yes . . . I remember him now,” she said, a bad taste filling her mouth. It was hard to think of LaBelle as a father, a man who was hurting at the loss of his child.

“But you never met his daughter.”

“No. I didn’t know anything about him. Once my mother died, I never went back to the hospital again, never talked to anyone who had worked there or been a patient.” She met Montoya’s steady gaze. “I tried to forget everything that ever happened there.” She was still grappling with the fact that Luke had been killed with a girl who was connected, even loosely, to Our Lady of Virtues. “Does Dr. LaBelle remember Mom?”

Montoya nodded. “Yeah.”

“No.” Try as she might, she couldn’t call up an image of the woman, but distorted images of the doctors at the hospital played in her mind. She thought hard. LaBelle?

“Maybe it’s you.”

“Maybe the link isn’t the hospital,” he said in a low voice that caused her heart to knock.

“No.” Try as she might, she couldn’t call up an image of the woman, but distorted images of the doctors at the hospital played in her mind. She thought hard. LaBelle?

“Maybe the link isn’t the hospital,” he said in a low voice that caused her heart to knock.

“Maybe it’s you.”

“What do you mean?”

He wasn’t smiling, his thin lips compressed. “Be careful, Abby,” he suggested. “Lock your doors. Set your alarm, if you’ve got one. If you don’t, then
call a security company and have one installed ASAP.” His eyebrows pulled into a single dark line. “Watch your back.”

She felt herself pale.

“You think I’m the link? Me? No.” She shook her head. “That’s crazy, Detective.”

“Just be aware.” He touched her shoulder and the gesture, as the first drops of rain began to fall, seemed somehow intimate. “I’ll call,” he promised and ridiculously she felt her heart surge.

Then he was gone, hunching his shoulders against the rain, climbing behind the wheel of the cruiser and driving off, taillights disappearing at the end of the drive.

Abby shut the door and leaned against it, Montoya’s warning echoing through her mind.

She stood there, frozen, a long time.

The numbers on the door of the room looked funny and uneven, but Abby knew this was her mother’s room: 307. That was it. Mama was always in the room. Abby tried the door, expected it to be locked, but it opened easily and she stepped inside.

“Mom?” she called and saw Faith Chastain at the window. She smiled, beatifically as always.

“Baby.” Her grin widened. “You came.”

But then Faith’s gaze shifted, moving past Abby to the door hanging open and the dark hallway beyond.

There was something in her mother’s gaze. Fear? Then a slight tightening of her neck muscles.


Suddenly her mother’s face changed. Faith’s smile fell away. Panic distorted her features. She started walking backward, her eyes fixed on the open door, her steps taking her closer and closer to the window. “No,” she whispered. “Sweet Jesus, no.”

“Mom?” Abby called again. Dear God, what was happening? “Mom, be careful!”

But apparently her mother couldn’t hear her.

A deep male voice seemed to rain from heaven above. “What are you doing here? Get out!”

Who was this guy? Another visitor? A patient? A doctor? One of the guards?

“Leave, now!”

Heart pounding, nerves stretched to the breaking point, Abby turned to face the man but he wasn’t behind her. The door to the hallway seemed to sag.

She glanced into all of the shadowy corners. Was he concealing himself in the darkness? Or in the closet, where the door was open just a crack? Or in the cedar chest at the foot of her mother’s bed . . . the bed! Was he hiding under it, secreted himself in the darkness beneath the thin mattress? Were those eyes peering out . . . hideous, damning eyes staring at her?

Her throat closed as she tried to see the image, but it came and went, a wraith with stark, cold features, the very face of the devil? Her heart closed as she tried to see the image, but it came and went, a wraith with stark, cold features, the very face of the devil?

She glanced into all of the shadowy corners. Was he concealing himself in the darkness? Or in the closet, where the door was open just a crack? Or in the cedar chest at the foot of her mother’s bed . . . the bed! Was he hiding under it, secreted himself in the darkness beneath the thin mattress? Were those eyes peering out . . . hideous, damning eyes staring at her?

Her heart closed as she tried to see the image, but it came and went, a wraith with stark, cold features, the very face of the devil?

More glass shattered and the floor gave way. Together, they tumbled through the night, tumbling and falling.

“Not your fault,” Faith whispered again and again as they fell into the darkness, straight, Abby was certain, into the yawning gates of hell. “It’s not your fault . . .”

Abby’s eyes flew open.

She sat bolt upright.

She was in bed. Her bed. Hershey beside her burrowing into the covers. Sweat soaked her body despite the paddle fan whirring softly overhead. Heart pounding, head thundering, she gasped as she tried to catch her breath.

The dog lifted her head and yawned as Abby slapped on the bedside lamp. Her small bedroom was suddenly awash with soft illumination, headboard gleaming, shutters closed, her robe tossed carelessly over the foot of her bed where Ansel, curled into a ball of feline comfort, opened one eye.

“Mama?” she whispered, using her little-girl voice and spying her mother’s reflection in the mirror hanging over the mantel. Tall, thin, ravaged, her clothes torn, bruises on her face, blood flowing from her wrists, Faith seemed to wither before her eyes.

The mirror suddenly shattered, distorting her mother’s image into thousands of tiny reflective shards that showered into the room.

Abby flung herself backward, away from the splintering glass, stumbling as she tried to get away from the tiny biting slivers.

“Not your fault,” her mother whispered into her ear.

“Wrong-o, Abby. You can’t blame the man for doing his job, or for being appealing. Nah-uh.”

“Damn!” She tossed off the covers.

She glanced at the clock. Four-sixteen. Almost too early to get up.

Montoya’s warning echoed through her brain. Lock your doors. Set your alarm, if you’ve got one. If you don’t, then call a security company and have one installed ASAP.

“Well, I don’t have one,” she muttered under her breath.

Still agitated, she rolled out of bed and padded barefoot through the house, testing the doors and making certain each window was securely locked.

Hershey followed after her, toenails clicking on the hardwood.

Maybe Montoya had a point. As it was, her security depended upon a friendly Lab who wouldn’t harm a damned flea, a revolver she’d never fired, and her own wits. “You’re doomed, Abby,” she chided herself. She also had stickers glued to the inside of the windows claiming that the house was protected by an alarm system connected to the sheriff ’s department, but that was a lie, one perpetrated by the previous owner. If anyone broke into her house, she was on her own.

“Get a grip,” she told herself and walked to the kitchen, where she grabbed a glass from the cupboard and turned on the faucet. She stared through the window as she first held the glass to her forehead to cool off, then drank half the water. As she swallowed, she saw her pale reflection in the window over
the sink, beyond which the thick darkness of the forest shrouded any and all who might be lurking outside and watching her.

And who would that be, Abby?

Are you getting paranoid now?

Like her?

Like Faith?

Remember, your mother’s disease started as simple distrust and moved quickly into general suspicion and thoughts of persecution. Is that what’s happening to you, too?

“Not!” Angrily, she tossed the last swallow of water into the sink. Like mother, like daughter.

“Oh, shut up!”

Talking to yourself, Abby? Isn’t that what she used to do? Didn’t you see her in the kitchen, mumbling to herself, having conversations with herself?

Isn’t that what customers at the antique shop used to accuse her of?

Leaving the empty glass on the counter, Abby refused to listen to the voice in her head. She was not like her mother.

Still wound up, she knew she couldn’t sleep, so she decided to go to the darkroom and check the prints she’d developed.

More to prove that she wasn’t afraid of living in this house than anything else, she threw on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt, then grabbed her keys. Whistling to the dog, she walked through the kitchen and outside, where the bullfrogs croaked and crickets chirped, and she caught a glimpse of a cloud-shrouded moon. She locked the door behind her, leaving Hershey to guard the house. In ten short steps she was across the walkway and into the little studio.

The darkroom was little more than a closet with water piped to it. Shelves stored paper, bottles, tongs, chemicals, and trays marked for the various stages in the process.

These days she didn’t develop many of her own pictures because she had use of the lab next door to her shop off Jackson Square. For commercial work she primarily used her digital camera and computer. But for her personal black-and-white photos she liked to develop her own film.

It was soothing. Calming. And lately she needed all the soothing and calming she could get.

Several days earlier she’d processed the negatives from the roll of film she’d found in her old 35mm camera, which she’d replaced some time after her divorce from Luke. Curious about what was on the film, she’d clicked off the remainder of the roll the other day, filming Ansel on the verandah with the late autumn light fading through the trees. Later, she’d developed the negatives and created a contact print of the small pictures. She’d left that print inside the darkroom, a cord strung across the darkroom.

Intending to get back to the contact print after it had dried, she’d been derailed by Detective Montoya’s initial visit telling her about Luke’s murder. The news had knocked thoughts of the print from her head. Only now, in the wee hours of the morning, after that horrendous, recurring nightmare, had she remembered. Deep down she suspected that it was more than a need to see what was on the print, that she’d really been looking for an excuse to get out of bed and stay up, that the thought of falling into another fitful sleep might bring back the terrifying nightmare.

“Chicken,” she muttered under her breath, bending to her work.

She removed the contact print from the cord and carried it out of the darkroom to her desk in the main part of the studio. Adjusting a tension lamp for the best viewing, she found her favorite magnifying glass in a desk drawer and began carefully viewing each shot, smiling when she caught images of Ansel sleeping, or hunting, or hiding under the sofa. Slowly she checked each image to see that the subject was clear, the light right.

On the third strip, she gasped. “Oh, God.” She nearly dropped her magnifying glass.

Her dead ex-husband’s face looked up at her.

Smiling easily, showing just a bit of teeth, a hint of a dimple and a sexy twist of his lips, he stared up at her in bold black and white.

“Damn.” How had she missed it when eyeing the negatives?

She took a step back, as if she expected the image to suddenly morph into the man.

She’d forgotten she’d taken the shot, having snapped it before deciding to use her digital camera. Luke had wanted new head shots and she’d agreed to photograph him.

Shortly after that session she’d found out about Connie Hastings. She’d called her lawyer that afternoon, told Luke to move out, erased the images in her digital camera, and started the legal proceedings to end her marriage. She’d forgotten this one final shot.

How long had it been since she’d taken those pictures? Eighteen months ago? Two years? It didn’t matter.

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” she muttered to herself and noted that the picture was good. It captured Luke’s fun-loving, devil-may-care spirit, brought out the boyishness that she’d fallen in love with so many years ago.

And now it was useless.

Unless she wanted to give it to his parents.

Or did she even want to open that can of worms? His mother had never believed her son to be a womanizer, had hinted that a strong woman could hold on to “her man.”

“Forget it,” she said and made an X through the shot. There were other pictures, taken of Hershey, Ansel, and some of the wildlife she’d caught around her house. She would enlarge those later. She’d had enough fun for the night.

She locked the studio behind her and walked the few steps to the house. It was still dark outside, the frogs and insects making noise, dawn not yet streaking the sky.

Hershey was waiting at the door, resting on the mat, her paws supporting her big brown head. “You are a good girl,” Abby whispered, scratching the dog behind her ears and then saying, “I shouldn’t do this, so don’t tell anyone, okay?” Reaching into the pantry, she found a box of dog biscuits and tossed them at her feet.

“Chicken,” she muttered under her breath, bending to her work.

Leaving the empty glass on the counter, Abby refused to listen to the voice in her head. She was not like her mother.

She locked the door behind her and walked the few steps to the house. It was still dark outside, the frogs and insects making noise, dawn not yet streaking the sky.

“Get a grip, Abby. No one’s out there.
No one at all.
The dog growled again and she felt a fear dark as the night.
And with it came a sense of foreboding.
A knowledge that whatever had begun with Luke’s death was far from over.
Jacques. It was awful, so awful.” She shuddered and blinked rapidly against suddenly glistening eyes. “One of the girls had brought a gift. It was Faith’s poor thing, lying all twisted and broken on the concrete.” She quickly made the sign of the cross over her bosom. “The girl was there and the husband . . . though it was so long ago . . .” Her eyes clouded, and though she looked across the courtyard to the groundskeeper busy with his broom, Montoya knew she passed her on the landing as I was coming down. The other daughter and Faith’s husband were still outside, fussing with a present for her, I think . . . out the door to the convent when I heard the sounds of groaning metal and shattering glass. And then the scream. That horrible, soul-jarring shriek of pure of her death,” she said, surprising him that her memory of the tragedy was so clear. “I’ll never forget it. I was the first one at her side. I’d been just starting the path he was interested in: Abby Chastain’s mother. “Let’s go back about twenty years ago. You remember a patient named Faith Chastain?”

“Pedro!” Sister Maria called, smiling and waving upon sight of her nephew. Montoya was already feeling out of place in the foyer of the convent; hearing his confirmation name only made him more so. “Tía Maria.”

“What a surprise!” She slipped her arm through his and hugged him. She’d aged since he’d last seen her, and her once vibrant skin was now lined, her lips thin, her hands spotted, but she still had a strength to her, a vitality that snapped in her dark eyes. “Come on, come on, let’s sit in the garden and you can tell me what it is that brings you here. Though I’d love to think that you were just missing your old aunt, I have the feeling that there’s something more to your visit.” She patted his arm as she teased him, just as she had for as long as he could remember.

She led him through the long hallway, past mullioned and tracery windows that allowed the gloomy day to seep inside. At the bottom of a carved wooden staircase she pushed open a door to a courtyard where flowers in large cement pots had begun to fade. A center fountain sprayed water upward only to cascade down on an angel holding two vessels from which streams of water poured into a large square pool. Water lilies floated on the surface and goldfish swam in the shimmering depths.

Maria sat next to him on a stone bench under the protection of the cloister roof. In her profile he caught a glimpse of the girl she’d once been, a frightened teenager who, he’d overheard from gossiping family members, had found herself pregnant before she was twenty. Whoever had been her lover had remained her secret, guarded for nearly forty years, and what had happened to the baby, Montoya had never learned through the whispers of his mother and her sisters. Maria had never married. Instead she had joined this order of nuns where she’d sought refuge, solace, and, he supposed, forgiveness.

As clouds collected in the sky and the wind buffered the Spanish moss draping from tall oaks rising on the outside of the cloister walls, they shared small talk about the family for a few minutes, catching up on relatives and sharing a laugh about the time when Sister Maria had caught him with his first girlfriend.

“But you’re all grown up now,” she said, angling her head to stare at him, the hem of her whimple falling over her shoulder. “And have you finally forgiven yourself for what happened to your . . . friend?”

“I’m not here about Marta,” he said quietly as a cloud passed over the sun.

“No? Why did you come here, Pedro? Is it something to do with the hospital being torn down?”

“Maria, my name’s Reuben, or sometimes I go by my middle name, Diego. No one calls me Pedro.”

“Just so,” she said with a smile. “And I’m not going to change. It’s a good name, you know. Pedro—Peter—is my favorite of all the saints.” She grinned. “You know what they say about old dogs.”

“I think you could learn new tricks if you wanted to.”

She laughed. “Okay, maybe. Just, please, don’t ask me to dance.”

“It’s a deal.” He relaxed a little. He’d always loved being around her.

She touched his hand with her right one, the one she wore a ring on. “Sometimes . . . well, sometimes I forget.”

This wasn’t a surprise. He’d heard from his own mother that she was worried about her sister’s “confusion” or her “forgetfulness” and there was a question, though no one said it aloud, of Alzheimer’s disease or some other form of dementia.

“She was one of them. Ended up quitting and marrying one of the doctors. Dr. Heller, I think it was.” She frowned at the mention of Heller, as if the very thought of him was distasteful. “No . . . I’ve got that wrong. It was Dr. LaBelle.” Her face registered her surprise as she put two and two together. “Oh, my stars. She’s the mother of Courtney Mary LaBelle, the girl who was killed the other night!”

“That’s right.”

Sadness touched Maria’s eyes. “I heard that she’d been murdered,” she said softly, resting her hands over the black folds of her skirt. “Such a shame. So that’s why you’re here. You’re investigating her murder. I think you should probably talk to Mother Superior. She knows more about Mary becoming a novitiate. I didn’t realize . . . how silly of me . . . I’d heard her name, met her, but it never registered that she was Virginia’s daughter.” She smiled sadly and said, “Sometimes . . . well, sometimes I forget.”

This wasn’t a surprise. He’d heard from his own mother that she was worried about her sister’s “confusion” or her “forgetfulness” and there was a question, though no one said it aloud, of Alzheimer’s disease or some other form of dementia.

Clearing her throat, Maria fingered the cross hanging from her neck and looked up when a gate on the far side of the cloister opened and a tall man with broad shoulders walked inside. He pushed a wheelbarrow while balancing a rake and broom across the empty pan.

“Who’s he?” Montoya asked, eyeing the man who wore dark glasses and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. Around his neck was a headset for listening to music. A long, looping wire attached it to his pocket, where a small CD player or iPod lay hidden.

“This isn’t a surprise. He’s Dr. Hassan.”

“What?”

“He’s the new chief of staff.”

He nodded. “He has a . . . well, a reputation among some people.”

“Ah.”

“Gladly, he snapped, but if he was irritated, he didn’t show it. “Sometimes, Pedro—the er, Reuben, I think the world has become a very ugly place. Then I remember the words of the Father and they are a balm to me. Settle me down. Give me back my faith in humankind. That might be difficult for you, I know, because of what you do for a living.”

“I think the reason?”

She gave his hand a squeeze. “You look like you could use a little of that faith now.”

“Probably,” he said, thinking he could use more than a little, but then faith for him was in short supply these days. He turned the conversation back to the path he was interested in: Abby Chastain’s mother. “Let’s go back about twenty years ago. You remember a patient named Faith Chastain?”

Maria’s face seemed to fold in upon itself. The lines in her forehead deepened. She locked her fingers. “A few days ago was the twentieth anniversary of her death,” she said, surprising him that her memory of the tragedy was so clear. “I’ll never forget it. I was the first one at her side. I’d been just starting out the door to the convent when I heard the sounds of groaning metal and shattering glass. And then the scream. That horrible, soul-jarring shriek of pure terror that had rolled through her throat. “Faith’s family had just pulled up in their car. One of the girls was already inside, perhaps even up the stairs, yes, I think I passed her on the landing as I was coming down. The other daughter and Faith’s husband were still outside, fussing with a present for her, I think . . . though it was so long ago . . .” Her eyes clouded, and though she looked across the courtyard to the groundskeeper busy with his broom, Montoya knew she was seeing something else in her mind’s eye.

Her skin seemed paper thin. Softly, she said, “It was awful. I heard screams and shouts as I was just coming out the front door and there she was . . . poor thing, lying all twisted and broken on the concrete.” She quickly made the sign of the cross over her bosom. “The girl was there and the husband . . . Jacques. It was awful, so awful.” She shuddered and blinked rapidly against suddenly glistening eyes. “One of the girls had brought a gift. It was Faith’s
birthday, that day. A strange thing, you see, to come into this world and leave it on the very same day of the year." She frowned. "And it was the birthday of one of the daughters as well, the younger one, I think, but I’m not really certain."

“What can you tell me about Faith?” Montoya asked.

“About her condition? Not much, I’m afraid. Patient records are confidential.”

“I know, but she’s dead, Tia. Has been for a long time.”

“Nonetheless, I can’t release any information to you.”

“I could get a court order.”

“And if I defy it, would you send me to jail?” She pushed herself upright and walked to the eave of the porch, from which a mossy basket hung. Flowers and fern fronds spilled over the edge. With her thin fingers she began plucking the dead, brown fronds and leaves from the basket.

“Tia Maria, please,” he said, trying to keep the exasperation from his voice. “Help me here, I’m trying to catch Courtney’s killer.”

“By asking questions about Faith Chastain?” She clearly didn’t believe him.

“Everything you say will be held in confidence, you know that.”

“There are laws protecting patients and doctors,” she said, keeping her voice low as she, crushing the dead leaves, walked back to the bench. She bit her lip and let the dry pieces of foliage fall from her fingers. Across the way the gardener kept sweeping, his head down, as if he hadn’t noticed them seated together on the bench.

She sighed. "I guess it’s no secret that Faith was in and out of the hospital several times. Different doctors diagnosed different conditions. Of course, it all happened years ago and the medical profession didn’t know as much about mental illness then as it does today.” She dusted her hands. “I can tell you my opinion: Faith Chastain was a very misunderstood and disturbed woman. That’s not a professional, medical diagnosis, but it’s the truth. As for her disease? Schizophrenia? Possibly. Paranoia? Certainly. It was as if she were fighting some inner demons. I tried to help her through prayer, and hoped she would find some consolation, some peace through God. Did she? I don’t know . . .” Maria’s eyes clouded over.

“What happened to her? What forced her to leap to her death?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure that anyone does. It’s one of the great mysteries surrounding the hospital. But Faith is with God now. She’s no longer plagued and tormented by the demons in her mind. That’s all that matters.”

“Except that Courtney LaBelle and Luke Gierman were murdered and the obvious link between them is that they each had family members who were associated with the hospital.”


“Not him. His ex-wife is Abby Chastain. Faith’s youngest daughter.”

“Oh . . . I didn’t realize.” She looked off into space. “That poor girl. What she saw that day . . .”

“You see why I need your help.”

She glanced at him, touched his cheek with her cool hand. “I appreciate what you’re doing. I know your job is difficult. You often see the gruesome and gritty side of life, but I don’t know anything more that would help you.” She smiled. “I’m sorry, Pedro.” She glanced at her watch and stood. “I have kitchen duty in a few minutes, but it’s been so good to see you again. Give my best to your mother.”

“I will.”

“And here.” She reached into her deep pockets and came up with a rosary, the decades made up of blood-red beads. “Take this.”

“I can’t,” he said.

She folded the rosary into his hand. “Of course you can. Use it, Pedro. Remember the saint you were named for. Capture his strength, his conviction.”

She wrapped her hand around his. “You’ll be surprised at the power of God.”

“‘The power of God’?” he repeated. “Wait a minute, Maria, you’re starting to sound like one of those born-again preachers. You know, like what’s his name?” He snapped his fingers. “Billy Ray Furlough. Isn’t ‘the power of God be with you’ his catchphrase?”

She looked away. “Is it?”

“I think so. You’re scarin’ me, Tia. I’d hate to think that you were straying from the order and starting to watch one of those fire-and-brimstone televangelists.”

“That’s highly unlikely.” But she didn’t laugh as he’d expected and the lines of worry around her eyes seemed to grow deeper rather than lessen as they walked out of the courtyard.

Montoya left the cloister and, with his aunt as his usher, wended his way through the dark, hushed hallways to the parking area. He drove through the gates of the convent but, rather than continue to the main road, turned at the fork in the road and onto what was left of the driveway that had been the entrance to the hospital.

He could get no farther than the fence. The old iron gates were closed, reinforced with a rusted chain and padlock, but he let the cruiser idle as he climbed out. With the damned alarm dinging a gentle reminder that he hadn’t bothered to close the door, he walked to the barricade to peer through the iron bars and toward the decrepit building beyond.

The cement driveway was buckled, weeds growing through the cracks. The lawn was knee high and above it all the brick building rose a full three stories. The roof was missing some tiles and many of the windows had been boarded over. In the center of the edifice, squarely over the front door and above the broken fountain, a dormer with a round, colorful window jutted out from the otherwise unbroken roof line. What had once been a wide veranda with short stone walls flanked one side of the building. It was now covered with vines and brambles, and on the other end antiquated, rusted fire escape stairs began creaking as a gust of wind rattled through.

This was the link between the murder victims?

This tired, dilapidated building?

He thought of Abby as a young girl coming here to visit a mother who was out of touch with reality, a “troubled” woman fighting her own inner “demons,” if Maria’s estimation was to be believed. He considered his own family: poor, but united and, for the most part, happy. Five heliions of brothers and two sisters. His family had struggled against poverty and all the temptations and frustrations lack of money caused, but the family unit had been strong, his parents firm in their faith and determined to make the most of their lives. He’d been encouraged to become an athlete, and his soccer skills and street-smarts had helped him get through college.

All of the class struggles and racial barriers that he’d overcome seemed small in comparison with dealing with a weak-minded mother who had ended up flinging herself from an upper-story window to land on the cement in front of her daughter. What a helluva thing for a kid to witness.
He slid through the corridors of the old asylum, for that’s what it had been no matter what fancy, kind, reverent, or even lofty name the building had been christened. He walked swiftly, running his gloved fingers intimately over the walls, trying to find some peace of mind. But even here, in his sanctuary, as he crept silently through the dark hallways, he felt no comfort, no calm. And the high that he’d experienced, the rush of blood and adrenalin that had come with the killings, was fading.

He moved onward, easing through rooms few remembered and those who did would rather forget. The smell of dust and misuse clung to the walls and settled upon the chipped tile floors. The ceilings leaked but he didn’t care.

This was where he would work.
This would be his home.
This was the place he had always remembered.
This was where he would make things right.

Setting a lantern in the corner of one of the private windowless rooms, he viewed the old equipment that was still hung on hooks in the walls or packed away and forgotten on tilted shelves. Slowly he ran a finger over a strait jacket, its straps dangling almost to the floor as it hung suspended from a rusted hook. The jacket had once been white but had turned gray and smelled of mold. Standing alone in a corner where it had been tucked over a decade before was an electric prod; an instrument of torture that had been outlawed for use on humans, he thought, but used it had once been. He walked to a metal cart parked against the wall. The top was stainless steel, the drawers shallow. He opened the top drawer and spied surgical instruments, no longer shiny and razor sharp, dulled with the passage of time, but organized by size and shape.

He swallowed hard. Remembered. Oh, yes, he remembered.

With a gloved hand he picked up a scalpel and held the slim blade close to his face, so that he could see his own reflection in the slender reflective surface. His eyes narrowed in the dim light and he thought for a moment that he could hear the horrible, tortured screams of those who had once been brought to this room, a place where practices and surgeries no longer deemed ethical had occurred.

He’d seen so many, the out-of-control and loud, all sedated and quietly wheeled into this very room. Remembered each and every patient who had lived through the archaic, Machiavellian practices as well as those who had not. He slipped the scalpel and a few other surgical tools into his backpack.
No one knew that he had survived.
No one knew that he was alive.
And no one cared.
But they would, he thought, feeling a warmth of anticipation steal through him, oh, they would.
The afternoon sky darkened as Montoya made his way back to his cruiser and climbed inside. He executed a quick U-turn to leave the decaying old hospital behind. As he headed toward New Orleans, his cell phone rang.

"Montoya," he said, flipping on his headlights while Bonita Washington updated him on the Gierman-LaBelle murders. The upshot of the conversation was that there were no skin scrapings under Courtney LaBelle’s fingernails, no DNA evidence whatsoever. None of the fingerprints they’d pulled from the scene came up with any matches using AFIS, so either the killer hadn’t left prints or he wasn’t in the database. Courtney LaBelle’s backpack had been recovered, but it was empty and pretty much a bust. No evidence collected from it.

Washington went on to say that the autopsy report showed nothing unexpected. Both victims had died from single gunshot wounds at close range. Both looked as if they’d been bound and gagged, most likely abducted.

“So,” Montoya said as he accelerated onto the freeway and the damned rain started up again. “Aside from the size twelve shoe prints and one short dark hair on the wedding dress, we don’t have a lot to go on.”

“At least it’s something.”

“I guess. The hair’s at the DNA lab now. I’ll let you know when we get the report back. There is one other thing,” she added as he flipped on his wipers.

“The wedding dress that the female victim was wearing had all the tags cut from it but it looks damned expensive to me. The fabric’s imported silk and there’s intricate beadwork along the sleeves and neckline. I’d bet that it’s a designer gown, not that I’m an expert, but I know someone who is. Maybe she can give us a clue as to where it was purchased or who designed it.”

“So we need to know for whom.”

“Yeah?”

“Have we come up with the last people to see our vic’s alive?”

“Yeah . . . well, we think so . . . let me see . . . yeah, okay, I got my notes right here. Let’s start with the Virgin Mary, okay? I followed her steps that night as well as I could, and the last people to see her alive were two girls who were going into the library about the time she was coming out, around nine-thirty. They’re pretty certain and they know it was Mary. One of the girls, Jenny Ray, had her in the same communications class. Jenny, too, caught Gierman’s act at All Saints.”

“Son of a bitch,” Montoya grumbled, glaring at the minivan in front of him. A bumper sticker was slapped onto the back bragging about the owner’s love for the 2nd Amendment.

“Now, before you ask, yes, I saw the bank’s videotape from the ATM. Got him front and center in his workout clothes as he withdrew the cash. It’s legit.”

“So these two, they spied her, dressed in her running gear with her backpack. She was headed across campus toward the dorm.”

“Her usual routine.”

“According to the freakoid roommate, yes.”

“Me neither. It was probably stolen. Maybe bought at a secondhand shop, or on eBay. But it wasn’t Courtney’s. Aside from the whole giving herself to Gierman, it was a very fitting dress for her. The dress is an eight, I’d guess, and made for a taller woman. The hem’s dirty where Courtney stepped on it.”

“Yeah, but probably not six-inch heels . . . this dress looks like it was made to order, especially designed, but not for Courtney LaBelle or anyone her size.”

“Yeah?”

“Son of a bitch,” Montoya grumbled, glaring at the minivan in front of him. A bumper sticker was slapped onto the back bragging about the owner’s kid. “What about word on the street? Anybody see anything? Hear about something big going down?”

“Not much.”

“Someone’s got the nerve to kill a couple of girls, and you can’t even find out anything.”

“I agree with Zaroster—not a woman’s crime,” Montoya said, irritated that Brinkman, as good a cop as he was, was still keeping Abby Chastain in the pool of suspects.

“Yeah . . . well, we think so . . . let me see . . . yeah, okay, I got my notes right here. Let’s start with the Virgin Mary, okay? I followed her steps that night as well as I could, and the last people to see her alive were two girls who were going into the library about the time she was coming out, around nine-thirty. They’re pretty certain and they know it was Mary. One of the girls, Jenny Ray, had her in the same communications class. Jenny, too, caught Gierman’s act at All Saints.”

“Yeah, well, time will tell.”

Frustrated, Montoya hung up. He drove toward the heart of the city, watching the New Orleans skyline come into view, tall buildings knitting into the gray day. But his thoughts were elsewhere, on the damned case. He felt the hours slipping away, as if some unseen clock was ticking, and he realized it was because of Abby with her seductive smile, intelligent eyes, and body that wouldn’t quit. Damn the woman, she was getting to him, something that hadn’t happened in a long while. There had been a time when any beautiful woman had caught his eye, but now . . . oh, hell. His fingers tightened over the steering wheel and he swore under his breath. It was imperative that he remain completely clear-headed and impartial, but Ms. Chastain, the ex-Mrs. Gierman, was definitely clouding his judgment.

He hadn’t liked how Brinkman had pushed her in the interview. For the first time ever, Montoya had considered the interrogation brashness out of line, which was damned ludicrous. He’d hate to count how many times he himself had done his own share of leaning on a witness, shaken ‘em up a bit, waited for the truth to sift out. In Abby’s case, it had been all Montoya could do to hold his tongue, to not step in, to goddamned defend her. And yet, he’d forced himself to go along with Brinkman’s tactics and hated every minute if it. The session had seemed more like an inquisition rather than an interrogation.

But then, his judgment wasn’t as clear as it should be.

He probably should remove himself from the case, but couldn’t stomach the idea of Brinkman running roughshod over Abby again, or teaming up with Bentz when he returned.

He had his thumb on the horn as he entered the city and wound his way to the French Quarter. The city was teeming with people, as usual.
Pedestrians vied with cars, buses, trucks, and mule-drawn carriages while jaywalking through the thick traffic. Even in the rain, street musicians played, their instrument cases open as they hoped for tips, people walked bareheaded or huddled under umbrellas, and the aromas from the local restaurants mingled with those of gasoline and oil.

And still his thoughts were with the case and Abby Chastain. The bottom line, he thought, as he wheeled around a corner, was that whether he wanted to admit it or not, he was attracted to the woman. Physically and even emotionally. The first woman since Marta. And the worst choice possible.

Luke Gierman’s ex, for crying out loud. And if not a suspect in his death, then certainly a person of interest. She had the means and opportunity. And the motive? Over half a million dollars was a good start. The fact that Gierman had publicly ridiculed her didn’t hurt.

But how could she pull a well-planned killing like that in so little time? And what about Courtney LaBelle? No, it couldn’t happen. Even if she had wanted Gierman dead because of what he’d said on the radio, there just wasn’t enough time to hire an assassin, set up the abduction and killings to make it look like what? A lover’s quarrel? Nah, no paid hit-man would do what was done to Gierman and LaBelle, despite the time.

Brinkman’s theory was bullshit. Plain and simple.

“Damn it all to hell,” he growled, catching sight of his reflection in the rearview mirror. He saw his own dark eyes, the purse of his lips, the determination in the set of his jaw. “Stay objective,” he ordered. As the light changed, he drove the final two streets to the station’s parking lot and nosed the cruiser into an open spot. Still irritated with himself, the case, and the whole damned world, he climbed out of the Crown Vic and took his foul mood up the main steps of the station.

Women had always been his problem.

He liked them. And they liked him.

Plain and simple.

His stupid libido had a way of working overtime, or at least it had, until Marta. For a while he’d been a one-woman man, changing his womanizing ways for Ms. Vasquez.

But that was all over now, he thought as he climbed the stairs and walked into the offices of the homicide division. Computer keyboards clattered, phones rang, and there was a sense of urgency in the nest of cubicles and offices that spread out over the floor. Somewhere a copy machine was whirring out pages, and near Zaroster’s desk a handcuffed and shackled suspect, his dreadlocks disheveled to his shoulders, his face unshaven, was talking with great animation. In jeans and a denim jacket with the sleeves cut out, he was speaking fast and jekrily, coming off of something, protesting his innocence vigorously to Zaroster and another detective.

Montoya nearly ran into Brinkman, who was heading out the main doors while slipping his arms through the sleeves of his jacket. “Get a load of that,” he said, sliding a look at the suspect. “Involved in a knitting down off of Esplanade and Royal. Scumbag One here,” he explained, hooking his thumb at his dreadlocks. “Didn’t like the fact that Scumbag Two was gettin’ it on with Scum One’s old lady. Grabbed a kitchen knife and that was the end of Scum Two.” He made a theatrical cross across his neck with his thumb. “Oops. I mean he ‘allegedly’ nearly sliced the guy’s head off in front of the lady, and I use the term ‘lady’ loosely, considering the piece of ass in question.”

“Why isn’t he in an interrogation room?”

“Full to capacity. A shooting on Decatur and an accident on the waterfront. Been a busy day. This scumbag already said his piece in the interrogation room. We’ve got it on tape, but he wanted to make a statement. Waived his right to a lawyer. We needed the space, so . . .” He shrugged as if to say “all in a day’s work.” He then found his pack of Marlboros in his inside jacket pocket, fished one out, jabbing the cigarette into the corner of his mouth.

“You know what I’m wonderin’?” he said, the filter tip bobbing. “Why the hell everyone in the damned Gierman case has another name? Courtney goes by Mary, the freakoid calls herself O . . . what the hell is that all about?”

“Beats me.”

“Hey, even you used to call yourself ‘Diego,’ didn’t ya? When you were out prowlin’ around for the ladies?”

Montoya figured he wouldn’t mention that his aunt referred to him as Pedro in honor of St. Peter. Things were confusing enough as it was.

Brinkman, patting his pants pockets in search of his lighter, started down the stairs. “Oh, by the way. Bentz is back,” he called over his shoulder.

“Lookin’ for you. Guess I’ve been replaced.” He said it without a drip of acrimony. Montoya figured Brinkman didn’t like him either. It was a mutual thing.

As the paunchy detective disappeared down the stairs, Montoya made his way to his cubicle, checked his messages, printed out Bonita Washington’s reports, and placed them into an ever-expanding file. Tucking the file under his arm, he grabbed a couple of cups of coffee from the pot in the small kitchen, then made his way to Bentz’s office.

He didn’t bother to knock, just shouldered open the door that was already ajar and found Rick Bentz seated at his desk, papers strewn in front of him, pictures of his wife and kid shoved to the corners. He looked up as Montoya walked in.

“Here it comes,” Bentz said, leaning back in his chair until it creaked. “Gettin’ back into the swing of things here,” Bentz said, sipping from his cup then hoisting it into the air. “Gracias.” In his mid-forties, he had a blocky body, an ex-football player’s build. At his age, the few gray hairs and lines in his face added character, or so he’d told Montoya time and time again when the younger man had flung him some crap about aging. And he was a helluva cop, despite what had happened in L.A.

“Hell, man, let’s not go there, okay?”

The corners of Bentz’s lips twitched and he stared pointedly at Montoya’s earring. “If you say so.”

“Why isn’t he in an interrogation room?”

“No reason to keep ‘em there if they’re uncooperative.”

“Why the hell did you have to go and get arrested?”

“Lookin’ for you. Guess I’ve been replaced.” He said it without a drip of acrimony. Montoya figured Brinkman didn’t like him either. It was a mutual thing.

Bentz barked out a laugh. “And I don’t suppose you’re talking about my job with the department?”

“Just breakin’ the ice, hombre. Gettin’ back into the swing of things here,” Bentz said, sipping from his cup then hoisting it into the air. “Gracias.” In his mid-forties, he had a blocky body, an ex-football player’s build. At his age, the few gray hairs and lines in his face added character, or so he’d told Montoya time and time again when the younger man had flung him some crap about aging. And he was a helluva cop, despite what had happened in L.A.

“Why isn’t he in an interrogation room?”

“Why aren’t they all?” Bentz asked as phones outside his office jangled and footsteps pounded past his doorway. “I’ll remember that. Christmas is coming.”

He reached into his drawer for a bottle of antacids, popped a few, and motioned toward his computer screen, where images of the Gierman-LaBelle murder
scene were visible. "So how about bringing me up to speed on the double? I've seen the preliminary reports. What else have you got?"

Montoya handed over the file and gave Bentz his version of what he thought had gone down. "We've got no suspects on the one hand," he said, "because no one was holding a grudge, at least not that we can find, against Courtney Mary LaBelle. She was a virgin, for God's sake, planned on joining the order at Our Lady of Virtue's."

Bentz was way ahead of him. "But on the other hand, you've got Luke Gierman, who has every feminist, or PTA member, or socially conscious group wanting him dead because he does a lot of shows on weird sex, odd behavior, pushes the envelope to entertain and offend."

"You got it."

"What about the murder weapon?"

"Given to Courtney by her father for protection and definitely a taboo on campus. I double-checked today. Even her roommate, who goes by the name of O and has an affinity for Goth culture and blood, didn't know about the piece."

"Someone did," Bentz said.

"Yep."

Montoya scratched his goatee. "You know, it's funny. The girl wears a promise ring and vows her virginity to God as some kind of sacred rite and her dad gives her a handgun for protection." He frowned. "I never think of God and weaponry as things that go together."

"You're wrong. Look at the Crusades, or what's happening in the Middle East. Religion and money are the source of all wars."

"So now you're a philosopher."

"A philosopher who just happened to win a fortune at the roulette wheel," Bentz said, flashing his smile as he reached onto the desk for his reading glasses. He thumbed through the file, his eyes scanning the pages. "What else have you got?"

Montoya filled him in on the albibs of just about everyone close to either of the victims, and the lack of evidence found at the crime scene. The forensics department was still separating out tire tracks near the cabin at the woods while also trying to find product matches for the shoe tread of the size twelve prints they'd discovered. Once they found the company who made the shoe, they could find the local distributors and start searching through the names of purchasers of size twelves in the last few years. A tedious process but a necessary one.

He told Bentz about the wedding dress and the single, short dark hair found on the fabric.

"It's at the DNA lab now. Hopefully it'll come back and match up with someone who knows the victims."

Bentz frowned. They both were aware that finding that individual would take a lot of time. DNA samples from all the potential suspects would have to be taken, and if the suspects balked and wouldn't give up a swab voluntarily, court orders would have to be issued.

That was a whole new ball of wax.

As Bentz listened, Montoya explained about the wedding dress, the fact that it might have been custom made, and that the bloodstained gown had already been photographed, the fabric analyzed. Copies of the photos were already being circulated to the local dressmakers and bridal gown shops throughout the state.

Montoya and Bentz talked over the list of suspects—who was close to the victims and who might want them dead. They narrowed the field by who, with the constraints of their schedules, could accost both Gierman and LaBelle and not be seen. Then they talked over where the victims had been abducted and why they'd been chosen.

Neither man believed either of the victims had been a random choice. The murders had been too well planned.

"That's the big question, isn't it? Who would want Courtney LaBelle and Luke Gierman dead?" Bentz said, thinking aloud. He reached into the top drawer of his desk and found a pack of Doublemint gum, pulled out a stick, and offered the pack to Montoya.

"No thanks."

"Still goin' cold turkey?" he asked as he folded his stick of gum and slid it into his mouth.

"Yeah."

"And how is that?"

"Fine," Montoya snapped. No way was he admitting to Bentz that he would have killed for a drag about now.

Bentz lifted an eyebrow in disbelief but didn't comment. "So let's go through this again. The last to see Courtney alive were some kids walking into the library as she was going out, right?"

"Can't find anyone else," Montoya admitted.

"And the last person to see Gierman was Maury Taylor at WSLJ."

Montoya nodded, explained Brinkman's theory and what they found on the bank's ATM tape as Bentz finished his coffee and Montoya's grew cold.

"I know some people over at the radio station. I think I'll poke around over there, see if I can turn up anything Brinkman might have missed." He crushed the paper cup in his fist and tossed it into the trash. "But on the other hand, you've got Luke Gierman, who has every feminist, or PTA member, or socially conscious group wanting him dead because he does a lot of shows on weird sex, odd behavior, pushes the envelope to entertain and offend."

"You agree?"

"Yep."

Bentz leaned back in his chair until it creaked, chewing his gum thoughtfully. "You know how I feel about coincidences," he said and glanced over at the graphic pictures visible on his computer monitor.


"You agree?"

"Yep."

Bentz rubbed his neck and frowned. "A guy who does something like this, he's looking for attention."

Montoya knew where this was going. "You think he'll do it again?"

"I hope to God not."
“I want to come to the funeral,” Zoey insisted from the other side of the continent. “When is it?”

“I don’t know.” Maneuvering through traffic, Abby was holding her cell phone to her ear while driving, and hating it. She was just no good at juggling her attention. Teenagers seemed to buzz in and out of lanes, cell phones to their ears as if the two tasks, talking on the phone and handling a car, were second nature.

It was raining, the sky dark even though it was closing in on noon. At sixty miles per hour, her Honda seemed to skate over the puddles of water that had collected in the low part of the road. Trucks, sending up sprays of water from beneath their massive eighteen wheels, were flying past her as if she were standing still. “Look, I’m in the car now, let me call you back.”

“I’m in the car, too. So what?”

“I can’t concentrate on the conversation and the traffic.”

“Come on. I do it all the time. Piece of cake.”

“Right,” Abby said sarcastically as a silver Toyota from the inside lane cut in front of her and she had to touch the brakes. “Jerk!”

“No? Well, at least not today.”

“Thank God,” Zoey said. “So when are you going to call?”

“When I’m done. Promise.”

“What’s on the agenda? Photo shoot?”

“Yeah,” Abby hedged. It wasn’t really a lie. Not a big one.

But she knew Zoey would hang up and start attacking her if she knew that Abby was on her way to Our Lady of Virtues intending to finally put the past to rest. Yesterday she’d spent the hours with clients or showing the house, or trying to catch up on her sleep. She’d dragged around all day, forcing herself to go on a three-mile run that had left her winded and her muscles aching. After a microwave dinner and a long, hot bubble bath which had included sipping a glass of wine, she’d slept like the dead. No eerie, returning nightmares had woken her up, no images of her dead ex-husband peppering her sleep. She’d awakened surprisingly revitalized and refreshed.

So today, she had planned to take charge of her life. First on the agenda: visiting the hospital. Laying the past to rest. It was time. Long past time. But Zoey wouldn’t understand.

“Okay, just let me know when Luke’s service is.”

“Oo, Zoe—”

“Look, you’ll need some support. Luke’s family isn’t exactly warm and fuzzy. No Ozzie and Harriet, if you know what I mean. Mom, baseball, and apple pie don’t exist in that bunch of loons!”

Abby couldn’t help smiling. Sometimes Zoey could be funny as all get-out; other times she was a royal pain in the backside. “Okay, okay, I’ll let you know.”

“Abby?”

“What?” she asked, checking her rearview and seeing that a semi had nearly attached itself to her bumper.

“Are you okay?”

“What? Yeah, fine,” she snapped, though of course that was a lie. “Just hunky-dory.”

“I mean it. I know Luke’s death is difficult and—”

“Gotta go, this is my exit,” Abby cut in, steamed. She hung up before Zoey asked another damned question. She was tired of the whole overly concerned older sister bit from her nosy sister. Sheesh. She hadn’t heard from Zoey for months and now she called all the time. All the time. It was almost as if her sister had some kind of sick fascination with Luke’s murder, or she needed to be close to the action.

Or she’s just genuinely concerned. How about that, Abby? Get over what happened in Seattle; Zoey is probably just worried. “Fat chance,” Abby muttered and clicked the damned cell phone off. Anyone else who wanted to call her could bloody well leave a message on voice mail. She glanced in her rearview, noticed the semi was still on her ass, and wanted to slow to a crawl so to really piss the guy off. Why didn’t the damned driver just pass her if she was going too slow?

“Idiot,” she muttered, slowing as she eased onto the exit ramp. The eighteen-wheeler gunned it past her, engine roaring, his HOW’S MY DRIVING? sign on his back bumper mocking her. If she had the time, she’d phone the number listed and give whoever answered an earful. As it was, he was already past her; she couldn’t read the 1-800 number anyway.

By memory, she found her way along the twisted road to Our Lady of Virtues. Of course the landscape had changed and where there once had been fields with cattle grazing or forests skirting the road, there were now clusters of houses in little pockets of farmland that developers had found.

Eventually the houses thinned and the terrain was more familiar with the stands of live oak or swamp holly. Her pulse accelerated and her hands were sweaty on the steering wheel. Several times she considered turning around.

When the going gets tough . . .

“Yeah, yeah, Dad, I know,” she muttered under her breath, ignoring an underlying sense of panic that had grown with each mile she’d driven closer to this, the place where her life had changed irrevocably.

She bit her lip.

You can do it.

One final turn and the narrow lane with its weatherbeaten sign was visible. OUR LADY OF VIRTUES. EST. 1843.

Abby’s fingers locked, her knuckles showing white as the wheels of her car rolled into the grounds owned by Our Lady of Virtues convent: thirty acres of lush, valuable gardens, buildings and forests that developers had been salivating over for years. As the suburbs had grown, inching ever closer to the secluded property owned by the order of nuns still living there, the land had doubled, then tripled in worth, even though many of the buildings were decayed and destined for the wrecking ball.

Abby took a fork in the private road and drove to the entrance of the hospital grounds. The gate, of course, was locked, a chain reinforcing the original bolts, a stern, faded NO TRESPASSING sign warning anyone who chose to ignore it that they would be prosecuted “to the full extent of the law.”

“Nice,” she muttered sarcastically. “Real Christian.” She had expected that the entrance would be barred and had formed a backup plan on the drive over. No way would she be thwarted. No way was she going to go through this emotional turmoil more than once. She unzipped her camera from its case, snapped a strap to it, then climbed out of her car. With more than a trace of sadness that she hadn’t expected, she noted the ever-declining state of the grounds and lawns and buildings beyond. Her heart nearly stopped as she viewed the old hospital, a building that had survived the War between the States, two world wars, and all the skirmishes in between. For a hundred and fifty years it had been maintained and kept alive, even flourished, but hadn’t been able to weather the most recent of times.

Everything has a life span.
Everything and everyone dies.

Ignoring her unexpected case of nostalgia, Abby pushed her camera’s lens through the bars and snapped off half a dozen shots in the fading light. As she stared through the viewfinder, she felt an overwhelming sadness at the crumbling mortar, missing bricks, and lengths of plywood nailed over once grand windows. Graffiti sprayed in neon orange was visible under a layer of black that someone, probably hired by the sisters themselves, had used to try and cover up the profanity.

Dear God, what was wrong with her? She hated this place. So why a sense of sorrow or wistful sentimentality for a place she detested, a building on whose grave she should be dancing?

Maybe she was more screwed up than she’d thought.

“Stop,” she ordered. This was getting her nowhere fast.

Abby tried the gates. Felt raindrops in her hair. The old metal rattled and groaned, but the lock and chain held. Of course. She’d expected as much. She could turn back now. At least from a distance she’d seen the spot where her mother had died. Still, she wasn’t satisfied. And this, she promised herself, was her last trip to Our Lady of Virtues. If she couldn’t lay the ghosts to rest today, they were destined to be with her for the rest of her life.

What a depressing thought.

She had to give this her best shot.

She climbed into her Honda again, but instead of taking the fork to the main road, she veered toward the convent. Once near the gates, she turned onto a small access road, to a lower parking lot which, in the past, had been used primarily by maintenance workers.

As a child she’d found this small parking lot while exploring the grounds of the hospital. She and Zoe had discovered the path leading between the hospital and convent long ago, when they’d been grade-schoolers, searching the grounds, chasing butterflies and broken dreams through the sun-dappled woods.

Today the sky was gloomy and gray, another rain shower appearing inevitable if the heavy clouds scudding across the sky were to be believed.

Snagging her camera again from the passenger seat, Abby stepped into the warmth and solitude of the afternoon. She heard birds chirping and the chattering of a squirrel, but no sound of prayers or music or conversation seeped through the thick walls surrounding the convent itself. Good. She didn’t want any of the nuns to witness what she was about to do.

Feeling more than a little nervous that she was not only breaking the law, but perhaps making a mistake of insurmountable emotional proportions, she ignored her second-guesses, locked her car, then walked to the side of one of the garages where mowers and gardening equipment were kept.

A row of twelve-foot-tall arborvitaes flanked a chain fence that loomed over Abby’s head. The fencing curved inward, toward the hospital, making it nearly impossible for anyone to climb out, at least not easily, though Abby knew it could be done if one was agile enough.

At ten, she had been.

Now, though, the task seemed daunting. Could she climb over the fencing, drop ten feet to the ground below, and then somehow climb out again? As a child she was monkey-like in her ability to scale trees, fences, and balconies. Now, nearly twenty-five years later and forty pounds heavier than her prepubescent weight, it would be extremely difficult. But there had been a time when Abby’s agility allowed the nuns and hospital staff to go between the two facilities. She searched the area and found what had once been some kind of entrance, though now the scratchy, moist, unclipped branches of the shrubbery had nearly grown together. She had a fleeting thought of the thorns and bracken surrounding the castle of Sleeping Beauty, a story her mother had read to her often when she was a child. In the bedtime tale the prince had found a way through the horrible, thorny branches to the castle to rescue his princess. Abby didn’t expect anything so grand or romantic. Even if she did manage to get to the hospital and face the past, as her last shrink had advised, what then? Would she feel this great uplifting of her spirit? Would all the problems in her life suddenly and miraculously disappear?

Not hardly. Nonetheless, she pushed through the wall of greenery to the gate and found, to her utter amazement, that it not only was unlocked, but swung open easily.

Why? She hesitated. This was too easy. Something wasn’t right.

Then why and chain the main gates and put up threatening placards, only to leave this one swinging free? That didn’t make any sense . . . unless the nuns still needed access, or the maintenance guys or groundskeepers still checked on the old building. That had to be it.

Why then let the arborvitaes grow out of control? Why not trim them here and keep the path clear? Inside the gate, on the hospital grounds, there was some evidence that others had trod through the grass and bushes . . . some bent blades, and for no reason other than to calm herself, she took a picture of the overgrown path she’d followed as a child.

Her heart raced a little faster as she hurried through the trees where grass, vines, and weeds had nearly obliterated the trail and her shoes squished in the mud. As she walked, she remembered running through this thin forest of bayberry and pine and oak. Zoe had often hidden in the branches of a swamp willow and sometimes the sweet scent of magnolia and jasmine in bloom had scented the air.

She saw herself as if it were an old movie, she and her sister running in sepia tones through this bit of forest, finding a hollowed-out oak and a nest of honeybees, spying jack rabbits and skunk. All the while she’d pretended that Faith Chastain was normal, that all the kids in the private Catholic school they had attended only saw their own mothers every Sunday after church, or on Wednesday evenings in the long hot summers. She’d tried, as a child sprinting toward the looming hospital, to convince herself that her classmates’ mothers, too, suffered from splitting headaches that changed their personalities.

Surely, too, those mothers had spent the long hours of the day in bed with the shades drawn and occupied their nights by pacing the hallways, just as Faith Chastain had. Abby remembered the sporadic times when her mother had lived at home.

Those long nights, lying in her twin bed, Abby had felt the breath of wind stir through the screened windows, seen the sweep of the paddle fan mounted on the ceiling. She’d listened to the sound of traffic, watched as the splash of headlights traversed around the pine-paneled walls of the room as cars passed, heard the lonely sound of a solitary owl while her sister, in the next bed, slept blissfully unaware of their mother’s ritual.

But Abby had known.

She had watched the slim crack of light beneath the doorway, seen the shadows moving slowly back and forth as Faith Chastain had paced the halls; she’d smelled the scent of smoke from her mother’s ever-lit cigarette.

It had been on one of those nights, when Jacques, a lumber broker, had been out of town, when Abby had been awake, listening to the hum of the crickets and cicadas while watching the shadow pass under the doorway, that she felt it . . . a strangeness in the air.

Now, as she hurried through the thickets surrounding the convent, she wondered why her mother was going to take a bath at three in the morning.

Abby had lain in bed, waiting, though she didn’t know for what, all the while listening as the water ran and ran and ran.

Finally, she’d been unable to lie still another second and had thrown back the thin sheets. By the time she’d left her room and stood in the hallway, water was seeping from under the bathroom door, running along the old plank floors in slow rivulets tinged red . . .

Now, as she hurried through the thickets surrounding the convent, Abby’s heart tightened and raindrops slid beneath her collar. In the back of her mind, she always thought her mother’s first stay at the hospital had been her fault . . . that if she’d been braver, if she’d gotten out of bed earlier, if she’d somehow stopped Faith Chastain from locking herself inside that bathroom, some of the tragedy that had become her mother’s life might have been averted.

I forgive you . . . Abby Hannah, I forgive you . . . Her mother’s voice, soft and whispery as it always was in the dream, slipped through her mind. She felt the first cool drops of rain fall from the sky and she stepped around a weed-infested hedgerow to look at the back side of the hospital.

How many times had she stood in this very spot, anxious as she’d slipped away from the shadows of the woods, hoping beyond hope that none of the
nuns, especially stern-faced Sister Rebecca or ever-exasperated Sister Madeline, would catch her?

Again she lifted her camera, took pictures of this side of the old building, the willow tree and the long, open verandah where now only one forgotten chaise, rusted and broken, lay on the splintered flagstones.

Creeaaaaaakk!

Looking up, she spied a gutter, bleeding rust and heavy with years of debris, leaning away from the roof, the metal being pushed from its eave by the wind. A gargoyles, eyes bulging over its spillway of an open mouth, glared down at her.

God, how these stony, medieval monsters had scared her as a child. She'd been certain any bird or squirrel foolish enough to step close to that gaping, dark mouth would be snagged and swallowed by the evil creature.

Of course, it had all been her childish imagination, she thought now as she walked to the front of the building.

She glanced to the upper floors and the third-story window poised directly over this spot. That window, shattered when Faith had flung herself through the old panes, had been replaced and was one of the few sheets of glass still intact. No bullet hole, no cracks, no graying plywood tucked over it.

Once Faith Chastain had fallen through, the window had been replaced quickly and now remained. Abby turned her camera to the window, and stepped back toward the end of the drive to make certain that the entire building and the fountain were included in the picture. Shadows moved and shifted, the dark reflection of the surrounding trees in the gloomy light. For a heartbeat, looking through the camera, focusing and snapping the first shot, she thought she saw a dark figure standing in the window of her mother’s room. She lowered the camera and studied the panels of glass with the circular, stained wheel of glass above them, but no one stood behind the panes.

“Oh, of course,” she growled at herself. She was determined not to allow her own wild imagination to take hold of her. Yes, this was a depressing place, the very spot where her mother had lost her life, the building where Abby’s life had shifted forever, but it was time to deal with it.

Setting her jaw, she forced her heart rate to slow and clicked off several shots of Faith’s room, getting lost in the play of shadows, shapes, and images she saw through the viewfinder. She took pictures of the hospital as a whole, then separate shots of the component parts, the lifeless fountain with its mossy weeping angels, the skeletal remains of the ancient fire escape, and the large, looming front door where she had raced, eager to see her mother, her heart pumping with excitement as she was anxious to confide her latest crush to Faith on their shared birthday . . .

“Or had she?”

Her brow knitted as she thought, the years tumbling backward. Was that what had happened? Or just the way she wanted to remember that day?

The rain increased as she stopped at the very spot in the cracked, wet concrete where her mother’s body had landed with a heart-stopping and sickening thud.

“Oh, Mama,” she whispered.

Her throat closed in on itself. She felt slightly ill remembering the horrifying scream and turning to spy her mother land, head cracking, bones breaking, blood pooling a thick, dark red.

“Jesus,” she whispered now and sketched the sign of the cross defiantly over her chest. She knew the exact spot where her mother had landed, and when she closed her eyes she still heard the rush of noise, her father’s shout, the cries and thunder of footsteps as others rushed to help.

Too little, too late.

Even the shriek of the ambulance’s sires was just useless loud noise, part of the cacophony that seemed to announce to the world that Faith Chastain had finally escaped from her pain.

Abby backed up, away from the precise point, where, if she let herself, she could still see the blood flowing, her mother’s face, turned at an impossible angle staring up at her . . . as if from a far distance . . . as if Abby were on a mountaintop. Her mind, as always, played tricks on her as she, still staring at that horrid place, forced herself backward.

Her heels hit the steps leading to the main door. Abby tore her gaze away from the area where Faith had lost her life. There was no use standing in the rain, reliving the tragedy. If seeing that precise slab of concrete had been the point, she’d accomplished it. She turned and mounted the stairs at the door, she reached for the handle, then pushed with her shoulders.

Locked.

Of course.

The clouds were beginning to open up, raindrops bouncing on the ground, the sky as dark as twilight. She should just go back, call it a day, hope that just being here was enough to satisfy whatever psychological and emotional need was necessary to find the closure of her mother’s death. But as she glanced up toward the window of Faith’s room, she knew she would always have questions, be plagued with doubts if she didn’t find her way into the bedroom where her mother’s madness had escalated to suicide.

And she was here, wasn’t she?

She walked the perimeter of the building, testing doors and finding them all locked, the French doors to the verandah, the kitchen door where deliveries had been made, the two opposing halfway doors beneath the old fire escapes . . . all locked tight.

She was about to give up, deciding the Fates were against her, when, at the back of the building near a service parking area, she noticed an unlatched window, one where the glass hadn’t yet been shattered. Maybe the Fates had changed their collective mind.

She stepped onto the crumbling stoop leading to the kitchen and tried pushing the window upward. It gave slightly. Slinging her camera to her back, she pressed closer and, using two hands, shoved hard. Nothing happened. It didn’t even budge. “Come on, come on,” she urged, wondering how many laws she was breaking and, ludicrously, imagining herself explaining to Detective Montoya why she was breaking and entering.

“At least I’m not a burglar,” she thought, as she pressed closer and, using two hands, shoved hard. Nothing happened. It didn’t even budge. “Come on, come on,” she urged, wondering how many laws she was breaking and, ludicrously, imagining herself explaining to Detective Montoya why she was breaking and entering.

But as she glanced up toward the window of Faith’s room, she knew she would always have questions, be plagued with doubts if she didn’t find her way into the bedroom where her mother’s madness had escalated to suicide.

She pulled the handle, then pushed with her shoulders. Nothing. She gave it another try, using all her might. It still didn’t budge. She was about to give up, deciding the Fates were against her, when, at the back of the building near a service parking area, she noticed an unlatched window, one where the glass hadn’t yet been shattered.

Maybe the Fates had changed their collective mind.

She stepped onto the crumbling stoop leading to the kitchen and tried pushing the window upward. It gave slightly. Slinging her camera to her back, she pressed closer and, using two hands, shoved hard. Nothing happened. It didn’t even budge. “Come on, come on,” she urged, wondering how many laws she was breaking and, ludicrously, imagining herself explaining to Detective Montoya why she was breaking and entering. That wasn’t a pleasant thought.

After taking several deep breaths, she tried again. This time she strained so hard, the muscles in the backs of her arms burned and her shoulders and upper back began to ache. She gritted her teeth. Pressed harder.

Suddenly, without warning, the window slid upward and Abby nearly tumbled off the stoop. Stale air escaped and she had another moment’s indecision before thinking, In for a penny, in for a pound. Using the strap on the camera to lower it, she set the Minolta inside. Now it was her turn. With more agility than she had expected, she pushed herself up and through, using her hands to catch herself as she landed on the dusty floor of what had once been a dining hall. It was empty now, the three chandeliers dark, the floor stained from water that had oozed through the window, down the wall, and into the cracks between the once-glossy planks.

It was dark inside, not only from the gloomy day but because she didn’t dare try any lights. She suspected the electricity had been turned off a decade earlier. The few windows that were still intact let in some natural light, but as she crept through the old dining area, she tried to be as quiet as possible, as if in making any noise, she might alert whatever ghosts and spirits abided here.

Which was just plain stupid.

She didn’t believe in ghosts.

So then why not run through the old hallways shouting? Did she think someone could hear her? Who? The nuns cloistered in their convent a quarter of a mile away? Did she feel the need to remain quiet out of reverence for the dead or fear? Of what? Possibly scaring up a snake that had taken up residence and now was coiled in some dark corner? Seeing a rat streak across the dust doing her heart a mercy.

Or simply because she knew she shouldn’t be here. Not only was she trespassing, but if she was honest with herself, she was afraid. Of what she would find.

Within herself.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going . . . Her father’s words again echoed through her mind, replaying like a mantra as she stepped from the dining room and through a butler’s pantry that separated the eating area from the kitchen. She remembered being here as a child, the gleaming glassware that guests and patients, if they could be trusted, were allowed to use.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going . . .
The kitchen was dark and dingy, the old stove covered with grease and a decade of dirt and, she assumed from the droppings she spied, home to any manner of rodents that had obviously scampered across the counters and into the drains. She tried the door to the basement, but it was locked solidly and she felt instant relief that there was at least one dark place she didn’t feel compelled to explore.

*Enough with the facing of demons here in the kitchen,* she thought and made her way to the foyer where, she remembered, an ornate grandfather’s clock had stood at the base of the stairs. The spot it had occupied was now empty, the reception desk unmanned and forgotten, the offices behind like small, airless tombs.

The parlor, with its high ceilings, had once seemed elegant and grand. It now reeked of decay and disrepair, its faded velvet curtains tattered and torn, the one remaining chair once a deep maroon now a dull orange, its batting spewing out of the cushions and littering the floor.

The whole damned place was depressing. If she were supposed to find any great epiphany of the soul here, it had yet to arrive.

*But then you haven’t visited her room yet, have you, Abby? Nothing else matters, does it? You need to see the room where she lived, the room where she spent her sleepless nights, the room where she finally cast herself through the glass and gave up her life.*

“Damn it,” she whispered and walked to the stairs. She climbed each riser slowly, as she had as a child, when Sister Rebecca had insisted that there was to be “No running. No jumping. No scampering about like wild hooligans.”

At the second floor she stopped and looked down the dark corridor. All of the doors to the private rooms were open, sagging against old hinges.

She grabbed the rail, started toward the third floor, and stopped when she thought she heard something—footsteps? —on the floor below? Or above?

Holding her breath, she waited. Listened. But there was no sound save for the rain falling against the roof and water running through the gutters. The rest of the old hospital remained silent aside from the sound of her own footsteps creaking up the staircase.

*Get hold of yourself,* she silently admonished, her heart hammering as, at the final landing, she looked at the stained-glass window and wondered how it had survived. Why hadn’t it been sold? What had saved it from being broken? She remembered staring at the image of the Madonna when bright summer sunlight had streamed through the colored glass, illuminating Mary’s golden halo so that it seemed to glow as if touched by heaven. Now it was dim and dark, no sparkling reds, blues, or greens on this dreary day.

She turned and walked up the final few stairs to the third-floor hallway and froze, her heart squeezing painfully. Every door was shut, not one open as they had been on the floor below.

“How odd,” she whispered and wished she’d had the presence of mind to bring her flashlight with her instead of leaving it in the glove box of the car.

*Just do this. Get it over with.* She stepped into the hallway and walked directly to the door of her mother’s room. The numbers 307 were intact, and only when she slid a glance at the room next door did she find it strange. The neighboring room had no numbers on its door at all, and the one across the hall was missing the zero, so it looked like Room 36 with a gap between the digits.

*So what? Big deal.*

*Go on, Abby, quit being such a wimp! What do you expect to find in there anyway? Mentally pumping herself up, she reached for the handle and tried to turn the knob. It didn’t move.*

She tried again. The door was probably just stuck, swollen against its frame from years of neglect. She tried again. The knob didn’t turn. It wasn’t the door that wasn’t moving; the lock had been turned.

“Yes.”

She rationalized that there must be some valuables left on this floor, so the rooms had been locked. The stained-glass window was proof enough of that.

*Obviously whoever was cleaning out this old place had . . . Again she heard a noise, a shuffling, and her heart lurched painfully. Was someone walking downstairs? Slipping through a door? Shunting it behind her? Oh, God.*

She melted against the neighboring door.

It gave way.

Opened under her weight.

She fell, stumbling loudly into the empty room. A gasp flew from her lungs as she caught herself. Over the knocking of her heart, she strained to hear any noises in this huge, nearly empty building. She heard nothing.

Or did she?

She licked her lips. Was there the slightest click of a door latch?

Her hair nearly stood on end.

*It’s your damned nerves, Abby. Nothing more. You’re paranoid.*

Just like she was!

A tiny sound of protest formed in her mouth, but she didn’t let it out. She wasn’t paranoid; wasn’t falling to pieces . . . no way! She was mentally strong.

Had to be. *When the going gets tough . . . Click.*

Abby’s heart thumped hard and fast. Was that another muffled noise? The nearly indecipherable sound of a lock turning?

She wanted to call out, but didn’t. Instead she shriveled into the shadows, fear pumping in her eardrums.

*This is stupid, Abby! Pull yourself together. Do not let the settling and creaking of a condemned building scare you out of your wits! She forced her heart rate to slow and sagged against the wall, closing her eyes. She heard nothing. Her imagination had gotten the better of her. Again.*

*Letting out a long breath, she fought the fear spreading through her, convinced herself that she was alone.*

*Do this now and get it over with! Do it now!*

Stiffening her back, she moved to the door of her mother’s room again. She rattled the damned knob and pushed her body against the panels.

It didn’t budge an inch.

She walked to another room in the hallway and turned the handle. The door swung open as easily as if it had been freshly oiled to another empty, dirty, forgotten room. She tried another one, on the opposite side of the hallway, and, too, opened without any effort on her part. So did the next.

But 307 was locked tight. The only room on the floor. Her mother’s bedroom. The supposedly safe haven from which Faith had flung herself to her death...

Or had it really happened as she’d believed all these years?

In her mind’s eye Abby observed her mother at the window . . . Had Faith been looking outside, making the sign of the cross over her thin chest, mentally preparing to leap through the glass?

That’s what she’d always thought, but in her dreams Faith, frightened and shivering, was always staring away from the window and toward the open door . . .

Thump, thump, thump!

*Footsteps!*

This time Abby heard the tread clearly. Someone was mounting the steps. Her lungs constricted and she gazed around in panic. Quickly, she shrank into the shadows, slowly sliding back into the room across the hall from 307.
Who would be here now?
Had someone seen her?
Or did they have their own reasons for entering this decaying asylum? For climbing to the third floor?
But why?
The entire building looked as if it hadn’t been entered in years. She was drawing in shallow breaths, trying to make no noise whatsoever, hoping desperately that whoever was coming hadn’t heard her, didn’t know she was hiding.
Still the footsteps echoed through the stairwell.
Closer.
Almost to the landing.
Oh, God. She swallowed hard and prayed.
Steadily the tread neared, the floorboards of the upper hallway groaning in protest.
She closed her eyes. Hardly dared to breathe.
Nearer.
Oh, sweet Jesus!
The footsteps stopped.
She opened her eyes and nearly screamed.
Looming in the shadows was a dark, bulky figure.
Abby gasped and stepped backward. 

“You’re the girl, aren’t you?” a soft voice demanded. “Faith’s daughter.” The figure moved closer, out of the shadows and Abby nearly collapsed as she saw the old nun’s face, a countenance she thought she recognized.

“Yes . . .

“What are you doing here?”

I wish I knew! “I was told, by my shrink, that I should come back here. You know, to resolve some issues I have.”

“Did he also tell you to trespass and break in?”

Heat climbed up her neck. “That was my idea.”

“You could have asked.”

“Would anyone have let me in?”

The nun smiled and shook her head sharply. “Probably not. I’m Sister Maria, by the way.”

Sister Maria. Of course. Abby stared at the old nun in the dark shadows and imagined how she would have appeared twenty years earlier with smoother skin, a healthy glow, more robust . . .

“I thought I saw someone heading over here, so I followed,” Sister Maria went on. “I’m just not as quick as I used to be, so it took me a while to catch up to you.” She cocked her head to one side. “So, then, Faith, I assume you found what you needed?”

“I’m Abby. Faith was my mother.”

“Oh . . . yes, of course. That’s what I meant.” She blinked as if to clear her mind.

Abby thought about all the hours of prayer, the sleepless nights when she’d cried and reached out to God, especially right after her mother’s accident. Abby thought about all the hours of prayer, the sleepless nights when she’d cried and reached out to God, especially right after her mother’s accident. asks the old nun how long ago she was in the hospital.

Abby cleared her throat. Forced a smile.

“Really?”

“But the doors to the room on the floor below were open.”

“Isn’t that odd,” Sister Maria said distractedly, seemingly unconcerned as she tested the door. It didn’t open. “Oh, come on.” She tried again. The door held fast. “Well, I’ll be.” She gave it one more shot before giving up. “You’re absolutely right,” she finally admitted. “It’s definitely locked. How strange.”

She sighed and looked to the side.

In Sister Maria’s profile Abby witnessed a younger woman, hurrying past, skirts billowing as twilight descended and Abby passed her on the stairs . . .

“You were there,” she said, realizing for the first time that this was the nun who had rushed to her mother’s side, felt for a nonexistent pulse in Faith’s throat. “The day my mother died, I saw you.”

“I worked here at the hospital, then. Yes.”

“I was visiting . . . it was her birthday,” Abby said. “I—I was bringing a gift to her.”

The old nun frowned. “You?” She focused on Abby’s hair, then her eyes. Confusion drew Sister Maria’s eyebrows into one. “That was you with the gold box and pink ribbon?”

“Yeah. It was my birthday, too,” Abby said, feeling the old sadness running through her. “I’d found this afghan in a little shop on Toulouse Street. It was white with a silver thread running through it and I knew my mother would love it . . .” Fragmented images of that long-ago night cut through her mind. The package. The gauzy ribbon. The blood-freezing scream. Her mother’s body lying broken by the fountain as she stared down at her . . .

“I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. I thought it was your sister, the girl with the black hair, who was carrying the box that day.” The nun was clearly puzzled. “Hadn’t you run by me on the stairs, near the landing? You were racing up as I was hurrying down, on my way to the convent. I’m sure of it.”

“No.” Abby shook her head, but felt something dark and insidious run through her mind. “That’s impossible.” Or was it? And yet she repeated her story, the one she’d been so certain was true. “I’d just gotten out of the car when it happened.” Goose bumps crawled across her skin.

As if she’d had a premonition.

But of what?

Why was the old nun staring at her so hard? What was with the unspoken accusations Abby suddenly felt simmering between them? As if she were lying. About what? The gift box? But that was silly. Abby remembered holding the bulky thing and fighting with Zoey in the car about who would actually get to carry it inside. As if it mattered. Abby had been impatient, her mind running forward to the upcoming dance and Trey Hilliard and . . . that was right, wasn’t it?

The nun was confused, that was all. Sister Maria had made a mistake.

And yet there was a sharpness to the woman’s dark eyes, as if she understood Abby more than she did herself. Abby cleared her throat. Forced a smile.

“So you knew her, my mother?”

“I didn’t know her well,” Sister Maria answered cautiously, “I’m not certain anyone really did.” She paused and looked at the door to Room 307. “If it’s answers you’re seeking, I’m afraid you’re not going to find them in here. At least not today.” Sighing, she touched Abby on the arm. “Your mother had a strong faith, child. Perhaps instead of searching through old hallways and dark rooms, you should look to God.” She motioned to the murky hallway. “This isn’t where you’ll find what you seek. You need to look inside yourself, into your heart. The Father will help you.”

Abby thought about all the hours of prayer, the sleepless nights when she’d cried and reached out to God, especially right after her mother’s accident. Where had He been then? She’d searched her heart, her mind, her soul, and all she had come up with was an overwhelming sense of despair laced with more than a tinge of guilt.

“Come now, there’s nothing more for you here. And besides, this building has been condemned.”

By whom?

The State of Louisiana?

Or the tormented souls who had resided here?

Abby hadn’t come this far to be thwarted. “I know, Sister, but I really need to visit my mother’s room before the wrecking ball destroys it forever. It’s part of my personal quest, my attempt at moving on with my life, of getting some closure about my mother’s death.” The nun hesitated. “I’ve prayed, Sister Maria, believe me. And I think God has led me here.”

“I wish I knew!” she said, realizing for the first time that this was the nun who had rushed to her mother’s side, felt for a nonexistent pulse in Faith’s throat. “The day my mother died, I saw you.”

“I was visiting . . . it was her birthday,” Abby said. “I—I was bringing a gift to her.”

The old nun frowned. “You?” She focused on Abby’s hair, then her eyes. Confusion drew Sister Maria’s eyebrows into one. “That was you with the gold box and pink ribbon?”

“Yeah. It was my birthday, too,” Abby said, feeling the old sadness running through her. “I’d found this afghan in a little shop on Toulouse Street. It was white with a silver thread running through it and I knew my mother would love it . . .” Fragmented images of that long-ago night cut through her mind. The package. The gauzy ribbon. The blood-freezing scream. Her mother’s body lying broken by the fountain as she stared down at her . . .

“I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. I thought it was your sister, the girl with the black hair, who was carrying the box that day.” The nun was clearly puzzled. “Hadn’t you run by me on the stairs, near the landing? You were racing up as I was hurrying down, on my way to the convent. I’m sure of it.”

“No.” Abby shook her head, but felt something dark and insidious run through her mind. “That’s impossible.” Or was it? And yet she repeated her story, the one she’d been so certain was true. “I’d just gotten out of the car when it happened.” Goose bumps crawled across her skin.

As if she’d had a premonition.

But of what?

Why was the old nun staring at her so hard? What was with the unspoken accusations Abby suddenly felt simmering between them? As if she were lying. About what? The gift box? But that was silly. Abby remembered holding the bulky thing and fighting with Zoey in the car about who would actually get to carry it inside. As if it mattered. Abby had been impatient, her mind running forward to the upcoming dance and Trey Hilliard and . . . that was right, wasn’t it?

The nun was confused, that was all. Sister Maria had made a mistake.

And yet there was a sharpness to the woman’s dark eyes, as if she understood Abby more than she did herself. Abby cleared her throat. Forced a smile.

“So you knew her, my mother?”

“I didn’t know her well,” Sister Maria answered cautiously, “I’m not certain anyone really did.” She paused and looked at the door to Room 307. “If it’s answers you’re seeking, I’m afraid you’re not going to find them in here. At least not today.” Sighing, she touched Abby on the arm. “Your mother had a strong faith, child. Perhaps instead of searching through old hallways and dark rooms, you should look to God.” She motioned to the murky hallway. “This isn’t where you’ll find what you seek. You need to look inside yourself, into your heart. The Father will help you.”

Abby thought about all the hours of prayer, the sleepless nights when she’d cried and reached out to God, especially right after her mother’s accident. Where had He been then? She’d searched her heart, her mind, her soul, and all she had come up with was an overwhelming sense of despair laced with more than a tinge of guilt.

“Come now, there’s nothing more for you here. And besides, this building has been condemned.”

By whom?

The State of Louisiana?

Or the tormented souls who had resided here?

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Maria smiled and shook her head sharply. “Probably not. I’m Sister Maria, by the way.”

Sister Maria. Of course. Abby stared at the old nun in the dark shadows and imagined how she would have appeared twenty years earlier with smoother skin, a healthy glow, more robust . . .

“I thought I saw someone heading over here, so I followed,” Sister Maria went on. “I’m just not as quick as I used to be, so it took me a while to catch up to you.” She cocked her head to one side. “So, then, Faith, I assume you found what you needed?”

“I’m Abby. Faith was my mother.”

“Oh . . . yes, of course. That’s what I meant.” She blinked as if to clear her mind.

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Maria stared at her, sizing her up. “All right, then,” she said slowly as if she wasn’t quite sure what to believe. “I’ll see what I can do.”
“With this assurance, Abby allowed the older woman to shepherd her toward the stairs.

“We have a caretaker for the grounds,” Sister Maria said. “I’ll ask him to come and check the door, see if he can find a way to open it.” She offered
Abby a kind, understanding smile that Abby thought was odd. How could this woman know anything about her? Or was it just her communion with the
Lord that made her seem so calm, serene, and understanding? “It may take some time, Mr. DuLoc has a lot of work taking care of the convent, but he’s a
very resourceful man. I’m sure he’ll be able to help.” They had descended to the second floor and the old woman stopped to squat down the darkened
hallway. “I thought you said all these doors were open?”

Abby couldn’t move a muscle. She looked down the corridor and her heartbeat deafened her ears. Every door was closed.

Shut tight.

“No! That’s false,” Sister Maria thought aloud and walked to the first door. “Hello? Is anyone here?” she called out, obviously irritated.

“Who would be here?”

“I don’t know, but let’s find out.”

“No, wait!” Abby stepped forward, not certain who or what she thought would be behind the door, but she couldn’t stop the nun from yanking on the
handle of 206. The door opened easily, allowing some light from a single cracked window to spill through the room and into the hallway.

Abby let out her breath. Next, Sister Maria reached for the handle of 205 and pulled it open.

No bogeyman jumped out. No one screamed, “Gotcha!” No ghost or monster or wraith appeared in a greenish cloud only to disappear.

“You’re certain these doors were open?” Sister Maria asked.

“Absolutely.”

The old nun raised an eyebrow, obviously disbelieving.

“Did you notice when you came up the stairs?” Abby asked and tried one of the doors herself. It swung open without catching. Room 204 was empty.

“I really didn’t pay attention.”

“What? But you were following me.”

Sister Maria nodded. “And I knew where you’d go, didn’t I? My eyesight isn’t as good as it once was, the hallway was dark . . . darker than this. I think
the doors were as they are now, Abby.”

But that couldn’t be. Abby’s fear dissolved and she marched down the hallway opening doors and peering inside, leaving the one directly under her
mother’s room for last. She walked to that final door, set her jaw, and yanked hard.

The door stuck.

“Come on!” Angry, she threw all her weight against the old panels. The door suddenly flew inward to reveal a room that was nearly identical to her
mother’s. There was nothing in it, of course, the furnishings missing, the walls drab where the wallpaper had long ago been stripped away. A closet was cut
into the wall in the same position as the room above, and a similar fireplace, some of the decorative tiles around the grate having fallen to the floor,
dominated the same wall as the room above. The only significant difference was the window. This one was tall and narrow, but it was different in that there
was no circular, stained-glass window mounted over the tall panes. That decorative panel, sometimes called a rose window or compass window, was only
on the top floor, set into a dormer that broke up the roof line directly over the front door.

As a child in the backseat of her father’s Ford, Abby had easily picked out her mother’s room as Jacques had driven through the main gates of the
hospital. That special arch in the roof and circle of colored glass below had been her beacon.

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“Who would be here?”

“Is something wrong?” the older woman asked. “Come on! It’s time to go.”

Abby followed the nun to the stairs, but as she glanced over her shoulder and looked down the corridor one last time, she experienced a cold feeling
against her spine, like the sharpened talon of a demon scraping down her backbone.

On the first floor, some of Sister Maria’s anger dissipated. She grabbed Abby’s hand and looked into her eyes. “You look tired.”

And she was. After waking up refreshed from the dreamless sleep, she’d thought she would be able to set the world on fire today, but this place, this
dreary, old asylum with its dingy walls and dark memories, had drained the energy from her, zapped her of her strength.

Sister Maria scowled upward. “I don’t see anything. Now, come along,” she insisted in exasperation. “We’re both getting soaked.”

But the image was gone as suddenly as it had appeared.

“In the window,” she whispered, pointing.

But the image was gone as suddenly as it had appeared.

“What is it?” the nun asked, sliding her a glance. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I . . . it’s nothing,” Abby replied. “I just had to take another look.” Quickly, her Nikes splashing through puddles, she hurried along the overgrown path,
through the trees, startling a squirrel that dashed into the underbrush.

Once they were through the forest, Sister Maria held open the unlocked gate, then the two moved rapidly along the fence line to the parking lot. “We
don’t use that gate very often,” Maria explained. “Except when the gardener has work to do, or one of the people who are planning to tear the hospital
down wants access, or when we need to chase down trespassers.”

Abby flushed. “I’m sorry. Next time I’ll ask.”

“Will there be a next time?”

She thought about the figure she’d seen lurking in the window of her mother’s room. Her imagination? A trick in the play of light? Then what about all
those suddenly closed doors on the second floor? “I hope so. As I said, I think I need to see Mom’s room one more time,” Abby said, pushing aside her
fears. There was no one in the old hospital. No one.

But the doors were shut!

And you saw someone staring at you! You did, Abby! You’re not imagining things. You are not cracking up!

“Who knows about this gate?” she asked.

Maria shrugged. “Except for the Sisters, not too many. As I said, there are a few who have access to the hospital now, but that’s about it. When the hospital
was open, some of the staff used it, of course, but only a few of those people are still around.” She chuckled, swiping a drop of rain from her nose
with the back of her hand. “You know, there was a time when we had trouble keeping people locked inside the gates, not the other way around.”

“Why don’t the people who are buying the hospital just go through the main gate?”

“Why don’t the people who are buying the hospital just go through the main gate?”
“Oh. That.” Sister Maria stopped as they reached the parking lot, seeking protection from the rain beneath the overhang from the garage. “They will. But the sale isn’t exactly a ‘done deal’ yet. Until all the snags are worked out through the parish and the archdiocese and the engineers and architects and the Mother Superior here, nothing will happen.”

“The hospital’s not sold?” Abby asked.

“Let’s just say ‘we’re in negotiations’ and leave it at that because I’ve probably said more than I should.” She looked at Abby again. “Are you certain you’re all right?”

“I’ll never be all right,” Abby thought. “My mother was a paranoid schizophrenic who committed suicide by throwing herself through a window, my father is slowly dying from disease, my sister slept with my fiancé who cheated on me with several women after we were married. Once Luke became my ex, he publicly humiliated me and now he and some coed are dead in a macabre, staged death scene. Oh, no, I will never be all right.”

“I’m fine.”

Concern drew lines across Sister Maria’s forehead. “Maybe you should come inside.” She glanced up at the heavy clouds. “I think I could scare up a cup of tea.”

“Not necessary. Really.” Now that she was out of the creepy old hospital, she was ready to make tracks and fast.

Sister Maria’s gaze was skeptical.

“Would you call me when the lock’s been fixed and I can get into my mother’s room again?”

“You’re certain that’s what you want to do?”

“Yes!” Abby said with renewed conviction, gazing over her shoulder to the fence and woods beyond. From here she couldn’t see the red bricks of the hospital, cosseted as it was by acres of forest, where, the idea had been, the gentle sounds, smells, and sights of nature would help soothe the tortured minds of the patients within.

“Then of course I’ll call.” The rain began to pour even more heavily, slanting with the wind.

“I’ll phone the convent later with my number.”

At the nun’s nod, Abby waved a good-bye and dashed to her car, sliding behind the wheel. Through the foggy windshield she watched an amazingly spry Sister Maria sprint toward a doorway cut into the wall surrounding the convent.

Abby twisted on the ignition of her little Honda and pulled a quick one-eighty, then nosed the car toward the main road.

She didn’t bother taking the fork that jogged to the old hospital.

She’d seen more than enough for one day.

He waited as she drove away.

From the third-floor window he could see over the gates, and at one point, where the trees parted, there was an eagle’s eye view of the road. Just a short glimpse, maybe two seconds, when her car would pass, turning the corner to the main road. But it was enough. For now. Taking up his vigil, he lifted his powerful binoculars so that he was ready to catch her expression as she drove by.

It took a little longer than he’d figured, probably because of that prattling nun, the one who had a few dark secrets of her own, secrets that were so close to his own. His lips twitched at that thought. The meek woman, draped in her black habit, might seem holy to some, but he knew better.

Soon, her secret would be exposed.

As would those of the others.

He had to work fast and so he intended to step up his time schedule. Through the field glasses, he saw a flash of silver in the rain. His heart pounded and anticipation thrummed through his body. A hot rush slid through his veins as he caught a glimpse of her taking the corner too fast. In the driving rain, the Honda’s tires slid, the back of the hatchback fishtailing.

He imagined her fear as she struggled with the steering wheel.

His heart pumped wildly and he felt a bit of sweat upon his upper lip. She looked so much like Faith . . . his throat went dry and lust slid like a hot, determined snake through his veins.

Faith . . . oh, beautiful . . .

His head pounded and he remembered the sweet, welcoming warmth of her, the way she gasped as he entered her, the glimmer of fear beneath the hot, anxious look in her eyes. His body thrummed as he thought of her seduction, her ultimate surrender, the need that had caused her to pant beneath him and press her teeth into his shoulder.

His lips curled back as he sucked in his breath. God, how he wanted her now, ached to feel the hot, urgent suppleness of her body clinging to his.

All in good time, he reminded himself as he squeezed his eyes closed. Faith’s face came to him . . . her hot eyes, her throaty laugh, the naughty invitation of her slick lips. And as he imagined her, almost smelled her, her features altered slightly and the memory of the mother became a vision of the daughter.
“Look, I’m telling ya, it was the last time I saw him,” Maury Taylor insisted as they stood in the reception area of the radio station. Bentz, having called in advance, had shown up at the time that Maury, spending extra hours in Luke Gierman’s chair, was free. The Gierman show was being played at various times in the afternoon and evening and apparently, from the latest poll, skyrocketing in the ratings.

That’s what being killed did for a person. Instant fame. Or infamy. In Gierman’s case, it was probably the latter.

“I explained this all to that other detective. What was his name?” Maury asked, then snapped his fingers. “Brinkman, the big guy with the gut.”

Bentz nodded. “I know, but I was out of town and I’m just double-checking a few details,” he said, which was pure garbage. Brinkman had done a decent enough job talking to everyone at the station, but Bentz just wanted his own “hit” about how things were going down here.

Besides, this was familiar territory. He’d been here often enough a few years back when Father John, a psycho of the worst order, was haunting the streets of the city. The killer’s fascination with Dr. Sam, a late-night radio psychologist, had been a grisly nightmare.

The radio station, a block off Decatur Street and close to Jackson Square, looked pretty much the same as it had then, the reception area with its padded benches, one wall covered by a glass case filled with awards and news items, pictures of celebrities, and even an authentic voodoo doll. Melba, the receptionist, seemed forever on the phone.

“I don’t know anything else except Luke was really pissed, and I mean really pissed at his ex-wife,” Maury explained. “She’d thrown away some of his stuff and he let her have it on the show that day.” He pulled a face. “I know we do some pretty off-the-wall things here, but usually Luke didn’t overdo the personal shit, you know, he wasn’t into bringing up his own personal dirty laundry. He had kind of an . . . unwritten rule or code of ethics about that.”

“Code of ethics?” Bentz didn’t buy it. He figured Gierman would have done anything including moon his own grandmother if he thought it would boost the ratings for his show as well as his own inflated ego.

“I don’t know, and he’d deny it to the death but . . . oh, hell,” Maury said when he heard himself.

“But what?”

Taylor glanced away, toward a colorful neon display that reflected pink and blue on his face, then returned his gaze to the policeman’s. “But I think he was still in love with her.” At the quirk of Bentz’s eyebrow, he quickly added. “Oh, yeah, yeah, I know. He liked the young ones. Hell, don’t we all? The way he told it, he couldn’t get enough . . . was a regular man-slut. I don’t know all the women he banged, but he told me about a few and I gave that information to the other cop. The only one I remember, and Luke only mentioned it once, when he’d had a few too many, was his wife’s sister.”

“What?”

“Yeah . . . it didn’t sit too well with the wife, if ya know what I mean. The minute Luke confided in me, even though he was drunk, he clammed up about it, laughed it off, like he was joking, but I don’t think so.”

Bentz made a mental note and felt an old pang of anger. He’d been there. Man, oh, man had he been there. He didn’t know what it meant to Abby Chastain to know that her husband had cheated with her sister, but it couldn’t be good.

“It really didn’t matter if the fling with his sister-in-law was true or not.”

Like hell. It mattered a lot.

“I just always had this feeling that he really never got over his ex-wife.”

“Did he say so?”

“Luke? Admit to being hung up on a woman who would have nothing to do with him? Nah. Not his style.” Maury raised his slim shoulders and shook his head. “But then who knows, maybe I got it all wrong.”

“The ex-wife couldn’t have liked the attraction to her sister.”

“Oh, no, Ouch! You know what they say about love and hate.”

Bentz didn’t disagree, but he knew from personal experience that the line between love and hate was so thin as to be invisible at times. Passion was a hair-trigger emotion.

“Anyone mind if I look through his desk and his closet?”

“Knock yourself out, but that other cop—”

“Brinkman?”

“Yeah! Geez, why can’t I remember that guy’s name?” Taylor snorted. “Not a good sign. I need my memory man, need to think fast on my feet or in my seat.” He offered up a proud, toothy smile. The high school geek who’d just made a touchdown. “The station manager’s talking about making me the next Gierman. How ‘bout that?”

Bentz figured the station manager wasn’t doing the listening public of New Orleans any great favors. “What about Brinkman?”

“Oh. Right. He already looked through Luke’s stuff. Took what he wanted. Luke’s desk is this way.” Maury guided Bentz down the main hallway, known as “the aorta,” through the labyrinthine corridors of the old building. They passed other employees as well as glassed-in sound booths and editing rooms.

“What about Gierman’s girlfriend?”

“Nia?” Taylor snorted. “Nice ass. But not much upstairs, if ya get my drift.” He tapped his temple with two fingers. “Not exactly a brainiac, and Luke, he’d get bored quickly if the woman couldn’t keep up with him. The physical chemistry was nice, always got him goin’, but that only lasts awhile, y’know.”

As if this guy were Casanova or Dr. Phil. The trouble was, in Bentz’s opinion, this time Maury Taylor was right. Wasn’t Bentz, himself, a prime example? He’d never planned to remarry after his first wife, but in Olivia Benchet he’d found a woman who was, he’d discovered, his mental match as well as drop-dead gorgeous. What combination was sexier than that?

“Except that the cheater ended up dead.”

“Yeah,” Maury said, grimacing. “Except for that. Double ouch! Sucks, ya know?”

“Big time.” They reached the back of the building, where a rack of built-in desks vied for wall space with lockers. “What about Gierman? Did he have any other girlfriends, or exes that he might have teed off with?”

“Don’t think so. On the air he always acted like he had a girlfriend whether he did or not. That was part of the routine,” Maury said as he pointed out Gierman’s desk, where Sharpie pens were kept in one of those personalized cups with a picture of a chocolate Lab on it. On the bulletin board over the desk were snapshots of Gierman sailing, skiing, playing tennis, leaning against the fender of a sporty BMW, or romping with the same brown dog that was on the coffee mug—a virtual shrine to himself and his hobbies. An ego-maniac if Bentz had ever seen one. The only other photo was a small one of a woman Bentz recognized as Abby Chastain. In the picture she was staring out to sea, her curly red-gold hair was tangled in the wind, her lips parted into a sexy
Montoya eyed the crowd, mentally checking off each of the mourners who had come to stand around the chapel door at All Saints College. A young priest, Father Anthony, stood straight-backed on the steps in front of the lancet-arched doorway. Flanking the fresh-faced priest was the old relic, Father Stephen, his bare head bent in prayer. Beside him was Dean Usher, the brim of her hat dripping in the rain.

Hundreds of students surrounded the chapel steps, each holding a candle, each listening raptly to the priest’s smooth, calm voice at this, the vigil for Courtney Mary LaBelle.

Chapel bells tolled softly as Father Anthony, a rapt, fervent individual, recounted the joy of knowing “Mary” and the tragedy that she, who had pledged herself to the service of God, was struck down, so young. So innocent. So trusting in God. Father Anthony’s white collar, a stark beacon in the night, stood in deep contrast to his black shirt and suit. The priest lifted his hands in supplication.

But he wore no vestments, Montoya noted, assuming the formal robes would be saved for the real funeral mass.

Wind rushed through the campus, causing the Spanish moss to dance from the branches of trees overhead, as Father Anthony warned that no one should be “heavy of heart” as Mary was with the Father now, she was safe and cared for, in a place far better than the rest of the crowd was.

Montoya listened with only half an ear.

The group of mourners prayed and cried, holding their candles in the darkness, and as they did, Montoya photographed them with a small, hidden camera. The pictures would be blurry at best, but they were at least something; he was certain Father Anthony would not approve a video camera with lights filming the students, faculty, and whoever else happened to stop by in his or her hour of grief.

Montoya only hoped that the killer would be hyped up enough to attend. Often times the murderer wanted to be a part of the investigation, to be close to the action, to revel in what he considered his superior intellect while the lowly police attempted to track him down. The killer would show up at the crime scene or the wake, or a vigil, joining with the others or hiding in the shadows, eager to be connected to the investigation and grief. It fed his ego to know that he was the mastermind behind the tragedy. It was usually only a matter of time before he showed his hand.

So, Montoya pretended to pray, to listen heedfully to the priest’s words of wisdom, but all the while he was checking out the faces in the crowd, noting which seemed out of place . . . not that appearances would matter. Some killers had the innate ability to blend in, to look more than normal, to appear so boring and bland that no one would suspect them of being able to slice their wife’s throat, or shoot the neighbor for scratching a borrowed lawn mower, or plan with meticulous detail the deaths of a string of victims.

At first no one had suspected serial killer Ted Bundy, a good-looking guy with a degree in psychology and a bright political future. Bundy had actually worked at a rape crisis center in Seattle. Then the BTK killer in Wichita was a compliance officer, a religious man who looked like an Average Joe. Closer to home there had been Father John and The Chosen One, neither of whom had raised anyone’s suspicions as they’d gone on their gruesome killing sprees. Dr. John McDonald, a brilliant young surgeon, was serving time for butchering his family, though he still vehemently protested his innocence.

No one, by looks alone, could identify a killer.

Meticulously Montoya photographed each and every individual who either genuinely or fraudulently expressed grief for Courtney Mary LaBelle. Someone who felt so fervently about the killings that they’d ventured out on this miserable, wet, blustery night.

As if to reinforce his thoughts, the wind gusted, causing candles to flicker and die, umbrellas to be whipped out of clenched hands, and in one case turned completely inside out.

“Let us pray to the Father,” the priest said, lifting his hands toward the heavens again, “and then come into the chapel for the rest of the service.” He folded his hands and bowed his head.

Everyone standing near the chapel did the same.

Except for Montoya.

“You said you’d call back,” Zoey accused as Abby answered the phone in the kitchen.

Abby’s gaze darted around the room. She was still creeped out by her experience at Our Lady of Virtues and couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being watched.

Which was just plain paranoid.

No, not paranoid, just overly cautious.

The refrigerator door was hanging open, Hershey standing expectantly beneath it, while Abby, with her free hand, searched through the bottles of half-used salad dressing and sauces to find a container of yogurt.

“I waited for hours,” Zoey pouted.

Oh, get over yourself, Abby thought. “I know, I know, Zoe. I’m sorry . . . time got away from me.” She was irritated that she felt the need to explain herself and apologize to her older sister. She was thirty-five, for crying out loud, not a baby, not a recalcitrant kid, not Zoey’s child. “I was busy. And no, I haven’t heard a word about Luke’s funeral.”

“It has to be soon, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know when it ‘has’ to be. If his family decides to cremate him, they might hold a service later. Look, Zoey, I’m not sure what my role in this is. Or even if I have a role. Ex-wife isn’t particularly high on the food chain, y’know. It doesn’t exactly mean I have royal status or even real ties to the family. I haven’t heard a word about Luke’s funeral.”

“You didn’t hear his last radio program. ‘That hits, Abby.’”

“Not funny, Zoe,” Abby said through her teeth. “To tell you the truth, it was weird as hell, okay? And spooky. Really spooky. The place is crumbling into total decay. I met a man who used to work there. She saw me going over there because I had to park at the convent.

Bentz glanced back at Taylor. The smaller man, too, was staring at the snapshot.

“What did I tell you?” Taylor said, his jaw sliding to one side. “The only woman Luke Gierman ever really gave a damn about was his ex-wife.”
Maybe you remember Sister Maria. She’s tall. Pretty. Latino, I think.”

“Yes, I remember her,” Zoey said a trifle tersely.

“She was there the day that Mom died.”

Zoey didn’t respond.

“It was weird. She got me confused with you, I think. She seemed to think that I’d run into the hospital ahead of you and Dad, at least I think that’s what she meant.” Abby pulled open a drawer and found a spoon. “That I was running upstairs while she was coming down and that she met you with Mom’s present . . . or something like that.” Abby felt her eyebrows pulling into a knot. “At least I think that’s what she was getting at. As I said, it was all weird.” She dipped her spoon into the yogurt and took a small bite. Zoey still hadn’t responded. “Zoe?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think of that?” The cool yogurt slid down her throat but she barely tasted it.

“I—I don’t know why she would say anything of the sort. She must be pretty old. Probably confused.”

“Most of the time she seemed pretty clear.”

“Most of the time,” Zoey repeated, seizing on her words. “It’s been twenty years, Abby.”

“Hey.” She held up her spoon and wagged it at the window, as if she were pointing at her sister. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re lying to me?”

“Because I’m uncomfortable discussing the hospital and Mom’s death, that’s why. I know you don’t have closure on it, Abby, but I do and I don’t need to revisit it every time you have a birthday on the anniversary of her death.”

“And her birth,” Abby reminded her sister.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You had this special bond with her, this unique, God-granted karma or whatever you want to call it that no one but you understands. I get it. But I don’t get it, and as far as I’m concerned, we should move on.”

“To Luke’s funeral?” Abby’s voice was dry.

“Yes! Let’s get some closure there, too. And once he’s in the ground or cremated or whatever, then I say you and I, we have ourselves a couple of cosmopolitans, toast him—then bury him, the past, and the damned hatchet, okay?” She was talking faster and faster, her voice rising nearly an octave.

“Okay. Fine.”

“So I’m coming to New Orleans.”

“Perfect,” Abby said with a false smile, “then Zoey, we can talk about a lot of things before we have that drink, okay? Including Mom and the day she died. I think you know more about it than you’ve ever said. If you won’t go back there with me, fine, but we’re going to discuss it.”

“Oh, Abby . . .

“I need this, Zoe,” she said, then hung up, hard. She tossed her uneaten yogurt into the sink. Where had that come from? She’d always had a feeling that her sister and father hadn’t been completely honest with her about that day, but she’d never boldly questioned them. She’d been content to be wrapped in her little cocoon of innocence, afraid of what she might find if she ever emerged.

Sister Maria’s insistence that Abby had been inside the hospital when her mother had plummeted to her death had brought back pieces of her memory, a memory she hadn’t known had been shattered. Something about the way she’d recalled the accident was wrong—and had been for the last twenty years. She had been inside the hospital. She remembered hurrying up the stairs, nearly running head-on into the tall nun who had warned her to slow down at the landing. But Abby hadn’t paid any attention to the woman in the black habit with her stern expression and rustling skirts. She’d raced past and up the final partial flight, focusing on the doorway to 307 . . .

After that, her memory failed her.

Now, closing her eyes, Abby tried to call up what had happened then and why, oh, why, did she see her mother’s broken body on the cement? A headache started in the back of her skull, pounding, warning her she wouldn’t like what she found. Still she fought to remember. Gripping the edge of the memory she hadn’t known had been shattered. Something about the way she’d recalled the accident was wrong—and had been for the last twenty years. She had been inside the hospital. She remembered hurrying up the stairs, nearly running head-on into the tall nun who had warned her to slow down at the landing. But Abby hadn’t paid any attention to the woman in the black habit with her stern expression and rustling skirts. She’d raced past and up the final partial flight, focusing on the doorway to 307 . . .

The night had been a bust. Montoya had spent his time talking to the students attending the vigil, double-checking with Courtney LaBelle’s friends. Then he caught up with Father Anthony for a few minutes before the priest had to rush off, hell-bent, or perhaps heaven-bent in his case, to comfort Mary LaBelle’s family. But Montoya didn’t like him. Father Anthony Mediera was too smooth, too outwardly calm, too damned not-a-hair-out-of-place perfect for Montoya’s tastes. The priest’s faith felt worn like a badge.

For twenty years she’d felt something wasn’t right about that day, but she’d been afraid to ferret out the truth, unwilling to peel the blindfold from her eyes.

No more.

It was time to stop protecting herself, to unwrap the layers of lies, decent, and guilt.

Zoey, whether she wanted to or not, was going to help.
had been a long time since he’d been with a woman. Too long.

Now, in the pelting rain, he unlocked the cruiser, slid inside, and pulled the door closed. Swiping the raindrops from his face, he turned on the ignition and wondered why he was already fantasizing about her.

She was out of reach and that was the end of it. He checked his mirror, found the side street deserted, and cranking on the steering wheel, pulled a one-eighthy and drove into the wet, dark Louisiana night.

The damned gate was stuck!
How the hell had that happened?
Asa Pomeroy leaned out the window of his Jaguar and punched in the electronic code to open the gates to his estate. Again. Nothing happened except that he got wet. Again. Rain was coming down in sheets, sliding down the sleek windshield and drumming the top of his balding head. "Son of a bitch! Come on, come on." He punched in the code a final time and swore loudly. Then he tried the remote again. Clicked it several times but the damned gate still didn’t move.

He had his cell phone with him, of course, but whom would he call? Vanessa was off at her mother’s for a blissful week, the maid was gone for the night, the gardener-handymen was twenty minutes away. And he’d been drinking too much to call a cop. Any of his friends would take a fall forty minutes to get here and they, too, would be tanked up from a night of drinking at the club.

No, he was on his own.
Which was usually not a problem. He was nothing if not efficient and capable. Hell, he hadn’t spent two tours in Vietnam only to come back to the good old US of A to build, market, and ship a better weapon. He sold rifles, grenades, bazookas, ammo(255,903),(744,909), and every weapon imaginable all over the planet and because of it was rich beyond his wildest dreams. All because of Yankee ingenuity from his father’s side of the family, Southern charm from his mother’s, and red-blooded American know-how, cast in iron from generations of his WASP ancestors.

Tonight, by God, no cheap-ass piece of Japanese technology was going to thwart him. He grabbed his Stetson, rammed it onto his head, pulled a flashlight from the glove box and slipped his reading glasses onto his nose, then stepped outside his car. Rain was running in rivulets, soaking his good-damned Italian leather shoes, the ones Vanessa had insisted he buy on their last trip to Tuscany. Jesus, what a waste of time and money that had been.

He was leaning over, peering at the backlit keypad, when he realized the dog hadn’t come out to greet him. Without fail, Geronimo, upon hearing the Jag’s smooth engine, would run pell mell down the long driveway and be waiting, tongue hanging from his mouth, on the other side of the gate. Once Asa pulled through, the big dog always raced the car up the long drive. Asa, without fail, let him win.

So where the hell was he?
Water dripped from the brim of Asa’s hat. His half-glasses fogged as he stared into the darkness, through the iron gates and trees where, though the house was hidden, lights should glow.

Now, save for the glow of the Jag’s headlights, where mist rose and swirled in the twin beams, there was only darkness.

He whistled loudly.

Nothing.
Something was wrong, he thought, and was just starting to sense that he’d been set up when he felt something hard and cold against his back. He started to whirl, but it was too late.

Zap!
Three hundred thousand volts of electricity jolted through his body.
His hat flew off.
He dropped to his knees.
Gasping, he tried to reach into his pocket for the knife he kept hidden there.
But he was confused, his body and mind at odds and he couldn’t so much as raise a finger. His brain ordered his hands to stretch into his damned pocket, but he couldn’t move a muscle.

Disoriented, he saw a big man step out of the shadows to loom over him in the rain.
Panic grabbed Asa by the throat.
Someone, this guy and probably his friends, had planned this attack. Meticulously.

Fear cut through him.
His assailant was dressed in black, in some kind of tight-fitting body suit, his face covered by a mask. Leaning over, he had the audacity to hold his weapon up so that it was visible in the light from the car’s headlights.

Still unable to move, to barely focus, Asa caught a glimpse of the stun gun and recognized it was one he manufactured.

Jesus H. Christ, what was this?
Then he knew. The guy was going to abduct him. To demand ransom in the form of millions. And he was going to kidnap Asa by using the very “self-defense” weaponry Pomeroy Industries manufactured.

Terror struck deep in his heart. Again he went for his knife. Again his hands failed him.
His assailant calmly set the stun gun against his neck and gave him another shot.

Electricity rocketed through him.

Another three hundred thousand volts.
Asa screamed.

Pain sizzled and popped down throughout his body. Despite all the advertisement to the contrary, the jolt stung like a son of a bitch. He withered, flopping in the mud while his attacker slowly and calmly pulled out a roll of duct tape from his utility belt. Then he came up with a circle of fishing wire as well as a knife. Asa recognized that weapon, too. His attacker clicked open what appeared to be a Pom 4SF—a folding knife with a quick release and four-inch serrated blade—a specialty knife advertised in Pomeroy Industries latest catalog for gutting big game as it could easily slice through gristle and bone.
A knife strong enough to eviscerate a man.

Fear turned his blood to ice.
He got the message.

Don’t do this! I’m rich. I’ll pay. Anything! He was screaming but only a garbled mewl came from his throat. He couldn’t form words.
He tried to struggle, but it was no use. Helpless and without control of his limbs, he was flailing in the mud like a warthog in quicksand.
He glanced up at his assailant and swore he saw satisfaction in the eyes looking down at him through the slits in his mask.

But that was impossible . . . right? It was dark.
Who was this guy? What did he want?

Jesus, help me, Asa silently pleaded. He watched helplessly as first a six-inch piece of duct tape was sliced from a roll and slapped over his mouth, then his hands were jerked roughly behind him bound first by the same tape, and fortified with a plastic-coated steel fishing wire he recognized as the same type he used when he was trying to land a marlin. The tape would have been enough: the wire was some kind of statement.

All hope failed as his ankles were taped together, but no fishing wire used. Then a hood was forced over his head and tied at the neck. There were air holes so that he could breathe, but he was surrounded by darkness.

Just like in ‘Nam.
He’d been captured by the Gooks. Held in a cage for nearly two weeks before he managed to escape. Well, he’d do it again, goddamn it. He’d fight back the terror, the bone-numbing fear, and beat this son of a bitch at his own damned game.

He was hauled to his feet by the collar of his jacket. He tried to fight, to spin away, but it was useless. He heard a car door open and his assailant pushed him inside, banging his forehead as he fell into what smelled and felt like the backseat of his Jag. His legs were pushed up so that they bent at the knees, then the door was slammed shut.

A few seconds later he heard the attacker climb behind the steering wheel, the car sinking slightly with the added weight, and then that door, too, shut. With a deafening click, all the doors were locked, the gearshift rammed into reverse, and then the perfectly tuned engine revved as they backed down the quarter mile to the main highway.

Asa’s only hope was that someone would recognize his car.

But it was late.

Few vehicles drove this stretch of isolated road.

For now, he had to do whatever this bastard had in mind. No doubt it was money. He’d be held for ransom. Well, that was fine; he had enough cash to pay whatever exorbitant figure the kidnappers came up with.

He might lose a finger in the process.

Or an ear.

He inwardly cringed, but reminded himself it was worth it, if he could just get out of this alive.

Vanessa would willingly pay the ransom, right?

The board of directors at Pomeroy Industries included his children. They would be eager to fork over the cash, wouldn’t they?

Hadn’t he helped his wives and children, even his grand-kids, for Christ’s sake? He’d paid for braces, college, vacations, any damned thing his progeny needed, even the ones who disdained his wealth, claimed they needed only a “little something” to “get started” or to “find themselves.” He’d shelled out for face-lifts and boob jobs and trips to psychiatrists. Health spas, new cars, even a boat; he’d come up with it, so those who owed him not only their lives but their lifestyles had damned well better offer up the cash to bail him out of whatever the hell this was.

Don’t count on them, Pomeroy.

You’ve been in tough spots before and who was the only person who came to your rescue?

No one but your own damned self.

And the truth of the matter was, if he examined his life closely, he had a lot of enemies, and some of the worst were his own kin. Backstabbers, money-grubbers, liars, and cheats . . . all either having been married to him or with his blood running through their veins.

And then there were his series of partners, most of which he’d screwed over.

Was this his punishment?

Don’t think that way. This is just some greedy, sick opportunist. You’ve dealt with worse across a boardroom table.

As the car purred down the smooth, winding road, some of Asa’s disorientation cleared. He thought of his wife who didn’t love him. His kids who didn’t respect him. His two sons both of whom were missing a screw or two and his daughter, a gold digger like her mother. His grandchildren were just as bad and thought of him as their own personal ATM. His business partners who only pretended to like him because of his net worth.

Had one of those sons of bitches set him up?

Hot anger replaced his cold fear. He might be hog-tied now, defenseless. But that was only temporary.

Whoever the hell the bastard driving his Jag was, he would damned well get his. The idiot hadn’t even checked his pockets, didn’t know that Asa’s own knife was, even now, resting against his thigh, right next to his money clip. If he got half a chance, Asa planned to use the Pom 3.5F, a deadly folding knife that would slice right through muscle and hide. Asa hadn’t spent some of his army hitch with the special forces and not learned how to slip a blade between a man’s ribs and slice the heart. It was just a matter of getting the jump on his attacker.

It had been years since he’d practiced killing a man, of course, but he was certain he could take the guy out. This time, the kidnapper had picked the wrong goddamned mark.
“A sa Pomeroy is missing,” Lynn Zaroster said as Montoya walked into the small kitchen at the station the next afternoon. He’d spent the day catching up on paperwork, going over autopsy reports, and interviewing witnesses all the while waiting for the pictures that he’d taken the night before to be blown up. The bodies of Luke Gierman and Courtney LaBelle were being released to their families, the DA wanted answers, and Montoya felt no closer to knowing who had committed the double homicide than the day he’d walked into that cabin by the river.

Zaroster was carefully dunking a tea bag into a steaming cup of water. Montoya headed straight for the coffeepot.

“The millionaire?”

“Multi-milli-millionaire if Industrialist magazine can be believed.”

“You read that crap?” Montoya asked as he grabbed a paper cup and poured a thin stream of coffee into it.

“My boyfriend does,” she admitted.

“Wait a minute. Doesn’t Pomeroy live in Cambrai?”

“Outside of the little downtown area. Kind of out in the boones, maybe even the swamp.”

He felt a tightening in his gut. He remembered driving past the elaborate iron gates securing the Pomeroy estate. “He lives close to Abby Chastain.”

“Really?” she asked, tossing the used, wet bag of English Breakfast tea into the garbage.

“Yep. They’re neighbors.”

“How weird is that?”

“ Weird enough.” Montoya didn’t like the feeling that was creeping over him. Didn’t like it one bit. “What happened to him?”

“Don’t really know. I just ran into Vera from Missing Persons in the ladies’ room and she told me that the wife was out of town, came back this morning and he wasn’t there. The bed was still made, and apparently he never even pulls the covers up. A real slob. Anyway, both the maid and the gardener hadn’t been able to get into the house, the automatic lock was jammed or something. It looks like maybe someone changed the electronic code according to the security guy who came out and checked. So the Mrs. calls Asa on his cell phone but he’s not answering. At this point she’s starting to get worried and then Asa’s secretary calls from his office: Asa’s late for a big meeting. After phone calls all around, including the cell again, his cronies, family members, and no one has any idea where he is, the wife called the station and is coming in to file a report . . . it hasn’t been twenty-four hours yet, but it’s not looking good.”

“Where was he last seen?”

Zaroster, testing her tea, held up her free hand and shook her head. “I said I don’t know anything. It’s just gossip at this point. It’s not our case.”

Yer, Montoya thought uneasily, remembering how close the Pomeroy estate was to Abby Chastain’s house. What were the odds that her ex-husband would end up murdered the same week her next-door neighbor turned up missing?

“Oh,” Zaroster said, sipping from her cup. “I called my uncle up at All Saints.”

“What’d I tell ya?” Brinkman asked as he, hitching up his pants, strode into the kitchen and grabbed the pot of coffee, pouring himself the last of the dregs. “Don’t tell me, the coven meets at seven every Sunday night like my auntie’s bingo group.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“And so, instead of homemade cookies and punch, they all bring their vials of blood for a little drinkie-poo?”

“Was Courtney’s roommate that bad, or is he just being a prick?” Zaroster asked Montoya.

“You tell me.”

“All I know is that my uncle said there’s this big Goth movement up at All Saints. Nothing scary, just some kids into black hair, boots, lipstick, and white face makeup. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Brinkman snorted.

“But there are a few who take it a little more seriously.”

“Like little Miss O, I’m bettin’,” Brinkman said.

“Maybe. There’s always gossip, of course, and there is talk of some vampire worship and blood drinking, you know, the usual college stuff.”

Montoya laughed.

“What’d I tell ya?” Brinkman took a sip of his coffee and scowled. “Next thing ya know they’ll be sacrificing virgins, except now that Mary LaBelle is already dead, they won’t be able to find any. She had to be the last virgin in college.”

“You might be surprised,” Zaroster said, irritation showing.

“Yeah, right.” Brinkman took a swallow from his cup, and his face drew together as if he’d just sucked on a lemon. “This tastes like shit.”

“Then make a new pot,” Zaroster advised and, when he started to open his mouth, added, “And don’t give me any garbage about you not knowing how or it’s a job better suited for a woman, okay?”

“Well, it is.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

He lifted a shoulder.

“How much of a baby are you? Look, the packs are premeasured.” She pulled a sealed foil package of coffee from a basket filled with packages of tea, coffee, and smaller packs of sweetener. Then she held the foil envelope in front of Brinkman’s nose. “Pretty damned easy. You flip one of these into the basket of the coffee maker, add water, and push a button.” She dropped the unopened package back into the basket.

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Montoya laughed.

What’s the deal with this uncle of yours? He’s not from here, is he?” Montoya asked.

“You tell me.”

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Her cell phone jangled and she picked it up, then, carrying her cup of tea in the other hand, stormed out of the room.

“Tell me that and she’ll have you up on harassment charges so fast your head will spin. That is, after she’s busted your balls.”

Brinkman chuckled and Montoya walked back to his desk. He thought about Asa Pomeroy. What were the chances that the millionaire’s vanishing act was connected to the Gierman-LaBelle murders? That was a stretch really. Or was it? Just because some rich old coot didn’t show up for work, or hadn’t slept in his own bed, didn’t mean someone had killed him. And so what if his estate was close to Abby Chastain’s property; that was probably just circumstance. It was nothing. No link whatsoever.

Nonetheless, the uneasy feeling wouldn’t leave him as he checked his e-mail and waded through phone messages that had come in over the night and early morning. He picked up the phone and called Missing Persons. No harm in finding out all he could about Pomeroy. Just in case.
“...the funeral will be at eleven,” Luke’s brother Lex was saying, “and I thought you might want to know. The service will be at St. Michael’s. No casket. He wanted to be cremated. Oh, God, I can’t believe I’m talking about this. It just really hasn’t sunk in yet, I guess.”

“I know.”

“So... maybe we’ll see you there.”

“Yes,” Abby said, “thanks for calling.” She hung up her cell phone and sighed. The thought of the funeral was depressing. Not only would it be surreal to meet all the people who had known Luke in life and witness their grief, but it was just so hard to believe that he was actually gone, that he would be eulogized, that she would have to smile while everyone told all their “good of Luke” stories. And then there was facing his mother and father. “Not fun,” she said to Hershey as she slid the phone into her pocket.

She’d been working in her studio all afternoon. Her digital camera was connected to her computer, which was set up on the desk. After digitally cropping the pictures, she printed those she needed, checked them again in case she wanted to change the parameters, then once she was satisfied with what would become the prints, she burned them onto CDs for her clients as well as kept copies on her hard drive and a separate CD for herself. She always printed out the final shots as well, then sorted and filed them.

She’d been at it for hours, barely taking off any time, except to get a cup of coffee or tea. Breakfast had been toast and peanut butter, then she’d spent a couple of hours packing and taking down some pictures from the walls, then removing the nails, using a hammer on the most stubborn ones. Afterward, around ten, she’d gone to work in the studio and she’d been too absorbed to break for lunch. The hours had flown by, and now, it was after eight. Her stomach growled, her back ached; she rubbed her shoulders and neck where a headache was starting. She only hoped she had a microwave meal in the freezer. She was stretching her back when Hershey, lying in the corner on her blanket, shot to her feet. Growling low, head down, she stalked to the door.

“Now what?” Abby muttered as all afternoon the dog had been nervous, wanting in, wanting out, barking at squirrels who scolded from the magnolia tree on the back patio.

The hackles on the back of Hershey’s neck rose and her head lowered. Unmoving, she stared at the studio door.

“Give it up, Hersh,” Abby said as she stared at her computer monitor and pictures of the Shipman wedding. She discarded the ones where the bride’s ex-husband was door or the groom’s cowlick showed prominently.

Hershey growled again.

“Stop!”

She studied the monitor again.

Every hackle on the dog’s neck was raised. This time the growl was almost inaudible, but it was enough to break Abby’s concentration. She finally gave in.

“I’m okay,” she said, refusing to be inflected by what it was that made the Lab nervous. “Show me.” She decided to call it a night and shut off the computer, then switched off the lights and opened the studio door.

The dog shot out like a rocket, barking and running back and forth along the back edge of the veranda, glaring into the dark trees beyond.

Abby felt a frisson of fear slide down her spine. Hershey was making her edgy, that was it, but she didn’t need any help in that department. Ever since finding out about Luke’s murder, she’d been nervous. And if she’d thought visiting Our Lady of Virtues would help her deal with the past, she’d been dead wrong. She hadn’t slept well since walking through those forgotten hallways. Three images had stayed with her from her visit—her mother’s locked door, the shutting of all the doors on the second floor, and the shadowy image of a man behind the third-floor window’s glass. Even now, just at the thought, her skin pimpled.

She dead-bolted the studio, followed the short walkway to the door, and unlocked the door. Hershey was still growling, hair ruffled, eyes trained on the woods, when Ansel suddenly streaked across the patio and shot straight into the house. The big Lab galloped after the tabby, tail wagging furiously.

“Okay,” she said, refusing to be inflected by what it was that made her nervous. “Show me.” She decided to call it a night and shut off the computer, then switched off the lights and opened the studio door.

“Bon appetit,” she said as she pulled the pizza out and preheated the oven. The pepperoni looked as if it had been made in the sixth century, the cheese looking like small crystals of ice, the crust possibly freezer burned. But it was all she had and she figured she could get creative, slice up a tomato and onions. When she rummaged in her pantry, she came up with a tiny can of black olives. “Gourmet,” she told the animals, then, as the oven warmed, dug in the cupboard and found a bottle of red table wine with no other information on it and a curled gold ribbon with a tiny card that said, Thanks for the hospitality! Love, Alicia.

Abby smiled, remembering Alicia’s last visit. They’d discovered a little wine shop on Decatur, where they’d found the bottles of white and red table wine placed next to shelves of imports from Germany and France, and they’d loved the plain white labels with big black letters: WHITE TABLE WINE and RED TABLE WINE. No color, no foil, no fancy script.

“Don’t you love this?” Alicia had said, holding a bottle by its neck. “It’s so unpretentious, so uncool. Not wine-fashonable at all!” She’d rotated the bottle under the dim lights of the tiny shop, ignored the patron’s mouth-expression, and read, “Smith Winery, Napa, California.” Smith Winery. Like, where’s that?

“Green eyes had twinkled. “Do you think there’s really a Smith Winery, or is it just an alias? You know, like when lovers supposedly sign into a no-tell-motel for a hot night of sex?” She’d lowered her voice. “Not that I have ever done that, mind you.” Then she’d tossed back her head and laughed in that naughty, fun Alicia way. “We have to have this... and the red, too!”

“Yeah, right. When Abby had hung up, Alicia had said, “He’s such a loser, Abs. Divorce his ass and be done with it.” She’d poured them each a second glass as the wind had sighed through the trees while a night bird had drifted. “But let’s not let him ruin our night. That son of a bitch is so not worth it.”

Oh, how right she’d been, Abby thought now. This bottle of red had been pushed into the cupboard, where it had collected dust for over two years. She’d made Alicia promise they would drink it the next time she visited, but that hadn’t happened and now she was selling the place.

Time to uncork it. Who knew the shelf life of such a unique blend? She would open the bottle and call Alicia, tell her to pour herself a glass of wine,
too, and they’d drink together while on the phone.

She opened a drawer to find the corkscREW. Her eye caught on Hershey standing frozen, not a muscle moving, eyes fixed on the darkened living room. Since she’d been working in the studio all day, the sun had set, and the house, aside from the kitchen, was dark. She wasn’t falling for this,” she told the dog, thinking Ansel was hiding under the couch. Except that at that moment the cat hopped onto her kitchen stool

“Ansel is not the enemy. Try and remember that!” The tabby had hopped onto the counter and was perched near the window, his tail flicking in agitation, his pupils still black and dilated. Bristled up to twice his size, he hissed at the dog. “You knock it off, too. Both of you... give me a break. I can scare myself. Got it? I don’t need any help from either of you!” Abby scooped the cat from the counter and set him onto the floor. She opened the freezer door and found one extra coffee and an ancient pizza.

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“Ansel is not the enemy. Try and remember that!” The tabby had hopped onto the counter and was perched near the window, his tail flicking in agitation, his pupils still black and dilated. Bristled up to twice his size, he hissed at the dog.

“You knock it off, too. Both of you... give me a break. I can scare myself. Got it? I don’t need any help from either of you!” Abby scooped the cat from the counter and set him onto the floor. She opened the freezer door and found one extra coffee and an ancient pizza.
the hospital with its ghostly opening and closing of doors. A whisper of fear, cold as a reptile’s eyes, touched the back of her neck.

She held the hammer in a death grip.

Oh, God, don’t do this to yourself.

Swallowing hard, she walked into the living room, quickly snapping on a Tiffany lamp. A rainbow of colors washed over the room, illuminating the dark corners.

No bogeyman here.

Hershey growled.

“You’re freaking me out, so just stop it!” Abby said, irritated. For her own peace of mind she carefully, hammer firmly in hand, walked through the hallway, feeling her pulse increase and anxiety seep through her blood as she flipped on one light after another, opened closet doors, peered under her bed and the guest bed.

In the bath, holding her breath, she raised the darn hammer and, with images of the shower scene from Psycho flashing through her brain, scraped the shower curtain back in one quick motion. She cringed, but there was no one inside the tiled walls, not even a frightened, exposed spider scuttling into the drain.

“See . . . nothing,” she said, her heart still pounding wildly, her stomach in knots.

There was only one other room on the first floor. She opened the final door to the laundry room and stopped short.

The window was open.

Her heart clutched.

She nearly dropped the hammer.

The window had been closed, hadn’t it?

Her mind raced as she tried to remember.

She sometimes opened it when she did laundry to air out the room as the dryer, with its faulty vent, tended to heat and steam up the room. But she hadn’t done a load today, didn’t remember opening the window.

Think, Abby. Don’t go nutso over this. You had to have opened it.

Fear brought nervous sweat to the surface of her skin, her fingers slick on the hammer’s handle.

Don’t lose it. You could have forgotten to shut it last night when you did the load of towels.

But she knew better.

Every night she double-checked the doors and windows, and though this one sometimes stuck, she always made sure it was closed.

But not necessarily locked, her mind taunted. Even after hearing about Luke’s murder, she didn’t always check the window latches, just made certain the windows were closed.

So why is this one open?

Try as she might, she didn’t know. Stepping into the tiny alcove, she slammed the window shut, then tried to latch it. But she couldn’t get the lock to hold. The window was too swollen from years of humidity. Great, she thought, knowing she’d have to jury-rig something to keep it closed—a board from the garage, maybe.

As she was deciding what to do, a chilling thought slithered through her brain.

Would she be locking the bad guys out, or would she just inadvertently lock some unwanted intruder inside? She still hadn’t checked the upstairs. “Oh, crap,” she muttered, turning around and walking directly to the end of the hallway, where a steep staircase led to her den.

She set her jaw.

She hadn’t been upstairs in her office all day. Surely no one was hidden away in the converted attic. And yet she had to find out. She knew she’d never sleep a wink tonight if she didn’t check every damned nook and cranny in the house. “Come on, Hershey, you started this,” she said to the dog. Opening the door, she turned on the sconce that lit the stairwell. Then, still clutching the damned hammer, she mounted the steep, narrow stairs, hearing them creak against her weight, feeling the skin on her nape prickle with new dread.

This was crazy. So the window was open, so what? So the damned dog was going bananas? Wasn’t that Hershey’s nature? This Lab wasn’t known for her intelligence, and she would hate to think what Hershey’s canine IQ might be.

With each step, the temperature of the hallway increased, the heat of the day having risen to the rafters and ceiling of the attic. There were no windows in the room, only a skylight mounted in the sloped ceiling that she could crank open. Heart pounding, she reached the top of the stairs and snapped on the bright overhead light.

The room, of course, was empty.

Aside from her desk and one old folding chair.

No bogeyman hiding up here either, just as there had been no monster under her bed.

“Liar,” she accused the dog as she searched through the closets. “False alarm.” Hershey lowered her head, her tail barely moving, as if she were ashamed. “Well, you should be,” Abby admonished. Dark liquid eyes rolled up at her in supplication. Abby felt a rush of regret. “Oh, Hersh, I’m sorry. You’re just doing your job, huh?” She sat on the top step, ruffled the fur at the back of the dog’s neck, and leaned close enough that Hershey gave her a quick lick on the cheek. “Doggy kisses,” Abby whispered, petting the Lab all over. “They’re the best.” She was rewarded with another touch of Hershey’s wet nose. “I love you, too. Just tone the guard dog thing down a notch or two, okay? Only let me know if there’s real trouble here.”

Don’t criticize the dog. The laundry room window was open and you didn’t leave it that way. Someone else pushed open the bottom pane. Either that or you really are cracking up.

Like her.

“No!” she almost yelled and the dog jumped. “Oh, Hersh, sorry.” She wasn’t even going to let that particular thought run wild. “Come on, maybe I can rustle up a doggy biscuit.”

The dog, ever resilient, let out a short “woof.” and streaked down the stairs. As Abby reached the main floor, she heard a soft ding, smelled the remnants of old meals burning, and realized the oven had finally reached temperature. The dog, barking, was at the front door.

“Ah, for God’s sake. Now what, Hersh? You’re not fooling me again, okay?” Abby called after the Lab. “No damned way.” She took the steps more carefully, but as she reached the archway to the living room, a wash of headlights splashed across the walls. Instantly she was wary again, the dog’s behavior and the open window having scared her half to death.

Get a grip, Abby.

The Lab was already at the door as she heard the car’s engine and the crunch of tires. Peering out the window, she spied a black Mustang wheel up to the garage. A second later the thrum of the engine stopped and the driver’s door opened.

Abby caught her breath as she recognized the driver.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, spying Detective Montoya behind the wheel. This was definitely not good news.
Montoya, dressed in faded jeans, a black T-shirt, and a leather jacket, stretched out of his vehicle. He slammed the door and pressed a button on his key ring. The sleek car chirped and blinked its lights but Abby focused on the man.

His jeans were tight, his face set, his black hair falling over his forehead as he jogged toward the front steps. Stupidly, her heart fluttered. “God help me.”

Oh, Abby, don’t be an idiot. Do not go there.

She swung the door open before he pressed the button for the bell. Hershey bounded out, wiggling and wagging her tail, begging for attention. Yeah, some watchdog the Lab turned out to be.

“Expecting someone?” Montoya asked, and though there was a tension to his face, a bit of a grin flashed in his beard. The man possessed white, white teeth and a crooked smile, the kind, she supposed, that could melt a woman’s heart. He took the time to bend on one knee and pet the dog, who responded by demanding more and more attention, wiggling and grunting in pure pleasure.

“Just you, Detective,” she said, aware of the sense of relief she felt at the sight of him. Her nerves definitely needed soothing. And maybe she was just one of those stupid women who were hung up on tough-looking guys, men with an edge, who, if you observed a little more closely, had a twinkle in their eyes and a soft spot in their hearts.

Oh, for the love of God! What kind of ludicrous thought was that? Montoya is a detective. Period. He’s working on Luke’s homicide. End of story.

Yet as he offered up that smile again, sexy and boyish at the same time, his dark eyes seductive and naughty, she experienced a warm rush in her bloodstream. So there was a fun guy beneath the tough detective façade. Knowing Montoya had a sense of humor was even more dangerous. The last thing she needed in her life right now was a man, and of all the men walking this planet, Detective Reuben Montoya would be the worst choice for her.

A cop? No way.
A homicide detective? Even worse!
Get real, Abby.
And who are you to even think about choosing a man? The last one you were serious about just got murdered, remember?
“You were expecting me?” he asked. “Is that why you came to the door armed with a hammer.”
“What? Oh. No . . . I was just taking out some nails.” Not a lie. That’s what she’d done earlier this morning. Quickly, she set the hammer onto a table near the doorway. As Hershey ambled into the house again, Montoya climbed to his feet. Light caught in his ebony black hair and along the slope of his chiseled cheekbones; she wondered what it would be like to kiss him. She focused on those thin lips partially hidden by the thick blackness of his goatee and something caught in the back of her throat. In her mind’s eye she saw him not only kissing her, but touching her, his mouth and hands skimming her body.

Whoa! Abby, stop it!

She couldn’t. As they stood in the warm glow of the porch light: he, on the porch; she, on the other side of the threshold, there was a sense of intimacy in the air. Her silly overactive imagination ran wild with fantasies of making love to him.

Which was just plain ridiculous.

“Are you here alone?” she asked, though she was pretty certain of the answer. She stood on her tiptoes and peered over his shoulder, as if looking for a second cop.

“Flyin’ solo tonight.”

“What, no suave and debonair partner?” she asked, folding her arms over her chest. As if to protect her heart.

Montoya’s grin was pure animal. “You’re talking about Brinkman?”

“Such a gentleman,” she said sarcastically. “He must win points with the women he works with.”

“Not a lot.”

“Big surprise, so where is my buddy tonight?” she asked, knowing she was flirting and unable to stop.

Montoya lifted a leather-clad shoulder. “Probably out irritating the populace and giving the department a bad name,” he said. She looked surprised at his candor, and he added, “Okay, so he’s a good cop. I trust his instincts. He’s got my back, but hey, I do know the guy. Let’s just say Brinkman and I, we don’t bowl together.”

She laughed, the tension of the night draining from her.

“I don’t think I should be telling you this. It could get me into trouble.”

“And that would worry you?” she asked, knowing she was flirting and unable to stop. She didn’t believe it, sensed that Reuben Montoya might thrive on stepping over the line for an occasional walk on the wild side.

“Not a lot. No.”

“I figured as much.” She stepped out of the doorway, silently inviting him inside. “So, Detective—”

“You can call me Reuben,” he said.

“Does anyone?”

He chuckled. “Only my mother.”

“And the rest?”

“ Aside from my aunt, who insists on calling me Pedro because of my confirmation name, and my brothers and sisters who refer to me as Reu, everyone refers to me as Montoya.”

“That’ll work,” she said. Less personal. “So, Montoya, you are here for a reason, whether official or not.” She pushed the door closed. “You want to tell me about it?”

He nodded, following her inside. Looking at the cozy living room with its Tiffany lamps, antiques, and overstuffed furniture, Abby decided she could think more clearly under brighter lights, maybe the dining room or the kitchen . . .

“Is something burning?” he asked.

“Od, damn! No . . . not really!” She beelined into the kitchen and scared Ansel, who’d been hiding under the couch. The cat slunk into the dining room, looking furtively over his shoulder and letting out tiny little hisses. He hopped onto the seat of one of the chairs where, beneath the table, he could watch what was happening.

“Friendly,” Montoya observed wryly.

“Ansel struggles with the concept of ‘chill out.’” Again, Montoya’s teeth flashed white against his black goatee and his brown eyes twinkled. “He’s been a grouch ever since you brought Hershey here. Ansel’s hoping the dog will somehow disappear. Or drop dead. That would work, too.”

In the kitchen, Abby pointed at the freezer-burned pizza still sitting in its plastic wrapper on the counter. Her dinner. Which she’d planned to eat alone
or with Hershey. Then there was the bottle of wine. Breathing invitingly on the counter. She hesitated before deciding to quit second-guessing herself. “I was making dinner, such as it is, before you showed up. It’s... well, it’s pretty darn pathetic, but...” would you like to join me?” She felt a flush climb up the back of her neck and felt as silly as she had all those years ago when she’d impulsively asked Trey Hilliard to the Sadie Hawkins dance.

Montoya picked up the bottle of red table wine, smiled as he read the label. “I’m off duty,” he remarked, looking up at her with those incredibly sexy brown eyes. “Best offer I’ve had all day.”

“Really?” She couldn’t help chuckling as she fished out a couple of wineglasses. “Geez, Montoya, you might want to rethink your life.”

“Don’t worry, I have.” He poured the red wine as she neared the pie, the can of chopped olives, then quickly sliced the tomato and onion. “So,” she said, sprinkling the cheese over the dry pepperoni, “about the reason you’re here.” She added the chopped onion and olives onto the top of the fresh cheese, then slid her beefed-up concoction into the oven. “Why do I have the feeling that you’ve come with more bad news?”

“Is there any other kind?”

“I used to think so,” she admitted. “Now I’m not so sure, and the fact that you’re here at nearly nine at night doesn’t bode well, does it?”

“I guess not.” He handed her a glass, took a sip from his own before resting a slim hip on her kitchen stool. As he did, his jacket fell open, showing the butt of the gun in his shoulder holster, and Abby was reminded that, first and foremost, Detective Reuben Montoya was a cop. He could sip wine, laugh, turn on the sexy twinkle in his eyes, even pet her dog as if he loved chocolate Labs to death, but he was still a homicide detective investigating the death of her ex-husband, a man who might still believe she was involved.

“Geez, Detective, all you’ve brought with you is not only bad, but also disturbing news. What’s on your mind?”

“Asa Pomeroy,” he said and set his glass on the counter.

“What about him?”

“Have you been watching the news?”

She felt it then, that first premonition of dread. The sensation of relief that had been with her for the past ten minutes drained away. “No, I’ve been working. Alone in the studio.” She hitched her chin toward the back door, then took a calming sip of the wine, which was surprisingly smooth. “I haven’t even turned on the radio. What happened?”

“He’s missing.”


“Since last night.”

“You suspect foul play,” she said and the world seemed to get just a little bleaker. If a man as rich and powerful as Asa wasn’t safe, who was? No, no, her thinking was off. It was because of the wealth and influence of Pomeroy Industries that he was a target.

“We’re not certain of exactly what happened, but since he’s a neighbor of yours, I thought I’d stop and see that you were okay.”

“Fine,” she said. As the kitchen began to fill with the scents of melting cheese, warm tomato sauce, and baking onions, she thought fleetingly of the open window and the dog’s growls and snarls.

“So there was no other reason that you were running around with a hammer?”

“I told you—”

“I know what you told me, but when you opened the relieved to see me, and you were holding the hammer so hard the bones in your knuckles showed through your skin.”

“You noticed all that?”

“I am a detective,” he said. She couldn’t tell if he was ribbing her or deadly serious. Probably the latter, considering the fact that he was here to tell her about Asa.

“Okay, Detective, you caught me. The dog acted like someone might be in the house, so I checked things out.”

“With a hammer as protection?”

“It wasn’t.” But Pomeroy’s high-profile and he owns property all over the South. His business is headquartered in New Orleans, but he’s got warehouses and factories in Alabama, Texas, even as far away as Georgia. And there’s a chance he might have been taken across state lines, we’re not sure yet, but all the agencies are on alert. I work Homicide, and there’s no evidence that Pomeroy’s dead. But he’s definitely missing. Since I’ve been to your house before, I volunteered to come and warn you and find out if you’ve heard or seen anything suspicious in the neighborhood.”

“But you’re off duty,” she clarified again.

“That’s right.”

“So someone else could still come over... officially.”

“Maybe. Depends on what shakes down. So tell me what you’ve seen or heard. It doesn’t have to be something blatant, just something that caught your attention.”

“I don’t know. Nothing.” She managed to find an oven mitt, but she was stunned, had trouble absorbing everything he’d told her. She opened the oven door and a cloud of spicy heat escaped. Carefully she slid the pizza from the oven. Melted cheese bubbled and dripped over the edges of the crust as she slid the pie onto a plate.

She thought about the times she’d been by the Pomeroy estate, either in her car or on foot. “I don’t remember anything odd or suspicious,” she said.

“When I drive to my office, I go by there twice a day, once into town, once out.” Scavenging in a drawer, she came up with a dull pizza cutter. Using all her strength, she pushed hard on the handle and forced the circular blade to slice the pie into eighths. “Then, I jog past the gates when I’m taking my run, but that’s been spotty lately. Have you checked with the Stinsons? They live right across the street. Asa and Mark know each other through some kind of flying club, I think. They both have airplanes, Vanessa and Celia Stinson play bridge or golf together.”

Then I jog past the gates when I’m taking my run, but that’s been spotty lately. Have you checked with the Stinsons? They live right across the street. Asa and Mark know each other through some kind of flying club, I think. They both have airplanes, Vanessa and Celia Stinson play bridge or golf together.”

“She arranged the sliced tomatoes, found plates and a spatula, then set two pieces of pizza onto each small platter. Handing one to Montoya, she took the stool next to his but ignored the food. After hours of her stomach begging her for something to eat, she was suddenly not hungry. To think that Asa
Montoya met the questions in her eyes. “I came here to warn you,” he said, lifting a slice and taking a bite. “And to make certain you were safe.”

A cold feeling settled at the base of her spine. “I don’t even know Asa Pomeroy.”

He nodded. “Tonight, that might be a good thing.”

“I guess.”

“Eat,” he suggested. “It’s good.”

“It can’t be.”

He poured more wine and she finally sampled the pizza. He was lying. It tasted like raw onions on cardboard, but she ate it anyway.

He waited a few minutes, finishing his first piece, and said casually, “I heard you went out to the old sanitarium.”

She nearly choked on the bite she was chewing. “How did you know that?” The only person she’d confided in was Zoey and she doubted her sister had picked up the phone and called the New Orleans Police.

Were the police tailing her?

If, so, why would Montoya bring it up?

“Your aunt is Sister Maria,” he explained, then washed down another bite with a swallow of wine.

“Oh.” Heat climbed up the back of Abby’s neck at the thought of trespassing on the grounds of the hospital. “So she turned me in?”

Montoya grinned, his smile disarming. “Nah. If she wanted to punish you, she’d make you get down on your knees and say the rosary from now until eternity. I called and asked about the hospital, if anything was going on over there with the pending sale and demolition, and she mentioned that you’d been by.”

“Just my luck, to meet up with Sister Maria, the gossiping nun. She forced down another bite of pizza. “Did she say why I was there?”

“No. Even when I asked.”

“Yes, so you’re asking me?”

He didn’t respond, just stared at her.

“It’s a big deal,” she said, deciding to level with him. “Under the advice of a psychiatrist I went to a few years back, I decided to go to the hospital and confront my past. You know, walk the grounds where my mother spent her last days. She committed suicide on my fifteenth birthday, her thirty-fifth, by jumping from the window of her room...the closed window.” She shivered and added, “But you already know that, don’t you? My guess is you know a lot about me, more than anyone’s willing to admit, and that makes me wonder why?”

Growing angry, Abby pushed her plate away. It slid across the counter, nearly landing on the floor. She barely noticed.


Drilling him with her gaze, she said, “Come on, Detective-Montoya, what’s this really all about? And please, don’t be reticent or try to spare my feelings. Didn’t dear old Auntie Sister Maria tell you that confession’s good for the soul?”

He smothered a smile. “ wasn’t intimidated in the least. Blast the man. “Maybe I just wanted to see that you were okay.”

“You expect me to believe that? After you’ve had the Our Lady of Virtues spies checking up on me?” She couldn’t keep the bite out of her words, but he wasn’t offended. If anything, he appeared amused by her outrage. God, she’d love to shake some sense into him. He was just so damned maddening!

“Come on, Abby. You’re an easy man to please.”

She had trouble finding her voice. “I...I will.”

Believe what you want,” he said, standing and wiping his hands on a paper towel he snapped from a roll on the counter.

“I will.”

He tossed the used towel into the trash. “So everything cool here?”

“Boy, he wouldn’t give it up, would he?”

“Except for a neurotic dog and a paranoid cat, yeah, everything’s fine.” She was tempted to tell him about the open window, and HERSHEY’s growl-fest, but couldn’t bring herself to do it. She didn’t want to come off as some kind of scared little mouse of a woman, and besides, no one had been in the house.

She’d proved that, hadn’t she?

He looked around the kitchen as if to satisfy himself. “Well, thanks for the dinner.”

“I’ll call if I need to.”

Again, he flashed her that infectious, disarming smile, and if she let herself, and looked beyond his black goatee, she might see a dimple or two.

“It was the best invitation and dinner I’ve had in a long, long time.” When she started to protest, he held up a hand. “Seriously.”

“You’re an easy man to please.”

Maybe. His dark eyes sparked and smoldered and she felt her breath catch in the back of her throat. “Come to think of it, maybe I am.”

Oh, dear God. Her pulse was thundering. Heat curled in her stomach and spread to her limbs. What was it about this man that bothered her so? One minute he was so damned infuriating she wanted to strangle him, and the next, he was getting to her, teasing and flirting, and generally digging under her skin.

Which was not a good thing.

He was sexy as hell in his black leather jacket, faded, butt-hugging jeans, and irreverent attitude, and she guessed he knew just how to play a woman, something that should have turned her off completely. She warned herself to tread carefully; flirting was one thing, falling for a man like Detective Montoya was another thing altogether. He was still off-limits. Way off.

There was a part of her that was dying to believe that he had stopped by because he cared for her, that he had felt compelled to see her again, but that was just wishful thinking by a very feminine and silly piece of her. The more real down-to-earth side of her nature knew better.

This man was a cop. Period. He didn’t trust her and she, now, didn’t trust him.

He forced down another bite. “Do you want to say anything else?”

“I’m not saying anything.”

He nodded, picking up the phone and calling the New Orleans Police.

Montoya hesitated a beat on the threshold.

She opened the door.

Montoya hesitated a beat on the threshold.

For a full half-minute, he stared into the dark night, where the rain was beginning to lash the ground, and the wind was whipping the branches in the old oaks near the drive. “Listen,” he finally said, turning to look her full in the face. "The back of her throat tightened. “Okay.”

He slid a glance past her, to the interior and the table in the entry hall. “And the hammer’s not such a bad idea. I’m not crazy about civilians with guns and guard dogs, but protect yourself.” He frowned. “You might want a bigger one.”

“Gun or dog?”
“Hammer.”

“Like a sledge?”

“Yeah.” He nodded and dropped his hand. “A sledge would work just fine.” But he didn’t smile as he hunched his shoulders against the rain. She watched him hurry down the steps of the porch, along the brick path to the driveway and into his black Mustang. Once inside, he engaged the engine, maneuvered a quick U-turn, and drove down the lane, his taillights fading in the rain.

“Did you hear that, Hershey? The hammer thing? As if. And he doesn’t think much of your skills as a watch dog, does he?” She slid the deadbolt into place and walked into the bedroom, trying not to be depressed that he was gone. She barely knew the man, didn’t trust him. But the house seemed suddenly empty without him.

Silly.

His warnings crept back through her mind. Maybe it was time to load the .38. She had ammo in a box in the closet.

She pulled open the drawer, intent on taking Montoya’s advice.

But the gun was missing.

She blinked hard. No way! Luke’s father’s revolver couldn’t be gone! She’d seen it only a few nights earlier, right?

So what had happened to it?

Shaken, Abby sank onto her bed, thought about dialing Montoya’s cell, and decided against it. One more time, she looked in the nightstand drawer, then rolled across the bed to the other side and the matching night table. Nervously she pulled the drawer open, silently praying she would find the .38, that she’d forgotten where she’d last seen it.

No such luck.

The gun was missing.

And the window had been open.

Someone had been inside the house.

Someone had climbed inside and stolen Luke’s precious handgun.

Her breath stopped in her lungs when she considered the possibilities.

The killer could have come inside, looking for something Luke had said was precious to him. Or some obsessed fan, who had heard Luke talk on the air about the .38, was either acting out of some fanatical obsession in righting the “wrong” she’d done his hero, or had thought the gun would get a great price on eBay, or the black market, or wherever it was that someone sold a weapon stolen from a famous person.

“Too bizarre,” she murmured and too damned scary. Before allowing serious panic to set in, she spent the next half an hour tearing the bedroom and house apart, all the while hoping beyond hope that she’d misplaced the damned gun. But in the end, she found no trace of it.

So who had taken it?

And what were they going to do with it?
The old man was waiting.

Which was just fine, he thought as he slid through the darkness and climbed the fence. His truck was parked behind the shed of the abandoned sawmill and he decided this was the last time he could risk parking so close to the Pomeroy estate.

Adrenalin crackled through his body and he felt more alive than he had since killing Gierman and the virgin. The threat was much stronger now that the cops knew Pomeroy was missing. The FBI would be called in and they would wire the Pomeroy mansion while waiting for a ransom demand that wouldn’t come.

A sly smile crept across his lips.

They had no idea what was happening, not yet.

But they would tomorrow…he would see to it. He already knew how to contact them, and through whom.

As much as he loved watching the police scratch their heads and chase their tails, they were making things more difficult for him. With all the law enforcement agencies swarming around this part of the state, he would have to be careful. Very careful. That’s why he’d snagged the gun today when Abby had been working in her studio. He’d watched her for over an hour, realized she’d probably spend most of the day in her studio, so he’d taken the chance. He’d known that soon things would become harder, especially as he intended to step things up, work more quickly. So he had risked sliding into her house and slipping the .38 from its hiding spot in her bedroom.

But he had indulged himself.

Despite the danger, he’d taken the time to lie on her bed, to drink in her scent, to imagine what it would be like to feel her body under his.

Writhing.

Sweating.

Wanting.

Faith’s daughter.

His blood ran hot remembering what her bed had smelled like. In his mind’s eye he’d seen her wild curls spread on the pillow, her lips parted and trembling, her body jerking upward as he’d thrust into her. Hard. Fast. Leaving her breathless until the perfect moment when he’d take her life…

Oh, how he would have loved to have surprised her today. He trembled with anticipation and his hands were slick on the steering wheel.

Be patient.

Her time is soon.

Now he opened the gate and eased his truck through then secured the chain again. The rain, which had been pouring most of the day, had lessened a bit, and he drank in deep lungfuls of the wet, night air. Stealthily, he drove onto the highway, eventually hitting the lights. With the police ever vigilant, it was time to act.

For nearly twenty-four hours, he’d let the old man think about his life. Long enough.

Now, it was time to end it.

“Damn it!” Gina Jefferson threw her pencil across the tiny room. It hit the wall, scratching the plaster beneath her award for being the 2002 African-American Business Woman of the Year granted her by the city of New Orleans. The pencil slid down the wall, landing behind the file cabinet. “Great, Gina. Smooth move,” she muttered under her breath, angry at herself for letting her temper get the better of her. It was late, after nine, and she was the last employee to still work in the premises at Crescent City Center. She’d been here twelve hours, worked her tail off, and was as frustrated as she’d been in her fifty-five years. Feeling foolish, and glad no one else was in the room, she walked across the worn carpeting, tried to retrieve the pencil but couldn’t. The file cabinet was a behemoth and stuffed full of client files, clients who would soon have to find a new facility for their mental health needs.

Unless she could pull a cash cow out of her hat.

She’d already knocked on most of the doors of the donors she could count on, over and over again. She needed a new list of wealthy philanthropists, if there was one. Using a coat hanger, she fished out the pencil, now covered with a long, sticky cobweb. Wiping it off with a tissue, she stuffed it into the cup on her desk, a gift from someone the free mental health center had helped.

“Lordy, lordy, give me strength,” she said as she snagged her raincoat from the hall tree and slipped it on. The coat seemed tight tonight and she reminded herself that she was supposed to be on a diet, that she needed to lose at least thirty pounds, but she was too depressed to think about her ever-expanding waistline. Too depressed and too stressed. Some of her friends smoked when they were on edge, others had the good fortune not to be able to eat. She, on the other hand, found food a balm in times of anxiety, and right now she was pretty damned anxious. The center was going to close and soon if she couldn’t find a way to raise the cash necessary to keep the damned doors open.

Through the window the night seemed darker than usual, but maybe that was just because she was so depressed. After months of fund-raising, hours on the phone, working round the clock, all her efforts seemed to have been for naught. The free mental health center would inevitably close its doors. Unless the coffers of some ka-billionaire or the ka-billionaire’s charitable foundation miraculously donated thousands upon thousands of dollars to keep it open. Even then they would need more money, federal grants, and additional funds from the state or parish or city, all of which were tapped out.

Rotating the kinks from her neck, she snapped off most of the lights, then glanced through the glass doors to a spot across the street where twice this evening she’d noticed a man standing alone.

She was used to dealing with oddballs. After all, the center catered to those poor individuals who needed psychological and emotional help. The more serious cases were referred to the hospital, but most of the people they saw were troubled souls who needed some medication, or direction, or just to talk. One medical doctor and two nurses volunteered their time; the rest of the staff was made up of clinical psychologists or social workers.

In her fifteen years here, Gina had seen more than her share of strange people. So why tonight, she wondered, did she sense that there was something different about the individual she’d caught lingering on the other side of the street, just out of the circle of the lamp post’s illumination? A sixth sense?

Or just the fact that she was bone-tired?

There were lots of homeless people and drifters in this part of New Orleans. And the town had more than its share of oddballs and neurotics and druggies. As much as she loved New Orleans, she knew the dangers of the city streets. She’d been born and raised here, the oldest of seven children. Her father, Franklin, had been a boxer in his youth, a bus driver later in life. Her mother had raised the children and cooked not only for the family, but for people in the neighborhood. Then, with a small inheritance and encouragement from everyone she knew, Ezzie Brown had opened her own restaurant on the fringe of the French Quarter. All of Ezzie and Franklin’s children, whether of legal age or not, had worked in the restaurant, busing tables, waiting, cooking, mopping the floors, and cleaning the grill, all the while learning the value of a dollar, and an appreciation for good jazz. A table made out of two doors stretched across the back room behind the kitchen and was set up as a long desk where, under the hum and bright illumination of fluorescent lights,
every one of Ezzie’s kids was supposed to do his or her homework. They were surrounded by shelves packed with jars of pickles, cans of tomato paste, sacks of onions, garlic, and hot peppers, all vying for space with the boxes of cornmeal and flour.

Now, Gina engaged the alarm system, tucked her umbrella under her arm, pulled her keys from her purse, and rezippered it, then, juggling her briefcase and everything else, she shouldered open the door. Outside it was a nasty night, wet and wild, water running through the dark streets, an occasional car flying past, splashing water, thrumming with music.

The scents of the city filled her nostrils, the smell of the Mississippi ever present. Lordy, Gina loved it here.

No stranger toistered in the shadows near the streetlamp. She checked.

Breathing easier, she locked the door behind her, thinking of the restaurant where her mother, pushing eighty, still served the best creole shrimp in all of Louisiana. Her parents had taught each of their children to be strong and smart, work hard, and love the Lord. No matter how tight money had been while Gina had been growing up, Franklin and Esmeralda Brown tithe faithfully to their church, sang in the choir, donated to the missions, and made their children do so as well. Never had a neighbor come by who had not been fed. If Christmas was lean, so be it; if the bus company laid Franklin off, then he’d work odd jobs until he was hired somewhere else. Throughout it all, the good times and the bad, her parents’ rock-solid faith had never faltered.

Flustered, she started to unzip her purse for her cell phone when she sensed something, nothing that she could see, just a dark premonition that made her turn, swinging the damned umbrella. Too late! Something cold and metallic was pressed against her neck.

“Get over your bad self! You’ve done this hundreds of times, every night, like clockwork. No one’s ever bothered you. You’re just upset because the center is going to close unless you find a way to keep the doors open! You, Gina. Ain’t no one else gonna step up to this plate!”

Walking briskly, she wondered how she was going to get the quick influx of cash. The trouble was, there just wasn’t enough money to go around, she thought, fidgeting with her umbrella in the gusts of wind and rain.

But she needed one celebrity type to help out. Someone the public could relate to, someone they would trust and give generously to. She thought of Billy Ray Furlough, that nearly rabid televangelist. He managed to get people to donate weekly to his church and his catchphrase, “Lord, love ya, brother,” was heard all over the country.

She’d never appealed to Billy Ray for money; there was something too slick, too big business, about him. But she might, after tonight’s meeting, have to swallow her pride and, rather than call in, see him personally and try to fight her way through the obstacle course of receptionists, bodyguards, and yes-men to get to the preacher, the tall man who’d been labeled as possessing a “Hollywood thousand-watt smile.” That phrase alone had made her want to throw up. She figured it was some spin doctor’s idea of good press. These days, apparently, even preachers had a public image to uphold—an image that probably wouldn’t need the world to know that the good preacher himself had worked through his own “issues.”

Yes, she’d call on Billy Ray Furlough personally. And once again she’d approach Asa Pomeroy, another wealthy man in the city, one she could barely stomach. Pomeroy traded in wives for younger models on a regular basis, and he sold weapons to the highest bidder. And yet, he’d been known to donate hundreds of thousands of dollars if the cause appealed to him. And even Asa, the almighty, had a son who had battled his own share of mental challenges.

Again, she’d have to smile, ask sweetly, and bite her tongue.

You’re a hypocrite, Gina. You hate preachers who are more about glitz and television ratings than God, and you despise anyone who makes money by selling arms.

But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Boy, did she understand that old bromide. Just last week she’d phoned her friend Eleanor Cavalier, who worked at WSLJ. Gina had wanted some on-air exposure, and she’d hoped to be a guest on Samantha Leeds’s program, Midnight Confessions. Dr. Sam was a psychologist who worked at the Boucher Center off Toulouse Street and sometimes helped out here at Crescent City Center. The trouble was the program manager for the station had thought it would be more interesting for the audience if Gina appeared on Luke Gierman’s show as well. Gina, fearing she’d just made a deal with the devil, had reluctantly agreed.

She figured now, with Gierman’s murder, she was off the hook.

She walked through the parking lot to her car, fighting the umbrella, stepping in puddles that had collected in the potholes and feeling the water seep through her boots.

_A night not fit for man nor beast_, her father used to say and she realized then why it was so dark. The only security light for the entire lot had burned out.

“How odd.

She had a bad feeling, again.

The long hours were getting to her. Every little thing made her jump tonight.

What she needed was to drive the five miles to her home, take a warm shower, pour both Wally and herself a glass of wine, and eat the pants off him in a game of cut-through Scrabble. He’d be waiting for her, just as he had for the entire thirty-six years of their marriage.

He was a good man, had always been there through times of plenty and want. She reached her car and tried to slide her key into the lock, but just like everything else on this cussed night, unlocking the car turned out to be a problem. The lock was jammed.

She tried again. “Come on,” she muttered between clenched teeth, her nerves strung tight as piano wires. “Oh, for the love of Mike!”

Fluttered, she started to unzip her purse for her cell phone when she sensed something, nothing that she could see, just a dark premonition that made her turn, swinging the damned umbrella. Too late! Something cold and metallic was pressed against her neck.

She started to scream as thousands of volts of electricity sizzled through her body. Her legs gave way. Her arms flailed wildly. She couldn’t breathe. Her thoughts scattered. It felt as if a million tiny daggers were touching her skin. No! She tried to scream again and only a garbled, faint noise came out of her mouth.

Quickly and adeptly, as if he’d done it thousands of times before, her assailant slapped tape over her mouth, grabbed her keys from the pavement beside her, peeled something off the lock of her car, opened both doors on the driver’s side, and stuffed her unceremoniously into the backseat. Helpless, unable to move, she saw him scrape something from the ground . . . her purse, then the umbrella. He tossed both items into the front passenger seat.
Panicked, Gina tried to get away, to force her jellied limbs to move, but it was no use. He was quick, and using the same kind of tape he’d pressed over her mouth, he bound her ankles as her legs still dangled off the seat, hanging out of the car. Once her legs were lashed together, he crawled half inside, painfully wrenched her arms behind her back, and wound tape over her wrists.

She tried to see him and wound him, to scrape some of his skin from his arms, but he was too quick, disguised in a black wetsuit or something like it.

Who was he and why, oh, why was he doing this? With all her might she tried to struggle, to fight, to save herself, but as many orders as her brain screamed, her muscles ignored. Her arms and legs were useless. A blindfold was swiftly tied over her eyes.

In less than two minutes she was trussed and locked into the backseat of her own car and he, whoever he was, began to drive. She felt the Regal’s tires bouncing over the ruts and holes in the parking lot as he eased down the alley. Throughout the entire ordeal, he’d been silent.

**Deadly efficient.**

Working with a cold brutality that drove fear straight into her heart.

It was as if he’d planned the attack for days, or weeks, possibly even months.

But why?

**Who would do this?**

_Dear Jesus, help me!_ Tears burned behind her eyes and her entire body trembled. She tried to concentrate, to figure out a plan of escape, to, at the very least, fling herself out of the moving car, but just as the thought hit her brain, she heard the childproof door locks click down.

He slowed at, she assumed, the alley’s entrance and eased onto the street, turning toward the river.

Oh, God, where was he taking her?

To do what?

She was shaking all over, tears tracking from her eyes, and she blinked hard, tried to get her bearings.

**Think, Gina, think! Your cell phone! If you could just get to it and hit speed dial for 911.**

Frantic, she willed her muscles to respond, but what good would it do? She was tied, her arms pulled behind her back, her shoulders aching in their sockets. Besides, her phone was in her purse and her handbag was in the front passenger seat.

Her heart dropped like a stone.

There was no escape.

_There isn’t unless you find a way! Don’t give up, Gina . . . find a way out of this mess! Isn’t that what you tell the people that you counsel, that God always gives you an opportunity, you just have to discover it and work for it? Then find that opportunity, now, before it’s too late! This is a test. God’s test._

You can save yourself. _The Lord will be with you._

She tried to stay calm, to keep her wits about her, to find comfort in her faith. _God helps those who help themselves._ What she could do was concentrate on where they were going. She couldn’t see, but she knew the streets of this city like the back of her hand. The center was two blocks off Esplanade and he’d taken the alley to the west.

Now, he was driving slowly, winding through the city. She thought they were continuing west. Through the blindfold she sensed illumination, streetlights. She heard other traffic as well—tires humming, engines racing, people shouting—and then, as her Buick picked up speed, she knew they were on the freeway, but which direction? She waited for the sound of a bridge. A short one over the Mississippi River, or the bridge across Lake Pontchartrain that would go on for over twenty miles.

However, he’d taken so many corners before he accelerated onto the freeway that she was confused. Soon the illumination from the city lights no longer bled through her blindfold. She felt that they were on the freeway, but had no clue any longer which direction.

She was lost, hog-tied and alone with a would-be killer.

She prayed for her safety, but with each passing mile, her hopes for rescue died.

She knew the odds. This monster’s motive wasn’t money. Otherwise he would have stolen her wallet and jewelry and left her. Nor would he be demanding ransom as she and Wally lived modestly and had no money to speak of. She wasn’t a rich woman. So if her abduction wasn’t for money, his motive was darker, more frightening. Deadlier.

He wanted her body. To rape her or kill her or both.

She told herself that if she could get out of this with her life, she would be lucky. She reminded herself that no matter what vile or painful acts were to come, there would be more to do, more else to matter but that.

Suddenly muted music, a lilting little jingle, rang through the car. Fresh tears slid from her eyes as she recognized the ring tone she’d assigned to her home phone. Wally was calling. Waiting. The wine poured, the Scrabble game on the kitchen table. Her throat clogged. She was probably only ten minutes away, but she couldn’t see, she didn’t know what they were doing. She couldn’t hear, she didn’t know the streets of this city like the back of her hand. The center was two blocks off Esplanade... and he’d taken the alley to the west.

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It all seemed so far away now as she lay in the backseat listening to the cell phone.

**The phone quit ringing and her heart nosedived.**

Don’t give up on me, Wally. **Please!**

Ten minutes later the same song began to play from inside her purse. The driver ignored her cell phone. As if he didn’t care. As if he wasn’t worried. Didn’t he know about GPS chips? That the phone could be found by the cell towers where the signals were picked up, or something? She hadn’t paid much attention to the spiel when the salesman had gone on and on about the value of the Global Positioning Chip which was part of her new cell phone, but now, she only hoped that, however it worked, it would help.

Again the phone stopped ringing and she imagined the worry in Wally’s voice as he left another message in her voice mail box.

Still her abductor drove. On and on through the night. Gina had no idea where they were but assumed from the lack of sounds of traffic and the time that had passed that they were far from New Orleans.

When the phone rang for the third time, she nearly sobbed. Poor sweet, brilliant Wally. He was probably worried out of his mind. But he would start looking for her and that was good. He would call the police, they would search for her car, and the GPS chip . . . oh, Lord, she’d never put her faith in technology before.

They drove for what seemed an hour longer before he turned off the freeway and onto a smooth, curving road. The cell phone rang twice more . . . and she expected that Wally had started calling friends and family.

Finally, her kidnapper slowed the car. He turned hard to the right, and the car jostled and bumped, the sound of weeds or brush scraping the undercarriage. Dear God, where had he taken her?

Her heart was knocking as the tires slid to a stop. He cut the engine, then opened the car door and she smelled the heavy, loamy odor of forest and swamp. Crickets chirped, bull frogs croaked, and the wind swept into the Regal’s interior, bringing with it the scents of swamp water and decaying vegetation.

She braced herself. This was it. Well, she wasn’t going down without a fight.

The back door of the Buick was yanked open and she started to squirm and struggle.

“I’ve got a gun,” he said. “Don’t move.” To reinforce his warning, he touched the cold, hard steel barrel to her thigh. He wasn’t kidding. “And a knife.”
This time a long, cool blade slid down her leg. She nearly lost control of her bladder. *Now for certain she knew. He was going to kill her. With the gun, if she was lucky. There was no way out of this. Lord, please help me. Give me strength.*

He slid the blade of the knife between her knees and lower. If she could get some control of her muscles, she could kick up with both feet, maybe slam him in the face with her boots, but just as she thought of it, the knife sliced down hard and cut through the tape surrounding her ankles. She reacted, swinging a booted foot in a hard kick, but he caught her foot in one strong grip and twisted. Hard. Pain shot up her leg. Her knee popped. She squealed behind her gag.

“Bitch!” he growled, in a deep, disguised voice. “Don’t you understand?”

Oh, God, yes, she understood. Pain screamed up her thigh. He was going to hurt her. Badly.

He pulled her roughly from the car, and though she was far from petite, he was strong enough to set her on her feet and prod her forward, the nose of his gun at her spine.

“Move,” he pushed.

Had she heard his voice before? Was it familiar?

She inched forward in the blackness, her knee throbbling, her entire body quivering with fear. Her boots sank into the mud, but she plowed forward, refusing to cry out, determined to either find a way to thwart him, or die embracing Jesus.

All around her the smell of the swamp was thick and she imagined snakes and gators and all manner of beasts slithering through the night, none deadlier than the creature who had abducted her.

The toe of her boot slammed against something solid and she almost fell. “Up,” he commanded. “Two steps.”

Swallowing back her fear, she managed to climb the two risers, and as she did, she felt his breath on her neck as he reached around her. A screen door squeaked and he urged her again with the gun’s cruel muzzle. Her boots clunked unevenly across what she assumed to be a porch.

Another door creaked open and her heart was hammering so loudly she thought it might explode.

“Inside!” The gun pushed urgently against her.

She inched forward. Even with the blindfold, she felt a new darkness, a closeness. Her every nerve ending was alive, her muscles tense, sweat covering her body. She was in a house, an empty house, she thought, her footsteps loud and reverberating against the floor. It smelled of dirt and misuse and something else, something acrid . . . urine?

Animal? Or human?

Her stomach shriveled.

Oh, dear Jesus, were there dead people in here? Or were they alive, kept here against their will? A tiny bit of light pierced through her blindfold, a dim illumination. Her imagination ran wild as she felt him step closer to her.

“That’s far enough,” he said into her ear, and she felt the edge of a cold steel blade against her cheek. He was behind her, pressed tightly against her, and she felt a fear as cold and dark as any she had ever known.

He shifted, one arm around her ribs, the gun pressed under her breasts as he slowly and sensuously slid the blade of the knife down the slope of her cheek. Against her back, she felt his erection. The jerk was getting off on this! Tears burned her eyes. All hope drained.

The knife moved lower, beneath her chin. To that soft, vulnerable tissue.

*Oh, God . . .* She quaked inside, her tears drenching the blindfold.

The blade pressed hard, moving seductively against the column of her neck, lingering at the soft spot between her collarbones. He was breathing rapidly now, short panting bursts against her ear.

Her knees gave out in fear, and had he not been holding her up, she would have fallen.

Jesus, give me strength.

Just when she was certain he would slice her throat, he moved and, as she gasped, cut the tape at her wrists. If she had known his plan, she would have been ready, but in the split second when she realized she was unbound, he shifted, holding the knife to her throat and forcing the gun into her hand.

She couldn’t believe it. If she turned the weapon on him now, took the chance that she could kill him first, what did it matter? He was going to kill her anyway.

“Shoot,” he commanded as his steely, gloved fingers covered hers.

*What?* He aimed the weapon in front of her, pointed downward, and she heard another sound . . . a muted cry?

So there was someone else in the room.

“Shoot, Gina!”

Hearing her name made her want to throw up. That she was a part of this macabre, twisted act, whatever it was, made her stomach wrench.

The knife wiggled at her throat and she felt a hot, searing pain as he cut her.

Hearing her name made her want to throw up. That she was a part of this macabre, twisted act, whatever it was, made her stomach wrench.

“Don’t do it. Gina. Don’t . . . there is something horrible happening here, something worse than you originally thought.”

Another muffled squeal.

From the area in front of her. The spot where he was aiming the gun. Dear Jesus, was he forcing her to do it? She tried to jerk away, but the hand over hers tightened, positioning the heavy gun. It was wobbling in her hand, but he took control and squeezed, forcing her finger to pull the trigger.

*Bang!*

The gun’s report was a crack of thunder.

Her hand flew up, but he held her tight.

A wail, muted by something, pierced the night.

*Oh, Lord what had she done?*

The smell of cordite and blood filled the air.

“Retribution,” her attacker growled as he yanked off the blindfold.

Gina’s eyes adjusted to the light, a small bulb at one corner of a large pine-paneled room. “Oh, dear Lord, no,” she whispered as she saw what she had done. A big man with mussed white hair and a shocked expression was staring at her, his hole in his chest gaping, blood flowing.

She recognized him as someone she detested, the very man she’d hoped to appeal to for money, even if she would have had to grovel for it. A low moan of denial whispered over her lips as she watched Asa Pomeroy die. “No . . . oh, no, no, no.”

Shaking violently, she shrank back, tried to drop the gun, but the monster was still behind her, his erection still hard as a rock. His fingers tightened over her throat, forcing her finger to pull the trigger.

She nearly lost control of her bladder. *Now for certain she knew. He was going to kill her. With the gun, if she was lucky. There was no way out of this. Lord, please help me. Give me strength.*
Maury Taylor looked at the note in his hands and knew it was pure gold. He’d overslept, run through the shower, thrown on his jogging suit, bought his morning jolt from one of those drive-through espresso huts, then parked his old Toyota in the lot across from the station. He hadn’t had time for the morning paper, not today.

For the next hour, he’d sorted through the mail addressed to Gierman’s Groaners or The Luke Gierman Show. He’d shuffled through cards, sympathetic notes, some stupid gifts including a tape of an old show—like the station didn’t have them all?—the same old drivel. He was nearly finished when he’d found this gem in the pile and knew in an instant that his life had just changed forever.

For the better.

Big time.

The simple note had come to the radio station addressed to Luke Gierman, the dead man himself, and was encased in a plain white envelope with block letters and no return address.

Ever since Luke’s death, the station had gotten bags full of cards and letters and notes. Not to mention hundreds of e-mail messages daily. The guy was more popular in death than life, and the ratings for his show were through the roof, which was just fine with Maury. The station manager was talking about making Maury the permanent host and eventually changing the name to something like Maury Taylor Presents Gierman’s Groaners . . . it was a mouthful and would eventually become just the Maury Taylor Show, but, the eager station manager had assured him, they’d have to work on something a little more memorable and personal. Taylor’s Trash Talk sounded pretty good, but was too feminine. He didn’t want to sound like some black chick . . . but things were looking up. Soon he’d get his due.


Ouch!

In Maury’s opinion, Luke had been a real jerk. A pompous pain in the ass. Nonetheless, Mrs. Taylor had raised no fool for a son, and Maury, despite his feelings about Luke, had gone along for the ride, playing the role of idiot, laughing uproariously at things that secretly offended him, even pushing the groan button at a particularly bad pun or statement.

Hell, who wouldn’t have taken the chance to be a part of a growing, popular show? Few people got rich being a radio jock, but Luke had broken through to the big leagues, and, judging by the amount of flowers, cards, and calls that had arrived at WSLJ, touched a lot of people, who were either fascinated or repulsed by his show.

But now it was Maury’s turn.

Because of this.

Maury read the single white sheet of paper one more time.

REPEND

A L

God, he’d love to read that one single word on the air, stir up the audience by suggesting he’d had contact with Luke’s killer . . . imagine the ratings. His palms sweated at the thought. So the police would be pissed. Wasn’t that what the station’s lawyers were all about? He’d been flirting with jumping ship and taking a job over at WNAB, but first, he wanted to see how things were going to be handled here in the wake of Luke’s demise.

So far, it was lookin’ good.

And now he was holding the goddamned keys to the kingdom, if he dared use them.

What would Luke do?

That was a slam dunk.

Maury didn’t have a second’s hesitation. He walked to the copy machine in the backroom, nodded to Ramblin’ Rob, a wiry old fart of a DJ who still played platters. Rob was drinking a potful of coffee while working the crossword puzzle, his usual routine before he went on the air. He challenged himself to finish it, then have time for a last cup of coffee and a smoke in the back alley before he sat down at the mike, playing requests from his stacks of old LPs.

Maury slid the note into the copy machine and pressed the start button. He did have one disturbing thought. What if the note proved to be a fraud? Just because he had a gut feeling about it didn’t mean anything. He didn’t want to come off as a buffoon. Not any longer. He’d played that role far too long as it was.

So how would he deal with that on the air later this afternoon . . . oh, hell, he’d just tell the audience about it, knowing the sender was listening, and then he’d bait the guy, force his hand. Maybe whoever wrote the note, whether he was a nutcase just looking for publicity, or the real killer, would respond. Especially if Maury jerked his chain a bit.

If so, the listening audience would go crazy. The buzz would be instantaneous. It wouldn’t matter if the note turned out to be a fraud or not. He thought about how it would play on the air and nearly got a hard-on.

The wheels in his mind were turning faster and faster, like a train gaining speed as the Xerox machine spat out his copy. He grabbed it and the original and was heading out the door when Rob looked up from his puzzle.

“Hey! You hear the news?”

“What news?” Maury stopped short, irritated by the interruption, but curious just the same. He hoped that Luke’s killer hadn’t been found, not yet.

“The kidnapping.”

“They find Pomeroy?”

“No, don’t know.” The crusty old DJ pulled a face, all his wrinkles creasing more deeply. “No, I’m talking about Gina Jefferson, you know who she is?”

“I do-gooder? Involved in the Urban League, always clamoring to the city council about funding for her clinic, the woman who Luke wanted on the show so that he could publicly fill her? That Gina Jefferson?”

“Yeah, that one,” Rob said, obviously disgusted. “And, ya know, do-gooder isn’t a dirty word. I know Gierman had a lot of fun knocking her, but she’s a great lady. Done a helluva lot for the city and the homeless and, you know, the people who are a few beers shy of a six-pack. Anyway, she’s missing, too.”

“Missing? Like Pomeroy?” Maury said. For a second he felt a pang of fear for the woman, but then the wheels in his mind began spinning again. Even more rapidly than before. Somehow this would make a great show . . . two of the city’s leading citizens missing, one a wealthy do-anything-for-a-buck industrialist, the other a bleeding heart who helped the downtrodden . . . yeah, oh, man, yeah. This was an incredible show in the making. “Was she kidnapped?”

He asked and glanced down at his note.

Could this piece of paper have anything to do with the missing people? Hadn’t Luke been kidnapped? And the girl, Courtney LaBelle?

“Appears that way. No one knows for certain yet. There hasn’t even been a ransom note for Pomeroy and he’s been missing, what? Two or three days?”

Rob thought long and hard. “Makes ya wonder what the hell is going on.”

The letter in Maury’s hand nearly burned him. He walked toward the door, afraid Rob might get suspicious. No one could know what he was up to. Not
Laura Beck was furious.

She drove her Lincoln Continental with a Manolo Blahnik-encased lead foot. That wasn’t really true, she thought ruefully. The leopard print sling backs weren’t really Blahniks, but they were damned good knockoffs and they’d cost over two hundred bucks, so she wasn’t happy that she’d have to walk through the rain and chance and sand and dirt.

Growing up a poor kid in Appalachia, she’d learned the value of a dollar at an early age, and it was only through smarts, grit, and yes, sleeping with the right men, that she’d come close to getting what she absolutely couldn’t live without.

So no low-life squatting was going to ruin the best deal she had going. No way. No how. She’d been in the diamond club of Respected Realty Company for the past eight years, selling over ten million dollars in real estate each and every year, in good times and in bad.

Now, she had a chance to buy out the owner of the realty company and she planned to expand the business to other cities. But even with all the cash she’d squirreled away, she still needed Asa Pomeroy’s account to make it happen.

Damn the man, where was he?

Why the sudden vanishing act?

As she drove along the winding road to her hunting lodge, she had a premonition that he might be dead, and if so, lawsey-mercy, all of her plans would go up in smoke . . . well, unless she talked to his heirs. Fortunately the eldest son, Christian, hadn’t been around for years, but Asa still had a couple of bitter ex-wives, a daughter who was an uptight bitch, and another son who was a blithering idiot and thought he was God’s gift to women. Jeremy Pomeroy had come on to her often enough. Practically at every chance he got. A big bore of a man, Jeremy took after his self-involved daddy, though Jeremy hadn’t been born with his father’s brains or work ethic. And those kids of his! Holy terrors. Just the thought of Asa’s grandsons set Laurie’s teeth on edge. As bad as their swaggering, good-ol’-boy father and as cold as their mother, those two adolescent half-wits were damned scary.

She shuddered thinking how she’d had to put up with the entire Pomeroy family last Christmas, smiling and laughing at off-color jokes, feeling her butt being pinched by too-friendly fingers, getting caught under the mistletoe at every turn.

All because she wanted a piece of the Pomeroy fortune.

She and every other real estate agent in Louisiana. She turned off the rural road and onto the long gravel lane that ambled through the estate, past century-old trees, and over leaf-strewn ruts. Brush and brambles obscured the view of the lodge from the road, but she noticed that the gates had been left open. Weird. Though the maid service and gardener didn’t have the keys, they knew to close the gates.

It seemed as if nothing about this listing was going right!
“You can pull this off,” she said then caught herself as she heard a bit of her Appalachian twang, the speech pattern she’d spent years disguising. It wasn’t the part of the country that embarrassed her. Lord, some of the nicest people she’d ever known lived in the mountains and holless of West Virginia, the breathtakingly beautiful country filled with God-fearing, music-loving, hardworking people. It was the poor part of her past that made her skin crawl and caused her to spend her life running from that poverty.

She glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. She still looked good, even though the big four-oh loomed just over next spring’s horizon. Her hair was a vibrant red with perfect gold highlights, her green eyes wide and sexy, her body toned by a strict regimen of salads, low-fat dressings, sugar-free yogurt, and two hours in the gym every morning at five. Two cups of black coffee and she was wired for the day.

God, she loved her work.

But not when some idiots tried to sabotage it.

She’d gotten a call from a neighbor that there was a car at the lodge . . . and on tour day! At first she’d thought it was the groundskeeper who had been scheduled to clean up the place, but the neighbor assured her no work was being done on the estate and the car was not the usual beat-up green pickup. Great, she thought angrily. Just . . . freaking great!

She’d already had the interior of the place cleaned to a spit-polished glow, and her car was filled with two thermoses of coffee, a fruit platter, and a basket of mini-beignets for the other agents who were planning on driving all the way out here as part of the weekly tour. The first of the lot were due to arrive at the Pomeroy hunting lodge in less than two hours. How the hell was that going to happen now?

“Damn it,” she muttered as she sped the old Buick in the drive. The neighbor had been right. Well, whoever was here was going to get the hell out. Careful, Laura. Treat carefully. Remember what Mama used to say: “You can’t sell a book by its cover.” Maybe whoever is here is interested in buying the place. There could be an armada of Mercedeses and Porsches or Ferraris in this guy’s garage.

No way.

The neighbor had called two hours earlier and Laura doubted a prospective buyer would hang out for hours just waiting. It wasn’t someone here early for the tour and the Regal sure as hell didn’t look like someone’s idea of a hunting rig.

Strange.

She nosed her Lincoln close to the Buick and parked. Climbing out of her car, she felt the first little tickle of a run in her panty hose—dear God, why had she bothered today? No big deal. She’d strip them off and show off her legs. Carefully dodging puddles, she walked up to the Buick. It was unlocked. And empty.

So where was the driver?

Inside?

She looked at the large rambling old lodge with its steep roof, dormers, and pine needles collecting in the gutters. All the windows seemed shut. How would the Buick’s owner get inside? The building was locked and secured with a real estate agent’s lock box. Or had been. Maybe the maid had returned with another key. Or maybe she’d left not only the gate wide open, but the building unlocked as well.

That thought royally pissed Laura off.

The tiny run in her stocking crawled upward and moisture seeped through the sides of her shoes as she marched up to the door, ready to use her electronic release for the lock box and grab the key hidden inside.

But as she mounted the two wide steps, she stopped dead in her tracks. The lock box was missing, not hooked to the handle of the giant door of the lodge as she’d left it two days earlier. Damn it. What did that mean? Her gaze took in the broad porch and she made a mental note to sweep it off before the tour began. The past few nights’ storms had pushed dry leaves and pine needles onto the hundred-year-old floorboards, and the damned lazy landscape maintenance man hadn’t bothered to show up . . . oh, hell. She spied the lock box, its handle snapped clean through, propped against a post of the porch rail.

“Son of a bitch,” she muttered, now not the least bit disconcerted about her twang.

She walked to the door, turned the knob easily, and pushed on the heavy oak panels. So much for security. The door opened as softly as if the hinges had been freshly oiled.

Strange.

Frowning, she took a step inside and had the instant sensation that something was wrong.

Well, no shit! The place is open!

“Hello?” she called out, the knockoffs clicking on the polished hardwood of the foyer. Smudges of dirt and a few dry leaves marred the shine. And there was something else. A hundred-dollar bill. Big as you please. Ben Franklin staring up at her from beneath a small table near the front door. “What the devil?”

Who had been in here and dropped a C-note?

The driver of the Buick?

The person who had broken in?

Glancing up the stairway, where hand-turned rails supported a gleaming banister, she yelled, “Anybody here?”

The rambling country home was silent as a tomb.

“Hello?”

She noticed a second bill in the archway leading to the living area . . . and another. Three hundred dollars. She picked up each of the bills and walked into the living room, where she saw more bills, a dozen or more, lying on the floorboards but they weren’t pristine. They were smudged with dirt and . . . blood?

Her heart kicked. Oh, God. That’s what it was, red stains smudged over Ben Franklin’s face. Then she smelled it, that coppery odor that had accompanied her father when he’d come back from a hunting trip with gutted deer or from slaughtering the pigs . . . Yes, that’s what she smelled. Blood and urine turning acrid, to sting the nostrils with the burn of ammonia.

She took two steps farther into the living area, where she could see the floor in front of the couch.

“Oh, God!”

Two bodies were lying on the floor. Obviously dead. A fully dressed, plump black woman on top of a bare-assed naked Asa Pomeroy.

“Jesus, no!” Laurie cried, backing up, nearly screaming out loud. “Oh, no, no, no . . .” She saw the bullet holes and the blood, pooled beneath Asa and streaking down the side of the woman’s face. A pearl-handled handgun was still clutched in the woman’s right hand.

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No, not just any woman, Laura finally realized. As her brain kicked into gear, she recognized the facial features of Gina Jefferson, the woman who’d been reported missing earlier today.

Laurie gagged.

Throughout the room, hundred-dollar bills were scattered, littering the bodies floor and couch, catching in the breeze from the open door.

Laura stumbled, turned on the thin heel of her sling back, ran for the door. She lost one of her shoes in the process. She didn’t stop, nor did she lock up, just leapt off the porch and sprinted to her Lincoln.

Inside, she turned on the ignition. The Lincoln’s tires sprayed gravel as she tore out. Her heart was pounding and she felt as if every hair on her head had turned instantly gray. Asa’s bloated face, his mussed white hair, the stain of blood, and his hideous beached-whale, white carcass, covered with the body of Gina Jefferson.

Her stomach curdled.

“Oh, God,” she whispered and scrabbled in her purse for her cell phone. She dialed 911 on the fly, not stopping at the country road, just careening onto it and nearly hitting a pickup truck loaded with live chickens as she slid over the center line.
The pickup driver laid on his horn and shook his fist, but she barely noticed as the emergency operator answered. “Nine-one-one. Police Dispatch. What’s the nature of your emergency?”

“I need to report a murder. A double murder!” Laura yelled, hyperventilating, her heart pounding, feeling for all the world as if she might pass out as the Lincoln streaked down the highway. “And . . . oh, God . . . you can stop looking. I’ve found Asa Pomeroy and Gina Jefferson. He’s dead! She’s dead! Oh, God, they’re both dead!” she cried, fighting the urge to puke. She cranked on the steering wheel at the next driveway, stood on the brakes, heard the thermoses slosh and the tray of fruit and pastry slam forward against the front seat. For once she didn’t care, just threw open the door and leaned out, heaving up this morning’s coffee.
“Pomeroy owns this place?” Montoya asked as he surveyed the crime scene. The 911 dispatch center had notified homicide as well as the FBI of the call they’d received. The operator had managed to pull the address out of a horrified Laura Beck, the real estate agent who had found the bodies and was now down at the police station talking to Brinkman.

It was late evening and dark. Lights had been set up, and the area roped off with crime-scene tape. Crowded inside this old hunting lodge, there were not only the crime-scene investigators but agents from the local field office, the sheriff’s department, and the Louisiana State Police. Also, detectives from both the Cambrai and New Orleans Police Departments had shown up earlier in the afternoon, trying to work together and stay out of each other’s way.

Bonita Washington, in a no-nonsense mood, had already barked at Montoya twice, first to sign the damned log and then to don covers for his shoes. He’d done both and held his tongue while Inez Santiago measured and took pictures. Another investigator dusted while a fourth studied the blood spatter.

The old hunting lodge was being examined board by board, trace evidence collected, the victims’ hands bagged, not only photographs snapped but a video recording taken as well.

Everyone was tense.

No one cracked a joke.

They knew they were dealing with another serial killer in an area that had seen far too many.

This scene was staged identically to the Gierman-LaBelle murders with the one exception that Gina Jefferson hadn’t been dressed in a bridal gown. In fact, it appeared as if she was wearing exactly what she had on when she’d gone missing. Her husband, Walter, had described her navy blue pantsuit and blouse to a T.

But Asa was naked as the proverbial jaybird. Not a stitch on. The clothes he’d been wearing had been left in a wrinkled pile near the fireplace: hat, boots, slacks, jacket, and underwear. Without so much as a drop of blood on any piece of the clothing. Nope. He’d been stripped before he was killed, rather than after. Just like Gierman.

The obvious difference in this scene was that over the bodies and the surrounding flooring, hundred-dollar bills had been strewn like snowflakes.

Why?

“Take a closer look at his body,” Bentz said, motioning toward Pomeroy. “Check out the tiny bruise marks on his neck, close together, the skin red.”

“Stun gun?”

“That would be my guess.”

“What about her?” Montoya asked, hitching his chin at the corpse of Gina Jefferson.

“None found yet.”

“So our killer only pulled out the voltage for Pomeroy.”

“Near as we can tell without moving the bodies, over six grand.”

“Not tough enough,” Montoya observed, frowning as he rubbed at his goatee. “If we’re talking about the same killer, and I’d put money on it, he’s changing his routine. This is different from how Gierman and LaBelle were handled. No stun gun marks on their bodies. And look here.” He pointed to one side of Gina Jefferson’s face, where a long thin cut sliced down her cheek and blood had oozed only to dry. “This isn’t the same as the first scene either.”

“But these two weren’t as compliant as the first. Or it could be that he’s honing his skills. Something didn’t work as well as he’d wanted the first time, so he improved his system, pulled out the stun gun and knife.”

“Or he’s getting off on his victim’s pain,” Montoya said, not liking that train of thought.

“We’re already checking on who purchased a stun gun lately; maybe by the marks on Pomeroy’s throat, we can figure out the make and model.”

“That would help,” Montoya agreed. “So what about the weapon that killed them?”

We think it belonged to Mrs. Jefferson’s husband, Walter. A few weeks ago, he came into the station and reported one of his pearl-handled revolvers had been stolen. Two were in the gun case, only one taken. From his den, while both he and his wife were working. I’ve got a call in to the officer who took the report and did the follow-up, but I doubt if we get much. Weapons are stolen every day. We’ll see what the officer has to say, but the husband’s a real mess, doesn’t want to believe that his wife is gone, blames himself for the weapon being taken, the whole nine yards. Zaroster and Brinkman have already talked to him, gotten one of his brothers to come and stay with him, just in case he’s so depressed he loses it and tries to do something stupid, like off himself.”

“Maybe these two weren’t as compliant as the first. Or it could be that he’s honing his skills. Something didn’t work as well as he’d wanted the first time, so he improved his system, pulled out the stun gun and knife.”

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“Like as we can tell without moving the bodies, over six grand.”

Montoya whistled. “Obviously the motive wasn’t money.”

“I talked to Pomeroy’s wife. She says Asa kept five thousand locked in the glove box of his car at all times in case he joined up with a private poky party. Kept it in one of those purple velvet Crown Royal whiskey bags. But that was just his backup wad. He usually carried another fifteen hundred or so on him, in the gold money clip she gave him for Christmas a couple of years back.”

“Is the money clip here?”

Bentz shook his head.

“You figure the killer took it?”

“If the missus can be believed, he never left home without it.” Bentz shot him a look. “Wives have been known to be wrong about their husbands’ habits when those husbands are off-lead.”

Montoya walked around the bodies, viewing the death scene from another angle. “Let’s just assume the wife knows what she’s talking about. So, the killer takes the money clip but leaves the cash Pomeroy had in his pocket at the scene. The killer also somehow knows about the glove box stash and includes that in our confetti here. Either Pomeroy, maybe pleading for his life, told him about his money or the killer, or someone he works with, is close enough to Pomeroy to know about the cash in the glove box.”

“Until we find the car, we won’t know.”


“Yeah.” Bentz nodded. He was avoiding staring for any length of time at the victims. Montoya remembered that Bentz always had trouble keeping the contents of his stomach down whenever he visited a murder scene.

“Anything taken from her?” Montoya asked. An investigator was prying the two corpses away from each other to check for lividity and take each body’s internal temperature.

“Maybe. Mr. Jefferson swears she always wears a simple gold cross, one her mother gave her years before. On a chain around her neck.”

“I take it, it’s not there.” Montoya glanced at the two now separated bodies.
“Not that we’ve found.”

“Bingo,” Santiago said, lowering her camera. She was looking at the base of a leather ottoman and the swath of purple fabric that was peeking from beneath it. “Bet the Crown Royal Bag is under this.” She took several more shots and, using gloves, moved the ottoman, then snapped off several more shots of the floor beneath the crumpled whiskey bag.

“Looks like the wife was right this time,” Montoya said as Santiago slipped the purple velvet drawstring pouch into a plastic evidence bag.

Montoya had seen enough. He didn’t understand why in each case the bodies had been positioned in a way to suggest the victims were lovers. What was the point of that? Skirring the central part of the crime scene, he walked with Bentz through the front door to the porch, where an officer stood guard, the sign-in log in his hand. Headlights and klieg lights were visible through the trees; the press was still camping out. Overhead the steady whoop, whoop, whoop of helicopter blades accompanied the beam of a searchlight from a local television station.

Bentz and Montoya lingered under the porch’s overhang rather than be caught by the sweep of the searchlight or the cameraman’s lens. “Courtney LaBelle always wore a diamond cross, and it was left in favor of the promise ring.” Bentz looked thoughtful.

“As I said, our boy ain’t about money.” His back to the breeze that was carrying the scent of damp earth and rain, Montoya automatically reached into his jacket pocket for his pack of cigarettes. His fingers scraped the empty pocket liner before he realized what he was doing. If Bentz noticed, he didn’t comment.

“Serial killers don’t do it for the money. It’s about power, ego-stroking, showing off, or some kind of personal mission.”

“And they don’t usually cross race lines,” Montoya said. “Whites kill whites, blacks kill blacks. But now, it appears we’ve got three white bodies, one African-American.”

“Usually. Yeah.” Bentz scowled and jammed his hands into his pockets. “What makes you think there’s anything usual about this case? Our guy has an agenda. This isn’t random. So he might not fit the profile.”

“Agreed.” Montoya knew that statistically serial killers were usually white, male, and somewhere in their twenties or thirties. They may have been abused; they probably had a history of childhood violence. It wasn’t true in every single instance, but it was the norm. However, there was always the exception to the rule, and Montoya wondered if this guy just might be it. “It’s obvious he’s trying to tell us something. With the things he’s taken, the way he stages the crimes. Why are the men naked, the women dressed and lying on top? Is he showing that there’s sex involved? Or is he signifying physical or psychological dominance? Why make it appear as if the woman killed the man, then turned the gun on herself?”

“If we knew all that shit, we’d have him.” Bentz scratched the back of his neck and gazed into the surrounding darkness. Another chopper joined the first, and arcs of blue light sliced through the night. He glanced up at the sky. “Give me a break,” he muttered.

Montoya’s cell phone chirped and he answered, “Montoya.”

“Hey, it’s Zaroster. You aren’t by any chance listening to the radio?”

“I’m at the crime scene.”

“Take a break and listen to WSLJ, Gierman’s Groomers. It could be that the killer’s surfacing.”

“Got it.” Montoya was already on his way to his cruiser, long strides tearing up the ground, Bentz at his side. The sweep of the helicopter’s light zeroed in on them, but he didn’t care.

“What is it?”

“Zaroster thinks the killer’s contacted the radio station.”

He turned the ignition to ACC, flipped on the radio, and found WSLJ. Maury Taylor’s nasal voice was on the airwaves.

“Good idea. I’d better finish up here. Call me.” Bentz glanced at the dash where Montoya’s fist had hit. “Careful with the car,” he said, climbing out of the station here. Any idiot can do that. So, if you’re listening A L, don’t get it. I mean, I know that you’re trying to creep me out and all, but I’m not all that convinced you’re the real deal.”

“What?” Bentz asked softly.

“I mean, I’d expect something a whole lot better than this to prove that you’re the killer. So I’m going to assume that it’s a fake, that whoever you are, A L, you’re just out for your fifteen minutes. Sorry. Pa-A L, you won’t get ’em from me. So, okay, enough with cowards and fakes, let’s get down to the topic of the night: Cheating on your spouse. If you can get away with it, who does it really hurt?”

“Son of a bitch!” Montoya hit the dashboard with his fist. “The killer’s contacted him. That scrawny-necked piece of crap!”

“Maybe the killer’s contacted him, maybe not. Remember who we’re dealing with. Maury Taylor would sell his soul to the devil, then renge on the deal if he got a better offer and higher ratings were involved. This could all be just a publicity stunt.”

Montoya, ready to spit nails, swore again. “Darn it all to hell, I think it’s time to visit our friends over at WSLJ.”

“Good idea. I’d better finish up here. Call me.” Bentz glanced at the dash where Montoya’s fist had hit. “Careful with the car,” he said, climbing out of the Crown Vic. “It’s publicly owned.”

“Sheove it, Bentz. Get the hell out of the car so I can go throttle that little dick-head.”

Bentz slid across the seat, slamming the door shut behind him. Montoya backed up then hit the gas, tearing down the lane, only to have to slow for the cluster of vehicles at the gate. Cop cars, lights flashing, half barricaded the drive while press vans collected as close to the crime scene as possible. Vehicles from rubberneckers lined the street, and knots of people stood and stared through the open gate, hoping for a glimpse of a victim or God knew what. Montoya wished they’d all go home. “Get a life,” he muttered under his breath as one woman wearing a yellow slicker barely moved out of his way. She stared after him. He wondered vaguely if the killer was among them.

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himself.

It didn’t matter. The important thing, the only thing that mattered, was that the note had been delivered.

Though the audio reception within the basement of the hospital was sometimes difficult, tonight the radio waves were getting through; he could hear the Gierman show with perfect clarity in this—one of the padded cells where those patients who had been out of control had been contained. It was a perfect room for honing his muscles. He was just finishing his daily routine—one that had been outlined by the armed forces—a regimen of sit-ups, pull-ups, push-ups, jumping jacks, and running in place. He had one elastic band he used for resistance as well as a set of graduated weights. A bench was tucked in the far corner. He worked out each day during the airing of the Gierman show. He’d intended to go on his routine, but he couldn’t help himself today. He’d finish later, perhaps do an extra set, but for now, he drew himself into a sitting position and crossed his ankles. Naked and sweating on the mat, his elbows resting on his knees, he picked up a towel from the floor and blotted his body as Maury Taylor, thinking himself so smooth and sly, tried to bait him.

“... it doesn’t take a brain surgeon to send a simple, and I mean simple, note....”

“How would you know, you idiot?” he said, swiping the sweat from his face. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, still smel...
The virgin had been the first.
The philanthropist the second.
But he was just getting started and he felt anticipation sizzle through his blood when he thought of the third . . .
Montoya slid his cruiser into a no-parking zone, stood on the brakes, and switched off the ignition in one swift motion. Blood pounding at his temples, he stormed inside the building near Jackson Square that housed WSLJ.

Ignoring a pretty woman with coffee-colored skin and corn rows who sat behind the reception desk, he headed straight down the hall.

“Wait a minute.” From the corner of his eye he saw her look up from her computer. “May I help you?”

Montoya kept walking.

“Sir, sir, you can’t go down there!”

He heard the click of high heels as if she intended to physically stop him. Digging out his badge, he flashed it behind him and kept walking so fast he was nearly jogging.

“Officer, please!”

The inside of the building was a rabbit warren, but he’d been here before. He horned in on the glassed-in studio with its lights warning ON AIR. Through the window he saw the weasel, headset on, seated at a console, talking to everyone who was tuned into this edition of Gierman’s Groaners.

Disregarding the illuminated sign, Montoya yanked open the door, strode into the room, and glared at the skinny, balding disk jockey whose claim heretofore had been Luke Gierman’s ass-licker. “You stupid, dumb son of a bitch!” Montoya growled, not caring that all of greater New Orleans and the surrounding parishes could hear him on their radios.

“Oh, look, what we’ve got here—a visit from New Orleans’s finest!” Maury said. He was smiling broadly, as if he’d known Montoya would show.

“Officer, to what do I owe the honor of—”

Montoya keyed in on the main power switch and slammed it. Lights blinked off and Maury’s mouth fell open. “Hey! You can’t do that!” Maury was bare-assed, knees still pressed against the wooden floor, reaching for the main switch.

“You’ve withheld evidence in a murder case and I’m taking your sorry ass downtown—”

“What the hell’s going on here?” A big black woman strode into the room and he recognized her instantly as Eleanor Cavalier, the tough take-no-prisoners program manager for the station. “Detective, this program has to go on the air! Pronto.” She shot Maury a look. “Turn it on. Go to commercial. There is to be no dead air. No dead air!”

Montoya, looking for all the world like the cat who swallowed the canary, smirked at Montoya and turned on the appropriate switches.

“What the hell is this all about?” Eleanor demanded. As a crowd gathered around her, she spied Samantha Leeds, better known as Dr. Sam, the radio psychologist whose program Midnight Confessions aired later in the evening. “Samantha, take over the booth and handle the controls. You don’t have to say much, just run the tape of a previous show for a few minutes.”

Dr. Sam nodded, and there was a glint of amusement in her eyes. Walking into the studio, she whispered to Montoya, “Still getting into trouble, I see.”

“Always.”

She slid into the booth and Maury handed over the headset, then rammed a faded Saints hat onto his bald pate and ambled into the hallway, hands in his pockets as if he were taking a stroll along the Mississippi on a sunny summer afternoon.

Montoya glared at the man as Samantha settled onto the barstool, flipped a few switches and adjusted the mike. She was already speaking to the audience as Maury finally found his way into the corridor.

“You probably think I’m withholding evidence in a murder investigation,” Montoya told Eleanor before the door to the sound booth shut.

“And you’re breaking more than your share of laws yourself, starting with parking in the no-zone, then ending up with I don’t know how many FCC violations.” Uncowed, Eleanor Cavalier took a step toward Montoya. “Don’t you flash your badge around here and bully your way around this station, got it? If you’ve got a problem with what’s happening here, you can damned well talk to me or the station’s lawyers.” She turned furious black eyes on Maury.

“Now what the hell were you thinkin’? I heard what Montoya’s talking about and he’s got a point. So, let’s get down to it.” She looked up, noticed the small crowd that had gathered, and said, “The show’s over, people. Everyone get back to work.” Her perfect eyebrows slammed together and she glared at each and every person who had made the mistake of letting their curiosity take them from their jobs.

They all scuttled away like bugs from beneath a rock. Satisfied with their reaction, Eleanor trained her fury on Montoya again. Her voice was steel as she said, “We’ll talk in my office.”

She motioned for Montoya and Maury Taylor to follow her, then led them to a small office where every book, recording, and file was in its place. On the desk was a brass paperweight in the shape of two golf balls . . . someone’s idea of a joke.

“What have you got?” She skewered the smaller man with a glare as she rounded the desk and dropped into her chair, the seat creaking a bit.

“I got a note. Well, the station did. Addressed to Luke. Maybe from the killer.” Maury shrugged. He and Montoya were standing like boys called to the principal’s office. “But it could be a fake.”

Her lips barely moved. “Get it.”

He was gone for less than a minute and returned with a small white piece of paper and matching envelope encased in a plastic sandwich bag. Somewhat less recalcitrant, he handed the package to Montoya. “All it says is ‘Repent’ and then it’s signed A L, both letters in capitals. I touched it, yeah, when I went on the air.”

“Right.” She glowered from her chair.

“You should have called the department immediately,” Montoya said.

“Heard it. And I agree with the detective. You are not—do you read me—not to mess with any police matters. And you”—she turned to Montoya, pointing a long, accusing finger—“have no right to bust in here like Wyatt Damned Earp. There is protocol to be observed, Detective, and I expect you to follow it. Don’t think I’m not going to call your superior.”

“A muscle worked in Montoya’s jaw. “Then make sure everyone here at the station follows that protocol you’re so proud of,” he growled.

She glared at him, her lips flattening. He saw he’d just stepped over a very thin line, but he didn’t care. Let the brass call him on the carpet. Big deal. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t already worn a hole in it.

Taking the new evidence with him, he left the radio station and hoped to hell that whatever else that chicken-necked, dumb-ass radio jockey had done, he hadn’t fucked over the investigation.
Zoey strapped on her seat belt and silently cursed the fact that, with the exorbitant amount of money she was spending on this airline ticket, a red-eye with a four-hour layover in Dallas, she’d ended up in the middle seat with a woman and an infant next to her on the window side, and a guy over six feet and topping the scales near three hundred—on the aisle side. The big guy couldn’t get comfortable no matter how hard he tried. Every time he squirmed, his arm brushed Zoey’s, and even though she wasn’t a germophobe or anything, she just didn’t like strangers touching her. Period.

She was even suspect of the blanket and pillow she’d found wedged between seats 13 A and B on her way down the aisle. But she needed to sleep and she hoped to hell that whoever had used the cheap bedding before her wasn’t infected with lice, or cooties, or some major strain of flu or worse.

She had her iPod with her and figured she’d zone out for the trip. She needed to relax as much as possible, considering what she was going to face when she landed. All hell was gonna break loose. Able to read her sister like a book, Zoey knew Abby would flip out of control when she finally heard the truth.

Yep, this book was going to end bad, Zoey thought with a grimace. No two ways about it. From the phone call the other night Zoey had figured out right away that Abby wasn’t interested in having her come visit or show up at Luke’s funeral, but that was tough. It was time.

Zoey put stock in omens, curses, signs, and luck, and all the signs that she relied on had pointed to the fact that her secret had to be released. She felt that if not God, then the Fates were watching over her and would give her clues as to what she was supposed to do with her life. Other people often initiated the signs, just as Luke Gierman had all those years earlier, when he’d told her he couldn’t stop thinking about her, that he’d had some cosmic revelation that forced him to follow her to her car on that warm May afternoon.

Though Zoey prized herself in recognizing bull when she heard it, she’d let Luke ramble on and on—finding him incredibly fascinating all over again. They’d been lovers before. She knew his chart by heart and realized that the planets were aligned for their union. That had been the sign—that and her own nightly dreams of making love to him . . . or at least that’s how she’d rationalized it at the time. Even though she’d known he was engaged to her sister by then, that he’d promised himself to Abby, she’d been powerless to resist Luke.

Zoey had never felt good about herself since.

And now it was time to make it up to her baby sister.

Hadn’t her personal astrologer recently told her that the heavenly bodies were situated in the perfect order? That now was the time to right past wrongs? Hadn’t he hinted about the familial torment that had existed for two decades? Hadn’t he suggested that now, before the stars shifted, she make amends?

And if the astrological viewpoint wasn’t enough, there had been that other very strong sign: a recent anonymous letter. No return address. Block letters. Postmarked in New Orleans. It read:

COME HOME. HANNAH NEEDS YOU.

Now, that was a pretty clear sign. Had Abby sent it and was ashamed to sign her name? Had she referred to herself by her middle name, the one their mother sometimes called her? The name of their maternal grandmother? Or had someone else sent the letter, someone who knew Abby well enough to use her middle name?

The final sign, completing the triad, was Luke’s murder. How could she possibly ignore it?

Two things were certain.

It was time to return to New Orleans.

And it was time for the truth.

It had been twenty years since their mother had plunged to her death, and Zoey was sick to the back teeth of holding on to the secret she and her father had shared.

No more.

Abby was a big girl. She could handle the past. Hadn’t she been trying to sort it out by herself? Going to the hospital on her own, wasn’t that another sign that he was healing? And the insinuations Abby had made . . . we can talk about a lot of things before we have that drink, okay? Including Mom and the day she died. I think you know more about it than you’ve ever said . . . We’re going to discuss it . . .

But now, Zoey second-guessed herself, something she rarely did. There was a pretty good chance that she should have come clean on the phone the other night, but she’d really thought it would be best to see her sister face to face before unloading the truth about the past.

At least she hoped she was making the right decision.

Zoey crossed her fingers, sent up a quick prayer to God, then asked the Fates to keep pointing her in the right direction, to help her be certain that she was making the right choice on this one.

The door to the plane closed and the flight attendants asked everyone to turn off his or her electronic devices before the jet pushed out of the gate. The big man next to her clicked off his cell phone and struggled to place it in his bag under the seat.

“Sorry,” he muttered as he shoved things around and continued to brush against her.

She flashed him a smile that she didn’t feel but her mind was on what she would face when she landed.

She couldn’t believe Luke was really dead. Murdered, no less. A college coed had been killed with him. How sick.

Zoey had been keeping up with the reports and had called friends at a sister station in New Orleans who were convinced that the police didn’t have any leads yet. Then there was this business with Asa Pomroy, Abby’s neighbor. What the hell was that all about? This morning she’d heard another woman was missing: an African-American community leader had seemed to have vanished. Though she wasn’t certain, Zoey thought she’d heard the name before, a long time ago.

Gina Jefferson. Why did that name sound so familiar?

From the amount of information Zoey had gleaned on the Internet this morning, Gina Jefferson was a big deal in New Orleans, a woman who worked behind the scenes rather than in front, but who had gained recognition for her efforts supporting the mentally ill.

Was that it? Zoey wondered as the jet lumbered toward the runway. She thought hard, digging her teeth into her lower lip. Had Gina Jefferson somehow worked at Our Lady of Virtues or in private practice with her mother? Could that be? A social worker maybe?

A headache began to pound behind her eyes as the plane eased into position, then began to pick up speed, its engines roaring. Faster and faster, the jet tore down the runway and Zoey was pressed hard into her seat as the 737 lifted off, cutting into the darkness of the heavens and leaving Sea-Tac with its blizzard of lights far below.

It would be worth it, she thought, a relief to finally put the past to rest. That was what Abby had wanted, wasn’t it? Hadn’t her sister said she needed to learn the truth and deal with it once and for all?

Jesus H. Christ, if Abby only knew what she was asking!

She will, Zoey, and soon. Steel yourself.

That would be worth it, she thought, a relief to finally put the past to rest. That was what Abby had wanted, wasn’t it? Hadn’t her sister said she needed to learn the truth and deal with it once and for all?

* * *

Montoya drove through the pouring rain. His jaw was clenched. It had been hours since he’d dealt with that lowlife worm Maury Taylor, but he was still
him. He'd dropped the note off at the lab, then reviewed everything with Bentz and Zaroster that they knew about the four murders. Which hadn't added up to squat.

No news on the bridal dress yet.

No prints at the first scene, or on Luke Gieman's BMW, or Gina Jefferson's Buick, that could be identified outside family members or friends.

Asa Pomeroy's car hadn't yet been located.

No trace evidence that would help in locating the suspect . . . at least not yet.

Size twelve boot prints at both scenes. The manufacturer had been contacted and was preparing a list of retailers who carried the common hiking boot.

Cell phones and personal phone records were being checked but so far had given up nothing.

The pictures he'd taken at the candlelight vigil were being pored over by the task force.

The black hair on the wedding gown was male and was now with the DNA lab. However, until they had something to match the markers against, it wouldn't mean much. Unless they got lucky.

Montoya sighed, turning over in his mind what he knew so far.

Each set of victims had been killed with the female victim's gun, then the scene was staged to approximate a suicides. "Approximate" was the right word because it wasn't done well enough to fool the police. The killer probably knew that. He was toying with them, giving them a clue to his twisted game; Montoya just didn't understand it yet.

Then there was the note. If it proved valid, it suggested that Luke Gieman, to whom the envelope was addressed, was being instructed to "repeent." One single word. And then the signature: A L. Who the hell was that? The department was searching databases and going over the notes from every interview taken on the two cases. Was it someone named Al, or Allen, or Aldren, or Alfred, or Alice . . . or was it initials? Everyone in the department had tossed out ideas, Bentz pointing out that two of the victims were Asa and Luke, and their first name initials could spell A L. Then there was the thought that it might mean Alabama. Maybe the killer had resided or had been born there. Turn the initials around and the other state abbreviation would be for Louisiana, their home state. Or how about LA, Brinkman had offered up, Los Angeles. "Tons of freakoids out there, let me tell ya. All that smog. Fries their brains."

Jesus, would the guy ever get serious?

A couple of the other detectives thought it might well be a hoax, but Montoya wasn't buying that. The single word, "repeent," seemed somehow connected.

There was something religious going on here, he thought, otherwise why bother with the stolen cross . . . but he didn't take the Virgin Mary's, did he? Hell.

At least it seemed Maury Taylor hadn't lied about not one touching the note but him; his were the only prints found on the single sheet of paper. There were others on the envelope, of course, and they were being checked against the letter carriers, but that was a time-consuming job. All the prints had been sent to AFIS and the glue under the flap of the envelope checked for DNA. If there was any, they would see if it matched the DNA of the black hair on the wedding dress.

Gina Jefferson and Asa Pomeroy's next of kin had been notified. Wally Jefferson had collapsed. The fourth, Mrs. Pomeroy, had taken it all in good stride, as had each of Asa's children. Not a particularly loving bunch, the Pomeroyos, Montoya decided. All of the people interviewed had "no idea" who would want to harm the king of weaponry, the poster boy for the NRA; ditto for Gina Jefferson, who in comparison was a saint.

Black and white.

Yin and yang again . . .

But someone had wanted them dead. Some unknown enemy.

Someone inherently evil and incredibly dangerous.

Someone who killed people who were as different as night to day.

Someone far too close to Abby Chastain to make him feel comfortable. He scowled into the night, staring at the blurry taillights of the car in front of him. He'd been thinking about Abby a lot lately. Too much.

He was definitely starting to get under his skin. Smart, pretty, sexy—she was a woman who made others pale by comparison. He loved the deep throaty sound of her laughter, and the way her eyes rounded when he said something she didn't expect. He found himself thinking of her not as a witness or someone who brought him close to the edge of seeking justice, but as a woman, a woman he wanted to be involved in her ex-husband's death. Which was just plain stupid. He couldn't let her get to him. For all he knew, she could be involved in her ex-husband's death. It was a long shot, yeah, and he didn't believe it for a second, but he had to stay impartial, sharp, willing to look at all the angles and possibilities. So, too bad if she just happened to be hotter than hell.

Pushing thoughts of her from his head, he drove steadily toward his house, watching the wipers whisk the rain from his windshield. He slowed as a traffic light glowed amber, then brilliant red, reflecting on the shiny, wet pavement. Two pedestrians, laughing and wearing cheap ponchos, jogged through puddles to the opposite side of the street.

His cell phone rang and he picked it up without looking at caller ID. "Montoya."

"Where do you get off breaking all kinds of policy and going on a personal rampage at the radio station?" Melinda Jaskiel, the D.A., demanded. Before he could answer, she added, "It's a damned good thing that Eleanor Cavalier is a personal friend of mine or your ass, as they say, would damned well be grass."

The light turned green and he stepped on it.

"Montoya, do not, and I repeat, do not screw up my case! We're going to nail this bastard and I don't want any high-profile defense attorney looking for his personal shot at fame to have any excuse to have evidence tossed because some cocky, hot-tempered detective messed it up. Do I make myself clear?"

"Loud and," he muttered, furious with himself, with the investigation, with the whole damned world.

"Good. Remember this. She hung up and he could still feel her seething through the phone.

"Goddamned son of a bitch," he muttered under his breath. He knew she was right, but it pissed him off just the same. Then again, everything about this case pissed him off. And he knew why. It all had to do with Abby Chastain. Each time he left her, he wanted to return. The other night with the bad pizza and so-so wine, it had been hard to peel himself away from her.

He'd found himself fantasizing about her, wanting her, thinking about wrapping his arms around her, saying to hell with the whole damned world, and kissing her so hard neither one of them would be able to think straight. He thought about stripping off her clothes, his thumbs skimming those breasts he'd only caught a glimpse of, kissing her throat, then tangling his fingers in that wild mass of red-blond hair as he ran his tongue downward.

His imagination ran wild: he saw himself tumbling into bed with her, both of them half-dressed, both so hot they were sweating and eager. He wanted to feel her anxious fingers on his skin as he thrust into her, not giving one good goddamn what anyone thought.

"Shit," he muttered, so caught in the fantasy that he almost missed his street. He gave himself a quick mental shake, forcing thoughts of the woman out of his mind as he parked in front of his house, a camelback shotgun that sat amid others that were identical. He'd bought the narrow house this last year and had managed to firmly put the past behind him.

Throwing his heart and soul into the century-old boards, lathe, and plaster of this railroad car of a home he had managed to firmly put the past behind him.
Grabbing a beer from the refrigerator, he twisted off the top while kicking the fridge’s door closed. Now, his thoughts were about Abby Chastain. Abby and the case that had brought them together. A case that had taken the lives of four people, all from different walks of life.

Montoya rubbed his face, then took a swallow.

The suspect list was growing, but most of them were discounted the minute their names came up. He was still leaning toward Nia Penne’s current live-in. Roy North was the right size and had black hair. His feet were size twelves, but his alibis were ironclad, unless Nia was covering up for her lover. So far, the police had no proof that Roy had been anywhere near Luke Gierman or All Saints College. And what would Roy or Nia have to do with Asa Pomeroy and Gina Jefferson? Nonetheless, Montoya wanted DNA from the guy. If a judge couldn’t be convinced to issue a warrant, then maybe he’d have someone follow North, try to pick up a tossed cigarette butt or coffee cup or something with the guy’s DNA on it, enough to compare it to the black hair found at the first scene and the saliva, if there was some, that would be collected from the envelope sent to WSLJ.

He took a pull from his bottle, then walked into the living room, where the news of Asa Pomeroy’s and Gina Jefferson’s murders was on every channel. The stations were talking about a serial killer stalking the streets of New Orleans again, and not only the public information officer for the police department, but also someone from the FBI, gave statements and took a few quick questions, all the while holding back information that only the killer would know about the murders, hoping to weed out the invariable nut jobs who pretended to be the sick-o called the station to “confess” and got off on the fame.

Sipping his beer as he watched, he knew that somewhere the killer, too, was glued to a television screen, reveling in the havoc he’d wreaked and the media and police department’s attention. That’s what it was all about: stroking a killer’s damned twisted ego.

“I’ll get you, you sick son of a bitch,” Montoya vowed. He drained his long-necked bottle. It might be far-fetched but he still believed the old hospital was somehow connected to what was going on. It was too late to call his aunt tonight. She didn’t even have a phone in her room. First thing tomorrow morning, he’d dial her up and find out if she knew of any connection between Asa Pomeroy, Gina Jefferson, and Our Lady of Virtues.

In the meantime, despite his promises to himself, he snagged up his car keys again, threw on his jacket, and headed out the door into the wet night. Someone had to tell Abby Chastain that her neighbor had been murdered.

He decided he was the best man for the job.
Abby couldn’t believe what she was seeing and hearing on her television.

Asa Pomeroy and Gina Jefferson were dead? Killed in the same manner as Luke and Courtney LaBelle?

Sitting on the edge of her couch, staring at the screen, she felt sick inside. How could this be happening? What kind of lunatic was stalking the streets of New Orleans and making his way clear out here, far from the city?

The reporters kept speculating and talking, showing exterior shots of a hunting lodge owned by Asa Pomeroy, the latest crime scene. From there they flashed to the Pomeroy estate, just down the road from her, before panning on the Crescent City Center, a small mental health clinic that helped the poor and the homeless.

Something inside Abby pricked and prodded at her brain … Gina Jefferson worked for a mental health clinic. Had she once been a member of the staff at Our Lady of Virtues? Was that why the black woman with the even features seemed familiar? Or was it because, like Asa Pomeroy’s, Gina’s face and deeds had been a part of the local news for years?

Nervously she puckled at the arm of the couch, playing with the gold chenille pile without realizing what she was doing. Was it about the mental health worker she should remember?

As if a window were open, a sudden chill swept through Abby, cutting to the marrow of her bones. Something tugged at her memory, something important, but she couldn’t quite latch on to it. The thought was just out of reach.

Yet she knew instinctively that it had to do with her mother and Our Lady of Virtues … What was it?

She glanced outside to the dark night and tamped down the sensation that someone was watching her, that deep in the thicket of oak, swamp berry, and buckthorn were hidden eyes, that something or someone malicious was peering into her house and studying her every move. “Stop it,” she admonished.

Still, she climbed to her bare feet and snapped every blind shut so tightly no light escaped. Now, no one would be able to see more than her silhouette on the blinds.

For once the dog was sleeping on her favorite spot on a rug near the cold, blackened fireplace. Ansel lay curled on the back of the couch. The cat’s eyes were closed and he was purring softly, unaware of the turmoil Abby couldn’t shake as she returned to the living room and flipped through the channels. She saw more of the same scenes: a helicopter shot from the air of the hunting lodge, taken before night had fallen, and another image of the old cabin where Luke and Courtney LaBelle had been found. Pictures of all the victims alive and smiling were shown and short bios reported, including the fact that Gina Jefferson had publicly harangued Pomeroy Industries, and Asa Pomeroy personally, for not giving enough to the needy, especially those with mental problems.

The two, according to the media, had often been at odds over Pomeroy’s stingy nature.

Vanessa Pomeroy, a petite, perky woman, not a hair out of place, nor a tear in her eye, chatted easily about “the tragedy” of her husband’s death. On the other hand, Walker Jefferson, so distraught and grief-stricken that he had to be propped up by a relative, was clearly undone, his face awash in tears.

“The poor man,” Abby whispered and clicked to another channel, where the Reverend Billy Ray Furlough was standing in the middle of a crowd on the steps of his church. It was still daylight on the tape, so this scene, too, had been shot earlier in the day. The tape rolled and Abby, curled into a corner of the couch, watched in utter fascination as the charismatic preacher turned the horror of the day into his own personal revival meeting. He ranted and raved, gesticulated wildly, and prayed with a pious sincerity that could melt even the most stubborn atheist’s icy heart. A natural-born public speaker, the Reverend Billy Ray had literally found his calling.

“Why is this happening?” he asked rhetorically as he faced the camera. “Why is God striking down some of our finest citizens?” A tall, good-looking man, with broad shoulders and a firm physique, he was somewhere in his late thirties, Abby guessed. Charisma practically oozed from him, with his clear skin, brown eyes, gleaming straight black hair, and white teeth that flashed disarmingly when he found the camera’s eye. He wore his clerical collar with pride rather than humility and there was something about him that also seemed familiar, something she couldn’t name, something that caused the hairs on the back of her arms to prickle.

Perhaps we should not question God’s wisdom. Let us not forget that God helps those who help themselves, and in our hour of grief, our time of tragedy, let us reach out to the Lord and tell him, ‘Yes, Father, I will trust in you.’ “

She flipped the channel, bothered by the display. It was almost as if the preacher were capitalizing on the tragedies, hoping that through his downplayed showmanship he could entice more people into his fold, more dollars into his church’s coffers.

Don’t go there, Abby. Who are you to judge?

Hershey’s head lifted. She gave out a “woof” and Abby heard the sound of a car’s engine as it approached. “Now what?” she wondered and again felt the uneasy sensation that had been with her for most of the evening. Padding to the front windows, she tilted one slat of the thin blinds and peeked through.

Montoya’s black Mustang slowed to a stop in front of her garage.

Good, she thought, relieved to see him slide from behind the wheel and slam the car door shut. Her heart did a quick little flip, which she completely ignored, but she couldn’t stop a smile from curving across her face. Watching him, she noted again how his jacket stretched over his shoulders, the way his hips nearly rolled with his long, athletic stride, and how his jeans fit snugly but hung low on his hips. For once, his black hair was mussed and he shoved it back arched and looking as if he’d just stuck his tail into an

The minute he rang her bell, Hershey went nuts. Abby threw open the door and folded her arms over her chest. “Surprise, surprise,” she said. “If it isn’t Detective Montoya.”

“I know.” His mouth lost some of its hard edge. “I’m making a habit of this. Sorry.” Was it her imagination or did his brown eyes grow even darker with the night?

“I don’t remember complaining,” she said, then mentally kicked herself for sounding so eager.

One of his black eyebrows cocked.

And she couldn’t help herself as she gestured him into the house. “I figure you’re just out here hoping for more of my fantastic home cooking.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Some of the tension eased out of his face, and he looked past her to the living room, where the television was still blaring the news of Asa Pomeroy and Gina Jefferson’s murders. He stepped inside and Abby shut the door behind him. “So you do know about Pomeroy.”

“What’s that?”

“Ames.” He walked to the set, standing not five inches from it, and stared at the screen. “Bastard.”

“You’ll catch him.” She flipped the dead bolt. “Right?”

Montoya glanced up at her, his dark eyes deadly serious. “Damned straight.”

“Well, do it soon, okay?”

“That’s the plan.”

From the couch, Ansel opened an eye, saw the stranger, and was instantly on his feet, back arched and looking as if he’d just stuck his tail into an
electric socket. The tabby hissed, then sprang to the floor. With his tail drooping behind him, he slunk swiftly out of the room. “Not a fan of mine,” Montoya observed.

“Of anyone else, save myself.”

Montoya actually cracked a smile. “Have you tried Prozac? I’m serious. One of the beat cops was going crazy with her cat spraying and refusing to use the litter box, and she put the stupid thing on some kind of antidepressant.”

“You’re kidding.”

He held up a palm. “God’s honest truth.”

“So, now you want me to get a fiercer dog and a sweeter-tempered, mellower cat?”

“I think any cat would fill the bill.”

“Hear that, Ansel? The cop thinks you need to be replaced,” she said, turning her head toward the hallway, where Ansel had disappeared. She smiled. “I think I’ll stick with the pets I have, all the same.” To reinforce her stand, she bent over and scratched Hershey behind her ears. “Yeah, baby, you have nothing to worry about.” Glancing up at the detective, she added, “Loyalty. It’s my thing.” She saw something change in his eyes, a sobering, and she knew in an instant what he was thinking.

“Uh-oh,” she warned. “Don’t go there. The answer to the question cutting through your brain is yes, I was loyal to my ex. Disgustingly so. I said ‘I do’ and I meant forever, but in all those vows, you know, sickness, health, good times and bad, never once did I say, ‘No matter how many affairs you have, I’ll stick it out. It’s okay. I forgive you.’ The minute she said the last three words, she felt a slight change in the atmosphere, and she remembered her recurring dream, the one where her mother, before she died, always whispered, “I forgive you.” All Abby’s lightheartedness fled into the darkest corners of the room.

“Something wrong?” Montoya asked and she jerked, brought back to the present, to the man with the searching dark eyes and protective manner. She yearned for that protection.

“What call?”

“Yes . . . yes, it is.” She swallowed and looked away from his intense gaze. “Come on into the kitchen and I’ll buy you a beer . . . I assume you’re off duty.”

“Until tomorrow morning unless I get the call.”

“What call?”

“That our guy has struck again.” He was stone-cold sober.

“So soon?” What a horrible thought! She glanced at the television screen, saw the exterior of Asa’s hunting lodge again, and silently prayed the terror would end soon.

“It wasn’t that long between the two sets of murders. This killer doesn’t seem to have much of a cooling-off period between attacks, and oftentimes serial killers escalate.”

“Serial killers,” she repeated, a shiver chasing down her spine. “Maybe this one’s finished. Maybe whatever it was he felt compelled to do is now complete.”

He sent her a look that spoke volumes. She saw her words as wishful thinking. He knew otherwise.

In the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator and dug out two bottles of Lone Star, cracked them both open, and handed one to Montoya. Ansel, hiding on one of the bar stools at the counter and frightened all over again, hopped to the floor and made a quick beeline down the hall.

“An improvement,” Montoya observed. “No hissing.”

“His really warming up to you. Watch out if you sit on the couch—he’ll probably hop onto the back and lick your hair.”

“Something to look forward to,” he said dryly.

Abby grimaced at his look of disgust. “Actually, Ansel would never—but my girlfriend Alicia’s purebred Siamese was really into it. Always wanted to ‘groom’ her.”

“I’d say the cat has a few screws loose. Or maybe it was into the kind of gel or shampoo she used.”

“Well, I guess we all have our personal idiosyncrasies,” Abby murmured, far too conscious of the way Montoya’s presence filled a room.

“Some more than others,” he agreed.

They returned to the living room, where on the screen again, Billy Ray Furlough was ranting on about the wrath of the Lord and how everyone had to look inside him or herself to help stop the poor, demented soul who was committing these crimes against God and man.

“Can you believe this guy?” Montoya pointed at the screen with the index finger of his beer-holding hand. “He’s already called the department several times. Wants to meet with the lieutenant and the detectives in charge to pray for divine intervention.”

“So much for the ‘God helps those who help themselves’ theory that I heard him spouting a little while ago.” She walked closer to the set. The preacher stared straight at the camera and offered a bold smile, one that suggested he was a strong leader in the face of adversity. “Hasn’t his church been investigated by the SEC or the IRS or something?” she asked, trying to remember.

“Maybe. I don’t know. He’s pretty much off-limits, though, being the head of a religious organization. Believe me, he’s buried so deep in tax lawyers, accountants, spin doctors, and I’d guess, makeup artists and hairstylists that it would take a backhoe to try and find him.” He took a swallow from his bottle. “Just my opinion, though. I’m not speaking for the department.” He rubbed thoughtfully at his goatee. “Odd thing though—I think his organization tried to buy the Our Lady of Virtues property.”

Abby felt that whisper of fear, cold as death, scrape the back of her neck again as she sat in one corner of the couch, he on the other end.

They sat there in silence, their gazes fixed on the set. “I think he wanted the entire piece of property, convent and all. And I’m not certain it was for a factory. It didn’t matter. The nuns balked and the archdiocese passed on the offer.”

“Why haven’t I heard of this before?”

“I hadn’t either. It happened a few years back,” Montoya explained. “I only found out earlier today as I’ve been checking on the victims. Pomeroy seems to have a fascination with the place, though, mind you, he was an elder with the First Baptist Church in Cambrai. Makes you wonder why he donated so much money to the hospital while it was open. He’s not exactly known for his philanthropy. I figure maybe he knew someone who worked there or was a patient.”

“Like Gina Jefferson,” she said, trying to remember. “It’s odd, but I have this feeling . . .” She frowned, forced her mind back to the day her mother died and the weeks before. “I think she might have been employed at the hospital.”

Montoya ignored his beer and his facial muscles tightened. “I’ll check it out.”

“You think it’s important?”

“Could be. Any connection between the victims will help us understand what’s going on, who might be behind all this”—he gestured toward the television—“crap.”

“Do you think there’s some connection to the hospital?” she asked. “I mean, Clyde LaBelle was a doctor there, Asa gave money, Gina Jefferson may have worked on the premises . . .”

She felt his gaze upon her.

“What about Luke?”
She shook her head and tucked her feet under her. “That’s where it all falls apart. Luke’s only connection that I know of is that my mother was a patient—and died—there.”

There was a moment of silence between them, then Montoya said, “I guess we’ll just have to keep digging.” He watched Hershey settle onto her spot by the unlit fire and suddenly asked, “Can we light that?” He indicated the dry stack of wood sitting in the grate. And then, as if he felt the need to explain himself, he added, “I’ve never had a house with a fireplace.”

“Oh, damn.” Smoke began to billow and boil into the house and she reached quickly over the flames to pull the lever on the flue. With a rush, the fire burned more brightly and the smoke was sucked up the chimney. “Sorry,” she said, feeling like an idiot, “I always do that.”

“Are you okay?”

“No third-degree burns or singed eyebrows this time,” she said and laughed. “Just this.” She showed off the black soot on her fingers. “Give me a sec and I’ll wash up.”

It took longer than a second but she managed to clean the oily, black film from her hands, scatter some crackers onto a platter, and slice up some cheese, carefully cutting off a little mold from the end of the brick. When she returned, Montoya had kicked off his boots and was staring at the fire.

“Sustenance,” she said. “Such as it is.”

“Looks great.”

“Well . . . it looks decent.” She set the platter on the coffee table and took up her seat on the couch again.

Montoya grinned. “Beyond decent.” Sitting low on his back, he cradled his beer between both hands and asked, “So did Luke know anyone named Al?”

“Al? Probably. Doesn’t everyone?” When he didn’t respond, she said, “Okay . . . let me think. He must have. Wait. Yeah. There was someone in college, someone I never met. Alan . . . Alan . . .” She snapped her fingers in rapid succession, thinking hard. “Oh, what was that guy’s name? O’Brien! Yeah, Alan O’Brien. I think they might have been in the same fraternity. He lives . . . somewhere in the North-east, maybe Boston now. I don’t think Luke kept up with him. They both went to the University of Washington.”

“Okay.”

He seemed to be waiting for more, so Abby thought hard. “Oh, yeah. Later, Luke had a sailing buddy who owned a boat that he docked on Lake Union in Seattle. His name was Andrew Allen and I think some people called him Al or Allen, but Luke always referred to him as Drew.”

Montoya rotated his bottle between his palms “What about you?”

“Do I know any people named Al?” she asked, and he nodded. “Well . . . I’m sure I’ve had clients or classmates when I was in school, but the only person I’ve ever called Al is my friend Alicia . . . the one who lives in the Bay Area.”

“Where you’re planning to move.”

“Okay.”

She thought of Sean Erwin, who had come by earlier, moving furniture, measuring every room, window, and door, then taking notes. “So,” she asked Montoya, “what’s this all about?” But before the words were out of her mouth, she knew. “Oh, wait a minute. I get it. I heard part of the radio program today, I was in my car and just checked out what was happening at good old WSLJ. Luke’s old program was running again, and Maury was talking about someone named Al, right? I’d just turned on the radio when someone showed up at the station and shut him down and Dr. Sam took over . . . hey, wait, was that you?”

The detective gave a quick nod. Abby smiled at the thought of Montoya busting in on Maury’s program. She could imagine the moron freaking out. “Way to go.” She leaned over toward Montoya and clicked the neck of her beer bottle with his. “I think we deserve this drink.”

He smiled. “Well, I know I do.”

She laughed and it felt good to let go of some of the tension of the past week. “I’ll have you know you’re not the only one who’s been working hard. While you were out fighting crime and keeping the streets of New Orleans safe from serial killers, I’ve been busy cropping wedding photos and paying bills. So, you tell me. Who has the more dangerous job?”

“Just numbers,” he said, shaking his head.

“Who?”

“Look, you’re the one who should be wearing the gun.”

He laughed despite himself, his teeth showing white against his dark beard. Brown eyes glinted. “You’re the one who should be wearing the gun.”

“Are you okay?”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, if I had one. Mine’s missing.” His smile fell away and she shrugged. “It was Luke’s dad’s .38. I kept it after the divorce, which really ticked my ex off. It’s here the other day and now it’s missing.”

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“Just numbers.”

“I know them.”

“You think it’s significant?” she asked, feeling that nasty breath of fear crawl through her again.

“These recent murders,” he said, “in both cases the victims were killed with the female victim’s weapon. In the first case, your ex-husband’s murder, the gun was a gift to Courtney LaBelle from her father, for protection. In the second murder, the weapon was stolen from the Jefferson house, part of a collection the husband kept.”

She could scarcely breathe. Panic swept through her. She shot to her feet, pacing before the fire. “You think the killer was here”—she pointed at the house and he stole my gun so that he can kidnap me? Then kill me and some
“No . . .”
“You should have told me.”
“I was afraid you’d think I was an alarmist—one of those weak, scared little women I test.”
“Don’t sacrifice your safety for your pride,” he ordered, sounding so imperative that her temper rose.
“I’m still here, aren’t I?” she snapped. “I searched the house and found no one, okay? It wasn’t until after you left that I found the gun was missing. Since then I’ve been looking for it and”—she shook her head—“it’s gone.”
“I don’t like it.”
“Neither do I.”
He was staring at her so intently, she had to look away. “So, tell me,” she said, rubbing her arms. She felt chilled to the bone. “Who’s this Al?” she asked, then suddenly she knew. “Oh, my God. He contacted the radio station, didn’t he? The killer. Maury’s been in contact with him! He called or wrote or e-mailed the station.”
“Someone did. It could be a fraud. Lots of times people pretend to be the donor, just to get some attention.”
“But you think it was the real thing,” she guessed, glancing at him as she shoved her hair from her eyes. “That’s why you’re here and asking all these questions. You may not be on duty but you’re still working.”
“I’m not sure the killer sent the note.” Montoya stood, stretching. “But it’s possible and we’re checking out every lead.”
“What did the note say?”
She came straight toward him, her fear and distress diluting her pupils. When she turned her earnest face to his, Montoya’s concentration shattered. He should have been prepared for the question. But he wasn’t. Nor was he prepared for the onslaught to his senses brought on by this little bit of a woman with her quick smile, sharp wit, and deep-set determination. She was close enough that he smelled a whiff of perfume, saw the tiny streaks of gold in her hair, gilded by the firelight, noticed the way the cords in her neck were visible. The FBI wouldn’t like it if he spilled his guts about the note, and he didn’t want to do anything that would remotely compromise the investigation. However, this, he thought, was a mitigating circumstance. She was missing her gun, for God’s sake, and that single fact scared the hell out of him. So fuck protocol. The task force was just getting together. The message was only a single word, and who knew how many people at the station had heard or seen it?
“What did the note say?” she repeated.
“If I tell you, you need to keep this under wraps.”
“Of course.”
“I mean it.”
“So do I, Detective.”
“I’m serious, Abby, this could cost me my job or, worse yet, cripple the investigation.”
“I’m serious, too. Damned serious. What the hell did the note say?”
He stared at her long and hard. “The only reason I’m telling you is that I have this sense . . . worry that somehow this is connected to you. I don’t know how, and I could be way off base, but that’s what I feel.” He saw the fear deepen in her eyes. “I’m sorry. But you need to be aware and alert. And cautious. I don’t want you to be taken by surprise.” Frowning, he ignored the warnings running through his mind, including Melinda Jaskiel’s last order concerning protocol. It was all he could do to keep from taking her into his arms. “There was only one word—Repent—and it was signed by Al, or more precisely A L; both of the signature letters were capitalized.” He watched as little lines of confusion appeared between her eyebrows, how her full lips pulled into a knot as she tried to make out exactly what he was saying.
“Repent? For what?” Her gaze was troubled. “Sins? Whose? Why?”
“We don’t know yet. But the task force is looking into it.”
“Shouldn’t this information be made public?”
“It will, when the officer in charge of the task force thinks it should.”
She shook her head. “It means nothing to me and I don’t know anyone else named Al or even with those initials.” Her shoulders slumped. “Why the hell is this happening?”
“I wish I knew.” And then he could restrain himself no longer. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. When she didn’t resist, he rested his chin upon her head and drank in the scent of her hair. “I’m afraid until we catch him, we won’t know.”
She shivered and held tightly to him.
“We will catch him. It’s just a matter of time.”
“Good.”
He closed his eyes for a second, lost in the feel and smell of her. It would be so damned easy to kiss her. They both knew it, and when she looked up at him, the question was in her golden eyes. With their bodies pressed so close together, their hearts beating faster, it was all Montoya could do to slowly release her. He had to. But when they were at arm’s length, he felt bereft.
She didn’t argue, nor try to nestle herself close against him, though he thought he noticed a glint of desire ripple through her gaze.
Don’t go there, Montoya. Kissing her would be a stupid move. Stupid. She’s involved in all of this somehow . . . remember that. She was married to one victim and could be the next.
His jaw tightened.
More to break the tension than anything else, he pointed to a picture on the mantel. “That you?” he asked, indicating a black-and-white head shot that was nearly identical to Abby, but just a little off.
“My mother.”
“Really?”
“Yeah . . . I think it was taken around the time she was twenty-five, maybe thirty.”
“You look a lot like her.”
“So I’ve been told.”
“It’s a compliment.”
“Then, thanks.”
She tried to hide a yawn. For the first time he noticed how tired she looked, how hard this was on her. “Look, why don’t you go to bed.”
“Now?”
“You look beat.”
She glanced toward the door. “You’re leaving?”
“Not on your life, lady. Not until you get a security system installed, a trained Doberman pinscher, and an attack cat.”
“But you can’t just . . .” Her voice trailed off.
“All I need is a blanket and a pillow. I’ll camp out here.” He pointed to the couch. “Believe me, it’s a lot better than some of the stakeouts I’ve been on.”
“I . . . I don’t know.”
“You can throw me out if you want to, but I’ll just park outside your door.” He stared at her long and hard. “I’m staying, Abby, whether you like it or not.”
“Thank you,” she said simply.
The cop was there.
Had come late.
And stayed.

From his hiding spot in the trees beyond the veranda of Abby’s house, he watched as the lights went out . . . all the lights, eventually even the bedroom
lamp. He couldn’t see through the drawn shades, but he noticed a soft flickering glow and smelt the smoke of a wood fire. It swept through the damp
autumn air and reminded him of sitting by camp-fires as a child; fires he’d built, fires he’d watched alone. That same loneliness, that feeling that he was
“different,” “not quite right,” “extremely smart”—off the charts in his pure, crystalline intelligence, but you know, a little odd”—his mother’s words, her
way of explaining why he had no friends, why he was unlike his siblings—swept through him. He felt it again—that dark coldness of being alone.

Segregated. Picked on.
Eventually he’d found solace being separate.

Then he’d met Faith.
And he was no longer alone.

Once more, he imagined her touch, her warmth, the feel of her lips grazing his skin . . .
But before he could sink into the delight of his memories, his gaze trained on the house. His jaw slid to one side. Rage burned through his veins, and his
lips curled in disgust.

They were fucking.
He was certain of it.

Like a dog in heat, she was letting the cop screw her! Was even now probably writhing and wriggling beneath him, sweating, crying out, begging for
more.

Fury and pain tore through his soul.
She was so much like her mother!

His stomach twisted. All over he felt tiny, little legs brushing over his body. His skin was suddenly crawling. As if a million red ants were marching
over him, stinging and biting, turning his flesh to fire, creating a black rage deep in his soul.

She’d betrayed him.
Memories assailed him.
He remembered Faith’s laughter, that throaty, heart-stopping chuckle that was meant only for him. Yet he’d heard it emanating from her room. Late at
night. When she should have been waiting for him.

He’d tried the door handle.
It had been frozen. Wouldn’t move.

Locked.
He’d been locked out.

Why?
He’d nearly called out, whispered through the panels. But then the other noises had reached him, the unmistakable sounds of rutting: the raw, guttural
moans of animal pleasure, the crass, rhythmic creaking of the bedsprings, the swift intake of breath, and a muffled cry of satiated lust.

He’d smelled the scent of sinful sex seeping under the door.

Even now the sounds rang in his ears, a harsh, painful noise that pierced his eardrums. He remembered the vile odor of their excitement.

His teeth grinded together so hard his jaw ached and his face twisted as if tortured.

So now the daughter was fornicating with the cop.

Bile rose in his throat.

He imagined her gold hair wet with sweat, her body so slick it appeared to have been oiled as she arched up to meet him, her breasts pointing toward the
ceiling, full and aroused, dark nipples taut. Oh, how she would welcome the cop’s hungry mouth, his long wet tongue, his sharp teeth. His beard would
scratch her skin raw.

His heart was pounding with fury. And with lust as he mentally witnessed their coupling image. Oh, the things she did to him, the dirty, lurid sexual acts
she would perform!

Tears filled his eyes as he thought of her beauty, of her tainted purity. He reached into his pocket and with gloved fingers touched the gun.

Her gun.
This weapon was his savior. And hers.
His right fist clenched around the cold steel of the revolver.

*Your time is coming,* he thought angrily. *And soon. Oh, yes, very soon.*

Closing his eyes, he conjured up her face. Beautiful. Innocent. Seductive. Playful. So much like Faith’s as to be her twin.

And like her mother, this one had betrayed him as well.

In his heart he believed she was an angel.

But in his gut he knew she was a whore.
The hospital was dark, the corridors murky, the stairs seeming to run upward forever. Abby hurried, carrying the box, wanting to surprise her mother. She had so much to tell her, so much to confide. She’d asked Trey to the dance... oh, my God... and wonder of wonders he’d said “yes!” Up, up, up, she climbed. But the package she was toting was bulky and awkward. It felt heavy in her hands, and as she struggled up the steep staircase, her euphoria seeped away, and the darkness of the old hospital seemed closing. Her breathing was labored, her legs so tired, and unseen hands seemed to pluck at the bright ribbon on the gift.

Finally she reached the landing, where the stained-glass Madonna was glowing, hands folded, halo bright and shimmering. Abby paused to catch her breath, then started up the final flight to the third floor, only to trip, her feet flying out from under her, the package shooting from her arms. Desperately she tried to catch not only the box, but herself as well. She caught onto the railing, but couldn’t grab hold of the gift. Twisting her neck, she watched in horror as the gold box, its fuchsia ribbon streaming behind, tumbled and bounced down the stairway, disappearing into the darkness at the base of the stairs. Into oblivion.

She started after it, but her mother’s muffled voice stopped her. “Abby? Abby Hannah?” It sounded as if Mom were very far away, calling to Abby from one end of a long tunnel. “Abby?”

“I’m coming, Mom,” she said and knew that Zoey would bring the package. Hadn’t they fought in the car about who would have the privilege of giving it to their mother? Let Zoey do it. Who cared? But as Abby stared down the stairwell into the inky blackness, she wondered where Zoey was. And where was their father? How long did it take to park a car?

“Abby!” Faith’s voice was sharp. Frightened. Abby spun around, heading up the final flight. From the corner of her eye she saw that the Madonna’s image had changed. Not a lot. Not enough that most people would notice but Abby did. Instead of looking tranquil and serene, the Holy Mother’s round eyes had thinned a bit, her angelic smile twisted a little wryly, as if she and Abby were sharing a private joke.

Frightened, Abby stumbled up the stairs. As she scrambled to the third floor, she heard the sobs. Broken, horrible sobs.

“Mom?” Surely it wasn’t her mother crying! But all the other doors on the third floor were open, the rooms dark and yawning as if hiding unseen beasts who lay waiting in their dark depths.

The door to 307 was firmly shut. She reached for the handle and pulled. Nothing.

“No. Oh, no, please, don’t—“ her mother pleaded on the other side.

“Mom!” Abby pounded on the panels with her fists. Bam! Bam! Bam! One by one her mother’s room numbers fell onto the floor.

Three.

Clunk.

Zero.

Thud.

Seven.

Bam!

As the final number hit the floor, the door burst open.

Abby stumbled into the room, where flowers wilted in a vase. The mirror over the fireplace was shattered. Blood smeared the glass. Her mother was at the window... but not alone... a man in a white coat and a shiny stethoscope had his back to Abby. His hands were on her mother’s shoulders, pushing her backward, toward the window. Faith’s dress was torn, one shoe kicked off.

Help me, she silently pleaded, looking over the man’s shoulders. Abby Hannah, help me!

Stunned, Abby found her feet, but her legs were leaden, refused to work. “Mama!” she cried, stretching out her arms, trying desperately to reach her mother.

The doctor pushed vigorously against Faith’s shoulders. Shrieking, she fell backward, her body hitting the window with enough force to crack the long glass pane. It splintered slowly, but relentlessly. Try as she might, Abby couldn’t stop her mother from falling.

The doctor shrank away, disappearing into the shadowy corners of the room as Abby propelled herself forward. The last frisson of glass shattered. Hot, moist air rushed into the room.

Faith, bleeding, clawed onto Abby’s hand, linking fingers, pulling her close. “I forgive you,” she whispered.

Together they pirouetted into the dark, dank Louisiana night.

Screaming, Abby sat bolt upright in the dark, the bed. She was sweating, her heart pounding, the dream so real that she couldn’t breathe. “Oh, God,” she whispered, pushing her hair from her face. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw her bedroom door stood open. She screamed again as she saw the silhouette of a man in her doorway. “Oh, God!” Her eyes rounded in horror as he moved closer. He was dressed in low-slung jeans and nothing else. Seeing that she was alone, he set his weapon on the nightstand. “Are you all right?”

“I, um, I, oh, Jesus.” She leaned against the headboard and shoved her hair from her eyes with both hands. “I... I had that dream again.” Shaking her head, she wondered if she would ever be free of that long-ago, painful night and the nightmares that stalked her. “Sorry... I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

He offered her a bit of a smile, the tiniest flash of white teeth. “It’s okay.”

She tried not to notice his strong pectoral muscles visible through black, swirling chest hair. And she attempted to ignore the fact that his abdomen was flat, just a hint of muscles visible beneath his taut skin. Drawing a long breath, she didn’t protest when he sat on the bed next to her, nor did she argue as he offered her a bit of a smile, the tiniest flash of white teeth. “It’s okay.”

“I’m coming, Mom,” she said and knew that Zoey would bring the package. Hadn’t they fought in the car about who would have the privilege of giving it to their mother? Let Zoey do it. Who cared? But as Abby stared down the stairwell into the inky blackness, she wondered where Zoey was. And where was their father? How long did it take to park a car?

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Abby stumbled into the room, where flowers wilted in a vase. The mirror over the fireplace was shattered. Blood smeared the glass. Her mother was at the window... but not alone... a man in a white coat and a shiny stethoscope had his back to Abby. His hands were on her mother’s shoulders, pushing her backward, toward the window. Faith’s dress was torn, one shoe kicked off.

Help me, she silently pleaded, looking over the man’s shoulders. Abby Hannah, help me!

Stunned, Abby found her feet, but her legs were leaden, refused to work. “Mama!” she cried, stretching out her arms, trying desperately to reach her mother.

The doctor pushed vigorously against Faith’s shoulders. Shrieking, she fell backward, her body hitting the window with enough force to crack the long glass pane. It splintered slowly, but relentlessly. Try as she might, Abby couldn’t stop her mother from falling.

The doctor shrank away, disappearing into the shadowy corners of the room as Abby propelled herself forward. The last frisson of glass shattered. Hot, moist air rushed into the room.

Faith, bleeding, clawed onto Abby’s hand, linking fingers, pulling her close. “I forgive you,” she whispered.

Together they pirouetted into the dark, dank Louisiana night.
“A long time for a recurring nightmare,” he observed.

“That’s why, on the advice of my most recent psychologist, I visited the hospital the other day.”

“So it didn’t work?”

“Not yet, I guess.” She frowned as pieces of the dream teased at her. “But I think there’s something important there, in my mother’s room.” She looked up into his dark, concerned eyes. “I know this sounds crazy, but it’s like if I go there, I’ll be able to put this all to rest,” she said with a twinge of dread. “I have to go back.”

“Why?” Swinging his legs onto the bed, he propped his back against the pillows, still holding her close.

“Because her room was locked when I was there last. Abby leaned her head into the crook of his shoulder, wrapped her arms around his chest, and fleetingly wondered about the wisdom of lying on the bed with him. “Here’s the deal: No other room in that whole damned place was locked. Well . . . aside from a basement door. The exterior doors were bolted, the windows shut, but the interior doors were open. Except for Room 307. Mom’s room.” She locked up at him and saw the furrows drawing deep between his eyebrows. “Don’t you find that odd?”

“Oh, darlin’, I’m finding a lot of things odd,” he admitted, and as their gazes held, she felt a shift in the atmosphere. She suddenly knew he was going to kiss her. Before she could think twice, he shifted, the bed groaned expectantly, and he drew her so close that she felt his breath mingle with her own.

“This is wrong, she thought, but tilted her head up.

“Damn it,” he muttered, and a second later, his mouth crashed down on hers. Warm lips molded over hers, one hand tangled in her hair, the other reached low and splayed over the curve of her spine, and she did nothing to stop him, to allay the onslaught to her senses.

Instead she closed her eyes and felt the wonder of his mouth, the gentle scratch of his goatee against her skin, the heat of his body against hers.

How long had it been since she’d kissed a man? Made love to him? She closed her mind to that train of thought and lost herself in the moment, feeling the urgent pressure of his lips against hers, the weight of his body as he rolled over her.

His tongue slid easily past her teeth, the tip touching the ridges along the roof of her mouth as he tasted her, touched her. She kissed him back, her own tongue exploring this man of whom she knew so little, this cop who at once charmed and irritated her half to death.

“Is that what you’re in the middle of?” she asked, teasing, her breath hot as it blew across his bare chest. He let out a soft moan. “And here I thought . . .”

“You think I don’t know this?”

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Why?”

Her fingertips slid down his flat abdomen, along the arrow of dark hair that delved beneath the waistband of those faded, sexy jeans.

She opened the top button and slid her fingertips past the worn denim. His stomach muscles contracted. Giving her more access to the warmth emanating between his legs.

“Careful,” he whispered, sucking in his breath. “Dangerous territory.”

“It’s all dangerous territory,” she replied and tugged. The buttons of his Levi’s opened in a quick series of pops and she felt the smooth hardness of his buttocks.

“More!”

“Give me more!”

Her fingertips slid down his flat abdomen, along the arrow of dark hair that delved beneath the waistband of those faded, sexy jeans.

“Oooh,” she whispered, wanting more, desire pounding deep inside—a real, living thing that demanded freedom. She ran her hands over the muscles of his shoulders and down the sinewy strength of his arms. He was strong and hard. Had, no doubt, loved many women, fought many men, perhaps even killed.

“Now.”

“Now.”

He tasted her, tongue flicking over her breast, one hand pulling her hips to his, his fingers hot against her spine, the tips brushing the cleft of her buttocks.

She squirmed in delicious agony.

“More!”

“Give me more!”

Her fingertips slid down his flat abdomen, along the arrow of dark hair that delved beneath the waistband of those faded, sexy jeans.

She opened the top button and slid her fingertips past the worn denim. His stomach muscles contracted. Giving her more access to the warmth emanating between his legs.

“Careful,” he whispered, sucking in his breath. “Dangerous territory.”

“I’m in the middle of a murder investigation and—”

“Is that what you’re in the middle of?” she asked, teasing, her breath hot as it blew across his bare chest. He let out a soft moan. “And here I thought you were in my bed, in the middle of making love to me. I wasn’t wrong, was I?” She ran the fingers of her free hand up his sternum to touch one of his flat nipples. “I didn’t get mixed signals.” She kissed his abdomen, her lips wet.

“I’m trying to be noble here,” he grumbled.

“Duly noted.”

“Abby—”

“What?” she breathed over his skin again, and the fingers around her wrist tightened for a second, then relaxed.
“Christ,” he whispered. “If this is what you want, darlin’; then it’s what you’re gonna get.” He drew her up to him, held her face between his hands, then kissed her as if he’d never stop. His mouth was hungry and hard, his lips eager. The barriers down.

With her help, he kicked off his jeans. He didn’t utter up a single sound of protest as she touched his hips, trailed her fingers along his rock-hard thighs, or cupped his buttocks.

His breathing audible, he moved slowly downward, kissing her intimately between her breasts, along her abdomen, and rimming her navel so exquisitely that she clutched the bedsheets in her curling fingers. His deft tongue and lips explored, while his hands kneaded as she writhed, sweating, panting, feeling. Hot, wanton sensations rippled through her and she wanted more . . . oh, dear God, so much more.

She parted her legs willingly for him, felt his ultimate caress as his tongue and lips tasted her, lapping, tickling, causing her to moan in sheer, incredible, torturous pleasure.

The first spasms hit her hard, jolting through her body, causing her toes to curl and her fingers to knot in the bedsheets. Again she rocketed, her body jerking. And again. Still he teased her, his hands kneading her buttocks, his fingers finding hidden spots, pleasuring her time and time again.

Her eyes closed just as she convulsed. A scream caught in the back of her throat. Still he came to her, pushing, pulling, hard and fast until she caught his fevered tempo again, her fingers digging into his shoulders, her head tossed back, her hair damp with sweat. Hotter. Faster. Wilder. Until her entire body bucked.

“Oh, God . . . Montoya . . .” she cried as he stiffened, his breath sliding through his teeth in a hiss, his head drawing back as if pulled by a string.

And then he collapsed, pouring himself into her, his arms surrounding her, his head falling against the hollow of her shoulder. “That’s what I was waiting to hear,” he said, his voice raw.

“What . . . ?”

“My name and God’s . . . at the precise moment of rapture.”

Silent laughter caught in her throat. “How can you joke right now?” Her heart was still pounding out of control, her pulse in the stratosphere, the synapses in her brain still firing asafterglowtugged at her.

“Who’s joking?”

“Bastard,” she muttered and swatted at him with the back of her hand.

“From God to bastard in one fell swoop.” He nuzzled her neck and she sighed in contentment, refusing to think of the morning and what recriminations the dawn would carry on its shoulders.

For tonight she would enjoy this fleeting feeling of love.

Let the morning bring what it would.

* * *

The Reverend Billy Ray Furlough was up late, in his study, his private sanctuary away from the world. Separated from the main house by a grove of tended willow, magnolia, pine, and oak, as well as an elaborate wrought-iron fence, his study was actually a suite of rooms complete with three car-garage, private entrance, lap pool, and interior full-sized basketball court. A little ostentatious, perhaps, but necessary, he felt, for him to spread the word of God.

Reverend Furlough never felt closer to the Lord than when he was sweating profusely and making that perfect basketball shot just to the right of the free throw line. It was his signature shot, had been since he’d been the leading scorer for the Hornets in college. He loved the game and for years the game had loved him. He’d played with a vengeance, with an angry fire that he had carried with him into his personal life.

It had been on the basketball court where he’d first seen the light.

One second he’d been leaping skyward and was completely airborne, his fingers extended for a rebound, the next he’d been on the ground, in a jumble of players, involved in a freak accident that had broken his ankle and knocked him unconscious for over ten minutes. In that precious dark span of time he’d lived a lifetime, seen Christ’s face, and when he’d awakened, had sworn that if he was allowed to heal—and play the next season—he would dedicate his life to God and His Son.

And so it was.

He’d healed, worked hard through hours of excruciating pain and physical therapy, and had received cards and notes from people he’d never met saying he was in their thoughts, swearing that they were praying for his full recovery. They had told him their private thoughts, offered good wishes, and to a one he’d lived a lifetime, seen Christ’s face, and when he’d awakened, had sworn that if he was allowed to heal—and play the next season—he would dedicate his life to God and His Son.

And so it was.

The Hornet’s league was, after all, a small one; the Hornets’ league not nearly as tough or as competitive as those of major universities. As for his injury, a bevy of doctors had declared him fit, tough, and stronger than ever. He still could play with fire and fury despite the two screws and plate in his ankle.

Only a handful of his closest friends had known of the pain he suffered after each game. His right foot, ankle, and calf felt as if they had been roasting in the fires of hell. He’d found relief not only from prayer, but from Vicodin and Percocet and whatever other prescription would help ease the raging, burning.
sensation that had made him grit his teeth.

It had been easy to find an adoring doctor, an alumnus of the college, to write him the necessary prescriptions . . . and he’d never abused the drugs, just used them to help control the raging pain and seething anger that accompanied it.

With no professional contract in the United States, he had briefly considered playing ball in Europe but knew he’d face the same problems overseas that he would have in the States. Then there were all the cards and notes he’d received and saved from the people who had reached out to him, the people who believed in him, the people who had asked for signed pictures of him, or wanted his old jerseys and basketball shoes. Adoring fans. Loving fans. People who believed in him.

He’d taken the lack of a professional contract as a sign from God to “play on Jesus’s team.” No fool, Billy Ray had realized that he could be a part of that team for the rest of his life, perhaps make as much money as in the NBA, but for substantially longer.

He could still be a star.

And so it was.

The same rage and dedication that had fueled him on the basketball court had helped him create a parish of thousands. No one knew where that rage came from, the lies his entire life had been founded upon. No one knew how betrayed he’d been when he’d discovered that his parents—two hardworking, loving people—had lied to him from the get-go.

They’d never told him he’d been adopted; never once mentioned that he wasn’t of their own loins. He’d found out by a simple class in genetics when he took biology at fourteen. Blue-eyed people did not give birth to brown-eyed children . . . that was a simple biological fact, so either his mother had committed the sin of adultery or he’d been adopted.

Easy enough to find out, and find out he did.

Now he tapped his pen on the desk and scowled at the perfidy. How many times had he tried to forgive those poor simple people, and how many times had he come up short?

“Give me strength,” he whispered as he sat in the study, darkness surrounding this part of what the negative press had dubbed his “compound.” Let them say what they would. Who cared? Billy Ray believed that there was no bad press. As long as reporters were writing about him, people were hearing his name and that was what mattered.

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. He was tired and should turn in. He had an expansive bedroom here in the study—a king-size bed, huge flat-screen television, even a gas fire that could be flipped on with a remote. He spent most of his nights here rather than in the huge antebellum-looking house his wife had spent years building.

He dutifully stayed in the main house each Saturday night, slept in their marriage bed and made love to her as if he still cared. The next morning they always ate breakfast in that monster of a dining hall, dressed for church service, then left in separate cars, she with the children, he alone to drive to the church.

There had been a time when they’d been passionate. He’d even been so moved as to once have had sex with her on that huge table, but that had been a few years back. Before she’d grown cold. Before she’d been so wrapped up in the children’s lives that she had no time for Billy Ray. Before she’d relegated sex to once a week and had lain there, barely moving, a statue who, because of her wedding vows, let him rut over her.

He hated it.

Sex with one’s wife should not feel dirty.

He had considered taking up with a younger, more vibrant, more alive woman than Aldora. He’d even flirted with the new church secretary, a recently divorced mother of two who wore high heels, tight skirts, and had a tendency to show a smile and wink at him when she talked. So far, he hadn’t stepped over that line. Yet.

But . . . a man had to feel loved, not only by God, but by a woman as well. These days Aldora just wasn’t holding up her end of the marriage bargain.

He felt simmering anger as he unbuttoned his golf shirt and stared down at the words he’d scrawled on a yellow legal pad. He’d been working on his sermon all week, ever since hearing about Luke Gierman and Courtney LaBelle’s murders. Their horrendous deaths presented an opportunity to bring more people to the Lord.

He’d already managed to get a lot of press over the killings; now he wanted more. Which was no problem. Asa Pomery and Gina Jefferson’s murders had provided more gristy fodder.

Billy Ray had a feeling that this Sunday his church would be filled to overflowing. Fear brought out the piety in people. It was interesting, he thought, how his words of the Lord’s wrath, of punishment for evil deeds, of fire and brimstone, were such a magnet for his followers. He’d found that the more harshly he spoke, the more he shook his hands toward the heavens, the more his voice boomed in fury, the more the veins in his neck throbbed with his convictions, the more the parishioners tithered. He even had a half-hour radio program on WNAB at nights and there was talk of television.

They all wanted a show.

Passion.

Wrath.

Power.

And above all else, a deep-seeded love of the Lord.

Billy Ray had them all.

So this had to be a great sermon, about the wrath and love of an all-powerful God, about the compassion of Jesus and about . . . He looked up. Had he heard something? A footsteps? He waited, his ears straining, and there was no other sound. Nothing but the wind outside, rustling through the dry leaves of autumn. He hadn’t heard anything. He was just tired, his body reacting to a week of strain, of being “on” for the cameras, of showing his own sympathizing for the victims, his own rage at the murdering maniac let loose on the streets of his city. Yes, yes, that was it. Picking up his pen, he began writing in swift sure strokes, his sermon spewing forth faster and faster. He would edit the text on the computer in the morning, clean up any mistakes. By writing his thoughts on paper, he let loose some of his anger, the pen nearly ripping through the top page as he scrawled on and on and . . .

Creak.

Again he looked up.

This time he was nearly certain he’d heard the squeak of floorboards. He leaned back and listened. “Anyone there?” he called, feeling a fool. His bodyguard and personal trainer had left hours ago and he’d heard the gates close behind Kyle’s Chevy Blazer, seen the wink of the SUV’s taillights through the open window.

Again there was nothing but silence.

He was just agitated tonight.

Perhaps he needed to pray. Dropping his pen onto the desk, he took in a deep breath. Then swiping his face with his hands, he leaned back in his chair, squeezed his eyes shut, and asked the Lord for inspiration, for clairvoyance, for God’s will to be spread through his sermon. For that’s how it happened, the reverend believed. He was inspired by God, touched by Him as if the Father actually reached down from glorious heaven and placed His fingertips onto Billy Ray’s crown. In that moment, God’s thoughts entered Billy Ray’s brain, sizzled through synapses down his nerves to his fingers, where the words—right from the Lord’s mouth!—flowed onto the pages of this legal pad.

“Lord help me,” he said aloud. “Let me see the light, let me feel Your presence, let me be Your mouthpiece. . . .”

Again the noise.

Billy Ray opened his eyes.
He gasped and leapt to his feet.
There, standing before him, holding a Taser pointed right at the preacher’s heart, was Satan.
Before Billy Ray could utter a word, Lucifer pulled the trigger.

Sister Maria sensed something in her sleep.
She rolled over.
A gloved hand clamped over her mouth.
Panic shot through her and she was instantly awake. Her room was pitch dark; it was long before morning prayers. She couldn’t see her attacker, but he was strong.
Determined.
Angry.
She felt his fury, smelled his sweat.
A sickeningly sweet smell filled her nostrils.
Ether!
She recognized it from her days at the hospital.
No! she thought. No, no, no!
Sister Maria struggled. Tried to scream. Fought with all the strength in her body, but as she writhed and flung her useless arms upward, she breathed rapidly. Deeply.
The thick chemical wound its way into her lungs, dulling her mind, weakening her limbs, causing her eyelids to droop. She gasped, struggling for breath, but more of the noxious sleep-inducer was dragged into her airways.
Her movements turned sluggish.
She knew what was happening but was unable to fight the inevitable.
In the end, she gave up, her body going limp, the blackness oozing through her brain.
Forgive me, Father, she prayed dreamily, for I have sinned...
Billy Ray Furlough wasn’t going down without a fight. Blindfolded, gagged, strapped to a chair, he’d been left by his abductor somewhere that smelled of rot and dirt and dampness. He guessed he was near the swamp as he smelled thick, stagnant water, heard bullfrogs croaking and ominous splashes. He imagined alligators slipping through inky depths, only their eyes visible over the water’s smooth surface, and he thought of cottonmouths or copperheads slithering down cypress trunks and roots to glide into the swamp water. A chill ran down his spine, but as dangerous as the creatures of the swamp were, they were nothing in comparison with the man who had captured him. A tall, broad-shouldered son of a bitch dressed in a black neoprene suit and ski mask. He was deadly, swift, and determined to kill. Billy Ray knew it. He’d read enough about the recent local murders to understand that the man who had kidnapped him was the killer.

There would be no ransom demand of Aldora.

No negotiating for his release.

Not even the slicing off of an ear or finger to prove that he was abducted. No, there was only certain death. Unless he did something to save himself.

The Lord helps those who help themselves.

How many times had he blithely handed out that piece of advice? So now he had to take it. He had to help himself. He’d been left alone, so he had time to plan, time to get ready, time to figure out a way to save himself. He wondered who the psycho was. Why had Billy Ray been chosen as a victim?

It made no sense. No one wanted him dead. He was adored by his parishioners and the news media alike. There was even a movement within his church pushing him toward local politics. But someone hated him. Someone with the balls to scale his fence and walk straight into his inner sanctum.

Yet bad as this was, at least Aldora and the kids were safe . . . right? The psycho wouldn’t have gone back for any of his family, surely not.

But didn’t this guy kill in pairs?

A man and a woman?

Assuming this was the same killer . . . maybe this nut job was a copycat, but whoever he was, he was strong and determined. Deadly silent. Without a word he’d walked into the study, stunned Billy Ray, and easily and efficiently trussed him up like a tom turkey before Thanksgiving supper. The only way Billy Ray could possibly get the drop on him was to pretend compliance, even fear, act as if he’d yet to have control of his body. Then he might just have a chance to overpower the man.

Maybe . . . but he’d have to be quick, surprise the creep. Even in as good a shape as Billy Ray was, this larger man was stronger, tougher. As soon as the Taser gun had sent Billy reeling backward and flopping on the floor like a landed catfish, his attacker had been on him, pinning him down, forcing his hands behind him, wrapping them in duct tape and doing the same with his ankles. A blindfold had been forced over his eyes, tape slapped over his mouth.

It had been over in a matter of minutes and then the brute had carried him fireman style into the garage, where he shot Billy Ray with the stun gun again. Hundreds of thousands of volts had shrieked through the preacher’s body and he’d been tossed into the backseat of his Mercedes SL600.

The bastard had fired up the sleek car and breezed down the lane using Billy Ray’s own electronic gate opener to leave the estate. And all the while Billy could do nothing. Nothing. Never had he felt so powerless.

Lying on the smooth backseat, smelling new leather, Billy Ray had prayed, oh, how he’d prayed, for salvation. He’d had no idea where they were going. He’d lost track after the driver had turned west onto the main highway then north . . . probably on Gatlin Road, but after that, with all the twists and turns, Billy Ray had lost all sense of direction. Nor did he know why he’d been kidnapped. But he had a dark fear that this psychopath was the same one responsible for the deaths of four other people.

About a half an hour from the time he’d been abducted, he’d felt the car shiver as it was turned too quickly onto a rough road. The Mercedes had bounced and lunged over potholes.

Within minutes, the car had slowed suddenly and the driver had climbed out. He’d opened the back door and given Billy Ray another shot for good measure. The rest of the abduction was blurry. Billy Ray had been briefly unbound, stripped, then forced into a chair, his naked butt feeling a crack in the plastic seat. His hands had been tied behind him with tape, and his legs were strapped to the legs of the chair.

Then the assailant had said the first and only words he’d uttered since walking into Billy Ray’s study.

Leaning close, his breath hot against the reverend’s ear, he’d uttered, “The power of God be with you, Brother.”

Billy Ray had felt a chill like no other.

Then his abductor had left. Billy Ray, shaking in his shackles, had heard the smooth sound of the Mercedes’s engine purr off into the night.

At that point, he’d known he had to work fast. Either the bastard planned to return to torment, torture, then finish the job, or Billy Ray had been left here indefinitely to die of dehydration while the creatures who called this place home waited patiently.

He’d tried everything. Throwing himself forward in the chair, knocking it over; struggling to slide to whatever doorway there was, yanking at the tape at his wrists until his arms ached, kicking his feet so hard that pain screamed up his legs to his lower back.

With all his strength, he’d shoved and scooted the chair over the dirty floor. Dust and filth pushed into his nostrils. His left ear was scratched raw as he inched toward what he hoped was the door. Slowly the chair scraped over the smelly linoleum, past pieces of cloth, over tiny hard pellets that he assumed were rat feces. There had to be something . . . anything he could use as a weapon.

Minutes ticked by. He was sweating, his naked skin rubbed to bleeding where his shoulder pushed over the floor. Suddenly his nose ran into something soft . . . cloth of some kind? He explored with his face and felt metal, cool, smooth, attached to a thin, long . . . snake!

Was it dead? Caught in a mousetrap? Lying on a pile of forgotten clothes? Why else the metal . . . ? But smooth metal. Polished metal. Expensive metal? Out of place here . . . and the cloth hadn’t been dusty or rotting. No foul odor had assailed his nostrils; if anything, he’d smelled a gentle musky scent.

His belt. Right? His clothes? He’d found the spot where his abductor had tossed his pants and shirt after stripping them from his body. And the psycho had been in a hurry. Billy Ray had sensed that. As if the lunatic were running out of time. So the clothes had been left, along with anything in his pockets. Along with his Pomeroy Ultra pocket tool, the one he had given him for Christmas last year. From needle-nosed pliers to a tiny saw to toenail clippers, the Ultra was a handyman’s dream and boasted fifteen blades. Billy Ray needed only one. Any would do.

The other selling feature had been that the Ultra was easily accessible, meaning that with the push of a small lever, two of the most commonly used blades would flip out. He remembered his son, eyes shining, back-dropped by the eighteen-foot Christmas tree. Garlands of greenery, lush poinsiettias, tissue paper, and ribbons littered Aldora’s gleaming hardwood floor, while his son proudly told Billy about the flip lever that made the Ultra “kind of like a
switchblade of tools.”

At the time Billy Ray had just smiled and thought, Darn it, son, who needs that? Now he was grateful for the function. He worked feverishly, scooting the chair into position in front of his pants. Quickly his fingers searched through the pockets while his shoulders screamed in pain.

Breathing deeply, praying minute by minute, he remembered all of the pain he’d endured as an athlete: broken fingers, a crushed nose, bruised elbows, torqued knees in addition to his ankle. He could endure this. He would! Anger started to burn bright in his chest as he set his jaw and found one pocket. Good! He pressed onward, his fingers searching and coming up with . . . his lighter. Perfect. Carefully, he set it aside. It could come in handy. Now, the other front pocket. His fingers brushed over his fly, feeling the metal teeth of his zipper, then discovered the pocket. Straining, he pushed his hands downward into the lining. It had to be there! He always carried it with him! Sweat burned his eyes. Panic started to surge through him.

Then he felt it . . . the Pomeroy Ultra! It was hard to grab hold of, his fingers slick as they were with sweat, but with sheer guts and determination, Billy Ray grabbed the tool and, inch by inch, slid it from his pants. Eventually it was free . . . Now, God help me, he thought, his fingers trembling as he tried to open the spring mechanism.

The Ultra fell out of his hands. He nearly swore, but caught himself. He wasn’t alone. God was with him. And yet he was angry at his clumsiness. “Give me strength,” he muttered behind his gag and found the tool again. Closing his eyes behind the blindfold, he used a technique he’d learned long ago when trying to deal with his rage. He pictured the Ultra in his hand and, breathing slowly and calmly, rotated it until it felt comfortable. In his mind’s eye he saw himself flipping the lever—where was the damned thing? There! He felt the nub and pushed.

Click! A blade swung free.

Hallelujah!

Thank you, Jesus!

God be with me, he silently prayed, and give me the strength to kill the son of a bitch.

In the last few hours of his darkness, Billy Ray had come to understand his mission. God was presenting him the opportunity to rid the earth of the monster who had abducted him. This was not only a test, but his opportunity to prove himself to the Lord. In so doing, he would not only save his life, and the life of whoever else the killer planned to murder, but also become more of a local hero. The press would eat it up. His parish would flourish. There would be a book deal. Even a television movie.

But he was getting ahead of himself. For now, all he had to concentrate on was somehow getting the upper hand, and he counted on his old buddy, rage, to help him through.

Because he was angry.

Furious and ready for revenge.

He began working with the Ultra, using the tool on the tape binding his wrists.

Come on, you sick bastard; he thought, fury searing through his veins, I’m going to bring you down.

* * *

Sister Maria was hauled roughly to her feet.

Her hands were bound behind her, but her assailant had cut away the tape that held her ankles together and untied her blindfold. He’d also draped her rosary over her neck.

“Move,” he muttered behind his mask.

Woozy and weak, she could barely walk. The muzzle of the gun in her back, and the urging of the brute of a man in black, kept her stumbling forward, through the darkness toward what? Torture, probably. Rape likely. And death certain.

As he pushed her forward, he swept the weak beam of a flashlight over the damp ground. Dead leaves formed a carpet over the soggy marshland. Cypress grew tall, bleached like ghosts, their roots buckling the earth and delving into the standing water. She had no idea where in the swamps of Louisiana he’d brought her, but she was certain she was going to die.

Our Father who art in heaven . . .

He trained the flashlight onto a building, a single-wide mobile home that seemed as if it had been abandoned long ago, the siding had rusted, the windows broken out, the lean-to that had once been attached to it was now crumpled into a heap of grayed boards.

She thought of the vile acts he would commit against her, of the pain she would endure, and she accepted her fate, prayed for strength, for fortitude, so that she wouldn’t break. She remembered Jesus and what he had endured upon the cross and only hoped that she would be able to handle what was to come with dignity, with piety, and be able to forgive this poor, tortured soul.

Up two uneven steps he pushed her, and she entered the dark interior, where she sagged against the wall. With the gun still pressed against her spine, he lit a lamp.

Her heart withered at the sight of the tiny space that had once been a living room. The interior was filthy from years of weather, vermin, and neglect. The smell of rot was everywhere and seated in a chair on the far wall, his legs bound to the rusted metal legs, his hands pulled behind him, was Billy Ray Furlough. He was naked, a blindfold over his eyes, a gag over his mouth. “No!” she cried, her voice muffled because of the tape over her mouth. Despite the weapon’s muzzle hard against her back, she bent over and started to wretch.

The smell of rot was everywhere and seated in a chair on the far wall, his legs bound to the rusted metal legs, his hands pulled behind him, was Billy Ray Furlough. He was naked, a blindfold over his eyes, a gag over his mouth. “No!” she cried, her voice muffled because of the tape over her mouth. Despite the weapon’s muzzle hard against her back, she bent over and started to wretch.

How could this be? Dear Father, no!

She was sobbing, crying, utterly destroyed.

No! No!

Tears ran down her face and she heaved again and again. She wasn’t aware that her tormentor had left her, that he’d crossed the small scrap of stained linoleum to stand near her only child.

By the saints, how had the monster known? What did he want of her? Deep inside, her soul twisted painfully. Gasping and coughing, she looked over at the masked man who had abducted her and how pridefully he stood over her son.

She couldn’t let this happen. Whatever this twisted mind had invented, she wouldn’t let him harm her son, the baby she’d given away so many years before . . .

“Don’t do this,” she begged. “Ask for God’s forgiveness and sin no more.”

His body stiffened. “I’m not the sinner,” he said slowly as he pulled off Billy Ray’s blindfold.

Billy Ray turned glassy eyes at her and she realized that he, too, had already suffered. She would not look at his nakedness, but only into his dark eyes, so like his father’s, a boy she’d known in her youth, a man long dead.

“You know each other,” the abductor said in a gravelly, satisfied voice, and to her horror, she saw the recognition in her only child’s features, realized that her secret had somehow been uncovered. “Mother and son.”

Oh, Mother Mary.

“Both living lies.”

Billy Ray’s eyes turned toward their captor, and Maria saw something shift in his features, an anger in the flare of his nostrils, the narrowing of his eyes,
and she knew then that he would do something stupid, something dangerous. She couldn’t let it happen.

Somehow she had to save him. Even if she had to kill to do it. Murder was a mortal sin . . . her soul would go straight to hell.

So be it.

Billy Ray, pretending to be bound and still disoriented, couldn’t help glaring at the woman who had borne him. Why was she here? The psycho had somehow abducted Sister Maria Montoya, the woman who had given birth to him and left him with parents too stupid to understand basic genetics.

There she was in her nightgown, looking old, tired, and scared, her rosary looped over her neck, her lips, now silent, moving mutely. He surmised she was mentally reciting the prayers of each decade of the rosary that was swinging from her neck. No doubt she was hoping for divine intervention.

She. The nun. Who was his mother.

Whore.

Hiding under the sacred habit.

Pretending piety.

He hated her, but more than that, he hated this man who was intending to take their lives with a gun that looked suspiciously like one from his collection, the nickel-plated Ruger he kept under the front seat of his Mercedes.

The psycho turned his back for just a second. In that instant, Billy Ray made his move. He leaped upward, his legs free, his hands unbound. With a strength he swore came from the Lord, he plunged the Pomeroy Ultra deep into the assailant’s chest, just as the man spun.

Blood spurted.

The nun screamed and threw herself at the attacker.

With a roar, the psycho slammed the gun into the side of Billy Ray’s face. Pain shot through his skull. His nose splintered. Billy Ray fell backward and lost his grip on the Ultra. His intention was to stab and stab and stab until the lifeblood flowed out of him, but his hands were slick with blood and the nun intervened, trying to force herself between the two, clawing at the man’s face, attacking him with her bare hands.

‘No!’

In an instant, the big man, his mask askew from the nun’s assault, Billy Ray’s weapon still protruding from him, smacked Sister Maria across the face, caught her as she began to fall, and forced his gun into her trembling, wavering hand . . .

Sister Maria gasped. He was going to make her kill Billy Ray? No!

She fought the brute, swinging her head back and forth, crying and screaming and praying in one horrible sound. But the psycho was strong—too strong. He aimed the weapon straight at Billy Ray’s heart, cocked the hammer . . .

Billy Ray scooted backward, tried to get away.

Bang!

Pain exploded in Billy Ray’s chest. He blinked, stunned, and blood gurgled up his throat. He saw the psycho twist Sister Maria’s wrist until she cried out. In slow motion and disbelief he watched the man place the muzzle of the gun to her temple and squeeze the trigger. Shuddering, Billy Ray closed his eyes and prayed as death claimed him.

The nun slumped in his arms. Carefully, he draped her body over the preacher’s, leaving them entwined, mother and son, so different.

Pain spread through his body. He glanced down at the irritating knife still embedded in his chest and felt fury. The bastard had sliced him. Luckily the blade had hit a rib, so the damage was painful but not debilitating. He would remove the weapon soon, but later, when he was away from here. He couldn’t afford any more of his blood being spilled.

He’d been foolish. Gotten careless. Hadn’t given the preacher enough credit for being resourceful. Now, he stared down at the dead man. How had he gotten free? In the flashlight’s beam he saw where the chair had been dragged to the pile of clothes. So the reverend had scooted himself across the room, somehow gotten the tool out of his pocket, freed himself, and then waited? Why not run for it?

Had he run out of time?

Not expected his captor to return?

Or had he wanted to be a hero, had felt invincible as he was on “Jesus’s team,” as he’d so often said. The hypocrite.

Satisfied that he’d arranged them just as he wanted, he lifted the nun’s head and pulled her rosary from her neck. Quickly he slid the holy beads into his pocket. Then he took the gun. Furlough’s nickel-plated Ruger.

Silently he walked outside. Realizing there was blood on his shoes, he took the time to wipe them on the steps before stopping at the Mercedes and popping the trunk. He found the emergency kit, grabbed it, forcing himself to ignore the pain in his chest. Then he headed down a long path, to a dilapidated dock where pilings were settling into the bog. The rowboat was right where he’d left it hours earlier. He stepped inside and, using the flashlight, popped the trunk. He found the emergency kit, grabbed it, forcing himself to ignore the pain in his chest. Then he headed down a long path, to a dilapidated dock where pilings were settling into the bog. The rowboat was right where he’d left it hours earlier. He stepped inside and, using the flashlight, looked at the weapon still protruding through the wet suit. Checking the emergency kit, he found several gauze pads and sterile tape. Good enough for now.

Grinning his teeth, he pulled out the tool. Blood started to flow and he quickly stanched it with the gauze. He unwrapped all five packs, layered the gauze pads, one on top of the other, wrapping them down with the tape. He ached and bled from the jagged slice, but no vital organ had been perforated. He’d have to work fast. Dawn would arrive in a few hours and he wanted to be far from the Reverend Billy Ray Furlough’s compound when the preacher was discovered missing.

Besides, his work was far from done.

He wouldn’t have much time, he thought as he dipped his oar into the water. Stroke, stroke, stroke. The pain in his chest throbbed viciously, but he pushed it aside.

He had others to take care of today.

His lips pulled into a rictus smile as he oared through the darkness. The beam from his small flashlight guided him through these familiar waters. He caught the glow of a gator’s eyes as it glided past, and when he scanned the shore, he caught images of ‘possum and raccoons staring after him. He
breathed in the heavy scent of the water, rowing unerringly, just as he had as a child.

When he’d been allowed. When the restrictions had been lifted . . . 

His jaw hardened when he recalled how all that had changed. When she had been introduced to him. His lips curled as if he’d encountered a foul smell.

She, with her tinkling laugh, tiny voice, and iron will. A small woman even in the high heels she forever wore. A frail-looking beauty who caused men, even important men, to fawn all over her.

She’d changed things from the start. No more hunting off-season, no more late nights, no more eating in front of the television, no more “obnoxiously loud eardrum-splitting bass” and certainly not one more “disgusting, violent, and sick lyric.”

His hands tightened over the paddle.

Stroke, stroke, stroke.

She, with her tiny, yapping dog and expensive horses . . . 

His smile turned to a sneer as he considered the irony of it all: the dog trampled by the horse; the sleek bay gelding rearing at a snake and tossing off his rider; the rider hitting her head on a large, knife-edged rock. By the time anyone had gone looking for her, the vultures had already been circling.

So now, he could breathe deeply of the thick bayou air, hear the insects thrum in the bulrushes, watch the moon rise over the dark, brackish waters. She couldn’t stop him.

Stroke, stroke, stroke.

He guided his small craft to the side of an inlet. Hopping out, he dragged the boat to the shore, concealing it in the thick cattails and reeds.

Stripping off his boots for the sneakers in his backpack, he took several shallow breaths, then a few deeper ones. The pain was bearable. He stuffed the emergency kit into the pack before heading cross-country through a farmer’s field, then on to the winding county road where he started the two-mile jog toward his truck.

Everything had been going so well.

Until Billy Ray Furlough had nearly outsmarted him, and the run . . . who would have thought that meek Milquetoast of a woman had the fire to challenge him? Like a mother bear, he thought, remembering his father’s warnings before they would take up their rifles and begin the long trek to the mountains. Do not get between a she-bear and her cubs. No matter what. If you make that mistake, shoot her. Quick. Before she has the chance to rip your liver out!

Twice during his run, a vehicle had passed. Both times he’d dived into the roadside ditch and laid flat until the beams from the headlights had passed over his body, the illumination fading and taillights visible. Only then would he start loping again, his wound aching and leaden. He knew he was bleeding again, and he bit back an oath when he thought of being fooled by the preacher.

How could that have happened? He was the one with the genius IQ. Billy Ray Furlough was just a hot-headed, has-been athlete who’d found a way to make a buck out of his rage by using it as a tool to appear passionately pious. Correction: Billy Ray Furlough was now a dead hotshot has-been.

His truck was where he’d left it: at the diner where he was often a patron. It was a place that was open twenty-four hours, where truckers often stopped for coffee and pie; in the evenings it was beer and hard liquor. He was known in this place by name, and no one thought twice if his truck remained there longer than he did. He always parked in the thick of the rigs and semis that pulled in at all hours. He always showed his face, too, as he was coming and going: sometimes through the back where the bar was; sometimes the front of the restaurant. He made certain he was seen every two hours or so. People knew him to be a hunter and a fisherman, a guy who sometimes left his rig in the parking lot when he stalked game. He was teased, too, as no one ever saw him with a bagged deer, or even ducks, or fish in his creel. He always laughed at the ribbing, buying a round, and telling the regulars that it was more to be out in nature than anything else.

They believed he was an independent contractor—a sheet rocker. They thought he was oftentimes out of work.

No one asked too many questions and the cover worked just fine.

Now, he glanced around. It was dark by the truck, extremely so, even though the eastern sky was faintly lightening. Quickly and carefully he removed his garments, stripped off the wetsuit, then pulled on a pair of jeans. He was shivering. The gauze was bloody. He shoved his arms through a blue cotton shirt, buttoned it over the gauze, then pushed his arms through a navy nylon jacket.

As he waited for his breakfast, he tried not to think about the killings, couldn’t yet let himself go to that place between wake and sleep where he relived the thrill, felt the thrum run through his veins, got off on the memory of their deaths. No, not yet . . . he needed his wits about him. And he also needed to take care of his injury, but not yet, not until he’d set his cover deeply, made sure everyone saw him having a leisurely breakfast.

Scanning the front page, he noticed that all mention of Asa Pomeroy and Gina Jefferson’s deaths had been placed below the fold, though because of the funeral, Luke Gierman’s picture was at the top of the page. Other related stories were buried deeper in the pages.

“Real sick-o behind that,” a local trucker who delivered eggs said. He thumped the paper as he passed on his way to his favorite booth. The tag embroidered on his overalls declared that his name was Hank. “Can’t wait ’til they catch that sumbitch and string him up by his balls.” He nodded, squared the bill of his trucker’s cap onto his head. “Yeah, I’ll like to see that. I listened to Gierman’s Groaners all the time. Can’t stand the fact that his sidekick, what’s the guy’s name?”

Maury Taylor, you imbecile, he thought, but shrugged.

“Maury, that’s it. A real jerk wad, that guy. Ridin’ on Gierman’s coattails. Hell.” He rubbed his fleshy jaw, which sported two days’ worth of silver bristles. “Don’t cha just hate it.”

“Hee-hee,” he said as his platter of eggs, bacon, and grits was placed in front of him.

“Sorry about the broken yolk,” the waitress said. “New cook. You okay with that?”

“No!

“I can get you a couple more.”

Don’t do it. Don’t draw attention to yourself. Smile and act like it’s no big deal that the cook is incompetent. “This is fine,” he said.

“You’re sure? It’s no trouble.”

“I’m okay.” Jesus, lady, back the fuck off!

“Well, then I’ll grab you a piece of pie. On the house. Pecan. Fresh baked.”

He nodded and Hank clapped him on the back. “Have yourself a good ‘un.”

“You, too,” he said, momentarily shocked by the impact. He struggled for breath. Then Hank’s out-of-control gray eyebrows drew together over the top of his thick glasses. “Hey, wha’d’ja do to yourself there?” he asked, pointing a thick finger at his shirt. “Cut yerself shaving?” Hank laughed but it sounded hollow.

He looked down. A red stain showed through his shirt.

He thought fast. “Chainsaw bucked the other day while I was cuttin’ brush.”

“Yes, Christ, man, you coulda kilt yerself. Gotta be careful with them things.”

“Hit a knot.” He nodded, pretending to show embarrassment that he couldn’t handle a tool. “I had it stitched up at the emergency clinic, but I think I’d better go back in.”

“Hell yes, you’d better go back in.” Hank frowned, nodded curtly, then lifted his hat and smoothed his hair before pulling the brim down low again.
“See ya ’round.” Finally the old coot ambled back to his chair.

He zipped his jacket and ate fast, careful not to take one bite of the broken yolk. To appease the damned waitress, he even washed down four bites of pie with black coffee before leaving enough cash on the bar for the meal and a fifteen percent tip.

And all the while he silently cursed Billy Ray Furlough.

Well, the bastard got his, didn’t he?

Dawn broke as he drove through the small towns to the back side of Our Lady of Virtues’ campus. The truck bumped down an old forgotten road that had once led to a dairy farm, now long abandoned. He parked inside the barn, ducked through a hole in the fence, then headed down a path he’d walked years before, one that led to a private entrance to the bowels of the main building.

Once inside, he maneuvered through the maze of corridors and stairwells until he came to his private set of rooms, the ones he’d known years before and had reclaimed. Using his flashlight, he worked his way to an old surgery unit and there, in the drawers, found leftover bandages. Shrugging out of his jacket, he unbuttoned his shirt, then removed the soaking wads of gauze. As he took off the shirt, he saw that his blood was clotting, the flow had slowed considerably. If the bastard hadn’t managed to slice him, had just left a puncture wound, then it wouldn’t have bled so much in the first place.

Carefully, he cleaned the wound using cold water from the shower. He squeezed gel from a tube of antiseptic cream tucked into the reverend’s first-aid kit. Then he ripped open packages of sterile cotton gauze patches—courtesy of the old hospital—and placed them directly over the wound. He secured the bandage with adhesive tape, then wrapped his chest tightly with a stretchy Ace bandage that he’d found still lying in one of the drawers. The whole place felt ready for business, as if it had just shut its doors yesterday. But it had been a long, long time.

Only when he was finished did he carry his backpack to his private room and light candles at his shrine. He unfolded the secretary’s table, then reached into the pack and withdrew his new treasures. The rosary and revolver would go into one cubby together, shining blood-red beads wrapped seductively over the muzzle of the nickel-plated .357.

He fingered the other treasures, the watch and ring, the little gold cross and diamond-studded money clip . . . His collection was growing but it still had so far to go. Six items were locked away, but he needed eight more . . . all belonging to a special person, one of the chosen.

Opening a photo album, he examined the old pictures—the hospital, the staff, the patients, the nuns. There were other photos as well, for some of the players were not a part of the smiling group shots. Part of his mission would be to find pictures of them.

He’d chosen wisely, he thought. Spent years formulating and perfecting his plan. The fourteen men and women were not random. In a way, they’d chosen themselves, had they not?

He ran a finger down their faces, the ones that he’d marked with a red pen, and then he glanced up to the top of the secretary, where the framed picture of Faith Chastain stared down at him. He thought of her and their secret trysts so long ago . . .

And then as he heard the old pipes drip, and smelled the mold and death and darkness, he thought of the others . . . His mind reeled with the memory of each death, that pure moment, that heady feel of power, that potent sexual thrill . . .

He would hide.

Rest.

For a few hours, perhaps a few days.

“But not for long,” he vowed, staring at the photograph of Faith. “Not for long.”
Abby stretched and opened an eye. Sunlight was slipping through the blinds, striping thin slats of light across the rumpled covers where Detective Reuben Montoya was breathing deeply. One of his arms was thrown over his head, his lips open just enough to inhale and exhale puffs of air. His black hair was mussed, giving a decidedly boyish look to his normally serious features.

Recalling the night’s lovemaking, she smiled. Smoothing closer, she wrapped her arms around his torso, and spied the small gold ring in his earlobe. She kissed his temple, then nibbled at the tiny piece of jewelry.

“You’ve got half an hour to cut that out.”

“You’re awake.”

“Very,” he said in a low tone that seemed to throb through her.

In a quick movement, he rolled over, pinning her beneath him. He stared down at her. Then, he captured her lips with his and began rubbing her body intimately, touching all the spots that created heat to swirl and rise within her. Seconds later she joined in and they explored each other anew, rediscovering the passion that lingered from the night before.

She opened readily to him. As they made love, she closed her mind to everything but the pleasure that rippled through her body in deep, searing waves. It happened so fast it left her breathless and surprised by her own desperate response.

“I’m falling in love with you,” she thought but didn’t let the words slip past her lips. No. She was enjoying this man, enjoying making love with him, but she wasn’t in love. She wasn’t about to mistake lust for love . . . yes, she cared for Montoya. She liked him. A lot. But that wasn’t necessarily love.

Later, when their breathing had slowed, Montoya looked up to see Ansel staring down from the bookcase. “Pervert,” he muttered.

“Yeah, right. Just after I bring you the newspaper and a long-stemmed rose.” She watched him walk from the room, her mind’s eye imprinted with the muscular V of his torso, the smooth muscles sliding beneath the skin of his back, the low dip of his jeans.

“I could get used to this,” she thought, leaning back on the pillows to stare up at the ceiling. She bit her lower lip as images of their passion flashed behind her eyes. Pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes, she groaned aloud in embarrassed amusement. It had been so wonderful.

Hershey padded into the bedroom and stopped on the bed without an invitation.

“Hey, girl, how’re you?” Sitting yoga-like on the bed, Abby petted the dog. She felt a light thump as Ansel landed on the foot of the bed. The cat gave the dog a wide berth, then settled next to Abby on a pillow and began to purr.

“I don’t know . . .” Cinching the belt of her robe, she hurried to the door. Peering through the blinds, she saw Zoey looking back at her. Luggage was strewn over the porch and a rental car was parked in the drive near Montoya’s Mustang.

“Did you go outside?” she asked. His lips curling. “I’m still the guy with the gun.”

She sobered slightly, remembering that Luke’s .38 was missing. “Need a hand?” she asked, settling onto a bar stool.

“Careful,” he warned, his lips curving. “I’m still the guy with the gun.”

“I think I’ve got it now.”

“Near black eyes flashed in amusement and she found herself loving the way his hair fell over his forehead and the way his jeans settled low on his hips. “Did you go outside?” she asked.

He nodded. “I checked under the laundry room window to see if there were any footprints, or any other sign of your thief. Nothing that I can see, but I’ll have someone from the crime lab come out and dust for prints and double-check the ground.

“Doesn’t there have to be a crime committed?”

“You report the gun stolen, and I’ll pull a few strings. Then you get an alarm system.”

She was stunned. “You’ve got strings to pull there, too?”

“Company?” he asked, glancing at the clock. “At eight?”

“I don’t know . . .” Cinching the belt of her robe, she hurried to the door. Peering through the blinds, she saw Zoey looking back at her. Luggage was strewn over the porch and a rental car was parked near Montoya’s Mustang.

“About time!” Zoey said, hauling in a roller bag, computer case, and oversized purse as soon as Abby opened the door. Hershey scrambled and wiggled wildly around Zoey’s feet, as if she’d been missing Abby’s sister for months. “Hey, girl.” Zoey bent down and offered the dog some pets before straightening. “What’s with the car? That’s not your Mustang, is it? You didn’t finally trade in the old Honda? Or did you inherit one from Luke, or . . .”

Her words faded as she spied Montoya, dressed only in his battered jeans, his side arm visible in his waistband, standing in the archway between the living room and dining room. “Oh . . . wow.” Her gaze returned to her sister’s. She cleared her throat. “A guy with a gun?”

“Yeah.” Montoya’s dark eyes glittered and he slid Abby an intimate glance, then winked. “Trust me, it could have been worse.”

Zoey stepped forward and shook Montoya’s hand. “I guess I, um, came at a bad time.”

“Zoey,” Abby said, feeling a blush stain her cheeks and wondering where in the world this was going to go. “This is Detective Reuben Montoya. He’s a undercover cop with a gun and a black Mustang.” Abby looked at Montoya and motioned toward Zoey. “Montoya, my sister, Zoey.”

Montoya stepped forward and shook Zoey’s hand. “I guess I, um, came at a bad time.”

“At eight?” Zoey said, feeling a blush stain her cheeks and wondering where in the world this was going to go. “This is Detective Reuben Montoya. He’s a undercover cop with a gun and a black Mustang.” Abby looked at Montoya and motioned toward Zoey. “Montoya, my sister, Zoey.”

Montoya looked envious.

Memories of her recent lovemaking flashed through Abby’s mind. She could see Zoey melting under Montoya’s charm. Just what she needed, her sister interested in her new man . . . He’s not your new man, Abby, she reminded herself sternly. Managing a smile, she resisted the urge to link her arm through the detective’s. “I think that was all the information my sister needs to hear right now.”

“Let me take those.” He grabbed Zoey’s bags and walked unerringly to the second bedroom, as if he carried guests’ bags through Abby’s house on a
regular basis.

Zoey raised an eyebrow and couldn’t hide the smile stretching across her face as she watched him disappear. “Oh, Abby,” she whispered. “He’s—”

“He’s the detective investigating Luke’s murder,” she said, cutting off Zoe’s train of thought.

She looked surprised. “And he’s here, with you? The ex-wife? Isn’t that a major no-no? I watch those crime shows and the detective never gets involved with anyone close to the victim because it could—compromise the investigation.” Her green eyes slanted. “Not that I blame you, though.”

Sending her sister a warning glance, Abby said shortly, “Detective Montoya was just making coffee. You look like you could use a cup.”

“You got that one right. The flight was the worst. I mean the worst. From Seattle to Dallas, I sat between a bawling baby and stressed-out mom on one side, and a big guy who couldn’t get comfortable on the aisle. I was either retrieving ‘binkies,’ those pacifier things, or trying to shrink so the big man could play computer chess. Then I was hung up in Dallas and the next leg was worse. Mechanical problems, a new plane, no bin space, no food . . . speaking of which, what have you got?”

Montoya disappeared. He was smiling, obviously overhearing the tail end of their conversation.

“What?” Zoey asked.

“Nothing,” Abby assured her as they headed to the kitchen, hersheying bounding in front of them.

“A private joke?” Zoey asked. “How long have you two”—she wagged her finger between Abby and Montoya—“been together?”

“It’s not a private joke. More like common knowledge that my culinary skills are . . . limited.” Abby adroitly sidestepped Zoey’s question as she opened a cupboard. “So I’ve got toast and . . . peanut butter.”

“Is it fat-free?”

Abby gave her sister a look. “It’s peanut butter, Zoe. Plenty of fat and . . .” She picked up the jar and rotated it so that her sister could view the label. “. . . it’s chunky. Pieces of real peanuts. Not the fat-free kind.”

“I’ll take it. Beats what I had on the plane, though, you know, you could have stocked up.”

Montoya laughed.

“I see he knows you already,” Zoey grumbled. As Montoya poured cups of coffee all around, she slid onto one of the bar stools. “I’m telling you, I’m going to eat this and then do a face-plant on the daybed. Wake me up an hour before the service and I’m not looking forward to it.”

You and me both, Abby thought.

A phone chirped from the living room.

“That’s mine,” Montoya said and strode out of the room.

Zoey, sipping from her cup, followed him with her eyes. “Nice butt.” She turned her gaze on her sister. “As a matter of fact, pretty nice all around.” Her eyes gleamed. “You should have told me.”

“It’s all new, I mean, real new.”

Zoey gave Abby’s state of undress and tousled hair the once-over. “Looks like you’re pretty involved.”

Abby didn’t like where this was going. “As I said, ‘new,’ I’m not sure how . . . involved . . . we are.”

“I’m not marrying him, Zoe. We’re just . . .” What were they? Not dating. “. . . seeing each other.”

“Mmm.” Zoey took a sip. “Don’t blame you . . . not at all.”

“Do you mean, ‘missing’?” Montoya asked, his heart turning to stone.

The Mother Superior sighed. “I mean that we’ve searched the building, the grounds, everywhere. Sister Maria is missing. Her bed was obviously slept in, unmade, and . . . she’s just gone. I hated to call you, but she spoke so highly of you and told me if ever something was wrong, I was to phone you first.” He was rapidly getting dressed, throwing an arm through a shirt-sleeve, finding his socks and shoes.

“Who was the last person to see her?”

“I think I was.”

“Where?”

“At the door to her room, sometime before vespers, we passed in the hallway . . . and . . . oh, dear.”

“I’m on my way,” Montoya assured her, a cold hammer of dread pounding at his skull. “Don’t let anyone into her room or even in the hallway by the room. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

He threw on the rest of his clothes, strode into the kitchen. Abby looked up from slathering peanut butter on a piece of toast.

“I gotta go.” He didn’t have time to explain, but she looked so damned seductive in the white terry bathrobe that he couldn’t stop himself from pulling her into his arms, kissing her hard, then releasing her. “Lock the doors,” he said, already heading out the door. “I’ll call later.”

“Okay.”

Zoey sat with the uneaten toast in front of her.

“My God, Abby,” she whispered. “He’s hot.”

* * *

“You’ve looked everywhere?” Montoya asked, trying to keep his cool as he sat in the chair in the Mother Superior’s office, a large wood-paneled room with a fireplace, broad desk, and windows that opened to the cloister.

“Everywhere in the convent. Everywhere she usually goes.” The woman, about half of his aunt’s height, was in her eighties, with papery skin, half-glasses, and eyes as blue as all of June. The lines around her lips were deep, but her mind seemed as sharp as it ever was. “Sister Maria is known to go on with a fireplace, broad desk, and windows that opened to the cloister.”

“Does he live on the grounds?”

“Would you?”

“Years . . . over ten, I’m sure. I would have to check the records.”

“Lawrence DuLoc, right? The groundskeeper?” Montoya remembered.

“Yes.”

“How long as he been with you here?”

“Has he ever done anything to make you think he might have any reason to be involved?”

“Has he ever been a suspect in any of the cases?”

“None.”

“Have you searched the grounds?”

“Have you searched the surrounding areas?”

“Just around the convent here, but I’ve asked Mr. DuLoc to check the surrounding areas.”

“Does he live on the grounds?”

“ monument remembered.

“Yes.”

“How long as he been with you here?”

“Years . . . over ten, I’m sure. I would have to check the records.”

“Would you?”

“We’ve never had any trouble with him.”

“Does he live on the grounds?”
“A small cabin, yes, on the edge of the property, but really, Mr. DuLoc has been a godsend.” Her eyes were fervent, and her chin inched up a bit, as if he’d offended her.

“We’ll have to look into everyone associated with the convent to find Sister Maria. I’m sure you’ll want to cooperate fully.” Her lips pursed a bit tighter. “Of course, Detective Montoya, but it’s also my position to protect the people who live here.”

“We’ll both be protecting them.” He stood. “May I see her room?”

The old nun nodded, took her glasses off her nose so that they swung from her neck on a chain, then climbed from behind her desk and led Montoya through the hallways to the second floor. She’d barricaded the room with a couple of chairs and opened the door without a key.

“The room wasn’t locked?”

She looked up at him. “There is no need.”

“Until last night.”

He looked inside the tiny chamber. A twin bed was pushed against one corner, the covers wildly mussed, the sheet draping to the floor. His stomach churned as he imagined her struggle. The closet door wasajar and a few items of clothing—habits and street clothes—peeked through. Her small window was open a crack, a breeze sliding through. “You haven’t disturbed anything?”

“No. Sister Rebecca, who usually walks with her to morning prayers, knocked on her door. When there was no answer, she went inside. Seeing Sister Maria was missing, she called me, and I came to her room. Then we went to prayers, thinking she would join us, but she didn’t. When she didn’t come to breakfast, we started looking more seriously. I spoke with everyone here and no one saw her after I did—which was around eight P.M. As I said, she didn’t say or do anything that would lead me to believe that she was troubled. Then, I called you. She’d given me your phone number in case of an emergency.”

There was nothing he could do officially until his aunt had been missing twenty-four hours. Nonetheless, he walked the perimeter of the convent, unofficially talked with a few of the nuns who were her aunt’s friends, and was shown some of the rooms and hallways Sister Maria had called home for nearly forty years.

Anger burned through him. She hadn’t been safe in a nunnery—the very place she’d found sanctuary when her own family had shunned her.

“You know my aunt well,” he said, eying the Mother Superior as she escorted him to his car.

“As well as anyone, I suppose.”

“Were you here when she joined?”

She nodded. “Yes.” She smiled slightly. “I’ve been here a long time. I think some of the younger nuns consider me a dinosaur. T. rex, I believe.”

He eyed the woman’s birdlike stare. T. rex was quite a stretch. “You must know why my aunt came here in the first place.”

She lifted a gray eyebrow as her lips pulled into a frown. “We’re a tightly knit little community here. There are few secrets.”

“Everyone has secrets.”

She hesitated, then said, “And they should be kept private, between oneself and God. I know about her son.”

They’d reached the pockmarked lot where Montoya was parked. He opened the car door but paused. “I don’t know if my aunt’s . . . if Sister Maria’s . . . disappearance has anything to do with the old hospital,” he said, “but I would like all the records for it. I need information about who worked there, who resided there, who visited often.”

She looked up sharply. “The hospital’s been closed for a long time.”

“It’s the records I’m interested in,” he said. “They must still exist.”

“That information is confidential.”

He was surprised she read him so well. “I want to know exactly what happened to Faith Chastain.”

“You know my aunt well.”

“From the convent?” Miguel asked.

“I’d owe you.”

“Yeah.”

“About time you had a new woman friend,” Miguel said. “Okay, I’ll get to it the first of next week. Give me her address. Wait . . . I need to find a pen.”

“Hey, Reu, we’re booked up for over a month,” Miguel complained. “We bid a new subdivision and people are calling like crazy what with that nut of a killer running around. When business is good for you, it’s good for me, too.”

Montoya took a corner too fast, forced himself to ease off the gas. “This is important.”

“They all are.”

“I’d owe you.”

“You already do, for life. Who is this woman anyway?”

“A friend, who might be in danger.”

Miguel chuckled and Montoya heard him lighting a cigarette. “A new friend?”

“Yeah.”

“She looked away for a moment, came to a decision. “I’ll see what I can do. Despite what I may appear, I’m not a dusty old relic clinging to the ‘old ways.’ Detective, I understand about the world we live in and all its ills. But like you, I have a protocol I must adhere to.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon.” He jogged to his car and drove like a bat out of hell to the city. As the miles passed, he called his mother and asked her to phone all the family members, find out if any of them had seen Maria. Then he dialed his brother Miguel at All-Security and explained that he needed someone to connect or rewire the alarm system ASAP at Abby Chastain’s house in Cambrai.

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You have to stop him. You’re a good cop, you know you are, so say his hide and save Maria. For God’s sake, Montoya, step it up. Don’t let this bastard take another life.

He parked on the street near the station and strode quickly inside. On the second floor he ran into Lynn Zaroster. “Hey,” she said as she was slipping off her jacket and hanging it over the back of her chair in her cubicle. “You heard the news? Billy Ray Furlough’s missing.”

He froze.

All his fears congealed. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. The wife’s already filed a report, though we think the last person who saw him didn’t leave the estate until around eight last night. Apparently the reverend and the missus don’t sleep together; he usually stays in his office on the property. It hasn’t been twenty-four hours, but because of the recent murders, we’re already all over it. Brinkman and Conway are on the scene along with someone from the local field office of the FBI.”

“Shit,” Montoya said, feeling sick inside. “My aunt’s missing, too. From the convent.”

“What?”

“My aunt’s a nun. The last anyone saw her was yesterday around eight P.M.”

“Oh, God.” She grabbed her jacket. “I’ll go out there.”

“I was just there.”

“Are you nuts! You can’t investigate family members—”

“It wasn’t official,” he cut her off. “I was just the first family member called and I happen to be a cop. Yeah, I asked some questions. Yeah, I took notes. Yeah, I looked into her room. Yeah, I did tell the Mother Superior to keep it cordoned off. I figure we’ll have to work with the local Sheriff’s Department.”

Frowning, she was already sliding her arms down the sleeves of her jacket. “You’re already thinking that we’ll find your aunt with Billy Ray Furlough.”

“Yin and yang,” Montoya said.

Zaroster gave him a long look. “Explain.”

“Look at the two other pairs of victims: one person is directly opposite of the other. The woman is staged to look like the killer, fully clothed, diametrically opposite from the other victim as anyone could be.” He felt bile crawl up his throat. “And that’s the way it would be with my aunt and Billy Ray Furlough. Both involved with the church, one outwardly, ostentatiously, so; the other, a woman who became a nun to live a quiet, peaceful life with God.”

“What is that? Principles of Taoism or some other Eastern philosophy?”

“I don’t know.”

She slid her Glock into her shoulder holster. “Maybe it’s time to bone up.”

The funeral had been excruciating. Abby and Zoey sat in one of the back pews with their father and Charlene, listening all the while the preacher extolled Luke’s virtues. Mourners sniffled and a few close friends gave testimonials to what a fine all-around guy he was. She recognized some of his coworkers from WSLJ, a few friends that she’d lost track of after the divorce, and some mutual acquaintances.

Montoya had been there, too, observing the crowd, positioning himself near the church steps as people left. News crews had camped outside and several reporters brandishing microphones talked into cameras held on the shoulders of cameramen as the crowd dispersed.

She and Zoey had spent a couple of hours with their dad and Charlene until, after looking at her watch pointedly several times, the second Mrs. Chastain insisted it was time to go and dutifully wheeled her ailing husband to her Cadillac. Zoey and Abby helped her get Jacques seated, then managed to hoist the wheelchair into the car’s voluminous trunk. “Careful of the paint,” Charlene warned and Abby saw Zoey’s jaw tighten. Afterward, on the drive home, Zoey insisted it was time to go and dutifully wheeled her ailing husband to her Cadillac. Zoey and Abby helped her get Jacques seated, then managed to hoist the wheelchair into the car’s voluminous trunk. “Careful of the paint,” Charlene warned and Abby saw Zoey’s jaw tighten. Afterward, on the drive home, Zoey leaned her head against the side window again. “Mmm, better . . .”

Zoey sighed. “Okay, I’m cranky, I admit it. No sleep tends to upset my usually bright and cheery disposition.”

Abby laughed.

“What?” Zoey grumbled.

“Bright and cheery? Give me a break.”

Zoey let out a huff of air. “Maybe you’ve got a point.” Yawning, she found a sweater in the backseat and wadded it up to pad her head before placing it against the side window again. “Mmm, better . . .”

“You sleep, I’ll drive.”

“You didn’t talk to that cute new boyfriend of yours.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Coulida fooled me.” Again she yawned. “You know when a guy stays over, makes coffee, and kisses the socks off you before he leaves—that’s usually an indication that he’s a boyfriend.”

“You never slept with Luke, okay?”

“Zoey, that’s a lie and we both know it.”

“I mean after you were married. I know you think I did, but even I’m not that low.” Zoey opened one eye and peered at her sister. She was dead sober. “I wouldn’t do that to you, okay. Not ever. I don’t know what Luke told you, but after you said, ‘I do’, I said ‘I won’t. Ever.’ And I meant it. As for before the wedding, okay, yeah, you know about that. But never once while you were married.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because Luke can’t lie anymore. He can’t screw with your head.” She sighed and twisted her neck so loudly it popped. “Being with Luke was not exactly my proudest moment, okay? I felt rotten about it forever. But there’s nothing I can do about it now except tell you the truth. Luke came on to me a lot, but I didn’t give him the time of day. Sure, I found him attractive once, but he was your husband.” She hesitated. “Is there any chance we can . . . lay that to rest and start over?”

Abby hesitated, looked over at Zoey. Could it really be that simple?

“Look, I just wanted you to hear it from me,” Montoya said as he drove to the station. He hadn’t been able to catch up with Abby at the funeral, so he’d called her at the first opportunity. “Sister Maria is missing.”

“What?”
He heard the anxiety in her voice. “I take it you haven’t heard the news.”

“No,” she said, her voice breaking up as their cell-phone-to-cell-phone connection was weak.

“What’s even more disturbing is that Billy Ray Furlough is missing as well.”

“Oh, God.”

“We don’t know if their abductions were done by the same person who killed the others, but it doesn’t look good.”

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You’ll find her,” Montoya nodded, switching lanes. “Yeah.” He only hoped that his aunt would be located while she was still alive. His fingers tightened over the wheel and his guts churned when he considered the alternative. “I called my brother, Miguel, from the security company. They’re going to squeeze you in.”

“Thanks.”

“And I’ll be by, I just don’t know when. Your sister is with you?”

“Yes. She’s planning to stay for a few days.”

“Good, and you’ve got the guard dog.”

Abby laughed. Despite his sour mood, Montoya felt the corners of his mouth twitch. “Don’t forget Ansel the alarm cat,” she said.

“Oh, right. My buddy.” He turned onto Chartres Street, close to Jackson Square, where a cluster of tourists had collected to listen to jazz musicians performing next to an open guitar case.

“Ansel misses you,” she said and he snorted.

“Tell him the feeling is mutual.” He pictured her face and the teasing light in her gold eyes and he felt better than he had since learning the news of his aunt’s disappearance. “I don’t suppose you’ve found the missing .38?”

“Not yet,” she said. Her voice sobered, now coming in loud and clear. “But I haven’t really looked for it again.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I know.”

The more he thought about the missing gun, the more worried for her safety he was. “I’ll try to stop by later. In the meantime you let me know if anything, and I mean anything, seems out of place.”

“I will,” she said. “Thanks.”

He hung up, feeling vulnerable. Not only was his aunt missing, but he was worried for Abby’s safety. Worried enough that, once her sister left, if the house hadn’t been wired with a security system, he was going to ask her to stay at his place, here in town.

His conscience twinged as he considered that he had deeper, ulterior motives—motives that had more to do with sleeping with her than keeping her safe, but he dismissed those thoughts. First and foremost he was concerned with her safety. He knew in his gut that she was somehow in danger and he couldn’t let anything happen to her.

Face it, man, a voice deep in his brain nagged, you’re falling for her. His jaw clenched hard as he slowed forjay-walkers. The police band crackled.

And the last time you fell hard for a woman, you couldn’t save her. All of your hotshot police skills and you were still helpless.

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered under his breath as he parked near the station. Though he hadn’t been officially removed from the case, it was only a matter of time if his aunt’s disappearance proved connected to the killings.

He locked his car and headed inside. He intended to plug his camera into his computer and print out all the shots he’d taken at Gierman’s funeral. He then planned to compare them to the ones he’d taken at Courtney LaBelle’s candlelight vigil. Her funeral was scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, so he would be in the crowd there as well. Surely the killer would show, to bask in the glory of the chaos and pain, to feel superior, to rub shoulders with the grief-stricken and the police to, in his mind’s eye, relive the crime.

Come on, you bastard, he thought, climbing the steps to the second floor, I’ll be ready for you.

“You received an anonymous letter that said, Come home, Hannah needs you?” Abby repeated, staring at her sister as if she’d gone completely mad. They were seated in a restaurant on St. Charles Avenue, located not far from Sacred Heart Academy.

It had been Zoey’s idea to ride the streetcar and “get away from all this stress,” once she’d taken a two-hour nap. Abby had wanted to stay home. She was tired and drained after Luke’s funeral. But she also wanted to get to the bottom of the “secret” Zoey and her father seemed to share about the night her mother died, and Zoey had promised she would tell Abby everything she knew.

In the end, Abby had driven them into town, where they’d hopped on the streetcar, ridden down the oak-lined avenue, and ended up in this quaint Victorian home—turned—dining room. It was early evening. They’d been seated at a table near the window, where a view of the garden showed off a million tiny white lights winking in the lush vegetation and along the fence. As the waitress delivered a tall glass filled with bread sticks, Zoey dropped the bomb.

“Mother died, and Zoey had promised she would tell Abby everything she knew.

“Then maybe . . . I don’t know . . . maybe Dad sent it.”
“Dad?” Abby picked up the note and shook it in front of her sister’s face. “How would he mail it?”
“Maybe Charlene did it for him.”
“Then I don’t know,” Zoey said defensively, but little lines of concern sprouted between her eyebrows. “Look, let’s not worry about it right now. We’ll talk about the damned note later.” She snapped the paper out of Abby’s hands and slipped it into the envelope just as the waitress reappeared.

“Are you all ready?” she asked pleasantly. She was plump, with rosy cheeks, her order pad at the ready. She glanced at Abby and added, “Or would you like a few more minutes to decide?”

Zoey, who had somehow scanned the menu, said, “I’ll have the iceberg lettuce wedge, with shrimp, caramelized onions, and blue cheese dressing on the side . . . oh, and maybe a cup of the shrimp bisque.”

The waitress turned to Abby, whose appetite was fast disappearing. She’d walked into the little restaurant famished and now her stomach was in knots. Who had sent Zoey the note?

“Abby?” Zoey said and glanced from her sister to the waitress. “Do you know what you want?”

I want an end to all these questions . . . all this secrecy . . .

Glancing down at the menu, Abby tried to focus. Was it her imagination or had several people at nearby tables stopped eating to stare at them? Pull yourself together, Abby. Don’t make a scene. You’ll get to the bottom of this. So Zoey received a note with your middle name on it the same week that your gun was stolen and people are turning up murdered . . . Her hands were shaking so she clasped them together in her lap.

“Maybe we do need a few more minutes,” Zoey said.

Abby cut her sister a look, then ordered the first thing she saw on the menu. “I’ll have the spinach salad, with barbecued shrimp. House dressing.”
She waited until the waitress had disappeared before she turned furious eyes at Zoey. “You should have told me about the letter earlier.”

“I wanted to wait until after the funeral.”

“So you knew I’d be upset?”

“More upset.” Zoey cast a glance to the ceiling, where paddle fans were gently pushing the warm air around.

Abby was finished with skirting the issue. “So when are you going to tell me about the day Mom died?”

Zoey stared down at the table.

“Zoe.” Abby leaned toward her.

Zoey closed her eyes and shook her head slightly. She let out her breath as she picked up her glass of sweet tea. “All right . . . I wasn’t supposed to tell you . . .”

“Why? What happened? Who said you shouldn’t tell me?”

“The doctors. Your doctors, Abby. The ones you saw right after Mom’s death.”

There was an echoing roar in Abby’s head, a sudden raging surf. She clenched her hands over her knees. “Tell me,” she demanded, her heart nearly stopping.

Spying Abby’s reaction, Zoey nearly changed her mind. “Maybe this isn’t the place.”

“Tell me!” Zoey repeated more tensely.

“Oh, okay . . . You seemed to have had some kind of blackout that day. Because of the emotional trauma. Dad talked to the doctors who saw you after Mom’s death and they said it’s not uncommon. It’s emotional amnesia and sometimes your memory comes back after a while and other times . . . it just doesn’t.” She took a swallow from her tea.

“Like in my case.”

“Right.”

“And in the past twenty years, neither you nor Dad thought I needed to know?”

“We were advised against it,” she said simply.

“Why? What happened? Who said you shouldn’t tell me?”

“Like in my case.”

“I don’t know,” she said baffled. “It’s just your memory isn’t exactly right.” The waitress refilled their tea glasses and Zoey waited until they were alone again. “You weren’t just getting out of the car that day, Abby. You and I—we’d had a fight about who was going to take her present up to her.”

“You weren’t just getting out of the car that day, Abby. You and I—we’d had a fight about who was going to take her present up to her. I won the flip of the coin. Dad was pretty angry that we were being so petty, as it was Mom’s birthday and all . . . your birthday, too, I know. Anyway, when we pulled up, you got out of the car before Dad had even shoved the gearshift into park. You took off up the steps into the hospital at a dead run and disappeared inside before either Dad or I got out of the car.”

Abby blinked hard, remembered that sultry twilight. “I wasn’t outside!”

“No. When Mom fell out her window, you were already in her room.”

The dull roar in her head grew louder. The restaurant’s chandeliers seemed to sway. The lights out the window twinkled and faded into stars. She looked past her memory of that day—her false memory, as it turned out. Vaguely she recalled running inside, through the dark building, past a boy in a wheelchair who watched her fly by, and around a nurse pushing a tray of medications down a hallway. She tore past the grandfather clock that was beginning to chime out the hour and ran up the stairs.


Zoey looked unsure of herself. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

She’d rocketed up the stairs, taking them two at a time, nearly plowing into the nun. She’d had to hurry. To be the first of Faith’s small family to say “Happy birthday.” It was their shared, special day. It belonged to them, and Abby, her heart pounding crazily from the exertion, couldn’t wait to tell her mother about the upcoming Sadie Hawkins dance.

Up, up, up she climbed, her shoes pounding on the stairs, past the stained-glass window of the Virgin Mother on the landing and up a final few steps to the third-floor hallway that was empty, the lights already dimmed.

Breathing hard, Abby pushed open the door to 307 and raced inside. “Happy birthday, Mom . . .” she said, then stopped short, her good wishes dying on her tongue. Faith was standing near the window, not far from the rumpled bed. Half-dressed, her blouse open, her bra unhooked, a dark nipple visible, she wasn’t alone. A doctor in a white lab coat, his stethoscope swinging from his neck, his hair mussed, was trying to grab her.

As the door banged into the wall, he spun. His face was red, a vein jumping in his temple as he pinned Abby with his furious gaze. “Don’t you know this is a private room! You should knock before you just barge in!”

“Miss,” Abby, standing in front of the closet, looked past the doctor to her mother.

Faith was already rehooking her bra, swiftly covering up. Her fingers were working with the buttons of her blouse, but her gaze, looking over the shoulder of the doctor, was fixed on her daughter. Fear shone in Faith’s gold eyes, tears glistening. Without saying the words out loud, she mouthed, “Don’t please . . .”

Her mother wanted her to keep her silence. She wanted her to hold the secret safe. And Abby hadn’t breathed a word. Not ever. She hadn’t even remembered that she’d been in the room. Now, she was shaking, feeling with surprisingly sharp clarity her mother’s despair.

“Abby!” Zoey’s voice was like a slap.

The memory faded, withering away, and Abby found herself in the restaurant again, her salad sitting upon the place mat in front of her. Zoey stared at her anxiously across the table. Her face was strained, ashen. “The waitress asked you if you’d like ground pepper on your salad.”

“What?” Abby glanced down at the mound of dark green spinach leaves, pieces of mandarin oranges, bean sprouts, and succulent shrimp on the plate in
front of her. She hadn’t even been aware that she was still in the restaurant, much less been served. Dear God, she was cracking up! Just like Mom.

No!

Quickly she looked up at the waitress holding the huge pepper mill poised over her platter. She forced a tremulous smile. She was not like Faith. Not weak-minded.

“Pepper?” the waitress asked, probably for the third or fourth time.

“No, thank you,” Abby managed, and with a last, curious look, the round little waitress moved on to the next table.

“What’s the matter with you?” Zoey hissed. “Get a grip, for God’s sake!”

“I remember . . .” Abby leaned over the table, whispering just loud enough for Zoey and Zoey alone to hear. Zoey didn’t pretend to misunderstand. She slowly set down her butter knife. “What happened?”

“She wasn’t alone.”

“I know that, you were there.”

“No, not just me, Zoe. There was a doctor in the room and . . . and I think . . . Oh, Lord, I can’t believe this, but I think he was abusing her.”

“Abusing her?” Zoey stared at Abby as if she, too, had lost her mind.

“Molesting her.”

“Jesus, Abs!”

“I know, I know, but as I recall, her blouse and bra were undone and . . .” She hesitated. “I can see his face, but . . .” She tried to think, to roll back the years, to call up his name, but nothing came to her, just the start of a headache that pounded through her brain. She drew a calming breath and glanced across the table. “Do you remember who was treating Mom? What the psychiatrist’s name was?”

“There were lots of doctors and nurses.” Slowly, as if she were acting by rote, Zoey dipped the ends of her fork tines sparingly into the small cup of dressing, then pronged her bite of lettuce and shrimp. “I don’t know. She was in and out of the hospital a lot. The staff came and went.”

“I know, but I’m talking about that last stay. Who was seeing her right before she died?”

“I can’t remember, but Dad would know.” She shook her head. “But he’s so frail. I don’t want to drag him into this.”

“I don’t think we have a choice, Zoe. I have a feeling that whoever that doctor was, he not only abused Mom, he might have killed her as well.”

“Oh, now, come on . . . Now you’re accusing this man of . . . what? Sexual molestation and . . . murder? You think he pushed Mom out of the window?”

Abby squeezed her eyes shut, tried to hold on to the memory, but it was slippery, skimming in and out of her consciousness. “Go visit Dad tomorrow.”

See what he knows.”

“And what will you do?” Zoey asked suspiciously.

“Keep trying to remember.” She ran her hands through her hair and regarded her sister. “You should have told me. I don’t care what the doctors said. I needed to know. I still need to know.”

“Nobody wanted you to keep having those nightmares.”

“I had those nightmares because no one’s been honest with me!”

“Oh, okay . . .”

They drifted into uneasy silence. Abby chased her salad around her plate with her fork. She now knew what she had to do, but she couldn’t confide in her sister. Zoey would have a fit.

But armed with this new information, Abby was certain if she went back to the hospital, she would remember everything. If she wanted to learn the truth about what had happened to her mother, if she wanted to break the hold her mother’s death still had on her, then she needed to step back in time . . . she needed to force her way into Room 307 at Our Lady of Virtues Hospital.

Only then would she really know what had happened.

Montoya pushed the stack of photographs to one side of his desk, leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his eyes. He’d been at the desk for hours. He’d been looking over each snapshot he’d taken at the Courtney LaBelle candlelight vigil, then later her funeral, and finally Luke Gierman’s service. He’d do the same thing when Asa Pomeroy and Gina Jefferson were laid to rest. So far he had a stack of photographs of people he hadn’t yet identified. He’d separated that pile down, pulling out the females, then weeding through the men until he found those who were big enough to wear a size twelve. Even so, this could be a wild-goose chase. Who was to say that the killer had attended either service?

Even if the psycho had shown up, he would probably disguise himself . . . he could even come as a woman . . . albeit a tall one.

Frustrated, Montoya ran a hand around the nape of his neck, then climbed to his feet to stretch his back and legs. He had too much restless energy to sit at a desk for hours.

They didn’t want him on the front lines till they knew more about his aunt. It was frustrating. Who better than he to search for his Maria? He knew he wasn’t objective, but what? No one wanted to find her abductor more than he did. Just as no one else was more concerned for Abby Chastain’s safety.

“Crap,” he muttered. His family was going nuts. From the time Maria had gone missing, every aunt, uncle, and cousin twice removed had phoned him, either demanding answers or sharing their deepest fears.

None of which were any deeper than his own. With each passing second that Maria and Billy Ray Furlough were missing, he’d grown more certain they were victims of foul play. Every time the phone rang, he gazed at it uneasily, half expecting to learn someone had stumbled upon their grotesquely entwined bodies.

So far, that phone call hadn’t come in.

Montoya expelled air from his lungs and tried to force the odd pieces of the murder puzzle into some sort of sane pattern even though he knew he was dealing with a deranged individual.

He reread the note from the killer.

REPENT

Al!

Repent for what? What had Luke Gierman, Courtney LaBelle, Asa Pomeroy, and Gina Jefferson had in common? What sin had they all committed? And what the hell did it have to do with Our Lady of Virtues?

Again, he viewed the pictures of the crime scenes on his monitor. Why were the male victims stripped bare? Why the women fully clothed and lying over them? Why the precise staging? The FBI profiler hadn’t come up with anything more than the usual . . . if a killer could be described as anything near “usual.” The same old stuff, white male in his late twenties to early forties, from a middle-class or lower-class family, someone who was probably abused as a child, someone who set fires and killed animals before escalating to humans, someone who had a fascination with the police and law enforcement . . . Montoya knew the drill.

But this guy, his gut told him, was different. This guy had taken the serial killing game to a new level.

Since Montoya was sidelined from the case, Bentz and Brinkman had returned to the convent as well as visited Billy Ray Furlough’s compound. The FBI—the agency in charge—was dealing with the worried wife and children, checking with friends, family, and members of the church, all the time waiting for a ransom demand that Montoya doubted would come through.

He leaned back in his chair and opened his desk drawer. He found a pack of Nicorette gum, unwrapped it, and popped a tasteless piece in his mouth.
Craning his neck, he peered through the open door to Bentz’s office, then glanced out his window, where gray clouds were weaving their way inland from the Gulf.

Soon it would be night again.
And Montoya was afraid the killer would strike.

What if the son of a bitch took Abby’s gun?
He considered camping out at her house again, but he knew that, if he did, he’d end up in her bed. Their lovemaking had been hot, desperate, and addictive.
He reminded himself she wasn’t alone.
Her sister was staying with her. And anyway Abby had her dog, and Miguel had promised to install a security system ASAP.
But her ex-husband’s gun was missing and that made him crazy.
Maybe she’d misplaced it.
Or maybe someone had stolen it.
And maybe that thief was the killer.
He swore beneath his breath in frustration, changing the screen on his computer and studying a digital image of a map of New Orleans and the surrounding area. It was large enough to encompass all the places where the murders had occurred. Places where the bodies had been found were pinpointed in red. The places from where the victims had been abducted were marked in blue, and spots where their vehicles had been located were in orange. Also, each victim’s place of employment and residence had been color coded. Montoya stared at the map, but try as he might, he saw no correlation.
He even played with the data, coloring everything that had to do with one victim, home, employment, abduction site, murder locale in one hue, then designating another for the second victim, and so on and so forth . . . but no pattern jumped out at him.
He frowned and shook his head. He was going at this all wrong. He looked at the crimes themselves. The commonality of the victims was twofold. First there was the obvious yin and yang of it all, victims selected based on the fact that they were diametrically opposed to each other, with good and evil being represented. The staging of the deaths represented the “good” half of the whole destroying the “bad.” Then, of course, there was the link of each victim, however thin it was, to the old mental hospital. He still couldn’t shake that.
He was still thinking about the old hospital when his cell phone rang. “Montoya,” he answered.
“Hi. This is Maury Taylor, down at WSLJ.”
Montoya’s muscles tensed. “Yeah?”
“Well, you told me to call if I got another one of those notes. And I did. Today.”
Montoya was already reaching for his jacket. “Don’t do anything with it,” he said. “I’ll be right there.”
“I thought I’d talk to the guy on the program again. You know, draw him out—”
“No!” Holding the phone in one hand, he thrust his other hand down the sleeve of the jacket, shaking his arm a bit to get the stiff leather over his shoulder holster.
“Well, you told me to call if I got another one of those notes. And I did. Today.”
Montoya was already reaching for his jacket. “Don’t do anything with it,” he said. “I’ll be right there.”
“I thought I’d talk to the guy on the program again. You know, draw him out—”
“No!” Holding the phone in one hand, he thrust his other hand down the sleeve of the jacket, shaking his arm a bit to get the stiff leather over his shoulder holster.
“Look, I think I have the right to—”
“You have no rights where this is concerned. Got it? Don’t touch the letter, don’t open it and—”
“I already opened it.”
The stupid little dick.
“I had to make sure it was from the same guy. Don’t worry, I didn’t touch it . . . well, not much.”
“Listen, Taylor, don’t do anything! You got it? Nothing!” He clicked the cell phone off and slid it into his pocket. Then he was out the door.
CHAPTER 25

The note read:

ATONE
LAW

As he stood in Eleanor Cavalier’s office with the program manager and Maury Taylor, Montoya held the single white sheet of paper in his gloved hands. He checked the postmark—not only was it New Orleans, but the two notes had been processed through the same station. In fact, they were nearly identical. Montoya read the information over and over again, then added the new note into a plastic evidence bag.

“You’re welcome to look through the rest of the mail,” Eleanor offered, “but this is the only item that looked pertinent.”

Through the plastic, Montoya read the note one last time. What was with the religious instruction? First REPENT, signed by A L. Then ATONE, signed by LAW. Was it a signature? He didn’t think so. It looked like the killer was trying to tell them something, but what?

“I think I should be able to mention on the air that the killer is contacting WSLJ,” Maury said in an obvious ploy to appeal to Eleanor’s penchant for higher and higher ratings. “It’s tantamount to a public service announcement.”

“We’ll decide that,” Montoya told him.

“But it came to this station, my show. I should get to use it to make the public aware.”

“Of what?” Montoya asked.

“Maybe someone close to the killer has seen this,” Maury suggested. “They’re unaware that their husband or best friend is the maniac.”

“He’s got a point,” Montoya tapped a red-tipped fingernail alongside her jaw. She was leaning toward the ratings spike, too.

Montoya managed to mash down his temper. “Okay, look, here’s the deal. I’m going to take it in for analysis, have the lab and our handwriting experts and the cryptologist do their things with it. If we decide to make it public, you get first crack.”

“I’m thinking an exclusive,” Maury said, pushing his luck.

“Yes, yes, I know that. But I remember Sister Maria liked calling you by your confirmation name. Please come directly to my office when you get here.”

“She’s welcome to look through the rest of the mail,” Eleanor pointed out. “I could recant all those nasty things I said about you to Melinda Jaskiel.”

“Too late. Damage done.” His cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen. “If you get any other letters, let me know. I’ll talk to my boss and the Public Information Officer about an exclusive. They’ll speak to the feds and we’ll get back to you.”

Maury looked about to argue as the phone rang again. He thought better of it as Montoya pressed the phone to his ear and walked down the long hallway toward the front door. Melba, the receptionist, offered him a smile and a wave, obviously through being miffed at him for rushing in and nearly throttling Taylor. Montoya figured that secretly everyone at the station was glad someone had knocked the cocky son of a bitch down a peg or two.

“Montoya,” he answered on the third ring, shouldering open the door.

“Hello, Detective,” Our Lady’s Mother Superior greeted him, identifying herself. “I’ve talked with several detectives since I first called you about Sister Maria and I’ve given them all the information I had, including those personnel and patient records.”

“Good.”

“But there’s something else you should know about, and it’s personal.” She sounded unsure of herself. “I need to speak to you. In person.”

He felt it then, that little niggle in his brain that warned him when something was about to change. “You know, because of my relationship with Maria, I’ve been taken off the case.”

“What I have to say is for your ears only. It requires their discretion.” Her voice brooked no argument.

He thought about the investigation and what his superiors would say about being a rogue cop, but when push came to shove, he didn’t give a good goddamned what would happen to him. If he lost his badge, so be it.

He wouldn’t do anything to compromise the investigation.

Unless it meant taking the killer out. He could do that and hang the consequences. Justice would be served and he’d save the state of Louisiana a pile of money in the process.

“I’ll be there in an hour,” he said.

“Thank you, Pedro.”

“My name is Reuben.”

“Yes, yes, I know that. But I remember Sister Maria liked calling you by your confirmation name. Please come directly to my office when you get here.”

“I’ve got a stop first, but I can be there in an hour or two.”

“That’ll be fine.”

He hung up, jogged to his Mustang, climbed behind the wheel with a sense of renewed urgency. The clouds had thinned and the spires of St. Louis Cathedral shone a bright, nearly angelic white. Music greeted him, a saxophone player backed up by a guitar, and along with the bustle of pedestrians and the hum of traffic, the mule-drawn carriages rolled past. Behind the levee, the Mississippi moved steadily toward the Gulf.

All in all it was a beautiful day in New Orleans.

And yet behind every smiling face Montoya saw a killer. Whoever the son of a bitch was, he was blending in. Of all the calls that had come into the station—people who were quick to report suspicious activity of their neighbors, friends, family members, or enemies—nothing had panned out. The phone lines had been jammed with callers, the 911 operators overwhelmed, but after all was said and done, not one report of suspicious behavior could be connected to the killer.

Maybe this new note would be the break they were looking for.

He stepped on the accelerator as he blasted to the station, his mind turning back to the notes. Could LAW be in reference to the law? The criminal justice system? Was the guy making a mockery of all the law enforcement agencies trying to bring him to justice? Or was there something more?

Something that was close at hand, something he could almost grasp, but couldn’t quite figure out?

There were a couple of obvious connections. LAW could be initials or the start of a name, such as Lawrence DuLoc, the caretaker at the convent.

Montoya didn’t really like it. It seemed too easy, almost a setup. This guy wasn’t stupid. In fact, he was clever enough to steal weapons, abduct people, and leave the crime scenes with very little evidence for the police to work on. Still, since he was going to see the Mother Superior, he planned to ask some questions about DuLoc.

Montoya sped through a yellow light, then cut down a side alley. What if each letter was a symbol? Could the letter represent the victim?


A for Asa Pomery.

W for . . . William. Montoya’s pulse jumped. The Reverend Billy Ray Furlough’s legal name was no doubt William. LAW . . . could that be it? Again it
seemed almost too simple, but it made sense.

Dread settled in his soul. If his theory was right, it meant the preacher was already dead; otherwise the killer wouldn’t have sent the note, right? And if there was one dead body, there was bound to be another, a female to complete the whole of the yin and yang. Montoya realized that if his theory was correct, there was little doubt that his Aunt Maria had been murdered as well.

Anger surged through his veins and pounded in his pulse. Never had he felt so impotent. Though he knew better than to personalize the crimes, Montoya felt that the killer had singled him out, was taunting him.

Don’t lose your cool.
Keep a calm head.
Remain objective.
Maria may still be alive.

He sent up a prayer as he slid his car into a spot close to the station. The streets were clogged with news vans, their white exteriors emblazoned with the names of the stations they represented, satellite dishes and antennae spiking out of the roofs. Several reporters and cameramen were taking position on the front steps—the station doors a backdrop for the segments they were taping. Knots of pedestrians had slowed to rubberneck.

Montoya ducked in through the parking lot door and headed to the second floor, where he was greeted with the clicking of computer keys, the smell of stale coffee, and the buzz of conversation. Detectives were interviewing suspects, discussing cases, or at their desks shuffling paperwork or talking rapid-fire into phones jammed between their shoulders and ears.

Zaroster was at her desk. He slid the note in its plastic evidence bag across to her. “Looks like our pen pal’s back.”

“Unless he writes the notes first, then offs his victims.”

She sent him a look that accused him of knowing better.

“How’d you end up with this? I thought you weren’t supposed to be on the investigation.”

“Maury Taylor at WSLJ called me. We’re old friends. Go way back.”

“My ass,” she muttered, but took the note and said, “I’ll get this to the lab and see how it compares to the other one.”

He rested a hip on her desk. “How’re we coming with all the evidence?”

“Ah, ‘all’ of it. Let’s see, the lab is still working on the black hair, no DNA matches yet. The bridal dress was recognized by one shop owner as looking like a ‘Nancoise’ creation, whatever that is . . . kind of like a cheaper version of Vera Wang, I guess. We’re looking into it, trying to get hold of Nancoise herself to see if she has any records. No epithelials or trace that means anything. The boots are regular hunting stock, made by, get this, Pomeroy Industries, their clothing division, so we’re making some headway there, although that particular tread hasn’t changed in four years, so it’s slow goin’.

“I did manage to find out something about the caretaker out at Our Lady of Virtues. Lawrence DuLoc? He’s got a record, all stuff done about twenty years ago when he was a kid.”

“What stuff?”

“Aggravated assault charge—that was dropped. Then later a domestic violence incident, again charges dropped.” She shrugged. “Not much, but something. He’s tall and wears a size eleven and a half shoe, but he’s got alibis for the times of the murders. Brinkman’s checking them out.” She sighed and shook her head. “I talked to DuLoc. He just doesn’t seem to have the smarts to pull off this kind of thing.” She frowned. “You think he could be our guy?”

“Doesn’t sound like it. Our psycho wants to outsmart us and then shove it in our face. Hard for him to pretend he’s no Rhodes scholar. He wants us to know how brilliant he is.”

“So . . . ?”

Montoya was already heading for the stairs. “So, we keep DuLoc on the list and push forward.”

“You’re not on the case,” she yelled after him.

Montoya kept moving.

The pain was an irritation.
His hands clamped around the steering wheel and he felt sweat soaking into his neoprene suit. The first hint of exhaustion was pulling at him. Though he’d rested for a few hours, he could feel his body’s need for sleep.

It would have to wait.

Until after.

His plans were set in motion, and he knew that soon he would feel that unique buzz that kept him going, that rush of adrenaline through his bloodstream that would carry him through and lift him up.

The damned wound bothered him. It hindered him more than he’d expected. Things weren’t going as well as he’d planned, not as smoothly as they had been. Ever since he’d underestimated Billy Ray Furlough, and the bastard had plunged that stupid tool into his chest.

He gritted his teeth.
Carefully, he drove the white Lexus out of the city and into the wilderness. The vehicle handled well but stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb.

Which was a problem. He glanced into the backseat, where his latest victim was shaking like a leaf, eyes blinking rapidly, mewling behind his gag, already passing himself and causing the car to reel with urine.

You should be scared, you lazy little bastard . . . just you wait.

If the mewing got any worse, he’d use the ether or another shot with the stun gun.

He’d attended Gierman’s service earlier today even though he’d known the police would be watching, monitoring all of the bereaved.

Imbeciles!

They were so easily outsmarted.

He’d walked directly past the cop taking pictures on the sly. Snap, snap, snap.

What a joke.

Pedro, the picture-taking detective. The defiler who had slept in Abby Chastain’s bed.

Thinking of them rutting, he lost control for an instant, the Lexus wandering over the center line. No! He could not bring attention to himself. Fortunately there was little traffic on this back road. To calm himself, he flipped on the radio, heard some classical crap, then managed to find WSLJ. But Gierman’s Groaners wasn’t on the air at the moment.

Another aggravation.

Hadn’t that stupid radio jock discovered the second letter? Why wasn’t he on the air crowing about it? He checked his watch. It was early yet, darkness a few hours away, which made his job all the more difficult.

He’d drive this car to the spot where he’d ditched his truck. But first he needed to unload the shackled man in the backseat. The pisser.

The radio was playing some smooth jazz that caused him only more irritation. He snapped it off, warned himself to be patient. He’d waited twenty years. A few more hours wouldn’t hurt.

His lips twisted at that thought. Just a few more hours and then the culmination . . . five of the seven would be disposed of—the most precious already
The Mother Superior looked tired. Beneath her wimple furrows lined her brow and below her half-moon glasses were dark smudges. “This is difficult for me,” she admitted, pointing to a manila envelope in the middle of her wide desk. “Those are the records you requested. Sister Madeline, bless her heart, knew where they’d been stored up in the attic and had Mr. DuLoc bring them down.” She motioned to the boxes that had been pushed to the corners of her room. “I’m keeping them here, just in case you need anything else, but I think everything you want is in here. She tapped the large envelope with one unpolished nail, then slid it across the desk to Montoya. “There was a time when confidences were kept, where faith was not only essential but embraced, when there was more . . . order. But now . . . oh, well.” She offered up the ghost of a smile. “I’ve thought long and hard and prayed for God’s blessing and intuition, that He would help me understand the path I should take,” she said. “In the end, He’s left me with a difficult choice.”

Pushing herself to her feet, she seemed to totter a bit as she walked to the window. She stared outside where a hummingbird was flitting through the hanging pots, seeking sustenance from the dying blooms. “I suppose I should have told you earlier. Your aunt confided in me that she had a son out of wedlock. She came here after the boy was adopted out.”

Montoya watched the old nun finger her rosary. “I know.”

She nodded, still staring out the window. “That boy grew up and became a local celebrity, an athlete, a scholar, and eventually a man of God.”

“Billy Ray Furlough!” Montoya asked, stunned.

“So she told me.”

Furlough was the right age, and if he thought about it, there was a bit of a resemblance between the flamboyant preacher and the Montoya family—the dark hair, burnished skin, and natural athleticism.

“When I heard that Mr. Furlough was missing as well as Sister Maria, most likely abducted on the same day, I thought I should contact you. And I didn’t want to tell the other officers, not when I knew that Sister Maria would prefer you to know.” She turned to face him, her back to the window.

“You’re her favorite, you know. Of all her nieces and nephews.”

Montoya felt a fresh rush of guilt. He wondered if the killer knew that he’d murdered mother and son. Of course he did. These murders were not random. They were meticulously planned.

“What can you tell me about Lawrence DuLoc?” Montoya asked, deciding to cover that ground first.

“I believe your colleagues already questioned him.” She walked to her side of the desk, reached across the glossy surface, and touched Montoya’s hand. “Larry is not a murderer.”

Montoya tended to side with her, but he didn’t let on. “He’s a tall man, right. Six-one or -two?”

“He’s tall, yes,” she admitted, straightening and folding her arms over her chest. “You can talk to him. Larry wants nothing more than to help you find your aunt. Larry DuLoc is a very devout man, Detective. His faith is strong.” She motioned toward the window. “He’s in the garden now.”

“Thank you.” Montoya hesitated, eyeing the nun. After a moment he asked, “And did you learn anything about Faith Chastain?”

She folded her hands. “She fell out of the window of her room on her birthday,” she said, sounding like she was reciting a tired story. “The hospital was sued for not having the windows secured properly. The grating was defective.”

“She fell through the glass.”

She nodded. “Had there been metal bars, or the decorative grating across the lower part of the window secure, the tragedy might have been avoided, or so the lawsuit suggested.”

“Who sued you? The State of Louisiana?”

Her smile was patently patient. “The State eventually got involved, but the lawsuit was initiated by the family. Faith’s husband, Jacques. It never went to trial, of course. We settled out of court.”

Montoya looked at her, feeling as if she was holding back. “Anything else about it?”

Mother Superior fingered the cross at her neck and seemed to be wrestling with an inner demon. Montoya waited and she finally admitted, “I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore. It’s been so long ago, and if it will somehow help you find Sister Maria, then . . .” She made the sign of the cross and seemed to whisper a silent prayer. “There was talk of abuse, or molestation—that one of our doctors and Mrs. Chastain were involved in a sexual relationship. At first the man involved denied everything. Then others came forward: staff members who had seen things they hadn’t reported for fear of losing their jobs. When that happened, he said the affair was consensual.” Her lips twisted downward in disgust. “Consensual? Can you imagine? With a woman who was suffering from mental illness?” Her nostrils flared angrily. “He was let go immediately,” she said.

“You’re not a murderer.”

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“No charges filed?”

She shook her head. “The family filed the civil suit for Faith’s death, and that was the extent of it. Perhaps they never knew about the other.” Her gaze slid to the floor. “Not the finest hour for Our Lady of Virtues Hospital.”

“Who was the man?”

She met his eyes. “Dr. Heller was a brilliant psychiatrist. In many ways ahead of his time. But he cut corners, was a little sloppy, lazy, if you will.” Her back grew even straighter, as if a rod held her up. This was difficult for her. “One of his worst critics was Gina Jefferson. She worked with us at the time.”

“She fell through the glass.”

She nodded. “He was a patient at the mental hospital. He had anger issues as a youth, though, of course, I shouldn’t be telling you this.” She turned her palms heavenward in supplication and barreled on, almost as if she were relieved to open the floodgates of her secrecy. “Yes, he was accused of some crimes long ago, but he has been with us for a long while. His work record is impeccable.” She looked up at Montoya. “I will personally vouch for him.”

“Larry is not a murderer.”

Montoya hesitated, eyeing the nun. After a moment he asked, “And did you learn anything about Faith Chastain?”

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“Did she witness the molestation?” Montoya asked, feeling that little frisson again. He sensed he was finally on the right track.

“No . . . I didn’t keep up with him. He moved out of state.”

“Dr. Simon Heller. Does he have a middle name?”

“Dick, his first name is Dick.”

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“I don’t remember, but she was no fan of Simon Heller.”

“Do you know where Dr. Heller is now?” Montoya asked.

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“Do you know where Dr. Heller is now?” Montoya asked.

“No . . . I didn’t keep up with him. He moved out of state. Somewhere west, I think.”

“Dr. Simon Heller. Does he have a middle name?”

“Yes . . . I remember he was particular about the name plate on his door.” She thought hard and Montoya had to force himself to remain seated. The clock was ticking. His aunt and Billy Ray could already be dead, and Abby’s mother was somehow involved. She was the link. “Simon T. Heller, that’s what he was on his name plate, I can’t remember what the T stood for. Theodore or Thaddeus, something like that.”

“His name and social security number are in this file?” Montoya asked, holding up the manila envelope.

“Yes. And his picture, I think.”

Montoya didn’t waste any time, but opened the clasp, sliding out the yellowed pages. “Was Heller a big man?”

“Tall, but not big. Almost scarcrowish. One of the patients saw a picture of a praying mantis in one of the nature books, pointed to it, and said, ‘Heller.’” She smiled despite herself. “That was unkind, but there was a nugget of truth in it, I suppose. He wore huge glasses and had extremely long legs.”

Montoya found a small photo of Heller attached to his long-ago employment application. The color had faded but Heller’s features were clear. He had
black hair, a thick mustache, and glared out through huge, wire-rimmed, aviator-type glasses.

“He wasn’t very old.”


“Do you remember anything else about him?”

“He had an air of superiority about him that he tried to mask with bedside manner. It didn’t work very often. He was a bit of a loner, and he ran, oh, my, how he ran. I think he did marathons, but... oh, well, I’m not certain. A lot of years have passed.”

Montoya fingered the faded photograph. “Do you have pictures of everyone who lived here?”

“Just the staff, for identification.”

“Was Heller still employed here when Faith died?”

“He was in the room with her,” she admitted. “He witnessed her fall but couldn’t save her. The molestation issue was brought up after her death. That’s when he was asked to leave.”

He gazed hard at the picture of an unsmiling man. His arrogance came through clearly. Montoya remembered the picture of Abby’s mother he’d seen on her bookcase. A beautiful woman with a sexy smile—a smile her daughter had inherited. Faith had been Simon Heller’s unwilling lover.

Montoya’s gut twisted. What had really happened the day of Faith Chastain’s death? Had her fall been a misstep? Or had Heller, maybe aware that the molestation issue was coming to light, given his victim a push?

The reverend mother cleared her throat. “Faith’s daughter witnessed the fall as well. She ran in just moments before.”

“Which daughter?” Montoya asked, but he already knew the answer. He’d witnessed Abby’s nightmares.

“The younger one...”

“Abby.”

“Yes, that’s her name. Abigail, though Faith often referred to her as Hannah.”

“Do you know why?”

“Oh, it’s been so long ago, and though I did work at the hospital then, I can’t remember. The daughter was just fifteen. It was her birthday as well as Faith’s. Apparently she rushed in, saw Dr. Heller there... and that’s all we know. Somehow Faith fell through the window. Hannah was so traumatized that she fainted. When she woke up, she remembered very little.” Clearly disturbed by the tale, Mother Superior walked back to her desk. “I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

“It might be enough,” he said, meaning it. Simon Heller. Montoya now knew where to look. He just hoped he wasn’t too late to stop another murder.
CHAPTER 26

Hidden in the surrounding forest, he watched her house. As it was still light, late afternoon, he kept back a long distance and was careful with his field glasses, making certain the lenses wouldn’t reflect the sun’s rays, alerting her. He’d also made certain he was downwind, so her stupid dog wouldn’t smell him.

What a pain.
Everything was ready, the stage set. All he needed was the players, and two of them were in the house. He planned to wait until they fell asleep, but that was hours away.

Patience, he reminded himself. Don’t rush things. You’ve waited so long, another few hours won’t matter.
But he was anxious.

Eager.
And the pain in his chest was increasing, as if he’d somehow contracted an infection. Consequently, a headache pounded behind his eyes.
He was sleep-deprived, but was also too keyed up to rest. So he waited and watched.
The sister was half-lying on the couch, stockinged feet dangling over a padded arm, wineglass on the coffee table, remote control in one hand. That was good. Drink up, Big Sister. Let the wine dull your mind, relax your body. Fall asleep early . . . oh, yes.
Zoey would be easy to subdue.

But not so Abby . . . she was on high alert; he sensed it. As he watched her gather things from her garage and kitchen, then carry them to the car, he began to worry. It looked as if she had decided to leave. He couldn’t have that. She’d packed a tool box, a crow bar, and flashlights.

Why?
His headache pounded and his agitation grew. He scratched at his chest through the wet suit until he realized what he was doing. Calm down. Observe.
She can’t be going far. You’ve seen no suitcase, have you? No overnight bag?

But it didn’t mean she hadn’t already packed one before he’d taken his position. Was she planning some kind of camping trip? With the cop? His stomach soured at the thought of them again, and he had to blink hard, clear his head. He couldn’t let her get away, not now, nor could he risk being caught. Could he take them both now? What about the dog? Could he use the stun gun on each, or a rag soaked in ether? He didn’t want to threaten them with a gun.

What if she was leaving now? What if she slid behind the wheel and half a second later the Honda’s engine suddenly engaged? She would ram the soft clunk against the door near his head and guessed that she had thrown something onto the passenger’s seat.

He walked to the front of the car, glanced through the Honda’s side window, and spied a backpack. He froze. Was that the edge of her cell phone sticking out? Could he really get so lucky?

He ducked down even farther, hiding between the car and the garage wall, his heart jackhammering.

No dog. No dog. No dog. His fingers tightened over the handle of the Pomeroy Ultra and sweat drizzled in his eyes. He noticed a spider waiting on a web near the floor where he was crouched, his head pressed to the cracked, oily cement. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared past the undercarriage of the Honda, to the far side of the car, where he watched her sneakers walk briskly. She opened the driver’s door, and he didn’t dare move a muscle. He heard a soft clunk against the door near his head and guessed that she had thrown something onto the passenger’s seat.

Panic roared through him.

In one hand he held the .38, in the other the multibladed tool. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use either. Not yet. Not when he’d planned her slow, perfect death for so long.

He should have anticipated this problem.

He was slipping. Losing his edge.

What if she was leaving now? What if she slid behind the wheel and half a second later the Honda’s engine suddenly engaged? She would ram the gearshift into reverse and back out, leaving him exposed.

There was no way she wouldn’t see him.

Nowhere he could hide.
In one hand he held the .38, in the other the multibladed tool. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use either. Not yet. Not when he’d planned her slow, perfect death for so long.

He was sleep-deprived, but was also too keyed up to rest. So he waited and watched.
The door to the interior of the house was open a crack, and he wondered if the dog sensed he was near. Damned mutt. Pulse drumming out of control, he stealthily crept inside, careful not to step on the hoe and shovel that had been tucked into the corner near a wheelbarrow.

Silently he pulled out the tool and clicked open a sharp little blade. He was about to jab the tread of her front tire when he heard footsteps approaching.

Damn!

He ducked down even farther, hiding between the car and the garage wall, his heart jackhammering.

No dog. No dog. No dog. His fingers tightened over the handle of the Pomeroy Ultra and sweat drizzled in his eyes. He noticed a spider waiting on a web near the floor where he was crouched, his head pressed to the cracked, oily cement. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared past the undercarriage of the Honda, to the far side of the car, where he watched her sneakers walk briskly. She opened the driver’s door, and he didn’t dare move a muscle. He heard a soft clunk against the door near his head and guessed that she had thrown something onto the passenger’s seat.

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But luck was with him. She started walking into the house again. He watched her feet, the frayed hem of her jeans brushing the tops of her Nikes, as she disappeared inside. The door closed with a soft click.

Instantly, he punched a hole in the front tire, then slid back for the second. One flat tire wouldn’t do. She was resourceful enough to change it herself, so he neared jabbed the rear tire for insurance but stopped himself . . . she would be suspicious if two tires suddenly went flat . . . no, he needed to catch her off guard.

He started to slink out of the garage and melt into the shadows of the forest again when he remembered that she’d tossed something into the front seat.

He walked to the front of the car, glanced through the Honda’s side window, and spied a backpack. He froze. Was that the edge of her cell phone sticking out? Could he really get so lucky?

Quietly he opened the passenger door. Yes! It was the cell phone! Deftly and carefully, he plucked it with two fingers from just inside the unzippered pack, then he crept quickly outside. Only when he was in the cover of the woods, the damp swampy air tickling his nostrils, did he breathe again.

So far, so good.

His heart was pounding in his ears as he thought about the little car breaking down. If he could time it just right, he might even be able to catch up to her, come along, and play the part of the Good Samaritan.

Don’t push your luck . . .
First the sister, then Abby.
Everything was on track again.

The afternoon nearly got away from Abby. She’d intended to leave Zoey at the house and then, in broad daylight, make a trek to the hospital, force her
way inside, climb up the stairs, and using the crowbar she'd already packed into her car, jimmy open the damned door to Room 307.

But phone calls from Montoya's brother setting up a time for the security system installation, Charlene reporting that their dad was "resting comfortably," three potential buyers who set up times to view the place the next day, and a few clients who needed information "ASAP" had slowed her down. Even Alicia had called, and since they'd played phone tag for a week, Abby had spent half an hour catching up. All the while Zoey lounged on the couch, nursing a glass of wine, flipping through the channels where news reports about the killings and footage of Luke's funeral from earlier in the day were being aired.

"I thought maybe someone would catch us on camera since you were the ex-wife and all."

"That's sick."

"No sicker than going to the mental hospital again. For the record," she said, sipping from her stemmed glass of Riesling, "I'm against this."

"It's something I have to do."

"Does Montoya know?"

"No."

"Will you call him?"

"And say what? That I feel compelled to go back to where it all started? That I have to face the demons of the past, that I can't go forward with my life until I go backward?"

Zoey lifted a shoulder. "It sounds kind of like psychobabble to me."

"I have to do this," Abby said.

"Then go. Zoey threw up a hand in surrender.

Abby let out a long breath. "You and Dad lied for twenty years. That's a helluva long time. I think I can at least have a few hours to get over it and. . .."

Zoey finished her wine in a gulp. "So go, already. Exorcize your damned demons."

"I'm on my way."

Zoey stalked to the kitchen, where she opened the refrigerator, found the bottle, and pulled out the cork. "Maybe I'll take another red-eye home."

Abby glanced to the lowering sun. "I don't have time to discuss this now, Zoe. When I get back, we'll hash everything out, have a few glasses of wine together, okay? We'll drink and watch old movies on television if we can find a station that isn't consumed with 'updates at eleven' of the murders."

Zoey refilled her glass, then shoved the cork into the bottle. She sighed. "If this is what you have to do, fine. Sorry I'm being bitchy. I'm still fighting jet lag and I think I might be coming down with something. The woman on the plane right behind me coughed so much I thought she'd back up a lung. It's probably the flu."

"There's ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom."

"This'll do for now. Zoey held up her glass and took a sip. "Unless you want me to go with you?" she asked reluctantly.

"Don't worry. I think this is something I should do alone."

"How about I drive with you? If you want to go into the hospital alone, I'll wait in the car."

"I'll be fine."

"Okay, then, but take my weapon with you."

"Your weapon?"

"Yeah, I usually have it in my purse, but because of airport security, I had to pack it. Just a sec." She left her glass on the counter, hurried off down the hall in her stocking feet, then returned seconds later holding some weird knife.

"What is it?"

"A cheaper version of the Pomeroy Stiletto. It folds up, but can be released by this little button here, see. . . ." She demonstrated, her index finger pressing on the small red button. "Spring action."

"Aren't these things illegal?"

"All I know is: you cannot take them on a plane. That's a major no-no, so I have to pack it." She closed the blade and slapped the little dagger into Abby's hand.

"Okay," Abby said, a bit uncertainly. "Thanks." She slipped the knife into her pocket. She was as ready as she would ever be; her car packed. She'd already tossed her purse, cell phone, camera, and for good measure, the canister of pepper spray she'd carried around for the better part of the last two years but had yet to use into the car. She'd also placed a crow bar, flashlight, and lantern in the back.

Hershey, spying her loading the car, whined and stood at the door, ready for a "ride." Abby hesitated. Should she take the dog? "Later," she said, patting Hershey's head. "Promise . . . or maybe 'Aunt Zoe' could take you for a walk."

"I'm not the dog's 'aunt,' okay? When you have kids, then sure, I'll be Auntie Zoe, but not for the dog."

"Whatever. I see you later. Build a fire, and have another glass of wine," Abby suggested. "If I don't show up in three hours, send the cavalry."

"I'll call Montoya."

"Even better," she said, thinking about calling him herself. But if she told him what she was doing, he would have a fit. Like Zoey, he wouldn't understand. Only he would be much more adamant that she stay home. Besides, he was busy—a detective trying to solve several murder cases, for crying out loud. His own aunt was missing.

Abby climbed into the Honda and backed out of the garage. What was the old saying?

*Today is the first day of the rest of your life.*

For her, it was the other way around. *Today was the last day of her previous thirty-five years.* Tomorrow would be the first day of her new life.

". . . that's right. Double-check Lawrence DuLoc's alibis and find out what you can on a Simon Thaddeus Heller. I've got his social," Montoya said, rattling off Simon Heller's social security number while driving one-handed and bringing Zaroster up to speed. "He was involved with Faith Chastain when she was a patient at Our Lady of Virtues. Let go, because of it. Then moved west, supposedly. Check with the FBI, they might have faster access to his records."

"Will do," she said before hanging up.

He cracked open the window and stared through his bug-spattered windshield. Had Heller returned? Was he wreaking his own personal hell on victims who had been close to Faith Chastain? . . . If so, how were Asa Pomeroy and Luke Gierman involved . . . or was it just a loose connection in their cases? Asa had a son who had been in the hospital, and Luke Gierman had married Faith Chastain's daughter, who'd just happened to be in the room when Faith died. Mary LaBelle was the daughter of people who had worked at the hospital. Gina Jefferson had been a social worker there.

When Heller had practiced at Our Lady of Virtues.

When DuLoc had been a patient.

He was closing in on the truth, he knew it, but it was still tantalizingly just out of reach.

He was nearly to the city when the phone blasted. He picked it up while negotiating a final turn before the country road became a highway. "Montoya."

"Zaroster."

"That was quick."

"It's not about Heller or DuLoc. I don't have an answer on either of them yet." She hesitated as Montoya watched the lanes separate into a split
highway. “Look, I know you’re off the case, but I thought you should know. Asa Pomeroy’s car has been located, parked in the swamp south of the city.” Montoya braced himself, he knew what was coming.

“The car was spotted by a guy giving helicopter rides to tourists over that section of swamp land. He saw the car, knew it was out of place, then remembered the police reports and called it in. The first officers to arrive were from the local Sheriff’s Department. Two dead bodies on the scene. Male and female, tentatively identified as Billy Ray Furlough and Sister Maria Montoya.”

“Damn it,” he growled, his stomach wrenching. Though he’d expected the news, it was still a blow, a kick in the gut.

“I’m sorry.”

“That goddamned bastard.” Rage tore through him. Tears burned the back of his eyes. Memories of his aunt, pictures frozen in time, slid behind his eyes. He recalled her as a young woman, full of hope and happiness, working with children, laughing at her nieces’ and nephews’ antics. There had been an underlying sadness to her, he’d thought, but she still had enjoyed her cloistered life.

“We’ll get him,” Zaroster was saying.

Montoya had no doubt. He would spend the rest of his life tracking down this psycho if he had to. Nothing would stop him. The monster would go down.

“Give me that address.” He floored his car, turned on the lights, and drove as if Lucifer himself were breathing down his neck.

A flat?

Her tire was flat now?

“Great,” Abby said, staring at the front passenger wheel of her little Honda. She glanced to the heavens and saw that it would soon be dusk. Great. Nothing to do but change the tire. Hopefully she’d get to the hospital and still have some daylight to work with. She could either change the tire herself—which would take a minimum of half an hour and God knew if the spare was any good—or she could call roadside assistance. That would probably take longer. Or she could take off cross-country. Though she was five miles from the hospital by road, she was probably less than a mile if she walked a straight line across farmers’ fields and ignored the NO TRESPASSING signs. But then she’d have to stow her gear in her backpack, which wouldn’t hold all the tools she wanted to take.

“Looks like Door Number One,” she told herself as she found the jack and the instruction pamphlet about how to use it.

* * *

She should have gone with Abby.

Working on her third glass of wine and watching a sci-fi flick that she’d seen several times already, Zoey realized she’d made a big mistake. What had she been thinking, letting Abby return to that god-awful sanitarium by herself? What had she thought, insisting that she phone Montoya; that would be a mistake. Nothing to do but change the tire. Hopefully she’d get to the hospital and still have some daylight to work with. The place was just creepy. She’d never liked it. Never wanted to go back there.

The dog, lying by the fireplace, raised her head and let out a soft little “woof.”

“Crap,” she muttered as the news switched to trouble in the Middle East.

“Give me a break.” She inhaled a calming breath.

She touched her numb nose. Nope, she didn’t dare drive. Instead she’d call Abby, see that she was okay. Insist that she phone Montoya; that would work. She thought of the detective with his black hair, dark eyes, and bad-boy smile. He was way too sexy for his own good. Or Abby’s. Maybe Zoey should phone him and tell him what her sister was up to. Surely Abby had to have his number somewhere around here . . .

Don’t do it.

* * *

Don’t call him.

* * *

Remember what happened with Luke?

You nearly lost your sister over him. Don’t get involved.

The dog was still barking its fool head off. Zoey peeked out the window cut into the door and saw Hershey barking and pacing around the edge of the house, near the laundry room. Whatever creature the Lab was stalking had probably darted under the house.

Great. What if it was a skunk?

She walked to the living room and found her purse. Scrounging through her bag, she glanced at the television. The Pope was on the screen, standing on some balcony and waving to a crowd of people filling a city square and spilling into the side streets.

She found her phone.
Creak!
What the hell was that? A door opening?
Zoey speed-dialed Abby’s cell. She would not freak out. Would not!
She heard the connection and a second later a musical ring tone within the house. Had Abby forgotten her phone? Oh, no . . . Still holding the cell to her ear, she walked into the hallway. The music was coming from the laundry room.
“Oh, Abby,” she muttered as she walked through the open door and spied the ringing cell on the sill of the open window . . .
Open?
Just outside that same window Hershey was growling and barking and . . . oh, God.
Every hair on the back of Zoey’s neck rose. She clicked off her phone and turned.
Fear shot through her.
She nearly fainted.
A big man dressed in black filled the doorway!
She started to scream and saw the weird gun.
This is it! He’s going to kill you.
Reacting on sheer instinct, she flung herself over the top of the washer and through the open window. She fell to the mud outside. Quickly, not daring to look back, she scrambled to her feet and began to run.
Where? Oh, God, where could she go? The rental car! She’d left the keys under the seat. She was sprinting by now, heading to the front of the house, realizing she still held her cell phone.
With trembling fingers, she disconnected the call and hit the middle button for 9-1-1. She heard a door open behind her.
Run, run, run!
She rounded a corner, the dog racing beside her.
The rental was parked to the side of the driveway. She heard the phone ringing on the other end.
Answer! she thought wildly, her bare feet sliding on the gravel. Oh, God, where was he? She glanced over her shoulder and saw him, not ten yards away.
Panic pounded through her.
“Nine-one-one Dispatch. What is the nature of—”
“He’s here! The killer’s here! In Cambrai. I’m at Abby Chastain’s—”
She was at the car, saw the weapon rise again.
“Hurry!” Her fingers pulled on the handle of the car door.
And then he fired.

Montoya parked his car at the end of the lane where a police barricade was already being manned by two deputies he didn’t recognize. He flashed his badge, wending his way through the other parked cars, avoiding the first news crew to arrive as he headed along the side of a narrow dirt and gravel road. This area of swampland was so deep in the forest that it was already as gloomy and dark as midnight, though there was still an hour before sunset.
The crime scene was orderly chaos. Officers were stringing tape around the perimeter and setting up lights; others were collecting evidence or taking pictures of the grounds surrounding an abandoned, single-wide trailer. A rusted-out car of indecipherable lineage lay in ruins beside the gleaming finish of Asa Pomeroy’s Jaguar.
He knew he’d get some flack about being here, but he walked into the area as if he belonged. If someone challenged him, he’d deal with it. All he wanted was a look. Nothing more.
It wasn’t that he didn’t believe his aunt was a victim; he just had to see for himself what the psycho had done.
Near the Jag, Brinkman was talking with a couple of sheriff’s deputies while Bentz and another guy from the Sheriff’s Department were examining a path leading to a rickety dock. It looked as if the FBI hadn’t arrived yet, but that was just a matter of minutes.
Right now, everyone was distracted.
It was now or never.
He walked up the steps leading to the yawning open door and stepped into the bowels of hell.
The interior of the old trailer was lit by the weird blue glow of klieg lamps and on the filthy floor were two bodies, entwined as previously: his aunt, in her nun’s habit, draped over the naked body of her son, Billy Ray Furlough. If there was blood present, it was well hidden under the splatter of red and black paint thrown over the victims. On one wall, in violent red was painted:
THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH.
Bonita Washington, gloved and examining the bodies, looked over her shoulder. “You’d better sign . . . Montoya?” Her eyes rounded. “What the hell are you doing here?”
He didn’t answer, just turned and walked out. He was halfway down the lane when Bentz caught up with him.
“Hold up!” he ordered and there was an edge to his voice Montoya didn’t like.
“You know what,” Bentz said tautly. “What the fuck are you thinking?” Montoya didn’t answer and Bentz’s eyes narrowed in the coming dusk. “Damn it. I’ll have to report this.”
“So do it. Do your job.”
“Crap, Montoya, don’t do this! We want this one by the book so we can nail this son of a bitch’s hide to the wall. I thought we were clear on that.”
“Crystal.”
“Then get the hell out of here and don’t come back.” A muscle worked in his jaw as Montoya held his gaze. “Hey. I know this is hard, but let it go.
We’ll get him.”
Not if I get him first, Montoya thought, his mind’s eye sharp with the memory of his aunt’s waxyen lifeless face, the paint poured all over her body.
Montoya strode back to his car, anger pulsing through him. He thought about the message scrawled on the inside of the trailer: THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH.
That’s right, you sick bastard, he silently agreed. And you’re one helluva sinner.
Get ready.
“God help me.” Abby stared up at the old hospital and felt a chill as cold as the arctic sea settle into her bones. Twilight was beginning to steal over the land, dark shadows fingerling from the surrounding woods, mosquitos buzzing loudly, crickets softly chirping, and as she stood near the fountain with its crying angels and cracked basin. She felt a presence, an evil malevolence, as if the building itself were glaring down at her.

It’s just your imagination.

The dilapidated old building that appeared so menacing was just brick and mortar, shingles and glass. It wasn’t haunted with the souls of those who had lived inside. It wasn’t glowing down upon her, silently warning her that she was making the single worst mistake of her life. Nonetheless her pulse drummed in her ears.

“You’re an idiot,” she told herself as she summoned up all her courage. She couldn’t back down now. Not when she was so close. Yet her heart was thudding, her nerves stretched to the breaking point.

_This is where it all happened_, she thought, eying the spot on the weed-choked concrete where her mother’s life had ended.

_Go. Now. Don’t put it off any longer._

She made a quick sign of the cross, then hoisting one strap of her backpack over her shoulder, she skirted the building, cutting across lawns that had once been tended, where butterflies and honey bees had flitted, where a group of children about her age had stared at her as if she’d been sent from another solar system. She remembered their eyes following Zoey and her as they’d chased each other around the magnolia tree so fragrant with heavy blooms.

She’d thought them then, those kids, and yet her father had always told her to pity them. “There but for the grace of God go I,” he’d reminded her...

. but she’d still thought they were weird. She glanced to the corner of the verandah where they’d always gathered and even now, when the flagstones were empty, she sidestepped the area and headed toward the back door.

But the ghosts followed her, if not the teenagers, then a little blond girl who never spoke and drew odd shapes in chalk over the rough flag stones; the boy who watched her every move and was forever pulling out tufts of his hair; the old lady who listed in her wheelchair, one arm dragging, her mouth often agape, her eyes wide and wondering behind thick glasses.

She’d been a former beauty queen, Abby had been told, reduced by age and dementia to a hollow shell. Then there had been the boy on the threshold of manhood who had eyed both her and her mother in a way that had made her want to wash herself. How often had he with his dark hair and brooding eyes been in the hallways, near her mother’s door squeezing one of those stress relieving balls so slowly at times she thought he was going mad?

Deep inside she felt that stirring again, the lust he’d experienced for Faith Chastain, the wrath he’d felt knowing she was giving herself to the doctor as if she’d felt dirty? The sexual message had been clear; he’d been kneading a malleable ball, but he’d wanted to do so much more with his big hands.

She shuddered as she thought of all the tortured souls who had resided here, cared for by doctors, nurses, social workers and staff yet left adrift. Her mother was supposed to have been safe here; this hospital was to have been a place of healing, of comfort. Not pain. Not horror. Not molestation.

Abby rounded a vine-draped corner and sent up a prayer for her poor fragile mother. “Oh, Mom, I’m so sorry,” she said aloud, her heart heavy.

A stroke of luck? Or a bad omen?

She stared at the partially open window."

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Enough already!” She gave herself a mental shake and pushed back her fears. Nervously she dropped her backpack inside the window then heaved herself over the sill and landed on the floor.

* * *

She was here!

Deep within his sacred room he heard the quiet thump of feet hit the floor overhead. His heart rate accelerated and he took in a deep breath. He’d known she’d come. Lured by the past, Faith’s daughter would return to the place where all her pain had begun. He licked his lips and blinked.

His pain, of course, had started much earlier.

As he stared at the walls of his room, he saw the writing he’d worked so diligently to create. Passages of Scripture, words of the great philosophers on sin, his own personal theories formulated by his own mother, reinforced at the strict Catholic schools that had eventually all kicked him out.

He listened hard. Heard footsteps. Of the daughter.

Deep inside he felt that stirring again, the lust he’d experienced for Faith Chastain, the wrath he’d felt knowing she was giving herself to the doctor as well.

_The wages of sin is death._

How many times had he heard that from his mother as she’d sat by the window, Bible lying open on her lap, cigarette burning neglected in the ash tray, ice cubes melting in her drink. “He’ll pay,” she’d told her only son often enough. “Your father and his whoring new wife are sinners and they’ll both pay.”

She’d taken a sip of her drink, her little tongue licking up a drop that lingered on her lip. “We all do.” She’d looked over at him and there had been no hint of motherly love in her gaze. “You will, too. You’ve got his blood in your veins and you’ll pay.” Another sip before she rained on him that twisted sarcastic smile he’d grown to hate. “But then you already are, aren’t you? The nuns at school have told me.”

Now, he felt the same pulsing shame run through him as she’d ranted about the sins that had been pounded into her own head while growing up. Lighting another cigarette in fingers that had shaken, she’d focused on his transgressions. The nuns had told her he’d cheated in school, which had been a lie, of course, but she’d believed the sisters and to punish him, to make him consider his sinful ways, she’d locked him in a closet.

It hadn’t been the first time.

Once before he’d been caught kissing a girl at school. Upon returning home, he’d faced a fierce, embarrassed and angry mother. That time he’d been...
stripped naked, locked away for three days, left in his own urine and feces without water. He’d been ordered, as penance to write on the walls, the wages of sin is death. For the three days of his imprisonment he’d believed he would die in that empty closet that had once housed his father’s guns.

He’d been released of course. Just as he always had been when his mother, reeking of alcohol, had finally decided he’d been punished enough. Then, always she would cry and beg for him to forgive her, bathe him, offer up new clothes, an expensive toy and kiss him . . . all over . . . while gently tending to the bruises and cuts that covered his body, scars from his efforts of trying to break free.

She’d been tender then, lovingly caressing him, assuring him that if he would repent and atone for his sins, he would find favor with God. With her.

Once after a particularly long stay in the closet, he’d felt not only fear, but rage. When he’d heard the locks click and seen that first blinding crack of light, he’d stood and walked past her, refused to let her touch him, and thrown her gifts of atonement back in her face. He’d threatened to leave her, to tell his father what she’d done. She’d shaken and cried but admitted that the man who had sired him had never wanted him in the first place. His father had paid for an abortion she’d refused. And later, after she’d given birth, had his father stuck around? Oh, for a few years, but after less than a paltry decade, the marriage had unraveled, his father had strayed and had abandoned them both.

At the time when she’d told him about this father wanting an abortion when she was crying and quaking, unable to hold her cigarette in her trembling fingers, he realized that this once she’d been telling the truth. His father had, indeed, abandoned them both for the whore.

He’d known then it was his mission to set things right, his own personal atonement for being unwanted.

And he’d eagerly taken up that sword of vengeance.

Hadn’t the new wife died?

Hadn’t he been looked upon suspiciously?

Hadn’t he ended up here . . . locked away permanently until the hospital had closed and he’d been shuffled from one facility to the next, always a private institution, always peppered with nuns and priests and rosaries and crucifixes, always knowing his every sin was being observed and catalogued, never forgotten and never forgiven.

He’d tried to stay true to his mission and not to follow his own urges. He’d tried to fight his own desires.

And yet . . . with Faith . . . he’d risked it all, condemning his soul to the depths of hell just to touch her and lie with her, to feel her sweet, warm body wrapped over his.

And now the daughter, who looked enough like Faith to be her twin, was here.

He glanced again at the words etched into the walls of this room. Above the passages he’d scratched into the walls, he carefully painted fourteen simple words for the fourteen victims, the sinners and the saints, those who would be punished, those who would do the punishing.

If only Faith were here . . . she would understand. She would soothe him. She would love him. But that was not to be. The lazy doctor had killed her.

Fucked her, then, upon being found out by the daughter, pushed Faith, beautiful Faith, through the window.

He would have liked to have had a attack dog, Montoya and a gun? Why not come back in the morning?

She unzipped the pack and pulled out her flashlight. A part of her brain screamed that what she was doing was just plain nuts, that she was as crazy as some of the people who had once lived here, that if she had any sense at all, she would turn and make tracks.

Why not come back in the morning?

In full daylight?

With an attack dog, Montoya and a gun?

Because she wanted answers now.

Because momentum was propelling her forward.

Because she couldn’t bear the thought of waiting one more instant.

Because it was now or never.

She lifted the backpack to her shoulder again. The fingers of one hand were curled around a crow bar, the fingers of the other hand gripping a flashlight.

As she turned on the flashlight, the shadowy halls came alive.

Abby felt the temperature drop, the atmosphere thicken.

No way, you’re just freaking yourself out. Keep going!

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She swept the thin beam over the dirty floor boards, shining it on the windows. She spied rotted, peeling wallpaper and cobwebs draped from the corners of old chandeliers as she walked softly through the first floor. Every scary movie she’d seen where the kids split up and start inching their separate ways down dark hallways played through her mind.

Never had she felt more alone.

Never had she been more determined.

You have to do this. You have to remember.

The building groaned softly.

Abby bit back a scream.

It’s nothing, just the settling of old timbers. You hear the same thing in your house.

She took two steps into the kitchen and heard another noise. Her heart lurched.

Scrape, scrape, scrape.

The scratch of tiny claws. She whipped the flashlight around, its beam jumping across old counters and the stove top to the rusted sink where she saw the furry back end of a rat sliding into the drain, its tail slithering like a tiny black snake as it disappeared.

“Jesus,” she whispered, her heart knocking crazily. Abby walked slowly, hearing her own footsteps, her own heartbeat.

She closed her eyes, thought she heard a soft cry.

Don’t do this to yourself. No one’s here. Don’t let your fears run wild. Do not fall victim to your mother’s paranoia.

Taking in a long, shuddering breath, she gripped the crowbar as if it were her only salvation. She swallowed back her fear but swore that if she listened really hard, she could hear the muted sobs and wails of despair from the patients who had suffered here.

Stop it. There is no one in this damned building, no one moaning or sobbing, for God’s sake. Now, get going! It’s nearly dark. Come on, Abby, get this over with!

Montoya floored the accelerator, ignoring the speed limit. He passed other cars and trucks, his jaw set, his pulse pounding in his temple. The image of his aunt’s body laid upon Billy Ray’s corpse burned through his mind and his fingers curled more tightly over the steering wheel. What if the monster had
gone after Abby? “Fuck,” he growled, shifting down and passing a flat bed truck, spraying gravel as his back wheels hit the shoulder. At a straight
stretch in the road, he grabbed his cell phone and speed dialed her home.
He counted the rings, his dread mounting. “Come on,” he urged, “Come on!” But no one answered.
Fear pounded through his brain.
So what? She could be out.
Rapidly he punched in the number for her cell.
The call went directly to her damned voice mail.
He didn’t like it. There could be a million reasons she wasn’t picking up, none of which had to do with the murders that had taken place, but he was still
nervous as hell.
In his gut he knew that Faith Chastain’s death had somehow led to the recent turn of deadly events. He just didn’t know how, couldn’t yet connect the
dots. All he was certain of was that Abby was involved.
The countryside blew by in a blur of farmland and forest as he tried to keep panic at bay.
What the hell was the connection between Faith Chastain’s tragic plunge from the third floor window of a sanitarium and the deadly events that were
happening now?
The wages of sin is death.
Why that message? What did it mean?
Scowling through the windshield, his eyes narrowing on the burgeoning purple-bellied clouds that scraped the horizon, he thought of the first message
received at WSLJ.
Repent.
For what? A sin? What sin? Slowing for a corner, ignoring the crackle of the police radio, fear chassing through his bloodstream, he tried like hell to
piece it together. The second message played through his head.
Abolish.
As in make amends? For what? More transgressions? What were they? What was with all the religious references? Think! Put it together. You have to.
Time is running out. And the killer is telling you something . . . it has to do with sin . . .
Why were the two victims posed together?
What were their sins?
A muscle worked in his jaw and his head ached he thought so hard. He was close to the answer, he could feel it. Each victim had been picked for a
reason . . . for his or her transgression. Against whom? The killer? Mankind? God?
Jesus, Montoya figure this out!
He slowed as he spied the narrow bridge dead ahead. A motorcycle sped in the opposite direction, headlight glowing like one bright eye, exhaust pipes
roaring as they passed mid-center on the span.
Montoya’s brain was still focused on the damn notes from the killer.
The missives had been signed by Al W . . . no, A. L. W. There was a clue there. There had to be. What was the killer trying to say?
The obvious answer was simple:
A for Asa.
W for William.
Why not the female victims?
No C for Courtney.
No G for Gina.
No M for Maria.
Why the bridal dress on the Virgin Mary? Why all the cash strewn around Asa Pomeroy and Gina Jefferson? Why the blood red and black paint, the
angry inscription on the wall of the scene with William and Maria, mother and son?
What were their sins?
And why was there so much rage evident at the last scene, so much anger? Such violence? When not at the others?
“Damn it all to hell.” He flipped on his blinker and pulled into the oncoming lane, flooring it as he passed an old truck with a bumper sticker that said,
Honk If You Love Jesus.
As he swung into the right lane again, he picked up the phone to try and call Abby one more time. He needed to hear her voice, to assure himself that
she was all right.
Punching her speed dial number, he glared through the bug-splattered windshield, listening to the phone ring on the other end of the connection while
his mind grappled with the puzzle of the case. Uneven pieces, sharp clues, poked at him, prodding him, taunting him that he couldn’t put it together. What
the hell was the twisted son of a bitch trying to convey?
What was the significance of yin and yang? Light and dark? Good and evil?
No!
Not necessarily good versus evil. More like sinner and saint!
He nearly stood on the brakes, skidding to the side of the road. As he pulled over, the pickup that had been on his bumper honked loudly as it tore by.
Montoya’s heart was beating like a jackhammer. Wildly. Crazily. Sinner and saint . . . Luke Gierman, the loud-mouthed adulterer and Courtney LaBelle, the
virgin. Asa Pomeroy the greedy industrialist and Gina Jefferson, the philanthropist. Billy Ray Furlough, not Maria’s son . . . no, that was only icing on
the cake. He was an angry, fire-and-brimstone preacher, railing on the wrath of God, while Maria was a soft spoken, true believer, a woman who trusted in
a gentle, caring deity.
Could that be it?
That simple?
His phone was still connected to his last call and Abby’s voice, instructing him to leave a message filled his ears. Oh, God, he hoped she was safe. He
still felt as if she was somehow intimately involved in this horror.
As his Mustang idled at the side of the road, he instructed Abby to call him immediately, disconnected and speed-dialed the homicide department
instead.
Seconds ticked by.
“Zaroster.” Lynn answered on the second ring.
“It’s Montoya. Are you near a computer?” he demanded, his mind running in circles as the first drops of rain hit the car’s windshield.
“Yeah, right here. At my desk. Why?”
“I need a Google search. Or whatever search engine you use.”
“Google. Sure . . . just give me a sec.”
He heard her typing and about went out of his mind while he waited.
“Okay, got it,” she said. “What do you want to search?”
“Start with the Seven Deadly Sins.”
The rain was picking up, splattering on the hood of his mustang, drizzling down the windshield. He flipped on the wipers as traffic rushed by. All the while he was impatiently listening to her type.

"Okay, I’ve got a lot of options here."

"Just go to one that lists them . . . use a Catholic website, if you can. Read them to me."


Adrenaline, fueled by dread, pumped through Montoya’s blood. His knuckles showed white where he gripped the steering wheel.

"Let’s see," she said. "We’ve got all the usual suspects here: Pride, Wrath, Envy, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth and Avarice."

"Okay. Good," he said, though his heart was drumming with fear. If what he was thinking was correct, if he’d finally understood what was happening, the worst was yet to come. "Years ago, when I went to Catechism, I learned about those sins. But there was more to it."

"Sorry, only seven."

"No, I mean, isn’t there something about . . . virtues that counterbalance the sins?"

"Virtues," she repeated. "You want to tell me where you’re going with this?"

"As soon as I know," Montoya gritted out, deafening the answer. He heard the clicking of computer keys. "There should be seven of them."

"Virtues. . . as in Our Lady of Virtues?" she said and Montoya’s fear only deepened.

"Yeah."

"Well, let’s see . . ." More typing and a pause of a few long seconds. He thought he might go out of his mind. "Oh, here it is. Well, I’ll be damned. Didn’t know they existed. Shit. Look at this."

"What?"

"I’ve got a list of Seven Contrary Virtues listed here, one for each of the sins."

The heavens opened up and rain poured from the sky.

"What are they?"

"Well for pride, there’s humility, for wrath, we’ve got meekness, envy’s counterpart is charity, and chastity, of course for lust. Then there’s moderation for gluttony, zeal as opposed to sloth and generosity as opposed to—"


"Bingo. Why hadn’t he seen it sooner? The clues were all there, the killer taunting him with the letters, not only for the victim’s names, but because of their supposed sin or virtue. "I was just at the most recent murder scene and there was anger literally written all over that place. The other scenes showed signs of rage. Just the opposite. Our killer is cold and clinical, so why the change? I thought maybe he was just unraveling, but then I remembered that Billy Ray Furlough was an angry minister and his given name, William, began with the letter W for Wrath. Contrarily, my aunt was the embodiment of meekness, her name was Maria—"

"M," Zaroster interrupted. "And Courtnay LaBelle, our Virgin Mary was C, for Courtnay and Chastity to Luke Gierman’s L for Lust. Jesus, how sick is that?"

"Asa Pomeroy’s sin was Avarice," Montoya said thinking of the greedy industrialist, "and Gina Jefferson was the epitome of philanthropy or generosity."

"And G," she whispered. "If you’re right about this, then he’s not even half way through. There are seven sins, seven virtues—"

"Fourteen victims." Montoya pulled a quick one-eighty, then floored the car again, the tires chirping as they hit the pavement. "And it all starts with Our Lady of Virtues Hospital."

"Shit! That’s where Simon Heller worked," she said and he imagined the fury tightening the corners of her mouth. "He must be our guy. I just received a confirmation of his most recent address. Guess what? Heller moved back to New Orleans three months ago. Rents a place in the Garden District."

Montoya’s heart dropped. Anger rushed through his veins. "Send someone out there." Maybe they could stop the bastard before it was too late.

"I’m on my way," she said and he imagined she was already reaching for her jacket and sidearm.

"Take someone with you. And tell Bentz what’s going on."

"I will."

"Be careful, Lynn. This guy’s dangerous."

"Don’t worry," she assured him. "So am I."

Rain pummelled the roof of the asylum. Notes were strung tight as piano wires, Abby stepped past the stained-glass window at the landing where the gloom of the dayhardly dared pierce the colored panes. Her throat was dry as sand, her pulse pounding in her ears. She strained to hear the slightest sound and squinted into the darkness that the weak beam of her flashlight barely pierced.

Up the worn steps.

Into the pitch black hallway of the third floor.

Her mother’s floor.

Where Faith’s life had ended.

Outside the wind whistled, driving the rain, causing the skin at Abby’s nape to prickle. This was the very hallway where Heller had crept, where he’d lurked outside the doorway.

In her mind’s eye, Abby recalled pushing open the door and finding him there, his big hands upon her mother, fondling her breasts, maybe pinching. Abby had gasped. He’d turned quickly, his face flushed and hard, his eyes glinting, a vein throbbing at his temple, his erection visible beneath his lab coat.

Her stomach had twisted in revulsion and only her mother’s pleading eyes, looking over Heller’s shoulder kept Abby from screaming.

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Now, Abby brushed the beam of her flashlight over the hallway. Every door down the length of the inky corridor was open, either yawning wide, or slightly ajar. But unlatched. Except for 307. That door was shut snugly.

Abby froze, disbeliefing.

Everything was exactly as she remembered it.
The iron bed, painted white, pushed into one corner. The nightstand with a vase of fresh cut flowers. The bifold picture frame with faded snapshots of Abby and Zoey as children. The patchwork quilt in shades of rose and peach that Abby’s grandmother had hand-stitched. The crucifix mounted on the wall. Time had stood still in Room 307.

“No,” Abby whispered taking several steps further into the room. Was that a hint of her mother’s perfume over the odors of cleaning solvents?

It couldn’t be. Her mother wasn’t here . . . As if in fast rewind, her mind spun backward in time to that night when her life had changed forever. She remembered rushing into the room, eager to tell her mother about the dance and Trey Hilliard . . .

“Mom?” Abby, breathless from racing up the stairs two at a time, nearly flew into the room. “Mom? Guess what?”

Her mother was near the tall window, twilight thick beyond the sheer panes. But Faith, partially undressed, wasn’t alone. A doctor, Simon Heller, was grappling with her.

Abby skidded to a stop and stared. “Mom?” Was Heller trying to push her through the glass, or save her from herself?

“Hey, what’s going on?” Heller spun. His face was red and screwed into a furious knot, spittle flying from the corner of his mouth. “Don’t you know this is a private room?” he demanded furiously, his eyes narrowing under bushy eyebrows, the nostrils of his hawkish nose flared. “You should knock before you just barge in!”

“But . . .” Abby stared at her mother who was obviously embarrassed, working at straightening her clothes. Faith couldn’t hide her shame. Tears filled her eyes and her cheeks were flushed a bright scarlet. She gazed over Heller’s shoulder to meet the confusion and disgust in Abby’s expression. Mutely, she mouthed “Don’t please . . .” then out loud, “Abby Hannah, I’m so sorry.” Before Abby could reply, Faith spun, as if Heller had somehow whirled her and forced her to turn away. Her body hit the glass.

The window cracked with a sickening, splintering sound.

“No!” Abby rushed forward, trying to reach her mother, but Heller grabbed her arm, holding her back. To keep her from saving Faith, or to protect her from falling?

“I forgive you . . .” her mother cried, her eyes wide and round. The window shattered, clear shards stained red with blood as Faith tumbled through, her terrified scream echoing in Abby’s brain.

“No! Mom! No!” Abby cried. She tried to rip herself from Heller’s grip. She heard something—a swift intake of breath?—over the sickening thunk of her mother’s body slamming against the concrete.

Horrified, tears streaming down her face, Abby stared through the broken glass to the cracked concrete and Faith’s broken body. “No!” Abby wailed, blood pooling beneath her mother. Faith Chastain’s eyes stared sightlessly upward. The insects of the night continued to buzz and voices were suddenly yelling, screaming, barking orders but Abby’s mother was dead.

Sobbing, Abby stumbled backward, away from the horrid sight. Another slight, nearly inaudible gasp from somewhere behind her. Turning blindly, she saw that the closet door was ajar. Just a sliver. A dark crack of shadow. And within . . . the glow of malicious eyes. Someone was watching this? A voyeur getting his jollies by viewing Dr. Heller force her mother into vile, perverted acts?

The eyes, sharp and hard, met hers in a moment of intimate, unthinkable understanding . . .

Dear God, she thought now, her head pounding, the vision of the past so real she could feel the moist heat of that damp Louisiana night. The flashlight was quivering in her hands, its fading beam jumping around the room. Her gaze swung slowly to the closet door. Hanging slightly open, a dark crack between door and frame. And from within, the reflection of hate-filled eyes.
Abby held back a scream.
Her pulse thundered in her ears.
She trained her flashlight into the black gap and the weakening beam landed upon an old frightened man staring up at her. His hands were bound behind him, his ankles taped together, a gag slapped over his mouth.
She’d seen him before, she thought, as she stepped closer and the acrid smells of sweat, urine and fear assailed her. His eyes were wide and behind his gag he was screaming, yelling at her, the sound muffled.
She started to reach for the gag over his mouth, then stopped.
Of course she recognized him.
Twenty years had added wrinkles to his skin and bleached his hair to snowy white. But his features were the same. Hard-edged jaw, thick eyebrows, aquiline nose. With a sickening jolt, she realized she was staring into the petrified, blood-shot eyes of Dr. Simon Heller.
Her mother’s abuser.
She recoiled at the sight of him. “You sick, murdering son of a bitch,” she said.
He was anxious, shaking his head, yelling wildly behind the gag.
The bastard.
“I should leave you here to rot!” She wondered who had put him here? Who had bound and gagged him. Left him alone. New fear climbed up her spine as she grabbed a corner of the tape and yanked hard, the adhesive hissing as it ripped off some of his whiskers and skin. As far as she was concerned, he deserved a whole lot worse. He yowled and over the pitiful sound of Heller’s cry and the rush of the wind, she thought there was another sound.
Something familiar.
A creak of floorboards?
A footstep?
She slid the crowbar into her hand, but it was too late.
“Watch out!” Heller yelled.
She whirled swinging the crowbar wildly just as she felt something hard and cold pressed against her neck.
Crunch!
The iron bar connected. Hard.
“Bitch!” a pained male voice cried as he pressed on the trigger of his stun gun. Thousands of volts of electricity ricocheted through Abby’s body.
Rendering her helpless. Leaving her to flop on the floor, her crow bar skating to the far side of the room and smash against the baseboards.
She jerked wildly, unable to do anything more than look upward into the furious, flushed face of a man she felt she should recognize. “You goddamned little bitch,” he growled, giving her another shot and rubbing his shin.
Her mind was misfiring. She couldn’t control her limbs. But in the gathering darkness she recognized the angry slitted eyes glaring down at her, the same eyes that she’d seen long ago when he’d been a much younger man kneading his stress ball in the hallway or cafeteria or verandah, the same man/boy she’d discovered hiding in the closet watching Heller abuse her mother.
You sick bastard,
she tried to say, but even to her own ears, her voice was garbled, only a series of indistinguishable grunts.
He smiled at her helplessness and his grin was pure, unadulterated evil. An unholy light glimmered in his eyes. She remembered how he’d kneaded that soft gelatinous ball, as if he were going to strangle it oh so slowly.
The spit dried in her mouth.
Christian Pomeroy!
Asa’s son.
How could she have forgotten?
Oh God, not only was he going to kill her, but he was going to do it slowly and painfully, torturing her and somehow satisfying his own dark sexual fantasies.
She wanted to throw up and when he reached forward to stroke her hair, she tried and failed to turn her head and bite him. Instead she was powerless.
He knew it.
“Welcome home, Faith,” he whispered.
What? Faith? No! She was not her mother.
“I’ve been waiting for this, for us, for a long, long time.”
What the hell was this sick pervert talking about?
“The waiting is just about over.”
Her stomach heaved as he leaned closer and she imagined he was going to place his slick lips on hers.
Instead, he gave her another painful jolt.

Drip.
Drip.
Drip.
The sound of water hitting the floor was steady and clear.
Where am I? Zoey wondered as she roused, groaning, every muscle in her body aching. It was cool and dank, only a small lantern flickering in the corner of a tiny cell-like room giving off any illumination. Her arms were forced behind her, her ankles shackled, and she could barely move.
Fear buckled through her.
Jesus-God, what was happening? She blinked and remembered the attack at Abby’s house, how the tall, muscular man had chased her outside the little cottage to the driveway where he’d captured her. Vaguely, as if through a fog, she recalled that he’d been wearing what looked like a black wetsuit. He’d used some kind of stun gun or Taser on her as she’d tried to climb into her rental car. She’d been awake, but couldn’t move or fight back as he’d gagged her, forced her hands behind her back, then wrapped duct tape around her wrists and ankles. As soon as he’d made certain she was no threat to him, he’d picked her up and thrown her into the back seat of her rented silver Toyota. He’d been strong and scary as hell, but as he’d lifted her, she’d heard the sharp hiss of his breath, felt him wince from the effort. He’d muttered an obscenity, as if the act of hoisting her up had caused him pain. Maybe he’d pulled a muscle.
She damned well hoped so.
But why kidnap her? Why bring her to this . . . this god-awful place?
Panic seized her and she looked around frantically, searching for a way of escape.

Drip.

There had to be a way out of her new prison, but her mind was out of kilter and thick. Concentrating, she focused on the lantern with its small flame that caused flickering shadows to climb up moldy, tiled walls. Not a window in sight. Just filthy tiles, a cracked concrete floor and a narrow door.

So what was with the drip from the ceiling, tiny drops falling to pool on the floor in an ever-expanding puddle? She glanced to the ceiling where a useless light fixture was protected by a metal cage.

Was she in some kind of prison cell? Or a closet . . . or underground? She thought of Abby and her fascination with the hospital, with her obsession with their mother’s death.

Drip.

As the tiny droplet hit the pool, she knew.

With mind-numbing clarity.

She was somewhere on the vast campus of Our Lady of Virtues. Maybe even in the hospital itself . . . though she didn’t remember any tiny cell like this.

**Because you’re underground! In a basement.**

**No!**

Adrenalin burst through her.

She had to get out of this prison! She hated basements. Went crazy when she was confined. And that lunatic, whoever he was, would be back. **Get out, Zoey! Get out NOW!**

She heard a terrified mewing and realized the sounds were issuing from her own throat. Clenching her teeth she fought back sheer, muscle-freezing panic.

**God help me.**

She took in a long breath.

**Be cool, Zoey. You’ve been in tight spots before. But not with a murdering psycho!**

She didn’t doubt for a second that he was the killer who had terrorized New Orleans, who had killed Luke and all the others . . . oh, shit . . . she had to save herself, had to! She was way too young to die, to face whatever sick torture he had planned.

So where was he?

And where was Abby? Wasn’t she coming here? Dear God, had the monster already killed her? Zoey began to shake uncontrollably, tremors wracking her body. She prayed her sister was safe, that Abby had somehow out-smarted this creep, that even now she was running for help.

But deep down she knew the chances of that were slim. Abby could already be dead.

Tears burned her eyes as she thought of her sister and how she’d taken Abby for granted. Oh, Abby, she thought, and began to tear at her bonds. She would kill her way out of this place! It wasn’t her nature to give up without a fight and this son of a bitch wouldn’t know what hit him if she could just find a way to get the upper hand. Struggling with the tape restraining her, half expecting the psycho to appear from the shadowy corners, she scanned the tiny room.

Of course she was alone.

She listened hard, tried to hear any movement, but over the sound of her own frenzied heartbeat and shallow breathing, she heard only the sound of the lantern’s soft hiss and the drip of water from the ceiling.

You’re alone, Zoey. That’s good. You have time. **Make the most of it.**

But the messages from her brain weren’t firing quite right and she struggled to push herself into a sitting position. If she could only get rid of the tape around her arms or her legs.

You can. You just have to find a way. **Come on, Zoey, concentrate.**

What do you know that will beat this guy? How can you find a way out of here?

The sick bastard who kidnapped you is a killer. **THE** killer. You can kid yourself all you want, but considering everything that’s gone on recently, you know he plans to kill you just like the others.

Her insides turned to jelly and she wanted to break down and cry. This was so wrong. So unfair. Tears sprang to her eyes and she immediately gave herself a swift mental kick.

**Bawling like a damned baby isn’t going to help! Do something! Do it, NOW!**

Using all her strength, she scooted toward the metal door, which, of course, was closed. She figured that if she could get herself to her feet and stand with her back to the door, she might be able to work the handle. Her wrists were strapped together and her shoulders hurt like hell, but she had no other option that she knew of. The thick iron door was the only way out of this room.

Slowly, she inched across the short span . . . she thought about the lantern, knew she could kick it over and maybe cause a fire, but how would that help?

And nothing in the austere room appeared flammable. She would be trapped in this cell, with no one to come and save her.

No. That wouldn’t do.

She inched over the filth.

Ignored the dirt.

Finally she was at the wall. She tried to climb to her feet, to push herself upright, planting her feet about a foot in front of her and pushing upward.

Once she fell.

Skinning her forearm, new pain searing upward.

Don’t let this bastard get the better of you.

Cursing silently, she tried again. Only to slide down the wall, burning her arm.

Do this, Zoey. Try harder. Don’t give up.

Her feet were bare, so she curled her toes, trying to dig into the cold cement of the floor, and managed to squirm her body up the door. Balanced, she attempted to push it open. To no avail. The slim handle didn’t budge. Was locked tight. She tried again, hoping the old latch would give way.

Nothing.

Again, setting her jaw, she forced all of her strength into the handle, willing it to move.

It didn’t.

**Damn, damn, damn and double damn.** She wanted to fall into a heap and cry.

She was trapped!

The madman had locked her up and would either leave her here to die a horrid, lingering death or would return for some other gruesome end.

She couldn’t give up. Her only hope, she decided, was the lantern. If and when someone opened the door, she could kick the lantern with its kerosene, burning wick, and glass base at whoever unlocked the door.

Other than that, she was a dead woman.

* * *
“God damn you, Montoya!” Bentz growled holstering his weapon. What the hell was his partner thinking? And where the hell was he?

Upon receiving Zarostor’s call, Bentz had peeled off from the crime scene where Billy Ray Furlough and Maria Montoya were the victims. Leaving Brinkman in charge, Bentz had driven like a bat out of hell to land here at Simon Heller’s house, a two-storied Greek Revival style home with huge white pillars, topiary in the front yard and a sweeping verandah.

Zarostor was already inside when he’d arrived, but the house had been empty. Bentz had barged in, shouting he was with the police and found Lynn Zarostor alone in the graceful old home.

“Something’s definitely up,” she’d told him and led him into a downstairs study where there were signs of a struggle.

A desk chair had been kicked over.

The computer monitor had been knocked to the floor and the screen had cracked.

Blood splattered a leather easy chair, where, it appeared someone had been working a crossword puzzle. The newspaper had scattered across polished floors, a pencil, too, had rolled up against the marble hearth of a fireplace, wire-rimmed glasses broken and strung over a folded piece of the newspaper, a third of the answers to the puzzle had been filled in.

Zarostor had already checked the rest of the house, but Bentz, too, looked things over. Nothing in any of the other rooms appeared, at least at their first, peripheral search, to have been disturbed. The beds were made, dishes washed, no sign of anyone in the house. And Heller’s vehicle was missing, a white Lexus SUV with California plates according to the DMV, not parked anywhere outside. Not in the single car garage, not in the alley, and definitely not on the oak-lined street. Bentz had checked.

But how had Montoya known about Heller?

That cocky forget-the-rules son of a bitch was a maverick. Montoya had enough balls to show up at his aunt’s crime scene against orders, then had managed to sneak his way past all the guards to view the gutted mobile home where Sister Maria and Billy Ray Furlough had been killed and left. Then with barely a word to Bentz, Montoya had taken off on some personal vendetta. Not confiding in anyone.

Except, it seemed, Lynn Zarostor.

“What’s Montoya now?” he demanded, once he’d searched for the Lexus and had returned to Heller’s den.

“At Our Lady of Virtues Hospital,” Zarostor said and quickly recapped her conversation with Montoya and his theory about the killing spree being tied to the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Contrary Virtues to Bentz. “But that’s not all,” she continued, “Montoya thinks everyone involved is connected either loosely or directly to that old hospital. We thought Heller was the killer, but—” she glanced around the mess in the doctor’s den. “—it looks like he’s another victim.”

“You theory is that the vics are killed using their name associated with a sin or . . . ?”

“A contrary virtue. In Heller’s case, Simon Thaddeus Heller, I’m betting Sloth as the sin.”

Bentz looked around the house. Other than the den, it was neat as a pin. “Doesn’t look lazy to me.”

Zarostor lifted a shoulder. “I’m just tellin’ ya.”

“I know.”

“And this guy, he could have a wife or girlfriend or boyfriend or maid to clean up after him.”

“Or the theory could be just a load of bull,” Bentz thought out loud, but he was starting to buy it as he stared around Heller’s house. Heller, who had worked at the asylum. Something about the way everything was falling together made Montoya’s sins/virtues M.O. ring true. Still, Montoya had no business acting on his own, bending the rules to the breaking point. Possibly compromising the case.

As if you haven’t,” his mind nagged.

He ignored it.

They walked to the front door of the graceful old house with its expensive furnishings and original pieces of art, trappings that wouldn’t help Heller now. “If Montoya’s right, then our killer isn’t finished.”

“No by a long shot. Let’s go.” She was already on her way to her car.

“Wait! You stay here. Secure this scene. Get backup. I’ll go to the hospital. Call Montoya and tell him what’s up. He won’t pick up my calls but no way is he to go inside that place. Especially not alone!”

“You think I can convince him?”

“You’d better damned well try.” Bentz was already across Heller’s clipped lawn and at the curb where his cruiser was parked on the street. “Are you familiar with the riot act?” he threw out as he opened the car door and glanced over his shoulder through the rain.

“Not by a long shot. Let’s go.” She was already on her way to her car.

“Wow! You stay here. Secure this scene. Get backup. I’ll go to the hospital. Call Montoya and tell him what’s up. He won’t pick up my calls but no way is he to go inside that place. Especially not alone!”

“You think I can convince him?”

“You’d better damned well try.” Bentz was already across Heller’s clipped lawn and at the curb where his cruiser was parked on the street. “Are you familiar with the riot act?”

“Cell phone to her ear, Zarostor stood in the huge entry-way of Heller’s house. She looked up at him expectantly.

“You might want to bone up, cuz I’m going to read it to you letter by letter when I get back. You knew what Montoya was up to, so you, too, may have thrown this whole case in jeopardy. There is no room, do you hear me?—no room for this rogue cop shit.” He slid behind the wheel, slammed the car door shut, fired up the engine, turned on the sirens and gunned it down the quiet street.

“Idiot,” Bentz growled as he picked up his cell phone to call for backup and punched in the number for the station. He understood Montoya’s motivations, just didn’t like them. What the hell was the younger cop doing, messing up the goddamned case?

Zoe started edging toward the flickering lamp when she heard something outside the door. Footsteps!

God, please, let it be the police! Someone to save me.

Her heart pounded wildly, fear spurting through her blood as she heard the lock click loudly. Groaning, the door swung open.

Looming on the other side, his features shadowy in the thin light, appeared the embodiment of Satan.

Oh God! Please help me!

She scooted as far and as fast as she could from him, shrinking away until her back was pressed against the gritty tile and she had no where to go.

The door was twisted.

Evil.

Leering.

She nearly fainted in fear as he stepped into the tiny cell.

“I thought you’d finally wake up,” he said, his voice as smooth as oiled glass. “Good. I want you to know what’s going on.”

That sounded bad. She braced herself for another shot with the stun gun, but he walked into the room, hauled her roughly to her feet, then before she could react, threw her over his shoulder and held her by her bound ankles. Again she heard that hiss of pain as he straightened and she knew instinctively that he had a vulnerable spot somewhere. She just had to find it. To use it. To wound this psycho and somehow bring him to his knees.

“Now, Zoey feared, it was her turn.

So she’d guessed right. The pervert had brought Zoey deep in the bowels of the sanitarium where Faith Chastain had been abused and molested, the asylum where she had died so horribly.

Now, Zoey feared, it was her turn.
The door was locked, but close by, adjacent to a cracked cement porch was a partially opened window.

Right next to Abby’s little Honda.

“Hell.” He’d instigated a Be-On-The-Lookout-For on the vehicle, but no one, as yet, had checked the private lot of the convent. He hadn’t called for backup and had ignored his cell whenever he’d seen Bentz’s number appear on the screen. He didn’t need a lecture. Or a command that he would have to ignore.

He wanted to confide in his partner, but couldn’t drag him into this. Not until he was certain. Bentz would have to wait.

But Abby’s car was a big clue.

A major clue.

He cut the engine and slid from behind the wheel, then doubled-up on his weapons by strapping a second small pistol to his ankle. He had a can of pepper spray with him and found a flashlight in the glove box. Once armed he started jogging for the gate.

His cell phone blasted and he checked the screen for the caller’s number. Zaroster.

Dread grabbed hold of his heart. What if it were news about Abby? What if he was too late? He clicked on as he ducked behind the dripping hedge of arborvitae. “Montoya.”

Zaroster’s voice was hard. “Heller’s place is empty and there are signs of a struggle.”

“Shit!”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“What about his car?”

“Missing. A white Lexus SUV. From the looks of this house and his car and everything, I guess life is good for the doctor. Or was. Bentz was here and we think Heller might be another victim. Why else the struggle in his own house? Looks like he was attacked in his den. We found blood and a pair of glasses smashed and broken, an identical pair to the ones in a picture of Heller that was on the mantel.”

Montoya didn’t like it. He’d thought Heller was the killer. If not Heller then who?

“Bentz is on his way,” Zaroster continued as he eased through the gate. “With backup. And he’s on the warpath. He told me if I got hold of you, you weren’t to go inside the hospital.”

“Too late. I’m already here. Abby Chastain’s car is parked at the convent and my guess is she isn’t planning on joining the order. I’ve tried calling her and she’s not answering her cell phone. Did anyone get to her house? Check on her?”

“Not that I know of. Not yet.”

“Damn.” He knew the truth. Her car was here. She was here. He only prayed she was alone and not with the deadly psychopath who had already killed so many. Six victims that they knew of. Potentially eight more. Abby Chastain . . . What sin or virtue could she and her name possibly represent?

A for Abby. A for . . . Avarice?

Nope. Already used with Asa Pomeroy.

Chastain. C. Chastity?

Again, if his theory was right, Chastity was represented by Courtney LaBelle, the virgin . . . wrong again.

C for Charity? The virtue opposing the sin of Envy?

His heart skidded to a stop. That was it! But what about Heller? Simon T. Heller, another victim . . . S . . . for . . . sloth. But that didn’t fit. The contrary virtue for sloth was humility.

Zaroster was still on the phone, trying to rationalize why he should wait for another cop to come along. “. . . local Sheriff’s Department can send a deputy in a few minutes, I’d guess.”

Montoya had heard enough. “Send them. Fast. But I’m not waiting. If Bentz doesn’t like it, that’s just too damned bad!”

“Bentz was clear about—”

“Bentz can cram it. I know what he said. You warned me. Your ass is out of the sling.”

“Shit!”

Zaroster’s voice was hard. “Heller’s place is empty and there are signs of a struggle.”

Dread caused every muscle in his body to tighten. He thought of Abby and what he might find.

Was the killer with her?

Was he already too late?

Or was this all a false alarm?

C for Charity . . . C for Chastain.

No!

What was her middle name? He’d heard it or seen it. Abigail Hannah Chastain Gierman. Hannah! H for Humility! Shit!

He didn’t wait for her explanation. Didn’t care. “I’ll call as soon as I know what’s up.” He hung up, pocketed his cell phone, turned the ring-tone to vibrate, then followed the wet path. He ran, feet sinking into the soft loam, the smell of the earth heavy in his nostrils. Fear urged him onward. Dread caused every muscle in his body to tighten. He thought of Abby and what he might find.

He passed through a copse of sourwood, then spied, through the branches, the imposing, sinister-looking building of crumbling mortar and cracked bricks.

What atrocities had it housed?

What malignancies had resided in the dark hallways?

For once he hoped to God that his instincts were wrong as he jogged softly through thick brush and ever-increasing rain. It poured from the sky, drizzled down the tree trunks, plopped in fat drops from the branches.

He wondered if he’d ever see her alive again, then refused to think of the alternative.

You can’t lose her!

Kill the bastard if you have to!

Kill him even if you don’t.

He tested the windows. Latched. Or boarded over.

“Hello?” He’d tossed a Brü derivative inside. Damn it all to hell!

Time was running short. He could feel it passing and with it Abby’s chances of survival. He had to find her. Had to. He searched the building again.

He didn’t dare break a window.

Needed the element of surprise on his side.

Once more he jogged around the perimeter of the huge edifice, passed by the fountain where rainwater was collecting in the dirty basin, ignored the graffiti still visible through the plywood panels and eased to the back of the building, near what appeared to be the kitchen.
And footprints.
Small footprints.
His heart nosedived.
Abby!
Without a second’s hesitation, he levered himself over the sill and landed softly inside.
He prayed she was alone, but didn’t call out, didn’t let anyone know he was near.
Just in case.
Abby could barely breathe. Trapped in the closet, her mouth taped shut, her ankles bound and her wrists pulled roughly behind her, she was forced to stare through the crack in the closet door just as Pomeroy had all those years before.

Why?
And why hadn’t she remembered him?

*Bene* you blacked it all out . . . you didn’t remember Heller and you didn’t remember Christian Pomeroy . . . get over it and figure out how to save yourself!

Night had settled into the room and Pomeroy before leaving had rigged up black blankets that he’d drawn over the window so that no light could seep inside or out. A small lantern had been left in the fireplace, burning quietly, giving off little light, just enough luminescence to bathe the room in a eerie, flickering glow.

She wasn’t alone. Pomeroy had stretched Simon Heller upon the bed and chained him there, spread eagle upon his back.

Abby shifted. Pain exploded in her shoulders. She couldn’t move much. He’d tied her to a hook in the back of the closet and it was rigged in such a manner that the more she struggled, the tighter her arms were wrenched behind her.

She thought of her pepper spray, useless in her backpack, or the crowbar that now rested against the wall. Out of reach. Damn!

Don’t give up. Think, Abby. Find a way out of this. He’s not here. Now’s your chance!

The closet was small with only one hook that held her bound and little else as far as she could tell. She’d felt the interior as best she could with her bound hands. There had been no other hooks, no nails protruding, but there was a board that ran around the inside of the closet, as if it had once been the base for a shelf. And it had a sharp edge. If she stood on her tip toes and rubbed her wrists back and forth along the ridge, she might be able to cut through the tape. Maybe.

It was a longshot, but all she had.

Ignoring the burn of her shoulders and the fact that her calves quivered as she stood on her toes, she worked. Fast. Hard. Rubbing. Feeling the heat of friction.

*Keep at it, Abby.*

Rain pounded against the windows while the wind, picking up speed, screeched through the rafters. She rubbed harder. Faster. Her calves were on fire, her shoulders screaming in agony.

*Don’t stop!*

Sweating, breathing hard behind her hated mask, she worked. Slid the tape back and forth chafing her wrists.

Then over her own racing heart and the rush of the wind she heard the sound of heavy tread upon the stairs, footsteps climbing to the third floor.

*No!*

Her heart, already beating out of control, kicked into overdrive.

Rub, *rub, rub!*

Did she feel the tape giving, if only just a bit? Or was it her own anxious imagination, her own desperate hopes?

Rapidly she worked, her shoulders shrieking in pain, her toes feeling as if they would break, her wrists hot and rubbed free of the skin where they’d skimmed the sharp edge of the board.

The footsteps came closer, following the hallway, pausing on the other side of the door to the room.

*Oh, no! Not yet! Please God!*

Abby swallowed back her fear. Sweat ran down her nose. She kept shoving the tape back and forth against the board, burning her skin. Faster and faster, pulling at the tape, trying desperately to stretch it though she knew the chance of breaking free was nearly impossible.

*Keep a cool head.*

The lock on the door to the room rattled and the door swung open noiselessly.

Abby’s heart sank.

Through the crack in the closet door, a small sliver of visibility Abby watched as Pomeroy lumbered into the room. He was carrying something, no, someone . . . another woman . . .

Oh, dear God, no!
All her hopes died as she recognized her sister.

Zoe!

Bentz floored it. He drove like a maniac through the pelting rain. The Crown Victoria’s wipers fought hard against the deluge, slapping water away from the windshield as fast as it poured from the hideously dark sky. The tires of his cruiser hummed and cut through pools of standing water, hydroplaning a bit, yet he didn’t let up.

No word from Montoya.

Of course.

Bentz had already alerted the Sheriff’s Department. The bad news was that the parish’s manpower was stretched thin, the result of a double car accident, one of the vehicles pushed over the railing of a bridge, the car plunging into the river, the other overturned on the shoulder. One driver was dead, life flight called for the passenger, the other driver and two passengers rushed by ambulance to a local hospital.

State and local law enforcement had their hands full.

He tromped on the accelerator.

The wind was howling, Spanish moss dancing eerily in the trees as he reached the turn-off to Our Lady of Virtues.

He set his jaw, kept his speed up. His siren was silent, his lights turned off.

He had a bad feeling about what was going down at the old sanitarium and thought it better, if he arrived first, to have the element of surprise on his side.

Rounding a corner he spied a fork in the road, one lane leading to the convent, the other to the hospital. He veered toward the old asylum and drove as far as he could, then, weapon drawn, climbed out of his car.

Of course the gates were shut. Locked tight. But not insurmountable. He’d been a wrestler and football player in high school and college. His senior year of high school he’d been the fastest in his class at climbing a thick rope that had dangled from the gym’s ceiling. So what if he had twenty-five years and nearly twice as many pounds to deal with? So what if it was driving rain and the metal grating was slick? It was only a damned gate. Eight, maybe nine feet tall.
Abby nearly fainted as she spied Zoey.

Sloth and zeal? Abby thought. What was he talking about?

“Sloth and zeal? Abby thought. What was he talking about?”

Hang on, Abby. Keep trying to cut through the damned tape!

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Sloth and zeal? Abby thought. What was he talking about?
Horrified, she watched as Pomeroy found a knife in the night table. Her heart froze in fear as he lifted the weapon, the long blade catching the golden light of the lantern.

She was certain he was going to slice Heller’s throat, but instead he turned on Zoey, the dish rag lying at his feet.

No! Oh, no! Desperately she worked at the tape, praying she could break through in time. But Pomeroy was swift. He bent down to Zoey and with a quick motion, sliced through the tape binding Zoey’s wrists, then did the same with her ankles.

Why? Was he letting his sister go? Because he had Abby? A woman who more closely resembled their mother? Abby felt a second’s relief until she realized that Zoey wasn’t about to be freed. No, her sister, too, was a part of Pomeroy’s sick plan.

“It’s time to pay for your sins, Doctor,” Pomeroy said with ultimate, chilling calm.

On the bed, Heller went wild. Screaming behind his gag, he writhed on the bed, rumpling the comforter, rattling the bedframe so hard that it jumped. Metal against metal scraped and chattered through the room, rising over the rain pounding against the windows.

Pomeroy hauled Zoey to her rubbery legs. “You, Simon Heller,” Pomeroy said angrily, “are damned. You claimed to be a doctor, you swore by oath to help and heal. Instead you took the easy way out. You not only abused your patients but you suffered from one of the Seven Deadly Sins, the sin of sloth.”

Abby couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Seven Deadly Sins? Sloth? He was rationalizing his crimes? Playing God? How insane was he?

She watched in terror as Pomeroy wrapped one arm around Zoey’s waist. Roughly, he pulled Zoey’s buttocks close to his crotch and forced the long-muzzled gun into her hand. There was a smile on his lips, a satisfaction as he rubbed up against Zoey’s rump.

Bile rose up Abby’s throat. Pervert! Sick, vile, pervert!

Zoey rolled her eyes upward and caught Abby’s eye in a moment of clarity.

In the heartbeat that followed, Abby understood. Zoey wasn’t as far gone as she was pretending. But what could she do?

Nothing! You have to help her!

Abby worked furiously on the tape. Her arms were screeching in pain, but again she felt the thick tape loosening, the fibers within it fraying as her wrists chaffed.

Pomeroy said, “And you, Zoey Chastain, firstborn of Faith, have the virtue of zeal, so it’s your duty to rid the world of the slovenly.”

Heller stiffened.

Pomeroy focused his hot eyes on Abby.

She froze. Had he seen her trying to free herself? Her heart drummed a horrified tattoo.

“And you won’t be far behind, Hannah. You, who were humiliated by your lustful, adulterating husband. He cocked his head to one side and frowned, his eyes clouding. “Faith?” he whispered in confusion . . . “Faith?”

She nodded, hoping he would believe her, but the clouds disappeared and he shook his head as if to rid it of fog. “No . . . Not Faith. Hannah . . . for humility.” He smiled suddenly as if all his synapses were connecting again. “Pride is certainly on his way.”

Pride? Humility? Sloth? Zeal? Sins and virtues? What was this all about? And who represented pride? Someone whose name started with the letter P?

She remembered the sins and virtues from her youth in private Catholic schools. But what did they have to do with her mother?

Virtues! Our Lady of Virtues!

Is that what this was all about? Not that it mattered. Nothing did. Only escaping. Somehow turning the tables on this bastard. She had to do something! Anything! She couldn’t stand by and end up a witness to cold-blooded murder.

“You know who I’m talking about,” Pomeroy said, rubbing hard against Zoey’s backside as he stared into the dark closet, searching for Abby’s eyes.

How demented was he? How far gone? “Pride? Your lover? Pedro?”

Bells clanged through her head. Pedro! Hadn’t Montoya said that Sister Maria had called him Pedro?


Oh, dear God, this monster was going to kill Montoya, too!

“Now,” Pomeroy said, and aimed the gun directly at Simon Heller’s heart. “It’s time.”

Zoey was totally limp. Useless. Or was she? Through the tangle of her disheveled hair, she peered again at her sister.

Pomeroy aimed the gun.

Heller screamed behind his gag.

The killer pulled the trigger just as Zoey crammed her elbow into the big man’s chest.

Bang!

The gun went off.

Heller shrieked horribly and went limp, blood pooling in his chest. At that second, Zoey rammed her elbow into Pomeroy’s chest again and the big man sucked in his breath in a loud hiss. She kicked at his shins and he yowled in pain.

“Bitch. Zealous, over ambitious bitch!” He turned the gun in her hand, forcing the muzzle to Zoey’s temple. “Now it’s your turn!”

Bang!

A pistol cracked, echoing through the hallway.

Muted screams followed.

Jesus, no! Abby! No! Fear and anger rushed through Montoya.

He was too late!

Damn it, he was too late!

Weapon drawn, he flung himself at the door of 307.

The old lock gave way with a sickening crack and splinter of wood. Montoya shot through the door just as Pomeroy turned the gun toward Zoey’s temple.

“Police!” Montoya shouted. “Drop your weapon!”

A gun shot!

Hell!

Bentz didn’t waste any time.

Using the butt of his Glock, he broke a window on the first floor, cracking out the glass. He hoisted himself up, feeling razor sharp shards slice into his palms, then vaulted over the sill and landed on the parlor floor of the abandoned sanitarium.

As soon as he hit the floor, he grabbed his cell phone and speed dialed 911.

“Nine-one-one. What is the nature—.”

As soon as he hit the floor, he grabbed his cell phone and speed dialed 911.

“Nine-one-one. What is the nature—.”
“This is Rick Bentz, New Orleans Police Department.” He rattled off his badge number and requested assistance, giving the name and address of the old hospital. “Gun shots at Our Lady of Virtues Sanitarium.” He clicked off, jammed the cell phone into his pocket, then weapon drawn, started through a decrepit old building that was dark as night.

* * *

Abby threw her weight against her restraints as Montoya burst into the room. The tape gave a little.

“Stay back!” Pomeroy warned, trying to hold onto Zoey, the muzzle pressed to her sister’s temple as Montoya took aim.

Zoey’s eyes were round with fear.

“Drop the weapon!” Montoya ordered. “Now!”

Pomeroy snorted. “Prideful to the end.”

On the bed Heller wheezed and bled out, the light fading from his eyes.

Abby worked at her bonds. Unafraid. Determined.

“Christian Pomeroy,” Montoya said sliding a glance to the closet, inching backward, toward the window using Zoey, who was, with the gun pressed to her head, his shield.

“Stop!” Montoya ordered.

But Christian Pomeroy’s eyes were trained on Abby and his lips quivered. “So beautiful.”

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” Montoya’s face was set, his jaw hard, his eyes pinpointed on Pomeroy, his gun aimed at the tall man’s head. “It’s over.”

That’s when you’re wrong, Pedro,” Pomeroy said in a calm voice that turned the marrow of Abby’s bones to ice. “No matter what else happens, tonight is just the beginning.”

“You’re going down.”

“And so are you.”

Zoey flinched, throwing back her head and slamming her elbow into the killer’s chest again. Pomeroy yelped. The gun in his hand wobbled.

Montoya fired.

Bang!

The bullet from Montoya’s Glock ripped through the killer’s shoulder just as Pomeroy squeezed the trigger.

Bang!

Zoey, blood gushing from her head, dropped to the floor.

The tape gave way, and Abby flung herself from the closet to the floor beside her sister.

Montoya fired again. Bang! And again. Bang!

Bullets ripped through the killer’s torso. Blood spurted.

Pomeroy threw himself through the blanket covering the window. Glass shattered and cracked, bloody shards flying outward.

The blanket and Pomeroy hurled into the wet, dark night.

Behind her gag, Abby screamed.

Thud!

She heard the crunch of bones as he landed on the wet concrete far below.

Abby scouted next to her sister, lying on the floor, blood streaming from a wound beneath her eye. “You’re going to be all right,” she said as Montoya dropped down beside her and felt for a pulse at Zoey’s neck. “You’re going to be all right, Zoey . . . You have to be. Hang on . . . please, please, hang on.”

Using Pomeroy’s knife Montoya cut Abby free. Then he was on his cell phone, barking orders.

Everything was a blur in Abby’s mind. Every muscle in her body ached and her mind spun as she had to fight to keep from blacking out. Through the open, broken window, wind and rain lashed into the room, the dark night warm with the scent of the bayou.

Sirens wailed, closer now and she thought she saw the strobe of colored lights on the walls of her mother’s room. People were shouting, footsteps thundering, and another man ran inside the room. She recognized him, she thought, maybe another detective? Bentz? But everything was surreal . . . trying to fade to black and Zoey . . . Zoey was lying unmoving, blood flowing down her face.

“Abby? Abby?” She heard his voice, looked into eyes as dark as obsidian . . . Montoya! Her heart swelled. He’d come for her. She forced a tremulous smile that fell away instantly. “She’s in shock.”

He held her close and said, “This is gonna hurt.” Deftly he pulled at the tape over her mouth. It ripped and tore at her skin, burning, but she didn’t care as she huddled over the still body of her sister.

“Zoey . . .”

“The ambulance is on its way,” he said holding her even more tightly. She drank in the scent of him, felt the power of his body.

“Zoey . . .not Zoey.”

“It’ll be okay,” he said into her ear and she wished she could believe him, but here in this room, nothing was ever okay, nothing ever would be.

“Do you know who the killer was?”

She blinked and when she spoke it was a whisper, her voice raw. “Christian Pomeroy.”

“Asa’s son?” Bentz asked.

“He was a patient here once,” Montoya said, as she heard a lock being shattered somewhere on the floors below. Men filled orders, footsteps pounded and through the yawning hole of the window the whirl of helicopter blades could be heard.

“I’m fine,” Abby insisted, clinging tightly to Montoya and silently praying for her sister’s life. She watched as Zoey was hoisted onto a stretcher and Heller’s body was zipped into a bag.

“What about her?” Abby asked motioning to Zoey. “My sister? Will she be okay?”

“Too early to tell,” the EMT said, “but she’s stable.” He took a second to stare at Abby. “We’ll do our best.”


“Sir?” an EMT said to Montoya. The emergency worker was hovering over Zoey, pushing past them to take vital signs, hook up an IV, and try to staunch the flow of blood. “Move back. Please.”

Another EMT, a tiny woman looked at Abby. “Is she all right?”

“I’m fine,” Abby said and suddenly the room was filled with people. Police officers. EMTs.

“Sir?” an EMT said to Montoya. The emergency worker was hovering over Zoey, pushing past them to take vital signs, hook up an IV, and try to staunch the flow of blood. “Move back. Please.”

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“Dead,” an officer replied, then hooked his chin toward the body bag that held Heller’s body. “Like that one.”

Abby shivered in Montoya’s arms. Finally, the past could be buried. The future was no longer clouded by the unknown . . . or was it? What was it that Christian Pomeroy had said so cryptically, as if he had another secret, one that he hadn’t shared?

She frowned. Surely he’d been lying. This had to be the end and yet the killer’s words, said with such conviction echoed through her mind.

Tonight is just the beginning . . .

“It’s gonna be all right,” Montoya said, helping her out of the room where so much tragedy had occurred.

“You’re sure?”
“Yep.” He kissed her crown. “Trust me.”
“I don’t think you need this anymore.” Montoya plucked the For Sale sign off the post, then tossed it into a pile of leaves near the trash basket.

“You don’t expect me to move?” Abby asked, teasing.

“Nah.” He wrapped strong arms around her. “Well, at least not far.”

He was right of course. In the past two weeks since the night that Christian Pomeroy had been killed, Abby had lost all incentive to move.

Her sister, Zoey, had spent a week in the hospital, then three days at Abby’s house before declaring that she had to return to Seattle. Zoey’s face still looked like she’d been beaten black and blue but the plastic surgeons had reconstructed the part of her cheek bone that had been shattered by Pomeroy’s bullet and passed through the soft tissue on the other side of her face. She was looking at several more surgeries and extensive dental work in the future, but she was alive and wanted to be home in the Pacific Northwest.

Abby hadn’t blamed her. She’d promised to visit and stay with Zoey during the next round of surgeries.

“Great. When this is all over, I’ll be so damned beautiful, Zoey had insisted, refusing to let the thought of more reconstruction and recovery get her down, “Hollywood will be knocking down my door. I could even get a job with one of those entertainment programs, I’ll bet. Mary Hart, move over!”

She’d laughed, then groaned with pain. “Well, eventually.”

As for Abby, she had no intention of moving away from Montoya who had been with her day and night. Hershey, of course, was thrilled that Montoya nearly looked up at Montoya now, with the sunlight piercing through the canopy of branches overhead. Bright rays caught in his black hair and glinted in his eyes. Staring at him Abby felt her heart swell. And she no longer fought the attraction.

After Luke’s betrayal and her divorce, Abby had vowed she’d never fall in love again. But she’d been wrong. Dead wrong. What she felt whenever she was around was five steps beyond exhilaration. As often as she’d tried to talk herself out of this ridiculous feeling of euphoria, she’d also decided it was time to trust again, to love again, to let the chips fall where they may. He’d asked her to trust him the night of Pomeroy’s death and she had.

He was definitely worth the gamble.

“You know, maybe I made a mistake,” Montoya said, slinging his arm over her shoulder as they walked toward the cottage, Hershey bounding at their heels. As they passed the For Sale sign lying on the ground, he gave it a kick. “Maybe you do want to move.”

“Not necessarily.” She winked at him. “Why don’t you move out here?”

“Alone?”

“Not necessarily. She winked at him. “Why don’t you move out here?”

“Oh, whoa. Plenty of reasons. Let’s start with we both have work in town, so I thought we could live there, close to work and nightlife and friends, but also keep this place. You know, stay here when we wanted to get away from the city.”

“Not too far of a get-away.”

He drew her into his arms and rested his forehead on hers. The gold ring in his earlobe winked in the afternoon light. “It would be perfect,” he said, his breath fanning her face, her heart suddenly trip-hammering.

“And that way, if things didn’t work out, I could come back here.”

“They’ll work out.” He seemed so positive. Yeah, maybe there was more than a little pride in Reuben Diego Pedro Montoya. “You know, they even have this pool down at the station. Bets are being taken. Bentz told me it’s two to one that you and I’ll be married by the end of the year.”

“Is that so? Then you’ll have to work fast, won’t you, Detective.”

“I’ve been told,” he said and she felt that little jolt of lust seep into her blood again reflected by the hint of desire in his coffee-dark eyes.

“I come with baggage,” she warned, “and I’m not talking about what happened at the old hospital and all those old ghosts of the past.”

“Not enough?”

“Maybe,” she said glancing around the grounds of her small cottage. “But I kind of like it here.”

“Yeah.”

His grin stretched wide, showing off white teeth in his black goatee. “The man was forever surprising her. “So now, five minutes after taking down the sign, you’re ready to put it up again and get rid of me?”

She cocked her head. “So what is this, some kind of back handed proposal?”

“I didn’t say that, either!” He laughed and gave her shoulders a squeeze. “You certainly know how to take the wind out of a guy’s sails.”

She waited. Where was this going?

“So, okay, here’s the deal: I have the opportunity to buy the shotgun house that’s attached to mine. Mrs. Alexander is moving up north to be with her kids. She offered her house to me on a contract. It’s a damned good deal and I was thinking about remodeling, the space, creating one bigger house out of the two narrow ones. So, I thought maybe you’d like to move in.”

“Maybe,” she said glancing around the grounds of her small cottage. “But I kind of like it here.”

“A lone?”

“Not necessarily.”

She winked at him. “Why don’t you move out here?”

“Okay. Plenty of reasons. Let’s start with we both have work in town, so I thought we could live there, close to work and nightlife and friends, but also keep this place. You know, stay here when we wanted to get away from the city.”

“Not too far of a get-away.”

He laughed. “I don’t know. A dog and a suspicious feline?”

“Ansel and Hershey.”

“Ansel and Hershey.”

She punched him in the arm. “Noooo. I was talking about Ansel and Hershey.”

“Hershey.”

He groaned. “I don’t know. A dog and a suspicious feline?”

“And a zealous sister.”

He laughed. “Is that all? No big deal. Come on, Chastain. Bring it on. What else do you have?”

“You’re impossible,” she said, giggling, and felt more light-hearted than she had in years.

“I’d been told.”

“I’ll consider the move,” she said as they climbed the two steps of the porch and she heard a squirrel running across the roof. “But I can’t promise anything.”

As much as she’d loved being with Montoya these past two weeks, they’d been difficult as well. News reporters had called repeatedly as her name had been linked to Faith Chastain and Christian Pomeroy. Sean Erwin had been pissed as hell when he’d tried to buy the house for thousands less than it was worth and she’d turned him down. Maury Taylor was still milking Luke’s death and the whole serial killer thing at WSLJ, and her clientele had grown exponentially with her new-found infamy.

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In-depth stories about Christian Pomeroy, the rich, mentally ill son of a local millionaire who had “slipped through the cracks” in the mental health system had come to light in chilling detail.

At odds with a father who had abandoned him, Christian had used the very weapons Asa Pomeroy had manufactured to subdue and kill him. Grappling with neurosis caused by mental disorder and exacerbated by a religious fanatic of a mother who, it seemed from old records, had abused her son, Christian had probably killed the second Mrs. Asa Pomeroy.

Rather than face prison, Christian had ended up in Our Lady of Virtues Hospital where he’d hung out with a group of angry, socio-pathic youths his own age, all with their own peculiar kinds of violent obsessions. While at the hospital, Christian had met and fallen in love with Faith Chastain, with whom, it was speculated, he had an affair.

Twenty years later he’d started his macabre killing spree.

Christian had died that night at the hospital, tumbling to his death just as his lover had twenty years earlier. Deep in the bowels of the old hospital, the...
politely on her lips. "You know, Darlin', I have a feeling that Bentz just might win his bet after all."

"With that kind of logic it seems that Christian Pomeroy had been plotting his revenge for years and that retaliation had been tweaked and molded by his mother's antiquated views of sin and redemption, creating a unique and deadly psychosis. He'd even dressed Courtney LaBelle in his mother's wedding dress, one she'd kept for years, and a designer had identified."

"He studied her with those dark, warm eyes and she realized she knew very little about the woman who had borne her, the woman whose birthday she never celebrated. "But that can't be. . . Mom and Dad weren't even together . . ." Abby said, hearing her own damning words as her insides turned to ice. Hadn't Faith had affairs with both Simon Heller and Christian Pomeroy? Wasn't it possible that she'd given birth to one of their offspring. . . that Abby had a half brother or sister somewhere? A child sired by a killer? Her heart turned to stone. "I—oh God—I guess we'd better find out." She detested the thought of it, just wanted to bury the past once and for all. Apparently, it wasn't to be. She took in a deep breath and met Montoya's concerned gaze. "So, Detective, where do we begin?"

"Duty calls. It's Bentz," he said with a smile, then clicked it on. "Montoya."

"But that can't be. . . Mom and Dad weren't even together . . ." Abby said, hearing her own damning words as her insides turned to ice. Hadn't Faith had affairs with both Simon Heller and Christian Pomeroy? Wasn't it possible that she'd given birth to one of their offspring. . . that Abby had a half brother or sister somewhere? A child sired by a killer? Her heart turned to stone. "I—oh God—I guess we'd better find out." She detested the thought of it, just wanted to bury the past once and for all. Apparently, it wasn't to be. She took in a deep breath and met Montoya's concerned gaze. "So, Detective, where do we begin?"

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"Montoya thought hard. Took a long pull from his bottle before setting it on the counter. "At the beginning," he said, managing a smile as he drew her into the strength of his arms. "We'll get through this together, you and me."

"Dear God, will this never end?"

"Of course it will," he said, managing a smile as he drew her into the strength of his arms. "We'll get through this together, you and me." He kissed her lightly on her lips. "You know, Darlin', I have a feeling that Bentz just might win his bet after all."

"Really?" she asked, and despite everything she couldn't help but smile. She was with Montoya, the man she loved. "Ah-so-friggin-lutely. Chances are by the end of the year, I'll be a married man."

"So who's the lucky lady?" she teased, her mood bright.

"Montoya winked at her. "Why don't you take a wild guess?"

"Uh-uh, Detective. No guesses. I'm only interested in a sure thing."

"Well then, Abby, I don't think you'll ever be disappointed."

"No!" Abby shook her head. "What about Zoey?"

Abby's gaze returned to Abby. "Abby's guts twirled. Something was wrong.

"She's right here . . . Yeah, I'll ask and get back to you."

"Ask me what?" she said as he clicked off. Her fingers tightened over the chilled bottle of Coors.

"It's about your mother." Abby felt a cold breath of dread against the back of her neck. "What about her?" she asked.

"She didn't have any children other than you and your sister, right?"

"Right. Just Zoey and me." What kind of question was that? Her stomach knotted. She set her beer on the counter.

"And you were born by Cesarean birth?"

"No!" Abby shook her head.

"What about Zoey?"

"No, I'm sure not. I heard the stories of our births from Mom and Dad. And once I walked into the bathroom and saw Mom naked. No scar. Why?"

"Bentz was just going over the medical records for your mother, including the coroner's report," Montoya said, scratching at his goatee. "It seems she did have a scar that indicated she'd had a C-section. Bentz checked her other, previous medical records, none of which mentioned a pregnancy or birth."

"No way."

They walked into the kitchen and she opened the refrigerator door as Montoya's cell rang. He pulled the phone from his pocket and checked caller ID.

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"Well then, Abby, I don't think you'll ever be disappointed."

"Nor will you, Detective," she vowed. "Nor will you."
Dear Reader,

Thanks for picking up a copy of SHIVER. I hope you enjoyed Montoya’s story. I loved writing the book, especially the passages involving Abby’s mother, Faith.

As you probably noticed while reading SHIVER, there are a couple of story threads that haven’t quite been sewn up, especially involving the character of Faith. The questions you might have will be answered in ABSOLUTE FEAR, the sequel to SHIVER. ABSOLUTE FEAR will be published in hardcover in April 2007 and it’s the story of Eve Renner, a woman who was lured to a remote Louisiana cabin and nearly killed. Months later, she remembers little of the tragic night where one man was left dead, but she has the disturbing feeling that her lover, Cole Dennis, was somehow involved. Did she see him at the scene of the grizzly murder, or is that all part of her fragmented amnesia? What she doesn’t understand is that she is trapped in a world of questions and deceit and that she is the ultimate target of a demented killer who has ties to Our Lady of Virtues Hospital, the same abandoned asylum in New Orleans that you first read about in SHIVER.

Once again Detectives Montoya and Bentz are investigating a string of horrifying homicides. This time nothing is as it seems, reality clashes with nightmares, and both Bentz and Montoya sense that those they hold dear are in jeopardy.

If you liked SHIVER, I’m sure you’ll really enjoy ABSOLUTE FEAR as well. It’s a haunting, twisted, psychological tale of love, retribution, lies and terror. You can find out more about the book at www.lisajackson.com. Log on and take a virtual tour of Our Lady of Virtues while you find out more about ABSOLUTE FEAR. If you’ve enjoyed reading about Montoya and Bentz, and this was your first time meeting them, look for HOT BLOODED and COLD BLOODED, the novels where I first introduced them!

Also, I’ve got a special surprise to all of you who loved my novel IF SHE ONLY KNEW. I have a new novel, ALMOST DEAD, that brings back some familiar faces from San Francisco. Remember Cissy Cahill, Marla’s daughter in IF SHE ONLY KNEW? Well, it’s ten years later and Cissy’s back with a sexy new husband and an innocent baby. Once again Cissy’s life is turned upside down. Everything she holds true turns out to be false. Her marriage is a sham. Both she and her child are in life-threatening danger and people around her start dying. Fortunately, Anthony Paterno of the San Francisco Police Department is on the case, but he just might be too late. ALMOST DEAD is a bizarre, twisted tale that’s guaranteed to keep you up late. Look for this original paperback in August 2007!

As always, keep reading!
Lisa
PROLOGUE

Near New Orleans
Three months earlier

The voice of God pounded through his brain:

Kill.
Kill them both.
The man and the woman.
Sacrifice them.
Tonight.
This is your penance.

He lay on the sweat-stained sheets of his bed while a neon light pulsed blood-red through the slats of blinds that didn’t quite close over the windows. The Voice thundered in his ears. Reverberated through his head. Echoed so loudly it drowned out the others, the little screechy, irritating, fingernails-on-chalkboard voices that he thought of as belonging to bothersome insects. They, too, issued orders. They, too, disturbed his sleep. but they were small, annoying and not as powerful as The Voice, the one he was certain was from God Himself.

A niggling doubt wormed through his mind, suggesting that the Voice was evil, that It might be speaking the words of Lucifer, the Lord of Darkness.

His jaw tightened. He couldn’t think this way. He had to have faith. Faith in the Voice, in what It told him, in Its ultimate wisdom.

Quickly, he rolled off the cot and onto his knees. Deftly, from years of practice and sacrifice, he made the sign of the cross over his naked chest. Beads of perspiration collected on his scalp as he prayed for guidance, begged to be His messenger, felt a thrum of anticipation that it was he who had been sought out. He was God’s disciple. “Show me the way,” he prayed, licking his lips. “Tell me what I must do.”

Kill.
The Voice was clear.
Slay them both.
Sacrifice the man and the woman.

He frowned as he prayed, not completely understanding. The woman, Eve, he understood. Oh, how long he’d waited to do just what the Voice commanded. He envisioned her. Heart-shaped face with a strong, impertinent chin. The faintest hint of freckles bridging her short, straight nose. Intense eyes as clear as and blue as a tropical lagoon and fiery, storm-tossed hair.

So beautiful.
So headstrong.
And such a whore.

He imagined what she let men do to that athletic body . . . oh, he’d seen her before, peeked through the slit between her curtains and seen taut skin stretched over feminine muscles that moved so fluidly as she bathed. Her breasts were small, firm, and tipped with rosy-hued nipples that tightened as she stepped into the bath water.

Oh, he’d watched her, spying on her as those long legs stepped over the edge of the tub, unknowingly flashing him just a glimpse of the pink folds and red curls at the juncture of her thighs.

Thinking of her, he licked his lips and felt that special tingle that only she could entice from him, the hot run of blood that flushed his skin and caused his cock to thicken in anticipation.

If only he could run his fingers inside her legs, lick those tight little breasts, fuck the hell out of her. She was a whore anyway. In his mind’s eye he saw himself mounting her, his toned body over hers, his cock driving deep into that hot, wanton wasteland where others had spilled their seed.

He was breathing hard.

Knew what he was thinking was a sin.
But just once he wanted to fuck her.
Before the killing.
But what of the man?

Realizing he was still on his knees, he made another swift sign of the cross and felt a jab of shame that God might read his thoughts and know his weakness. He had to fight the lust. Had to.

And yet, as he stood, stretching his honed muscles, he felt needles of anticipation piercing his skin, desire causing his groin to tighten almost painfully.

He dressed in the dark, pulling on his camouflage pants and jacket, ski mask and boots, the uniform he’d hang from a peg near the door. His weapons were already stowed in his truck, hidden in a special locked drawer in the false bottom of his tool box. Knives, pistols, silencers, plastic explosives, even a pea-shooter and darts with poisoned tips, along with the plastic explosives. He slid out of his dark room and stepped into the dark, mist-laden night.

Eve checked her watch.
Ten forty-five.

“Great,” she muttered between clenched teeth.

She was running late.

Despite the fact that the night outside the windshield of her Camry was thick with fog, she stepped on the gas. Her dented Toyota had nearly a hundred and twenty thousand miles on the engine, but still leapt forward, ever reliable. So she wouldn’t be on time. So what? A few minutes one way or the other wouldn’t hurt.

She took a corner a little too fast, cut into the inside lane and nearly hit an oncoming pickup. The driver blasted his horn and she jerked on the wheel, slowing a little, her heart jack-hammering.

Roy could wait, she thought, thinking of the frantic phone call she’d received less than half an hour earlier. “Eve, you’ve got to come,” he’d said in a rush, his voice tense. “To the cabin, you know the one, where we used to go in the summer as kids. My uncle’s place. But hurry. I’ll . . . I’ll uh, meet you at eleven.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” she’d protested. “I’m not going to—”
He tried to concentrate. Had he been mistaken. Hadn’t the Voice told him there would be two inside? Two to sacrifice? Yes, he was certain that was it.

And now he was being punished.

Because he’d erred.

The Voice of God, it seemed, had become mute.

There was nothing but silence and the sound of his short, rapid breaths that mingled with the fog in the still air.

No crickets chirped.

No cicadas hummed.

No frogs croaked.

But the night was deathly quiet.

His breath became faster at the thought of stalking her, cornering her, witnessing his fear, then taking her.

Talk to me, he silently begged the Voice. I have done your bidding as best I could. She wasn’t there, not where you said she’d be. I couldn’t kill her.

Should I track her down? Hunt her?

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Horridly.

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He tried to concentrate. Had he been mistaken. Hadn’t the Voice told him there would be two inside? Two to sacrifice? Yes, he was certain that was it.

A man and a woman, Eve, were supposed to be inside and yet he’d only found the man.

“Forgive me,” he whispered in agony. What would his penance be this time? He thought of the scars upon his back from flagellation, the burns on his palms from hot coals. He shuddered to think what was to come.

And yet . . .
His heart was still beating erratically, his blood still singing in his veins from the kill. Oh, how exquisite had been that first slice of his blade to the soft tissue of the throat. And the thin, pulsing seam of red as the blood began to flow... He closed his eyes and felt the rush all over again.

Nervously, he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

Disappointment gnawed at his guts.

Still he waited.

The Voice had never been wrong before.

And who was he to doubt God’s instructions?

Sometimes he became confused. Often, the other voices screamed at him... screechy, irritating little things that would hiss, whine and yell at him, clouding his judgement, causing his head to pound making him wonder about his own sanity. But tonight, they, too, were silent.

“Help me,” he mouthed. “Talk to me. Please assure me that I am doing your bidding.”

There was no response, only the sound of a short gust of wind rattling leaves as it whipped through the cypress and live oaks in this part of the swamp.

He would wait.

Quickly, pleadingly, he made a desperate, deft sign of a cross over his chest and as he did, he heard the soft rumble of a car’s engine approaching.

YES!!

His eyes flew open.

Tires crunched on the sparse gravel.

He didn’t have to see the car to know it was a Toyota. Eve’s vehicle. Anticipation zinged through his blood as he spied the headlights, mist swirling in their weak golden beams. His gloved hand tightened over the handle of the knife, with its razor thin blade, sharp enough to slice flesh quickly to the bone.

Crouching, he began to steal silently through the undergrowth and stopped near the garage, behind a rotting tree stump, close enough that he could reach her in three steps when she walked to the door.

Her headlights washed over the grayed walls of the tiny cabin and the engine died. In a split second the door opened and he caught a glimpse of her, red curls scraped away from her face, jaw set, eyes darting quickly. She cast a glance at Roy’s truck, parked beneath the overhang of a carport, then using a small flashlight, she walked swiftly toward the cabin’s door, tested it and found it locked.

“Roy?” she called, knocking loudly, a hint of her perfume wafting his way. “Hey... what’s going on?” Then adding more softly, “If this is some kind of sick joke, I swear, you’ll pay...”

Oh, it’s no joke, he thought, every nerve stretched to the breaking point. She was so close. If he leaped out, he could tackle her.

She flashed the flashlight’s beam over the dilapidated siding and onto a sagging, battered shutter. What’re the chances? She reached behind the broken slats and extracted a key. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she muttered, inserting a key into the deadbolt.

With a click, the old lock gave way.

As she stepped into the house, he started to move. He had his knife gripped tightly in his hand and he desperately wanted to use it, to watch as it slit her soft white flesh. But, just in case, there was always the pistol, a small caliber, but deadly enough.

A light snapped on inside the cabin.

Through the dusty glass of the kitchen window, he saw her, her hair pulled away from the long column of her throat. His heart kicked into overdrive and he licked his lips, envisioning the act.

She’d hear his footsteps, turn, gasp when their eyes met, then he’d move quickly, slashing that perfect long throat, slicing her jugular, crimson blood spraying.

He drew in a swift breath.

His cock got hard.

He could almost taste her.

Eve.

The original sinner.

Time to pay.

“Roy, are you here?” Eve called. She didn’t know whether to be scared or pissed as hell as she stepped through the kitchen where a thin layer of dust covered everything. “You know,” she said, feeling sweat bead in her hair as she spied a half drunk bottle of beer left on the scarred drop-leafed table, “this is creeping me out. I mean, if this is one of your games, I think I’ll just have to kill you.”

She heard a scrape, turned, her heart in her throat as a small black body scrambled across the yellowed linoleum to hide beneath an ancient refrigerator.

“Crapt!” The mouse’s tail slid out of sight. “Oh, Jesus.” Her heart pounded crazily. She shouldn’t have come here and she’d known it from the get-go.

When Roy had called, she should have insisted he come to her or they meet somewhere public. Being out here was creeping her out.

“Irritated, she took one last look around. Just past the open stairway was a short hall leading to the one bedroom on the main floor. The door gaped open.

She walked three steps to the living room where a lamp on an old end table was burning bright. Obviously Roy had been here... no, not really, obviously someone had been here though the room itself looked as if no one had been inside for a decade. Dust and cobwebs covered the floor, pinewood walls and ceiling. Even the ashes and pieces of burnt wood in the grate seemed ancient. A yellowed fishing magazine, its pages curled, had been published nearly eleven years earlier. It was as if time had stopped, here in this dilapidated cabin on the bayou.

So what the hell was she doing here?

To see Roy? To find out what he meant by evidence?

What the hell kind of evidence was Roy talking about?

Sometimes to do with Dad, she thought again. That’s what Roy meant. You know it. You can feel it in your bones. Roy knows whether Dear Old Dad is innocent, or guilty as sin.

She swallowed hard and pulled her cell phone from her purse. Still no service.

“Roy? Look, you’ve got about two minutes and then I’m outta here and I don’t give a damn about whatever evidence you think you’ve got. E-mail me, okay?”

Irritated, she took one last look around. Just past the open stairway was a short hall leading to the one bedroom on the main floor. She took the stairs up. Steeling herself, she walked toward it.

Shit! She had a cell phone! He hadn’t thought of that. The Voice hadn’t warned him about the phone. But as he stared through the window, watching her walking carefully through the house, he saw the damned phone and knew she’d call 911. The number was probably on speed dial.

He had to stop her. Fast!

Without a sound, he sheathed his knife, flicked open his ankle holster and pulled out his pistol.
Time to finish this.

* * *

Nerves on edge, she pushed open the bedroom door. It creaked on old hinges. “Roy?”
She heard the faintest of moans. “Roy?” The hairs on the back of her neck raised as she fumbled for the light switch. With a click, the room was instantly awash with light from an ancient ceiling fixture.

She screamed.
Roy lay on the floor by the old metal bedframe. Blood slowly oozed from a huge gash on his neck and spread over the floor.

“Oh, God.” She stumbled forward. The blood was flowing. His chest moving ever so slightly as he struggled to breathe. He was still alive!
“I’m here, Roy, hang on!” she cried, terror clawing through her, bile rising in her throat. “Who did this . . . oh, sweet Jesus . . .” She tried to staunch the flow of blood with one hand while dialing with the trembling fingers of the other. The phone slid from her hand, sliding through a thick smear of blood. In an instant, still holding her fingers to Roy’s throat, she retrieved the bloody cell with her free hand and punched out 911 with sticky, shaking fingers.

“Help,” she pleaded, but the screen told her there was no service. No calls were going through.

“Damn!” Panic welled up inside her. She was frantic.

Calm down, Eve. You can’t help Roy without a clear head. Don’t lose it. Think! Does the cabin have a phone? A land line? The electricity’s working. Maybe Vernon keeps phone service for emergencies . . . Her gaze swept the room and skated over the pinewood walls. No phone outlet, but near Roy’s head, upon the yellowed pinewood walls was a message, written in blood: 212.

She recoiled and gasped.

What the hell did that mean?
Was it Roy or someone else . . . Oh, God was Roy’s assailant still here? Maybe in the house? She thought of the can of pepper spray in her purse . . . a useless weapon.
She didn’t have time to waste, she had to get help . . . the blood flowing through her fingers at Roy’s neck had eased to nothing. Oh, God . . .

Another low moan and it was over. Roy took one last shallow, wet breath.

“No! Oh, God, no . . . Roy! Roy!” But the hand on his neck found no pulse. “You can’t die, oh, please.”

A floorboard creaked.

She froze.
The killer was still here!

Either inside the house or on the porch.

Oh, God.

Her heart thudding in her ears, she tried her damned phone again. Come on, come on, she thought, listening for any sound, her gage moving quickly around the room and to the doorway. If she could only snap out the light, or crawl out the window.

Another soft footsteps. Leather sliding over wood.

Her insides turned to water.

She reached into her purse, bloody fingers scrambling for the pepper spray as she kept her gaze moving from the doorway to the two windows to the mirror and her own panicked face. She risked glancing down, found the spray and had the canister out of her purse when she heard the footsteps again.

More loudly. Coming at her.

He knew where she was.

Get out, Eve, get out now!

She shot to her feet, adrenaline fueled by horror, pushing her. She reached for the light switch, slapped it off. Darkness rained.

She turned quickly, her shoes sliding in Roy’s blood. She fell noisily, biting back a scream, holding fast to the canister. Her leg scraped down the iron bedframe. Her head thudded against the wall. Pain exploded behind her eyes.

More footsteps!
Don’t pass out. For God’s sake, don’t lose consciousness!

She flung herself toward a window. Pitched forward. She saw him.

In the glass.

He was holding something in his hand. Pointing it at her.

She recognized him in a heartbeat.

Cole?
The man she loved?

Cole Dennis was going to shoot her?

NO!

Bam!
A gun went off.

The muzzle blazed fire!

Glass shattered.

White hot pain exploded in her head.

Her knees buckled. She crumpled onto the floor. The dark room swirled around her and Cole Dennis’s angry face was the last image burned into her brain.
LISA JACKSON

ABSOLUTE FEAR
Books by Lisa Jackson

See How She Dies
Final Scream
Wishes
Whispers
Twice Kissed
Unspoken
If She Only Knew
Hot Blooded
Cold Blooded
The Night Before
The Morning After
Deep Freeze
Fatal Burn
Shiver
Most Likely to Die
Absolute Fear

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation
To Dad.

You were, are, and always

will be the best.
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Also, I have to thank my incredible agent, Robin Rue, and everyone at Kensington Books, especially Laurie Parkin, who also worked very hard on this one.

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If I’ve forgotten anyone, my apologies. You’ve all been wonderful.
Author’s Note

For the purposes of the story, I’ve bent some of the rules of police procedure and have also created my own fictitious police department.

This book was written pre–Hurricane Katrina, before the incredible city of New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf Coast were decimated by the storm. I hope I’ve captured the unique essence of New Orleans, what it once was and what it will be again.
Near New Orleans, Louisiana  
Three months earlier

The Voice of God pounded through his brain.

Kill.

Kill them both.

The man and the woman.

Sacrifice them.

Tonight.

This is your penance.

He lay on the sweat-stained sheets of his bed while neon light pulsed blood red through the slats of blinds that didn’t quite close over the windows. The Voice thundered in his ears. Reverberated through his head. Echoed so loudly, it drowned out the others—the little, screechy, irritating, fingernails-on-chalkboard voices that he thought of as belonging to bothersome insects. They too issued orders. They too disturbed his sleep, but they were small, annoying, and not as powerful as the Voice, the one he was certain was from God Himself.

A niggling doubt wormed through his mind, suggesting that the Voice was evil, that It might be speaking the words of Lucifer, the Lord of Darkness.

But no…. He couldn’t think this way. He had to have faith. Faith in the Voice, in what It told him, in Its ultimate wisdom.

Quickly he rolled off the cot and onto his knees. Deftly, from years of practice and sacrifice, he sketched the sign of the cross over his naked chest. Beads of perspiration collected on his scalp as he prayed for guidance, begged to be His messenger, felt a thrum from anticipating that it was he who had been sought out. He was God’s disciple. “Show me the way,” he whispered urgently, licking his lips. “Tell me what I must do.”

Kill.

The Voice was clear.

Slay them both.

Sacrifice the man and woman.

He frowned as he prayed, not completely understanding. The woman, Eve, he understood. Oh, how long he’d waited to do just what the Voice commanded. He envisioned her. Heart-shaped face with a strong, impertinent chin. The faintest hint of freckles bridging a short, straight nose. Intense eyes as clear and blue as a tropical lagoon. Fiery, storm-tossed hair.
So beautiful.

So headstrong.

And such a whore.

He imagined what she let men do to that athletic body.... Oh, he'd seen her before, peeked through the slit between her curtains and seen taut skin stretched over feminine muscles, skin that moved fluidly as she bathed. Her breasts were small, firm, and tipped with rosy-hued nipples that tightened as she stepped into the bathwater.

Yes, he'd watched her, spying upon her as those long legs slipped over the edge of the tub, unknowingly flashing him just a glimpse of the pink folds and red curls at the juncture of her thighs.

Thinking of her, he felt that special tingle that only she could entice from him, the hot run of blood that flushed his skin and caused his cock to thicken in anticipation.

If only he could run his fingers inside her legs, lick those tight little breasts, fuck the hell out of her. She was a whore anyway. In his mind's eye he saw himself mounting her, his toned body taut over hers, his cock driving deep into that hot, wanton wasteland where others had spilled their seed.

He was breathing hard.

Knew what he was thinking was a sin.

But he wanted to ram deep into her just once.

Before the killing.

And he had the opportunity. Hadn't the Voice instructed him to prove what a whore she was?

*But what of the man?*

As if the Voice had heard his thoughts, It whispered, *You are the Reviver. The One I have chosen for this task to revive the souls of the weak. Do not fail me. It's up to you who will live and who will die. Now, go!*

Realizing he was still on his knees, he made another swift sign of the cross and felt a jab of shame that God might have read his thoughts and learned of his weakness where *she* was concerned. He had to fight the lust. Had to.

And yet, as he stood, stretching his honed muscles, he felt needles of anticipation piercing his skin, desire causing his groin to tighten almost painfully.

*The Reviver.* The Voice had given him a name. He rolled it around in his head and decided he liked it, enjoyed the thought that he was the decider, the one who ultimately chose who lived and who died. It was a good sign, wasn't it, that the Voice had decided to name him? Kind of like being anointed, or knighted. *The Reviver.* Yes!

He dressed in the dark, pulling on his camouflage pants and jacket, ski mask and boots, the uniform he hung from a peg near the door. His weapons were already stowed in his truck, hidden in a locked drawer in the false bottom of his toolbox. Knives, pistols, silencers, plastic explosives, even a peashooter and darts with poisoned tips....

And something special, just for her.

He slid out of his dark room and stepped into the deep, mist-laden night.

He was ready.

Eve checked her watch.

Ten forty-five.
“Great,” she muttered between clenched teeth.

She was running late.

Despite the fact that the night outside the windshield of her Camry was thick with fog, she stepped on the gas. Her dented Toyota had nearly a hundred and twenty thousand miles on the engine but still leapt forward, ever reliable.

So she wouldn’t be on time. So what? A few minutes one way or the other wouldn’t hurt.

She took a corner a little too fast, cut into the inside lane, and nearly hit an oncoming pickup. The driver blasted his horn and she jerked on the wheel, slowing a little, her heart jack-hammering.

She forced herself to relax her grip on the wheel and take a deep breath. Roy could wait, she decided, thinking of the frantic phone call she’d received less than half an hour earlier.

“Eve, you’ve got to come,” he’d said in a rush, his voice tense. “To the cabin—you know the one. Where we used to go in the summer as kids. My uncle’s place. But hurry. I’ll…I’ll uh, meet you at eleven.”

“It’s late,” she protested. “I’m not going to—”

“I’ve got evidence.”

“Evidence of what?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here. Just come. Alone.”

“Hell, Roy, you don’t have to go all cloak and dagger on me. Just tell me what’s going on!”

Her answer was several clicks and dead air. He’d hung up.

“No, wait! Roy! Oh for God’s sake,” she growled, poking a few buttons on her phone, hoping to capture his number on caller ID and return the call. But her screen had come up with the phrase “Unknown Caller,” and she was left gnashing her teeth in frustration, her heart pounding with a case of nerves. What “evidence” had Roy found? What was he talking about? Half a dozen possibilities, none of them good, had run through her mind as she’d hurried to meet him.

Maybe she shouldn’t have come at all. Cole hadn’t wanted her to. In fact he’d practically barred the door, completely infuriating her. In her mind’s eye she still envisioned his taut, worried face, and she recalled every angry word. He’d wanted to come with her, but she’d insisted on going alone. She’d hurried out the door into the cold, foggy night before he could bully his way into her decision making.

This was something she had to do by herself.

So now she was driving, in the middle of a moonless Louisiana night, toward the swampland where Roy’s uncle, Vernon, owned an old fishing cabin. If it still existed. The last time she’d been there, over ten years earlier, the place had already been going to seed. She couldn’t imagine what it might be like now.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, she saw the worry in her eyes. What the hell was going on?

She hadn’t spoken to Roy in over a year.

Why would he call now?

He’s in trouble again, of course. You know Roy. He’s a prime example of borderline paranoia. The man’s got his own special brand of neurosis.

So why do you always come running when he calls, huh?

What kind of pull does he have over you?
What’s your own special brand of neurosis that you have to bail him out over and over again?

“Oh shut up,” she muttered tightly. The problem with being part of a post-grad psychology program was that she was always psychoanalyzing herself.

It got old.

She snapped on the radio. Notes from the tail end of some country ballad about a love triangle trailed into a commercial for the latest weight-loss program. Not much help. Switching stations and listening with half an ear, she peered through the rising mist. Vernon’s place was nearby, she thought. Squinting, she spotted a faded No Hunting sign that had been nailed to the trunk of a tall pine tree and blasted with a shotgun several times over, the letters nearly obliterated by buckshot.

Only one other vehicle passed by her as the road wound through the swampland. She shivered, though the night was far from cool. Finally her headlight beams splashed upon a burned-out snag of a cottonwood tree, and just beyond was the entrance to Vernon Kajak’s property. A rusted gate hung drunkenly on one hinge; the old cattle guard was still intact, causing her tires to rumble and quake as she entered the private acres.

The drive was little more than twin ruts. Where there once had been gravel, there was now only scattered stones and mud. Weeds scraped the Camry’s undercarriage. The car shuddered and bounced over the potholes and protruding rocks, and she was forced to slow to a creep as she picked her way through the bleached trunks of the cypress trees and brush.

God, it was dark. Eerie. The stuff from which horror films are made.

Eve had never been faint of heart, nor was she a coward, but she wasn’t an idiot either, and driving around in the middle of the Louisiana swamp on a gloomy night seemed like a bad idea. Years of practicing tae kwon do and a small canister of pepper spray tucked inside her purse didn’t seem like enough firepower to fight whatever evil might lie in the dense undergrowth. “Oh, get over yourself,” she said aloud.

She clicked off the radio and picked up her cell phone, only to note that it was receiving no service.

“Oh, of course,” she said beneath her breath. “Wouldn’t you know…”

Her car edged forward, and she narrowed her eyes, straining to see the cabin.

Everything that had happened today was out of sync, just not quite right, and it had culminated in that fight with Cole.

How had that happened? Okay, so she’d been prickly after a visit from her father, but had that warranted the kind of cold fury that had been unleashed upon her by the man she planned to marry?

The call from Roy had sent her out here…into this seeping, clinging fog. Everything about this day and night felt a little out of kilter, and Eve gave herself a shake, trying to dispel the heebie-jeebies.

She checked her watch again.

In a few minutes it would be over.

The cabin was less than a quarter of a mile ahead.

The Reviver waited.

Trembling.

Anticipating.
Ears straining.

Every nerve ending stretched to the breaking point.

But the Voice was silent.

There was no praise for his act; no recriminations for not completing the job.

His heart raced, and he turned his face skyward as a cold spring wind rattled through this part of the bayou. The moon, nearly obscured by the rising fog, offered only a chilling slice of illumination in the night.

Senses heightened, he smelled the metallic odor of blood as it dripped from the fingertips of his gloves.

*Talk to me,* he silently begged the Voice. *I have done Your bidding as best I could. She wasn’t there, not where you said she’d be. I couldn’t kill her. Should I track her down? Hunt her?*

His breath quickened at the thought of stalking her, cornering her, witnessing her fear, then taking her.

But the night was deathly quiet.

No frogs croaked.

No cicadas hummed.

No crickets chirped.

There was nothing but silence and the sound of his short, rapid breaths—visible breaths that mingled with the fog in the still air.

The Voice of God, it seemed, had grown mute.

Because he’d erred.

Horribly.

And now he was being punished.

He tried to concentrate. Had he been mistaken? Hadn’t the Voice told him there would be two inside? Two to sacrifice? Yes, he was certain of it. A man and the woman, Eve, were both supposed to be inside, and yet he’d found only the man.

“Forgive me,” he whispered in agony. What would his penance be this time? He thought of the scars upon his back from flagellation, the burns on his palms from hot coals. He shuddered to think what was to come.

And yet...

His heart was still beating erratically, his blood still singing in his veins from the kill. Oh, how exquisite had been that first slice of his blade as it separated the soft tissue of the throat. And the thin, pulsing seam of red as the blood began to flow…. He closed his eyes and felt the rush all over again.

Nervously, he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

Disappointment gnawed at his guts.

Still he waited.

The Voice had never been wrong before.

And who was he to doubt God’s instructions?
Sometimes he became confused. Often the other voices screamed at him—screechy, irritating little things that would hiss, whine, and yell at him, clouding his judgment, causing his head to pound, making him wonder about his own sanity. But tonight they too were silent.

“Help me,” he mouthed. “Talk to me. Please assure me that I am doing your bidding.”

There was no response, only the sound of a short gust of wind rattling leaves as it whipped through the cypresses and live oaks in this part of the swamp.

He would wait.

Quickly, pleadingly, he made a desperate, deft sign of the cross over his chest, and as he did, he heard the soft rumble of a car’s engine approaching.

YES!!

His eyes flew open.

Tires crunched on the sparse gravel.

He didn’t have to see the car to know it was a Toyota. Eve’s vehicle. Anticipation gave him a rush of heat through his blood as he spied her headlights, mist swirling in their weak golden beams. His gloved hand tightened over the hilt of the knife, the razor-thin blade scarcely visible in the darkness.

Crouching, he began to steal silently through the undergrowth and stopped near the cabin garage, behind a rotting tree stump, close enough that he could reach her in three steps when she walked to the door.

Her headlights washed over the grayed walls of the tiny cabin, and the engine died. The car door opened, and he caught a glimpse of her, red curls scraped away from her face, jaw set, eyes darting quickly. She cast a glance at Roy’s truck, parked beneath the overhang of a carport. Then, using a small flashlight, she walked swiftly toward the cabin’s door, tested it, and found it locked.

“Roy?” she called, knocking loudly, a hint of her perfume wafting his way. “Hey…what’s going on?” Then, more softly, “If this is some kind of sick joke, I swear, you’ll pay….”

Oh, it’s no joke, he thought, every nerve stretched to the breaking point. She was so close. If he leaped out, he could tackle her.

She shined the flashlight’s beam over the dilapidated siding and onto a sagging, battered shutter. “What’re the chances?” she asked herself. She reached behind the broken slats, extracted a key, and looked at it a long moment. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she muttered, inserting the key into the dead bolt.

With a click, the old lock gave way.

As she stepped into the house, he moved swiftly. He had his knife gripped tightly in his hand, and he desperately wanted to use it, to watch as it slit her soft, white flesh. But, just in case, there was always the pistol, a small-caliber one but deadly enough.

A light snapped on inside the cabin.

Through the dusty glass of the kitchen window, he saw her, her hair pulled away from the long column of her throat. His heart kicked into overdrive, and he drew a shivery breath, envisioning the act.

She’d hear his footsteps, turn, gasp when their eyes met. Then he would move quickly, slashing that perfectly arched throat, slicing her jugular, crimson blood spraying.

He drew in a swift breath.
His cock hardened.

He could almost taste her.

Eve.

*The original sinner.*

*Time to pay.*

“Roy, are you here?” Eve called into the watery light of the cabin. She didn’t know whether to be scared or pissed as hell as she stepped through the kitchen, where a thin layer of dust covered everything. “You know,” she said, sweat beading in her hair as she spied a half-drunk bottle of beer left on the scarred drop-leafed table, “this is creeping me out. I mean, if this is one of your games, I think I’ll just have to kill you.”

She heard a scrape, turned. Her heart jumped as a small black body scampered across the yellowed linoleum to hide beneath an ancient refrigerator. She bit back a scream with all she had, watching the mouse’s tail slide from sight. “Oh Jesus.” Her pulse pounded in her ears. She shouldn’t have come here, and she’d known it from the get-go. When Roy called, she should have insisted he come to her or that they meet somewhere in public. Being here was creeping her out.

Where the hell was he? “Roy?” He had to be here. His truck was parked in the carport. “Roy? This isn’t funny. Where are you?”

The door to the bathroom gaped open, but it was dark inside. She tried the switch, but the bulb had burned out, and when she raked her flashlight beam across the sink and toilet, she saw only rust, stains, and dirt. Something was definitely wrong here.

She walked three steps to the living room, where a lamp on an old end table was burning bright. Obviously Roy had been here….no, not really. Obviously *someone* had been here, though the room itself looked as if no one had inhabited it for a decade. Dust and cobwebs covered the floor, pinewood walls, and ceiling. Even the ashes and chunks of burned wood in the grate seemed ancient. There was a yellowed fishing magazine, its pages curled and tattered. It was as if time had stopped for this dilapidated cabin on the bayou.

So what the hell was she doing here?

To see Roy? To find out what he meant by “evidence”?

What the hell kind of evidence could he mean?

*Something to do with Dad*, she thought. *That’s what Roy meant. You know it. You can feel it in your bones. Roy knows whether dear old Dad is innocent…or guilty as sin.*

Swallowing, she pulled her cell phone from her purse. Still no service.

“Royal Kajak, you’ve got about two minutes, and then I’m outta here,” she called to the shadowed corners of the cabin. “I don’t give a damn about whatever ‘evidence’ you think you’ve got. E-mail me, okay?”

Irritated, she took one last look around. Just past the open stairway was a short hall leading to the one bedroom on the main floor. The door to it yawned open.

Steeling herself, she walked toward it.

*Shit! She had a cell phone!* He hadn’t thought of that. The Voice hadn’t warned him about the phone. The Reviver stared through the window, watched her walking carefully through the house. He knew she’d call 911. The number was probably on speed dial.
He had to stop her. Fast!

Without a sound, he sheathed his knife, flicked open his ankle holster, and pulled out his pistol.

Time to finish this.

Nerves on edge, Eve pushed open the bedroom door. It creaked on old hinges. “Roy?”

She heard the faintest of moans.

The hairs on the back of her neck were raised as she fumbled for the light switch. With a click, the room was instantly awash in light from an ancient ceiling fixture.

She screamed.

Roy lay on the floor by the old metal bedframe. His entire face was covered in blood, and there was a huge gash on his neck spreading a dark stain across the floor.

She stumbled forward. All she could see was blood. Dark. Black. Sticky. Everywhere.

His chest moved ever so slightly as he struggled to breathe. Eve amoaned with hope. He was still alive!

“Hang on!” she cried, terror clawing through her, bile rising in her throat. “Who did this? Oh sweet Jesus…” She tried to staunch the flow of blood with one hand while dialing with the trembling fingers of the other. The phone slipped from her hand, sliding through a thick smear of blood. Pressing against the gash in Roy’s throat, she retrieved the bloody cell with her free hand and punched out 911 with sticky, shaking fingers. “Help,” she pleaded, but the screen silently mocked her: NO SERVICE.

Panic welled up inside her. She was frantic.

Calm down, Eve. You can’t help Roy without a clear head. Don’t lose it. Think! Does the cabin have a phone? A landline? The electricity’s working. Maybe Vernon keeps phone service for emergencies… Her gaze swept the room and skated over the pinewood walls. No phone outlet, but near Roy’s head, upon the yellowed pinewood walls, was a number written in blood:

212

She recoiled in horror.

What the hell did that mean?

Had Roy written it?

Or someone else?…Oh God, was Roy’s assailant still here? Maybe in the house? She thought of the can of pepper spray buried in her purse.

She didn’t have time to waste. She had to get help. The blood seeping against her fingers at Roy’s neck had eased to nothing. Oh God…

Another low moan, and it was over. Roy took one last shallow wet breath.

“No! Oh God, no…Roy! Roy!” But the hand on his neck found no pulse. “You can’t die, oh please—”

A floorboard creaked.

She froze.
The killer was still here!

Either inside the house or on the porch.

Heart thundering in her ears, she tried her damned phone again. *Come on, come on*, she silently pleaded, listening for any sound, her gaze moving quickly around the room and to the doorway. If only there were a back door, a way to escape.

Another soft footstep. Leather sliding over wood.

Her insides turned to water.

She carefully reached into the purse, bloody fingers scrabbling for the pepper spray as she kept her gaze moving from the doorway to the two windows, to the mirror, to the reflection there of her own panicked face. She risked glancing down, found the spray and had the cannister out of her purse when she heard the footsteps again. Louder. Coming at her!

He knew where she was.

*Get out, Eve, get out now!*

She shot to her feet, adrenalin fueled by horror pushing her. She reached for the light switch, slapped it off. Darkness blinded.

She turned quickly, her shoes sliding in Roy’s blood. She fell noisily, biting back a scream, holding fast to the canister. Her leg scraped down the iron bedframe. Her head thudded against the wall. Pain exploded behind her eyes.

More footsteps!

*Don’t pass out. For God’s sake, don’t lose consciousness!*

She flung herself toward a window.

Pitched forward.

She saw him.

In the glass.

He was holding something in his hand. Pointing it at her.

She recognized him in a heartbeat.

*Cole?*

The man she loved?

Cole Dennis was going to *shoot* her?

*NO!*

*Bam!*

The noise slammed like a blow.

The muzzle blazed fire!
Glass shattered.

White-hot pain exploded in her head.

Her knees buckled. She crumpled to the floor. The dark room swirled around her, and Cole Dennis’s angry face was the last image burned into Eve’s brain.
Three months later

“This is a big mistake, Eve. Big! You can’t leave yet; you’re not ready.” Anna Maria, in a bathrobe, fuzzy slippers, and no makeup, was chasing Eve down the driveway of her home.

“Watch me.” Eve wasn’t going to get into it with Anna again. Not now. It was morning, barely light, the street lamps still offering some bit of illumination as dawn crept down the manicured street of this suburb tucked between Marietta and Atlanta. Time to leave.

Holding a cigarette in one hand and a cup of sloshing coffee in the other, Anna somehow managed to keep up with her sister-in-law. “You’re not through with physical therapy, you can’t remember jack-shit about the night you were attacked, and for God’s sake, there’s a rumor, probably a good one, that Cole Dennis is going to be released. Did you hear me? The man you think tried to kill you is going to walk!”

At the mention of Cole’s name, Eve’s heart clutched. Just as it always did. And she ignored it. Just like she always did.

“We’ve had this argument a kazillion times. I need to get home.” Lugging a cat carrier, Eve made her way to her Camry as Samson, her long-haired stray, howled from within. “No matter what you think, you’re not dying,” she assured the unhappy animal as she scrounged in her purse for her keys with her free hand. The carrier bobbed wildly, and Samson, freaked out of his mind, hissed loudly. She placed the plastic crate on the driveway near the back tire of her car as she kept searching for the damned keys.

“Eve—”

“Don’t start.” Glancing up at her sister-in-law, Eve shook her head, short strands of hair brushing the back of her neck. “You know I have to leave.” She managed to slide her key ring from a side pocket, but as she did, her cell phone, tangled in the keys, popped out of the purse and dropped onto the concrete, landing with a sickening smack. “Oh great!” Just what she needed; another reason for Anna, supposedly a devout Roman Catholic but as superstitious as anyone Eve had ever met, to find an excuse for Eve to linger. It amazed Eve how Anna was forever seeing “curses,” “signs,” or “omens” in everyday life—so much so that Samson, being a black cat, was nearly banished from Anna and Kyle’s home.

“I saw that!” Anna announced. “God is trying to tell you something.”

“Yeah, like I need a new cell-phone carrier,” Eve muttered through clenched teeth.

“Not funny, Eve.”

“You’re wrong. It was really funny.” She managed a smile and looked up at her sister-in-law as dark clouds, heavy with the promise of rain, moved slowly across a low Georgia sky. Only the slightest breath of wind rattled the spreading branches of a magnolia tree growing close to the drive, but it was enough to cool the sweat that was already sprouting on Eve’s neck and spine. Picking up the phone, she saw that the screen was still illuminated. Hitting the speakerphone button, she heard the familiar hum of a dial tone. “Still working. Guess I won’t have to switch networks.” She tucked the phone more securely into a pocket of her purse, unlocked the door, and slid the cat carrier onto the backseat.
“For the record, I’m against this,” Anna said, her arms crossed beneath her large breasts.

“For the record, I know.”

“You could at least wait until Kyle gets home. He just ran out for milk and cigarettes. He’ll be back any minute.”

All the more reason to leave. Eve and her oldest brother had never gotten along. Having her camp out at his house while recovering from a gunshot wound and trauma-induced amnesia hadn’t improved their relationship.

“You’re not talking me out of this, so don’t even try. Nita says I’m eighty-five percent of normal, whatever that is.”

“Nita’s an idiot.” Anna Maria took a long drag on her cigarette and shot smoke out of the side of her mouth.

“Nita’s a board-certified physical therapist.”

“What does your shrink say?”

Eve paused. “Low blow, Anna.” She’d quit going to the psychiatrist after just three sessions. She hadn’t “clicked” with him and knew enough about psychiatry to realize a patient had to trust in her doctor completely. She didn’t. Dr. Calvin Byrd was too guarded, too quiet, too studious. The way he’d leaned back in his chair, pen in hand, as she’d confided in him had given her a bad feeling. She’d felt as if he were more interested in judging her than healing or helping her. So she’d quit the sessions. She’d been around enough shrinks in her lifetime to know the good from the bad. Wasn’t her own father proof enough of that? Not to mention that she herself had been working on her PhD in psychology before her life had been shattered at that cabin in the woods. Bottom line: no doctor should make a patient nervous.

“He might be able to help you with your memory,” Anna argued.

“I told you, I don’t like him. End of story.”

“He’s well respected. One of the best psychiatrists in Atlanta.”

“I know.” Eve had seen all the degrees, awards, and letters of commendation so proudly displayed in Dr. Byrd’s office. “It’s personal—just a gut feeling.” She was already walking back to the house, to the breezeway, where her luggage was stacked. Eve passed by her brother’s work van—a dirty paneled truck with the predictable words WASH ME scribbled into the dust on the back windows. Obviously he’d taken his Porsche for his morning run to the store. “Look, Anna, I’m not arguing about this anymore. You can either help me load up the car or stand there and rant and rave to no good end. So what’s it going to be?”

“This is nuts, Eve.”

Eve smiled gently. “Oh, come on. Things aren’t that bad.”

“Not that bad? For the love of God! When did you become such a Pollyanna? You were shot. Shot! The bullet hit your shoulder and ricocheted to your temple, and your brain was bruised. Bruised. You didn’t end up dead or paralyzed or God only knows what else, but pul-eeze don’t tell me things aren’t bad. I know better.” Anna took a long drag on her cigarette and glared at her sister-in-law over the glowing tip. “You were almost killed. By that son of a bitch you thought you might marry! C’mon, Eve. Things are definitely ‘that bad’ and probably a helluva lot worse. The problem is, you just can’t remember.”

Done with arguing, Eve picked up a duffel bag and her computer case, then started hauling them back to the Camry, where Samson was crying loud enough to wake the dead. Yes, she had big holes in her memory. But her amnesia wasn’t complete. She did recall bits from that night. Painful little shards that cut through her brain. She remembered being late. She remembered seeing Roy lying on the floor, bleeding out, barely hanging on to life. She remembered the bloody number 212 scrawled on the wall. She remembered reaching for her cell phone, hesitating, her fingers shaking too badly to dial, dropping the damned thing, seeing NO SERVICE in bold letters against a glowing
LCD. She remembered seeing the gun leveled through the window before it went off. And she remembered blood. Everywhere. Splattered on the wall, pooling on the floor, making the touch pad of her cell phone sticky, oozing from Roy’s neck and forehead…

She closed her eyes for a second and drew a long breath. Guilt, ever lurking, loomed again. Deep, dark and deadly. It ate at her at night. Cut through her dreams. If only she’d been at the cabin earlier as she’d promised, if only she hadn’t hesitated or dropped her phone before dialing 911, her friend Roy might still be alive…. Shaking inside, she opened her eyes to the somber morning. The clouds overhead seemed even more ominous.

“The doctors think my memory will return,” Eve said as she reached her car and tossed the duffel onto the floor of the backseat. She slid her computer next to the cat carrier. She noticed Samson, pupils dilated, glaring through the tiny windows of the crate.

“Maybe getting your memory back isn’t a good thing.”

Boy, was Anna on a tear this morning. First one side of the argument, then the other. Eve tossed her purse onto the front passenger seat then turned to find her sister-in-law standing within inches of her.

“Aren’t you the one who told me that the brain shuts down because of trauma, to protect itself?” Anna pushed her long hair from her eyes. She was close enough that Eve smelled the smoke and coffee on her breath, the hint of perfume clinging to her skin. “Maybe you don’t want to know what happened.”

“I want to know,” Eve responded evenly.

Across the street, a door opened. In a striped terry robe and slippers, a balding man pushing eighty stepped onto his porch and shot a glance their way from behind thick glasses. He sketched out a wave then bent to retrieve his newspaper.

“Morning, Mr. Watters,” Anna said, waving back as her neighbor scanned the headlines and disappeared inside. She lowered her voice and moved closer to Eve. “I’m just asking you to wait. A week. Maybe two. ’Til you’re stronger, and maybe by then we’ll know what Cole is up to. Stay here until we’re certain you’re safe.”

“I am.”

“He’s dangerous.”

Eve had already started up the drive again. “Besides, I’m thinking of getting a dog…a puppy.”

Anna Maria took a final hit on her Virginia Slim and sent it to the concrete of the driveway, where she stomped the butt out with her pink mule. “A puppy? Like that’ll keep the bad guys at bay!”

“I’m talking about a really, really tough puppy.”

There wasn’t the slightest hint of humor in Anna’s worried eyes. “Look, Eve, you can laugh and make light about this all you want, but the bottom line is: someone tried to kill you.”

“I was at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Anna tossed her an exasperated look. “You think it was Cole. You were going to testify that he shot you. And now…now they expect him to be released from prison. The whole case against him has fallen apart. But that doesn’t mean he won’t come after you. He did before, didn’t he? When he was out on bail? He called. Planned to meet with you, and you, being some kind of idealistic numbskull, were actually going to see him! What the hell were you thinking?”

Eve’s stomach knotted. The headache that never seemed to quite go away began to beat slowly inside her skull. She didn’t want to think about all this again.

“Cole thought you were having an affair. Probably with Roy.”
Anxiety clamped over Eve’s lungs. The truth of the matter was that she couldn’t remember. Her headache thundered. “Damn it all.” She found her purse in the car, scrounged through a zippered pocket, came up with a nearly empty bottle of ibuprofen, and tossed two pills into her mouth. “I told you, I don’t want to rehash this. I’m done arguing.” She grabbed Anna’s cup and washed down the tablets with a swallow of tepid, milky coffee. “God, this is awful.”

Anna snagged her cup.

Feeling a tic develop beneath her eye, Eve sensed another panic attack in the making. Her heart was racing, and she felt as if her lungs were strapped by steel bands.

Not now. Not here. A full-blown anxiety attack will only add fuel to Anna Maria’s you-aren’t-ready-to-leave fire…. One … Breathe! … Two … Think calm thoughts…. Three … Slow your heartbeat….

By the time she reached ten, she was taking normal breaths again, but Anna was watching her closely. “I gotta go.” Eve grabbed her makeup kit, not that it would do much good. Her face was still a bit puffy, the plastic surgery around her right eye not quite healed. She placed the makeup bag beside the cat carrier, then turned to reach for her large roller-bag.

“Oh, fine. Hey! No! Stop! For God’s sake, don’t lift that. Just wait a sec, will ya?” Anna set her cup down then grabbed Eve’s roller-bag. “Jesus, this weighs a ton. What’ve you got in here, lead weights?”

Eve smiled faintly. “At least you didn’t say a dead body.”

“I thought about it.”

“I know you did.”

From within the interior of the car came the pitiful sound of a cat who thought he was being tortured. “Won’t that drive you nuts?” Anna asked.

“Probably.” Eve flipped up the lid of the trunk. “But I’ll survive.”

“You know you’re impossible, don’t you? As stubborn as your brothers.” Anna refused Eve’s help as she hoisted the bag into the trunk. “And don’t give me any of that crap about you not being from the same genetic pool as Kyle and Van. It doesn’t matter. You were all raised under the same roof, and that’s why you’re all so bullheaded.”

Eve had given up arguing. There was just no point to it. Not when Anna Maria got going. Logic didn’t count, and the fact that Eve’s older brothers were from their mother’s first marriage, that they were twelve and ten years old when Eve, as an infant, was adopted by Melody and Terrence Renner, wasn’t going to change Anna’s mind. Eve suspected that the only reason she’d ended up living with Kyle and Anna after being released from the hospital was that Anna Maria had insisted upon it. It hadn’t been any bit of brotherly love, or nobility, or even guilt on Kyle’s part.

Anna picked up her cup, took a swallow, and scowled. “You’re right. This is really bad.” She tossed the dregs into the dirt beneath the magnolia tree.

“Told you.”

“So, if you’re going to go,” Anna said, glancing up at the menacing sky, “go already. And Eve?”

“Yeah?”

“Avoid Cole. He’s just plain bad news.”

“I know.”

“That’s not the answer I want to hear.” Anna wrapped her arms around Eve and held her tight, as if she didn’t
want to let go, and Eve wondered if it was because she was worried for Eve or because she didn’t want to be left alone with her husband. Eve knew only too well what a brooding, moody tyrant her oldest brother could be. The fact that Anna had never bent to Kyle’s will or had let him break her spirit was testament to her strength.

“Take care of yourself, Anna,” Eve whispered emotionally. “Thanks for everything. I owe you!”

“I’ll try. You too.” Before the whole scene got any more difficult, Eve extracted herself from Anna’s embrace, slid behind the wheel of her car, ignored the yowling cat, and fired up the engine. “Bye!”

Anna was already reaching into her pocket for her pack of cigarettes. She shook out the last one before crumpling the empty pack.

As Eve headed out the drive, drops of rain began to pepper the ground. Just what she needed. She had over four hundred miles of asphalt between here and New Orleans.

And once you get there, then what?

“God only knows.” She flipped on the wipers and pressed her toe to the accelerator. To drown out Samson’s mournful cries, she turned on the radio, found a country station, and wondered which was worse, the wailing guitar or the unhappy cat.

The rest of her life, whatever that was going to be, was waiting.

“Get me the hell out of here!” Cole Dennis paced from one end of the small holding cell to the other. He was tense. Agitated. This tiny room, with its scarred cinder-block walls and steel bars, smelled of must, dirt, and broken dreams. Worse yet, beneath the strong odor of some pine-scented cleaner was the whiff of ammonia and urine, as if the someone who’d been here last had been scared enough to lose control of his bladder. Or maybe he’d pissed on purpose to mark his territory or just make a defiant, in-your-face point to the cops.

Cole’s attorney, Sam Deeds, was seated at the simple table that was bolted to the floor. Impeccable in an Armani suit, a silk tie, and a haircut that cost what some men made in a month, Deeds looked the part of the slick attorney: clean shaven and hawkeyed, his expression serious, his dark eyes missing nothing as Cole paced from one end of the cell to the other.

How many times had Cole himself sat in that very chair, dressed like Deeds, telling his client not to sweat, never once noticing the odor of desperation that clung to these chipped walls?

“We’re just waiting for all the paperwork. You know the drill,” Deeds said.

“Like hell. They’re stalling. And why am I locked in here? I’m supposed to be getting out. This is an interrogation room, for God’s sake.”

“Your case is high profile.”

“So this is for my protection? So that I’m hidden from the press?” Cole snorted his contempt. “Bullshit!”

“Cool it.” Deeds tossed a look to the large mirror on one side of the room as if in silent reminder about the two-way glass.

Cole shut up. He knew all about the mirror and about the pricks standing on the other side watching him squirm, hoping against hope that there was some way to nail his hide for the Royal Kajak murder. Jesus, what a mess. He shoved one hand through his hair and felt warm drops of sweat on his scalp. Just like he’d seen hundreds of times on the poor sons of bitches that he’d represented.

He cast a hard glance at the reflective glass, wondering if Montoya, that useless piece of crap, was on the other side, or maybe Bentz, the older, heavier, quieter guy, Montoya’s partner. Or Brinkman…Christ, now that guy was a piece of work. How he held on to a job was beyond Cole. Then there was the DA, Melinda Jaskiel. She was
probably eating this up. Cole couldn’t count how many times he’d sat on the opposite side of the courtroom from Jaskiel or one of her assistants, working against them. He’d been surprised Jaskiel herself hadn’t handled his case, that she’d handed it off to an underling.

No wonder they were doing everything in their power to nail his ass.

What was it Bentz had said when they’d booked him? What goes around, comes around. Yeah, that was it. Well, that worked two ways. He narrowed his eyes and hoped that pompous son of a bitch was watching him now, that Bentz was feeling the frustration of losing what he considered a “good collar.” Bastard. And that Montoya, what a cocky, self-serving ass.

The police didn’t have enough to hold him. Their case against him had been thin to begin with, then had fallen apart completely because Deeds had found some problem with the evidence chain—someone in the department had screwed up, leaving key evidence against him unsupervised and possibly contaminated. Then there was Eve. Beautiful, deadly, cheating Eve. She’d been ready to testify against him, claimed he’d shot her, for God’s sake! But then her memory of that night was faulty, Cole reminded himself with repressed fury.

Deeds had been prepared to tear into Eve, making her look like a fool, a liar, a woman without morals or conscience, one who had “convenient” memory loss. Yes, he’d inwardly cringed when he’d heard Deeds talk about cross-examining her, but had girded himself with the knowledge that she’d betrayed him.

Fortunately, the case never made it to court, though Cole had been detained on trumped-up charges.

Morons!

Cole walked over to the mirror, glaring through the glass and seeing only his own reflection: harsh blue eyes; thick brows drawn down in simmering anger; high, flat cheekbones and a razor-thin mouth compressed to the point that white showed around his lips. The crow’s-feet at the corners of his eyes and bits of gray in his dark hair seemed more pronounced than they had three months earlier. He’d aged a lifetime in the hellhole of a cell where he’d been locked away. His clothes were a mess: the pair of faded jeans and T-shirt were wrinkled and still smelled of perspiration, his own nervous sweat from the quick ride in the patrol car the night he’d been taken in. He’d been barefoot at the time; thankfully Deeds had brought him a pair of battered Nikes, even if they were a size too small and pinched.

In the reflection, he noticed a muscle working on one side of his jaw.

So did Deeds. “Sit down, Cole.”

“I can’t.”

“Do it.” Sam Deeds’s voice was calm. Firm. Insistent.

Just as Cole’s had been with all of his own clients. That is, when he still had clients, still had a law practice, still had a house, a membership in a country club, a Jaguar, a goddamned life. Things had taken a turn for the worse. A real bad turn. Now he knew what it was like to have zero freedom, to have to do what he was told, to feel the cold grip of steel around his wrists and ankles.

Turning away from the mirror, he rubbed the back of his arm, where the handcuffs had cut into his flesh. There was still the hint of a scar. A reminder of the night the police had shown up at his house, read him his rights, and hauled him to jail. He’d just stepped out of the shower, was wearing nothing but a pair of worn jeans and was pulling on a shirt when the banging had started. He’d opened the door, seen blue and red lights strobing the night sky as his neighbors and the press had watched the circus. Cameras had flashed, his bare feet had sunk into the loam of his yard, and despite his immediate request for a lawyer, he’d been pushed into a cruiser and driven to the station, where, after being booked and Mirandized again, he’d had to wait three hours for Deeds. In that time he hadn’t said a word but, from the questions put to him, had surmised that he was being held in a murder investigation involving Eve Renner and Roy Kajak.

His jaw slid to one side as he thought about it.
Eve. Jesus, he’d loved her.

Passionately.

Wildly.

Without regard to consequences.

That was the problem: he’d loved her too damned much.

His ardor for her had been unhealthy.

And she’d used it against him.

Now, not only had he lost her, he’d lost everything.

From this day forward, he would have to start over. From scratch.

Well, it wouldn’t be the first time.

He clenched a fist then straightened his fingers, stretching them, only to do it all over again.

Catching another harsh glance from Deeds, he decided not to fight it. He could pound on the damned two-way, scream that he was innocent, rail to the gods, and threaten all kinds of suits against the parish for false arrest.

But that would only make things worse.

And he’d already done a fine job of that, screwing up his bail as he had. Hell, he couldn’t win for losing.

The whole damned case against him reeked of a setup. One he planned to prove, once he was out.

But it wouldn’t be easy. The damned dicks were determined to lock him away, to prove that he’d been there the night Roy Kajak died, to find a way to show that he had indeed pulled the trigger of the gun that had nearly killed Eve Renner.

He couldn’t risk another screwup.

Even if he were completely innocent.

Which, of course, he wasn’t.
“He’s guilty.” Montoya glared through the two-way window in to the room where Cole and his attorney were waiting. He jabbed a finger in Cole Dennis’s direction. “Guilty as goddamned sin.”

Bentz grunted but gave a quick nod of assent. They stood in a darkened room that smelt vaguely of ancient cigarette smoke.

Montoya would have killed for a drag about now, but he’d given up the habit, his beloved Marlboros replaced first by the patch and then, in the past few months, by tasteless gum that was supposed to give him a nicotine hit but, in reality, was nothing more than a useless oral substitute. It was times like this, when he wanted to concentrate, when he missed his smokes the most. He scratched his goatee and tamped down the urge to go flying into the next room, to slam Cole Dennis up against the wall and force the truth from the self-serving jerk.

“Can’t hold him any longer. The DA’s dropping the homicide case.” Bentz too was disappointed. And angry. His jaw was set, the corners of his mouth pinched, his lips flat against his teeth.

“Hell.” Montoya wanted Cole Dennis so bad he could taste it. He tugged at the diamond stud in his ear. Though he felt a bit of satisfaction that Dennis had been cuffed and shackled, then spent nearly ninety days in lockup, had been forced to wear the stiff cotton of jail attire long enough to wipe the cocksure grin from his face, it wasn’t enough. The bastard had spent most of his adult life wearing designer-label suits, hanging out at all the right golf and tennis clubs, and managed to get some of the biggest, wealthiest scumbags off on crimes ranging from tax evasion to assault. It was well past his time to pay.

But the damned case had fallen apart.

Even after Dennis had made bail, walked out of the jailhouse then been busted again for failing to adhere to the rules of his bail, the damned case had fallen apart. Montoya shook his head. The guy had lost a cool million, but he was still going to walk. Montoya scratched more vigorously at his goatee then caught Bentz watching him, and scowled. “What?”

“Let it go.”

“I can’t, damn it. Dennis was there that night at Roy Kajak’s cabin. There was a footprint outside the door, size twelve and a half, same as Dennis.”

“So where’s the shoe or boot?”

“Ditched. Along with the clothes. Had to have been a lot of blood from Kajak, slicing his throat like that. We caught Dennis in the shower, you know.”

“And we tore his house up looking for something—the shoes, clothes, blood. Nothing there.”

Montoya lifted a shoulder. The forensic team hadn’t found any evidence of blood, not even in the pipes. But there had been traces of bleach…. The bastard had known enough to cover his tracks. And fast.

Bentz, always playing devil’s advocate, said, “Maybe Cole didn’t kill Roy. Just shot Eve Renner.”
“Then who slit Roy’s throat?” Montoya asked for the hundredth time. He and Bentz had been over this same conversation daily. They got nowhere each time. Every once in a while they’d come up with a new idea, only to run headlong into a dead end. And what the hell did the number 212 mean? Written in blood, for God’s sake, with the index finger of the victim’s right hand.

And tattooed into his forehead. The same numerals. When they’d cleaned up the victim, they’d found that chilling surprise. Was it some kind of code? A number for a post office box? An area code? A password on a computer? A birthday? The police had come up with nothing.

Same as with Faith Chastain. She had been murdered years before at Our Lady of Virtues Mental Hospital. And a tattoo had been discovered beneath her hair…. Coincidence? Hell! He could use a smoke about now. Maybe a drink too.

Who would go to the trouble and time of tattooing a victim? The thought of someone inking dead flesh…weird. Just the idea made his skin crawl.

Montoya glanced again at Bentz. The older cop’s flinty gaze was trained through the glass. His lips were pulled into a thoughtful frown, creases sliding across his brow, and he was chewing a wad of gum. He might show a calmer exterior than Montoya, but he was aggravated. Big time.

For now, they had to release the son of a bitch.

Through the glass, Montoya watched as the release officer entered the interrogation room to literally hand Cole Dennis his walking papers.

Hell.

His stomach clamped. This was wrong. So damned wrong.

A few strokes of a pen and that was that.

Cole Dennis was once again a free man in his wrinkled T-shirt and faded jeans. He might be a million dollars poorer, his license to practice law in question, but he couldn’t be locked up any longer.

Shit!

Montoya, his eyes still trained on the glass, hooked his leather jacket from the back of an unused chair.

As he walked through the door, Dennis had the balls to look over his shoulder at the two-way mirror, but he didn’t smile. No, his eyes narrowed, his lips compressed, and the skin over his cheekbones stretched tight. He was pissed as hell.

Good.

Montoya only hoped the bastard was angry enough to make another mistake.

When he did, Montoya intended to slam his ass into jail for the rest of Cole Dennis’s miserable life.

Hands curled around the steering wheel in a death grip, Eve rolled the kinks out of her neck and tried to ignore the headache that had only intensified as she’d driven south toward New Orleans. The rain had come and gone, spitting from the dark sky in some spots, pouring in sheets a few times, and then disappearing altogether when she’d driven through Montgomery and the sun had broken through the clouds to bask the hills, skyscrapers, and the Alabama River in a shimmering golden glow.

At that point poor Samson had given up his hoarse cries and, if not sleeping, had grown silent.

The good weather and Samson’s silence had been fleeting, however. Now, a few miles outside of Mobile, the
Clouds had opened up again, drenching the Camry in a loud torrent. The wipers struggled with the wash of water, Eve’s stomach rumbled, and Samson whimpered pathetically.

Nerves stretched raw, Eve noticed a road sign for a diner at the next exit and decided, since her progress had slowed with the storm, to grab a quick sandwich and wait out the deluge. She pulled into a pockmarked asphalt lot littered haphazardly with only a few vehicles. Using the umbrella she always kept in the car, she skirted rain puddles, her nostrils picking up the acrid scent of cigarette smoke. A couple of teenagers who obviously worked at the place had lit up and were puffing away under an overhang near the back door, and one lone guy was seated in a dark pickup, the tip of his cigarette glowing red in the dark, smoky interior.

Eve didn’t pay much attention, just shouldered her way past a thick glass door into the horseshoe-shaped restaurant, where an air conditioner wheezed and fryers sizzled above the strains of a Johnny Cash classic. The smells of frying onions and sizzling meat assailed her as she slipped into one of the faux-leather booths that flanked the windows.

A waitress carrying a large tray whipped past, muttering, “I’ll be with y’all in a sec,” before flying to another table. Eve fingered a plastic-encased menu, scanning the items before the same waitress, a breathless, rail-thin woman with her hair pulled into a banana clip, returned to take her drink order. A U-shaped counter, circa the sixties, swept around an area housing the cash register, milk-shake machine, revolving pie case, and soda fountain. “Now, darlin’, what can I getcha?” the woman asked, not bothering with pen or paper. “Coffee? Sweet tea? Soda? I gotta tell ya, our chef’s meatloaf, that’s the special today, is ta die for. And I’m not kiddin’!”

“I’ll have sweet tea and a fried shrimp po’boy.”

“You got it, darlin’.” The waitress left in a rush, only to deposit the tea seconds later. Eve shook out the last three ibuprofen from the bottle in her purse then washed down the pills with a long swallow of tea and prayed they’d take effect soon. She wondered fleetingly if Anna Maria had been right, if she wasn’t ready for this trip.

Don’t go there. You’ll be fine. Just as soon as you get home.

She closed her eyes. Home. It seemed like forever since she’d walked up the familiar steps of the old Victorian house in the Garden District. She envisioned its steep gables, paned, watery-glassed windows, delicate gingerbread décor, and the turret…Oh Lord, the turret she loved, the tower room Nana had dubbed “Eve’s little Eden.” From that high tower, looking over the other rooftops and trees, she felt as if she could see all of the world.

Crash! A tray of glassware hit the floor, glass splintering. “Oh no!”

Eve nearly leapt from the booth. Her heart pounded erratically as flashes of memory cut through her mind. Blinking rapidly, she was once again standing in that darkened cabin, the muzzle of a gun spewing fire, glass shattering loudly, and Cole’s harsh face glaring at her. She glanced down, saw that both her fists were curled. Her breathing was thin and ragged. Slowly she unclenched her fingers, counting to ten. It was only an accident. Eve could see a busboy already rounding the corner with a broom and dustpan as a girl no older than sixteen, flushed and embarrassed, apologized all over herself for losing control of the tray.

Quit jumping at shadows, Eve silently scolded herself as she turned her attention out the window. The storm was really going at it. Rain slanted across the parking lot, blurring her view of the freeway ramp and traffic. Her cell phone rang, startling her, and she banged her knee against the table.

“Damn.”

Dr. Byrd’s right: you’re a head case.

She answered the phone on the second ring, carrying it to the foyer, where she might have a chance at privacy. Caller ID displayed Anna Maria’s number, and her sister-in-law’s picture flashed onto the small screen. “Hey there,” Eve answered, her heart rate finally slowing a bit.

“Where are you?” Anna demanded.
“Not far from Mobile.”

“So you haven’t heard?”

“I guess not. Heard what?”

“Cole was released today. Just like I told you. All charges dropped.”

Eve’s stomach clenched. “We knew this was going to happen.”

“But on the same day you decide to return to New Orleans? What’re the chances of that? It’s a bad sign, Eve, I swear. I know you don’t believe in it, but I’m tellin’ ya, there are forces at work that we just don’t understand. Unless you knew about this and that’s why you were so hell-bent to leave today.”

Eve heard the hint of accusation in Anna Maria’s voice. “I had no idea,” she said, which was the God’s honest truth.

“Then it’s a coincidence.”

_Better than a sign from God._

“It’s all over the news,” Anna went on, “but I figured if you didn’t have the radio on, you wouldn’t have heard, and you know what they say, ‘Forewarned is forearmed.’”

“Thanks for the forearming.”

“That man is dangerous to you, Eve. We both know it. If not physically, then emotionally.”

“I’m over him, Anna. I thought we were clear on that.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I mean it. When someone points a gun at you, you kinda lose all that warm, touchy-feely feeling you had for him.”

“Good,” Anna said, though she didn’t sound all that convinced. “Keep those thoughts and watch your back. If you need to, you can always turn around and come back here.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep it in mind.” But she was lying. She was going home, period. She hung up, refusing to let the thought of bumping into Cole again intimidate her. However, as she reentered the restaurant, she turned in the opposite direction from her booth, down a darkened hallway and past a cigarette machine to the bar, where a couple of men hanging out at the counter were sipping beers. Another twenty-something guy with tattoos covering his forearms was sharpening his skills by playing pool solo, and the televisions over the bar were turned to sports stations. No image of Cole Dennis leaving a police station in the company of his high-powered lawyer, saying “No comment” as he avoided a gauntlet of reporters with microphones and ducked into a waiting car, played on any of the screens.

_Get over it_, she told herself as she returned to her table, where an oval plate held her steaming po’boy, a slice of corn bread, and a cup of coleslaw. Butter oozed and melted across the corn bread while the cabbage nearly drowned in the dressing. Eve’s appetite had all but disappeared with Anna Maria’s phone call, but she slid into her seat and bit into the sandwich. _Nourishment_, she reminded herself, barely tasting the spicy fried shrimp as she chewed.

What would she say if she ran into Cole? What would _he_ say? Would he avoid her? Or try to find her? She swallowed another tasteless bite of the sandwich and tried not to remember his penetrating blue eyes, thick, dark hair, and severe jaw. But that proved impossible, and as she stared out at the gloom, her mind’s eye saw him as he’d been when they first met.

It had been on the wide porch of her father’s house. Cole had been sitting on a stool, leaning forward, tanned arms
resting on his jean-covered knees, dark hair badly in need of a haircut, a day’s worth of beard shadow darkening that defined jaw.

She’d mistaken him for a farmhand as she’d parked her old Volkswagen bug and hauled her suitcase out of the backseat. The dust the VW’s tires kicked up had slowly settled onto the sparse gravel on that sweltering summer day. She’d been sweating from the drive—the VW’s air-conditioning unit had long since given out—and her T-shirt was sticking to her back, her clothes damp and uncomfortable as she walked up the path. Cole stood, stretching to his six-foot-two-inch height, as her father’s old Jack Russell terrier mix scrambled to his feet and bounded down the worn steps to greet her excitedly.

“Let me help you with those,” Cole offered. His voice held the hint of a west Texas drawl. She almost expected a “ma’am” or “miss” to be added.

“No need. Got it. I’m fine. Hi, Rufus,” she said, bending down to pet the wiggling, whining dog.

Her father, pale, looking as if he’d aged twenty years in the few months since spring break, rose stiffly to his feet, his knees popping loudly. “Hi, baby,” he said as she walked up the flagstone path and steps, Rufus at her heels. Terrence hugged her fiercely even though she was still holding on to her duffel bag. He pressed a kiss to her temple, and she smelled it then, the faint scent of whiskey that had been with him more and more often in the past few years. She felt awkward and gangly and foolish as her father released her, and she found the stranger staring at her with eyes so intense, her heart did a foolish hiccup. “Eve, this is Cole Dennis. Cole, my daughter.”

“Glad to meet ya,” Cole said, extending his hand.

“Hi.” She hiked her bag to her shoulder and shot out her arm.

His calloused fingers folded over hers, and he gave her palm a swift, quick shake before he let go.

“Cole is my attorney,” her father added, sitting down again. She noticed the small glass on the table, ice cubes melting in the heat while overhead a wasp worked diligently on a small mud nest tucked under the eaves.

“Your attorney?” she repeated, taken aback. “A lawyer?” She tried not to stare at the disreputable state of his clothes—the worn jeans, rumpled, sweat-stained shirt, and battered running shoes that looked ready for a dumpster. Nor did she turn her attention back to the gravel lot in front of the garage and the unfamiliar, dented, and dusty pickup that was parked beneath the leafy branches of a pecan tree.

A slow smile spread across Cole’s jaw, as if he were reading her thoughts. “That’s right, ma’am,” he drawled, and there was that Southern deference she’d expected, along with a tiny glint of amusement in eyes that hovered somewhere between blue and gray.

“What kind of lawyer?”

“Defense,” her father said, settling into his chair heavily. “I’m being sued. Malpractice.” He made a wave with the fingers of his right hand as if to dismiss a bothersome fly as he picked up his drink with his other. “It’s…a headache. It’ll go away.” But the bits of melting ice cubes in his glass clinked, and she noticed that his right hand shook a bit. And the beads of sweat clustered in the thinning strands of his straight hair were unusual for him, even on a hot day.

“So everything’s okay. Or gonna be?”

“Of course.” Her father smiled tightly. Falsely.

She glanced back at Cole. All signs of amusement had faded from his angular features and deep-set eyes, and in an instant he seemed to transform from a laid-back ranch hand to something else, something keener and sharp edged, something honed. She didn’t ask the question, but it hung there.

“Your father’s innocent,” he assured her. “Don’t worry.”

“Innocent of what?”
“It’s just a little malpractice thing,” Terrence Renner muttered again, taking a sip from his glass.

“I don’t understand.”

The two men exchanged swift glances. Her father gave a quick nod to Cole and then, carrying his now-empty glass, walked to a glass-topped cart where a bottle of Crown Royal Whiskey sat near an ice bucket.


Enlightenment followed. “This is about Tracy Aliota again, isn’t it? I thought the police said you weren’t responsible, that you couldn’t have predicted her suicide, that releasing her from the hospital was normal procedure.” She stared at her father’s back, watching his shoulders slump beneath the fine silk of his shirt as he added a “splash” of amber liquor to his glass.

Cole cut in. “This is different. It’s a lawsuit instigated by the family. It’s not about homicide or—”

“I know the difference!” she rounded on him. Her face was hot, flushed. The anger and fear she’d been dealing with ever since first hearing that one of her father’s patients had swallowed so many pills that no amount of stomach pumping and resuscitation had been able to save her life, came back full force. Tracy Aliota had been under Dr. Terrence Renner’s care ever since her first attempt at suicide at thirteen.

“But how…I mean, can they do this? Legally?”

“If they find a lawyer willing to take the case…then they’re in business,” Cole said.

Eve closed her eyes, hearing the mosquitoes buzzing over the sounds of a tractor chugging in a nearby field. The trill of a whippoorwill sounded. Everything seemed so perfect, so easy and somnolent. She wanted it to be that way, but it wasn’t. “Damn it,” she whispered.

Finally she opened her eyes again, only to find Cole staring at her.

“You okay?”

Of course I’m not okay! “Just dandy,” she responded tightly.

“It’ll be all right.” Her father was swirling his drink, ice cubes dancing in the late afternoon sunlight. His voice lacked enthusiasm. And conviction.

“Is that true?” Eve asked Cole, who had rested a hip against the porch railing as Terrence lifted the bottle of Crown Royal, his glance a silent offering to his guest.

Cole shook his head. “No, thanks.”

“I asked if everything will be all right,” Eve reminded.

“I’ll do my best.” Again that hint of Texas flavored Cole’s words.

“And you’re good?”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Beneath the worn Levis, ratty T-shirt, and “Aw-shucks, ma’am” attitude, he was a cocky son of a bitch.

“He’s the best money can buy,” her father said.

She stared straight at Cole. “Is that right?”

“I’d like to think so.” Was there just the suggestion of a twinkle in those deep-set eyes? Almost as if he were flirting with her…or even baiting her.
Whistling to the dog, she picked up her duffel bag and opened the screen door. “I guess we’ll find out.”

And she had. Inside a dark-paneled Louisiana courtroom where ceiling fans battled the heat and Judge Remmy Mathias, a huge African-American man with a slick, balding head and glasses perched on the end of his nose, fought a summer cold, the trial had played out. Cole Dennis, the scruffy would-be attorney, had morphed into a slick, sharp lawyer. Dressed in tailored suits, crisp shirts, expensive ties, and a serious countenance that often showed just a glimmer of humor, Cole was charming enough to woo even the most reticent jurors into believing that Dr. Terrence Renner had done everything in his power to preserve and keep Tracy Aliota’s sanity and well-being. Cole Dennis indeed proved himself to be worth every shiny penny of his fee.

And over that summer, Eve had fallen hopelessly in love with Cole, a man as comfortable astride a stubborn quarter horse as he was while pleading a case in a courtroom. A private, guarded individual who, when called upon, could play to judge and jury as well as to the cameras.

He’d been amused that Eve initially thought him unworthy in his disreputable jeans and running shoes, and it was weeks before he explained to Eve that her father had called him and told him to “drop everything” to meet with him at the old man’s house. Cole had been helping a friend move at the time and on the way home had stopped by the old farm to do Renner’s bidding.

In the end, after days of testimony in that small hundred-year-old courtroom, her father had been acquitted of any wrongdoing.

And Eve, watching from the back of the room, had grown to wonder if justice truly had been served.
Sam Deeds nosed his BMW to the cracked curb of the street surrounding Cole’s new home—a hundred-and-fifty-year-old bungalow that was the kind of place described as a “handyman’s dream” in a real estate ad. The front porch sagged, the gutters were rusted, the roof had been patched with a faded rainbow of shingles, and several of the original wood-encased windows had been replaced sometime in the past half century with aluminum frames. Cars were parked on both sides of the narrow, bumpy concrete of the street, crowding each other.

“Home, sweet home,” Cole muttered under his breath as he climbed out of the passenger side of Deeds’s BMW 760.

“Hey, I said you could crash with me for a while.”

“You mean with you and Lynne and your two kids. And Lynne’s pregnant again, right? Thanks, but I think I’ll pass.”

Deeds had the good grace not to look too relieved that his friend hadn’t taken him up on his offer. No doubt Lynne and Sam’s daughters might not have been so eager to have a near-miss felon sharing their roof.

“Fine. But if you change your mind, the offer stands.”

“I’ll be okay here.” He noticed a faded red Jeep parked before a sagging garage. “Is that mine?”

“Not until you fill out the paperwork, but, yeah, essentially it’s yours. I bought it from a cousin. Runs great, drinks a bit of oil, and has a little over two hundred thousand on the engine.”

“Just broken in.”

“That’s what I thought. The tires are decent, and I figured you might want a set of wheels.”

“Seein’ how you had to sell the Jag.”

“Seein’ how.”

Cole eyed the beaten Jeep and gave a quick nod of approval. “I like it.”

“Fill out the papers. The title’s in the glove box, locked with a second set of keys, a copy of the bill of sale, and the registration.”

Deeds popped the trunk of his 760, and Cole pulled out a slim black briefcase and fatter laptop bag. Deeds had managed to retrieve the two small cases from the police. No doubt the hard drive on the computer had been compromised and all of the information on Cole’s cell phone, Palm Pilot, and personal files was no longer private. After all, he’d been considered a criminal. Probably still was, in some circles. At least Deeds had gotten his stuff back; that was all that really mattered.

He grabbed his things and glanced again at his new home, if you could call it that. The ramshackle cottage was a far cry from his last house, an Italianate two-story manor whose exterior still boasted its original cast-iron grillwork and wide porticos cooled by slow-turning ceiling fans and shaded by centuries-old live oaks. The interior had been
renovated to its original charm with gleaming hardwood and marble floors, smooth granite and marble countertops, shiny white baseboards and doors, built-in pine and glass bookcases in the library, and a wrought-iron and wooden staircase that swept from the grand foyer to the library and bedrooms located above. Outside, behind thickets of crepe myrtle hedges, cut into the smooth stones of the backyard, was a lap pool that he used each morning before the sun had come up, before he drove his Jaguar into the private parking lot of the offices of O’Black, Sullivan and Kravitz, Attorneys at Law.

What was it his pa had said not long before he’d taken off? “The higher they climb, the harder they fall.” His old man had been a bastard, a part-time preacher, part-time grifter, and full-time loser, but he’d left his only son with a dog-eared Bible and a few pearls of wisdom.

Maybe old Isaac Dennis had been right. Cole certainly had experienced his own personal tumble. Nearly to hell. This pathetic little cottage only served to remind him of that.

As if reading his thoughts, Deeds said, “It was the best I could do.”

“This place is just my style,” Cole lied, managing the kind of conspiratorial smile he’d been known to flash a jury when cross-examining a witness and closing in for the kill. He’d never looked smug or self-righteous, just not surprised when the prosecution’s star witness was led down the garden path, trapped into admitting things he or she had tried to hide.

“Give me a break,” Deeds said. “Think of it as temporary.”

“Now you give me a break.” He and Deeds both knew that not only his credit but his reputation had been destroyed in the past quarter of a year. His once-sizable bank account had withered to a few thousand bucks. His house, Jaguar, and job had disappeared. But he was still good with his hands, able to fix about anything broken, so Deeds had somehow convinced the owner of this shack to rent to him despite his current lack of employment.

“I need a job.” Cole rubbed a hand around the back of his neck. Jesus, he hated asking for anything from anyone.

“We’re working on that.”

By “we,” Deeds meant the partners at the law firm, where Cole had once been their brightest star. Now his license to practice law had been suspended and was currently “under review.”

“You can still clerk at the firm.”

Cole nodded. He’d swallow his pride if it meant getting a paycheck, but it still stuck in his craw that the very interns and law students he’d mentored would now be higher on the food chain than he’d be. Well, so be it. He’d been in tight spots before and had always landed on his feet.

He’d do it again.

Besides, he had a plan. One he couldn’t tell Deeds about. A plan that was his personal secret.

A gust of wind swept down the street, trailing after a rumbling, converted bus spewing exhaust. The driver ground the gears as he reached the intersection, and somewhere, a few houses down, a dog barked. Lights began to glow in some of the neighboring windows though night was still far off. A few kids played on skateboards and bikes, and rap music blared from a beat-up garage two doors down, where a couple of twenty-something men were working on the engine of an older Pontiac.

“I had a moving company put your stuff inside. Still in boxes, I’m afraid.” Deeds handed him a small ring with two keys, one for the house, the other for the Jeep.

Cole managed another wry smile. “It’s not as if I don’t have some time on my hands.”

Deeds snorted. It was almost a laugh. Almost. “So, I’ll be talkin’ to ya.”
“Yeah.” Cole stuck out his hand. “Thanks, Sam.”


“I will.”

“I mean it.” Deeds didn’t let go of Cole’s hand. “And for God’s sake, don’t go looking up Eve or anyone associated with Roy’s death, okay? It’s a closed chapter.”

“Of course it is,” he said, forcing conviction into his tone as Deeds finally dropped his hand. He had to play this carefully. No one could suspect what he intended to do.

Deeds’s eyes narrowed as if he weren’t buying Cole’s new attitude. Thin lines of frustration were etched on the lawyer’s high forehead. “Just so we’re on the same page. Whoever killed Kajak has either left the vicinity or is laying low.”

“Or is dead.”

Deeds held up a hand, silently warning Cole not to say anything else. “Maybe. Doesn’t matter. You keep your nose clean. You and I both know that you’re not the New Orleans PD’s favorite son, so don’t give them anything to work with. We’ve still got that small charge to deal with.”

Cole’s jaw tightened when he thought about the misdemeanor that was still smudging his record. “I was set up,” he muttered through lips that didn’t move. “I haven’t smoked dope since I was an under-grad.”

“Even if I believe you, the weed was found in your glove box while you were out on bail.”

The muscles in Cole’s jaw tightened even more, and his fingers were clenched so tightly over the handle of his briefcase that he knew his knuckles had blanched. “Someone yanked the taillight fuse of my Jag to make certain I’d be pulled over. When I reached for my registration, the bag of marijuana fell out. If the stuff was mine, would I have been so stupid? So careless?”

“Hey, you don’t have to convince me. But I still have to clean it up. Get it off your record.”

Cole swore under his breath.

Deeds touched him on the arm. “So the pot wasn’t yours. So someone set you up. Okay. I believe you. But you’re the one who broke bail. You knew the terms, that you weren’t supposed to talk to anyone involved in the case, and you couldn’t help yourself.”

Cole couldn’t argue that one. He’d tried to contact Eve and had paid the price.

“Stay away from her, man,” Deeds advised, lowering his voice as if the kid jumping the curb on his skateboard could hear or care about their conversation. “She’s bad news.” Deeds’s cell phone rang, and he slipped it out of the clip on his belt. “Deeds.” A pause. “Oh hell…Look, I’m on my way.” He checked his watch, mouthed, “I’ve got to go,” and when Cole nodded, he sketched a wave, folded himself into his BMW, found his earbud, and switched to the hands-free mode of his cell as he turned the ignition.

As the sleek car roared away from the curb, Cole headed inside, but he knew he wasn’t going to take Deeds’s advice. One of his first acts as a free man would be to confront Eve.

Hang the consequences.

She had to keep moving.

Couldn’t waste time.
Eve headed to the cash register, pulling out bills. She didn’t want to think about her father’s culpability or innocence or anything else about the trial. It was all water under the bridge, and the fact that she’d wondered if Roy Kajak’s reference to “evidence” had something to do with Tracy Aliota’s death was just her own way of admitting she didn’t completely trust the father she’d thought she loved.

She finished paying her bill and walked outside to a day that was even gloomier than before. Purple clouds scraped the tops of the spindly pines in the perimeter of the lot. Raindrops pounded and splashed on the cracked asphalt, forcing Eve to make a mad dash to her car.

Samson howled in his cage, and as she shushed him she spied water on the passenger seat. Swearing under her breath, she grabbed the towel she kept in the car for just such emergencies. In the past few weeks the window had begun to slip a bit, refusing to seal. Kyle had looked at it a couple of times but hadn’t been able to repair the damned thing. She mopped up the small puddle then leaned across the bucket seat, pressed on the button to raise the window, and heard the electric motor whine to no avail. The glass didn’t budge. She’d just have to live with it and call a mechanic once she got home.

If she ever made it.

Her headache had dulled, the edges softening, and she wasn’t going to let something as inconsequential as the broken window bother her. She could even put up with Samson’s now-intermittent mewling.

She drove out of the lot and onto a side street before locating the ramp to the freeway again. Nosing her Toyota into the flow of traffic heading toward the gulf, she tried to relax. So Cole was a free man. So what? She wondered if he would return to New Orleans. Her sister-in-law was right about one thing: it was damned ironic that he had regained his freedom on the very day she decided to take the reins of her life again.

Fate?
Coincidence?
Or just bad luck?
Not that it mattered.
Because she wanted to see him again. Intended to face the bastard.

She had a hell of a lot of questions for him.

Within a few miles, the rain let up then stopped completely. Her wipers were suddenly scraping and screeching against the glass, and sunlight, so long filtered by the clouds, bounced off the pavement in bright, blinding shafts. Maybe things were getting better. Even the cat had stopped crying. Eve switched off the wipers just as her cell phone jangled. With one eye on the road, she pulled the phone from a side pocket of her purse and flipped it open.

She put the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“He’s free,” a raspy voice hissed.

“Excuse me?”

The phone went instantly dead.

“Hello…”?

A tingle of fear plucked at her spine.

She wanted to think that someone had dialed her incorrectly, that the call had been a mistake, but she knew differently. The message was meant for her, to tell her that Cole had been released from prison.
“No shit, Sherlock,” she muttered, scowling as she tried to read the display on the small screen. Caller ID failed her: Unknown Number was all she learned for her efforts.

She dropped the phone into the pocket of her purse again and fought a tiny drip of panic. So some idiot had called to…what? Inform her? Warn her? Scare her? So what?

It was no big deal.

Then why did whoever called hang up?

Why not finish the conversation?

The gravelly, almost hissing timbre of the voice in those two small words, He’s free, caused latent goose bumps to rise on her forearms.

She glanced in the rearview mirror and felt the spit dry in her mouth. A dark pickup was following her. Surely it wasn’t the same shadowy truck she’d seen in the parking lot of the restaurant nearly an hour before? The one with tinted windows where a man had been smoking…?

Don’t go there, Eve. Don’t panic. You, of all people, know how dangerous that can be.

But her heart rate jumped and her palms began to sweat.

Don’t do this…. It was nothing. NOTHING! A phone call. Nothing more.

Her gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. Had the pickup closed the gap? Was he hanging on her bumper? She knew all about incidents where someone would intentionally rear-end a victim on the pretense of an accident, but when the victim pulled over, the assailant would get the upper hand, pull a gun or a knife or…

Her heart was pounding crazily now.

She stepped on the accelerator and switched lanes, speeding past an eighteen-wheeler carrying gasoline. The pickup followed, and her heart thumped even more wildly, and she considered calling 911.

Get a grip, she told herself. The guy’s just passing the semi. It happens all the time.

She was breathing shallowly again, and the cat, damn the cat, as if he were infected with her own fear, started yowling again. She checked the mirror as she shot past a minivan and two cars, the needle of her speedometer twenty miles over the speed limit. Fine. Let her get a ticket. Be pulled over by the police. That would solve the problem!

But as she flew past the last vehicle, the dark truck she’d thought was so malevolent lagged far behind, soon disappearing from view.

He hadn’t been following her.

It probably wasn’t even the same truck that she’d seen at the rest stop.

She’d overreacted.

Again.

“No reason to borrow trouble,” she told herself, remembering one of her grandmother’s favorite phrases: Why borrow what you know is already coming your way? “Oh Nana,” she whispered, instantly missing the woman who had helped raise her once her mother had died fifteen years earlier.

Her sudden anxiety attack melted away, and she slowly let out her breath. For the next fifteen minutes she tried to concentrate on the radio, talking nonsense to the cat, obsessively checking her rearview mirror every few seconds. The menacing dark truck failed to reappear.
Maybe Anna Maria was right. She was still far from a hundred percent of being herself. Then again, would she ever be the woman she was before she’d been shot?

Of course not.

No one could ever be.

Not when she knew that the man she loved, the man she had trusted above all others, had tried to kill her.

His breath came in short gasps.

His heart was thundering so loudly that the freeway noise, usually crushing, couldn’t be heard. He snapped the stolen cell phone shut and licked his lips. Though he stared straight ahead, driving by instinct, his mind was full of her, recalling, relishing the sound of her voice as she’d answered.

Hello.

Innocent.

Trusting.

One little word, and it caused so many emotions to roil deep within him. His fingers gripped the steering wheel more tightly, and he smiled. A tingle swept through his blood, causing his groin to tighten just as the sunlight broke through the clouds. He stepped on the accelerator. The truck nosed up a small rise. Through the bug-spattered windshield, he spied her car again as she switched lanes, the Camry half a mile ahead, gliding easily around another eighteen-wheeler.

His heart thumped in his chest.

Behind his sunglasses, his eyes squinted as if he could focus sharply enough to see her. His fingers stretched over the steering wheel.

Come on, baby. One glimpse…that’s all I want.

Then her car disappeared around a long, sweeping curve. But he knew she was close, could feel her. He knew where she was going, but he couldn’t let her get too far ahead, out of sight, just in case she took a detour.

No, he had to remain within view.

Without checking his mirrors, he floored the pickup and sped around an ancient Mercedes burning too much oil, black smoke pluming from the exhaust pipes.

More speed!

He was losing her!

He pushed down on the gas. His truck roared past a newer Ford Focus with heavy-metal music throbbing loud enough that he could feel the thrum of the bass through his closed windows.

Still his eyes remained straight ahead, his gaze focused on the little red Toyota with Eve at the wheel.

He’d blown it the first time at the cabin.

She’d lived.

He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.
Eve couldn't make it all the way to New Orleans. The needle on the gas gauge was hovering near empty, while her bladder was stretched to full. With less than eighty miles to the city, she was resigned that she'd have to stop, so she pulled into a gas station/mini-mart that shared a parking lot with a coffee hut. Across a small access road was a McDonald’s where cars and trucks were stacking up at the drive-up window and vying for spots near the doors.

Eve eased her car to a pump and waited for the minivan in front of her to drive off. Finally she filled her tank, pulled around to a parking spot, took Samson out of his cage for a couple of strokes of his long fur, then offered him water from her bottle. He clung to her like crazy, rubbed the top of his head against her chin as she told him what a good boy he was. He meowed pitifully when she returned him to the crate. “Just a little longer,” she promised, leaving him in the car and wending her way through the vehicles parked in front of the market. The convenience store was doing a banner business. Inside, there were people standing in line to buy their gas, sodas, nachos, cigarettes, and beer. At the restroom she waited for nearly five minutes before it was her turn. After using the facilities and washing, she eyed her reflection in the small mirror, scowled, but didn’t bother to repair the damage. Who cared that her hair was a mess and her lipstick had faded hours earlier? She walked out of the restroom and through the crowded little store, where she grabbed a pack of M&Ms, a small container of aspirin, and a bottle of Dr. Pepper.

As she waited in line, she noticed a mirror mounted high overhead. Convex, the reflective glass gave the cashier a distorted but panoramic view of the interior of the market. In the reflection she saw several customers searching through the shelves, eyeing products, selecting their purchases, but one man was standing alone, not shopping, just looking at the entrance of the store through dark wraparound sunglasses…or…was he looking at her?

Don’t be silly, she told herself and glanced over her shoulder. She couldn’t see past the products stacked on the highest shelf and told herself she was imagining things. No one was lurking, ogling her behind the rolls of paper towels and boxes of cold cereal, for God’s sake!

No—this was all in her head. She’d been edgy ever since she’d gotten that weird phone call.

“Get over it,” she muttered to herself. Then, when the girl behind the counter peered at her oddly, Eve offered an embarrassed smile and quickly paid for her purchases and tank of unleaded.

Outside, beyond the overhang covering the gas pumps, the clouds had lifted to a high, thin haze that was rapidly burning off. The sun hung low in the sky, promising darkness within the hour, but for now it was bright enough to be bothersome, reflecting harshly against glass and metal, creating tiny rainbows on the oil swimming on the surface of puddles caught in the uneven asphalt.

Eve rotated her neck, heard it crack, then slid into the driver's seat, where she tore open the bag of candy and unscrewed her bottle of soda. After popping a couple of M&Ms and aspirin and washing them down with the Dr. Pepper, she set the bottle into one cup holder and the open bag of candy into the other.

As she turned the key and her car started, she noticed a dark pickup parked near the coffee hut. A ripple of fear slid through her. Was it the same truck that she’d thought was following her earlier?

There are thousands of trucks like that, she reminded herself. She couldn’t make out the smudged plates from this distance, but they were definitely from Louisiana. The bed of the truck wasn’t empty. A toolbox positioned near the
back window had been bolted into the truck’s bed.

 Probably a construction worker or handyman or farmer…no big deal. Right?

 But as she pulled out of the lot, she glanced in her rearview mirror and saw a tall man in wraparound shades slip through the glass door of the mini-mart to stand and stare at her. “Sweet Jesus,” she whispered. She told herself she was overreacting, that the guy was probably just looking across the street at the drive-in lane at McDonald’s, where a vanload of kids were yelling at the speaker box.

 BEEP!!

 Eve gasped and stood on her brakes.

 Her car rolled just short of the access road as a red, low-riding sports car, hip-hop music blaring, jetted by, just inches from her front bumper. The three teenaged boys inside yelled obscenities and flipped her off.

 She sucked in a breath, her heart knocking wildly. She’d been so caught up in her own personal paranoia, she’d neither seen the car approaching nor heard it roaring down the road. Had there been an accident, it probably would have been her fault regardless of the other vehicle’s speed.

 “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

 Glancing backward, she saw no one. The man in the doorway had moved. Probably to get into a car and go about his business. It had nothing to do with her. “Get a grip,” she growled to herself as she eased onto the narrow road and squinted against the lowering sun. At a red light near the ramp leading to the freeway, she leaned over the passenger seat and opened the glove box, where she’d stashed her dark glasses.

 A manila envelope that had been crammed into the small compartment fell to the floor. Dozens of scraps of paper, that looked like jaggedly cut clippings and articles, spewed onto the floor mats and between the seats.

 “What the devil?” she whispered as the light turned green.

 The driver of the SUV behind her laid on the horn, and Eve stepped on it, somehow accelerating onto the entrance ramp and merging with southbound traffic.

 But her heart was thudding, her eyes darting from the road ahead to the scattered pieces of paper. She grabbed one off the passenger seat. It had sharp, jagged edges, and Eve realized the article had been clipped with pinking shears. Her heart was thudding as she held the piece of paper against the steering wheel and scanned the headline:

 TWENTY-YEAR-OLD MYSTERY SOLVED. WOMAN’S DEATH RULED A HOMICIDE.

 “What?” Driving nearly sixty miles an hour, she didn’t dare read the article as she drove, but several phrases leapt out at her.

 Faith Chastain, murder victim.

 Our Lady of Virtues Mental Hospital.

 Detective Reuben Montoya of the New Orleans Police Department.

 Eve’s confusion and anxiety increased. “My God,” she whispered, dropping the clipping. Montoya was one of the cops who had been integral in Cole’s arrest, and the mental hospital was a place Eve knew all too well. Her father had worked there, been the chief psychiatrist, and she had played on the grounds as a child. Faith Chastain. Why did that poor woman’s name ring a distant bell in her head?

 Her throat turned to sand. She glanced at another article. It, like the first, had been cut with pinking shears.
“Dear Lord, what…?” Eve eased off the gas as she skimmed the article about a recent serial killer in New Orleans, a sick man who had killed at least half a dozen people.

She didn’t bother reaching for another. She got the idea. Biting her lower lip, she tried to concentrate on the road stretching out before her.

Who had left the packet in her car?

Who would know that she’d grown up at the old mental hospital?

Why all the interest in Faith Chastain, a woman long dead?

Her heart was hammering, her lungs tight. If she let herself, she could easily slip into a full-blown anxiety attack. “Hang in there,” she told herself and began counting silently in her head once again. *One…Two…Three…*

Whoever had put these articles in her car had done it deliberately…to make a point.

Why? When?

**WHO?**

All the clippings were about the mystery shrouding Faith Chastain’s death, and they hadn’t been torn or cut carelessly. Whoever had taken the time to cut out the articles had indeed done so with pinking shears. It was as if each of the little printed stories was surrounded by razor-sharp, even teeth.

Eve’s skin crawled.

She’d heard about the scandal surrounding the old, abandoned hospital and the more recent murders. The story had been all over the news a few months earlier.

Before Roy’s death.

Before a bullet had grazed her skull.

Who had left the envelope in her locked car? She checked her mirrors, saw no dark, ominous truck trailing after her. How had someone put the envelope in the glove box? She always locked her car….

*Except at the gas station.*

*You thought you would just run in for a second.*

*You were distracted by the cat. By your headache. By the fact that you needed to pee.*

Even so, she usually hit the remote lock on her key chain. It was automatic, part of her routine, and on this trip security was even more important. She was driving with most of her belongings in her Toyota. Would she have been so careless as to leave the doors unlocked?

She thought hard. She remembered locking the doors at the restaurant, but…maybe not at the gas station? A chill whispered through her as she remembered the phone call and the raspy voice:

*He’s free.*

What the hell was that all about?

And the truck she’d thought had been following her, was that somehow also connected…to the old asylum?

*Don’t jump to conclusions.*
“I’m not!” she said aloud, and from the backseat Samson growled.

Cold sweat broke out on her skin as she glanced in her mirrors again then floored it. She needed to get to New Orleans as fast as humanly possible. Once she was home, inside the house, with the doors locked, the dead bolts thrown, and the chains secured, she would read all of the articles that had been left for her and try to figure out what it all meant.

She knew this for certain: someone had followed her. The thick envelope hadn’t been in the car this morning when she’d shoved her sunglasses in the compartment that held her registration and maps.

Panic pulled at the edges of her mind. What else could the guy have left? A homing device? A bomb? A tiny camera?

Stop it. You’ve seen too many stupid murder movies lately.

But her breathing was erratic, her pulse jumping.

He’s free. The message from the anonymous caller was somehow connected to Cole Dennis’s release from prison. Was it also connected to Our Lady of Virtues Hospital? Had her mysterious caller left her the clippings? Was there some message she was meant to understand?

Or was she making up a plot when there was none? Searching for answers that simply did not exist?

Reaction sent a shiver through her, and Eve pressed her foot to the accelerator.

She found the envelope!

He knew it.

Could sense her fear, her panic.

Behind his dark glasses, the Reviver stared through his windshield to the road ahead. She was within striking distance. She was having trouble concentrating, breathing hard, trying to keep her fear at bay.

And failing.

Hidden behind a pickup and an SUV, he forced himself to lag nearly half a mile behind her Toyota. From this distance, he was able to catch glimpses of her car and noted how her Camry hugged the shoulder, never going over the speed limit, even slowing, until suddenly she took off, the Toyota picking up speed as she tore past two semis going sixty.

Perfect.

Finally she understood.

He licked his lips and imagined her as he, too, passed a few cars. But he always kept his distance, tucking into the right lane between the semis, ever following her, knowing where she was heading.

He imagined her face. The terror in her eyes. The rounding of her mouth as she realized she was being targeted. He knew her fingers were tight and sweaty upon the steering wheel, her heart trip-hammering wildly, her fright nearly a living, breathing beast.

Oh yes.

His own pulse was beating a quick, blood-heating tattoo.

I see you. Do you see me? Do you feel me, Eve? Are you scared? I’m here. I’ll always be here. You can’t run away. Not ever. You and I…we’re destined to be together…to die together.
Smiling, he pressed his boot more heavily on the accelerator, his dark truck picking up speed. The bright sun was settling into the western horizon.

Darkness soon to follow.

He felt that sweet torture of adrenaline spurt through his bloodstream.

Because he knew what was to come.

Dusk suited Cole just fine.

He’d waited for it, his nerves strung tight, Sam Deeds’s warning playing and replaying like a broken record through his brain: Stay away from her…. She’s bad news.

Yeah, well, he’d known that from the get-go.

But he figured that at this point he didn’t have much to lose.

After four hours of cleaning and organizing the rental house, he needed a break. And he had business to take care of. He’d already loaded a small tool kit and flashlight into the Jeep. Now he walked outside to the front porch. Though it was dark, the streetlight gave off more than enough illumination for him to see some kids still outside on skateboards and bikes, weaving through the parked cars and trucks. One old guy sat on his stoop, puffing on a cigar, and a gray cat slunk along the chain-link fence guarding an alley. The twenty-somethings were still at work on their old car, the music still cranked loud. He leaned on the porch rail, and the dank scent of New Orleans reached his nostrils, an odor that permeated the smell of burning tobacco, exhaust, and dirt, a reminder that the slow-rolling Mississippi River wasn’t too far away.

As far as he could tell, his house wasn’t being watched by the police, but he wasn’t certain, and he knew for a fact that Detectives Bentz and Montoya wouldn’t give up; they’d be gunning for him. So he had to be doubly careful.

He climbed into the old Jeep and backed slowly out of the cracked concrete drive. No other car on the street pulled out, no engine caught, no headlights followed.

Yet he couldn’t be certain.

With one eye on the rearview mirror, he spent the next hour driving through the city streets, filling the Jeep with gas, stopping at a market for a few groceries, then easing through the warehouse district and the French Quarter. No one seemed to tail him. No car followed, only to disappear and have another one tag-team. Obeying the speed limit, he drove on and off the Pontchartrain Expressway and across the river twice, all the while checking the cars surrounding him, watching his mirrors, ever vigilant for a tail. The police would be good, probably using two or three different vehicles, but after a final stop at a convenience store a few blocks away from Bayou St. John, and seeing no one pull out after him, he felt he was safe from being followed.

At least for now.

So he let himself think about Eve.

Damn her beautiful, lying face. She’d pulled a fast one on him, betraying him, using him, and setting him up. How had he been so blind?

He’d asked himself the same question for three months and had come up with no answers. Not one lousy explanation. But then, he hadn’t been able to see her, to talk to her, to shake some sense into her.

All that was about to change.

As soon as he settled a few things down here, he planned on driving to Atlanta and having it out with her.
Damn but he’d loved her, thought they’d spend the rest of their lives together, and she’d turned on him. Big time.

He’d believed she was sleeping with Roy and still wasn’t certain about that. The truth was murky. But he knew there was someone else in her life, a man she’d never named, a man she’d protected.

He ground his back teeth together. Remembering was a form of torture—masochistic maybe, but necessary all the same.

His fingers clenched over the wheel as he recalled their last fight, how she, all rosy in sexual afterglow, teasing, nipping at his neck and chest, playing with his nipples as she lay beside him in the sweatsoaked sheets, had fooled him completely. His heart had barely stopped pounding wildly, his breath was still short, and there she was touching him again, hot fingertips toying, a small purr of delight slipping past pink lips when she’d felt him grow hard against her leg.

“Look at you,” she’d whispered, those blue-green eyes glinting wickedly. “All ready again.”

“Aren’t you?” he’d asked against her ear.

“I suppose I might be persuaded.”

He laughed at her sudden coyness.

“If you tried hard enough.” Her breath had been warm seduction, rolling over his skin.

“This is a test?” He’d kissed that sensitive spot at the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

“Mmmm.”

“Am I passing?”

“ Barely,” she’d murmured, though her hands were already running their magic along the muscles of his back, and her nipples had tightened. He had run his tongue over one, and she’d arched up.

“ Barely, my ass.” His breath had blown over the wet tip of her breast.

“And what a great ass it is.” One of her hands had cupped his buttock, the tip of her fingers brushing his cleft.

Lust had gushed through his blood, and he was suddenly white-hot with wanting her, feeling her touching him intimately as he swept her legs apart with his knees and…

“Shit!” he said aloud to the empty Jeep. He was driving ten miles over the speed limit, taking the risk of being pulled over when he didn’t dare have any run-ins with the cops. Not tonight.

He sucked in his breath, his hands sweaty over the wheel. The image of Eve lying upon her back, naked and wanting, her lips parted, cheeks flushed and eyes glazed with wet, hot desire, still pounded through his skull.

Yet on that night, within seconds of further lovemaking, her cell phone had rung and she’d nearly leapt from the bed. It was as if the caller, Royal Kajak, had yanked her to her feet with an invisible string.

“You’re leaving now?” Cole hadn’t hidden his surprise and growing anger as he watched her pull on a pair of tight jeans.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He needs me.”

“He’s a nutcase.”
“Doesn’t change the fact that he needs to talk.”

“About what?”

She’d hesitated then, and he’d sensed she was lying when she said, “I don’t know.”

“Sure you do.”

“I won’t until I talk to him.”

“At this time of night? It can’t wait?” He’d glanced at the clock. Already after ten. But his argument had fallen on deaf ears.

“I won’t be gone long. I know it’s late but…that’s Roy for you.” She’d slid her arms through her little scrap of a bra then pulled her long-sleeved T-shirt over her head.

“Where are you meeting him? Can’t he come here?”

“No…he’s…he’s at his uncle’s cabin, the one I told you about…where he and I used to go when we were kids.”

“The fishing cabin?”

“That very one.” She’d searched the bedroom, found one shoe, and slid it on.

“Call him back. Tell him to meet you here. Or…or at your house. Or in the morning, for God’s sake.” Cole had rolled to a sitting position. “You don’t need to drive out to some decrepit cabin in the swamp. I grew up out there. It’s not safe.”

“He’s already there. Waiting.”

“So what? His car won’t start? You can’t call him back, change the plan?”

“I’m going, Cole.” Her voice had brooked no argument. “Oh.” She discovered her other shoe near the window and stepped into it. “This isn’t open for debate. Roy is critical to some of my research, you know that.”

Cole knew in his gut that whatever Roy told Eve over the phone, it had nothing to do with her studies of aberrant psychological behavior. “If it’s just about research, then it can wait until morning.”

She’d shrugged into her jacket and headed toward the bedroom door. A woman determined. A woman with a secret.

Cole had thrown back the covers. “Hell, if you’re so goddamned stubborn, I’ll come with you.”

“No!” She’d spun on a heel to face him. “He has something he wants to talk to me about. Obviously something important. He won’t like it if I don’t come alone. He’ll clam up. Be embarrassed and self-conscious.”

“Eve, listen to—”

“How many times have you left me? Just up and went to meet a client without a word of explanation?”

He was surprised when she suddenly took the offensive. “That’s different.”

She had snorted and pulled open the bedroom door.

Quick as lightning, suddenly realizing she wasn’t going to listen to reason, Cole had shot out of the bed, grabbing his own crumpled Levis. “There’s lawyer-client privilege and—” he’d started to rationalize as he stepped into one leg of his jeans and hopped toward the door.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she’d cut him off.
On the landing overlooking the foyer, still struggling with the damned Levis, he’d called, “I don’t like this, Eve.”

She was heading down the sweeping staircase of his home, moving quickly, one hand trailing along the polished banister. She didn’t so much as glance back at him.

“It’s not safe.” He had then managed to jerk the denim up his legs and over his bare butt as she reached the floor below.

“I’m a big girl, Cole.”

“Wait! Eve, this is nuts!”

She was at the door, purse slung over her shoulder, as he hurried down the stairs, still fiddling with his damned button fly.

“You can’t—”

“I can and I will.” She’d grabbed for the door handle, but Cole threw himself in front of it, barring her exit.

“Just… wait,” he’d demanded.

That had really infuriated her.

“You’re barricading me in?” she’d asked in disbelief. “These aren’t the Middle Ages! Get out of the way!”

“I’ve never trusted Roy.”

“You don’t trust anyone,” she’d shot back. “Even me, it seems. So cut out all this Machiavellian, macho, backwoods crap!”

That’s when he had made his biggest mistake: he grabbed her hard, his fingers circling her upper arms, holding her still.

“I’ll come with you.”

She had looked down at his taut fingers. “Let go of me, Cole,” she’d said in a curiously controlled voice. “So help me God, don’t you ever try to restrain me again.” When she met his gaze again, her eyes were filled with cold fury.

“What is it, Eve?” he’d asked, loosening his grip. He was at a loss to understand her. What kind of pull did Roy Kajak have over her? Childhood friend? Research subject? Or something more? Something deeper. Darker. Vastly more intimate.

“You’re way out of line here.” Her voice was low, threatening. “Way out. I’m leaving. You’re staying, and if you don’t let go of me this instant, I’m calling the police.”

He’d dropped her arms as if she’d stung him, watching as she snagged her cell phone from the side pocket of her purse.

“You’d call the cops on me?”

She didn’t answer, just had shouldered past him, cell phone still in hand, as she yanked open the door and hurried to her car.

Even now, months later, he could still hear the thud of her car door slamming shut, the cough and catch of her Toyota’s engine, and the angry squeal of her tires as she’d reversed out of the drive.

He’d stood stunned for about two seconds before closing the door, taking the steps back upstairs, two at a time. He’d then strode across his bedroom carpet, entered the closet, and hurriedly twisted the combination lock on the safe embedded in the back wall. His hand had closed over a handgun, and he hurried to his car, filled with confusion
and fear for her safety. Whatever was happening wasn’t right. Eve was hiding something big.

And he knew a shortcut to the cabin.
Streetlights glowed an eerie blue as Eve pulled up to the house she’d inherited from her grandmother. Her shoulders ached and her head throbbed, but at last she had arrived at the one place she could call home.

She parked in the drive in front of the old single-car garage. Nana’s old house stood alone, a covered porch leading from a door on its side to the main house, a three-story Victorian complete with the high turret her grandmother had used as an artist’s studio for as long as she could mount the spiral staircase. Even as a kid Eve had claimed the room as her own, and whenever she spent weekends or summers with Nana, she slept in the turret with its three-hundred and-sixty-degree view and easy access to the roof. In the summers, Eve had often sat outside on the old shingles, staring across other roofs and trees, imagining she could see across St. Charles Avenue, Magazine Street, and the area known as the Irish Channel, to view the Mississippi River—which, of course, was impossible.

Now she eyed the old house and smiled with relief. “We made it,” she said to Samson as she turned off the engine. First things first: let the damned cat out! Well, if not out, at least free of the cage and in the house. She would keep him inside for a few days, just to make certain he was reacquainted with the house, and only then would he have some freedom outside.

Glancing down at the clippings still littering the passenger seat and floor, she decided to leave them where they were for the time being. She wasn’t as panicked about them now. Later, she said to herself, hauling her purse and the cat carrier up the back steps to the porch and back door.

As much as she’d always loved this house, with its high ceilings, narrow halls, and smells of pecan pies, rich coffee, and dried flower sachets, she’d been as shocked as anyone that Nana had left the house to her, bypassing her own son and Eve’s half brothers as well.

Eve unlocked the back door and walked through a small mudroom before entering the kitchen. She switched on a few lights and wrinkled her nose at the smells of dust and mold that had settled into the old timbers in the time she’d been gone. There was also the pervasive smell of rot, and she had only to look under the kitchen sink to find garbage that had needed to be taken out months ago.

“Great,” she muttered, unlocking the cat carrier and watching Samson streak through the cage door. She spent the next fifteen minutes hauling out the trash, refilling the litter box, and setting out food and water for Samson then carrying in her things. After she’d hauled in her luggage and stacked it near the foot of the stairs, she returned to the car one last time and picked up the envelope and all the scattered clippings from the floor of the passenger seat. Just touching them made her feel dirty. Whoever had gone to all the trouble to cut these out, stuff them in an envelope, and wait for the right moment to plant them in her car had done so with a purpose.

He’d intended to scare her.

Why else break into the car and leave the envelope anonymously? Had it been at the gas station, where she’d perhaps forgotten to lock the car? That’s where she’d seen the man staring at her from behind dark glasses.

No doubt about it: she’d been followed.

*He could be here right now. Watching.*

Her head snapped up quickly, and she studied the empty street, the shadowy bushes skirt ing her house, the alley
behind the garage. Her eyes and ears strained, but she saw no one, heard no scrape of shoes against pavement, felt no whisper of air movement, smelled nothing but the rainwater dripping from the broad leaves of the mountain laurel tree planted near the drive.

She shivered as she gathered all the papers and pressed the lock button on her remote. The car chirped, and its parking lights flashed as the Camry locked down. No more break-ins. She glanced over her shoulder and felt the hairs on the back of her neck lift. Who had done this? Had they followed her?

Everything looked safe. The houses flanking hers had warm lights glowing through their shaded windows. The night was quiet, few cars passing, just the soft sough of the wind whispering through the pecan, pine, and live oak trees in the yard. Still, looks could be deceiving. She was wary, nerves strung taut as she hurried inside and slid the dead bolt behind her with a satisfying *thunk*.

She placed the envelope and all of the pieces of paper onto the kitchen table, examining them from a distance, almost afraid to touch them. There were nearly thirty articles, all neatly trimmed with pinking shears, all pertaining to Faith Chastain’s tragic death.

Who had sent them to her?

Why?

What did a woman who’d been dead over twenty years have to do with her?

Struggling to make sense of it, Eve considered what she knew. *Faith Chastain died at Our Lady of Virtues. The mental hospital where Eve’s father practiced. That massive brick building where she had played as a child, hiding from the nuns, spying on the patients.*

Now Eve rubbed her hands together, tamping down a niggling anxiety. She asked herself: *Don’t you intend to go back there, to wander through the hallways and rooms where you witnessed so much cruel abuse once called “treatment”? Haven’t you been fascinated with the old asylum? Isn’t it integral to your research? Don’t you plan to compare the use of physical restraints, so common at Our Lady of Virtues, to some of the antipsychotic drugs used today? The question is, Who else knows? Why does he care? What is he trying to tell you?*

Swallowing hard, Eve felt a little dizzy as she stared at the articles. If her theory was correct and someone wanted to either scare her from her research or…what? Warn her? Then why focus on Faith Chastain? A woman she didn’t remember.

Or did she?

Had Faith Chastain been one of the patients Eve had spied on as a child? Eve’s heart pounded a little faster and shame washed over her as she remembered lying to her father, telling him she was going to play outside on the swings, or take a walk through the woods, or go to the stables where a few horses were kept, when she’d really been intent on slipping through the hospital itself like a ghost, creeping through rooms and hallways that were supposed to be off-limits, ignoring all the rules.

It had been horrifying but fascinating to her as she witnessed patients in straitjackets or other restraints. She knew it wasn’t right, but at times the patients had frightened her. Some of them, perhaps, who had been given lobotomies years before; others who were the victims of electroshock treatment.

Her childish fears still had the power to embarrass her, and now her cheeks flushed. The patients she’d found so captivating, those she’d avoided, or those who had frightened her, had been ill, battling unseen demons. Of course she hadn’t understood their maladies or psychoses.

She’d been so uninformed. If not uncaring, then at least more concerned about herself than anyone else. The truth was, some of the more serious patients just plain creeped her out. They had been intriguing, but in a frightening way. Her interest in psychiatry was more than a career choice; it was a means to atone. With her injury and Roy’s death, she’d missed the spring semester but hoped to return to the university in the fall.
Shaking the thoughts aside, she turned her attention to the clippings. Someone obviously knew about her connection to the old hospital. But why would they care?

With a determined sigh, she walked to the table again, picking up the clippings one by one, scanning them and trying to put them in some sort of order. There were no dates on the articles and the best she could do was separate them by type of print—newspaper or magazine. She could search the articles on the Internet and planned to do so as soon as she had her modem hooked up again.

But not tonight. Not when her headache was building again after the long trip. She needed to sleep on this, maybe figure out what it meant. Rubbing her temples, she walked to the sink, where she let the water run for a couple of minutes while she scrunched in the cupboard for a reasonably clean glass. She swallowed two more tablets of aspirin, chased them down with cool water from the tap, then leaned over the sink and splashed more water onto her face.

Twisting off the tap, she found a terry-cloth towel in a drawer and dabbed at her face. Everything she’d gone through this day faded a bit as she glanced around the room where she’d spent hours with her grandmother. Pink tile, floral wallpaper in tones of green, gray, and pink, once-white cabinets, scratched hardwood floors—the kitchen hadn’t changed since she was a toddler who had needed to stand on a chair at the sink to play with a piece of pie dough as her grandmother created the sweetest pecan and peach pies Eve had ever tasted.

She smiled faintly as she remembered her hands and tiny apron covered in flour while her brothers—“the ruffians,” Nana had called them—played outside no matter what the weather. Even then there had been a distinction. Kyle and Van hadn’t been allowed to wear shoes past the mudroom or to “roughhouse” inside, whereas Eve had been given carte blanche to do nearly anything she wanted. She was Nana’s favorite and had been from the get-go. Even though Eve was adopted, Nana had still considered her special, solidifying the union between Terrence Renner and his wife, a woman who had come to the marriage with two sons sired by a man who had spent more years in prison than out. Though Eve’s father had adopted Kyle and Van, they had been surly preteens with attitudes at the time of the marriage—“Troublemakers and hooligans,” Nana snorted—while Eve had come into the family as a tiny infant.

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to understand why Kyle and Van had so little use for her. Kyle had grown into a brooding, unhappy man, while Van had spent his adult years thinking only of himself, a narcissist to the nth degree.

Eve knew now that the grandmother she’d worshiped was in reality a bigoted old woman who relished playing favorites. And it had only been exacerbated with Dorothy Gilles Renner’s death—when Eve’s grandmother spelled out in her last will and testament that the lion’s share of her estate would go to Eve. Token bequests had been left to Kyle and Van, while Eve’s father, Dorothy’s only child, had wound up with an abandoned farm surrounded by swampland and his father’s World War II memorabilia.

A bitter pill to swallow for all of the men in the family.

At the time of the bequests, Eve had wrestled with her conscience about the unfairness of it all and had finally decided that when she ever sold the old house, she’d make it up to her brothers.

But not tonight.

Now she was beat. She walked through the house, turning on table lamps. At the base of the stairs, she grabbed her largest suitcase and luggerd it up the creaking wooden steps. The once-colorful runner leading upward was worn, just like the rest of the house, and sometimes Eve wondered if her grandmother had bequeathed her a golden goose or an albatross. Bringing the old house up to date while preserving its historic charm would cost a fortune, so for now the fraying runner, chipped pink tiles and fading wallpaper would remain.

On the second floor she paused, caught her breath, and frowned when she realized how weak she still was. All because of a would-be assassin’s bullet.

Cole.

Her lover.
Her confidant.

Her assailant.

Her stomach tightened into a hard knot as she envisioned his handsome, angry face glaring at her as he raised the gun and, in a flash of light and a splintering of glass, nearly killed her.

That’s how it was.

Wasn’t it?

Cole had tried to kill her....

“Bastard,” she whispered, shuttering her mind. She couldn’t go there tonight.

Walking into the master bedroom, she tossed her dirty clothes into a basket and hung the others up, wrinkles and all. She took one last trip downstairs, found Samson and held him close, listening to his deep purr rumbling against her body, feeling his long tail wrap around her torso.

“I’m sorry for that horrible, long drive,” she said. “You’re such a good, good boy. Forgive me?” The cat looked at her with wide gold eyes then rubbed his head beneath her chin and purred loudly. “So, here we are Samson. Now what’re we going to do? Hmm? Start over, I guess.”

*And face Cole. No matter what.*

The cat slid from her arms and hopped onto a window ledge near the kitchen table to peer into the night.

“Don’t get on the counters,” Eve said as she always did. “Or the table.”

After double-checking that all the doors were locked and bolted, she headed for the bathroom. Once inside, she locked the door, swabbed out the old claw-footed tub, filled it, stripped off her clothes, then climbed into the warm water.

_Heaven_, she thought, lowering herself to her chin, feeling the water caress her skin, soaking out the knots of tension in her neck and back. She closed her eyes. The water enveloped her, and over the sound of her own breathing she heard the sigh of the wind rustling the leaves of the magnolia trees in the backyard and the creaks and groans of the old house.

Cole’s image floated through her mind. A rugged if not handsome face, startling blue eyes that shifted color with the daylight, a blade-thin mouth that could flatten in silent anger or lift at the corners in amusement. She’d thought he was “the one,” if there really was such a thing—and she’d been wrong, she realized now as she reached for a cracked bar of soap.

Dead wrong.

“Son of a bitch,” Cole swore as he drove out of the city. Thinking of Eve was getting him nowhere.

With a wary eye on the other traffic, he maneuvered his Jeep across the bridge spanning Lake Pontchartrain and was only vaguely aware of the miles of black water stretching in all directions. He tapped his fingers nervously on the steering wheel and, once he was across the wide stretch of water, drove through several small towns to a wooded spot where one of his few cousins still owned a mobile home. They’d played here as kids, but he suspected that Jim, long married and living near Philly with his wife and son, hadn’t been back in half a decade. He parked in the drive and waited.

Five minutes.

Ten.
No one appeared.

It was now or never.

Grabbing the tool kit, he pulled out a flashlight and locked the Jeep behind him. The night was cool, a fine mist rising through the trees and undergrowth of this bayou retreat. Cole pulled on a pair of thick gloves then vaulted the fence and walked toward the old house. It stood long and low, a once-white behemoth in the otherwise dark woods. Chancing the flashlight, he ran the beam over the aging aluminum and glass. The curtains were drawn, stains visible in the lining, spiderwebs tucked along the dirty glass where moss seemed to have somehow taken root.

No one had been here in a long time.

Aside from hunters or fishermen who had trespassed, he was probably the last one to walk around the old single-wide. There wasn’t even a sign of a campfire or broken lock to suggest that squatters had found the remote trailer.

Which was all the better.

Feeling as if time were chasing him, Cole hurried along an old deer trail until he came to a fork in the path. He turned unerringly toward the south and ended up at a dock where once his cousin had moored a dinghy. There was no longer a boat, and the pier was rotting, some of the boards missing. Cole shined his light across the dark water and heard a splash that was probably an alligator sliding from the bank.

Sweeping his flashlight’s beam over the shore, he located a solitary cypress tree with a split trunk. Bleached white, it stood a ghostly sentinel, and Cole sent up a silent prayer that it hadn’t been disturbed in the last year. Making his way to the far side, near the water, he found a hole between the bare, exposed roots. First he pulled on a pair of thick gloves. Then he tested the hollow by shining a light inside. He saw nothing, but it was dark, the slit in the roots barely larger than a man’s hand. He couldn’t be certain. Squatting closer to the bole of the tree, he withdrew a long-handled screwdriver from his tool kit and used it to poke and prod whatever might have taken refuge there. He didn’t want to surprise a sleeping water moccasin or other creature.

No animal hissed, barked, screamed, or flew from the opening, but his heart was pounding double-time all the same. He reached inside carefully and gently scraped at the dirt he’d piled inside until the tips of his gloves encountered something foreign. He smiled in the darkness. “Bingo,” he whispered, digging swiftly until he extracted a nylon fanny pack.

Slipping the unopened pack into his tool kit, Cole retraced his steps quickly, half running through the low brush and trees. He heard nothing save the sound of his own short breaths and thudding heartbeat. If anyone found him now, he’d have a lot of explaining to do.

Near the fence, he clicked off the flashlight, climbed over the old chain-link, and landed softly about twenty yards from his Jeep. Where he froze. Waiting. Catching his breath and watching for any hint that he’d been followed or that someone was nearby.

The seconds clicked by.

Nervous sweat trickled beneath his collar.

Somewhere to the east, an owl hooted softly, but he could see no figure in the darkness, detected no scent that shouldn’t be in the night air, heard no snaps of twigs or shuffling of feet.

Get moving. It’s now or never.

Ever alert, he started forward, and when no one jumped out at him, he walked quickly and surely until he reached his vehicle. He unlocked it, yanked open the door, and tossed his tool kit and dirty fanny pack inside.

He backed out of the lane carefully. No flashing red and blue lights were waiting for him, no burly cops with handguns or clubs. At the county road, he threw the Jeep into first and took off, eyeing the bag on the seat next to him. Only after he’d put five miles between himself and the single-wide and was heading through a small town on
his way back to the city did he pull open the fanny pack zipper and reach inside. Plastic met his fingertips. He flicked on the interior light and caught a glimpse of the money. Fifteen tight rolls, each totaling a thousand dollars, banded and wrapped in a ziplock bag. Fifteen grand. Not exactly a king’s ransom, but enough to start him rolling again.

*Blood money,* he thought but didn’t really give a damn.

Montoya glared at his badge and flung it on the table. Sometimes the job just wasn’t worth it. In the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator, grabbed a beer, and popped the top. The room was chaos, as he was in the middle of a major remodeling job. Some of the plumbing worked, some didn’t, and the common wall that had separated his shotgun-style rowhouse from the neighbor’s had been torn down. Now, to keep the heat in, Visqueen sheeting separated the two identical halves that would soon merge into one living area. The kitchen would be double its current size; they would have two baths and a second bedroom.

Eventually.

After two swallows of his Lone Star, he sat in a caned-back chair and absently patted the big dog’s head. Hershey, his girlfriend’s chocolate lab, licked Montoya’s palm. Montoya grunted, “Good girl,” but he wasn’t really paying attention to Hershey as he looked over a copy of the file he’d made of the Royal Kajak homicide.

There had to be something they’d missed, some piece of evidence to tie Cole Dennis to the crime. Correction: some piece of evidence that they hadn’t fouled up—or lost. They’d had, in their possession, a torn piece of black fleece that had matched a rip in one of Dennis’s pullovers, but the scrap had been lost before it had been tested for blood spatter or epithelials or as a fit into the sleeve of a sweater they’d discovered in Dennis’s hamper. Trouble was, the pullover itself had no blood spatter on it, just a hole, so they had nothing concrete. And even if the missing piece were to suddenly turn up, it would be the *only* part of the shirt with incriminating evidence, so what were the chances of that? Still, it was a departmental screwup they couldn’t afford, especially with a man like Cole Dennis.

Which meant, apart from Eve Renner’s word, there was no proof Dennis had even been at the cabin.

“Damn,” Montoya muttered, shifting his head. They hadn’t had enough to hold the bastard, and their prime witness had come up with a severe case of amnesia.

So now Dennis was free.

Montoya wondered if Eve Renner had intentionally sabotaged their case. She and Cole Dennis had been lovers. But then why finger him in the first place?

Shoving stiff fingers through his short-cropped hair, he scowled so hard his face hurt. The thought of that slime-bag of an attorney walking on the homicide caused the stomach acid in Montoya’s gut to start roiling.

Hershey gave a short, high-pitched bark and lunged for the front door. Her tail was already pounding against the side of a chair, kicking up dust.

*Abby was home.*

Montoya’s bad mood eased a bit.

The front door rattled, opened, and Abby Chastain paused on the porch to shake out her umbrella then folded it and dropped it into the stand near the door. The dog went nuts, wiggling like crazy. As she stripped out of her raincoat and hung it on the curved arm of a hall tree, Abby caught Montoya’s eye. She flashed him a sexy grin that caused an immediate shot of lusty adrenaline to spurt through his blood. “Hi.”

“Back atcha.”

“Sorry I’m late, but I stopped for takeout. Just a sec…Hey, you. Miss me?” she asked her squirming dog, kneeling down to scratch the lab behind her ears. Hershey whined and pushed her head into her chest. “Yeah, me too.” If
possible, Hershey’s tail thumped even harder. “Hey, slow down,” Abby commanded, nearly falling over and laughing.

Montoya couldn’t help but smile. His bad mood disappeared as she straightened and dusted her hands. “Now, that”—she motioned to Hershey—“is the kind of homecoming I expect, Detective.” She reached through the open door and pulled a white plastic sack and her portfolio from the porch swing, where she’d left them so that she could open the door.

“You want me to wiggle my fanny and whine at you?” Montoya scraped back his chair.

“For starters, yeah. And then, oh, I don’t know, you could nuzzle my face and lick me all over.”

She smiled at him. God, she was beautiful. Though she’d tied her hair back, some of the tousled red-blond curls had sprung free to frame her face. With a small mouth that was often in a thoughtful pout and eyes the color of aged whiskey, she got to him the way no other woman ever had. Now those eyes glinted naughtily. “And don’t forget to kiss my feet and tell me you’re crazy about me and that you can’t live without me.”

“And what would I get back?”

“Hmm. Let me think.”

In three short strides, he crossed the distance between them.

“What would you want?” she questioned softly.

“Careful,” he warned, “you’re wading in dangerous waters.”

One eyebrow lifted in wicked defiance. “My specialty.”

“Oh lady.” He barked out a laugh and shook his head. Wrapping his arms around her, he said, “Let’s forget dinner and go straight to bed.”

“No way. Not after I searched for a parking place for ten minutes, parked in a loading zone in desperation, and stood in line for the last order of pad Thai. Sorry, but we eat first. But afterward…who knows?”

“You are so much trouble.” He kissed her hard on the lips. Felt her melt against him. When he lifted his head, she sighed. “Okay, so you’re persuasive, but, really, let’s eat first. I see no contractor showed up today.”

“Tomorrow. He promised.”

“Oh-huh,” she said, disbelieving as she eyed the wall of plastic behind the big-screen TV. Where there had been built-in shelves, there was now just a murky plastic barrier separating Montoya’s living space from the gutted living room that had once belonged to Selma Alexander. “Hey, what’s this?” She looked at the table where the files on Dennis were strewn around his badge. “Uh-oh, I heard about this. It was all over the news that Cole Dennis was released.” She walked into the kitchen, the dog at her heels, and untied the plastic bag she’d been carrying, then opened each individual container of food. As she scooped steaming noodles, vegetables, and chicken onto two plates, she added, “I know this goes against everything you believe in, but maybe you should just let this one go.”

Montoya shook his head. “I can’t. Cole Dennis is dirty, I know it.”

“But you can’t prove it.”

“Not yet.” He rubbed at his goatee as he followed her to the kitchen, where he rested his jean-clad hips against the counter.

“Sounds like a vendetta to me.”

“Call it what you want.” He took a swig from his long-necked bottle of Lone Star. “There’s got to be a way to nail
the son of a bitch, and I intend to find it.”

Handing him a plate, she said, “Clear a spot on the table, and I’ll get the forks. Unless you want chopsticks...”

“Forks’ll do.”

“So, where’s Ansel?”

Montoya lifted a shoulder. “Beats me.”

She skewered him with a glare of pure gold. “Was he in when you got home?”

“Don’t know. I’m tellin’ ya, the cat hates me.”

“Honestly!” she said with more than a little exasperation in her tone. “You don’t try to be friends with him.”

“It takes two to tangle.”

“That’s ‘tango.’”

“Is it?” He grinned widely, and Abby sent him a scathing look, handed him the forks, and instructed him to set the table before heading off in search of the miserable gray tabby. Montoya wasn’t big on cats to begin with, and this one was a royal pain, but he tolerated it as Abby seemed bewitched by the damned thing.

A few seconds later she returned, the gray tabby in her arms. The cat was purring loudly as she rubbed his pale belly and made little loving sounds into Ansel’s flicking ears. The cat rotated his head and stared at Montoya with wide gold eyes and such a smug look that Montoya could almost believe the feline understood every word and was using it to his advantage. “Safe and sound, I see.”

“Cowering under the bed.”

“I’m telling ya, I didn’t do anything but walk in the door.”

“Sure, Detective,” she teased as the cat squirmed out of her arms and dropped to the floor, only to hide under the couch.

“Hate at first sight.”

“Don’t worry about it. Eat,” she said and pulled a couple of place mats from a nearby cupboard before slapping them onto the table.

Montoya grabbed a second beer from the fridge, and when thoughts of Cole Dennis regaining his freedom surfaced, he forced his mind from the case. Maybe he needed a break. He opened the bottle and handed it to Abby, added napkins and a bottle of soy sauce, along with knives, then settled into his chair across from her.

Their living arrangement was new enough to feel a little awkward at times. They’d gotten engaged and she’d moved in, and though they’d known each other only a short time, he was certain he wanted to live the rest of his days with her, a divorced woman whose life had been in chaos from the first minute he’d set eyes on her.

“Zoey called today,” she said, winding noodles over her fork.

Zoey was Abby’s older sister, who lived in Seattle. “How is she?”

“I asked her, and she said, and I quote, ‘More beautiful by the day.’”

“No problem with her self-esteem,” he said, but they both knew Zoey was referring to the plastic surgery that had helped erase the scars from a vicious attack that had left her nearly dead. Montoya didn’t doubt that Zoey’s face would heal, but he wondered about her psyche, if the terror of being held by a madman, her life in dire jeopardy, would ever be completely erased.
“She wanted to know if there had been any progress on finding out about our mother’s other child.” Abby set her fork down and stared straight at Montoya. “I told her I hadn’t found anything.” Tiny lines of frustration crawled across her forehead, and Montoya understood her agitation. Abby had grown up believing that she and Zoey were the only children of Faith Chastain, a tormented woman who had spent much of her adult life at Our Lady of Virtues Hospital, a mental asylum that had been closed for nearly two decades. Only recently had the mystery surrounding Faith’s death been solved and another revealed: Faith Chastain had borne another child. The autopsy report from the time of Faith’s death revealed a cesarean scar, one that hadn’t been there when Abby, as a young child, had caught a glimpse of her mother’s naked body.

So what had happened to the baby?

So far, no one had a clue.

Abby frowned. She pushed her plate aside and folded her arms over the table. “I’ve searched all the birth and adoption records for the fifteen years between my birth and my mother’s death. If she had a baby, it would have had to have been in those years. I came up with zip. What about you?”

“Nothing.” The department, of course, had nothing. No crime had ever been reported, so Montoya had phoned an old poker buddy, an ex-cop who was now a private detective. “I talked to Graziano last week, and he hadn’t found anything. But he’s still looking.”

“The only way we’ll find out anything is to go through all the hospital records.”

“Our Lady of Virtues was a private institution.”

“So? There have to be records. Somewhere.” She picked up her plate and carried it to the sink. Hershey was only a step behind. “And someone knows about them.”

He knew where this was heading, and he didn’t like it. “The church.”

“Bingo.”

He picked up his plate and set it on the counter next to the sink, where she was running water. “You want me to talk to the nuns out there?”

“You don’t have to do it. I will.”

“Abby,” he said softly, touching her arm so that she glanced up at him. “Maybe it’s time to let this go.”

“You want me to just forget that I have a brother or sister that I’ve never met?”

“The baby might not have made it.” They’d been over this ground before, but as always, she was stubborn as hell.

“Then let’s find out, okay?” She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and tossed it at him. He caught it with one hand as she pointed a long finger at his nose. “Look, Detective, I’m getting to the bottom of this. I can’t go on living the rest of my life not knowing. So either you help me or I go it alone. Your choice.”

“Okay, okay. I know. I’m with you.”

“Good.”

“I’m just telling you we might not find anything, or, if we do, you might not like it.”

“So what else is new?” She let out her breath and held up both hands. “Hey, sorry. I didn’t mean to pick a fight.”

“You didn’t.”

She smothered a smile. “I tried.”
“And failed miserably,” he teased.

“You’re impossible.”

“At least.” He snapped the towel at her rear. “Besides, I’ll get even with you later.”

“What? In the bedroom?” she asked, eyes widening in mock horror. Splaying the fingers of one hand over her chest, she added, “Whatever do you have in mind?”

“You’ll see...”

To his surprise, she reached around him, unclipped the small case attached to his belt, and in one swift motion dangled the metal cuffs in front of his face as she kissed the lobe of his ear. Her teeth scraped the diamond stud he always wore. “And so will you, Detective....”
CHAPTER 6

The Reviver was agitated. Ready. Every nerve screaming through his body.

It was time.

At last.

He couldn’t wait.

Anticipation propelled him. Bloodlust snaked through his veins.

On silent footsteps, he crept through the undergrowth and followed a sagging, dilapidated fence line. Dressed for battle, his weapons belted to his body, he edged ever closer to his prey. A fine mist rose, adding another layer of camouflage to the already dark night.

In the distance, across a lonely field, he spied the farmhouse, windows glowing faintly. His pulse quickened. He told himself to be careful, to tread lightly; he didn’t want to make a mistake and suffer the wrath of the Voice.

Not this time.

God had spoken to him, and His instructions were clear.

Stealthily he slipped around a spindly pine tree.

A sharp hiss cut through the night.

His hand went to the knife at his belt before his eyes adjusted and he spied the thick, furry body of a raccoon. It had reared up on its hind legs, its nasty little teeth bared, its masked eyes glaring at him defiantly.

Stupid animal. It would serve the fucker right if he sliced its throat, killed the damned creature out of spite and left it for vultures and crows.

But he couldn’t risk anything that wasn’t planned. He had to remain focused. His orders had been succinct. The Voice of God had been specific and strong, telling him exactly what to do while the other irritating, whining voices had buzzed like white noise. The killing would begin soon enough.

Eyes glittering, the raccoon lowered itself onto all fours and lumbered awkwardly deeper into the underbrush and brambles, as if it hadn’t known how close it had come to death. His lips curled, and his fingers itched to grab his hunting knife.

Good riddance.

As the vermin disappeared from sight, he focused his attention to the house where his victim was waiting.

Unknowing.

With renewed purpose, he stretched the sagging barbed wire, slid through the opening, then took off at an easy
jog across the open field. The night was cool for May. Rising clouds of mist swirled from the damp ground, and the air was fresh and clean from the recent rain, filling his nostrils with the smell of moist earth.

It had been a long, rewarding day.

And he’d caught glimpses of her.

Eve.

Beautiful.

Seductive.

Deadly.

Oh, to want her, to feel her pliant, soft body beneath his. To smell her. Taste her. Feel the heat of her skin rubbing anxiously, eagerly against him. He would love to hear her moan, see her writhe in fear and ecstasy as he mounted her, claimed her, thrust so deep into her she’d gasp and the cords of her beautiful neck would stand out…inviting. He would do anything he wanted to her beautiful body, and she would accept him, understand their destiny. She would kneel before him, licking her already wet lips…ready to take him in.

He felt his cock twitch, threatening to harden, and he clamped his jaw tight.

There was no time for this kind of fantasy, not yet.

Later…Oh, yes, later…

For now, he had to concentrate.

He had work to do.

She would wait.

He knew where she was.

Earlier, he’d followed her. After assuring himself that she had indeed driven into the city and not to this remote farmhouse, he’d turned off the freeway on the outskirts of New Orleans, doubling back a bit and driving unerringly to a spot where he could park his truck. His pickup was now hidden behind a dilapidated old barn on a forgotten piece of soggy farmland near the swamp.

From the truck’s hiding place, he’d walked nearly two miles through thickets, woods, and open pasture. He’d seen the massive dark shapes of dozing cattle, startled a flock of sheep into bleating for a few seconds before he’d slipped from their pasture, and crossed two streams, ever intent upon his mission.

The Voice had warned him that there might be a dog guarding the premises. If so, he would take care of the mutt as easily as he would kill his victim. The Reviver would have to be wary. He slipped his bowie knife from its leather sheath then held it in his mouth.

Through the thin veil of fog, he loped up a small rise to the far side of the pastureland and spied an aluminum gate. Too noisy to open or climb over. Again he stretched the wire between the fence posts and slipped noiselessly to the other side.

He paused.

Listened.

Stared into the darkness.
He sensed no one outside, heard only the sound of his own heartbeat and the soft sigh of the wind rustling the branches of a willow tree and causing an ancient windmill to creak as the wooden blades slowly turned.

The house was only thirty feet away.

The porch light was off, but there was no dark shape lying near the door, no sound of a dog padding in the darkness, no smell of canine feces or urine or hair.

Ever wary, his hand on the hilt of his knife, the Reviver walked noiselessly through the weeds then hurried across parallel ruts of a gravel and dirt drive. At the garage he paused, every muscle tense. Slowly he swept his gaze over the unlit floorboards and stairs of the back porch. Still no mutt was visible.

Good. He pulled on a pair of thin black gloves and stretched his fingers. Then the waiting was over.

On the balls of his feet, he silently crept up the stairs to the back door. Paused. Checked the windows, peering through the glass. The kitchen itself was dark, but enough light spilled into the room from the hall. The room was neat. Uncluttered. Except for the bottle of whiskey, uncapped and sitting on the counter. Good. Just as expected. The Reviver moved his gaze slowly over the rest of the neat expanse and located the tiny light glowing on an area that was obviously used for a desk. Plugged into an outlet and next to an open notebook that was either a calendar or day planner or the like was a cell-phone charger with the phone inserted, the tiny red light glowing like a beacon.

He moved to the door.

Above the thin doorjamb he found a hidden key.

Just as the Voice had told him.

Barely breathing, the Reviver inserted the key.

With only the tiniest click of metal against metal, the lock gave way and the door swung open on well-oiled hinges.

Perfect.

He pocketed the key and took his knife from his mouth, holding it ready. Barely breathing, he stepped over the threshold and into the dark kitchen.

He was inside.

Eve made the call.

Dressed in her cotton nightgown and robe, she stood in the kitchen, warming one hand on a cup of green tea and holding her cell phone to her ear with the other. She’d promised Anna Maria she’d phone, and even though it was closing in on eleven, she was going to make good.

“Hello?” Anna’s voice was clear and chipper. Of course. She was a night owl, always had been, and didn’t understand people who rose before dawn.

“Hey, it’s me. I made it back. Safe and sound.”

“I was beginning to wonder,” Anna said.

“Tell Kyle.”

“I will, when he gets back.”

“He’s not there?”
“Uh-uh. He just missed you this morning, ran into the house, took one call, and left not long after you did. Some emergency at work. A breakdown of some computer system he set up for a local bank. They suffered a major crash. Their entire system is down, and with all of the identity fraud and scams out there, the owner of the bank freaked. Insisted all of the computers in every branch have to be up and operational by the time the bank opens tomorrow, so Kyle’ll be pulling an all-nighter.”

“You’d think they’d have a backup system.”

“Probably do, but Kyle’s their guy.” She sounded totally disgusted with the situation.

“Bummer.”

“Don’t get me started.”

Eve didn’t dare. She knew the drill. As much as Anna professed to believe in wedded bliss, her own marriage was a train wreck; she was just too stubborn and too Catholic to do anything about it. “Listen, I’m about ready to call it a day, so I’ll talk to you later.”

“Have you called your father?”

“No,” Eve said quickly then bit her tongue. She and Terrence Renner hadn’t been on good terms for a long while. “I’ll call him in the morning.”

“Right after you get the puppy?”

“What? Oh.” Eve smiled at Anna’s clever way of calling her a liar. “No, right before.”

Anna laughed. “Good. I’ll talk to you in a couple of days. Bye.”

“Bye,” Eve said, but the connection was already severed. Anna had hung up.

Making a face, Eve considered dialing her father and letting him know she was in New Orleans then decided it could wait until morning. Even if he were still awake, Terrence would have already downed a couple of stiff drinks.

She’d prefer to talk to him when he was sober.

Adding a little hot water from the kettle to her cup, Eve sipped at her tea then stared some more at the newspaper articles still scattered over the scarred oak table.

You should go to the police.

She read the clippings over again, taking mental notes. Faith Chastain’s obituary, over twenty years old, was included, and within it were the names of the loved ones she’d left behind: her husband, Jacques, and two daughters, Zoey and Abigail. Abby Chastain. Why did that name ring a dim bell?

Who had done this? How? There was no evidence that her car had been broken into. No windows smashed, no locks pried or jimmed. It was almost as if someone had used her own key to get inside.

A duplicate?

Her insides turned to ice. If someone had somehow gotten hold of her key ring, then any of her keys could have been copied, including the keys to this house.

She heard a scrape.

The sound of a fingernail sliding against glass.

Her heart clutched before she realized that it was the sound of a branch against a window on the second floor. Still, she dropped her cup onto the counter, and tea slopped over the sides of the rim. She didn’t care. She ran up the
stairs, stopping at the landing. Sure enough, the wind had picked up, rattling the limbs of the trees outside, causing a small branch to rasp against the glass. That’s what she’d heard. No one was trying to get in.

Forcing her pulse to slow and her mind to think clearly, Eve concentrated on the keys.

*Don’t go there, Eve! Don’t think anyone can let himself into your house at will. Your keys were never stolen. They were never missing. Someone slipped into your car when you inadvertently left it unlocked. And they did it today. You know that. Otherwise you would have found the packet earlier, when you put your sunglasses into the glove box.*

She tried to think dispassionately about the guy in the wraparound shades. She’d panicked at the sight of him, imagined him to be the embodiment of evil tracking her down. When she’d calmed down a bit, she’d blown off her fear as the bothersome result of an overactive imagination, but was it really? Could he be the culprit, the one who’d left her the clippings?

If only she’d seen his license plate.

“Get a grip,” she said, then nearly tripped on Samson, who was lying on the bottom step. “Careful there, guy.” She picked him up and carried him back to the kitchen.

*Turn these clippings in to the police.*

Eve grimaced. The local detectives already thought she was at least three cards shy of a full deck. Taking in this bundle of news articles would only up the ante on the theory that whatever brains she once had were destroyed when a bullet ricocheted against her skull.

*Maybe the police could pull off fingerprints, find out who broke into your car and left the envelope in the glove box.*

All too clearly Eve remembered the harsh, no-nonsense visages of Detectives Montoya and Bentz and the skepticism of the Assistant District Attorney who had been chosen to prosecute Cole.

“You’re certain about this?” ADA Yolinda Johnson had asked Eve, her dark eyes narrowing. She was a slim, smart African-American woman of about thirty-five who wasn’t about to walk into the courtroom without all of her facts straight and her ducks in a row. Eve was seated on one side of a large desk, Yolinda on the other. The office was small and close, no window open, and Eve had been sweating, her pain medication beginning to wear off. “Mr. Dennis shot you.”

“Yes.” Eve’s insides had been in knots, and she’d worried a thumb against the knuckle of her index finger.

“But you don’t remember anything before or after the attack, is that right?” Yolinda had clearly been skeptical, her lips pursing as she tapped the eraser end of a pencil on the legal pad lying faceup on the desk.

Eve’s stomach tightened. “That’s…that’s right….I mean, I remember being with Cole at his house—”

“In his bed, Ms. Renner. Let’s not mince words. The defense attorney certainly won’t.”

Eve’s head snapped up, and she met the other woman’s gaze evenly. “That’s right. We’d been in bed.”

“You were lovers.”

“Yes.”

“Go on.”

“I received a call from Roy…Roy Kajak. He was insistent we meet. He said he had some kind of ‘evidence,’ whatever that meant. But then…then it gets kind of blurry.”

“Mr. Dennis didn’t want you to go.”
“That’s right.”

“He barred the door.”

“Yes…”

“Did he follow you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you see him leave the house?”

“I…I don’t think so.”

“But you’re not sure, are you?” the assistant DA had accused, leaning forward across the desk.

“No.”

“So it’s all a blur. Until you saw Cole Dennis leveling a gun at you through the window.”

“Yes.”

“Even though it was dark.”

“Yes!” Eve’s guts had seemed to shred.

Yolinda frowned, her lips rolling in on each other. Her pencil tapped an unhappy tattoo. She stared at Eve a long minute that had seemed punctuated by the ticking of a clock on the credenza behind her neat desk. “Look, I’m not going to sugarcoat this, okay? The jury will understand why you don’t remember anything after the shooting. You were wounded. Passed out. Unconscious. That works. But possessing no memory leading up to that moment in time is a problem.”

“I can’t lie.”

Yolinda held up her hands, stood, then walked to the small window. “The last thing we want you to do is lie, but you’re going to be asked some tough questions while you’re on the stand.” Turning, she rested her hips against the window ledge, her dark gaze boring into Eve’s. “The fact is that you’ve got credibility issues, Ms. Renner. You were taken to the hospital, unconscious, and, along with other medical treatment, you were examined for rape.”

Eve had nodded. Braced herself. Felt as if the air in the room had suddenly gone stale. She knew what was coming.

Yolinda’s voice softened a bit. “You weren’t raped, Eve. We know that. There was no bruising or tearing consistent with rape. But you had semen in your vagina.”

Eve met the ADA’s hard gaze. She’d been through this before, but it was still difficult to hear. “I’d been with Cole,” she said softly.

Yolinda nodded. “Some of the semen belonged to Cole Dennis. But there was other semen as well. Other viable sperm. Definitely not belonging to Mr. Dennis.”

The first time she heard that horrifying information, the blood rushed to her head and made her feel like she would pass out, throw up, or both. With an effort, she just stared back at the ADA.

“And it was not from Royal Kajak.”

Eve swallowed but still said nothing. What was there to say? What kind of comment could she make? And how could she not remember something so vital? This wasn’t right. It couldn’t be. True, she had holes in her memory—a dark, blank nothingness surrounding the night of Roy’s murder—but she knew herself well enough to understand
that she would never sleep with two men within hours of each other. Never.

You weren’t raped. We know that.

Then how ???

“I only remember being in bed with Cole,” she finally managed to get out, sounding as confused and shattered as she felt.

Yolinda shrugged and exhaled a long-suffering sigh. “You see my problem, don’t you? If I get you up on the stand, and you ‘don’t remember this’ and you ‘don’t remember that’ and you don’t even remember who you slept with, how’s that gonna look to the jury? What do you think Cole’s attorney, Sam Deeds, is gonna do with that testimony on cross-examination?” Eve shook her head, and Yolinda continued tersely, “I’ll tell you what he’ll do. He’ll go at you, over and over again, get you tongue-tied and angry, so that you look like you’re either stupid or a bald-faced liar. Then, when it’s already awful, he’ll just keep pushing you, so that you get defensive and look like a two-timing bitch.”

“It was only Cole!”

“That’s not what the evidence says.”

They were at an impasse. Eve’s paltry excuse of “I can’t remember,” though the truth, was not going to sit well with the jury.

Yolinda nodded as if they’d come to some kind of agreement. “Even if we can convince the jury that you’re telling the truth about your amnesia, the idea that you slept with two men within twenty-four hours will be planted. Add to that, you’re trying to pin a murder on a jealous boyfriend. That’s how Deeds’ll play it. And he’ll have clean-cut, smart, innocent-looking Cole Dennis at the table, looking for all the world like the wounded party—the choirboy whose girlfriend was two-timing him with another man she can’t, or won’t, name.” Yolinda pushed herself upright and walked to the desk, found a file in her top basket, and slid it over the polished wood so that it landed, open, in front of Eve. “This will be one of Deeds’s exhibits. It’s the DNA report. Two different semen samples taken from you. It won’t help that the sperm wasn’t Kajak’s. If anything, that will only make it worse, because you claim you can’t remember whose it is.”

“Stop.” Eve knew she was being goaded, but she couldn’t take it a second longer. “I get it. I see your point. But I haven’t slept with anyone but Cole in two years.”

“Then how?

“I don’t know!” Eve shook her head. “It…had to have happened…after…after I got into the cabin.”

“But you saw Mr. Dennis at the cabin. Was there someone in between the time you left Mr. Dennis at his home and went to meet Mr. Kajak at the cabin? Before Mr. Dennis arrived?”

“No.”

“Was there someone else there?”

“No.”

“Who was he, Ms. Renner?”

“No one!”

“Someone after you claim Mr. Dennis shot at you at the cabin?”

“No. I didn’t have sex with anyone!”
“How do you know, Ms. Renner? You don’t remember.”

“Then it…it was afterwards….”

“At the crime scene? Or the hospital? When the police were crawling all over the place, or in the ambulance ride when you were still unconscious? Could you pick out the EMT with whom you had sex from a lineup?” Yolinda hammered at her. “You know, those people who saved your life? Which one of them did you have consensual sex with?”

Eve’s eyes stung. “I’m telling the truth.”

Yolinda nodded. “We can’t use your testimony, Eve. You see that, don’t you? Not unless I want to completely destroy my case.” With a sigh, she said, “We’re done here,” and that was the end of it.

And Eve had no more answers now than she had then.

The old man was drunk.

So it wouldn’t take long.

Hidden in the shadows of the aging trellis in the side yard, the Reviver checked his digital watch. Twenty minutes had passed since he’d slipped into the house, taken care of business, and then noiselessly walked outside again. His victim, who had been in the den and listening to some radio program, was none the wiser that he’d ever had a visitor.

Yet.

That was soon to change.

Everything had gone perfectly, just like clockwork. Just as the Voice of God had instructed.

He watched through the window. The kitchen was now lit, the open bottle of Jack Daniels in the sink, a tray of ice cubes left on the counter, the few remaining in the tray beginning to melt.

Unlike the good doctor to be so messy.

Tsk, tsk, he thought as he retrieved the cell phone from his pocket.

He made the first call. Listened as the man on the other end answered.

“Hello.”

The Reviver didn’t respond. Not yet. He had to do just as God had told him last night in his dreams.


“I have evidence,” the Reviver whispered, his voice so low and raspy no one would ever recognize it.

“What did you say?”

There was no need to repeat himself. The message had been heard and understood.

He hung up.

Glancing up at the house, he then swiftly checked the menu on the phone for a list of contacts, scrolled down, and pressed the dial button again.
Within seconds, the phone was connected.

One ring.

Two.

Three.

“Hello?” The old man’s voice was brusque, loud over the background noise of the talk radio show he was tuned to. “Wait a minute. Who is this? How did you get my…shit!” A beat. “You’re calling from my cell number…but…how?”

The Reviver smiled as the man appeared in the kitchen, walking with an uneven gait.

“You have my phone!”

Outrage. And his words were slightly slurred.

The Reviver didn’t respond.

“Hello? Are you there? How the hell did you get my damned phone?”

Again, no response.

“Did you find it somewhere? Did I leave it in my car…? No, wait. It was here earlier. I remember plugging it into the charger…. .” His voice trailed off. “You were in my house? You stole it, you punk bastard!”

“I have information,” he finally said.

A pause. “Information about what?”

“Information you’ll want.”

“Hey…what is this?”

Another lengthy pause.

“So, what is the information you have for me?” The man’s voice was calmer now, but the Reviver spied him walking from room to room, peering out the windows. “Why did you take my phone?”

Checking his watch, the Reviver hung up then flipped the ringer to vibrate and slipped it into his pocket. Within seconds he felt the cell vibrate against his leg, and he smiled inwardly, sensing the man’s panic.

Just as he expected.

The vibration stopped as quickly as it had started.

Quietly he walked to the side of the house, careful to stay in the shadows. The cell vibrated again, and he could feel the man’s growing unease.

Good. You feel it. It’s your turn.

In the window, his victim nervously lifted a short glass filled with whiskey to his lips.

Drink up, moron. Drink it all.

The man visibly swayed, caught himself by pressing a hand to the glass pane.

The Reviver grinned in the darkness. He’d spent so little time in the kitchen, just long enough to steal the phone
and slip the small tablets into the open bottle of whiskey.

It had been so easy.

And now those pills were working their magic, making his victim sluggish.

“Bottoms up,” he mouthed, feeling a rush steal through his blood as the man stumbled away from the window, heading, no doubt, for his recliner.

No reason to wait.

He hurried to the back of the house and stole up the steps to the back porch.

The door to the kitchen was still unlocked.

Dr. Terrence Renner drained his glass, set it on the table next to his recliner, and tried not to panic. Someone had called him…using his own cell phone. Someone had been in the house. Probably the teenagers who lived about a quarter of a mile away; three boys, and hellions every one. Troublemakers.

All that talk about “information” was probably just part of a prank. Right? And yet he’d heard real menace in the caller’s voice. Determination.

It took him three attempts to place the portable receiver into its cradle. Then he half collapsed into his recliner and stared at the phone, expecting it to ring again. All the while Midnight Confessions, that ridiculous radio show with “Doctor Sam,” a pseudo-psychologist, was playing on the radio. The show and woman irritated him, but he hadn’t been able to stop tuning in. Pop psychology. Ridiculous.

So who had his damned phone?

“Stupid punks,” he muttered and told himself to calm down, enjoy his fire—perhaps the last crackling fire of the season—and the remains of his drink.

He flipped off the radio, couldn’t stand to listen to that damned fake shrink another minute.

Had someone been in the house?

When?

Rubbing the back of his neck, he looked at the phone again and considered calling the police but was just too damned dizzy. He’d think more clearly in the morning. Tonight he’d finish his crossword puzzle then go to bed. He pulled the folded newspaper onto his lap and forced himself to concentrate.

From habit, he reached down to pat Rufus’s old head then realized his mistake. The dog had been dead over two weeks, and it was amazing how much Renner missed the old terrier, who in his youth had chased rabbits, squirrels, and cars with the same enthusiasm. Fortunately, the stupid dog had never caught anything.

A soft footstep sounded in the back of the house.

What the devil now?

He looked up quickly, knocking the newspaper from his lap as he stared over the top of his reading glasses. The room seemed to rotate slightly, and he blinked a couple of times. His nightcaps had hit him hard. Harder than usual, and as he pushed himself upright, he wobbled slightly, his legs unable to hold him.

“So...
when someone walked along its length.

But he was alone.

Wasn’t he?

The hairs lifted on the back of his skull.

Had the punks who’d stolen his phone returned?

“Hello?” he called, slightly nervous and feeling like a fool. No one was in the house. No one.

He strained to listen, to rise from the chair, to push up, but his arms were as weak as his legs, flaccid, useless appendages. Had he had a stroke? Was that possible?

Another footstep. Heavier this time.

His heart froze for an instant.

“Ith thum-one there?” he demanded and heard the slurred panic in his voice. “Inez?” he asked, calling out the housekeeper’s name though she wasn’t scheduled for another couple of days. “Franco?” But the farmhand who worked for him had left hours earlier, before the sun had gone down. For the first time in his life, he felt isolated out here.

Again he tried to push himself upright, his arms trembling with the effort, his legs wobbly.

Again he fell back.

Don’t panic. You’re imagining all this. The drinks were stronger than you thought...that’s all. Get up, damn it. Get up!

“Dr. Renner.” A deep male voice called to him from the darkened hallway beyond the French doors.

His eyes widened, felt stretched across his face.

He lunged for the phone, throwing himself from the recliner, knocking over the remains of his drink.

Ice cubes skittered over the gleaming hardwood floor.

Pain shuddered through him.

Pushing himself, he was determined to get to the phone, even if he had to crawl. But...but his arms wouldn’t drag him. His legs were useless. He was facedown on the floor when the light shifted. The glass doors opened, a shadow stretched in front of him, and he found himself looking at a pair of thick army boots.

He nearly lost control of his bladder as he slowly raised his eyes, up, up, up long, powerful-looking legs covered in camouflage, then farther upward past a matching jacket that covered a massive chest. Above the collar was a thick neck and a face concealed by a ski mask.

Startling blue eyes stared down at him.

“Who are you?...What do you want? I have money...in the safe....” Renner squeaked as panic closed his throat and constricted his lungs.

“Money.” The intruder spat the word. Moved his gloved hands.

Renner saw the knife—a long, wicked hunting knife, the blade catching and gleaming, reflecting the fire.

Terror grabbed him. “No,” he whispered. “Please...I beg you...”
“Retribution,” the big man whispered in a voice that cut through the air like a whipsaw.

“No…please…I don’t know who you are…what you want…but you’re making a mistake.”

“No mistake, Doctor.”

Fear blasted through him. He tried to scuttle away, to move anywhere, but his damned body…Oh hell, he’d been drugged. He realized that now. It wasn’t the booze…

His attacker lunged. Was on him in an instant.

A big hand pulled back on his forehead until his neck bowed back so far he was certain his spine would snap. Pain screamed down his backbone. “No!” he rasped.

In one last terrifying instant, he saw the wicked blade in a strong black-gloved hand.

It moved across his line of vision.

Oh sweet Jesus, this maniac was going to slit his throat!

The tip of the blade pressed against the side of his neck.

“I’m the Reviver,” his attacker whispered intimately into his ear. “I decide. Who lives. Who dies. Who will be revived.”

*Delusional psychopathy with a God complex.*

Renner closed his eyes. He knew what was coming.

*God have mercy on my soul.*

The knife point pricked his skin.

He swallowed hard.

“It’s God’s will, Doctor, that you go straight to hell,” the killer whispered just before he drew his arm backward and the blade slashed in a sharp, clean arc.
Why the hell had Terrence Renner called him?

Cole’s eyes narrowed on his cell phone’s screen as he drove toward the heart of the city.

And how would Renner know that after three months in jail, Cole’s cell phone service was restored, courtesy of Sam Deeds?

A bad feeling crawled through him, and he resisted the urge to return Renner’s call. In fact, he thought he should probably ditch the phone. The police had confiscated it when he’d been arrested; Deeds had just gotten it back and restored service, but what if someone in the department had put a GPS chip inside the phone? What if the police could tail him without physically tailing him? How would he know?

Shit! He didn’t dare use the thing, and the only numbers he needed that were stored in the phone, he had already memorized. He had to be smart...couldn’t take chances...had to ditch the cell and his computer and start over. Brand new. Just to make sure that Montoya and Bentz, or someone higher up, or the damned Feds, weren’t listening in.

You’re getting paranoid!

But someone had set him up for Royal Kajak’s murder. Someone who knew his movements. His reactions. Someone with a hard-on to see him sent away for good.

Who? he wondered for the millionth time over the past three months. Who had set him up? Was Eve involved? And who the hell had she slept with besides him on the day Roy died? His jaw slid to the side, and he squinted against the glare of oncoming headlights.

He would be a fool to think whoever had framed him before would stop now, or that the police would quit thinking he was involved in Roy’s death. No, he had to be careful.

So think, Cole, think!

First things first: he had to ditch the cell phone. With that in mind, he stopped the Jeep, placed the phone under its tire then ran over it, hoping to destroy the GPS chip if it had one.

Secondly, he had to hide the money again. Over time he planned to deposit it to his account in small amounts, as if he were being paid for odd jobs. But for now the Jeep was an unsafe bet, as was his new home.

But he knew another place…. It would just take some time, once he was back in New Orleans.

For now, he’d take care of this Renner business.

He didn’t like the feel of it and would take some precautions, but he wanted—needed—to know what was going on. Why had Renner called him?

Don’t step into a trap.
Cole wheeled the Jeep into a one-eighty and headed for the old farmhouse where he’d first met Eve. His jaw clenched, and he felt that same old rush in his bloodstream as whenever he conjured up her image.

The first day they met, she’d had the nerve to question his ability. She stared at him through intelligent eyes half a beat longer than necessary then opened that sexy mouth of hers and started putting him to the test, asking questions, studying him suspiciously, silently suggesting that she didn’t think he was up to the job.

“You’re really the best money can buy?” Her freckle-dusted nose had wrinkled, and Cole had found her amusing and irritating at the same time.

“I can hold my own.”

“Against what?” She’d swatted at a fly that buzzed too close to her loose red-blond curls. Thrusting out her chin, she’d tilted her head and waited, as if she enjoyed putting him in the hot seat.

“I think you mean ‘against whom,’” Cole had countered.

“I just want to know that you’re up for the job.” He had noticed a hint of fear in her eyes, and he realized that beneath her brash exterior was a daughter frightened her father could be sent to jail.

Cole had understood. In his estimation, Terrence Renner was a little off, a doctor with an incredible God complex. In retrospect, it had been Eve, more than Renner, the psychiatrist, who had persuaded Cole to take the case. Not because she’d asked him to. No. Just the opposite. Because she’d doubted him, eyed his battered jeans and faded T-shirt and made a judgment call: he wasn’t good enough.

And he’d been determined to prove to her that he was everything her father had claimed, the “best money could buy.”

What a joke.

The whole situation had spiraled out of control, and look where he was now.

Now, as Cole headed to that same farmhouse where he’d been so hell-bent to prove himself, he found it almost laughable how things had gotten twisted around. Now he was the suspicious one. For instance, why had Eve shown up at Renner’s that particular day? Coincidence? Or part of something much bigger than Cole suspected? His jaw slid to the side. And what about Renner’s patient, Tracy Aliota? Had Renner been as innocent as he’d proclaimed? Or had he had a tiny bit of hesitation about releasing her? Had he suspected that she might try to injure herself again? It wasn’t Renner’s fault that the girl committed suicide, but had he borne some responsibility for what had happened?

_Ethics_, he reminded himself. He was thinking about ethics, not legalities. Cole had proven that _legally_ Renner had fulfilled his obligation to his patient, but ethically…that was another question.

In any event, Renner had been vindicated in the trial, found “not guilty.” It had left the prosecuting attorney pissed as hell and Cole Dennis a hero in Eve Renner’s eyes. Which had been just what he’d wanted. He’d been so attracted to her, so focused on her, that he’d ignored the warning bells clanging loudly in his mind. He’d all too eagerly broken his own hard-and-fast rule of avoiding any personal contact with a client or any member of a client’s family. He had flatly ignored the fact that blending the boundaries between business and pleasure always ended up clouding his clear, razor-sharp viewpoint.

And so it had been.

For over two years.

Now, as he saw the flashing red light in the middle of the small town near Renner’s house, he eased on the brakes, and his Jeep rolled to a stop. His was the only vehicle at the junction. The reflection from the stoplight pulsed red against the pavement as he turned, driving down the lonesome street.
The empty town was lifeless, stark, only a few parked cars on the streets where neon lights sizzled and burned in the one tavern and every other shop had been locked for hours. A skinny stray dog wandered across the street a hundred yards in front of him, then, head down, disappeared down a narrow alley. A bad feeling crawled through him. It almost felt as if this part of the world were on a distant planet.

Shaking off the eerie sensation, Cole turned down the main street and headed out of town, past the shop fronts with their security lights, then through a residential area of single-story homes built in the forties and fifties, mostly dark, only a few lamps glowing behind drawn shades.

On the outskirts of town, he stepped on the throttle, pushing the speed limit, suddenly feeling an urgency to talk to Renner. He told himself that it had nothing to do with Eve, this visit to her father. He’d deal with the old man first then decide what to do about the woman who had turned his world inside out, sworn to have loved him only to end up cheating on him and accusing him of murder.

Rage fired through his guts, and he forced his mind away from Eve: beautiful, lying, two-timing, sexy-as-hell Eve. He couldn’t think of her now.

He passed familiar landmarks: a narrow bridge, a stone fence, a tilted mailbox only a quarter of a mile from Renner’s property. He slowed for the turnoff then cranked hard on the steering wheel, nosing the Jeep into the long, furrowed lane.

The good doctor was apparently still up, as warm light glowed from the windows on the first floor. He had mixed feelings about this place. It was the first place he’d set eyes on Eve. The start of so much that had ended so badly.

Cole parked near the garage. Then, as he had in the months before the trial, he walked up the back steps to the kitchen and rapped on the door. Crickets chirped loudly, and a moth was beating against a kitchen window. “Terrence?” he called, spying an open bottle of booze on the counter along with a tray of melted ice cubes.

No one answered.

He tried again. “Hello? Terry? It’s Cole!” He banged so hard on the back door, the glass panes rattled.

Again, nothing.

Nor did the old, half-crippled dog appear.

Cole knocked again but knew it was no use.

Well, hell.

Had Renner taken off?

Cole walked to the garage, peered through the side door, and spied the looming dark shape of Renner’s truck, a newer model Dodge, parked inside. Which didn’t mean he couldn’t have taken off with someone. Renner had called from his cell; Cole had recognized the number. So that meant he might not have phoned from the house.

Still…the open bottle of booze, the ice tray on the counter? Cole knew a lot of men who wouldn’t have bothered capping a bottle or returning the tray to the freezer, but those men weren’t the precise and anal Dr. Terrence Renner.

Walking down the cement path again, Cole took the steps to the back porch two at a time and pounded on the door again. “Terry!” he yelled, and when that didn’t work, he grabbed the damned door and pushed.

It opened.

Cole stood a moment in surprise. This wasn’t Renner’s style. He’d been about to search for the spare key he knew Renner kept hidden on the sill above the door, but it hadn’t been necessary.

Another oddity.
Renner was a stickler for locking his doors, be it his house, his office, his truck, or his briefcase. Probably from all those years working with the mentally ill. Cole had seen some of Renner’s patients. Some were docile, just troubled or depressed. Others were violent. Psychopaths. It was a wonder Renner had never installed an alarm system…but then, he’d had the dog. “Terry?” Cole yelled, walking into the kitchen. “Dr. Renner? Rufus?”

No startled response. No surprised bark. No clicking of dog toe-nails or pad of slippered feet coming down the hallway to investigate. “Dr. Renner!”

Why the hell wasn’t he answering? Had he been too drunk to turn off the lights, lock the door, put the booze away, or turn off the radio? Maybe he’d already gone upstairs to bed.

But Cole’s gut told him otherwise.

Slowly, he turned down the hallway, his senses on alert.

Maybe Renner had fallen asleep. And the dog had been half deaf. The pop of a crackling ember drew Cole’s attention to the adjoining den. He peered inside and noticed a dark stain on the floor.

A drop.

A red drop.

And then another.

And another.

“Shit! Terrence!” Cole yelled as he burst into the den.

Every muscle in his body froze.

Renner was lying faceup on the carpet. His eyes stared at the ceiling. Blood covered his neck and face. It pooled thickly on the floor.

“No!” Cole knelt beside him, his fingers clenching the doctor’s wrist to find a pulse, hoping to hear the sound of shallow breathing.

He was too late.

The blood had stopped flowing. There was no heartbeat. Not the shallowest of breaths being drawn.

Renner was dead.

Distantly Cole noticed Renner’s right arm lay at an odd angle. His gaze moved upward slowly, and he saw the number scrawled onto the wall in thick red streaks:

101.

Every hair on Cole’s scalp was raised. One hundred one? Like 212? The number written with Royal Kajak’s blood by his own damned finger?

Cole’s heart was a drum.

Renner was dead…and yet he’d called Cole on his cell less than an hour earlier.

Jesus Christ, what the hell was going on?

You’re being set up.
Again.

Someone had waited for him. Patiently biding his time until Cole had been set free. And then, within hours of his release, he’d slaughtered Renner—and called Cole!

*What was it the guy on the phone said?*

“I’ve got evidence.”

The same chilling message Eve had received from Roy Kajak before he’d been killed.

*The killer could still be in the house.*

He scanned the room, checking the shadows, searching the darkened hallway where light from the den didn’t spill. There was a letter opener on the desk. He grabbed it.

*Get out! Get out NOW!*

He listened, ears straining for any foreign sound, but all he heard was the tick of an old clock in the foyer, the notes of soft acoustic music playing from a radio on the desk, and the loud, powerful pounding of his heart crashing frantically against his ribs. No running footsteps. No deep breathing. No sound of a knife being slipped from a sheath.

The house seemed still.

Empty.

Not even a whimper, whine, or bark from the dog.

*What are you waiting for? Get out!*

Full-blown panic ripped through him.

*Someone’s setting you up, Cole. This is no fucking coincidence. Some sick son of a bitch has it in for you.*

Why?

*Who?*

Someone Terrence Renner had been mixed up with?

Someone who had *killed* Renner.

Cole found the telephone and dialed 911. The dispatch officer answered before the phone rang twice. “Nine-one-one, What’s the nature of your—”

“There’s been a murder,” Cole cut in tersely. “Terrence Renner. Someone killed him. At his house…” He had to think for a second before he rattled off the street address.

“Sir? Are you all right?”

“Yes. But Renner. He’s dead.”

“What’s your name?”

He clicked the phone off.

He had to get out of here and fast. Before the cops arrived. He was in enough trouble already…. They’d figure out that he’d been here, of course, but for now he needed some time to sort things out.
Spying Renner’s laptop sitting on the desk, he snatched it up, yanking the cord from the wall. Face set, mind snapping ahead, he shoved the slim device into the briefcase that lay open on the small love seat that faced the fire.

Taking anything from the house was a crime, but he didn’t care. Whoever had killed Renner had purposely called Cole as a means to tempt him here. Maybe there was a clue in Renner’s work notes, maybe not, but he’d never have this chance again.

Spurred by fear, fueled by adrenaline, he started a quick cleanup. If he were caught here, or anywhere near here, he’d be taken into custody.

The phone rang, and Cole jumped. He whipped around. It was the cops! The 911 dispatcher calling back!

As rapidly as he could, Cole wiped away any finger-, hand- or shoe-prints he might have left on the desk, the floor, the phone. Distantly he heard sirens screaming, and he flew out of the house, wiping the doorknob on his way out and leaping from the back porch to the patchy grass. Heart thudding, he sprinted to his Jeep, tossing the briefcase inside.

He backed down the driveway as fast as he dared. Then, at the county road, he threw the Jeep into first and stepped on it, rocketing in the opposite direction of the small town, telling himself not to speed, fear knocking deep in his soul. He forced himself to calm down, to step outside the murder, to think as a defense attorney, not one of his clients.

His voice was recorded. The police would eventually figure it out and call him in for questioning. He would have to face them. But not tonight. Not before he had a few answers of his own. In jail he’d vowed he would figure out what really happened the night Roy Kajak died, and that’s what he intended to do. He couldn’t have Roy’s murder forever unsolved, himself the only serious suspect. And now Renner’s death would put him at the top of that suspect list as well!

Think, he told himself. Figure out your next step.

First things first. He not only had the money, but Renner’s laptop. He needed a place to hide them, and he knew a place that should be perfect: Eve’s house. It was empty. Had been for months.

And, he decided, his brain clicking systematically, if the police searched her home, they wouldn’t think it all that odd that Terrence’s computer was there, at his daughter’s. Cole would stash the money there too. No one would be able to connect it to him.

He found his way back to the freeway, and as he did he saw the familiar glow of New Orleans in the distance, the city lights visible through a thin, rising fog.

What about Eve? You need to call and tell her about her father. She deserves to know.

His jaw slid to the side as he considered the consequences.

Leave it to the police. If you tell her, she’ll lead the cops straight to you.

Son of a bitch, he thought. No matter what he did, he was screwed.
CHAPTER 8

Time is running out.

And there is much to do.

So many rituals... so little time.

Yet he couldn’t rush things, oh no.

The Reviver was still hyped-up as he parked his truck in a space he’d carved out in a dense thicket of brush and buckthorn. Nerves jangling, his body covered in sweat, he removed his tools from the back of the truck. He worked efficiently, taking anything incriminating from the truck then locking the vehicle securely and dashing up a slight hill to the knoll where his cabin was tucked into a deep copse of trees. The cool night breezes could not quench his heated skin. His pulse was pounding, the scent of blood still tantalizing his nostrils as he headed down the long, overgrown path to the cabin.

He had a place in the city, of course, but here, in the woods, this was where he belonged, where the Voice of God had found him, the only place he was certain to communicate with the Father.

Once inside, he threw the dead bolt, made certain the shutters were completely closed, then stripped himself of all clothing. He dropped all of his clothes into an ancient washer then placed his boots into the stainless steel sink and used a sprayer to wash the blood down the drain. When he was finished, he ran the washer, dumping a quart of bleach into the machine and scrubbing the sink with chlorine bleach as well. Though he felt as if he were doing a good job in covering his tracks, he had to be doubly careful. No plan was fail proof; the cops were far from idiots.

Trust in the Voice. Have faith.

Do not doubt.

Never doubt.

He was still on a high, reliving the kill over and over.

He’d known that Cole Dennis would take the bait.

The bastard had shown up at Renner’s house right on cue and discovered the body.

The Reviver hadn’t been foolish enough to wait around and watch, much as he’d wanted to. That would have been too risky, and the Voice had been clear about leaving as soon as he was finished. But as he’d driven here he’d turned on the police-band radio mounted in his truck and listened to what the cops were doing.

He didn’t need much time to complete the plan. The Voice had been clear that the Reviver’s mission was to be finished quickly, in a mere matter of days, culminating with Eve.

He thought about what he would do to her.

How he would punish her for all her sins.
He scratched his palms in anticipation.

He would strip her bare.

Take that body she flaunted and do everything he dreamed…

Now, lighting the fire, he spread a plastic sheet in front of the grate before carrying a freestanding full-length mirror from the bedroom and angling it on the edge of the sheeting so that the glass caught the reflection of the fire and of the mirror over the fireplace. He located his “kit” in the bottom drawer of an old cupboard and spread all the implements over the mantle. Once the altar was ready, he hurried into his cranny of a bathroom, turned on the pulsing spray, stepped beneath it. Icy water blasted his skin in a quick, harsh tempo. Thoroughly he washed away all the dirt, all the sweat, all the grime with industrial-strength soap that he used on his hair, his face, his hands, and his genitals. Once the suds were rinsed off, he stepped onto the cold stone floor and, still dripping, his skin dimpling with the cold, patted to the living area, where the fire illuminated the sparse, utilitarian room.

He lit the candles standing ready on the centuries-old mantel. Unscented votives, tapers, and pillars, all pristine white, flickered and burned, their tiny flames reflecting a dozen times over in the angled glass.

Catching the light from the candles’ flames, his rosary sparkled as it hung from a hook over the mantel.

Tenderly he removed the glittering strand from its resting place. Letting the cool, blood-red beads run through his hands, closing his eyes as he lowered himself to his knees, he recovered some of his equilibrium. The rosary always comforted him, helped calm him, aided him in keeping the demons and ungodly thoughts at bay. He knew that what he’d done—the killing—was considered a sin, but not, he told himself, when he was on a mission from God, a modern-day crusade, a cleansing of the heathens.

The Voice of God had instructed him.

He was but an instrument; this he believed.

And yet he had unclean thoughts. Lustful thoughts. And he savored the killing. Fantasized about it. Relived it. Which was not God’s intention.

How he ached to revel in the taking of Terrence Renner’s life, to replay it even more, over and over, in his mind — just as he longed to imagine the violent coupling with Eve before he sacrificed her.

But he had to wait, to calm himself, to ignore the fantasies. In the end surely God would understand, for it was God who had led him to Eve, who had brought them together, as children and now as adults. As a child she’d been intelligent and clever. He remembered seeing her running through the hospital grounds, her tanned legs flashing in the bright sunlight, her coppery hair flying behind her, her blue eyes dancing. Even then, at twelve, her breasts had started to show, little buds that had been visible under her T-shirts until she’d started wearing a bra. She’d been athletic and wild, and he’d watched her grow, feeling heat seep through his bloodstream, causing his groin to tighten, his dick to grow, desire thudding in his brain.

But he hadn’t dared mention his want of her to the doctor, her father. Not if he wanted to keep away from the medications that made him feel thick and dull, every movement an effort, as if he were trudging through water.

God had shown him Eve as a child.

God had allowed him to see her develop into a woman.

Then God had taken her away, probably because he’d sinned. Hadn’t Sister Vivian told him so when she’d caught him in the closet, alone, touching himself, a picture of Eve taped to the back of the door? He could still see the nun’s shock, the horror on her face.

She’d punished him then, threatened to tell the doctor. But his tears of repentance had stopped her from speaking of his sins to anyone but Sister Rebecca, who had pursed her lips and condemned him with her harsh gaze. It was she who had insisted he confess to the priest. To God. While the priest heard his confession, his prayers, and meted
out his penance of prayers, good deeds, and clean thoughts, Sister Rebecca had come up with her own punishment. He’d been isolated from the other patients his age, those who had only “clean thoughts.” He also was at Sister Rebecca’s beck and call, her personal slave.

He’d felt as if he’d been chained to the voluminous skirts of her dark habit and by the dark beads of her ever-present rosary. If he ever complained about his serfdom, Sister Rebecca threatened to tell Eve and Dr. Renner his dark secret, that he found pleasure in fondling himself while watching her.

“Just think what will happen then,” Sister Rebecca had warned him in a conspiratorial whisper. “Everyone here will soon know just what kind of a sinner you are….”

Sister Vivian, an underling of Sister Rebecca’s, had avoided and abandoned him. While Sister Rebecca had revelished punishing him, the younger nun had wanted nothing to do with such a sinner.

But then, they had been impure themselves, had they not?

Haven’t the Voice said as much?

Haven’t God Himself led the Reviver to Eve, who was no longer a girl but a woman?

And a sinner.

A whore.

And as unclean as she was, he ached for her.

His mouth dried of spit, and he began to tremble inside as he thought of her, remembered standing in the closet, staring at her picture….

He needed to pray now, to beg forgiveness for his unclean thoughts and then finish with his own penance, his own private ritual.

Only then could he hope for the Voice to reach him again, to seek him out, to drown out the other tinny, aggravating voices that beleaguered him.

Gently holding the crucifix within the rosary between his thumb and forefinger, lightly touching the tiny image of Christ’s body upon the cross, his voice barely audible over the hiss of the fire, he began to pray.

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only son, our Lord…”

His blood began flowing more slowly, his heartbeat finding a regular cadence again, the beads of water upon his skin drying. As he had since he was a child, he touched each bead, murmured each prayer, until he was finished. “O loving. O sweet Virgin Mary. Pray for us. O holy mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ. Amen.”

Slowly he rose, his naked body cleansed, his soul washed free, for he considered this his confession and communion. He didn’t need a priest, an intermediary between himself and the holy Father.

God talked to him.

At night.

When he was alone.

And He told him to mark himself to remind himself of his mission. He opened his small case and looked at the gleaming instruments inside.

He took out the needle, filled the syringe with blue ink, plugged in the machine. Staring at the image of his naked,
shaved, and waxed body in the tall mirror, he began. With careful strokes, he inscribed the number 101 upon his skin, the tiny, sharp needle moving with rapid, stinging strokes as he worked a foot pedal. He was precise, adding the tattoo to a clean space where he could read it easily among the others that he’d drawn on his body. For his victims, of course, he had to use a smaller, battery-powered needle. His work on the bodies was quick and rough. But on himself, he had the luxury of time to make each letter and number perfect. Exquisite.

The pain was exciting, a turn-on. While he worked his needle, he had to concentrate intensely to keep his cock from coming to attention, to keep his mind free of images of sex and pain, to ensure the quality of his artwork. Over and over the numbers he worked, coloring them in, making certain the scab would form and the impression would be forever.

The number 101 tattooed onto his flesh…along with the others, including names and the number 212.

It was over all too quickly. The sensual pain suddenly banished as his job was completed.

Blowing out the candles, he doused the fire with water, cleaned the needles and the tubes, wound the cord around the compact machine, and tucked it all into its case. After replacing the tattoo machine inside the desk, he folded the plastic tarp and stowed it away. Then he examined his artwork, tended to it and lay down on his bed, no sheets covering him.

He was done for this night.

But there would be others.

As there had been before.

Some he’d killed quickly. Others more slowly. Releasing their souls to heaven. There had even been one who had been revived, but only one, and that was a long time ago…so long. Tears came to run in hot streaks from the corners of his eyes.

Now, though, that the killing had started once again, it would continue.

That thought pleased him.

The waiting was over.

He closed his eyes and soon the voices came, little chattering, irritating, and garbled pieces of conversation that whirred like bats’ wings in his head.

Go away, he thought. Leave me be…. Let me hear only God…. Let the Voice of the Father find me….

But it was not to be.

By the time sleep found him, the other hissing, crying, wailing voices had eaten away at his peacefulness, had made his muscles tense, his nostrils flare, and his fists clench. The tears that now welled in his eyes were not tears of sorrow but of frustration, and he bit his lip so hard that blood flowed. He nearly screamed aloud. He knew this would be one of those nights. Long, terrible nights. Nights where, when slumber finally did find him, it would be not with peace but with a raging storm of razor-edged nightmares.

Eve’s cell phone shrilled loudly.

Her eyes flew open.

Where am I? What…what is the ringing?…The phone? Where is it?

For a second, Eve was disoriented, the room unfamiliar. She sat up in bed.
“Ssssss!” Startled, Samson hissed, arched his back, then hopped quickly off the coverlet and scrambled to hide under the dresser.

Fumbling for the cell, Eve flipped on the night-table lamp. The room was suddenly bright. She blinked, her heart beating triple-time.

She managed to pick up the phone. “Hello?”

“He’s free,” warned the same low, raspy voice she’d heard before.

Eve sucked in a strangled breath. “Who is this?”

No answer. But he was still on the line. She knew it. Could feel him.

“Listen,” she said, trying to keep the fear from her voice, “who-ever you are, I know that he’s free, okay? So you can quit calling me!”

“Heeeessss freeeeeee…” The caller’s voice was so low, so ophidian a hiss, she barely heard it.

Click.

The phone went dead.

“Son of a—” she whispered, pushing her hair out of her face and trying to calm down. Who the hell was harassing her? Phoning her in the middle of the night now, for God’s sake. She stared at the face of her phone, silently praying for a number or name. Of course the call was restricted, and no combination of punching numbers and reading screens and scrolling down menus gave her a clue as to the caller’s identity. Whoever the bastard was, he wanted to remain anonymous while scaring the tar out of her.

Turning out the light, she flopped against the headboard and glanced at her alarm clock where the time was illuminated in glowing red numbers.

Two thirty-six.

Who the hell in his right mind would be calling at…Her own question taunted her. That was the problem. There was no “right mind” about it. Whoever was doing this had one serious screw loose. Probably two or three.

“Hell.”

She lay in the dark, waiting for her pulse to slow. Who was he? Where was he calling from? Why did he feel the need to tell her that Cole was a free man? It was all over the news. And these calls weren’t friendly warnings. No, these were sinister. Evil. Meant to intimidate.

Someone’s trying to terrorize you.

“And doing a damned good job of it,” she admitted as the cat hopped back onto the bed and curled up against her. She petted him absently, glad that she was forgiven.

Why would anyone—

Rap! Rap! Rap!

Her heart nearly stopped. She bit her tongue to keep from screaming. Someone was knocking on the door! Samson lifted his head and stared at the closed door to the bedroom.

Eve hardly dared breathe, but the knocking downstairs continued, a pounding that sounded as if it were coming from the back door. She thought of the bastard who’d just called. Maybe he was checking to see if she were home.

But no one knew she was here!
“Don’t freak out,” she whispered but was already in a near panic. She thought about calling the police but discarded the idea…for now. This was her neighborhood, not some deserted bayou.

Don’t think about the night Roy was killed.

Stay calm…. Be rational….

Without turning on a light, she threw on her robe and hurried to the room her grandfather had used as a den, an extra bedroom on the second floor that, twenty years after his death, still held some of his possessions: pictures of him and his wife, his medical degrees, his favorite old recliner, and his revolver. Thin light from the nearest streetlamp gave her enough illumination to find the gun in the bottom drawer of his desk. The gun wasn’t loaded, and there were no bullets anywhere in the house that she knew of, but she would carry the weapon, along with her cell phone, downstairs just the same.

If she encountered an intruder, he wouldn’t know that the revolver was useless.

Think, she told herself as she eased down the stairs, her eyes accustomed to the darkness. She’d walked down these hallways in the dark hundreds of times as a child and did so now rather than throwing her silhouette in relief and making herself an easy target by turning on a light.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Whoever it was, was banging hard enough on the back door to rattle the window set into the thick oak panels. Certainly no sneak thief would want to call attention to himself. But a crazy person, one hopped up on drugs, someone desperate, just might.

Her fingers tightened over the revolver’s handle as she headed down the long hallway separating the parlor from the dining room, past the bath to the kitchen. Her heart was beating crazily, anxiety firing her blood.

Don’t panic, she told herself, but as she stepped into the mudroom, where she could see through the window cut into the back door, she spied a man on the porch—a tall man, his face hidden in darkness. A little cry escaped her taut throat.

“Who’s there?” she demanded in a strained voice, her fingers gripped around the butt of the gun, her pulse pounding. She aimed the revolver at the window as if she intended to shoot then flipped on the switch for the porch light with her free hand.

The lamp lit weakly, the dim bulb casting the porch in a watery blue light that only seemed to accentuate the shadows as it flickered, threatening to die and leave the stoop in total darkness.

Nonetheless she recognized the man on the other side of the door.

Cole Dennis, big as life, stood on her porch.
Eve didn’t flinch.

She aimed the gun squarely at his chest. As if she intended to blow him and his black heart away.

Cole took one look at her through the glass and froze. Slowly he lifted his arms until both his palms were in the air, his fingers spread wide. “Eve, it’s me!” he shouted through the door.

“What the hell do you want?” she asked, hating how scared she sounded.

“I didn’t know you were here.”

“Then why were you pounding on the door in the middle of the damned night?” She was furious with him, her heart rattling, her mind screaming at her to call the police. Remember what he did to you! Remember looking through another window, at Roy’s cabin, and seeing the gun go off! He was aiming at you, Eve. YOU. He intended to kill you!

A light went on in the neighbor’s upstairs window.

Damn, they were causing a scene. The last thing she needed was the whole neighborhood privy to her personal life. She’d had enough scandal to last her a lifetime.

But this was Cole.

“I need to talk to you,” he said.

A second light shone in Mrs. Endicott’s house, and Eve swore under her breath. If she didn’t want the police and everyone on the block to know what was going on, she’d have to let him inside.

Reluctantly she unlocked the door and let it swing open, leaving the thin barrier of the screen door between them. “You can stop shouting. Say what you need to say, then leave.”

Cole lowered his voice. “I didn’t know you were here when I came by. I just got out of—”

“I know about that. It’s all over the news.”

“—but I saw your car.”

“So you decided to wake me up at two-damned-thirty in the morning?” she mocked, trying to whisper. What the hell was he doing here? Nothing good.

He hesitated, his hands lowered a bit, and he nodded.

“Why?”

“I think you’d better let me inside.”

“No way.” She was shaking her head violently, the short strands brushing the back of her neck.
“Eve, please. This is serious.”

“You bet it is!” Trembling inside, her emotions nearly strangling her, she couldn’t help staring at him. Three months earlier, she’d seen him aim a gun at her, viewed it with her own eyes. Witnessed the blast. Felt the bullet. Suffered the aftereffects.

He lowered his voice even more. “No, I mean it. I need to talk to you.”

“I’ll be damned if you’ll set one foot inside my house. It’s over, Cole. Got it? Over!” She felt in the pocket of her robe with her left hand, found her cell phone, and held it up, all the while training her grandfather’s handgun on his chest. Good Lord, she’d been a fool to love this man so fervently. How blind she’d been. “I’m calling the police.”

“Great.” He frowned, his lips twisting in that familiar thin line of frustration she’d witnessed dozens of times. He muttered something to himself then said, “Go ahead.”

“You don’t think I will? You think I’m bluffing?” She began pressing buttons with her thumb and watched as he scowled into the night.

“I don’t think you know what you’re doing.”

“Nice, Cole. Way to score points.”

“It beats pointing a gun.”

“You should know!”

“Damn it, Eve. I didn’t come over here just to kill time!” He stepped closer to the door. Through the mesh, in the weak light, she noticed how tired he looked, how the crow’s-feet around his eyes were etched deeply into his skin, how his jaw was dark with a day’s growth of beard. “Hear me out.”

“So you can lie to me again? So you can kill me?”

“I never tried to harm you,” he insisted angrily, his gaze finding hers in the darkness. Blue eyes so serious, so sincere, she wanted to cry out, to trust him. But she didn’t dare. Couldn’t trust herself. “I never put your life in jeopardy.”

“Liar!”

“You know it, Eve. Deep in your heart, you know I would never do anything to hurt you.”

“I saw you, Cole.”

“No.” He held one hand lower, palm flat as if to stop the tirade he sensed was coming. “You think you saw me. But you’re not sure. That’s why you couldn’t testify. Your memory’s messed up.”

“You were there,” she insisted, trying to convince herself. Hadn’t this been the problem all along, that she hadn’t believed what her eyes, or trusted what her damned faulty memory, had told her had to have happened? And the ADA had known it. Yolinda Johnson had said as much. “I know what I saw.”

“Do you?”

She waggled the gun. “Don’t try any of this BS with me. Got it? All your wow-the-judge-and-jury tactics don’t work with me.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“The ‘truth.’” She sighed and noticed another light in the neighbor’s house switch on. Damn it all to hell! No doubt Mrs. Endicott could hear the argument. “That’s the problem, Cole. You’re deluded. You wouldn’t know the truth if it sat down to dinner with you.”
“I’m not the one who’s suffering from amnesia.”

“That’s right. *Your* memory is selective. You *choose* to believe what you want to believe. I don’t get that luxury. You know what’s sick about this? You actually believe all the crap you’re peddling my way.”

Some repressed emotion flashed in his eyes, and his lips flattened over his teeth. “Fine.” He drew a breath deep into his lungs. “But I think you might want to know about your dad.”

“My dad?”

“Terrence.”

“I know who he is.” Her composure cracked a little. She wanted to think that he was baiting her, but there was something in his serious expression that kept her from arguing. “What about him?” she asked, but as the words passed her lips and he looked at her again, she caught a glimmer of something that squeezed her heart with dread.

“I think it would be better if I came inside.”

She paused, her pulse drumming.

Could she trust Cole Dennis?

Not as far as she could throw him.

This was probably some kind of trick.

“We’re fine this way.”

“I’m serious, Eve.”

“So am I.”

“It’s not good news.” He hesitated as if he were trying to decide how to deliver the news.

Her insides turned to ice. He wasn’t bluffing. Swallowing back a mounting sense of dread, she dropped her cell phone on the counter, unlocked the screen door, pulled it open, and stepped to one side. “Just don’t tell me he’s dead,” she said.

“Eve…” His voice was unsteady.

Her mouth opened in horror. No. It was a trick! It had to be. A way to gain her sympathy. “I—I don’t believe you.”

But his face was white and stern. “I just came from there. I found him on the floor of his den. Someone killed him, Eve. Just like they killed Roy.”

Her legs started to give way, and she backed up into the kitchen, where she leaned against the counter to avoid collapsing. He wouldn’t lie about this, would he? Even Cole wouldn’t stoop so low.

*Don’t trust him, don’t trust him, do NOT trust him!*

Anxiety skittered up her spine. Somehow she managed to flip on the light over the sink. She caught sight of her weak reflection in the window: a thin woman with haunted eyes, pale lips, and short, streaked hair that, in some spots, had barely started to grow out to cover the scars. “You said…You, uh, said you didn’t think I’d be here…. Why were you…Oh God!” She gasped as he moved into the room, into the illumination.

Dried blood so dark, it seemed brown had stained the hem of his white T-shirt. “Cole?” she whispered, horrified. What had he done? Terror widened her eyes.

He followed her glance down, noticing the stain. “It’s not like that. Eve, you know I had nothing to do with this.”
“With…?”

Her body was shaking from the inside out. Her stomach roiled. Nausea climbed up her throat, and she dry-heaved into the sink. The gun nearly fell out of her hand as she clutched the edge of the counter for support. Her father was dead? Dead? She retched again, spiting bile, her brain pounding with denial. No! No! No, no, no! No! She couldn’t, wouldn’t believe it. Cole was a practiced actor, a lawyer, for crying out loud. A liar!

“He called me…I thought it was him, and I went to see him. When I got there, he didn’t answer the door. It was unlocked. I went in and found him in the den.”

She looked up, wiped the back of her hand across her lips. “How?” she squeaked, fighting tears and the grasping fear that clawed at her brain.

Cole’s arms had fallen to his sides. He looked like hell. His eyes were sunken, his usually tanned face pale. “It was just like Roy, Eve. Just like Roy. Your father’s throat was slit. There was blood all over…. Oh Christ, Eve, it was—”

“Stop.”

“—the same.”

“I don’t know why you’re here, why you’re doing this to me. It’s unfathomable…. It’s…”

“I tried to revive him and failed. He’s dead, Eve.”

Blood rushed noisily through her brain. “You just got out of prison. Today. Why would anyone…anyone but you kill my father?” She drew in a shaky breath and felt sick again. From the corner of her eye, she saw her cat pause in the shadows of the hallway.

“Eve.” He looked stricken. “I had no reason to kill him.”

“Since when are your actions reasonable, Cole? You tried to kill me, and now my father…Why are you here now? To finish me off?” she said, fighting down hysteria.

“Stop it, Eve. For Christ’s sake, listen to me. I thought you were in Atlanta.”

“Why the hell are you here, Cole? Why did you come here if you thought I was still in Atlanta?”

He hesitated.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “Don’t lie to me.” Samson, as if sensing the tension in the air, took off, disappearing into the shadows. Eve straightened, her back stiffening though she felt tears tracking down her face. “The least you can do is tell me the truth.”

One hand closed into a fist then opened. “I was going to hide some things here,” he admitted.

“What? Here?” She sniffed loudly and shook her head. She didn’t believe him. She swiped at her tears with the sleeve of her robe. “What things? Incriminating evidence?”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“What things?” she demanded.

“Money.”

“Money?” she repeated, shaking her head.

“Yes. And a briefcase.”
“Yours?”

Another beat.

“Whose briefcase, Cole?”

“You father’s.”

Every muscle in her body froze. “You stole my father’s money and his briefcase?” she repeated, thunderstruck. This was all so bizarre. So surreal. Unbelievable. And yet, staring at him, seeing his bleak, solemn expression, the pain in his eyes, she was nearly convinced he was telling the truth, or part of it. But her father? Was he really gone? Killed? A sudden chill, cold as December, slid over her skin.

“The money was mine.”

“Yours?”

“I’d hidden it, a long time ago.”

“Oh Cole—”

“It’s the truth, damn it! Something I learned a long time ago from my old man.”

“The con artist?”

“Who would know better about needing an emergency fund?” he asked, walking farther into the kitchen, out of range of the window, keeping one eye on the revolver she still held loosely. “I’d already picked up the cash when I got the call—a weird call—so I went to his place and found him lying on the floor. I tried to revive him, but it was too late. So I called 911. Then, before I took off, I saw his laptop. I stuffed it in the briefcase.”

“You stole from a dead man, a murdered man.” Eve could scarcely get the words out. She couldn’t process what he was saying.

“I thought I might be able to figure out what’s going on,” Cole said tensely. “Why your father was killed. Who’s responsible. Was it because of something he knew, something related to Roy’s murder?”

“That’s a job for the police.”

“Is it? Because they didn’t do such a bang-up job with Roy, did they?”

Eve pressed a hand to her forehead. “You’ll be arrested for…tampering with evidence, leaving the scene, I don’t know what all. You’re in big trouble.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“I can’t…think,” Eve murmured, but Cole went on.

“The two murders have got to be connected. Roy Kajak had been a patient of your father’s—”

“Years ago.”

“Look, Eve, no one’s going to try and figure out what really happened. The police aren’t going to look any further than me.”

“Do you blame them?” she demanded, but her voice had no volume, no power. “You just got out of jail today, and now my father is dead. Look at you. Look at his blood. It’s all over you.” She was hanging on to the shreds of her sanity for all she was worth.

“I’m being set up, Eve. I’m not a killer. And if I were, I’d be a helluva lot smarter. I wouldn’t be here with you
now. Someone called me tonight. I thought it was your old man. He said, ‘I’ve got evidence.’”

Eve flashed back to the night Roy had called her, the panic in his voice, his insistence that she come. *I’ve got evidence.*

“That’s right,” he said, watching her face. “Just like the call you got from Roy.” He glanced down at the gun quivering in Eve’s outstretched hand. “Oh for Pete’s sake, Eve! Give me that. You’re not going to shoot me or anyone else.” He wrested the revolver from her nerveless fingers, and she didn’t fight him. She was too stunned, too disbelieving, and he was right. She’d never thought him brainless. But he was passionate, that much she knew. If her father had set him off…

Cole checked the chamber of the gun and sighed. “I thought so.” He tossed the useless weapon onto the counter next to her cell phone.

“You have an alibi?”

“No.” He stared at her long and hard, his eyes an intense steel blue that had always caused her heart to pound, though now she was too numb to care. “Someone’s behind this, whatever it is, and I think it’s a lot bigger than I can imagine. But your father and Roy were killed for a reason. This wasn’t random, or coincidence. Someone waited until I was released.”

“I can’t believe it.” Anxiety, fear, and disbelief twisted in her brain, calling up the damned headache again. She reached for the kitchen phone.

“What’re you doing?” he demanded.

“Calling my father’s house.”

“Eve, he’s gone. I already phoned the police. They’ve got to be at the farm by now. They’ll answer and come directly here.”

But the call was connected, already ringing through. No one was picking up. Eve swallowed back her fear. *Come on, Dad, answer!* Her heart was beating a thousand times a minute, nervous sweat rising on her back and palms. When Terrence Renner’s voice mail answered, she said, “Dad? This is Eve. I’m sorry to call you so late, but I thought you’d want to know that…that I’m back in town…. I, um, should have called earlier. Call me back.”

She hung up, clutching the phone tightly, as if it were a lifeline.

Cole was pale as death.

She said, “No one answered.”

Cole took the phone from her hands as fresh tears welled in her eyes. “Oh, darlin’,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around her and folding her shivering body against his. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“He can’t be dead. He can’t be….”

Strong, steady arms held her firmly and for a second she collapsed against him, accepting the grief that rose like a giant within her. The fingers of one hand curled over his biceps, and she fought the urge to strike out, to flail at him, to scream and rail to the heavens. Instead she held the feelings inside, apart from silent tears.

For just a minute.

Just long enough to catch a glimpse of their reflection in the window, a ghostly image of two lovers entwined. She squeezed her eyes closed. This was a mistake of gargantuan proportions, an irreversible error. She couldn’t trust him. Not for a second! Stiffening her spine, she pushed away from him. “Leave.”

“What?”
“Get the hell out of here, Cole.” Still trembling inside, she crossed her arms under her chest and glared up at him. “I don’t need you or want you here. If you’re telling the truth, then the police are going to show up here soon, and they’ll be all over you. You’ll be back behind bars before you can think twice. If you’re lying and have come here for some other reason, to get back at me, to play a cruel joke, or whatever, I don’t want anything to do with you, and I will call the police. Make no mistake. Either way, you’ll spend the rest of your first night as a free man back in jail.”

“I’m not lying.”

She believed him but steeled herself. “Fine. Go.”

“Eve.”

“Really, Cole. Get out.”

The muscles in the back of his neck tightened. “I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“I’m fine.”

He hesitated. “I don’t have a phone. If you want to call—”

“I won’t.”

He seemed nearly convinced, when his gaze landed on the table where all the scraps of newspaper were spread. “What’re these?” he demanded, and before she could say a thing, he switched on the Tiffany lamp suspended over the table. He started to pick up one of the clippings, and she said, “No! Don’t touch anything!”

“Why? What’re you doing?” He scanned a few of the articles. “Making a scrapbook? About the days you spent at Our Lady of Virtues?”

“No.”

“Pinking shears?” He sent her a sideways glance full of questions. “Wait a minute. These are all about Faith Chastain.”

“I know.”

“She was Abby Chastain’s mother.”

“So?”

Frowning, he read each of the articles. “Abby Chastain is Montoya’s fiancée.”

“Reuben Montoya? The detective who…”

“Yeah. That one.” He looked baffled. “So, why are you interested?”

“I’m not….I mean, these were left in my car.”

“What? When?”

“Today, I think.” She explained quickly, and the muscles in his face tightened.

“Why today? Why now?”

“I don’t know…but…”

“What?” he demanded.
In for a penny, in for a pound, she thought. “I got a couple of weird phone calls today.”

“Today?”

She nodded then told him about the calls—the one on the road and the one less than half an hour earlier with its raspy voice that warned her, “He’s free.”

Cole studied her soberly as he listened to her narrative. His eyes narrowed and his lips became a thin crease, but he held his thoughts in check.

Eve finished with a helpless gesture in his direction. “The next thing I know, you’re pounding on my back door.”

A muscle clenched in his jaw. “I don’t like it.”

“That makes two of us.”

“You need to go back to Atlanta. Or anywhere else. I don’t think it’s safe here.”

“Now, wait, this is my home.”

He stepped forward. “Two men are dead, Roy and your father. They were killed violently, viciously, and Eve, you were hit by a bullet. The day of your father’s murder, you get a packet stuffed into your car and strange phone calls. Eve, you need to leave. Drive to Atlanta, or at least check into a motel tonight. In Lafayette or Baton Rouge or anywhere else, but you really have to leave.”

“I’m not leaving. I need to know about my dad.”

“Oh hell, Eve!”

Her cell phone jangled, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. Glancing down at the screen, she saw her brother Kyle’s number.

“Hello?”

“Eve!” Anna Maria’s voice sounded strangled. “Ohmigawd, I’m sorry to call so late, but Kyle’s not here and I just got a call from a friend of mine who works for a newspaper in New Orleans. He’s always listening to the police band, and he said there was a possible homicide and the victim’s name is Renner. He’s not supposed to have that information until everything’s confirmed and the next of kin is notified, but he thought…Oh Mother Mary, is it Dad? The address sounded like the farm and…and I don’t know what to do and…”

“No one’s called me,” Eve said, refusing to look at Cole, refusing to fully believe.

“I’ve tried to call Kyle, but he’s not picking up,” Anna babbled. “He’s an idiot when it comes to operating a cell phone. And then I didn’t see any reason to call Van, as he lives so far away, and until we know what’s happening…” She paused, and Eve heard the click of a lighter, then a deep breath.

“Don’t call Van.”

“Someone should. I tried to call Dad, but no one answered. Just the damned machine.”

“I’ll drive out there,” Eve assured her, and she saw Cole react out of the corner of her eye.

“No…you’ve gone through too much already. Kyle should be handling this!”

“It’s all right, Anna. I’ll take care of it,” Eve insisted, although it almost felt as if she were having an out-of-body experience. Her phone stuttered in her ear. “Look, I’ve got another call coming in. I’d better take it.”

“Call me back!”
“The minute I know anything, I promise.”

Cole’s eyes found hers. Then Eve glanced down at her phone. She recognized the prefix on her LCD as one for the parish in which her father resided. She snapped the phone closed without answering and gave Cole a twisted smile. “That was Anna Maria.”

“And the other call?”

“My guess—the sheriff’s department. You said the police would call back, didn’t you?”

A muscle worked in Cole’s jaw. “Yeah.”

The phone rang again, and she glanced at the luminescent screen. “Same number.”

Cole gritted his teeth. “They’re on their way to inform you of your father’s death.”

“Then you’d better take off.”

He hesitated a fraction, swore under his breath, and stared at her so hard she thought he might kiss her. Instead, he reached for the handle of the door and yanked it open. With one foot over the threshold, he glanced back. “For the record, I’m really sorry about all this, Eve, really sorry.”

She swallowed hard.

“It’s not over, you know.”

She gazed at him. She didn’t pretend to misunderstand what he was talking about.

But she knew better than to think there was anything left between them.

She shook her head, but he’d already disappeared into the night.
Bentz climbed into the cruiser, and Montoya threw the car into reverse, flooring it.

“Fill me in. What’ve we got?” Bentz asked, looking pissed as hell. Montoya hadn’t explained, had just told him that they had a case and he was on his way, that he would pick Bentz up at the cottage he shared with his wife, Olivia, in the swampland on the outskirts of the little town of Cambrai. Grumbling, Bentz had said he’d be ready, which today meant faded jeans, no socks, slip-on shoes, and a sweatshirt.

“Terrence Renner. Dead. Killed with the same MO as Royal Kajak.”

“Shit.”

“On the first day that Cole Dennis is out of prison,” Montoya added, his headlights cutting into the predawn gloom. “A buddy of mine from the parish where Renner lived called me. Knew about the Kajak case and thought we’d be interested.”

“We are,” Bentz said with a snort. He was a big man, a guy who had to fight his weight by working out with a punching bag, a man who had to battle his addictions day by day.

“How stupid is Dennis?” Montoya asked, his leather jacket creaking as he reached up to adjust the mirror.

“He’s not.” Bentz ran a hand around his unshaven face and glared out the windshield. “He’s a smart-ass attorney. A street kid who worked the system, kept his nose clean after getting into some trouble as a juvey, and somehow got through college and law school. Graduated third in his class.”

“He knows how to work the system.” Montoya braked as he rounded a corner, then hit the gas again as they reached the freeway. He punched it, and the Crown Vic shot forward, flying along the pavement. The engine thrummed, the tires whined, and the police band crackled as Bentz, solemn, held onto the door handle with his usual white-knuckled grip. “Dumb prick.”

“Dennis isn’t dumb,” Bentz reiterated.

“He broke the terms of his bail.”

“Yeah.” Bentz didn’t sound convinced.

Montoya was having none of it. He wanted to nail the slime-ball so bad he could taste it. “Look, man, he screwed up. Tried to see Eve Renner while he was out last time.”

Bentz grunted.

“And he was found with weed. Pulled over because his taillight was out. Opened his glove box and—looky here! —out falls a baggie of pot.”

“My point. Why would Dennis do something so spectacularly stupid?”

“Cuz he’s obsessed where Eve Renner is concerned. He can’t stay away from her.”
“And the taillight and baggie? A fuse was taken out of his car. Missing. Someone removed it. So he’d be pulled over. Then, when he goes to get his registration, the weed falls out.”

“What are you tryin’ to say?” Montoya demanded, flying around an eighteen-wheeler before cutting across to the off-ramp.

“You think the son of a bitch was set up?”

Bentz shook his head, reached into his pocket then came up with a stick of gum that he unwrapped and popped into his mouth. “Why not hide the weed somewhere else?”

“Cuz he’s an arrogant SOB who is above the law.”

“And the fuse?”

“He could’ve taken it out to replace something else.”

“He was out on bail, knew the terms.” He chewed thoughtfully for a few minutes while Montoya negotiated the winding country roads leading to Terrence Renner’s farmhouse. “Nah.”

“He’s our guy!” Montoya couldn’t keep the irritation out of his voice. He and Bentz had been working the Roy Kajak murder for months, trying to put the pieces together, always coming up with the same answer: Cole Dennis was the killer. Cut and dried. Now his partner was waffling. Shit! Montoya was tired and cranky and didn’t need Bentz pulling a one-eighty on him now.

They drove through a podunk town with a single stoplight blinking red at the main intersection. No one stirred. It was so quiet, it gave Montoya a case of the creeps. He liked the city with its bright lights, open-twenty-four-hours atmosphere, and action. This was way too quiet.

“Just doesn’t feel right,” Bentz said, his gum popping. “Something’s off.”

“Everything’s off.” Montoya stepped on it, heading deep into the Louisiana farmland. While Bentz stewed about the case, silently turning it over in his mind, Montoya tried to fit the pieces together as well. He’d been called by a deputy from this parish, a guy who had worked in the city and recognized the connection between this case and Kajak’s. Montoya and Bentz would have to tread gently in case the sheriff decided he didn’t want any New Orleans cops messing inside his jurisdiction. But if it turned out this kill matched Roy Kajak’s enough that a serial killer was suspected, then the Feds would join the manhunt…unless Montoya could collar Dennis and throw his ass in jail first.

He saw the flashing lights before they’d reached the turnoff to Renner’s house. A car from the sheriff’s department was already parked at the end of the lane, nearly blocking traffic, while two uniformed officers discouraged anyone—from the curious, to neighbors, to the press—from turning in. Other official vehicles were parked nearby, along with a van from a New Orleans television station, two pickups, and a sedan, all of whose passengers stood outside, staring at the farmhouse. Montoya nosed into a spot across the road then climbed outside into the night that smelled of recent rain and turned earth. Frogs were croaking loudly, and he heard a police officer’s radio crackle.

The two New Orleans detectives approached the two officers standing guard. Montoya and Bentz introduced themselves and flashed their badges while Montoya explained that they’d been called to the scene.

“You still need to log in,” the tall, skinny deputy said. His hat was a size too big, his Adam’s apple bobbing, his teeth slightly bucked. His nametag read Deputy Blair Mott.

Both Montoya and Bentz signed the crime-scene logbook.

“Anyone keeping track of these people?” Bentz asked, motioning with his pen to the ragtag group of bystanders who had collected beside their cars.

“Yep. Checked their IDs. Even wrote ’em down.”
“Good. Anyone else stop by?”

“Nah. A couple of lookie-loos slowed down then took off, including the paper guy. It’s early yet. In an hour or two we’ll get more action. People gettin’ up and go in’ to work or makin’ deliveries.”

“Thanks.”

Careful to disturb as little as possible, Bentz and Montoya walked along the tracks leading to the house. The scene was already crawling with crime-scene investigators, detectives from the sheriff’s department, and someone from the coroner’s staff. A videographer panned the rooms of the house, where bright lights had been set up. Bonita Washington from the crime lab was giving orders to Inez Santiago, who was measuring blood spatter, and A. J. Tennet, who dusted for prints. Measurements were being taken, the rooms dusted for fingerprints or shoe prints, a vacuum used to suck up any unseen trace evidence. Bags of evidence had already been collected.

They walked into the kitchen where a bottle of booze was being examined and a tray that had once held ice was half filled with water.

Down a hallway and through open French doors they found the crime scene—a den where embers in the fireplace glowed red under white ash. Renner’s body lay on the floor in a pool of blood, his forehead marked with a tattoo. A newspaper was on the floor, an overturned glass beside it.

“Jesus,” Montoya said and noticed that his partner’s complexion had blanched, jaw muscles working as if he were trying to keep whatever was in his stomach down.

On the wall near the top of Renner’s head, the number 101 had been scrawled in blood. Probably Renner’s. Just like Kajak.

“The number is wrong,” Bentz said.

Montoya sniffed loudly. “We don’t know that. We only know that it doesn’t match the other killing.”

“Copycat?” Bentz offered up. A few facts from the Kajak homicide had never been given to the press. The actual number written on the wall of the cabin had been withheld. Just in case some nutcase tried to claim he was the murderer. With a few facts secret, the police were able to sort out the looney tunes from the real players. “Someone with a grudge against Renner who read about Renner’s association with Kajak and thought they could pin this on the other doer.”

“My money’s on Cole Dennis.”

“Yeah, I know.” Bentz’s gaze swept the interior, landing on the officer in charge, Detective Louis Brounier, a burly African-American man with silver hair, fleshy face, and intense eyes that seemed to miss nothing.

“Look familiar?” Brounier asked, and Montoya nodded.

“Who called this in?” Bentz asked.

“The caller didn’t ID himself, but the call came from Renner’s land-line, and it wasn’t Renner.” Brounier pulled out a small notebook and flipped back a few pages, his big face creasing as he scanned his notes. “A male phoned 911 at one forty-seven A.M. today. He said, ‘There’s been a murder. Dr. Terrence Renner. Someone killed him. At his house.’ Then there’s a two-second pause while he comes up with the address.”

“You think it was the murderer?”

“Maybe. Whoever it was didn’t stick around. By the time the first officer arrived, the place was empty, back door unlocked.” Bushy eyebrows rose in speculation. “By the way, no forced entry.”

“Anything missing?”
“Not that we can tell. Yet. We’re still looking. But if robbery were the motive, the killer missed out on some expensive art, and Renner’s wallet was in his back pocket. All his ID, credit cards, and nearly a hundred bucks. His stereo is here, his television, and he’s got one of the new expensive ones, as well as his computer, a desktop in a bedroom upstairs.”

“Laptop? Cell phone?”

“Haven’t found either.”

“Anyone see anything? Any phone messages?”

“Not that we know of. Two phone messages came in just after the first officer arrived. One from Eve Renner, the victim’s daughter. Another from Renner’s daughter-in-law, Anna Maria Renner. Deputy Mott didn’t answer either call. He wanted to hear what kind of messages they would leave.” Brounier walked to the answering machine in the kitchen and hit the play button. The breathless, worried voice of Eve Renner filled the room.

“Dad? This is Eve. I’m sorry to call you so late, but I thought you’d want to know that…that I’m back in town…. I, um, should have called earlier. Call me back.”

Brounier clicked off the machine. “That call came in at two fifty-one, according to this machine.”

“She knows,” Montoya said, his heartbeat quickening, the synapses in his brain moving so quickly he felt agitated, nervous, already ahead of the game. “How could she know unless whoever had done it had called her?”

“You don’t know—”

“No one calls their parent at three in the morning unless you want to give them a heart attack. She was worried about him, otherwise she would have waited until the morning.”

“Maybe something happened to her, and she needed to talk to him. Maybe she hurt herself, fell, or—”

“Oh shut the hell up, Bentz. You don’t need to play fucking devil’s advocate. Eve Renner knows because someone told her, and that person is the killer.”

Bentz turned to Brounier. “Maybe,” he conceded. “So, where did the call originate? Eve Renner’s been in Atlanta.”

“Caller ID says the call came in from a New Orleans number. I checked already. It’s her house. The second one, that’s the call from Atlanta.” He hit the play button again.

“Dad? This is Anna Maria. Could you call me back? I just want to make sure you’re okay. I’ve, uh, I’ve got this friend who works for the paper. He called and said there might be some trouble at your place, so I kinda got worried. Kyle’s not home right now, but you can probably reach him on his cell. But you can call here. Okay? Please. Just let me know that everything’s fine. Love ya.”

Click.

“Stupid reporters,” Brounier said. “Listening in on our bands. I know they’re just doing their jobs, but hell, they’re such a pain.”

“So Eve Renner’s back in New Orleans,” Montoya whispered. “Same day that Cole Dennis is released. Same damned day that her father gets himself offed. How much of a coincidence is all that?”

“You know how I feel about coincidences,” Bentz muttered.

“Don’t believe in ‘em.” Brounier took off his glasses and rubbed the lenses with the tail of his shirt.

Montoya said, “Someone from the department should go and give Eve the bad news.”
“A unit’s already been dispatched,” Brounier said. He checked his watch and scowled. “They should have reported back to me by now.” His mouth pursed in aggravation, and Montoya guessed Louis Brounier suffered no fools, especially if they were underlings.

“Anything else you can tell us?” Bentz asked.

“Not until we gather more evidence and sift through what we’ve got. It looks like the victim was surprised, attacked, his throat slashed, and then, as he was bleeding out, the killer wrote the number on the wall with a finger.”

“The vic’s finger,” Montoya said, adding, “If it’s the same killer.”

“Then there’s the number tattooed on his forehead. One hundred one, same as on the wall.”

“Same MO as the Kajak homicide,” Montoya said, “but a different number.”

Bentz stared at the body then glanced up at Montoya. “Got to be the same guy.”

“Now you’re talkin’.”


Eve saw the police cars, flashing lights, officers, and news crews parked haphazardly on the road running past her father’s small farm and felt ill all over again. She found a spot near the neighbor’s fence, nosed her Camry into the weeds, and pulled to a stop. Saying a quick prayer, she climbed out of the car and half ran toward the end of the lane, where a skinny officer was standing guard. The night was bone cold, or so it suddenly seemed. She pulled her hastily donned jacket more tightly around her.

“I’m Eve Renner,” she said as she reached the deputy. “I need to see my father.”

“Sorry, ma’am, no one’s allowed. Crime scene.”

“But I’m family. Terrence Renner is my father. I lived part of my life in this house,” she said as if the man hadn’t heard her correctly.

“If you’ll just step to one side, I’ll have one of the detectives come and speak with you.”

“The police came to my house to tell me. That’s why I’m here,” she insisted.

“Excuse me.” The officer spoke into the radio microphone attached to his uniform. Eve felt all the starch drain out of her and sank against the police cruiser and tried to pull herself together, but all the while images of her father flashed through her mind.

*Dad! Oh Dad! I’m so sorry…so sorry.* Tears again filled her eyes as she remembered Terrence Renner as a young man, over two decades earlier, when she hadn’t yet entered kindergarten. She recalled how he’d tossed her into the air, only to catch her again, and how she’d squealed in glee. “More, Daddy,” she’d cried, though her mother had been horrified at the game. “More, more, more!”

Another fleeting image, of her father as a doctor, the tails of his blindingly white lab coat catching in the breeze as he walked briskly across the tended lawns and gardens of Our Lady of Virtues campus. His professional smile had always been in place, though he’d rarely looked side to side at the patients who sat in the shade or pushed walkers or clustered in “outdoor group activities.” He’d been self-important then, a brilliant, educated man among the mentally incapacitated, the patients he’d tried to help.

She closed her eyes and turned her face to the night breeze. Another memory seared through her brain: she’d been older, maybe preteen, and her father had made a daily ritual of returning home to their house just off the campus of the hospital. Eve’s mother, lipstick bright, forever in jeans and a colorful T-shirt, had always had a pitcher of drinks
waiting for him. Each night Terrence had set his briefcase in the front closet, deposited his keys in a dish on the table in the foyer, and brushed a kiss over his wife’s cheekbone. Even so, he was distracted, lines of worry creasing his high forehead, his gaze trained on the living room, where the sanctuary of the television and nightly news waited.

And then there was the most painful memory: Eve and her father standing at the cemetery in the hot sun on an August afternoon without a breath of breeze. Her brothers, red eyed and uncomfortable in their suits and ties, had been a few steps away, part of the family but not too close. Nana, draped in black, had been there as well, as Terrence stood staunchly in the blazing sun, his face pale, no tears visible as his wife was laid to rest.

Now, leaning against the police car, Eve tried to rally.

“I would like to see my father,” Eve repeated to the skinny officer with the big hat.

“Sorry, ma’am. I can’t let you. Crime scene.”

“I heard you the first time. I understand a crime has been committed.” Her head was thundering again, pounding mercilessly. “Can you please tell me what’s happened to my father?” When she realized the deputy wasn’t about to budge, she added, “Or…or can I talk to whoever’s in charge?”

“Detective Brounier’s on his way.”

“Brounier?” Eve turned toward the house and saw not one but three men, backlit by the lights of the house and flashlights, striding down the lane. She didn’t recognize the big, burly black man, but she knew the others.

Too well.

Her heart nosedived.

Detectives Bentz and Montoya.

More bad news.

Before they spoke, just as the threesome reached the barrier of yellow tape, she said to the approaching black man, “I’m Eve Renner. Dr. Renner’s daughter. I want to see him.”

“Detective Louis Brounier,” he said, extending a big hand, though he didn’t smile. He stared at her with surprisingly kind eyes. “You were alerted to the news about your father?”

“It’s a homicide?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t equivocate, and for that she was grateful. She nodded slowly several times. “I would…I would like to see him.”

“No, you don’t,” Montoya interjected.

Her temper snapped, white hot. “He’s my father, damn it.” Who was this guy to tell her what she did or didn’t want?

Bentz said, “We can’t let you do that. Not yet, anyway. In a few hours, after he’s been transported to the morgue, then we’ll need you to make an identification.”

Brounier said, “The sheriff’s department is going to work with the state police and the New Orleans Police Department. We just don’t have enough resources to handle something like this alone.” Eve knew there was more to it. Bentz and Montoya had been called in because her father’s death was similar to Roy’s. There was a connection. Sooner or later, the police would be knocking on Cole’s door again. And she was betting on sooner.
Montoya said, “You called here earlier. For your dad.”

She nodded. “I got into town late, and I wanted to call him and let him know I was back. But I got his machine, and then my sister-in-law from Atlanta phoned me. A reporter friend of hers had called her and told her there was trouble at Dad’s house, a possible homicide.” Eve managed to keep her voice in check. She’d already decided not to mention Cole. Not yet. “Then the police came and alerted me, and then I drove straight here.”

“It would have been better if you’d stayed home and let us do our job,” Montoya said.

“I couldn’t,” Eve said simply.

Montoya eyed her. “What time did you call your father?”

“Two-thirty, three…Does it matter?” Eve felt herself begin to perspire. Cole had been with her when she’d made that call, and it felt as if the detective knew it.

“It couldn’t wait till morning?”

“I really wasn’t concerned about what time it was. I was too keyed up and worried to sleep.”

A moment passed when no one said anything. Eve broke the uncomfortable silence. “Do you have any idea who would do this? Or why?”

“We thought you might be able to come up with a list of his enemies,” Bentz suggested.

“Enemies? I…I have no idea. He was retired.” She flashed to Tracy Aliota’s parents and their accusations that her father had been responsible for their daughter’s death. “I’ll think about it,” she promised, suddenly so tired her bones ached. Her father was dead. There was nothing more she could do for him, and even if she did regret their recent estrangement, it was too late now to make amends. “I think I’d better call my brothers.”

“What about Cole Dennis? Has he contacted you?” Montoya asked, the diamond stud in his ear reflecting sharply in the strobing lights.

Eve nearly stopped breathing. “What?”

“He’s out of jail, you know.”

“Of course I do. It’s all over the news.”

“So did he call you?”

“I just got into town, Detective, and I have a restraining order against him, and let’s just say I’m not exactly his favorite person these days.”

“So he didn’t contact you?”

“He hasn’t called me, no. Not in a long, long while,” she said, wondering why she felt compelled to protect the man who she’d once thought had tried to kill her. She started for her car, but Montoya stepped in front of her.

“We have a few more questions.”

“Can they wait?” she asked. “Until tomorrow?”

“Yes, ma’am. Let us have someone drive you home,” Brounier offered.

“No. I’m fine.”

“Are you certain? Is there someone I can call?”
“No, thank you. I’ll be all right,” she said, hoping to appear more collected than she felt. Her head was throbbing, she was dead on her feet, but the last thing she wanted was to be cooped up in some vehicle with a cop. She had to be careful, sort things out.

“We’ll call you later,” Detective Bentz said, though Montoya studied her as if he didn’t trust anything about her.

Brounier nodded his agreement. “Thank you, Ms. Renner. Again, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, walking quickly toward her car. She didn’t wait for anyone to change his mind. She just needed some time alone. To think. Tomorrow, after a night’s sleep, she would talk to the cops again, and when she did she’d show them the weird clippings about the mental hospital and admit that she thought she’d been followed. If they blew her off as a nutcase, so be it.

And will you tell them about Cole?

One of the news reporters looked her way. Oh God, she didn’t want to talk to anyone from the press. Not now. Probably not ever. Averting her face, Eve unlocked her car and quickly slid behind the wheel. Slamming the door closed, she prayed the reporter wouldn’t recognize her, wouldn’t put two and two together about Royal Kajak and her father. And Cole. The reporters will make that connection too.

She rammed her key into the ignition.

Will you tell them? Will you?

She shook her head and bit her lip, wondering what it said about her that, against all reason, she was protecting Cole.
“I think I’m in trouble.” Cole held the grimy pay-phone receiver to his ear while drinking a brutally hot cup of coffee he’d gotten from an espresso hut on Decatur. He’d called Deeds collect. Thankfully his attorney had deigned to take the call.

“Already?” Deeds said, and Cole imagined him leaning back in his desk chair, looking through the panoramic windows of his corner office. “It’s barely eight in the morning. You haven’t been out of jail twenty-four hours. What took you so long?”

Cole was in no mood for wisecracks. “Terrence Renner’s dead.”

Silence.

“It’s all over the news.”


“He was murdered. Throat slit. Just like Roy Kajak.”

“This is a joke, right?”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes. Turn on the television. Renner’s homicide is nearly identical to the Kajak murder. The only difference that I know is that the numbers scribbled in blood on the wall and tattooed onto his forehead were different: 101 instead of 212.”

“All of this information was on the news?” Deeds asked.

“Probably not all of it. Some was held back.”

“Then how do you know?”

“I was there. Renner called me.”

“Damn it, Cole! I knew it! You can’t keep your nose clean for a day!”

“I told you I thought I was in trouble.”

“Trouble is a traffic ticket. This isn’t trouble. It’s a fucking catastrophe!” He paused to draw in a deep breath then continued his rant. “What the hell were you thinking?” He swore again, calling Cole every name in the book before he somehow managed to calm down. “Okay, okay. Let me get this straight. You witnessed the crime?”

“No.” Cole sipped the hot coffee from his paper cup and kept staring through the smudged glass of the booth, watching people pass by. Some were walking to the bus stop one block away, others whipping by on bicycles, still others strolling or out for a morning jog. No one seemed to be paying any attention to him. A police cruiser stopped at a nearby light but rolled past the booth without either of the officers inside even glancing in his direction.

“I got to the scene just afterward, I think.” Talking quietly and rapidly, he sketched most of the details of the
events of the night before, only omitting the part about locating his stash of money, stealing Renner’s things, and visiting Eve. Those details could come out later.

Maybe.

Deeds listened.

Cole knew the legal wheels were whirling at light speed in his attorney’s mind as Deeds tried to come up with a good “spin” on the unwelcome news of his client’s escapades. As Cole concluded, Deeds said, “Just tell me you didn’t call Eve.”

“I didn’t call Eve.” That, at least, was the truth. He didn’t know how much he could confide in his lawyer, and as for Eve, oh hell, he didn’t know what to think about that himself. He hadn’t intended to meet her last night, but in truth, had he known she was back in town, he might have made a beeline for her door anyway. “Look, I gotta go. I’ll call you later, and we’ll meet.”

“I’m booked until six. Got a squash match after that, but I’ll change it. Come in then.”

“No, let’s meet somewhere else.”

A beat.

“Okay. Your place?”

“How about O’Callahan’s, on Magazine, a block or two off of Julia?”

Deeds said, “I’ll be there around six-thirty. Don’t, and I mean do not, do anything stupid in the meantime.”

“Right. Oh, and Sam, don’t call me. I had to ditch the phone.”

“Son of a bitch, Cole, what’s got into you?”

“I don’t want to be traced. If you don’t show up at O’Callahan’s, I’ll call you.”

“Jesus H. Christ, what the hell have you done this time?”

_Oh man, if you only knew._ “I’ll explain when I see you,” Cole lied then hung up and started walking.

_Don’t do anything stupid._ What Deeds really meant was don’t contact Eve. Deeds didn’t yet know that Eve was in town and that Cole had already found her.

Taking another scalding sip of coffee, Cole kept walking, over the slight rise that separated the city streets from the waterfront. He needed time to think, to clear his head.

Except his damned thoughts kept tumbling back to Eve. Dressed in a soft robe, her eyes glistening with tears and emotion, her lips compressed angrily, and her hands pointing a revolver straight at him, she’d been ultimately desirable. He should have been scared, angry, but there was something about that woman that just got to him. Even though she’d obviously been with another man, cheated on him, and despite her admitted memory loss would have willingly testified against him, he still found her the most intriguing woman he’d ever met.

So much for thinking rationally.

He strode toward the Riverwalk Marketplace, watching the sluggish water of the Mississippi roll past. A barge was heading upstream, and a bit of wind, blowing across the water, brought the dank scent of the river to his nostrils.

Who had killed Terrence Renner?

The same psycho who had slit Roy Kajak’s throat?
It had to be…So what did the numbers mean? 212? 101? Were they clues to the killer’s identity or a part of the homicidal maniac’s sick sense of justice?

Why, on the very day he was released, had the killer found his next victim?

*Maybe it isn’t about you. Maybe the killing resumed because Eve returned to New Orleans. Or maybe because of some incident entirely unrelated.*

A coincidence.

Oh yeah, like he believed that for even an instant.

Watching a teenager throw a Frisbee to some kind of mixed-breed shepherd wearing a red bandana, Cole downed the rest of his coffee, crumpled the cup, then tossed it into a trash receptacle. He had too much to do to spend time thinking in circles. He headed to the spot he’d parked his Jeep.

In the early morning hours, after leaving Eve’s house, Cole had headed back to his place, changed into clean clothes, then driven across town to a laundromat where he’d bleached the hell out of the blood-stained T-shirt and jeans before drying them and dropping them off at a depository for the Salvation Army. He was back home by six, slept three hours, showered in the thin spray of his bathroom, then walked to get his coffee and make the call. Fortunately, the caffeine was doing its job, jolting his system awake. He had a lot of things to do today, the first of which was to buy one of those prepaid, nearly impossible to trace cell phones that, he suspected, were popular with the drug-dealing crowd. Once he’d purchased a new phone, he’d make a few calls and see if he could connect with one of his former clients, a low-life slumlord who might just be able to help him out.

In the meantime he was going to go against his attorney’s advice and his own better judgment.

Because he couldn’t leave well—or Eve Renner—alone.

It was nearly ten when Eve finally forced herself out of bed. Somehow, despite the confrontation with Cole, the drive to her father’s house, the further phone calls to Anna Maria and her brother Van’s answering machine, she’d slept.

Like a log.

Now, though, she was sluggish, and the events of the past twenty-four hours bogged her down. Scrounging in the freezer, she discovered a bag of opened beans, which she ground, and started the coffeemaker. As she let Samson outside, Mr. Coffee began to gurgle and scent the room with the rich, warm aroma of some dark blend called Mississippi Mud. She didn’t remember buying the coffee, but that was pretty much standard these days. Her memory, though recovering, just wasn’t reliable.

She walked through the shower. Then, with a towel cinched around her body, swiped at the steamy mirror and nearly cringed at her reflection. Her long hair was cut short and highlighted, compliments of Anna Maria the hairdresser. The “style,” if you could call it that, was spiky and uneven due to the large spot over one temple that had been shaved for her surgery. Her hair would grow out, and, for the moment, she decided to “go with” the new “do.” It wasn’t all that bad, and a hairstyle was the least of her problems.

The face beneath her shaggy bangs was a concern, however; she looked as if she’d aged ten years in the past three months. Her skin was pale, her eyes without their usual sparkle, her cheekbones pronounced with the loss of nearly ten pounds. She hadn’t been heavy to start with, and losing the weight hadn’t aided in her attempts to appear healthy and athletic.

“In time,” her physical therapist had told her, “you’ll be a hundred percent, but it will take awhile.” So maybe the eighty-five percent motion in her shoulder would improve. She ran a toothbrush around her teeth, added a little lip gloss and minimal mascara, and called it good.

Who really cared anyway?
When she stepped into the jeans she found in her drawer, they hung lower on her hips than she remembered. The sweater she tossed over her head draped loosely but was comfy, so she went with it. As for the headache that had followed her around all day yesterday, it had abated a bit, and, despite the grief she bore for her father, she felt as if she could tackle the day.

She slid into her favorite pair of slip-ons and clattered down the wooden steps just as the phone jangled. Racing to the kitchen, she snagged the receiver before it rang for the third time. “Hello?”

“Eve Renner?”

She braced herself at the sound of the unfamiliar male voice. “Yes,” she responded cautiously.

“This is Miles Weston with WKMF.”

Her heart sank. She recognized the name.

“I’d like to talk to you about your father’s death.”

“No comment,” she said.

The reporter continued, “The police are listing it as a homicide.”

She hung up. Her anonymity had been short lived. Last night she hadn’t been recognized, but today the press was already putting two and two together, having figured out she’d returned to New Orleans. She was Eve Renner, the woman whose lover had been accused of murdering Roy Kajak in a bizarre homicide, and now she was also Eve Renner, the daughter of Terrence Renner, who’d been killed in like fashion.

And Cole Dennis, blast his hide, was a free man.

At least temporarily.

The phone rang again. She saw it was the same number as before, so she let the answering machine take the call. The last thing she needed to deal with today was the damned media. She’d had enough to last her a lifetime.

And she wasn’t ready to deal with her father’s murder.

Not yet.

The coffee, despite its enticing smell, was a little bitter without any cream, but she sipped it as she read over the articles about Faith Chastain and Our Lady of Virtues again. They seemed less sinister in the morning light, almost childish with their perfectly cut notched edges. Why the pinking shears? Why sent to her? Why, why, why?

She sat at the table and read each clipping carefully. Faith Chastain. She fingered a grainy picture of a beautiful woman with a haunted expression. Had Eve seen her before? She checked the articles closely and determined that Faith Chastain had been in and out of Our Lady of Virtues but that she’d stayed for an extended length of time when Eve was young….She’d been killed twenty years earlier, about the time Eve was fifteen…not long before Eve’s own mother’s death.

Moving the clippings around, Eve tried to put them in some sort of order, and as she did her thoughts returned to Our Lady of Virtues. The hospital was a creepy and fascinating place for a curious child. Though she’d been warned time and time again about keeping to the main hallways or her father’s office on the first floor, she had, over the years, explored all of the old brick asylum, from the basement with its cool tile walls and shining equipment to the dusty attic where unused and broken furniture and records had been kept. She’d loved to sneak into that forgotten space under the rafters.

Our Lady of Virtues was where she’d first met Roy…. They were both around ten at the time and up to no good. Roy was the son of the caretaker, and they’d instantly connected, two normal kids in a bizarre world of insanity, delusion, and pain. For the most part, they’d played outside, off the grounds of the hospital, in the surrounding
woods and fields, but when the weather was bad, they spent time inside the campus of Our Lady of Virtues. Though both the convent and hospital were deemed off limits, they ignored the rules as much as possible.

It had been a game to them both, slipping through the quiet hallways, up the service stairs, and avoiding the ever-rustling skirts and stern glances of Sister Rebecca. How many times had Eve hidden in the laundry cupboard, peering out, seeing the dangling cross from the heavy belt rosary Sister Rebecca wore around her waist? Or viewed the crisp uniform and pinched lips of the nurse, a slim blond woman who seemed to do her job with long-suffering efficiency? What was her name? Nurse…Suzanne…That was it; there had been an old song by the same name, one she’d heard on her mother’s tape player. Roy had always whistled it under his breath, singing only, “You want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind…but you know that she’s half crazy…”

They’d thought they were so funny, so clever, so sly as they’d filched cookies and apples from the kitchen then sneaked them upstairs to the attic to build their own hiding space with the old furniture, drapes, and broken equipment.

She remembered the gloomy day that Roy had led her to the attic and then, making her promise not to tell on pain of death, showed her a series of holes in the floor where light from the rooms below filtered upward. “Spy holes,” he had told her, and they’d spent many afternoons looking through them into the patient rooms and hallways below.

Eve had felt a little guilty about it, uncomfortable that she was peering into another person’s privacy, but it hadn’t stopped her.

Had one of the people she’d observed secretly been Faith Chastain? What was the reason so many articles about this woman had been forced upon her?

Now, as morning sun filtered through the dirty windows and slats of the blinds, she had no answers, just the same feeling of unease that had chased after her so many years ago.

Her stomach rumbled from lack of food. She made a quick mental note to pick up a few essentials before she returned, then scooped up the newspaper articles and slid them into the envelope in which she’d received them.

No doubt the police, if interested, would want everything.

Especially the truth.

What are you going to tell them about Cole, Eve?

Sooner or later, you’re going to have to explain that he stopped by, that he was covered in blood, that he’d been at your father’s house but you, the woman who’d accused him of trying to kill her, had believed his story when he told you he hadn’t slit your father’s throat.

“Later,” she told herself as her cell phone indicated she had a text message. She checked, saw that it was Anna. All it said was, Hope you’re okay. Call later. What was it with Anna and the texting?

She stuffed the envelope into her purse then headed outside, locking the door behind her. The air was warmer than the day before, and sunlight was filtered through high, drifting clouds. Samson, pressed flat on the floorboards of the porch, was peeking between the rails, his body frozen, only the tip of his tail twitching as he stared at a bird flitting between the budding, twisting stalk of a clematis winding its way up the rain gutter.

“In your dreams,” she told the cat, smiling to herself.

She unlocked the car, slid inside the already warm interior, and was about to start the engine when she saw the glove box. Closed. No evidence that anyone had opened it. Yet her heart kicked into a quick tempo and she couldn’t help but open the small compartment.

It was empty except for her sunglasses case and owner’s instruction manual for the Camry. “Good,” she told herself as she backed onto the street. She noticed Mrs. Endicott busily weeding her flower bed and as the older woman waved, Eve raised her hand then drove toward St. Charles Avenue. She hated to imagine what her neighbor
had overheard last night but decided not to dwell on it. If she were lucky, it would never come up.

“Yeah, right,” she said with more than a trace of sarcasm as she braked for a red light.

Her cell phone rang before the light changed and she pulled it out of her bag. Caller ID told her that Renner, Kyle was calling, but Eve was laying odds that Anna Maria was on the other end of the wireless connection.

“Eve?” Anna asked when Eve answered. She didn’t wait for a response. “You didn’t call me!”

“Just got your text message a few minutes ago. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Did you get hold of Van?”

“Yeah. I left him a message.”

“Me too, and he hasn’t called back.” She sounded worried, but that was nothing new. “I just don’t get him. Do you know anything else? I mean, we’ve got to plan a funeral. Kyle hates these things; I think he’s in denial, and… Oh damn, I didn’t mean to go on like this. How’re you?

“I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

“Fine, I guess. The news reporters have started to call and, well, that’s kind of weird. You know, unnerving.”

“I hear you,” Eve said. “They’ve started with me too.”

“I’m glad Kyle’s not around, or he’d be having a fit. Has he phoned you?”

“No. Where’s Kyle?”

“Still at that damned job I told you about.”

“When he gets home, have him give me a call and we’ll figure out funeral arrangements once the police release the body. I just don’t know when that will be.”

“Okay…. Listen, I hate to bring this up, but what about his will?”

Someone behind Eve honked, and she saw the light was now green. Easing into the intersection, she said, “I don’t know. He never talked about one.”

“I suppose we’ll find it when we clean out his house or safe-deposit box.”

“If he has one.”

“I know it’s kind of uncomfortable to be talking about it so soon, but it’s just that Kyle thought you might know something about it.”

Her stomach soured. Their father had been murdered, and her eldest brother’s first thought was the estate? It was just so like Kyle. To this day, she didn’t understand what Anna saw in him. Slowing for another amber light, Eve decided to end the call. “Look, let me call you back later, Anna. I am no good at multitasking when one of the tasks is driving.”

In the business district, she found a small storefront that advertised all kinds of copying and mailing services. She parked then walked inside past a bevy of mailboxes to a wide room lined with different sizes of copiers and counters. One wall held boxes of all sizes and shelves holding envelopes, tape, and various office supplies. Behind a counter, clerks were busily helping customers with faxes, shipping, and mailing services.
Eve tossed her purse onto an unused counter near a vacant copy machine then made photocopies of each of the clippings that had been left in her car. She planned to go to the police with a complaint and expected they would want the originals. She would keep the copies for herself, to pore over, to try and figure out why the specific, jagged clippings had been left for her.

When she was finished xeroxing, she picked out a large envelope and paid for it along with the copies then shoved the door open and stepped onto the street.

Where she came face-to-face with Cole Dennis.

“What are you doing here?” they asked in unison.
Leaning against the side of the building, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and shades, Cole looked as sexy, irreverent, and outwardly cool as he always had. Gone was any trace of a man on the run, a man worried about being questioned by the police for a second murder, a man in near panic. In fact, she saw no indication of stress whatsoever in the sharp angles of his face.

He’d changed and taken the time to shower and shave since she’d last seen him. An improvement. A vast improvement. But, she told herself, she was impervious to any of his charm. “Im-freaking-pervious!”

“You knew I was going to be here. No need to lie about it. You’re following me,” Eve said as he pushed away from the brick wall of the bistro situated next to the UPS store. When she saw Cole wasn’t going to deny it, she added dryly, “Or you just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

The sun was bright and intense enough that rays spangled the street, catching in bits of glass on the sidewalk. Eve concentrated on her surroundings, anything but Cole.

“I just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

“Uh-huh.” She shot him a sideways glance. Was that a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth? Sometimes he was difficult to read. “So, you’ve recovered from last night?”

“I don’t think I ever will.” The smile faded, and creases appeared on his forehead above the rims of his sunglasses.

Neither would she. “So, why are you following me?”

“Unfinished business.”

Eve sighed. “You’re just making me feel tired.”

“Am I?” Again with the smile. As if he were calling all the shots, still playing the role of Hollywood’s interpretation of a rebellious hero.

She slipped her sunglasses onto the bridge of her nose and ignored him.

His smile grew at her irritation, became that insufferable and damnably sexy grin that showed off white, straight teeth and a bad boy charm that he seemed to cultivate. Well, it wasn’t working. Not on her. “Quit following me, Cole.” She started toward her car and noticed that the meter had run out, so she quickened her steps across the sidewalk and was only vaguely aware of the notes from a plaintive saxophone over the rumble and whine of traffic.

He walked a step behind her then stood by as she scrounged in her purse and came up with her key ring. She unlocked the driver’s side door, asking, “Have you gone to the police?”

“No yet.”

She sighed and shook her head, felt the noonday heat slide through her hair. “Look, I can’t cover for you forever. I lied last night, though God only knows why. I’m on my way to the station now, and if they start asking questions
about you, I’m going to have to be straight. They already think I’m a lunatic.”

“I just need a little time.”

She pulled her door open. “Sorry. All out.”

Before she could slide into the car, he slammed the door shut, nearly pinning her with his body.

“Hey!”

He was so close to her, she saw the pores in his skin, noticed the tiniest of dark hairs on his chin, smelled that same musky aftershave she’d come to think of as pure Cole. “I’m not asking you to lie. Just to give me a little more time.”

“Wait a minute. You stole Dad’s computer. From a crime scene. I’m sure that’s a felony. And I know about it. So if I lie, I’ll be aiding and abetting or…Wait a minute, why am I explaining all of this to you? You’re the hotshot defense lawyer. You already know what laws I’m breaking.”

“You’re going to the police now?”

She lifted the envelope with the clippings. “I was, yeah, but…” Oh God, why on earth did she consider giving into his request? She tried to step away from him, away from the edge of the curb, but he reached forward, and his fingers tightened around her arm.

“I’m only asking for a couple of hours.” Behind his wraparound shades, his gaze locked with hers, and she felt the warmth of his fingertips on her bare skin. Which was ridiculous. This was a man who was, if not her enemy, still dangerous. At least as far as her emotions were concerned.

“If you go to the station now, we both know what will happen,” he said. His cool exterior had cracked. Anger was evident in the set of his jaw.

She jerked her arm from his grasp. “I won’t lie for you, Cole.”

“Just to me.”

She recognized the silent fury in the corners of his mouth and knew exactly what he was talking about, what he was insinuating. “Low blow, Cole. And not very smart. You follow me, chase me down, ask a huge favor, and then insult me? It takes a lot of nerve to practically beg me not to tell the police what I know, then make some disparaging crack about me. Careful, Counselor.”

“I’m just trying to get to the truth.”

She couldn’t believe the nerve of the guy. “So here, in broad daylight, on the day after my father was murdered, you accuse me of lying to you…about my sex life, right?” She was steamed. Beyond steamed. “You’re unbelievable.”

He held up a hand, and the sharp edge of his jaw slackened a bit. “You’re right. I was out of line.”

“Waaaay out of line! Leave me alone. Okay? Just leave me the hell alone.” Before he could say another word, she climbed into her car, twisted on the ignition, then nearly clipped a bicyclist who rounded a corner on the fly as she was pulling out. She stood on the brakes, the biker shot her a dirty glare, and then, adrenaline flooding her bloodstream, she slowly nosed the little car away from the curb.

Visible in her side-view mirror, Cole stood where she’d left him—arms crossed over his chest, gaze following her car. “Bastard,” she muttered, furious with herself for caring the least little bit about him. It would serve the jerk right if she drove to the police station this very second and explained everything he’d done. No doubt Detective Montoya would take great satisfaction in tossing Cole’s ass back in prison.
And what about you? What then? Maybe you overreacted a bit. Maybe guilt got the better of your temper. All Cole wanted to know about is, who you were sleeping with, what other man was in your life. Her hands were sweating over the wheel, anger radiating from her cheeks. Damn the man. She slowed for an amber light and rolled down the windows to cool off.

The trouble was, he’d hit a nerve.

A sensitive nerve.

Why couldn’t she remember another man in her life, a man she’d known so intimately as to have gone to bed with him? When had it happened? Before she’d been with Cole on that night, or after? Certainly not on her way over to Roy’s. She’d been late as it was; she remembered that much. Her fingers tapped nervously on the wheel.

If there had been another man in her life, one she’d slept with, wouldn’t she remember? His face? His touch? His smell? While she recalled being with Cole that night, looking upward into his stormy gray eyes, raking her fingers down his chest, feeling him sweat as he pushed into her…

In her mind’s eye she again witnessed how the cords on his neck stood out, how the sweat shone on the sinewy muscles of his shoulders and arms as he propped himself above her. She could hear the exertion of his rapid breathing over her own gasping breaths and moans again, feel the tingle of lips that tasted slightly of whiskey….

And yet not one image of this other supposed lover. Not a glimmer of who he was.

A horn blasted, and she was instantly brought back to the present. She looked up, saw the green light. Instinctively she pushed on the accelerator then glanced into the rearview mirror at the angry, impatient motorist in the car behind her.

Her heart nearly stopped.

A dark pickup with tinted windows loomed just beyond her back bumper. “Oh God,” she whispered and nearly floored it as she took a corner and headed northeast along St. Charles Avenue. Could it be the same truck from yesterday? No way…. And yet…and yet…

She kept one eye on the rearview mirror as she drove. Another car came between them, but even as the pickup lagged back, two, maybe three cars behind, he stayed the same course as she did. At Poydras Street, she angled toward the freeway and, four cars behind, so did the truck.

“You sick bastard,” she said, her voice shaking.

Enough was enough.

At the next cross street, she timed her speed so that the light turned from amber to red just as she sped through the intersection. The silver car behind her stopped abruptly, tires screeching a little, and the dark truck, trapped behind a minivan, was forced to an abrupt stop. Eve stepped on the accelerator and drove as fast as she dared to the next light. Braking slightly, she pulled a quick right turn, tearing around the corner, intending to turn the tables on the creep and follow him for a change. She would get his license number and as much information about the truck and the driver as she could. Maybe she would even recognize the prick. Still driving over the speed limit, she cut down two narrow streets before she was able to angle back toward Poydras.

“I’ve got you, you bastard,” she said, her fingers tight around the steering wheel.

But at the intersection, she was thwarted by road construction.

A bearded flagger held up a hand and spun his sign from Slow to Stop as if on cue. She had no option but to slam on her brakes and stew in the resulting dust and dark glare she received from the flagger.

“Damn!” She punched her steering wheel in frustration as a lumbering dump truck loaded with gravel and belching black smoke rumbled slowly into the construction site.
She counted the seconds as the flagger motioned traffic from the opposite direction to move. A short stream of cars bounced around a gaping hole and steel plate in the intersection. After what seemed a lifetime, the flagger twirled his sign to Slow then made frenzied hand signals to get her to step on it and drive through the dusty intersection. By the time she reached Poydras Street again, the menacing dark blue pickup was nowhere to be seen. Her chance of getting the make, model, and license plate numbers vanished.

Damn the luck.

Her phone rang, and Eve’s gaze jerked to it. Her skin crawled. The creep was onto her! He’d seen her desperate attempt to chase him down and was calling to taunt and laugh at her. Breath quivering, she picked up the phone and flipped it open, carefully guiding her Camry onto Poydras.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Eve!” Her brother Van, always affable, never reliable, was on the other end of the wireless call.

Not some bogeyman. Van. Exhaling in relief, Eve said, “I guess you heard, huh?”

“Anna Maria got hold of me. Bad news about Terrence.”

She’d forgotten. Neither of her brothers had ever referred to the man who had adopted them as “Dad” or “Father.” “Real bad,” she agreed.

“Same guy who did Roy?”

Word was leaking out. “I don’t know.”

“Cole Dennis?”

Her stomach clenched as she melded into traffic, her gaze scraping every inch of the area. She looked hard at all the surrounding cars, trucks, SUVs, and minivans. “I doubt it.”

“You said he killed Roy.”

“I said I thought he did. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Going soft?”

“Just…trying to remember and get the facts straight.”

“So, I’m in New Orleans,” Van said, easily changing subjects.

“What? I thought you were in Arizona.”

“I was. Came into New Orleans for a sales conference. I’m selling spas right now. High end. How’s that for a coincidence? Just when Terrence checks out.”

Eve’s blood turned to ice. “Yeah…” Almost too much of one.

“So I thought maybe we should get together. Talk things over. Kyle’s on his way.”

“On his way? Here?”

“Yes.” Van acted as if nothing were odd about their conversation, though she hadn’t spoken to him in months. “There are the arrangements, and the will, lots of stuff to deal with. Kyle and I, we know you’ve been through a lot. Thought we could help out.”

“Is that right?” she asked bitterly. The brothers who had never been close to her were now concerned. And she knew in her heart it was because of her father’s estate. Great. Just what she needed on top of everything else!
“Look, I gotta run. Another call coming in.” He hung up, and she considered turning her phone off. What a loser. Their dad hadn’t been dead twenty-four hours and the vultures were already circling.

The phone rang in her hand. Hadn’t turned the damn thing off fast enough. She stabbed her thumb on the green talk button, certain Van had ended his other call and come up with a new, great idea concerning the estate. “Hello?”

“He’s free!”

Click.

The phone went dead.

He watched from his parking spot. His pickup was next to the curb, hidden behind a moving van. He’d seen her frustration as she’d been forced to sit at the construction site, waiting to drive forward. She was nervous. Antsy. Her eyes searching the side streets because she’d noticed his vehicle—known he was following her.

Stupid! He’d gotten too close again. Been too eager to be near her, had driven up behind her. When she hadn’t been quick enough at the red light, some idiot behind him had laid on the horn, startling her, making her check her mirror.

He’d lagged back, but it had been too late.

She’d seen him.

Knew he was tailing her.

Even though he’d let several cars weave between them, she’d been aware of his truck.

He realized immediately she would try something; a trick to read his license plate or get a better look at him.

Fortunately, he’d figured what would happen. Sure enough, she’d gunned it through a red light and turned quickly at the next corner, her tires squealing a bit. He’d known that she was on the attack. Quickly, across oncoming traffic, he’d wheeled into an alleyway then driven behind two restaurants and back to a tree-lined avenue where the moving van was nearly filling the street. He’d been forced to pull in behind the truck while two burly guys struggled with a refrigerator. From his hiding spot, he could observe the main street, expecting her to wheel onto it again, though he couldn’t be certain where her little Toyota would appear. Then he’d spied her car, trapped by a sign-wielding construction worker.

The Reviver had waited.

Now his heart was pounding like crazy, and he licked his lips in anticipation. The Voice had been clear that he was to follow Eve, to observe her, yet there were others to come before.

Frustration burned through him.

She was the one he wanted.

But he would hold back, listen to the instructions, leave his life in God’s hands. Hadn’t God, through the Voice, told him what would be?

Your patience and your acts will be rewarded. Fear not, Reviver.

He felt thrilled when God called him by his name. Only God would tell him who would die and who would only suffer, to be revived again.

Had that not happened with Eve?

Had she not nearly died, only to be revived?
He wasn’t certain that he could really be credited for her return to the living, but he was glad she’d been revived all the same, because he could kill her again, more slowly this time, more intimately.

She would look into his eyes, and she would know.

A shudder of desire snaked through his body, touching his soul, its forked tongue flicking at his genitals, touching both balls, making his palms sweat in anticipation and his cock thicken.

He was breathing shallowly and fast when he saw the flagger wave Eve through the intersection. She turned onto Poydras Street, heading toward the freeway, but he couldn’t follow. He had too much to do. As much as he wanted to pursue Eve, there would be time later. For now, he would return to his life on the outside, deal with the idiots who knew nothing about him and thought they understood him. Fools, every one.

He pulled slowly from behind the moving van, waiting as another couple of husky movers eased a recliner down the ramp from the interior of the truck. Once they’d packed the chair out of the way, he drove around the van and stopped at the intersection. Far in the distance, he spied Eve’s Camry. He imagined her nervously checking her rearview mirror or glancing anxiously at the passing side streets, the other vehicles.

So how do you feel now, Eve? You, the princess…. Do you sense me watching you? Or do you think you lost me? Do you know I can see you? Do you even suspect that I’m under your skin? Oh pampered, spoiled Eve.

Just you wait.
“This is the best I got.” Ivan Petrusky, a penny-ante grifter, unlocked the door to what he optimistically had referred to as a furnished “studio” apartment. In truth, the entire unit was one twelve-by-twelve room that had been narrowed to allow for a minuscule bathroom and a closet that hid a tiny sink, an impossibly short counter, and a microwave/refrigerator.

A sagging sleeper sofa, table, and lamp with its burned shade, where a lightbulb had overheated, were the extent of the furnishings, but the apartment was cheap. Better yet, Petrusky took cash and kept no records.

Cole needed that.

“You off the hook for that murder a while back?” Petrusky asked. A short, wiry man pushing seventy, he had bristly white hair and sported an unlit cigar forever tucked in the corner of his mouth. His glasses were thick, his eyes sharp, his mind as clear as it had ever been. Petrusky had known Cole’s father, and then, a few years back when one of his three ex-wives had accused him of battery, he’d hired Cole to fight the charge. It had been a slam dunk as far as Cole was concerned. Belva had set the chump up by having her new boyfriend beat on her, then claiming Ivan had assaulted her. Cole had smelled a scam from the get-go. He hadn’t done all that much, as the police were on to Belva, but Ivan, who had experienced his share of run-ins with the law, had decided Cole was his savior. Since that time, as far as Cole knew, Petrusky had sworn off marriage for good. “You know the one I’m talking about,” he added. “That one that happened up in the cabin. The Kajak murder.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“That’s not what I asked.” A bushy eyebrow was raised over the tops of tortoiseshell glasses. “Here ya are, looking for a place…”

“And I came to you because you usually don’t ask a lot of questions.”

The older man shrugged. “Okay. But this is a gem, let me tell you. I could rent it for a lot more, but you…”

“You don’t have to sell me. I’ll take it.” He reached into his wallet and peeled off two months’ rent then waited until Ivan got the hint and left.

The place wasn’t much, but it would have to do. He could set up the computer he’d purchased and pirate into someone else’s wireless connection so that he had Internet access. Along with purchasing the new laptop, he’d already copied everything he could from Renner’s briefcase. His next step was to download all the information he could from Renner’s computer onto discs then find a way to get the information to the police.

But he wasn’t going to hand it over himself.

No way.

“I’m telling you he’s dirty,” Montoya said, resting a shoulder against the filing cabinet in Bentz’s office. The door was slightly ajar, and through the crack came the buzz of conversation, click of computer keys, ringing of phones, and every once in a while the protestation of innocence from some scumbag giving his statement. Montoya found a pack of nicotine gum in the pocket of his leather jacket. As he unwrapped a piece, he stared at the computer monitor,
where gruesome pictures of the Terrence Renner crime scene were displayed. “Somehow Cole Dennis is involved.”

Bentz leaned back in his chair until it creaked in protest. “Give me a for instance.”

“I don’t know.” Montoya frowned darkly, popped the gum into his mouth. Under the fluorescent lights, his black hair gleamed almost blue, and his eyes glittered like obsidian. He was angry and not afraid to show it. “I’d like to say he’s our guy, but…” He chewed furiously. “You’re right. He’s not stupid, and I don’t make him for a psychopath. A killer maybe, and I can see him offing someone for messing with Eve, but…I don’t make him for a bloodthirsty psycho.”

“So who is?”

“The same guy who did Roy Kajak.”

“Not Dennis.”

Montoya wouldn’t answer. Just chewed his nicotine gum.

“Back to square one,” Bentz muttered. The Kajak and Renner murders weren’t the only unsolved homicides in the department’s case file. There had been a stabbing on the waterfront two nights earlier, a drug deal gone bad from the looks of it, an assault in the French Quarter over a woman, and what appeared to be an accidental shooting: a kid had found his old man’s gun and hadn’t known it was loaded when he’d pointed it at his friend and pulled the trigger.

Sometimes the job got to him. Bentz glanced at the computer screen and felt a little of the same queasiness that always attacked him when he first stepped into a murder scene. “When can we expect the preliminary autopsy report?”

“I think they’re putting a rush on it, but it’ll be at least another day; the complete by the end of the week. And the lab? Trace evidence? Fingerprints?”

Bentz sighed. “I made the mistake of asking Washington and about got my head snapped off.” Bonita Washington was in charge of the crime lab and a force to be reckoned with, a black woman with coffee-colored skin, green eyes, and, Bentz guessed, an IQ pushing the genius level. She also didn’t take any crap from anyone, so Bentz had learned to tread lightly. He’d even resorted to bringing her coffee upon occasion. The first time he’d showed up at her office door with a steaming cup in his hand, she, seated behind her desk, had looked over the tops of her reading glasses and nodded to herself. As if something she’d figured out long before had just been proven.

“You catch more flies with honey than vinegar, Detective?”

He’d nodded and handed her the cup. She gave the contents a cursory glance then took a sip. He thought he’d scored major points.

“You know, if you’re gonna try to bribe me, I’m partial to diamonds. A caramel macchiato latte with whipped cream and drizzled in chocolate is damned nice, but, really, diamonds would work so much better. Hell, for a measly carat, your case might just miraculously work itself to the top of my in-box.” She grinned and took another swallow.

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“You catch more flies with honey than vinegar, Detective?”

He felt the muscles in the back of his neck tighten warily and an embarrassed heat crawl up his face. The woman was a barracuda.
“You want something, Bentz, and we both know it. Trouble is, you’re just gonna have to wait in line. I’m understaffed and overworked. But you knew that, right? If not, you do now.”

After her sharp-tongued tirade in front of her staff, he’d learned his lesson. As she’d turned back to the work on her cluttered desk, she’d muttered something under her breath about “smart-ass, know-it-all dicks” and then added, just loud enough so that he could overhear, “Good thing I like you.”

Within three hours, the report he’d wanted had landed on his desk—a good two days before she’d promised it. Since that initial conversation, they’d had an understanding.

Montoya’s cell phone beeped, and he took the call. With a nod to Bentz, he walked out of the office and was about to shut the door when Bentz’s daughter, Kristi, pushed it open. In a tight denim skirt and a fuchsia tank top, she said, “Hey, Reub” as he passed, then dropped onto a chair in front of her father’s desk.

“Hi!” she said a little breathlessly, and he was reminded of her mother, Jennifer, his first wife. Though Jennifer was long dead, she wasn’t forgotten. Kristi had recently cut her hair, her coppery curls now in unkempt layers to frame a face that was as intelligent as it was beautiful. Curiosity filled her green eyes, and, at least in his opinion, she was so full of energy and life, she seemed to light up a room when she walked in. Then again, he might not be objective, as she was his kid.

“Hi, yourself.”

“I thought you might want to go to lunch or coffee or something.” She was grinning at him widely, again reminding him of her mother. Bentz was a little wary of all this enthusiasm.

“Lunch?” He glanced at his watch. “It’s almost three.”

“Okay, make that a late lunch, or, like I said, coffee. We could even indulge in a beignet at Café Du Monde.”

He made a point of checking his watch again. The last thing he wanted in the middle of the afternoon was something sweet, like fried dough dusted with powdered sugar. “Kristi, what’s up?”

“What do you mean?” she asked so innocently, he couldn’t fight the smile that threatened his lips.

“How long have I worked here at this station?” Before she could answer, he held up a hand. “That was a rhetorical question. Okay? But the point is, I’ve been here, at this desk for years, and this is the first time you’ve just popped in and suggested lunch. So as I asked before, ‘What’s up?’”

“Young detecting skills are amazing,” she said as if she meant it.

He knew when she wanted something. “You didn’t come down here to flatter me.”

“Well…no…” she admitted. She wasn’t quite looking at him. Her gaze had strayed to his computer screen, where the pictures of the Renner homicide were still visible. “Oh wow. That’s Dr. Renner, right?”

“Yep.” With his mouse, he clicked the file closed, and instead of gruesome shots of Terrence Renner, a rotating screen of his favorite spots in New Orleans came to view. “Level with me. Why’re you here?”

At least she didn’t throw the can’t-a-daughter-come-down-for-lunch-with-her-father line at him. She exhaled a disgusted breath and looked out the window for a second. When her gaze found his again, she was decidedly more serious. “I want to work a case with you.”

He shook his head. “You’re not a detective. Not even a cop. And you’re my kid.”

“I don’t mean that kind of work,” she said, making air quotes around the last word.

“What other kind is there?”
“I want to write about it.”

Now she had his full attention. She’d mentioned writing before. English had been her best subject in high school and at All Saints College in Baton Rouge. One of her English professors, a Dr. Northrup, had called her essays “brilliant,” and though Kristi had admitted that she thought the guy was a weirdo, she’d basked in his praise nonetheless. So she’d toyed with writing, had inquired to several magazines, even mentioned a book before, but this?

“I’d love to write true crime, and I figure that I’ve kinda got an inside track, what with you being a detective and all.”

“Whoa. I can’t let you be a part of an ongoing investigation. You know that. It would be unethical and potentially compromise the case.”

“Even if I promised to keep everything confidential until it was solved?”

He stared at her long and hard, this bull-headed, smart-as-a-whip, athletic daughter of his. “No.”

“I’ll talk to Montoya.”

“He won’t buy into it either.”

“Then Brinkman,” she countered, her chin thrusting just a bit, the way it had when she was a child and was determined to get what she wanted, no matter what. “Or Noon.”

“You wouldn’t last two seconds with Brinkman,” Bentz said, thinking of the irritating detective. Though good at his job, Brinkman was misogynist, bigoted, and had a foul mouth. The thought of his daughter being anywhere near the man caused bile to climb up Bentz’s throat. “And Noon’s a prick. Somethin’ not quite right with that guy.” Noon was a younger detective and on his own kind of authority trip. “You know, you’re right. Let’s go to lunch.”

“You’re trying to change the subject.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, it’s not working. I mean it, Dad,” she insisted, climbing to her feet and letting him hold the door for her. “I want to do this. Working for Gulf Auto and Life isn’t my idea of a career.”

“You just started with the insurance company.”

“Nine months ago!” They were wending through the cubicles and desks where detectives and clerks were typing, answering phones, taking statements, or finishing up paperwork.

“Not exactly a lifetime.”

“But why not do what I really want?” she countered as they started down the stairs. “Why waste any more time?”

“There’s the matter of bills. You know, gas, rent, cable, you name it.”

“I’m not quitting,” she insisted, “at least not right away. Not until I write the book and it sells.”

“If it sells.”

They were on the first floor, and she shot him a harsh glare. “Way to be supportive, Dad.”

“I am supportive. Just being realistic. Come on, cross here,” he suggested. He yanked at his collar. Only May, and already the temperature was over eighty. “There’s a restaurant up about three blocks, open all afternoon, has great gumbo.”

She wrinkled her nose, and again he was reminded of Jennifer, so beautiful but so different from Olivia.
At the thought of his new wife, he couldn’t help but shake his head. She was an enigma, that was for sure. Olivia Benchet Bentz was a beautiful woman who was as smart as she was mystical. He still didn’t understand the little bit of ESP that seemed to flow through her blood, but she was the best thing that had happened to him. Even if she had brought a feisty mutt named Hairy S and a parrot into the marriage.

“I’m not really into gumbo,” Kristi said as they crossed the street against the light.

“Don’t worry, they’ll have something you’ll like.”

“You don’t even know what I like.”

“Last I heard it was tofu and beans.”

“Very funny.”

He laughed and held the door open for her. The rich smells of hot Cajun cooking wafted from the kitchen and invaded his nostrils. The booths were dark wood with stiff backs and thin cushions.

They split a fried-shrimp-and-crawfish basket complete with curly fries. Over cups of sweet tea, Kristi tried to convince Bentz what a great idea it would be for her to be privy to information on the Renner investigation. He wasn’t buying it and told her so.

“Not gonna happen,” he said.

“Then how about one that’s already been solved?” He dredged a french fry through a pool of catsup as she championed her cause. “What would it hurt? I’d make sure all the facts were correct and that everyone who needed to got credit and—”

“Why?” he cut her off, skewering her with a gaze that had caused more than one would-be assailant to think twice.

“I told you.”

“I mean why, after what you’ve gone through, would you want to dwell on this crap?”

“Probably for the same reason you do.”

He scowled, pushed the basket aside, and leaned across the table. “What about that nutcase who called himself the Chosen One, huh? Remember him?” When he thought of it now, the black fear that had enveloped him during the hours Kristi and Olivia had been held captive, Bentz still felt chilled inside.

“It’s over, Dad,” she said, but he didn’t believe her. Such a harrowing, mind-twisting ordeal was never over, never completely forgotten.

They finished the basket, and he paid the check.

“This is something I want to do, for me,” she said as they headed outside. “I thought you’d be all for it.”

He glanced at her skeptically. As she started to step off the curb, distantly he heard the roar of an engine and caught the flash of chrome out of the corner of his eye. Instinctively he grabbed her arm and jerked her back onto the sidewalk. A motorcycle, engine roaring, took the corner fast, skidded through the crosswalk, and nearly wiped out.

“Holy crap!” Kristi cried, her eyes wide.

Bentz glared after the disappearing bike but didn’t catch the plate. Every muscle in his body had flexed, taut as bowstrings. He realized he was still holding on to his daughter’s arm in a death grip and slowly uncoiled his fingers.

“Sorry.”

“No…it’s…it’s okay,” she said, still shaken. “I saw him and I heard him, but I just thought he wasn’t turning.”
“Neither did I, but I couldn’t be certain.” He grabbed her arm again and gave it a squeeze. “I couldn’t take a chance.”

“Okay, Dad. I get it. You’ve made your point. But I am going to write a book about a real case, one that I find fascinating, and it will probably be one of yours, so”—she flashed him a blinding smile—“you’re going to have to find a way to deal with it.”
Eve stood on one side of the glass and watched as the sheet was pulled back. Her father, his skin pale, his eyes closed, lay on the slab. She thought of all the things she wanted to say to him, all the things she never could. They’d been close once, long ago when she’d been a little girl and her mother was still alive. After Melody Renner’s death, they’d grown more distant rather than closer. And then there was Tracy Aliota, a girl under her father’s care, a girl who, like Eve, had rebelled, but had gone further, a girl who had ultimately lost her battle with sanity and her life. Though no criminal charges had been filed against Dr. Terrence Renner or the hospital where Tracy had been treated, the girl’s family had taken him to court for wrongful death. Cole Dennis and the high-profile, high-priced law firm of O’Black, Sullivan and Kravitz had convinced the jury that Terrence Renner hadn’t failed his patient, that he’d done everything possible, that in no way whatsoever was Tracy Aliota’s condition mis-diagnosed, nor was Dr. Renner responsible in the least for her death.

The only person who hadn’t been convinced in the courtroom, other than Tracy’s grieving family, had been Eve.

I’m sorry, Dad, she thought, her throat hot. Oh God, I’m so sorry. If only I’d talked to you, if only I’d tried…. If only…

“Ms. Renner?” Montoya asked, his voice low.

“It’s him,” she said, nodding, her insides twisting as she stared past the glass. Her father’s body had been cleaned. She could see the gash around the base of his neck and the dark, garish tattoo embedded into his forehead.

She imagined the last seconds of his life. The pain. The terror.

What kind of monster would do such a thing?

Who?

Why?

Shaking, she sniffed and ran a finger under her eyes to wipe away her tears.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, cleared her throat, and stiffened her spine. The headache that was forever her companion threatened to rise again, but she ignored it, didn’t have time to deal with it. “Get the bastard who did this,” she told Montoya.

“Believe me, I’m trying. But I do have some questions.”

“Fire away.”

“Maybe we’d better do this at the department.”

“Wherever.” She didn’t care; she just wanted to get through the interview.

“Great.” Montoya called Bentz, and they met Bentz in his crammed office. His desk was littered with reports and old coffee cups, and a dying plant was withering in a pot on top of a filing cabinet. The room was stuffy and close
despite an open window through which the sounds of the street filtered in. As she took a seat in one of the chairs near the desk, Eve watched two pigeons flutter near the window ledge and listened to the hum of tires and rumble of engines along with some impassioned street preacher begging passersby to “accept Jesus into your hearts.”

Montoya didn’t bother sitting, just stood near the filing cabinet.

“What is it you want to know?” Eve asked as Bentz pulled out a small pocket recorder, shuffled some papers out of the way, and set the machine on the cleared desk blotter that had seen better days. Rings from ancient coffee cups were visible as he pushed the record button then identified everyone in the room, noting the date, time, and place of the interview.

“Oh, for the record, tell us what you know about the night your father died.”

She did, explaining about driving to New Orleans from Atlanta, the panicked calls from Anna Maria, and her own attempt to reach her father. For now she left out any mention of Cole or the fact that she thought she was being followed. Montoya leaned against the file cabinet and didn’t say a word, content, it seemed, to let Bentz ask the questions. It took nearly an hour, and finally, just when she thought they were about finished, Montoya pushed himself away from the cabinet and took up a spot in front of Bentz’s desk. “Okay, Ms. Renner, so here’s the thing. Your story hangs together except for one thing. We’ve listened to your father’s answering machine and are in the process of getting his phone records. Your call came into his house before the call from your sister-in-law. I’ve made a duplicate from the answering machine we found at the scene.” He pulled a small tape recorder/player from his pocket and hit the play button.

Eve tried to remain calm, but her fingers curled of their own accord as she heard her panicked voice.

“Dad? This is Eve. I’m sorry to call you so late, but I thought you’d want to know that…that I’m back in town…. I, um, should have called earlier. Call me back.”

“That call, the one you just heard, came in at two fifty-one. Then later, at three oh-two, we get this…”

“Dad? This is Anna Maria…. I’ve, uh, I’ve got this friend who works for the paper. He called and said there might be some trouble at your place…. Kyle’s not home right now, but you can probably reach him on his cell…. Just let me know that everything’s fine.”

“See the problem?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You knew something was wrong before your sister-in-law called.”

The detectives were silent, still staring at her. “I just wanted to talk to him.” She wasn’t going to tell them she’d learned about her father’s death from Cole. Not yet.

“The other problem we have is that someone, a man, called in the murder.”

“Who?”

“We don’t know, but we’re going to compare the 911 tape to other voices we’ve got on record. We thought maybe you might know.”

She swallowed hard. “I don’t know. But…do you think the man who called was the person who killed my father?”

“Could be. Or a witness.” Montoya folded his arms over his chest, his black leather jacket creaking with the movement. “We just have a lot of leads to follow.”

“Is there anything else you can think of that might help us?” Bentz asked.
“Maybe.”

The cops waited.

“I think I’m being stalked. Someone’s following me, calling me at all kinds of weird hours, and leaving me the same message.”

“Which is?”

“‘He’s free.’ The voice is male, I think, low and rough, as if he’s whispering to disguise it, and I have no idea who it could be.”

“He’s referring to Cole Dennis? Or someone else?”

“Cole, I think. The calls started about the time he was released.”

Bentz’s expression darkened.

Montoya shot him a look that Eve couldn’t decipher.

She reached for her purse and pulled out the manila envelope she’d tucked inside. “I don’t know if this is connected or what it means, but there have been some strange things happening to me too. I think I was followed from Atlanta, and someone put these in my car.”

Using a handkerchief, Montoya picked up the envelope then slowly spilled its contents onto the desk near Bentz’s recorder. The jagged-edged clippings, looking like snowflakes from a kindergartener’s art project, scattered over the ink blotter. “What is this all about?”

“I don’t know. My dad was the chief psychiatrist at Our Lady of Virtues Hospital for some time, and that woman, Faith Chastain, was one of his patients, I think.”

Montoya’s head snapped up. “Faith Chastain?”

“All of the articles are about her, not just the hospital. I’m sure there have been dozens of stories written about the hospital itself, or the staff, or its closing, or whatever, but these stories are all about Faith Chastain. You two are mentioned too, in a couple of them…. Oh, there’s one.” She pointed to one of the clippings in which both detectives were quoted.

“You don’t know where these came from or why?” Montoya demanded tersely.

Eve shook her head. “Someone broke into my car and left them in the glove box, but as to why, I don’t have a clue.”

If possible, Montoya grew even more serious. Patiently he asked her to go over her story a couple of times. She explained about the dark pickup but could provide them no concrete information, no license number, not even the make or model of the truck, just that it was full-sized, very dark blue or black, and that the windows were tinted. “If I were to guess, I’d say it was a domestic pickup, but I really can’t be sure.”

“But you think it’s in New Orleans.”

“I think, but I can’t be certain. I thought someone was following me earlier today, but I could be wrong.”

“Can we keep these?” Bentz asked, motions toward but not touching the clippings.

“Sure.”

“Has anyone else touched them?”

She thought of Cole and how he’d read the articles, nearly picked one up, but hadn’t when she’d told him not to.
“Not since I received them.”

“Have you shown them to anyone else?”

“No, Detective. I just received them yesterday.” Oh, how easy it would be for them to catch her in another lie. All they had to do was talk to Mrs. Endicott, who no doubt had heard enough of her conversation with Cole while he’d been on the porch to point the police in the right direction.

“Can you tell me about your relationship with your father?” Montoya asked as the tape continued to record and Bentz took a few notes on a small spiral pad.

“It was pretty good when I was a child, but then, as I hit adolescence, we grew apart. We, uh, we weren’t that close in the last few months. Not quite estranged, but…but just not as close as we once were.”

“Because of the Kajak murder?”

“No—it was before that.”

“Because of your relationship with Cole Dennis?”

“No, not really.”

“Not really?”

“Dad and I really drifted apart after he was accused of being responsible for the suicide of one of his patients.”

She didn’t elaborate, and Montoya asked suddenly, “Your mother’s deceased?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Heart failure. When I was sixteen, about fifteen years ago. Why? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just filling in case history. You have a brother living in Atlanta and one in…?”

“Phoenix…well, Mesa, really. But I think they’re currently both in New Orleans. Van, he’s…well, the middle child, the younger of the two. He just called me and said he’s here for a convention of spa dealers, and he told me Kyle was on his way here, though I haven’t talked to him.”

“Will they be staying with you?”

“I doubt it. Van didn’t say anything about it, and Kyle doesn’t like to spend the night at other people’s homes. He’d rather live in a hotel. He doesn’t like to play by anyone else’s house rules.”

“Is that so?” Bentz asked.

Eve shrugged. “It’s not like we were all one big happy family, okay? My dad adopted Kyle and Van when he married my mom. The boys were half grown when my parents adopted me.”

Montoya’s eyes turned dark as night. “So Terrence Renner isn’t your biological father?”

“Right.”

“Who is?” Bentz asked, leaning forward, his pencil unmoving.

“I don’t know either of my biological parents. I asked a few times, got no answers, was told mine was a closed adoption, which I guess means my birth parents don’t want to hear from me.” Eve’s mouth twisted. “It was a private thing, arranged by an attorney, and, well, Mom died before I got any real information from her, and Dad was always
so vague. I always figured I’d try to locate my biological parents someday. What’s the worst that could happen? I’d get a door slammed in my face?” She sighed. “I never got around to it.”

Montoya scratched at his goatee as Bentz said, “We’ll need the phone numbers of your brothers.”

She gave them Kyle’s house number in Atlanta, then said, “Just a sec” as she found her cell phone in her purse. Scrolling down the menu on the phone, she found the cell numbers for Kyle, Anna Maria, and Van. “I don’t have Van’s home number anymore. He moved to Mesa not long before I was injured, and I always just call his cell and leave messages.”

“That’s all right.” Bentz was writing on his notepad. “What about enemies? Did your father have anyone who would want to harm him?”

In her mind’s eye she saw Tracy Aliota’s grieving parents and brother as they’d sat in the courtroom, hearing the verdict of “not guilty” ringing to the rafters. They’d fallen apart, Tracy’s mother, Leona, nearly crumpling. If not for her husband’s strong arm, she might have fallen to the floor. Tracy’s older brother, J. D., had been red faced and seething, his eyes burning with the certainty that a dark injustice had been done. “I suppose,” she said, giving the detectives a quick review of the Aliotas’ grievances. “They were probably not the only patients who were unhappy, though none that I know of had gone so far as to sue him. But he did deal with people who were mentally ill.”

“Psychotics?”

She nodded.

“What about personally?” Montoya asked.

She thought hard. “My brothers’ father—their biological father, Ed Stern—didn’t like him much. Blamed him for the divorce, as I understand it, but he ducked out of the picture early. When the boys were very young, he gave up all parental rights. I’ve never met him, and as far as I know, my brothers haven’t seen him since he took off.”

Bentz was still taking notes.

“Anyone else?”

She shook her head. “I think my father got into some legal thing about use of an access road that cut across the farm...with the neighbor, Hugh Something-or-other... Hugh...Hugh Capp, I think, but I only heard Dad say something about it a couple of times, and that was five or six years ago. As far as I know they resolved whatever it was.”


“I really don’t know.”

“Or patients or staff at Our Lady of Virtues—that’s the last hospital where he was on staff. Afterward, while he was in private practice, he worked alone, right? And was just associated with a small, private hospital”—Bentz flipped back a few pages in his notebook—“St. Andrews, not far from Slidell.”

“That’s right,” she said, remembering the small hospital across Lake Pontchartrain.

“Do you know anyone who held a grudge against your father at either of the hospitals?”

“No. You’d have to ask someone who worked there,” she said, feeling her headache toying with the edges of her brain again. “There must be records.”

The detectives asked a few more questions before the interview wound down, and by that time Eve’s headache was back in full force. Montoya escorted her through the department and down the stairs. When she was outside again, she finally felt like she could breathe.
Clouds had gathered in the sky, and shadows had lengthened over the city. The air was thick. Muggy. It pressed her clothes against her skin.

She walked to her Camry and looked over her shoulder. Once again she experienced the eerie feeling that someone was watching her, someone inherently evil. Unease crawled up her neck, breathing on her scalp, and she turned to slowly search the sidewalks and streets.

A woman pushed a stroller. Two teenagers were walking, holding hands and almost yelling at each other, each plugged into an iPod. An elderly man was walking his little dog, a terrier of some kind, and several people waited for a city bus. One guy in a silver sedan was studying a map and scowling as if he were horribly lost. A couple of twenty-something kids with spiked hair were skateboarding recklessly through the crowds, and a panhandler claiming to be a homeless vet was waiting for someone to drop money into his open guitar case as he strummed a tune from the eighties.

She saw no one hiding malevolently in the umbra of an awning, no one smoking a cigarette in a large, dark pickup with tinted windows, no one paying her the least bit of attention. The street preacher was still in full force, handing out literature, still pleading with anyone who would listen to accept Jesus as his or her savior.

But no luminous eyes stared at her from the shadowy alleyways, and the only dark truck that passed by had a sign advertising a florist’s shop and was driven by a girl who looked barely sixteen.

*It’s all in your mind,* she told herself but couldn’t shake the feeling that someone nearby was observing her every move.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Bentz said when Montoya returned. “That Eve Renner is Faith Chastain’s missing daughter. But you’re jumping the gun. Just because she’s about the right age, was adopted, and someone stuffed a bunch of articles about the hospital and Faith Chastain in her car doesn’t mean she’s the missing kid.”

“It’s something to check out.”

“Agreed.” Bentz tapped the eraser end of his pencil on the desk.

“We could tell her about it. Ask for a DNA sample.”

Bentz glanced out the window at the pigeons that had taken roost. “It isn’t really a police matter,” he said. “Not a crime if a woman has a baby and doesn’t tell anyone.”

“What about a woman who has a tattoo hidden in her hairline? A tattoo she probably got while she was a patient, for crying out loud?”

“Again, no crime that we know of. And the woman’s dead. We know how she died and how she was abused. The tattoo happened more than twenty years ago. And we don’t even know if it was forced upon her.”

“A tattoo on her head, a head that had to be shaved… You think she wanted it?”

“She wasn’t exactly stable.”

“Oh come on. The woman was brutalized. We know that.” Bentz scowled but couldn’t argue. They’d found proof that Faith had endured unspeakable crimes while a patient at the hospital.

“I know, but face it, this is a personal issue with you. Any crime that was committed is long over.”

“Then what the hell are these all about?” Montoya pointed to the clippings littering Bentz’s desk. “Don’t you think it’s strange—one helluva coincidence—that someone wants Eve Renner to know about Faith Chastain at the same time people who know Eve are being slaughtered?”

“Damned strange.” Bentz glowered at the newspaper clippings. All neatly clipped, with jagged, precise edges. All
about Faith Chastain. Could it be that easy? That Faith Chastain’s unknown child had just waltzed into the
department carrying evidence linking her to the dead woman? Who would know about the adoption? Why bring it to
the fore now, after thirty years? And how would Eve, being Faith’s daughter, have anything to do with the murders?

Roy Kajak spent time at Our Lady of Virtues, not only as the son of one of the caretakers, but later, as a patient.

Terrence Renner was the head psychiatrist at the mental hospital before it closed.

Faith Chastain died at the old asylum.

Once again there were homicides and a mystery linked to the once-grand brick buildings now in decay.

“You’re the one who doesn’t believe in coincidence,” Montoya reminded him.

“So what do you want to do?”

“Check it out. If Eve agrees. DNA test. Compare it to Abby’s. If Eve is Faith’s daughter, she should have enough
matching markers to Abby.”

“Don’t need Abby’s. We’ve got Faith’s DNA on file, the lab took it when her body was exhumed. All we need is
Eve’s, if she goes for it,” Bentz said. “She may not want to help us.”

Montoya snorted. “She’s holding back.” He reached into his shirt pocket for a nonexistent pack of cigarettes then
stuffed both fists into the pockets of his leather jacket.

“I think so too.”

“Remember, she’s still recovering from her attack, still has memory problems.” Montoya made the statement as if
he didn’t believe it. “If you ask me, she’s a nutcase.”

“No argument there, but even so, someone’s playing a head game with her.” He reached into the drawer of his
desk, found a bottle of antacids, and tossed a couple into his mouth. He wouldn’t necessarily think the two incidents
were related; a woman getting weird notes and two murders, but they all revolved around Eve Renner.

Why?

And how the hell was Faith Chastain, a woman dead over twenty years, the mother of Montoya’s fiancée,
involved?

Montoya was restless, pacing in front of the desk, nervously rubbing the diamond stud in one ear. “Remember last
fall and the siege at the old hospital, when we nailed the son of a bitch who was terrorizing Abby?”

Bentz knew where this was going. In the last case involving Our Lady of Virtues, the killer had warned Montoya,
No matter what else happens, tonight is just the beginning.

Over half a year had slipped by. Montoya had started to believe that the killer had been rambling, shouting a dire
prophecy that was little more than a bluff, but now he wasn’t so certain.

Because of these clippings with their saw-toothed edges, left in Eve Renner’s car. If they could believe her story.

“Let’s not jump the gun,” Bentz said. “We’ll send these down to the lab, have them fingerprinted and checked for
any kind of trace, and go from there.”

“I’ve got to tell Abby.” Montoya was already out the door. He spun on the other side of the threshold. “Be sure
that I get copies of those.”

Bentz nodded. “You got it.” Through the open door, he watched as Montoya cut through the desks to the stairway
then disappeared from sight. Bentz was left with the strange newspaper articles.
What was the connection?

He made a note to find out about Eve’s brothers, her dead mother, and, if possible, her birth parents. Like it or not, he knew he’d have to make a visit to the convent at Our Lady of Virtues and talk to the Mother Superior.

Bentz turned to his computer, clicked open an old file, and found a clear photograph of Faith Chastain, noting her haunted beauty, the high cheekbones, straight nose, gold eyes, and wild mass of un-tamed dark curls. Abby Chastain was nearly a carbon copy of her mother, but Eve Renner? There could be a slight resemblance, but certainly not enough to make that kind of call.

He tapped his pencil on the desk again, then, using gloves, placed the clippings back into their envelope to take them to the lab. He didn’t understand what was going on yet, but he knew, whatever it was, he didn’t like it.
Deeds was late.

He was also pissed as hell.

“Tell me you’re not screwing up,” he insisted as he ordered a beer from the bartender. O’Callahan’s was dark and cool, filled with timeworn mahogany and leather, smelling of cigars, aged whiskey, and Cajun spices.

“I’m not screwing up.”

Deeds didn’t accuse him of the lie, just accepted the frosty mug of beer and took a long sip, then glanced toward a couple of guys hanging out at the bar, where they watched a television mounted near the ceiling. Only a few patrons were seated around the scattered tables. Smooth jazz filtered from hidden speakers. One guy was shooting darts near the back by the restrooms. All in all, the place was quiet. Low-key.

“So you’re minding your p’s and q’s?” Deeds was skeptical as he reached for some of the mixed nuts the bartender had placed between them.

“Yep.”

“Then tell me Eve Renner’s not back in town and you haven’t seen her.” He popped a couple of peanuts into his mouth.

“Can’t do it.”

“I knew it! Cole, are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Probably.”

“This is no time for jokes,” Deeds said furiously. He took a long pull from his glass, glanced at his reflection over the mirror, and said tightly, “So tell me what’s going on.”

Cole did.

For the most part anyway. He explained about Terrence Renner calling him and about visiting the farm, finishing with, “Renner was dead when I got there, but he hadn’t been for long. I checked for a pulse. None. Nor was he breathing.” Cole’s voice lowered as he remembered the crime scene. “There were numbers written in blood on the wall and tattooed on his forehead.”

“Like Kajak.” Deeds tossed another couple of nuts into his mouth.

“Except instead of 212, the number was 101.”

“You think it was the same killer?”

“Had to be.”
“Then why change the numbers?”

“I don’t know.” Cole shook his head then took a long swallow from his draft. “Maybe the guy messed up, or maybe they were meant to be different. Who knows?”

“Just our killer.”

“I’ve been wracking my brain, but I can’t come up with a thing.”

“You have to make a statement to the police.”

“They’ll try to pin this on me.”

“Why would you kill Renner? And on the first day you’re free? It doesn’t make any sense.” Deeds dusted his hands then drained his beer. “So, you haven’t exactly been keeping your nose clean since you got out.”

“Renner called me. Or at least some guy claiming to be him.”

“Okay, and what about Eve? You’ve seen her. And I suppose you’re planning to see her again.”

Cole stared at his beer, didn’t answer.

Deeds shook his head woefully. “You’re making a big mistake there. You know, I’ve already warned you about her, so I’ll shut up. But use your head, Cole. The big one. You’d better tread very carefully. Someone’s trying to frame you, my friend. Someone made certain you were at Renner’s house last night.” He set his empty mug on the table. “Just like before.”

Cole didn’t respond. Decided there was no reason to. He’d never admitted to a soul that he had been at Royal Kajak’s cabin on the night Roy was killed, that Eve’s memory wasn’t completely faulty.

He figured he wouldn’t start spilling his guts now.

“...So you see, Ms. Renner, if you wouldn’t mind, we’d like to check your DNA, just a mouth swab to begin with,” said Detective Bentz through her cell phone as she pulled into her driveway. She rammed the car into park and let it idle as she digested what Detective Bentz had just told her about Faith Chastain’s mysterious C-section, a birth that had most likely occurred when she was a patient at Our Lady of Virtues, a birth that Eve’s father no doubt knew about. Bentz was still making his pitch. “We should have asked you about this when you were in, but we hadn’t really quite connected the dots at that point.”

“Let me get this straight,” she said. “You think I could be Faith Chastain’s daughter, one no one knew about?”

“That’s right.”

“And you think that somehow whoever put the clippings in my car knows this.”

“Could be.”

“So why not just call me up and tell me?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have an answer for that yet. We’re still investigating.”

“Dear Lord,” she whispered, looking through her windshield, where the old wipers had streaked the glass.

“We’ll subpoena the hospital records, of course, but that will take time; the hospital has been closed for years. Fortunately we already have samples of Faith Chastain’s DNA on file. We’d like to compare it to yours.”

“Of course,” she said. “When?”
“As soon as possible. Unlike the labs you see on television, our testing will take weeks, even though I can put a rush on it.”

“Can I come in now?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

To find out my biological parents? Are you kidding? She was already backing up. “I’m on my way.” He gave her instructions and promised to meet her at the lab. She turned onto the road and headed into the heart of the city again.

Eve’s head was spinning. Was it possible? Could she really be Faith Chastain’s long-lost daughter? Sister, or at least half sister, to Abby Chastain, who was now involved with Detective Montoya? How was that for a bolt of lightning? The whole six-degrees-of-separation thing seemed to be working double-or triple-time.

“Weirder and weirder,” she muttered as she worked her way through traffic.

A few drops of rain began to pepper her windshield as she found a parking spot and met Bentz in the lab. Her mouth was swabbed by an efficient tech who smiled at her, took her information, then assured Bentz he’d explain that the tests needed to be done ASAP so that Bentz could get the information he required.

It was all over in minutes.

And soon she’d find out if she was, indeed, Faith Chastain’s missing child.

“You think that Eve Renner might be my half sister?” Abby said, thunderstruck. She had just finished her last photography session; her clients had walked out of her studio at the same moment that Montoya had walked in. He’d locked the door behind them, grabbed her, and twirled her off her feet before kissing her as if he’d never stop.

“Hey! What’s gotten into you?” she’d asked, breathless, as he’d set her back on her feet.

Then he’d dropped the bombshell. “I think Eve Renner might be your long-lost half sister.”

She stared at him. “What? Back up. Explain what’s going on.” Abby couldn’t help feeling a little thrill of excitement to think that finally, after learning her mother had most likely had another child, she would finally get to meet the mysterious sibling…if it all panned out. But Eve Renner? How was it all connected?

Montoya sketched out the story as quickly and concisely as he could. Abby listened, frowning as he finished with the unsettling news that Eve thought someone was following her. “But who knows?” he added. “The woman’s got trauma-induced amnesia and God knows what else. She’s not exactly reliable.”

Abby tamped down her own expectations as she turned off the lights and set the security alarm. “But you seriously think she could be my half sister? Because she was adopted and her father worked at the hospital? That’s kinda slim, isn’t it?”

“I’m just saying it’s possible.”

“Hmmm.” They walked outside, where dusk was stretching in long, lavender fingers through the city streets and alleys and the air was thick with the threat of rain. Montoya slung his arm around her shoulders and guided her toward his car, a gleaming black Mustang parked illegally in a tow-away zone. “Someday you’re going to come out here and your car’s going to be gone,” she predicted.

“Nah. Not with my luck.” His teeth flashed white, and his hair, longer than he usually kept it, gleamed blue-black in the watery glow from the streetlamps. The scent of cologne mixed with cigarette smoke reached her nostrils, and she figured the case was getting to him, and, against all sound advice, he’d broken down and started smoking again. She decided not to call him on it as she settled into the passenger seat even though she noticed the open pack of Marlboros on the dash.
“We have your mother’s DNA. We’re hoping Eve will give us a sample for comparison, but even if she does, getting the results will take time.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” she said as he flicked on the ignition, rammed the Mustang into reverse, then swung the car around. He skimmed through the city streets as if he were a NASCAR driver, and, as always, Abby clung to the passenger door’s armrest for dear life.

“I’m still going to contact the convent and find out what they know,” she said as Montoya turned onto Chatres. “Are we going somewhere?”

“How about out to dinner?”

“Don’t tell me, a quick bite and then you’re back on the job?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinkin’.”

“Then it better be takeout,” she said, checking her watch. “Hershey hasn’t been out since this morning, and neither has Ansel.”

“Worse than kids,” Montoya grumbled.

“You think?” She laughed as he negotiated the next turn, heading toward their house with its half-done renovations. “Wanna put some money where your mouth is?” she asked and glanced down at the diamond ring she wore, his gift to her last Christmas when he’d proposed. She’d said “Yes” and moved most of her things to his shotgun house in the city before New Year’s Eve.

“A wager on whether kids are worse than pets?” he suggested.

“Hmm. Payoff after you have two kids.”

“You’re not trying to tell me something, are you?”

She caught his drift and laughed. “I’m not pregnant. But once I am and you’re the father of a couple little hellion Montoyas, then we’ll compare notes and see if you think being up all night with bottles and diapers is as tough as a litter box for the cat and Hershey’s two walks a day.”

“You’re on,” he said. Then one dark eyebrow raised in invitation. “Let’s get the research going.”

“What? You mean have a baby?” She smiled as he shifted down. “You’re out of your mind, Montoya.”

“Well, I’m thinking, you know, it might not be such a bad idea if we...you know...” His voice lowered suggestively.

“You want to go to bed when we get home?”

He slowed for a light and flashed her another heart-stopping grin.

“I thought you were going back to work tonight.”

His dark eyes sparkled devilishly. “I am, but I might be able to be persuaded to stay an extra fifteen minutes.”

“Oh wow,” she said laughing. “A quickie. Be still, my heart.”

He wheeled the Mustang around a final corner and onto the street they’d called home together for over four months. At their house, he eased his car into the short driveway. “We’ll order pizza.”

“So much for romance.”

He parked the Mustang and winked at her in the soft light from the dash. “We can make it as romantic as you
He answered as she climbed out of the car. Fingers scrabbling through her purse as she searched for her keys, she stepped around a discarded sink and cabinet the contractor had ripped out of Mrs. Alexander’s side of the building and had yet to take away.

Pulling out her key ring, she started walking up the broken cement walk toward the front door, where through the glass panes and backlit by a single lamp, Hershey was going nuts. Jumping wildly, tail thumping, letting out sharp, excited barks.

“I’m coming! I’m coming! Hold your horses!”

“Stop!” Montoya’s voice was raw with panic. “Abby! No!”

She froze.

Turning, she saw him vault over the hood of the Mustang, touch down, then leap over the sink as he dashed across the small patch of grass that was their yard. His expression was as hard as she’d ever seen it. “Move away from the house! Get the hell away!” He didn’t waste time, just grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the cottage, propelling her backward, toward the street. She dropped her keys and nearly tripped at the curb.

“Are you crazy?” she shouted.

Montoya just moved faster, urging her across the street. Abby lost her purse. “Wait!”

He twisted his head to view the house. His dark eyes focused on the door. “Some son of a bitch just called. Said he left me some ‘evidence’ on my front porch, and goddamn it, there it is.”

“What?”

“Next to the damned door!”

Abby followed his gaze. Her heart nearly stopped. Propped against the siding, next to the old porch swing, were two small cases.

“Shit!” Montoya swivelled his head, his eyes searching the street.

“I don’t understand,” she said, an unspoken terror scraping down her spine.

Montoya didn’t usually give in to fear. Right now he was frantic.

“It could be a bomb, Abby. Some nutcase with a grudge who has my cell number and my address. Maybe someone I sent away who is on parole. Who knows?”

“But Hershey—”

He held her tight with one arm while pulling his phone from his pocket and punching out 911.

“No one put a bomb on our porch,” she said, trying to convince herself. She had to get the dog and cat out! Now!

But Montoya didn’t release her. “The animals will be okay,” he insisted, holding on to her for dear life.

Abby heard the operator answer.

Montoya identified himself and demanded officers from the bomb squad be sent to his house immediately.
Once the operator took the information, he hung up, his gaze searching the neighborhood.

“Ansel and Hershey are inside,” Abby whispered, her nerves shredding one by one. So this was what it was like to be involved with a cop.

“They’ll be okay,” he said, but his voice was sober, and Abby wondered if her life would ever be the same.

Eve slept like the dead.

No phone calls interrupted her dreams.

No one pounded on her back door in the dead of the night.

She woke up refreshed, the headache that had been plaguing her for months having retreated. At least for the time being. She made the bed, showered, messed with a bit of makeup, added a touch of gel to her short hair, then called it good.

Who cared?

She and Samson had even eaten breakfast, kitty bits for him and a bagel with cream cheese and coffee for her. Not exactly gourmet, but not half bad.

She was beginning to feel almost like a normal person when she spied Cole Dennis big as life walking through the back gate and up the steps. “Now what?” she said but couldn’t help the tiny rush of adrenaline that sped through her bloodstream whenever she saw him. “Masochist,” she muttered under her breath.

This time she opened the door before he knocked.

“What? No revolver?” he asked, one dark eyebrow lifting.

“It’s early, Cole. You could still get lucky.”

A sexy grin stole over his lips, and she regretted her words. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Tease.”

“Yeah, that’s me,” she said, rolling her eyes, then realized that his cocky grin had faded. “There is, I assume, a reason you’re here?”

He walked into the kitchen, and, as he passed, she closed the door, trying to ignore the scent of aftershave that lingered in the air. Though she couldn’t remember the details of the night Roy was killed, she could recall in an instant the electricity she felt whenever Cole’s lips brushed across her cheekbones, or touched the underside of her chin, or pressed against the back of her neck. Oh yes, those intimate, sizzling memories still found their way back to her consciousness.

“I thought you’d like to know that your father’s belongings are safely with the police.”

“You turned them in?” she asked suspiciously.

“I made sure they got into the right hands.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Evasive, Counselor.” Walking to the counter where the coffeepot sat warming, she watched as he made himself comfortable in a chair at the table. “Coffee? Or what’s left of it?” She lifted the glass pot, where the dregs of the morning’s brew sloshed darkly.

“That would be great. Thanks.”

“So you talked to the detectives?” she asked, reaching for a cup, checking it, then rinsing it with hot water before
dumping in the coffee and sticking the cup into the microwave.

“Not yet, but I will. Deeds is paving the way.”

She set the microwave for a minute. “I don’t trust Sam Deeds.”

“You don’t trust anyone.”

She considered. He wasn’t too far off the truth, but she hadn’t always been so cynical or jaded. Although she’d never been one of those upbeat, innocent Pollyanna types, there was a time, a time before she’d gotten involved with Cole Dennis, when trust had come much more easily. Bits of her memory might be foggy or missing, but she hadn’t forgotten that.

“Deeds is a good guy.”

“If you say so.” She wasn’t convinced. The defense lawyer was just too damned slick in his tailor-made suits and expensive shoes. And then there was all that talk from ADA Johnson about how Deeds would, if given the chance, tear Eve’s testimony to ribbons. Nope, she didn’t like him.

The timer dinged, and, using an old oven mitt, Eve extracted the steaming cup from the small oven then handed the mug and mitt to Cole. “Sorry. It’s hot.”

“Thanks.” He blew across the cup. “What did the police say about the newspaper clippings?”

“They think whoever planted them in my car might have been trying to tell me that I could be Faith Chastain’s long-lost child.”

“What?” He held his cup in midair. “What long-lost child?”

She explained. He already knew that she was adopted but hadn’t heard the latest speculation. “Isn’t that a bit of a leap?” he asked. “From clippings to missing daughter?” He took a sip from his cup. “That…that’s too out there. Who would know that information? No, I think this has to do with your dad’s murder and the fact that Faith was a patient at the hospital when he was on staff.”

“There’re only two ways to find out.”

“Two ways?” he asked.

“Well, I could sit around and wait for the DNA test results, or I could go out to the campus of Our Lady and see if there’s anyone there who might know something.”

“The hospital’s been closed for years.”

“But the convent’s still open, and I’m willing to bet some of the nuns who worked at the hospital might still be alive and living there.” She walked to the drawer where she’d put the envelope holding the photocopies of the clippings. As he sipped his coffee, she sorted through them. “Let’s see…. Okay, here we go. This one”—she handed the sheet to Cole—“quotes Sister Rebecca Renault, who is now the Reverend Mother. I remember her from the hospital.”

Cole’s eyebrows drew together as he scanned the article.

“I think I’m going to try and talk to her,” Eve said slowly.

“You believe she’ll remember something?”

“I don’t know, but it’s worth a shot.”

To prove her point, she picked up her cell phone, called information, and was connected to the convent, where a secretary told her that the Reverend Mother’s schedule was full for the next several days but that if she called back
at the first of the following week, something might be arranged.

“Can you have the Reverend Mother call me back?” Eve asked, not about to be put off.

“Of course. She usually returns calls before Vespers, but today she has appointments all afternoon. I’ll see if she can get back to you tomorrow.”

“That would be great,” Eve said and gave the secretary her phone number. She hung up, feeling disappointed.

“Struck out?”

“Not yet.” Tapping her fingers on the counter, she added, “But close.”

“Join the club.”

“Meaning?”

“I didn’t find anything on your father’s computer. No information.”

“So much for us playing Nancy Drew.”

He drained his cup, stood, and set it in the sink. “Speak for yourself. I’m not giving up.”

“Fine, Nancy, what’s your next move?”

“My next move? After you call me Nancy?” Cole smiled at her in surprise.

Eve felt the change in atmosphere between them and suddenly wished she hadn’t been so open and teasing. “I just meant, what do you plan to do next?”

“I don’t know. Give me a minute.”

They stared at each other. Eve drew a breath. Oh, she was in big trouble.

He took a step forward and she said, “Don’t.”

“It’s still there, isn’t it, Eve?”

“No. I don’t remember.”

“Sure you do.”

She held her hands up. “No…no…”

Cole crowded into her space. She told herself not to lift her eyes, not to look at him, NOT TO DO ANYTHING, but she slowly raised her gaze.

“Yes,” he said. Then he pulled her against him and before she could utter another word of protest, pressed coffee-laced lips to hers.
Kissing Eve was a mistake. He knew it instantly. He knew it before it happened, but he hadn’t been able to stop. Touching her, holding her tight against him, hearing her heart beating so close to his own, feeling her breasts crushed against his chest, tasting her, for God’s sake—all of it was a colossal error in judgment.

Colossal!

But it had been such a long time since he’d felt her bones melt as they kissed, and when he slowly, steadily walked her backward so that her spine was pressed against the wall and her arms surrounded his neck, he couldn’t breathe.

“This is…this is wrong,” she whispered when he finally lifted his head.

“Yes.”

“We shouldn’t. I mean…we just can’t.”

“Uh-huh.” He kissed her again and lost himself in the feel of her. She closed her eyes and moaned almost imperceptibly. Through her T-shirt, he felt the soft, pliant muscles of her back, the indentation of her spine. His fingers dipped lower, into that smooth curve and just below the waistband of her jeans.

Heat sizzled through his blood.

Desire pounded in his ears.

He remembered making love to her. The power. The passion. Sometimes teasing and laughing, almost girlish, other times all feminine, nearly feline seduction, Eve had always been passionate.

He remembered the time he’d come home and found her waiting for him in the bed, and when he’d stripped his clothes off to join her, she’d laughed and run to the shower, already warm and steaming when he’d caught her and had lifted her up to make love to her with her shoulders pressed to the tile…. And the time they’d been hiking, cresting a mountain ridge, and all she’d had to do was turn, her hair catching in the sunlight, her eyes squinting up at him, her breasts heaving from the exertion of the climb, her lips curving upward in invitation…

But now, here, in her grandmother’s kitchen, he kissed her hard and felt her response. Familiar. Tempting. Oh so arousing.

One hand tangled in her short curls, pulling her head back, bowing her neck as he kissed her at the base of her throat.

Desire thundered through him.

He found the button of her faded Levis, popped it open. The zipper hissed downward with the slightest of pressure. And then he was cupping her, fingers brushing silky panties.

“Oh God!” Her eyes flew open. She blinked, and the arms surrounding his neck stiffened. “Cole. No…oh no.” She pushed away from him and stared at him in horror. “We can not go there! Oh my God, what was I thinking?”
“You weren’t.”

“And neither were you.” Stepping away from him, she rezipped her pants, buttoned them, and straightened the hem of her T-shirt. “No way. I can’t do this. I just…can’t!”

He raked a hand through his hair and willed his half-masted erection to relax. “If you expect me to apologize…”

She looked up at him, her aquamarine eyes dark with desire, her cheeks still flushed. “Apologize? No. I’m not blaming you. For God’s sake, Cole, I’m not some whimpering virgin going to point a finger at you. You know that. You felt my response.” She drew a breath and said in self-condemnation, “I wanted to go to bed with you, to lose myself, to just end this nightmare for a while too, but considering everything…” She threw up a hand, then finger-combed her short hair.

“Considering everything.” He had to agree with her, but damn, he wanted her. His stupid cock wasn’t taking the hint, and he turned his back on her and forced his mind to a different place. A darker and more dangerous place. The reason he was here.

“I spent last night thinking,” he said. “Whatever is going on, it’s dangerous and we’re both involved. Someone, and I’ll be damned if I know who, is making certain we’re in this together.”

She nodded and, as the cat wandered into the room, picked him up and stroked his long fur.

“So it only makes sense to me that we should fight it together.”

“How?” she asked, lines appearing between her eyebrows.

“I’m not sure yet. But someone sent you clippings about Faith Chastain. Someone followed you from Atlanta to do it. Someone killed your father and made damned sure that I’d show up there.” She nodded again, pensive. “What made you leave Atlanta when you did, Eve?”

“It was time to go. I’d really worn out my welcome. Kyle and Anna Maria weren’t getting along, and I felt that I was exacerbating an already bad situation.”

“It had nothing to do with my release?”

“Not directly, no. I knew you were supposed to be getting out, yes, but wasn’t certain as to the day.”

“Did you call your father and tell him you were on your way home?”

“Not that day, but I’d called him sometime the week before, I think. I can’t remember the exact date.” The cat wriggled in her hands, and she let him hop to the floor. Samson shot like a streak to the door, pacing and meowing.

“So only you, your brother, and your sister-in-law knew for certain that you were leaving?” Cole asked.

“Even Kyle wasn’t sure, I don’t think. I’d been talking about it and had one bag packed, but the morning I woke up and thought ‘I’m outta here,’ he wasn’t around. Anna said he ran to the store.”

“What about friends or neighbors? Did you phone anyone and tell them you were coming back?”

“No, but my physical therapist, Nita, she was aware that I was moving.” Eve walked to the door of the mudroom and opened it. Samson shot outside.

Cole looked away, didn’t want to concentrate on the way the denim of her jeans fit around her ass. He grabbed a chair at the kitchen table, twirled it, and straddled the back. “Anyone else?”

She shut the door then returned to the kitchen, where she started making more coffee. “Probably my shrink, a guy named Calvin Byrd.” Glancing over her shoulder at him, she rolled her eyes. “I got his name from Anna Maria. A mistake. I saw him a couple of times then stopped. I told him I’d locate someone down here if I thought I needed a
session. He wasn’t all that cool about it. Thought I was in major denial, which maybe I was.” She rinsed out the pot, filled it, then poured the water into the reservoir of the machine. “That’s about it, I think. Anna could have told her friends, I suppose.”

“Whoever left you the clippings was ready for you. Waiting. Have you seen that truck again?”

She found her bag of coffee beans. “I think so, but I’m not sure,” she admitted. “Yesterday, after I left the police station, but…I tried to double back and get behind him for a better look and maybe get the numbers of his license plate, but it didn’t happen. I lost him.” She cast him a rueful smile as she poured beans into the grinder. “I guess it’s me who’s not cut out to be Nancy Drew.”

She pressed a button, and the screaming, whirling sound of coffee beans being pulverized destroyed any chance of conversation.

“I just don’t understand what the hell’s going on,” she said once the grinder was silent again.

“Neither do I.” Cole rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m going to talk to the police. Maybe later today. Whenever Deeds can arrange it. I don’t know what’s going on, Eve. But someone made damned sure that I was at your father’s house the other night. I think it’s time I came clean.”

“Good.” She was relieved. “And in the meantime?”

“As I said, let’s pool our resources.” He walked over to her as she lined the coffeemaker with a paper filter and poured in the dark powder. “I don’t like it that someone’s following you, breaking into your car.”

“That makes two of us.”

“So I think I should camp out here.”

“No!” She spun so quickly she knocked into the coffeemaker, and water sloshed onto the counter. “You’re kidding, right?” When he didn’t respond, she laughed, grabbed a paper towel from a roll sitting on the counter, and began blotting up the spill. “You can’t ‘camp out’ here, for God’s sake! What do you think you can do, protect me? Oh, Cole, think about it. I was the one who said you tried to kill me.”

“But you don’t believe that, do you?”

“I don’t know what to believe!”

“Eve…”

“All right. Yes, I don’t think you would want to hurt me. I don’t think I ever really thought that, but when I go back to that night and concentrate…I see your face and a gun that fires.” She finished wiping the counter and tossed the soggy towel into the trash. “But you still can’t stay here. That’s out of the question.”

“We’re going to have to have a little faith in each other if we’re going to do this.”

“That works two ways, Counselor.” As Mr. Coffee gurgled and spat, she folded her arms under her breasts. “I wasn’t involved with anyone other than you,” she said positively. “But the police say I wasn’t raped during my blackout period, so…” She shuddered. “I don’t know, I can’t explain it. But I don’t remember anyone but you, Cole. I was in love with you. I hoped to marry you and…” Her eyebrows slammed together as she studied a coffee stain on the tile. “I never cheated on you.” She rubbed at the stain then lifted her gaze to meet his. “I would know if I had, wouldn’t I?”

It killed Cole to see her indecision. Looking past his own anger and betrayal, he suddenly understood how truly devastating her memory loss was for her.

But Eve, hearing her own confusion, seemed to shut down, cut herself away emotionally. “If this is going to work, we both have to start over,” she said briskly.
He nodded. Resisted the urge to pull her close to him again. “I know.”

“It’ll take trust, and that’s a pretty tall order for each of us.”

“The way I figure it, we don’t have much choice.”

She handed him a cup of coffee. “Okay then.”

“Okay.”

Cole gazed at her over the rim of his mug. A tenuous pact had been formed between them, an alliance, whether Eve realized it completely or not.

They were together!

Eve and her lover.

From his vantage point on the property of the vacant house whose yard abutted the grand Renner home, he had a perfect view of the kitchen. He rarely dared come this close, but he’d taken a chance, been drawn to stop as he drove past when he noticed the battered old Jeep: Cole Dennis’s rig.

Through the watery glass he saw him kiss her, force himself upon her, and she, of course, did little to resist.

His nostrils flared. He chewed nervously on a fingernail. He swore that, even from this distance, he could smell them together, the stink of their rutting, the reek of their sex. His skin wrinkled in revulsion, and the stench of it burned his airways.

Eve the princess.

Now Eve the whore.

Sensual, flirting, and dangerously cunning.

How she used her feminine wiles so indiscriminately!

And yet he wanted her.

Desperately.

Achingly.

A bad girl. The kind his mother had warned him against.

If he closed his eyes, he could hear his mother’s voice as clearly as if she were standing next to him beneath the protective branches of this willow tree.

“You mustn’t want her! She’s unclean! A whore! Spawned by Satan!”

Though Mama had been dead for years, he still heard her recriminations, her dire warnings, her heartfelt prayers, her quiet sobs…

Hers had been a low, soft voice, one that on the surface seemed kind and caring. But beneath the warm, dulcet tones there had always lurked a warning. Strict. Insistent. But sugarcoated with a false Southern gentility. A voice that had permeated his days and nights and scraped through his brain.

“Oh, sweetie, don’t you ever go near those girls,” she’d admonished him time and time again. At school, where the nuns had still worn voluminous habits, on the playground where other children were laughing and running and screaming in delight, in the car as they drove. An image from his youth flashed behind his eyes.
He’d been eight years old, and she was dragging him through the city to mass at St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter.

He remembered standing in front of the old church, feeling small as the three whitewashed spires knifed upward against a cloudless summer sky. Horse-drawn carriages creaked by, big wheels turning, horseshoes ringing on the cobblestones. People were bustling around the Cathedral and Jackson Square.

His mother caught him looking at a curlyhaired girl who had been about his age. The girl, wearing a yellow sundress and matching ribbons in her hair, was walking with her mother across Jackson Square, pausing at the statue of Andrew Jackson upon his rearing horse to look back over her shoulder and smile at him, her brown tresses bouncing.

His mother had intercepted the glance and recognized pure evil in the girl’s innocent brown eyes.

“Stay away from her,” his mother had said, spinning him around to face her tall, trembling, furious form. “She’s one of them.” She hissed this into his ear, and he’d smelled the scent of the same perfume she always wore, a cloying scent he could remember decades later.

“Do you hear me, Son? That girl will make you want to do vile, nasty things that will take you down a path that leads straight to the depths of hell. They’re all sinners. Oh, I know they look pretty and innocent. Believe me, I know. But they are all the same. Never, Son, do you hear me, never trust them. They are all like Eve with the apple in the Garden of Eden. Born of original sin. You understand, don’t you? You must never, never touch them.” Mama had shifted, placing her body directly in his line of vision, casting a cool shadow over him. Bending slightly so that she was peering through the black lace of her hat, she had glared hard then, her eyes wide and unblinking, her pupils mere pinpoints in pale blue irises. “Girls like that one are heathens, honey. Daughters of Lucifer. Do you hear me?” Her glossy red lips pulled into a tight smile. Her fingers dug into his arm so deeply, the sharp, polished nails had pinched his skin, painfully etching tiny white crescents on his flesh, nearly drawing blood.

“Y–yes, Mama,” he’d said, shamed.

“Good.” She pushed him in the opposite direction, toward the whitewashed towering walls of St. Louis Cathedral. The girl turned away. Bells were tolling, people bustling and talking, a saxophone wailing from a street corner two blocks down. The August sun was high in the sky, shining down in hot, blistering rays that bounced against the pavement.

“Don’t ever forget.” Mama straightened then adjusted her hat with one hand, making certain the partial veil covered her eyes before shepherding him through the yawning doors of the cathedral.

Now, years later, he felt that same hot shame burning through him. Because of Eve. Always Eve.

He itched to call her again, to warn her…to remind her…to let her feel that icy drip of terror that would chill her wanton soul.

All in good time, he told himself as he headed back to the nondescript silver sedan he’d parked three blocks away. All in good time.

Everything had to go according to plan.

Eve was forbidden. A sick sin and yet he couldn’t help his lust. Yet, as much as he wanted to feel her writhing beneath him, hot for him, her legs straddled over his ribs, it might never happen. But, he thought, biting off the tip of another fingernail and spitting it out into the street drain, he knew with infinite certainty, he and Eve would die together.

He would make it so.

It was their destiny.
Montoya lit up, took a long drag, then crumpled the pack of Marlboros in his fist and tossed it into the trash can on his way into the station. He’d bought the pack at a convenience store the night before and smoked three cigarettes, counting this one. His last.

At least for a while.

But the Renner case had gotten under his skin in a way that only nicotine could salve.

He paused at the steps and inhaled again.

“Hey, I thought you quit.” Brinkman, the biggest dick alive, was lumbering toward the station from a nearby parking lot. A smart enough detective, Brinkman was a royal pain in the ass, always pointing out flaws or making crude remarks or being a general social mis-fit. Now he motioned to the filter tip smoldering between Montoya’s fingers.

“I did.” Montoya flipped the rest of his cigarette onto the pavement and crushed it with his boot as he started up the stairs.

Brinkman was right on his heels. He wore his hair long on the sides, just brushing his ears, to make up for the fact that there was nothing on top, just a freckled pate. He was always fighting his weight and was wheezing as they reached the top step.

“I heard there was a bomb scare at your place.”

Montoya didn’t respond as he yanked open the door.

“But it turned out to be nothin’, huh?”

“It was evidence from the Renner case. His laptop computer.”

“Just dropped it off on your porch?”

“The guy called me and told me what he’d left, but I didn’t trust him.” Montoya figured he didn’t owe Brinkman more of an explanation as he headed toward the stairs.

“Who was he?”

“Don’t know. Probably the same prick who called in the murder.”

“The doer?”

“Maybe.”

Brinkman paused at the elevator, but Montoya kept walking, taking the steps two at a time, glad to be rid of the other detective. On the second floor, he headed toward the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee, and watched as Lynn Zaroster, a smart, cute junior detective, slapped a packet of artificial sweetener against the counter. She’d been with the division a little over two years, and already some of her idealism was starting to wash away. She ripped open the packet and dumped a minuscule amount of fake sugar into her cup, where coffee steamed.

“That stuff’ll kill ya,” Montoya said.

“Oh yeah?” She cocked a dark eyebrow and seemed amused as she blew across her cup. “Is that before or after you die of lung cancer?”

“He quit smoking,” Brinkman said as he angled into the room and tried to hide a smirk.

Bastard. Jesus, would the guy never transfer? Why not Kansas City or Sacramento or effing New York City, anywhere but here?
“I’ll believe it when I see it.” Zaroster headed back toward her desk.

Muttering under his breath, Brinkman lifted the glass pot from its warming tray. Only a swill of black gunk swam around the bottom of the carafe. “You know how to work this thing?” Brinkman asked Montoya, though his gaze followed after Zaroster and her tight little ass, which, Montoya suspected, she swung a little more sexily just to bug Brinkman.

“Yeah, but so do you,” Montoya said. The I’m-incapable-of-doing-this-woman’s-job act didn’t wash with him. He opened a cupboard where the premeasured packs of coffee were kept and tossed one to the other detective. “Knock yourself out.”

Quicker than he looked, Brinkman caught the packet. “Great.”

Before the balding detective could grumble, complain, or whine any further, Montoya headed down a short hallway toward Bentz’s office.

He found his partner poring over an open file that was labeled Royal Kajak. Pictures of the crime scene were scattered over his desk, along with notes and lab reports. His computer monitor, too, displayed pictures of the deceased along with interior and exterior shots of the cabin and woods.

Bentz looked up as Montoya arrived. “Heard you thought a bomb was left on your porch.”

“Good news travels fast.”

“Renner’s laptop?”

“Yep. I didn’t get a chance to look at it. Once the crime techs have done their thing, I’ll see what I can find.” He kicked out one of the chairs in front of Bentz’s desk and sat.

“Who left it?”

“The guy who called me and told me that the briefcase and laptop were on the porch didn’t ID himself, but I’m thinking the items were at Renner’s house, and whoever called in the murder lifted them then got the hell out.”

“Why?” Bentz raked fingers through hair that was still damp from his morning shower.

“Don’t know.”

“A witness?”

“Maybe, but why not come forward?”

“Could be this guy’s the doer.”

“The number on the screen said pay phone, and I’m pretty sure we’ll get nothing when we figure out which pay phone it was.”

“But it could have been the doer.”

They banged that theory around awhile, but neither one of them bought it. Why would the killer bother to return evidence?

“Take a look at this.” Bentz picked up a couple of sheets of paper that had been lying on his desk then handed them to Montoya.

“Tox report. On Renner. Not complete, but interesting.”

“His blood alcohol level is high,” Montoya said, his gaze scanning the document. “Drugs? Alprazolam? A sedative?”
“Hmm. Brand name Xanax.”

“He took it with booze?”

“Not a good combo.”

“He was a psychiatrist, could have prescribed it himself.”

Bentz nodded. “But we didn’t find any bottles of the med at the house. I double-checked. No samples either.”

“Could’ve used ‘em all.”

“Packets should have been found in the trash. Again, no dice.”

Montoya scratched at his chin thoughtfully, scraping the bristles of his goatee. “So the doctor was out of it when he was attacked?”

“Uh-huh. The lab is all over it. They tested the bottle and, sure enough, plenty of Xanax mixed in with the Jack Daniels.”

“So you’re thinking the killer did this to him on purpose to sedate him, make him more malleable, easier to attack?”

“Looks like it to me.”

“And no forced entry.”

“Yes.”

“He was visiting?”

“Only one glass at the scene. No evidence that Renner was entertaining.”

Montoya pointed to the older file. “Kajak’s tox screen came back clean, right? No booze. No drugs.”

Bentz threw the file to the younger detective. “Not even a trace of an antidepressant, and the guy had been under a psychiatrist’s care for years.”

“So you think our killer is evolving?”

Bentz shook his head. “Maybe.” He stared at the grisly pictures of Roy Kajak. “I don’t know.” Frowning, he added, “I’ve already got a call from the Feds. They think there might be a link, a serial killer on the loose.”

“So now we get to deal with the FBI.”

“Looks like,” Bentz nodded.

“Task force?”

“Probably. I’ve already got a partial list of everyone who knew Renner. Of course the neighbors heard nothing.”

“The nearest one’s pretty far away.”

“Yeah, I know, but you’d think someone might notice a car parked in the drive, hear an argument, something, but no. I’m trying to chase down his sons. So far no one’s returning my phone calls.”

“Really?” Montoya said, surprised. “I did reach Kyle Renner’s wife, Anna Maria. She’s upset but couldn’t tell me where her husband was. ‘At work on a job out of town,’ was her explanation.”
“Thin.”

“Very. As for the last person to see Renner alive, it might be the clerk at the liquor store where he bought a bottle of Jack Daniels.”

“New bottle?”

Bentz nodded. “That’s right. Purchased around four-thirty in the afternoon. Doctored after that.”

“And no fingerprints?”

“None that shouldn’t be there.”

“Just like Royal Kajak’s cabin.”

“Yeah.”

Montoya frowned. “You know, Eve Renner’s right in the middle of this.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Bentz stretched his arms over his head and rotated the kinks from his neck.

“Wish I could.” Drinking from his cup, eyeing the bloody numbers smeared onto the walls and tattooed on the victims at both crime scenes, Montoya tried to figure out what the damned numbers meant. 212. 101.

Significant?

Or just a nutcase’s idea of a joke, something to throw them off?

Time, he figured, would tell.
Eve locked the door then watched through the window as Cole walked across the overgrown yard to his Jeep. She couldn’t help but notice the way his shirt pulled across his shoulders and the casual manner in which his ragged, faded jeans hung low on his hips. In her mind’s eye she remembered his body, naked and hard, firm butt muscles, legs so strong the skin stretched taut over his thighs and calves. And then there was his back…. Oh Lord, how she’d loved to trace a finger down his spine and experience his reaction. One slow, twisting movement of her index finger and his eyes would darken, his pupils wide. Eagerly his mouth would find hers, and he’d wrap those sinewy arms around her and pin her to the mattress, pushing her knees apart in one smooth motion…unless he rolled her onto her stomach first and, cupping her breasts, pushed into her from behind. She touched her lips and quivered inside at the memory.

What that man could do to her!

She watched as he opened the Jeep’s door and found his sunglasses, sliding them onto the bridge of his nose.

She thought of the kiss here in the kitchen and how easily it could have turned into more. Her mouth turned to sand at the thought of the sex they could have had and might be having still.

Watching him slide into his rig, she called herself seven kinds of fool. What was she thinking, letting him kiss her?

Not smart, Eve, she thought, though she’d convinced herself that her memory of the night that Roy had died wasn’t just faulty, it was flat-out wrong.

Cole wouldn’t have tried to kill her. Of course not. She was missing something. The image in her mind was off somehow; that had to be it.

Her gaze was still on him as he yanked the door closed, then rolled down the driver’s side window of the battered Jeep and, as if sensing her stare, looked up suddenly, catching her. Damn the man, if one side of his mouth didn’t lift into a knowing, amused grin. Her silly heart fluttered, and she couldn’t believe her reaction to him. “He’s just a man,” she told Samson as he hopped from a chair to the counter, then sat, tail twitching, defying her to scold him and shoo him off his perch.

However, she knew she was lying to herself.

Cole Dennis was not just another man. Which was just plain bad news.

Disgusted with herself, she tried to pluck Samson from his spot by the sink and only succeeded in brushing his back as he leapt from the counter. After landing softly on the battered linoleum, he slunk, ears backward, belly nearly sweeping the floor, down the hallway. Eve looked back to see the taillights of Cole’s Jeep as he braked at the corner. She was a damned fool where he was concerned. Her feelings for him were, and always had been, a problem.

“One among many,” she said as she hurried to the stairs and raced upward, not bothering to stop on the second floor. Tennis shoes pounding the steps, she climbed to the turret and headed straight for the old secretary desk her grandmother had used eons before.

Her grandmother had given the secretary to her, and Eve, delighted, had promptly stored all her precious nothings
in the locked section. After all these years, she still had the key, and now she fished it off her key ring.

With a click, the lock sprang and the top of the secretary folded downward to become a writing desk. Inside were tiny drawers and cubbyholes meant for stamps and writing paper, sealing wax and pens. Behind the slots for envelopes was a false back and a small drawer that, if you pressed just right, sprang open. As a girl, Eve had hidden her most secret treasures in the tiny cache, but now the space was empty save for a small leather key holder and the three keys inside, keys her father had given her long ago. Keys, she now hoped, that would open some very old doors.

What were the chances?

She palmed the smooth, worn leather and slipped the keys into her pocket. She couldn’t sit around and do nothing.

When Sister Rebecca hadn’t returned her call by early afternoon, Eve decided to seek the Reverend Mother out. Of course she was busy, of course she had a schedule, but damn it, two people close to Eve were dead, two people who had connections to Our Lady of Virtues. Then there was the matter of Faith Chastain’s pregnancy. If she gave birth at Our Lady of Virtues, wouldn’t there be a record of it? Eve had already called the state offices and gotten nowhere, so she’d tried the Internet. Again to no end. If Faith Chastain had borne a third child, there seemed to be no record of it.

As for her own birth certificate, her biological mother and father were listed as “unknown.” The story she’d heard was that she, as a newborn, had been left at an orphanage associated with the order of nuns at Our Lady of Virtues. Word had gotten back to the mental hospital, and Dr. Renner had examined the baby. Since he and his wife had been thinking seriously of adoption, they’d made the necessary arrangements through a local lawyer, who, when Eve had checked, had died nearly twenty years earlier, the records of his business locked away in some storage unit that his only heir, a nephew living out of state, saw no reason to disturb. Short of a court order, those records were lost to her.

So it was time to do some digging on her own.

No telling what she’d find, she thought as she pocketed the small leather key case and returned downstairs to the kitchen, where, digging through a drawer next to the mudroom, she found a heavy flashlight. She clicked it on and, surprisingly, the beam, though weak, was visible. “Good enough.”

Lastly she found an ancient, dusty backpack and loaded it with a few of her grandfather’s forgotten tools: the flashlight, a roll of duct tape, a pair of gloves, and a small hand towel.

Half a second later, she was out the door.

The interview with the police was going to hell in short order.

Deeds had set it up, and Cole had done his part. He’d admitted that he’d been at Terrence Renner’s house on the night of his murder, had discovered the body and called in the homicide. He believed phone records would bear out his story and admitted he was wrong in not waiting for the police to arrive or in identifying himself. He also admitted to taking the briefcase with the laptop inside. The cops wanted to cuff him right then and there, but Deeds calmed them down, pointing out that Cole had come clean when it might have served his purposes to keep his mouth shut.

Montoya had been incensed, blistering in his condemnation that Cole had tampered with evidence. Deeds had suggested the department’s computer techies check it out. He assured them that if the techs were any good, they would see nothing had been changed or deleted.

In the end, though deeply suspicious of his motives, the cops apparently believed that Cole hadn’t killed Renner. Either that, or they didn’t have enough to hold him. More than likely, they didn’t want to arrest the wrong guy again and end up looking like idiots in the press.
Cole was nervous throughout the ordeal but tried not to show it. He sat in the straight-backed chair in the small, stuffy room with Montoya’s near-black eyes glittering with suspicion and Rick Bentz pencil-tapping as he asked questions. Montoya, that prick with his signature leather jacket and ridiculous diamond stud, was itching for a fight; it was written all over him. His expression was tense, his skin stretched tight over his face, his lips flat against his teeth as he spat out question after question around a wad of gum that he chewed furiously, as if his life depended on it. Cords showed on the sides of his neck above his collar, and one of his hands kept curling into a fist.

Cool, he was not.

As for Bentz, the older cop was methodical, slower, more even keeled, but, Cole sensed, as eager to pin the murder on Cole Dennis as his hothead of a partner. There was no game playing, none of the good-cop/bad-cop crap you saw on TV, just two damned determined detectives.

“You broke the terms of your bail,” Montoya pointed out, stuffing his fist into his pocket.

Deeds shook his head. “The charge was dropped. There is no bail to worry about.”

“But there’s still the matter of the marijuana found in his possession,” Bentz said.

Deeds looked over the tops of his reading glasses. Disappointment was written all over his face. “We all know what that was about,” he said, “and we’re dealing with it. Someone set him up.” Montoya opened his mouth to argue, and Deeds held up a hand. “Another time, another place, Detective. My client came in here voluntarily. He’s committed no crime, and so, if there aren’t any other questions, we’re leaving.”

“Thief is a crime,” Montoya said, taking a step forward, but the accusation was without teeth, considering the laptop was now in the authorities’ possession. Catching a glance from Bentz, Montoya checked himself but said tightly, “We may have more questions, Dennis. You’re not off the book on this.”

Deeds got to his feet. “When you have enough to charge him, call me.”

Cole scraped back his chair. The metal legs screamed against the old tile floor. He’d answered all their questions, told his story, and it was all he could do. Being in the small, airless room, pent up with detectives who were looking to trip him up, knowing that his every word and movement were being taped and that other cops were standing on the other side of the two-way glass, waiting for him to mess up, had nearly been more than he could bear.

Kristi Bentz thought she might puke if she had to take another phone call from one more cretin-client for one more insurance claim. How many dented bumpers, broken windshields, bent axles, and smashed quarter panels was she supposed to hear about and pretend like she cared while the client raved on and on about the “idiot” who’d been “driving up my ass” and rear-ended them, or the “moron” who stupidly had backed into the client at his local grocery, or the “ass” who had been driving like a bat out of hell while the client decided to switch lanes?

Now, seated at the small desk in her cubicle, her computer monitor showing off all of the “products” Gulf Auto and Life had to offer, she was talking to the mother of a fifteen-year-old who, despite the fact he had no driver’s license, had taken the family’s minivan out for a spin and ended up in the ditch. Now the woman was wondering if Gulf Auto would pay for the damages on the near-totaled vehicle.

Kristi had referred the woman to her agent and told her that she’d call an adjuster, but that wasn’t good enough. Client/Mother-of-an-Imbecile wanted Kristi’s promise that she was covered.

*Holy Mother of God.*

“I’ll have Ms. Osgoodie call you,” Kristi said and finally was able to hang up.

She had a few more hours of paperwork before she could go home.

Home.
A studio apartment in the University District that was furnished with hand-me-downs and pieces she’d picked up at the local thrift stores. It was cozy enough, she decided, but not exactly where she’d thought she’d be now that she’d graduated from college. Nor was this dead-end job the height of her aspirations.

No way.

Not when there were true-crime cases to write about and she had an insider’s view on some of the most interesting homicides in this town. And the most interesting one at the moment was right under her nose, the victim being Dr. Terrence Renner, the suspects all connected to that spooky old mental hospital located not too far out of town. What could be more perfect?

Who cared if her father didn’t want her involved?

She could do a little digging on her own, start her own file. From writing for crime magazines and being cheap, cheap, cheap with herself, she’d already managed to save enough money that she could quit this job. She could work nights as a waitress or bartender to survive while researching and writing her book during the day.

So her social life was a big fat zero.

Big deal.

She’d kind of struck out with the boyfriend thing long ago.

The dork she’d dated in high school, the guy who’d planned to be a farmer and had wanted to marry her, had ended up going to school, getting not only a BS but a damned PhD in criminology, and now worked in the state crime lab. Go figure. The guy she’d been nuts about in college had been a two-timing jerk who had ended up dead. Since that time she’d only dated casually and hung out with her friends some weekends.

The phone rang, and she groaned.

This just wasn’t working. The tiny cubicle was stifling. She had nothing in common with most of her coworkers. Her degree in English Literature wasn’t being used. At all. She could have gotten this job without stepping one foot over the threshold of All Saints College in Baton Rouge.

She was going to give it up.

Soon.

Like maybe this afternoon as soon as her boss decided to roll back in.

Terrence Renner’s murder had all the earmarks of a best seller. If she didn’t write about it, someone else was sure to, and Kristi decided that just wasn’t going to happen. The Renner homicide, especially if it was tied to the Kajak murder, was hers!

The phone blasted again, and she picked it up.

Forcing a smile in her voice that she didn’t feel, she answered, “Gulf Auto and Life. This is Kristi. How may I help you?”

“Hey, Diego, looks like you got company,” Brinkman said as he passed by Montoya’s desk on his way out. “Isn’t that the name you use whenever there’s a hot woman nearby?”

“Bite me, Brinkman,” he said as he looked up and spied Abby hurrying toward his office. Her jaw was set, her face paler than usual, her freckles more visible, her hair clipped away from her face as she zigzagged her way through desks, filing cabinets, and cubicles.

“I have something I thought you might want to see,” she said without preamble, fishing in her purse and pulling
Montoya took it carefully, opened the flap, and slid the contents into his palm. Inside was a black-and-white photograph and a negative of Our Lady of Virtues Hospital.

“I took this a while back,” she said a little breathlessly. “When...well, when we were all trying to figure out what happened to my mother. I’d forgotten that this roll was in the camera, and today I developed it.”

He was staring at the photograph, trying to figure out what was important enough to spur her to the station.

“Look there,” she said, pointing to a window located on the third floor, the window that her mother had fallen through twenty years earlier. “See that shadow?”

He frowned, sliding the envelope under the shade of his desk lamp. Barely visible was a dark smudge.

“It’s a man.”

He looked up sharply. “You’re certain?”

“Yes. Look at it with a magnifying glass.” Again she rummaged in her purse and found an enlarging lens, which she handed to him. He walked around the desk, sat down and, like a jeweler checking for flaws in a diamond, went over the photograph.

“I’ll be damned.” Sure enough, there was an image of someone standing in the window.

“It’s not him,” she said, and they both knew she meant the killer who had terrorized New Orleans the previous fall, the murderer who had sought his victims in pairs and had been so closely associated with the hospital.

“Then who is it?”

“Exactly.”

“You think this guy might have something to do with what’s going on now?”

“I don’t know, but it’s something.” She jabbed at the picture with her finger. “No one was supposed to be in that old hospital. It’s nearly condemned, but there, big as life, is a man.”

“Maybe the caretaker.”

“Sure,” she said, mocking him because they both knew that the caretaker for Our Lady of Virtues at the time had been a man named Lawrence Du Loc, and despite the lack of clarity in the photo, when Montoya stared at the image with the magnifying glass, he had to agree. The man in the window was not Du Loc.

But Terrence Renner’s killer?

Maybe. Or someone who knew something.

Montoya grimaced, wondering if they were chasing shadows. But since they had no real leads in the case, he couldn’t afford to overlook anything, no matter now insignificant or far-fetched it might appear. “I’ll check it out. See if the guys in the lab can increase the clarity. Do you know the date you took this picture?”

“Not exactly, but a few days before you caught the guy.”

“Close enough. For now.”

She leaned her hip against his desk. “I talked with Zoey. About Eve.”

“Yeah?”
“I’d like to meet her. Actually, Zoey would too, but she’s stuck in Seattle a while. Can’t get away, and it’s really pissing her off. So it’s up to me.”

Montoya found it incredibly hard to say no to Abby, except when it was police business. “The woman in question’s involved in an ongoing investigation. It might be better if you waited until we know what’s going on and have a suspect in custody.”

She angled her head up at him, and, by the set of her chin, he knew he was in trouble. “Look, Detective, not that I don’t have faith in you, but it could be weeks or months or even years before you close this case. I’d like to meet ‘the woman in question’ now.”

He was about to protest, but she whipped her hand into the air to stop him from arguing.

“I know you could wrap things up in a matter of days. I do. But just on the off chance this takes a while, or, God forbid, the killer is never found and brought to justice, I think it’s only fair that I meet someone who could very well be my half sister.”

“You could wait until the DNA results are in.”

“And when will that be? This afternoon? Tomorrow? Or maybe weeks away. And it doesn’t matter anyway. I’m not going to compromise your case. I just want to meet her.” She pushed herself away from the desk. “Instead of looking at this negatively, you might turn your thinking around. This could be a good thing. I’m guessing Eve could use a sister about now.”

“She’s got two brothers.”

“Sisters are different.”

He shook his head. He didn’t have a good feeling about Eve’s siblings. They were elusive, didn’t return calls, not even to the police. Red flags waving at full mast in Montoya’s head when he thought about Kyle and Van Renner, both of whom, it appeared at first glance, had money problems. Credit card records showed that the brothers Renner were both maxed out on several cards, and Kyle had three separate mortgages on his house. Van rented, but he’d skipped town a couple of times owing money to various creditors. Collection agents were on his ass.

So maybe Abby was right. It could be that Eve needed a sister to confide in. He sighed. “Okay. I’ll set it up.”

“I think it would be better if I did it myself. You know, ‘No cops.’”

“I’m not sure I like this. People around Eve Renner die.”

“I’ll be fine, Detective,” she said. “Besides, I have a big, macho fiancé whom I’ll call if I get into any kind of trouble.”

“You’d better.”

“Always.” She winked at him and wasn’t able to hide the sexy glimmer in her eyes. His pulse immediately elevated. Damn the woman, she knew what she did to him, and she used it.

“You owe me.”

“Mmm…I’ll try to think of some clever way to pay you back.” Then she pressed a warm kiss to his cheek, whispered a naughty invitation in his ear, and sashayed out the door as if she were pure as the driven snow. “Devil woman,” he said, just loud enough for her to hear.

“That’s me, honey!” she called over her shoulder.

He settled back into his chair and stared at the picture of the hospital. Was it possible? Could the shadowy figure caught in the camera’s lens be Terrence Renner’s and Roy Kajak’s killer, the same person who had sent Eve the
jagged-edged clippings?

No way.

Too coincidental.

Or was it?

Hadn’t Faith Chastain’s killer given him a warning?

*Tonight is just the beginning.*

Those words slid like ice through Montoya’s veins.
“I’m sorry. I thought I told you,” the prim secretary for the convent said, “the Mother Superior is busy all day. I gave her your message, and I’m sure she’ll get back to you.” The woman, wearing a black skirt, crisp white blouse, wedding ring, and crucifix on a petite gold chain, rain'd a patient, beatific smile on Eve. Her nameplate identified her as Mrs. Miller, and her blue-tinged gray hair was permed tight above ears that supported tiny gold crosses.

“I thought she might squeeze me in,” Eve said. She felt awkward standing in the vestibule, out of place in her jeans and T-shirt, but she figured she’d try to get what she wanted through the normal, conventional way.

It was getting her nowhere.

Mrs. Miller, it seemed, considered herself a guard dog who appeared as small and mild as a toy poodle but, when backed into a corner, was more protective than an English Mastiff.

“Please tell her it's very important,” Eve said, and left her name and phone number again.

She retraced her steps out of the darkened, serene hallway and into the parking lot, where her Camry sat in the late afternoon sun. Sliding behind the wheel, she noticed that someone was watching her from a window on the second floor. Sister Rebecca? Or just one of the nuns stopping at the window to stare out at the manicured grounds? With sunlight refracting on the old glass, it was difficult to make out the person’s facial features or even gender, for that matter. Eve assumed anyone in the convent would be a woman who had joined the order, but in the glare, she wasn’t sure.

Not that it mattered. She knew what she had to do.

And it involved breaking into the old mental hospital.

“Great,” she muttered to herself. She didn’t think too highly of her skills as a cat burglar, and she sure as hell didn’t want to be discovered breaking and entering. She couldn’t imagine trying to explain her actions to the police.

Just don’t get caught.

Driving out of the compound, she headed her Toyota away from the convent. When the access road forked, Eve angled toward the hospital grounds, away from the country road that eventually fed into the freeway and New Orleans.

Though the convent and hospital abutted each other, they were separated by a tall fence that surrounded each separate campus. There were gates linking the two parcels, of course, and Eve, from years of growing up here, knew exactly where those portals were, but she had to be careful. She didn’t want anyone to see her flagrantly ignoring the No Trespassing signs that were posted around the property.

Slowing at the entrance to the hospital, she noted that the huge, wrought-iron gates were locked. Beyond those filigreed gates was the long drive leading to the asylum. No longer tended, the grounds were in shambles. The long concrete driveway was buckled and cracked, crumbling away.
A small shiver slid through her as she caught a glimpse of the hospital with its boarded windows and weed-infested lawn. How different it had been all those years ago.

She drove farther along the access road until she came to the cemetery. There was no gate here, just an archway of filigreed wrought iron that spelled out OUR LADY OF VIRTUES CEMETERY. On either side of the archway were statues, once white, now gray from grime and years of neglect. One was of St. Peter, the other of Jesus, and the arch itself was wide enough for a truck to pass beneath it.

Eve drove into the graveyard and parked her Camry in the gravel lot facing a field of headstones as well as several family tombs built above and below the ground. Here, as opposed to New Orleans, the land was stable enough, the water table low enough, to support in-ground burials. She parked beneath a tree then made her way unerringly through the graves, just as she had dozens of times as a kid. She and Roy had spent hours in the cemetery, looking at the old headstones and inscriptions, wondering about those who were interred. Roy had even suggested they dig up one of the graves, just to see a dead, decomposing body, but of course they never had. She was certain he brought it up just to gross her out.

Around the perimeter of the cemetery was a forest of cypress and pine that had been, years before, intersected with deer trails. Who knew if they still existed?

“Time to find out,” she said as she grabbed her backpack and locked the car. She headed toward the stretch of fence line that separated the cemetery from the hospital grounds. At the edge of the woods, she ducked into a thicket of pine, still making her way toward the fence and scaring up a rabbit as she passed. Sunlight dappled the ground, but the air turned cooler in the shade, and the forest seemed hushed, oddly quiet, the slightest breeze moving through the trees. Eve didn’t pause to think about it. She was on a mission after months of recuperating, of lying idle and useless, a victim. Finally she was doing something, not waiting around for someone else to come up with answers. Brushing aside cobwebs, she found an overgrown path and wandered through thickets and open spaces, never more than three feet from the fence line.

A woodpecker drilled somewhere nearby, and she nearly jumped when she saw a black rat snake sunning itself on a pile of flat stones left near a fence post. The snake flicked its tongue in the air then slithered quickly through the crevices in the stones and disappeared.

Get a grip, she told herself. A rat snake wasn’t poisonous, and that one wasn’t all that big, yet her anxiety level notched up a bit, and when she found the spot where she and Roy had climbed the fence, she checked the ground and branches of trees for any snakes. Satisfied that she wouldn’t startle another serpent, she climbed up the chain link and then grabbed a limb of an overhanging tree to swing over the coiled razor wire atop the fence. As a child she’d been agile and strong; now the feat was more difficult, and she couldn’t help but hear the warning voice of Nita, her physical therapist: “Remember, you’re only at about eighty-five percent, and that’s good, but just keep working out and be careful not to strain anything.”

Too late, she thought, her shoulder screaming in agony as she hoisted herself upward then shimmied along the branch. Once she’d cleared the fence with its jagged, vicious wire, she dropped to the other side and felt a splinter of pain in her legs and spine from the impact.

Fortunately the pain dissipated, and she found the old trail that led through the thickets of pine and cypress and around a hedge of arborvitae to the rear of the hospital and a parking lot that had been reserved for employees and deliveries. Her father had been assigned a designated spot for his sporty little Carmengia, and if she looked hard, she could almost see the lines that had been painted on the asphalt.

It had been so long ago, she thought as she viewed the asylum for the first time in over ten years. Built of red brick, the main building rose three full stories. Its roof was steeply pitched, and on either end old fire escapes zigzagged to the highest window. The gutters were rusted and bent, some completely detached, though gargoyles still perched near the eaves. Some of the roof’s shingles, torn by wind and rain, had tumbled into the yard of crabgrass and weeds. Once there had been manicured grounds and pools where brightly colored koi swam beneath lily pads. Now overgrowth and brambles prevailed near stained, cracked basins that only held rainwater before it drained away or evaporated.
On the other side of the parking lot, the garages and sheds still existed, though roofs sagged, walls had started to lean, and the few windows that had escaped being boarded over were cracked and broken.

The place was a mess.

And more than that, there was not just a feeling of disrepair that was visible, but something else, something darker, a sense of despair that seemed to cling to the vine-clad walls.

Oh for God’s sake, don’t get all melodramatic! Just do what it is you have to do.

Nonetheless, Eve fought a sense of foreboding. Not only was she trespassing, but she felt as if whatever it was she would find here might be better left undisturbed.

“Oh get over yourself,” she said. It was broad daylight, and she planned to go inside, search around, see if she could find any locked files, then leave. She figured she’d be in and out in less than an hour, long before evening even thought about stretching lavender shadows over this part of the world.

She started with the back door, one that led into the kitchen, but none of the keys worked the lock. “Great.” When she couldn’t open that door, she headed around the building to the side door, at the bottom of one of the fire escapes.

Once again, none of her father’s keys would turn the dead bolt.

“Strike two,” she told herself, feeling the heat from the late afternoon sun beat against the back of her neck. She realized she was standing upon a wide veranda once filled with tables and umbrellas, where some of the more infirm patients had been rolled in wheelchairs outside. There had been planters filled with a dazzling display of flowers, and chaise longues for those who wanted to lie in the sunshine. Now there was just cement spiderwebbed with crevices, weeds, and one rusted lawn chair crumpled beneath a tall magnolia.

If she closed her eyes, she could still see the patients in wheelchairs, the nuns hurrying by, the nurses eyeing a group of younger, silent patients whose gaze followed Eve as she and Roy crossed the lawn. What had that boy’s name been? Rick or Ralph or Ron... God, she couldn’t remember, though she would never forget his silent, angry face and the fiery blue eyes that burned a hole in her every time she passed.

The hairs on the back of her neck raised, and she turned back to her task, pushing aside all the disturbing memories this place was certain to evoke.

The wind had kicked up. Hot as Satan’s breath, it did little to calm her nerves or cool her skin. She hurried to the front of the hospital, past overgrown crepe myrtles and along a nearly submerged path of flagstones through the tall, uneven grass.

She remembered taking this very walkway with her father, hurrying to keep up with his steady, long strides, trying like crazy to get his attention. To no avail. Not when he was stopping to talk to nurses or the nuns or, now and then, a patient.

Nurses in white,
Sisters in black
All in all
They don’t know Jack...

Roy’s voice rang so clearly in her head, she nearly stumbled. How often had he whispered those very words to her? One of his clever little poems about the place. Then there was the “Ode to an Asylum.”

Made of mortar, stones, and bricks
Housing retards, nuns, and pricks
Our Lady of Virtues is really of sins

God turns His back while Lucifer grins.

Roy’s attempts at poetry had been amateurish and cruel, but even now the crude rhymes ran through her head and she walked faster, rounding the corner of the building leading to the front entrance with its sweeping drive and elaborate fountain, all now in ruin.

She walked up the marble steps to the broad front door.

So, what if all the locks have been changed?

What then?

Are you going to literally break in?

She tried to insert the first key.

No good.

The second didn’t work either.

“Third time’s a charm,” she whispered and slid the key into the lock. But it wouldn’t turn.

“Great.” She pulled the key out of the dead bolt and felt sweat drizzling down her face and back. What had she expected? She should just give up. The interior of the hospital was probably long gutted, and then there had been the police and crime-scene technicians…. What could possibly be left?

Nothing. Go home. Forget this. Really, what are you doing? This is just a bad trip down memory lane.

And yet she walked around the building, careful not to disturb a papery wasp’s nest as she turned the corner of the far end and stopped dead in her tracks.

The last section of the fire escape had been lowered.

How odd.

Had someone forgotten and left it hanging?

She noticed a piece of yellow plastic on the last rung and realized it was a torn section of crime-scene tape. Slowly she raised her gaze upward. The metal staircase had a landing at each window. The first floor was boarded, but the second was intact.

A possible entry?

Only one way to find out.

Adjusting her pack on her shoulders, she grabbed hold of the lowest rung and swung upward. Pain rippled down her shoulder, but she knew that if she let go, she’d never be able to find the strength to try again. Gritting her teeth, ignoring her weakened muscles, she started climbing, pulling herself up rung by rung until her foot found the lowest bar.

Her heart pounded, and sweat trickled down her back. More than once she asked herself if she was as certifiable as the police had intimated, but she kept at it, one rung at a time. Gritting her teeth, she finally managed to reach the lowest platform on the second floor and pull herself to her feet. She stood gasping for a second.

Glancing around, she half expected someone, a caretaker or one of the nuns, to appear and insist she climb down. Instead, she saw only a whippoorwill flying low to land in the branches of a pine tree.
Aside from the gentle rush of a summer breeze, the grounds were quiet.

Undisturbed.

Almost too silent.

She refused to think about the troubling quietude. She tried the window on the second floor, but it didn’t budge.

Undaunted, she climbed up the clanging, rickety steps to the third floor.

The window, though splintered, was half open.

Almost in invitation.

Eve swallowed hard. It was probably just an oversight. Nothing more. She pushed on the casing, expecting it to stick or screech, but instead it slid easily upward, as if the tracks had been oiled.

Don’t even think it, she told herself as she crept into the dark, noiseless interior.

Despite the open window, the building smelled musty and dank, the floors dusty and scratched, wallpaper and paint peeling from the walls.

Eve made her way downstairs, past the landing with the stained-glass window of the Madonna still intact, all the while letting her fingers run along the worn banister just as she had as a child. She decided to start her search on the first floor, though she was certain this part of the hospital had been torn apart by the police last autumn when a deranged killer had ended up here.

Because of Faith Chastain, the woman who could very well be your birth mother.

The lower floor was nearly empty and dark. Very little sunlight seeped in through the boarded-over windows and broken shutters. The grandfather clock that had chimed off the hours at the base of the stairs was no longer there. The reception area still possessed its long counter/desk that separated the foyer from the offices behind.

She imagined how it used to be, filled with briskly walking nurses, worried visitors, an office staff that was cheery but firm, and patients whose lives were fraying. Always and ever present were the nuns. Now the foyer was shadowy and gloomy, smelling of dust and disuse. Eve felt nervous, as if she were stepping onto someone’s grave.

Stop it. This is just an old building. Nothing sinister about it. Outside, the day is bright. Warm. Get on with it.

Using her flashlight, she walked through the linked offices and short, mazelike hallways, noting the rooms that the hospital secretary, two nurses, the Mother Superior, and the priest had once occupied. Though the names on the doorways had disappeared, a few faded numbers remained, and Eve remembered the whispers that seemed to seep from half-open doors, the discussions and concerns, the odors of antiseptic and pine cleaner that were ever present. The floor creaked as she shined her fragile beam ahead of her. She ended up at room number 1, her father’s office, a small interior cubicle without windows, only a transom over the doorway that allowed in natural light from a window in the corridor.

The room was empty, the wooden floor discolored where a desk, file cabinet, and bookcase had once stood. The walls were dark with dirt, showing lighter patches where once pictures and degrees had hung.

Aside from spiders watching from their corner webs near the ceiling, the room was unoccupied.

What had she expected?

She could visualize her father as she’d often seen him, seated at his wide desk, his head bent over some medical journal or patient chart. A banker’s light had created a pool of illumination. Upon the smooth plaster walls, his degrees had hung proudly. On the bookcase, a bifold frame held two pictures: one of Eve, one of her mother. Aside from one family portrait, there had been no pictures of Eve’s brothers.
And now her father was dead.
Murdered.
Like Faith Chastain.
Like Roy Kajak.
Disfigured with a tattoo.

Goose bumps crawled along her skin as she explored the rest of the main floor quickly, shining her light in the corners of the parlor, dining room, and kitchen, then trying the basement door.

It was locked.

None of her keys worked there either, and she felt a bit of relief. She could do without dark, dank rooms belowground. Ever since her brothers, in an inspired and cruel prank, had locked her in the cellar at their aunt’s house in the country and left her there for hours, she’d become slightly claustrophobic. She’d been five at the time, traumatized, and never again felt safe in dark, dank places underground. She’d slept for months afterward with the light on in her room and had often woken up to horrible dreams of trickling water, tiny beady eyes staring at her from dark corners, and spiders with dripping fangs. She’d woken up screaming, and her mother had usually crawled in bed with her, whispering softly and holding her close until she’d finally fallen asleep again.

Yeah, real sweethearts, her brothers, she thought as she returned to the staircase and climbed to the second floor, where she found empty bedrooms, baths, and closets. Like those of the lower level, the floors and walls here were scarred and shaded where artifacts and pictures had hung.

On the third floor, she walked unerringly to room 307, having remembered it had belonged to Faith Chastain. It was different from most of the other rooms in that it had a higher ceiling, fireplace, and a tall, arched window…the window through which she’d fallen. On the walls were outlines of pictures and, it seemed, a crucifix.

Was this the home of her mother?

Eve bit her lip and tried to remember Faith Chastain. She only had fleeting images of a haunted, petite woman who in moments of clarity could smile, her amber eyes intriguing and intelligent.

A dark stain discolored the center of the floor, and Eve backed away from what appeared to have once been blood.

You’re imagining things, she thought. You’re letting this gloomy, dark place with its history of evil get to you.

In the hallway, she walked past the other rooms, shining her flashlight into each doorway and seeing nothing other than emptiness. The bathrooms and showers were grimy and forgotten, infested by insects.

At the end of the hall, there was an empty linen closet and across from that doorway another closet with a second door at its back that led upward to the attic. It was locked, but this time one of her father’s keys slid easily into the dead bolt and turned. The lock clicked, and the door opened to a steep set of stairs that wound upward around a chimney to a long, narrow garret with exposed rafters and unfinished plank floors.

This had been her hideaway as a child. She and Roy had snuck up these twisting steps and spent hours playing make-believe games or spying on some of the patients and doctors. She cringed now as she thought about the peepholes they’d discovered that allowed them to view into the rooms below.

Including Faith Chastain’s bedroom.

Roy had spent hours numbering the tiny slits in the flooring with the appropriate rooms. Now Eve walked along the floorboards, ducking the cobwebby rafters and crossbeams, shining her weak light until she saw the number 307 written in a felt-tip pen and covered with dust and grime.
The wind whistled through the old rafters, sweeping through this oven of a chamber but not bringing any relief from the heat.

The place was creepier than she remembered it, and, she thought, if she closed her eyes, she could still hear the soft cries, the whimpers, the desperate whispers of some of the most tormented patients.

How many times had she and Roy looked down this very peephole into Faith Chastain’s room? Now, of course, she was embarrassed. How could she have been so uncaring, so callous, so ultimately curious?

“Forgive me,” she whispered but couldn’t resist the opportunity to look down that dime-sized hole once more, one created by the wiring for the overhead lamp in Faith’s room. As she did, she found herself staring at that damning crimson stain.

A shadow passed over the discoloration.

She gasped.

Her lungs constricted.

No one was in this decrepit hospital but her.

Right?

Fear splintered through her body. It’s just a shadow, a trick of light. It doesn’t mean anyone’s inside.

But she swallowed hard, and the back of her skull tightened as she strained to listen, not moving a muscle.

She blinked.

The shadow vanished.

As if it had never existed.

Light from the window…that was it…. There was still some glass in the higher panes, and a tree branch could have swayed in the wind, blocking the sun…. She had heard the wind up here, how its wept through the rafters. But there was no wind now. Not a whisper of a breeze skimming over the roof.

She waited.

The shadow didn’t appear again.

Nor did she hear the sounds of breathing, or footsteps, or a voice…. Perhaps she’d imagined the dark umbra that had been cast for a few seconds over Faith’s room.

But the skin on the back of her arms prickled in warning, and her insides had turned to jelly.

Just do what you have to do and get the hell out of here!

Moving more quickly now, she walked past a junkyard of old hospital bed parts and dresser drawers and medicine trays and God knew what else until she found a stack of cabinets. Old files. Long forgotten. She withdrew her keys again, found the smallest, and unlocked a tall cabinet.

Inside were old charts and records, dusty, some covered in mildew, all smelling like they were a hundred years old. Not quite a century, she realized, but old enough that the information was all handwritten or typed, no computer printouts.

She wondered if Roy’s records were here. He had eventually wound up here as a patient, at least for a few months before the facility closed forever. She’d always thought it was pure irony that perhaps Roy had been spied on himself once he’d had his own breakdown.
These files, though, were older, and she found a folder marked Chastain, Faith. “Oh God,” she whispered and opened the dusty manila file. It was thick, filled with notes and charts and evaluations, too much information to sift through here. She tucked the file inside her backpack and tamped down the feeling that she was not only trespassing but stealing as well.

Too bad.

This was information that she, if she were Faith’s daughter, deserved to know. If it turned out she wasn’t related to Faith Chastain, then at least she might have some insight as to why someone was linking her to the woman and this hospital, why her father and Roy might have been murdered.

She flipped quickly through the other tabs and saw a few names that conjured up faces. Rich Carver…Oh, he was the odd boy who was so silent…always watching, a tiny smile playing upon his lips until he looked away; then his expression turned demonic…The next name was Enid Walcott, a thin, birdlike woman with wild hair and wide eyes. Merwin Anderson, a big man who had sat and stared for hours at the birdhouse near his window. John Stokes, a sly boy who was always sedated, rumored to have murdered his cousin. Ronnie Le Mars…She stopped at the name. That was the name of the boy who’d stared at her with such intensity. Ronnie Le Mars. She shivered as she thought about his hot blue eyes. What had he been in for? Self-mutilation? Or…did she have him and John Stokes mixed up? Had Ronnie been the one who had killed a member of his family? She glanced back to the files. The last name she recognized was Neva St. James, a bright, crafty girl whose aunt had committed her because of some form of autism.

Though she would find the files fascinating and could use them for her research, she couldn’t take them with her, at least not now, so she quickly closed the cabinet, relocked it, and headed toward the stairs. Walking quickly, she bent to avoid hitting her head, while the beam of her flashlight, offering ever-weaker light in the sweltering attic space, swept side to side.

She saw the doll.

*Her* doll, one that she hadn’t seen in nearly twenty years, caught in the yellow sweep of illumination.

“She’s Jesus,” she gasped, training the fading light onto a corner where an old, faded sleeping bag was pushed near the tiny, dirt-covered window, a little nook where she had come and played for hours as a child. With her impish face and pleading tone, she’d managed to wheedle plates and forks from the kitchen staff, along with some of the cook’s key lime pie or pralines, then had dragged her booty up here. She’d nearly forgotten about this little nook, and she hadn’t seen the Charlotte doll in so, so long.

Now the doll was lying facedown on the dingy sleeping bag that seemed to be losing some of its filling to mice.

Something didn’t feel right about this.

She didn’t remember leaving Charlotte here, and she’d been up here long after she’d had any interest in rag dolls. This one had been sewn and stuffed by her grandmother. Nana had even made a blue dress and pinafore, then braided the doll’s brown hair and added a hat, as if she were a small girl at the turn of the century.

Now, as she edged closer, Eve noticed that Charlotte’s hat was tossed to one side, its ribbon ties askew. The doll’s braids had been clipped off and tossed away as well, leaving her plump head practically bald. Worse yet, Charlotte’s arms and legs were spread wide, and the hem of her dress was raised over her waist and fixed with a rubber band. Her panties were pulled down to the tops of her felt shoes, and her faded pink butt was sticking upward in the air in some weird pose.

“Sick,” Eve said, knowing she had never left Charlotte in such disarray. It was sexual and freaky and, she knew from her studies, the work of a psychopath. Her stomach turned, and a deep, clawing fear curled through her guts. As hot and stifling as it was up here, Eve was suddenly cold to the bone.

Who had been playing and had left Charlotte like this? One of the mentally unstable boys who was a patient at the asylum years ago?
Was this just a tormented soul’s idea of a joke?

*No, Eve, this isn’t random!*

*You know it.*

*Someone left the doll positioned this way on purpose. And they wanted someone, probably you, to find her.*

Her mouth went dry. She swallowed back her fear and inched closer to the sleeping bag then reached down and turned Charlotte over.

As she did, her blood ran cold.

A scream worked its way up her throat and ended in a terrified gasp.

Charlotte’s button eyes had been clipped off, her pinafore slashed with jagged cuts made by pinking shears, and she’d been mutilated across her belly, the number 444 scrawled in blood-red ink.

And below the numbers was a single word.

*EVE.*
CHAPTER 19

Eve dropped the doll as if it had burned her fingers.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” she said, backing toward the top of the staircase. Who would do such a thing? What sick mind would—

Briiing!

Her cell phone shrilled, and her heart nearly stopped. Scrambling for the damned thing, she pulled it out of the backpack and noticed that no number showed on the screen. Restricted call.

Oh hell!

It rang again, and she, paralyzed, thought about turning the damned thing off. Don’t answer it.

She clicked on the button.

Lifted the phone to her ear.

Didn’t say a word.

“Heeeeee’ssss freeee…”

She slammed the phone shut and spun, the fading light from her flashlight splashing on the walls and underside of the roof where tiny nails poked through the ceiling. The person on the other end of the phone had known she was here, had realized she’d found the doll. She was certain of it. She reached into her backpack and withdrew a screwdriver, one of her grandfather’s tools. Her fingers wrapped around the grip, and, heart hammering, sweat staining her clothes, she searched all of the dusty corners, the hidden spots of the attic.

He’s not up here…remember? He’s a floor below. You saw his shadow.

She trained her flashlight on the doorway at the top of the stairs, the only entrance to the garret.

Heart in her throat, she waited, inching her way toward the door and the brick chimney. If she could hide to one side of it, when the psycho entered and stepped into the room, she could shoot past him, fly down the stairs, lock the door, and run to the fire escape and safety…

Or you could dial 911 now!

Even if the killer didn’t appear, you could show the police the doll.

And then what?

So someone messed with an old, forgotten toy.

She was the one who had trespassed.

She was the one who had broken into the hospital.
She was the one who, even now, had a stolen file in her backpack. No, she couldn’t let panic overtake her…She had to fight the anxiety.

Crouched by the chimney with its rough bricks and crumbling mortar, she turned off her flashlight and waited, hardly daring to breathe. Panic stormed through her. Her head began to pound.

Straining to listen, she silently counted. One…two…three…four…

Drops of sweat slid down her forehead and nose…five…six…

She blinked.

Her breath came in panicked, wild little gasps.

Seven…

Creak!

Oh Jesus, was that a footstep?

Her heart began knocking out of control. Someone was in the hospital with her.

She caught her breath.

Strained to listen.

Nearly screamed when she saw a mouse dart across the floorboards.

Another footstep.

Her fingers tightened around the screwdriver. Could she use it? Damned straight!

Give me strength.

More footsteps. Climbing faster now, no more hesitation.

He knew she was trapped!

A looming dark shape appeared in the doorway.

Every muscle bunched, she was ready to spring. One more step, you son of a bitch, just take one more step.

“Eve!” a strong male voice echoed through the attic.

She nearly broke down completely. “Cole?” she whispered, and her voice was little more than a whimper.

“Where the hell are you?”

“Here!” She flung herself at him, her arms circling his neck as she collapsed against him.

“Hey!”

A part of her screamed, The last time you were in a dark, scary place, he raised his gun and…No!

She wouldn’t believe it and nearly sobbed when she felt his strong arms wrap around her.

“Shh…darlin’, what?” he said against her hair. “What the hell are you doin’ here?”

She nearly laughed. Her nerves were strung to the breaking point, and she needed release…laughter, tears…any kind of relief. Instead, she kissed him. Hard. Anxiously. Fervently. On the lips.
His response was immediate. His arms tightened, his hands splayed over her back, and his mouth molded to hers eagerly.

Desperately she clung to him and slowly, oh so slowly, her reason began to return. She was holding Cole and kissing him and practically lying down for him on this hard, dirty, vermin-infested attic floor.

Slowly she pulled away, stepping out of his embrace and running a hand through her hair as she caught her breath and grabbed hold of her runaway emotions.

“Change your mind?” he said, his voice a little raspy.

“You were lucky…. You, um, you almost ended up with a screwdriver through your neck.”

“From whom?” he asked, then guessed, “You? No way.”

“I was pretty freaked out,” she said shakily.

“If this is the reception I get, maybe you should be freaked out more often.”

“No thanks.” She flipped on her flashlight and shot the pale beam at his face. “How did you know I was here?”

“I followed you.”

“What?”

“Didn’t I tell you I thought we should camp out together?”

“I thought you were going to the police station.” She drew a breath, collecting her thoughts. “Wait a minute. How did you follow me?”

“You were trying to contact the Mother Superior. This hospital is connected to the case.”

“But how would you know? Why now? Why here?”

Cole seemed to come to a decision. “Since I’m trying like hell to make you trust me, I guess I’ve got to come clean. I put a bug on your car.”

“What? You’re kidding. Cole, you did not put some kind of electronic device on….” She could hardly speak. “This is…this is like stalking. You can’t just go around and…and invade my privacy—”

“While you’re breaking and entering?”

“Don’t turn this around.”

He laughed. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” He slung an arm around her shoulders.

She tried to hang on to her sense of injustice. It was far better than gratitude…or fear…. “Don’t try to talk your way out of this, Counselor,” she said. “Um, there’s something I think you should see.” Using her flashlight to illuminate the way, she led him to the corner with the sleeping bag and Charlotte.

He stared down at the doll. “What the hell is this?”

“A message, I think. I saw it, then started to leave, and my cell rang. He said it again: He’s free. It was almost as if he knew I was in here looking at Charlotte.”

“Charlotte?”

“That’s what I called her. My grandmother made her for me years ago, and I thought she was locked in a trunk at
the house. Nana insisted I save her for my own daughter if I ever have one. I hadn’t seen the doll in forever.”

“You’re sure it’s the same one?”

“Oh yeah. Charlotte’s an original.”

He bent down on one knee and, using a rag he found near the sleeping bag, picked up the doll gingerly, looking at her and the message slashed across her body. “Your name.”

Eve nodded, looking away from the tortured doll.

“Who knew about this place?”

“I…I don’t know…. Some of the kids who lived here, I guess, and I imagine the nuns knew what was going on. My dad even got wind of it and had a fit, which my brothers found particularly vindicating.”

“So they knew about it too?”

“Eventually, yes…and, well, I left all this stuff up here. Anyone who came up here over the last twenty years could figure out that I’d been here. I think I left some books with my name up here and, oh God, maybe even a diary.” She played the beam of the flashlight over the area under the window, where some old comic books and paperbacks were flung. “There’s my old English/Spanish dictionary.” Cole picked the book up. Inside the flap in girlish handwriting was the name Eve Renner.

“So, how did he lure you to the attic?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t even know I was coming here. If Sister Rebecca had seen me this afternoon, I probably would have gone straight home.”

Cole’s expression hardened, became more grim. “I wonder if he thought he would bring you up here.”

“What do you mean?” she asked but felt her skin tighten over her back as she understood.

“As in kidnap you.”

“God, no…don’t even say it.”

“Okay, I won’t.” He stood, a muscle working in his jaw. “But from here on in, I’m not losing sight of you. I’m going to stick to you like a burr.”

“You think you’re going to protect me?”

“Either me or the police.” He was grim.

“Not the police,” Eve responded instantly.

“Not the police, then.”

“But…we’ll have to tell them about this.”

For once he didn’t disagree. “As soon as possible. Let’s go.”

“Should we take the doll?” she asked.

He hesitated then shook his head. “Let’s leave things as they were, let the police come up here and see how it was.”

“All right.” Plucking Charlotte from his fingers, Eve turned her face-down on the sleeping bag and felt a little queasy to be even remotely associated with anything so perverted. Then she led the way down the rickety stairs that
curved around the chimney. “You know, I almost had a heart attack earlier. You scared the liver out of me.” She relocked the door to the attic and stepped through the closet. “I was looking through a peephole into Faith’s room, and I saw your shadow pass by. I nearly lost it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I was creeped out anyway, and this was before I caught a glimpse of Charlotte. Then I saw you in 307.”

“In 307?” He motioned toward the closed door of the room in question. “I was never in that room.”

“Yes…you had to be.”

“No.” He was dead serious, his brows slammed together, his lips compressed. “I climbed the stairs, heard someone overhead, saw the open closet door, and climbed up to the attic.”

“But I saw you,” she insisted. “I know it was the right room, because your shadow passed over that horrible stain on the floor…”

“Not me, Eve. I swear.”

Her insides turned to water, and Cole, the idiot, strode down the hallway toward 307.

“Wait!” she said. She imagined her father’s killer behind the door, knife raised, ready to slice Cole’s throat. “Don’t!”

Ignoring her, he opened the door and stepped inside.

“Cole!” She started after him, but her toe caught on the edge of a baseboard that had come loose. She tripped. The flashlight went flying from her hand. Eve hit hard, the wind knocked out of her, pain splintering through her shoulder. She cried out, and Cole was beside her in an instant.

“Eve! Are you okay?” His gentle hand touched her back.

“NO! I think so,” she whispered, but tears sprang to her eyes and fire burned through her shoulder and arm. She tried to push herself upright and winced.

“Here. Let me.”

“My flashlight,” she said weakly.

Cole located it and stowed it in her backpack. Then, guided by light trickling in through the few intact windows, he carefully picked her up and carried her down two flights of stairs. She had no choice but to sling her good arm around his neck for balance.

“I’m fine,” she said.

His face only inches from hers, he sent her a look. “Yeah, right.”

She felt like a fool. Yes, her shoulder pained her, but she was perfectly capable of walking on her own. “I take it there was no one in Faith’s room?”

“No.”

“Well, I was in there earlier, and I didn’t close the door on the way out. Unless you closed it, someone else was here.”

He muttered an oath under his breath. On the first floor he set her on her feet and twisted open the lock on the front door. Before he could attempt to pick her up again, she held her bad arm with her good and walked outside, where the sun had settled deeper into the horizon and the air had cooled a bit.
She felt as if she could breathe again.

Cole fashioned a sling out of the strap of her backpack, then helped her as they walked out the way they’d both come in, through the forest and along the fence line to the cemetery.

There was no way she could climb over the fence, but Cole helped her through the spot he’d chosen to enter, a section of weakened chain link that he’d kicked through. Now he bent it back and held it open, straining against the metal to allow Eve to pass through. By this time, her shoulder was throbbing.

“I’ll drive,” he said, but she shook her head as she spied his Jeep, which was parked near hers at the front gate of the cemetery.

“We’ll just have to come back later and pick up your car.”

“Not we. Me. I’ll get Deeds to bring me out here.”

“Oh, he’ll love that.” She moved her arm and sucked in her breath as pain shot through her shoulder.

“He’ll be fine with it.”

“Yeah, right.”

He took the keys from her, opened the passenger-side door for her, and without further argument she slid into the Camry’s sun-baked interior. A few seconds later, Cole climbed behind the wheel, dug through her backpack, and pulled out Faith Chastain’s file. “What’s this?”

_No way to lie her way out of this one._ “Something I found.”

“Breaking and entering, and now larceny?”

“You should talk,” she said, and Cole gave her a quick smile. She nodded toward the file. “That’s the reason I came here. I thought I remembered some old files up in the attic.”

“More than this one?”

She nodded then leaned back in the seat. Not only was her shoulder throbbing, but her head as well.

He hesitated. Drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

“What?”

“I want to look at those files.”

“They’re ancient. Forgotten. At least twenty years old.”

“But they might hold a clue to what’s going on now,” he said.

“Why do you think that?”

He tapped his finger against the folder for Faith Chastain. “Because of her. She was here over twenty years ago. She had the baby no one knows about. Someone’s sending you clippings about her death. Why wouldn’t you think it might be someone in that file cabinet?”

“But why wait twenty-some years to start all this?”

“I don’t know,” he said as he started the Toyota’s engine. “But it could be that we might find out by searching through those files.”

“Let’s just start with this one to begin with,” she suggested, trying to smile and feeling her lips tremble.
He gave her a look that was hard and tender at the same time. “You need to see a doctor.”

“I’ll be all right, really.”

He touched her near the elbow, and she sucked in a sharp breath. “Sure you will, once you suffer through an emergency room experience, get X-rays, and have some doctor prescribe painkillers as he stitches you up.”

“I’m not going to the hospital, Cole.”

He flashed her a grin. “I hate to tell ya this, darlin’, but right now you’re going to go wherever the hell I take you.”

“Bastard,” she grumbled.

“That’s me.”

That night, the Voice was clear.
And angry.
Rising above the irritating little squeaks of the others who infiltrated his brain with their wheedling demands.

“There is another you must sacrifice soon,” God told him, and he trembled on his bed, sweating, thinking of Eve. Was it her turn? Would she be one of those that God had chosen? Closing his eyes, he conjured up her face. So perfect.

Now, as a woman, she was beautiful.
Then, as a child, she’d been elusive.
She was the one he wanted.
God knew how much he wanted her. Wasn’t his lust for her the very reason the Voice had first come to him?

“Who, Father?” he whispered anxiously, his fingers curling over the edges of his quilt. “Who is to be taken? Tell me, and I will do Your will.”

He closed his eyes and concentrated. So soon after the others, he was to do the Lord’s bidding again. To take up his knife once more. To slay those who had so obviously infuriated the Almighty. This was his mission, his quest, for hadn’t the Voice promised if he did as he was bidden that he too would be deified?

Deified!

He would someday sit next to the Father in heaven…. Tears filled his eyes at the thought. He just had to do the Voice’s bidding, to follow His instructions, to wash away his own sins…

Please, please, may it be Eve’s time.

“There are those who sin,” the Voice said harshly. “Under the guise of innocence they walk the earth, guiding others, pretending righteousness, feigning faith. They are the worst of sinners, hiding behind their sanctity, and they must be sacrificed, their artifice exposed to all. Sacrifice this one first and take the second…”

“Take the second? Take her where?”

There was only silence.

“Father?” he cried and wondered fleetingly if, as his mother had said, he was insane. Hadn’t that been what the doctor had diagnosed, the nurses had suggested, the nuns had pitied and prayed about?
And yet the Voice of God was real. It spoke to him. Had It not named him, called him the Reviver? Told him he
would be deified? No, he could not doubt. He must believe.

“But Eve,” he finally said. “When will it be Eve’s time?” He’d seen her today at the hospital, lured there as he’d
known she would be. Our Lady of Virtues belonged to her. To him. Soon, he thought, anticipation sliding through
him. “Father?” he asked, hoping beyond hope that it was finally her time.

There was no answer, just the tomblike quiet of his room.

God was angry with him.

He knew it.

He’d been too bold.

“They will be done,” he said aloud.

Trembling with excitement, he rolled off his bed and fell to his knees. Bending his head, folding his hands over
his mattress, he eagerly awaited his instructions, anxiously considered what would be his mission.

And God told him.
“Come here,” Eve said as Cole tucked her into the bed, her bed, high in the turret of her house.

He smiled down at her and shook his head, his dark hair catching in the light from the bedside lamp. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?” She felt so good. Better than she had in a long time, and Cole, damn him, was as handsome as ever. She felt so protected at the hospital with Cole standing beside her, helping her through the admissions process…She sighed happily and patted the bed beside her.

He sat on the edge of the bed and kissed her forehead. “Listen, Eve, this is not for lack of wantin’, y’know. But I think we should wait until you’ve got all your faculties.”

“You’re turning me down.”

“Oh…” A dimple showed in one cheek. “Let’s just say I’m taking a rain check.”

“I thought you said you wanted to take care of me…to protect me.”

“I do and I will.”

“But you won’t sleep with me? You don’t want to make love to me?”

“You’re twisting my words. I need to call Montoya and Bentz or Deeds or someone and tell them about what we found at the asylum—”

“But I want you to stay with me,” she said.

“Sure you do. You’re feeling no pain now, all due to artificial means. But I’d feel a whole lot better about this if you weren’t on a cocktail of happy pills.”

“Come on, Cole,” she said, sticking out her lower lip. A part of her realized she had lost her inhibitions because of the drugs she’d been given; the other part of her didn’t care.

“You’re no fun.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong.”

“Prove it.”

“Prove what?”

She lifted an eyebrow and stared up at him. “Just how fun you are.”

She let her teeth sink into that lower lip and heard him groan. “You’re a bad woman, Eve Renner.”

“Am I?”
“And I love ya.” With that, he kissed her, his lips fitting against hers so perfectly that she felt as if she were floating. She opened her mouth and felt his tongue play against her teeth before sliding inside.

Her bones melted as his hands skinned her body, slowly caressing her arms and ribs then touching a breast.

“Ohoh,” she moaned and knew it was his undoing.

All restraint was lost.

His kiss deepened, his breath hot and hungry, his body stretched out next to hers. He was careful…. She was aware that he was more tender than she remembered him being. He cradled her as he kicked off his jeans and tore off his shirt and settled the length of his body against hers, bare skin to her nightgown.

“You’re sure about this?” he asked one last time as he pushed an errant curl from her forehead then tugged her nightgown down, exposing one breast. With a quicksilver touch, he traced the areola of her breast with one finger until she squirmed.

“Absolutely.”

“Really?” He kissed her nipple then breathed across it as she watched him in the lamp’s golden glow.

“Mmmmm.” Her abdomen collapsed against her spine as his hand traveled downward, bunching up her nightgown, strong fingers exploring the lace of her panties.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

“Cole! Please…”

“You got it, darlin’.” He yanked the panties downward, nearly ripping them as he pulled them over her feet, and then he kissed her in the most intimate of regions, his lips and tongue tasting her, his breath curling hot and wild deep within.

Perspiration sheened her skin, and deep inside she felt an ache that begged to be released. The fingers of her good hand twisted in his hair as the first ripple poured through her, a cascading wave of pleasure that was as warm as it was intense. She bucked upward, wanting more, so much more…and Cole didn’t disappoint.

He prodded her knees apart then pulled her up to meet him as he thrust inside. She gasped, her good arm holding tight around his neck, her head pressed so tightly against his strong shoulder muscle that she could barely breathe. She kissed the spot where his neck joined with his shoulder, and he groaned, moving faster, deeper, until he leaned back and pulled her atop him, still moving, still thrusting, still touching the most sensitive part of her. Faster and faster, deeper and deeper.

Eve, already floating, felt as if the world were spinning, a world only big enough for the two of them.

“Cole,” she whispered, barely able to speak. “Oh God, Cole…” The next wave hit her so hard she shuddered and was still shaking when she felt him stiffen beneath her and then, with a hoarse cry, release himself.

She fell against him and, entwined, lay with him in her bed high above the city. It felt so right to be with him, she wouldn’t let go, wouldn’t let the rest of the world in, wouldn’t question what they’d done.

At least until the morning.

Vespers was long over and the moon had risen above the walls of the convent. Stars winked in a vast array. Usually this midnight darkness in the cloister wrapped around Sister Rebecca like Christ’s robes. Most often this hour of the night was a time of calm and strength for Sister Rebecca, a moment when she would seek the solitude of the garden, where she could reflect on the day that had passed and pray for the morrow. As Mother Superior, she felt great responsibility and even greater unworthiness.
The air was scented with magnolia and pine, the night quiet aside from the rhythmic hoots of an owl hidden in the darkness. It was here that she’d sat so often on the edge of the fountain, watching the water spray upward only to cascade down upon the statue of an angel, hoping that her own sins would be washed away.

Oh, were it so.

But there were too many secrets.

Too many sins.

And soon all of her perfidy would be exposed.

“Forgive me,” she whispered, making the sign of the cross over her bosom, her fingers brushing the chain that held her glasses. She was tired, her life’s struggle of over eighty years had exhausted her. It was time for her to be called home. First, of course, there was confession—confession to sins she’d not revealed for, oh, so many years.

She stood, heard her old knees pop, and stiffly walked toward the door that she’d left ajar to let in the night’s cooling, fragrant breeze. With some difficulty she walked down the long hallway, where the lights were turned down to a feeble glow, reminiscent of a time when only candles had illuminated these old, hallowed corridors.

The chapel door creaked as she opened it, and she reminded herself to ask the caretaker to oil its hinges. Then she slipped into the nave, moving slowly along the central aisle toward the chancel, her fingers touching each of the backs of the wooden pews as she passed.

This was a small place of worship and, despite its cold stone floors, soaring ceiling, and imperious tracery windows, a cozy chapel where Sister Rebecca had always found solace and repose. The hours she’d spent praying on her knees, her fingers moving easily over the time-smoothed beads of her rosary, had been too many to count, but tonight that feeling of tranquility had given way to restlessness.

She knew why.

Terrence Renner was dead.

Murdered by some poor soul who had wielded a knife, if the newspaper stories were to be believed. Sister Rebecca had known Renner well in the years he’d been employed by the hospital. An arrogant man and not without his own private demons, but to be murdered? Brutally slain?

Staring up at the crucifix, at Jesus’ serene face and bloody crown of thorns, she crossed herself again then settled into a pew. Praying, searching her soul, she felt a darkness steal through her. There had been a time when she’d thought all of the evil was behind her, that the old hospital would be sold and razed to be replaced by a modern assisted-living facility. Naively she’d hoped that the scandals and secrets that had swept through the halls of the asylum would be buried deep within its rubble, never to be revealed, never to see the light of day.

But her dreams had been shattered, the police having held up the demolition of the building indefinitely. Because of all the questions about Faith Chastain, though the poor, tormented woman had died twenty years earlier.

“Father, forgive me,” she whispered.

Through the quiet of the night she heard the chapel bell toll, sounding off the hours.

Midnight.

There was no reason to tarry. She should leave the chapel and go to her quarters even though she knew sleep would, again, remain elusive.

_The product of an impure conscience_, she reminded herself. It had been less than a year since the last spree of killings. That murderer, the serial killer behind those heinous crimes, had stalked through these sacred halls.
Once he had been exposed, it had been Sister Rebecca’s hope that, finally, she would find peace again. Freedom from the pain of the past.

Of course, that expectation had proved impossible.

Yes, the police had eventually pulled up stakes, leaving Our Lady of Virtues’s reputation besmirched and pieces of crime-scene tape still flapping in the breezes, a reminder of the atrocities that had occurred on the hospital grounds. But it was the memories that truly remained, the memories that haunted.

Sister Rebecca had prayed that the scandal was finally over, but she knew, deep in her heart, it never would be. And now the new murders, not only Dr. Renner’s but Royal Kajak’s as well, both of whom had been a part of Our Lady of Virtues, only proved her worst fears true.

She shivered in the church, a sudden premonition sliding through her soul. She realized that the reign of terror which had held everyone associated with the decaying hospital fast in its grasp was far from finished. The serene period of the last few months had been only a lull, a short time of peace meant to trick all of those involved; the proverbial calm before the storm.

Shattered by two brutal murders.

No doubt a new evil had been unleashed.

One that was, most likely, worse than the last.

“God be with us,” she whispered, the marrow of her bones turning to ice.

Should she go to the police?

Tell them what she knew? The secret she’d borne for three long decades?

God would let her know. She had to pray, to trust in Him.

“Father, please, please guide me,” she whispered, genuflecting before leaving the chapel and crossing the cloister again. As she passed beneath the overhang, she heard the sound of a crow cawing and told herself it was not an evil omen, not the heralding of Lucifer. Besides, she didn’t believe in such idiocies; her faith was much too strong.

But as she passed by the fountain, she thought she heard the sound of leather scraping against flagstones. A footstep.

At this hour?

Surely not.

She had to be imagining things. Her worries getting the better of her.

Nonetheless, her heart began to beat irregularly and she cast a glance backward, scanning the shadows not illuminated by the moon’s pale light.

Nothing.

Silently scolding herself, she kept walking while she murmured a familiar prayer, her footsteps moving faster than they had in a decade. “Our Father, who art in heaven…”

Another telltale scratch of a sole against stone.

Every muscle in her body froze. She gathered her breath. Perhaps she was being tested.

Turning, she saw no one. Nothing. Just the trailing flowers in the hanging baskets swaying in the breeze—
A dark form, lightning quick, flashed by, seen only in the corner of her eye.

“Who is there?” she whispered, her skin crinkling in premonition, her voice wheezing as her lungs grew tight. “Show yourself!” Was it her imagination? A trick of shadow and eerie light? Her peripheral vision deceiving her? Swallowing back her fear, she slid a hand into her pocket and twined her fingers in the beaded strands of her rosary.

*Fear not, the Lord is with you.*

She turned toward the convent door. She was just imagining things. An old, foolish woman whose guilt was eroding her common sense.

In that instant, he sprang.

Out of the darkness.

A huge, shifting shape that landed against her back.

His weight was impossible to bear, and she started to crumple. Tried to scream, but a big gloved hand covered her mouth.

*No!*

*No, no, no!*

She felt her spine crushing as he held her fast from behind.

His other arm arced upward in front of her face. In his gloved hand, a long blade caught in the moonlight.

*Help me! Someone, please help me! Oh dear God, please.*

Terrified, Sister Rebecca tried to scream, to bite, to fight, but his strength was overpowering.

He struck.

Fast.

The blade sliced downward.

Deep into her chest.

She gasped, gurgled, toppled to her knees. Her mind swirled, pain burning deep in her soul. Who would do this? She tried to see his face, but the darkness hid it. Her voice failed her, and she watched, unable to move, unable to warn anyone of the hideous terror that was to come.

He slipped through the open door of the convent as she felt her lifeblood ooze onto the smooth, timeworn stones.

He wasn’t finished.

There would be more killing.

And the secrets she’d tried so desperately to conceal would be exposed.

*Father, forgive me,* she silently prayed as the fog and darkness pulled at her consciousness, *for I have sinned.*

The sounds of the night, the lapping of a slow-moving stream, the rush of wind through the leaves of the trees, the rattle of a train rumbling on tracks not far away, were obscured by the thrum of blood rushing through his veins and the exhilarated pounding of his heart.
He’d killed the old nun, just as the Voice had said. He’d had to leave her bleeding out while he entered the convent because he thought he’d heard someone approaching, had expected to have to take care of the intrusion, but the hallways of the convent were empty. Quiet. Still.

Assuring himself that he was alone, he returned to the body and, using the old woman’s finger, wrote upon the cloister wall in blood then pulled out his portable tattooing machine and quickly embedded a number in her forehead. He hated having to do such a rough job. He needed more time, but time was never a luxury. He could only do his best work, his artist’s work, on his own body.

He finished quickly then crept through the undergrowth, following the footpath, his blood still singing through his veins. He wasn’t done with his mission; there was still another to deal with, but the head nun, the Mother Superior, had been dispatched.

Her spirit released.

Her body not revived.

Now, for the ritual...

Once inside, with the door bolted behind him, he lit the fire despite the warmth of the night, stripped off his clothes, washed his boots and clothes, then spread his plastic tarp in front of the fire. Once he’d arranged his mirror to the right angle, he showered beneath the pulsing spray, cleansing his body and mind. Afterward, naked, he lit the candles slowly, one by one.

Holding his rosary, he prayed long and hard. Then finally, once his soul was as cleansed as his body, he retrieved his kit and began his work.

He chose red ink and worked in an area not far from the scab still formed on one hundred one. Carefully he drew a new number upon his skin, one so similar to the other it was nearly identical. One hundred eleven for Sister Rebecca. Once he was satisfied with the look of the new number, he switched on the machine, watched the red ink flow. He felt the first little sting of the needles and gritted his teeth, his lips curling in a grim smile, for there was always pleasure in pain, tranquility in torment.

As for the Reverend Mother, there had been no reviving her, oh, no. Her black soul was on its way straight to hell. Where it belonged.
The phone call came at four-thirty. Montoya opened a bleary eye, groaned, and, rolling over, away from the warmth of Abby’s naked body, he grabbed his cell. “Montoya,” he mumbled, his voice low, nearly guttural with sleep. The damned cat, which had inched onto the bed during the night, hissed and slithered away.

“We got another one.” Bentz sounded irritatingly awake.

“Another what?” But he knew. As he sat up in bed, he understood.

Abby groaned, turned over, and rubbed her eyes. “Now what?” Hershey, another late-night visitor who’d found a way to sleep between Abby and the edge of their bed, lifted her head then let it fall between her paws again.

“Another DB, same as the others,” Bentz was saying. “Only this time it’s a nun.”

“A nun?”

“Sister Rebecca. The Mother Superior at—”

“Our Lady of Virtues,” Montoya finished, all thoughts of slumber, or even morning sex with Abby, pushed from his mind. He’d met with Sister Rebecca Renault more than once and liked the little woman who was in her eighties. God Almighty, who would want to kill her? He threw off the thin sheet and scrounged in the dark for his jeans.

“The officer who responded said her throat was slit and a tattoo inked into her forehead. Different, though. This time it’s one hundred eleven.”

“A hundred eleven?” Montoya dragged on jeans, not bothering with his boxers.

Abby hit the switch to her bedside lamp and the small bedroom was instantly awash with light. She pushed herself to a sitting position and squinted up at him. Her face had paled, and she looked as if she might break down altogether.

“I think we’d better go check out the scene,” Bentz said.

“I’ll be ready in five.”

“I’ll be there in three.”

Montoya hung up. “It’s the Mother Superior. Killed like the others,” he said as Abby reached for her rumpled nightgown and tossed it over her head. Her beautiful face was stone-cold sober, her burnished curls falling into her eyes.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “I don’t believe it. Not Sister Rebecca…”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and meant it.

She swallowed hard, her eyes filling with tears. She glared up at Montoya, some of her shock and grief morphing into anger. “I don’t get it. Why?”
“Yes, why?” he repeated grimly. He looked around. “Where the hell is my wallet?”

“Over there.” She pointed to the dresser, and Montoya snapped up his wallet, badge, and keys then threw on a shirt.

“Get this guy,” Abby said as he slid into his shoes. “I mean it. Get him.”

He met her angry gaze as she rolled out of the bed and walked up to him, all sexy and sleepy and damned irresistible.

He kissed her just hard enough to let her know that no matter what, he thought she was hot.

“I will,” he promised. “I’ll nail his ass.” He slapped her on the butt. “Go back to bed.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“I’ll call later.”

“Good.” She yawned and sat on the edge of the bed, searching for her slippers.

Montoya took off, walking quickly down the short hallway and past the wall of plastic sheeting in the living room. He snagged his jacket from a hook by the door and heard the dog’s feet hit the floor as if Hershey intended to shoot past him and out the door. He didn’t have time for the dog this morning. Abby could deal with her.

Stepping outside, he pulled the door shut and cut across the lawn. A police cruiser was already in his driveway, Bentz at the wheel. Montoya climbed in the passenger side and found a cup of coffee in the holder.

“How’d you manage this?” he asked, picking up the cup and sipping.

“All-night convenience store.” Bentz backed out of the drive, put the car into gear, and flipped on the lights as he stepped on the gas.

“For crying out loud, how long have you been up?” Montoya asked, swallowing some of the hot brew and noticing that Bentz’s hair was wet.

“Long enough to have worked out with the punching bag and showered.”

“And stopped for coffee.” Montoya frowned as dawn began to streak the sky. “You morning people bug the shit out of me.” He took another drink as Bentz sped past a delivery van double-parked near a restaurant and headed toward the freeway. “So tell me what happened.”

“I got a call from Sister Odine at the convent. She found Sister Rebecca in the cloister.”

“Damn.” Montoya stared into the coming dawn, noticing that even at this hour traffic flowing into the city was picking up, the stream of headlights seeming endless. “I suppose the press is on to the story already.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me.” Bentz shot his partner a look. “If not now, then soon.”

“Same with the Feds. The FBI will be all over this like stink on shit. At least they can take some of the heat.”

Bentz grunted his agreement as he edged over a lane, ready to exit. “I finally connected with Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum.”

“Who?” Montoya said, irritated. It was too damned early for word games.

“The brothers. They’re still both in town. I’ve got a meeting scheduled with them later this morning. I’m interested to hear what they have to say about dear old dad.”

“Amen to that.” Montoya grimaced. “They both called you? Individually?”
“Within half an hour of each other.”

“They’re together?”

“Seems like. And the Mrs., Anna Maria, the one married to Kyle? I don’t think she likes it much. She’s called me a couple of times, asking if he’s been in to see me.”

“Communication breakdown.”

“My guess is they want the body released so they can stuff the old man in the ground and divvy up his estate.”

“You haven’t even met them yet,” Montoya pointed out.

“I’m just saying that’s what it feels like to me. The type of questions they asked didn’t lead me to believe there was any love lost between Renner and his sons.”

“Adopted sons. Have we ever located their old man, the one that gave ’em up?”

Bentz shook his head. “Still MIA. Has been for over twenty years.”

“Be interesting to see what became of him.”

Bentz angled the cruiser along the fields and forests of the country road leading to Our Lady of Virtues. The police band crackled and the stars faded with the coming day and Montoya tried to wrap his mind around this case. Another person murdered. Not half a mile away from the old hospital. “You have any idea when the DNA on Eve Renner will be processed?”

“I called Jaskiel because I figured the DA had a lot more influence than I did. She told the lab to put a rush on it, whatever that means.”

“Yeah,” Montoya agreed, frowning to himself. “But it’s better than nothing.”

The road forked, one stretch angling off toward the abandoned hospital, the other toward the convent. As they passed the split, Montoya looked through the window, unable to see the asylum from the car.

But it was there.

And he knew in his gut that this latest spate of killings revolved around whatever secrets it hid.

Deified!

The Voice had promised he would be deified if he finished his tasks.

He drove through the dark night, his blood thrumming through his veins, his pulse pounding in his brain. He barely saw the headlights of the vehicles heading in the opposite direction. No, in his mind’s eye he replayed the sacrifice over and over again. He’d sensed the old nun’s fear, saw the terror in her eyes as she’d recognized him, felt her surrender, for she’d known there was no escape from God’s will.

Sister Rebecca.

Nun.

Mother Superior.

He held the steering wheel in a death grip, his hands sweating inside his thin gloves. Insects splattered against the windshield of his pickup as he headed northeast along the freeway away from New Orleans.

He was nervous.
Baton Rouge was far afield from his usual hunting grounds, All Saints College unfamiliar. But he knew his next victim, the other liar and false innocent, was there.

He kept his speedometer two miles below the limit, never drawing attention to his dark vehicle but never veering from his path.

God had told him where she would be.

What she would be doing.

How he could abduct her.

He must have faith.

“Never even, never even, never even…,” he whispered, calming himself, using the mantra that forced all doubts from his mind. The Father had told him to whisper it whenever he felt as if Satan were luring him from the path of righteousness.

“Never even…never even…never even…”

He spied the turn-off for Baton Rouge and on his portable GPS screen he saw his ultimate destination, the campus. He’d changed in the truck, just so that no one—a late-night jogger, some idiot out walking his dog, or a drunken college kid weaving his way back to his dorm—would notice anything out of the ordinary, such as blood staining his neoprene jogging suit.

As the Voice had directed, he drove past All Saints’s main gates, and a chance meeting with a campus security guard, then parked his truck in an alley behind an abandoned service station with boarded windows, dry pumps, and a signboard indicating the price of gasoline at under a dollar a gallon, either someone’s idea of a bad joke or the service station had been closed for a long, long while.

Fortunately, the alley backed up to a far edge of the campus and no one paid him any notice as he headed quickly across the lawn. He wore a jogging suit with an oversized jacket covering his backpack, tools and weapons. Anyone who saw him cutting through the live oaks would think he was an overweight man trying to jog off a few pounds before starting his day.

The small convent was on the perimeter of the campus, far away from the quad, library, and lecture halls. He glanced neither left nor right as he jogged, as if he’d run this particular course a hundred times. At the convent garden, he stopped, leaned over, gloved hands on his knees, as if to catch his breath, and then, glancing around the immediate area and seeing no one nearby, he scaled the fence, an easy job for anyone athletic enough to hoist his own weight upward. The edges of the bricks made perfect finger-and-toeholds, and as he reached the top of the wall, where a single row of wrought-iron spikes prevented most people from even entertaining the thought of trying to climb over, he placed his hands on the smooth concrete, arched his body up and over, and did a handspring into the air. He landed as soft as a cat on the interior side of the wall.

Easy as pie.

Now for the hard part.

He only hoped the Voice knew Sister Vivian’s routine.

Doubt not, God is with you, he thought, wishing the Voice would speak with him, guide him. Of course, it was not to be. God spoke to him only when He wanted. It seemed always late at night while he was lying in his bed—having trouble falling asleep, the aggravating little voices scraping through his brain—that God would visit and the Voice would offer him counseling and instructions.

The convent was darker than the campus had been, but his eyes adjusted, and, with moonlight as his guide, he followed the map in his head, around one vine-clad building, across a small patio, and through a creaking gate to the lush and fragrant gardens.
He checked his watch. The illuminated dial read four-forty. He would have twenty minutes to wait, then only ten more to execute God’s intricate plan. He hid behind a tall pillar and prayed for strength, pleaded for understanding, begged for God’s help, and implored the Father to show him the way…though all the while he thought of Eve. Surely when he dispensed with this one, God would see fit to—Bong!

His heart nearly exploded in his chest. Then he realized it was the church bells pealing at the stroke of five.

Bong!

He was ready. Knife, rope, drink, and, if necessary, small pistol, all at hand.

Bong!

He leaned out from behind the pillar, waiting, watching.

Bong!

He saw a dark figure approaching, hurrying forward, head bent. She was small. And frail. This would be easier than he’d anticipated.

She found a place on a bench and mumbled softly, her fingers working a rosary as he slid silently up behind her through the tall, shadowy plants.

Bong!

The death knell. He leaped forward, slung his small garrote over her head and around her throat. She gasped, struggling, her fingers scrabbling desperately at her throat, her tiny body stronger than she looked in her habit. Her rosary dropped to the smooth stones of the garden; her small prayer book, too, fell to the ground. Her spine flexed and bent. She tried to scream, to fling him off her, to save herself as she fought tooth and nail.

But she, this little nun, Sister Vivian—“Viv,” as they’d called her—was no match for him. No match whatsoever.

Grimacing, he pulled tighter, his arm muscles flexing as she began to go limp, the fight slipping out of her.

Feeling powerful. Indeed Godlike, he took her to the brink, into the darkness of unconsciousness, then he hauled her swiftly and efficiently in a fireman’s carry out of the garden, through the main gate. This was where it was tricky.

If anyone saw him now he would have to use his gun and that, too, would cause complications, the kind that he didn’t want to deal with. He moved swiftly through the shadows, away from the security lights, hiding whenever he heard anyone, ducking into an alley when a garbage truck, lights flashing, passed.

He was sweating, frightened, but exhilarated as well.

This, the capture, was a new thrill.

This one would be revived.

But only for a short while.

Then she, too, would die.

Kristi rolled out of bed and groaned. It was just too damned early to get up. It wasn’t even light out yet, but she had no choice, not if she wanted to stay fit, keep her body honed. Besides, she needed a release, something to help mentally prepare her for her day ahead of eight hours of calls and complaints to Gulf Auto and Life.

“Yuck,” she said aloud as she propelled her body from the bed and walked to her closet where her gym bag was already packed with her swimsuit and workout gear. The club where she exercised was kind of a “rat gym,” but it
had a clean, Olympic-sized pool, and at this time of the morning she was assured of her own lane. If she changed her routine and swam later in the day, the pool was too crowded, and besides, she needed those hours after work to read, watch cop dramas on television, or work on her own writing projects. She'd just sold two more true-detective stories to a magazine but had resisted her editor's offer to write some kind of funky "real-life Nancy Drew-type series," seeing as how she was the daughter of a New Orleans detective. The editor seemed to still believe she could draw her father into this writing gig and give his insight into the cases she was writing about.

Yeah, right.

She tore off her oversized New Orleans Saints T-shirt and flung on her jogging bra, T-shirt and shorts. That accomplished, she used the toilet, splashed water onto her face, twisted her hair into a tight little knot that she banded in place, then did a quick series of stretches, just to get her blood flowing. After stepping into flip-flops, she slung the strap of her gym bag over her shoulder. The small canvas bag was packed with a fresh set of clothes, tennis shoes, and anything else she would need if she wanted to add to her routine and jog on the treadmill or lift weights.

Grabbing a bottle of water from her small fridge, she threw a glance at the police scanner that sat on her desk as she headed for the door. Her father'd had a fit about her buying the equipment and listening to the radio band, but she didn't care. She figured it was her money, her apartment, her business.

And as for the apartment... She looked around and frowned. She had clothes draped over her few pieces of furniture, a floor that should be mopped, a sink filled with glasses and cups that needed to be washed, and the shower—gross! If her stepmother Olivia ever stopped by, she'd probably faint. Housework wasn't exactly "her thing," but even Kristi knew that before she settled in at her desk she'd have to do major cleaning. Fortunately the place was small.

The police-band radio started sputtering out reports as Kristi was opening the door. She heard the words "at Our Lady of Virtues Convent" and froze in the act. Several officers were speaking, and then she recognized her father's voice. It was a homicide. A murder.

Correction, make that another murder.

Kristi stepped back into the studio and let the door softly close.

She felt a little tingle. This was the story. No matter what her father said. The killings that were swirling around Our Lady of Virtues were perfect for her book. Perfect!

She dropped any idea of heading to the gym this morning. Her workout could wait.

And she still had three hours before she would have to even think about getting ready for work. There was plenty of time to run out to the convent and get back in time to hit the shower and fly to the office. Her dad would kill her, of course, be mad as hell that she showed up, but with the crowd of reporters that were no doubt already gathering around, she'd blend right in. He was just no damned help... yet. She planned on changing that and soon. In the meantime she already had a leak in the department, a cute guy who, after a few drinks, could be counted on to give up something. True enough, he was just trying to get her into bed, and they both knew it, but still, he would let a few things slip.

If her dad didn't come through, and he wouldn't, she could count on her friend.

For now, though, she needed to get out to the scene and fast, learn what she could firsthand. There would be news crews at the convent and lots of loose chatter. And she was a cop's daughter, trained in the art of observation. Her father had always been over-protective, forcing her to learn to observe her surroundings and be prepared at all times for a potential attack or kidnapping. He'd paid for self-defense classes and had insisted she run with a whistle and can of pepper spray when she was jogging. But most of all he'd taught her to watch everything that was happening around her. He was a damned freak about it, always believing that someone he'd sent away to prison might get out and seek retribution by harming Kristi.

But, as she'd proven before, she knew how to handle herself.
And after that time she’d been abducted, she’d taken her father’s advice more seriously and had redoubled her efforts in the martial arts and weaponry. As her computer-geek friend had once told her, “You’re one badass dude… or is that dudette?”

Whatever.

Digging in her closet again, she came up with a battered Marlins baseball cap then located her sunglasses in her purse. She crammed the cap onto her head, pulled the brim down low. Next she slid the shades onto the bridge of her nose.

Checking out her reflection in the mirror mounted over her bureau, Kristi figured her dad might not even recognize her.

And if he did, so what?

The last she heard, it was still a free country.

The half-dead nun was lying on his bed, stripped of her clothes and moaning softly. Irritating him. She was waking again, and that was a mistake. Hadn’t the Voice said to kidnap her, kill her, then dispose of her? Hadn’t God’s instructions been precise as to what He wanted?

Yet the Reviver had improvised.

He’d driven her to his little cabin in the woods rather than to the spot God had indicated.

And she was still alive.

Because he’d let his emotions run away with him. While he was still on an incredible high from the first killing, he’d decided that he was able to make his own decisions, that he was the Reviver and could decide who would live and who would die. But that was wrong. God would be very, very angry. Perhaps punish him. Even take away his promise of deification. He had to work quickly. To cover his mistake.

*God is all-knowing. And he’s furious. That’s why he hasn’t spoken to you. You are already being punished!* Agitated, he stood in front of the fire, the last number—111—gleaming upon his body near the others. He stared at the words he’d spent so many hours inscribing into his flesh, feeling the sting of the needle, the bite of the first little puncture. And now there were so many fresh ones with scabs.

“Oooh,” she moaned.

Revived.

Brought back from the brink of death…only to sink into oblivion forever. He thought about decorating his body with her information but decided he would have to wait. The ritual was always the same…. The engraving was to take place after the killing.

*Not always, though. You’ve broken that rule…. Look into the mirror. At your reflection. What do you see?*

He saw her name. *Eve.* Etched into his skin, reminding him of her. He traced her name with one finger, rubbing his skin over and over, imagining the needle pressing into her firm flesh, puncturing her, deeper and deeper, faster and faster, the sweat on their bodies mingling as he reverently and indelibly made her his.

His blood thrummed. *Eve. Eve. EVE!*

He’d broken his own rules because of her, but this…this inconsequential nun was different.

He turned and saw that she was awake, her eyes round with terror, her voice gurgling in panic behind her gag.
“Viv,” he whispered, and she visibly cringed in the firelight, her pale body cast in gold.

She was shaking her head, silently screaming, “No.”

In a way, he felt sorry for her—the sinner—and he walked back to his altar, found his rosary, and carefully twined the blood-red beads through her bound fingers. Tears filled her eyes and she blinked, but he knew she was already, in her mind, seeking comfort in the prayers.

Then he went to work.
What had she done?

Eve opened a bleary eye and rolled over, expecting Cole to be lying beside her. What felt like hours of intense, glorious lovemaking hadn’t been a dream. She was sore in all the right places to remind her that last night, while still on medication, she’d practically seduced Cole Dennis!

But the bed was empty, and as she turned to one side, pain ripped down her shoulder.

Oh yeah.

That.

She looked down at herself. All she was wearing was a sling.

“Great,” she mumbled, climbing out of bed and catching sight of her reflection in the mirror over the dresser. It was worse than she’d thought. Inwardly groaning, she noticed her bruises, messed hair, and sunken eyes. Either she’d had a really good time last night or a really bad one.

So where was he?

Maybe he’d already taken off.

That would be good. Very good. She couldn’t get involved with him again. Not unless she wanted to play emotional suicide.

Face it, Eve. You are already involved.

Cringing at the thought, she heard Cole singing off-key, the atonal melody floating up the stairs along with the warm scent of coffee. Just like old times. As if they’d never experienced a horrid rift where they’d almost ended up in the courtroom, when she’d been certain he’d tried to kill her and he’d thought she was sleeping with another man.

And poor Roy had ended up dead.

“I’m living a soap opera,” she said, grabbing her robe, then heading barefoot to the second floor, where she locked herself into the bathroom, showered quickly, tossed back half a dose of pain pills, and towel-dried her hair. A slash of lipstick and the tiniest bit of mascara was all she could manage before she slipped on her robe, tightened the cinch, and nearly tripped over Samson on her way down the stairs.

“Watch out,” she warned the cat, then followed him to the kitchen, where bacon was sizzling in a frying pan.

Cole was at the sink.

Having the audacity to look chipper and hale.

Pouring coffee and scrambling eggs while a platter of hash browns steamed on the counter.
“You went shopping?” she asked as her grandmother’s old toaster clicked and two pieces of only slightly burned toast popped up.

“Just to the local market.” He cast her a glance and grinned wickedly, reminding her of the night before.

Bastard!

But her stupid heart rate skyrocketed despite herself. Damn the man, he knew what he did to her, and he took advantage of it. Even now, in the crummy jeans and T-shirt, facing away from her, slapping butter on the toast, he was sexy as all get out. His jeans hung low, his shirt stretched over his shoulders, and every once in a while she caught a glimpse of his smooth, muscular back as the hem of his shirt shifted.

“Like the view?” he asked, not even turning around.

She flushed. “The view’s fine.”

“Better than fine.”

“Way to be humble.”

He looked over his shoulder. “What do you mean? I was talking about the yard,” he said, hitching his chin toward the window, where the magnolia tree was visible. But his slow-spreading smile told her differently.

“You are a miserable piece of work, you know that?”

“I’ve been called worse.” He found a cup, rinsed it in the sink then poured coffee into it. “Sleazeball, scumbag, jackass, you name it.”

“Lawyer?”

He laughed. “Yeah, I’ve heard that one too.” He added a little cream to the coffee then placed it in front of her.

“You’re trying your best to be charming, aren’t you?”

“Just doin’ what comes natural.”

“Yeah, right.” She blew across her cup and tried to ignore how comfortable it felt here, in her house, with Cole. She’d been alone these last few nights, had told herself that’s what she wanted, but now she wasn’t so sure.

“Look, Cole, about last night…”

“Hmm?”

“What we did was…wrong.”

“According to whom? The sex police or the Kama-Sutra squad?”

“Not funny,” she said, but her lips twitched a bit.

“Kinda funny.”

“Don’t derail me here, I have a point.”

“Which is?”

“We can’t act like horny teenagers.”

He turned to face her, his hands braced against the counter, his eyes boring into hers. “Your memory about the events might be a little fuzzy and disjointed, but mine is clear, and basically, I said ‘No’ and you kept pushing.”
She held up a hand, remembering how it all came about.

“You seduced me, not the other way around. I tried to be noble, but you were having none of it.”

“Okay, yeah, I know—”

“So just enjoy it. Chalk it up to a great experience.”

“But it won’t happen again?”

Now he smiled. “That, I can’t promise. And, judging from your actions last night, neither can you. Don’t even try to tell me it was all the meds, okay, cuz I just don’t buy it. I was there, darlin’, and in my right mind. I remember it all. Vividly.”

She dropped her gaze, felt the back of her neck grow warm.

“Don’t worry about it, okay? I think we have much bigger problems.”

She couldn’t argue that logic. “True. But in the light of things, I guess I need to call my lawyer and have the restraining order against you lifted.”

“That might help.” He slid a plate of scrambled eggs with cheese, hash-brown potatoes, and crisp bacon under her nose. “Here ya go. Dig in.”

“What, no parsley sprig?” she asked, though the food looked so good, her mouth watered.

“They were fresh out at the local market,” he quipped then set his plate on the table and handed her a paper towel and utensils. “No napkins either. But apples.” He pointed to a basket on the counter.

“You’re slipping,” she charged, taking the fork, knife, and spoon from his outstretched hand.

“No doubt. Now”—he gestured toward her plate with a finger—“eat. Then we’ll discuss who gets to call the police and tell them about the doll and the old hospital.”

She bit into a piece of toast. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“I know. But we have to.”

“After breakfast.”

“Definitely.”

The eggs were delicious, the bacon smoky and crisp, the potatoes divine. Eve had just decided she could get used to Cole pampering her when the phone rang.

“I don’t even want to know,” she said with a sigh. Then, seeing her brother’s number flash on the caller-ID screen, she braced herself. “Hello?”

“Eve? It’s Anna.” Her sister-in-law was breathless. “Have you heard from Kyle? He, uh, he hasn’t been home, and when I did reach him on his cell, he said he was in New Orleans!” She sounded undone as she took a deep drag on her cigarette. “Can you believe it? He never even asked me if I wanted to come down with him, didn’t so much as come home or pack or anything. Just left, apparently, on the same damned day you did!”

“I didn’t know,” Eve said, and in a heartbeat the warm domesticity of the few minutes before evaporated.

“He said he was going to see you…. Remember, I told you that he’s interested in the will? Look, if he shows up, have him call me, okay?”

“Oh of course.”
“I’m packing some things, not just my own, but for the big jerk too. I’ll leave in a few hours, and I’ll be down there sometime tonight, depending on traffic. But please have Kyle call me.”

“If I hear from him, I will.”

“Thanks.” Anna Maria let out a long sigh. “I don’t have to tell you we’ve been having some problems, but, unlike your brother, I think the best way is to face them and talk about them, not run away from them. Look, I’ve got another call coming in….Have Kyle call me. Love ya, bye!”

She hung up, and Eve was left holding the phone. “My sister-in-law,” she said, setting the receiver into its cradle. “My brother’s in town. I guess he never went back home after I left Atlanta.”

“Why?”

“She didn’t say, but, believe me, I quit trying to figure out my family a long time ago.”

He snorted. “Join the club. Now, I think we should call the police and tell them about what we found.” He grabbed the backpack and pulled out the file on Faith Chastain. “After we look at this.”

Eve nodded with more than a little trepidation then scooted her chair back and scrounged in a few drawers with her good arm before coming up with two notepads and pens. “My guess is that the police will want to keep this.” She tapped on the file with a finger.

As she sat at the table again and started reading, he refilled their coffee cups then pulled a chair up next to hers.

It was weird, really, reading all the different notes, some typed, others handwritten, all regarding a woman who had suffered several nervous breakdowns, who’d battled depression, and who’d seemed to hallucinate. Nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, and even some of the clergy had added to the file. Nowhere was there mention of a pregnancy or birth.

“Maybe this is all wrong,” Eve said, shaking her head. “I mean, what are the chances that I’m Faith’s daughter?”

Before Cole could answer, the doorbell pealed.

“Expecting someone?” Cole was already walking in his stocking feet toward the front of the house.

“At eight-thirty in the morning?” she asked, right behind him. “I don’t think so…. No, wait! Anna said that Kyle was on his way.”

“I think he’s here,” Cole said.

She peered around him, and through the narrow window flanking the door, she spied her oldest brother. Big and grim, he stared back at her through eyes that never seemed to smile.

Her heart sank.

“And he’s not alone,” Cole said, his voice terse and cool.

Eve caught a glimpse of Van standing off to one side, sporting an Arizona tan, smoking a cigarette, and looking nervous as a caged cat.

Both her brothers.

Here.

Now.

The morning just took a turn for the worse.
“No comment,” Bentz said, brushing past a reporter as he made his way to the cruiser. The crime scene, roped off and already being processed, was exactly what he’d expected, and as usual he’d nearly lost the contents of his stomach when he’d viewed the body, still lying in the courtyard, bloody number drawn on the wall, an un-sightly tattoo scrawled upon her forehead, blood staining the edge of her wimple from white to red.

He’d managed to hold onto his morning’s coffee and ask a few questions before he discovered that the batteries in his pocket recorder had died.

The story was that Sister Odine, on her way to the chapel, had discovered the Mother Superior’s body. She’d called 911 and then, because she’d met him last fall, phoned Bentz as well. A deputy from the sheriff’s department had stopped by, and once he’d called in the homicide, Bentz was notified a second time, just before he’d pulled up to the convent.

Now he found an extra set of batteries in the glove box and headed back inside. The press were too close, and he barked at a couple of deputies to push the reporters, cameramen, bystanders, and vans back farther down the lane leading to the convent. It was light now, the day promising to be sweltering. He was already sweating.

Another reporter approached him, a thirtysomething woman with a toothy smile, salon-streaked hair, and intelligent eyes. “Detective, please, if I could just have a minute. Recently there were three murders, all similar, and all connected to the Our Lady of Virtues campus. Could you comment on any link to the crimes? Do we have another serial killer on the streets?”

Bentz stopped under the glare of the camera’s lights. “I have no comment at this time. But I’m certain the public information officer will issue a statement later today. Until then, there’s really nothing I can say.”

“But the public has the right to know what’s going on.”

“A statement will be issued.” He kept walking, leaving the reporter without any answers. He tried to keep his cool, but the press and the damned bystanders, gawkers who fed on this type of grisly crime scene, aggravated him to no end.

“Keep them back,” he said to a deputy as he made a sweeping gesture to the news crews and bystanders. From the corner of his eye, he saw a slim figure of a woman in a baseball cap who looked familiar. He looked more closely and recognized his daughter standing in a crowd of onlookers. She was looking straight at him but now turned away.

What the hell did Kristi think she was doing? If he weren’t so damned busy, he’d march over to the crowd and tell her to go home, go to work, go anywhere, but go away. For now, though, he had a job to do.

Christ, what a mess!

Bentz strode back through the gates and along a path to the convent itself. In the garden area, Bonita Washington moved carefully over the crime scene with gloved hands and booties on her shoes. “We’ve got a real sweetheart with this one,” Washington said as she nodded toward the frail nun’s body. “Santiago, make sure you get a shot of the tattoo on her forehead.”

Inez Santiago, long red hair wound onto her head, moved closer to the corpse and snapped a photo.

“Don’t mess with my scene, Detectives. We’re still processing,” Washington warned them.

Montoya hadn’t shaken his bad mood. “We know the drill. We just want to see what’s going on here.” He shot her a glare, and Bentz noted that his jaw was tight, his lips thin. He had personal ties to this order of nuns who still wore traditional habits long after Vatican II had loosened the dress code.

“Don’t we all?” she said, then motioned to two of her technicians. “Santiago, Tennet, how’re we doing?”

Santiago snapped another photo. “I need a few more minutes.” A. J. Tennet, who often worked with the medical examiner, held up his collection case. “Got the blood samples.”
“Hold onto them….We don’t want anyone accusing us of losing or compromising evidence,” Washington said, reminding everyone of the situation with Royal Kajak’s murder.

Tennet flashed a smile. “No way.”

“Good.”

As the technicians continued their work, Montoya and Bentz carefully studied the cloister garden where Sister Rebecca Renault had lost her life. Crickets chirped, a frog croaked, and the fountain gurgled as night slowly gave way to day. Aside from the dead body and blood staining the flagstones, this would be an idyllic place, a peaceful spot, an area of repose and contemplation.

Desecrated forever.

“Sometimes this job is a real bitch,” Montoya muttered.

Bentz squinted as sunlight began to pour over the garden walls. “Not just sometimes,” he said. “Always.”

He spent another couple of minutes eyeing the area, envisioning how the killer got in, how he surprised the little nun, how the killing went down.

She never had a chance, he decided as he headed inside. The dark hallways were quiet, just a few hushed whispers as the nuns sat in a row, waiting their turn to be called into the small room they were using for interrogation. Sister Rebecca’s own sparse room and more opulent office were being processed, considered part of the crime scene, as was the area where she was found, in the cloister not far from the chapel door.

*Helluva place for a homicide,* Bentz thought, refilling his pocket recorder with the batteries and taking a seat across from Sister Odine. She was a frail-looking woman, somewhere in her late sixties or early seventies he guessed, and as sharp as a tack.

She and the other nuns told him essentially the same thing. Sister Rebecca had been at Vespers and then, as was her usual routine, worked later in her office. Several of the sisters had looked through their windows and seen the lights glowing in the Reverend Mother’s place of business.

It wasn’t all that odd for her to go alone to the cloister gardens or chapel. She’d been a spry woman who existed on few hours of sleep each night. Sister Odine had discovered her body on the way to the chapel early in the morning.

Montoya asked for records of anyone who had visited or called Sister Rebecca over the past two months, and Bentz requested the same of everyone who lived in, or was employed by, Our Lady of Virtues. Some of their questions were deferred to the local parish, others to the Archdiocese, and when they asked for records of employment or admittance to the hospital, Sister Odine opened her mouth, closed it again, then shook her head, her wimple rustling.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I have no idea where those might be. You could check with the Archdiocese, of course, and go through whatever we have here, but the hospital has been closed for so many years, I’m not certain those records still exist.” She blinked several times then anxiously touched the crucifix dangling from her neck. “They must, of course. I’ll search for them.”

“An officer will be assigned to help you,” Bentz said, and the little nun’s eyebrows raised over her rimless glasses. Though it was un-stated, she knew that Bentz was doggedly pursuing evidence, that he trusted no one, not even a woman who had pledged her life to the Lord forty years earlier.

They questioned everyone and found out little while the crime-scene techs vacuumed, photographed, videographed, and dusted the scene. As Bentz and Montoya left, the techs were still searching the grounds for trace evidence. So far no one had discovered how the killer had breached the walls of the institution. The gates had been locked, as they had been for the past few years, and the perimeter appeared undisturbed.
Bentz glanced up at the walls. They were certainly not impossible to scale, especially with the use of a ladder, but they’d found no impressions in the mud to indicate that a ladder had been used, nor had they yet discovered any boot-or shoe print. But it was still early.

The killer couldn’t be so lucky.

Not all the time.

Sooner or later, he’d slip up.

Bentz only hoped it happened before another person was butchered.

“For Christ’s sake, Eve! What the hell is he doing here?” Kyle demanded, eyeing Cole as if he were Satan incarnate.

“I was invited,” Cole said, though Eve knew that was a bit of a stretch. “What about you?” He’d made it clear to her more than once that he’d never much cared for either of her brothers. Obviously, he didn’t see any reason to be polite now.

“We’re here because of our father,” Van said as he tossed his cigarette over the railing to sizzle in the dewy grass. He was shorter and fairer than Kyle, his hair straight and dirty blond while Kyle’s was thick and the color of dark coffee. Both of them had inherited the same icy blue eyes of their father, or so Melody Renner had claimed, though Eve had never so much as seen a photograph of the man.

“But this is the guy you accused of murdering Kajak, and now you’re what—?” Kyle ranted. “Sleeping with him? Are you out of your fuckin’ mind?”

“Let’s not get into it out here,” Eve said calmly, stepping out of the doorway to allow her brothers inside. “And keep it clean, would you, Kyle? I have neighbors.”

“For the past three months you claimed that this guy murdered Kajak and tried to kill you!”

“I was wrong.” She slammed the door shut and tried counting to calm down.

“Just like that?” Kyle snapped his fingers while Van looked like he wanted to melt into the floor and disappear. “This is fucking unbelievable.”

“She said to clean it up,” Cole said, bristling, the muscles on the back of his neck rigid.

“So the minute you’re out of my sight, you hook up with this…this killer and lay on your back for him. What kind of weird fantasy are you having now?”

“You’d better leave,” Cole bit out, eyes narrowing, the sizzle of a fight in the air.

“Take your own advice,” Kyle said, his face red, his nostrils flared. He jabbed a finger at the floor. “This was our grandmother’s house, man. You have nothin’ going on here!”

“Enough!” Eve stepped between them. “I think we’ve heard and seen way more testosterone this morning than we want to.” She looked from Kyle to Cole. “Both of you, just back off and take it down a notch or two.”

Kyle muttered tersely, “Don’t be an idiot, Eve. He’s playing you.”

Every muscle in Cole’s body flexed, but his voice was cool, the detached counselor, when he said, “If anyone’s playing anyone, Renner, I figure it must be you. Why are you here now? Because of your old man? Don’t forget, I represented him. I know how close you were. You two boys just rolled into town to pick over his corpse.”

“That’s not the way it is!” Van sputtered, but he was nervous, and when Cole focused on him, Van looked away.
“So, let’s start over,” Eve suggested. “And be civil about it.”

No one said a word for a few seconds. Eve’s brothers eyed the foyer, parlor, and staircase as if they’d never been inside Nana’s old house before. As she shepherded them toward the kitchen, Kyle ran a finger along the top of the hallway wainscoting and Van stared at the pictures, light fixtures, rugs, and furniture as if he were doing a mental tabulation of what it was all worth.

“Nice place,” Van observed, clearly trying to defuse the situation.

Grateful that the fight had abated, Eve realized it had been years since either of them had set a foot on the ancient floorboards. “We just finished breakfast, but there’s coffee and toast,” she offered.

Cole led the way and somehow managed to scoop up Faith Chastain’s file and place it under a stack of three-month-old magazines.

“Don’t bother,” Kyle said as she reached for cups in the cupboard. He wiggled a finger at her arm in its sling, as if he finally noticed she might be hurt. “What happened?”

“I fell.”

Van glanced at Cole. “Yeah?”

“Over my own two feet,” she said tightly. “A real klutz move, but I can still make and pour coffee.”

“I’m okay,” Kyle said.

“Me too. Coffeed out.” Van nodded. “We’re here about Dad. To see if you need any help with the funeral or the estate.”

“To be honest, I haven’t thought of either yet. The police still haven’t released Dad’s body.”

“How long does that take?”

“Depends. On a lot of things.” Cole picked up an apple from the basket, passing it between both hands, a release of tension. “You can request it, but until the police have all the information and tests they need, you’ll have to wait.” He tossed the apple upward and, without watching it, caught it one-handed. “In a hurry?”

“No need to drag it out.” Kyle reached into his pocket for his cigarettes, shook one out, and jabbed it between his lips. He found his lighter in the same pocket and was about to light up when he caught Eve’s discouraging gaze.

“Oh for the love of God, Eve, you won’t let me smoke? After all the time you stayed at my place?”

“Outside.” She tossed him the phone. “And call your wife while you’re at it. She’s half out of her mind with worry about you.”

“Half out of her mind is about right. That woman!” But he took the phone.

“What happened?”

“Outside.” She tossed him the phone. “And call your wife while you’re at it. She’s half out of her mind with worry about you.”

“Call her cell. She’s on her way down here.”

“Oh fu—!” Sending her a dark glance, he hauled the phone and his cigarettes outside.

As the door closed behind him, Van said, “Listen, Eve, I’m sorry I didn’t come and see you more often, you know, while you were recuperating, but I was busy and...well, I know that isn’t much of an excuse, but you know I’ve never really caught a break.” His lips compressed. “Not one damned break. I’ve just been trying to make ends meet. Hell, I even moved to Arizona because an old army buddy of mine said things were booming out there.”

“Not so?” she asked while Cole stood near the window, where he could watch Kyle outside.

“More like a bust. I was about to pull up stakes anyway. I’d already called Kyle.”
“He never said anything.”
“I don’t think he wanted to worry you or Anna.”

_Bull_, Eve thought but held her tongue.

Van ran a hand through his hair. “So the thing of it is, I’m…”


Van nodded, glanced through the window, and frowned. “So the faster we could wrap up Dad’s estate, you know, the better it would be for me. For Kyle. Hell, for you too.”

“I’m not the executor, Van. At least I don’t think so.”

“You don’t have a copy of the will?”

She shook her head.

“Then it must be at his house.” Van brightened at the prospect.

“The farm is a crime scene. I’m not sure the police have released it yet.”

“Jesus, how long does it take?”

“A lot longer than on television,” Cole said.

“So how do we find out about the money? He was loaded.”

“I don’t know anything about it,” she admitted.

“But someone must,” Van insisted. “I could really use the money.”

“Who says you’re entitled to any?” Cole asked. “Terrence might have left everything to charity, for all you know.”

“Nah. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t.” Van seemed almost frantic. He shoved his long hair from his eyes. “Look, Eve, we have to get this settled.”

“We will, when we get into his house and find the will.”

Cole pushed away from the window. “Check with Guy Perrine at O’Black, Sullivan and Kravitz. I’m not sure, but Terrence might have worked with him. You’ll be better off not mentioning my name. I’m still persona non grata down there.”

“And if this person, this Guy, doesn’t have the will?”

Cole’s cool gaze met Van’s anxious one. “Then I guess you’re shit out of luck.”

“Let’s not go there,” Eve said as Kyle pushed the door open so hard it banged against the wall.

“She’s on her way,” he said, glowering at Eve as if all his marital problems were her fault. “And she’s really freaked out about the nun.”

“The nun?” Eve asked blankly.

“The Reverend Mother at Our Lady of Virtues.”

“Sister Rebecca?” Eve’s knees threatened to give out as she read the message in Kyle’s eyes. Something horrible
had happened.

Kyle nodded. “That’s the one. Anna Maria says it’s all over the news. Guess she was killed last night.”
Bentz was walking with Montoya toward the cruiser when his cell phone rang. Caller ID showed that Eve Renner was on the other end of the line.

For the first time all morning, he picked up. “Bentz.”

“This is Eve Renner. I just heard the news about Sister Rebecca. He’s struck again, hasn’t he?”

“I can’t discuss the case, Ms. Renner, but I can confirm there’s been a homicide.”

“The news people have identified the victim as the Mother Superior,” Eve went on, and Bentz wondered who had already leaked that information. “I know…you know it’s the same guy. I want to help. I, uh, found something I think you need to see.”

“What?”

“I think you’d better see for yourself.”

Bentz didn’t like the game-playing. “Okay, where?”

“At the hospital.”

“What hospital?” he asked, but he felt a chill run through his blood as he understood.

“Our Lady of Virtues.”

“I’m already at the campus.”

“Then open the hospital main gate, and I’ll be there in half an hour or so.”

“Can’t you just tell me what this is all about?” Bentz demanded testily.

“It’s complicated, and you’ll want to see it for yourself.”

Her voice was firm, but there was a drip of fear in it. “Believe me, this is important. I also have something you’ll want. Something I took from there,” she said. “Faith Chastain’s medical history.”

“What!”

She hung up. Just like that.

“Son of a bitch!”

Montoya had stopped walking. “What the hell was that all about?”

“I don’t know,” Bentz said, “but I don’t like it.” He moved out of the way as a couple of guys from the coroner’s office hauled a body bag out of the convent. The news crews still stood by, vans and trucks parked along the side of the lane leading toward the convent. Earlier, as he’d examined the cloister, he’d heard the distinctive whoosh of
overhead rotors and looked up to spy a news helicopter hovering above, hoping to give the cameraman a better shot of the crime scene.

Bentz realized the newspeople had their place. Hell, sometimes the local stations were instrumental in investigations, posting pictures of wanted criminals or asking the public’s help in finding a suspect or a victim. But today he wanted nothing to do with them.

“Give me a second. I need to get something. I’ll meet you at the car.”

“What?” Montoya called after him, but he didn’t turn around, didn’t understand why he felt compelled to do Eve Renner’s bidding. Maybe it was the sound of desperation, of fear, in her voice. He chided himself as he made his way to the secretary’s desk, where a shaken but priggish secretary by the name of Mrs. Miller manned the single telephone. There was a computer on her desk, though most of her notes seemed to have been scribed in perfect cursive by one of the three sharpened pencils that were arranged in a neat row at the edge of her desk blotter.

Wearing a gold cross and an expression that indicated she thought she was guardian to the sanctuary, she wasn’t easily persuaded to find the keys to the old hospital, but when Bentz suggested she might be hampering a homicide investigation and that he could arrest her for it, she blanched and punched the buttons on her phone so quickly her fingers were a blur.

Within five minutes a caretaker arrived with the set of keys. Grudgingly, lips pursed, insisting Bentz return the “order’s property” promptly, Mrs. Miller dropped the keys into Bentz’s outstretched palm.

“Thanks,” he said, then jogged back to the cruiser, only pausing long enough to ask one of the deputies to follow in his car. He didn’t know what kind of show Eve Renner planned to put on at the hospital, but he figured he might need backup to guard the gates and keep the lookie-loos at bay.

“There’s been a leak,” he told Montoya as he settled behind the wheel of the asylum. “The person who called was Eve Renner. From listening to the news, she knows that the victim was Rebecca Renault.”

“Damn!” Montoya slipped out of his jacket and tossed it into the backseat. “So much for notifying next of kin.”

“I think the sheriff’s department is taking care of that. Sister Rebecca has a niece in Cambrai.”

“I hope she found out before she saw it on the news.”

“Me too.” Bentz started the engine.

“The sheriff’s gonna be pissed.”

“He won’t be the only one.”

Bentz rammed the car into reverse and was about to back up when Montoya said, “Hey, wait. Something’s going down.”

Bentz hit the brakes as he saw Sister Odine, holding the huge skirts of her habit high, half running toward his car. Several of the officers standing near the door started to follow her, and a cameraman turned his head and caught the running nun on tape.

“Detective,” she called, waving frantically, her cheeks flushed. “Please wait!”

Bentz rolled down the window as she approached. “I’m so glad I caught up with you,” she said, breathing hard. From the corner of his eye, Bentz saw the camera crew hustling toward the cruiser.

“Get rid of them,” he told one of the deputies who had followed Sister Odine to his car. With a nod, the deputy turned toward the news crew and ran interference.
Sister Odine said in a rush, “I just received a call from Sister Jeannette, the Mother Superior at All Saints.” Bentz felt his back muscles tighten at the mention of the college Kristi had attended, where once she’d faced unspeakable terror. “She asked me if I’d heard from Sister Vivian… Vivian Harmon, who is part of their order?”

“What about her?”

“She’s missing.”

“For how long?” Bentz asked.

“Reverend Mother didn’t say, but…” Sister Odine nodded, her head bobbing rapidly. “Her room is empty, and they found a rosary and prayer book in the garden. The Reverend Mother recognized them as both belonging to Sister Viv.”

Bentz’s gut twisted. He knew the campus well and was all too familiar with the dark terror associated with it. “Did the Reverend Mother call the police?”

“Not yet. They searched the grounds and thought maybe Sister Vivian had gone visiting and neglected to tell anyone, but that’s unlike her.” Sister Odine’s face crumpled a little. “Someone from the college staff told one of the nuns about what happened here, about Sister Rebecca… Oh dear.” Tears filled her eyes again. “Anyway… now the Mother Superior is worried that something… something horrible might have happened to Sister Vivian too.”

Bentz wanted to reassure the nun, to tell her that Sister Vivian probably was taking a break from the order, that she was second-guessing her vows, that she would show up sometime soon, but he suspected that would be a crock. “Have her call nine-one-one, explain what’s going on, and tell her that Detectives Montoya and Bentz will be out to talk to her in a few hours. In the meantime we’ll call the Baton Rouge P.D.”

“Thank you,” she said fervently, far more relieved than she should have been as she made the sign of the cross over her chest. “Bless you, Detectives,” she murmured as she bustled off.

Bentz turned the car around and headed down the drive where parked cruisers, vans, and trucks crowded the lane, scarcely allowing access between the tall live oaks and spreading magnolias.

“Hey,” Montoya said as they fought through what appeared to be an ever-growing crowd. “Isn’t that your kid?” He pointed a finger at the window and the slim girl in a Florida Marlins baseball cap. Again she turned away from the road, engaging another person in the crowd.

Bentz’s lips tightened. Theirs had always been a difficult relationship, one that had probably been exacerbated by the lies he’d had to tell her while she was growing up. It had to have been tough on her when she’d finally realized the truth: Bentz wasn’t her biological father. Yeah, well, that had been a helluva mess, and in the end, he’d been the one who had stuck by her, especially after Jennifer’s death, then during those rough teenage years.

She hadn’t had it easy, but that didn’t give her the green light to put herself in danger. The fact of the matter was that he couldn’t have loved her more had she been his natural child. End of story.

“What’s she doing here?” Montoya was frowning darkly, his gaze following Kristi in the sideview mirror as they rolled down the length of the lane.

Bentz grunted. He knew damned well what she was thinking. Not that he’d confide it to anyone, much less Montoya.

A true-crime writer!

Of all the idiotic, half-assed ideas!

Why in God’s name would she want to make herself more of a target than she already was as a homicide detective’s child?
He didn’t have time for it right now, but he planned to engage in another attitude-adjustment talk with her ASAP. Montoya wisely let the matter drop. “What did Eve Renner want?”

“Us to meet with her. At the hospital.”

“What hospital?”

“The one next door.”


“She said she was there and found Faith Chastain’s file. She wants to give it to us, but there’s more. She hung up before she explained.” Bentz reached the winding road, saw there was no traffic, gunned the engine.

“This just gets weirder and weirder,” Montoya said, flipping down the visor to shield his eyes. “I told you about the picture Abby took of the place.”

“Any luck with that?”

“The lab’s still working on it.”

Bentz turned off the main road and angled the cruiser toward the hospital. A fox squirrel ran onto the road, changed its mind, and darted back to the ditch. Bentz tapped on the brakes. “Idiot,” he muttered at the long-disappeared rodent.

Montoya said, “I hope to hell this isn’t a wild-goose chase.”

Bentz found a pack of gum in his pocket and pulled out a stick as he watched an SUV from the sheriff’s office pull up behind them. “Only one way to find out.”

Montoya and Bentz were waiting.

Along with a deputy from the sheriff’s department.

In front of the open gate to the hospital, the two detectives were leaning against the fender of a cruiser as Eve parked her Camry next to the cop’s car. The deputy in the SUV was on the phone but hung up when Eve rolled up.

“This looks like it might turn out to be another gunfight at the O. K. Corral,” she murmured.

“They’re just being cautious,” Cole assured her.

“If you say so.”

The deputy slid out of his SUV as Eve and Cole climbed from her Toyota. Both detectives visibly tensed, Montoya in black shirt, jeans, sunglasses, and his damned leather jacket, Bentz in T-shirt and faded jeans.

Oh great, another pissing match. Just what she needed. Slinging one strap of her backpack over her shoulder, Eve locked her car. The deputy hung a few steps back, eyes on the road.

“Wasn’t there a restraining order?” Montoya asked, white teeth flashing as he zeroed in on Cole.

Eve held up one hand. “The restraining order was lifted.”

Cole met his gaze squarely. “I’m escorting Ms. Renner.”

A dark eyebrow cocked over the rims of Montoya’s shades. “You her attorney now?”
One side of Cole’s mouth lifted in that self-deprecating grin Eve had found alternately irritating and endearing.

“Last I heard, you were on the other side,” Montoya said, his gaze focused on Cole.

“Water under the bridge, Detective,” Cole said with a shrug.

“What about last night?” he asked, taking off his sunglasses so he could stare hard at Cole. “Where were you?”

Cole’s smile widened. Dear God, he was enjoying this! At that moment, Eve wanted to strangle him, and Montoya for good measure. Before Cole could say more than she wanted, Eve said, “He was with me all night. We even spent some time at South General Hospital.” She held up her sling. “I fell here, on the third floor in front of Faith Chastain’s room.”

“Here?” Montoya asked, but his eyes still challenged Cole.

“Yes.”

Bentz stepped between the two other men, and the deputy looked back as if waiting for the word to come and assist. “Okay, we’ve had our fun. Now let’s get down to it. So, where’s the file?” Eve retrieved the thick folder from her backpack and Bentz took it gingerly, his forehead etching with new lines as he read the file tab. “Anyone else touch this?”

“Not since I found it yesterday. Just us. Both of us.”

Annoyed, Montoya slipped on his shades and said, “That makes it easy. We’ve already got your prints on file.”

Cole let that one slide while Bentz grabbed a flashlight and locked Faith Chastain’s file in his cruiser.

Pocketing his keys, he asked, “So how did you come to find it in the first place? Where was it?” He glanced at the hospital as if he anticipated the answer.

She gestured toward the top floor as they crossed inside the grounds. “In the attic.”

Montoya cocked his head. “Attic?”

“There’s a small garret above the third floor. I used to play there as a kid. I came back yesterday because I felt compelled. Because of this whole ‘Faith-Chastain-might-be-your-mother thing.’ I needed to look around.”

Bentz closed the gate behind them and locked it. “Make sure no one gets in,” he ordered the deputy, then caught up with Montoya, Cole, and Eve. It was late morning, closing in on noon, and the sun was intense. Even so, Eve felt chilled inside, knowing what they would find inside the huge edifice that had originally been an orphanage and later a full-fledged hospital before eventually ending up as an asylum. The grounds and building had always been owned by the Archdiocese, and now, in its decrepit state, the hospital was slated to be razed.

All for the best, she thought as they walked up the buckled, cracked concrete drive and past an overgrown lawn gone to seed. The drive curved around a once-grand fountain directly in front of the front doors. As a child Eve had been enchanted by the three winged angels spouting water to the heavens. Now the fountain was bone dry and still, the angel statues chipped and stained, Eve’s sense of wonder long dead.

“So, how did you get in?” Bentz asked as they walked the perimeter of the building. Her footsteps were still visible in the grass and dirt, but as they rounded a far corner, she noticed that the fire escape that had been lowered the day before was now unreachable, its ladder tucked near the landing on the second floor.

“This isn’t the way it was,” Eve said in surprise, explaining how she’d used the ladder to gain access to the building through a partially opened window.

“The ladder was down. I used it too,” Cole continued as he stared upward to the window. “Now the window’s closed too. We didn’t shut it.”
“You’re certain?”

“Absolutely.” Eve shaded her eyes as she looked upward at the red bricks and mortar. “Yesterday, when I was looking down from the attic through a hole in the floor, I saw a shadow in Faith’s room, one I couldn’t explain.”

Montoya rubbed the back of his neck. “What hole? What shadow? I don’t get it.”

“You will,” Cole said. “Let’s go inside.”

They circled the building but found no other open windows. They stopped at the marble steps at the front of the building while Bentz found a key that unlocked the dead bolts on the main doors.

He switched on his flashlight and Montoya and Eve followed suit with their own flashlights. Trepidation was Eve’s companion as she once again stepped into the decay and gloom that was the abandoned asylum. Immediately her skin crinkled, raising goose bumps though the temperature inside had to be nearly eighty. The policemen, too, became more somber as they shined their beams over the reception area and hallways.

“Your father worked here,” Bentz stated. “Did he have an office?”

She pointed in the general direction. “But there’s nothing in it. I looked yesterday.”

“Show us.”

Eve led them to the small area her father had used for his counseling sessions and paperwork. Bentz searched the room while Montoya swept the beam of his flashlight around the small maze of rooms. “He was in office number one?”

“I think it was reserved for the chief psychiatrist.”

She pointed out the other rooms: one for examinations, another for accounting, still another for the clergy, and then larger areas for the nursing and housekeeping staffs.

“What about the basement?”

“It was used for alternative treatments.”

“Such as?”

“There were operating rooms and padded cells and rooms where electroshock therapy was administered.” She met the questions in Bentz’s eyes. “Some treatments seem barbaric and demeaning now, but they were widely accepted when the hospital was open.” Eve heard a defensive note creep into her voice, but she didn’t like even the least little intimation that her father, as head of the hospital psychiatric staff for years, had done anything the least bit inappropriate.

“You intimated there was something else,” Bentz said. “A reason we had to come here?”

“In the attic,” Eve confirmed, leading the way. She couldn’t help glancing away as they passed the stained-glass window of the Madonna at the landing, an intricate piece of craftsmanship that for some reason had sustained no damage over the years.

They trooped silently upward, the steps creaking under their weight. On the third floor they paused briefly at the open door to room 307, illuminating the hideous discoloration on the floor with the beams of their flashlights.

Montoya took one look at the large bloodstain and said something harsh under his breath before turning to Eve. “So the attic? How do you get there?”

“This way.” She showed them to the linen closet with its door hidden behind the chimney, unlocked the latch, explaining how she and Roy had played up in the attic as children, that they had a “fort” complete with books and
They climbed the attic stairs single file. At the top she paused, took a deep breath, then told them about the doll.

Bentz couldn’t believe his ears. “You pulled me off a murder investigation to look at a mutilated doll?” he said in disbelief.

“And Faith Chastain’s file. There are also other patient files in the cabinet up here. I thought they might have information useful in your investigation.”

“Legally they’re off-limits,” he reminded her. He was irritated. None of this was good. Why had he let himself believe this trip had some merit?

“Where’s this doll?” Montoya asked.

“Over in the corner by the window.” Ducking under the overhanging rafters, Eve steeled herself as she turned her flashlight toward the spot where yesterday she’d discovered the sleeping bag and doll.

The beam crawled over the ancient floorboards, past an old bookshelf, to the sleeping bag.

But the doll was gone.

And in its place was the half-dressed, bloodied body of a nun.

“My God,” Montoya breathed.

Eve stared then let out a keening scream. “No. Oh please God, no!” she wailed, her voice hoarse with desperation as it rose to the rafters of the dusty attic.

Cole was at her side in an instant, his arm around her, his gaze locked on the grisly, brutal scene before him. Clinging to him, Eve couldn’t quit staring at the horror of this dark attic. Where once there had been a hideously mutilated doll, there was now a real woman lying in the same position she’d found the Charlotte doll. Facedown, knife wounds on her body, her habit bunched up around her waist, her panties pulled down.

Bentz and Montoya rushed to the woman then paused. Neither of them touched her, as she was clearly dead.

“That bastard knew we were here,” Eve said shakily. “He was in Faith’s room, I know it…. And…and he called me, right before you showed up,” she said, pressing her cheek to Cole’s chest.

“You got a call from him?” Montoya’s head snapped her way.

“Yesterday, on my cell…yes.” She was trembling now, partly out of fury, partly out of sheer terror. “He was taunting me, letting me know that he was watching.” Her skin crawled to think he’d been so near.

Her knees threatened to turn to mush, but Cole supported her, holding her tight.

“That’s the way the doll was positioned yesterday,” Cole told Bentz. “Except that there were red slash marks in felt pen, just like the stab wounds on this woman’s body. And the number…four hundred and forty-four was marked across the doll’s belly. Eve’s name was scratched in capital letters a little bit lower, across the doll’s lower abdomen.”

“Charlotte…my doll’s hat had been taken off, and her hair had been cut too,” Eve added, staring at the nun’s nicked and tufted head. Nearby, stained red, lay her wimple, coif, and veil.

Bentz leaned closer to the corpse, his eyes examining the body before he shot a look back at Montoya. “Call this in and tell the guy at the front gate to let no one inside except the police. Shit.” He rocked back on his heels, and his Adam’s apple worked as he swallowed hard. “Looks like we just found the missing nun.”
Bentz stood outside the hospital, his stomach roiling, his thoughts black as night while the sweat rolled beneath the neck of his T-shirt. The sun was high in the sky, its heavy heat merciless, the humidity inching toward a hundred percent. A crime-scene crew had already started processing the scene, and yellow tape was strung around the hospital grounds.

Again.

Two nuns killed, their bodies tattooed and arranged in a posed position.

A signature killer?

Maybe, but some things didn’t make sense.

Didn’t follow the rules.

Serial killers usually stayed within the bounds of race. They usually chose a gender. There was usually time between the killings.

_Usually, usually, usually._

“Our boy’s upping his game,” Montoya said as he lit the cigarette he’d bummed from one of the uniforms on the scene. “Escalating.” He inhaled deeply then breathed out, twin jets of smoke curling from his nostrils.

“It’s more than the usual thing, not just some creep getting his rocks off by killing a random woman,” Bentz said. “This guy has specific victims.”

“And he marks them with specific numbers. Tattoos them, for Christ’s sake.”

“We need to check all the local dealers of tattooing supplies.”

“Already done. Zaroster’s on it,” Montoya said, hazarding a glance to the roped-off area in front of the gates where Eve Renner in her arm sling and Cole Dennis stood next to her Camry.

Bentz shielded his eyes. The press hadn’t been ten minutes behind Montoya’s call to the station, and all of the people who’d been fascinated with what had happened at the convent before were now parked outside the hospital. Sickos, every one of them.

Then there were the Feds. Taking charge. Which was fine with Bentz. Let the FBI use its resources and work with local crime enforcement. The Feds added a new perspective, and though a few of the agents rankled him, so what. There were cops in his own department that aggravated the crap out of him as well. “The videographer’s taping the crowd, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Bentz wanted to make certain that anyone found hanging around every crime scene was identified and investigated. His eyes searched the crowd, looking for someone who just couldn’t stay away, who felt compelled to
be there. His gaze landed on Kristi. Oh hell! She was talking into a handheld tape player and had obviously blown off work for the day. Hadn’t she told him this was the case she was going to use to write her ridiculous true-crime book?

As if she sensed him staring at her, she looked his way. This time she made eye contact and waved.

He tapped his watch, indicating that she should get her butt to work. She shrugged, ignoring his attempt at fatherly advice.

Crap.

Muttering under his breath, Bentz reached into his pocket, found one last antacid, tossed it into his mouth.

“So, what do you think about the missing doll? You buy it?” Montoya asked.

“So where’s the doll—Charlotte, isn’t that what she called her?”

“Beats me.”

“If the damned thing existed.”

“The empty cabinet. Big deal.” Montoya wasn’t impressed.

“Dennis and Renner insist it was full the day before.”

“The missing doll doesn’t bother me as much as the missing files.”

“Humph.” Montoya took a final drag and tossed the cigarette butt onto the concrete then crushed it with the toe of his boot. They’d discovered no other files in the attic. “Maybe they didn’t exist either.”

“We’ve got Faith Chastain’s folder. It exists.”

“That could have come from anywhere. Maybe Dennis stole it from Terrence Renner’s house the night he was killed and just didn’t bother to return it with the laptop. Or maybe it was at Eve’s place all along. That house was owned by her grandparents, her father’s family. Terrence Renner had lived and visited there, maybe not for a while, but the file’s twenty years old. Who knows where Eve dug it up. We only know where she says she found it.”

“Her key fit into the lock of the cabinet.”

“The empty cabinet. Big deal.” Montoya wasn’t impressed.

“Dennis and Renner insist it was full the day before.”

“So our guy, the doer, besides killing two people and hauling one from Baton Rouge to here, took the time to clean up. Not only did he swipe the doll, he took all the files from the file cabinet. Why? Cuz his name is in the cabinet?”

“Or something connecting the crimes to him.”

“Maybe he was hoping to take Faith’s file.”
“Then why take the others?” Bentz asked.

“You tell me,” Montoya said tensely.

“Maybe he couldn’t find Faith’s,” Bentz allowed. “Panicked, figured it might be misfiled and didn’t have time to search.”

“So he takes everything inside? In what? Boxes? Bags? Who is this guy? Supermover? Where did he park? Close enough to haul those files to his vehicle? Then, after everything else, he takes the time to cover his tracks, close windows, and make sure the ladder’s back up on the fire escape? I don’t buy it.” Montoya ran a hand through his glossy black hair and glared at Cole and Eve. “Besides, I still don’t trust Cole Dennis. He may not be the doer this time, but he’s holding back. I just know it.”

“She seems to trust him now.” Bentz was watching Cole and Eve. They were deep in a confab, talking, glancing up at the hospital then over at him, waiting for their cue to leave. “I called South General. They were there last night. Together.”

“So what’s that all about? After being a prime witness in Roy Kajak’s death, now she sleeps with Dennis? After being convinced that the son of a bitch nearly killed her?”

Bentz shook his head, swatting at a horsefly that was buzzing near his head. “Don’t know, but I think we should find out.”

“No shit.”

Eve slept for hours.

Cole had brought her back to her house and, over her protests, given her some of the pain medication the ER doctor at South General had prescribed then insisted that she rest. She’d been certain sleep would prove elusive, as her headache had returned and her shoulder had throbbed mercilessly. She was shaken to her core, her mind filled with spinning, disjointed, and terrifying images of a dark red bloodstain, the missing and mutilated doll, and Sister Vivian’s posed, bloodied corpse with its hideous tattoo.

She and Cole had talked to the police, including an agent from the FBI, given statements at the station, and tried to come up with every bit of information they possessed. Eve had been asked about her father over and over again, the police intimating that he’d not only had a drinking problem but might have used self-prescribed drugs. They’d asked about her childhood, about Roy and her relationship with him. They’d wanted to know what names she’d seen on the missing files and if she remembered anyone from the list she’d pulled together. Then they’d zeroed in on her sex life, bringing up, once again, the man she couldn’t name, the man whose sperm was found swimming in her vagina, a man she’d been with only a few hours after sleeping with Cole.

The interview had been exhausting. She’d been separated from Cole, and he too had been questioned relentlessly, to the point he’d even asked if he needed to call his lawyer.

She’d seen Van and Kyle at the station as well, though she hadn’t spoken to them. They too had been questioned.

In the end, when the police had been convinced Eve and Cole had nothing more to tell, they’d been allowed to leave. Eve had taken Cole to pick up his Jeep. Then they’d reconvened at the house, where Eve’s energy had dissipated to zero.

By the time she’d lain down, it was midafternoon; now it was after eight in the evening, and her stomach growled from lack of food, which was a good sign.

She headed downstairs, where the lamps were lit and Cole was seated at the kitchen table, head bent over scads of yellow sheets from a legal pad he’d found somewhere. He glanced up at the sound of her footsteps, and a smile pulled at one corner of his mouth. “Ah, look, Sleeping Beauty has awakened,” he said to Samson, the traitor, who was curled happily in his lap.
She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror and shuddered. “Maybe Sleeping Ugly is a better description.”

He laughed and pushed back his chair, the cat scrambling to the floor. “Never.”

“Close enough,” she said ruefully, self-consciously touching her short hair. It was clumped and sticking up at odd angles, and what little mascara she’d once worn on her lashes was smudged beneath her eyes. Her lipstick had long faded, her clothes were wrinkled, and she was still wearing a sling. All in all, she was a mess.

He waved her over and patted his lap. “Sit and take a look. I’ve been busy while you’ve been catching up on your… beauty sleep.”

She groaned as she settled onto his lap. One of his arms slipped around her waist.

“This could be dangerous,” she said.

“That’s the general idea.” He pressed a kiss to the back of her neck then pointed to the papers strewn before him. “Just not now. So, here’s what I did….”

He explained that he’d made a sheet of information on all of the victims who’d been recently killed, trying to find a common link. Anytime he’d found something he could attribute to another of the victims, he starred the information then listed it on a separate piece of paper including all the victims’ names to whom it pertained. “For example, both Sister Rebecca and Sister Vivian were nuns, so they’re linked that way, but no one else—that I know of, anyway—is part of the order, so they’re the only ones with this in common.” He’d made a note on the information paper. “And these people worked at the mental hospital: your father and the two nuns. But not Roy. I know his father worked there, so I did put a question mark by his name, but the link to the hospital is broader, not about employment, or Roy wouldn’t be included.”

“But everyone’s linked in one way or another to the hospital?” Eve asked.

“Yes, but not to Faith Chastain.” He drummed his fingers on the edge of the table. “I thought everyone who’d been killed would have some major connection to her, but I can’t find it. Roy didn’t know her.”

“Sure he did…. Well, at least peripherally. He wasn’t just the son of the caretaker. Later, he spent time there as a patient.”

“At the same time Faith was there?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“For right now, the only total connection is the hospital,” he said, tapping his pen on the page. “That’s the key…. So, what do these numbers mean? 212, where Roy died, 101 at your dad’s, 323 on the nun, and 444 on the doll.”

“What about the Mother Superior, Sister Rebecca?”

“We don’t know yet. We can assume there must have been something written in blood and tattooed on her, but the police have that information.” He set his chin on her shoulder and stared at the pages scattered on the table. “Do you have any idea what the numbers mean? Are they part of a social security number? Or some other kind of ID? Or an address? Or maybe a date? February twelfth for 212? January first at your dad’s, 323 on the nun, and 444 on the doll.”

“What about the hospital?”

“Well, that won’t work. Look at 444. It’s not a two-digit date. There is no forty-fourth month or day…. It would have to be years, April 4, 2004, but that won’t work because of the 101. No month or day is zero…. ” She stared at the notes, her head aching again, Cole’s breath warm against the back of her neck.

“Maybe the 444 is the one that’s off, because it was on a doll, not a real person? That whole thing: Charlotte posed and then the nun in the exact same manner, what’s that all about?”

“I don’t know.” She was glad for the strength of his arm around her waist. “And why did he steal the files?”
“Because of something inside that cabinet? Patient records, right? Nothing else?”

“Nothing that I saw, but I didn’t have time to go through every drawer or flip through all the files.”

“So, what did you see?”

“Let me think…..” She remembered some of the names that had jumped out at her. “Enid…um, Enid Waller, I mean Walcott. And John Stokes, Ronnie Le Mars and Merlin…Oh God, what was his last name? Not Merlin, Mer win Anderson and Neva St. James…. There were others, but I can’t remember.”

He wrote down the names. “Do any of these connect with any of the victims?” he asked.

“Aside from being patients at the hospital and all treated by my father?”

“Were any of them close to Faith Chastain?”

She shook her head slowly. “I wouldn’t know. I was just a kid for most of it. I wasn’t paying much attention. It seems that they were all at the hospital at the same time, but then again, I can’t be sure.” She exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry. I just don’t know.”

He kissed her nape. “It’s okay, but since we’re getting nowhere, how about I take you to dinner?”

“Dinner?” she repeated. It sounded so normal. So welcome. “Yes, please.” She glanced out the window and noticed that dusk was starting to creep across the backyard.

Cole pulled her to her feet. “Come on. I know this great little place that serves a mean bowl of dirty rice and mudbugs.”


“Best I can do,” he said, taking her hand. “Let’s go.”

“I’m just tellin’ ya, it’s not a smart move to quit your job and start poking around a homicide scene,” Bentz said with forced patience, his cell phone plastered to his ear as Kristi tried to come up with every excuse under the sun why she should have “exclusive” access to the ongoing case. “Forget it.”

“Dad, listen, please! I won’t do anything to hinder the investigation. You have to trust me.”

“The answer is ‘no,’ you got that? I’ll call you later.” He hung up, fuming. Why was she pushing him on this? Why mess up her job, a good job? Why complicate her life?

Montoya sauntered into the room. “You need to go home and get laid,” he said, observing Bentz’s utter frustration.

Bentz shot him a look. “Like that’s gonna help.”

“It always helps me.”

“Fine.”

“Look, you don’t smoke, you don’t drink, but you’ve got one helluva good-lookin’ woman waiting for you at home.”

Bentz stole a look at the picture of Olivia on his desk. Montoya was right. Petite, with gold curls falling down her shoulders, clear eyes, and a tight little butt… “I’m meeting her for dinner in half an hour,” Bentz admitted then decided the less Montoya knew about his love life the better. “You heard the information officer made a statement about the recent killings? He’s asking for the public’s help.”
“Not much they can do. We don’t even have a composite of the guy.”

“Yeah, well, maybe someone saw something at Our Lady of Virtues or All Saints. Maybe we’ll catch a break.”

“Maybe,” Montoya said, sounding unconvinced. Not that Bentz blamed him.

“What else is happening?”

“No DNA yet, but soon, I’m told.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“Zaroster has a few leads with the tattoo ink and equipment, but nothing concrete yet. The plaster casts at the crime scene of footprints and tire marks haven’t been analyzed completely, but the guess is we’re looking for a guy who wears size twelve or twelve and a half.”

“Big guy,” Bentz said.

“So it would seem.”

“What about Abby’s picture?”

“Nothing yet, and again no one at either convent or the college noticed anything out of the ordinary.”

“Two nuns killed and it’s business as usual?” Bentz scowled and twisted a pencil in his fingers.

“We’re not done yet,” Montoya said, but he was irritated and anxious as well. “I’m still trying to put together a roster of the people who worked at the hospital when Faith was there, but the records, hell, they’re obsolete.”

“The state must know, or the Feds. Tax records.”

“FBI’s supposed to be on it. So, did you meet with Eve Renner’s brothers?”

“Both of ’em.”

“And?”

Bentz leaned back in his chair. “I think Eve’s lucky she only has two. They were here to try and get the body released, so they can, let’s see”—he found his notes—“‘get on with our lives,’ which I take as Renner-speak for they can’t wait to get their hands on whatever Daddy left them.”

“You think they could have killed him?” Montoya asked.

“Anything’s possible. I’m waiting to see who inherits. There’s got to be a will, and we’re already checking into life insurance benefits. Neither brother has an alibi. Seems as if they were both out driving around about the time dead old dad had his throat slit. Kyle claims he was on his way here from Atlanta, and Van says he was driving from Arizona. I figure we might get credit-card receipts to bear their stories out.”

“Or prove them wrong.”

“Kyle, he’s big. I’d guess the size twelve shoes would be about right, but the other guy is smaller in stature.”

“So what reason would either of them have to kill the nuns?”

“What reason would anyone?” Bentz pushed himself closer to the desk again, studying his notes.

“What you got there?” Montoya asked, nodding at Bentz’s desk.

“Just me trying to sort things out. Those are their tattoos.”
Montoya spun the paper around and read Bentz’s block letters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAITH CHASTAIN</th>
<th>LIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROYAL KAJAK</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERRENCE RENNER</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REBECCA RENAULT</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIVIAN HARMON</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOLL??</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“So, what do you make of it?” Montoya said.

“First off, I’m not certain whoever tattooed Faith Chastain is our killer. Her tattoo was a word, not a number. And we can’t really count the doll. We’re not even certain it exists. But there’s something weird about the numbers.

“Which is?”

“They read the same way backward as forward.”

“So?” Montoya said, his forehead wrinkling.

“Well, it doesn’t mean too much, but when you read the tattoo on Faith Chastain’s head backward, what do you get?”

Montoya looked at the letters, and his cocky smile faded. “Evil.”

Bentz dropped his notes on the desk as he stood.

“Jesus.” Montoya’s eyes narrowed. “Okay…but so what? Maybe it’s just a coincidence. I mean, Faith was tattooed over two decades ago.”

“Thought you didn’t believe in coincidence.”

“I don’t, but…”

“It’s just a thought. Means nothing.”

“It means enough for you to bring it up.” Montoya rested a hip against Bentz’s desk, apparently waiting for an explanation.

“It’s just something to explore,” Bentz said, but he felt that he was on the edge of something. Something that might be important. He just hadn’t sorted it out, wasn’t sure what it was quite yet. Throwing his pencil on the desk, he said, “I’ve got to run.”

“I’m thinking you’re gonna get lucky tonight.” Montoya’s grin was absolutely wicked.

“I’m always lucky.”

“An old fat guy like you? Huh.”

Bentz laughed despite himself. With Montoya in tow, he snapped out the lights and tried to shake off the feeling that he was missing something major about Faith Chastain. There was a reason she’d been tattooed twenty-odd years ago. He just had to figure out what it was.
“This is where you live?” Eve looked around the small camelback house wedged tightly onto a poorly lit street. To say it needed work would be the understatement of the year, and when compared to the roomy Italianate home Cole had once owned, it was a dump. Pure and simple. Barely more than a roof over his head.

“I’ve really come up in the world,” Cole said with a quick smile. He’d stopped by his place, grabbed a quick shower, a bag of clothes and personal items on the way to the restaurant. It was odd, really; in all the time that they’d talked about marriage, they’d never lived together, just stayed overnight at each other’s places. But now, it seemed, Cole was moving in, at least for the time being, and it seemed like the right course of action.

*Quite a turnaround from just a few days ago when you still thought him capable of murder.*

“All set?” Cole walked out of the bedroom dressed in a pair of khakis and an open-collared dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. “My wardrobe’s pretty limited,” he admitted when he noticed her eyeing him. “I think I have a ton of suits somewhere, but I’m not sure. Deeds could have sold them too. He certainly didn’t leave me with a key to any storage unit, so…” He spread his arms wide and shrugged. “What you see is what you get.”

“And I like,” she admitted, walking into his open arms and kissing him soundly.

“Careful, darlin’, you keep this up and we’ll never get to those mudbugs.”

“Can’t miss that.” She kissed him again, took his hand, and led him outside to the narrow little driveway where his Jeep was parked. There were kids hanging out, plugged into iPods and practicing jumps on their skateboards, an older man smoking on the stoop of an apartment building, and a couple of men in their twenties working on a car in a garage a couple of doors down the street.

On the corner of the next block, a sizzling sign for the local bar glowed neon green in the night. Farther south, past cross streets and old buildings, was the waterfront, where the Mississippi slowly moved toward the Gulf of Mexico. The night was clear, and somewhere above the streetlights there were stars, but Eve couldn’t catch a glimpse of many as she climbed into Cole’s Jeep and he drove her into the French Quarter. He located a parking spot three blocks from Chez Michelle then walked her inside, where the cozy wood-paneled interior was packed with patrons. The scents of tomato sauce, cayenne pepper, and sassafras made her mouth water the minute she walked through the door.

A thin, friendly waitress led them past an open kitchen where chefs in white coats worked their craft, braising meat, broiling fish and sausage, and creating sauces.

At a private table tucked in a back corner, Cole ordered the special mudbug appetizer and a pitcher of beer. “You’ll love them, I promise,” he said over the buzz of conversation and strains of jazz piped in from hidden speakers.

“You don’t scare me, Counselor. I grew up on crawdads.”

“Did you, now?” he said, a bit of the devil in his eyes. Oh, it was so easy to fall back into this routine with him, and despite the holes in her memory, she remembered clearly how much she’d loved him.

Frosty mugs of beer and a bucket of bright red, spicy mudbugs were served, and they both dug in, cracking the
shells of the crayfish and dipping the tails into a succulent hot-pepper sauce. Eve ordered a spicy gumbo filled with seafood, sausage, and okra, while Cole chose the signature jambalaya.

For the first time all day, Eve relaxed, and the headache she’d been fighting for weeks retreated. She and Cole talked about inconsequential things, neither wanting to tread too close to the brutal murders, his life in prison, or the complicated layers of their relationship.

For now, they were able to push the rest of the world and the nightmare surrounding them into the darkest corners of the night. She wondered where they’d be now. What twists and turns would their love affair have taken if that one night had been different?

What if Roy hadn’t called her?
What if she hadn’t gone?
What if she hadn’t been so certain that Cole had been there, pistol in hand?

Roy’s throat had been slit, no bullet in his body, and yet she’d been shot from a handgun as yet unlocated.

“…so I’m hoping to move out of the dive as soon as I get back on my feet again,” he was saying, his blue eyes fixed on her in a way that made her shift in her chair.

“And move where?”

“Does it matter?”

“Maybe.” She smiled up at him and knew she was flirting. Don’t do this, Eve. Don’t be suckered in…. It’s too soon. Too many horrible, unexplained things are still happening.

He winked at her, and she melted inside. “We’ll see.”

They lingered over coffee and split a dessert of espresso-flavored crème brûlée and pralines.

He paid for the meal with cash. Then they walked into the balmy night. Cole linked his fingers with hers as they crossed the street. “So, what do ya think?” he asked, heading toward his Jeep.

“About what?”

“Everything that’s going on.”

“Do we have to think about it?” she asked, hating the lighthearted spirit of the night to end.

“We don’t have much choice,” he said, and the words were barely out of his mouth when her cell phone rang. She looked at the caller-ID screen and didn’t bother answering it. “Television station,” she said, groaning. “I don’t want to talk to them.”

“Then don’t.”

He unlocked the door, and, just before she slid into the passenger side, she felt a little tremor in the air, as if someone were staring at her, sending her bad vibes. She paused and glanced down the street.

“What?” Cole twisted his head, picking up her unease. “You see something?”

Shaking her head, she said, “No. Just a weird day. Too many awful things going on.”

He slammed the door shut, and she kept her eyes on the sideview mirror, observing the sidewalk illuminated by streetlights.

She heard the clop-clop of hooves as a mule-drawn carriage creaked by.
A shadow appeared in the mirror.

Eve froze.

A tall, dark figure stepped out of the gloom for an instant.

She twisted in her seat, but as she stared at the circle of light from the streetlamp, a van rolled across the intersection, blocking her line of vision for second. In that heartbeat, the shadowy figure disappeared. She saw nothing.

“Something is wrong,” Cole said tensely as he slid into the Jeep.

“I thought I saw someone staring at me, but I could be wrong.”

“Let’s check it out.”

He pulled out of the parking lot, negotiated a U-turn, then drove through the narrow streets, where knots of people strolled amid slow-moving traffic. Eve’s eyes scanned each intersection, alley, and street, but no one seemed out of place.

“I guess I was imagining it.”

“I doubt it.” Cole turned down a side street. “You’re not prone to invention and paranoia.”

“Except at Roy’s cabin?” she asked.

He tensed as he nosed his Jeep around a corner. “You have to trust that I would never do anything to hurt you, Eve. Not that night. Not ever.”

“So I just imagined you there.” It was a statement of fact, not a question.

He slid her a glance and touched her leg as he shifted. “It was a strange night.”

“Can’t argue with that,” she said, still unsettled.

Her cell phone rang again, and she checked the display. This time caller ID indicated only that the call was restricted. “Maybe the reporter’s cell,” she said and turned the phone off. “Whatever it is, I’m not dealing with it now.”

But the damage was done.

Between the phone calls and Eve’s thinking someone was watching them, they were back where they’d started. The few hours of breaking away from the nightmare were over, and the real world had intruded once again.

In silence, Cole headed to the Garden District, a place Eve had always loved. Tall, ornate houses and gardens were tended and well kept, the history of each building as lush as the surrounding grounds.

But tonight she noticed the vaults and headstones of a cemetery as they passed. In the dark the tombs seemed ominous, a reminder of the death that was stalking the city. As they turned onto St. Charles Avenue, even the castelike universities of Loyola and Tulane appeared sinister and dark, malevolent fortresses that could surely house evil.

Stop it, she told herself. Hadn’t Cole just said she wasn’t prone to paranoia? Although she tried to tamp down the bad feeling that had crept over her, as Cole turned a final corner and Nana’s house came into view, even the familiar sight of the broad front porch, tall, shuttered windows, and curved turret couldn’t temper her unease.

Cole parked near the garage, and as Eve opened the Jeep’s door she spied a shadow dart across the yard. “Samson?” she called as the cat climbed up the back steps and paced on the mat by the door. “How’d you get out?” She picked the cat up with her good hand and held him to her as Cole unlocked the door. “You’re so much trouble,
but I love you anyway.”

“Nice to know,” Cole said, opening the door and letting her step into the mudroom first.

“I was talking to the cat.”

“Oh-huh.”

As if he didn’t like being in the middle of their discussion, Samson wriggled out of her arms, hopped to the floor, and shot through the open door to the kitchen.

“There was a time you said something like that to me,” Cole reminded her.

Her heart clutched, and she had a fleeting memory of riding horses across a flat expanse of field at her father’s house. It was after her father’s trial, after he’d been acquitted of any wrongdoing. It was a glorious spring day, just before sunset. She and Cole had bet on whose horse was faster then raced back toward the barn. She’d been on the swifter little mare, but Cole had convinced his horse to jump a downed tree and somehow ended up at the barn a stride ahead of her. Still breathless, he’d claimed victory. She’d accused him of cheating, and he’d climbed off his horse, pulled her from the mare and, before her booted feet had hit the ground, kissed her so hard she’d scarcely been able to stand.

“It’s time you paid up, Eve, or I might just have to take the winnings out of your hide.”

“Promises, promises,” she laughed, goading him.

“Is that a dare?” Eyes as blue as a west Texas sky had sparked, and beneath a day’s worth of stubble, one side of his mouth had lifted a bit.

“Take it whatever way you want!”

“Dangerous talk, lady.”

“Oh yeah, like you scare me.”

“I should.”

She’d laughed as he’d kissed her again. Hard. And when he’d finally lifted his head, she’d held his face in her hands. “You are so much trouble, Cole Dennis, but, damn it, I love you anyway….”

Now he was staring at her with those same blue eyes, the same laser-sharp intensity that caused her stupid heart to pound. She tried to talk, but for a second her voice refused to work, and she had to clear her throat. “Let’s just not go there, not tonight.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“I love you, Eve.”

There it was. Hanging in the air between them, and all flirtatiousness, all signs of playfulness that had been with them through the night, were suddenly dispelled. Here, in this dimly lit room off the porch, Cole Dennis had bared his soul, and as she looked into his face, she saw that he was raw. Naked. His feelings exposed.

She swallowed back an impulse to blurt out her own feelings.

Cole’s jaw was working, his hands at his sides. He was waiting for her to respond. To say what was lodged so deeply in her heart.

*Tell him. Tell him you love him, that you’ve always loved him, that you’ve known all along that he couldn’t have*
raised a gun at you. That you were wrong. That you are sorry for all the pain you caused him. Tell him, Eve.

The words stuck in her throat. How long had she ached to hear that he still loved her?

“We should be careful,” she said, her own words rushing through her head. You love him. You do. Tell him. For God’s sake, Eve, don’t blow this!

She had loved him. There was no use denying what was so patently obvious. There was a chance she still loved him, had never really stopped.

He touched her on the side of the face. “Take your time, Eve,” he said, and she had to fight not to fall against him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

His finger slid along the side of her throat then lower, hooking on the neckline of her blouse, his skin warm against hers. Leaning forward, his lips a hair’s breadth over hers, he whispered, “I’ll wait.”

Oh dear God.

Tears, unbidden, touched the back of her eyes, but she refused to cry in front of him. Would not break down. Her skin tingled where he touched her, and she had thoughts of wrapping her arms around his neck and then stripping off his clothes. In her mind’s eye, she saw them together, kissing, touching, sweat-soaked, naked bodies entangled in the sheets of her bed. Would it be so wrong? Would it?

Grabbing his hand, she wrapped her fingers around his. “I think we should take this slow,” she said carefully.

“I’m not sure there’s any ‘slow’ with you.”

“Cole…”

“Stop fighting me,” he said urgently.

Eve gazed at him. She wanted him. She tried hard to remember that she shouldn’t have him, but all she could see was Cole, the man she loved. “Okay,” she said on a shaky laugh.

Her sudden capitulation surprised and delighted him. He kissed her hard then grinned. “I’ll go get my things. Meet you upstairs.”

She turned and nearly ran through the kitchen, along the hall, and up the stairs, the cat following close behind. Was she crazy? Out of her mind? All she could think about was making love to him. Should she strip and lie naked in the bed?

Or put on a sexy piece of lingerie? Dear God, did she even own a teddy or flimsy nightgown? Surely she had something…. Not that he would care.

Samson shot ahead of her, bounding up the final flight to her turret room. Downstairs, she heard Cole reenter the house. She’d have to work fast if she wanted to surprise him with a sexy piece of lingerie.

This was nuts! But wonderful.

She was up the remaining flight in an instant. Heart pounding, gasping for breath, she pushed open the door to her bedroom, crossed the dark room, and snapped on the bedside lamp.

Then she saw the doll.

In the wash of warm light, Charlotte was posed in the same position as she had been at the old hospital: facedown, half dressed, red slashes marring her stuffed body, lying in the middle of Eve’s bed.

But this time there was blood everywhere. And there was a message in blood on the wall. For her.
A strangled scream ripped from her throat. Loud and long, it echoed her terror through the house.
The scream ricocheted down the stairs.

Eve!

Cole dropped his bag, bolted through the house, and took the steps two at a time, nearly tripping on the damned cat that was streaking down as he ran up. He reached the turret room just as Eve was backing out of it. Her hands covered her mouth. She turned to face him, her eyes round with terror. Without thinking, he grabbed her, held her tight, and peered into the room.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” she moaned. Then he noticed it, the words scrawled in blood on the wall near the baseboard: DENNIS SINNED. In block letters, bold and dripping. His stomach clenched, and revulsion forced him to step back as he recognized the mutilated doll and what appeared to be blood drenching the bed and dripping onto the floor. Bile burned up his throat.

He couldn’t pull Eve down the stairs fast enough.

“How?” she whispered. “Who?” She was trembling in his arms. “Why would anyone…”

“Someone who’s seriously deranged,” he said.

Dennis sinned.

Someone knew.

“Come on.” He hustled her into the kitchen then handed her a butcher knife. “I don’t think anyone’s still here, but I’m going to check. Where’s the gun, the one you pointed at me?”

“The revolver…Uh, I put it back in my grandfather’s desk in the den,” she said vaguely. Then, with more awareness, “But it’s not loaded. I don’t think we have any bullets.”

“That’s probably a good thing. What about a rifle or shotgun?”

“No. Nana sold them a long time ago.”

So all he had to worry about was whatever weapon the psycho brought with him. If the madman was still around. “Okay. Now”—he grabbed the handheld receiver, quickly dialed 911, then handed the phone to Eve—“have them send someone out and have them locate either Montoya or Bentz. Can you do that?”

She nodded, but he wasn’t convinced.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” She held the phone in one hand, still clutching the butcher knife in the other.

“I’ll search this floor first then go upstairs.”
“I’m coming with you,” she said.

“No, Eve, stay here and—”

“This is Eve Renner,” she said into the phone, then rattled off her address, begging Cole with her eyes to stay put until she was finished. “I’d like to report a… a break-in…. No, I don’t know if anything was taken, but the person left me a sick message of some kind, a doll soaked in blood and… and…” She glanced up at Cole but couldn’t force the words of the damming message over her tongue. “Please have Detective Montoya or Bentz call me…. Yes… No, I’ll wait here…. No, I’m not alone. I’ll be safe.” She hung up, and, clutching Cole’s hand in one of hers and the knife in the other, joined him in searching the main floor. Nothing was out of place. With trepidation they mounted the steps to the second floor, but it too was empty. Undisturbed. The unloaded revolver was where Eve had hidden it in the desk drawer.

Only the turret bedroom had been bloodied and scarred.

Cole’s thoughts raced. What kind of fiend was hell-bent on frightening Eve? On using his name? With mind-chilling certainty, Cole realized these murders were more than a killer looking for prey. Whoever was behind this had a fixation with Eve. She was his ultimate target. Someone wanted to terrorize her. And they didn’t like him being close to her…. Why else write his name in blood, for Christ’s sake? All the murders, starting with Roy Kajak’s, were because of this madman’s fascination and ultimate need to control the woman Cole loved.

And that scared him to death.

Eve was still staring at the bed as he propelled her into the closet. “Pack a bag. We’re not staying here tonight. There was no forced entry, Eve,” he added as he found an overnight bag and handed it to her. “Someone has a key to your place.”

“No one does,” she argued, opening an overnight case.

“Wrong. I have a key, remember?” Cole pointed out. “You gave it to me when we were talking about marriage.”

She nodded.

“Does one of your neighbors have one too? To check on the place when you’re out of town? What about your brothers? You never changed the locks when you moved in, did you?”

“No, it was Nana’s house.”

“And who did Nana trust with her keys? A housekeeper? Maybe a gardener? Her best friend?” He pulled a couple of shirts off hangers and dropped them into the open overnight case.

“I don’t know.”

“Exactly. Come on. Pack. The police won’t like it that we were messing around in here, but they can just deal.”

She glanced at the bed one last time then tossed in underwear, a pair of jeans, and two pullovers. “This is insane,” she whispered under her breath, and he agreed as they headed to the bathroom, where she scooped up a makeup kit.

Cole grabbed Eve’s laptop on the way out, and they were heading out the door when they heard the first sirens screaming in the distance.

For the first time in a long, long while, Cole Dennis felt relief that the police were on their way.

Montoya snapped his cell phone shut then clicked off the television. “Gotta go,” he told Abby as he found his wallet, sidearm, and badge.

“Where?”
“Trouble at Eve Renner’s.”

Abby’s head jerked up. “Is she all right?”

“I think so, but I’m not sure.” He scooped up his keys. “Doesn’t sound like anyone’s seriously hurt. I’ll find out when I get there.”

“I’m coming with you,” she declared as she grabbed her purse.

“No way in hell. This is police business.”

“And she might be my sister.”

‘Might’ being the operative word.” He was already halfway to the door. “I don’t know what’s going on over there, but you’re not coming with me.” He shot her a stern look, his dark eyes serious.

“You can’t stop me.”

“Sure I can. Don’t interfere, Abs.”

“I’m coming, damn it.”

“Oh for the love of God, I don’t have time for this. Stay. I’ll call you.”

She looked like she wanted to fight further but just gestured for him to go.

Montoya flew out the door, and Hershey whined after him.

“I know,” Abby told the dog determinedly as she petted the animal’s broad head. “Don’t worry. We’re going too, just not with him.”

She waited until Montoya had roared off. Once his taillights had disappeared around the corner three blocks away, she whistled to Hershey and headed outside. As Hershey bounded onto the porch, she locked the door behind her and cut across the grass to her Honda. “Come on,” she said, unlocking the hatchback.

The dog jumped into the backseat, and Abby sped away. She knew that Eve lived in the Garden District, and in a matter of minutes she was driving along St. Charles Avenue, then cutting past stately old manors until she saw the flashing lights of police cars in front of a grand Victorian complete with turret. Reuben’s Mustang was double-parked nearby. This had to be it. Curious neighbors wearing pajamas, or shorts and T-shirts, had already wandered onto their porches or huddled together on the curb. Somewhere down the street a dog barked, and Hershey gave up an answering woof.

“Shh. Be good,” Abby warned. “I’m gonna be in enough trouble as it is.”

She parked a block away. Then, leaving the windows cracked, she locked the car and jogged to the Renner house. There were people clustered around outside. One officer was roping off the area, another taking names of anyone who tried to cross. A van with crime-scene techs had arrived, and just turning down the street was the first news van on the scene.

Abby approached from behind the garage, away from the porch, where Montoya was talking with Bentz, Cole Dennis, and Eve Renner, who stood surprisingly close to the man she’d once accused of trying to kill her. Abby had seen pictures of Eve, of course, and had even jokingly said to her sister, Zoey, that Eve could have been a member of their family, but it had been a passing thought. She’d also seen pictures of Eve in the newspapers and in sound bites on the television when Roy Kajak’s murder had been front-page news, but not until now, seeing Eve in the glow of the porch light, watching her talk with Montoya, did she get it. In the semi-dark, Eve looked so much like Faith Chastain it was downright spooky.

She must’ve been blind not to see it earlier.
Before Montoya looked her way, she pulled her cell phone from a pocket of her purse and speed-dialed her sister in Seattle.

Zoey answered on the third ring. “Hey, hi!” she said, recognizing Abby’s number. “What’s up?”

“I’m at a crime scene, and I’m looking at her now.”

“Crime scene?”

“I think everything’s cool. I don’t know what’s happened yet, but I’ll let you know when I find out.”

“Like I would care? Wait a sec. Who are you looking at?”

“Eve Renner, and I gotta tell you, Zoey, if Eve isn’t our sister, she should be. She’s the spitting image of Mom.”

“I thought that was your claim to fame. Everyone used to say you looked so much like her it was eerie. You were crowned with that particular honor.”

Abby was still staring at Eve. “I think I just lost my tiara.”

“Really?”

“A definite resemblance, Zoey. Definite.”

“But no DNA test results back, right?”

“Not yet.”

“If she is our sister, this is going to be really, really weird. Does Dad know yet?”

Abby thought of her father, Jacques, wasting away in an assisted-care facility, battling cancer and emphysema, and Charlene, his second wife, who was a basket case from trying and failing to care for her once-robust husband. “I don’t think we should tell him until we know for sure. Same with Charlene. She’ll spin out of control and could end up in the care facility with him.”

Zoey snorted. “It’ll never happen. But agreed. Let’s keep this to ourselves until the DNA comes back.” There was a pause. “So…does this woman—Eve?—does she look anything like Dad?”

Abby studied Eve’s features—high cheekbones, small, straight nose, short, curly reddish hair. Then she imagined her father’s face and build. “No,” she said with a certainty that made her stomach twist. “Not a thing.”

“Dear God,” Zoey whispered. “You don’t think…I mean, is there a chance that she could have been fathered by him?”

Abby shivered, her mind winding down a dark chasm of memories. Faith Chastain had not been faithful to their father, either by design, because of her frail mind, or because she was forced to do abominable acts while a patient at Our Lady of Virtues. No one knew for certain what abuse she had suffered.

“Let’s not go there,” Abby said into the phone.

“But what if she’s our half sister and that sick, twisted psycho is her father. What then?”

“Zoey! Shhh! Let’s not borrow trouble!”

“Okay, fine. Then you tell her she’s the daughter of a psychotic killer.”

“We don’t know that for sure.”

“Well, brace yourself. I have a feeling our odd little dysfunctional family is about to get a helluva lot odder and, if
possible, even more dysfunctional.”

“I think I’m going to talk to her.”

“Go for it. And while you’re there, give my love to Sis, would ya?”

Abby ignored Zoey’s sarcasm as she hung up. It was now or never. Too bad it was a crime scene. She had to know. Had to. Steeling herself, she walked up boldly and found Montoya still talking to Eve and the man next to her, a man Abby had caught glimpses of on newscasts and in the local paper, the “scumbag” Montoya had tried like hell to convict for Royal Kajak’s murder. Abby knew all about Cole Dennis. At least all the bad stuff.

Montoya must’ve seen her in his peripheral vision because he turned suddenly and, if looks could actually kill, Abby would have been six feet under from that one, black glare. “Excuse me,” she said boldly and stuck out her hand. “You must be Eve Renner. I’m Abby Chastain.”

The Reviver watched from the shadows.

As close as he dared.

The police were filming; he saw their cameras clicking off pictures of anyone who stepped a little too close to the crime scene. He had to be careful. There were still traces of blood on his clothes and in his truck. He couldn’t risk getting caught. Not when there was more work to do.

He saw her in the porch light.

Small, beautiful, standing close to Cole Dennis as another woman approached, someone he couldn’t recognize, as her back was to him. But it didn’t matter. All he cared about was Eve.

Only Eve.

His back teeth ground together as he saw her shake the woman’s hand then familiarly touch Dennis’s arm and whisper in his ear. Dennis responded by placing a comforting arm over her shoulder and pulling her even closer against him.

His insides twisted at the display of affection.

In front of the cop.

In front of him.

In front of God.

He waited, half expecting the Voice to come to him, to note the blasphemy, to instruct the Reviver on how to deal with the situation. Please, he silently begged. *Let me kill him first and then Eve...when the time is right.*

He didn’t dare pray for a few minutes alone with her, for the time to do what he wanted with her, to force her to kiss him, stroke him, lick him as he suspected she licked Cole Dennis. Oh, he’d known they were rutting, had seen the light in the tower room and smelled the scent of their dirty, vile sex. It had floated to him on a breeze, over the fragrances of freshly mown grass and magnolia blossoms. He imagined how it was between them and let his mind wander.

It was Dennis who tempted her.

Dennis who enticed her into sinning.

Dennis who tore off her clothes, exposing those perfect breasts with nipples that needed to be suckled. Dennis who brazenly poked and prodded her sex, burying his face in the dark curls at the juncture of her legs. Dennis who
tasted her, nipped at her, bit her, then mounted her roughly, driving hard into her until she gasped in fear and revulsion, joining with her in a frenzied passion spawned by Lucifer, one that she no doubt regretted and feared.

The act was not only a rape of her body but a rape of her soul.

God would never have blessed so base a union.

Because of Dennis, Eve was a jezebel. A whore. A slut. There was no love in their sex act, only lust.

With the Reviver, the lovemaking would be pure. Ordained by God. A way of salvation for Eve before she paid the ultimate price for her sins and faced the Father herself.

_Give her to me_, he thought wildly, for the moment forgetting that he was close to the crime scene, that he was taking a chance by lingering. _Please, please, please, give her to me. Tonight. Oh, it had to be soon!_ The Reviver ached for her so badly. His cock was rock hard as he just stared down the road and fantasized about her body…. If God would only talk to him now!

But the Voice only reached him when he was in his cabin, lying upon his bed, thinking of Eve. No other time did any of the voices fill his mind. Even the little nasty voices; they came to him only at night, interrupting his sleep, gnawing at his brain. So God wouldn’t answer him now. And yet he prayed. _Please, Father_, he silently begged, _making a quick sign of the cross over his chest. Speak to me, tell me what You want. I am Your servant, and I want to do Your bidding, but I need to know what it is You want of me—_

“Hey, ya got a light?” a voice boomed beside him, and he jumped, looking up sharply to find a man standing next to him. So caught up in his fantasy and prayers, he hadn’t heard anyone approach.

His heart pounded and instant sweat soaked his body as he tried to find his voice. He willed his cock to relax. The man, a Latino who looked to be in his midthirties, a cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, didn’t appear to notice as he waited for a response.

_The blood! This idiot of a neighbor will notice the blood! Leave, now!_”

Shaking his head, the Reviver backed away. He could not be seen. Did not want to use his voice.

“I wonder what went on down there?” the guy said, then turned to another man who was walking quickly toward them.

The Reviver nearly pissed his pants as he realized the person approaching was a cop. In full uniform. Staring straight at him and the Latino neighbor. Big, black, and bold, the policeman approached.

“Hey, gotta light, man?” the stupid neighbor asked the uniform.

Quick as lightning, before the cop could get a good look at his face, the Reviver ducked through a hedge then moved swiftly across a shadowed lawn. He didn’t check to see if either man was following him, the cop or the would-be smoker. He just moved rapidly and quietly, circumventing the Renner house, cutting through yards and alleys, winding his way to the parking lot of a restaurant where he’d left his truck.

He was breathing hard as he reached the edge of the lot, nervous sweat nearly drowning him. He smelled the metallic odor of blood on his clothes and mentally chided himself for being so reckless.

He cast a glance over his shoulder and saw a movement in the shrubbery skirting the lot. The cop, athletic as hell, was on his tail.

_No!_ He hadn’t come this far to lose it all.

He sprinted to his truck and heard a sharp “Hey!” as he climbed behind the wheel and reached under the seat for his Glock.
It was too late to bluff his way out of this one; the cop would probably get his license plate if he tried. He rolled down the window, and, as the cop approached, he looked outside, his hand on his gun. Easily he clicked off the safety. “Is there a problem, Officer?” he said through the open window.

“Just get out of the truck. Real slow.” The cop’s sidearm was drawn, barrel aimed at the open window. He had a microphone strapped to his shoulder, and his nametag read Officer L. J. Tiggs. It was only a matter of seconds before Tiggs would call for backup, if he hadn’t already. “And show me your hands,” the policeman ordered, his tone brooking no argument. “Keep ’em up. High.”

The Reviver moved as if he planned to do as he was ordered. In a millisecond he raised his left hand then jerked up his right arm and fired point-blank at Tiggs.

_Blam!_

The cop went down in a heap.
“Excuse me, you must be Eve Renner. I’m Abby Chastain.” Eve, standing next to Cole, turned her head to spy an athletic-looking woman somewhere in her thirties approaching, hand extended.

So this is the woman who might be my sister, the woman who’s engaged to Detective Montoya, Eve thought, trying to shake off the absolute terror that wanted to keep her in its sharp talons.

“Nice to meet you,” she said lamely, as nothing else came to mind. They shook hands, and the movement reminded her that her arm was still in a sling.

The woman, Abby, was beautiful, and yes, Eve thought, there might be a resemblance. She couldn’t help staring then quickly dropped her hand and forced her gaze back to Montoya, who was glaring at his fiancée as if he wanted to wring her neck.

“This is a crime scene,” he said to her.

“I know, but I wanted to meet Eve.” Abby managed a cool smile for Montoya. Then her gaze returned to Eve. “I know there’s a chance that we might be related…sisters. I knew it would be awkward, so I wanted to break the ice.”

“In the middle of an investigation,” Montoya reminded her through lips that barely moved.

“I got it,” she said. “You want me to leave.” To Eve, she added, “I’ve got to go, but if you ever want to talk to me, have coffee or a glass of wine, just give me a call.” She reached into her purse, grabbed her wallet, and slid out a card. “This has my business and cell number on it.”

“Thanks,” Eve said.

Montoya was seething, his jaw rigid as steel.

Abby blew him a kiss. “See ya later, honey.” And then she was gone, walking swiftly up the street.

Muttering oaths about hardheaded women under his breath, Montoya watched her leave, his gaze lingering for half a beat on her butt. “Sorry,” he said. “I guess we were about done anyway.”

“So we can go now?” Cole, too, was watching Abby leave. But he drew his gaze back to Montoya. “Eve’s not staying here another night. Not until the locks are changed.”

“Good idea,” Montoya said grudgingly. “Let me know if you can think of anyone who might have written that note, someone who’s out to get you.”

Cole didn’t flinch.

Montoya guessed the jerk was thinking his biggest enemies were on the force. Well, truth to tell, Cole Dennis probably wasn’t too far off base.

“I’ll call if I think of anything.”
Yeah, right, Montoya thought, checking his watch. Where the hell was Bentz? When the call to the Renner place came in, Montoya phoned him first, and Bentz said he was on his way. If that son of a bitch was taking time to get himself laid as Montoya had suggested, he’d wring the guy’s thick neck himself. But then, that wasn’t like Bentz. Reaching for his cell phone again—

*Pop!*

Montoya stiffened. He motioned to another officer standing by the porch. “Was that a gunshot?”

“I think so.”

Cole, walking toward his Jeep, whipped around, facing the direction from which the sharp report had come.

*Pop!*

“Shit!” Montoya grabbed for his weapon, knowing that something bad had just gone down. He met the prick lawyer’s gaze. “Yeah, go. You can leave. For now.” And then he was on the move, reaching for his radio, talking in short bursts. “Detective Reuben Montoya,” he said, giving his badge number. “Gunshots. Somewhere off St. Charles.” He rattled off Eve’s address. “I don’t know…checking now. Send backup!”

“Where’s Tiggs?” one of the uniformed cops asked.

“He was going to talk to the neighbors….” Montoya’s eyes moved up the street, where he’d seen Tiggs heading less than ten minutes earlier. All of the neighbors were looking toward the sound of the gunshots, but there was no evidence of a uniform among them.

*Fuck!*

He jogged to his car. His radio crackled, and the dispatcher’s voice confirmed what he’d already feared. “Officer down!”

Yelling at a patrolman to secure the scene, Montoya listened as the dispatcher spat out the address of the shooting.

Less than three blocks away in a restaurant parking lot.

Jesus Christ, this was getting worse by the second.

He was shaking inside.

Worried.

His guts twisting, mind in a panic, he drove out of the city limits, always checking his rearview mirror, never completely certain he wasn’t being followed. He charged out in the wrong direction, doubled back, then did the same thing again, crossing the river four times before he finally headed in the right direction and the lights of New Orleans faded. On the outskirts of the city, the traffic thinned. But only when he was on the two-lane road, winding through the woods and swamps with no bright headlights glaring in his mirrors, did he draw a relieved breath. Twice he encountered the red glimmers of taillights ahead of him when the road straightened, but he slowed until they vanished from sight.

By the time he reached the lane to his private retreat, he was alone, his heart rate having slowed to normal. But the smell of blood reached his nostrils. He’d disobeyed.

Never had God told him to kill a cop.

Never.

He blinked rapidly, hoping all was not lost. Surely the Voice would come to him tonight, to reassure him he’d
only done what was necessary; that still he would be deified.

I will do anything. ANYthing.

As he parked his truck, the series of pitfalls, of mistakes, came back in quicksilver images: Eve at the house with Cole Dennis; his own private fantasy that had clouded his judgment; the cop approaching and the ensuing chase through the neighborhood.

He’d had no choice. He’d had to shoot. Even though it was not part of the mission, even though the Voice had not told him to take the cop’s life.

But it hadn’t ended with that one shot.

As he’d gone down, somehow Tiggs had fired.

The Reviver had flinched.

The bullet had gone wild, ricocheting off the hood of his truck.

Adrenaline fueling him, the Reviver had rammed his pickup into gear and tromped on the accelerator. Burning rubber, his truck had screamed out of the lot.

Heart hammering, blood pumping, fear shooting through his veins, the Reviver had hazarded a quick glance in his rearview mirror.

Tiggs had lain still, not moving, bleeding onto the asphalt. Dying. People began streaming from the restaurant into the lot. Shouting. Pointing fingers. One son of a bitch had even run for his car to give chase. Someone else had fallen to Tiggs’s side in a vain attempt to save him.

Too late, the Reviver had thought, driving out of sight, losing the would-be hero and knowing the cop’s fate.

Tiggs was one victim who would never be revived.

Now he walked briskly through the surrounding woods, ignoring the taunt of an owl hooting from a nearby tree, taking no heed of the whir of bats’ wings as he unlocked the cabin’s door and entered the dark, welcoming interior.

He would shower.

Wash away the blood.

And then he would fall to his knees in front of the cold grate, and he would pray.

For guidance.

For strength.

And ultimately, for forgiveness.

Bentz stared at the woman sitting across from him in his office. Her name was Ellen Chaney. She was black, slightly plump, pushing fifty, and she’d come in because of what she’d heard on the news.

Dispatch had called him, ruining his dinner date with Olivia. He’d hated to cut the evening short, but fortunately his wife, who had been through her own share of terror, had understood.

So he’d met with Chaney at the station, where a few detectives were working at their desks. Compared to the noise of the day shift, the place was quiet.

“So you came in because of the press conference?”
“Yes.” She nodded, her dark eyes troubled. “I was a nurse at Our Lady of Virtues,” she said, twisting her wedding ring nervously. “For a while. It…well, it depressed me.” She looked away from him into the middle distance. “Some of what went on was just plain wrong and…I should have reported it to someone. The medical board, the state, even the Archdiocese, but I didn’t. I just did my job, and when an opportunity to move on came along, I was all over it.”

Bentz listened, his small recorder taping the conversation.

“I thought it was all behind me. Especially during your investigation last fall, when that other serial killer was on the loose. So much came out, and I read about it, feeling as if I was finally free, but then”—she was working the ring so hard, it was nearly cutting into her flesh—“then all this started up again, and there’s talk about Faith Chastain. I figured that when her body was exhumed, someone would notice that she’d had a C-section.”

Bentz hid his sharpened interest, let the woman run with her story. The information about Faith Chastain’s surgery had been kept away from the press for a reason. Only those close to her or to the hospital would know of another baby.

“And…”

“And she had a baby. I was there. The attending nurse. Dr. Renner delivered the baby himself.”

“He was a surgeon?” Bentz asked, surprised.

“A psychiatrist. A medical doctor. He’d done surgical rounds in med school. At least that’s what they told us.”

“Why not call in an ob-gyn?”

Chaney looked at her hands. “They were worried about a scandal.”

“Who was?”

“Hospital administration and the Reverend Mother. The baby, it wasn’t Faith’s husband’s.”

“How did they know?”

“Because there was over a year where they didn’t see each other at all.”

Bentz wasn’t sure how much to buy, but the woman had enough facts to make her story believable. He just couldn’t separate fact from fiction. She seemed truly rueful, her face tortured, the cross dangling from her neck testament to her faith. And yet…

“So, who was the father?”

“I don’t know.”

“Renner?”

“What?” She’d been staring at her ring finger, but her gaze swept up quickly, offense evident on her face. “The doctor? No.”

“What about Dr. Simon Heller?”

“Oh, no…I mean, I don’t know. There was talk that he, um, was caught with a patient, but nothing ever bore out. But I really don’t know whom it could have been. All I know is that the baby was stillborn. A boy. Faith named him Adam.”

“Dead?” Bentz said, surprised.

“Yes.”
"You saw him? This male child?"

She nodded gravely. "He wasn’t breathing, and…and Faith was beside herself. The doctor sedated her, and then they shuffled me out of the room."

Bentz eyed the woman, watching as she avoided his eyes. Telling the truth? Maybe…just not all of it. And if what she was saying was true, then Eve Renner was not Faith Chastain’s missing child. The acid in his stomach started to roil. He’d chosen to meet with her instead of joining Montoya at Eve Renner’s house because he’d thought maybe they were going to catch a break with Ellen Chaney. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“What happened to the baby?”

“I told you. He died.”

“I mean the body.”

“Buried in the cemetery. A grave with a blank headstone, as if he hadn’t even existed. The only reason they marked it at all was for Faith, so she would have a place to go to visit. We were all sworn to secrecy.”

“You and the doctor?” he surmised.

“As well as Faith, Sister Rebecca, and Father Paul.”

“Sister Rebecca Renault?” he asked, noting the connection. “The Reverend Mother at Our Lady of Virtues?”

Ellen nodded and bit her lower lip. “I read about what happened to her. I wonder if she might still be alive if only I’d come forward earlier.”

“What about this Father Paul? Is he still alive?”

“I don’t know.”

“How old is he?”

“Um, he was in his late fifties, I’d guess, at that time.”

“What was his last name?”

“Oh…Gosh…I…can’t remember…. A simple name, I think. There were a lot of priests who passed through, you know, and stayed for a few months or a year before they were assigned somewhere else, but Father Paul, he was there a long while.” She massaged her temple, trying to think, like someone rubbing a lamp and hoping for a genie to appear. “It was a common name, I think. Like Smith or Johnson or Brown….I really can’t remember.” She paused, lost in thought.

Bentz was trying to add her information into the total puzzle. Face grim, he didn’t immediately ask another question, and after a silent stretch, Ellen reached for her purse.

“Well, I hope that helps you. I don’t think there’s anything else I can tell you,” she said.

“Just a minute, Mrs. Chaney.” He looked through the pages of notes he’d taken over the course of the past few days. He’d seen the name Paul somewhere. Running a finger down one page, he located one of the names he’d found in Faith Chastain’s file. “How about Father Paul Swanson?”

She hesitated, her hand in midair over her purse. “That’s it, I think.”

He made a mental note to find the priest with all the secrets. “Can you think back to the people who were employed by the hospital at the time of the birth of Faith’s child? Anyone who was a patient? It could help.”

“It’s been nearly thirty years.”
“I know,” he said, offering a tight smile. He felt the clock ticking. He was running extremely late. Montoya was going to be really pissed. “Here’s a partial list. Maybe these names will help jog your memory.” He slid three pages across the desk. On it were the names of the patients whose files Eve claimed to have seen in the attic cabinet. Bentz had added a few more himself, names taken from the notes in Faith Chastain’s folder, including Dr. Terrence Renner and Simon Heller, as well as others he hadn’t recognized, such as Father Paul Swanson.

Ellen Chaney dutifully picked up the papers and skimmed the first page. “Oh. Enid Walcott. She was a sweet little woman, such a sad case, too nervous to sit and eat or do anything, and she was allergic to so many of the meds. Oh, and Neva. She was so lost, in her own world. A severely autistic child.” She flipped over to the second page and stopped short, her expression turning to shock. “Oh no…Dear Lord…” She looked up sharply and dropped the paper onto his desk.

“What?”

She shivered and ran her hand through her hair. “I probably shouldn’t say anything, but this person…” She pointed a long finger at the name of Ronnie Le Mars. “I’ve never in all my life met anyone I thought was born evil. I mean, I believe in Christ our Savior and redemption through prayer and that everyone can be saved, but…but that one, Ronnie, he’d sooner take a knife to your throat than look you in the eye.”

“Whose blood was that?” Eve whispered once they were driving away from the house. “All over the bed. Whose blood was it?”

“I don’t know.” Cole squinted into the night. They’d loaded up his Jeep with the cat, some sleeping bags and pillows, and their personal belongings and left the police still finishing up. Though there was no body, no obvious homicide, the fact that there was so much blood in her room, and the sick message incriminating Cole, had left the police certain that this newest incident was linked to the crime scene at Our Lady of Virtues. They were treating her house as part of the overall homicide investigation.

“He wouldn’t have collected blood from Sister Vivian and then poured it over the doll and the bed, would he?” she asked, the idea so repulsive she could scarcely voice it.

“I don’t know what he’d be capable of.”

She glanced out the window, tried to gain strength in the lights of the city.

From the backseat, trapped in his carrier, Samson started howling.

“Wherever you’re taking us, you’d better get there fast, before Samson drives us both crazy.”

“It’s not far,” he said, and to Eve’s surprise he didn’t drive her to the little camelback bungalow where he’d picked up his clothes hours earlier. However, the apartment he ushered her into wasn’t an improvement. If possible, he’d found a worse place, a one-room fleabag of a studio apartment, with no furniture, that seemed to trap all the heat of the day within its thin walls.

“What is this?” she asked as he threw the sleeping bags on the floor.

“I think of it as a safe house.”

“Hmmm…” She looked around the room. “All it needs is a ten-gallon bucket of Lysol, some paint, new carpeting, appliances, and, oh yeah, furniture. Maybe a few throw pillows and pictures. Then it would be cozy.”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “Would you rather be back at your house?”

An image of the bloodied doll and bed flashed through her mind. “You have a point. This is just as good as a five-star hotel.” She set the cat carrier on the floor and opened the gate. Samson immediately streaked out and began exploring the room. “I guess we’re lucky. We brought our own furry, four-legged pest control with us.”
Cole walked to the window, left it shuttered but flipped a switch on the air-conditioning unit. It rattled to life; she hoped it would bring down the temperature and create some air movement. “The good news about this place is that no one knows about it.”

“Except the landlord.”

“Petrusky won’t say anything,” Cole told her. “He’s got too much to lose.”

“Ahhh. A client.”

He shot her another look then organized the sleeping bags and pillows on the floor. She didn’t want to think about what kind of creatures might have crawled across the stained carpet, nor who might have lived here before Cole took up residence.

“Now, Ms. Renner, if you can find a way to keep your hands off me, we could work.”

“Meaning?”

“We need to find out who’s behind all this, and I’ve decided to treat it like a case. Whenever I had to defend someone against the police department, I made it my business to know as much as they did.”

“Oh yeah?”

He smiled. “There’s always someone willing to talk. For a price.”

“That’s the most jaded piece of cynicism I’ve heard yet. Even from you.”

He let the jab slide. “But it’s true.”

“Wait. Are you telling me you have a leak in the department?” she asked, astounded.

“No just a leak, lady,” he assured her, reaching into a cupboard and coming up with two legal pads and a box of pens. “A goddamned reservoir.”

She was skeptical as she settled onto the makeshift bed and opened the box of Sharpies. “Why haven’t you used this untapped reservoir before?”

He sat down beside her and took up a pen. “I have, but I had to be careful. I was a suspect. I was followed, dogged, tailed, whatever you want to call it. Maybe I was paranoid, but I was certain my phones were tapped, and I didn’t even trust my cell phone. I couldn’t risk getting any of my sources into major trouble, so I’ve laid low.”

“And now?”

“Montoya and Bentz would love to nail my ass, but neither one of them is a moron, and now it’s blatantly evident I’m not behind any of the murders. Including Roy’s.”

She was about to ask who this source was, but mention of Roy’s name brought her up short. She felt a click inside her head, truly felt it, as if something had just unlocked in her brain.

Memories of that night suddenly flooded her mind. She recalled making love to Cole, the fight, her race down the stairs as he, behind her, was pulling on his clothes. He’d tried to stop her, but she wouldn’t hear of it, and when she’d arrived at the cabin she found Roy already dead, blood everywhere, the horrid number written in blood on the wall and, in the glass, pointing a gun at her…no…not at her…but close, as if he were aiming above her shoulder…

She blinked, and the image became sharper. Clearer. More defined.

“Cole,” she whispered now, aloud.

Her heart raced as pieces of her memory forged and melded only to shatter again. But she had a glimpse, a very
real glimpse, of what had happened that night.

“What?” he asked, but she was lost to the memory.

It was Cole’s face showing in the darkness, the barrel of his gun steady. “Don’t!” she’d yelled. But the weapon fired, a white flash as glass shattered and searing pain had exploded in her shoulder and head.

“Eve!” he’d screamed. The world had spun crazily. She’d fallen, her eyes fixed on him, her mind screaming, NO, NO, NO! He was so close and yet so far away…. And the knife…There’d been a wicked knife. Blood dripping onto the floor. Cole had been carrying a knife…. No! The knife wasn’t in Cole’s hand…. Someone else’s. Whose?

The blackness had come at her from the outside in, eating at her consciousness. Within seconds she’d passed out.

Now she stared at Cole with new eyes. Shaking, her guts clenching painfully, she saw that he knew. His blue eyes registered pain and regret. He knew. And he’d known all along. For the past three months, and yet he’d kept his secrets. Lied to protect himself.

“You were there,” she whispered in a low, rasping voice. “You lying son of a bitch, you were there!”

He didn’t argue. Didn’t have to.

“But we weren’t alone. There was someone else in the room. Roy’s killer.” She swallowed hard, the events of the night coming into focus, sharpening, the fog dissipating. “You were trying to shoot him,” she realized. “But you hit me. And then lied about it. Why, Cole? What is it you know? What are you hiding?”
Cole gazed at the woman he loved. It was time to give up the fight.

“I was there,” he admitted for the first time to anyone. He hated the look of horrified betrayal on Eve’s face, but he pressed on. “There was just something wrong about everything that happened that night. I knew where you were going, and, because I’d lived in the area, I figured I could beat you and find out what Kajak wanted, what this ‘evidence’ was. But Roy was already dead by the time I got there.”

“You were there…ahead of me.”

“I panicked. Okay, I admit it. I didn’t have my cell, couldn’t call the police, and then I saw you walking inside and I smelled a trap. I figured someone had coerced Roy into calling for you to come and meet him.

“Before I could call out to you, I saw him at the window. I fired, and you’re right, I accidentally hit you. You saw everything I did in a mirror, not the window.”

“And you left me there,” she whispered.

“No, I stayed with you. That’s why I didn’t catch the guy. I called nine-one-one from your phone and stuck it out until they got there, but then, yeah, I took off. As the officer came in through the front door, I slipped out the back. It was a lone trooper, and by the time he called for backup, I was outside. I waited until the ambulance got there a couple of minutes later. Then I took off.”

“I could have died. I—who is he?”

“I didn’t get a good look. He was gone in an instant. I couldn’t leave you.” He tried to touch her, but she recoiled.

“You could have sent the police after the killer!”

“It wasn’t going to work that way. They would never believe me. I was right there. I was jealous of Roy’s relationship with you. Motive and opportunity.”

“You should have stayed,” she said, hysteria edging her voice. “Let justice run its course.”

“And tell the police about the missing ‘real’ killer? The one I didn’t get a good look at? Like Dr. Richard Kimble in The Fugitive? Always looking for the damned one-armed man.” He grabbed her arm, and when she tried to pull away, he held on tighter. “Okay, maybe I should have stayed. Fought the charges like a man. Ignored the fact that the New Orleans PD had been gunning for me for years. But I thought I could figure it out for myself.”

“Like Kimble,” she said bitterly. “Now you’re pleading both sides of the argument.” She shook him off. “I told myself over and over, don’t believe him, he’s a liar, don’t go with him, and for God’s sake don’t fall in love with him all over again!” She climbed to her feet, and when he tried to step forward and touch her again, she pointed a finger at his nose. “Don’t! Just…don’t! Not ever again! As soon as this is over, you and I will never speak again. Never!”

“Eve…”
“But we’re stuck with each other for now,” she said, her voice quivering.

He saw it in her eyes, the angry, disgusted resolve that stiffened her backbone and flushed her cheeks. God, she was beautiful. Enraged or sleeping soundly, scared out of her mind or teasingly playful, she was the only woman who had ever turned him inside out. And she was right. He’d failed her miserably.

“Think about the last few days—”

“You mean since you got out of prison? Those days?” she demanded.

“Everything I’ve done has been to prove to you how much you mean to me. I want to find out the truth as much as, maybe more than, you do.”

“By making me look like a liar to the DA? By denying the truth and having people, even myself, suspect that I might be crazy? That’s what you did to show me how much I mean to you. Everyone else was right about you, Cole, and I was wrong. You’re just a slick attorney who will turn the truth around to make it serve his own purpose. Worse yet…worse yet, you’re a lying bastard who only cares about his own damned hide, so just leave me the hell alone!”

She was so mad, she was seething, her breath coming in short gasps, her eyes filled with a dark fury that sliced right to his soul. He wanted to grab her, to hold her down, to promise that he would make things right, that he loved her and would do anything, even die for her, but he knew that she wouldn’t believe a word he said. His fists opened and closed as he stared at her.

“Just think,” he tried again.

“That’s all I’ve done for the last three months. And all the while I was ‘thinking,’ trying to figure out if I was going out of my mind, you knew the truth. You didn’t ‘think’ enough of me to confide in me. So don’t even try to tell me what to do.”

“I love you. That hasn’t changed.”

She looked at him coldly. “Go to hell, Cole. Don’t talk to me about love or feelings or any sort of emotion. That’s over.”

He didn’t call her a liar, though he wanted to, because it wouldn’t change anything. Beneath her fury was pain. He didn’t blame her for that. Maybe she’d never get over it. But for now he wasn’t going to let her out of his sight. Not until this nightmare was over.

“Now we’ve lost a cop!” Montoya raged when Bentz caught up with him at the station the next morning. They were in the kitchen, each grabbing a cup of coffee.

“Last I heard, Tiggs was still hanging on.”

“By a goddamned thread!” Montoya sputtered, running a hand through his hair and swearing again. “We’ve got to bring the bastard in. I was close last night, man, so close!”

“You know what they say—”

“Yeah, I do. Don’t give me any crap about horseshoes and hand grenades!”

“Ouch.” Lynn Zaroster walked in and winced at Montoya’s outburst. “Wrong side of the bed?”

“Is there a good side?” he grumbled.

She shot Bentz an I’m-glad-he’s-your-partner look, then picked through a box of muffins left on the table.
“What’s the occasion?”

“Brinkman’s birthday.”

“So who—?” she motioned to the box.

“Vera, in Missing Persons.” Bentz took a sip, and the coffee nearly scalded his tongue. “Who knows why she does what she does, but help yourself.”

“You think any of them are lite or no-fat?”

Montoya sent her a look that spoke volumes.

She held up one hand to ward off another verbal attack, grabbed a muffin that appeared to be liberally laced with chocolate chips, then hustled down the hallway.

Bentz chose poppy seed. “Don’t blame anyone here. Everyone’s working their asses off on this case.”

“Yeah, tell that to Tiggs.”

“I mean it, Montoya. Cool it.”

“No way. Not until we catch this fucker.”

“Let’s get out of here.” They’d already discussed why Bentz hadn’t shown up at the crime scene and what had gone down at the Renner house.

“Where to?” Montoya poured coffee into a paper cup.

“Our favorite place. Our Lady of Virtues. Already got an excavation crew on call, just in case we need to dig up a grave or two.”

“Great.” Montoya picked up his cup and sloshed hot coffee onto his hand. “Damn it!”

“Looks like you could use a cigarette,” Brinkman observed as he strolled in, reeking of smoke.

“I’m fine.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“You enjoy being a pain in the ass, man?” Montoya demanded.

“Rough night?” Brinkman asked.

“Fuck you.”

“Not my fault that you haven’t been able to catch the Three-Digit Slasher.”

“The what?” Bentz asked.

“That’s what they’re calling him. I heard it on the radio on the way in today.”

“No one knows about the numbers,” Bentz said swiftly.

“They do now.”

“Jesus Christ, what’s with all the leaks!” Montoya was blistering now, as hot as Bentz had ever seen him.

“Your case,” Brinkman pointed out as he strolled in the room. He took his time making his selection then finally
picked up a fat muffin with thick chocolate icing. Licking frosting from his fingers, he added, “You might want to
tell your people to put a lid on it.”

Montoya tensed, and Bentz thought for a second he might throw a punch. Instead, he forced a frigid smile.
“Thanks for the advice, Brinkman, and happy fuckin’ birthday.” To Bentz, he said, “Let’s roll.”

They walked through the department, and Bentz paused at Zaroster’s desk. She was just picking up the phone but
hesitated, lifting her brows at him in a question.

“You’re working on tracking down Ronnie Le Mars?”

“Already got a call in to his parole officer…. Get this. Ronnie was released from prison about five months ago and
kept his nose clean for a while then just disappeared, just quit checking in with the parole officer, and no one’s seen
or heard of him since.”

“He can’t just vanish into thin air,” Montoya muttered.

“But he could’ve left the state.”

“Has to work somewhere. There are records,” Montoya argued.

Zaroster shrugged. “Fake ID or under the radar. Happens all the time.”

Bentz took a bite of his muffin. “So, what about the priest? You workin’ that too?”

“Yeah, but I just started. The Archdiocese is a little touchy these days, but I think they’ll come around. It’ll just
take time.”

“Which we don’t have,” Montoya pointed out.

“I understand.”

Bentz said, “Let me know the minute you get a location on either of them, Le Mars or Swanson.”

“You’ll be the first to know.” Then she cast a glance at Montoya. “Or maybe the second. I’ll flip a coin.”

Bentz tapped on her desk. “Thanks.” Montoya just headed down the stairs.

“I’ll drive,” Bentz said, taking another bite of his muffin before tossing the remains into the trash near the back
steps. Because of the mood Montoya was in, Bentz didn’t plan to get into a car with his partner at the wheel. There
were times when Bentz had ridden white-knuckled while Montoya had lead-footed it down the city streets as if he
were in the damned Daytona 500.

He was surprised that Montoya didn’t fight him for the wheel but didn’t mention it. One less argument. He drove,
and Montoya cracked his window then slid a pack of cigarettes out of an interior pocket of his jacket, lit up, and
offered his pack to Bentz.

He almost gave in but shook his head. He’d been known to break down and have a smoke when a case got tough,
and maybe he would later, but for now he’d stick to gum. Montoya slipped his hard pack of Marlboro Reds into the
inner pocket of his jacket. Finally he said, “That nurse claims Faith had a boy, born dead and buried somewhere at
the convent’s cemetery.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You believe her?”

“She believes her,” Bentz said as he sped around a truck pulling a horse trailer. “I called the convent and talked to
Sister Odine, but she was no help. She didn’t like the thought of equipment up there, digging up graves, but I
convinced her it was necessary if we were ever going to catch Sister Rebecca’s killer.”
“Eve looks like Faith. Abby’s already bought into it after seeing her in person.” Montoya shook his head. “Hell, she’s nearly written Eve’s name down in the family Bible.”

“We should get DNA results soon. I put a rush on it. Then we’ll know at least that part of the story.”

Montoya took a pull on his cigarette. “So, where does that leave us with Eve Renner? If she’s not Faith Chastain’s daughter, why did she get that bundle of newspaper clippings all about Faith and the hospital?”

“Besides the fact that Eve grew up there? Beats me,” Bentz admitted as he switched lanes again, maneuvering for the exit ramp.

“It makes ya wonder,” Montoya said, blowing out a stream of smoke and crushing his cigarette in the ashtray. “Just who the hell is Eve Renner?”

Kristi walked out of the offices of Gulf Auto and Life and felt freer than she had since college. She’d known she wasn’t the type for a sit-on-your-butt, eight-hours-a-day, forty-hours-a-week job, but she’d had to eat and pay rent, and there was no way she was ever going to move home again. No way. Especially now, when she suspected her stepmother might be trying to get pregnant. The last time Kristi had been over to their house, she’d spied the discarded package of a pregnancy test in a wastebasket in the bathroom. Which was just plain weird. To think that she might have a half brother or half sister that would be over twenty-five years younger? She couldn’t imagine.

Besides, technically, the kid wouldn’t be your half brother or half sister. At least not biologically.

She didn’t want to think about it or deal with it, nor had she wanted to be under her father’s thumb or watchful eye when she’d graduated from college, so she’d taken whatever jobs she could find: waitressing, clerking, just about anything steady. Finally, as luck would have it, insurance claims had become her way of life.

But now, thank God, she was done! Never again would she have to listen to someone whine about their deductible!

When Kristi had told her boss this morning that she was leaving, she’d been surprised at her response. “Well, you’ve accumulated nearly two weeks of vacation pay, so why don’t you clean out your desk?” Her boss had smiled falsely, and Kristi guessed maybe Gulf Auto and Life was as glad to see her go as she was to leave.

It was perfect.

She took in a long, deep breath and actually saw this part of the city, the downtown area, with new eyes. She could walk through the aquarium. Situated on the waterfront, it was supposed to be fabulous, and she’d never set foot inside. Now she could go put some money in the slot machines and have a free drink if she wanted, even though it was only ten in the morning. Maybe a mimosa or a Bloody Mary. Wouldn’t her father, the teetotaler, have a hemorrhage if he knew? She smiled to herself. It wasn’t that she didn’t respect her old man. Good Lord, no. He’d done everything he could for her, raising her as a single parent, putting her needs above his. Most of the time. She hadn’t been all that crazy about moving here from LA all those years ago but had finally blended in and now loved this city, couldn’t imagine moving back to California.

She strolled along the sidewalk then up over the levee. The river, wide and dark, moved slowly. In one direction she saw an old paddle-wheeler docked at the Toulouse Street Wharf while tugboats were guiding a large cargo ship through the channel. The sun beat down on her head and glittered off the water while clouds piled on the horizon, moving steadily closer. Yeah, she liked it here, but she discarded any idea of wasting what was left of the day. The sharks and slots could wait. If she was going to make this true-crime-writer aspiration work, she had to get on it, follow this investigation.

She pulled her cell phone from her purse and speed-dialed her contact at the police department.

Today, she thought, the tables were turned.

She was the one checking up on dear old Dad, not the other way around.
Eve wasn’t about to waste a single second. In the hour since she’d rolled up her sleeping bag, she’d cleaned out the cardboard box full of sand that she’d set up in the bathroom as a makeshift litter box, called a locksmith and made an appointment to have the locks changed, even found a maid service to do the cleanup, though she intended to scrub down her bedroom and any place else the creep had touched with gallons of disinfectant.

Last night she’d fallen asleep sometime around two in the morning, though Cole had still been awake, going over his notes, logging onto the Internet by way of her laptop with its wireless connection and some neighbor’s unsecured server. While she’d been awake, he’d been animated, talking about theories of who and why and how they were going to crack the case. All the while Eve had seethed. How had she been so foolish as to trust him again? Hadn’t she known better?

What a lying piece of dirt!

If it hadn’t been for Samson, she would have checked into a hotel.

Or so she’d tried to convince herself.

She was conflicted; that was the problem. Mad as hell and conflicted to the nth degree!

He’d told her to think about the past few days; since then she’d thought of little else. True, Cole had been nothing but determined to figure out who was behind the murders, and he’d risked his own neck in trying to save hers and been her rock when she’d wanted to fall into a billion pieces, but that didn’t change the fact that he was a liar, out to save his own hide.

He said he loved you, and that was before he admitted that he’d been at the cabin.

So what?

Talk was cheap.

Though he had seemed intent on protecting her, caring for her, loving her….

She clenched her teeth and made a sound of frustration.

Has he done anything since being released from the jail that would make you think he isn’t trustworthy?

Yes! He hadn’t come clean from the get-go. It had been lie upon lie upon lie! Only when her memory was returning, and she began to piece together the night Roy had been killed, had he finally given it up and told the truth.

She couldn’t trust him!

Woulnd’t.

Worse yet, she couldn’t trust herself when she was near him. She’d even woken up cuddled up next to him. Fully dressed but still surrounded by the warmth and feel and scent of him. She’d instantly scooted away from him and found her cell phone. While Cole, damn him, slept on top of the open sleeping bag, his dark hair falling over his closed eyes, his lips slightly parted, his tall body relaxed, she had made the calls. She had to get on with her life, make her house clean and safe, go to the post office and make certain her address was changed from Anna and Kyle’s house in Atlanta.

If she were even going to stay in the house she’d thought of as home ever since she was a child.

Which was a pretty big if, all things considered. At the thought of her bloodied bed, the doll, and the damned scrawled message, she considered moving. Nana’s house or not, she couldn’t imagine ever sleeping in the turret room again. Whoever was behind this nightmare, he was winning. She was a wreck. She didn’t know up from sideways or what she was going to do for the next five minutes, let alone the rest of her life.
Cole stirred.

Her heart softened a little at the sight of him, but then she steadfastly shut down any vague romantic or sexual notions she might still possess. That part of her life, she was certain, was over.

He made some kind of growling noise that did strange things to her then rolled over and opened one eye. “Mornin’,” he drawled, all west Texas again.

Oh sure.

He stretched, his arms reaching far over his head, lengthening him out, making his abdomen appear even flatter, almost concave. “So…where’s the coffee?”

“Very funny.”

“Still mad?”

She was aghast at his audacity. “What do you think?”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Too bad. I thought maybe you and I could have a quickie this morning before—”

“Stop!” She threw a hand up, instantly incensed. “Do you remember what we’re in the middle of?”

“Of course I do. I just thought we could lighten up a little. You know, they say it’s not good to go to bed angry, and I figured once you’d had time to think about everything, sleep on it, come to—”

“If you were going to say, ‘Come to my senses,’ don’t.”

“Yesterday you—” he started to say.

“Yesterday I was a blind woman who didn’t know the truth.”

He didn’t bother finishing what he’d been about to say. Instead, he stated flatly, “And today we don’t have time for recriminations. Save ‘em. We’ve got to figure this out. Fast.”

She wanted to argue, to keep at it, but she knew he was right. Festering fury didn’t get anyone anywhere. She still could not trust him, but she did need to deal with him.

“There must be some kind of method to this guy’s madness,” Cole said. “So, let’s take the number that was written on the wall of Roy’s cabin. 212, right?”

She nodded.

“And your father, 101?”

“Yes.”

“And where the nun, Vivian, was found, up in the hospital…323, while the doll was 444.”

“I know what the numbers are,” she said, still irritated. “So what?”

“And if you read them backward?” He held up his notes for her to see.

She looked the numbers over. “Okay…so…they’re the same. Left to right or right to left.”

“Now look at the message that was written last night. Dennis sinned. Read it backward.”

“Dennis sinned….” She looked at him in surprise. “I still don’t get it.”
“It can’t be a coincidence, Eve. And there’s more. The drug that your father was given?”

“Xanax.” A pause. “Weird.” She didn’t understand this, not at all, but she was certain Cole was on to something.

“And your father’s last name? Renner. A palindrome. A word that reads the same way backward or forward.”

“Like Viv,” she said. “But…Sister Rebecca…Becca…Renault or…”

“Let’s go with ‘nun.’”

“Okay. Nun.” And then her eyes met his, and she felt a cold thrill rush down her spine as she realized where he was going with this. “Or,” she said, drawing in a shaky breath, “like Kajak.”

“Yeah, Kajak works, but that’s just for starters.” Cole was suddenly stone-cold sober, and before the words were out of his mouth, she understood what he was going to say.

“I hate to bring this up, darlin’, but we can’t ignore your first name. E-v-e. Same both ways. Eve and Renner both. I’d say whoever is behind this is definitely fixated on you.”
Bentz stared at the fresh grave, red brown earth turned and moist, a small cross marking its location between other, larger, engraved headstones. Cut into the grass and weeds, the earthy patch was impossible to miss.

“I don’t understand it,” Sister Odine said, worrying her hands as she walked with Bentz and Montoya around the machinery standing ready to chow into the ground. A driver was in the cab, another two workers standing by, the big backhoe idling noisily, smelling of diesel. “We’ve not had a burial here in six months.” She blinked up at Bentz and shook her head. “I walked through here just three days ago, and this”—she pointed to the gravesite with its mound of fresh earth—“wasn’t that way. There was a grave here, yes. The marker has been here for as long as I have, I think. But I swear, the grass was undisturbed.”

“I believe you,” Bentz said, then nodded to the excavation crew. He handed Sister Odine the necessary paperwork, though she wasn’t the least bit concerned with legalities. Bentz assured her the Archdiocese might be. He motioned to the backhoe driver, and, with a grind of gears, the machine got to work, tearing through the soft soil, making short work of the grave.

“I don’t like this.” Montoya reached into his jacket pocket for his cigarettes then glanced at Sister Odine and thought better of it. “Digging up graves is…well, it’s just creepy. I don’t like messin’ with the dead. Once in the ground, stay there, I say.”

“Part of the job.”

“Huh.” He folded his arms over his chest, his leather jacket creaking as he did, then waited impatiently, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, glancing up at the heavens, where a jet cut across the sky, leaving a white plume in its wake before disappearing into the approaching clouds.

Noisily the backhoe kept working, extracting scoops of dark, earthy-smelling dirt, dropping each bucketful into an ever-growing pile.

It didn’t take long for the backhoe to expose the coffin.

“Hey! Hold it!” one of the men on the ground said, raising a hand to keep the driver from lowering his scoop onto the coffin. “Detective?”

Steeling himself, Bentz walked to the gravesite’s edge, and there, a few feet within the hole, still partially covered with dirt, was a small casket. A sense of sadness seeped through him. Unlike his partner, he wasn’t creeped out by this part of his job, though he agreed that he never liked disturbing the dead or exhuming bodies.

“Jesus,” Montoya said, edging nearer to the pit and glancing down at the small coffin. “Jesus.”

“I assume that was a prayer,” the sister said.

“Absolutely!” Montoya was emphatic.

Bentz actually believed his partner. He nodded at the graveside workers. “Bring it up,” Bentz instructed, then stepped back as the men retrieved the box that was scarcely larger than the body of an infant.
Montoya’s face tightened as the coffin was hoisted upward. Lips flat, skin drawn over his cheekbones, eyes glittering darkly, he waited while it was placed on the ground and, at a nod from Bentz, the lid pried open.

Bentz forced his eyes to the interior. In the simple wooden box lined with sheeting there was a body.

A fresh body.

Blood still lined the sheets.

But it wasn’t a child. It was a baby pig, its throat slit.

“For the love of God!” Montoya said, repulsed, his skin almost visibly crawling. “What the hell is that?” He looked up at the nun and said, “Sorry, Sister” then turned his attention to the coffin again. “But man, what is that? A pig? A damned fresh pig?”

He stepped away from the coffin. No longer concerned about any kind of protocol or respect for the dead, he scrabbled for his pack of Marlboros and hastily lit up. “Jesus,” he said under his breath again, and even the construction workers stopped their conversation.

The little nun frowned into the open casket and hastily made the sign of the cross over her chest. She too was obviously shaken, her skin blanched, her eyes wide behind her glasses. “Why would anyone do this?”

“I don’t know,” Bentz said, “but we’ll find out. I have to take this coffin back to the lab.” Bending on one knee, he got a closer look. The pig was bloated, no sign of maggots but already starting to smell rank. Bentz pulled on a pair of gloves and gingerly lifted the carcass, then the sheet, so that he could peer beneath. “You got the flashlight?” he asked Montoya, who was already fishing it out of his pocket. He handed it to him, and Bentz clicked on the light, shining a beam along the inside of the box.

Partially hidden by the sheet, scrawled across the side of the coffin, was another message. He read aloud.

“Live not on evil.”

“What?” Montoya stepped closer and read the words. “‘Live not on evil’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Bentz twisted his neck and squinted up at his partner. “Our guy wanted us to read it. He left the earth freshly turned, didn’t try to hide it. He wanted us to find this grave and dig it up.”

“So that we could find a dead pig?”

“So that we could find the message.” Bentz dropped the sheet so that the pig rested as it had. Straightening, he yanked off his gloves. “Our boy is talking to us,” he said. “What’s he trying to tell us?”

God was angry with him.

The Reviver knew it. He’d lain awake all night, waiting for the Voice, hoping to hear that he was pardoned. But all that came to him were the scratchy voices making white noise in his head, and he’d fallen to his knees and prayed, begging absolution, tears streaming down his face, his pleas going unanswered in God’s deathly cold silence.

“Please, forgive me. Father, I beg Thee, speak with me again and I will do Your bidding.”

When there was no response, he took solace in his rosary and then laid out his tarp and candles and stripped bare. After carefully showering, protecting his new flesh engravings, cleansing his body and soul, he retrieved his tattoo machine, lit the candles, and checked the vials of ink. Soon he would have to buy more, but for now, all was as it should be.

Except that God was no longer speaking to him.
No longer instructing him.

No longer calling him the Reviver and hinting that he would soon be deified.

He needed to repent, to do a long penance to find favor with the Lord again.

Standing in front of the mirror, he turned on his machine then placed his hand on the inside of his leg, where the flesh was tight from all his exercise. He closed his eyes, said a prayer, and pushed the needle into his skin, deep, feeling the hot little bite, the sting of the first prick. He would write his name here, where he could see it easily without the aid of a mirror. Though it might rub, and he would have to be careful with it for the next few days, it would be a reminder.

Concentrating, revived by the pain, he started to ink the word “Reviver” onto his flesh. And as he did, he turned his mind to God, away from Eve, where it often strayed whenever he touched himself. To want her was a sin. He knew it, and yet he hoped that the Voice would speak to him again and tell him that his patience, his waiting, his obedience had bought him a little time with her.

Just enough…Not much…but enough that he could do all the things he’d dreamed about. Touch her. Taste her. Nip her flesh.

The needle cut deep, and he quickly banished Eve from his thoughts.

For now, he would concentrate on God.

Cole had gone to the store for donuts, juice, and coffee, and the remains were strewn around the sleeping bags that had become their bedroom, kitchen, and den. The air conditioner wheezed but brought some kind of movement to the stale air. They’d cracked the blinds, and pale morning light striated the dirty floor as it passed through the slats.

Eve felt a little sick with the rush of sugar and caffeine, but she’d managed to concentrate on the pages of notes they’d taken. She was certain he was on to something with this pattern of palindromes.

And it scared her.

Not just for herself.

But what about Anna Maria? Her first name was the same backward and forward. She knew no one close named Bob or Lil or Ava or Gig, or any other name that could be construed as reading both backward and forward. But what about someone called dad or mom? Cole and she had worked on a list of potential victims, and Cole had even thought that Sam Deeds—if you used just his first initial, as ‘S. Deeds’—could be another person in the killer’s sights.

It was twisted. Made no sense. But it must mean something, and it was somehow connected to Our Lady of Virtues and Faith Chastain.

Eve had called Anna’s cell phone, but her message had been instantly sent to voice mail. Desperately wanting to know that her sister-in-law was alive and well, she’d next phoned Kyle, only to get a terse greetings, “Leave a message.”

Great.

She was already sick with tension. Not being able to reach Anna Maria only ratcheted up her level of anxiety.

Cole sat cross-legged on his sleeping bag, leaning over his papers, T-shirt stretched tight over his shoulders, the waistband of his jeans pulling low enough to show a slice of his bare back. He glanced up and caught her eye on him. “Quit ogling me and get back to work.”

“I’m not ogling.”
He smiled infuriatingly. Eve looked away. She found herself shocked to realize her anger was dissipating. Damn it. She was way, way too susceptible to this man. And she was infuriated with herself for caring.

“Look at all these numbers and words backward and forward,” he said, bringing her back from her self-flagellation. “I put the numbers by the names, the way I think the killer has them…see?”

“I’ve seen this before,” she said but sat down beside him, careful not to let her and his skin touch anywhere. She stared at the sheet again. Samson wandered over to her and settled into her lap. Idly, she petted his head and back, stroking his long fur as she read Cole’s bold block letters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KAJAK</th>
<th>212</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RENNER</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUN or SIS</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIV or NUN or SIS</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>??? (doll) EVE</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Just look more closely. I think the doll represents you. It was found up in the attic, in a place that hadn’t been disturbed since you were a child, and then again in your bed.”

“Oh great,” she muttered.

“I know,” he said, the muscles in the back of his neck tightening. “But he didn’t go after you. Just did things to scare the hell out of you.”

“Mission accomplished,” she whispered.

“Sick son of a bitch,” Cole muttered harshly as he pointed at the numbers. “Do these mean anything to you?”

She stared at the list and shook her head. Samson rolled onto his back, purring. “I’ve thought about this a hundred times over, and the only thing that comes to me is the floors of the hospital.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, both my dad and Sister Rebecca had offices on the first floor, and then, I think, when Roy was back at the hospital as a patient, he was on the second floor. The attic would be the fourth floor.”

“What about Sister Vivian?”

Eve lifted her palms. “But she could have been a patient at one time.”

He ran a finger down the numbers. “Okay…let’s take it a step further. Did your father’s office have a room number?”

“Yes. Number one. He liked that. I remember because he’d whisper to me, ‘I’m number one.’ You know, like every football team heading for a bowl game.”

“And Sister Rebecca?”

“Not sure. Her office was down the hall from Dad’s.”

“Could it be room eleven?” he asked, reopening the cap of a half-drunk bottle of cranberry juice and taking a long swallow.

“Yesss…” Samson batted at her hands, as, lost in thought, she’d quit petting him. She absently began to stroke him again.
“Do you think it’s possible that these are room numbers of the hospital?”

“Maybe. But what about the attic? There were no numbers up there.”

He screwed on the cap and dropped the bottle onto the floor next to the open box of donuts. “Maybe I’m all wet… but, okay, think about it. If the attic were sectioned off into rooms like the floors below, what numbers would they be?”

“You’re taxing my brain.” Examining this so closely brought her fear bubbling to the surface.

“Come on, Eve,” he urged. “The rooms on the second and third floor were stacked directly above each other, the composition the same, so imagine the floor beneath the spot where you made your little fort or whatever you want to call it. What room was that? Three forty-four?”

“Could be…” She fought back her urge to push this away and tried to remember the configuration of the halls.

“Maybe your little attic nest would be where room four forty-four would be if there were a set of rooms up there.”

“That’s a pretty big leap, isn’t it?”

Cole inclined his head in agreement. “But it’s something. The only thing we’ve really got.”

“Which isn’t much,” she said, disheartened, then reached for her phone to call Anna Maria again. “Please answer,” she whispered, but once again the call was sent directly to voice mail.

It was nearly five when the call came in from the lab. “I think it would be best if you all come on down here,” Bonita Washington told Bentz. “See for yourself what we’ve got.”

“I’m on my way.” He turned to Montoya, who was cradling a phone to his ear while scribbling notes.

“Yeah…yeah…Okay…Got it!” He hung up and explained. “Another case…The knifing down at the waterfront. Got a snitch who’s coming in later to say what went down. What’s up?”

“Washington called. Wants us to come down to the lab ASAP.”

Montoya grabbed his jacket. “Serious stuff.”

“Sounds like it.”

On their way past Lynn Zaroster’s desk, Montoya dropped off his jotted notes. “I’ll be gone for a while. If this guy calls in”—he tapped the note—“get the info, and I’ll call him back. I’m not sure he knows anything, but he’s making noise like he knows what went down the other night near the park.”

“Got it,” she nodded and placed his note near her phone. “I think I’ve got a lead on the priest, Father Paul, who used to work at Our Lady. Paul Swanson. He’s retired. Might be in a nursing home or assisted-care facility. I’ll let you know if and when I locate him.”

“Good. And Le Mars?”

“No luck yet.” She twirled a pen in her fingers. “I’m checking with all his known contacts, friends, family, old girlfriends. So far, zilch. But I’m still working on it.”

As they all were. Bentz and Montoya each had spent hours running down leads on Ronnie Le Mars. They’d all ended up going nowhere. Zaroster’s phone started ringing again. “This might be it,” she teased. “The call that breaks the case.”

Montoya snorted. “From your lips to God’s ears.”
“Yeah, that’s right. God and I are real tight. He answers all my prayers pronto.” She reached for the phone. As they headed downstairs, they heard her answer, “Homicide. Detective Zaroster…”

They found Bonita Washington in the photo lab, talking with Inez Santiago. “Montoya…glad you came along. Come over here and take a look at this.” She guided them to a long counter and switched on undercabinet lights. “Here’s the original photo that Abby Chastain took of the hospital. There’s definitely a shadow of a man in the window. Now, I could give you the long and boring speech about how we enlarged, sharpened, and enhanced the image, but it doesn’t matter. What does is this.” She pointed to the last in a series of about twenty prints. “It’s the clearest image we have.”

“Pretty good,” Bentz observed. The image was definitely a man, a big man, his features a little muddy but distinct enough to be recognizable.

“Not pretty good, Detective. It’s damned good. Got it? Damned good. Now…take a look at this.”

She handed him a mug shot of Ronnie Le Mars, the same picture Bentz had already viewed when he’d checked the computer records. “I’d say this could very well be your guy.”

Montoya, who had been silent so far, nodded. “It’s him.”

“Maybe.” Bentz wasn’t completely convinced.

“Good chance,” Santiago piped up. In a lab coat, her red hair twisted onto her head, she added, “We’ve got more good news.”

“That we do,” Washington agreed. “Blood work.” She led them around a corner and along a well-lit corridor to an area dedicated to examining bodies and body parts. “We’ve got company,” she announced to A. J. Tennet, who was seated on a rolling stool and staring into a microscope.

He looked up. “Good.” Sliding his chair along a counter, he stopped sharply and picked out some papers from a basket. “First of all, the blood found at the Eve Renner house was porcine, not human.”

Bentz felt a wave of relief. “I think we found the pig.”

Tennet nodded. “We’re double-checking that now and looking for any other stains or epithelials in the coffin.”

“The coffin’s old,” Washington explained. “We figure it might have been used before. We’re taking soil samples from the area around Our Lady of Virtues, from the pig’s hooves, and from the coffin, just to see that they match. Any other trace evidence, including the sheet, will be analyzed.”

“Good.”

“Montoya, why don’t you go over the lab work here with A. J. in more detail,” Washington suggested. “Detective Bentz, I’d like to show you something else. In private.”

Montoya lifted a dark eyebrow, obviously curious, but didn’t follow as Washington led Bentz into her office.

“What’s going on?” he asked as she closed the door behind them.

“Something I thought you should find out about alone. Then you can handle it any way you see fit.”

“Okay.” Bentz felt more than a little apprehension. Bonita Washington had always been a straight shooter. Never pulled any punches. Not into high drama in the least. “So what’s up?”

“The DNA report came in on Eve Renner.”

“She’s not related to Faith Chastain,” Bentz guessed. “We already know that Faith had a son who died at birth, the baby who was supposed to be in that coffin.”
“Then you got your information wrong.” She handed him the report. “Not only does Eve have enough identical genetic markers to make it clear that she is Faith’s daughter, she also has markers that match another person.”

“Who is that?” Bentz asked. “Ronnie Le Mars?”

“No.”

“Not Roy Kajak?”

“No.” She was staring at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“Then I don’t know. Who else?”

Washington looked him squarely in the eye. “You, Detective,” she said, watching his reaction. “According to our tests, and I ran them three times to make certain of the data, you’re related to Eve Renner.”
CHAPTER 30

“There’s got to be a mistake,” Bentz declared, disbelieving. He was holding his hands up and shaking his head emphatically as the wheels whirled in his mind. “I never met Faith Chastain. Never.”

“Well, someone related to you did. And it was a whole lot more than just meeting her.”

“Wait.” There had to be something wrong! But the first dark worm of understanding was boring through his brain. “Jacques Chastain was her husband. He could have…There’s a mistake,” he repeated.

“You’re not listening to me, Detective,” she said determinedly. “This is Bonita. I don’t do anything half-assed. I checked your daughter’s DNA as well. We still had a sample on file from that case a few years back, you remember, with that psychopath who called himself the Chosen One?”

Bentz nodded. Both Kristi and Olivia had nearly lost their lives because of that twisted maniac.

“So I ran the sample…and sure enough, bingo, Kristi’s an instant winner too. Related to Eve Renner.”

“Through Eve’s biological father.” Bentz felt the need to sit down, but he stayed on his feet by sheer will.

“I knew there was a reason you were promoted so quickly.” She slapped the reports into his hand and let him scan them for himself. Some of her bad-ass attitude fell away, and her intense green eyes appeared surprisingly compassionate. Pushing a hank of kinky hair from those eyes, she said, “Look, Bentz, I don’t know what this means, other than you and Eve are related, but I figured you might want to process this yourself and decide how you’re going to tell the rest of the department. Anyone working on this case will be privy to this information.”

He shook his head to clear it. How could this be? Who in his family had even met Faith Chastain. For a second, he questioned his own legitimacy.

With a kindness he hadn’t thought her capable of, she added lightly, “I figure you owe me big-time.”

“Diamonds. I know.”

“You got that right.” She patted his shoulder. “Remember: big ones.”

Report in hand, Bentz connected with Montoya, who was on his phone pacing through the labyrinth of hallways, deep in conversation. “Uh-huh…I’ll check it out. Yeah, that’s fine…We’re done here now. Okay, we’ll meet you there. Thanks.” Montoya fell into step with Bentz. Together they headed out of the building. “That was Eve Renner,” he explained. “She and Cole Dennis have cooked up this theory. Kind of out there, and I wouldn’t buy into it all, but it’s a lot like yours.”

“How so?”

He explained about the names or titles of the victims being palindromes, how the numbers at the crime scenes read both left to right and right to left, how they also might represent room numbers for the hospital. “Terrence Renner’s office was room 101, and Sister Rebecca’s was 111. They’re not sure about all of the victims, but it’s worth looking into.” Montoya tugged at his goatee. “Seems kinda far-fetched to me, but we’ve walked down that road before.”
Bentz grunted in agreement. “Far-fetched” sometimes felt like it was the norm.

They continued single file as two officers came through, hurrying the opposite way. Montoya added, “Eve’s really freaked because she can’t get hold of her sister-in-law, Anna, who has one of those backward-forward type of names.”

“Does this Anna have any connection to the hospital?”

“None we’ve found. Yet. Hell. But Eve does, and she’s obviously already in the killer’s sights.”

“Maybe they’re on to something.” Bentz fell into thought as his shoes clicked on the polished floor. “The whole palindrome thing is too much of a coincidence.”

“I told Eve we’d meet at her house. She’s already got a cleaning crew and locksmith lined up. We’re done there, right? We can release the house to her. All the evidence and photographs have been taken. We’ve got the sheets, blood samples, prints. No reason to keep her out of the house.”

“If she wants to go back there.”

“I wouldn’t,” Montoya admitted as they walked outside.

Heavy clouds had rolled in, blocking what was left of the afternoon sun, and the temperature had dropped a few degrees. Traffic, full in the throes of rush hour, sluggishly snarled its way through the streets as, cars, buses, and trucks moved out of the city.

“So, what was it Washington wanted to talk to you about?”

“DNA.” Bentz handed the pages to Montoya, who scanned the information quickly.

“So…wait a minute. Ellen Chaney swears Faith Chastain had one baby, a boy, who was stillborn. How do we get from that to a dead pig in a coffin and a woman who is very much alive and Faith’s daughter?”

“Read on.”

“There’s more?”

“Oh yeah.” Bentz flexed his hands, still trying to process the information Bonita Washington had handed him. The story wasn’t hanging together—the dead baby, Eve’s DNA matching Faith’s…Something was wrong somewhere. Ellen Chaney was either lying or hadn’t gotten her facts straight. That bothered him. He could usually sense bullshit, but Chaney had seemed sincere. Now, running a hand through his hair, he felt his stomach begin to roil and thought the hell with it. To Montoya, he said, “I’ll take that smoke now, if you’ve got one.”

“Sure.” Montoya found his cigarettes and handed the pack and his lighter to Bentz.

Bentz lit up, drawing deep, sensing smoke curl into his lungs as his partner flipped through all the pages slowly, his eyes narrowing as he read.

Montoya stopped dead in his tracks and looked up at Bentz. “What the hell does this mean?”

Bentz handed over the rest of the pack and the lighter, enjoying the first buzz of nicotine. “Don’t know. I never met Faith Chastain.”

“But—”

“I can’t explain it,” Bentz said, but his mind was taking a trip of its own, running down a long, dark corridor with doors to rooms that he’d hoped would never be opened again. No matter how hard he wanted to lock the truth away, it always fought to get out, to be known. His gut gnawed, and he reached into his pocket for his antacids.

Montoya’s dark eyebrows slammed together as he read the information for the second time. “For Christ’s sake,
you must know something. This is your damned family.”

“Yours too, if you marry Abby.” He plopped a pill into his mouth and chewed. “We might all be related.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Related?” Montoya shook out a cigarette for himself, jabbed the Marlboro into his mouth. He flicked his lighter to the tip of the cigarette, inhaling as if the smoke were life giving. “That’s sick,” he said as he exhaled a cloud of smoke.

You don’t know the half of it, Bentz thought as he considered all the possibilities of who in his family could be Eve Renner’s father. He didn’t like where his logic took him and couldn’t imagine how to tell Eve or Kristi. Montoya was right. It was sick. “Looks like Abby can start adding Eve’s name to the family Bible after all.”

“And yours too? Man, what a mess.”

Amen, brother, Bentz thought, crushing out his cigarette on the sidewalk. A-damned-men.

Eve couldn’t believe her ears. Stunned, she stood next to Cole in the backyard of her grandmother’s house. The wind was sighing through the branches of the magnolia tree, dusk was slowly creeping across the land, and Bentz’s shocking statement still hung in the air as if it were a living being.

“The DNA tests prove that you’re Faith Chastain’s daughter. And I’m afraid there’s more. It looks like you’re related to me as well.”

She stared at Detective Rick Bentz, and he stared back. “How…I mean…” She held up her good hand and processed the unlikely information all over again. She was related to Bentz. And she also was Abby Chastain’s half sister. And Faith’s daughter. But not Jacques Chastain’s child. “I don’t believe it.”

Cole, too, was skeptical, but then he’d never trusted the police. “You’re sure?” he asked Bentz, his gaze moving from Montoya, who was resting a hip against the fender of his car, to Bentz, who was standing closer, delivering the unlikely news.

“I understand this is difficult.”

“Difficult?” Cole laughed silently at the understatement.

“I have the reports. The tests were run three times. I had trouble believing this too. Believe me. But the DNA markers are clear,” Bentz said.

Eve regarded him with new eyes, trying to decipher if there was any resemblance between them. The answer to that question was a firm no. Eve had a slim build, curly reddish hair, a short nose, and blue eyes tinged with green. Bentz was stocky, with brown hair showing hints of gray, a square jaw, and flinty, deep-set eyes. “Related how?” she asked suspiciously. She needed more specifics before she could swallow this story. She saw no reason for him to lie, but…this just couldn’t be true! What was he saying? That he was her father, her brother?

He must’ve read the questions in her eyes. “I’m not exactly certain how we’re related, but no, I’m not your father. I never met Faith Chastain.”

Eve was more than a little relieved. She’d suffered too many blows in the father department as it was. Terrence Renner had just been brutally murdered, not even as yet buried, and she couldn’t come to grips thinking this rugged detective with whom she’d been so combative could be the man who had sired her. Bentz, along with Montoya, had doubted her word from the moment they’d met, and both men had been dogged in their quest to see Cole put behind bars.

Nonetheless, she was convinced by his expression that he believed the news he was delivering was the truth.

“Could you be my half brother?” she asked, rubbing the arm that was still in a sling. “Could we have the same
father?”

Montoya found his cigarettes and fired one up.

Bentz responded, “I don’t see how. My dad was shot in the line of duty, long before you could have been conceived.”

“An uncle, then?”

“I don’t have the answers yet. But believe me, I’ll get ’em.” His jaw set determinedly.

“But Abby’s my half sister?”

“Yes.”

Montoya, leaning against his car, gave Eve a searching look. “I was going to tell her tonight, unless you want to.”

She didn’t have to think twice. “I’ll leave that to you, Detective. But ask her to call me when she wants to.”

Montoya nodded. “Knowing her, it’ll probably be as soon as she hears the news.”

“Anytime would be fine.” She felt strange. At sea. If it were true…if…then Abby and Zoey Chastain were both her half sisters, and somehow Rick Bentz was part of her family as well.

“You should also know that we found a grave, the one that was supposed to have held Faith’s child, her boy child,” Bentz said.

“A grave?” Eve froze, felt Cole step closer to her. “With a baby?”

“There was no baby, at least none that we could find.”

She pressed the heel of her palm to her head and closed her eyes. “You found an empty grave for Faith’s baby, for me, is that what you’re saying?”

“We think it was originally for Faith’s child, but it had been tampered with, the earth fresh, and when we opened the casket we found a dead pig inside.”

Repulsed, she wrapped her good arm around her middle and turned into the safety of Cole’s arms.

Montoya added, “Not just a dead pig. There was a message inside as well, written in blood. ‘Live not on evil.’”

Cole said, “‘Live not on evil.’ Another palindrome.” His expression grew darker. “The hits just keep on coming.”

“The blood we found in your bedroom—it was the pig’s.”

“Oh for the love of God, why?” she whispered, digesting the news. Though she was relieved that the blood splashed all over her room hadn’t been human, she was still sickened by the idea of the horrible, gruesome mess, that someone was perverted enough to mutilate a doll, pour blood onto her bed, then take the time to write a cryptic message in that blood. It was sick and psychotic and chilled her to the bone.

“What kind of a pervert are we dealing with?” Cole asked as a thick, starless twilight stole over the city.

Montoya pushed away from the car. “This guy’s a psychopath. Sick. Deranged. And yeah, if you’re asking, for some reason he’s focused on Eve. We’re just not certain why.”

She knew about psychoses, had witnessed for herself the results of such severe mental disorders, and yet, faced with an unknown killer who somehow drew great satisfaction, perhaps even sexual excitement, in gruesomely terrorizing her, she felt sick inside.
“Police protection is available,” Montoya offered.

“You think I’m in serious danger.”

“Don’t you?”

“I think that if he had wanted to kill me, he would have by now. I’m sure he’s had opportunities.”

“But he’s stringing it out, getting off on scaring the hell out of you,” Cole said. “I think you should accept.”

She was astounded. Cole never trusted the police. Never. His eyes met hers, and she saw that he was wrestling with his own conscience, that he was really worried.

“It couldn’t hurt. Might deter the maniac,” he said.

Bentz added chillingly, “He’s going to escalate. He’s already taken lives.”

She quivered inside. But police protection? Someone watching her around the clock? Having zero privacy?

“I’ll be with her,” Cole said when she hesitated.

“Well, that’s all fine and good, but as far as I know, you don’t own a gun. At least none that you admitted to during the Kajak investigation. So how’re you going to protect her?” Montoya’s gaze slid from Cole to Eve. “If I were you, I’d take my chances with the professionals.”

“How would that work?”

“We’d stake out the place. Have someone watching the house.”

“Do it, Eve,” Cole said.

“I’ll think about it. Tonight I’ll be at a hotel, so it won’t be an issue. But after I get the place cleaned up and move back in, then I’ll let you know.”

“You’re sure?” Bentz asked.

“I’ll be okay,” she said, thinking of Cole. She didn’t doubt that he would protect her. Gun or no gun. That much she trusted.

“And we do have a revolver, still registered to my grandfather. It’s just a matter of buying bullets.”

“I’d feel better if you had an officer trained with a weapon right now,” Bentz said tightly.

“I’ll call you if I change my mind.”

“Do it. In the meantime, we’ll look this over,” Bentz said, holding up Cole’s notes about the numbers and names. “I’ll also keep trying to reach your sister-in-law. So far, she hasn’t shown up, hasn’t called.”

“Please do,” Eve said, worried sick. She’d left Anna three voice mails on her cell phone during the course of the day and had even called her house in Atlanta. It was just odd that Anna had been so desperate to get in touch with her after Terrence’s death then had gone ghostly silent, completely incommunicado.

While people all around Eve were being slaughtered.

Montoya’s cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen. Then, turning a shoulder to Eve, Cole, and Bentz, he wandered off to take the call.

Eve said to Bentz, “Would you please let me know if you hear from either of my brothers?” After demanding to meet with her and the police, both Kyle and Van seemed to have disappeared. Neither was answering his damned
cell phone. True, it had only been a few days, but as eager as they’d been to divvy up Terrence Renner’s estate, it was strange that they had gone completely and inexplicably silent.

Bentz nodded as Montoya hung up, shoved his phone into the pocket of his jacket, and turned back their way. He looked at his partner and said curtly, “We gotta roll.”

“I think we’re done here anyway.” To Eve, he added, “I’ll be in touch.”

“Thanks.”

Bentz jogged back to the Mustang. Montoya was already inside, behind the wheel. Bentz opened the passenger-side door, and the car’s engine roared to life. A second later the tires chirped, and Montoya pulled away from the curb.

Eve watched them leave. “How strange was that?” she murmured, still trying to digest everything Bentz had told her.

“Too strange,” Cole said as the taillights of the Mustang disappeared around the corner. “Dead pigs, new siblings. You being related to Bentz himself and Montoya’s fiancée? It’s out there. Waaay out there. It’s almost like a setup of some kind.”

“A conspiracy? What do you mean?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know what to think,” he admitted, glancing back at the house, which was still surrounded by pieces of crime-scene tape that flapped and caught in the breeze. “But I do think you should take them up on their offer.”

“Not tonight. Okay? I just want…to shut it all down for one night.”

“You think you can?”

“I’m going to give it my best effort,” she said, hoping she could manage to get a night’s sleep without this horrible nightmare encroaching. She needed to sort things out and get a new perspective on her life.

“You said something about staying in a hotel tonight?”

“I can’t stay here, and though your place is…well, safe, I suppose, I need a real bed. Maybe we could leave Samson there for a few hours then in the morning meet the locksmith and the house cleaners back here.”

“So, we’re together?”

She felt that same old rush whenever she was around him. It would be just so damned much easier if she didn’t care about him. “Yes.” She glanced at the old house with its smooth siding, paneled windows, and dark shutters. In her mind’s eye she saw her grandfather at his desk, her grandmother in the kitchen, wiping down the tile or baking a custard. This house, more than anything, represented family to her. More than the older brothers who’d never cared much for her, or her sickly mother, or her psychiatrist father who had been cool and distant one minute, overtly affectionate the next. This three-story Victorian with its memories of her grandparents was home and hearth, her bedroom a sanctuary. She gazed upward to the turret room, where she’d once found such solace.

All that had changed in the flash of a killer’s blade.

An evening breeze, fragrant with magnolia, shivered against the back of her neck. She felt a deep, abiding sadness with the realization that her home was forever violated. Biting her lip, she admitted, “I don’t know if I can ever stay here again.”
“Son of a bitch.” Kristi sat at her desk in her apartment and fumed. Damn Detective Rick Bentz! Oh, how she’d like to pick up the phone and taunt him with what she knew! Her lighthearted I’m-free-free-free attitude had flown out the window when she’d learned what her father was doing. Not from him, of course, no way, but from some guy she barely knew in the department. He was the one who was her confidant, the one she could phone any hour of the day or night to get information. Not dear old, sealed-lips Dad. Never him.

She drummed her fingers on her desk, glaring at her computer monitor, where she was researching every article that had been written on this new spate of murders. Just recently, according to a local station’s website, there had been vandalism at Eve Renner’s house, and it had to have been something pretty bizarre and gruesome for so many police officers to have been called in. One policeman had even been shot while chasing a suspect.

Just minutes ago, over the phone, her new friend in the department told her that Detective Rick Bentz had been at the grounds of the old mental hospital again, digging up a grave no less. Her father was looking into DNA on Eve Renner and Faith Chastain.

Her source didn’t know exactly what had transpired at Eve Renner’s house. Either that or he was keeping it to himself—he liked to mete out the facts a little at a time—but she knew she would eventually weasel it out of him. One way or another.

The case that apparently had started with Royal Kajak’s murder was growing more fascinating and weirder by the minute. And of course her dad had completely shut her out of it.

“I shouldn’t tell you any of this,” her contact had warned in that low, sexy tone of his. Kristi always ignored the tenor of his voice. The guy was interested in getting into her pants, so she let him think he could have a chance, just to get the information she needed.

“Oh come on,” she said, playing along, matching his sexy tone with her own low voice. “It’s all going to come out in the papers any way.”

“Yeah, but…I could lose my job.”

“I won’t use anything you tell me, promise, not until the press has gotten hold of it somewhere else. I’m not trying to beat someone to a byline for the next edition. This is going to be a book. A great book!”

“And when you publish that book?” he said suggestively.

“You’ll get plenty of credit, trust me.”

“Like what?”

“More than a one-line acknowledgment.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” She almost gagged on the word. It wasn’t that the guy wasn’t cute enough. He was just a little too smooth, too proud of being a part of the whole cop thing, which Kristi was over. Big-time.
“You know, there’s something else that might sway me into letting you in on this,” he added in the suggestive tone that, the more she heard it, was starting to nauseate her.

“Nuh-uh. Business, remember.”

“Someday you’ll break down and go out with me.”

“I suppose. If you play your cards right.” Her words were an out and-out lie. She’d made a personal vow never to seriously date any one in law enforcement. No exceptions. She’d seen firsthand how a being a cop could ruin a relationship. Then there was the matter of Jay. The boy she’d left behind. Who, right out of high school, had wanted to marry her. Whom she’d dumped and now worked in the forensics lab.

She sure didn’t want to run into him. She’d heard he was engaged, and that was good, or at least she told herself so, remembering at one time she’d accepted a “promise” ring from him. A lifetime ago.

So no, she wasn’t about to date anyone where there was a chance, however remote, that she’d run across Jay’s path.

She made a note to herself to check out the grave soon, during the day, and poke around the old hospital too. At that thought she felt a few qualms but tamped them down. This was her new career, and it wasn’t for sissies. She was athletic, had taken a ton of martial arts, and wasn’t stupid. She always carried pepper spray. She could handle a visit to a crumbling-down old building.

Kristi surfed the Internet for a while then returned to the story she’d started. She needed a title. Something that would catch the eye of an editor and a reader. Something explosive. Hot. Sexy. Something that had to do with the crime. A double entendre would be nice.

Unfortunately nothing came to mind, probably because she was inwardly seething, still burned that her father hadn’t confided in her.

It’s his job. He can’t talk about the crime with you, can’t compromise the case. You’ll have to find another source, not just the one you’ve got in the department but someone on the outside. Maybe one of the nuns at the convent, or someone who worked at the hospital. Someone who is close to the case but won’t be in jeopardy of losing his or her job if they discuss it.

She started making lists of things to do.

She thought about interviewing the killer.

After the arrest, of course.

But wouldn’t that be something?

Not only an exclusive discussion about the case from her father as lead detective but also with the psycho who was committing the crimes.

Yep, she thought, leaning back in her chair and stretching her arms high into the air. This was going to make a great book. Maybe even a best seller.

Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Rick Bentz.

The inn was over a hundred years old, renovated, situated in the middle of the French Quarter, and, compared to the Petrusky apartment, pure heaven.

Eve and Cole checked in, and she tried to tell herself that it was no big deal, that she was here with Cole because she needed his strength, his eyes, his mind. Oh for the love of God, did she really and truly need him?
A part of her screamed a loud and vibrant No. She wasn’t the kind of woman who was dependent upon a man, especially not a manipulative, bald-faced liar.

The other part of her said, Hell, yes, you need him! He gives you strength and a deeper insight. He’s smart, clever, maybe even wily. Yes, he did lie to save himself, but he’s proven himself over and over since he’s been back. You don’t have to marry the guy. All you have to do is trust him a little. You do need him.

She was still angry with Cole, no doubt about it, but she decided to be pragmatic. The truth of the matter was that she just felt safer when he was nearby. For the night, they were together, and she would try to ignore the romantic overtones to the charming room complete with gas fireplace, four-poster bed, and French doors that opened to a veranda flanking the second story.

She realized ruefully that she should have picked a clean, tidy, and sterile motel on the freeway. It would have been cheaper and definitely less conducive to eliciting any romantic or sexual fantasies.

“Hungry?” Cole asked once he dropped their bags near the bed.

“Starved.”

“Let’s find something.”

He knew of an Italian restaurant one block off Bourbon Street, and during the meal they somehow managed to keep the conversation light, away from the death and gore of the last few days. Cole bought a bottle of wine for the room, and though Eve thought sipping Riesling near a fire with Cole sounded like a recipe for disaster, she didn’t complain.

Just keep your head, she told herself. A feat that seemed near impossible with Cole sometimes.

When they were back in their room, Eve kicked off her shoes. Cole uncorked the bottle and had just poured them each a glass when Eve’s cell phone rang.

“Don’t answer it,” he suggested.

She glanced at caller ID and saw her sister-in-law’s name on the screen. Relief flooded through her. She flipped her phone open. “Anna Maria! Where are you? Are you okay?” she said, making eye contact with Cole.

“I’m…I’m fine. I’m driving.” Anna Maria’s voice was thick, belying her words. “But how about you? Geez, Eve, I just read about what happened. Are you all right?”

“I guess that depends, but yes, for the most part,” Eve said. The papers and news reports had been sketchy about the vandalism at her house, as the police had kept some of the evidence from the press. Eve couldn’t fill her sister-in-law in on the full story, but, as she settled into a chair near the hissing fire and tucked her bare feet beneath her, she explained where she was and that she wasn’t moving back to the house until it was cleaned and secured.

“I don’t blame you,” Anna said quietly.

Cole, to give her privacy, walked onto the veranda and closed the French doors behind him. From her vantage point, Eve watched him place his hands on the wrought-iron rail and look down at the street below. Her gaze skimmed over his backside, lingering for a second on the back of his jean-clad thighs and tight butt.

Aware of what she was doing, she readjusted her gaze, staring instead into the fire, where yellow flames licked at charred ceramic logs that would never burn. “Well, where are you? I was out of my mind with worry!”

“…I mean we, Kyle and I, were at a motel. Well, he was there some of the time,” her sister-in-law explained. “I haven’t called because I have bad news.” She paused for a second. Eve could hear her inhale deeply, probably on a cigarette. Eve scarcely dared breathe. More bad news? She braced herself. Then Anna said heavily, “Kyle and I are separating.”
“Oh…” Eve hardly knew what to feel. It was a letdown of sorts. A welcome letdown, but she could sense how much Anna was hurting.

“I know it’s a shock. For me too, but it’s what he wants. He needs his space, whatever that means. We’ve spent the last couple of days fighting. Like cats and dogs. All of this old, repressed anger…. It’s just been awful.” Her voice was hoarse with unshed tears. “We’ll be together for a few hours trying to sort things out. Then the fight escalates, and one of us walks out. It’s been an emotional yo-yo, and I finally realized, accepted, I guess, that it’s just not working. I’m not sure we even like each other, much less love each other.” Her voice caught as she finally admitted something she’d feared. Sniffling, she added, “I don’t like it, but there’s nothing I can do. I…Oh God…I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s another woman. He swears there isn’t, but what’s he going to say?”

“I’m sorry, Anna.”

“He won’t admit it, won’t tell me her name.”

In her heart, Eve thought divorce might not be a bad thing and that Anna might find someone so much better than Eve’s dumb-ass brother. However, that’s not what Anna wanted to hear. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“Nothing to do.” She was crying now, sobbing.

“I didn’t help things by staying with you forever.”

“It wasn’t forever, and besides, that’s what family’s for.”

“Look, Anna, where are you? I don’t think you should be driving. I’m at an inn downtown. Either drive here or we’ll”—she glanced at Cole again—“I’ll come and get you.”

“I’m…I’m fine.”

“It doesn’t sound like it. Come on, you can stay with me here for the night. We can talk things over or not, but I don’t like you being alone.”

“I’m fine.” She sniffed loudly. “I don’t need babysitting. I’m depressed, yeah, but not suicidal or anything.”

“Anna—”

“I’m on my way home. My wonderful husband has decided he’s going to ‘bunk in,’ that’s what he called it, with Van for a while. He’s talking about moving his business down to New Orleans, but he’ll lose so many of his established customers. Jesus God, what’s he thinking?”

“Why don’t you turn around? You can live with me until you sort it out.”

“After you move back to the house? Thanks, but with all that’s happened, you may as well sell that thing. I don’t know why you’d ever want to go back there again.” She laughed shortly. “I gotta go. I’ll call you tomorrow, once I’ve had time to think. I might need a damned lawyer. So much for love ever after, huh?”

Eve murmured a response and replaced the receiver. She looked through the watery glass panes to the veranda, where Cole was standing.

Love ever after.

She didn’t really believe there was such a thing.

Maybe tonight she’d find out. Maybe tonight she’d let Cole into her heart. She glanced at the bed. They’d spent so much time arguing and fighting and not trusting. Tonight, she thought, would be different. She would let down some of her barriers. Cinching her robe around her more tightly, she walked through the glass doors and slipped her arms around his waist.
“Hey, what’s this?” He turned and looked down at her.

She grinned and arched an eyebrow. “Well, if you play your cards right, ‘this’ might just be your lucky night.”

Late at night he lay in his bed and closed his eyes.

He was tired. Needed sleep. But he was jangled. Anxious. He bit at his fingernails. Spit them into a waste basket next to his bed. There was so much to do. And little time. He trembled inside, and his head was filled with thoughts of Eve.

Always Eve.

He found other women attractive, but none were Eve.

Eve the beautiful.

Eve the princess.

Eve the loved.

It was time to find his ultimate absolution.

It was time for him and Eve to finally meet.

No more teasing. No more games. No more dolls. And no more waiting. Everything was in place. Finally, finally, she would be his. To the death.

Their destiny entwined.

As it had been from the beginning.

EVIL LIVE.

LIVE NOT ON EVIL.

Isn’t that what Mother had always said? Hadn’t she always talked in palindromes? Hadn’t she told him they were the secret ways to communicate? Forward and backward?

He listened to the sound of the night seeping through his windows, the warm breath of spring slipping through the slight crack between glass and casing.

He visualized her surprise. Soon he would see it on her face. He’d drawn out the anticipation as long as possible, and now, oh God, now it was time. His lips were dry in anticipation, and he moistened them with his tongue then closed his eyes and imagined what he would do to her. At long last.

“She’s the princess, you know,” his mother always said, taunting him, telling him little details of Eve’s perfect life as she’d sat at her sewing machine, clipping threads with her sharp teeth or cutting fine lines of cloth with her shiny pinking shears. They too had teeth. Many steel teeth.

“Oh yes, that Eve!” Mother had clucked her tongue. “She’s always had the best, you know, never wanted for a thing, her father being a doctor and all.” Mother’s brows arched emphatically over her reading glasses as she sat on her stool at her sewing machine, brightly colored fabric spilling onto the floor. “Fancy house, shiny cars, frilly dresses, the little princess. And she’s pretty too—oh, my, how pretty. Her mother loves her, her father adores her, and she’s pampered by that grandmother of hers! Nothing’s too good for little Eve.”

He’d tried to close his ears to her poison, but his mother, the poor, hard-working seamstress with her arthritic knuckles and ever-growing envy, had never let him forget. She always brought up Eve. Especially at night, when the entire house was asleep, his father snoring soundly in the room far down the hall, his younger siblings already long
dreaming in their bunk beds.

Then she would come to him. In the early hours of the morning, creeping down the hallway, padding barefoot into his bedroom, clicking the lock behind her and bringing with her the smell of gin and smoke and sick desperation. It had always been just to “tuck him in” or “kiss him good night.”

But the soft little brush of lips against his cheek had been far from chaste, and the tucking of his bedsheets with her smooth hands had led to exploration of his body. “You’re a good boy, such a good, good boy,” she’d cooed, as if he were a dog who had just performed a difficult trick. “So much better than that nasty little Eve. She’s a whore, you know, in her designer dresses and expensive panties. Doesn’t matter how much they cost, the truth is, Eve’s underpants are always at her ankles. She’s a dirty little girl, believe me. Lying and panting and spreading her legs for anyone.”

He would lie upon his mattress, frozen, unmoving, sweating and nauseous, silently praying to God that she’d stop, that she wouldn’t lick away his tears and tell him everything was all right, that she wouldn’t slide under the covers and press her naked, bony body up to his. She’d told him displaying affection between a mother and a son was only natural.

But he’d known better.

Even then.

During those awful, debasing nights, he had called up Eve’s image. Bringing her, not Mother, to his bed. Eve the princess, Eve the beautiful, Eve the loved…

He’d tried to close his brain to the things that were happening to him, attempted to take himself to a faraway place safe from his mother’s sweaty, trembling hands as they caressed and fondled him. All the while he’d thought about Eve…How much better it would have been if she, the nasty little whore, had been in his bed.

And now, as he lay in bed, nervously biting his nails even though Mother no longer came to him, even though his nightmare of an adolescence was long over, he still thought about Eve. Constantly.

Eve the beautiful.
Eve the princess.
Eve the loved.
Eve the bitch.
The Voice had come to him early in the night, while he’d been sleeping dreamlessly. It had been clear. Concise. Reverberated without interruption from the tinny little voices of white noise that often preceded Its arrival. As he’d lain in the bed, the Voice had told him precisely what he was to do.

God had forgiven him!

But there was a price to pay.

An atonement.

And this was it.

The Reviver wouldn’t blow it again. His nerves jangled. He realized he was being tested.

He’d driven for nearly eight hours and arrived in the predawn, the neighborhood not yet waking, the streetlights glowing as he’d found the address.

She was inside.

Only her car was parked in the driveway, as the Voice had told him.

Boldly, he backed his truck into the driveway, confident that the Florida license plate he’d ripped off at an all-night dinner outside of Mobile wouldn’t be missed for a while. The tags were current, and that was all that had mattered. The owners of the Dodge sedan might notice the missing front plate in the morning light, but by then it would be too late to identify him. His mission would be accomplished.

He drew his gun, complete with silencer, and slipped into the backyard. The sliding door to the patio was unlocked. With a smooth whoosh, the door opened.

He braced himself.

No dog barked.

No alarm system began bleating.

But he heard voices…soft and low. Every muscle tensed, but he couldn’t give up, couldn’t flee. He looked down a dark hallway and saw the flickering blue light of a television showing through an open door.

Carefully he inched toward the master bedroom. A floorboard in the hallway creaked. He froze, expecting to hear someone shout or feet hit the floor, but there was no disturbance, just the voices from the television, dialogue from a movie. Cautiously he peered inside and saw the bed in the reflection of a mirror mounted on a wall.

She was lying on the mussed covers, her dark hair tangled over the pillow, her eyes closed, her mouth open. Soft little snoring sounds were nearly muted by the television. He pushed the door open a bit, slid inside. There were pill bottles on the table, next to a bottle of Vodka and a box of tissues. Wadded-up used Kleenex littered the floor and night table. Two of the pill bottles were open.
For an instant, he panicked.
What if she’d already tried to kill herself?
Oh no, that wouldn’t work, wasn’t part of the plan.
He couldn’t mess up again. God had been specific.
She had to be alive! Had to!

He stepped forward anxiously, and he nearly tripped over a shoe she’d kicked off at the end of the bed. His knee slammed into the footboard, and he bit back the urge to curse.

On the bed, she stirred. Lifted her head, pushed back her tangle of hair, and blinked. “Kyle?” she said, already reaching for the phone or bedside light. “Is that you, baby?”

He sprang.
His body landed over hers.

“Oh!” The air blasted out of her lungs.

In an instant she was fully awake, writhing, wrestling, trying to throw him off her as she opened her mouth to scream. One gloved hand covered her mouth. With the other he shoved his Glock to her temple, the barrel pressing into the flesh next to her eye. “No, honey,” he rasped, enjoying the fear that he saw in her wide eyes, the terror he felt in her stiff body, the pure, wonderful horror that was evident in the rapid rise and fall of her chest, “I’m not Kyle.”

“Found him,” Zaroster said. She stepped into Bentz’s office holding a memo pad. A triumphant smile creased her pixielike face.

“Ronnie Le Mars?” Bentz asked.

“Father Paul Lavender Swanson.”

“Lavender?”

“No wonder he became a priest,” she said dryly. “If anyone in high school ever found out, the poor kid would have been laughed out of school.”

“No wonder he became a priest,” she said dryly. “If anyone in high school ever found out, the poor kid would have been laughed out of school.”

“Or become the toughest guy on the football squad.”

“Maybe so. He’s in a nursing facility not far from here. Just across Lake Pontchartrain, in Covington.” She flashed him another grin and stripped a piece of paper off the memo pad. “Here’s the address. Still working on Ronnie Le Mars.”

Bentz was out of his seat in a second. “Tell Montoya where I am. He can call me or catch up with me there.”

“You got it.”

She returned to her desk. Bentz grabbed his jacket then headed through the maze of cubicles where other detectives were talking on phones, staring at computer screens, taking statements, and shuffling papers. He nearly plowed into Arvin Noon, a junior detective hauling in a suspect who reeked of whiskey and vomit. The guy’s hair was stringy, his clothes filthy, and his wrists were cuffed behind his back.

“This is Herman Tessler. Got caught trying to rip off a convenience store.”

“And?” Bentz asked. There had to be a reason for Noon to haul the suspect’s ass up to the homicide department,
though sometimes the big detective’s methods weren’t conventional. “Tessler claims he was at the Black Bird Restaurant the other night, combing through the dumpster, and he saw what went down between Officer Tiggs and a guy in a dark blue pickup. Says a bullet ricocheted off the truck, and that’s consistent with the shell casing found at the scene. Officer Tiggs’s gun had been fired.”

“But the bullet missed Tiggs’s attacker?” Bentz asked.

Tessler, the drunk, was nodding.

Too bad.

“I’m taking his statement then letting him sober up before I talk to him again. Show him some pictures, see if he can pick our guy out of one of our albums.”

“Why bother having him make a statement now?”

Tessler was obviously drunk.

The younger cop’s blue eyes flashed with a bit of defiance. “I just want to compare what he has to say. Sometimes inebriation helps bring out true feelings.”

“Sometimes it just brings out bullshit.”

“I’ll do this my way. All right with you?”

Bentz gave the younger man a long look. “Handle it however you want. Just let me know the outcome.” He didn’t have time to get into a pissing match with the junior detective. Let him work it out with Tessler. The drunk would sober up, make his statement, and that would be that. So Noon was a bully, so what?

He grabbed his sidearm, jacket, and keys, then patted his pockets to make certain he had his wallet as he hurried downstairs.

Once in the department parking lot, he unlocked the door of his assigned Crown Vic and was getting inside when he spied Montoya’s Mustang wheeling into the lot. Bentz flagged him down.

Montoya, his mood obviously as black as his goatee, jogged up to the cruiser. “Somethin’ up?”

“Father Paul’s in the St. Agnes Nursing Home in Covington.”

“Let’s go.” Montoya slid into the passenger side, and Bentz nosed the Crown Vic toward the freeway. Though the day was overcast, the interior of the car was warm. Bentz hit the AC as he blended into the thick of afternoon traffic. He headed north toward Metairie and the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, a twenty-four-mile bridge that spanned the vast estuary and ended up not far from Covington.

“I just came back from the hospital,” Montoya said, slouching down in his seat. “Tiggs has been upgraded from critical to serious.”

“That’s good.”

“Well, maybe. Part of his face is missing, and there could be brain damage. He’s lookin’ at tons of plastic surgery, physical therapy, and God knows what else.” Montoya glowered out the window, staring at the endless stretch of water as Bentz drove onto the causeway.

Pelicans skimmed the lake’s surface, and gulls, calling noisily, floated higher in the air. The sky had taken on the ominous hue of an approaching storm.

“Shit, man, Tiggs has a wife and two-month-old little girl. Two months! She’s so little, she probably doesn’t even recognize him. Now he’ll never be the same. Lose his job. Be on disability. Who knows if he’ll ever…Oh hell! It’s
all just bullshit, I’m telling ya. Bullshit!”

Bentz didn’t say anything, just let him rant. Everyone on the force had been in the grim spot Montoya was now occupying. It was part of the job. But it never set well. Never. From the console, the police radio crackled and sputtered, officers talking back and forth, cutting out over the static while the cruiser’s engine rumbled smoothly. Neither of them spoke for a while. Then finally Bentz said, “Sometimes this job can be a real bitch.”

“Yeah,” Montoya agreed. “And that’s on a good day.”

On the north side of the causeway, Bentz drove through Mandeville and along Highway 190 until they reached the outskirts of Covington. Once inside the city limits, it was only a matter of a few blocks before they found the parklike setting of the care facility, a newer two-story building that housed individual apartments and could only be entered by means of a code punched into a keypad or a buzzer that called an attendant.

They buzzed, showed their badges to a woman who appeared on the other side of the glass door, and were allowed inside the cheery edifice. She took them to meet the on-duty manager, Alyce Smith, a robust African-American woman with neatly cropped hair and half-glasses perched on her nose. She occupied a meticulous office filled with bookshelves, cabinets, and a huge desk. A Bible lay open on a stand, a crucifix dominated one wall, and windows overlooking a courtyard allowed some natural light to filter through the blinds and diaphanous panels. The room smelled of jasmine, compliments of an air freshener plugged into a wall socket.

Again, upon Mrs. Smith’s insistence, they showed their IDs and explained that they wanted to see Father Paul Swanson on police business.

“Just be cognizant that Father Paul is frail and tires easily. He also suffers from dementia, so I’m not certain how much he can help you.”

“We need to talk to him,” Bentz insisted.

“Please don’t upset him,” she said, flashing a smile that showed off a tiny gap between her teeth but did nothing to reveal any real warmth. She meant business. She hit a buzzer, and a girl of about eighteen appeared. “Sherry, please show Detective Bentz and Detective Montoya to Father Paul’s room.”

They followed Sherry along a hallway, trying not to notice the stares from the nursing staff and patients, some in wheelchairs, others with walkers or canes, as they approached an elevator. They silently ascended to the second floor then turned down a short hallway, passing a single window that overlooked the same courtyard they’d viewed from Alyce Smith’s office.

“He’s not always clear,” Sherry said. “It kind of depends on what kind of day he’s having.”

Montoya was accepting no excuses. “We still need to talk to him.”

“Of course.”

The studio apartment was furnished sparsely with a twin bed, dresser, television, and recliner. A large crucifix, identical to Alyce Smith’s, decorated one wall; a calendar with pictures of the saints, another. And again, the air freshener, to help disguise the smells of a body slowly dying.

The occupant, a tall, excruciatingly gaunt man with sunken features, was sprawled upon the recliner. He was dressed in a plaid shirt and cardigan sweater, slacks and slippers, no sign of a clerical collar. His eyes were closed, his mouth agape, and he was snoring softly over the muted tones of an announcer for a golf match playing on the television. “Father Paul?” Sherry said loudly.

The priest snorted and opened one eye.

“Father Paul? You have visitors.”

“What?”
“Visitors. These men are with the police,” she nearly shouted as he fumbled with his hearing aid.

“I don’t know any policemen.”

“No, they’re here to ask you some questions.”

“Questions?” he repeated. Blinking from behind glasses that made his eyes appear owlish, he scrabbled with one hand for the handle of his recliner, pushing the footrest down with some difficulty in order to force the chair and himself into a sitting position.

“Detectives Montoya and Bentz,” the aide said, pointing to each of the cops in turn.

“We need to talk to you about Faith Chastain,” Bentz said loudly. When Father Paul didn’t respond, didn’t seem to understand, he added, “She was a patient at Our Lady of Virtues when you were the priest there.”


“Yes.”

“It was a long while ago, wasn’t it?” He blinked up at Bentz as if he really didn’t know. Then he swiped at the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Yes.”

“Sad…Faith? Yes…yes…”

“But she had a baby while she was at Our Lady of Virtues, by a Cesarean section.”

“And Sister Rebecca, she died too,” he said, his face twisting with sudden agony. “Someone killed her. I read about it. A terrible thing, that. A pity.”

“Yes.”

“But she is with God now,” Father Paul went on, running a hand over his head and smoothing some wayward gray hairs over his bald pate.

“What can you tell us about Faith Chastain and the baby she gave birth to about twenty-eight years ago?” Bentz decided it best not to bring up the name “Adam,” the still-born issue, or the fact that Eve Renner’s DNA said she was Faith Chastain’s daughter. Even though Sherry had warned them that Father Paul was in and out of lucidity, and that much was evident, Bentz wanted to see what the priest could remember without being given every prompt.

“The child,” Father Paul said softly and gazed so long at the floor Bentz thought he was memorizing the pattern of the carpet. Finally he said with more clarity than Bentz would have expected, “I suppose it’s time someone knew the truth. Before anyone else is hurt.”

“Or killed,” Montoya put in. “Who was the baby’s father? And what happened to it? We found the coffin in the cemetery. Someone had dug it up, put a pig’s carcass inside.”

Father Paul winced. “So it’s come to this.” He rubbed his large hands on his knees. Guilt settled on his narrow shoulders, stooping them even more. “Faith was confused and active…. She had men to whom she bestowed favors.”

“She was abused by members of your staff and other patients,” Bentz corrected.

“But she wanted the attention.” He glanced out the window, where a wren was flying toward the roof.

Bentz and Montoya waited for more, but minutes passed with no further response. They exchanged glances.
The priest seemed fascinated by, even fixated on, the bird outside the window. The sky was dark and menacing. Raindrops began to pepper the glass.

“She wanted attention from whom?”

He started, as if he hadn’t remembered anyone was in the room with him.

“Faith Chastain. You said she wanted attention?”

“Father James. He counseled her.”

“James McClaren?” Bentz supplied, his gut twisting. The familiar name sent his mind down pathways he’d rather not travel. But it was imperative that he did.

“Oh, I don’t know…McCafferty?”

“McClaren.”

“Oh…Father James…yes.”

“He was assigned to the parish.”

Bentz felt Montoya’s gaze on him.

“Yes. No…Oh, for a while.” Father Paul was obviously troubled, his forehead wrinkling as he tried to call up the memories. “I think he and the woman, the patient…”

“Faith Chastain.”

“Yes, yes. That’s the one. She had a baby. No.” He shook his head, and one long, gnarled finger moved in the air as he thought. “She had two babies. I was there. They thought the boy child died.”

“He didn’t?”

“Oh no.” He shook his head thoughtfully. “It was just after the nurse left the room that the doctor…Dr…."

“Renner.”

“Yes, Renner. That’s it. He realized the baby was alive, and then the other one…The woman was in so much pain. There was nothing to do.” He looked up pleadingly then sat back hard in his chair. “I, we, vowed…never to tell. Never. I prayed about it.”

“Can you tell us about it?” Bentz asked, pulling up a chair.

He folded his hands and bent his head. “Yes…”

In fits and starts, with Father Paul moving from periods of clarity and guilt to cloudiness and what seemed total loss of memory, he told them of the more dark secrets within Our Lady of Virtures. It took nearly an hour to pull out the story, and they were left in silence, absorbing what the old priest had told them.

Father Paul revealed that when Faith delivered, two babies were born. The first was a boy, who was originally thought to have not survived the birth. He was born vaginally, the cord wrapped around his neck, and he was blue… but, “Miracles of miracles from the Holy Father, the boy child began to breathe.”

The discovery that the boy was alive had apparently happened after Nurse Chaney was excused from the birthing area. Then there were complications. Father Paul wasn’t clear, but it seemed from what he said that Faith had started to have more contractions, and the doctor had realized she had another baby to deliver. For another unclear reason, the delivery had been performed by C-section, though the nurse was not called back into the room. The hospital was ill equipped for that kind of procedure. The priest wasn’t sure if Faith knew she had delivered twins, only that she
was not “thinking clearly” and very “confused,” possibly “delusional.” All he knew for sure was that Faith thought she had one baby, a boy named Adam, who died at birth. For her, nothing else registered except shame and fear and desperation. “She confessed to me often and was always in tears, but I’m not sure she knew why she felt such overpowering guilt.”

Nor, it seemed, did Father Paul any longer. He could provide no information about the people who had adopted the boy, only that both babies were put with “people of strong faith.” The girl had ended up with Renner, but the boy’s parents and identity were a mystery. Father Paul recalled nothing of them, not even if they were parishioners, though he did mention that Dr. Renner took care of all the paperwork, whatever that meant. That was also how Renner adopted Faith’s daughter with no questions asked.

When the priest was asked about the grave where Faith’s child was supposed to be entombed, he sighed. “Another lie,” he muttered unhappily, rubbing his hands nervously. “To protect her from the truth.”

“Protect who?” Montoya asked.

The priest opened his mouth and closed it again. He seemed to drift into a place far away but finally whispered, “Everyone.”

They asked a few more questions. Bentz even brought up Ronnie Le Mars’s name, but they got nothing further, not the least flicker of recognition in his eyes. The old man seemed to have shut down. When the nurse came in with his medication, they left.

They took the stairs down and exited through the main entrance. Bentz wondered if the boy Faith bore might still be named Adam. His adoptive parents may have changed his name to make his adoption all the more anonymous.

At least now they had something to go on. Renner probably had fabricated some of the information, but hopefully he hadn’t switched dates or times of birth. There still should be some kind of record for them to find.

As they drove off, Montoya said, “Half of what the old guy said could be fantasy. Just in his mind.”

“Possibly, but enough of the facts agreed with Chaney’s.”

“Can you believe that crap? Hidden babies, falsified records, illegal adoptions? Who are these people who think they’re God and can just bend or break the rules to suit their needs because a kid, a damned human being, was inconvenient or even an embarrassment? Jesus H. Christ! All in the name of religion.”

“This has nothing to do with the Church. It’s people abusing power, thinking they were doing the right thing.”

“All to avoid a scandal. Unbelievable!”

Bentz glanced back in the direction they’d come. “Do you think Father Paul is safe? Sister Rebecca was at the birth. So was Terrence Renner. Both of them were murdered. So is there a connection, and, if so, what about Ellen Chaney and Father Paul? Are their lives in danger?”

Montoya pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “I’ll tell the FBI and the local authorities for Covington and in Ellen Chaney’s home-town.”

“Call Zaroster too and have her check vital records. Get a copy of Eve Renner’s birth certificate and see if there are any other birth records for boys who were born on the same day, in the same area. Anyone named Adam. That might have changed, but maybe not.”

“And about Father James…You going to tell Eve Renner you’re her uncle?” Montoya asked.

“Right after I tell Kristi she’s got a sister,” Bentz said flatly.

“There’s no way I’m going to be able to keep this from Abby so, let me know, will ya?”
Bentz nodded and flipped on the wipers.

The house was clean, the locks changed, and yet when Eve walked through the familiar rooms and hallways, she could feel her skin lift into gooseflesh. This, the home she’d loved, the place she and Nana had baked pies and cookies, the house where she’d felt on the top of the world in the turret room.

She glanced at Cole but didn’t say anything as she dropped Samson to the floor. The cat skittered up the stairs ahead of her, and Eve trudged up dutifully, steeling herself. She was glad for the sound of Cole’s footsteps behind her.

On the second floor, everything was the same as she’d remembered it. Nothing had changed, but in the turret room, when she pushed open the door and the clean and gleaming room greeted her, she still cringed. She’d bought new bedding, including a new mattress pad. Even so, in her mind’s eye, she still saw the bloodstains on the mattress, quicksilver images of her doll lying facedown on the coverlet, along with images of Sister Vivian’s body in the attic of the old hospital.

The doorbell rang, and she nearly jumped from her skin.

“I’ll see who it is,” Cole volunteered. He was down the stairs before she could protest. She hurried to follow him, and as she reached the first floor she spied Detective Bentz in the foyer. He was grim as ever, and Cole was still holding on to the edge of the door as if he intended to slam it closed the minute the cop left.

Bentz looked up at her, and she saw that whatever he had to say, it wasn’t good news. He barreled right in. “I met with Father Paul, who was the priest who worked at Our Lady of Virtues the night you were born. He confirmed what I’d already guessed: a priest by the name of James McClaren is your biological father. He’s also my half brother, so technically, you’re my niece.”

She stopped short. “Your niece?” He nodded, and she saw that what was about to come next was difficult. “There’s more.”

He sighed. “It’s a complicated story, but the long and short of it is that James McClaren also happens to be my daughter, Kristi’s, natural father.”

“What?”

“My first wife had an affair with my half brother, who also happened to be a priest.”

“Why the hell is that guy a priest?” Cole asked, his own disbelief evident.

“Good question. But too late. He’s dead.”

A dull roar started deep in Eve’s ears. “So I’m related to you and to Kristi on…on my father’s side and to Abby and Zoey Chastain on my mother’s?” She couldn’t believe it. She’d gone from being an only, adoptive child to a woman with three sisters and an uncle in one fell swoop.

“Are you kidding me?” Cole demanded as if he smelled some kind of trick. “What are the chances that Eve would be related to both you and Montoya?”

“Technically not Montoya. Only by marriage, if he and Abby tie the knot.”

They were all still standing in the foyer, the door open, the wind and rain slapping onto the front porch.

“Close the door, please,” she said to Cole.

“So, what does this have to do with the investigation?” he asked. “It’s interesting history, but so what?”

“We think Eve has a twin.”
“A twin?” Eve repeated, lips parting.

“A boy, now a man. A boy called Adam, who was thought to be stillborn. It was his grave we dug up at Our Lady of Virtues, but it was a fake.”

“Wait, you’re going much too fast,” she said, her head spinning.

Bentz said by way of apology, “It’s a lot of information. We don’t know how, but we think he might be a part of this. I thought you might want to know about it.”

“Yes…I do. Come in, Detective,” she said. They walked into the parlor, a room rarely used, and she waved Bentz into one of her grandmother’s Queen Anne chairs. She settled on a corner of the sofa. “Go on, please.”

Bentz launched into his tale while Eve listened and Cole, standing in the archway from the foyer, crossed his arms and stared at Bentz as if there was some kind of trap lurking in Bentz’s words.

Eve listened quietly. It was a wild tale. With her father right in the center of it. Was it really possible? Did her father and the staff at Our Lady of Virtues hide two births for twenty-eight years? She glanced over at Cole, who was glowering.

“So,” Bentz finished, “we’re trying to find your brother, see what he has to say.”

“And you’re linking him to the crimes somehow? As a killer or a victim?” Cole finally asked, the defense lawyer in him coming to life.

“That’s a question I’d really like to ask him.”

Bentz’s phone rang, and he looked at the screen, saw it was Montoya, and picked up. “Bentz.”

“Thought you’d want to know. The suspect that Noon brought in, Tessler, he picked Ronnie Le Mars out of the photo lineup.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“That’s not all, Bentz,” Montoya said, his voice dark with anger.

“What?”

“Tiggs just died.”
Eve was going stir-crazy. For the past three hours they had been working with a security expert from a local company. Cole wasn’t satisfied with the locksmith who had come and done his job. He was insistent that Eve have the entire house rewired for a security system. As soon as Bentz had left, he’d called the same company he’d used on the house he’d had to sell.

“I don’t even know if I’m going to stay here,” she’d argued, but he wouldn’t hear a word of it.

“Even if you sell, where are you going to live in the meantime? A hotel? For how long?”

“Maybe your friend Petrusky could find me a place,” she’d teased but had given in. And so here they were on the back porch discussing how much it would cost for the system. She heard her cell phone ring in the kitchen, where it was charging, while Cole told the guy exactly what kind of high-tech security he envisioned for a house that had, in all its history, survived without the aid of security cameras and laser beams and access codes. From Cole’s description of what he wanted, Eve was certain this old Victorian would rival the White House for a high-tech alarm system. “Seems a little over the top to me,” she’d confided in Samson three hours earlier when this had all started.

“I’ll be right back,” she said and hurried inside. By the time she reached the phone, it had stopped ringing.

She saw that the last caller was Anna Maria. She pressed return call but was thrown to her sister-in-law’s voice mail. She waited then called her own voice mail and heard the message from Anna, who, upon Eve’s advice, had returned to New Orleans and wanted to meet. Anna suggested a bar downtown and said she’d be there in fifteen minutes. Eve called her back immediately but again Anna didn’t pick up.

Sometimes high tech was nothing but frustrating.

She walked back to the porch, where Cole and the security guy were still hashing out the details of the new system, going over pages of several different models. “That was Anna Maria. She wants to meet me for a drink down at Gallagher’s.”

“Give me half an hour and I’ll come with you,” Cole said. “We’ll have this figured out then, won’t we?”

The security tech nodded. “Sure. Piece of cake.”

“Mmmm. Why don’t I go on down, and you meet me later. I’ll scope out how she’s feeling, you know, about everything, and once I see that she’s okay, I’ll call and give you the green light.”

He hesitated. “I don’t like you going out alone.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake, it’s just downtown.”

“Give us a minute, would you,” he said to the security guy as he shepherd Eve into the kitchen.

“No problem.” The man was flipping through pages of diagrams for a variety of systems.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Cole said, shutting the door behind him.
“Obviously, but I think I should see her. She needs a friend, and my brother is being a real jerk. She drove all the way back here because I asked her to.”

“She’ll wait a few minutes.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want you there. You’re not her favorite person, and this is probably just some kind of girl talk. I’ll call you the minute I get there and then again when it’s okay for you to join us.”

He shook his head.

“Look, Cole, you can’t keep me on this tight of a rein, no matter what the reasons. I get it that you’re worried. Really. And no, I haven’t forgotten what happened right upstairs or that there’s a nutcase on the loose, but I can’t live my life inside a cave.”

“I’m just asking you to be smart.”

She let out a huff of air. “So…how about this, and let me tell you, I don’t like it. You follow me down there, just see that I get inside safely, then vamoose before Anna spies you.” She heard her own words and rolled her eyes. “Oh God, that sounds so ridiculous. Like I’m some pathetic little woman who can’t handle her own life.”

“You’re just being cautious.”

“Yeah, and I’m letting some kook determine how I’m going to run my life!”

“Not a ‘kook,’ Eve, a killer. A sadistic, deranged serial killer who’s focused on you.”

She let out a long breath and met his gaze. “Sorry, Cole, I can’t live this way. I’ve got things to do. As soon as I know that Anna Maria’s all right, I’m going to call Abby Chastain and meet with her to discuss all this business about being sisters. After that, I’ll need to talk to Kristi Bentz. So you can handle the security system, okay? I’m pretty booked up today.”

He wasn’t buying her light and breezy mood. “This is serious, Eve.”

“I know, but I think I’ve got a couple of policemen watching over me. Even though I told Montoya and Bentz I didn’t want the extra security, I don’t think they listened.”

“Oh? Not that I wouldn’t think they might do something behind your back, but why do you think you’ve got your own personal bodyguards?”

She took his hand and led him upstairs to the turret room and ignored the eerie feeling that stole through her blood whenever she crossed the threshold. She guided Cole to a window that overlooked the neighboring street. “See that red Pontiac?”

He nodded.

“It’s been there for a couple of hours. Two people inside. Before that, there was a blue Blazer parked about two spaces down. It was there when Bentz was here.”

“How do you know it’s the police?”

“I don’t, but I’m willing to put fifty bucks on it. You watch, when I leave, if they follow.”

“It could be the killer.”

“Nah…not with two people.” She turned and pecked him on the cheek. “Face it, Counselor, the cops are watching our every move. So go figure out the alarm system, and I’ll keep in touch with you via cell phone.”

A muscle worked in his jaw. He obviously wanted to argue with her, but she was hearing none of it. She felt stronger today, ready to take on the world. Though the room still bothered her, she might eventually get over it.
Might.

She tore off her sling and tossed it onto the bed; her arm had quit hurting, and she was tired of having her movements restricted. After rotating her shoulder a couple of times and deciding it was working without too much pain, she changed into clean jeans and a red cotton sweater while Cole stood, arms crossed over his chest, eyeing her with disapproval. “I’ll call, promise,” she said and kissed him again. Then, before he could argue, she was down the stairs and out the door.

As she drove through the rain, she saw Cole still standing in the turret window, staring down at the street. The guys in the red Pontiac came to life. She turned the corner, passed them, and, in her rearview mirror, saw the Pontiac pull away from the curb and do a quick one-eighty.

Poor Anna Maria.

She had no idea Eve was coming with her own personal posse.

Anna Maria could barely move. Whatever the whack job had given her was taking effect, and her legs felt like rubber. Scared out of her mind, she was lying in the back of his truck, trying to keep her wits about her, alternately praying and trying to find a way to escape.

The prick had held a knife at her eye and forced her to make the call to Eve. Now she was lying in the truck, listening as rain pounded on the canopy and wondering if she’d ever see Kyle again. That bastard. Oh God, how she wished he’d come and save her…that someone would. And now she’d dragged Eve into this madman’s sickness.

She hadn’t seen his face. He’d worn some kind of neoprene mask, but he was big and strong and had attacked her in the bedroom, gagged her, bound her, and hauled her out to his truck, where she’d ridden for hours, her body aching, her bladder stretched to the breaking point.

He must’ve figured out that she’d have to pee because he’d pulled off into the woods somewhere, yanked down her pants, and watched as she’d relieved herself. She’d been so mortified, she’d almost been unable to go, but then nature had finally taken its course.

She’d been forced into the back of the truck again, onto the stained mattress, her arms once again bound behind her, but, as he’d pushed her inside, she’d caught a glimpse, beneath her blindfold, of the license plate mounted on the truck’s bumper. She’d immediately pressed those letters and numbers into memory just in case she somehow got the upper hand and escaped. Then he’d driven away again, and she’d listened hard, hearing the sing of the tires on the pavement, the rumble of the truck’s engine, and his voice droning as if he were chanting or praying, the words unclear.

She’d felt an increase of speed when he’d reached the freeway again and tried to remember how to make the vehicle noticed by other cars, how to communicate to the other drivers on the road that she was being abducted.

By a madman.

But bound as she was, she couldn’t move, could communicate with no one.

In her heart she knew the psycho who had captured her was the same killer who’d taken the lives of her father-in-law, Royal Kajak, and those nuns. Dear God, what could she do?

And she’d been weak.

She’d spent the next, long stretch of hours crying and praying. Then she’d felt the truck’s speed slow down, and the sounds of the traffic had changed. She knew that he’d driven her into a large city, most likely New Orleans. The truck stopped and started at several lights. Then he’d parked, and her heart had been a wild drum.

Was this it?
Where he planned to kill her?

Oh dear God, no!

Her mouth was dry as sand, her fear palpitating as she heard him climb into the back of the truck with her. It was so dark. So damned dark. He’d touched her, and she’d recoiled. Then she’d felt something cold and hard as steel, the barrel of a gun, now pushed against the underside of her chin. He’d told her what to do. And promised to kill her should she make one slipup. Too terrified to do anything but what he’d demanded, she’d made the call to Eve.

And so she’d lured her best friend into the psycho’s trap.

She’d thought he would kill her right then and there once Eve had agreed, but he’d lowered the gun and said, “Good girl” in a soothing voice that made her want to scream.

Then he’d slithered out of the canopy like the snake he was and locked her inside again. She’d yanked on the ropes that bound her, tried to bang and get someone’s attention, but the sounds were muffled by the mattress, the gag stopping her screams.

*Dear Lord, forgive me,* she prayed, fighting tears and mind-numbing terror. Desperately, she tried to concentrate. There had to be a way.

She had to save Eve.

Save herself.

*Oh God, please help me. Please!*

*So he hadn’t lied.*

Kristi stood in the cemetery and stared at the open pit where once there had been a casket. Just like her source had told her. She peered inside then pulled her digital camera from her backpack. The day was dreary and overcast, threatening rain, but it was light enough to click off a few pictures for the book. She imagined a section with photographs of the crime scene.

Which led her to believe she should really get some shots of the hospital. Before it was torn down. She knew there were a lot of pictures available; the place had been photographed hundreds of times. But she’d like a picture of Faith Chastain’s bedroom, and the stairs leading to the attic, where Sister Vivian Harmon’s body had been found. The attic itself, of course, Eve Renner’s house, and, if she could swing it, pictures of the cloister of the Our Lady of Virtues convent. That might be a tough sell because there were nuns living in the convent, people working there. She doubted anyone would just let her enter without some kind of viable excuse.

This is why it would be nice if her father would open some doors for her, use his influence.

She stared through the trees and the thickening shadows toward the convent and figured it would be a dead end. But the hospital, if she could scale the walls, shouldn’t be a problem.

She glanced to the menacing sky just as the first few drops of rain started to fall. It was dark as twilight already, so she’d have to work fast. She’d come prepared, not only with her camera but with a few tools, a strong flashlight, and, of course, her pepper spray.

She felt the slap of wind against the back of her neck as she looked through the gloom at the crumbling headstones, some of which had toppled, and the few family tombs that rose above the ground or cut into it.

If she let herself, she could be creeped out by all this, but that would serve no purpose. She took a few more pictures of the graveyard then climbed into her car and drove to the convent, searching for the access road she’d heard about from her father the last time there was a serial killer on the prowl near the old hospital. Supposedly there was a driveway that led to the garages and working sheds of the convent and a walking path that cut through a
hedgerow of arborvitae and led to a gate in the fence surrounding the hospital. This path had been used by the nuns of the convent and some of the gardeners and other staff as a shortcut.

Or so Kristi had heard.

Well, it was time to test the theory.

The rain was starting to come down hard enough that she flipped up the hood of her jacket as she reached the garage area, where a pickup was parked and a dumpster rusted in the rain. A hedge grew beside the fence line, and she walked next to the dripping evergreen shrubs until she spied a flagstone and an overgrown path that sliced between two of the tall bushes. As she stepped along the stones, wet branches slapped at her shoulders.

On the other side, she found a rusted gate hanging open. She stepped through, onto the campus of the hospital. Through a canopy of limbs just starting to leaf, she spied the dark roofline of the asylum.

Ridiculously, a chill swept through her, but she ignored any trepidation as she found her camera and started clicking off shots. She couldn’t let unfounded fears stop her. The rain was really coming down now, and she ducked her head and followed what had once been a trail through the thicket of pine and live oak. Her heart was pounding, and she felt a little as if she’d stepped into another world, a dark and forbidden path that wound through the pain and misery of the past. Closer to the hospital, she clicked off a few more pictures and considered the people who had lived here, who had been misdiagnosed, mistreated, or trapped in this monolith of an institution.

Her cell phone jangled, and she jumped, saw that her father was calling again and decided to keep ignoring him. He’d ask what she was doing, and then she’d either have to lie, which he always seemed to sense, or she’d have to tell him the truth, in which case he would come unglued and start in on his routine, discouraging her from writing the true-crime book.

She didn’t want to hear it.

For God’s sake, she was an adult.

She switched the phone to vibrate and continued. Once she had finished her business, she’d call him back. She’d heard the earlier messages about dinner, but she wasn’t all that interested, wasn’t going to change her plans to suit him. Nah, she was done with that.

*So what if he’s had a change of heart, what if he finally wants to talk to you?*

It could wait.

At least a few more hours.

Frowning, she kept walking through the wet puddles and damp leaves that had never been raked from the fall.

Closer to the asylum, she saw the decay. The crumbling mortar, the falling bricks, the broken windows, the encroaching weeds and vines. Once grand and imposing, the structure was now forbidding and bleak. Again she found her camera and trained her lens on the rusted-down spouts, freakish gargoyles, and black windows. What a creepy, almost hellish place.

It was great!

And the pictures were turning out better than she’d anticipated. There were still a few hours of daylight, though the damned rainstorm was turning day to night. She had to hurry.

So, how to break into this fortress?

She saw the windows near the back door had been boarded, and she knew she was probably wasting her time, but she walked up the back service entry steps, twisted on the knob, and, with only the slightest creak of old hinges, the door swung inward.
Kristi hesitated.

An unlocked door just didn’t seem right.

But maybe the nuns left it open, or maybe because of the last murder someone had forgotten to check the latch. It didn’t matter. As far as she was concerned, it was a godsend.

She stepped inside.

The rain was spitting as Eve parked in a spot as close to Gallagher’s as she could get. She made a mad dash through the drops and walked inside, where the after-work crowd was taking advantage of the happy hour and the dark ambience of the bar. Blue smoke hung near the ceiling, and the jazz combo, despite their heavy-duty speakers, was nearly drowned with the sound of conversation and laughter. People clogged the dance floor and waitresses bustled past while busboys cleared the tables. Not a great place to have a quiet conversation, but then maybe Anna needed noise and people and a singles scene.

A hostess was mapping out tables.

“I’m looking for a woman named Anna,” she said, nearly yelling. “I’m Eve.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ll find her.” Eve wended her way through the tables and booths, jostling dancers as she searched the smoky interior. Nowhere did she see Anna. She made another pass and then saw a drink, a cigarette in an ashtray, and a scarf and wet coat that she recognized as belonging to her sister-in-law. Even her purse was on the bench. What was she thinking? Anyone could pick it up. She searched the dance floor, didn’t see Anna, then decided she was probably in the restroom, which was just down a short hallway.

Scooping up Anna’s purse, she walked toward the restroom and was jostled by a big man heading in the opposite direction. The contents of the purse scattered.

“Excuse me,” he said as she reached down to pick up the pieces and he did the same. “Let me help.”

“No, I can—” His hand was over her mouth so fast she couldn’t scream, and something sweet and sickly smelling filled her nose and mouth. Too late she tried to scream, to fight, but her arms and limbs were already not obeying her, and the punches she threw glanced off him as he quickly dragged her past a janitor’s closet and through an open door to the back alley.

The rain was coming down in sheets, blown by a crosswind.

She tried to fight but could barely stand, her legs wobbly, her mind beginning to fog. She blinked. Tried to clear the cobwebs and stumbled a bit, just like she’d had too much to drink. She knew then that no one would stop and help her. No one even knew there was a problem. She looked like a drunken woman whose caring husband was guiding her to their car.

No! She tried to articulate, to yell at someone, but her words came out in a slur.

Then she saw it.

The dark pickup; the one she’d seen following her from Atlanta. She fought the effects of the ether and the urge to throw up, but it was no use.

She blacked out.
CHAPTER 34

The room numbers lined up. Bentz had spent most of the day running down friends and relatives of Ronnie Le Mars and drawing a rough sketch of the hospital, adding layers, lining up the floors, then doing research. Vivian Harmon, before joining the order, had been a patient at Our Lady of Virtues. Her room number had been 323, the same as tattooed on her forehead. And the area where her body had been found, the nook that Eve Renner had claimed as a child, was positioned right above 344, so, conceivably, to a twisted mind, Eve’s childhood play area could be considered room 444. Roy Kajak had occupied room 212 when he’d been a patient at the hospital. He’d known Ronnie Le Mars, as had Vivian Harmon.

His shoulders ached from too many hours leaning over the desk. Rotating his neck and listening to a series of worrisome pops, he thought it was time to call it off for the day. He’d planned to meet with Kristi and tell her about Eve Renner being her half sister, but he wasn’t looking forward to it. He needed something to bond him more closely to his kid, not drive a wedge further between them.

“It is what it is,” he told himself, stretching his arms upward.

“Hey!” Montoya shouted, then burst into the room. “I think we got the son of a bitch!” Montoya’s dark eyes glittered. “Le Mars,” he said, unable to keep from grinning. “We found him!”

Bentz was already reaching for his coat and sidearm. “Where? How?”

“Anonymous call to 911 from a pay phone in town. Someone claimed to know Ronnie, heard him bragging, says he’s staying in a bayou cabin about twenty miles outside of the city—get this—about fifteen minutes as the crow flies to Our Lady of Virtues. The place is owned by someone named Lester Grabel, deceased. Lester’s son Raymond just happened to be a cellmate of Ronnie’s in prison. We’ve already sent an officer to check it out, and the FBI will be there, but I’d like to see the look on this guy’s face when we nail him.”

“You think this is legit?”

“Good as anything we’ve got.”

“Let’s go.” Bentz was already around his desk. They hurried down the stairs together, and for once Bentz didn’t argue when Montoya said he’d drive.

They were in a department-issued Crown Vic, lights flashing, when a call came over the radio. The first unit from the state police was closing in and would secure the access road to the cabin. Within two minutes, a second unit would back them up. No one was entering until they received word from higher up.

Montoya sped onto the freeway like a bat out of hell. Lights flashing, siren screaming, he cleared traffic in front of him and never took his eyes off the road.

“Can it really be this easy?” Bentz asked. “An anonymous tip out of the blue?”

“Not exactly out of the blue. We’ve been beating the bushes on this one, contacting anyone who ever knew any of the victims and Le Mars. Someone finally decided to give him up.”

“Maybe.” Bentz was skeptical. But then, that was his nature. Always had been. He didn’t trust in coincidence or
happenstance or just plain good luck. In fact, he lumped all of the above in with the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny.

The sky was darkening, getting black as night, and what was at first just a drizzle started pouring, coming down in sheets, aided by the wind. Montoya didn’t slow. The cruiser’s tires splashed through the puddles and standing water, spraying up against the undercarriage and any vehicle he passed. Bentz popped a couple of Tums then dialed Kristi again. He’d been trying to reach her all day. He wanted to take her to dinner, talk things out, but now, he figured, dinner was out. He left another message, telling her there might be a change of plan, then hung up, not wanting to think how many times he’d had to cancel or postpone because of work.

Well, damn it, tonight it was important.

The first unit had reached the location; the second would be there in minutes.

“I can feel it,” Montoya said, his hands tight over the wheel, his eyes narrowing as he stared through the windshield as the wipers slapped away the rain. “This is it. We’re gonna get the bastard!”

Bentz hoped to hell he was right.

Cole checked his watch as the security guy drove off. Eve had been gone an hour and a half.

So what?

She said she would call.

He walked from the kitchen to the front room, glanced out the windows, and then headed back to the kitchen. She and her sister-in-law were probably deep into some kind of conversation. No big deal.

Nonetheless, he called.

She didn’t pick up.

Should he go down there?

His phone rang in his hand, and he felt a second’s relief, then read the screen and realized it was his attorney calling him. “Hello?”

“Hey, good news,” Sam Deeds said.

“Great. I could use some.”

“The DA’s dropping the marijuana charge.”

“I expected that. I was set up. We all know it.”

“Baby steps, my friend. Baby steps. But I’m working on all of the charges that have ever been filed against you, going to see if there’s a way we can get everything off your record. The partners are on board. They’re taking you on, pro bono.”

Cole wanted to say, “Big of them,” but held his tongue. True, the firm hadn’t stood behind him during the Royal Kajak mess, but he wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. If the partners at O’Black, Sullivan and Kravitz were finally going to do something for him, he’d take it. For now. “Great.”

“That’s all you can say? Hell, Cole, I’ve stuck my neck out for you, pushed these guys. And all you can say is ‘Great’?”

“If you’ve been reading the papers, you know I’ve got bigger issues.”
“I told you to stay away from Eve. And what was that nonsense of siccing her brothers down here to check on the will?”

“Doesn’t the firm have it?”

“Yeah, and they got the information they wanted, though they weren’t happy with it.”

“Cut out of Daddy’s will?”

“Essentially. But you didn’t hear it from me.”

Cole imagined that pissed Eve’s brothers off big-time. He glanced at the clock and couldn’t tamp down the worry that dogged him. He and Deeds talked a little longer, and then he hung up, tried to call Eve again, and decided enough was enough. Grabbing his keys, he walked outside, turned his collar against the rain, and headed for his Jeep.

He couldn’t sit around and wait.

He had to find out that she was all right. If that bothered her, it was just too damned bad.

Eve was in and out of consciousness, unable to keep her eyes open. Everything that had happened seemed as if it were a dream. She remembered being shepherded into a dark truck…and she hadn’t been alone. Anna Maria. She’d been there. Or had she? And after driving for a while, the big man had stopped and forced her to drink something, and then she passed out again….

Right?

She wasn’t sure.

Where was she now?

On a bed?

Where were her clothes?…No, this wasn’t right.

A blindfold covered her eyes, but it had worked its way up her forehead and she could peek beneath it…. Wherever she was, it was nearly dark, with spots of light…candles…Yes, candles…and someone was crying. No, chanting. No, praying. She tried to concentrate, to hear the murmured words of the rosary—yes, that was it—but someone was definitely crying. Who? Why? Where? Or was this all just a dream?

Cole.

She needed Cole.

But…

From beneath the edge of her blindfold, she saw him. A big, muscular man. Naked. His skin gleaming in the firelight. She couldn’t see his face, but his body was covered with scars, all kinds of scars…. No…not scars. Tattoos. Some had healed; many had not…. Numbers and names…Her name in large letters: EVE…

She knew she should be afraid.

She sensed the situation was dire.

A woman was crying, for God’s sake.

She tried to focus and started to drift again but caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror, a face she thought she recognized. Those eyes. Oh Lord, they were the same as they had been so many years before, looking down at her
with a lust that was as raw as it was evil. Fear sliced through her, but even that deep, visceral emotion wasn’t enough to stave off whatever drug it was that held her in its grip. She couldn’t keep her eyes open, couldn’t think.

Somewhere, far away, she heard a door open, but she was fading. The chanting stopped abruptly. The muffled crying ended with a long, tortured, muted scream….

And then there was nothing but the blackness that consumed her.

The hospital was getting darker by the minute. Kristi had spent a lot of time on the first floor taking pictures, walking the hallways and trying to imagine what the asylum would have been like twenty years earlier, filled with patients, uniformed staff, and the ever-present vigilance of the nuns in their habits.

It was time to leave, but she felt compelled to at least visit the floor where Faith Chastain had lived and died. The stairs creaked as she raced up them, and she felt more than a little creeped out by the stained-glass window of the Madonna on the landing, her beatific features seeming sinister in the dim light. The round window was unharmed, each colored panel intact, unlike so many of the other panes. She clicked off a couple of shots of the window then headed upstairs to room 307, Faith Chastain’s room.

The door opened with a soft whisper, and she stepped inside to an empty room with a huge dark stain on the floor. She pulled out her camera and clicked off several shots. Not all of them would be used, of course, but she’d rather have a ton to choose from, and she wasn’t certain when she’d be able to return. This was her chance.

Her phone vibrated, but she ignored it and headed for the end of the hall and the stairway leading to the fourth floor, where the dead nun’s body had been found. She tried not to let her imagination run away with her as she kept her flashlight’s beam steady on the dirty wood floor and found the linen-closet door ajar.

Inside, behind a wall of shelving, was another door. She unlatched it and shined her light up the stairs that wrapped around a chimney. Dozens of footprints from the crime-scene investigators, the detectives, and all kinds of law enforcement were visible.

Kristi felt more than a little apprehension, but she told herself it was now or never and started mounting the steps. It wasn’t until she was in the attic, sweeping the beam of her flashlight over the floor and rafters, that she spied the blood, a dark stain and smaller drips.

Her stomach turned over.

And there was something else…marks on the floor, probably made by the investigators. Every so often. Circles around what appeared to be holes in the flooring. Kristi leaned closer to one and peered through, to see one of the rooms below.

How odd.

And interesting!

She’d have to remember this.

She looked through a second hole and realized from the dark stain spread upon the floor that she was looking into room 307. Faith Chastain’s room. She felt a thrill. It was too dark to take any pictures now. She could barely see the rooms below. She’d just have to come back when it was light.

Tomorrow morning.

Hopefully the rain would quit.

She turned to head down the stairs when she heard a noise. The soft, distinct click of a lock being turned.

Her heart jumped to her throat.
Who would be coming to the hospital now?

She swallowed back fear and told herself not to jump to conclusions. Maybe one of the nuns had stopped by. Or a
maintenance man or gardener might have the key.

Or the killer. For God’s sake, he’s obviously been here before!

No, no…Don’t go there. Don’t let your imagination run away with you. Maybe you didn’t really hear anything. A
lock turning? Could you hear that clear up here? No way. The hospital is quiet, yeah, but you’re letting your fears
get the better of you.

A few floors down, a door creaked open.

Kristi froze.

She listened hard, over the thundering beat of her heart.

And then she heard footsteps.

Heavy and steady.

Inside the hospital.

The city was far behind when Montoya cut the siren and lights then peeled off the freeway and flew down the
two-lane road that sliced through the parish. Farmhouses were sparse, fields stretching into forest and lowland, the
smell of the swamp reaching into the car as the rain pounded. Bentz’s phone rang, and, seeing that it was the station,
he answered. “Detective Bentz.”

“Hi, it’s Lynn,” Zaroster said. “I thought you’d like to know that Cole Dennis called in. Apparently Eve Renner is
missing.”

“What?” Bentz said. “We had guys on her.”

“Yeah, I know. I talked to them, and their story dovetails into Dennis’s.”

“Which is?” he asked. The road narrowed, winding through stands of live oak, pine, and willow. Even Montoya
had to slow a bit.

“That she went to meet her sister-in-law at a bar named Gallagher’s. She was supposed to check in with Dennis,
and he never heard from her again. He got worried, so he went down to the place, and a hostess remembers seeing
her but doesn’t recall anything else. No one at the restaurant remembers serving her or her leaving. This is
confirmed by the officers who were assigned to watch her.”

“And where the hell were they?”

“Keeping a low profile, as the ‘subject,’ that would be the now-missing Ms. Renner,” Zaroster said with a bit of a
bite, “didn’t want any kind of police protection.”

“Did she meet anyone? Leave with someone?”

“We don’t know.”

Bentz tried to keep the anger out of his words, but he was furious. “What the hell do our guys say?”

“They knew she was in the bar. Watched her walk in. Then they staked out her car and the front door. They didn’t
realize she’d ducked out the back.”

“Son of a bitch. Son of a goddamned bitch! Look, put out a BLOF for her. See if Gallagher’s has a security
camera and get the tape if you can.”

“This could be just a matter of Eve Renner wanting some privacy.”

“I know, but I doubt it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

His stomach burned as he hung up.

“Trouble?” Montoya asked.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Eve Renner gave Cole Dennis and our boys the slip.” He ran a hand over his jaw. He didn’t like this, not at all.

Montoya missed a turn, hit the brakes, backed up, spewing gravel, then turned down the road and stepped on it again. Bentz’s phone rang again, and he saw the caller ID. “Hell. It’s Cole Dennis.” He felt compelled to answer. “Bentz.”

Dennis didn’t bother identifying himself, just said, “Eve’s missing. I just called 911. I thought you and Montoya should know.”

“I heard. We’re looking for her.”

“Wasn’t someone watching her back?”

“She didn’t want protection.”

“But you gave it to her anyway,” Cole accused. “We saw the cops parked just down the street.”

Bentz frowned as the gloom of the day seemed to seep into the interior of the cruiser.

“We thought it would be a good idea.”

“Well, it sure as hell wasn’t very effective. She left to meet her sister-in-law and then disappeared.”

“Where is Anna Maria Renner now?”

“I don’t know, Bentz, but you guys have to find Eve. You have to!”

“We will,” Bentz promised, but he had a bad feeling.

Obviously Dennis was angry. And scared. And probably riddled with guilt.

A few miles down the road, they spied a state trooper’s rig parked at the end of a long drive that was partially obscured by brush.

Montoya slammed on the brakes and the Crown Victoria shuddered to a stop. He was out of the car in an instant, with Bentz at his heels. The troopers had already sealed both the front and the back entrances to the place, which was little more than a shack hidden from the road by a long, weed-choked lane.

Bentz knew they should wait for more backup, or the FBI, or a damned SWAT team, but he was too hungry. This was way too personal. He didn’t want to chance Le Mars somehow slipping into the coming night because protocol wasn’t observed.

Through the storm, two state troopers ran to the back of the building and took up positions at the rear door. Bentz flattened his back against the cheap siding by the front door, while Montoya pressed against the wall on the opposite side of the door. Troopers covered the windows.
He waited.
Gathered himself.
“No signs of life,” Bentz said.
No light shined from any of the windows.
No smoke rose from the chimney.
“Nice and quiet,” Montoya observed. “Kind of spooky.”

Weapons drawn, Bentz nodded at Montoya through the dripping rain, then banged on the door. “Ronald Le Mars! Police! Open up!”

No response. Just the steady beat of the rain.
Bentz didn’t wait. He twisted on the door handle, certain it would have to be forced, and was shocked when the door swung open to a room as dark as death.

“Le Mars!” he yelled again as Montoya shot a look inside. “Ronnie! Give it up!”

“Police!” Montoya shouted.

Taking a deep breath, Bentz whirled through the doorway, hitting the floor, his weapon drawn. There was no light inside, so Bentz lay still, hardly daring to breathe, trying to get his bearings. He didn’t dare use his flashlight in case Le Mars was hiding and lying in wait, searching for a target.

“Le Mars!” Montoya shouted as Bentz’s eyes adjusted to the gloom and he saw the bodies. Naked and shadowy, lying faceup in front of the fire. His stomach lurched, and he felt something wet on the floor. Too thick to be run off from a leaky roof. He rubbed a thumb and finger together then lifted the substance to his nose.

Blood.
He was half lying in a pool of blood.
He climbed to his feet and, using his flashlight, exposed the bodies.

“Oh sweet Jesus,” Montoya whispered as, with his weapon drawn, he stepped into the room. “It’s Le Mars.”

“Yeah,” Bentz agreed, staring at the woman. “And Anna Maria Renner.”

“So where’s her sister-in-law?”

Bentz was already reaching for his cell phone. “Nowhere good,” he said, sick inside. “That’s for damned sure.”

Kristi hardly dared breathe.
She heard the footsteps climbing the stairs. Slowly. With a heavy tread. But never faltering. Over the sound of the rain peppering the roof and gurgling down the gutters. She swallowed back her fear and strained to listen, all the while trying to figure out what to do.

She had her cell phone…. She could call someone.

And say what? *That you’re hiding up in the attic of the old hospital? That you’re trespassing and someone else is here? Grow some damned balls, Kristi, and think, damn it. You don’t want to sound the alert until there’s a reason to.*
So she’d play it safe. Quietly she extracted her cell phone. It was still on mute and vibrate, so she didn’t have to worry about anyone calling her and the phone ringing. Biting her lip, she typed out a text message: I’m at OLOV asylum. Not alone. Send help. K. Then she picked two people to send it to. She just wouldn’t press the send button until she was certain she was in a dangerous situation.

The footsteps paused.

Kristi’s heart nearly stopped.

Had he heard her?

How?

She strained to listen, thought she heard a moan, and clenched her jaw so that she wouldn’t scream.

She doused her flashlight and wondered if someone outside had seen the moving beam through the few small windows that allowed natural light into this garret. That was ridiculous, right? No one ever came onto the property.

The footsteps started up again, climbing upward until she was certain he’d stepped onto the third-floor landing.

_God help me_, she thought and made the sign of the cross over her chest.

_Send the message. Send it now. It will take a long time before anyone can come here anyway. Send it!_”

He walked slowly down the hallway, and her eyes followed the sound, her gaze traveling over the floorboards that lay directly beneath the center of the attic. He slowed, and she heard the moan again as he switched direction, entering one of the rooms.

She crept silently to a spot directly above and knew that he’d entered Faith Chastain’s room. Without making a sound, she got to her knees and looked through the hole. Oh Lord, it was so dark, but she saw a shadow pass beneath the peep hole. More than a shadow: a large man, and he was carrying something. Oh dear God. She watched as he dropped a woman onto the floor.

Kristi pushed the send button on her phone.

Help would soon be on its way. She just had to wait for a few minutes, keep her head and—

She heard a trill, loud and sharp.

Somewhere a cell phone was ringing.

Echoing through the empty hallways of this hospital!

Oh dear God.

No, oh please, NO! It couldn’t be!

The footsteps stopped completely.

And the trilling ceased.

Kristi knew her message had been received.

By the man in Room 307.

By her contact in the police department. A. J. Tennet would know she was on the floor above him.

All her hope died.
Bentz wanted to throw up.

Once they’d found the light switches and illuminated the cabin, he’d been sick as a dog.

Fortunately the FBI was now on the scene, securing it, waiting for the crime techs, who were on their way.

Bentz looked over the cabin one last time. The naked bodies were still stretched in front of the dying fire, posed together. Anna Maria’s corpse was unmarked aside from a single bullet hole in the back of her head. Along with his matching head wound, Ronnie Le Mars also sported tattoos that were repeated over and over, inked into his body as well as scribbled across the walls of the room:

- Eve, 323, Renner, 444, Nun, Viv, Xanax, 101, evil, Kajak
- 212, Deified, Reviver, Dennis sinned, Live not on evil.
- Never even. Evil live.

The tattoos were all recent; no mention of them were in the file on Ronnie Le Mars.

“A real nutcase,” Montoya said, shaking his head. They were waiting for the crime-scene specialists, but time was slipping away.

As far as they knew, the killer might already have Eve Renner.

“Look at this place, it’s all wrong,” Bentz said, eyeing the cabin. Though parts of it were neat and organized, the rest was filthy, as if all that really mattered was the fireplace, a kind of shrine. He eyed the rosary hanging from the mirror and the blackened windows. He’d been at enough crime scenes to sense when something didn’t quite fit.

“This place doesn’t match our mastermind. Do you think Ronnie Le Mars was capable of pulling off all the killings? Getting away clean? The guy was a maniac.”

Montoya tensed. “What’re you saying? He’s our killer. The tattoos are evidence…” He stepped closer to the fireplace. “You think he had a partner.”

“I think he had someone calling the shots.”

“That’s a helluva leap.”

“I’ve read Ronnie’s file, talked to his parole officer and yeah, he was our killer, but something’s just not right.”

“Hey!” an officer shouted from outside. “We found the truck. Got a scratch on it consistent with a round.”

“Shootout with Tiggs,” Montoya muttered. “This is our guy.”

Bentz swallowed hard as he searched the room, carefully examining the mantel, mirror, and desk. He found tattoo supplies and patterns and again, a notebook with pages of pages of palindromes, as if the guy lived for them.
It still seemed wrong. A bad feeling ate at him, roiling his stomach. He eyed the bed. Carefully made. Obviously the man spent all of his time either at the fire doing God knew what or here in the bed. “Hey, hand me a flashlight.”

“Looking for bedbugs?” Montoya asked, grabbing a flashlight from a uniform.

“Maybe.”

On his knees he shined the harsh beam over the sheets, pillows, and quilt. When he peered under the springs, he saw it. “Jesus H. Christ,” he whispered. Hidden deep inside the springs and mattress, he found tiny speakers, some kind of receiver and electronic gadgets he didn’t recognize.

“What is it?” Montoya asked.

“I don’t know.” He glanced around, searching for a radio or stereo that would transmit to the speakers and found none. “I don’t get it,” he said, but the bad feeling that had been gnawing at him just got worse.

“So who killed them?” Montoya said, motioning to the victims. “Obviously not Ronnie as he’s now a vic. So who’s left? The son? Eve’s twin? The guy we can’t find?” He shook his head. “Why would he off Ronnie Le Mars?”

“Good question.” Bentz popped a couple of antacids and walked outside, where the rain was a welcome relief from the stuffy, hideous cabin. “Somehow he knew Le Mars was here. No one else did.”

“Except the anonymous caller,” Montoya pointed out, scratching at his goatee. They walked toward the cruiser, wending their way through the other vehicles that had arrived, including a news van.

Bentz was not in the mood. Fortunately a spokesperson for the Feds was fielding the questions of two reporters.

As they reached their car, Bentz’s cell phone rang. Caller ID told him the call originated at Our Lady of Virtues.

“This is Detective Bentz.”

“Oh, hello, Detective. This is Sister Odine, with the convent.”

She got right to the point. “Remember, you asked me to let you know if anyone showed up here? Well, I thought you should know there’s a car parked at the cemetery. A red Volkswagen Jetta, I believe. I have the license plate.”

“What is it?” Bentz asked, but he could barely hear the nun’s words over the crashing of blood pounding through his brain. She rattled off the letters and numbers of the plate, confirming his suspicions. The Jetta belonged to his daughter.

“We’re on our way. I’ll meet you at the front gate of the convent. We’ll need the keys to the hospital.” He climbed into the passenger side of the cruiser. “How fast can you drive to Our Lady of Virtues?” he asked Montoya.

“Twenty minutes,” Montoya said, firing up the engine. “Give or take.”

“Make it ten.”

“Why?” Montoya was already cranking the wheel and hitting the gas. “What’s up?”

The cruiser shot forward.

“Kristi’s there.” Bentz hit the speed-dial button for his daughter and waited. No doubt she wouldn’t pick up. For the first time in a long while, he sent up a quick, short prayer. Please keep her safe!

The phone connected.

“Kristi!” he said. “Kristi!”
But she didn’t answer.

The phone indicated he’d just received a new text message.

*I’m at OLOV asylum attic. Not alone. Send help. K.*

Cole drove his Jeep as if he were fleeing Satan himself. As the wipers tossed off sheets of rain, he mentally kicked himself up one side and down the other. Why had he let Eve go to the bar alone? He’d known it wasn’t safe. He shouldn’t have allowed her to bully him, and now she might be lost to him forever! Now, after they’d just crossed so many hurdles, when they’d finally come together. He thought of their last night of lovemaking, in the hotel, and his jaw clenched so hard it ached.

He had nothing to go on but gut instinct.

He had no weapon, just the tools in the back of his rig.

He didn’t doubt that she was with the madman, though he had no idea where he’d taken her or what he’d done to her. In sharp, jagged pieces, he remembered Royal Kajak’s mutilated body, then Sister Vivian’s naked corpse, and the doll propped on the bloody bed.

His only hope was to piece together the messages that the killer had given them, the clues. Palindromes and numbers, backward and forward.

Through the slap of the wipers, in quick tempo, he thought 101; 212; 111; 444; 323; Eve; Renner; Kajak; Viv; Nun; Dad.

He was certain the numbers referred to rooms at Our Lady of Virtues, and he intended to walk those rooms and decipher their meaning. Somehow he would piece together the clues. He had no other options, and time, he felt with every breath he drew, was running out.

Eve opened an eye.

Where the hell was she, and why was the darkened room spinning?

Lying on her back, staring upward at a high ceiling, she heard the beat of rain, steady and hard. Her headache was back, pounding in her skull, and as she fought it, images came back. Fuzzy bits of memory. She’d been abducted. At the bar. And Anna…Oh, God, was she dead?

She blinked hard, remembering the cabin and Ronnie Le Mars and a woman weeping…. then…oh, God! Someone had come in and shot them both then hauled her away. She’d passed out again, only to wake up here.

In the hospital.

He’d brought her to the mental asylum.

She realized now that she was in Faith Chastain’s room, lying on the stained floor.

For the love of God, why?

And where was he?

She tried to sit up, but her arms and legs were still uncooperative and useless.

*Try again, Eve.*

*It’s a situation of mind over matter!*
Concentrating, she willed her right arm to move.

Nothing.

_Come on, come on, don’t give up_!

She tried again, focusing and straining, and her arm slid a bit, though in no controlled fashion.

_Again! Hurry! Who knows how long he’ll be gone?_ 

This time she was able to get her finger to twitch, but that was it. No great show of strength, no ability to push herself upright, no chance of running.

_Then find a weapon._ 

She looked around frantically, but the room was empty.

_Don’t give up. Be creative, damn it!_ 

She looked frantically again, her gaze scraping every corner of the room. Nothing…Oh God…And then a little glitter near the hearth. Glass?

She started to try and move closer to the fireplace, but she heard something and froze.

Footsteps? 

Overhead?

In the attic. What was he doing up there? Spying down on her? Using the peep holes in the attic, the ones she’d used as a child. How ironic that someone now might be spying on her. No, that didn’t make any sense. What the hell was he doing up there?

She was going to die. She knew it. There was so much she had planned for her life, so many things she still wanted to do. Cole’s image came to mind, and she nearly wept as she realized how much she loved him and that, recently, she hadn’t had the nerve to tell him how she felt. She remembered making love to him, feeling his body entwined intimately with hers and how he’d whispered words of love as he’d pushed her hair from her face. But never had she told him how she’d felt.

_Fear of being hurt again had paralyzed her._ 

_How foolish she’d been._ 

_Now, she might never get the chance._ 

_A lump filled her throat, but she ignored it. She had no time for “could have beens” or “should have beens.” She had no time for anything._ 

_She looked again at the little bit of glitter near the fireplace. A piece of glass? Not much of a weapon._ 

_But better than nothing._ 

_He was coming for her._ 

_Krísti’s only hope of escape was down the very stairs he would ascend into the attic._ 

_His footsteps thudded as he ran down the length of the hallway. Hers were silent. While every instinct told her to run in the opposite direction, she quickly tiptoed to the chimney and melted against its far side, the rough bricks pressed hard against her back._
How could she have been so foolish? So stupid as to trust him?

She reached into her backpack and fumbled until she found the pepper spray. Then she waited.

And felt sick when she saw the beam of a flashlight. So much for hiding. So much for surprising him.

Not daring to breathe, she waited.

“I know you’re up here,” he said, standing in the doorway, sweeping his flashlight to the farthest reaches of the garret. In the illumination, she saw a rat scamper into a hole in the roof, and she bit back a gasp.

“You know, Kristi, you are such a tease. After everything I’ve done for you, now you’re going to hide?” There it was again, that sexy, cocksure tone that she found nauseating. “You know I’ve got Eve, don’t you? Your half sister.”

What? Half sister?

“Funny thing about that. She’s my sister too. Did you know that? My twin. She and I have the same father, you two share the same mother. How incestuous is that? We’re all just one, big, happy, sick family.”

Don’t listen to him. He’s talking crazy.

“What does he know all this? Her heart was pounding, her muscles strung tight. Don’t let him bait you. That’s what he’s counting on. Do not listen.

“I guess your dad never got around to calling and telling you the news. Maybe that’s because he’s not really your dad, now, is he? Old Rick is really, what? Your uncle? Isn’t that how it works? Your mother fucked around with a priest, right? Good old Father James. If only he could have kept his pants on.”

How does he know all this? Her heart was pounding, her muscles strung tight. Don’t let him bait you. That’s what he’s counting on. Do not listen.

“So the story is that your mother wasn’t the first woman that let the good priest into her panties. Oh, no. Father James was nothing if not persuasive and charming. Faith Chastain, a woman of…well, less than high moral standards, went for him too. Of course, it didn’t hurt that she was mentally disturbed. Did that stop the good priest? Hell, no! And bingo, she got pregnant. My mother, oh, make that my adoptive mother, she saw them, you know. Told me how Faith screwed the priest, really shook my mama’s faith.” He snorted as if the idea were absurd. “She considered herself a good, God-fearing Catholic, but it didn’t stop her from coming into my room at night now, did it?” he said, his voice rising with emotion.

Kristi felt her stomach lurch. She had to fight to keep from throwing up, to stay still and quiet. “So the story is that your mother wasn’t the first woman that let the good priest into her panties. Oh, no. Father James was nothing if not persuasive and charming. Faith Chastain, a woman of…well, less than high moral standards, went for him too. Of course, it didn’t hurt that she was mentally disturbed. Did that stop the good priest? Hell, no! And bingo, she got pregnant. My mother, oh, make that my adoptive mother, she saw them, you know. Told me how Faith screwed the priest, really shook my mama’s faith.” He snorted as if the idea were absurd. “She considered herself a good, God-fearing Catholic, but it didn’t stop her from coming into my room at night now, did it?” he said, his voice rising with emotion.

Kristi felt her stomach lurch. She had to fight to keep from throwing up, to stay still and quiet. “So what’s really interesting,” he continued, his voice causing her to shrink against the rough bricks, “is that somehow Faith managed to hide her pregnancy from just about everyone.”

The guy was nuts! Insane! Kristi swallowed back her fear. Tried to keep a clear head.

“So you see…You and I, we’re blood, little sister. I can call Father James ‘Daddy’ too!”

No. This was unbelievable. No friggin’ way!

He swept the beam across the floor again and stepped into the room. “Come on, Kristi. Where are you? Believe me, you do not want to make me mad.”

You are mad. Crazy. Insane! But there was a grain of truth in his words, enough fact woven into his fiction to give her pause and make the skin on the back of her skull tighten in revulsion.

He turned the flashlight toward the ceiling, as if he thought she might be in the rafters. She clenched the pepper
spray in a death grip.

He took one more step, and she sprang.

Just as he turned and shined the light right in her eyes. Blinding her.

“Stupid girl,” he muttered, and she blasted him with the spray, shooting a stream straight into his eyes.

He dropped the flashlight. It rolled onto the floor, shining in a wide arc.

For the first time, she saw the gun.

Pointed straight at her heart.

He was coughing. Tears streamed from his handsome face, but he didn’t seem to mind. He grabbed hold of her arm and forced her down the stairs, the gun pressed into her back.

She thought he was taking her to the third floor, but he pushed her farther and farther down the stairs, through the foyer on the first floor, past the dining room, and into a horrible place that was once the kitchen. Near the back door, he prodded her around the corner, where he yanked open a door to the basement.

Her heart sank, and she nearly stumbled on the stairs and half fell into a long hallway. Kerosene lamps had already been lit along the tiled corridor. They passed by darkened rooms that looked more like cells, and Kristi’s imagination ran wild as she thought of the patients who had been isolated here, below ground.

“Stop,” he said and nudged her into a room where a lantern burned and ancient tools and equipment hung from hooks screwed into the molding tile. She spied an electrical prod, a straitjacket, and a tray of time-dulled surgical instruments. Lights protruded from the ceiling, and she imagined the room had been one where surgical procedures had been performed. Her stomach churned.

A. J. plucked a grimy straitjacket from the wall. While pointing the gun at her head, he held the jacket out to her with his other hand and said, “Slip your arms through.”

“No.” She shook her head, her skin crawling at the thought. “I can’t.”

“Do it, Kristi, or I promise you, I’ll shoot you. Not in the heart to begin with. I’ll start with your femur, shatter the bone. Then I’ll shoot you in the hand.” He smiled through his tears and running nose. “Consider yourself lucky. That’s as sadistic as I get. If you would have run into my buddy, Ronnie Le Mars, he would have brought his knife. Done exactly what I told him to do. He thought I was God, did you know that? I had to look long and hard to find someone with ties to the hospital, someone who remembered Eve, someone who was psycho enough to play into my hands. And along came Ronnie. Released from prison. Someone I knew about from my mother who worked in the laundry at Our Lady of Virtues. I kept track of him, because he was perfect, and when he was released, everything I worked for could happen.” His eyes, still red and glistening with tears, actually gleamed, and he smirked with satisfaction. “But you won’t have to worry about Ronnie or his weapon of choice, because I put him out of his self-inflicted misery.” His face suddenly hardened again and he sniffed loudly. “I won’t hesitate to put you out of yours, so do as I say. Got it?”

Ronnie Le Mars was dead? Killed by A. J.? Stunned, she had to keep trying to make sense of this, find a way to best him. Desperate, she tried another tack. “I thought you were my friend.”

“Brother, Kristi, get it right,” he said, angrier than ever, his nose still running. “No, we were never friends. You were using me, that was all, and I saw through it from the beginning. But it worked for me, so I went with it.”

“And used me,” she said.

“Yeah, how’s that for irony?” He shook the straitjacket. “Put this damned thing on. Now!”

She didn’t move fast enough, so he took the gun and fired it point blank at the wall.
BLAM!

The shot cracked in her eardrums and split the tile.

“Watch out! The bullet could ricochet!” she yelled, jumping backward. He caught her with the hand holding the gun, wrapping one strong arm around her and forcing the sleeve of the straitjacket on her with his other hand.

She started to struggle until the gun barrel pointed at her, cool against her cheek. He was a cold-blooded killer. She believed that.

Once her arms were inside the sleeves, he set down the gun and tightened the straps, forcing her to hug herself, rendering her hands and legs useless. Dear God, what did he plan for her? She felt helpless and knew if she didn’t do something, she would die.

*But your legs are still free…. Don’t give up. Remember. Never give up.*

Crack!

A gun blasted.

Eve screamed. Sweet Jesus, what was happening? She shuddered to think.

She could only assume the monster had murdered someone. Possibly someone she knew.

Her stomach quivered and her head pounded. Trembling, she tried to somehow hold onto her thoughts. *Think, Eve, think! Save yourself. Before he kills again!*

One. Two. Three…

She had no idea why he hadn’t killed her yet, but she knew that it was only a matter of time, probably minutes rather than hours, until he’d end her life as well.

Unless she did something…took action.

Heart racing, she tried to swallow back her dread and think.

Four. Five…

She’d heard two sets of footsteps walk down the stairs. Whoever had been hiding in the attic had been caught. And killed. Holy Mother Mary, she couldn’t imagine who would have been in the garret or why. One of the nuns? Someone hiding, seeking shelter, a homeless person? Or someone she knew?

But now, she was certain, it was her turn.

*Dear God, help me…. Please, please, help me!*

*Pull yourself together, Eve. You’re not dead yet!*

Six. Seven. Eight…

Slowly her limbs began to tingle and ache. She could flex her fingers, straighten her toes…. She gritted her teeth, forced her arms and legs to drag her. Slowly. Inch ing. Her muscles rebelled, not listening to her brain. *Come on, come on! You can do this! You have to!*

With supreme effort, she started to move. Muscles straining, screaming in protest, she pushed herself ever so slowly across the grimy, dusty, blood-stained floor. Closer and closer. Toward the fireplace where she’d seen the glittering piece of glass.
Let me get there, please.... Please...

Her hand closed around the sharp-edged fragment.
Cole parked at the front of the hospital, pulled out a pair of bolt cutters from his toolbox, and went to work on the chain that held the wrought iron gates together. Rain poured down his neck and the wind slapped at him as he worked.

“Come on, come on, you bastard,” he said, his jaw set, his shoulders and arms pushing, straining. “Come on!”

Crack!

He heard the muffled report of a gun and then, faintly, a woman’s scream.

Eve!

Adrenaline fired his blood.

Don’t go there!

He couldn’t think that she’d been shot. Wouldn’t. He pressed hard again, his arms shaking, and the metal link snapped. The chain gave way, slithering like a dying snake to the ground. Cole shoved hard on the gates, and, with a horrific groan, they opened. In an instant he was through and running up the drive.

He couldn’t lose Eve.

Wouldn’t!

Oh, God!

Once before he’d seen her lying in a pool of blood, a gunshot wound at her temple. But not this time. Oh God, not this time!

The monster returned.

Holding a flashlight in one hand, he pointed a gun at Eve and grabbed her by the shoulder she’d injured earlier. “Come on, let’s go. You should be able to walk now.” He yanked her to her feet, and pain screamed down her arm. Still, she held on to the shard of glass, hoping beyond hope that he wouldn’t notice her fist was clenched. Dozens of questions raced through her mind, but she asked none, instead pretending to be duller than she was, a zombie.

Face red, eyes gleaming with evil malice, he was sniffing, snorting, and coughing as he prodded her with the gun to the stairs.

“Move it!” he yelled.

Her legs were still unsteady, and she had to catch herself on the railing, cutting her hand in the process. Still, in the darkness, blinking as if he’d been crying, he didn’t notice, not even when blood began to drizzle down her fingertips and onto the stairs.
Give me strength, oh, Lord, please, give me strength.

Down to the first floor and then around the corner and through the kitchen to the basement steps where he unlocked the door. She cringed inside, her blood running cold as death. Oh, how she hated dark, dank places. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as he pushed her down the creaking, filthy steps.

Don’t let your fears get to you…

One, two…

With the gun at her kidneys, he locked the door behind him. His flashlight aimed over her shoulders, illuminating the cobwebs and filth as he shepherded her to the basement. Quivering, her skin pimpling in fear, she walked along a long corridor lit by kerosene lanterns, their golden light glowing, dark smoke curling to the low ceilings and the smudged tile walls.

Eve could barely breathe. Her heart thundered in her ears and the glass cut her hand, but still she stumbled forward past rooms where unspeakable operations had taken place. If she listened, she thought she could hear the desperate, raw whispers of ghostly patients.

She swallowed hard, closing her mind to the horrors that had occurred here. “Stop,” he ordered halfway down the shadowy corridor, and she froze.

He unlocked a door and as it creaked open, he nudged her inside with the nose of his gun. But he didn’t lock the door, she noticed, as the lock was only on the outside, in the hallway, used to keep people inside.

Another woman was waiting, standing, wearing a filthy straitjacket where a single lantern illuminated the room.

“Isn’t this cozy,” the maniac said, sounding pleased with himself over the drip of rusting, ancient pipes. “I assume you two have met…. No? Oh, that’s right. Kristi, meet your half sister, Eve. And Eve, have we met? Do you know who I am?”

She didn’t respond.

“Oh, come on, now, Sis,” he said, obviously enjoying her confusion. “Tell her, Kristi.” Then before the girl could say a thing, he added, “I’m A. J. Tennet, actually Adam Tennet. Get it? Adam and Eve? Like some kind of great cosmic joke, the gods, or really your father played on us.”

In the semi-dark she stared into eyes that were as cruel and cold as they were like her own.

Her twin! The brother she hadn’t known existed!

“That’s right. You’ve got it. We came into the world, right here, in this hospital. Together. Trouble was, Dr. Renner adopted you, and he tossed me out in the garbage, handed me over to a couple who didn’t give a crap about me, especially once they suddenly got fertile and had kids of their own. So you were the lucky one, weren’t you, princess?”

He was psychotic. No telling what he planned to do, but no doubt it was demented and evil. Death lurked around the corner. Don’t give up. Fight him! He thinks he has the advantage. Her fingers tightened over the shard of glass.

He reached for another straitjacket, but as he pulled it down it fell apart in his hands, the ancient cloth disintegrating. “Fuck!” he said. Then, to Eve and Kristi, “Sit the fuck down!”

He’s unraveling, right before my eyes, like the straight jacket. If things don’t go exactly as he plans, he falls apart…

Both women slid slowly to the floor.

He wasn’t through raving, and though Kristi tried to meet Eve’s eyes, Eve stared straight at this abomination who
was her twin.

“Yeah, my mother, Lara Tennet, she was a piece of work. A real sweetheart. She taught me everything I know about women.” He said it with disgust as if it brought a bad taste to his mouth. “Whoring cunt. If you knew what she did to me. Her own damned son.” He was furious now and something more…. Beneath the anger there was another emotion visible…Self-loathing?

“And you, Eve,” he snarled. “The princess. Good old Mom told me all about you. Couldn’t give it up. She was fascinated.” He came closer then, bending down, staring at her with a lust and envy that scared her to her soul.

Pretend. Act like you’re not with him. Maybe he will let his guard down.

“You don’t know how many times I heard about you. I’d love to fuck the hell out of you. But I don’t think that’s possible and besides….” He was shaking now, his gun trembling in his hands.

Oh God, it could go off at any second!

“I—I don’ unnerstand,” she said, as if she were still more woozy than she felt. She wanted to keep him talking, hoping that he would slip up, his attention diverted, if only for a split second. Then she’d attack.

“Of course you don’t,” he said, nibbling a fingernail. “You didn’t have to join the army to get away from your mother, did you? You didn’t have to depend on the government to buy your education for you. You didn’t have to fudge on your application and hope that it would get through. You didn’t sweat that the police wouldn’t accept you into their ranks.” He tore off a nail in his teeth and sank to the floor, his gun still trained on her. “I’ve been planning this a long time, you know, but I had to wait until the time was right, until Ronnie got out of prison.”

Adam grinned then and whispered in a raspy voice, “Heeee’s freeee…”

Eve’s skin crawled, and he saw the reaction.

“Oh, I know you thought I was talking about Cole Dennis…. Nope. It was Ronnie. I needed someone who would do my dirty work, and who better than nutcase Ronnie? You may not know this, but he had a real hard-on for you, Eve. Um-hmmm. Planned to fuck the hell out of you and then kill you. You won’t have to worry about that now.”

He leered at her as if he imagined what it would be like to rape her, but something held him back, something ridiculously tied to sanity. “Ronnie thought we were doing God’s will.”

“How do you know that?” Kristi demanded.

“Because I’m God,” Adam said, still staring at Eve. “The Voice, I think he called me. I had it wired so that I could talk to him at night, tell him what I wanted him to do. He heard other voices as well, whispery conversations that made him think he was insane. It was sick how he begged and prayed for me to come to him. He was the Reviver, that’s the name I gave him. Told him he would be deified and because I’d planted the seed, another gift from Mom and her sick palindromes, he was convinced that he was doing God’s work, God who thought backward and forward. ‘Reviver’ is a word that goes both ways, same with ‘deified’ and ‘Eve,’” he said, looking straight at her. “And the numbers tattooed onto the victims? Room numbers from the hospital. Even Sister Viv stayed here.”

Eve swallowed hard. He was sicker than she imagined.

Kristi said, “You told him who you wanted killed?”

“Yeah, and as I said, I worked palindromes into the equation and that started with Mom, too. Ronnie saw her tattoo Faith’s head with ‘live’ all those years ago. She knew Faith had been screwing around, and so she upped Faith’s meds, made her woozy and tattooed her. ‘Live,’ but really ‘evil.’ And then, on top of it all, Mom and Dad adopted me, all under the table. She told me this, you know, right before she overdosed on her own meds, poor woman. That’s why I had to steal all the files that were hidden here, in the attic, so you wouldn’t guess Mom’s death was connected to Our Lady of Virtues.”

He grinned as she realized he’d started the killing with his own mother.
He’s proud of himself. Bragging, Eve realized, sick at his story and filled with a colder fear. He’d accomplished whatever it was he thought was his mission, so now he had no goal, no reason to live, no reason to keep either Kristi or her alive.

The hand holding the gun was more relaxed, but he still gnawed on the fingernails of the other hand, nervously chewing. He was volatile, liable to snap at any minute.

“Don’t you want to know how you ended up with two sets of sperm in your vagina, Eve?” he asked, and she forced herself to roll her eyes at him, her head lolling. “That was my idea. Ronnie actually did the honors. He had no problem getting off on you.”

She nearly threw up at the thought of the maniac with the needle.

Sensing her revulsion, he grinned. “Don’t fret, princess. The Reviver didn’t touch you. I did the lab work myself, added his sperm to the rape kit.” His watering eyes gleamed as he leaned close, adding, “So they’d all know you’re a whore, just like our mother.”

She fought the urge to attack, to leap across the room and pummel him with her fists and slice his face with her measly weapon. But it was no match for a gun. She glanced at Kristi, who was watching his every movement. If only she could convey her thoughts to Kristi.

Not yet….Wait…. He’s letting down his guard. Maybe we can some how get the upper hand and if not kill him, lock him inside his own prison!

“So you see, sisters, I think we should all go out in a blaze of glory. As much as I’d love to fuck you both, we don’t have time, and that would be the ultimate sin, wouldn’t it? In another lifetime,” he whispered, and Eve felt as if the grim reaper had just slid his fingertips down her spine.

Adam glanced over at Kristi. “You know, you weren’t a part of this until you came snooping. I really was going to let you write your damned book, but once you tried to call the cops on me, well, I figured you deserve the same fate as the princess. Especially since you called in the cavalry. So…we all die. Become martyrs. We, the illicit spawn of Father James. Fitting, don’t you think? Listen…”

He cocked a head as if to focus on sounds, and Eve heard it then, the sound of footsteps, running overhead.

Where was she?

Oh God, where was she?

Heart pounding, pulse thundering, his hand bleeding from the window he’d broken to get in, Cole raced through the old hallways and stairs of the hospital. Up, up, up to the attic. Surely that’s where the son of a bitch would take them. To Eve’s retreat as a child, where the doll and Sister Vivian had been found. Frantic, he eased around the chimney, his heart in his throat, his gut churning.

Eve! Hang on, darlin’! I’m coming. Oh please, please hang on!

Around the corner and into the attic, a desolate garret where the rain pounded on the roof and the interior was still as death.

Where are you, you bastard? Cole thought, frantic as his gaze scraped the deep umbra and every cranny. Where!

His mouth dry as the Sahara, he stepped across the floorboards and heard the rush of the wind and scream of sirens.

No one leapt at him.

No one shouted.
He didn’t stumble over any bodies.

No one was here…. So where, damn it, where in God’s name was she?

Back down the stairs and, quickly, silently, searching every room. His heart hammered and fear tore through him as he ran, feeling every second of Eve’s life tick away as if it were her last.

Montoya stood on the brakes, and the Crown Vic screeched to a stop right beside Cole Dennis’s Jeep and the worried form of Sister Odine, who was huddled under an umbrella. Rain pelted from the sky, dark and ominous as a curse.

“I just got here,” she said, eyeing the Jeep as the officers sprang from their vehicle. “I have no idea who this belongs to or who opened the gates.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bentz said, eyeing the bolt cutters and clipped chain. “You’ve got the keys to the building?”

“Yes.” She singled out one key and handed the ring to him then saw the blood covering his shirt. “Oh, my.”

“Not mine,” he assured her, snagging the key ring.

“Thanks. Now, please, Sister, go back to the convent and stay there. I’ve called for backup, but please leave. Now.”

“God be with you,” she whispered then made the sign of the cross. Holding her umbrella against the wind, her skirts billowing, she started back to the convent just as sirens screamed from a distance.

Bentz didn’t wait. Weapon drawn, he ran up the cracked, wet driveway and heard Montoya’s footsteps as the younger cop kept pace. Past the overgrown lawn and empty fountain, through the sheeting rain, they raced toward the behemoth of a hospital that rose sinister and dark, a malevolent brick beast where only evil resided.

Bentz’s heart nearly froze.

Kristi was inside.

In the attic.

And not alone.

With the killer!

*God help her*, he thought, reaching the doors and jamming the key into the lock. His fingers were wet and the metal was slick, but the latch gave way. With a groan, the huge doors swung open.

“Hear that? Didn’t I tell you? We have company,” Adam said as the sound of footsteps echoed from above. “Time to end it.” He was agitated. Edgy.

He glanced toward the ceiling as he stood up, and in that instant Eve nodded sharply at Kristi then sprang, her arm raised high, the piece of glass cutting into her palm.

She struck.

Hard.

Blood spurted from his neck.

Rained on her.
Adam bellowed, shocked. Twirling, he fired. The gunshot echoed like thunder in the small room, a bullet zinging past her head.

Kristi rolled, using her entire body to whip his legs out from under him. A. J. fell hard, landing on his back. He shot again, wildly.

Hot pain sizzled through Eve’s thigh.

Kristi kicked hard, landing a blow to the side of his face.

He screamed. Rage and agony reverberated through the room. Footsteps thundered on the stairs.

_Hurry, hurry, hurry!_

He bobbled the gun, but somehow held on, blood streaming down his neck and staining his shirt. His eyes were wild, his rage palpable. He turned the muzzle on Kristi.

“Bitch!”

Kristi kicked again, trying to knock the weapon from his hand and knocked over the lantern. Kerosene and fire crawled across the room.

_Blam!_

The pistol went off again, the noise like thunder.

Kristi crumpled.

Voices shouted from outside in the hallway.

“NO!” Eve screamed, staring in shock as she realized the bastard had killed her sister. The sister she’d never gotten to know. Eve whirled on him, her gaze locked with his as flames began to spread. “You bastard!”

“Like you,” he gasped, winded from the blow, but still hanging onto his weapon. “Like you, princess!”

Someone pounded on the door. “Police, open up!”

Slowly, deliberately, unafraid, he raised the gun again. Staring down the barrel, Eve knew this was what he’d planned all along. In the puddled kerosene, fire crackled around them.

“You and me, Eve. We came into the world and we go out together!”

“Open the damn door! Now!” Bentz’s shouted urgently.

_Crack!_

Wood splintered. The door to the cell burst open the same moment the gunshot echoed.

Bentz fired.

Point blank.

A second later he rushed into the room, Montoya on his heels, Cole a step behind. In time to see the killer slump over and drop his gun.

“Get them out of here. Shit! Fire! For Christ’s sake, get extinguishers! There’s a fire here, damn it!” Montoya yelled. “Jesus Christ! It’s Tennet!”

Eve nearly fainted.
But Cole was suddenly beside her, pulling her into his arms, kissing her hair, cradling her protectively. “I thought
I’d lost you,” he said, holding her as if he’d never let go. “I thought…Oh God.”

Tears sprang to her eyes and she broke down, clinging to him as EMTs and cops streamed into the small room. “I
love you,” she sobbed against his ear. “Damn it, Cole Dennis, I love you.”

“Move it…Sir, please,” an EMT said. “I need to get in here!”

“Over here! She’s bleeding out!” another voice said. “Call Life Flight. Where the hell is the fire department!”

“Life Flight? Wait,” Rick Bentz said at Kristi’s side. “This is my daughter! She’s going to be all right!”

“Move, sir. Get out!”

“But she has to be all right,” Bentz insisted. “Kristi!”

“Out of the way, Detective.” The EMT was all business. “And get the damned chopper!”

Hours later, Olivia met Bentz at the hospital. “Oh God, Rick,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

He crushed his wife to him, drank in the smell of her and wanted to break down and bawl like a baby. “She’ll be
okay,” he said and realized it was his mantra, that if he said it over and over long enough, he’d believe it.

Kristi had been in surgery for three hours…and he hadn’t heard word one. He didn’t know the extent of her
injuries, just understood that it was bad. Real bad.

Images of her life floated through his brain, and he couldn’t even consider what his life would be without her.
They’d been through so much together, good times and bad. Sometimes it had been them against the world, other
times it had been them against each other.

He knew now that Adam Tennet had been hired by the department and never should have been. That the guy had
sailed through all the tests given him and somehow made it in, literally falling through the cracks in the system to
gain employment with Bonita Washington’s crime scientists. He was a whiz kid who had fooled everyone. He’d
been with the department less than a year and had managed to set his sick, twisted plan into motion.

Was it over now? All the sickness that had come out of Our Lady of Virtues Hospital? Was it truly and finally
over?

Only if Kristi survives, because if she doesn’t this will be your curse for the rest of your life.

He squeezed Olivia hard and fought the tears as he twined his hands in his wife’s lustrous hair.

“She’ll be okay,” she whispered as the doors to the operating rooms swung open and a woman not much older than
Kristi walked through. Wearing surgical scrubs and a grim expression, she approached.

“You’re Rick Bentz?” she asked, and Bentz felt his insides shatter into a million pieces.

“Yes.”

“You’re Rick Bentz?” she asked, and Bentz felt his insides shatter into a million pieces.

“Yes.”

“You daughter’s had a tough time of it but she’s a fighter. We lost her twice during surgery, but we were able to
get her heart started again.”

He felt the blood drain from his face as the doctor rattled off the injuries Kristi had sustained and the procedures
she’d suffered through. Essentially what it all came down to was that one bullet had hit her in the gut, rupturing
several organs, all of which had to be surgically repaired. Another bullet had ricocheted and scraped across her
temple, and there was a possibility of brain damage.

“But she’ll live?” Rick said.
“We’re doing our best.”

The doctor left, and Rick slid into a chair. He cradled his head in his hands. “This is my fault. My being a cop, that’s the cause.”

“You can’t blame yourself.”

“Like hell.”

“Bentz!” Olivia’s tone brooked no argument, and when he looked into her eyes, he felt a kind of solace. “She needs you to be strong now. Believe in her. Believe in yourself.”

He looked away and cleared his throat. “Okay,” he said huskily, though he wasn’t certain he could do everything she told him. “So, when did you get so smart?”

One side of her mouth lifted in a tiny smile. “I think it was around the day I agreed to marry you. Yeah, that’s when it was. Come on, Detective, let me buy you a cup of coffee. You look like hell!”

“I love you too.”

“I know it.” She laughed, and damned if he didn’t feel better. Somehow they’d get through this. And the doc was right. Kristi was a fighter.

“I don’t want to spend a night here,” Eve protested from her hospital bed, but Cole wasn’t listening. He stood at the window, the night backdropping him. It was late, the hospital was hushed and comfortable, but she’d had enough of being a patient to last her a lifetime.

“It’s just for observation. You were lucky the bullet didn’t hit any arteries or veins or bones.”

“Just a helluva lot of muscle.” She was going to be sore for a long time and it looked like a lot more physical therapy was in her future. But she really couldn’t complain, not with Kristi Bentz battling for her life.

“So it’s really over?” she asked.

He nodded. “It looks like Adam had been gunning for you for a long time. He just needed a psycho who knew you to do most of his dirty work. There was electronic equipment hidden in the mattress of Ronnie’s bed, little speakers and a small receiver. I’ll bet they find the transmitter at Adam’s place.”

“I don’t want to think about him.”

“Good idea.” He leaned over the railing and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Why don’t you concentrate on me?”

“You know, Counselor, I might just do that,” she said and reached upward to wrap her arms around his neck. “I wasn’t kidding back at the asylum. I do love you.”

“Well, then, darlin’, as soon as they release you from this place, you can show me just how much.”

“You’re on, Counselor,” she said around a yawn. “You are definitely on.”
EPILOGUE

Three months later

Limping, still using a stupid cane, Eve walked into the hospital room where Kristi Bentz lay comatose. She was breathing on her own, and the doctors expected her to awaken. But so far it hadn’t happened.

Rick Bentz sat at his daughter’s side, reading aloud to her as he had every day since the incident. He looked up over the tops of his reading glasses but didn’t smile.

“I thought I’d spell you,” Eve said. “How is she today?”

“Better, I think.”

“Good. That’s good.” She managed a smile and didn’t say aloud that she didn’t believe him. Kristi looked the same to her, lying on the bed, barely moving.

As Bentz made his way down to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee, Eve took Kristi’s hand. “Now tell me,” she said, feeling a lump in her throat as she stared at the beautiful, serene woman who was her sister. “How are you really doing?” She linked her fingers with Kristi’s, though there was no response. “Well, let me fill you in on what’s happened. You know I met Abby, and we get along great. I haven’t connected with Zoey yet, but that will probably happen in a few months because Abby and Montoya have set a date. Do you hear me? They’re getting married this June. You have to come to the wedding. They’re counting on it.

“And, uh, what else? Oh, well…I guess we made it official, too. Cole moved in. So far, fingers crossed, we’re getting along…Even your dad and Montoya have decided he’s an okay guy; at least that’s what they tell me…. Well, speak of the devil.”

Cole appeared in the doorway only a few steps in front of Abby. They talked for a while, including Kristi in the conversation, but of course, she didn’t respond.

It seemed so wrong.

But then there had been a lot of wrong in the last few months. They didn’t see her eyes flutter beneath her lids and missed the fact that one of her fingers twitched. They had no idea Kristi was dreaming.

But Kristi saw the images, weird, distorted pictures of people she knew going about their daily lives, running errands, walking dogs, shuffling paperwork, mowing lawns, cooking, or whatever. All in vibrant, incredible color.

The image today was of her father. He was riding with Montoya in a cop car. The sirens were shrieking, the lights flashing bright, the radio crackling. They screeched to a halt in front of a Gothic-looking house and jumped out of the vehicle.

*Crack!*

A bolt of lightning sizzled from the sky, splitting the lone tree in the yard. Both men ducked instinctively, and, when it was over, they straightened. Montoya looked the same, but Bentz’s color had faded to black and white. Though he still climbed into the car with Montoya, his color didn’t return and he fell over, bleeding black blood
onto the street.

Rick Bentz was dead.

“Kristi? Can you hear me?”

Who was that? Olivia?

“Kristi?”

She tried to talk, but only a tiny croak escaped her lips. God, her mouth tasted terrible. And every muscle in her body ached.

“Did you hear that? She’s responding! Call the nurse!” Olivia’s voice pierced Kristi’s thick brain. It was as if she were thinking in a bog, her brain mired in quicksand.

She blinked. Her eyelids felt as if they were cracking.

“Oh my God, she’s waking up! Kristi!” Olivia’s voice broke with emotion. “Kristi!”

Kristi forced one eye open then squeezed it shut against the bright light. She felt a pain in her gut and her head and heard footsteps walking quickly toward her.

She tried to open her eyes, and this time, wincing and blinking, she was able to fixate, though the images were a little blurry.

Slowly her eyes came into focus.

She was in a hospital, lying half propped up and Olivia was standing over the bed, tears shimmering in her eyes. On a table were several baskets of brightly hued flowers: gold black-eyed Susans, blue bachelor’s buttons, pink carnations, and yellow roses.

“Oh honey!” Olivia cried, her blond hair falling over her shoulder. “Bentz! Look who’s awake!”

Kristi turned her head to the doorway where her father stood. She gasped. Her blood turned to ice water as fear shot through her.

Backdropped against the smooth green hospital walls, Rick Bentz had no color. His skin and hair and clothing were in shades of black, white and gray. Just like in her dream.

“Thank God,” he said, his eyes filling with tears. But as his gaze dropped to her bed sheets they reflected no light. He ran to her and held her tight. “Kristi,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “Oh, honey.” Tears rained from his eyes, dampening the bedsheets, but Kristi couldn’t feel them. And the arms that held her so tightly felt weird, almost weak. The side of her father’s face was gray as death.

It was an omen, she was certain of it.

Kristi felt like she might throw up. She’d had the dreams and realized now that they weren’t dreams at all; they were glimpses into the future.

In a heartbeat she knew that Rick Bentz was doomed.

Her father was going to die, and he was going to die soon.
LISA JACKSON

LOST SOULS
KILLING PATTERN

Kristi picked her words carefully. “I think whoever’s behind the girls’ disappearances is into something really dark. Evil.”

“Evil?” Jay repeated.

She nodded and he saw her shiver. “I think we’re dealing with something so vile and inherently depraved that it might not even be human.”

“What are you saying, Kris?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of research. On vampires.”

Jay laughed. “Okay. You had me going there.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“So whoever’s behind the girls’ disappearances believes in vampires. Is that what you’re saying?”

“What I’m saying is this guy believes in vampires or maybe he believes he’s a vampire. I don’t know. But a person like that, Jay? someone deluded or obsessed…They’re dangerous. This guy is dangerous.”

A whisper of something slid over Jay’s skin. Fear? Premonition? “Maybe you’ve let your imagination carry you away,” he said, but she could hear the uncertainty in his voice…
Books by Lisa Jackson

SEE HOW SHE DIES
FINAL SCREAM
WISHES
WHISPERS
TWICE KISSED
UNspoken
IF SHE ONLY KNEW
HOT BLOODED
COLD BLOODED
THE NIGHT BEFORE
THE MORNING AFTER
DEEP FREEZE
FATAL BURN
SHIVER
MOST LIKELY TO DIE
ABSOLUTE FEAR
ALMOST DEAD
LOST SOULS
LEFT TO DIE
WICKED GAME
MALICE

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Author’s Note

For the purposes of this story, I’ve bent some of the rules of police procedure and also created my own fictitious police department in the city of New Orleans.
Where am I?

A rush of icy air swept across Rylee’s bare skin.

Goose bumps rose.

Shivering, she blinked, trying to pierce the shifting darkness, a cold dark void with muted spots of red light shrouded in a rising mist. She was freezing, half lying on a couch of some kind and…

Oh, God, am I naked?

Was that right?

No way!

Yet she felt the soft pile of velvet against the back of her legs, her buttocks, and her shoulders where they met the rising arm of this chaise.

A sharp needle of fear pricked her brain.

She tried to move, but her arms and legs wouldn’t budge, nor could she turn her head. She rolled her eyes upward, trying to see to the top of this freaky dark chamber with its weird red light.

She heard a quiet cough.

What?

She wasn’t alone?

She tried to whip her head toward the sound.

But she couldn’t. It lollled heavily against the back of the chaise.

Move, Rylee, get up and friggin’ move! Another sound. The scrape of a shoe against concrete—or something hard—reached her ears. Get out, get out now. This is too damned weird.

Her ears strained. She thought she heard the softest of whispers coming from the shadows. What the hell was this?

Her insides shrunken with a new fear. Why couldn’t she move? What in the world was happening? She tried to speak but couldn’t utter a word, as if her vocal cords were frozen. Frantically, she looked around, her eyes able to shift in their sockets, but her head unable to swivel.

Her heart pounded and, despite the chill in the air, she began to sweat.

This was a dream, right? A freakin’ nightmare, where she, immobile, was positioned on a velvet lounge and naked as the day she was born. The chaise was slightly raised, it seemed, as if she were on a weird stage or dais of some kind, and surrounding her was an unseen audience, people hiding in the shadows.
Her throat closed in terror.

Panic swept through her.

It’s only a dream, remember that. You can’t speak, you can’t move, all classic signs of a nightmare. Calm down, shut this out of your mind. You’ll wake up in the morning....

But she didn’t heed the suggestions running through her mind, because something was off here. This whole scene was very, very wrong. Never before when she’d been terrorized by a nightmare had she had the insight to think she might be dreaming. And there was a realness to this, a substance that made her second-guess her rationale.

What did she remember...oh, God, had it been last night...or just a few hours earlier? She’d been out drinking with her new friends from college, some kind of clique that was into the whole Goth-vampire thing...no, no...they insisted it was a vampyre thing. That old-fashioned spelling was supposed to make it more real or something. There had been whispers and dares and blood-red martinis that the others had insisted were stained with real human blood. It had been some kind of “rite of initiation.”

Rylee hadn’t believed them, but had wanted to be a part of their group, had taken them up on their dares, had indulged...and now...and now she was tripping. They’d laced the drink, not with blood, but with some weird psychedelic drug that was causing her to hallucinate—that was it! Hadn’t she witnessed the hint of hesitation in them when she’d been handed the blood-red martini and twirled the stem in her fingers? Hadn’t she sensed their fascination, even fear, as she’d not just sipped the drink but tossed it back with a flourish?

Oh, God....

This initiation—which she’d thought had been a bit of a joke—had taken a dangerous, unseen turn. She remembered vaguely agreeing to be part of the “show.” She’d drunk the fake “blood” in the martini glass and yeah, she’d thought all the vampire stuff her newfound friends were into was kind of cool, but she hadn’t taken any of their talk seriously. She’d just thought they’d been screwing with her head, seeing how far she would go....

But within minutes of downing the drink, she’d felt weird. More than drunk, and really out of it. Belatedly, she’d realized the martini had been doctored with a potent drug and she’d started to black out.

Until now.

How much time had elapsed?

Minutes?

Hours?

She had no idea.

A nightmare?

A bad trip?

She hoped to God so. Because if this was real, then she really was situated on a couch, on a stage, wearing nothing, her long hair twisted upon her head, her limbs unmoving. It was as if she were playing a part in some eerie, twisted drama, one that, she was certain, didn’t have a happy ending.

She heard another whisper of anticipation.

The red light began to pulse softly, in counterpoint to her own terrified heartbeat. She imagined she could see the whites of dozens of eyes staring at her from the darkness.

God help me.
Gritting her teeth, she willed her limbs to move, but there was no response. None.

She tried to scream, to yell, to tell someone to stop this madness! Her voice made only the tiniest of mewling noises.

Fear sizzled through her.

Couldn’t someone stop this? Someone in the audience? Couldn’t they see her terror? Realize the joke had gone too far? Silently she beseeched them with her eyes. Slowly, the stage became illuminated by a few well-placed bulbs that created a soft, fuzzy glow punctuated by the flickering red lamp.

Wisps of mist slid across the stage floor.

A rustle of expectancy seemed to sweep through the unseen audience. What was going to happen to her? Did they know? Was it a rite they’d witnessed before, perhaps passed themselves? Or was it something worse, something too horrible to contemplate?

She was doomed.

No! Fight, Rylee, fight! Don’t give up. Do not!

Again she strained to move, and again her muscles wouldn’t obey. Vainly she attempted to lift one arm, her head, a leg, any damned thing, to no avail.

Then she heard him.

The hairs on her nape raised in fear as cold as the Northern Sea. She knew in an instant she was no longer alone on the stage. From the corner of one terrified eye she saw movement. It was a dark figure, a tall, broad-shouldered man, walking through the oozing, creeping mist.

Her throat turned to sand.

Panic squeezed her heart.

She stared at him, compelled to watch him slowly approach. Mesmerized by terror. This was the one. The man the vampyre-lovers had whispered about.

She almost expected him to be wearing a black cape with a scarlet lining, his face pale as death, eyes glowing, glistening fangs revealed as he drew back his lips.

But that wasn’t the case. This man was dressed partially in black, yes. But there was no cape, no flash of red satin, no glowing eyes. He was lean but appeared athletic. And sexy as hell. Wraparound mirrored sunglasses covered his eyes. His hair was dark, or wet, and was long enough to brush the collar of his black leather jacket. His jeans were torn and low-slung. A faded T-shirt had once been dark. His snakeskin boots were scuffed, the heels worn. Something about him was familiar, but she couldn’t place his face.

Eager anticipation thrummed from the darkness surrounding the stage.

Once again she thought this was a far-out dream, a weird nightmare or hallucination that was now as sexy as it was frightening.

Oh, please…don’t let it be real….

He reached the couch and stopped, the scrape of his boots no longer echoing through her brain, only the hiss of expectation audible over her own erratic heartbeat.

With the back of the lounge separating their bodies, he slid one big, calloused hand onto her bare neck, creating a thrill that warmed her blood and melted a bit of the fear that gripped her. His fingertips pressed oh-so gently against
her collarbones and her pulse jumped.

A part of her, a very small part of her, found him thrilling.

A hush swept through the unseen crowd.

“This,” he said, his voice commanding but low, as if addressing the shrouded viewers, “is your sister.”

The audience released an “ahhh” of anticipation.

“Sister Rylee.”

That was her name, yes, but…what was he talking about? She wanted to deny him, to shake her head, to tell him that what was happening was wrong, that her nipples were only stiff from the cold, not from any sense of desire, that the throb inside the deepest part of her was not physical lust.

But he knew better.

He could sense her desire. Smell her fear. And, she knew, he loved her for her raging emotions.

*Don’t do this*, she silently pleaded, but she knew he read the warring signals in the dilation of her pupils, the shortness of her breath, the moan that was more wanting than fear.

His strong fingers pushed a little more forcefully, harder, hot pads against her skin.

“Sister Rylee joins us tonight willingly,” he said with conviction. “She is ready to make the final, ultimate sacrifice.”

What sacrifice? That didn’t sound good. Once again Rylee tried to protest, to draw away, but she was paralyzed. The only part of her body not completely disengaged was her brain, and even that seemed bent on betraying her.

*Trust him*, a part of it whispered. *You know he loves you…you can sense it…. And how long have you waited to be loved?*

No! That was crazy. The drug talking.

But she wanted to succumb to the feel of his fingers, slipping a little, edging lower, a hot trail along her breasts, ever-closer to her aching nipples.

Deep inside, she tingled. Ached.

But this was wrong. Wasn’t it…?

He leaned closer, his nose against her hair, his lips touching the shell of her ear as he whispered so quietly only she could hear, “I love you.” She melted inside. Wanted him. A warm throb rose through her. His fingers rubbed the skin beneath her collarbones a little harder, pressing into her flesh. For an instant she forgot that she was on stage. She was alone with him and he was touching her…loving her…. He wanted her as no man had ever really wanted her…. And…

He pushed hard.

A strong finger dug into her flesh, jabbing against her rib.

A jolt of pain shot through her.

Her eyes widened.

Fear and adrenaline spurted through her bloodstream. Her pulse jumped madly, crazily.
What had she been thinking? That he could seduce her?

No!

Love? Oh, for the love of Jesus, he didn’t love her! *Rylee, don’t be fooled. Don’t fall into his stupid trap.*

The damned hallucinogen had convinced her that he cared for her but he, whoever the hell he was, intended only to use her for his sick show.

She glared at him and he recognized her anger.

The bastard smiled, teeth flashing white.

She knew then that he reveled in her impotent fury. He felt her heart pumping, the blood flowing hot and frantic through her veins.

“Hers is the untainted blood of a virgin,” he said to the unseen crowd.

*No!*

*You’ve got the wrong girl! I’m not a—*

She threw all her concentration into speaking, but her tongue refused to work, no air pushing through her vocal cords. She tried fighting, but her limbs were powerless.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered.

In horror she watched as he bent downward, ever closer, his breath hot, his lips pulling back to show his bared teeth.

Two bright fangs gleamed, just as she’d fantasized!

*Please God. Please help me wake up. Please, please…!*

In the next heartbeat she felt a cold sting, like the piercing of a needle, as his fangs punctured her skin and slid easily into her veins.

Her blood began to flow….
CHAPTER 1

So far, so good, Kristi Bentz thought as she tossed her favorite pillow into the backseat of her ten-year-old Honda, a car that was new to her but had nearly eighty thousand miles on the odometer. With a thump, the pillow landed atop her backpack, books, lamp, iPod, and other essentials she was taking with her to Baton Rouge. Her father was watching her move out of the house they all shared, a small cabin that really belonged to her stepmother. All the while he was glaring at her, Rick Bentz’s face was a mask of frustration.

So what else was new?

At least, thank God, her father was still among the living.

She hazarded a quick glimpse in his direction.

His color was good, even robust, his cheeks red from the wind soughing through the cypress and pine trees, a few drops of rain slickening his dark hair. Sure, there were a few strands of gray, and he’d probably put on five or ten pounds in the last year, but at least he appeared healthy and hale, his shoulders straight, his eyes clear.

Thank God.

Because sometimes, it just wasn’t so. At least not to Kristi. Ever since waking up from a coma over a year and a half earlier, she’d experienced visions of him, horrifying images that, when she looked at him, showed he was a ghost of himself, his color gray, his eyes two dark, impenetrable holes, his touch cold and clammy. And she’d had many nightmares of a dark night, the sizzle of lightning ripping through a black sky, an echoing split of a tree as it was struck, then her father lying dead in a pool of his own blood.

Unfortunately, the visions haunted more than her dreams. During daylight hours, she would see the color leach from his skin, witness his body turning pale and gray. She knew he was going to die. And die soon. She’d seen his death often enough in her recurring nightmare. Had spent the last year and a half certain he would meet the bloody and horrifying end she’d witnessed in her dreams.

These past eighteen months she’d been worried sick for him as she’d recovered from her own injuries, but today, on this day after Christmas, Rick Bentz was the picture of health. And he was pissed.

Reluctantly he’d helped lug her suitcases out to the car while the wind chased through this part of the bayou, rattling branches, kicking up leaves, and carrying the scent of rain and swamp water. She’d parked her hatchback in the puddle-strewn driveway of the little cottage home Rick shared with his second wife.

Olivia Benchet Bentz was good for Rick. No doubt about it. But she and Kristi didn’t really get along. And while Kristi loaded the car amidst her father’s disapproval, Olivia stood in the doorway twenty feet away, her smooth brow wrinkled in concern, her big eyes dark with worry, though she said nothing.

Good.

One thing about her, Olivia knew better than to get between father and daughter. She was smart enough not to add her unwanted two cents into any conversation. Yet, this time, she didn’t step back into the house.

“I just don’t think this is the best idea,” her father said...for what? The two-thousandth time since Kristi had dropped the bomb that she’d registered for winter classes at All Saints College in Baton Rouge? It wasn’t like this was a major surprise. She’d told him about her decision in September. “You could stay with us and—”

“I heard you the first time and the second, and the seventeenth and the three hundred and forty-second and—”
“Enough!” He held up a hand, palm out.

She snapped her mouth closed. Why was it they were always at each other? Even with everything they’d been through? Even though they’d almost lost each other several times?

“What part of ‘I’m moving out and going back to school away from New Orleans’ don’t you get, Dad? You’re wrong, I can’t stay here. I just…can’t. I’m way too old to be living with my dad. I need my own life.” How could she explain that looking at him day to day, seeing him healthy one minute, then gray and dying the next, was impossible to take? She’d been convinced he was going to die and had stayed with him as she’d recovered from her own injuries, but watching the color drain from his face killed her and half convinced her that she was crazy. For the love of God, staying here would only make things worse. The good news: she hadn’t seen the image for a while, over a month now, so maybe she’d read the signals wrong. Regardless, it was time to get on with her own life.

She reached into her bag for her keys. No reason to argue any further.

“Okay, okay, you’re going. I get it.” He scowled as clouds scudded low across the sky, blotting out any chance of sunlight.

“You get it? Really? After I told you, what? Like a million times?” Kristi mocked, but flashed him a smile. “See, you are a razor-sharp investigator. Just like all the papers say: local hero, Detective Rick Bentz.”

“The papers don’t know crap.”

“Another shrewd observation by the New Orleans Police Department’s ace detective.”

“Cut it out,” he muttered, but one side of his hard-carved mouth twitched into what might be construed as the barest of smiles. Shoving one hand through his hair, he glanced back at the house to Olivia, the woman who had become his rock. “Jesus, Kristi,” he said. “You’re a piece of work.”

“It’s genetic.” She found the keys.

His eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened.

They both knew what he was thinking, but neither mentioned the fact that he wasn’t her biological father. “You don’t have to run away.”

“I’m not running ‘away.’ Not from anything. But I am running to something. It’s called the rest of my life.”

“You could—”

“Look, Dad, I don’t want to hear it,” Kristi interrupted as she tossed her purse onto the passenger seat next to three bags of books, DVDs, and CDs. “You’ve known I was going back to school for months, so there’s no reason for a big scene now. It’s over. I’m an adult and I’m going to Baton Rouge, to my old alma mater, All Saints College. It’s not at the ends of the earth. We’re less than a couple of hours away.”

“It’s not the distance.”

“I need to do this.” She glanced toward Olivia, whose wild blond hair was backlit by the colored lights from the Christmas tree, the small cottage seeming warm and cozy in the coming storm. But it wasn’t Kristi’s home. It never had been. Olivia was her stepmother and though they got along, there still wasn’t a tight family bond between them. Maybe there never would be. This was her father’s life now and it really didn’t have much to do with her.

“There’s been trouble up there. Some coeds missing.”

“You’ve already been checking?” she demanded, incensed.

“I just read about some missing girls.”
“You mean runaways?’

“I mean missing.’

“Don’t worry!’ she snapped. She, too, had heard that a few girls had disappeared unexpectedly from the campus, though no foul play had been established. “Girls leave college and their parents all the time.”

“Do they?’ he asked.

A blast of cold wind cut across the bayou, pushing around a few wet leaves and cutting through Kristi’s hooded sweatshirt. The rain had stopped for the moment, but the sky was gray and overcast, puddles scattered across the cracked concrete.

“It’s not that I don’t think you should go back to school,” Bentz said, leaning one hip against the wheel well of her Honda and, today, looking the picture of health—his skin ruddy, his hair dark with only a few glints of gray. “But this whole idea of being a crime writer?’

She held up a hand, then adjusted some of the items in the back of the car, mashing them down so that she would be able to see out her rearview mirror. “I know where you stand. You don’t want me to write about any of the cases you worked on. Don’t worry. I won’t tread on any hallowed ground.”

“That’s not it and you know it,” he said. A bit of anger flashed in his deep-set eyes.

Fine. Let him be mad. She was irritated as well. In the last few weeks they’d really gotten on each other’s nerves.

“I’m worried about your safety.’

“Well, don’t be, okay?’

“Cut the attitude. It’s not like you haven’t already been a target.” He met her eyes, and she knew he was reliving every terrifying second of her kidnapping and attack.

“I’m fine.” She softened a bit. Though he was a pain in the ass often enough, he was a good guy. She knew it. He was just worried about her. As always. But she didn’t need it.

With an effort she tamped down her impatience, as Hairy S., her stepmother’s scrap of a mutt, streaked out the front door and chased a squirrel into a pine tree. In a flash of red and gray, the squirrel scrambled up the pine’s rough bole to perch high upon a branch that shook as the squirrel peered down, taunting and scolding the frustrated terrier mix. Hairy S. dug at the trunk with his paws as he whined and circled the tree.

“Shh…you’ll get him next time,” Kristi said, scooping up the mutt. Wet paws scrambled across her sweatshirt and she received a wet swipe of Hairy’s tongue over her cheek. “I’ll miss you,” she told the dog, who was wriggling to get back to the ground and his rodent chasing. She placed him on the grass, wincing a little from some lingering pain in her neck.

“Hairy! Come here!” Olivia ordered from the porch, but the intent dog ignored her.

Bentz said, “You’re not completely healed.”

Kristi sighed loudly. “Look, Dad, all my varied and specialized docs said I was fine. Better than ever, right? Funny what a little time in a hospital, some physical therapy, a few sessions with a shrink, and then nearly a year of intense personal training can do.”

He snorted. As if to add credence to his worry, a crow flapped its way toward them to land upon the bare branches of a magnolia tree. It let out a lonely, mocking caw.

“You were pretty freaked when you woke up in the hospital,” he reminded her.
“That’s ancient history, for God’s sake.” And it was true. Since her stay in ICU, the whole world had changed. Hurricane Katrina had ripped apart New Orleans, then torn through the entire Gulf Coast. The devastation, despair, and destruction lingered. Though Katrina had raged across the Gulf over a year earlier, the aftermath of Katrina’s fury was evidenced everywhere and would be for years, probably decades. There was talk that New Orleans might never be the same. Kristi didn’t want to think about that.

Her father, of course, was overworked. Okay, she got that. The entire police force had been stretched to the breaking point, as had the city itself and the beleaguered and scattered citizens, some of whom had been sent to far points across the country and just weren’t returning. Who could blame them, with the hospitals, city services, and transportation a mess? Sure there was revitalization, but it was uneven and slow to come. Luckily the French Quarter, which had survived virtually unscathed, was still so uniquely Old New Orleans that tourists were again venturing into that part of the city.

Kristi had spent the past six months volunteering at one of the local hospitals, helping her father at the station, spending weekends in city cleanup, but now, she figured—and her shrink insisted—that she needed to get on with her life. Slowly, but surely, New Orleans was returning. And it was time for her to start thinking about the rest of her own life and what she wanted to do.

Detective Bentz, as usual, disagreed. After the hurricane Rick Bentz had fallen back into his overly protective parental role in a big way. Kristi was way over it. It wasn’t as if she was a child, or even a teenager any longer. She was an adult, for crying out loud!

She slammed the back of her hatchback shut. It didn’t catch, so she readjusted her favorite pillow, reading lamp, and the hand-pieced quilt her great-aunt had left her, then tried again. This time the latch clicked into place. “I gotta go.” She checked her watch. “I told the landlady that I’d take possession today. I’ll call when I get there and give you a complete report. Love ya.”

He seemed about to argue, then said gruffly, “Me, too, kiddo.”

She hugged him, felt the crush of his embrace, and was surprised to find she was fighting sudden tears as she pulled away from him. How ridiculous! She blew Olivia a kiss, then climbed behind the wheel. With a snap of her wrist the little car’s engine sparked to life and Kristi, her throat thick, backed out of the long, narrow driveway through the trees.

At the country road, she reversed onto the wet pavement. She caught another glimpse of her father, arm raised as he waved good-bye. Letting out a long breath, she felt suddenly free. She was finally leaving. At long last, on her own again. But as she rammed her car into drive, the sky darkened, and in the side view mirror she captured a glimpse of Rick Bentz’s image.

Once more all the color had drained from him and he appeared a ghost, in tones of black, white, and gray. Her breath caught. She could run as far away as possible, but she’d never escape the specter of her father’s death.

In her heart she knew.

It was certain.

And, it would be soon.

Listening to an old Johnny Cash ballad, Jay McKnight stared through the windshield of his pickup as the wipers slapped the drizzling rain from the glass. Cruising at fifty-five miles an hour through the storm with his half-blind hound dog seated in the passenger seat, he wondered if he was losing his mind.

Why else would he agree to take over a night class for a friend of a friend who was on sabbatical? What did he owe Dr. Althea Monroe? Nothing. He’d barely met the woman.

*Maybe you’re doing it for your sanity. You damned sure needed a change. And anyway, how bad could one term of teaching eager young minds about forensics and criminology be?*
Shifting down, he guided his truck off the main drag and angled along the familiar side streets, where rain fell through the naked branches of the trees and the streetlights were just beginning to glow. Water hissed beneath his tires and few pedestrians braved the storm. Jay had cracked the window and Bruno, a pitbull-lab-bloodhound mix, kept his big nose pressed to that thin sliver of fresh air.

Cash’s voice reverberated through the Toyota’s cab as Jay slowed for the city limits of Baton Rouge.

“My momma told me, son…”

Jay angled his Toyota onto the crumbling driveway of the house on the outskirts of Baton Rouge, a tiny two-bedroom bungalow that had belonged to his aunt.

“…don’t ever play with guns…”

He clicked off the radio and cut the engine. The cottage was now in the process of being sold by his ever-battling cousins, Janice and Leah, as part of Aunt Colleen’s estate. The sisters, who rarely saw eye-to-eye on anything, had agreed to let him stay at the property while it was being marketed, as long as he did some minor repairs that Janice’s do-nothing wanna-be rock star husband couldn’t get around to making.

Frowning, Jay grabbed his duffel bag and notebook computer as he hopped to the ground. He let the dog outside, waited as Bruno sniffed, then lifted his leg on one of the live oaks in the front yard, before locking the Toyota. Turning his collar against the rain, he hurried up the weed-strewn brick path to the front porch, where a light glowed against the coming night. The dog was right on his heels, as he had been for the six years that Jay had owned him, the only pup in a litter of six who hadn’t been adopted. His brother had owned the bitch, a purebred bloodhound who, after going into heat, hadn’t waited for the purebred of choice. She’d dug out of her kennel and taken up with the friendly mutt a quarter of a mile away whose owner hadn’t seen fit to have him neutered. The result was a litter of pups not worth a whole helluva lot, but who’d turned out to be pretty damned good dogs.

Especially Bruno of the keen nose and bad eyes. Jay bent down, petted his dog, and was rewarded with a friendly head butt against his hand. “Come on, let’s go look at the damage.”

“Folsom Prison Blues” replayed through his mind as he unlocked the door and shouldered it open.

The house smelled musty. Unused. The air inside dead. He cracked two windows despite the rain. He’d spent the last three weekends here, repainting the bedrooms, regrouting tile in the kitchen and single bath, and scraping off what appeared to be years of dirt on the back porch where an ancient washing machine had become the home to a nest of hornets. The rusted washer along with its legion of dead wasps was now gone, terra cotta pots of trailing plants in its stead on the newly painted floorboards.

But he was far from finished. It would take months to get the house into shape. He dropped his bags in the small bedroom, then walked to the kitchen, where an ancient refrigerator was wheezing on cracked linoleum he had yet to replace. Inside the fridge, along with some cheese that had dried and cracked, he discovered a six pack of Lone Star that was only one bottle shy, and grabbed a long neck. It was strange, he thought, how Baton Rouge, of all places, had become his haven away from New Orleans, the city where he’d worked and grown up.

Had it been the aftermath of Katrina that had drawn the lifeblood from him? The crime lab on Tulane Avenue had been destroyed by the storm and the work the lab did scattered to different parishes and private agencies as well as to the Louisiana State Police crime lab in Baton Rouge. Sometimes they worked in FEMA trailers. It had been a nightmare—the extra hours, the frustration of evidence that had been collected, only to end up being compromised. And then there was the volunteer time spent helping with victims of the storm, as well as the cleanup after the floodwaters receded. He doubted few people on the police force hadn’t thought about quitting, and a lot had, leaving the force understaffed in a time when it needed more dedicated officers, not less.

Not that Jay blamed anyone for leaving. Not only were they helping victims of the hurricane, many officers, too, were dealing with the loss of their own homes and loved ones.

He, too, needed a change. It wasn’t just the horrendous hours he’d worked. Witnessing the horror of the hurricane and watching the city struggle to recover while the Feds pointed fingers at each other was bad enough. But then
knowing that so much evidence, painfully collected over the years, had literally been washed away—that had settled
on him like a weight. So much waste. So much to do to bring things back.

At thirty, he was already jaded.

And something—some last piece of tragedy—had sent him on this journey away from New Orleans.

Had it been the looters—those who were desperate or criminal enough to take advantage of the tragedy?

The victims trapped in their own homes, or nursing homes?

The lack of a quick response by the federal government?

The near-death of a city he loved?

Or was it the fact that his own home had been totaled by the screaming wind and flood that had torn his rented
cottage from its foundation, ruining nearly everything he’d owned?

And how much of the disaster could he blame for his ill-fated romance with Gayle? Had the demise of their
relationship been his fault? Hers? The situation?

He gave the dog fresh water in an old saucepan, then opened his beer. As he took a long swallow from the long
neck, he stared through the grimy, rain-spattered window to the backyard. Through the panes he saw a bat swoop
near the branches of a solitary magnolia tree. Dusk was falling rapidly, a reminder he had work to do.

Twisting his head, he heard his vertebrae crack and adjust as he walked to the second bedroom—still painted a
nauseating shade of pink—where he’d set up a desk, lamp, and small file cabinet. A dog bed was in the corner and
Bruno found an old half-chewed rawhide “bone” and started working on it. Jay took another swallow of his Lone
Star, then set the beer down. He opened his notebook computer and set it on the chipped Formica desktop before
hitting the power button. With a whirr, the PC started and images appeared. Seconds later he was on the Internet,
eyeballing his e-mail.

Imbedded in the spam and mail from coworkers and friends was another note from Gayle. His gut clenched a bit
as he opened the missive, read her quick little cheery e-note, and found no humor in the joke she’d forwarded to
him. No big surprise. They’d agreed to be civil to each other, remain friends, but who was kidding whom? It wasn’t
working. Their relationship was dead. Had been dying long before the storm hit.

He didn’t respond. It was as pointless as the diamond ring that sat in his bureau drawer in New Orleans. His lips
twisted at that. He hadn’t had much luck in the ring department. Years before he’d given a “promise ring” to his
high school sweetheart, and Kristi Bentz had promptly gotten involved with a TA when she’d gone off to school up
here, at All Saints College. How about that for a bit of irony? Years later, when he’d finally offered a ring to Gayle,
she’d accepted the diamond and begun to plan their life together—his life—to the point that he’d felt as if a noose
had been draped over his neck. With each passing day the rope drew tighter until he hadn’t been able to breathe. His
attitude had rankled Gayle, and she’d become all the more possessive. She’d called him at all hours of the night, had
become jealous of his friends, his coworkers, even his damned career. And she’d never let him forget that he’d
wanted to marry Kristi Bentz long before he’d met her. Gayle had been certain he’d never stopped pining for his
high school sweetheart.

Which was just damned stupid.

So he’d asked for his ring back.

And had it hurled at his forehead, where it had cut his skin and left a small scar just over his left eyebrow,
evidence of Gayle’s fury.

He figured he’d ducked a bigger missile when he’d called off the wedding.

So much for true love.
Grabbing the remote for the small television balanced upon the filing cabinet, he skimmed through his e-mail. Half listening to the news as he waited for a sports report and an update on the Saints, he’d started reading through a dozen other pieces of e-mail when he caught the end of a news report on the television.

“…missing from the campus of All Saints College since before Christmas, the coed was last seen here, in Cramer Hall, by her roommate on December eighteenth around four-thirty.”

Jay swung all of his attention to the screen, where a female reporter in a blue parka, battling wind and rain in a threatening sky, was staring into the camera. The report had been taped in front of the brick edifice of the dorm in which Kristi Bentz had lived years ago as a freshman. An image of Kristi as she was then, with her long, auburn hair, athletic body, and deep set, intelligent eyes, sizzled through his brain. He’d been stupid about her back then, certain she was “the one.” Of course since that time, he’d learned how wrong he’d been. Thankfully she’d broken it off, and he’d avoided a marriage that would’ve certainly ended up a trap for both of them. Talk about a screwed up family!

“…Since that day, a week before Christmas,” the reporter was saying, “no one has seen Rylee Ames alive.” A picture of the twenty-ish girl flashed onto the screen. With blue eyes, streaked, blond hair, and a bright smile, Rylee Ames looked like the quintessential “California girl,” a cheerleader type, though the reporter was saying that she’d attended high school in Tempe, Arizona, and Laredo, Texas.

“This is Belinda Del Rey, reporting for WMTA, in Baton Rouge.”

*Rylee Ames.* The name sounded familiar.

Bothered, Jay quickly logged onto the college’s Web site and checked his class list, one that was updated as students added or dropped classes from their schedules. The first name on his roster was Ames, Rylee.

His cop radar was on full alert and he had to slow his mind from reeling onto one horrifying scenario after another. Rape, torture, murder—he’d seen so many violent crimes, but he tried not to leap to any conclusions, not yet. There was no evidence that she’d met with foul play, just that she was missing.

Kids her age dropped out, changed colleges, or took off on ski vacations or to rock concerts without telling anyone. For that matter she could have eloped.

But maybe not. He’d worked at the crime lab in New Orleans long enough to have a bad feeling about this student he’d never met. He took another swallow of beer and read lower on the roster.

Arnette, Jordan.

Bailey, Wister.

Braddock, Ira.

Bentz, Kristi.

Calloway, Hiram.

Crenshaw, Geoffrey.

*Wait! What?*

*Bentz, Kristi?*

His eyes narrowed on the screen, zeroing in on the familiar name that still had an impact that sent his blood pressure soaring.

*No way! She was haunting his thoughts!*
Kristi Bentz couldn’t be in his class! Could not! What kind of cruel twist of fate or irony would that be? But there her name was, big as life. He wasn’t foolish enough to think it might be another student with the same name. He had to face the fact that for three hours each week on Monday nights, he’d see her again.

Crap!

The rain pummeled the windows and he stared at the class roster as if mesmerized. Images of Kristi flitted through his mind: Long hair flying as she ran from him through a forest, the play of shadowy light catching her through the canopy of branches, her laughter infectious; emerging from a swimming pool, water dripping from her toned body, her smile triumphant if she’d won the meet, her frown deep and impenetrable if she’d lost; lying beneath him on a blanket in the back of his truck, moonlight shimmering against her perfect body.

“Stop it!” he said out loud, and Bruno, ever vigilant, was on his feet in an instant, barking gruffly. “No, boy, it’s...it’s nothing.” Jay promptly shut out the stupid, visceral images of his horny youth. He hadn’t seen Kristi in over five years and he figured she’d changed. And for all his romantic fantasies about her, there were other images that weren’t quite as nice. Kristi had a temper and a razor sharp tongue.

He’d figured long ago that he was well rid of her.

But the truth was, he’d read and heard about her brushes with death, about her dealings with madmen, about her long stint in the hospital recovering from the latest attack, and he’d felt bad, even going so far as to call a florist to send her flowers before changing his mind. Kristi was like a bad habit, one a man couldn’t quite shake. Jay was fine as long as he didn’t hear about her, read about her, or see her. All those old emotions were locked away under carefully guarded keys. He’d been interested in other women. He’d been engaged, hadn’t he? Still, having to see her on a weekly basis...

It would probably be good for him, he decided suddenly. “Character building” as his mother used to say whenever he was in trouble and had to pay the price of punishment, usually at the hands of his father.

“Hell,” he muttered under his breath as the truth of the matter sank in. His jaw slid to one side and for a second he let himself fantasize about teaching a class where Kristi was his student, where she would have to be under his scrutiny, his control. Jesus! What was he thinking? He’d decided long ago that never seeing her again was just fine. Now it looked like he’d be staring at her face for three hours once a week.

Draining his beer, he slammed the empty bottle onto his desk. He hadn’t altered his whole damned work schedule, started working ten-hour shifts, gone through the headache of changing his whole life only to have to see Kristi every week. His jaw clenched so hard it ached.

Maybe she’d drop his class. The second she realized he was stepping in for Dr. Monroe, Kristi would probably alter her schedule. No doubt she didn’t want to see him any more than he wanted to deal with her. And the thought that he would be her teacher would probably really bug her. She’d resign from his class. Of course she would.

Good.

He read the rest of the class list of thirty-five students interested in criminology—make that thirty-four. His gaze drifted back to the first name on the list: Rylee Ames. Disturbed, Jay scratched at the stubble on his chin.

What the hell had happened to her?
“…No loud music, no pets, no smoking, it’s all here in the lease,” Irene Calloway said, though she herself smelled suspiciously of cigarette smoke. In her early seventies with a few short wisps of gray hair poking from under a red beret, Irene was as thin as a rail beneath her faded baggy jeans and oversized T-shirt. Her jacket was a man’s flannel shirt and she peered at Kristi through thick glasses. She and Kristi were seated at a small scarred table in the furnished studio apartment on the third floor. The place had a bit of charm with its dormers, old fireplace, plank floors, and watery glass windows. It was cozy and quiet and Kristi couldn’t believe her luck in finding the place. Irene jabbed a long, gnarled finger at the fine print of the lease.

“I read it,” Kristi assured her, though the copy she’d been faxed had been blurry. Wasting no more time, she signed both sets of the six-month lease and handed one back to her new landlady.

“You’re not married?”

“No.”

“No kids?”

Kristi bristled as she shook her head. Irene’s questions were a little too personal.

“No boyfriend? The lease stipulates only one person up here.” She motioned to the small loft that had once been an attic, possibly servants’ quarters of the grand old house now chopped into apartments.

“What if I decide I need a roommate?” Kristi asked, though whoever that might be would be relegated to the tired-looking love seat or an air bed.

Irene’s lips thinned. “Lease would have to be rewritten. I’d want to run a security check on any prospective tenants and, of course, the rent would go up along with another security deposit. And no subletting. Got it?”

“So far, it’s just me,” Kristi said, somehow managing to hold her tongue. She needed this apartment. Housing was hard to find in the middle of the school year, especially any apartments close to campus. A stroke of luck helped her discover this loft on the Internet. It had been one of the only units she could afford within walking distance to school. As for a roommate, Kristi would rather fly solo, but finances might dictate trying to find someone to share the rent and utilities.

“Good. I’ve no use for nonsense.”

Kristi let that one slide. For now. But the older woman was beginning to bug her.

“You don’t have any other questions?” Irene asked as she folded her copy crisply with her fingernails and slid it into a side pocket of a hand-crocheted bag.

“No yet. Maybe once I move in.”

Irene’s dark eyes narrowed behind her glasses as if she were really sizing Kristi up.

“If there are any problems, you can also call my grandson, Hiram. He’s in One-A.” She waved her fingers as she explained, “He’s kind of the manager on duty. Gets a break on his rent to fix things and take care of small problems.” The furrows over her eyebrows deepened. “Damned parents of his split up and forgot they had a couple of kids. Stupid.” She fished into the pocket of her jeans and withdrew a business card with her name and phone number along with Hiram’s, then slid it across the table. “I told my son he was making a mistake taking up with that woman, but did he listen? Oh, no…Damn fool.”
As if realizing she was saying too much, Irene quickly added, “Hiram, he’s a good kid. Works hard. He’ll help you move in, if you want, does all the fix-up. Learned it from my husband, may he rest in peace.” Pushing to her feet, she added, “Oh, I’m having Hiram install new dead bolts on all the doors. And if you have any window latches that aren’t solid, he’ll take care of those, too. I suppose you’ve heard the latest?” Her gray eyebrows shot up over the tops of her rimless glasses and she scratched at her chin nervously, as if she were weighing what she was about to reveal. “Several students have disappeared here this school year. No bodies found, y’know, but the police seem to suspect foul play. If ya ask me, they’re all runaways.” She glanced away and muttered, “Happens all the time, but you can never be too careful.” She nodded, as if agreeing with herself, tucking her bag under her arm.

“I saw the news coverage.”

“Things were different when I grew up here,” Irene assured. “Most of the classes were taught by priests and nuns, and the college, it had a reputation, but now…ach!” She waved one hand into the air, as if brushing aside a bothersome mosquito. “Now it seems they hire all sorts…weirdos, if you ask me, anyone who has a damned degree. They teach classes about vampires and demons and all kinds of satanic things…religions of the world, not just Christianity, mind you, and…then there are those ridiculous morality plays! Like we’re still living in the Middle Ages. Oh, don’t get me going about that English Department. A nutcase is in charge of it, let me tell you. Natalie Croft has no business teaching a class, much less running a department.” She snorted as she opened the door. “Ever since Father Anthony—oh, excuse me, it’s ‘Father Tony’ because he’s so hip I guess, everyone’s best friend—ever since he took over from Father Stephen, all hell has broken out. Literally.”

Lips compressed, Irene shook her head as she stepped over the threshold onto the porch with its poor lighting. “How’s that for progress? Morality plays, for crying out loud? Vampires? It’s like All Saints stepped back into the Dark Ages!” She grabbed hold of the railing and headed down the stairs.

Open-minded, Irene Calloway was not. Kristi neglected to mention that some of the classes the old woman had disdained were already on her schedule.

Locking the door after her new landlady, Kristi checked all the windows, including the large one in the bedroom leading to an ancient, rusted fire escape.

The latch on every window in the small apartment was broken. Kristi figured she wouldn’t mention the lack of security to her father. Immediately, as she headed down the exterior staircase for her things, she called Hiram’s cell. Irene’s grandson didn’t answer, but Kristi left a message and her phone number, then began hauling her few belongings to her new home, a crow’s nest overlooking the stone fence surrounding All Saints College.

Seated at her desk at the Baton Rouge Police Department, Detective Portia Laurent stared at the pictures of the four coeds missing from All Saints College. None of the girls had resurfaced. Just disappeared, not only from Louisiana, but, it seemed, the face of the earth.

As computer keyboards clicked, printers hummed, and an old clock ticked off the final days of the year, Portia eyed the pictures for what seemed to be the millionth time. They were all so young. Smiling girls with fresh faces, intelligence and hope shining from their eyes.

Or were their expressions masks?

Behind those practiced smiles was there something darker lurking?

The girls had been troubled, that much had been ascertained. So they’d been written off. No one, not the other members of the police department, not the administration of the college, not even the missing girls’ families seemed to think that any serious foul play was involved. Nope. These smiling once-upon-a-time students were just runaways, headstrong wild girls who had, for one reason or another, decided to take a hike and not reappear.

Had they been into drugs?

Prostitution?
Or were they just tired of school?

Had they connected with a boyfriend who had whisked them away?

Had they decided to hitchhike around the country?

Had they wanted a quickie vacation and never returned?

The answers and opinions varied, but Portia seemed to be the only person on the planet who cared. She’d taken copies of these girls’ campus ID pictures and pinned them to the bulletin board of her cubicle. The originals were in the general file of all the recent missing persons, but these were different; these photos connected every girl who had attended All Saints College, disappeared, then left no trail. No credit cards had been used, no checks cashed, no ATMs accessed. Their cell phone usages had stopped on the evenings they’d gone missing, but not one of them had turned up in a local hospital. None of them had bought a bus or plane ticket, nor had there been activity on their MySpace pages.

Portia stared at their pictures and wondered what the hell had happened to them. Deep inside, she believed them all dead, but she hoped against hope that her jaded cop instincts were wrong.

None of the girls had owned a vehicle, and none had called the state of Louisiana home until they’d enrolled at the small private school. The last persons known to have seen each of them hadn’t noticed anything strange, nor could they give the police even the tiniest hint of what each girl had in mind, where she could have gone, whom she might have seen.

It was frustrating as hell.

Portia reached into her purse for her pack of cigarettes, then reminded herself that she’d quit. Three months, four days, and five hours ago—not that she was counting. She grabbed a piece of nicotine gum and found little satisfaction in chewing as she gazed from one picture to the next.

The first victim, missing nearly a year since last January, was an African-American student, Dionne Harmon, with dark skin, high cheekbones, a beautiful, toothy grin, and a tattoo that said “LOVE” entwined with hummingbirds and flowers low on her back. She hailed from New York City. Her parents had never married and were now both deceased, the mother from cancer, the father in an industrial accident. Her only sibling, a brother by the name of Desmond, already had three kids of his own, had skipped on his child support, and when Portia had tried to reach him he’d told her he wasn’t interested in “what had happened to the ‘ho.’”

“Nice,” Portia remembered aloud, recalling the phone conversation. None of Dionne’s friends could explain what had happened to her, but the last person to admit seeing her, one of her professors, Dr. Grotto, had at least seemed concerned. Grotto’s specialty was teaching classes on vampirism, sometimes using a Y in the spelling—like vampyrism—which was a little odd, though people could become intrigued and inspired by the strangest things sometimes. In his mid-thirties, Grotto was sexier than any college professor had the right to be. The old Hollywood description of “tall, dark, and handsome” fit him to a T, and he certainly was far more interesting than any of the old dusty profs who had been her teachers in her two years at All Saints over a decade earlier.

The other missing girls were Caucasian, though they, too, had disjointed, uninterested families who had written them off as irresponsible runaways, “always in trouble.”

How odd they had all ended up at All Saints and subsequently disappeared within eighteen months.

Coincidence? Portia didn’t think so.

The media had finally noticed and was adding some pressure. The public was now nervous, the police department receiving more calls.

Since Dionne had disappeared over a year ago, Tara Atwater and Monique DesCartes had also vanished, Monique in May, Tara in October, and now Rylee Ames. All of them took some of the same classes, primarily in the English Department, including the class on vampyrism taught by Dr. Dominic Grotto.
Slap!

A file landed atop her photos.

“Hey!” Detective Del Vernon said, resting a hip on her desk. “Still caught up in the missing girls?”

*Here we go again,* Portia thought on an inward sigh, expecting a lecture from the ex-military man turned detective. Vernon had the “three-B-thing” going for him: bald, black, and beautiful. Though he was in his forties, he’d never lost his U.S. Marine-honed build. His shoulders were wide and straight, his waist trim, and according to Stephanie, one of the secretaries for the department, his butt was “tight enough to hold in his bad-ass attitude.” And she was right. Vernon had a great body. Portia tried not to notice.

“What’s this?” she asked, picking up the file and flipping it open to a crime scene report and the picture of a dead woman.

“Jane Doe…throat slashed, from the Memphis PD. Looks like it could be the same guy who killed the woman we found last week near River Road.”

“Beth Staples.”

“I want you to check it out.”

“You got it,” she said, and waited for him to remind her that the girls missing from All Saints weren’t known to be victims of homicide and therefore not their concern.

Yet.

But he didn’t. Instead Vernon’s cell phone rang and he thumped his fingers onto her desk before walking back through the maze of cubicles. “Vernon,” he said crisply, crossing the threshold to his private office and kicking the glass door shut behind him.

Portia picked up the Jane Doe file, turning her attention away from the pictures of the coeds. There was a chance that she was wrong, a chance that the missing coeds were, indeed, still alive, just teenage runaways rebelling and getting into trouble.

But she wasn’t laying odds on it.

Two days after Kristi moved in, she landed a job as a waitress at a diner three blocks from campus. She wasn’t going to get rich making minimum wage and tips, but she would have some flexibility with her shifts, which was exactly what she’d wanted. Waiting tables wasn’t glamorous work, but it beat the hell out of working for Gulf Auto and Life Insurance Company, where she’d spent too many hours to count in the past few years. Besides, she hadn’t given up her dream of writing true crime. She figured with the right story, she could become the next Ann Rule.

Or a close facsimile thereof.

Twilight had settled as she crossed campus, her backpack slung over one shoulder, her head hunched into her shoulders as the first drops of rain began to spatter the ground on this, the day before New Year’s Eve. A gust of winter wind stole through the quad, rattling the branches of the oak and pine trees before brushing the back of her neck with a frosty kiss. She shivered, surprised at the drop in temperature. She was tired from the move and her legs felt leaden as she angled past Cramer Hall, where she’d lived her freshman year of college nearly ten years earlier. It hadn’t changed much, certainly not as much as she had, she thought ruefully.

Her breath fogged in front of her, and from the corner of her eye she thought she saw a movement, something dark and shadowy, in the thick hedge near the library. Gaslights glowed blue, casting watery light, and though she squinted, she saw no one. Just her overactive imagination.

But who could blame her? Between her own experiences at the hands of predators, her father’s warnings, and her
landlady’s remarks, she was bound to be jumpy. “Get over it,” she admonished, cutting past Wagner House, a huge stone edifice with dark mullioned windows and black iron filigree. Tonight, the grand old manor seemed foreboding, even sinister. And you think you can write true crime? How about fiction? Maybe horror? Or something equally creepy with your imagination! Geez, Kristi, get a grip!

Hurrying as the rain began to pour, she heard footsteps on the walk behind her. She hazarded a quick glance over her shoulder and saw no one. Nothing. And the footsteps seemed to have stopped. As if whoever was following her didn’t want to be discovered. Or was mimicking her own hesitation.

Her stomach squeezed and she thought about the can of pepper spray in the backpack. Between the spray and her own skill in self-defense…

Dear God, get over yourself!

Hoisting her bag higher, she started off again, ears straining for the scrape of leather against concrete, the whisper of heavy breathing as whoever it was gave chase, but all she heard was the sound of traffic in the streets, tires humming over wet asphalt, engines rumbling, an occasional squeal of brakes or whine of gears. Nothing sinister. Still, her heart was hammering and despite her mental berating, she unzipped a pocket of the leather pack and fumbled for the canister. Within seconds it was in her hand.

Again she looked over her shoulder.

Again she saw nothing.

Half running, she cut across the lawn and through the gate nearest her apartment. She’d reached the street when her cell phone jangled. Jumping wildly, she cursed softly under her breath as she reached into her coat pocket. Her father’s name lit the screen. Clicking on, and grateful, for once, that he had called, she greeted, “Hey, don’t you ever work?”

“Even cops get breaks every once in a while.”

“And so you decided to take one and check up on me?”

“You called me,” he reminded her.

“Oh, right.” She’d forgotten…one more little reminder that she wasn’t a hundred percent—her damned faulty memory. Every once in a while, she totally blanked out on something important. “Look, I wanted to tell you my new address and that I got a job at the Bard’s Board. It’s a diner and all the food is named after Shakespearean characters. You know, like Iago’s iced latte and Romeo’s Reuben and Lady Macbeth’s finger sandwiches or something. It’s owned by two ex-English teachers, I think. Anyway, I have to learn them all by Monday morning when I start. I guess it’ll get me back into the swing of the whole memorizing thing again.”

“Romeo’s Reuben sounds sexual.”

“Only to you, Dad. It’s a sandwich. I might not mention it to your partner.”

“Montoya will love it.”

She smiled and, as she reached the apartment house, asked, “So how’re you feeling?”

“Fine. Why?”

She thought of the image of him fading to gray as she’d driven away the other day. “Just checkin’.”

“You’re making me feel old.”

“You are old, Dad.”
“Smart-ass kid,” he said, but there was humor in his voice.

She almost said, “A chip off the old block,” but curbed the automatic response. Rick Bentz was still a little touchy when reminded that he wasn’t her biological father. “Listen, I’ve got to run. I’ll talk to ya later,” she said instead. “Love ya!”

“Me, too.”

She started up the exterior stairs only to meet a petite girl at the second-floor landing who was struggling with what appeared to be a leaking garbage bag.

The dark-haired Asian girl looked up and smiled. “You must be the new neighbor.”

“Yeah. Third floor. I’m Kristi Bentz.”

“Mai Kwan. 202.” She gestured widely toward the open door of the nearest unit that occupied the second floor. “Are you a student? Hey, give me a sec while I take this to the Dumpster.” Moving lithely, she eased around Kristi and hurried down the remaining stairs, her flip-flops clicking loudly in the rain.

Kristi wondered if she wasn’t some kind of kook with her sandals and dripping bag. And anyway, Kristi wasn’t about to wait in the cold and rain. Reaching the third floor, she heard the snap of Mai’s flip-flops hurrying up the staircase below her. Kristi had just unlocked her door and stepped inside when Mai called out from the darkness. “Kristi, wait!”

For what? Kristi thought, but stood just inside the door as the scent of rainwater swept through her apartment. Mai appeared at that moment and didn’t wait for an invitation, just waltzed right in, her sandals making puddles on the old hardwood floor.

“Oh, wow!” Mai said, eyeing Kristi’s new place. Her hair, chopped into shaggy layers that ended at her chin, gleamed in the lamplight. “This looks great!” She grinned, showing off white, straight teeth rimmed in shiny coral lip gloss. Her dark eyes with their carefully shadowed lids took in the space.

A small kitchen was tucked behind bifold doors at one end of the long room, which was punctuated with dormers that allowed views over the walls of the campus. Kristi had pushed a small desk into one of the dormer alcoves, and a reading chair and ottoman into the other. She’d cleaned the furniture as best she could and scattered a few cheap area rugs over the floor. One of the lamps, a fake Tiffany, was hers. The other, a modern floor lamp with a shade that was seared from being held too close to a lightbulb, had come with the unit. The walls were covered with posters of famous writers and pictures of Kristi’s family, and she’d bought candles and positioned them over the windowsills and scratched end tables. With a mirror she’d purchased at a secondhand store, and a few well-placed pots with growing plants, the place looked as student-chic as she could make it.

“This is great! Geez, you’ve even got a fireplace. Well, I guess all the units on the north end do.” Mai walked to the thick carved mantel and ran her fingers along the old wood. “I love fires. You’re a student here, too?” she added.


“I was surprised when I heard this had been rented.” Mai was still walking through the place, glancing at the pictures Kristi had hung on the wall. Squinting, she leaned closer to a framed five-by-seven. “Hey, this is you and that famous cop in New Orleans…wait a sec. Kristi Bentz, as in the daughter of—?”

“Detective Rick Bentz, yes,” Kristi admitted, a little uncomfortable that Mai had recognized her father.

Mai stepped closer to the picture, eyeing the framed snapshot as if to memorize every nuance in the photograph of Kristi and her dad on a boat. The picture was five years old, but one of her favorites. “He cracked a couple of serial killer cases around here, didn’t he? Ones up at that old mental asylum? What was the name of it?” She snapped her fingers and before Kristi could answer, she said, “Our Lady of Virtues, that was it. Oh, wow. Rick Bentz…Huh…He’s kinda like a living legend.”
Well, now, that was stretching the truth. “He’s just my dad.”

“Wait a minute…” Mai cocked her head. “And you…you…” She turned and faced Kristi again and a look of awe passed over her face. “You were involved, too, weren’t you? Like almost a victim. Jesus! I’m kinda into the whole serial killer thing…. I mean I don’t glorify them or anything—they’re evil—but I find them fascinating, don’t you?”

“No.” Kristi was firm on that. However, there was the true-crime book she was considering. In that way, she, too, held more than a passing interest in the deviants whose number seemed to grow more prolific every day. But she didn’t feel like going into it with a neighbor she’d met less than five minutes earlier. “You said something about being surprised that I rented the apartment.”

“That anyone did.” Mai glanced again at the picture of Kristi and her father.

“Really? Why?”

“Because of its history.”

“What history?”

“Oh…you know.” When Kristi didn’t respond, Mai added, “About the previous tenant.”

“You’re going to have to fill me in.”

“It was Tara Atwater, as in the same Tara Atwater that went missing last spring term?”

“What?” Kristi’s heart nearly stopped cold.

“You had to have heard about the missing students.” Without waiting for an invitation, Mai plopped onto the oversized chair, sitting on it sideways so that her feet dangled over one of the arms. “It’s been all over the news…well, at least in the last few days. Before then, the administration acted as if each of them had just dropped out or run off or whatever. No one could substantiate that any of them were really missing. But what’s really weird is that their families don’t even seem to care. Everyone assumes they just took off and poof”—she snapped her fingers again—“vanished into thin air.”

Not everyone, Kristi thought, remembering her father’s worries.

“They turn up missing and it’s a big deal. Then the story gets shuffled off page one and everyone seems to forget, until the next girl disappears.” She frowned, her smooth forehead wrinkling in frustration.

“And one of them lived here.” Kristi motioned to the interior of her new apartment, the “steal” she’d found on the Internet. No wonder it had been in her price range.

“Yeah. Tara. From Georgia. Southern Georgia, I think, yeah, some tiny podunk town. A Georgia Peach, whatever that means. I don’t know much about her. No one did. I mean I saw her a few times, but never thought twice. Then she ended up missing; no one really realized she was gone, for a while.”

“So that’s why no one rented the place?”

“Mrs. Calloway put it on the Internet and stuck the FOR RENT sign up, then Rylee Ames disappears. Now the missing girls are big news again—I can’t believe you didn’t know!—but by then, you’d rented the place.” She plucked a tiny feather off the overstuffed arm of the chair and let it drift to the floor.
The hairs on the back of Kristi’s neck raised as she thought about Tara Atwater. Had she really rented a space most recently occupied by a girl who was missing, who could have ended up the victim of foul play? Damn, what were the chances of that? Kristi observed her studio with new eyes. She asked, “And the police, they’re sure she disappeared…that the others disappeared, too? That they weren’t just runaways?”

“Just runaways,” Mai repeated. “Like that’s okay.” She lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know what the police think. I really don’t think they put the whole thing together until recently.” She let out a disgusted sigh. “What’s that saying about our culture, huh? Just runaways.”

Kristi thought about the latches and locks in her apartment that didn’t work. “So tell me about Hiram.”

“Irene’s grandson?” Mai shrugged. “Major geek. Into all things technical.”

“He’s supposed to fix the latches on my windows and install a new dead bolt.”

“In which century? He’s like a ghost, you never see him.”

“A techno-major geek ghost?”

“Exactly. Hey, if you’re not busy on New Year’s Eve, some of my friends and I are going to hang out at the Watering Hole. You could join us and y’know, ring in the new year. ‘Auld Lang Syne,’ funky little hats, confetti, champagne, and crap. The cover’s really cheap. Just enough to pay for the band.”

“Maybe,” Kristi said, acting as if her social calendar wasn’t completely empty. “I’ll see.”

The first notes of a classical piece Kristi couldn’t quite place erupted and Mai reached into her pocket for her cell. She glanced at the screen and grinned. “Gotta run,” she said quickly as she climbed to her feet. “Nice to meet ya.”

“You, too.”

“Seriously. Call me if you want to party and kick in the new year.” She pushed a button on her cell phone as she eased to the door and opened it with her free hand. “Hey! I was wondering when I was gonna hear from you. A text? Nah, I didn’t get it…..” She was out the door and wrapped in her conversation with the person on the other end of the call.

Kristi closed the door behind her and, alone in the apartment, was left with a creepy feeling. “Don’t let it get to you,” she told herself. The building was centuries old, people could have died here, been killed here. All sorts of atrocities could have occurred here over the years. Tara Atwater’s disappearance wasn’t even necessarily a crime. She eyed the cozy room but couldn’t fight a sudden chill. What had happened to the girl? Was her disappearance really linked to the others? What had happened to all of them? Had they all met some horrid fate as her father seemed to think?

Find out, Kristi. This is the story you’ve been looking for. Here you are in the thick of it, in the very damned apartment from which one of them went missing. This is it!

She picked up her purse and dialed Hiram. True to the history of her previous three calls, she was sent directly to voice mail. “Great,” Kristi muttered, grabbing her purse. She wasn’t waiting for the dweeb. How tough could it be to install a damned dead bolt? She’d go to a hardware store, buy the hardware she needed, and put it in herself. She figured she’d take the expenses off the next month’s rent and Hiram could explain it to his granny himself.

Locking the door behind her, she headed to her car. No one followed her. No dark figure lurked in the shadows. No sinister eyes trailed her every move. At least none she could distinguish in the thick, shimmering, rain-washed shrubbery surrounding the pock-marked parking lot. She climbed into the Honda without incident, and after turning on the headlights and wipers, stared through the windshield, again seeing nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe Mai was just messing with her, jerking her chain.

Why? Sooner or later she’d be found out. No, Mai Kwan was telling the truth as she knew it.
“Wonderful,” Kristi groused to herself as she backed up, then rammed the car into drive. No one was about but a man walking his dog near the gaslight, and a biker pedaling fast enough to keep the beam of his headlight steady. No criminal was waiting for her. No deranged psycho hiding between the parked cars on the street. All was quiet. All was normal.

But as she drove onto the street, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was about to go wrong.

So she’d returned.

Like a salmon drawn from the sea to a creek to spawn.

Kristi Bentz was a student again at All Saints.

It was fitting somehow, he thought, from his rooftop viewpoint. Through the skeletal branches of the trees near the thick stone wall of the campus, he focused his binoculars at the attic loft she’d rented.

Where one of the others had once lived.

A sign from the Almighty?

Or from the Prince of Darkness?

He grinned as he watched her check her window latches, make small talk with the Asian girl, then fly down the exterior steps to that pathetic little car she’d parked beneath a security lamp in the nearest lot. His view was cut off, of course, once she was down the stairs and below the wall, but he knew what she was doing.

The sound of the Honda’s engine firing up was barely audible over the drip of rain and swoosh of traffic on the side streets, but he heard it. Was tuned to it. Because it was she, the prodigal daughter. How perfect.

His throat went dry at the thought of her: long dark hair streaked with red, pert nose, intelligent green eyes, and wide mouth…. Oh, what she could do with those lips! He imagined them trailing down his body as she let her tongue slide across his flat abdomen, her breath hot and anxious as she undid the fastening to his jeans.

His groin tightened and his cock grew thick and he knew a minute of regret. He had to deny himself, at least for now. There was another…

He slid through the darkness and inside the fortresslike structure within the campus walls. Without turning on any lights, he made his way to the stairwell and eased down the steps, quiet as a cat. His gift was his vision, a gaze that could penetrate the darkness when others couldn’t. He was born with the ability, and even in the thick Louisiana nights, when low-lying fog clung to the cypress trees and oozed over the water of the bayou, he had vision. Enough that he could see prey and hunt without the use of night goggles or flashlights.

His ability had served him well, he thought, as he slipped outside and took in a deep breath of the fresh scent of rain…and more. He imagined he smelled the salty scent of Kristi Bentz’s skin, but he knew the aroma to be an illusion.

The first of many, he imagined, as he jogged silently and easily through the night. His body was in perfect shape. Honed. Ready.

For the ultimate sacrifice.

She wouldn’t be taken easily.

But she would be taken.

And, at first, willingly.
He just had to plant the seeds to pique her curiosity.
And then she wouldn’t be able to stop herself.
“…This is Hiram Calloway,” a thin, reedy voice said over the static of a bad cell connection. “I got your message about the locks. I thought I’d stop by your apartment and see if I could fix them.”

“Too late,” Kristi said, irritated. Only today, at two o’clock on New Year’s Eve, had he decided to return her calls. “I already installed new ones and put in new latches on the windows. I couldn’t wait any longer. I’ll bill you.”

“What?” he shrieked, his nasal voice hiking up a notch. “You can’t—”

“I can and I did.”

“That kind of thing has to be approved. It’s…it’s in the lease, paragraph seven—”

“I’m just telling you, the apartment wasn’t secure and I think there’s something about that in the lease, too. Check it. And I don’t know what the paragraph is, but I’ve already taken care of the problem.”

“But—”

“I have to get back to work,” she said, snapping her cell off. She slipped the phone into the pocket of her apron and walked past two cooks loitering under the overhang of the back porch where they were smoking in their greasy chef coats. The screen door slapped shut behind her as she made her way through a maze of hallways in the thirties bungalow that had been converted to a restaurant years before. The history of the building had been written up in the local paper ten years earlier and was yellowing in its frame that hung between the bathrooms, marked LORDS and LADIES. As if any of the clientele were blue bloods.

Retying her apron, Kristi passed through swinging doors from the kitchen to the dining area and stopped fuming about Hiram. At least he’d finally called back. Kristi had been beginning to think the manager/grandson was a figment of Irene’s imagination.

So far, it had been a busy morning and early afternoon, but things were slowing down, thank God. Her feet were sore, her clothes feeling grimy from the grease and smoke that hung in the air and clung to her hair. After a few hours working frantically in her section, she’d wondered why she hadn’t taken her father’s advice and tried to nail a desk job at another insurance company. After all, it wasn’t as if she were getting rich on tips. However, just the memory of hours on the phone with complaining customers of Gulf Auto and Life had reminded her of her goal and her dream of writing true crime.

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten anything since downing a muffin on the fly early in the morning. After her shift she thought she might splurge on a Mercutio melt and a slice of King Lear’s key lime pie.

Happy New Year, she thought sarcastically as she grabbed a pot of coffee and refilled half-empty cups on the tables in her section.

A group of women strolled in and squeezed into the worn bench seat of a corner booth.

Snagging four plastic-encased menus, Kristi approached. The women hardly noticed, they were so into their conversation, and one of the voices sounded familiar. Kristi couldn’t believe it, but as she stared at the back of a curly head, she realized that she was about to serve Lucretia Stevens, her original roommate when she was an undergrad and living in the close quarters of Cramer Hall. Inside, Kristi cringed. She and Lucretia had never gotten along and had been as different as day to night. Kristi, in those days, had been a party girl and Lucretia a brainiac who, when she hadn’t been studying, had spent hours flipping through Brides magazine and munching on Cheetos. She hadn’t had any social life and had been evasive when talking about her boyfriend, who’d gone to another college. Kristi had never seen the guy and had often wondered if he’d only existed in Lucretia’s mind.
What goes around, comes around, she thought as she slid menus in front of the women and asked them what they wanted to drink.

“Kristi?” Lucretia asked, before anyone answered.

“Hi, Lucretia.” Geez, this was going to be uncomfortable.

“What’re you doing here?” Lucretia’s eyes were wide, probably due to the contacts that, when she’d worn them in lieu of her glasses, had always made her appear owlish.

“Trying to take your order,” Kristi said, offering a smile.

“Hey, everyone, this is Kristi Bentz, my old roommate when I was a freshman, oh, God, a kabillion years ago.” She laughed, then motioned toward a woman of about twenty-five with narrow-framed glasses and dark brown hair that fell to her shoulders. “Kristi, this is Ariel.”

“Hi,” Kristi said, shifting from one foot to the other.

“Oh, hi.” Ariel nodded, then glanced past Kristi to the door, as if she were looking for someone, at least someone more interesting than Kristi.

“And this is Grace,” Lucretia indicated her thin friend who wore braces and had spiked, reddish hair. The woman couldn’t have weighed a hundred pounds. “And this is Trudie.” The last girl, seated next to Lucretia in the booth, was heavier-set, had thick black hair pulled into a long ponytail, a smooth olive complexion and white teeth with a bit of a gap. All three managed smiles as Lucretia said, as if surprised, “Geez, Kristi, you look great.”

“Thanks.”

“Bentz?” Trudie repeated. “Wait a sec. Didn’t I read about you?”

Here we go, Kristi thought. “Probably about my dad. He makes the press.”

“Wait a minute. He’s a cop, right?” Ariel asked, twisting her head and squinting up at Kristi. She was suddenly interested. “Didn’t he crack that case at Our Lady of Virtues a year or so ago?” She shuddered. “That was soooo weird.”

Amen, Kristi thought, anxious to end the personal conversation about a time she’d rather forget.

“Weren’t you involved?” Lucretia was now serious. “I mean, didn’t I read something about you being injured?” Her forehead wrinkled as she thought. “The way the article was slanted it was as if you were almost killed.” She was nodding, her hair shimmering in dark curls beneath the overhead lamps. “Like before.”

Kristi didn’t want to be reminded of her close calls at the hands of sicko perverts. Twice already, she’d nearly been killed by a psychopath, and the shards of memory about those encounters were enough to turn her blood to ice. She needed to deflect the conversation and fast.

“It was a while back. I’m over it. So, the special today is red beans and rice, I mean Hamlet’s hash.”

But Lucretia wasn’t about to be derailed. She had everyone at her table and the surrounding area’s attention, and she wasn’t going to let go. “I think I read or heard that you died and came back or something.”

“Or something,” Kristi said as all of the women at the table, Lucretia’s friends who had been so animated a few minutes earlier, grew silent. The strains of an old Elvis tune ran over the clink of silverware, buzz of conversation, and hiss of the ancient heater as it struggled to keep the diner warm. She shrugged, relegating the story of her past to “who cares” status.

“Kristi’s used to it,” Lucretia said. “Lives the life.”
Ariel asked, “What does it feel like to have a famous father?”

Pen poised over her order pad, Kristi ignored the knot in her gut. “Quasi famous. It’s not like he’s Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise or even—”

“We’re not talking about movie stars.” Lucretia interrupted her. “Just local celebs.”

“Local celebs like Truman Capote and Louis Armstrong?” Kristi said.

“Dead,” Trudie said.

“My dad’s just a cop.”

Lucretia stared at her as if she’d just said she’d become a devil worshipper. “He’s not just anything.”

Kristi held on to her patience with an effort. That hadn’t been what she’d meant, but Lucretia had always had a way of twisting things around. Maybe it was because her divorced parents had hardly had time for her; they’d been so wrapped up in their own problems. Or, maybe it was something else entirely. Whatever it was, it was annoying and always had been.

“You’re right,” Kristi managed. “He’s great, but he’d be the first to tell you he was just doing his job.”

“How cool is that?” Trudie asked.

Time to end this. “So, anything to drink?” Kristi asked. “Coffee?”

Thankfully, Lucretia and her group picked up their menus and rattled off their choices.

“Two sweet teas, a Diet Coke, and a coffee. Got it,” Kristi said, thankful to hurry back to the kitchen. Who would have thought that Lucretia would have kept up with her, or her father? Kristi and Lucretia hadn’t kept in touch over the years; in fact, while living together, they hardly spoke. They’d had nothing in common before. Kristi doubted that had changed over the years.

“Old friends?” Ezma, a waitress with mocha-colored skin and impossibly white teeth, asked as she filled plastic glasses with shaved ice from a rumbling ice machine positioned near the soda dispenser. Ezma, barely five feet and a hundred pounds, was a part-time student and full-time waitress, a wife, and a mother of a precocious two-year-old.

“I guess.” Kristi took three of the glasses and filled two from the pitcher of sweetened iced tea, then pushed a button on the soda machine and filled the final glass with diet cola, holding the dispenser button a second too long. The soda fizzled over the top. Sweeping a towel from a nearby hook, she swabbed at the spilled cola and topped off the glass. “One of the women”—she hitched her chin toward the table where Lucretia seemed to be holding court—“was my roommate when I first enrolled at All Saints, back before the turn of the millennium.”

“Let me guess—Lucretia Stevens,” Ezma said, sliding a glance toward the table.

“How did you know?”

“How you know?”

“I guess I’m just omniscient.”

“Yeah, right.” Kristi smiled faintly.

“And”—she lifted a slim shoulder—“I eavesdrop.”

“That’s more like it.”

Ezma laughed as she grabbed the dispenser handle for the water hose and filled the remaining glasses. “Actually, I had her for one of my classes, writing two twelve, I think it was.”

“She’s a professor?”
“Assistant.”

Kristi was stunned. She’d always known Lucretia was a perpetual student, but she’d never imagined she would actually stick around All Saints to teach.

“And I think she’s involved with someone at the university. Another professor.”

“Really?”

So much for Lucretia’s college boyfriend, whom she’d pined about for the year Kristi had known her.

“Well, I have to admit, if I weren’t a happily married woman, I might be interested. Some of the professors are hot!”

Kristi remembered some of her teachers from the past. Weird Dr. Northrup, edgy Dr. Sutter, and crusty, superior Dr. Zaroster. All of them were musty, slightly crotchety academics who suffered from superiority complexes. Definitely not “hot.” Not even lukewarm. At least not in Kristi’s vocabulary. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Uh-uh. I’m tellin’ you, the staff at All Saints is something. At least the English Department. It’s as if whoever was recruiting was looking at Hollywood head shots.”

“Now I know you’re full of it.”

“Well, you’ll see soon enough.” Ezma added a slice of lemon to each glass. “Classes start next week. I bet you’ll agree.”

Kristi filled her tray. “And so you think Lucretia is dating one of these hotties?”

“Rumor has it. But I don’t know which one. Whenever I get too close, she clams up, like she’s hiding it or something.”

“Why?”

Ezma shook her head. “Don’t know. Maybe he’s married or engaged or there’s some rule about the staff fraternizing. Or maybe it’s Dr. Preston.” Her lips tightened at the corners. “He teaches writing and he’s bad news.”

“I think I have him for a class.”

“Oh, yeah? My friend Dionne took his writing class and was all about him, but he comes in here and he’s just plain rude. Then Dionne went missing.”

“Your friend is one of the missing girls?” Kristi asked. “And you think Preston might be involved?”

Ezma was about to say no. But she changed her mind. Kristi could see it in the way her chin slid to the side. “I don’t think so, but I wouldn’t put anything past that guy. The trouble is, no one really believes anything bad happened to Dionne. They think she just disappeared, probably took off with her boyfriend.” Ezma shook her head.

“Then why hasn’t anyone heard from her?”

“Exactly! The common theory is that she’s with Tyshawwn and they’ve taken on new identities. Tyshawwn Jones is also bad news. Into drugs, did time for robbery when he was still a minor. Personally, I never knew what she saw in him. Before Tyshawwn, she dated a really great guy, Elijah Richards. Was going to school at a junior college, planning on being an accountant, but Dionne started seeing Tyshawwn and that was the end of her relationship with Elijah. A shame.”

“What about Tyshawwn? Is he missing, too?”

“No one ever mentions that, do they?”
Kristi swept around one of the line cooks as he tossed a handful of sliced potatoes into the fryer and the hot oil sizzled and bubbled. She pushed the swinging doors open with her back, then carried the drink tray to the women’s table and heard Lucretia’s voice over the piped in music.

“…I’m telling you, he’s amazing. Absolutely and undeniably amazing. I’ve never…not ever met anyone like him.”

Kristi had to fight from rolling her eyes. Even as a freshman Lucretia had been a hopeless romantic. It seemed as if things hadn’t changed. Lucretia was on the verge of adding something else, but quit gushing when she spied Kristi. She sent the other women a silent glance, which they understood, and everyone at the table went quiet.

Kristi got the message—Lucretia did not want her old roommate to know anything about her love life. As if Kristi cared.

As Kristi distributed the cold drinks and poured coffee, Lucretia eyed her old roommate. “So you’re enrolled at A. S.?”

“Uh-huh.” No reason to lie about it. Kristi poured coffee into a cup.

“Didn’t you graduate?”

Kristi wasn’t about to be baited. “Just a few credits shy.” Jesus, why did Lucretia care?

“I thought you had a thing about writing.”

“Mmm. Cream?” she asked the woman who had ordered coffee, ignoring Lucretia’s questions.

“Do you have no-fat milk?”

“Sure. Just a sec.”

“I’m teaching now,” Lucretia said proudly.

“That’s great,” Kristi forced out as she swept away, refilled half-empty cups at a nearby table, then hurried back to the kitchen, where she filled a small pitcher with skim milk and grabbed a dish with packets of sugar and artificial sweeteners. Tamping down her irritation with Lucretia, she returned to the table. “Here ya go.” She set the pitcher and dish onto the table near the coffee drinker. “Now, have you decided?” Forcing a smile, she took their orders without further incident and carefully wrote the instructions on the ticket. One woman wanted diet dressing on the side of her Julius Caesar salad, another insisted on no condiments whatsoever on her King Lear burger, and a third wanted a cup of the Cleopatra clam chowder with a side of fruit rather than coleslaw. Lucretia had recently developed allergies to all shellfish, so she wanted to insure that Tybalt’s tuna salad hadn’t been tainted with any of Ophelia’s oysters or Scarus’s scampi.

Hands delved deep inside the pockets of her raincoat, Portia Laurent walked along the sidewalks that crisscrossed the quad at All Saints. It was New Year’s Eve and she was on her dinner break. Already, the night was closing in and the promise of revelry was evident in groups of students laughing and talking and hurrying to the local restaurants and bars to ring in the new year.

At least four students wouldn’t be among the partiers. Dionne Harmon, Monique DesCartes, Tara Atwater, and now Rylee Ames, whom, Portia believed, had all met with the same bad end. There could be others as well, she thought, though none from All Saints. She’d checked. In three years no other students had been reported missing.

“No bodies, no homicides,” Vernon had insisted in their most recent conversation, but Portia didn’t believe it. True, there was no proof that anything suspicious had happened to the girls, and while Dionne was African American, the other three girls were white. Serial killers usually didn’t cross racial lines, but that wasn’t always the case.
She thought about Monique DesCartes, from South Dakota. When Monique was fourteen her father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and Portia knew firsthand how that could ruin a family. Monique’s mother had been straight-up pissed that Monique had applied for scholarships and taken off, leaving the mother to deal with a rapidly failing husband and two younger daughters, one of whom was still in grade school. Monique, ever rebellious, had run away twice in high school and so, now, was chalked up as a girl who gave up easily and took off. She’d been known to drink and smoke dope and had broken up with her most recent boyfriend a few weeks before her disappearance. The boyfriend, already in an “intense” relationship with a new girlfriend, hadn’t given a rat’s ass what had become of Monique.

It seemed as if no one did. Except Portia.

She walked past the library, where three stories of lights glowed bright in the night. The rain had let up but the air was heavy and damp, leaves of some of the bushes still dripping as they shivered in the rain. The outdoor lights glowing throughout the campus had the appearance of old gaslamps, a nod to the era in which the school was founded.

As she headed to Cramer Hall, where she had lived years ago as a first-year student, she thought about the missing girls. All English majors. All enrolled in some basic classes as well as a class in the newer controversial curriculum. They’d each been enrolled in Writing the Novel, Shakespeare 201, and The Influence of Vampyrism in Modern Culture and Literature. There was no evidence that the girls had known each other and they’d not taken the classes during the same terms, but they had enrolled and passed each of those three classes. Maybe it was nothing. But maybe it was….

She found herself directly in front of the dormitory. The brick edifice looked very much the same, and she stared up at the room on the second floor that had belonged to Rylee Ames. Rylee, like the other girls, was estranged from her family but her mother’s remarks hadn’t rung true. Nadine Olsen had simply said in her west-Texas drawl, “You know how it is with some girls, when the going gets tough, the tough hitchhike to Chicago and get knocked up.” Portia had found no evidence that Rylee had ever given birth, but she had dabbled in drugs—ecstasy, marijuana, and cocaine—and run away several times as a teenager while Nadine tried to hold her brood of three sons together on a cannery worker’s salary. Rylee’s father, the first of Nadine’s five husbands, had only said, “Always knew that kid would come to no good. Takes after her mother.”

Great, Portia thought grimly. No one seemed to care what had happened to Rylee Ames.

Which was the same apathy that surrounded the other victims.

“They’re not victims until we prove that some crime has been perpetrated against them,” Del Vernon had insisted, but Portia knew better. Those girls had been victims from the day they were born. That much they had in common. Along with the fact that they had been English majors at All Saints College and as such, had taken some of the same required and elective courses.

Coincidence?

Portia doubted it.

A cold wind blew across the grounds, rattling the branches of the pines and causing the Spanish moss hanging from the live oaks to dance and sway, like ghosts in the lamplight.

If Portia had been a superstitious woman, she might have felt a chill in her soul or cared when she spied the black cat scurrying across her path. However, she didn’t believe in ghosts or demons or vampires. She wasn’t even really sure about God, though she prayed regularly. But she did believe in evil. The dark rotting of the soul where malevolence and cruelty resided in a human form.

And she was scared to death that the four girls missing from All Saints had encountered a homicidal maniac of the worst order.

She hoped to God that she was wrong.
Kristi couldn’t stand it. So what if it was New Year’s Eve? So what if everyone she knew was out celebrating. She’d had offers, of course. From Mai, just yesterday, which she had no intention of accepting, but also from friends in New Orleans, friends she’d grown up with, friends she’d worked with, and even from her new-found sister, Eve. She’d turned them all down. She wanted to get settled, here, in Baton Rouge, and when it came to the woman who was her half-sister, that was just too weird to think about. For most of her twenty-seven years she’d thought she was an only child and then…out of the blue, Eve Renner turns out to be related to her. It was just too bizarre to be contemplated and all wrapped up in a time she’d rather forget.

“One step at a time,” she told herself as she lit a few candles and turned on her notebook computer. Besides, she was on a mission. She had no intention of schlepping tables at the Bard’s Board forever and she was back at school for a reason—to hone her craft.

She’d found some success writing for Factual Crime magazine and had done a few articles for a similar e-zine, but she wanted to write a full-blown book. Since her father had refused to give her access to any of his cases, she’d have to locate her own.

The laptop whirred to life and, with little difficulty, she found an open wireless connection that she could use. Seated at her little writing alcove in the dormer, its pane window overlooking the wall surrounding campus, Kristi began scouring the Internet for information on Tara Atwater, the girl who had lived in this very unit when she’d disappeared. Kristi had become adept at finding information on the net, but this time, she came up with very little, just a few articles that mentioned Tara Atwater. There wasn’t much on the other missing girls either, she decided, as she scanned articles on the Web version of the local paper. But this felt like a story. Maybe the one she’d been looking for. Maybe she’d ended up with this apartment because this was the true-crime book she was supposed to research and write.

Something had taken the coeds away.

Girls didn’t go missing for no reason. Not four from the same small college within an eighteen-month period. Not four enrolled in the same classes.

Kristi bookmarked a page as she heard steps on the staircase. A second later the doorbell rang, and she rolled her secretary’s chair away from the desk, crossed the small room to peer through the peephole. Through the fish-eye she saw a scruffy man in his early twenties or late teens standing under the single dim light mounted on the landing of the staircase meant to be her porch. Damp and dripping, his dishwater blond hair was plastered to his head. He was carrying a toolbox in one hand and wearing an I’m-pissed-as-hell expression that was meant to suggest authority.

“Who is it?” she called just to be certain.

“The manager. Hiram Calloway. I need to check your locks.”

Oh, now he needed to check the locks? Way to be on it, Hiram.

He looked as pathetic as she’d expected with his thin beard, ancient bad-ass T-shirt from a Metallica concert, grungy camouflage pants, and sullen ask-me-if-I-give-a-shit attitude.

She opened the door a crack, leaving the chain in place. “I already took care of the locks.”

“You can’t just go doing all kinds of stuff to the place, y’know. You don’t own it. I’m supposed to fix things around here.”

“Well, I couldn’t find you, so I handled it myself,” Kristi stated with finality.

He frowned. His lips, half hidden in what he clearly was hoping would be a beard someday, curved petulantly over slightly crooked teeth. “Then I’ll have to have the key. I mean a copy. My grandma…Mrs. Calloway owns this place. She has to have access. It’s in the lease.”
“I’ll see that she gets one.”

“That’ll just take more time. She’ll give me a copy anyway. I have to have a key to every apartment in this building. I might have to get into the unit, you know, if something goes wrong or you lose your key or—”

“I’m not going to lose my key.”

“It’s for your protection.”

“If you say so.” She wasn’t counting on it.

“Jeez, why are you being such a——” He bit off the epithet at the last moment.

Kristi’s temper flared. “I called you and it took you three days to respond. All the locks in the unit were broken or loose and I heard that one of the girls who went missing from the campus lived here, so really, I thought I’d better take the situation into my own hands.”

His mouth dropped. “Anyone ever tell you to lose the attitude?”

“Like they’ve told you?” she snapped back.

He actually blushed and she felt a jab of regret. The kid, though incompetent, seemed to be trying to do his job. Even though he was failing, she really didn’t want to tick him off.

“You don’t have to be so mean,” he mumbled.

Kristi inwardly sighed. “Okay, let’s start over. Everything’s cool here, okay? I fixed the locks. I’ll give your grandmother, Mrs. Calloway, a key and she can see that you have one, though, I assume that you won’t come barging in here unless you give me notice…I think that’s in the lease, too.” She slid the chain out of its latch and let the door open wider, then stepped onto the small porch. “I didn’t mean to get off on the wrong foot with you, Hiram. I’m just a little nervous, hearing that one of the missing girls lived here last term. Your grandmother didn’t mention it and it’s a little weird.” He stared at the floorboards of the landing. He didn’t look a day over seventeen. Hardly man enough to be a manager of any kind. “So, did you know her? Tara?”

“Not really. We talked. A little.” He lifted his eyes to meet the questions in Kristi’s gaze. “She was nice. Friendly.” He didn’t have to say “not like you” but the unspoken accusation was there in his dark, murky stare. His features stiffened almost imperceptibly, but enough so that Kristi noticed the tightening of his jaw, the nearly involuntary pinching of the corners of his mouth. In that instant Kristi knew she’d been fooled by his youthful appearance. There was something sinister smoldering in his night-dark eyes, something she didn’t like. This was no boy at all, but a man in a boy’s gawky body. She hadn’t noticed it through the peephole or in the slit of the door when the chain was engaged, but now, face to face with Hiram Calloway, she realized she was standing next to a complex and angry man.

She lifted her chin. “So, what do you think happened to her?”

He glanced over the railing toward the campus. “They say she ran away.”

Kristi said, “But no one really knows.”

“She did before.”

“Did she tell you about it?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “Nah. She kept to herself.”

“You said she was friendly. That you talked.”

A funny smile played upon those half-hidden lips. “Who knows what happened to her? One day she was here.
The next, gone.”

“And that’s all you know?”

“I know that her old man is in prison somewhere and that she stiffed my grandmother.” He met her gaze deliberately. “Owed her back rent. Grandma says she’s a ‘flake’ and a ‘crook like her old man.’ Grandma figures she got what she deserved.”

“Got what she deserved,” Kristi repeated slowly, not liking the sound of that. Far away, laughter crackled through the night.

Hearing his words repeated made Hiram frown. “I’ll tell Irene you’ve got a key for her.” And with that he was gone, trudging down the steps and carrying his tools. Kristi stepped back into her apartment and slammed the door shut. She locked the dead bolt and chain and felt her skin crawl. Irene Calloway’s “good kid” of a grandson gave Kristi a major case of the creeps.
BANG!

A sharp gun report blasted through the thick dark night, the smell of cordite overriding the earthy odor of the wet grass, the horrible crack reverberating through Kristi’s skull.

In horror, she watched as Rick Bentz went down, falling, falling, falling…near the thick stone wall surrounding All Saints College.

Blood flowed. His blood. All over the street. Staining the concrete. Spraying the grass. Running in the gutters. Draining from him.

“Dad!” she screamed, her voice mute, her legs leaden, as she tried to run to him. “Dad, oh, God, oh, God….”

Lightning sizzled through the sky, striking a tree. A horrid rending noise keened through the night as the wood splintered and a heavy branch fell with a thud. The ground shook and she nearly fell.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

More shots! People were yelling, screaming through the hail of bullets. Someone was howling miserably as if he or she, too, had been hit.

But her father lay still, his color fading to black and white.

“Dad!” she screamed again.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Kristi sat bolt upright in her chair.

Oh, God, she’d been dreaming, the nightmare vivid and terrifying. Her heart was thundering, fear and adrenaline screaming through her blood, sweat breaking out on her skin.

She jumped, then looked at the clock and realized she was hearing the sound of firecrackers. People were ringing in the new year. Muted laughter and shrieking reached her ears. Church bells on campus peeled and over the din she heard the sound of horrible yowling, the noise she’d attributed to someone injured in the attack.

“Dear God,” she whispered, her heart still thundering.

Still a little groggy, she pushed herself up from the chair. She’d been reading about a serial killer and the imagined images still danced inside her head as she shoved her hair from her eyes and then walked to the door of her studio. Only her desk light was on, and aside from the pool of light cast from the small lamp, the room was in shadows. Peeking through the peephole in the door, she saw nothing. Just the empty stair landing where the dim bulb in the ceiling offered a hazy blue glow. Still the crying continued. Leaving the chain locked, she slid the dead bolt out of place and opened the door a crack.

Instantly a skinny black cat shot inside.

“Whoa…!” Kristi watched as the half-starved creature scurried under the daybed, the bedskirt undulating in the cat’s wake. “Oh, come on, kitty…kitty…no…” Kristi followed the scrawny animal, then got down on her knees and peered under the skirt. Two yellow eyes, round with fear, stared back at her. Somehow the damned thing had wedged itself between the top mattress and the lower trundle in a space barely wide enough for Kristi’s hand. “Come on, kitty, you really can’t be here.” She tried to reach into the tight space but the cat hissed and flattened
itself deeper in the crevice, its body pressed against the wall. “I mean it, come out.” Again, she was shown a curling pink tongue and needle-sharp fangs. “Great. Okay.”

Kristi pulled on the lower bunk and the cat dropped into the space between the mattress and wall. When she pushed the trundle back, she thought the cat would squirt out one end, but apparently the little thing found a hiding spot. No amount of moving the bed could dislodge the animal and Kristi wasn’t about to drag out the bed and slide into the tight space with a terrorized feline and its sharp claws.

“Please, cat…” Kristi sighed. She didn’t need this. Not tonight. Besides, there was some damned rule in clause five hundred and seventy-six or something about not having any pets on the premises. She was certain Hiram could recite it chapter and verse. “Come on…” she said, trying to sweet-talk the frightened feline.

No such luck.

“Kitty” wasn’t budging.

“Okay…how about this?” She scrounged in her cupboard, found a can of tuna, and opened it. Glancing over her shoulder, she expected to see a little nose or curious eyes or at least a black paw peeking from beneath the daybed.

She was wrong.

She put a couple of forkfuls of tuna into a small dish and half filled another with water, then set them close enough to the bed to entice the cat, but far enough away that Kristi thought she could grab it by the back of its neck and haul it outside. But she’d have to be patient.

Not her long suit.

She set the dishes on the floor and backed up. Then waited, watching the digital clock on the microwave as the minutes dragged by as if they were hours and more revelry sounded outside: people yelling, horns honking, fireworks exploding, footsteps on the porches below. Laughter. Conversation.

Inside, the cat stayed put. Probably petrified with all the noise.

Perfect, Kristi thought, fighting a headache. She was bone tired. The minutes dragged by and she finally gave up. She couldn’t wait all night.

“Fine. Have it your way.” Already in her PJs, she closed the door, locked it, double-checked the latches on the windows, and crawled into the daybed. It creaked beneath her weight and she thought for certain she’d hear the cat slink from beneath the mattress, but not a chance. There were noises outside. Music and laughter filtering up through the floor. Mai Kwan’s group back from the Watering Hole, no doubt, but her new houseguest didn’t so much as stick his nose out from under the bed.

It appeared that the black cat she’d already decided to call Houdini had settled in for the night.

“It’s midnight. Come on, celebrate!” Olivia insisted, and offered Bentz a glass of nonalcoholic champagne. “It’s going to be a better year.”

“Doesn’t it have to be?” He pushed away from the desk in their cottage in Cambrai. Ever since the roads had been repaired from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, he and Olivia, along with her scruffy dog and noisy bird, had lived out here. Kristi, too, off and on, had stayed in the spare bedroom upstairs in this cottage Olivia had inherited from her grandmother. Kristi, though, had always been restless in this little cabin on the bayou. Moreover, she’d never really felt comfortable with him and his new wife. For years it had been just the two of them, and though she gave lip service to “liking” Olivia and “loving” the idea that he wasn’t alone any longer, that he’d finally gotten over Kristi’s mother, that he was living his own life, there was a part of her that still hadn’t accepted it all. None of this had escaped his ultraperceptive wife, though Livvie held her tongue on the matter. Smart woman. And goddamned beautiful.
Since living out here they both had to commute to the city, but it was worth it, he decided, once he’d gotten used to living next door to gators and egrets and possum. The distance from the city gave both he and Olivia some peace of mind, a little time away from the chaos that had been New Orleans.

Olivia still owned her shop, the Third Eye, just off Jackson Square, where she sold trinkets, artifacts, and new age stuff to tourists. The store had been spared any serious damage, but the square itself had changed and the tourist business had been slow to return. The tarot readers and human statues, even many of the musicians, had left in the storm’s aftermath, as their homes had been destroyed and even now, things were slow.

“Don’t be such a pessimist, Bentz,” she teased, and he grudgingly took the drink and touched the rim of his glass to hers. “Happy New Year.” Her eyes, the color of aged whiskey, gleamed and wild blond curls surrounded her face. She’d aged some in the years since they’d married, but the lines near the corners of her eyes didn’t detract from her beauty; in fact, she insisted they gave her character. But there was a sadness to her, too. They’d never been able to conceive and now Bentz wasn’t really interested. Kristi was in her late twenties and starting over again seemed unnecessary, maybe even foolhardy. Jesus, he’d be in his sixties when the kid finished high school. That didn’t seem right.

Except Olivia wanted a child.

And she would make a damned fine mother.

“I’m not a pessimist,” he corrected as Hairy S. trotted into the room and hopped onto Bentz’s La-Z-Boy to peer at them through the bush of his eyebrows. “I’m a realist.”

“And a glass-is-half-empty-kind-of-guy.”

He took a swallow of his tasteless fizzy fruit juice and held it to the light. “Well, I’m right. It is half empty.”

“And you’re worried sick about Kristi.”

“I didn’t think it showed.”

“You’ve been a wreck ever since she left.” Olivia sat across his lap, wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and touched her forehead to his. “She’s going to be all right. She’s a big girl.”

“Who was almost killed...had to have her heart started twice. Almost legally dead.”

“Almost,” Olivia stressed. “She survived. She’s tough.”

He rotated the kinks from his neck and drank in the scent of her as Hairy whined from the nearby recliner as if he wanted to join them in the oversized chair. “I just worry she’s not tough enough.”

“You’re her dad. She’s tough enough.” She took a long swallow from her glass, then twirled the stem. “Wanna fool around?”

“Now?”

“Yeah. You play the big, tough detective and I’ll be—”

“The weirdo who can read a killer’s mind?”

“I was going to say a weak little woman.”

He was taking another drink and nearly choked. “That’ll be the day.” But he kissed her and felt the warmth of her lips mold over his intimately. Familiarly. Old lovers who still had heat.

His cell phone vibrated loudly, quivering across the desk.

“Damn,” Olivia whispered.
He picked up the phone and glanced at the LCD. “Montoya,” he said. “No rest for the wicked.”

“I’ll hold you to that when you get home,” she said as he grinned and placed the cell to his ear. “Bentz.”

“Happy New Year,” Montoya said.

“Back atcha.” It sounded as if Montoya was already driving, speeding through the city streets.

“We’ve got a DB down by the waterfront. Looks like a party gone bad. Not far from the casino. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

“I’m on my way,” Bentz said, and felt a jab of regret when he saw the disappointment in Olivia’s eyes. He hung up and started to explain but she placed a finger over his lips.

“I’ll be waiting,” she said. “Wake me.”

“You got it.”

He found his jacket, keys, wallet, and badge, then, making sure Hairy S. stayed inside, walked outside to his truck, an ancient Jeep that he kept threatening to trade in. So far he hadn’t had the heart, nor the time. Climbing behind the wheel, he heard the familiar creak of the worn leather seats as he jammed the SUV into reverse, backing around Olivia’s sedan. Ramming the Jeep into first, he managed to find a pack of gum and unwrap a piece of Juicy Fruit as he nosed his rig down the long lane and across a small bridge. Popping the stick of gum into his mouth, he slowed as he turned onto the two-lane road toward the city, then hit the gas. Olivia was right, he supposed, he had been out of sorts. Worried. He had his reasons and they all centered around his kid. The boles of cypress, palmetto, and live oak trees caught in the splash of his headlights while he thought about Kristi.

Headstrong and beautiful as Jennifer, her mother, Kristi had been described as “a handful,” “stubborn,” “independent to a fault,” and a “firecracker” by her teachers both in LA where he and Jennifer had lived, and here in New Orleans. She’d certainly given him more than his share of gray hairs, but he figured that was all part of the parenting process and it would end once she’d grown up and settled down with her own family. Only, so far, that hadn’t happened.

He took a corner a little too fast and his tires skidded just a bit. A raccoon, startled by the car, waddled quickly into the undergrowth flanking the highway.

Kristi seemed as far from getting married as ever and if she was dating anyone, she studiously kept that info to herself. In high school she’d gone with Jay McKnight, even received a “promise ring” from him, whatever the hell that meant—some kind of preengagement token.

Bentz snorted, listening as the police band crackled, the dispatcher sending units to differing areas of the city. Kristi had claimed she’d “outgrown” Jay and broken up with him when she’d attended All Saints the first time around. She’d found an older guy at the school, a TA by the name of Brian Thomas who’d been a zero, a real loser, in Bentz’s admittedly jaded opinion. Well, that had ended badly, too.

Gunning the engine, he accelerated onto the freeway and melded with the sparse traffic, most vehicles driving ten miles over the speed limit toward Crescent City.

Now, Jay McKnight had finished college and a master’s program. He was working for the New Orleans Police Department in the crime lab and Bentz would defy his daughter to think of Jay as “boring” or “homegrown” any longer. A little turn of the screw was that Jay was going to teach a night class up at All Saints. Maybe Kristi would run into him.

And maybe he could be convinced to check in on Bentz’s daughter....

He inwardly groaned. He didn’t like going behind Kristi’s back, but wasn’t above it, not if it meant her safety. He’d nearly lost her twice already in her twenty-seven years; he couldn’t face it again. Until the Baton Rouge Police figured out what was happening with the missing coeds, Bentz was going to be proactive.
Easing off the freeway, he headed for the waterfront. In the moonlight, the decimated parts of town looked eerie and foreboding, abandoned cars, destroyed houses, streets that were still impassable. This part of New Orleans was hardest hit when the levees gave way and Bentz wondered if it could ever be rebuilt. Even Montoya and his new wife, Abby, had had to abandon their project of renovating their home in the city, two shotgun row houses that they had been converting into one larger home. The house, which had survived over two hundred years, had been in its final phase of reconstruction when the wind and floodwaters of Katrina swept through, destroying the once venerable property. Montoya, pissed as hell, was commuting from Abby’s cottage outside the city.

They were all tired. Needed a break.

He sped to the crime scene, where two units were already in position, lights flashing around a roped off area where officers were keeping the onlookers at bay. Montoya’s Mustang was parked half on the sidewalk, and he, dressed in his favorite leather jacket, was already talking to the officer who’d been first on the scene.

The body was lying face up on the sidewalk. Bentz’s gut clenched and the taste of bile climbed up his throat. The woman was Caucasian, in her early forties. Two gunshot wounds stained a short red dress. There were signs of a struggle, a couple broken fingernails on her right hand and several scratches across her face. Bentz stared at her long and hard. She wasn’t one of the missing women who had disappeared from All Saints College. He’d memorized the faces of Dionne Harmon, Tara Atwater, Monique DesCartes, and now Rylee Ames. Their images haunted his nights. This unidentified woman was none of them.

He felt a second’s relief and then a jab of guilt. This victim belonged to someone, and whoever it was—mother, father, brother, sister, or boyfriend—would be devastated and grief-stricken.

“...so I’m thinkin’ it was probably a robbery gone bad. No wallet or ID on her,” the officer was saying.

Jane Doe.

“She was found by those guys over there—” He hitched his chin to a sober group of four, two men and two women, who’d been separated from the lookie-loos wandering by. “They’re just partiers on their way home from the Hootin’ Owl, a bar on Decatur,” the officer said.

Bentz nodded. He knew the place.

The officer continued, “They claim they didn’t hear or see anything, just nearly stumbled over her body. But then, they’re pretty wasted.”

Bentz glanced at the two couples, dressed in glittery clothes and looking suddenly sober as judges.

“I’ll talk to them,” Montoya said, easing toward the couples, both African American. The girls rubbed their arms as if chilled to the bone, their eyes wide with fear. Their dates were both tight-lipped and tough-looking. The slimest girl stared at the body, the other looked away, and the tallest of the group lit a cigarette that he shared with his date, the thin one.

Bentz’s cell phone rang as the crime lab van arrived with Bonita Washington at the wheel. She double-parked behind a cruiser. Inez Santiago, hauling a tool kit, climbed out of one side, while Washington cut the engine of the big rig.

Bentz glanced down at the digital readout on his phone. Police dispatch. No doubt another homicide.

Crap.

“Bentz,” he answered, watching as Bonita, in all her self-important fury, ushered the uniforms and gawkers away from what she considered “her” crime scene. She was an intense black woman with a don’t-mess-with-me attitude and an IQ rumored to be in the stratosphere. She loved her job, was good at it, and didn’t take flack from anyone. Santiago was already taking pictures of the dead girl. Again Bentz’s stomach twisted.

Over the phone, the dispatcher gave him the location and a quick rundown of what looked like a hit-and-run
closer to the business district.

“I’ll be there ASAP, as soon as I’m done here,” he said, hanging up.

“Move away,” Washington yelled at one of the uniforms near the yellow tape, waving him off with one hand. “Who the hell has been tromping all over here? Damn it all—Bentz, get these people back, will ya? And you,” she said to the uniformed cop, “don’t let anyone, and I mean not even Jesus Christ himself, across that line, you got that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Just as long as we understand each other.” She flashed him a smile with zero warmth and got down to the business of collecting samples, gunshot residue, footprints, and fingerprints as the medical examiner’s van pulled up.

“Don’t tell me,” Montoya said as his phone began to play a salsa melody. “Damn.” He checked his watch. “Fifty-three friggin’ minutes into the new year and already two DBs.”

“There’ll be more,” Bentz predicted as he glanced once more at the victim. Two hours ago, this woman had been ready to celebrate the new year.

Now she’d never see another day.

His cell phone rang again.

His jaw clenched.

It promised to be a helluva night.

Midnight.

The witching hour.

A time when the last day was done and the next starting, and, in this case, a new year. He smiled to himself as he walked through the rain-washed city streets, hearing the sounds of firecrackers and, he supposed, champagne corks, all sounding like the rapid-fire reports of guns.

Not that he was into that type of weaponry.

Too impersonal.

Being so far from a victim, hundreds of yards in some cases, took away the thrill, the feeling of intimacy that came when the lifeblood drained from the body, the light in the victim’s eyes died slowly, and the frantic, fearful beating of her pulse at her neck slowed to nothing. That was personal. That was perfect.

Dressed in black, blending into the shadows, he crossed the campus, smelled the sweet odor of burning marijuana, and watched a couple clumsily fumbling at each other’s clothes as they kissed and made their way toward a dorm, and presumably a small twin bed where they’d go at it all night.

He felt a twinge of jealousy.

The pleasures of the flesh…

But he had to wait.

He knew it.

Despite his restlessness.
His need.

Deep inside he craved release and knew it would only come through the slow taking of a life...and not just any life. No. Those who were sacrificed were chosen.

The ache in him throbbed, refused to be denied, and his nerves were strung tight. Electrified. Anxious.

He smelled their lust. Their own special yearning. The blood singing through their veins.

He clenched his fists and cleared his mind of lust, of desire, of the heat that pounded through his skull.

Not now.

Not this night.

Not them.

Giving the entwined, stumbling couple one last angry glance, he clamped down hard on the most basic of urges to follow.

To hunt.

To kill.

*They are not worthy,* he reminded himself. *And there is a plan. You must not stray from your mission.*

On noiseless footsteps he made his way swiftly through the campus gates and along several streets, zigzagging through alleys to the old building that had long been condemned, a once-grand hotel that was locked and boarded, where the only inhabitants were spiders, rats, and other vermin. He made his way to the back of the building, where once there had been a service entrance for deliveries. He hurried down the crumbling stairs and, using his key, unlocked a back door. Inside, he ignored the dripping, rusted pipes, broken glass, and rotting boards that had been part of a previous attempt at renovation. Instead he walked along the familiar hallway to another locked door and spiral steps leading downward. At the base of the steps, he unlocked the final door and stepped inside to an area that smelled of chlorine. Locking the door behind him, he waited a few seconds, headed down a short dark hallway to a large open area, then flipped a switch, where dim bulbs illuminated an Olympic-sized swimming pool, its aquamarine tiles shimmering silently in the ghostly light.

Stripping noiselessly, he cast his clothes into a corner and, once completely naked, walked to the pool’s edge and dove deep into the bracing, unheated water. The shock puckered his skin, but he stretched his body and began swimming through the water, breathing naturally, turning at the far end, athletically, then swimming the length again. His body, honed by hours of exercise, sliced through the water as easily as a hunting knife through flesh. He stroked faster and faster, increasing his speed, feeling his heart pump and his lungs begin to strain. Five lengths. Ten. Twenty.

He only drew himself out of the water when he felt the first wave of exhaustion pulling at him, calming him, forcing the bloodlust from his heart. There was time enough for that later. Cool air slid over his wet skin. His nipples tightened. His cock shriveled. But he embraced the cold as he made his way through a dark hallway, his eyes adjusting to the lack of light as he turned two corners and walked into another chamber where his trophies were hidden.

There was a bare writing desk in the room, a squatty black table, and a few thick pillows upon the tired concrete floor. A computer screen from a notebook added a faint blue glow and he considered logging on. He communicated with them over the Internet; on pirated wireless connections throughout the city they knew him by several screen names, but he called himself Vlad. Not particularly clever but fitting for his purposes, he decided. What was the quote from Shakespeare? “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet.” Well, Vlad smelled sweet and tasted even better, he thought. So, for the purposes of this, his mission, he would be known as Vlad the Impaler. And was he not? Did he not impale each of the ones he chose?
Oh, irony.

Lighting a candle, Vlad sat cross-legged at the stubby Japanese table, opened a drawer within it and drew out the pictures, snapshots taken for student ID cards. He set the first four onto the glossy surface of the table.

*Sisters,* he thought, though not genetically related.

He touched each photo with the tip of his index finger, in the order in which he’d taken them.

Dionne, sweet and supple, her rich dark skin soft as silk. Oh, she’d been ripe and so hot…so damned hot and wet…Crying out her unwillingness, but her body responding to him as he made her ready, made that perfect body want him. His throat tightened at the memory of taking her, from behind, his hands kneading her abdomen, making her come just before he did.

He swallowed hard.

And Tara, the thin one with her gorgeous breasts. Full and white, with pale rose-colored nipples the size of half-dollars. He felt his prick twitch at the thought of those glorious tits. He remembered suckling them, teasing them, biting them, scraping them with his teeth as she cried out in heated torment…again his blood began to sing. He touched Tara’s photo, then looked to the next girl.

Monique. Tall and lean, an athlete’s body. Muscles that had strained against him as he’d sculpted her with his palms, fingers exploring all her intimate, sweet crevices. He licked his lips as his cock stood at attention.

He glanced to the next photo. Rylee. Small. Frightened. But oh, so delicious. Her pale yellow hair had caught his attention and when she was stripped bare, her white skin had been luminous, her veins visible beneath the surface, her beating heart apparent in the fluttering, frightened pulse throbbing so perfectly within the circle of bones at her throat.

Oh, God, how succulent she’d been…the taste of her…He turned the photo over where the smear of her blood was still visible on the back of the snapshot. Smiling in pure self-indulgent wickedness, he lifted the picture to his mouth and gently flicked the tip of his long tongue over the dark crimson stain. The taste of her filled his mouth and he sucked in his breath with the euphoria of it.

His cock was rock hard now. Ready.

To impale.

Licking his lips, he laid the picture onto the table with the rest of his chosen ones, then searched the others…hundreds of them tucked into his hiding place.

He’d already pulled those he thought the most likely candidates, the girls who appealed to him. Though he was missing a few. The new ones. The coeds who had signed up for this, the second term, as new students. He didn’t have their pictures yet.

But he would.

And soon.

Then they would join those he’d already identified, those who would soon join their sisters.

He smiled, running his tongue over his teeth, savoring the taste of poor, scared-out-of-her-mind Rylee Ames.

In the next batch, though he had yet to procure her photograph, Vlad thought of another, the cop’s kid who had rented Tara’s apartment. As if she were fated to do so, he thought, conjuring up her image in his mind.

He’d seen her. Watched her. Mentally claimed her. She was a gorgeous woman with just the right amount of spirit and the perfect body for his needs, for his sacrifice. When her time came. She was not slated to be the next, but her
time would come soon enough. He could wait. He had no choice. All that was to be, had already been decided.

His blood flowed hot at the thought of taking her and he looked down at the pictures on the table before him.

Though she didn’t yet know it, Kristi Bentz would soon join her sisters....
So this is what everyone was talking about, Kristi thought as she took a seat in the packed classroom on the first day of the term. It was the Monday after New Year’s at eight in the morning. Most of the students looked as if they’d just rolled out of bed.

Chairs scraped against the floor, shoes shuffled, voices buzzed with conversation, and in the background the soft strains of Renaissance music drifted from speakers mounted high on the walls of the large, auditoriumlike room. Rows of seats were situated on tiers that funneled down to a barren center stage that held a battered table, podium, and microphone. A stack of books and an open three-leaf binder were situated near a laptop computer on the table.

A man in his mid-to-late thirties, presumably Dr. Victor Emmerson, was already standing behind the table, one jean-clad hip thrown out as he leaned over his notes, his scruffy black leather jacket tossed over a white T-shirt, a pair of reflective sunglasses folded and tucked into the shirt’s crew neck. His hair was shaggy, dark brown, and appeared not to have been combed since the day before. About three days’ worth of beard-shadow covered a strong jaw. He looked as if he took road trips on a Harley-Davidson. Everything about him oozed “cool, moody biker.” A far cry from the stuffy teachers she remembered from a few years earlier.

Maybe the class would be as interesting as she’d heard. She’d signed up because it was required for an undergraduate English degree and it sounded interesting. Even more so now.

Emmerson scratched at the stubble on his chin as he read his notes, flipping through pages, scowling at his own scribbles, only looking up when the door to the room opened and yet another student walked in and searched for a vacant desk.

The remaining spots to sit in were few and far between.

This class on Shakespeare was surprisingly popular and Kristi figured the fascination with the class had more to do with the sexy, unlikely professor than the Bard or his works. She slid her computer onto the desk to take notes and checked out the other students, several of whom looked familiar. Mai Kwan, her neighbor, was seated near the front of the room, several rows below Kristi, and a couple of girls who had been with Lucretia the day she’d come into the diner were huddled together near the windows. But the kicker was that just before class was to start, who should stroll in but Hiram Calloway, Kristi’s would-be apartment manager. She turned away quickly, hoping that he didn’t notice one of the few vacant seats was next to Kristi. Fortunately, he found another desk, near the back of the room.

Good.

The door slammed shut behind Hiram, and Emmerson checked the clock on the wall, then hit a button behind the podium, killing the music. Straightening, taking the entire class in with one broad look, he said, “Okay, I’m Professor Emmerson, this is Shakespeare two-o-one and if this isn’t the class you signed up for, leave now and make room for someone who intended to enroll. For those of you who have heard that this is an easy class, a guaranteed A, you, too, are welcome to exit.”

No one moved. The class was silent except for the ticking of the clock.

A cell phone chirped loudly and Emmerson looked directly at the kid in a baseball cap who was fumbling in his pocket.

“That’s the next thing. No phones in class, and not just ringing. If I sense one is vibrating, or if anyone looks at his or hers to read a text or even to check the time, you’re history. Automatic F. If you don’t like the rules, then drop the class and take it up with the administration. I don’t care. This classroom is not a democracy. I’m the king, okay? Just like the ones we’ll study, only, I hope, not quite as self-serving.
“While you’re in here”—he held up two hands to indicate the entire classroom—“with me, we’ll be studying good old Willie Boy like you’ve never studied him before. We’re not just going to read his plays and his poems. We’re going to learn them. Inside and out. We’ll read them as they are meant to be read, the way Mr. Shakespeare—or depending upon your viewpoint, whoever wrote them—meant them to be read. For the purposes of this class, we’ll assume they belong to William Shakespeare. If you’re one of those Francis Bacon freaks who thinks he did it, even though he wouldn’t have had a lot of time, or Edward de Vere enthusiasts, or for those of you who think Christopher Marlowe, even though he supposedly died in 1593, took up the quill in his dead hand under Shakespeare’s name, or, for that matter anyone else, again”—he pointed toward the back of the room—“there’s the door. I know there’s a movement to prove that poor, illiterate William couldn’t possibly have written anything so sophisticated or knowledgeable about the upper class and Italy and all that rot. I also know some of academia think that his works were really written by a group of people. We’re going to have a lot of lively discussions about Shakespeare’s work, don’t get me wrong, but the whole ‘did he or did he not write them’ subject is taboo. I don’t care who wrote them, okay? That’s for another class. I’m only interested in what you think of the work.” He walked around to the front of his desk and rested his jean-clad hips against the edge. “I assume you all received a syllabus via e-mail for this class. If you haven’t, double check your inbox or spam folder and only if you really didn’t receive one, call my office and I’ll shoot another your way. Most of your assignments will come through the Internet and that’s why you all have an address ending with allsaints.edu. If you don’t have one, or think you don’t, check with the registrar or admissions. It’s not my problem.

“For those of you who did check your syllabus, you’ll see that we’re going to begin with Macbeth. Why?” His smile was a little wicked. “Because what better way to start off the year than with witches, prophesies, blood, ghosts, guilt, and murder?”

He had everyone’s attention now and he knew it. Glancing over the captivated students, his gaze moving from one rapt face to the next, he nodded slowly. His eyes found Kristi’s and held for a split second. Was it her imagination or did he linger just a little longer on her than the others?

No way.

It was just a trick of light.

Had to be.

And yet, his grin seemed to shift a little before he looked away, as if he knew a deep secret. An intimate secret.

What the hell was wrong with her? Just because he was good-looking she was thinking all kinds of ridiculous things.

“Besides,” he said in his deep voice, “in this classroom, I get to decide what we do. I like Macbeth. So—” He clapped his hands together and half the class jumped. Again the knowing smile. “Let’s get started…”

“Kristi!” As she was walking briskly past the steps of the library, she heard her name and her stomach nose-dived. She recognized the voice. Turning, Kristi spied her old-roommate-cum-assistant professor, Lucretia, black overcoat billowing, umbrella held in one fist, hurrying toward her. The skies were threatening a downpour, the wind was kicking up, and the last thing Kristi wanted to do was have a chat with Lucretia Stevens in the middle of the quad. “Hey, wait up!”

There was no escape.

She paused and Lucretia, breathless, half ran to catch up with her. “I need to talk to you,” she said without preamble.

“Really.”

Lucretia ignored Kristi’s irony. “Do you have a minute?” Other students, heads bent against the wind, hurried along the concrete and brick paths intersecting the lawn in the middle of campus. Some were on bikes, some walking, and one zipped by on a skateboard. “We could go into the student union and get a cup of coffee or tea or
something.” She seemed earnest. Worried.

“I have a class at eleven and it’s across campus.” She glanced at her watch. Ten thirty-six. Not much time.

“It won’t take long,” Lucretia insisted, grabbing hold of Kristi’s arm and trying to shepherd her toward the brick building that housed the student union, café, and on the other side, the registrar’s office. Kristi pulled her arm back, but walked with Lucretia into the cafeteria-style restaurant, where they headed to the coffee counter and waited behind three girls ordering coffee drinks. Kristi perused a display of scones, muffins, and bagels, then ordered a black coffee while Lucretia asked for a caramel latte with extra foam. Kristi tried not to notice the minutes ticking by as they waited for their drinks, but it ate at her that she’d be late for her next class, The Influence of Vampyrism on Modern Culture, taught by Dr. Grotto.

Once they were served, she followed Lucretia through scattered tables where students were clustered, talking, studying or listening to their iPods. She noticed a couple of Lucretia’s friends, Grace and Trudie, locked in a deep conversation at a table near the back door, but Lucretia, as if to avoid them, headed for a corner booth that hadn’t been cleaned in a while. She took a seat with her back to her friends.

Kristi settled in to her side of the booth and realized she now only had twenty minutes to get to class. She was doomed to be late. “Better make it quick. I don’t have a lot of time,” Kristi warned as she blew across her steaming cup.

Lucretia let out her breath, then glanced over her shoulder as if she expected someone to be watching them. Satisfied that they weren’t being observed or overheard, she leaned over the table and whispered, “You’ve heard that some of the students—girls—have gone missing from campus.”

Kristi pretended only mild interest. She nodded. “Four, right?”

“Yes.” Lucretia bit at the corner of her lip. “So far they’re just missing….”

“But…you think…something else?”

Lucretia didn’t touch her coffee, just let it sit on the chipped Formica table near some used packets of hot sauce and mustard that someone hadn’t bothered to throw away. “Well, I just think something’s going on. Something weird.” She lowered her voice even further. “I knew Rylee.”

“What is?”

“I think she might have been a part of some cult.”

“Cult?”

She was nodding, rotating her small cup and watching the foam slowly melt into her untouched coffee.

“You mean like a religious cult?”

“I don’t know exactly what kind…. There are rumors about all kinds of weird things going on. The big thing seems to be some interest in vampires.”

“Like in Buffy the Vampire Slayer or Dracula or—?”

“I mean in real live vampires.”

Kristi gave her a look. “Vampire bats…or the Count Dracula kind? Oh, wait, I get it. You’re putting me on.”
But Lucretia was serious. “This isn’t a joke! Some of the kids run around with fangs and vials of blood hanging from their necks, and they are so into Dr. Grotto’s class that it’s almost like an obsession. Totally out of line.”

“But they don’t really believe there are vampires who sleep in coffins during the day and run around and drink human blood at night. The kind that are only killed by wooden stakes or silver bullets and can’t look into mirrors.”

“Don’t be that way.”

“What way?” Kristi asked.

“So…harsh. And I don’t know what they believe.” Almost guiltily, Lucretia played with a gold chain encircling her neck. Between her fingers a small diamond-encrusted cross dangled.

“So, Rylee was into this vampire thing,” Kristi said skeptically.

“Yes. Oh, yeah…” The diamond cross glittered under the huge suspended lights of the dining hall.

“What do they do? This vampire cult?”

“I don’t know. Rylee was…secretive.”

“What do you know about her?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call her the most stable girl on the planet,” Lucretia admitted. “She had quit college once before, maybe in winter or spring term of last year.” She cleared her throat. Looked away. The cross winked.

“And—” Kristi prodded, sensing there was more.

“And, well…she was…is a bit of a drama queen. Well, not just a bit, I would say. She did try to commit suicide once.”

“Suicide?”

“Shh!” Lucretia lowered her voice and quit playing with her necklace. “I know, that’s a cry for help and I’m not sure she ever got it. Her mother spent so much time worrying that Rylee would get pregnant, she never saw how much pain Rylee was in.”

“Her mother ignored her suicide attempt?” Krista asked incredulously.

“The way Rylee told it, she gave her mom a lot of trouble as a teenager—staying out late, partying, the wrong crowd, drugs, boys, you name it. So she washed her hands of her, turned her back on her own kid. How about that?” Lucretia said the last phrase bitterly and Kristi was reminded of Lucretia’s own disengaged parents. At least disengaged emotionally.

Lucretia cleared her throat. “Anyway, from what I understand, her mother thinks Rylee’s disappearance is just one more of her ‘stunts,’ a clamor for attention.”

“But you think it’s this…cult.”

“Yes.”

“And that she got mixed up with something or someone evil within the cult.”

Lucretia swallowed hard. “I hope I’m wrong.”

“You think she took this vampirism thing too far, really believed it, and got in over her head.”

Lucretia was obviously turning it over in her mind. “Yes…yes…I think it’s possible.”
There was something off about the conversation, something Lucretia wasn’t saying, something worrisome. Here they were in the middle of the damned cafeteria of the student union, surrounded by kids and adults, talking, laughing, joking, or studying, some listening to iPods, some eating or drinking coffee or sipping on sodas, and she and Lucretia were actually talking about vampires and cults. Something soulfully evil? She eyed her ex-roommate and wondered what had happened to her over the past few years. “What about you, Lucretia?” she asked, watching for the tiniest reaction. “Where are you on the whole vampirism thing?”

Lucretia glanced at the window to the gloomy day beyond. “Sometimes I don’t really know what’s real and what’s not.”

A shiver of apprehension slid down Kristi’s spine. “Seriously?”

“Do I believe in vampires? As in the Hollywood archetype? No.” Lucretia shook her head slowly. Thoughtfully. As if she were wrestling with the idea for the first time. Almost unconsciously, she began shredding her paper napkin.

“Let’s take Hollywood out of it,” Kristi suggested. She should probably drop the entire conversation. It was too weird. Too unreal. But she couldn’t help herself. Her curiosity had been whetted with the mystery of the missing coeds and she’d already decided to look into their disappearances; maybe Lucretia could help. She certainly seemed as if she wanted to.

Lucretia thought hard, then said, “Philosophically, I believe that you can make your own truth. People who hallucinate, whether from drugs or medical conditions, see things that are very real to them. It’s their truth, their frame of reference, though it isn’t, maybe, anyone else’s. My grandmother, before she died, saw people who weren’t in the room, and she was certain she’d gone places that she couldn’t have, because she was stuck in a hospital bed in a nursing home. But she described her ‘trips’ with amazing clarity, to the point she nearly convinced us. Was she dreaming? Hallucinating?” Lucretia shrugged her shoulders. “Doesn’t matter. Her reality, her truth was that she had been there.”

“So you’re thinking that the students who are in this cult, they’ve altered their reality. Through what? Mental problems? Drugs?”

“Or maybe desire.”

Kristi felt an icy wind cut through her soul. “Desire?”

Sighing, Lucretia finally brushed the pieces of her napkin aside, piling the tiny bits with the gooey used packets of condiments. “They want to believe it so badly that it’s real. You know what I mean. Wanting something so badly in your life that you can almost taste it. Wanting something...something you would do anything to get.” Her dark eyes zeroed in on Kristi and she grabbed her hand, holding it so tight her knuckles showed white. “We all want something.”

A moment later she let go of Kristi’s hand. Kristi found that her heartbeat had accelerated. “But this particular fantasy...Why would anyone want to think that there are vampires?” Kristi asked, truly mystified.

“It’s hot. Sexy.”


“No one said anything about them being in their right minds.” Lucretia stared at her again, then finally picked up her coffee cup and took a sip. “These—believers—their lives are empty, or boring, or so goddamned awful that any kind of magic, or sorcery, or alternative existence is better than what they’re living.”

“That’s whacked. You’re saying there’s a whole cult of these people who believe in this creature of the night fantasy.”

“It’s whacked to you. But not to them. Oh, there are probably some who participate just for the thrill of it. There’s
an allure to the whole vampire culture. It’s dark. It’s sexual. In some ways it’s very romantic and visceral. But to some people it’s not a fantasy. Those are the ones that really, and truly, believe it.”

“They need help,” Kristi said.

When Lucretia stared at Kristi her eyes had darkened again. With worry? Or her own Stygian dogma? How weird was this? Kristi and Lucretia had never been friends, so why had her old roommate sought her out? Why were they even having this discussion? At a nearby table two jock-type guys scraped chairs from the table and set down a tray loaded with hot dogs and fries. They were joking and talking, grabbing at the mustard and ketchup packets. It was all so normal.

Was she really having a conversation about vampires with Lucretia?

“So what about Dr. Grotto?” Kristi asked, envisioning the tall sardonic man with such dark hair and intense eyes. “Do you think he promotes it with his classes on vampirism? Is he the cult leader?”

“What? God, no!” She set down her cup so hard that some of the foam and coffee beneath sloshed over the rim.

“But he teaches the classes—”

“Not on being a vampire, for Christ’s sake, but on the influence of the whole vampire, werewolf, shape-shifter, monster myth in society. Historically, and today. He’s an intellectual, for God’s sake!”

“That doesn’t mean he’s not into the whole thing—”

“You’re missing the point. It’s not about Dominic….” Lucretia shook her head vehemently and actually paled at the thought. “He’s a wonderful man. Educated. Alive. Look, this was a mistake.” Ashen-faced, she stood, and she was actually trembling as she gathered her things. “I thought because you’d been through a lot, because your dad is such a crack detective, that you might be able to help, that you might be able to convince your father to check into what happened to Dionne, Monique, Tara, and Rylee, but forget it.”

“Your friends are still missing,” Kristi pointed out, as she, too, got up from the table.

“They’re not ‘my friends,’ okay? Just some girls I knew. Part of a study group.”

“They knew each other?”

“Peripherally, I guess. I’m not sure. They were English majors and all of them, I think, were kind of troubled, lonely kids, the kind who could’ve gotten caught up in the wrong thing. But I should have known you’d twist it all around.” She rolled her eyes as she tossed the wet napkin into a nearby trash can.

“Did you tell this to the police?”

“No—I—I’m an assistant professor here now, but I’m not tenured, and I don’t have access to all the records as I’m not a full professor yet and…damn, it’s complicated. I can’t go spouting off about cults on the campus, but then I ran across you and…so, I’m telling you now. Because I thought your father could look into this quietly, without getting me into any hot water. Before, I wasn’t convinced that there was anything wrong. Dionne and Monique, they were pretty wild and always talked of just hitchhiking away, but now…I don’t know. Tara was unhappy, but Rylee?” She shoved her hair out of her eyes, caught sight of the boys at the nearby table, and lowered her voice. “Maybe I’m imagining all this. You know, the whole blur between what’s real and fantasy. I don’t know why I even told you about it.”

Neither did Kristi. She’d never seen someone go from ice cold to red hot in a matter of seconds. Obviously she’d hit a nerve bringing up Professor Grotto, who just happened to be the teacher of Kristi’s next class, the one she was late for, the one on vampires. Kristi decided she’d keep that information to herself for the moment. She gulped the last of her coffee and tossed the cup away while Lucretia gave the table one last swipe.

Kristi couldn’t help but notice the ring on Lucretia’s left hand. “Are you engaged?” she asked, and remembered
the conversation Lucretia was having about the guy who was absolutely “amazing.” Could she have meant Grotto?

Lucretia stopped mopping for a second, looked down at her fingers, and her white face instantly flushed scarlet. “Oh…no…” she stammered. “It’s…it’s just…nothing.” Quickly she wadded the napkins over the old packets of sauce and dropped the whole mess into the trash bin. She added quickly, “And it’s not a ‘promise ring’ or whatever you called it when you were a freshman.” A little smile crawled across her lips. “Remember?”

“Yeah.”

Lucretia was wiping her hands on a fresh napkin. “Isn’t that a hoot? To think that the guy you tossed over when you were first here is now on the staff. Talk about a twist of fate.”

Kristi stared, trying to make sense of Lucretia’s comment. “You mean Jay?”

“Yeah, Jay McKnight.”

Her stomach dropped to the floor. Whatever she and Jay had shared was long over, but that didn’t mean she wanted to bump into him. No, Lucretia had to have gotten bad information. “He works for the New Orleans PD,” Kristi argued, then started to get a really bad vibe when she saw a glint of triumph in Lucretia’s gaze as she slung the strap of her purse over her shoulder.

“But he’s teaching a class here. A night class, I think. Filling in for a professor who had family problems and had to take a leave of absence or something.”

“Really?” Kristi couldn’t believe it, but wasn’t about to argue. Lucretia was just plain wrong or yanking on her chain just to bug her. She wasn’t about to give it any credence until she saw Jay McKnight with her own two eyes. Then she was hit by another bad feeling. “What class?”

“I don’t know…something in criminology, I think.”

Kristi’s stomach tightened. “Introduction to Forensics?”

“Could be. As I said, I’m not sure.”

_Oh, God, please no._ She couldn’t imagine Jay being her instructor—that would just be too much to deal with. She flashed on how she’d so callously broken up with him and cringed. Even though it had been nearly a decade, she didn’t want to think there was a chance she could run into Jay on campus. Or that he could be her teacher. That would be torture.

“See ya around.” Lucretia was already heading for the door when Kristi noticed the big clock mounted on the back wall of the building over the doors leading to the admin offices.

She noticed the time.

It was three minutes to eleven.

No way could she make it across campus. No doubt, she’d be late. But maybe it was worth it. Lucretia’s fears, her theories about a cult here on the campus, were definitely interesting. Worth checking out. But really—vampires?

“Don’t make me laugh,” she muttered to herself, then was annoyed by the involuntary shiver that slid down her spine.
The double doors of the student union clanged shut behind Lucretia, then opened again as a wave of students, talking and laughing, dripping from the rain, pushed their way inside and headed for the counter to order.

Wasting no time, Kristi gathered her notebook computer and purse, then hurried outside and down the steps as the bells from the church tower began tolling off the hour. “Great,” she muttered, noticing how few people were still hurrying across the quad.

Because everyone’s already in class.

Even Lucretia, who had left just moments before Kristi, was nowhere to be seen, as if she’d vanished into the gloomy day.

This is no way to start the term, she told herself as she half ran along a brick pathway that led out of the quad and cut past the chapel and around Wagner House, the two-hundred-year-old stone mansion where the Wagner family, who had donated the land for the college, had once lived. Now a museum, and rumored to be haunted, the towering manor rose three full stories and was complete with mullioned windows, gargoyles on the downspouts, and dormers poking out of the steep, ridged roof.

Raindrops began to fall as Kristi dashed past the wrought-iron fence that separated the gabled house from the edge of the campus, then cut behind a science building. She rounded a corner and nearly crashed into a tall man dressed all in black who was standing with his back to her. He held a hand to his forehead, as if protecting his eyes from the rain. He was deep in discussion with someone Kristi couldn’t see, but as she dashed by, she caught a glimpse of his white clerical collar and etched, grim features. He was talking to a small woman in an oversized coat. Her face was turned up to him as she lowered her voice when Kristi passed, but Kristi recognized Lucretia’s friend, Ariel. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail, she was holding a bag of books, her glasses were splattered with rain, but even so, she looked as if she were on the verge of tears.

“…I… I just thought you should know, Father Tony,” Ariel said, flipping the hood of her jacket over her head.

Father Tony. The priest Irene Calloway had griped about being too hip. Kristi had seen his name in the school catalogue, where he’d been listed as Father Anthony Mediera. In the All Saints information packet the priest had been smiling and calm, wearing a cassock as he stared into the camera with large eyes. Now those blue eyes were dark and guarded, his jaw set, his thin lips flat in repressed anger.

“Don’t worry,” he said with the hint of an Italian accent, also lowering his voice as Kristi passed. “I’ll handle it. Promise.”

Ariel’s smile was tremulous and adoring, until she spied Kristi. Her expression changed quickly and she hurried away, as if hoping Kristi hadn’t recognized her like she’d obviously recognized Kristi.

Which was fine.

Kristi was late. Whatever Ariel was confessing to Father Tony had nothing to do with her.

She zigzagged behind the religious center and finally, nearly ten minutes late, reached Adam’s Hall, where she took the exterior steps two at a time. Inside the old building she clamored her way to the second floor, where the doors to her classroom were already closed.

Damn, she thought, yanking open the door to a room so quiet she was certain anyone within could hear a pin drop let alone her bold entry.
The windows were draped in thick dark velvet, the rectangular classroom lit by fake candles. A tall man stood at the podium. Her heart nearly stopped as he stared at her with near-black eyes, then glanced at the clock over the door.

She found one of the few empty seats and told herself he wasn’t glaring at her with eyes like embers, dark but threatening to glow red. It was all just a matter of lighting and her own vivid imagination. Because the classroom had been converted to a creep-a-thon, and the image that was cast behind him on the chalkboard from a slide projector plugged into his computer was of Bela Lugosi, dressed as Dracula, in white shirt and cape.

Bela’s picture disappeared, changed to another image, one of a horrible, hissing creature with needle-sharp teeth and blood dripping from his lips.

“Vampires come in all shapes and sizes and have varying powers,” Dr. Grotto said, glancing at the next picture, an old comic book cover with a cartoon image of a lurking vampire creature about to lunge at a fleeing, scantily clad blonde with a figure that would make Barbie envious.

Kristi tried to meld into the other students, but no such luck. Dr. Grotto seemed to single her out, to glower at her as she opened her notepad and laptop computer. Finally, he cleared his throat and glanced down at his notes. “We’ll start the term with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, discuss where he found his inspiration. In cruel Vlad the Impaler, as most people believe? In Romania? Hungary? Transylvania?” he asked, pausing for effect. “Or perhaps in other historical monsters such as Elizabeth of Bathory, the countess who tortured servant girls, then bathed in their blood to protect her own waning beauty? Myth? Legend? Or fact?” Grotto went on about the course itself and what he required. Kristi took notes, but she was more interested in the man than his lecture. He walked catlike from one side of the room to the other, engaging students, seemingly to mesmerize them. Tall and lithe, he embodied his subject matter.

The images kept changing behind him, from campy to cruel. As a trailer for the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* appeared behind him, Grotto hit a button on his desk. The overhead lights glowed and the curtains retracted. Buffy and the gang’s image faded and the room transformed into a normal classroom. “Enough of the theatrics,” Grotto said, and the class groaned. “I know, we all like a stage show, but this is a college credit course, so, I trust you have all received a syllabus through your e-mail and you know that you’re to read Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* by the end of this week. If not, see me after class.

“So, let’s start the discussion…. What do you know of vampires? Are they real? Human? Do they really feast on human blood? Morph into a variety of creatures? Sleep in coffins? Today we’ll discuss what you know about vampires, or think you know.” He smiled then, showing off glistening fangs, only to remove the false caps and set them on the desk. “I said I was done with the theatrics, didn’t I?”

From that second on, Dr. Grotto held everyone’s attention for the rest of the lecture. The class was lively with Grotto asking questions as well as answering some, and it was obvious why the class was one of the most popular at the college.

Dominic Grotto could transform as easily as the mythical creatures he studied. One minute dark and thoughtful, the next animated and witty. He had an easy manner and used the entire front of the classroom as his stage, walking from one side to the other, making notes on the chalkboard, pointing to students to speak their minds.

Kristi recognized several students in the class, a couple of kids who had been in her Shakespeare class with Dr. Emmerson, including Hiram Calloway—was there no getting away from the creep? Again, she spied Lucretia’s spiked-haired friend Trudie, and Mai Kwan, the girl who lived downstairs from Kristi.

*Small world,* Kristi said to herself, then corrected herself, thinking *small campus.* With less than three thousand students in the entire school, it wasn’t that surprising that she’d see familiar faces in her classes.

Within seconds, the door opened again and the professor glared as Ariel slipped into the room, grabbing the first empty seat she found near the door. Ariel looked as if she wanted to do nothing more than melt into her seat. Kristi sympathized. Ariel caught Kristi’s glance, but turned her attention to her notepad, flipping it open as the professor continued to speak.
An odd girl, Kristi thought, wondering about Lucretia’s mousy friend. Ariel seemed shy, even needy, the proverbial wallflower who wanted to disappear into the background. Kristi glanced at the girl again, but Ariel had lifted the book up, to hide most of her face.

Was she still crying?

Why? Homesickness? Something else?

Whatever it was, Father Tony had promised to “take care of it,” so Kristi focused all of her attention on the front of the room.

She listened raptly to Dr. Grotto, taking in the man’s appearance. He was tall with thick, expressive eyebrows, a strong jaw, and a nose that looked as if somewhere along the way it had been broken a couple of times. His eyes weren’t red or black, but a deep brown, his lips thin, his body honed, as if he worked out. There was an arrogance about him, but an affability as well, and Lucretia’s words rang through her brain. He’s a wonderful man. Educated. Alive.

As opposed to dead? No... as in animated, Kristi berated herself. All this vampire talk was getting to her. Lucretia was certainly quick to defend Dr. Dominic Grotto, despite her suspicions. She’d acted as if the man were nearly a god, for crying out loud, and then there was the matter of the ring....

Kristi watched the professor’s hands. They were large. Strong looking. Veins apparent when he wrote on the board. But his left hand was bare. No wedding ring. No tan line or indentation suggesting he’d recently removed it. What had Ezma at work said? That Lucretia was rumored to be involved with one of the professors? A big secret? Hmm.

She studied Dr. Grotto and tried to imagine him with Lucretia. It just didn’t fit. Grotto was smart enough, that much was evident, but he exuded an innate sexuality in his beat-up jeans and casual black sweater. Lucretia was the egghead’s egghead. Not unattractive, just socially a step off, almost snooty in her pseudo-intellectuality, but then, maybe that air of superiority was what had attracted him to her.

Stranger things had been known to happen.

Kristi settled back in her desk chair and scrutinized her new professor.

As Ezma had warned, Grotto was definitely “hot.” Was he involved with the missing coeds? The man who’d maybe inspired the vampire cult that had attracted Rylee?

When Kristi had first driven to Baton Rouge, her father’s warnings had fallen upon deaf ears, but now that she was here, on the campus of All Saints, she was beginning to think there might be some merit in Rick Bentz’s fears. Four girls were missing. Maybe dead. All had taken Grotto’s class on vampires.

Coincidence?

Kristi didn’t think so.

In fact, she was going to find out. She’d start calling the family, friends, and neighbors of the girls today, in between classes, if she had to. Something had happened to the missing students. Something bad.

Kristi was damned well going to find out what it was.

Jay stepped out of the shower and toweled off after a weekend of ripping off paneling and repairing the tears to the plaster that had been beneath the wooden facade. His muscles ached from hours with a chisel and hammer, but the house was taking shape. Most of the deconstruction was about finished. He had only a bit of linoleum to rip up and then he’d be ready to rebuild. He threw on boxers, a pair of khakis, and a cotton sweater, then yanked on a pair of socks and stepped into his shoes as he checked his watch. Less than an hour until his first class. With Kristi Bentz. He’d had no notes of anyone, including Kristi, dropping out, so he expected to see her.
Brace yourself, he thought, then chided himself for being childish. They were both adults now. So they’d gone
together as teenagers. So what? Time had marched on and other relationships had come and gone.

The phone rang and he recognized Gayle’s number. What the hell did she want and why now, when he was just
getting ready to deal with Kristi, did he have to talk to her? He almost didn’t answer. But the thought that she might
really be in trouble, might really need him, caused him to take the call. Good old trusty Jay. “Hi,” he said, without
preamble. They both knew about Caller ID.

“Hi, Jay, how’re you?” she asked in that soft, dulcet drawl he’d once found so intriguing.

An interior designer who adored antiques and New Orleans architecture, she’d grown up in Atlanta, the only
daughter of a judge and his wife. Jay had found her cultured, smart, beautiful, and fun-loving. Until they’d gotten
serious. Then he’d recognized her strong, unbending will and almost obsessive attention to detail. How many times
had she insisted his tie hadn’t matched his shirt and jacket, or that his shoes were out of style, or that his jeans were
far too “ratty to even be considered hip, darlin’?” Her temper, too, had come to the fore. What did it say about his
personality that he always picked hardheaded, smart, sassy women who could blow at any minute. For a half a
second, he thought of Kristi Bentz. Talk about a temper! Kristi’s was practically legendary. Jay figured his choices
in women were a major character flaw.

“I’m doin’ fine, Gayle,” he said, realizing she was waiting for a response. Tonight, he didn’t have time for
niceties. “How ‘bout you?”

“All right, I guess.”

“Good, good.” He was gathering up his keys and wallet, making certain he had everything he needed. His gaze
scraped the interior of the cottage as he made certain he was leaving everything secure.

“But I have to be honest. Sometimes I get lonely. Sometimes I miss you,” Gayle said, drawing his attention back
to the telephone conversation.

His gut tightened. “I thought you were dating someone—an attorney, right? Manny or Michael or something?”
She hesitated, then said, “Martin. But it’s not the same.”

“Nothing ever is. It’s always different, sometimes better, other times worse.” Why the hell was he even having
this conversation?

As if she knew she’d pushed him too far, she said, “I know this is the night of your first class and I wanted to wish
you luck.”

Yeah, right. “Thanks.”

“You’ll do great!”

The woman did know how to stroke his ego.

“Hope so.”

“Believe me, those kids will be enthralled with all that creepy forensic stuff.”

“Yeah?” He checked his watch. Time to go. Where the hell was the leash? He didn’t want to take Bruno
anywhere without it. Oh, maybe in the truck!

“Oh, yeah, honey. I’ve heard you speak. You know, I was wondering—”

Here it came, the real reason for her call.

“I know you spend most of your weekends up there at your cousins’ house, but when you’re back in the city, give
me a call. I’d love to go out for a glass of wine or dinner or something…. You know, no strings attached.”

The no strings part, he didn’t believe.

“I doubt I’ll have any time before the end of the term,” he said. “Pretty busy.”

“I know, Jay. You always are. That’s the way I like it.”

Again, a fairy tale. She liked a man she could boss around. That’s where most of their problems began and ended. “Listen, Gayle, I gotta run. Take care.”

“You, too,” she whispered as he hung up and whistled to the dog. He was not going to be pulled into the trap of dating Gayle Hall again. Not ever. He’d learned his lesson and had the scar above his eyebrow to prove it.

He double-checked the lock on the back door, then gathered his notes and stuffed them into his banged-up briefcase. He had samples in the case as well. Examples of evidence that he’d share with his class. The science of forensics had become a big deal since the airing of the CSI shows and their knock-offs on television, and Jay figured part of his job was to point out the difference between fiction and fact, between wrapping up a drama in forty-odd minutes, and doing the legwork and lab work that required hours and hours in real life. Even the shows on Court TV were somewhat misleading with days, weeks, months, and even years of detective work wrapped up in under an hour. Though the detectives and criminalists and even the announcers would remind the viewer of the time that passed, the case was always solved within an hour, including time for advertisements. It was all part of the quick response/action/reaction short attention span television programming that viewers had come to expect.

If only they knew the truth about all the fancy television-inspired crime labs that could get DNA evidence back nearly instantly. The extraction of body fluid, the dropping of a sample of the fluid into a test tube, a flick of a switch and the spin of some centrifuge, and voilà, DNA results. In truth it took weeks and months to process, and then there was the matter of all the evidence that had been destroyed by the hurricane. Not only evidence that could convict a criminal, but evidence that might exonerate an innocent man. Or woman. It made him sick to think about it.

He locked the front door behind him, whistled to the dog, then with Bruno at his heels, walked briskly to his truck. The rain that had pummeled this part of Louisiana all day had stopped, leaving sodden ground and the air heavy with a thick mist that seemed to rise to the skeletal, bone white branches of the cypress trees.

A perfect night to discuss the subject of murder.

Hoisting himself easily from the pool, Vlad stood at the edge of the shimmering depths and felt the water cool upon his skin. The lamp beneath the water’s surface and the monitor of his small computer gave off the only light in this, his special retreat. He loved the kiss of the cold air against his wet flesh but had little time to savor it.

There was so much to do.

And one problem that nagged at him. He’d tried to ignore it, had spent months telling himself it was of no consequence, but with each passing day, he felt a little more irritated, a bit more compelled to correct his stupid mistake.

He’d hoped that the taking of the last girl would have calmed him, but it hadn’t. Not completely. Though Rylee’s ultimate submission and death thrilled him, the fact that he’d erred gnawed at him. Distracted him. Even now, he found himself biting his nails and spitting them into the pool, then forced himself to stop the disgusting habit he’d had since childhood, when he was certain his father would return, discover that he’d gotten into trouble, and lock him into the old outhouse.

At that thought his stomach convulsed, so he pushed all images of his childhood aside. After all, the old man had gotten his, hadn’t he?

Vlad smiled as he remembered the bloody tines of the pitchfork in his father’s freak farming accident. He’d spent
hours relating the horror of finding his father on the barn floor, how the old man had fallen from the hayloft and onto a broken bale where the pitchfork had been left. Vlad had admitted to leaving the tool where it wasn’t supposed to be. And had the pitchfork not hit the femoral artery, how his father might have survived. Instead, the old man had lain on the pitchfork like a turtle on its back, his pelvis shattered, his screams unheard until Vlad had returned from the neighbor’s house and found the man who had sired him in a pool of coagulating blood. How unfortunate it had been on the weekend when his mother had been away, visiting her sister.

But the old man’s death couldn’t help the situation now.

Vlad prided himself upon his perfection, and the fact that he had made one mistake bothered him.

He walked to the far end of the pool and into a small alcove where a bank of metal lockers still resided. They were empty save for the one he’d reserved for his treasures, those he’d locked away. Deftly, in the semidark, the smell of the chlorine he’d added drifting to him, he flipped the combination of the lock and opened the rusting door.

Inside were several rows of small black hooks. Three, on the upper row, saved for the elite, the ones he thought of as royals, had been marked with the name of the owner and held a gold necklace from which a tiny vial dangled. Carefully, he extracted one of the gold loops and held it to the light so that he could see the deep red color within the bit of glass…like expensive wine, he thought. Gently twisting open the vial, he held it under his nose. He inhaled the sweet, coppery scent of Monique’s blood. Closing his eyes, he remembered how she’d struggled. A natural athlete, she’d fought the effects of the drugs, and as he’d restrained her, she’d gone so far as to spit in his face.

He’d laughed and licked it into his mouth and that’s when he saw her fear. It wasn’t that he could hold her wrists or pin her weight with his legs, it was that he enjoyed the fight in her and that scared her to death.

He’d seen it in the dilation of her pupils, felt it in the rising and falling of her chest as he’d held her down waiting for the cocktail she’d been given to completely take effect. He’d witnessed her struggles on the stage before she’d ultimately succumbed to him. He’d suspected she would be difficult, a fighter. And she hadn’t disappointed.

Hers was a life not quickly given.

Thinking of Monique now, he licked his lips. Draining her blood had been exquisite, watching her breaths become shallow and bare, seeing her skin whiten, feeling her heartbeat slow and finally stop all together, then staring into her open, dead eyes….

He shuddered, reliving the moment, but it wouldn’t be enough. Memories faded all too quickly.

Fortunately the bloodlust would be fulfilled.

He capped the teeny bottle and watched it dangle and sparkle for just a second before returning it to the locker.

The empty hooks mocked him, especially the one marked for Tara Atwater. Old rage burned through him when he thought of how that little bitch had tried to defy him, had hidden the treasure meant for him. No amount of urging or force had been able to loosen her thick tongue and she was dead quickly, almost willingly, with little fight in her.

But she had managed the tiniest of smiles as the blood had drained from her and she’d released her soul, as if she had somehow won their battle.

His teeth clenched as he considered the imperfection.

The vial was out there. He just had to find it.

He’d tried of course, to no avail.

But he wouldn’t give up.

He slammed the locker door shut. *Bam!* The sound ricocheted off the walls and he stormed still naked into the cavernous room with the pool and alcove he used for an office. The water reflected in shifting shades of blue upon
the walls and ceiling, his computer hummed faintly.

The vial was most likely in Tara’s apartment, hidden away somewhere. Until now, he’d been careful to stay away from the empty unit with the old busybody of a landlady. But now he had more than one reason to return. Not only was he certain that the precious vial of Tara’s blood was secreted somewhere on the premises, but now Kristi Bentz occupied the very apartment he had to search.

Which was perfect.
“Wasn’t Grotto’s class the best?” Mai gushed as Kristi climbed the stairs to her apartment. Carrying an overflowing basket of laundry, Mai met her on the landing of the second floor. Almost as if she’d been waiting for her and peering out between her living room blinds. “I saw you come into the class a little late.”

“Everyone did,” Kristi said, silently groaning. She’d wanted to talk with the vampirism prof after class but had failed in her efforts. But she was determined to meet with him and see what he knew about campus cults.

“Was the whole experience cool, or what? The dark classroom, the drapes drawn, and fake candles lit? All of those images of vampires? Some of them were so scary, I actually got goose bumps, and the others were so camp. I mean, Bela Lugosi? Really? But I gotta say, I about freaked when Grotto took out his false fangs.”

“You didn’t think it was a little much?” Kristi kept hiking up to the third floor. She didn’t have a lot of time. She’d taken over part of Ezma’s shift at the Bard’s Board from twelve-thirty until six and now she had less than forty-five minutes to get to her night class.

“I think it was imaginative, and interesting, and so much cooler than a musty old professor in a tweed jacket with suede patches on the elbows up at the podium lecturing while we, all bored out of our minds, flipped through pages of a textbook written in the eighties.”

“Like that was going to happen.”

“Hey, I just admire the guy for bringing some life, or, well, maybe death into the classroom!” Animated, Mai hauled her basket and followed Kristi upstairs. As Kristi entered her apartment, Mai was on her heels and through the door. She set her laundry basket on a table near the kitchen alcove as if she and Kristi were best friends now.

Houdini, who ventured from his favorite hiding spot when he felt Kristi wasn’t looking, jumped from the windowsill to the daybed, then quickly slunk into the small space he’d made his home.

“Friendly,” Mai observed dryly. “So what’s with the cat? I thought pets were a definite no-no.”

“He’s not a pet. Just a stray I can’t seem to get rid of.”

Mai glanced to the area in front of the bifold doors hiding the kitchen. There upon a small mat was a pet dish that held food and water, one Kristi had picked up at the local grocery market when she’d been buying coffee, milk, peanut butter, bread, and half a dozen tins of cat food. “You’re feeding it. Mrs. Calloway will freak.”

“She can come and catch him then. I don’t even have a litter box.”

Mai wrinkled her pert little nose. “Then…how…where?”

“He’s toilet trained.”

“What?” She whipped her head around toward the doorway leading to the closet-sized bathroom. A beat passed as Kristi took off her coat. Mai caught her faint smile. “Oh, you’re kidding.”

“I leave the window open a crack and he slips through, outside onto the roof. It’s amazing how small a space he can get through, but so far, no accidents.”

“You’re not trying very hard to get rid of him,” Mai observed, and Kristi shrugged. “So he goes on the roof?”

“I think he climbs down the magnolia tree.”
“I won’t tell…but if Mrs. Calloway sees him, there’ll be hell to pay.” Mai’s almond-shaped eyes took in the room, just as she had the last time she’d visited. It was almost as if Mai were looking for something, or trying to memorize every nook and cranny of Kristi’s private space.

“If she sees Houdini, I’ll deal with it then,” Kristi said.

“Houdini?” Mai repeated. “You *named* it?”

“He had to have a name.”

“You’re sure it’s a he?”

“I haven’t got that close.”

Mai looked at her as if she’d lost her mind. She walked to the table that Kristi used as a desk, the space where Kristi had left her notes about the missing girls.

Suddenly Kristi felt uncomfortable with Mai’s prying eyes. “You’ve been here since last year, right?” Kristi asked to divert her.

“Uh-huh.”

“So you know a lot of people.”

“My share, I guess.”

“Have you heard anything about a cult, maybe on campus? One that believes in vampires?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Mai’s fingers touched the back of Kristi’s chair. A moment passed and Kristi got the impression she was giving herself time to think.

Kristi pressed, “Is it possible that the girls who went missing were involved in some kind of secret society?”

“That’s kind of a reach,” Mai said.

“Is it?”

“Do you know something?” Mai asked.

“You know something,” Kristi guessed. “Tell me.”

Mai glanced at the photos of the missing girls lying face-up on Kristi’s makeshift desk and she bit her lip. Shaking her head, she picked up the picture of Rylee Ames. “I don’t want to sound crazy.”

“I just want to know.”

She dropped the photo. “There’s always been an interest in the vampire thing, y’know? I mean, if you look it up on the Internet, you’ll find all kinds of parties and groups who purport to really be vamps. It’s this big counterculture. Some people get into it for cheap thrills, I think, but others, they have all these rituals and they sleep in coffins and drink blood, I think even human blood.”

“And there’s a group here on campus. People who are into it,” Kristi added.

Mai lifted a shoulder. “I’ve heard rumors, sure.”

“You think Grotto’s involved?”
Mai glanced away. “Grotto? It seems far-fetched. I mean, if it’s all so secret, why would he flaunt it? You know, call attention to himself? His class probably just adds to the interest, the allure of it all. My guess? At least some of the students who take his classes are part of the group. But I don’t think that just because kids show some interest in vampires and try to hook up with others that I’d call it a cult.”

“Maybe it’s just the extremists,” Kristi said, “a faction that takes things further. Maybe that’s the cult part.”

“If there even is one. People tend to label things they don’t understand.” She glanced again at the pictures on the desk. “What are you doing with these?”

“I don’t know yet. Just thought I’d do some checking,” Kristi said. That much was true enough. Already she’d spoken with two family members of the missing girls. She didn’t tell anyone that she thought she’d write a book about them, because, truth to tell, if the girls did end up being runaways, she had no story. Until there was actually a crime, she couldn’t very well start penning a true-crime book.

Of course, she hadn’t shared that information with Dionne’s purportedly great, once-upon-a-time boyfriend Elijah Richards, who was sure he’d see his name in print like some sort of urban hero. In her conversation with him, he’d been all about Elijah, barely able to focus on the girl he supposedly loved. Maybe there was a reason Dionne left him for Tyshawn Jones, even with Tyshawn’s criminal tendencies.

Kristi bit her lip, thinking of the other family members she’d reached—Tara Atwater’s mother, who had been a real piece of work. Angie Atwater had spent most of the conversation ranting about how her “no-good daughter” was following in her father’s path—straight to the Georgia State penitentiary. Poor Tara.

With each conversation, Kristi was becoming more convinced that something awful, something evil had happened to the four missing girls. There was a chance that through her digging, she could find a link between them, a reason they’d gone missing, and turn over whatever she found to the police. Maybe they’d get lucky and find the coeds alive. At the very least she could help prevent any more girls from disappearing.

“Did you personally know any of the missing girls?” Kristi asked Mai.

“No,” Mai said quickly. “I didn’t really talk to Tara.” She lingered over the desk as if intrigued…connected. She seemed about to say something more, but changed her mind.

Suddenly, Kristi realized the time. “Look, I’ve gotta run. I’ve got a night class in”—she glanced at the clock hung over the fireplace—“fifteen minutes!”

Mai picked up her laundry. She looked away from Kristi’s desk and managed to shake off the pall that had settled over her. “Yeah, I gotta get at this”—she held up the basket of dirty clothes—“or it’ll be midnight before I’m done. The laundry room here—” She shuddered. “It’s just plain creepy. I don’t think anyone’s cleaned that basement since the Civil War. Pardon me, the War of Northern Aggression, as it’s called by some of the natives around here. There are tons of spiders down there and some might even be poisonous, and there are probably rats and snakes, too…. I put off washing my clothes until the last minute.”

Kristi didn’t argue. The basement laundry room was dark and dingy. The ceiling was low, the concrete walls looking as if moisture seeped through the cracks, the exposed beams filled with cobwebs. The odors of mildew and mold were ever present, even when Kristi added bleach to her wash.

“Creeps me out,” Mai said. “Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that you missed a great party.”

“Next time.”

“You mean next year?” Mai asked, her gaze skating once more across the room to the desk where the pictures of the missing girls were strewn. “I’m probably not going to throw another party until next New Year’s Eve. If then. The party itself was fun, but the mess the next day—forget it!” Mai made her way to the door, and holding the basket on her hip, waved and said, “See ya,” before leaving.

Kristi made a beeline for the bathroom, where she took a two-minute shower to rid herself of the smell of grease,
onions, and fish that still clung to her from her hours at the diner. After toweling off, she snapped her wet hair into a ponytail and pinned it loosely on her head. Throwing on a clean bra, panties, jeans, and a T-shirt, she then smudged on some lip gloss without checking the mirror. At the front door she stepped into boots, pulled a sweatshirt from a peg and tossed it over her head. She picked up her backpack again and was out the door bare minutes behind Mai.

If only she’d brought her bike from home, the fifteen-speed she’d bought after losing her racing bike to the hurricane, she thought as she clattered down the stairs, cut through a back alley, and jogged across the street separating the apartment house from the campus. Once through the massive gates, she headed toward Knauss Hall, which was primarily used for the biological science curriculum, but now held the new criminology department.

Silently she prayed that Jay McKnight was not her teacher. Surely someone would have told her, right, if there had been a change in instructors?

No way. You sign up for a class; the school registrar/computer decides where you’ll end up.

“Not Jay,” she said aloud, then felt foolish, as if she were fourteen instead of twenty-seven. Get a grip, Kristi. You can handle this. No matter what.

“You know, Baton Rouge is not your jurisdiction,” Olivia said as she entered the alcove in the guest room on the second floor of their cottage.

Bentz had set up his laptop on a TV tray in the room Kristi had occupied when she’d lived here. The makeshift desk wasn’t much, but he did most of his work at the station. He was now hunched over the small computer.

Glancing over his shoulder he spied his wife leaning in the doorway, one shoulder propped against the jamb as she cradled a cup of tea in her hands. Though a smile caused her lips to twitch, she assessed him with serious eyes that seemed to see past his facade and into his very soul.

“How do you know what I’m checking into?”

“I’m psychic, remember?”

That he did. When he’d first met her, he’d thought her a bonafide nutcase. She’d shown up at the station, ranting about seeing murders as they’d been committed, and he’d written her off. At first. He hadn’t wanted to believe that this woman with her wild blond hair and gold eyes could read the mind of a cold-blooded killer. But she’d proved him wrong. He still felt sick inside to know what she’d experienced as she’d witnessed the most macabre and brutal of crimes. “You were only a psychic on one case,” he reminded her. “Since that time you’ve proven yourself utterly useless.”

“Oh, low blow, Bentz,” she said, but chuckled deep in her throat. “So, okay, I’m lying about being able to read your mind, but I know you, Detective, and I do know how you think.” She walked into the room and propped that tight little butt of hers against the arm of an overstuffed chair that was pushed into a corner, opposite a twin bed covered with an aqua-colored spread. “You’re worried about Kristi.”

“You don’t have to have ESP to know that.”

“But it’s because of the missing girls and hence my warning that Baton Rouge is not your jurisdiction.”

“I know. But who cares about lines on a map when girls have gone missing?”

“Oh, yeah, like you would be thrilled if someone from another jurisdiction showed up and started nosing around your cases. Face it, Bentz, you don’t like it when the FBI shows up, and you’re not even crazy about sharing your cases with some of your own men. I don’t know how many times you’ve complained about Brinkman.”

“He’s a pain.”

“Hmm…I won’t argue that one,” she said, dunking her tea bag in the steaming water within her cup. The scent of
jasmine wafted over to him as he stared at the images on the screen—pictures of the four missing girls.

“Brinkman might be resigning.”

“Really?” She looked up, letting the tea bag settle.

“Because of the storm.”

“It’s been over two years.”

“He lived in the Lower Ninth Ward, had a couple of rentals there, too. All gone. His parents lived in one. They got out,” he said, not adding that their cats hadn’t. They’d hidden during the storm and when the rescuers had come, couldn’t be found. Weeks later, when the floodgates had receded, Brinkman had returned to his family home and found the house marked with an X by the searchers. The other note said only: “Two dead cats inside.” Brinkman had gotten to dispose of the animal carcasses and inform his mother. Since then, he’d packed up his parents, who now lived in Austin, and was talking of getting the hell out of Dodge himself.

“It’s too bad.”

“Yeah. So I’m not going to let some government-drawn lines stop me from looking into the disappearances on my own time. I’ve got a call up to the Baton Rouge PD.”

“Because you don’t have enough to do.” She lifted the tea bag from the cup and dropped it, dripping, into a nearby trash basket.

“I said it was on my own time.”

“Time you could be spending with your family.”

“Kristi is my family.”

“I was talking about me,” she said.

He smiled. “I know.”

Sipping the tea, she said, “I could put on my sexiest negligee and we could…” She let her voice trail off.

He cocked a brow.

“Interested?”

Pushing his chair away from the TV tray, Bentz growled, “Always. But you don’t need a negligee.”

“No?” She looked up at him over the rim of her cup.

“Waste of time.” He took the cup from her hand and set it on the window ledge. “So tell me, Mrs. Bentz, is this attempt at seduction because you’re so hot for me you can’t think straight, or is it because it’s the right time of the month to conceive?”

“Maybe a little of both,” she admitted, and it was like a douse of cold water.

“I told you…I don’t think I want any more children.”

“And I told you, I need a baby.”

He rested his head against hers and saw the desperation in her eyes. He’d give her anything. But this…

“Being a cop’s kid is no picnic.”
“Neither is being a cop’s wife. But it’s worth it. Please, Rick, let’s not worry about this, okay. If it happens, it happens, if it doesn’t, then we’ll see.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning let’s not worry about that now.”

He pulled her more tightly against him, feeling her warm body pliant against his. To his knowledge, he’d never fathered a child. Not biologically. Kristi’s mother, Jennifer, had cheated on him. Plain and simple. And she’d gotten pregnant. That could have been the end of it, as Jennifer had owned up to the fact that the baby in her womb wasn’t his in the eighth month of her pregnancy. But Bentz had taken one look at Kristi seconds after she’d been born and had claimed the baby as his own. Even now, twenty-seven years later, he remembered the moment she’d come into the world, the moment that had changed his life forever.

In all the years since, neither Jennifer nor anyone else had gotten pregnant by him, whether by luck or incredibly good birth control. He’d never been tested, hadn’t really worried about it. Never felt the need for another kid, but now Livvie wanted a baby, when he was facing the big five-o. If she got pregnant now, Bentz would be pushing seventy when the kid finished high school. If he didn’t get killed in the line of duty first.

Was that fair to the child?

His wife stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. She tasted of jasmine and desperation and damn it, he gave into her. As always.

Kristi took off across campus.

The air was thick. Heavy. A wisping fog rising from the damp ground. She wasn’t alone. Other students, too, were heading this way and that, cutting across the quad. They passed her on bikes, skateboards, or on foot; knots of kids talking, solitary students walking briskly to the various old brick buildings that made up All Saints College.

It was weird to be back.

Most of the undergrads were nearly a decade younger than her. There were the grad students, of course, in much smaller numbers, and a few adults who’d returned to school in midlife or beyond. Though the campus with its vine-clad, hundred-year-plus buildings and neatly trimmed grounds seemed fairly unchanged, the feel of being at All Saints was quite different from her freshman year.

At the library, she veered away from the heart of the school as Knauss Hall was at the edge of campus not far from the large old mansions that had been converted to sorority and fraternity houses. Hurrying as the night closed in, she looked down the narrow, tree-flanked street lined by estatelike houses. Her gaze landed on a pillared white plantation-style mansion, home to the Delta Gammas, a sorority she’d pledged at her father’s insistence all those years ago, but the whole Greek thing had never worked for her. To this day she didn’t know where even one of her sorority sisters was, nor did she care. She’d never felt like a “DG” while here. Not only had Rick Bentz insisted she join what she’d later referred to as “the sisterhood,” but he’d also laid down the law and forced her into tae kwon do lessons as well as teaching her all about the use and safety of firearms. Although the sorority thing hadn’t taken, she’d gotten a black belt in her martial art of choice. She also knew her way around guns and was a decent-enough shot.

She noticed a car moving steadily up the street, creeping along, as if the driver were looking for something, or someone. The hairs on the nape of her neck rose. She squinted, unable to make out the driver.

Most likely, it was nothing. He was probably just lost and searching for an address, she decided, though all the talk about missing girls and possible foul play made her a little suspicious.

_Maybe some of your dad’s paranoia is finally rubbing off on you!_

The glare of the car’s headlights reached Kristi and the vehicle slowed even more, tires crunching. The low-lying
mist rose over the fogged windows, making it even more difficult to see who was behind the wheel. Was the driver a man? A woman? Was someone in the passenger seat?

Church bells tolled the hour, reverberating chimes reminding her of the time.

“Hell,” she whispered. Late again!

She kicked into a jog, leaving the slow-moving car and its mystery driver behind. Running easily along the walkway, she cut through the grass and trees lining the brick and stone building that housed the science labs.

She heard the car pick up speed, then slow again to the point where the engine was only idling. Kristi glanced over her shoulder, still unable to see who was in the darkened vehicle. She wished she was close enough to get the license number. All she saw was that it was a dark domestic-looking sedan, probably a Chevy, but she couldn’t be sure.

So what? A car is going slow. Big deal. What does it matter if it’s a Ford, a Chevrolet, or a friggin’ Lamborghini? Get over it.

She had a more pressing problem: there was a chance that the high school boyfriend she’d so callously tossed over might be her professor.

Groaning inside, Kristi dashed up the steps of the vine-clad hall and yanked open a heavy glass door.

Another student shot through ahead of her and she recognized Hiram Calloway as he swept past. She almost said something because she felt as if the guy were following her. When she’d needed his help with the apartment building, she couldn’t scare him up to save her life. But now that she was starting classes, he was everywhere she turned on campus. She had a bad feeling that he, too, might be signed up for Dr. Monroe’s Monday night class…. Geez, didn’t guys work their schedules so that they could stay home on Mondays and watch football?

Let him get to the classroom first so she could avoid sitting anywhere next to him.

As the door swung shut behind her, Kristi headed for the stairwell, where the smell of some pine-scented cleaner couldn’t quite hide the odor of formaldehyde that seeped through the hallways. Many of the floor tiles had cracked, and the light green walls had grown dingy with age. The stairs, too, were worn, the banister polished smooth by thousands of hands.

The staircase opened to a wide landing. Several hallways angled off the main corridor, making the area seem more like a rabbit warren than a science lab building.

She followed signs around a corner that led to a long corridor. At the far end of the hall a door was open and a few students, including Hiram Calloway, were walking into a large classroom.

Crossing her fingers that she wasn’t about to see Jay again, Kristi walked briskly to catch up with the crowd. She stepped through the doorway with the last of the stragglers.

Once inside, Kristi’s worst fears were founded.

Beneath the glow of fluorescent lights, Jay McKnight stood at the front of the windowless room. Several life-sized charts of the human body were pulled down over a chalkboard behind him.

Kristi’s heart sank. What had started out as a bad day just nose-dived. She caught his eye and he didn’t so much as smile, but he didn’t look away. The worst part of it was that the fates of aging had been more than kind to him. At six foot two inches, he was tall, fit, with a strong clean-shaven jaw and razor-thin lips. His light brown hair was longer than she remembered and uncombed, either because he didn’t care or because he was making a stab at being hip. Eyes somewhere between brown and gold met hers and she thought she caught the faintest narrowing at the corners. He had a new tiny scar that cleaved the top of one eyebrow, but other than that one slight imperfection, he looked none the worse for wear. In fact, he’d filled out slightly, his beard shadow darker than it once was, and there was a new air of confidence about him that increased his appeal.
Not that she cared.

She was over him. Had been for a long, long time.

She dropped into one of the few empty chairs and didn’t immediately realize that she’d taken a seat directly in front of Hiram Calloway.

_This is just getting better and better_, she thought without a drop of humor, then reminded herself it was no big deal. She was in college, not fourth grade. It’s not as if the seats were assigned.

_It’s only about ten weeks, for God’s sake. Thirty-odd hours. You’ll live!_

But tonight, staring at Jay McKnight, the first man she’d ever loved, she wasn’t so sure about that.
Jay wasn’t going to let her distract him.

Of course he noticed Kristi the second she stepped into the room. How could he not? And he’d been primed, seeing her name on the class roster.

She was taller than he recalled, probably because her long legs were accentuated by slim jeans and boots with at least two-inch heels. She had an athletic build, her shoulders defined by years of swimming, her abdomen flat, breasts on the small side but still firm, hips slim.

Even dressed down in old jeans and a sweatshirt, she could turn some heads. Not because she had runway model beauty, but because she was a little bit more than pretty and she wore an air of confidence that was natural, easy, and compelling.

As she started toward the rear of the room, she glanced at him, but somehow he hung onto his cool, not even acknowledging her as the rest of the would-be next generation of forensic scientists found their seats. Jay was certain that these students assumed his job was like *CSI*, glamorous and slick, in cities as cool as Las Vegas, New York, and Miami, with sexy, smart police officers and clever, if quirky, crime scene techs working against sly crooks. They probably imagined investigators who were always able to determine the perpetrator and send him away for good. Jay figured his job here was not so much to disavow the television image as to give them all a cold dose of reality.

“Some of you are probably wondering who I am,” he began, rounding the desk and balancing his hips upon its edge as the final stragglers slid into their seats. The classroom had seen better days and the worn flooring, scarred desks, and undulating fluorescent lighting suggested the last time it had been revamped was in the Eisenhower administration. “I’m Jay McKnight and I work for the New Orleans Police Department. I’ve got a double degree, one in criminology and another in clinical laboratory science, then a master’s in forensic sciences, the last from the University of Alabama. I also work for the New Orleans crime lab, which, as you probably guessed, since Katrina, has been a struggle. We lost our lab and more than five-million dollars worth of equipment in the storm. Evidence was destroyed and will never be regained. We’ve had to work out of space provided by other parishes’ sheriff’s offices or through private agencies, which has slowed things down incredibly. We’ve lost technicians, too, who got tired of living out of FEMA trailers and working in FEMA trailers and collecting evidence at FEMA trailers.”

He had their attention. Their eyes, serious now, were trained on him, and no one was talking or so much as chewing gum.

“But things are getting better. Slowly. We don’t have the offices and labs portrayed on television shows like *CSI*, but we do have our own facility now at the University of New Orleans at the lakefront campus.”

He glanced at Kristi. She, like the others, was regarding him soberly. If she felt any emotion other than studious regard, she sure managed to hide it.

Good.

“I know most of you thought the class would be taught by Dr. Monroe, but due to an illness in her family, she had to take some time off and so you’re stuck with me.

“So, for the next nine weeks we’ll be discussing criminology in three-hour segments. We’ll hit the major topics and rather than say I’ll lecture, we’ll say I’ll lead the discussion on the science of forensics and evidence. During the last hour and a half, we’ll have whatever quiz I think is appropriate and then there’ll be a question and answer period. We’ll discuss crime scenes and how to protect them, how to gather evidence and what we do with that evidence when it’s collected. We’ll cover everything from blood spatter patterns to firearms, entomology, and
forensic biology, both plant and animal. We’ll talk about cause of death and autopsies.”

One boy, sporting a soul patch and several earrings, shot a hand into the air, “Is there any way we can go to an autopsy?”

That caused a few whispers, some excited, some disgusted.

“Not this term, I’m afraid,” Jay said.

“But how cool would that be?” Soul Patch wasn’t giving up.

“I don’t know, how cool would it be?” Jay asked the class, and some of the kids actually hooted while others groaned. “As I said, it’s not scheduled and this is a pretty large group. There are rules about that kind of thing, contamination issues, timing issues, and as cool as you think it might be to see, the medical examiner is a busy person, as is everyone who works for the examiner’s office.

“However, to make things interesting, each week I’ll discuss a specific case that the department solved, then show you the evidence that was collected, and we’ll see what you can tell me about the crime. Afterward, we’ll compare it to what the police actually discovered.”

He still had their attention. Everyone seemed tuned in. At least for now. He made eye contact with Kristi again, as he did with the other students as he continued to lecture. It was easy for him because he loved his job. Examining evidence and linking it to a crime and a suspect was exhilarating as well as frustrating. He was animated as he talked, though it was difficult not to notice that Kristi still had that same vibrancy about her that had attracted him years before, when she was still in high school and he’d just started taking a few college classes while still working for his dad. Then, Jay had found her to be smart, sassy, stubborn, and tough as nails, sometimes even foolhardy, but Kristi Bentz had never been boring. Athletic and brave almost to the point of idiocy, Kristi exuded a raw energy that had been missing in most of the women he’d dated in his lifetime, including Gayle Hall.

Now, sitting in the back of the room without any makeup, her big, green eyes staring at him, her dark coppery hair twisted away from her face to reveal a clean jaw, straight nose, and high cheekbones, Kristi watched him intently. She sat low on her back, arms folded over her chest almost insolently, as if she were daring him to teach her anything she didn’t know.

Or maybe he was imagining things.

He barely let his gaze touch hers before he turned toward the other side of the room and focused on a tall boy with thick glasses and a scruffy black beard that didn’t cover his case of acne.

“I’ll send each of you a syllabus tonight via e-mail, and my office hours are Friday afternoons from four to six. I know, that’s a bummer for those of you who like to take off for the weekend, but it’s the best the department could do as they have to work around my schedule. You can e-mail me at anytime; my e-mail address is on the syllabus.

“So, let’s start with a little basic anatomy. Tonight, we’ll talk about how a person can be killed, and what the body might show in an autopsy. After the break we’ll discuss the crime scene and collection of evidence. This might seem a little backward, but I thought for our first ‘case’ we’d go at it from the body back to the scene. Next week, we’ll take another case and do it in just the opposite manner, which, of course, is usually the normal procedure, though, not always. Can anyone tell me why?”

One arm shot up and waved frantically as if she could barely contain herself. She looked to be less than five feet tall and couldn’t weigh a hundred pounds. Her light blond hair fairly shivered as she tried to get his attention.

He nodded at her. “Yes?”

“Sometimes the crime scene evidence doesn’t make sense because the body might have been moved. In that case you would have the dump site but you’d also find evidence from the place where the attack or killing actually occurred.”
“That’s right,” Jay said, nodding to the girl, who smiled smugly and beamed at being correct.

“Now, let’s take a look at these—” Jay hopped off the desk and walked toward the charts of the human body he’d hung on the wall. One was skeletal, another was muscular, another showed the organs, and the fourth was a blowup of the sketch of a human body with the marks and notations added by a coroner from an actual case. He told the class this crime had occurred over ten years earlier, when a killer who called himself Father John was stalking the streets of New Orleans. The ligature marks around the victim’s neck, as indicated by the ME’s notes, were unique to Father John, or the Rosary Killer as he’d been called, who had strangled each of his victims with a rosary he’d created just for that purpose.

Father John had been a twisted serial killer, someone the kids would find macabre and fascinating.

Jay had not only a copy of the drawing from the autopsy, but photographs of the victim, which he would show later, then demonstrate how the science of forensics had helped lead the police to their killer. This case, he thought, would interest his class as the murderer had been familiar with All Saints Campus. Of course, Kristi Bentz might find it all a little more personal as her father had helped unmask the killer’s identity. He noticed that she straightened in her chair.

“Now we’ll look at a murder and work backward. You’ll see we have a photograph of the victim and the medical examiner’s notes.” He reached for a stack of papers and began passing them out. “We’ll look at the body the way the ME did. Start on page one, it’s a smaller version of the medical examiner’s notes….”

Tonight, Vlad thought, from his perch on the third floor. Tonight would be a perfect time for his next abduction. He glanced upward through the highest limbs of the trees to the sheer outline of the moon, barely visible through the slowly moving clouds.

But, of course, that was not how the process worked. He couldn’t just take a victim on her way home from a late class or the library or her job. He wasn’t allowed to hide in the backseat of their cars at night, nor stalk them as they went unknowingly about their business. No…he was required to wait, to play the game, to make certain everything went as meticulously planned. He could take a life tonight, but it would not be one of the elite, one of the “chosen.” Those who had been screened so carefully, those he deemed the royal ones. The privileged and college-educated. He had to be careful with them. They were being watched. But the others. Those he could maraud at will; though as ever, he must be careful. Always careful.

He heard the chime of the chapel bells and his pulse quickened. It was time.

Bong, bong, bong…

As they tolled off the hours, he felt a surge of excitement. Students began to pour out of the buildings, dashing hither and yon, talking, laughing, hurrying through the night, not realizing he was watching, that here, from his hiding spot, he could, if he were so inclined, pick them off one by one with a rifle, or a bow and arrow, or even a wrist rocket, a weapon he’d used as a child, sighting on birds and squirrels, even bats at night. His vision and hearing were so acute, even his sense of smell honed, that he could easily kill the prey of his choice, not that he needed a weapon.

But that was not the way it was to be.

That would be breaking the rules.

Tonight All Saints could not be his hunting ground.

His gut tightened as he spied several coeds, girls he’d seen on campus, students whose pictures he had tucked away. Several he knew by name and he smiled when he realized that one of them would be the next of the chosen ones. He rubbed his fingertips together and imagined their unwitting paths to him, which they themselves created, as they were the catalysts of their own demise…mistresses of their very own fates, the prophets of their own deaths.

Soon, he thought as a shadow passed over the moon and the air changed slightly. He smelled her scent first, then,
turning, caught sight of her, Kristi Bentz, walking swiftly, her long legs eating up the concrete path leading from Knauss Hall. She was following someone...no, chasing him down as he strode to a parking lot at the edge of campus.

Even from this distance, he recognized the man.

The new professor.

Of course. His lips twisted as he eyed Jay McKnight, newest addition to the staff of All Saints.

The cop’s daughter waved and, hair streaming behind her, caught up with McKnight.

Hidden in the shadow of the tower, he felt his blood begin to run hot. From passion? Desire? Or anger? The night seeped through his skin and into his bones as his pulse elevated. His heart was thundering now, his muscles taut, his nerves tight as stretched rubber bands. He imagined what it would be like to touch her...to feel her respond to him, to slowly pull away each stitch of her clothing until she was bare to him. In his mind’s eye he saw her long limbs, muscular yet feminine...supple legs that would wrap around him as he leaned forward, his breath hot over her breasts, his teeth and tongue sliding over her nipples as he nipped....

His muscles became taut and his genitals responded, an erection growing rock hard.

No! He couldn’t allow himself to go too deep into the fantasy. Not yet. He had to save himself. Without a sound, he closed the window.

Slowly, on silent footsteps, he backed away from the glass panes to the stairs and, as he descended the well-worn steps, he tamped down his need.

He could not be rash.

He could not give in to quick judgments.

He had to follow the plan.

Meticulously.

Or all would be lost.

“Jay! Professor McKnight! Hey, wait up!” Kristi walked as fast as she could, trying to catch up with him. She’d left right after class and started home, then decided they needed to clear the air, so she’d retraced her steps, only to spy him heading out a back door. By the time she’d gotten close enough to call to him, he’d reached a staff parking lot. In the watery pool of illumination cast from a security light, he was loading his books and briefcase into the cab of a beat-up old pickup.

He looked over his shoulder and his jaw slid to one side. “Kristi Bentz.”

“Hi.” She nearly slid to a stop a good ten feet away from him. “I, uh, I was surprised that you were taking over Dr. Monroe’s class....”

“I bet.”

She inclined her head, feeling her face flush. “This is awkward. Look, I know we—I—didn’t leave things very good between us, and I thought—”

“Ancient history, Kris.”

She’d forgotten he’d called her that. He’d been the only one in her life who had shortened her name. “Okay.” She nodded. “But who knew we would be in the same classroom, or that you would be my professor, or—wait a
minute,” she said as the truth suddenly dawned on her. “You knew. You had to have known.”

“As of a few days ago, yeah.” He nodded and opened the door a little wider.

A deep “woof” escaped from the darkened cab and a huge, muscular dog leaped to the ground. In the streetlight, the animal’s muscles rippled beneath a coat that looked like burnished copper.

Kristi took a step backward.

“This is Bruno,” he said.

“He’s mammoth!”

“Nah, just a little guy.” Leaning down, he stroked Bruno’s big head. “Gentle as a fawn unless you piss him off.”

“I won’t be doing that.”

Jay flashed a smile and scratched the big dog’s floppy ears. “Hurry up,” he said to Bruno. “Take care of your business.” Jay motioned to the edge of the lot where crepe myrtles lined the flower beds separating the campus from the parking area.

Bruno complied, sniffing the moist ground, then lifting his leg on a shrub while staring at Jay with baleful eyes.

“Good boy,” Jay said as the dog finished relieving himself and began to sniff the ground. “Later. Come on, load up.”

Bruno glanced at Kristi, then sprang into the passenger seat of the cab.

“So…why are you teaching here?” she asked.

“Change of pace. Things at the PD are still rough, never been right since Katrina, but I bet you know that.”

She nodded, thinking of her father and his long hours, frustration, and disintegrating attitude. She’d even overheard him talking about retirement, which was years off. It was odd because Rick Bentz had been born to be a cop. He was most alive when he was on the job. That dedication and work-above-all-else ethic had cost him his job in LA and his marriage to her mother. Ultimately, she feared, it would cost him his life. But lately, since the mother of all hurricanes and the storm’s aftermath, he’d been overworked, overstressed, and disenchanted.

“So, opportunity knocked and I answered.”

“And now I’m in your class.”

“Appears so,” he drawled, and for the first time she saw beyond his own frustration to a bit of amusement at the situation. Oh, great. Just what she needed.

“Well, I just wanted to be sure that there were no hard feelings.”

He lifted a shoulder. “No feelings period.”

That stung a little bit, but she let it go. “Then we can go about this as if I’m just a student and you’re the prof.”

“Right.”

“Good.” She was still uneasy with the conversation; there seemed to be a million things they should be talking over, but why drag up all the old, hard feelings? If she could believe what he was saying, then they didn’t have a problem.

“So, can I give you a lift?” he asked.
“Oh—uh, no…I’ll cut across campus.” She hooked her thumb in the opposite direction.

“It’s late,” he said.

“I’m fine. Really.”

“Some girls have disappeared.”

“Yeah, I know, but I can take care of myself. Tae kwon do, remember?”

The smile broadened. “Oh, yeah,” he said.

A quicksilver memory slashed through her brain. She’d been a senior on a night not unlike this. They’d been alone in her father’s apartment and she’d made the mistake of telling him that with her martial arts skills she could take down any man who tried to bother her. She’d assured him, then said: “I can take care of myself.”

A don’t-give-me-any-of-that-feminist-crap smile had crossed his face. “Yeah, right.”

“I can.”

She’d insisted that with her skills, she could handle anyone who came near her. He’d called her on her bragging and the discussion had elevated into a dare. Then, before the terms had been hammered out, he’d grabbed her, swept her feet from her, and taken her to the ground, using a technique he’d learned as a high-school wrestler. Within seconds he’d pinned her and she’d been unable to twist away from his weight.

She remembered lying on the living room carpet, staring into his triumphant face, breathing hard, so furious she wanted to spit at him. Nose to nose, hearts pumping, they’d lain wedged between her father’s recliner and the television, each waiting for the other to move. Muscles tense. Ready. He’d known if he were so much as to shift his weight, she might be able to twist away; she was waiting for just that opportunity.

“Give?” he’d asked.

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I pinned you.”

“For now.”

He grinned, taunting her. “I’ve got to be heavy.”

She glared up at him and tried vainly to ignore her racing heart. The truth was he’d been crushing her, but there was more to it than that. She had to fight to keep from glancing at his lips, so near hers. Her blood pumped hard through her veins and she wondered what it would be like to make love to him. Right then. Right there. While they were still sweating and breathing hard from their wrestling. She saw his eyes darken, his pupils dilate as his own thoughts possibly mirrored hers. “Come on, Kris, I win,” he said, his voice low.

“It’s temporary…” She licked her lips and heard him groan, felt the hardness between his legs. She let out a little moan in reply and he lost control and kissed her. Hard. With a hot lust that spread from his bloodstream to hers. It was glorious.

And then she bit him.

Drawing blood.

He sucked in his breath in pain, his weight shifting just a bit. He swore, too, softly but dangerously as she started
to wriggle free, struggling to gain enough room to twist and kick him as she’d learned in her last class.

But she stopped cold when she heard footsteps on the stairs outside the apartment door.

“Get off!” she ordered.

“What?”

Keys jangled on the other side of the door.

“It’s Dad! Get off!”

In one fluid motion, Jay rolled off her and onto his feet. Before she could tell him what to do, he sprang over the couch, landed in the hall, and slipped into the bathroom as Kristi quickly adjusted her clothes and threw herself in her father’s chair. She clicked on the remote just as the door swung open, revealing her father.

“Kristi?” Rick Bentz called as he spied her. “Oh…” Dropping his keys, wallet, and badge onto the entry hall table, he glanced at the television that was flickering on to a sports station. As if she’d ever been interested in a golf match. Cripes!

“Hi,” she said brightly, with more enthusiasm than she’d ever greeted him. She knew her face was red, her hair sweaty, guilt written all over her expression, but she pretended that everything was normal and that her father, a detective who’d spent his life being suspicious and who was an expert in recognizing when someone was lying, didn’t notice anything unusual.

“What’s going on?” he asked casually.

About that time Jay flushed the toilet loudly, ran water in the sink, and walked out of the bathroom. He, too, was red in the face and his lip was discolored, a bit of dark blood visible where she’d bit him. Kristi wanted to drop through the floor and disappear.

“Hi, Detective,” Jay said, and reached for his jacket, which had been slung over the back of the couch. “Gotta run. Work.”

“Good idea,” Rick Bentz said, his eyes narrowing on Jay. “You know there’s a rule in my house. One my daughter seems to have forgotten, so I’ll tell you. It’s archaic, I know, but hard and fast. There are to be no boys in this place when I’m not here.” He glared at Jay, then at Kristi.

“Sorry. Just bringing her home.”

“And ending up with a split lip?”

“Yeah. Kristi can explain,” Jay said, shooting her a look. “’Night, Kristi. Detective Bentz.” And then he left her to deal with her father and “the talk” in which her father asked her if he needed to make an appointment with a doctor; if she needed to be on the pill, or should he be buying her condoms. She explained about the wrestling match, about biting him to gain control, and her father exploded, telling her that she was pushing it, that boys don’t have any control, that she was asking for trouble.

“Way to go off the deep end, Dad,” she declared, furious. “For your information, not that it’s any of your business, I’m fine. I don’t need pills or anything yet and when I do, believe me, I’ll take care of it. Myself.”

And she had. Six months later.

So now, here she was, in the dead of night, declining a ride from Jay McKnight, the boy to whom she’d given her virginity, then tossed over. The boy who was now a man and her college professor.

“I’ll see you next week,” she said, and moved away from the truck.
“I’d feel better if you’d let me drive you.”

Shaking her head, she half smiled. “I can take care of myself,” she said, echoing the phrase from so long ago once more, then turned on the heel of a boot and headed toward Greek Row and the Wagner House.

“Call my cell if you need anything,” Jay threw after her, rattling off his number. Kristi lifted an arm but didn’t turn around as she headed toward the library. From there, she cut to the gate near her apartment house, aware that she was memorizing his number against her better judgment. She didn’t need Jay in her life.

She didn’t look behind her, but heard the sound of a truck’s engine cough, then catch. Good. She’d cleared the air with Jay and she was okay with it.

A second later, she heard the pickup drive out of the lot and she was on her way, hurrying across the dark campus, feeling the wind pluck at her hair.

There were a few other students out, but not many, and the shadows between the security lamps were thick and gloomy, seeming to shift with the rattling of the branches and the turn of the wind. The rain had stopped sometime during the past three hours, but the smell of damp earth was heavy in the air, the grass covered in dewy drops that shimmered in the moonlight.

Kristi angled toward the other side of the campus, to the gate near her apartment building. She cut behind Wagner House and saw a movement…something out of the ordinary. Red flags went up in her mind and she flipped open the flap of her purse, her hand sliding into the pocket where she kept her pepper spray.

*Don’t be silly,* she told herself, *it’s probably just a dog.*

But she felt nervous sweat gather at the base of her spine. It wasn’t so much what she could see as what she couldn’t. She moved rapidly, on the alert, her pepper-spray canister clutched tight in her fist. She hated being a wimp. *Hated* it. She’d worked hard to be observant, to pay attention to her surroundings, to trust her feelings, and she’d been trained in self-defense so that she wouldn’t have to rely on anyone but herself.

But there was no reason to be foolhardy.

She thought of the weird sensation she’d gotten from the dark car rolling down the street before class, and the feeling every so often that she was being observed, watched by unseen eyes.

The result of all her research on the missing girls. The disturbing conversations she’d had with their families—people who truly didn’t care—were getting into her psyche.

She studied the shadowy shrubbery as she rounded a corner and cut across the quad. A person in a dark hooded jacket was walking in her direction. Kristi tensed, her muscles suddenly tight, her senses honed on the approaching figure.

Until she realized the person approaching her was a woman. A slight woman.

Kristi let out her breath as they passed. She caught a glimpse of a face in the dark hood and recognized Ariel, who, upon spying Kristi, veered a step away.

Kristi was about to say something when Ariel looked directly at her and in that moment, all color drained from Ariel’s face, her complexion turned ashen, her visage in shades of gray. Was it a trick of light? The silvery glow from a cloud-covered moon? The sheen from incandescent security lamps flickering in the mist?

“Ariel?” she said, turning, but the girl had headed down a brick path near the Commons and disappeared into the gloom.

But that draining of color…so much like the vision of her father…. Kristi’s heart pounded hard.

She sensed, with cold certainty, that Ariel was doomed.
“Idiot,” Jay muttered under his breath. He wanted to kick himself five ways to hell and back as he drove through the empty streets surrounding the campus. Bruno gave a soft woof, his nose at the crack in the passenger window, drinking in the smells of the night.

Jay flipped on the radio, hoping the sound of the Dixie Chicks would drown out any thoughts of Kristi. Instead, the song about getting even with an ex-lover only made him grip the wheel even tighter. “Son of a bitch.” He’d kept his cool through class and beyond, when she’d chased him down to set things straight and clear the air between them, but it had backfired. At least for him. As mule-headed and reckless as she was, he still found her damned fascinating.

It was a sickness.

Like a death wish for his soul.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he grumbled, and switched stations to a local radio station where Dr. Sam, a radio psychologist, was dispensing advice to the lovelorn or confused in a special extended program. He figured there must be a lot of loonies in the dead of winter. He slapped the radio button off as he flipped on his wipers to swat away the mist that had collected. It wasn’t raining, but the fog was dense and he wondered if he should have insisted on driving Kristi home.

How? By bodily restraining her? You offered. She declined. She didn’t want to ride with you. End of story.

“Unless she ends up missing,” he said, squinting through the windshield and stopping at an amber light about to turn red. A couple of teenaged boys zipped across the dark street on skateboards, their wheels grating on the pavement. Laughing, one dialing a cell phone as he rode, they turned toward a convenience store sizzling with neon lights but guarded with bars on the windows. A few cars crossed the intersection before the light changed again, glowing green in the mist.

Jay started, only to slam on the brakes as a cat sprinted across the street. “Damn!”

Bruno, spying the speeding tabby, started baying and scratching madly at the dash.

“Stop!” Jay ordered the dog as he eased through the intersection.

Bruno twisted, paws on the back of the passenger seat as he glared through the window of the cab at his adversary. He was still growling and whining. “Forget it,” Jay advised, increasing his speed to thirty. “It’s gone.”

The hound wasn’t about to give up but with a final “Leave it,” from Jay, he gave a single woof and curled up on the seat again. “Good boy,” Jay said, then spying something in his headlights, slammed on the brakes again. “Jesus!”

His truck skidded, frame shimmying, tires squealing. Bruno was nearly dumped into the dash as the truck’s grill barely missed the man in black who leaped to one side and hazarded a quick glance at the pickup, his clerical collar showing white, his glasses fogged and reflecting the headlight’s glare. His washed-out face was twisted in anxiety, as if he were in fear for his life. He kept running, his cassock billowing behind him. “Are you nuts!” Jay yelled, adrenaline shooting through his bloodstream.

Jay’s heart was beating like a drum. He’d nearly struck the guy! But the priest didn’t so much as break stride. Half running, he disappeared into a park that backed up to one side of the campus.

“The guy’s out of his mind,” Jay muttered furiously, mentally counting to ten as he eased off the brakes and once again started driving through the night. “What the hell is he doing crossing the damned street in the dark? Moron!
What’s wrong with the crosswalk?”

What the hell was going on…? The holy man looked as if he’d just seen a ghost, and he seemed to want to avoid anyone seeing him.

Jay let out his breath but he was still tense, muscles drawn, nerves stretched thin, fingers clenched over the steering wheel. Within three minutes he’d nearly hit a cat and a man.

The priest had looked familiar. It had been dark, yes, but there was something about him that made Jay think they’d met before. Here. In Baton Rouge. And it wasn’t because Jay hightailed it to mass on Sunday mornings. No…it had to have been on campus or at an All Saints event of some kind.

Letting out a shaky breath, Jay shook his head. He cautiously stepped on the gas again, his eyes narrowing on the quiet road. “Third time’s a charm,” he said, wondering if he were cursing himself. Few cars passed him, nor were any following him as he turned onto the winding street leading to his cousins’ bungalow.

He glanced in the rearview mirror, though he didn’t know why. No one was following him. “Better keep your eyes on the road, McKnight.”

He was still trying to place the priest. It hadn’t been Father Anthony Mediera, the priest who, for all intents and purposes, was in charge of the college, but someone else he’d met on campus. Who? When?

He turned into the driveway of Aunt Colleen’s small house, wondering what the hell the priest had been running from.

Mathias Glanzer!

That’s who it was. Father Mathias, Jay was certain of it, and yes, he was associated with the college in some way. Huh, Jay thought. What’s the deal?

Jay parked, pocketed his keys, and dragged his briefcase and computer into the cottage. With Bruno at his heels, he walked into the kitchen, where he studiously ignored the exposed sheetrock and lack of countertops. As Bruno sloppily drank from his water dish, Jay pulled a beer from the refrigerator and followed a short hallway to his pink office. Bruno, water dripping from his snout, tagged after him.

“I really have to paint in here,” Jay advised the dog as Bruno curled into his dog bed in the corner of the room, where once Janice’s—or had it been Leah’s?—twin bed had been positioned under a canopy of posters and album covers of the sisters’ favorite rock stars. David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, Rick Springfield, and Michael Jackson came to mind.

He sat down at the makeshift desk, then hooked up his laptop, waiting for an Internet connection. Logging on to the Web site for All Saints College, he browsed through the list of instructors until he found a picture of Father Mathias Glanzer, head of the drama department.

Twisting off the cap of his Lone Star, he took a long swallow. In the photo Father Mathias looked almost beatific, his expression warm, friendly, at peace. He sat wearing a white alb with a gold-embossed overlay stole. His hands were folded and his blue eyes, behind rimless glasses, stared straight into the camera’s lens. His chin was sharp, his lower lip slightly larger than the upper, his nose narrow. The entire photograph gave the viewer a sense that they were staring at a composed, calm man of conviction.

Far from the vision Jay had experienced earlier, when the priest had seemed rattled—or furtive—as if a demon straight from hell had been on his tail.

Why?

Jay shook his head. He’d had a long day and had to get up at the crack of dawn to drive to New Orleans. Shoving all thoughts of the holy man from his mind, he found the e-mail addresses of the students in his class and attached his syllabus. He saw Kristi Bentz’s name again and frowned.
Bad luck, that.

He grimaced. Maybe Gayle had been right when she’d charged him with never really being over his high school girlfriend. It had seemed ridiculous at the time, the ranting of a jealous woman.

But…

After seeing Kristi again, he realized she was still under his skin. It wasn’t as if he wanted to get back together with her. No way. But he couldn’t deny that there was something about her that caused him to think stupid thoughts and remember forgotten moments in sudden sharp clarity, memories he’d considered long forgotten.

He exhaled heavily.

The smart thing—the only thing—was to leave her alone as much as he could.

Wasn’t it bad enough that she thought she could predict her father’s death? Did she have to bear this onus for other people as well?

Kristi unlocked the door of her apartment and stepped inside. To the rooms that had been occupied by Tara Atwater, one of the missing students. Get over it. The apartment had nothing to do with Tara vanishing. She went missing from the campus and that didn’t keep you from signing up for classes. Wouldn’t you have taken this apartment anyway, even knowing?

“Not on a prayer,” she murmured, unable to stop the goose bumps from rising on her flesh. She double-checked the dead bolt as Houdini, who must’ve been waiting on the roof, hopped through the partially opened window, climbed over the kitchen counters, and disappeared.

“My stepmother would have a heart attack if she ever saw you on the cabinets,” Kristi said. The cat peeked out at her. Houdini still wouldn’t let her get close, but he was starting to seem to want to interact.

She filled the cat’s bowl, made herself a bag of microwave popcorn, and spent the next hour and a half organizing her desk, not only for her schoolwork, but also to organize her notes on the book she hoped to write, the book about the missing girls, if it turned out they all had come to bad ends.

She looked around the small space where Tara Atwater had lived. Had Tara, like Kristi, slept on the trundle bed? Had she noticed the small closet smelled of mothballs? Had she complained about the lack of water pressure? Had she made popcorn here, used the same microwave, experienced the uncanny feeling that someone was watching her?

Kristi plugged her laptop into her printer, logged on to the Internet and began downloading and printing any article she could find on the missing girls. She located their MySpace pages and looked for any hint of them belonging to a cult or being interested in vampires. She thought there were some veiled references in their likes and dislikes columns, and decided to check them out further later. Tonight she’d gather information; later, she’d sort and analyze it.

Barely touching the popcorn, she searched cults, vampires, and cross-referenced them to All Saints College. She found that there was a surprising number of groups into the vampire/werewolf/paranormal thing. Some of the Web sites and chat rooms were obviously just for those with a passing interest, but others were more intense, as if whoever created the spaces actually believed demons walked among the living.

“Creepy,” she said to the cat as he tiptoed to his food. He scurried away at her voice. “Definitely creepy.” And Lucretia knew more about it than she was saying. “I guess we’d better stock up on garlic and crosses and silver bullets,” she said...“or wait, are the bullets for werewolves?” Houdini froze, tail switching. Then he ran across the floor, up to the counter, and out the window. “Something I said?” Kristi muttered as she walked to the counter and stretched.

She gazed out at the night, over the wall surrounding the campus to the buildings beyond. A few stars were visible through shifting clouds and the layer of light from the city. Again she had the disturbing sensation that she was
being watched attentively, that unseen eyes were observing. Calculating. She lowered the blinds, leaving only enough space for the cat to return if he so deigned.

Returning to the computer, she wondered if Tara Atwater had experienced the same odd sensation that someone was surveying her from the cover of darkness.

It was time.

He had to dispose of the bodies.

As Kristi Bentz snapped the blinds shut, Vlad checked his watch. It was after one in the morning. Perfect timing. He’d been watching her for over two hours and wishing that she was next. He’d caught glimpses of her breasts as she’d pulled off her sweatshirt and unhooked her bra. The mirror over the fireplace was positioned so that if the bathroom door were ajar, he had a view of the shower stall, sink, and even a bit of the toilet. He’d observed Tara from this very spot as she’d spent so much time painstakingly applying makeup or cocking her head as she inserted her earrings, struggling with the backs. He’d held his breath as he’d watched her lift her arms. She’d been unaware that she was also moving her breasts, giving him a better view of those gorgeous, sexy globes and the vial of her blood hanging from a chain surrounding her neck, nestled in her cleavage. Where the hell had she hidden it?

You’ll never find it, he imagined her taunting him from the other side of the pale. Her tinkling laughter slid through his brain and his fists clenched so hard the skin over his fingers stretched taut.

“I’ll find it,” he muttered, then realized he was talking to no one, a ghost, the figment of his imagination.

Just like his mother.

Clenching his jaw, Vlad snapped back to reality. He couldn’t stand here indefinitely and remember Tara. Nor did he have time to fantasize about what it would be like to watch Kristi as she showered and toweled dry, her wet hair clinging to her white skin. His teeth ground together and he pushed aside the want that always snaked through his blood. He knew that his lust was only one part of his life, and the girls he so lovingly sacrificed were only a means to an end.

Without wasting a second, he hurried down the stairs and out a back door. On quiet footsteps he made his way through the alleys and streets, always taking a different path, never allowing himself the luxury or trap of using the same route, one where he might be seen over and over again.

Noiselessly he unlocked the door to his private space and entered. He was restless and knew the bracing cold water of the pool would settle him, but there was no time. He’d spent too long at the window, watching Kristi Bentz, trying to decipher what it was she was doing at her desk so long. She’d spent hours on the Internet and he doubted that she was studying for any of her classes.

Already dressed in black, he spent a few minutes applying dark face paint, pulled on a wig of light brown, then covered his features with a nylon stocking…just in case. He already had lifts for his shoes, so he appeared taller than he was…no one would recognize him and he’d been careful in his dealings with the women, so that there would be no way to link him to them.

He walked quickly, past the shimmering pool and further to the space beneath the old hotel’s kitchen. He unlocked a heavy door and carefully pushed it open, feeling the cold breath of winter against his skin, the kiss of Jack Frost. He snapped on a light. The single bulb illuminated the interior of the freezer in a glaring light that reflected in the thick bands of ice crystals lining the frigid room and sparkling, almost giving life to the open, dead eyes of the four women who hung on meat hooks, their skin frozen and pale as snow, the muscles of their faces solidified into expressions of sheer horror.

He hated to let them go.

He enjoyed visiting them after a long swim.
He’d walk between their cold bodies feeling the icy air on his own naked flesh. He would rub against them, feeling an erotic high, his white-hot blood almost boiling in his veins, the arctic air against his skin and the hard, smooth frozen muscles of these, the first of what would be many.

Licking his cracked lips, he leaned forward and ran his tongue over Dionne’s breast, darker than the others, the nipple taut in icy death.

“I’ll miss you,” he breathed, before suckling a bit and feeling his erection strong as he rubbed it against her hanging legs. One hand cupped her buttocks and he remembered the hot joy of entering her….

“In the next lifetime, my sweet,” he vowed, turning his attention to Rylee…perfect, petulant Rylee. He hadn’t had enough time with her. Her perfect, icy body called out to him and he thought of saving her, playing with her bloodless body, but he knew it was best to take her away as well.

He kissed her frozen, twisted lips and stared into her open eyes. Then he smiled as he viewed her neck, so perfect, arching back, the icy strands of her hair falling away to show the two perfect holes at the base of her throat, and he imagined the taste of her blood. Salty. Warm. Satisfying.

Yes, it would be difficult to let her go.

But there would be others…so many more.

He smiled in the darkness as their faces came to him.

Kristi couldn’t sleep. The clock at her bedside table told her it was nearly one in the morning and the events of the past few days had been swirling in her mind. Over and over again, the pictures of the missing girls revolved and she remembered the phone calls she’d made between classes and work and a few face-to-face meetings with students who had known the girls who disappeared.

“Always knew she would come to no good…bad blood just like her father.” It was Tara’s mother’s words that kept her awake the most. “He’s in jail, y’know. Armed robbery, not that it’s any of your business. My guess? She took off with some boy and somehow I’ll end up having to pay the loans she took out to go to school. You just wait and see. And me with two other kids to support…."

But Monique’s mother had been no better, seemingly pissed off that her daughter had gone away to school and left her to deal with a husband with Alzheimer’s disease. “She couldn’t deal with it…not that she could deal with anything. That girl!” Monique’s mother had snorted from somewhere in South Dakota.

Dionne’s brother had thought she was a “cheap-ass ho,” while her last boyfriend Tyshawn Jones was still MIA, or so it seemed. Dionne’s coworkers at the pizza parlor had insisted they didn’t get to know her and that she’d kept to herself.

Rylee’s mother was a nightmare, inferring her daughter would just get herself “in trouble” as if that were the worst thing that could happen.

Kristi threw off the covers, disturbing Houdini, who had ventured close to the bed as she was sleeping. “Sorry,” she said as the cat scrambled to his hiding place. She padded barefoot into the kitchen area, flipped on the faucet and, holding her hair away from her face, took a long swallow of the tap water.

*How many times had Tara done this?*

Kristi twisted off the tap and wiped her lips by turning her head, using the shoulder of the oversized T-shirt she used as pajamas. She leaned her hips against the counter and stared into the room where she and the ghost of Tara Atwater resided. The desk chair had come with the place, probably used by Tara to study for the same classes that Kristi was now taking.

She listened as the clock ticked off the seconds, the refrigerator hummed, and her own heart kept a steady beat. It
was almost as if she was tracing Tara’s life, walking in her footsteps, becoming the girl who had just left class one day and never shown up again.

It didn’t make any sense.

Tara had no car, but she did have a credit card, a computer to log on to the Internet, a MySpace page, and a cell phone, none of which had been used since. The last person Tara had seen was the head of the English Department, Dr. Natalie “No comment” Croft. So far Kristi hadn’t been able to get through to her.

Kristi’s mind jumped to Rylee. The last person she’d met with was Lucretia Stevens, something Kristi’s ex-roommate had failed to mention. “Curiouser and curiouser,” she said to Houdini, who’d slunk to the far side of the room, luminous eyes focused on Kristi. Closing her eyes and rotating her neck, Kristi took in five deep breaths; then knowing that sleep would be far too elusive, she rolled out her desk chair, sat down, turned on her computer and, ignoring the charts she was making, logged on to the Internet. She’d found several vampire sites and some of the kids were chatting with her anonymously.

Maybe tonight she’d get lucky chatting with people who had names like ILUVBLUD, or FANGS077, or VAMPGRL or whatever. She hadn’t had much luck with getting information about a cult or whatever, nor had anyone yet admitted to knowing any of the missing girls. Either they knew something and were keeping it secret, didn’t recognize the coeds’ real names as opposed to their screen names, or were totally clueless. Kristi was betting on the last, but she still kept up a conversation while checking out the missing girls’ MySpace pages, reviewing their “groups” and pictures, trying to find a clue that she might have missed before.

Surely she’d find something.

People didn’t just vanish off the face of the earth.

Even if they did believe in vampires…

Right?

The Mississippi rolled by thick and dark as he stood on the levee downstream from New Orleans. Ghostlike, Spanish moss drooped from the branches of the live oaks planted near the river’s banks.

Vlad drew in a deep breath, smelling the damp earth mingling with the overpowering odor of the slow-moving water.

He was alone on this remote stretch of riverbank, yet he felt it still too exposed. If the bodies were to float to the surface, to be discovered, things could get dangerous, and he still had so much work to do.

For her.

Always for her.

He closed his eyes and thought of her.

So perfect.

So beautiful.

A woman who, beyond all others, heated his blood. He could hardly wait until he saw her again…watched her from a distance, feeling himself grow hard at the thought of her warm body and the blood…always the blood.

He ran his tongue across his teeth in anticipation. A surge of excitement sped through his veins and need coursed to his soul.

Discarding this spot as his dumping ground, he walked swiftly from the rise, through the long grass, and into the
trees where his van was parked. He climbed behind the wheel and turned around, then drove out the long lane and onto a back road that cut into the bayou.

Here, the sound of crickets chirping and toads croaking cut through the stillness. Every once in a while there was the soft, nearly inaudible splash of an alligator slipping into the water.

He parked by the dilapidated cabin, walked to the back of his van, and pulled on hip waders. He slid a miner’s helmet onto his head, then switched on its light. In the bright beam, he worked quickly, yanking on a pair of gloves, then pulling out each body from the back of the van. Wrapped in tarps, weighted with bricks strapped to their torsos, they had begun to thaw, but each was a deadweight as he carried her firemanlike, over his shoulder. Down a deer trail to the edge of the water. He unwrapped the first and stared down at her face and her naked, frigid body for just a second. In the harsh glare of his light, Dionne stared sightlessly up at him, her black skin taking on a bluish tinge, ice crystals in her hair beginning to melt.

He hadn’t wanted to leave them all together. That would make things too easy should anyone discover one of the bodies, but he was running out of time. He’d waited too long, putting off this part of his mission. He’d wanted to keep them near him forever, but, of course, could not. “Eternal rest,” he said as he pushed Dionne’s smooth body into the water. Once she submerged, the bricks ensuring that she sank to the bottom, he returned to the van.

Next he pulled out the tarp wrapped around Tara. The third. He’d watched her from his hiding spot as she’d walked nude around her apartment, the same upstairs studio Kristi Bentz now occupied. How fitting, he thought as he lugged Tara’s frozen body to another point a little further downstream, opened the tarp and viewed her again. Her skin was pale, though tan lines that hadn’t quite faded from summer were still visible. Her big breasts with their incredible nipples were puckered, begging for him to kiss them, lick them one last time. Yet he resisted. She, too, was pushed into the motionless water to be found by the creatures of the night.

He made two more trips, first with Monique. Tall and statuesque in life, an athlete, and now heavy and stiff, unbending. He untied the tarp with his gloved fingers and noticed that even in death, her muscles were defined. Her long red hair fell stiffly past her shoulders and was mimicked by frosty curls at the juncture of those long, incredible legs. His gut tightened as he looked at her before rolling her body into the water.

Finally he carried the last, smaller tarp far from his parking spot, where he untied the lashings, let the plastic fall free, then gazed long and hard at Rylee, with her cheerleader good looks and blue, sightless eyes. Even in the harsh beam of the headlamp, she was still beautiful. Her curves were perfect, her tiny waist nipped in beneath the globes of round breasts with pale pink nipples. A butterfly tattoo was frozen on the inside of one thigh and he remembered licking the icy decoration with his tongue as he’d explored her.

Yes, he would miss her and was irritated that he hadn’t had longer to view her, touch her, feel her icy smooth skin against his own.

There will be others…give her up. Make room for the next.

His heartbeat quickened. He had but a week to wait and then…oh, and then…

With renewed energy, he pushed her body into the shadowy swamp water. With the beam of his light cutting through the inky depths, he saw her staring up at him through the wavering current as the water slid over those pale features.

Her blood, he’d thought, had been pure.

Perfect.

Slowly she disappeared from view.
CHAPTER 10

Ariel knelt in the chapel.

Her knees ached and her shoulders were tight as she bowed her head and asked for guidance. Again. As she had every morning this week.

Ariel had always had a strong faith, hoping it would carry her through the tough times in her life: the death of her older brother Lance; her parents’ divorce; her new stepfather and the string of boyfriends who had left her from the time she was fourteen, boys whom she’d given her heart and so much more before they all moved on.

No one had stayed.

Even her mother, after the divorce, had lost a ton of weight, started coloring her hair, and dating men who, like her, all tried to look younger and more hip than they really were. Eventually Claudia O’Toole had remarried. Tom Browning, a long-haul trucker, was nice enough, but he’d destroyed Ariel’s tiny dream that her parents would get back together.

So, Ariel had turned from her family to her faith…until college.

“God forgive me.”

From her knees she glanced up at the life-sized crucifix hanging between two tall stained-glass windows. The statue of Jesus, wearing his crown of thorns, his head, hands, and side bleeding, arms stretched wide, stared benevolently down upon her.

*I am the light….*

She could hear the words He told all of those who believed in Him.

“Dear Lord.” She squeezed her eyes shut against her tears. Why, if Christ was so near, so caring, was she always so lonely? Why did she feel abandoned?

“Be with me,” she intoned. “Please, Father.”

Never before had she been so confused about her religion. Never before had she questioned the tenets of the church, never had she been so tempted…

She made the sign of the cross deftly, as she had thousands of times in her life.

She’d never been away from home before…well at least not for any length of time. Sure, she’d stayed with her father every other weekend for a while, then less often. And yes, there had been the time she’d run off with Cal Sievers when she’d found she was pregnant…even that precious little baby hadn’t survived. Ariel, unfit to be a mother, had miscarried in her third month.

Now she bit down on her lower lip and felt her shoulders shake. She’d wanted that baby, that small little life who would love her, but even the infant, whom she sensed was a girl and had named Brandy, had left.

Knees aching, she swallowed hard, tasted the salt of her tears in her throat, and thought about the group she’d joined, those who had willingly embraced her.

No questions asked.

No judgments made.
And the leader…She stared up at the crucifix, felt that Christ could see into her soul, notice the tarnish around its edges.

She loved God. She did.

But she needed friends. A family here on earth.

Her own parents weren’t interested.

The girls in the sororities were a bunch of shallow, self-indulgent snobs.

But her new friends…

She made the sign of the cross and stood, turning only to spy Father Tony standing in the balcony, gazing down upon her. Dressed in black, his clerical collar in stark contrast to his black shirt and slacks, he was a tall, handsome man. Too handsome to be a priest. She glanced away, sniffing and self-consciously dashing her tears from her eyes, but she heard his tread on the staircase, knew she couldn’t make it out the carved doors of the chapel without facing him, talking with him, maybe even being persuaded into the confessional.

She sent up another small prayer and hurried past the rows of pews and was nearly to the front doors when he rounded a corner on the stairs and descended the last few steps into the vestibule, where candles had been lit, their small flames flickering as he passed.

“Ariel,” he whispered, the hint of an Italian accent discernible. His dark hair gleamed in the candlelight, the expression on his even, handsome features solemn and concerned. “You are troubled,” he said softly. Knowingly. Gently, he touched her hand with his warm fingers.

“Y–yes, Father.” She nodded, unable to keep the tears from running down her cheeks.

“So many are. You know you’re not alone. You must trust in the Father.” Dark eyebrows drew together and his eyes, a pale ethereal blue, searched hers. She noticed the tightness in the corners of his mouth, the fact that his nose had obviously once been broken. “Talk to me, my child,” he suggested, softly, almost seductively.

Ariel swallowed hard. Dare she trust him? Her private thoughts were so personal, her dilemma one no mortal man would understand, and yet she was tempted. Staring into a gaze that could surely see into her soul, she wondered how much she could bare her soul and how far she could stretch her lie.

Kristi gulped down her final swallow of coffee and left her cup in the sink, then made sure the window was open a crack for Houdini to enter and leave at will. Sunlight filtered into her apartment, the first time there had been a cloudless day since she’d moved in. And the clear skies had a way of lifting her spirits, a welcome change after she’d immersed herself in cults, vampires, and missing girls, doing research, making charts, logging in hours on the Internet searching news articles and personal pages. She was beginning to understand the missing girls, getting a sense of their dysfunctional family lives.

Didn’t anyone care?

Kristi had approached the dean of students and had received a frosty “none of your business” indicating to her that the school was covering its ass, worried about bad press.

Frustrated, stretched thin, and running on only a few hours of sleep each night, Kristi barely had time to breathe. She’d taken on a few hours working at the registrar’s office to gain access to files regarding the missing girls’ addresses and families, and insight into the inner workings of their jobs and backgrounds. She was still working at the diner, taking a full load of classes, and struggling to keep up with the mounds of homework assigned.

And the missing girls were forever with her.

On her mind during class, or walking across campus, or while she was working. She’d started making a few social
inroads, meeting friends of the girls, but they were few, far-between, and extremely closemouthed. Of the girls she’d tried to interview, no one had any idea about a special group to which any of the coeds had belonged, but she sensed they had been hiding something.

Something she damned well was going to uncover.

Even if she had to enlist help from someone on staff. She’d been fighting the idea, but was tired of hitting her head against a brick wall.

Today, in the sunlight, she felt uplifted. For over a week the overcast days had seeped into her bones, the thickness of the night had made her want to curl up by the fire and double-and triple-check the locks on her doors.

She’d never had serious issues with fear, not after her mother died, not even after the attempts upon her life. It was odd, she thought, that she wasn’t one to experience panic attacks considering all she’d been through. But lately, in the dead of winter, in this apartment from which a woman had vanished, on the campus where she had few friends, things had changed. At times she felt as paranoid as her cop father, who, even though he hadn’t left New Orleans, seemed to be breathing down her neck.

But not today. Not with the January sun chasing away the clouds.

Grabbing her backpack with her laptop computer, she headed out of her apartment.

It was Thursday of the second week and already she was caught on the horns of several dilemmas. First, there was the matter of Jay and her conflicted feelings for him. During the second class he’d been all business, his gaze never touching on hers for more than an instant, no more than anyone else’s as he’d reconstructed the evidence of a crime scene involving the serial killer Father John. Jay had been coldly clinical in his analysis of the differing pieces of evidence that the police had found. During the break, he’d been besieged by interested students as he had been after class. He hadn’t seemed to notice when she’d left.

So what? Big deal. All for the better, she’d tried to convince herself. He’s your professor. End of story.

And yet the fact that he’d basically ignored her had bothered her more than she wanted to admit. But then, she knew she was about to fix that, for like it or not, she had to approach Jay, talk to him, engage him and hopefully enlist his help.

“That should be a lot of fun,” she said to herself.

Her other quandary was more difficult to deal with, she thought as she found a jacket and threw it on. For the past ten days, off and on, Kristi had caught glimpses of Ariel O’Toole, Lucretia’s friend. Once at the bookstore, another time in the student union, a third time near Wagner House, and each and every time Kristi had seen the girl, Ariel was pale, washed out, her skin the color of cold ashes.

Was she ill?

Or about to meet with an accident?

Or was this all a figment of Kristi’s imagination?

No one else seemed to notice. Could Ariel’s appearance be all in her mind? Very much like the death she was certain she’d seen in her father’s features time and time again? Should she approach Ariel? Talk to her? Mention it to Lucretia?

She frowned at that thought as she stuffed her cell phone into her purse. If she told anyone about her newfound ability to predict a person’s death, she’d be considered a kook. And did she have any proof of this “gift”? Well, a little. One woman she’d seen on a bus who’d turned gray before her eyes had died a week later. But then she’d been, according to the obituary, when Kristi had looked it up, ninety-four.

She tried to shake off her worries but she didn’t even have time to relax. On today’s schedule was Creative
Writing with Dr. Preston, another hunky instructor. He had the looks of the quintessential California surfer dude, complete with shaggy blond hair and hard, sculpted body, which he didn’t bother to disguise in his tight jeans and old T-shirts. During class he had the habit of pacing across the room, looking at the class, all the while tossing a piece of chalk up in the air and catching it. He never broke stride, never quit lecturing, and never dropped the piece of chalk, which he kept at the ready in case he had to scribble some inspiration on the chalkboard before starting his pacing again. Ezma had labeled him rude, but he was definitely eye-candy.

If Dr. Preston was sun and surf, Professor Deana Senegal was at the other end of the spectrum. Since Althea Monroe had taken a leave, Professor Senegal was Kristi’s only woman instructor. Senegal, who taught journalism, was a woman around forty who spoke in rapid-fire sentences and stared through sleek, rectangular glasses. Deana Senegal was pretty, smart, and had worked at newspapers in Atlanta and Chicago before getting her master’s and accepting a position here at All Saints three years earlier. She’d taken a sabbatical for the birth of her eighteen-month-old twins, but now was back to work. With thin lips stained a deep wine color, porcelain skin, and green eyes that snapped fire behind those designer frames, Senegal was all business. She’d barely cracked a smile for the entire class period.

Kristi made her way down the stairs, thinking how she’d met several people who resided in the building. A married couple lived next to Mai on the second floor, and on the first, in the unit abutting Hiram’s, was another single man, maybe a student, but one who kept odd hours; she’d only seen him late at night, either coming or going. He was tall and usually wore a dark coat, but she’d never seen his face well enough to decipher his features.

Today, as Kristi grabbed a textbook she’d left in her car, she spied Mrs. Calloway’s PT Cruiser roll into the lot. The white car with its convertible top was distinctive, and not what Kristi had expected the older woman to drive.

Kristi reached her driver’s door just as Irene was climbing out and scowling at some dead weeds growing at the edge of the crumbling asphalt. “Damned things,” she said, then caught sight of Kristi. “Oh. Hello. I heard you fixed those locks yourself.” She was already shaking her head and reaching inside for a wide-brimmed hat to add to her outfit of brown corduroy slacks, a pink flannel shirt, and a beige cardigan sweater with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows. “I told you Hiram would handle it.”

“I couldn’t get hold of him in time.”

She plopped the hat upon her head, covering her curly salt and pepper hair. “Well, then, I’ll need a set of keys to your unit, and if you think you can take the expense of changing the locks off your rent, then you can think—”

“I’ll see that you get a set,” Kristi said, irritated with the money-grubbing landlady. “I heard that Tara Atwater lived in my apartment.”

The older woman reacted and Kristi knew she’d hit a nerve. “Tara? The girl who ran out without paying her last month’s rent? That’s right, she lived upstairs.”

“And she’s missing.”

“All I know is that she took off on me without paying.”

“Or was taken. Some people think she was abducted.”

“That girl?” Irene snorted derisively. “No way. She was a partier and a runaround. My guess is she took a notion to take off and did.”

“And no one’s seen her since.”

“Probably because she was messed up with drugs.” Irene squinted at Kristi. “I know the press gets worked up when girls drop out of college, making something out of nothing. The police don’t seem to think there’s foul play. Those girls who went missing? They’ve done it before. Their families aren’t even concerned and I can vouch for that as far as the Atwater girl goes. I called her mother, and the woman could barely talk to me. Complained of working two jobs with two younger kids to support. As for the dad, now there’s a lost cause. Been in and out of jail. The last I heard he was still serving time. No one wants to ante up the back rent.”
“You’re saying no one really cares about Tara.”

Irene lifted a scrawny shoulder, the pink and brown plaid of her shirt shifting in the sunlight. “She was a party girl. Always with the boys.” She clucked her tongue, then leaned down and picked out one of the weeds daring to grow in the cracks of the parking lot. “That spells trouble to me.”

“Do you know the names of the boys she dated?”

“I keep my nose out of my tenants’ business.”

That, Kristi knew, was a bald-faced lie. Irene Calloway had already told Kristi enough that suggested she loved to gossip, so, Kristi figured, it was only a matter of buttering her up or trading information to learn everything the landlady knew.

“Who collected her things? Someone had to pick up her stuff if she just left it.”

“Not yet they haven’t! And I’m charging ’em rent, too. Space ain’t cheap, even storage compartments.”

“You boxed her things up?”

“Me? Nah.” She shook her head. “That’s a job for the manager.”

_Hiram. The do-nothing. Great._

Kristi left the old lady muttering to herself as she yanked a few more weeds from the parking lot. Irene Calloway’s take on things always had a negative spin on it.

Jaywalking across the street, Kristi headed to Adam’s Hall, the vine-clad building that was home to the English Department, where her writing class with Dr. Preston was located.

As she reached the steps of Adam’s Hall, her cell phone jangled with a special tune reserved for her father.

Of course.

“Hey,” she said, making her voice sound cheery, even though she was a little bugged that he’d called. Had there been a day he hadn’t checked in, making up some excuse to talk to her? Well…maybe a couple, but for the most part, Rick Bentz had phoned daily, inventing some lame excuse to talk to her.

“Thought I’d call because you said something about wanting your bike and I thought I could run it up to you this weekend.”

“Give it up, Dad. You’re making an excuse to check in with me,” she said, squinting as she glanced back across the grassy area separating Adam’s Hall from the religious center. The chapel spire rose above the branches of the surrounding live oaks and the brick face of the abbot’s lodge, which was attached to a cloister, all part of the old monastery that was located on the premises.

Her father laughed and Kristi couldn’t help but smile. “Old habits, you know,” he said.

“Yeah, I do, and I would like the bike, but don’t make a special trip up here. I’ll get it my next trip down.”

“And put it in the Honda?”

“I’ve got a bike rack….” Staring at the chapel, she saw two figures emerge: one, a priest, not Father Tony, but the other guy; and two, Ariel O’Toole. So just how many hours did Ariel spend in the chapel or with the priest? Was she having an affair with the guy? Applying to become a nun? Confessing a myriad of sins?

“Look, Dad, I’ve got to run. We’ll talk later…or text me, okay? Bye.”

She clicked off and watched as Father Mathias, ever brooding, hurried into the chapel and Ariel, head down,
walked rapidly in Kristi’s direction. Once again, Kristi saw her in shades of gray. Despite the sunlight, a coldness swept through Kristi’s bloodstream. She swallowed hard and knew she couldn’t confront the girl head on. Ariel would think she was a nutcase, for sure. No, Kristi would have to be sneakier about it. She dashed up the remaining steps and slipped into the hallway, then waited until she spied the glass doors open again and a group of five or six students pass through. Ariel lagged a little behind them but didn’t look up or notice Kristi as she turned down the corridor to Dr. Preston’s classroom.

Kristi followed and as soon as the door to the classroom closed behind Ariel, she went inside. Ariel found an empty desk and Kristi snagged one nearby. She didn’t catch the other girl’s attention, just waited and pretended interest in Dr. Preston as he began to lecture on the importance of perspective and clarity in writing.

“So let’s talk about last week’s assignment,” Preston was saying. He dropped his chalk in favor of a stack of printed papers. “The assignment was to write two pages about your darkest fear…right? Most of you used description very well, but, let’s see—” He flipped through the pages until he came to the one he sought. “Mr. Calloway had an interesting take on the subject. He writes: ‘This is supposed to be a creative writing class and I cannot write creatively when forced to write upon a specific subject. My creativity—and that word is in quotes—is stifled.’” Preston looked up and focused on Hiram Calloway, who stared defiantly back at him. “Well, that’s an interesting way to get out of an assignment.” He glanced to the rest of the class, his gaze touching lightly on Kristi’s before moving on. “However I would have been more impressed had Mr. Calloway said something like, ‘I feel chained to my desk, forced to write a paper I loathe.’” He might have gotten an A for that response; as it is, he’ll have to settle for a B as the paper, or lack thereof, was original.” He smiled then, white teeth against suntanned skin, blond hair gleaming under the lights. “Now, I’d like to read something more traditional and worthy of the A she received. This paper is written by Miss Kwan and I would say she has a good understanding of writing viscerally and descriptively.”

Kristi glanced at Mai, who lifted her chin a notch as Preston began to read.

“I fear the devil. Yes, Satan. Lucifer. Evil incarnate. Why? Because I think he, or she, if you so believe, lurks in all of us, at least, if I’m honest, he lives in me, deep in the nether regions of my soul. I struggle to keep him trapped and locked away for fear of what he, and I, as his vessel, might do. I cannot imagine the pain and suffering he might inflict should he be unleashed.”

Preston grinned at Mai, almost as if he knew her intimately. What was that all about? “That was just the first paragraph and yet we feel the writer’s battle, her fear, her worry about her own psychosis. For in that one paragraph we see that she still has the upper hand. She talks not of the devil breaking free but of her unleashing him. She still has control, albeit a very tenuous hold on Satan and her sanity.” He nodded as if agreeing with himself, his blond hair catching the light of the fluorescent bulbs humming over his head. “Well done, Miss Kwan. She received the only A because she was the only one of you who made me believe she was indeed writing from her heart.”

Mai smiled self-consciously, blushed, then looked down at her desk, as if she were slightly embarrassed, but Kristi wasn’t buying it. She knew her neighbor better than to believe the humility act. But the subject matter of Mai’s fears gave her pause.

Satan in her soul? Not spiders or snakes or dark places or airplanes, or falling from bridges or marrying the wrong person, but the devil lurking in her soul? Where did that come from?

“Jesus,” Kristi whispered, and caught a quick, non-approving glance from Ariel. “I just meant that was pretty creepy.” Frowning, Ariel gave a little shrug.

Her attempt at becoming Ariel’s friend was not going well. At this rate it would take eons for Kristi to gain her trust, and she felt as if she were running out of time. Why did she even care? Because Ariel was Lucretia’s friend? So what? And the gray-faced thing, maybe it was all a figment of her imagination.

Leaning back in her desk chair, Kristi forced her full attention to the lecture. Finally, after Preston tossed the chalk a few times, returned their papers and gave the next assignment, Kristi gathered her belongings and walked out of the building, one step behind Ariel. The day was still warmer than usual but the sunlight was now filtered by high, thin clouds, causing dappled shadows on the ground.
Kristi figured she’d blown her chance at cozying up to the girl. No surprise there. Kristi had never been able to fake a friendship or hide her true feelings. She couldn’t count how many times she’d been told she wore her heart on her sleeve. It just wasn’t in her to fake it, so she decided to just flat-out ask Ariel what was going on. “Hey, Ariel,” she called.

Hearing Kristi’s voice, Ariel stopped dead in her tracks. “What?” she asked, and pointedly checked her watch.

“Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?” She started walking again, a little faster. Obviously wanting to get away.

“You seem preoccupied.” Kristi kept up with her, stride for stride and tried not to think that she had to get to work in less than half an hour.

Ariel hazarded a quick glance at Kristi. “You don’t even know me.”

“I can tell that something’s bothering you.”

“And you’re here to help?” She shot Kristi a bewildered look, and in that instant Kristi decided to confide in her.

“Look, I know this sounds weird, but…I…have this thing, okay? Call it ESP, or whatever, but I’ve had it ever since I was in the hospital and nearly died. The deal is that I…can kinda see into the future. Not always, but sometimes, and I can see if someone’s in danger.”

Ariel folded her arms, shrinking into her oversized hoodie. “Either you’re crazy or this is some kind of weird joke.”

“I’m serious.”

“What are you saying? That I’m in trouble?”


“Oh. My. God. You are nuts! Leave me alone.”

“It’s just that sometimes, when I see you, there’s no color in your skin. It’s like you’re in a black and white movie.”

Ariel shuddered despite her bravado. She backed away from Kristi, her eyes searching around as if for help. “Leave me alone. Don’t ever talk to me again. You must be on something. Or you’re a head-case. This isn’t funny, you know.” Kristi took a step forward and Ariel looked ready to scream. “Get away from me. Now!”

“I’m just concerned.”

Ariel snorted, putting more distance between them. “You’d be the first,” she muttered fiercely as she hesitated at the gate of Wagner House. Her face was so washed out she looked half dead already. “Stay away from me! You hear? Don’t ever come near me again or I’ll call the police and have a restraining order slapped on you.”

Before Kristi could say anything more, Trudie and Grace rounded a corner not far from the library. Ariel saw them and began to wave frantically, like a panicked, drowning woman hoping for a lifeline. Without another word, she met up with her friends and walked through the open gates. They all headed up the steps to the old stone manor. As Kristi understood it, Wagner House had been the home of the original settler of this tract of land. Now it was a museum.

Grace pulled one of the double doors open and the three girls stepped inside. Ariel turned to slip Kristi a final look, her face wan and shadowed. Though they were only yards away from each other, Kristi felt as if there were oceans of distance between them. The thick wooden door shut behind the trio with a distinct thud.
Kristi hesitated. Obviously the girl didn’t want her help. And who was to say that Ariel was caught in some dire, fatal situation? Sure, the elderly woman on the bus had died, but so what? Her father was still alive, wasn’t he? True, the glimpses she’d caught of the ghostly Rick Bentz had been fleeting and spotty, sometimes not being apparent for months, but he didn’t seem on the brink of death.

The knot in her stomach said otherwise, but she wanted desperately to believe she was mistaken about him—that she was wrong about all her visions. However, in the case of Ariel O’Toole, the ghostly appearance was steady. Every time Kristi caught sight of her she was washed out, pale and gray. Ariel had needed to be warned, but Kristi already knew she’d made a mistake in confiding in her. Now Ariel thought she was deranged and should be in a mental hospital, or that she’d been playing a cruel joke on her. Worse yet, the secret Kristi had kept for all the past months was no longer hers alone. That wasn’t good. She shouldn’t have blurted out the truth, but what other choice had she had?

She glanced up at the mullioned windows of Wagner House and thought she saw Ariel’s image, shattered and misshapen, by the beveled panes of glass. Even so, she appeared a ghost.
CHAPERT 11

Officer Esperanza in Missing Persons wasn’t happy. A big bosomed woman, she leaned on the other side of the counter separating the work space from the reception area and glared at Portia. She didn’t like Portia Laurent or anyone else questioning her authority, and it showed in the tightness of her lips and the flare of her nostrils. Portia pressed her lips together waiting for the explosion. Pushing sixty, her hair dyed a Lucille Ball red, Lacey Esperanza was not known for her restraint. Smart, sassy, and sometimes downright ornery, she took her job beyond seriously. Waay beyond.

“I’m gonna tell you exactly what I tell anyone who calls from the press, Detective, and that is to take it up with the goddamned FBI. They have the resources, the manpower, and the GD know-how to deal with this,” she said in a gravelly voice. “They’ve been notified and are running their own investigation or lack thereof. The way I see it and we all agree here, there is no case. Yes, the girls disappeared from All Saints. Missing? Phooey! Murdered? Then where the hell are the bodies? I don’t know about you, but I got a butt-load of work to do on cases where people are actually”—she made air quotes with her fire-engine red fingernails—“missing. You know, where family members or friends are calling and looking for someone.” She leaned close enough so that Portia could smell the scent of stale cigarette smoke mingling with her perfume. “What’s wrong over there at All Saints that they can’t keep track of their students, huh? LSU is what? Five or six times the size of All Saints and they seem to keep track of theirs.”

Which was exactly the point. What was it about the smaller college that caused it to lose some of its coeds? Portia didn’t say it to Esperanza, but she believed there was a predator at large and his hunting ground was the campus of All Saints College. She’d checked. Lacey was right. Louisiana State, located only thirty minutes from the campus of All Saints, hadn’t reported any missing students. Nor had Our Lady of the Lake, or Southern University, or the community college, or any of the bible colleges or even the beauty schools. Just All Saints.

So far.

Until this monster that Portia believed was stalking the small college broadened his hunting ground. Dear God, she hoped she was wrong.

“Let me tell you,” Lacey rambled on, “I get nearly a hundred e-mails a day and that’s after the spam has been filtered out. Double that many come in over a weekend. I’m pretty damned busy. Let the Feds figure it out. However”—she turned her palms toward the acoustic tiles of the ceiling—“if you want to look in the files, be my guest. I guess it says something about the Homicide Department if you have time on your hands to go rootin’ through our files.”

Lacey turned to a coworker sitting at a nearby desk so clean it looked as if no one actually worked there. Not a photo, dying plant, or name plate on the desk. The in-basket was as empty as the out. “Mary Alice, if Detective Laurent wants anything, you see that she gets it, y’hear. Me, it’s time for my break.”

Lacey scraped her pack of cigarettes from the top of her cluttered desk, then rained a saccharine smile on Portia as she opened the top of the long counter that served as a gate. Squeezing her way through, she walked briskly between the scattered desks to the staircase leading to the front entrance of the station.

Mary Alice, a thin girl with stringy mouse brown hair, looked up at Portia with huge hazel eyes. “I apologize, Detective. Lacey, she’s got herself a passel of trouble at home what with that daughter of hers. Nearly forty years old and the woman can’t seem to hold down a job or get her act together. Sheeeeit, she’s got three kids of her own, for God’s sake, and that oldest one, Lacey’s grandson, he’s already got hisself into trouble with meth. Nasty stuff, that.”

Portia couldn’t agree more. “That’s too bad.”

“Praise the Lord and amen to that!” The small woman pushed on the edge of her desk and rolled her chair
backward far enough so that she could stand, showing off her slight figure, slim skirt, and high heels. “So, tell me again, what is it exactly I can get for you?”

Portia slid the list of names across the counter. “Everything you’ve got on these girls.”

“The fearsome foursome,” Mary Alice said as she eyed Portia’s handwritten note. “Most of this is on the computer. Don’t you have your own files?”

And then some. “Nothing official,” Portia hedged. “I’ve looked over what’s on the computer but, if you don’t mind, I’d like to see the actual files.”

“Makes me no never mind long as Lacey’s okay with it. Just give me a sec.” High heels clicking, Mary Alice walked to a bank of file cabinets and started searching through the folders. In a matter of minutes, she had slapped the pathetically thin files on the counter and Portia signed them out. Portia carried the few documents back to her cubicle and decided she’d copy everything within the files just so she’d be ready.

She prayed she was misguided, but all her instincts told her it was only a matter of time before one of the girls’ bodies showed up.

When it did, and there was an actual homicide case to be solved, she’d be ready.

Two classes down, too many more to go, Jay thought as he drove north on Friday night. With Bruno by his side, nose to the crack in the window, and Springsteen blasting through the stereo, he hauled some new plumbing fixtures and tiles toward Baton Rouge. Even in the darkness as he squinted into the headlights of cars heading toward New Orleans, he noticed more evidence of Katrina that had yet to be cleared: uprooted, long-dead trees, piles of rotting boards alongside homes being restored by the most stalwart and determined of Louisianans.

So far he’d settled into his new routine. He enjoyed the challenge of renovating his cousins’ house and had found teaching exhilarating. Except, of course, for dealing with Kristi. After the first night when she’d run him down to clear the air between them, they hadn’t spoken. She hadn’t asked a question in class, nor had he singled her out to answer one he’d thrown at the students. She’d sat at the back of the room, taking notes, watching him, her expression fixed and bland. Icily cool and disinterested.

Definitely un-Kristi.

The fact that she tried so hard to look studious and unanimated made him smile. Obviously, by her attempt at detachment, she was having as hard a time dealing with him as he was with her.

Well, fine, he thought, flipping on his wipers for a second, just to scrape off the thick mist that was settling with the night.

Kristi deserved a little discomfort. As much as she’d served up to him. Jesus, in the past two weeks he’d had three dreams involving her. One hot as hell, their naked bodies covered in sweat as they made love in a bed that was floating down a swift, dark river. In the second dream he’d watched as she’d taken off with a faceless man, looping her arm through his as they walked into a chapel with bells chiming, and in the third, she was missing. He kept catching glimpses of her, only to watch as she vanished into a rising mist. That nightmare had tormented him just last night, and he’d woken to a pounding heart, dark fear pumping through his bloodstream.

“Gonna be a long term,” he advised the dog as he signaled to leave the highway. Up ahead the lights of the city cut through the fog.

His cell phone rang. Bruno let out a soft woof as Jay managed to turn off the radio, answering without looking at the digital display.

“McKnight.”

“Hi.”
Well, speak of the devil. Jay’s jaw hardened. He’d recognize the sound of Kristi Bentz’s voice anywhere.

“It’s me, Kristi,” she said, and then added, “Kristi Bentz.” As if he didn’t already know.

“You memorized the number.” The wipers skated noisily over the windshield and he switched them off, driving for half a second with his thigh.

“Yes, I guess I did,” she said tightly.

His right hand gripped the wheel again and he braced himself. “Need something?”

“Your help.”

“With an assignment?”

She only hesitated a heartbeat, but it was enough to warn him. “Yeah.”

God, she was a liar. “Lay it on me.”

Angling his truck off the main road at the outskirts of the city, he followed what was becoming a well-worn route to his cousins’ house.

“I can’t. Not over the phone. It’s too complicated and I’m already late for work. It, uh, it took me a long time to screw up the courage to call you.”

Now that was probably the first bit of truth in the conversation. He didn’t respond.

“I thought that maybe…maybe we could meet,” she said.

“Meet? Like in my office?”

“I was thinking somewhere else.”

Jay was watching the road, spying a kid on a motorized scooter who, as he passed, zipped out of a driveway to speed across the road behind him. “Jesus!” he muttered.

“Wow…I’ll take that as a no.”

“I wasn’t talking to you. I’m driving and a kid nearly hit me.” He slowed for a stop sign. “Where?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the Watering Hole.”

“For a drink?”

“Sure. I’ll buy.”

He stepped on the gas and drove to the next corner, where he turned down the street to his part-time bungalow. “You mean, like a date?” he asked, knowing she’d probably see red.

“It’s just a damned beer, Jay.”

“A beer and a favor,” he reminded her. “You want me to help you with something.”

“Call it whatever you want,” she said, a tinge of exasperation in her voice. “How about tonight? Around nine? I’ll meet you there. It’s not far from where I work.”

He knew he was asking for trouble just seeing her again. Big trouble. The kind he didn’t need. Just having her in his class caused him to have nightmares. Anything more intimate was bound to spell trouble.
He hesitated.

Who was he kidding? He couldn’t resist. Never could, when it involved Kristi. “Nine it is,” he said, and as the words spilled out of his mouth he was already giving himself a hard mental shake. *Idiot! Lamebrain!*

“Good. I’ll see you then.” She hung up and he drove into the driveway with the cell phone still clasped in his hand. What the hell could she possibly want from him? He slammed the truck into park and sat behind the wheel. “Whatever it is,” he said to the dog, “it’s not gonna be good.”

Kristi untied her dirty apron, dropped it into the hamper near the back door of the restaurant where she worked, snagged her pack from a hook, then headed toward the restroom. Inside the cramped room she stripped off her grimy skirt and blouse, then stepped out of the black flats she wore on the job. With a spritz of perfume in lieu of a shower, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror, groaned, and pulled on her jeans and a long-sleeved T. In one motion she yanked the band holding her ponytail to the back of her head and shook her hair loose. Half a second later, she laced up her running shoes and stuffed her dirty clothes into her backpack. She was late, as usual.

It was already nine and she didn’t want to stand Jay up. She was bugged that she had to ask for his help, but she’d been butting her head against the wall when it came to getting more information on the missing girls. Kristi needed someone with connections, though asking her father for help was out of the question. But Jay was on campus, available in Baton Rouge part of the week, and since he was a professor he had access to records at All Saints. Her six hours a week working for the registrar weren’t enough to open the locked doors and filing cabinets she wanted to search. Nor had she been given a password to the most private and sensitive information stored in the school’s database.

So, she was forced to turn to someone on staff.

She’d thought about Lucretia and discarded the notion; her former roommate wasn’t the most trustworthy or helpful person on the planet.

So she had to find a way to persuade Jay to get involved.

If she could have come up with another person who had access to the kind of information she needed, she never would have called Jay—at least she *hoped* she wouldn’t have. She’d come to terms with suffering through his class for a few weeks, but this was different. It put her in closer contact to him.

*Maybe that’s what you were angling for.*

“Oh, shut up,” she said to that persistent and irritating voice in her head. She did *not* want to be close to Jay. Not now. Not ever. This was just a necessity, a means to an end.

“Date my ass,” she muttered, leaving the restroom and yanking her jacket from a peg.

With a wave to Ezma, she was out the back door of the restaurant, where two of the line cooks were smoking in the blue illumination from the security lights. The night was cool, a mist sliding through the parked cars in the lot and clinging to the drooping branches of the single tree.

Kristi took off at a jog for the Watering Hole. The student hangout would be crowded enough so that it wouldn’t feel intimate, yet there were spots in the connecting rooms that were quieter than the open space around the sports bar. There was a chance Jay might be seen with her, but she figured it didn’t matter. Who would care?

 Barely breaking a sweat, she made it to the hangout only eight minutes late. Shouldering open the door, she slid inside. With a quick perusal of the semidark, crowded interior, she zeroed in on Jay seated at the bar, nursing a drink, staring up at a television screen where some football game was being played. He was facing away from her, but she recognized his shaggy brown hair, wide shoulders stretching the back of a gray sweatshirt, and jeans she’d seen him wear in class, the battered, sun-bleached ones with a tear at the top of a back pocket. The stool beside him was empty, but he’d claimed it by resting the sole of his beat-up Adidas running shoe upon one of the cross-rails, as if he were saving her a seat.
Fat chance. She knew he hadn’t wanted to come. She’d heard the hesitation in his voice.

But then, Kristi couldn’t blame him. It had taken her half a week to work up to calling him, and the only reason she had was that she was desperate and needed help. His help.

She took in a deep breath as she wended her way between the tables and knots of patrons talking, laughing, flirting, and drinking. Glasses clinked, beer sloshed, ice cubes rattled, and the smell of smoke hung in the air despite all the efforts of a wheezing air-filtering system. The televisions were muted but music wafting from speakers mounted high on the walls competed with the noise of the crowd.

Jay kicked out the stool just as she reached him, as if he’d sensed her presence.

“Nice trick,” she said, and he lifted his glass toward the bar and the mirror behind it, where her reflection stared back at her.

She slid onto the stool. “And for a second I thought maybe you were clairvoyant.”

One side of his mouth twitched upward. “If I was, then I’d know what the hell it is you want from me, now, wouldn’t I?”

“I guess you would.” To the bartender wiping up a spill, she said, “I’ll have a beer…light. Whatever you’ve got on tap.”

“Coors?” the bartender asked, tossing his wet rag into a bin under the bar.

“Yeah. Fine.” Forcing a smile she didn’t feel, she met Jay’s brutal gaze. “Bet you were surprised that I called.”

“Nothing you do surprises me anymore.”

The bartender set a frosted glass in front of her and she placed her ID and several bills on the bar.

“That’s a tip,” Jay said to the man behind the bar. “Put her drink on my tab.” To Kristi, he added, “Come on, let’s talk in the dart room where it’s a little quieter. Then you can tell me what this is all about.”

“And beat you at a game.”

“In your dreams, darlin’,” he said, and her stupid heart did a silly little flip. She wasn’t falling for his charms. No way, no how. There was a reason she’d broken up with him all those years ago and that hadn’t changed. Worse yet, he was wearing a three-day’s growth of beard, the kind of pseudo-chic look that she detested. Of course it just made him look cowboy-rugged. Crap. The least he could do was look bad.

She grabbed her beer and again serpentined through the tables and crowd to a booth where a busboy was busily picking up near-empty glasses and platters bearing the remnants of onion rings, french fries, and small pools of ketchup. With a nod from the busboy, Kristi slid into one side of the booth while Jay sat opposite her.

Once the table had been swabbed down and they were alone again, Kristi decided to cut through all the uncomfortable small talk. “I need your help because you’re on staff here and have access to files I can’t see.”

“Okay…” he said skeptically.

“I’m looking into the disappearance of the four girls who went missing from All Saints,” she said, and before he could protest she launched into an explanation about her concerns, Lucretia’s worries, the lack of anyone seemingly interested in what happened to the coeds, and the fact that they could have all met with foul play.

Arms crossed over his chest, Jay leaned against the wooden backrest and stared at her with his damnable gold-colored eyes as she laid it out to him.

“Don’t you think this is a matter for the police?” he asked.
“You are the police.”

“I work in the crime lab.”

“And you have access to all records.”

He leaned forward, elbows propped on the table. “There is a little matter of jurisdiction, Kristi, not to mention protocol and the fact that no one but you and maybe a few hungry rogue reporters think a crime has been committed.”

“So what if we’re wrong? At least we tried. Right now, we’re just sitting around not doing anything because no one else gave a damn about these girls.”

“There’s no ‘we.’ This is your idea.”

But he still hadn’t said no or argued that he wouldn’t help her. He took a long swallow from his beer and stared at her. The wheels were turning in his mind; she could almost see them. And the one thing that she’d admired but had also disliked about Jay was that he was a bona fide do-gooder. A regular Dudley Do-Right when it came to matters of the law.

“Doesn’t matter whose idea it is, we need to check it out,” she insisted.

“Maybe you should contact the local police.”

“I’ve tried. Gotten nowhere.”

“That should tell you something.”

“Just that no one gives a damn!” She half rose from her chair. She was reminded just how maddening Jay could be.

“If the locals aren’t interested, you could consider talking to your dad,” he suggested.

“I considered it and threw the idea in file thirteen. He’s already freaked about me being up here. He knows about the missing girls and he’s damned sure I’ll be the next.”

“He could be right, what with you poking around and all.”

“Only if there is a psycho on the loose. If not, I’m in no danger. If so, then we’ve got to do something.”

“By making yourself a damned target?”

“If need be.”

“For Christ’s sake, Kristi, didn’t you learn your lesson the last time, or the time before that?” he demanded, his lips thinning in frustration. When she didn’t answer, he snorted and said, “Apparently not.”

“So are you gonna help me or am I gonna have to go this alone?”

“You’re not going to guilt me into this.” He cocked that damned broken eyebrow and drained his glass.

“How’d that happen anyway?” she asked, motioning to the little scar.

“I pissed a woman off.”

“Really pissed her off. And she beat you up?”

“Hurled a ring at me.”
So that’s what had happened to the engagement she’d heard about. “At least she was passionate.”

“Maybe a little too passionate.”

“Didn’t think that was possible.”

One side of his mouth lifted into a knowing half grin. “Passion can run hot and cold, Kris,” he said. “When one person can’t get what he or she wants, that passion can turn into brutal frustration and anger. I figured I was better off without a woman who would tell me she loved me one second and try to kill me the next.” His gaze touched hers. “I think that’s all you need to know about my love life. So, spell it out. What do you want me to do? Copy all the personnel files, grade reports, loan applications, social security numbers of the girls?”

“That would be great.”

“And illegal. Forget it.”

“Okay, okay, so just look through the information and let me know if you see anything that looks suspicious, anything that links the girls besides their choice of classes and the fact that their families gave new meaning to the word dysfunctional. You’re a cop.”

“And I could lose my job.”

“I’m asking you to do a little research, not break the law.”

His lips compressed as a waitress came by and asked if they wanted another round. Jay nodded and Kristi said, “Sure,” then drank half her beer while still waiting for an answer. Finally she said, “If you find anything, we’ll go straight to the police. Or the campus security and leave it to them.”

“You’d do that?” he asked, skepticism tingeing his words. “Just hand over everything you’ve got?”

“Of course.”

He snorted in disbelief.

“Come on, Jay, I’ll play you a game of darts. If I win, you’ll look through the records.”

“And if I win?” he asked.

“You won’t.”

“So sure of yourself?” he asked, his eyebrows slamming together. “No dice. I want to know what the stakes are if I win.”

The waitress came back with the new round, scooped up Jay’s empty and left Kristi with a beer and a half in front of her. “Okay, Professor, if you win, then you name it.”

“That’s pretty cocky.”

“Just confident.” She finished the first beer and stood. One dartboard wasn’t being used. She walked over to it and plucked one set of darts from their holder.

He slid out of his side of the booth and said conversationally, “I’ll expect you to pay up when I win and, trust me, you’re not going to like what I want as pay-back.”

She felt a little thrill sizzle through her blood, ignored it, and concentrated on winning. She didn’t like the stakes at all. God only knew what he would want from her.

But it didn’t matter.
She wasn’t about to lose this match.
As he sat in the driver’s seat of his truck, the engine cooling and ticking in the parking lot of Kristi’s apartment building, Jay decided he was a moron.

A bona fide, dyed-in-the-wool moron.

Kristi was gathering her bag together and reaching for the door handle. He’d lost at darts to her. Not once, but the best of two out of three, then three out of five. He’d only won one of their matches and he suspected that she’d intentionally mis-thrown so that his bruised masculinity wouldn’t be completely destroyed. Though that wasn’t really Kristi’s way. For as long as he’d known her, she’d been a competitor to the nth degree. Throwing a match just wasn’t her style.

He could have blamed it on the beer, but he’d only drunk three over the course of as many hours. She’d kept up with him and showed not one sign of having been affected at all by whatever alcohol existed in light beer.

So he’d lost the damned bet, but she’d agreed, albeit reluctantly, that he could take her home. So here they were in the parking lot of her apartment building, which was really an old three-storied clapboard house that showed influences of Greek Revival architecture with its massive white columns and wide portico. However, even in the poor light cast from a security lamp, he could see that the building had lost much of its original luster. Far from its once grand beauty, the old home was now cut into individual units, the massive front porch and veranda above now converted into walkways between the apartments.

A shame, he knew, but kept his mouth shut.

Kristi cast a glance in his direction. “Come on up,” she suggested, opening the passenger door and stepping out of his truck. “I’m on the third floor.”

Big mistake, he thought. No, make that impossibly huge mistake. And yet his hand was on the door handle as she slammed the passenger door shut. He stepped outside, pocketed his keys, and mentally chided himself for agreeing to this.

He comforted himself by thinking it might be a good idea to look around and ensure that she was safe. But that was just an excuse; he was rationalizing and he knew it. The truth of the matter was that he wanted to spend more time with her and, it seemed, she did with him.

He followed her past a row of overgrown crepe myrtles and some shrubs that looked like sassafras. Under the portico, on the far end of the building beneath the porch light, a single guy was seated in a plastic chair smoking, the tip of his cigarette glowing in the night. He turned to watch them head up the steps but didn’t say a word.

Kristi was already on the stairs and Jay followed.

Don’t trust her. Sure, she might have grown up in the last nine years or so, but what was it Grandma used to say? “A leopard doesn’t change his spots overnight.” Or in this case nearly a decade.

She led him up two flights to the third floor, and with her a step or two ahead of him, he couldn’t help but notice the way her jeans hugged her.

Holy Christ, she had a tight little ass.

He remembered all too well and hated himself for it.

Damn it all to hell.
He dragged his gaze away, tore his attention from her to the apartment building. On the third floor they reached a single unit tucked under the gables of the once-massive home. Thankfully, his gaze was centered higher now, over her crown as she unlocked the door. It appeared that the uppermost story housed only one unit whereas the lower two floors had been cut into two or three units. There was less square footage up here as the roof angle was sharp, and he guessed that the third floor might have originally been servants’ quarters.

From the landing at Kristi’s door, he was able to gaze across the small backyard of the apartment house, then over the massive stone wall surrounding All Saints. He could make out the tops of trees and the bell tower and steeply angled roof of the church. Other buildings, illuminated by watery street lamps, were visible through the trees. He recognized the portico of the library and a turret of Wagner House.

The lock clicked and Kristi shouldered open the door. “Come on in,” she said, stepping over the threshold. “It’s not much, but for the next year or two, if I can stomach dealing with the Calloways, it’s home.”

Still thinking this was a major mistake, he entered her apartment and closed the door behind him.

Kristi dropped her backpack onto a battered couch, stripped off her jacket, and hung it on a hook near the door. “Isn’t this place kinda funky-cool?” she asked with obvious pride. The hardwood floors were beaten and scratched, full of character. A fireplace with painted peeling bricks dominated one wall and peekaboo windows peered from dormers. The kitchen was barely a counter with holes cut into it for a sink and stove. There was a smell of age to the building that the candles and incense she’d scattered around the rooms couldn’t hide. Kristi’s home looked like it needed the kind of facelift he was giving his cousins’ bungalow, but she seemed to love it.

“Definitely funky. I’m not sure about the cool part.”

Amusement glimmered in her eyes. “And what would you know about cool?”

“Touché, Miss Bentz.” He smiled. She had a way of putting him into his place. “Cool is something I’m not into.”

“Well…” She’d already dismissed the topic and was on to the purpose of why she’d invited him up. “Here’s what I’ve got so far,” she said, pointing to a table covered with papers, pictures, notes, and her laptop. A chipped cup held pens and a small bowl contained paper clips, tacks, pushpins, and a roll of tape. On the wall she’d tacked up posterboard that included pictures of the four missing girls. Beneath the photographs, she’d listed personal information that included physical and personality traits, family members, friends and boyfriends, employment information and schedules, addresses for the past five or six years, classes taken, and various other information in the form of notes that looked like she’d printed them off her computer.

“Do you give this much attention to your studies?” he asked, noting the colored overlining on some of the information.

Kristi snorted. “Want a beer—? Oh, wait, I don’t know that I have any. Damn.” She walked to the kitchen alcove and peered into a narrow, short, obviously barren refrigerator. “Sorry. Didn’t know I’d have company. All I’ve got is a hard lemonade. We could split it.”

“I’m okay,” he said as she extracted the drink, slamming the refrigerator door shut with her hip. She opened the bottle, poured it into two glasses, and found a bag of microwave popcorn in a cupboard. “I missed dinner,” she explained, placing the bag onto the rotating platter.

She set the timer, switched the microwave on, and handed him a glass of lemonade that he didn’t really want. Her shoulder brushed just above his elbow as she studied the intricate charts she’d created. He smelled a hint of perfume over the lingering scent of smoke from the bar. She took a swallow and said, “I’ve assigned each of the missing girls a color—for example, Dionne, the first girl that we know went missing, is in yellow.” All of Dionne’s information had been highlighted by a neon yellow marker. “Then there’s Tara, who, incidentally lived here—”

He jerked his gaze away from the charts to stare at her. “Here? In this apartment?” he asked, even though he saw the address listed in her information. He couldn’t believe it.

She was nodding, her gaze turned to his. “This very unit.”
“Are you kidding?” But he could see she was serious. Dead serious. “Jesus.” She had all of his attention now and he didn’t like what he was hearing. One of the girls who’d disappeared had lived in this very studio? What kind of weird twist of fate was that? He studied Tara’s chart as if it were the key to salvation. He held up a hand. “She lived here right before she disappeared? Did you know that when you moved in?”

“No, it was just a strange coincidence.” She set her drink on a side table, then reached onto the desk, grabbed a rubber band and twisted her hair onto her head before snapping the band in place.

Her hair was a messy knot, her neck long, and she looked damned good. He took a swallow from his own glass.

“I don’t like this.” He felt an uncomfortable anxiety creep through him as the kernels began to pop and the smell of hot butter filled the room. “If the girls were really abducted—”

“They had to have been.” She nodded. Certain.

“And you’re living here.”

“Hey, I didn’t know, okay?” She gave him a hard look as the muted sound of corn popping increased. “But it doesn’t matter anyway. I’ve changed the lock on the door and fixed the broken latches on the windows. I’m as safe here as anywhere. Maybe more so. If someone is really behind their”—she motioned to the pictures on the charts as the corn popped wildly—“disappearances, and I believe someone is, then he won’t show up here again. Lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same spot.”

Jay shook his head. “We’re not talking about some freak of nature.”

“Aren’t we?” she asked, her voice suddenly low.

Her tone arrested him. “What do you mean?”

She picked her words carefully. “I think whoever’s behind the girls’ disappearances is into something really dark. Evil.”

“Evil?” he repeated.

She nodded and he saw her shiver. “I think we’re dealing with something so vile and inherently depraved that it might not even be human.”

“What are you saying, Kris?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of research. On vampires.”

Jay’s breath expelled on a laugh. “Okay. You had me going there.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“Oh, come on. You don’t believe in all that pop-culture-fiction-romantic—”

“There’s nothing romantic about this,” she cut in. “And do I believe in vampires? Of course not. But some people do, and you know what? If a person believes something is true, then it is. At least for him or her.”

“So whoever’s behind the girls’ disappearances believes in vampires. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I can hear you laughing inside.”

“I’m not. Honest.”

“What I’m saying is: this guy believes in vampires, or maybe he believes he’s a vampire. I don’t know. But a person like that, Jay? Someone deluded or obsessed…They’re dangerous. This guy is dangerous.”
A whisper of something slid over Jay’s skin. Fear? Premonition? “Maybe you’ve let your imagination carry you away,” he said, but could hear the uncertainty in his own voice.

Kristi simply shook her head.

“Just listen to me, Lucretia,” he said angrily from his end of the wireless connection. “I know that you’re concerned. Hell, I even know that you’ve been trying to sort all this out, wrestling with your conscience, but you can’t have it both ways. You either trust me or you don’t.”

“I trust you,” she said, her heart thumping with dread as she imagined his handsome face, remembered their first kiss, a gentle, tender meeting of lips that had promised so much more. They’d been standing on the back porch of Wagner House, in the dusk while rain poured from the dark heavens. Some people claimed the house was haunted; she thought of it as magical. The only light had been the strands of tiny Christmas lights strung over the building. Each bulb seemed a miniature candle, glowing softly in the December night. She remembered the smell of the rain on his skin, the tingle of her nerves as he’d brushed his mouth over hers so tenderly.

She’d ached to give herself to him and he’d sensed it.

Hours later, in her room, they’d made love, over and over again, and she’d felt a blending of her soul to his.

And now he was ending it?

“I don’t understand,” she said weakly, and they both knew it was a lie.

“If I can’t have absolute faith—”

“You mean power, right?” she said, finding some of her old spunk. “And obedience. Blind obedience.”

“Faith,” he said in a soft voice that reminded her of his breath whispering over her ears, his lips working magic on her naked body. How he could make her sweat and tingle all at once…

How willingly she’d lain beneath him, staring in wonder at the power of his body as he raised himself on his elbows and kissed her nipples. She’d watched as their bodies had moved, his cock sliding in and out of her. Sometimes he’d stop for a heartbeat, pull out and flip her over, only to take her from behind more forcefully. Often he would nip at her, biting a bit, leaving the sheerest of impressions upon her neck, or breast or buttocks, and she’d spend the week being reminded of their long, sensual session.

“I said I trust you.”

“But I can’t trust you. That’s the thing. We both know what you did, Lucretia. How you betrayed me. I know you were confused. Frightened. But you should have come to me instead of going outside the circle.”

“Please.”

“It’s over.” The words rang in her ear. Hard. Final.

“No, I’m sorry, I should have—”

“There are lots of things you should have done. Could have done, but it’s too late. You know it.”

“No! I can’t believe—”

“That’s right, you can’t and therein lies the problem. I hope that you know what you experienced is sacred and as such it’s never to be talked about. Can you keep your tongue? Can you?”

“Yes!”
“There is a chance then, a slim one, but a chance that you will be forgiven.”

Her heart did a stupid little flip. She thought he might be lying again, tantalizing her in order to keep her from going to the police or campus security.

“But if you say a word, then I can’t keep you safe.”

“You’re threatening me?”

“I’m warning you.”

Dear God. Tears welled in her eyes, clogged her throat. Misery surrounded her heart. She couldn’t give him up.

“I love you.”

He paused a minute, the silence heavy, then said, “I know.”

The phone went dead. She stared at it a minute, the pent-up tears sliding down her cheeks, falling onto her chest. This was wrong, so wrong. She loved him. LOVED him. “No,” she wailed softly, feeling as if someone had ripped out her very soul. She was hollow inside without his love. Empty. A useless vessel.

She was sobbing now, hiccuping even as she tried all sorts of mental panaceas.

There are other men.

“But not like him,” she said aloud, “not like him.” She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked herself, cradling her body. She tried not to dwell on the realization that she would never kiss him again, never touch him, never make love to him, but the thought was always at the back of her mind. Through her tears she gazed across the thick pile of her carpet to the corner that housed her desk.

On top of the desk she saw her computer, a few pictures, not of him—he wouldn’t stand for it—but of two of her friends. Beside the framed photographs was a potted Christmas cactus still in bloom and a cup that held pencils, pens, and a pair of scissors. Sharp scissors.

She bit her lip. Did she have the nerve to end it all?

He’s not worth it.

“Yes, he is.” She could sacrifice herself, show him just how much she loved him, spill her own damned blood!

If only she had trusted him blindly, if only she was like the others, if only…if only she hadn’t drawn Kristi Bentz into this. He would still love her. Still caress her. Still tell her she was beautiful.

She squeezed her eyes shut and fell to the floor, where she curled into a fetal position. Again she rocked herself on the thick carpet, but it was no use. When she opened her eyes again, she was focused on the scissors. Twin snipping blades that could easily slice through her skin and open a vein or an artery.

The irony didn’t escape her.

Had she been willing to trade her jeweled cross for a vial of her own blood, she wouldn’t now be contemplating suicide and dying for her love.

The microwave dinged loudly. A few kernels kept popping, sounding like gunfire. Jay had been silent, processing for long minutes, as had Kristi.

“You’ve worried me,” he finally said. “I think I should leave Bruno with you.”

Kristi managed a half laugh. She’d wanted him to hear her, believe her, but she didn’t need another damn savior.
Her father was enough. “Mrs. Calloway would love that monster in here. I can’t have pets.” She walked to the microwave and gingerly removed the plump, slightly burned bag.

He glanced pointedly over to the water and food dishes on the floor near the refrigerator. “Looks like you already do.”

She opened the bag and steam escaped in a buttery cloud. “Houdini is a stray. He doesn’t live here, really.” She noticed the skepticism in his expression and added, “I don’t have a litter box. So the answer is a big N-O to the dog, but thanks, just the same.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

She sucked in a quick breath. “Uh…” Her eyes met his again. “I don’t think that would be such a hot idea. And what would be a worse one is if you had any thoughts, any thoughts at all, of explaining this to my dad.”

“He might be able to help.”

“Not yet,” she insisted, pouring the popped corn and blackened unpopped kernels into a bowl. “Later.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Jay looked out the window toward the campus. Just then he heard the sound of the chapel bells tolling off the hour through one slightly open window.

Midnight.

The witching hour.

“On top of everything else, I don’t like the fact that you’re living in Tara Atwater’s apartment. That’s too coincidental to me.”

She carried the bowl to the desk and shoved aside her paper clip cup to make room for it. “I found the apartment over the Internet. I called and rented it before I even knew Tara had lived here, or that I was going to get so involved.” She plucked a few popped kernels from the bowl and plopped them into her mouth, holding the bowl toward Jay, silently inviting him to join in. He took a small handful. “At the time I didn’t even know Tara Atwater’s name, or that she was one of the missing coeds. I mean, I’d vaguely heard about them, of course. My dad had brought up the fact that some of the students might have disappeared, and there was a bit about them on the news, not a lot, or not a lot that I was aware of. At the time, I thought it was all conjecture. No one knew for certain they’d been abducted. I mean, no one still does. The fact that I ended up with one of the apartments is probably because most people already had their leases set for the school year. I signed up for January classes, so I was looking in December, when there weren’t a lot of apartments available.”

“You sound as if you’re trying to convince yourself.”

She smiled faintly. “Okay…it’s a little freaky, yeah. But if you think about it logically, it really is just a coincidence.”

“Uh-huh. And then you just happen to end up living here in Tara Atwater’s apartment and then you just happen to assign yourself the duty of becoming Nancy Drew in The Case of the Missing Coeds?”

“I was interested anyway and then Lucretia asked for my help.”

“Lucretia? Lucretia….” He frowned, thinking back to place the name. “Didn’t you have a roommate you hated named—”

“Yep. She’s one and the same.” Kristi explained about running into Lucretia, how she was worried about the missing girls but was afraid to say anything because she’d just been hired by members of the administration who were taking the stance that nothing was wrong. “I told Lucretia I’d look into it,” she finished.

“I still don’t like you living here alone.” It felt to Jay like everything was slipping a little, “off” in a way he
couldn’t define.

“It’s just an apartment. Sorry, the dog can’t stay. Neither can you. End of story.” She motioned to her charts again, then pointed to the poster dedicated to Tara Atwater. “Back to the colors. Tara’s in pink, Monique is green, and Rylee is in blue. You can see that I’ve listed places, people, and things that they might have in common, then connected them. The connections show two or three or four colors.”

He took in all the information. The overlapping data, where the colored lines converged, aside from a few stray friends or places, was the missing girls’ class schedules. Every one of them had been English majors and they all had taken classes from a handful of professors here at the university.

Kristi said, “These girls didn’t have a lot of friends and their family life was negligible. I tried to reach the parents and pretty much came up with nothing. They had the attitude of ‘no news is good news.’ All the girls had been in some kind of trouble. Drugs or alcohol or boyfriend problems, and their families gave up on them.”

“What about girlfriends? You know, the BFF thing on all text messages?”

“If any of them had a Best Friend Forever, I have yet to locate her. Even Lucretia wouldn’t cop to being close to any of them.” Kristi frowned, puzzled, little lines forming between her eyebrows. “I’ve tried to call Lucretia a couple of times since then, and she hasn’t called back.”

“Why?”

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Kristi said, picking up a pen and twirling it in her fingers as she thought. “It’s almost as if she felt like she had to do something, so she told me about it and that was the end of it.”

“She passed the ball. Got rid of feeling guilty for thinking something was wrong, and then put it on you.”

“Or she regrets even mentioning it to me.”

Kristi had set the bowl back on the desk and now Jay absently reached for it. “So these girls were basically loners. Or, at least alone in the world.”

“I’ve talked to people in their classes and some coworkers, and what they said over and over again was, ‘I didn’t really know her,’ or ‘she was pretty closed off,’ or ‘she kept to herself,’ that sort of thing.”

Jay studied her charts again, focusing on the areas where the lines met and intertwined. He pointed to the class schedules. “Each of them took writing from Preston, Shakespeare from Emmerson, journalism from Senegal, and The Influence of Vampyrism from Grotto?” He felt a chill slide through him. “Christ, Kristi, this is your schedule.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

She shrugged. “It’s really not that odd. Or unique. The college curriculum is set up through computers, right? Block scheduling. Depending upon your major. So these aren’t the only students who had this curriculum, not by a long shot. And there are some variables. For example, Tara took forensics from your predecessor, Dr. Monroe, and both Monique and Rylee took a literature class from Dr. Croft, the head of the English Department, just before they went missing. Oh, and here…” She pointed to Dionne’s schedule and tapped the notation. “Dionne took religion from Father Tony and Introduction to Criminal Justice from Professor Hollister along with the other classes.”

“Heavy schedule.”

“She was fast-tracking, trying to graduate early, I think. The term she went missing she had a load of six classes, eighteen credit-hours. And she worked part-time at a local pizza parlor. Here’s a kicker, too. All of the girls, without exception, participated in Father Mathias’s morality plays, again associated with the English Department.”

“Morality plays?”
“I know. Kind of out there, isn’t it? Like something out of the Dark Ages. I haven’t really figured them out yet, but I heard a couple of girls in the class on vampirism talking about the first one of the term being Sunday night, so I thought I’d check it out. Don’t suppose you want to come?”

“You want me to?”

Did he make it sound like a date? Probably, because Kristi backtracked fast. “No, I’ll go alone. It’ll be better. People might notice you.”

“Maybe I should go.”

“Nope. I mean it, Jay. This is my deal.”

“I don’t like this,” he muttered. If she was right, there was a psycho on the loose, abducting women from the campus; if she was wrong, something was driving the girls away. Four missing coeds within less than two years on a campus this size was more than unusual, more than suspicious. “I can’t believe the university isn’t all over this.”

“The administration is trying to sweep it under the rug. Admissions are already down and they don’t want any more bad press. I brought it up with the dean of students and was shuffled right out of her office. Told I was imagining things and treated as if I had the plague.”

“But the liability—”

“Only if you recognize it. They’re into the ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’ mode. Therefore the evil doesn’t exist.”

“My ass.” He stared at the charts and shook his head. “You have to take this to the police.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Think about it.” She finished her drink. “Let’s say I stroll into the Baton Rouge Police Station. Who do I talk to?” she asked with a lift of her shoulders. “Probably the Missing Persons Department, right? Maybe I’ll have these charts with me. And then I’ll say…what? That I’m the hotshot New Orleans detective Rick Bentz’s daughter and you’d better pay attention to me? Even if I don’t bring him up, they’ll put two and two together and get all pissy about jurisdiction and protocol.”

A thin black cat slid through the partially open window over the sink.

“If I did anything so ludicrous, I’d be thrown out on my ear and my dad would be called on to the carpet. No thanks.”

She had a point.

“Hey, Houdini,” she said as the cat shot off the counter and under the couch. “Getting friendly, aren’t ya?” she joked as the cat peered suspiciously from the shadows.

Jay wasn’t about to allow the subject to be changed. “The authorities need to know what you’ve found. Maybe you could phone your father and explain—”

“Oh, sure. He’d yank me out of here so fast my head would spin.”

“He couldn’t do that. You’re an adult.”

She glared at him as if he were insane. “Oh, right. You tell him that! He’d either assign me a damned bodyguard or come and stake out this apartment himself. No, informing Detective Bentz is out of the question. I am an adult and we’re going to do this my way.”

“Whatever this is.”

“Right.” She suddenly smiled at him, sensing his capitulation even though he’d been certain he’d given nothing
away.

God, she was beautiful. He tried not to notice, but there it was as she stared at him with those damnable eyes. For half a second he felt a swell of heat rise in his veins, desire tinged with memories of holding her gasping, perspiring body next to his. The back of his throat turned dry and he looked away, jabbed his hands deep into the front pockets of his pants. He set his jaw in an effort to tamp down his stupid urges. Here she was talking about abductions, the potential murder of four students, and he was still responding to her.

Which was just plain ludicrous. “I think I’d better shove off,” he said.

“But you’ll help me?”

“As long as you don’t ask me to break any laws.”

“Okay, I promise,” she said, then blushed and looked as if she was about to bite her tongue.

She didn’t have to say why. He remembered her repeating just those words nearly a decade ago when he’d slid a tiny ring upon her finger.

“Good,” he said quickly, as if he didn’t remember. No reason to dig up the past. Hell, they’d just been kids. “See ya in class.” And then he left, not even glancing over his shoulder.

Yep, he thought as he descended the stairs, he’d been right. Where Kristi Bentz was concerned he was a bona fide moron.
For the most part, the chat rooms were a bust.

After Jay left, Kristi spent over an hour instant messaging different screen names and joining chats online, some of which were disturbing, others which were silly and just plain inane. She figured those were probably filled with kids just messing around on their computers when they were supposed to be sleeping. However one room, dedicated to blood in literature, as opposed to shape-shifters, werewolves, or vampires in the campiest and most twenty-first century of meanings, intrigued her. For the most part she lurked, watching the conversation between several of the participants. Whereas some of the chat rooms talked up the *Buffy* television series to death and another focused on the *Blade* movies, this one dealt with vampires in literature, and for a minute Kristi thought Dr. Dominic Grotto himself might be leading the discussion. There was a little talk about Count Dracula, the work of Bram Stoker, questions about Elizabeth of Bathory, the countess who bathed in the blood of her subjects, and even Vlad III, the Impaler, also known as Vlad Dracula, whom the discussion suggested was the inspiration for Bram Stoker in creating the character of Count Dracula. Some talk centered around Transylvania and Romania and fact versus fiction, and questions abounded about the drinking of blood.

But all in all, in this particular chat room, the participants seemed interested in more than trying to score some shock value; they seemed sincere in their quests, whatever they were.

Kristi poured herself a glass of Diet Coke, then made notes on everyone who partook of the chat and what their particular bend was. Or at least she kept track of the screen names they used, all of which, it seemed, included some reference to the subject. Since she wanted to blend into the group, she had signed in with the screen name of ABneg1984, though her own blood type was O positive and she wasn’t born in 1984. She used a couple of blind aliases to hide her true identity and asked a question or two every five minutes, just to keep the other users from thinking she was spying on them.

Which, of course, was the whole point of her being online at this ungodly hour.

It was a bit of a juggling act as she kept several screens open at the same time. They each were dedicated to a different live chat room, and, at first, she had a little trouble keeping up with all the conversations. Soon, however, she was getting the hang of it and clicked out of a few that seemed off topic. What she needed were other people online from Baton Rouge or at least Louisiana. There was just no way to tell by the screen names and as far as she could tell the chatters could be from anywhere in the known universe.

It was like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack, even though she tried to narrow down the rooms by mentioning Louisiana.

Finally, in the intellectual-sounding room, there was mention of All Saints Campus and vampirism.

“Bingo,” Kristi whispered as if she were afraid the other chatters could actually hear her. Fortunately, her laptop mic and camera were disabled. She couldn’t believe her good luck. Someone by the name of Dracoola lived nearby. Or at least had connections to the school.

She lurked. Waiting. Tried to read between the lines, even going so far as visualizing the different characters, many of whom supplied their own icons. Blood drops, snarling fangs, and flying bats seemed to be the favorites. People came and went, but some of the chatters seemed in for the night. One was JustO, who eventually mentioned Dr. Grotto’s class.

Kristi felt a tingle of anticipation. Things were coming closer to home. “Now you’re talkin’.”

Several people responded, all agreeing. Kristi quickly scribbled down the screen names for Dracoola, JustO, Carnivore18, Sxyvmp21, Deathmaster7, and Dmin8trxxx. “Sheesh,” Kristi said to the cat, who stopped short,
skittery, halfway to his bowl. “Who are these people?” Houdini pressed himself to the wall, all muscles tense.

Kristi tried to think of a way to bring up the missing girls, but the conversation wasn’t segueing in that direction and she wanted to buddy up to the weirdos who spent their nights virtually talking to strangers about blood and vampires and otherworldly beings. She let the others guide the conversation, all the while trying to find out something, some little hint about vampire cults on campus, or some connection to the women who had gone missing. One of the latecomers to the conversation had a screen name of DrDoNoGood and there was something about his questions, something a little bit familiar, that disturbed her.

Did she know this guy?

Or was it a woman?

A medical doctor? Wannabe? PhD? A James Bond/ Ian Fleming fanatic as his name might be a play on words for Dr. No?

He asked another question and she froze. She’d seen that very question before in her study notes for her class with Dr. Grotto.

Could DrDoNoGood be a cybernet alias for Dr. Dominic Grotto?

Her mind raced. What was the meaning of his name? Or was she just jumping to conclusions in the dead of night? Or…

Her pulse jumped as she read only the capital letters in the screen name. DDNG or DrDNG.

Didn’t Grotto’s middle name begin with N? Or, again, was she forcing a connection? Making something out of nothing? Hadn’t she seen Grotto’s name somewhere? From something she’d gotten from the school?

With her attention split between the computer screen and the bookshelves over her desk, she located the course handbook for the college. It was beat-up and dog-eared, but she flipped it open to the section on the staff of All Saints College. “Come on, come on,” she murmured, barely managing to stay on top of the conversation discussing the ritual of drinking blood and the sexuality inherent in the act.

“Yuck.” She shuddered. “No thanks.” Flipping the pages, she finally saw Dr. Grotto’s picture. Damn, he was good-looking. Piercing eyes, strong chin, high forehead, and dark hair. Underneath his photo she read: Dominic Nicolai Grotto, PhD.

Could it be?

DrDoNoGood and Dr. Dominic Nicolai, one and the same?

She couldn’t prove it, but she felt a rush, the same gut instinct her father experienced when he would figure out a clue in some homicidal maniac’s twisted game.

“Like father, like daughter,” she told herself as she asked a simple question about the class.

She wondered if there was a way to uncover his identity, some way to flush him out. Maybe she could pander to his vanity, complain about him as a teacher and see what happened.

Still reading the conversation, now about cultural mores and human blood, she pulled out her class notes. Maybe if she quoted him, she’d get a response…and if she said something about him being more an actor than an intellectual, more into theatrics than literature, she was certain he’d be unable to pass that up. She pulled up another screen in the program on which she kept her notes, but before she could come up with a significant question, he logged off.

“What! No!” she cried, and quickly reopened the other chat room screens, hoping he’d show up somewhere else. But he wasn’t anywhere she could find. If he’d entered another cyber chat, it was one she hadn’t located. “Of all the
bad luck!” She tossed the school catalogue aside and was about to close out the windows for the chat rooms when she saw a strange question in the room so recently vacated by DrDoNoGood.

Deathmaster7 asked: Do you wear a vial?

Kristi froze.

Three people responded with a yes while one, Carnivore18, answered with a question mark. Obviously Carnie didn’t get it either. One person didn’t respond and two typed in no. Kristi decided to go with the flow and responded yes.

Carnivore18 created a line of question marks. He clearly felt out of it.

“Join the club,” Kristi said, and wondered how she should prod the conversation along. But she remembered something—hadn’t Lucretia mentioned that some of the girls in the “cult” and Dr. Grotto’s class wore vials of their own blood?

Deathmaster7 asked: Whose?

Kristi stared at the screen, her pulse leaping at the thought that she might have just stumbled onto the connection she needed to find out more about the vampire cult that was supposedly on campus. But she had to be careful, not answer too quickly. What if she were wrong? What if Lucretia had given her bad information? Fingers poised over the keyboard, she waited.

The only one who responded was JustO: Mine. Who else’s?

Kristi grinned. “How about that.”

None of the other chatters was responding but Kristi wanted to keep this alive. Following JustO’s lead she typed: My own.

The other vial wearers were strangely silent until they, too, answered along the lines of JustO. Were they reticent to tell the truth, or like Kristi, liars with their own agendas?

For the first time since logging on, she sensed she was getting somewhere and could barely contain herself. She bit her lip so hard she nearly drew blood as she thought. Kristi was certain JustO was cyber-texting about blood. So who was she or he? How, if at all, was he or she connected to the cult? Kristi tried to imagine who JustO was. Someone in Dr. Grotto’s class? Someone she saw every time she stepped into the classroom? Was his or her name, like Kristi’s, for the purpose of this chat room all about blood? Was JustO’s blood type O?

Kristi felt a rush of adrenaline and could barely sit still. She felt certain this person was female, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on why. She just had some sense of it. Almost like a memory.

Could it be that JustO really did wear a vial of her own...Oh, God! It hit Kristi then. She did know who this person was! She was sure of it. Hadn’t she heard of a student at All Saints who went by one initial. Just “O”?

Kristi’s own father had mentioned the girl. He’d interviewed “O” while investigating a homicide a couple of years earlier. It had been one of the cases that had been linked to Our Lady of Virtues, the abandoned mental hospital located a few miles outside of New Orleans. One of the victims of that particular nutcase had been a student here, at All Saints.

Detectives Bentz and Montoya had driven to Baton Rouge, where they’d interviewed students, family, and staff. One of them had been a girl who had worn a vial of her own blood around her neck.

Feeling almost dizzy with the connection, Kristi stretched her arms over her head, hearing her spine pop, but still she kept her gaze fastened to the conversation on her monitor. Her mind spun backward as she remembered the conversation that had taken place in her father’s living room. She hadn’t been living with him then, but she’d been visiting. Olivia hadn’t been home, but Bentz and Montoya had been discussing the case and Montoya mentioned
something about the “weird Goth girl” wearing her own blood. She hadn’t wanted to be called Ophelia, her given name. She’d told the detectives to call her “O” or “Just O”.

There was a girl named Ophelia in Grotto’s class, a sullen, quiet girl who always sat at the back of the room. Kristi hadn’t actually met her face to face, hadn’t been close enough to notice if she wore a chain around her neck and a tiny vial of her own blood.

But that was about to change.

Even though the idea of anyone taking the time to draw blood, seal it in a tiny bottle, then wear it…Jesus, that was really out of the boundaries of normal.

The screen flickered and JustO logged out of the chat room.

Kristi felt a sense of disappointment. She knew she was on the verge of something important, though she wasn’t certain what. She glanced at the clock on the computer screen and groaned. It was nearly two and she had an early morning class. Besides, she really needed to think about what she’d learned online. Process it. It was probably just as well that JustO had left the conversation, which seemed to be rapidly going downhill. Even Carnivore18 gave up the ghost and logged off.

Her eyes burning from lack of sleep and staring at the monitor, Kristi closed out all of the open screens and thought about how she would approach O, the quiet girl, how she would get her to admit that she was JustO. If the vial were visible, that might start the conversation, but Kristi would have to pretend to be someone else because ABneg1984 had bragged about wearing her own blood and Kristi couldn’t fake it. If the people wearing the vials were part of a cult, there was probably a certain vial they used, maybe a certain necklace on which it hung, some sort of conformity that would make it immediately evident if she came up with a fake. Maybe the vials were a certain shape, or etched, or dark glass or…Oh, she couldn’t think about it now.

Yawning, she stretched again and envied the cat, who was already back in his hideaway.

She wasn’t certain of the significance of what she’d just discovered, but it sure looked like it had a lot to do with Dr. Grotto’s vampyrism class. Maybe the cult Lucretia had mentioned was a subject of the class.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on, but I’m definitely getting closer to something…something that’s going to make one helluva book,” she said aloud as she switched off the computer and watched the screen turn black.

Why in the world would anyone wear a vial of their own blood? And what, if anything, did it have to do with the girls who had vanished?

She walked to the window overlooking the campus.

Somewhere out there, was a predator, someone preying on students who took a particular combination of courses. “So who are you, you sick bastard?” she whispered. “Just who the hell are you?”

It was hours after midnight and Vlad felt an insatiable hunger, a craving he could no longer fight. The need to kill thundered through his brain as he drove ever closer to New Orleans, the tires of his van singing along the pavement, the traffic at this late hour thin and spotty.

All the better.

It was wrong to hunt tonight.

Dangerous.

He could easily make a mistake.

And then who could he blame?
Only himself.

This he knew. Yet Vlad could wait no longer. He knew there was a protocol, a reason to wait for the killing.

And yet, he found it impossible to tamp down his urge, and for that, he had the “lessers,” the women who would suffice physically if not intellectually.

And there were issues to deal with. A naysayer who had to be quieted, a guilty conscience that had to be silenced or all would be lost, and he couldn’t allow that.

His head began to throb.

He was empty. Hungry. Yearned for the thrill of the kill.

Could no longer hold back.

And he rationalized that this, tonight’s kill, would be a sacrifice to her, the one to whom he was forever linked, the one to whom he was fated.

And perhaps this unplanned killing of another lesser would throw the police off, send those who suspected on a wrong path in a different city.

*Don’t do this. If you succumb to temptation, if you kill, you could be exposed, your mask stripped from your face.*

His hand began to tremble as he considered turning around, resisting the urge that was a living breathing thing within him, a need so fierce he was its slave.

A willing slave.

He swallowed hard and felt the emptiness within. His hand steadied on the steering wheel as he saw the bright lights of New Orleans washing up against the night sky in the distance.

There was no turning back.

He knew the one he wanted...the perfect woman. Her skin was near translucent, her neck a long, welcoming arch, her body firm and ripe. His skin flushed, his own flesh heating at the thought of taking her.

Alive...oh, she needed to be alive, to know that theirs would be a hard, night-long union of passion and lust where she could satisfy his every need. And then she would give him the ultimate gift of her lifeblood.

Oh, how he would take her tonight.

He felt a throb of anticipation heat his veins at the thought and savored what he would do to her. Before. And after.

From deep in his throat came a soft growl of anticipation. Of need. He heard his own blood pumping through his veins, felt his pulse jump in expectation of the night ahead.

He closed his eyes for the barest of seconds, felt his erection hard and strong and straining. Which was good. Necessary. He needed the edge, the relentless resolution, the sheer testosterone-driven will that kept him sharp, cunning, and ruthless.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the rearview mirror and smiled at his transformation. His disguise was complete. No one would recognize him. Eagerly, he took the off-ramp he wanted, then wound through the city, driving carefully, under the speed limit on the empty streets. He knew where to park, where to wait.

He’d planned this one for a long time, knowing that at some point he would give in to his needs and search for a lesser one who would satisfy him for the next few days. Until the next.
The street on which he parked was nearly deserted, in a section of the city where the hurricane’s wrath had been mighty. There were a few parked cars, some abandoned and tagged, a few others occupying stretches of the battered street. He rolled down the driver’s window and breathed deep of the cool winter air. Even here, in a desolate section of the city, the Louisiana night felt alive. He heard the sound of insects buzzing, the whirr of bat wings in flight, and he smelled them all, a rat scurrying into a sewer hole, a raccoon searching the street for garbage, a snake slithering up the side of a tree.

Far off was the muffled sound of traffic on the freeway. Every so often headlights cut through the night and a car rolled past.

His nostrils flared and he drank it all in, his eyes easily adjusting to the dark. Lust was his constant companion. It had been since he’d been eleven or twelve, maybe younger….

He leaned back against the cushions of the driver’s seat, his hands tapping on the steering wheel. There were several lessers he wanted, those whose lives would be given without the elaborate rituals of the entitled, ones he’d earmarked for just the purpose of the letting of their blood. This one, the woman he would sacrifice tonight, would not be missed for several days. In that she was perfect.

He knew she would come. He’d watched her before, had met her several times, here in New Orleans. She was beautiful, her body toned, but she had no interest in improving her mind. And that was her mistake. Her soul could not be elevated. She was not royal, only a servant.

As are you, that nagging voice in his head chided. Are you the master? Of course not! You gave your free will over long ago and here you are, adhering to rules that you find restraining. Whether you admit it or not, there is a chain around your neck, one that is always kept taut.

He closed his mind to such arguments, knew they were blasphemy. He saw her then, walking alone, the friend who was sometimes with her missing. Good. She strode briskly in her high heels, her footsteps sharp and hard. Determined. Trademarks of a strong woman.

A dancer.

Who called herself Bodiluscious, but whose real name was Karen Lee Williams.

Wearing a short miniskirt, crop top, and jean jacket, she walked alone on this desolate street, heels clicking on the pavement. She probably knew better than to walk this way, but it was the quickest, straightest shot to her small house.

And a perfect place to become lost.

He waited until she was nearly a block away and then he slipped noiselessly from his vehicle. There were no lights, no alarms, just a soft little click of the door.

Though it was dark, with his eyes he zeroed in on her. He walked swiftly, hiding in the shadows, keeping near the empty buildings. Hard to believe any woman was stupid enough to take a shortcut and walk home after a night of writhing around a pole for money. Money used to support a habit instead of her child.

She deserved to die.

And she was lucky he was here to save her from her lowly existence.

He’d heard her complaints about her life, the unfairness of what fate had cast her, but she hadn’t wanted to change. It was all just idle chatter, used to garner his sympathy.

Smiling to himself, he followed her, then took a shortcut through a few vacant lots where, with his heightened vision, he could avoid the rubble, rats, and scavenging dogs.

Tonight, he thought, his blood singing through his veins, he’d release her from her misery.
Karen was edgy. Nervous.

And sick of the mess that was her life.

It had been a bad night, she decided as she clipped her way home on high heels that were beginning to hurt. She was walking through a part of the Big Easy where she'd once felt safe but now was a little nervous. But she had no choice: this route was the quickest way since her car had broken down a few weeks ago and she couldn’t afford a cab.

Besides, she needed a little time to breathe some fresh air and think. Get away from the throbbing music, hooting customers, and smell of stale beer and cigarettes. The club had gone downhill, too. The night was a little chilly, but the further she got from Bourbon Street, the quieter and calmer it seemed. She even imagined she could smell the river, which was probably just her imagination.

She had danced until eleven, when she’d been forced off the stage by Big Al’s latest “find,” a girl who wasn’t a day over sixteen unless Karen missed her guess. But the girl, Baby Jayne, with Kewpie doll makeup, long blond pigtails that nearly swiped her tight little ass, see through baby-doll outfit, and boobs that would make Dolly Parton envious, had all the customers streaming in for the after-midnight show. Even though she was awkward with the damned pole. Karen had watched a lot of the younger woman’s act, spent time lurking near the door, observing Baby Jayne’s pornographic moves. There was no seduction in her dance, no allure, just the obvious.

Now, it was late.

Nearly three in the damned morning.

It just wasn’t fair.

To think that at thirty, she, Bodiluscious, had been demoted. Her tips a few years back had been incredible—on some nights she’d made enough to pay her rent and buy a bit of nose candy—but now, after the storm had nearly wiped out the town and Baby Jayne had strolled into the club, Karen was lucky to have enough money to pay the bills each month. Which was probably good. If she had extra money, it tended to find her nasal passages. She’d been clean for over two months and she intended to stay that way. She was gonna put her life together. Hell, she couldn’t dance forever.

She kept angling toward her little house, which had miraculously suffered only minor damage in the storm. For that, she’d been thankful.

She cut across the street and felt as if someone were watching her, which was ridiculous. For God’s sake, that was her career, to have men ogling her, the more the better. She knew what that felt like.

Click, click, click. Her footsteps kept right on hitting what was left of the sidewalk. And she kept her eyes ahead of her, afraid to make a misstep on the cracked concrete and end up turning her ankle. What then? Her career would definitely be over.

Maybe it was time to patch things up with her mother and kid, move back to San Antonio. At least that way she could see her daughter more than once or twice a month. She smiled to herself when she thought of Darcy; now that girl would go far. At ten she was already at the top of her fourth-grade class and the piece of art she’d made for Karen last Christmas was incredible. The kid was a genius even if she had a no-account father doing time for possession, and a mother who danced on a stage, making love to a metal pole six nights a week.

A car rolled slowly down the street and Karen just kept walking. New Orleans had become dangerous, and if the press were to be believed, the crime rate sky-high. But she was careful. Never headed out alone without her small pistol tucked beneath her jacket. If anyone tried to mess with her, she’d be ready.

The car passed without incident, but she still felt edgy. Something wasn’t right. Something more than Baby Jayne stompin’ all over Bodiluscious’s turf.
The feeling that she was being observed, maybe even followed, hung with her. She hazarded another quick glance over her shoulder and saw nothing…or did she? Was there someone just out of her line of vision?

Her skin crawled and a spurt of adrenaline shot through her, spurring her on. She was nearly running in the damned shoes now.

*Don’t go crazy. You’re letting your imagination run wild.*

But she opened the flap of her purse, where she could grab her pistol, cell phone, or canister of mace in one quick movement. She looked over her shoulder again, and saw no one.

Good. She was only three blocks from home now, approaching a safer area where the flood damage had been minimal and cleaned, the streetlights working, at least a quarter of the homes occupied, another quarter nearly cleaned and renovated.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry!*

She was walking so fast she was nearly breathless, and that was something she prided herself on: how fit and strong she kept herself with the dancing. She made it into the pool of light cast by the first strong street lamp along her route and she drew in a calming breath. She looked behind herself once more, then realized, standing in the circle of light, she was an easy, visible target.

*You’re almost home, girl. Just keep walking. Fast.*

She saw her house on the corner, then cursed herself for forgetting to turn on even one light. She hated walking into a dark house, but at least she was home.

She raced up the new walk and newly fixed front steps, her key in her hand. On the porch, she opened the still-squeaking screen door, then unlocked the dead bolt and shouldered open the new, heavy front door.

Inside, the smell of fresh paint assailed her as she flipped the dead bolt and reached for the light. The house was silent. Strangely silent. No hum of the refrigerator. No whisper of the air from the fans. She flipped the switch.

Nothing happened.

The entry hall light remained dark.

*Scraaaaape.*

The sound of a shoe against the floor?

Oh, Jesus, was someone inside?

Her heart fluttered wildly with fear as she flipped several switches. No lights. She fumbled into her purse for her pistol with one hand, while the other scrabbled on the door for the dead bolt.

A hand clamped over hers.

Harsh.

Strong.

Brutal.

It crushed her fingers and she started to scream, only to have another hand cover her mouth.

Oh, God, no! She squirmed wildly. Writhed. Bit the leather covering her lips. Kicked at his legs, but his grip only tightened.
“Slow down, Karen Lee,” he said in a voice that was as seductive as it was frightening.

He knew who she was? This wasn’t random? She fought harder.

“There’s nothing you can do,” he assured her. “Nowhere you can go.”

That’s where you’re wrong, cocksucker, she thought as her fingers brushed the cool nickel of the pistol. She grabbed the gun, yanked it out of the purse, heard the bag hit the ground with a soft thud. She drew her hand up, ready to blow this jerkwad to hell when she caught a glimpse, just a hint, of the guy’s face and she nearly dropped the gun.

Red eyes glared at her, fuckin’ red eyes from deep in the folds of some black hood.

A face black as night with ghoulish features and purplish lips was inches from hers. The face of evil, she thought wildly.

Oh, God! She nearly peed.

Hot breath washed over her.

Holy shit.

She struggled. Fought. Even though she was shaking from head to foot. Fumbling with the safety, she tried to think clearly. All she had to do was swing the gun around, over her shoulder, and fire.

But from the corner of her eye, she saw the thing, this fiend from hell, draw back those awful lips and expose a nasty array of sharp white teeth.

Sweet Jesus!

She had the safety off.

Immediately, she swung her arm upward.

Teeth slashed.

Blood spurted.

Pain screamed up her arm.

She squeezed the trigger.

Blam! The gun fired.

Blasted next to her ear.

The smell of cordite filled the air.

But her attacker held on, twisting back her arm so that she was helpless, her legs no longer able to kick. Her shoulder wrenched, throbbing in pain.

Oh, dear God, she’d missed hitting him. And the pain…excruciating. Blinding. Help me, Lord, help me fight him off!

She arched her back, still fighting, still hoping for a chance to get one good kick to his shins or his damned crotch. But he was heavy and strong. All sinew and muscle and determination.

Agony tore through her.
Her legs buckled.

In the darkness she saw the floor rushing up at her and now could only hope that somewhere, someone had heard the shot.

_Bam!_ Her head cracked against the new hardwood.

She nearly passed out from the pain.

He fell atop her and shifted his hands. Before she could scream his fingers were on her throat pressing harder and harder as he straddled her. Alarmed by the red eyes glinting with malice, she fought back, her hands flailing at him, scraping at the leather on his body. If he was going to kill her, by God, she wasn’t going to make it easy.

But her lungs were burning, shrieking for air, and the hands on her throat were tightening so that her eyes felt as if they might pop right out of her head.

She kicked and writhed frantically.

Her lungs were bursting with the pressure.

Blackness seeped into the edges of her vision.

_No! No! No!_

She tried to scream and failed, couldn’t even drag in a breath.

Oh, God, oh…God…

Her legs stopped moving.

Her arms were leaden.

The burning in her lungs was pure agony.

_Let me die, God, please. End this torture!_

He leaned down and in the fog that was overcoming her she saw his fangs. White. Shining. Needle-sharp.

She knew what was to come.

A quick puncture. A quick sharp nip of pain as his hands relaxed and she dragged air into her windpipe in a wet hiss.

But it was too late.

She knew she was going to die.
“If you want to keep them for the full day, they’re due back tomorrow at”—the clerk in the camouflage T and dusty jeans looked at the clock hanging over the door of the Rent-It-All store—“nine-thirty-six, but I’ll give y’all till ten.” Winking at Kristi, he offered her a gap-toothed smile that showed flecks of tobacco. She tried not to notice.

“Kind of you,” she said, trying not to sound too sarcastic. He was, after all, just a kid.

About eighteen years old, “Randy” as the name pinned to his shirt claimed, was gangly and fighting a case of raging acne, but still tried to flirt with her. Kristi smiled back. At least he’d helped her locate the right kind of bolt cutters she needed in this dusty warehouse full of equipment and would be do-it-yourselfers. “That’ll be thirty bucks.”

“Really?”

“Yes, ma’am. Them things ain’t cheap.”

Talk about highway robbery. Sure they were the expensive ones, but really, how much could they cost brand new?

“Great,” she said with an undertone of sarcasm.

“So what did ya do?” Randy asked, adjusting his trucker’s hat and trying a little too hard to be friendly. “Forget your locker combination?”

“Yeah, that’s me, just a dumb woman with a bad memory. “Something like that,” she said, then handed him two twenties, waited for her change, and declined his help in carrying out the long-handled tool. “Thanks, I got it,” she said, slipping the ten into her wallet and the strap of her purse over her shoulder.

“Now, if them there cutters don’t work fer ya, y’know, because y’all are a woman and they’re meant for a man, then you might want to rent a hacksaw or a sawzall.” He nodded, as if agreeing with himself. “That’d do the trick.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, silently bristling. It wasn’t as if she were some tiny little frail stupid thing, for God’s sake, but she kept her sharp tongue in check as she hauled the bolt cutters outside. At eighteen, she’d hadn’t exactly been an Einstein either, and there was just no reason to get into it with the clerk.

She’d considered asking Jay to help her with her new project. She suspected he might own a pair of bolt cutters which could have saved her the thirty bucks, but she wanted to limit his involvement. First of all, he was misinterpreting her interest in him. He seemed to think she was angling to date him and that was not what she’d intended. So it was a good thing to keep him at a distance. He’d ask too many questions and what she was doing was bordering on illegal. As it was, he’d be in plenty of hot water if he was caught getting the information she wanted from the school and police records. If he even did that much for her. She wasn’t certain that he’d cross that line and so she hadn’t shared everything Lucretia had told her about vampires and cults. It was hard enough to get Jay on board without getting into the surreal, goth stuff.

Besides, she told herself as her running shoes crunched in the gravel of the Rent-It-All parking lot littered with battered pickups and a couple of monster trucks, some things were for her to do by herself. And breaking into the storage unit holding Tara Atwater’s personal things was one, despite what Randy, the eighteen-year-old expert, thought. She slid behind the wheel and started the car. Dust had settled over the windshield and the interior of the car was warm, the sun visible through high, thick clouds. Kristi found a pair of sunglasses in her glove box and slid them onto her nose. She backed out of her parking space, trying and failing to avoid potholes in the dirty gravel. She passed a jacked-up truck covered in mud, where a man lit a cigarette as he packed a chainsaw in the back.

“Idiot,” she muttered under her breath, then eased her Honda onto the side road and headed for the freeway that cut north from this section of low-slung, commercial buildings on the southeast part of town toward the All Saints
campus.

Her plan was only partially formed, but she was rolling with it. Having Tara’s things tucked away in the basement of the house she was renting was a godsend. She’d turn everything over to the police for evidence, of course, but until they were interested, she figured whatever was in the storage unit was fair game. She’d already found out the type and make of the combination lock Irene Calloway had used to secure Tara’s things, then had spent two hours going to three different hardware stores before she’d found a lock that appeared the same.

Now she was ready.

A huge Suburban passed her covered in LSU stickers. A tiger fan, she thought with a faint smile. Kristi considered Louisiana State with its huge student body in Baton Rouge. Wouldn’t a larger campus make for a wider, less-noticeable hunting ground? Why girls at All Saints?

Because whoever is doing this is comfortable there. He’s either a student, a member of the faculty, or an alumni. LSU or another campus is unfamiliar. Whoever is doing this is intrinsically connected to the college, knows how to get around, has hiding places, blends in.

She felt a little frisson of fear slide down her spine. She was convinced that there was a monster stalking the ivy-clad brick buildings of All Saints, a psycho who had, so far, gotten away with his horrendous deeds.

“No for long, bastard,” she said, and glanced down at the speedometer. She was flying, driving nearly twenty miles over the posted limit. She eased off the throttle and glanced in her rearview mirror, certain she would see flashing red and blue lights, but no highway trooper was following her. This time, she’d gotten lucky. Good. She couldn’t afford a ticket.

She took the exit closest to the campus and wound through the side streets, then parked in her usual spot near the staircase leading to her unit. Rather than head upstairs, she found the door leading to the basement laundry and storage facilities and unlocked it with one of the original keys she’d gotten from Irene Calloway. The stairs leading downward were dark and creaky, the walls made of ancient cement, the few windows small and grimy and shrouded with cobwebs, their thin threads littered with the drained, brittle carcasses of dead insects.

“Lovely,” she said as she turned a precarious corner. Three steps later she was in the bowels of the building. At least the basement was dry. There were stains on the walls indicating that water had at one time or another seeped through old cracks, and areas where an attempt had been made to patch the damage with little or no success.

On one wall two washers were already churning, and one of the dryers was spinning and heating, something inside its drum clanging with each rotation. Kristi didn’t dare try to break into the storage cage now, when someone might catch her. She didn’t want to explain herself. She planned to wait until the middle of the night and bring down a couple of boxes, though the thought of being here in the dark, with only a few sparse overhead lights, was nerve-wracking.

She left the basement, climbed up to her apartment and grabbed her laptop. She had a few hours before her shift started at the diner, so she planned to work at the local coffee spot where she could connect wirelessly to the Internet and listen to the buzz of conversation. She’d already figured out that Bayou Coffee, on the far side of the campus near Wagner House, was the most popular with the All Saints students. She slid her computer into her backpack, snapped her hair into a top knot, and pulled on a baseball cap, then took off.

From her door to the coffee shop’s took twenty minutes and, as luck would have it, two Asian students were leaving a small table near the window. Kristi snagged it, dropping her backpack onto one of the wooden seats, then stood in line to order a vanilla latte and a raspberry scone. As an espresso machine shrieked and steam rose over the groups of patrons, Kristi waited for her drink and surveyed the crowd. She recognized a few kids either from class or just running into them in the student union, library, or walking across campus.

Thankfully, no one turned gray before her eyes.

She was just picking up her order when the door opened and a tall, leggy girl with straight brown hair that fell halfway down her back walked inside. She looked familiar and Kristi placed her as someone in her classes who
usually sat near Ariel O’Toole. The girl studied the tables as if searching for someone.

“Hey,” Kristi said as she passed the girl. God, what was her name. Zinnia? Zahara? Something with a Z…

“Oh, hi,” the girl looked like she was having trouble placing Kristi.

“Zena, right? You’re a friend of Ariel’s?”

“Oh…yeah?”

“I’m Kristi, you’re in a couple of my classes. Grotto’s vampyrism and Preston’s writing.”

“Huh…” Zena said without a hint of enthusiasm, and Kristi could tell that the girl still wasn’t connecting the dots, which may have been just as well.

“Have you seen Lucretia?”

“Stevens? Oh, uh, not since last week, I think. I’ve been kinda busy getting ready for the play.”

“You’re in the drama department,” Kristi guessed, and the girl visibly brightened.

“Yeah.”

“With Father Mathias?”

“Uh-huh. I’m not really into the morality play thing, but hey, it’s a start. He promised me if I did well, I would be considered for something deeper. I think they’re doing Tennessee Williams in the spring. A Streetcar Named Desire maybe, and I’d love to play Blanche DuBois.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Kristi said, though she had no interest in anything remotely to do with acting or being on stage. “So what’s with the morality plays?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a lift of one shoulder as she eyed the oversized menu of coffee drinks suspended over the baristas’ heads. “Just Father’s thing, I guess.” She stepped up to the counter and ordered a chai-tea latte and a muffin.

Kristi could tell Zena wasn’t interested in more conversation, so she walked back to her table and opened her computer. With one eye on the screen and the other on Zena, she picked at her scone.

Before Zena’s order was up, the door opened and Trudie arrived. Her round face was red and she seemed breathless as she spied Zena. She hurried up behind her and gave her own order. Within five minutes the two friends had scoped out the busy shop and were hovering near a booth being vacated by two young mothers and their babies. One infant was contentedly sucking on a pacifier while the other one was making noises that indicated he was winding up for an out-and-out wail. His mother was working feverishly to strap him into his stroller and get him outside. Her friend, with the calmer boy, wasn’t as frantic, but the minute the women had wheeled their tiny charges away from the table, Trudie and Zena nabbed it and sat down.

Kristi strained to hear part of their conversation, but only picked up a few words. She made out “Glanzer.” As in Father Mathias Glanzer. And “morality.” Probably the play. Zena was all about the play. And then she thought she heard the word “sisters.” But nothing more.

Kristi decided she was lousy at eavesdropping and was about to leave when Lucretia, wearing a long black coat and five-inch heeled boots, swept through the side door. Already a tall woman, she was now well over six feet. Kristi considered confronting her ex-roommate. After all Lucretia had asked for her help, then had been avoiding her. But Kristi decided she’d wait and see what happened. Maybe Lucretia was meeting someone here. Her lover, or boyfriend, or fiancé or whatever? Or maybe she was just grabbing a cup of coffee on the run. Whatever the reason, Lucretia, never particularly cheery to begin with, was looking perturbed and frustrated, her features bordering on haggard. As she stood in line, she ran a hand through her curly hair and stared up at the menu as if she’d never read
it before. Or as if she were lost in thought, a million miles away.

Kristi lowered her head to her laptop. Still wearing her baseball cap, her face partially hidden by the computer screen, she thought she might avoid being detected.

No such luck.

Just then Lucretia glanced away from the menu, zeroing in on Kristi. “You!” Lucretia gave up her position in line to stalk across the tiled floor, nearly knocking over the cart holding a display of Christmas mugs and coffees that were marked down to half price. The cups with Santa and Frosty on them wobbled and Lucretia righted them in time. “Are you following me?” Lucretia demanded.

“What? No. I’ve been here for half an hour.”

“You’re sure?” Lucretia asked, glancing over at Trudie and Zena who, engrossed in their own conversation, hadn’t yet noticed her.

“Pretty sure,” Kristi said dryly, more than a little annoyed. “I have called though. Left you two messages.”

“I know, I know. I—I’ve been busy. Look—” She placed her hands on the table in front of Kristi’s computer and leaned closer. “I made a mistake.” Her voice was a sharp, nearly inaudible whisper. “About those girls.”

“You mean Tara and—”

“Yes, yes!” she said emphatically. Her throat moved, as if she were swallowing hard. “I should never have told you about…about everything. I was wrong. Okay? I’m sure that all of the missing students will turn up eventually. When they want to. After all, they were all known runaways.”

“But you said that you knew them, they were your friends—”

“Not my friends,” she bit back. “I said I knew of them. And now I’m telling you I was wrong. So…just forget it. I made a mistake. You lived with a cop for a father. You know how they are. If there was really something criminal going on, the police would be all over it, so just drop it, okay? And…don’t call me anymore.”

“Are you all right?” Kristi asked.

Lucretia blinked. “Of course. Why?”

“You look pale.”

“Oh, God.” Lucretia gulped and stared at Kristi as if she’d seen a ghost. “So, what? Are you going to tell me I’m in danger? Like Ariel? She told me, y’know. Thinks you’re a flippin’ head case. What the hell is that all about?”

Inwardly, Kristi cringed. She knew she should have never confided in Ariel, figured it would come back to bite her. “Obviously, you and Ariel are close.”

“She knows you were my roommate, for Pete’s sake. I introduced you, remember? And then you act all weird. As if she’s in black and white.”

“Sometimes, I…” Oh, what was the use? How could she explain that there were times when people appeared colorless, as if they were drained of blood.

Drained of blood…

Kristi’s heart thudded uncomfortably as she made the connection to the vampire cult. But that wasn’t certain…no, the woman on the bus who had died hadn’t been in Grotto’s class. “It’s just a strange thing that I see.”

“Strange like a psycho, so stop it, okay? And leave me the hell alone. Face it, Kristi, you’re odd. Maybe it’s because of everything you’ve been through, but you’re definitely out of step.”
“You asked me to look into this,” Kristi reminded her, her voice and temper rising. The older couple at a nearby table glared at them.

“You’re causing a scene,” Lucretia hissed. “God, I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“Into what?”

“Nothing!”

Lucretia rolled her eyes and reached up to push her hair from her face. As she did, her sleeve slid and Kristi got a glimpse of gauze taped over Lucretia’s left wrist.

“What happened?” Kristi asked, indicating the bandage.

Lucretia turned chalk white. Her hand fell to her side. “I had a little accident. No big deal. I…oh, hell, I’m kind of a klutz in the kitchen,” she said, and it was obviously a lie. “But I’m okay. Really. And that’s not the point. What I’m asking, no, telling you to do, is forget we ever talked before about…you know.”

“The cult—”

“I was wrong, damn it!” Lucretia blurted out. “And now I want you to back off.”

“You said that already, but…” Kristi trailed off. She was talking to dead air as Lucretia had already swung around and was hastening to the booth with Trudie and Zena. Trudie made a big deal of sliding over as Lucretia talked with them for a minute or two, before taking her place in line again.

Kristi wasn’t sure what to think. She knew Lucretia had been ducking her. That much had been obvious, but to pretend that their conversation basically hadn’t happened? After talking about missing, possibly abducted, coeds and vampires and cults? What was that all about? And the bandage. Kristi would have thought it was no big deal, but Lucretia’s reaction said otherwise.

Had someone warned Lucretia off?

The hairs on the back of Kristi’s arms raised.

Someone found out she talked to you and they’re threatening her. And someone’s following her, scaring her spitless. Even hurting her. That’s why she’s hiding a bandage.

Kristi glanced at the table where Lucretia now sat with the other girls and caught her ex-roommate staring at her. Lucretia’s face was drawn and white, her lips pursed, and she looked worried as hell. She met Kristi’s eyes for the briefest of seconds, then looked away. As she did, her face turned the color of cold ashes.

Kristi’s heart nearly stopped. What the hell was that all about?

Maybe it’s nothing, she quickly assured herself. You’ve been seeing a lot of this, haven’t you? No one has died…yet.

She swallowed hard.

Lucretia’s color returned. As if it had never washed away.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Kristi. Maybe you are the freak!

She thought about the conversation with Lucretia, how her ex-roommate had wanted her to forget everything they’d discussed before. Why?

Someone got to her.

Kristi folded her computer closed and packed up. She left the coffee shop without meeting Lucretia’s eyes again,
but she’d be damned if she was going to back off. If anything, she was more committed than ever to finding out what had happened to Dionne, Monique, Tara, and Rylee.

It was only when she’d unlocked the car and slid inside that she realized what else was off about Lucretia. Not only did she look worried as hell, not only had she tried to convince Kristi to back off, but she was no longer wearing the ring on her left hand, the one she’d been so coy about. Kristi had looked at her hands as she’d leaned over the table and they’d been bare. Even the nail polish missing, her fingernails bitten down.

*Have you been following me?*

Lucretia’s accusation echoed through Kristi’s mind.

*Not yet,* Kristi thought, *but maybe that’s not such a bad idea.*

“I already told you, I don’t know which professor Lucretia Stevens is dating,” Ezma said as she tossed her apron into the bin for dirty clothes. “Maybe it was just a rumor.”

“So who told you?” Kristi wasn’t about to be derailed. It was nearly eleven P.M. and both she and Ezma were getting ready to leave.

“I don’t know…oh, wait…it was someone from school, I think, a professor.” She snapped her fingers to jog her memory. “Oh, who was it?” Her face was drawn into a deep knot of concentration. “Oh, Lord…Oh, I got it!” She looked up, her eyes bright. “I was waiting tables right here, and I overheard two women gossiping. Let’s see, it was Dr. Croft, the head of the English Department, and, oh, hell, who was she sitting with that day?” She rubbed her chin. “I think it was the journalism instructor. The new one.”

“Professor Senegal?”

“That’s who it was, but I couldn’t hear much. They kept their voices low, especially when I was anywhere nearby. I was kinda surprised. I mean people gossip, of course, but Dr. Croft’s the head of a department and this is a pretty public place. Oh, well…” She lifted her shoulders, then smoothed out the bills she’d gotten for tips, counting them and leaving some for the busboys.

Kristi did the same, handing the girl who had cleared the tables a percentage of her tips. She and Ezma walked out of the restaurant together. The night was clear and cool, the air crisp as Kristi climbed into her Honda and Ezma slid onto the seat of her moped and strapped on her helmet. A few seconds later, the motor bike was humming out of the lot.

Kristi started the car. Though she usually walked to work, today she’d been late, so she’d driven the short distance. Before she put the Honda in gear she tried calling Dr. Grotto again and was immediately asked to leave a message on his voice mail. Kristi didn’t bother—the guy already had two from her. Obviously he wasn’t picking up his calls or he was singling her out and ignoring her. Nah, that didn’t make sense.

She drummed her fingers on the wheel and decided if she didn’t hear from him by Monday she’d have to do a sit-in at his office, force him to talk to her. There were also the Internet chat rooms. Maybe she could test the waters with DrDoNoGood, if he showed up. Flirt with him, pander to his ego. So far she hadn’t turned on the video cam on her computer, preferring anonymity, but maybe it was the only way to reach him. She could buy a cheap wig, colored contacts or glasses. She had to do something to get the creepy professor to start a conversation with her.

Shoving the hatchback into drive, she nosed out of the parking lot. Gunning the engine, she drove ten miles over the speed limit on the way home. She was anxious to gain access to the storage unit containing Tara Atwater’s things.

Maybe she would finally learn something about the missing girl.

She parked in a hurry, running up the steps to her apartment. Inside, she quickly stripped off her work clothes and tossed them into her laundry bag. She also threw in two packets of detergent, the bolt cutters, and a flashlight, then
stepped into jeans and a sweater. After slipping on a pair of tennis shoes, she started on her mission.

She was nervous as a cat, her stomach knotted as she descended two flights before unlocking the door to the basement and snapping on the wimpy lights.

At night the cavernous room below the building was even more formidable, the nooks and crevices more shadowy and dark. None of the washing machines were agitating, nor the dryers heating and spinning.

Good.

Carefully, certain someone would walk down the dark stairs at any second, Kristi removed the bolt cutters and set them on the floor near the wire storage bins, then she sorted her clothes quickly and started two of the washers.

As the machines began to fill, she grabbed the bolt cutters and studied the bins. They were each clearly marked and locked, one for each unit and two extras. One of the extra bins held gardening supplies and tools, obviously used for the apartment house, the other was filled with boxes. Kristi shined her flashlight through the mesh and saw Tara Atwater’s name scrawled across them, along with a date of November 13, over a month after the girl had been deemed missing.

“Good enough,” she said, and went to work.

Unfortunately Randy of the I-Man, You-Woman caveman mentality had been right. Using the bolt cutters proved difficult. She could get the blades over the shackle, the metal piece that attached the lock to the door, but then she didn’t have the strength to make the damned cutters snip through.

Which ticked her off.

“Come on,” she said, and tried again, pushing the handles together so hard that her arms ached, pain screaming down them, the muscles trembling with the pressure. “Wuss,” she muttered under her breath as the washers continued to fill, water rushing into the tubs.

Again she put all her strength behind it.

Again she failed, only managing to score the shackle with the cutters. “They must be dull,” she told herself, and twisted the cutters around, so that they were pressed against the side of the steel door. Setting her feet on the concrete floor she shoved against one handle with all of her weight, wedging the other into the door. Straining…straining…sweating…eyes squeezed…jaw set…

Click!

Oh, God, was that someone at the door?

Damn!

What idiot would be doing their laundry this late at night?

Just you.

Her heart, already pounding, soared into overdrive. Adrenaline shot through her bloodstream. With a grunt she shoved harder just as she heard the key turn and the upstairs door creak open over the changing of gears in the washers, then footsteps. Heavy tread descending.

No!

With all her strength she gave one final shove.

Snap!

The shackle broke.
Kristi didn’t check to see if it was cut through. She shoved the bolt cutters into her laundry bag and, sweating, though the temperature in the basement couldn’t have been over sixty, she bent over the dryer and opened the door as if checking on her wash.

Except someone else’s wash was already there. Still very wet.

Criminy! She hadn’t thought to check to see if there were clothes in the dryer. “Hell,” she muttered, straightening just as a huge shape hovered at the bottom of the stairs. Her insides turned to water. Dear God, could this be the abductor? Is this how the psycho found his victims, alone in a dark basement? Had Tara been down here when…

She was about to reach for the bolt cutters to use as a weapon when Hiram stepped beneath the weak light of one of the overhanging bulbs.

She let out her breath and snapped back to the problem at hand. Would he notice the broken lock? “Hey, are those yours?” she asked, pointing at the dryer, then opening the door of the second one. It too was filled with wet clothes.

“Yeah.” Hiram was dressed in flannel pajama bottoms that hung low on his hips and a hooded gray sweatshirt, his hands in the single front pocket of the hoody. On his feet were huge slippers that barely covered what had to be size thirteen or fourteens.

“Didn’t you turn the dryers on?” she demanded.

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“I dunno. Couple of hours ago.” He was getting defensive, his lips, behind his scraggly beard, folding in on themselves.

“Well, your clothes are still wringing wet.”

“I used ‘low’ so my jeans wouldn’t shrink,” he said as if it were she who was the imbecile who didn’t know a thing about laundry protocol or procedure.

“Well, you’ve got about thirty minutes before the washers are finished with their cycles and when they are, I’m going to need both dryers.”

“Too bad, you’ll just have to wait.” He made a big deal of checking the sodden clothes. Like he really cared. From the looks of his outfit, this might have been the first time he’d used the laundry facilities since Christmas.

Hiram hit the start button again, the timer set for twenty minutes, the temperature once again on “low.”

She said, “That’s not going to work.”

He snorted, turned, and faced the storage cages.

Holy crap! Her heart was trip-hammering like mad.

What would she say when he accused her? Could she lie? From the corner of her eye she saw her laundry bag, the outline of the bolt cutters visible. She kicked the washer. The resulting clang rang throughout the basement.

Hiram spun as if a top on a string.

“Damned thing,” she said, shaking her head.

“What was that noise?”

“I don’t know but it’s been doing it ever since I loaded it.”
“The washer? Which one?”

She pointed to the one she’d kicked. “Every couple of minutes or so it does that banging noise. Can’t be good. You’re the super or the manager or whatever, maybe you could fix it.”

“It didn’t do it for me.”

“How do you know? Were you down here?” she asked, and saw by his eyes that he hadn’t been. Good. Her lie was safe. “Maybe you should get your toolbox.”

He nodded and edged toward the stairs. “Yeah, I will, but after you’re done with the washer, you, uh, might put a note on it that no one is to use it until I, um, get it fixed.”

“Good idea,” she said, and let out her breath as he, hands in the front pocket of his hoodie, started to climb the staircase. Every step seemed to groan in protest with his weight.

She waited until she heard the door at the top of the stairs open and close, then she didn’t waste a second. She pulled the lock off the security cage, flung open the door, and started opening the boxes within. Clothes, CDs, candles, pictures in frames, books, and various personal items. Too much to fit into the laundry bag in one trip and she didn’t dare carry the boxes upstairs. As quickly as possible, she grabbed up some small items, intending to come back for the rest later.

Then she took off the lock and replaced it with the one she’d purchased earlier today, the one with a combination she knew. It clicked into place. Until someone came down here and tried to get into the storage unit, no one would be the wiser.
CHAPTER 15

Kristi, damn her tight little ass and sassy in-your-face attitude, had gotten to him.

No two ways about it, Jay thought, disgusted with himself.

Maybe Gayle had been right all along.

Maybe he’d never gotten over Kristi Bentz.

“Fool,” he muttered as he sat in his desk chair in the lab in New Orleans. Ever since leaving her apartment last night, he’d been thinking about her, worried that she was getting into something dangerous. So he’d had to do something.

Instead of tearing out the old bathtub and starting to fix the plumbing at Aunt Colleen’s house, Jay had rolled out of bed at the crack of dawn Saturday and, with Bruno at his side in the pickup, had driven like a bat out of hell back to his house in New Orleans. Once he’d dropped the dog off, he’d driven to the crime lab and the computer at his desk, where he’d sifted through all of the police databases he could, accessing information on the missing coeds.

And he hadn’t stopped there.

Over the course of the day, he’d called a couple of friends who worked for the Baton Rouge Police, a sheriff for the parish of East Baton Rouge, and even an old college buddy who was working for the Louisiana State Police. If they were off duty, he then tracked them down by their cell phones, interrupting their days. He figured it didn’t matter. He was going to get to the bottom of Kristi’s obsession come hell or high water.

Because she’s yours, his mind taunted. You’ve been obsessed with that woman from the first time you set eyes on her, and if you think you’re doing this for any reason other than to score points with her, guess again.

His jaw tightened and he pushed the thought aside. Besides, it wasn’t true. He would have checked into any of his students’ concerns. Maybe not with quite so much fervor, or he might have passed the information along to the proper authorities and then stepped back, but he would have taken some action.

Face it, McKnight, you’re pussy-whipped.

He refused to listen to the voice as he worked in his office, which was not much more than a closet with a window, but it had a computer terminal and access to all of the police databases. “All I need is here,” he said aloud, though it was a lie. What he’d like was a beer. Instead, he settled for a semi-chilled can of iced tea from the vending machine and snacked on peanut butter cups and red licorice.

At least it was quiet here, the weekend shift busy in other areas of the building, away from his small office.

Everyone he’d phoned was willing to talk to him and all agreed to call him back if they found any information on the four girls, but so far no one had offered up anything he didn’t already know.

To a one, the police officers believed Dionne Harmon, Monique DesCartes, Tara Atwater, and most recently Rylee Ames were troubled girls who had just taken off. If their credit or debit cards hadn’t been used, it was surmised that they’d found a different money source. Probably dealing drugs or prostituting themselves for cash. Maybe gambling? Mooching off some low-life friends?

The only glimmer of hope Jay received was from his friend Raymond “Sonny” Crawley, with whom he’d gone to college and who now worked in the Homicide Department at Baton Rouge.
“Jeeezus, McKnight,” Sonny had said when he’d answered his cell phone. “What happened? You been talkin’ to Laurent or somethin’? That’s the trouble with that damned woman, she won’t let this thing go, I’m tellin’ ya. No bodies. No crime scene, but she seems to think the girls were abducted or killed or God only knows what. Trust me, we got all the work up here we need without creatin’ any more, but she’s not convinced. Pissin’ everyone off.”

“Who’s Laurent?” Jay asked, scribbling a note to himself as he stared at the computer screen with the picture of Rylee Ames, the girl who was supposed to have been in his class this term.

“Portia Laurent’s a junior detective with the department who has a bug up her butt about those girls. Hell, we all want to find them, but shеееit, there just isn’t a case. Not yet. But you know how those newbies are. They tend to get fired up about any little thing. Not that I’m makin’ light of the situation, but there just isn’t much we can do about it until we come up with a body, murder weapon, suspect, or witness. So why the hell are you interested?”

“Just curious,” Jay hedged. He’d already decided to keep Kristi’s name out of it, unless he determined that she was in any kind of danger. The fact that she lived at the address of one of the missing girls bothered him. “I work up there, part-time, teach a class on forensics, and there’s been a lot of talk about what happened to the girls.”

“Don’t I know it?” Sonny snorted. “Every time it’s a slow news day around here, I get some reporter nosin’ around, tryin’ to stir up trouble, make news if there isn’t any. Take that Belinda Del Ray from WMTA…what a pain in the ass she is. Good-lookin’, I’ll grant you that. And she uses it, let me tell you. But she’s like a damned pitbull with a bone, don’t ya know? Won’t take no for an answer and keeps pokin’ around even when we try to steer her to the PIO. But she’s not interested in the official statement from the Public Information Officer, no siree, not Belinda. She wants more than we’re willing to give. As far as the department’s concerned: no bodies, no case. But some reporters don’t know how to butt out.”

“Just doing their jobs,” Jay said, playing devil’s advocate. He was ambivalent about the press. A necessary evil. Often useful. Sometimes a real pain. Especially the aggressive reporters hungry to make a name for themselves.

“Humph,” Sonny snorted. “Obviously you haven’t dealt with too many reporters.”

This was going nowhere. “So tell me about Detective Laurent. Why isn’t she buying the company line?”

“Fuck, I don’t know what the hell Laurent thinks. You’d have to ask her. Oh, hell, I got another call comin’ in.”

He clicked off and Jay stared at the notepad on his desk. Portia Laurent. He definitely wanted to hear what she had to say. He circled her name, tore off the sheet, stuffed it into a pocket of his jeans, and settled in to work.

By the end of the day, chewing on his last brittle rope of red licorice, he didn’t know a whole helluva lot more than he had last night. Just enough, though, that he was starting to believe that Kristi was onto something. As for the whole vampire thing, he was surprised how many people bought into it. Not only books, movies, television, online gaming, but there was an entire Internet culture, linked, he was certain, to real people.

A cult?

Maybe.

Centered at All Saints?

He hoped to hell not.

He thought about all the missing girls and Dr. Grotto’s class. He’d heard from a few members of the staff he’d met about the guy’s theatrical way of presenting the class, the fake fangs and contacts that covered his irises and made his eyes appear flat and black. Without a soul. Inhuman. But no one was worried about it. It was drama. Flair. And the students loved it. The fact that he was taller than most with thick dark hair and penetrating eyes didn’t hurt the image either.

Jay rubbed the back of his neck and rotated his head to relieve the tension, all the while staring at the computer screen, where the face of Rylee Ames met his gaze. Young. Beautiful. Vibrant. At least in the head shot. But
obviously messed up.

Runaway? Or abduction? Possible murder victim…?

Had she been a part of some private cult?

Was Grotto into it? Hell, if so, he was flaunting his part, wasn’t he? Really out in the open with this vampire crap. How stupid would that be, to point a finger at himself? Or was it Grotto’s ego? Did he really think he was invincible? If so, the intense teacher wouldn’t be the first. Jay chewed hard on the tasteless candy, then tossed the wrapper into his trash can, all the while thinking about his colleague at the school. Maybe it was time for a background check on Grotto, a deeper check than the university had made. For that matter, what about some of the other professors and department heads? Or members of the administration? From what he knew about cults, they crossed all sorts of social barriers. He had the resources, he decided, and there was no reason not to use them. All he had to do was cross reference names and addresses. Some of the information would be public, other private. He’d go as far as he could without breaking the law.

And then what?

What if you need to dig deeper?

“Hell,” he muttered. He would damned well cross that slippery bridge when he came to it.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket.

Shifting on his chair, Jay retrieved the phone and saw Gayle’s home phone number flash onto his screen. Inwardly groaning, he considered not answering, but knew that was only postponing the inevitable.

He had tried to be kind.

It hadn’t worked.

The woman wasn’t taking the hint.

“Hey,” he answered, hating the upbeat sound of his voice. It sounded as phony as his feelings.

“How are you?” Her voice too was sunny, a little breathless.

“Busy.”

“Always.” She sighed and he imagined her face turning petulant. God, how had he ever thought it was cute? “I suppose you’re in Baton Rouge and don’t have time for a drink or anything?”

“Afraid not, Gayle.”

“I could head up that way.”

He didn’t tell her he was in New Orleans. He didn’t intend to spend the night here, anyway, and he definitely didn’t intend to spend it with Gayle. “I’m working.”

“Well,” she said, and he imagined her walking across the plush carpet of her home, probably standing at the floor-to-ceiling windows to stare out at the night. The suggestion wasn’t unexpected. “You won’t be working all the damned night, now will you? I could stay over….”

If it wasn’t so damned sad, it would be funny. Gayle, living in the lap of luxury, spending the night in Aunt Colleen’s torn-up bungalow without any hot water or much else.

“Conditions are rustic. I sleep in a sleeping bag on a cot, Gayle.”

“Cozy,” she said, deliberately misreading what he meant. “I could get a hotel. You could stay in something a little
less primitive for a night.”

“I don’t think so.” He leaned back in his desk chair again, his weight making it squeak in protest as he placed a foot on his desk. He thought of Kristi, the difference between the two women, and the fact that he’d never really felt the same way about Gayle. Not even close. Gayle had been right about that, her feminine instincts honed.

“You’re avoiding me,” she said with a little pout in her voice.

Jay steeled himself. There was just no way to sugarcoat this. “I can’t make time for you right now.”

He heard her swift intake of breath. “Wow. I guess I didn’t expect that. I thought we were going to be friends.”

Outside the door of his office, he heard footsteps and soft conversation as two colleagues passed. Further away a phone rang.

“I think we have a different opinion on just what being friends is.”

She charged, “You don’t want me to come up there.”

“It wouldn’t be a good idea.” There was a pause. He didn’t really know how to do this without hurting her, then decided he had to be cruel to be kind. “Gayle, I don’t think we should see each other again. Not even as friends.”

“Why’re you doing this?” she cried, appalled.

“We both agreed it’s over.”

“Your idea. Not mine!”

“You weren’t happy.”

“I could be.”

“Oh hell, Gayle. It would never have worked. We both know it.”

“You wouldn’t let it.”

“I’m not going to fight about it.”

“You bastard,” she said, her voice switching tones. “It’s Kristi Bentz again, isn’t it? I knew it. That’s why you went up there in the first place. Because she was going to school up there—surprised I know that?”

No, he wasn’t. That was the problem. “It’s over, Gayle.”

“For the love of God, Jay, will you never learn?” Her voice rose and once again he heard someone walk past his door as the phone momentarily cut out, heralding an incoming call.

“I gotta go. Another call.”

“You’re seeing her! Goddamn it, Jay, I was right, wasn’t I? The least you could do is admit it. You’re still in love with her!”

“Good-bye, Gayle,” he said, and clicked off, but her accusation rang through his head, echoing and sharp: You’re still in love with her.

“Damned straight,” he said to himself. Okay, there it was. He was still fascinated as all get-out with Kristi. More than ever. “Shit.”

He clicked to the other call. “Hello?”
“McKnight?” Rick Bentz’s voice caught him off guard.

“Yeah.”

“I need a favor.” No beating around the bush with Bentz.

“What?”

“Kristi needs her bike. If I run it up there she’ll accuse me of butting into her personal life. I know you’re teaching a class at All Saints and that you’ve got a truck. Maybe you could run it up to her.”

Sometimes fate had a funny sense of humor, Jay thought. “Sure.” He considered confiding in the detective; after all, Bentz was Kristi’s father and she seemed poised to get herself into trouble. Thinking of her, he held his tongue. For the moment.

They made arrangements for Jay to pick up Kristi’s fifteen-speed at the station later in the day and Jay didn’t mention anything about the fact that Kristi was his student, that she’d confided in him, that she was digging into vampire cults, or that Jay intended to see more of her.

He hung up and wondered if he’d made the right choice. What would he tell Bentz if Kristi got herself into real trouble? Danger? What if she ended up abducted? How would he feel then?

He swore under his breath. Kristi would kill him if she found out he confided in her father and that would be the final straw. They would never reconcile.

“Shit.” So that’s where all this was going. What a mess! He clicked off the computer and got to his feet. Maybe it was time to head back to Baton Rouge.

Nothing!

Kristi didn’t find one damned thing in Tara’s belongings that helped her figure out what had happened to the girl.

“Damn it all to hell.” Rocking back on her heels, Kristi studied Tara’s things, all of which were strewn over the tarp she’d laid across the floor. If she’d hoped the jewelry box had contained a necklace with a vial of blood attached to it, she’d been sorely disappointed. If she’d thought she’d find a treasure map leading to a secret meeting place of a vampire cult, she’d been wrong there, too.

“There has to be something here,” she said out loud. “Just find it.”

But the obvious items were missing: computer, purse, cell phone and/or BlackBerry. There was no secret diary. No love letters. No address book or phone Rolodex. In the boxes of clothes, she had found a backpack that she’d unzipped, searched, and even turned upside down. One of the straps had been broken, but there was nothing inside except an empty pack of cigarettes, two sticks of gum, a half-full box of breath mints, couple of receipts from a local quickie mart, a squashed tampon, and a rubber band.

She felt a little like Geraldo Rivera when he’d opened up what was supposed to be Al Capone’s vault on live national TV in the eighties, expecting to find all kinds of treasures or evidence against the gangster only to find the area empty except for debris. Which is just what Kristi had—nothing but debris from a missing girl.

After almost being discovered by Hiram, she’d made three trips downstairs with her laundry bag, hauling up Tara’s things bit by bit, then searching through the pockets of her pants and jackets, looking for anything that might be a clue. But nothing came to light.

“My father would be disappointed,” she said to the cat as he stared at her from an upper shelf on the bookcase flanking one side of the fireplace. “What am I missing?” She sifted through the piles of jeans, khakis, and shorts, then the sweaters, T-shirts, and jackets one more time.
Disappointment crawled through her. “Maybe I’m just not cut out for this,” she muttered while the cat watched her box up Tara’s things. Either Tara had taken everything of value with her when she left, or her abductor had. Kristi folded her own laundry, whipped out a paper for Dr. Preston’s writing class, and kept nodding off in bed while reading the latest assignment from the tome of Shakespearean plays.

“Tomorrow,” she confided in Houdini as he hopped onto the bed and lay in the far corner, still ready to jump for cover should she startle him. Theirs was a growing, but extremely tentative, relationship. Bit by bit Houdini was edging closer, almost letting her pet him upon occasion, though his ears were often pinned back. Whenever she reached down he leaned away from her. She’d only managed to brush her fingertips along the tips of his fur.

Not too far from the way she and Jay reacted to each other, she thought. Wary. Suspicious. Interested but frightened. God, why did she always seem to return to Jay? He was her professor and he’d agreed to help her figure out what had happened to the four girls, but that was it. There was absolutely nothing romantic or sexual in their relationship. And that’s the way it had to stay.

“Right, Houdini?” she asked.

The cat gazed at her, unblinking.

Father Mathias Glanzer paced through the church, past the glass votives holding candles that had burned low. His footsteps sounded hollow along the floorboards of the nave. At the altar, before the huge suspended crucifix, he genuflected, made the sign of the cross, and sent up a small prayer for guidance as the image of Jesus stared down at him.

In anger?

Or compassion?

His clasped hands were clammy, his body beneath his robes covered in a nervous, self-loathing sweat. He’d been a priest for nearly fifteen years and still he sought guidance, still he doubted. His faith wavered, though he would deny it to anyone who asked.

But God knew.

As did he, himself. “Forgive me,” he whispered, and though he knew he should stay and pray for hours, he found no solace in prayer, no comfort in seeking God’s counsel. Straightening, he left the church, the door to the nave shutting behind him with a soft, definitive thud.

Outside, the night promised rain. Clouds were thick, the moon and stars blocked from a storm that was pushing inland. The January wind was cold, with a harsh bite as it blew through his soul.

He’d come to All Saints thinking he could start over, reaffirm his vows, make changes in the college. In himself. Find God again.

Just as in a marriage when spouses become too comfortable and take each other for granted, lose interest or vitality, so had he accepted his faith as pure and important and all-knowing. He’d become prideful. Vain. Seeking his own glory over that of God.

And, of course, as high as he’d climbed, as far as his blind ambition had taken him, it had abandoned him. Now he was falling, tumbling into a darkness so bleak, he feared there was no return. Moving to All Saints hadn’t been a blessing, but a curse.

He wanted to blame Dr. Grotto, or Father Anthony, or Natalie Croft with her damned vision for the English Department. He’d gone so far as to harbor feelings of injustice at the school administration with so many laypeople on the board, including the descendants of Ludwig Wagner, the man who had given the original plot to the
archdiocese to build the school, but, in truth, all of his railing against the fates and those with whom he worked was foolhardy. The person who was at fault was himself. He thought of those who had gone before him, pure men who had tortured themselves in horsehair or with flails, who knelt for days upon cold stones, who fasted until they fainted…he would never test himself as they had.

For years he’d told himself those penances were for the weak and addled, that he was above them. Now he knew differently. They were for the strong, and only cowards like himself—weak, mortal men—would run from God’s challenges.

*You can never outrun yourself, Mathias, now, can you? And even if you could, the Father would see your pathetic efforts. He looks deep into your soul and witnesses the wretched darkness within.*

*He knows of your sins.*

The chapel bells tolled, their deep dulcet tones reverberating in his brain, echoing in his heart. They should have uplifted him, but their deep resonance only served to remind him of how much he’d lost, how much he’d so willingly, almost eagerly, cast away.

Swallowing hard, Father Mathias made the sign of the cross over his vestments yet again as he strode through the wet grass. He would go to his apartment, drink a little brandy, and try to come up with a plan, an escape.

*Coward! You can never break free. You are condemned to hell by your own hand. You are Judas.*

From the corner of his eye, he saw a movement, the slightest shiver of the shrubbery flanking the galilee, the porch at the west end of the church.

Father Mathias felt his heart shudder. He told himself not to be so frightened, the movement was probably caused by a cat out on a nightly hunt, or an opossum hiding beneath the branches or…Oh, God.

He froze.

A dark figure rose from its crouching position beneath the narrow tracery windows. “Father Mathias,” it whispered hoarsely as it drew near.

Mathias was struck by fear as dark as Lucifer’s soul.

“What is it, my son?”

The being, for that’s how he thought of it, was large, a man in a costume, or something otherworldly? Male? Or an Amazon woman? Or sexless? Its features were hidden in the dark recesses of a thick cowl, its eyes seeming to glow bloodred.

Mathias trembled, cold as death.

White teeth flashed in the darkness. Lips dark, as if stained with blood, warned, “Do not betray us. I see it in your eyes, feel it in your expression, smell the fear within you.” The lips curled as if in disgust and for a millisecond he imagined he saw fangs within that shadowy evil countenance. “If there is a whisper of treason, the barest breath of your disloyalty, you will be blamed. And, I assure you, you will be punished.”

Before Mathias could raise his arms to hold his crucifix in the demon’s face, it lunged, grabbing hold of his wrist in a painful grip. Hot breath scorched his skin.

“No!” he cried.

Too late.

Cloth ripped.
Lips curled back.

Fangs clamped down hard.

“Aaaah!”

Pain screamed through his arm as the fiend’s teeth sliced into his flesh. “God in heaven no!” Mathias cried, horror tearing through his body.

The demon wrenched on his wrist and he screamed out again. “Please, don’t!”

“Shhh!” The creature raised its dark head and blood—the priest’s blood—dripped from its horrid lips. “Be gone,” it hissed, spraying Mathias with his own lifeblood, a forked tongue visible through those blood-smeared incisors.

*Holy Father, what kind of beast from hell was this?*

Stricken, the priest fell to his knees, scrabbling for his rosary, sending up prayer after prayer in his terror-riddled, near-paralyzed state. What had he gotten himself into? *What?*

He heard voices. From the other side of the church. Dear God, he couldn’t be found like this…had no explanation. The fiend turned and ran, sweeping almost silently across an expanse of lawn, then into the darkness.

Mathias crumpled into a heap. Tears tracked from his eyes. Tears of fear. Tears of remorse. Tears of a broken, faithless man.

“Our Father,” he started to mumble, but the words stuck in his throat. His tongue was thick and awkward, his repentance too little, too late. He’d gone too far. Crossed a burning threshold from which there was no return. Prayer wouldn’t help. Confession, the ultimate cleanser of all sins, was no longer his salvation.

The truth of the matter was that he, like so many before him, had sold his very soul to the devil.

And Satan wanted his due.
Boomer Moss had hunted gators all his life. Sometimes he'd done it all legal with a tag, in season, and sometimes, like tonight, not. He figured alligators were mean sumbitches who deserved to die, and if he could make a few bucks off their hides, their heads, and their meat, all the better. He was doin' the world a big fat favor by takin' the motherfuckers out, one slithery life at a time.

The fact that there was a season for the huntin' and tags to be purchased and forms to be sent into the government really got his balls in an itch. His family had been hunting the swamps, ponds, lakes, and canals around New Orleans for over two hundred years. The government had no business, no damned business tellin' him what to do.

Besides, huntin' in the swamps in the dark was a rush like none other. Boomer had a few beers stashed in a cooler as he trolled the black waters and passed the ghostly, skeletonlike trunks and roots of the cypress trees. He had his snares set, but you could never tell when you might come across a gator in the water, dormant season or not.

Sometimes he'd kill himself a raccoon or an opossum or a snake if he could catch one. He figured these swamps belonged to him. Here he ruled, and the bounty of the boggy land was his for the taking. He didn't want to mess with any tags—hell, no. And he knew a raccoon or skunk was better bait than the cow guts sanctioned by the state.

Again, the government should have better things to worry about. Christ! Using the beam of a heavy-duty flashlight, Boomer scoured the water, hoping to see eyes emerge from the darkness, just over the inky water's surface. The gators were sluggish this time of year, most dormant, but not impossible to find.

He had his traps set and come morning he expected to have at least one of the fuckers, maybe as many as five or six if he got lucky. For now, he'd troll, check the bait he had strung up a couple of feet above the water, hoping to lure a gator into propelling himself to leap up and snag himself on the hook.

He saw their eyes in the darkness, realized they not only saw him, but sensed him, as they did any movement in the water. Big dang toothed lizards. He heard a splash, saw one slide into the water not far from a nest where the grass had been beaten down, noticed the mound of mud and grass that indicated where the eggs had been laid.

"Come on, Mama," he said in a cooing voice. "You all come over here to Daddy." He waited, searching, his twenty-two pistol in his hand. But the she-gator hid in the shadows, away from the beam of his light, and he moved on, slowly, one hand on the tiller, the sounds of the night filling his ears: the whirr of bats' wings, the hoot of an owl, the croak of bullfrogs, the hum of a few insects over the rumble of the boat's small outboard motor. Every now and again he heard a splash, a fish jumping or a gator sliding into the still water.

He spent long hours trolling, not getting close enough to shoot a damned gator and haul him into the boat, but scouting out the swamp. Through the hours, he downed a six-pack of Lone Star and two of Mindy Jo's fried oyster po' boy sandwiches.

Finally, as the night waned, he checked his snares. The first was empty, the bait stripped clean.

"Shit," he said, steering his boat further to the next trap, and there, hanging partially in the air, was a gator. Eight feet if he was an inch. "Hallelujah, brother," Boomer said, moving close enough that he could raise his pistol to the critter's small brain. He fired, the sound a sharp report. Had to make sure the reptile was good and dead before cuttin' him down. Boomer sure as hell didn't want any four-hundred-pound gator thrashing around in the boat. It was tricky enough dealing with a dead one.

He prodded at the gator with an oar, then certain the big reptile was indeed dead, carefully lowered the massive carcass into the bottom of the boat. The bull alligator was a prime specimen, not many scars on his hide. He'd fetch a damned good price. Feeling as if the night wasn't a complete waste, Boomer checked his other snares, found the bait still hanging over the water without any gators attached. Might as well leave the traps baited for now. He could
He turned the boat back toward the dock where his truck was parked. He didn’t bother with gutting his prize, just wrapped the gator in a wet tarp, winched him into the truck bed, and drove back to the house, a small single-wide set on concrete blocks deep in the woods.

Boomer felt good. He’d go home, shower, then wake his wife and screw the devil out of her, just as he always did after a successful hunting trip. He could hardly wait, his hands clenched over the steering wheel as the old Chevy bounced and shimmied through the potholes in the gravel lane leading to the house.

Mindy Jo never complained about being waked for the sex, no siree. She was probably at home now, waiting for him, her cunt already wet. She loved it when the old testosterone was flowin’ fast and hot after the thrill of a hunt. He’d spend hours in the big old bed they shared, pushin’ her to the brink over and over again, rutting over her like a damned stallion.

She’d get so turned on she’d even let him slap her buttocks in the process. Man, she loved that!

At the house, he parked in the garage, put some ice over the tarp, then went inside. He decided to forget about the shower and see what she’d think if he smelled of the hunt…he’d done that a time or two and this morning it seemed like a damned good idea, so he stripped out of his hunting clothes, left the camouflage shirt and pants in a pile in the kitchen in front of the new washer and dryer, then walked into the bedroom.

King of the realm.

It was dark, the black-out curtains drawn, and it smelled of cigarette smoke and the damned cats she insisted on keeping around the place.

“Honey, izzat you all?” she mumbled, her face buried in the pillow.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “it’s me, all right, and I’m horny as hell. Caught myself one helluva bull gator.”

“Oh.”

He touched her thigh with a finger and she rolled away, making a disturbed, bothered sound. He didn’t buy it. Kneeling on the mattress beside her, his dick rock hard, he touched her again. “Did you hear me? He’s a big un.” He slipped his hand around her body, touching her breast.

“Oh, Boomer. Not now. Leave me alone.”

“No way, baby,” he said, and she sighed, already waking. Maybe he’d get lucky. Maybe she’d suck him off.

“Ooh, God, you stink.” She rolled over and faced him, her mouth only inches from his cock. “Didn’t you shower?”

“Nah!”

“Oh, God, Boomer. Go clean up!”

But he’d already leaned down to kiss her and he took one of her small, soft hands and placed it on his penis. “I can’t wait, baby. You’re just so damned beautiful.”

“And you’re a lyin’ son of a bitch. It’s too dark in here to see anything.”

“I see you in my head, honey.”

“What a bunch of crap,” she said, but her fingers were already flexing around him and as he came to her, she opened her mouth, kissing him with a fever that was always with her in the morning. More and more it seemed that at night she was just too tired for sex and slapped him away, but she woke up horny in the morning and that was fine
He rolled atop her and decided since he’d been up all night as it was, he wasn’t going to spend too much time getting her to come. No siree. He would work fast and hard, touch all her hot spots right off the bat and once he’d felt her start to move against him, going into that low moan of hers, he would finish the job. But, he’d rushed things. Misjudged her reaction. She was a little tight this morning, not fully awake or into it like she usually was, and by the time he’d got her slicked up inside, he couldn’t wait and came in a rush, before she was ready, flopping down on her just like the dead gator.

Which really pissed her off.

“You big oaf,” she declared, pushing him to the side of the bed. “What the hell do ya think ye’re doin?”

“It’s all right, baby, I’ll take care of you.”

“Forget it. I’m not in the mood.” He tried kissing her roughly and she pushed him away. “Stop it, Boomer. You got your damned rocks off, now just leave me alone.” She rolled to the side of the bed and scraped her fingers across the nightstand, feeling for her cigarettes. One of her stupid cats walked across his pillow, its tail brushing his nose and reminding him that they were never alone, not with all the goddamned felines crawling through the house.

Boomer closed his eyes and figured he’d sleep for a few hours. The gator was safe, iced up as it was. He heard the click of a lighter, then smelled burning tobacco as she inhaled. Tired as he was, he fell asleep and only opened an eye when he felt her stir nearly six hours later. He wanted to sleep longer—hell, he deserved it—but he had to check on the gator and make sure it was still cool and besides, the damned banty roosters that belonged to Jed Stomp, his stupid-ass neighbor, were crowing up a high-pitched raucous that could wake the dead.

A bit of a headache nagged at him as he climbed out of bed. He gave Mindy Jo’s naked, round little butt a playful slap and headed back to the kitchen, where he pulled on his hunting clothes again.

The sun was high in the winter sky, the day promising to have a little heat for January. A crow sat on the peak of the roof, eyeing him and emitting irritating caws.

“Oh, shut up,” he grumbled, wishing he had his twenty-two. Damn noisy thing.

In the carport, he opened the bed of the truck, then worked to slide the gator and the tarp out onto the gravel of the driveway. The crow’s caws were echoed by a jay who’d come to squawk. To add to the noise, he heard the damn squeal of the coffee grinder from inside the house. Mindy Jo was up and going through her ritual of grinding coffee, which he thought was a big bother when you could buy a can of Folgers for less money at the Piggly Wiggly.

Ignoring the morning cacophony, Boomer grabbed his sharpest knife and went to cuttin’ on the gator. It was hard work, but he was already counting the dollar signs in his head and thinking that he’d go check the other traps later. Maybe he’d gotten lucky. Just about finished with the messy job, he heard the screen door creak open, then slam shut.

Mindy Jo, wrapped in some silky Asian robe, pink slippers, and faux ostrich feathers, walked onto the screened-in porch. She held a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. Three of those miserable cats wound around her leg. The gray tom, with no tail and only one eye, had the nerve to glare at him. God, he hated that stupid lynx.

“He is a big un,” she said, not stepping off the porch as she eyed the alligator’s carcass. “Just get one?” She took a drag from her cigarette and tipped back her head to let out a stream of smoke from one side of her mouth.

“Fer now. I’ll check the traps again later this morning.” He was sweating, working hard as he eviscerated the animal. “And he ain’t too scarred. Skin’s good. The hide’ll fetch a good price.”

“Nice,” she said, drawing hard on her cigarette. The banty rooster started up again. Mindy Jo ignored the screeching. “Ya want grits and bacon?”
“Yeah.”

“Eggs?”

“’Course…hey…what the hell?” He saw something that just looked wrong. He’d gutted a helluva lot of alligators in his lifetime and never had he seen one of ’em’s stomach look so oddly shaped. “What the fuck you been feedin’ on, big fella?”

“Don’t you dare open up his guts here!” Mindy Jo screeched.

Too late. Boomer’s curiosity had already gotten the better of him. He slit the stomach wide and the inside, smelling of stomach acid and dead fish, opened up.

Boomer jumped back. “Holy shit!” He nearly threw up at the sight.

“What?” Mindy Jo asked.

“I think we’re in trouble,” he said, wondering how the hell he was going to explain the obviously poached alligator and already trying on several lies to save his own skin. But Boomer did have a conscience. “Big trouble.” How could he explain this? “Call the sheriff.”

“The sheriff?” Mindy Jo’s slippers clipped down the two steps and along the brick path toward him.

“Do as I say. This gator ain’t been snackin’ on Fig Newtons, that’s fer sure.”

The clicking stopped and her shadow passed over him and onto the open belly of the dead reptile. “Lord, Jesus!” she whispered, her eyes bugging at the smelly contents of the gator’s gut. Amongst the crayfish, frogs, turtles, and fish lay an arm, a very human female arm and hand, painted fingernails and all.

Stroke, stroke, stroke.

Kristi cut through the water of the pool cleanly, breathing easily, feeling her muscles begin to strain. She’d been at it over half an hour, was going for forty minutes.

The smell of chlorine was everywhere and there was mist on the windows of the college’s pool house, but aside from an older guy several lanes over, she had the water to herself.

She hadn’t swum in over a month and it felt great. Energizing. Cleared her mind.

Stroke.

She thought of Jay and had to admit she liked seeing him again. But just as a friend…

Stroke.

She hadn’t found anything in Tara Atwater’s personal items, but she’d look again. There had to be some evidence about her disappearance in the same damned apartment in which she’d lived.

Stroke.

Ariel and Kristi’s father were still very much alive. So her black and white vision thing might just be a physical thing, not some kind of special ESP or visions of the future.

Stroke.

There were no such things as vampires. And she was going to talk to Professor Grotto and see what he had to say for himself. Then, perhaps, the police.
Maybe she should call Jay…. No way. She needed his help, yes, but that was it. She was not trying to start something up with him again.

Liar! There’s something about him that gets you.

Damn!

She couldn’t think about Jay McKnight as a man. That part of their relationship was long over. Still…she found the way he pushed his hair from his eyes endearing, the boyish hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth fascinating, and the way his eyes darkened with humor or interest compelling. Dear God, she was a mess when it came to that man.

She told herself that she didn’t want him before and she couldn’t want him now. The whole forbidden fruit thing? Totally overrated. Yet she was thinking about him in ways she shouldn’t, and that really ticked her off.

Reaching the edge of the pool, she glanced up at the clock. Forty-three minutes. Long enough. She was breathing hard as she pushed her hands on the side and pulled herself up to the concrete pad. What was it about Jay that got to her? Grabbing her towel from a hook near the locker room, she dried herself vigorously. Needed to rub Jay out of her life.

She glanced over the water’s aquamarine surface and realized the old man who had been swimming laps when she’d dived into the pool had already left. She was alone in the pool house with the steamy windows. Outside it seemed as if night were descending, late afternoon shadows creeping through the windows.

She suddenly sensed that someone was watching her through the glass, someone she couldn’t see. Her body shivered convulsively. Chiding herself for her fear, she dabbed at her face.

Don’t overreact. All your research on the missing girls is getting to you.

Inside the women’s locker room, she tore off her wet swimsuit, showered, and changed into jeans and a sweatshirt. As she left the building, once again she wished she had her bike instead of having to walk across campus. It wasn’t as if she were alone; plenty of students were on the walkways heading to a late class or the library or their dorms. A lot of the people she passed were in groups or listening to iPods or talking on cell phones. Nothing was out of the ordinary, except that she caught a glimpse of a tall, blond girl she’d seen in some of her classes, and the girl’s skin changed in front of her eyes, the color leeching from her skin.

This was nuts!

Hadn’t Kristi just convinced herself that the whole gray pasty look was just some trick of her mind? Ariel was still alive. Her father was still walking the earth, chasing bad guys for the New Orleans PD. This black/white thing was a figment of her imagination, her problem. Still…

Kristi kept on following the pale girl who was striding at record speed past the chapel. She nearly had to jog to keep her in sight and was worried that she was leaving All Saints, heading to a parking lot off campus.

“Damn,” she said, wondering what she’d say to the blonde, if and when she finally caught up with her. Are you feeling okay? Man, you sure look pale. Do you need a study partner for Dr. Grotto’s class? “Lame, lame, and lame,” she muttered under her breath as the girl reached the gate of Wagner House, walked inside, and hurried up the steps.

But the museum was closed.

Kristi hesitated. The blonde—what was her name, Maren or Marie? Something like that—had entered without a problem.
After a moment Kristi strode through the front gate as if she’d intended to head into Wagner House all along, and flew up the steps. Though a sign on the door said closed and listed the hours of operation, she tried the latch and the glass-paned door swung open. Huh, she thought, crossing the threshold and stepping inside. The latch clicked softly behind her and she was alone. In the supposedly haunted house. With no sign of the blonde.

The foyer, decorated with an antique table and a plaque giving a short history of the house, was empty. A single Tiffany lamp glowing in shades of amber and blue threw a bit of illumination into the deepest shadows of the room.

From the entrance, stairs led to the upper floors, and a parlor room was to the right. It, too, was lit by a single lamp, the rest of the room in shadow. Antiques and period pieces were placed around a patterned rug and a marble-inlaid fireplace, and mullioned windows flanked a floor-to-ceiling bookcase stuffed with leather-bound, ancient-looking volumes.

This house, she knew, had belonged to Ludwig Wagner, the first settler of the area, a rice or cotton baron who had left his estate and part of his fortune not only to his children, but also to the Catholic church for the purpose of building All Saints College. Several of his descendants were still on the board and played active politics with the school. But the house had been preserved, used for formal parties and opened on some afternoons as a museum. The velvet ropes, which forced people who viewed the house to file through the rooms without disturbing anything, were still in place.

Marcia or Marcy, or whatever, wasn’t anywhere to be seen as Kristi crossed to the foot of the stairs. The house was silent. She heard nothing. But the slight scent of perfume still lingered. Kristi thought about calling out, but dismissed it.

A few days ago Ariel and her friends had walked into this grand old manor. Kristi hadn’t thought much of it at the time; the museum had been open. But now…

She turned into the dining room where a long table covered by a runner and candelabra gleamed in the semidark. A built-in hutch in deep mahogany filled a wall, and an arched doorway led to a kitchen that had been roped off. Kristi stepped over the velvet barrier and, reaching into her purse, pulled out her keys and the minuscule penlight on the ring. The beam was small but intense and helped her find her way. She looked around the antiquated room that still housed a wood-burning stove along with a newer gas range. A butter churn stood in one corner and the back door led to a huge porch. Kristi stared out the window but didn’t open the door for fear some alarm might go off.

She listened hard, hoping to hear some noise, but the house was deathly quiet. No sound of air movement. No hum of a refrigerator or tick of a clock. All she could hear were the faint sounds of her own heartbeat and footsteps, the latter muffled by her running shoes.

So where had the blonde gone?

Was she meeting someone?

Was this where she worked?

A place of refuge?

Outside, night had fallen, darkness caressing the windows, the few pools of light cast by the well-placed lamps giving off no warmth. The house felt cold and still, devoid of warmth.

As if it has no soul.

Oh, God, please, she silently chastised herself. Now she was starting to fall into the trap of everything she’d been reading from Shakespeare’s bloody tragedies that her biker of a teacher, Dr. Emmerson, had assigned. Those plays with their guilt and ghosts were bad enough, but then there were the bloodlusting creatures in Grotto’s class. She thought about Grotto, tall, dark, handsome, and brooding, with eyes that seemed to see into a person’s mind.

All an act, she reminded herself. Theatrics.
She continued on, past the pantry door and another that was locked, leading, she supposed, to a cupboard or a set of stairs that accessed the basement. She eased around the back side of the staircase, past a wall laden with hooks for coats, to the front of the house again without making a sound. Once again she was at the foot of the darkened, roped-off staircase. She stared upward into the gloom. No lights burning up there.

Did she dare?

She hesitated, then mentally called herself a wimp. The blonde—Marnie, that was her name—was somewhere inside.

Quickly, before she changed her mind, she stepped over the fading velvet rope and started up the wide staircase. She made little noise as a faded floral runner muffled her steps, her tiny bluish penlight beam guiding her.

At the landing, the dark figure of a man stood in the corner.

*Oh, God!*

She gasped, her fingers reaching into her bag for her mace.

She was about to flee when she realized the “man” was unmoving and she shined the penlight at him only to realize he wasn’t a man at all, but a suit of armor standing guard near the landing’s window.

Kristi set her jaw and counted to ten.

Stiffening her spine, she dashed up the remaining risers to the second floor, where she expected to see a long hallway with a row of closed doors that opened to bedrooms. Instead the head of the stairs widened to a library area complete with narrow, tall bookcases and a reading nook that housed chairs and a window seat. Across from the bookcases was a baby grand piano, sheet music open above the keys, a silent metronome sitting atop the gleaming wood.

Kristi moved past the piano and bookcases. Further ahead was a hallway that led into a suite of rooms: his and hers bedrooms separated by a lavish bath that had obviously been added long after the house was originally built. A canopied bed decorated in floral prints and pillows sat before a fireplace with hand-painted tile in one room, while the other was filled with heavier masculine furniture, a hunting rifle hung above the mantel of a massive stone fireplace.

Lots of antiques.

But no blonde.

For a second Kristi wondered if the girl had dashed in the front of the house, zipped through the main floor, and left through the kitchen.

Maybe she’d made a mistake.

There was a chance searching through this house was just a big waste of time.

And yet…

She reached the staircase again, shining her penlight up the risers to the third floor. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” she said, and began ascending. The steps were narrower as they wound to the upper floor. At the top was the expected hallway with doors on either side.

The hairs on the back of her neck raised as she remembered searching through the intricate, soulless corridors of the abandoned mental hospital, Our Lady of Virtues, outside New Orleans, and the psycho she’d met within. The memory gave her pause. Wagner House was far different from the old asylum, but poking around in the massive old structure reminded her all too well of the events leading up to her hospital stay and her resulting condition.
Holding on to her courage, Kristi placed a hand on the first doorknob and opened the door slowly. It squawked on ancient hinges.

*Great. Announce to anyone hiding within that you’re here.*

The room was decorated as a child’s bedroom. A small white bed was pushed into a corner and a rocking horse with fading paint and hemp mane and tail was placed near the window…and it was moving slightly.

Forward and back on its rockers.

As if a ghost child were riding it.

Kristi nearly dropped her penlight.

In this still house where the air was motionless and dead, the horse was rocking.

It slowed to a stop but Kristi’s heartbeat was rollicking.

The closet door was shut. She licked her lips. Did she dare open it?

What if…?

Holding her penlight shoulder high, she placed her other hand on the handle and yanked hard.

The door swung back.

Revealing a dark, empty space with pegs and a rod, but nothing else. No killer or abductor of women ready to spring out at her, no vampire snarling and showing slick white fangs dripping with blood, no damned ghost child whispering “help me.”

Kristi nearly sank from relief. The power of atmosphere. Wow.

Then she noticed the other door, a glass door separating this room from the next. She walked through and found another room, another girl’s room with a small bed and a table on which a Victorian dollhouse sat, showing off miniature rooms decorated in intricate detail.

She retraced her steps to the hall. The other two rooms were similar, another bedroom with a larger bed and a small wheelchair parked near the iron bedstead, which was covered with stuffed animals, and a fourth decorated as if a boy, interested in boats and fishing, had last resided within. A game of jacks was spread upon a table near an old slingshot.

But, again, no blonde with ashen features fleeing the campus.

Kristi walked to the window and stared out at the night. From this viewpoint, she saw across the quad in the center of the campus and past a few other buildings. Through the trees, she spied the far wall. Beyond that, a roof line was partially visible, illuminated by a street lamp. Dormers peaked from the gables and a light illuminated the room. It was too far to see clearly into the room, but…

Her heart clutched.

*Was it her apartment?*

She squinted, her heart drumming at the thought that someone standing here could stare straight into…

A shadow passed in front of the window.

Of *her* apartment.

*Inside?*
Was someone inside her home?

Anger and fear burned through her and she turned quickly, intent on charging back to her place and confronting whoever was searching her rooms.

*And what if he’s got a weapon? What then? Girls have disappeared, you know.*

And whoever was in the apartment might even now be going over her notes, logging on to the Internet through her computer, sorting through her belongings, searching Tara’s things….

She started toward the stairs when she heard something. A steady noise. Footsteps?

So she wasn’t alone after all.

Quietly, she hurried down to the second level, where the steady ticking became louder and she realized it was too perfect to have been caused by footsteps. At the landing she saw the metronome clicking off the beats of some unheard musical piece.

Kristi’s blood ran cold.

Someone had set it rocking. Someone knew she was here and was toying with her.

*Someone or something.*

Her fingers tightened over the canister of mace and she shined her small beam into the darkest corners and crevices of the landing, but she appeared to be alone.

She didn’t believe in ghosts or vampires, but she did think that someone else was inside the house. Marnie, the blonde, messing with her mind? Nah. No reason. So who else?

She heard the front door open and close and she pressed herself into the shadows of the second floor hallway, her pulse thumping. She heard hushed voices—female voices—and footsteps, more than one. What the hell was going on? Her penlight was tucked under her arm and she gently clicked it off. Carefully, she edged near the railing, looking down to the foot of the stairs, but she saw no one, just heard them pass through the foyer and, she thought, the hallway that led to the back of the house.

On stealthy footsteps she eased her way back to the first floor. She was still gripping her little canister of mace in clenched fingers as she moved to the back of the house and the kitchen, keeping close to the wall.

Empty.

The women had disappeared.

Kristi entered the kitchen and stopped, ears straining, but she heard nothing. She peered through the windows, but saw nothing outside. The answer was the locked door to the basement; it had to be. She tried the handle. It didn’t budge. So the girls who came here had a key.

To what?

She thought of Lucretia’s talk of a cult. Could this be the meeting place, an old manor complete with gargoyles and a haunted history? Could the cult meet here? Her heart raced, perspiration ran down her back, and she gripped the damned mace as if it were the very essence of life.

Leaning close to the door panels, she closed her eyes and strained to hear anything, but the house was again silent as a tomb. She tried the door again. Nothing. She shined her light over the kitchen looking for a key—anything—that might open the dead bolt, but found nothing.

And she couldn’t wait here any longer.
Not if she wanted to catch the person who had broken into her place.

Holding her can of mace in one hand and her phone in the other, she slipped out of Wagner House and started running across the campus, adrenaline spurring her, unaware of the eyes that were following her every move.

_Run, Kristi, run._

_You’ll never get away._

Vlad watched her flee across campus and he smiled to himself. He’d known she was in the house, had sensed her presence, seen her from his hiding spot outside on the overhang of the portico. She was a brave one. A little foolhardy, but athletic, strong, and smart.

One of the elite.

It was only a matter of time before she joined with the others, and though her sacrifice wouldn’t be as willing, it would be complete. So much more satisfying than those thrill seekers who came to him eagerly. Pathetically. They were searching for something only he could give them, a feeling of family and unity, a chance to no longer be alone.

They didn’t completely understand, of course. Couldn’t know what would ultimately be expected of them. But it didn’t matter. Eventually they gave.

As Kristi would.

He stared after her until she reached the far side of the quad, then he slipped inside the window and started down the stairs. Tonight was the choosing. Later would be the giving.

He only hoped that the bloodletting would be adequate….

But of course it wouldn’t.

It never was.

The need was insatiable.
Kristi hit the speed dial button on her phone as she hurried across the street. She hated to be one of those women who always turned to a man, but damn it, she needed a back up and Jay was the only person she’d confided in. Armed with the mace in one hand and her phone in the other, she reached the rear entrance of her apartment house and paused near the hedge of crepe myrtle by the stairs. The phone rang one time. Twice. “Come on, come on,” she whispered just as Jay picked up.

“Hey.”

“I’ve got a kind of a situation,” she whispered without any preamble. “I think someone might be in my apartment.”

“Are you there now?” he asked urgently.

“I’m outside. I saw a shadow in the window.”

“Human?” Jay asked, but he’d relaxed a bit upon hearing she wasn’t in the unit.

“I think so.”

“I’m on my way. Don’t go in without me.”

Suddenly she felt foolish, as if she’d let the night get to her. She was probably overreacting. “Maybe I made a mistake. I don’t know.”

“I can be there in five. Just wait.”

“Jay—”

“I said I’d be there,” he said tersely. “Wait for me.”

She heard a door open above her, so she hung up, switching the phone to silent. Hiding at the base of the stairs, she stayed in the shadows, waiting for whoever was inside her apartment to appear. There was enough light at the base of the stairs to be able to catch his image on her cell phone, or so she hoped. Then she could follow him on foot or in her car and figure out just who he was and what he wanted. If he had a car, she’d get the license plate number; if he was on foot, she’d tail him.

Why would anyone break in to her apartment?

Maybe because it belonged to Tara Atwater.

Yeah, but that was months ago. Why now? And how? The locks had just been changed.

Nerves strung tight, Kristi waited on the balls of her feet, ready to match wits and weapons with whoever it was.

But if he had a gun…?

Footsteps descended and she counted off the steps…ten, eleven, twelve…

And then a pause.

At the second story.
Crap! He must’ve seen her. She hugged the building, straining to hear, squinting up at the staircase where a bulb glowed in the ceiling of each level. _Come on you bastard_, she thought. The footsteps resumed, but they were light and quick, farther away. Not descending.

*What?*

Oh, damn! He’d slipped off the stairs at the second level and was moving along the wide portico of the building to the far staircase, the one located near the crosswalk that led to All Saints. She was off in a shot, springing from the shadows just as a pickup screeched into the parking lot, bright beams of headlights flooding the front of the apartment house.

Jay!

He was out of the truck in a second, his face taut and drawn. “What happened?”

“He’s getting away!” She heard whoever it was clamor down the stairs at the far end of the building, vault over the railing, then run across the street. “That way!” She only got a quick glimpse of a figure in black before he ducked behind the large house and disappeared.

There was a squeal of breaks, an angry honk of a horn, and a man’s shout: “What the fuck kind of idiot are you!” the driver shouted.

“Who is it?” Jay demanded, catching up to her as she ran.

“Don’t know.” She crammed her cell phone and her can of mace into the pocket of her sweatshirt. Her bag flopped at her side as she sprinted, her feet pounding the cement and uneven asphalt. Damn it, she was going to catch the creep!

Running easily alongside her, Jay whistled sharply, and from the open window of the truck’s cab, Bruno sprang, landing on the pockmarked pavement with a soft woof. Kristi and Jay rounded the building together as the angry driver’s car, a red Nissan, disappeared at the next light, veering toward the freeway.

The street in front of the campus was suddenly empty.

“No!” Kristi cried as she dashed across the two lanes and the sidewalk before shooting through the main gate of the college. _Damn, damn, damn!_ He couldn’t get away.

Once past the tall columns, she ran to the edge of the live oaks skirting the brick wall and stopped short. Breathing hard, she scanned the tree-lined walkways and grassy spaces between the buildings, the very pathway she’d just raced across. Jay slowed to a stop beside her, breathing deeply, his eyes scanning the area. Lamps illuminated the pathways, but shadows and shrubbery flanked the old halls and newer buildings. The mist had begun to rise again and there were many murky hiding places. Groups of students as well as those walking alone were heading through the quad, scattered about the walkways and hurrying up the steps into the wide entrances. Kristi looked from the library to the student union but saw no one fleeing into the darkness.

“On your right!” a woman’s voice yelled over the sound of changing gears as a bike whizzed past, the rider hunched over her handlebars.

Bruno let out a low growl.

Kristi’s heart sank as she studied the grounds.

No one seemed out of place. She didn’t see a dark figure darting through the trees or dashing up the steps of one of the tall, vine-clad buildings that comprised the small campus of All Saints. “Damn…damn…damn!” Lurking in the distance, at the far end of the quad and tucked behind some willow trees was the massive dark structure of Wagner House. Lamplight from the lower floor was barely visible.

“Did you see him?” Jay asked tensely. “What did he look like?”
She was glad for his presence as he stood near her, his gaze scraping every visible inch of this section of the quad. “No...he was just a shadow in the window and the blur of a dark figure when I was closer.” She motioned toward Jay’s dog. “Can Bruno find him?” The dog, hearing his name, turned his eyes to Jay, waiting for direction. “Isn’t he part bloodhound?”

“And part blind. But he has a great nose. Maybe if the guy left something at the scene, in your apartment, or something he might have dropped along the way, but Bruno’s not trained.” Jay eyed one knot of students then the next, studying anyone walking alone.

It was useless.

Kristi knew it.

The intruder had vanished.

At least for the moment.

She let out a long sigh and tried to tamp down her anger; her frustration. “I guess we lost him.”

“Looks like.” Eyebrows slammed together as he squinted at a trio of girls walking through the library doors. Jay asked, “So what happened? How’d he get in?”

Kristi shook her head.

He gave her a long look and said, “Okay. Let’s go see what he took.”

“Oh, God...” She didn’t want to think that her computer might be missing, or any of her things. She had her wallet, her cell phone, and all of her ID, but everything else, including her meticulous notes on the abductions, her small amount of jewelry—thankfully mostly costume stuff—and pictures of her father as well as her mother...oh, God, if he took those...“I don’t want to think about it.” Jay would insist she call the police and then she would have to explain about Tara Atwater’s things—assuming they were still in the apartment—and her theory that something of value within them might connect her to the other missing girls, or their kidnapper.

Then there was the issue of her father. Mentally she groaned. Despite the fact that she was an adult, there was just no way Rick Bentz wouldn’t learn about what she was doing. There would be hell to pay.

Squaring her shoulders, Kristi walked back to her apartment with Jay and Bruno. She braced herself for the battle that was to come. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t taken on Rick Bentz in the past. She would just have to do it again. Sooner or later he’d figure out that he couldn’t tell her what to do, right?

But he could sure make life damn miserable in the meantime.

At her third-story unit, the door was shut, the dead bolt in place.

“The intruder has a key?” Jay asked, as there was no way to unlock the door without one. “That narrows the field of suspects a bit.”

“Quite a bit,” she said, thinking of Irene and Hiram Calloway, the only people beside herself who possessed a key. But why would either of them be nosing around her place?

With emotions ranging from anger to dread, Kristi unlocked the door and stepped inside.

“Stay,” Jay ordered Bruno; then to Kristi, “Don’t touch anything.”

“I know.” If they had to call the police for the break-in, the crime scene couldn’t be disturbed.

But the apartment was dark. Still. She hit the light switch and overhead illumination flooded the studio.

Everything was just as she’d left it. Her computer was on the desk, her posters tacked to the wall, Tara’s things
strewn on the tarp on the floor. All of her pictures were where she’d left them, nothing outwardly disturbed. And no lamps had been lit; the only illumination came from the light on the old stove, the one she used as a night-light, the one that had allowed her to see the intruder. It seemed that her small apartment was the same as when she’d left it.

Except that someone had been inside. She’d seen him. The thought made her skin crawl. Who was it? What did he want?

“This doesn’t make any sense,” she said.

“Why?”

She stepped into the room and studied the contents more carefully. “Nothing’s disturbed.”

“You’re sure?”

“I…yeah, I think so.” Her gaze scraped the mantel, bookcases, tables, and bed, before landing in the kitchen, which, dishes in the sink, was also exactly as she’d left it.

“But someone was in here?” he asked.

“Yes!…I think so.” She thought back. “Of course they were. I saw him in the stove light. When I got here, I heard him on the third landing of the staircase, then he descended a flight to the second floor where the porch runs across the face of the building to the stairs on the far end. I don’t know if he saw me or what, but he got scared and didn’t come down the only staircase leading from my door. Instead he took off on the second-level porch.” She walked to the sink, grabbed a cup from the counter, and drew some water from the tap. “Whoever it was had to be up here.” She took a long swallow of the tepid water.

“But not necessarily inside.”

“No, no, I’m sure I saw…” She was going to say she was certain that she’d seen someone inside her apartment, but was she? She looked through the window over the kitchen sink and stared into the night, but it was too dark to see the outline of Wagner House over the wall and through the trees. As there were no lights turned on in the upper floors of the manor house turned museum, she couldn’t decipher the building’s silhouette, let alone that third-story window where she had been standing when she’d seen someone in her unit.

Wagner House was so far away.

And it had been dark.

For the first time since spying someone in the window, she doubted what she’d seen.

“Well?”

“I…I don’t know. I think someone was in here.”

He glanced down at the tarp covering the floor and all of the items placed so carefully on the plastic surface. “What’s this?”

“A long story,” she said, not certain she wanted to share it. Nervously, she grabbed a long-handled lighter and lit a few candles in the apartment. Then, deciding candle glow might be too intimate, she turned on all the table lamps.

Jay whistled to the dog and made Bruno lie on the floor. Then he closed the door and sat, straddling one padded arm of the single chair in the room. “Well, Kris, you’re in luck. I just happen to have all night.”

The crime lab techs had already arrived and Bonita Washington, one of the smartest women Bentz knew, was barking out orders, making certain no one disturbed “her” scene. “I mean it,” she was saying, “you all wear booties and you don’t touch anything or you don’t get it. That goes double for you,” she said, her green eyes narrowing on
Bentz’s partner, Reuben Montoya. African American and proud of it, Washington was a few pounds overweight and all business. “You signed in?” she asked Bentz.

He nodded as he followed her into the small frame house that had been recently renovated. Just inside the door, he stopped and looked around. Furniture had been kicked back, there were scuff marks on the floor, and in the living room a dark stain, most likely blood.

“We checked,” Bonita said, nodding. “It’s blood all right.”

“But no body?”

“Nuh-uh.”

One of the criminalists was taking pictures, another dusting for fingerprints. The story was that the police had taken a call from Aldo “Big Al” Cordini, owner of one of the strip joints in the Quarter. One of his dancers, Karen Lee Williams aka Bodiluscious, hadn’t shown up for work for a couple of nights and he’d sent someone to her house to check on her. No one had answered the door and her car, which she’d told the owner of the club was inoperable, was still in her garage.

The blood on the floor wasn’t enough to suspect a homicide but the fact that Karen Lee hadn’t shown up in any of the local hospitals or clinics added to the fear that she’d been killed. Or abducted, Bentz thought, his mind returning to the missing coeds at All Saints in Baton Rouge.

Not that whatever happened to Karen Lee had anything to do with the missing girls—there was nothing to link them—but because of his daughter, his mind naturally went there. The coeds at All Saints had disappeared without a trace. Karen Lee obviously went down fighting.

They looked over the scene and started talking to the few neighbors who had returned to their homes in this storm-devastated part of the city. No one had seen anything unusual. All Montoya and Bentz learned was that Karen Lee was a single mom with a kid tucked away with Karen’s mother somewhere in west Texas. The child, a daughter, was nine or ten, or thereabouts, and named Darcy. No one knew of any friends or family nearby, any boyfriends past or present. No one knew what had happened to the kid’s father, as Karen Lee had never talked about him.

“So we’ve got a big zero,” Montoya said as they returned to Bentz’s car. “Not even a body.”

“Maybe she’s alive.”

Montoya snorted, climbed into the passenger side, and shook his head. “I wouldn’t bet on it. She might not have been dead when the bastard hauled her out of here, but I’m thinking he’s killed her by now.”

“We could get lucky,” Bentz said as he started the car and rolled into traffic. They’d drive down to the club, figure out who had seen Karen last, and find out who’d been in the bar that night. Chances were that her killer had been watching and waiting, maybe followed her home.

“Luck’s for fools,” Montoya said, and reached for his nonexistent pack of cigarettes before he remembered he’d given up the habit.

“Like I said, we could get lucky.”

Jay leaned forward in his chair and said, “So what you’re telling me is that you broke the law by opening the storage unit, then compromised evidence in a potential abduction or murder case, then trespassed in the Wagner House chasing after some ‘blonde’ that you thought might be part of this vampire cult. Then, though you didn’t find the blonde, you heard voices and then looked out the window, saw someone in your apartment, and came streaking back to confront him.” Jay’s disapproval wasn’t hard to miss.

“Someone was here,” Kristi insisted. “And so what if I was breaking a law or two? I’m trying to find out what happened to those girls, damn it. And come on, Jay. You’re not entirely innocent, are you? You dug through
government records, right?” Kristi was having none of this blame-game BS. She was seated in her desk chair and rubbing the tension from the back of her neck.

“I didn’t put my life in jeopardy.”

“Just your career. Okay, Jay, let’s just get down to it. Someone was in my apartment and I want to know who. And why.” She glanced at the computer where she, while explaining everything to Jay, had logged on to a couple of chat rooms. A few familiar names had come and gone. Deathmaster7 was cruising the rooms and JustO had lurked for a while but hadn’t joined any conversations.

“Who do you think would break in?” He checked the window she’d left open for the cat, but that would require roof access.

She’d told him that Hiram and Irene were the only ones who possessed keys, so she shrugged and said, “Who else could it be but Hiram and Irene?”

“We’ll start with them. Meanwhile, I’m staying here.” His long legs were stretched in front of him, Bruno lying on the rug wedged between the daybed and the chair.

“I don’t think that’s such a hot idea.”

“Gonna kick me out?” he asked, a dark eyebrow cocking, damned near daring her to try.

“Jay—”

“That’s Professor McKnight to you.” She gave him a look that caused him to smile. “Kris, I’m not budging, so let’s find some place that delivers all-night Thai or Chinese or Italian food, then call it a night. Either that, or you can come back to my aunt’s house that I’m renovating and we can share a sleeping bag.”

She stared at him incredulously. “Are you joking?”

“You think someone broke in to your apartment,” he reminded her, reaching for his cell phone. “So what is it going to be? Pad Thai? General Tsao’s chicken? Mushroom and sausage pizza?”

“I can’t do mushrooms.”

One side of his mouth lifted. “I know.”

Kristi felt a traitorous glow of warmth that he remembered her aversion to mushrooms, which ticked her off to no end. “I guess…pizza…”

“What kind?”

“I don’t know.”

He got up from the chair. “Figure it out while I go get your bike.”

“My—bike?”

“Your dad asked me to bring it up. Knew you needed it and didn’t want to show up here and be accused of invading your privacy or being overly protective or whatever. It’s none of my business what goes on between you two, but, yeah, I did bring the bike. It could get stolen in the truck. I’ll bring it inside.”

“Great.” Kristi’s tone reflected her ambivalence.

“How about a combination, sans mushrooms?” Jay was already messing around with his cell phone, searching for a restaurant. As he headed outside, she could hear him ordering. A few moments later he returned with the bike. He slammed the door behind him, and Houdini, who had been hiding beneath the bed, finally made himself known by growling low at Bruno. The dog, still coiled into a sleeping position, barely raised his head.
“Another voice heard from,” Jay remarked as he propped the bike against the wall near the bathroom door.

Houdini wasn’t finished. Hissing, showing off his teeth, his back arching, he suddenly shot across the room, a black streak hurtling himself onto the daybed. Then he sprang to the mantel and from there picked his way to the bookcase.

“Is that cat always in a bad mood?” Jay asked.

“Yes.”

Bruno couldn’t have cared less. He let out a sigh and let his chin fall into his outstretched front legs.

Houdini suddenly scurried across the shelf, sending a picture of Kristi tumbling to the floor, where the frame shattered and the glass broke. Frightened out of his mind, he sprang from the shelf, flew across the floor, hopped effortlessly onto the counter, slipped through the partially open window, and was gone.

“Friendly,” Jay observed dryly.

“He’s getting better.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He is.” She picked up the broken pieces and tried to prop them up on the shelf, which was several feet above her head.

“Let me help you.”

“I can get it.”

“If you had a ladder.” He was already walking up behind her, plucking the picture from her fingers, placing it on the shelf.

Kristi was determined to ignore the length of his body, pressing up against her back, the smell of him—a little cologne, a little musk—mingling in the air. He was just too damned close.

Jay hesitated a bit too long for comfort and she thought he was feeling it, too, that hint of electricity in the air between them, the awareness of the opposite sex in such close proximity. She wondered if he, like she, was thinking how she’d broken up with him, thought him too young, too familiar, too hometown while now…Oh, Lord, she was not going to remember how he’d once made her feel, how she’d looked forward to kissing him, to touching him, to feeling his weight atop her….

He pressed closer and she noticed the wall of his chest against her back, the stretch of his arm over her head.

“What’s this?” he asked and broke the spell.

“What?”

He was fingering the shelf of the bookcase, which was higher than his head. “I don’t know…wait…hell…here, take this.” Standing on his toes, he placed the picture into her hand again and, as if he had been totally unaware of the charged air between them, said, “Move to the side.” As she got out of his way, he reached upward as high as he could.

“What is it?”

“I think there’s something up here, like a little niche in the back of the bookcase where it meets the shelf. I think there’s something in it….” He was straining. “Now, if I can just get my finger in there…. What the hell?” He pulled his hand back and rocked back on his feet. From his fingers dangled an intricate gold chain. Hanging from the chain was a small glass vial filled with dark reddish liquid. It glittered and swung in the soft light.
“Oh, God,” Kristi said, her stomach turning. She knew without a doubt that she was staring at an ampoule of Tara Atwater’s blood.

Vlad slipped through the long hallway, the tunnel that connected the abandoned basement lab to another building, another forgotten chamber deep in the heart of the campus, a room few knew of. This secret place was carved out of the ground by Ludwig Wagner centuries before as a place for his own private trysts. Marble lined the walls of the subterranean spa, where warm water was piped from an underground spring to the massive tub in the center of the room. Candles had been lit. There was no electricity down here.

She lay in the middle of the tub, the water lapping over her perfect body, the sound of drips from ancient pipes the only noise over a soft gentle rush of air within an old ventilation shaft.

_Elizabeth._

Flawless white skin was visible in the ripples, round, rose-colored nipples sometimes breached the ever-moving water, only to pucker with the cold. A dark thatch of curls was stark against the alabaster white of her slim, long thighs. No tan lines were visible, no age spots dared darken her perfect complexion. Her hair, black as night, was caught with a bloodred clip and held atop her head.

Though her eyes were closed, he knew that she was aware of him. It was always so. Always had been. Theirs was a bond that started early in life only to grow and strengthen with time.

She’d known of his fascination with her even as a child. She had molded him into what he’d become. The process had been long, taken years, and yet, he suspected that Elizabeth had seen his weakness the first time she’d laid eyes upon him and had understood his needs. Though she’d been a child of seven, and he only five, she’d set about weaving her web upon him and he’d wanted her so desperately—still wanted her—he’d done everything she’d suggested.

Willingly.

Eagerly.

His IQ brushed genius.

Hers was higher.

A fact he never forgot.

Nor would she let him.

She allowed him his infidelities, encouraged him, even sometimes watched him, but she knew, they both knew, that he was hers. Forever bound to do her bidding. He hid little from her, but tonight he would have to tread lightly. He would not let it be known that Mathias, the weakling priest, was balking. He would not mention that Lucretia, the slut, was having second thoughts and confiding in Kristi Bentz, the cop’s daughter, who now claimed she could see danger before it was apparent, that she witnessed it in the color of their skin, as if the blood had drained from their bodies.

Prophetic?

He wondered…if she looked in a mirror, would she see her own pale image staring back at her?

But for now, he would forget.

For now, he would concentrate on Elizabeth.

Her eyelids raised just a fraction, enough that he saw reflections of the candles in the exposed slits but not enough that he could read any emotion that might betray her feelings. The room was cold, only a piece or two of furniture
pushed into the corners, a small bed, a kerosene lamp upon a table, a few books, always the latest books about her namesake, stacked neatly on the table, mirrors abounding. He saw his own reflection in the looking glasses, refracted images that caught his every move.

“I thought you’d come tonight,” she said.

Was there any doubt?

Without a word, he walked to the raised tub and sat upon the marble ledge. The scents of lilac and magnolia rose with the steam from the warm, clear water. She let him touch her, allowed his fingers to slide up the length of one thigh, but when he tried to explore further, to enter her most private of spaces, she snapped her legs shut and brushed his hand away. “Ah-ah-ah,” she said in that throaty voice he found so wickedly intriguing. “Not yet.” But he knew that she was as ready as he was, that her blood ran hot and wild within her.

“Not yet,” she insisted, as if to convince herself that it was not yet time, a time she dictated. “You brought more, didn’t you? From your hunt?”

He stared at her. Surprised at her nearly ESP like qualities.

“You think I don’t know about the stripper?” Sighing, she clucked her tongue.

“You set the rules,” he reminded her, surprised that she had read his mind, had known whom he’d taken.

Her face drew into a little pout. “But a stripper? Really?” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think so. No.” She touched her pointed chin with one wet hand. “I know we are getting low, that we need a refill, but a stripper? Remember, this is an intellectual, as well as a physical experience.”

That, he doubted. She could rationalize all she wanted, come up with lofty excuses, even reasons, but he’d faced the truth: they both enjoyed the search, the hunt, the kill. It was simple. She was into torture more than he; he was into pure, primal, sexual pleasure. Hurting and wounding wasn’t necessary for him. Her sadism wasn’t infectious; he had no real use for it unless it heightened his sexual experience. He got his thrills in the lovemaking and the death.

He wanted to argue that “Blood is blood,” but knew better, so he held his tongue as she deliberated, obviously tempted.

“Use what’s left of the others,” she finally said.

“Then we’ll be out. You’ll have to wait for your next fix.”

“You think this is a drug, that I’m an addict?” A smile curved her perfect lips and it was all he could do to restrain himself from taking her now, before they went through their ritual. But he would wait.

“Do I think you’re an addict?” he asked. “Absolutely.”

She didn’t disagree, just cocked her head, exposing the long length of her neck, the curve of her throat. “Maybe so, but I don’t want my addiction to be tainted, now, do I? Bad blood? I think not. I’ll wait.” She was toying with him now, amused that he was challenging her. “What is it they say? ‘Patience is a virtue’?”

“I think it’s ‘All good things come to he who waits.’”

She corrected, “Or she who waits.”

“Or she.”

“For now, though, there is no waiting. The moon has risen, the timing’s right.”

“Agreed.” He knew what he had to do and what was to come. His heart beat a little faster as he reached for the knob on the top of the tub, the one attached to an iced cooler that he so diligently kept filled. After priming the
pump, he twisted the tap. It squeaked a bit as he opened the valve slowly and saw her expectation in the pulse at her 
neck and her white, glistening teeth sinking into her lower lip.

Slowly, in an uncoiling ribbon, the blood began to flow. Ice cold and thick, it spread its dark stain into the clear 
water, a plume of thinning red that dissipated and curled.

When the first drip of the dark liquid caressed her skin, she sucked in her breath, her abdomen shrinking, her eyes 
closing with the ecstasy, for she believed, like the woman whose name she had taken, that cleansing with the blood 
of other younger, more vital women would elongate her life, keep her skin clear and flawless, and renew her vitality.

A bloody fountain of youth.

Was she mad?

Or a visionary?

He didn’t care which. Either way, she gave him a purpose to hunt, to kill, and he could convince himself that the 
thrill he felt while taking a life was for the ultimate good. For her. And as for madness, had he not questioned his 
own sanity at times? Did he not struggle with reality and fantasy? But then, he knew, the line between madness and 
genius was thin and frail.

He was, without question, her dedicated disciple.

Her tongue flicked upon her lips as the water chilled.

Soon she would be ready. She was already letting out those soft, sexy moans that were his signal. His nostrils 
widened and he drank in the scent of the aromatic water, the blood, and his own rising lust in this dark cavern.

Soon she would invite him into the tub. Her legs were opening and she was beginning to draw in quick little 
breaths.

Soon he’d fuck the living hell right out of her.

He reached for his belt and let his pants fall to his ankles. Kicking them aside, he unbuttoned his shirt, his eyes 
ever leaving her. His erection was thick, his need running hot through his veins, the water over her body now 
murky and red. He stepped inside and lowered himself against her, expecting her to welcome him, for her nails to 
dig deep into the muscles of his back.

Instead she tipped her head upward so that she could breathe against his ear. “The next one,” she said hoarsely. 
“When you take the next one, I want to go with you. And it won’t be some aging pole dancer who works for dollars 
stuffed into her thong! It has to be someone smarter, cleverer, more vital. Not someone whose life has already been 
drained from her. I should never have agreed to your ‘lessers.’ If they are indeed less, I don’t want them.”

“There are only so many I can take from the school,” he protested.

Her beautiful features twisted into a sneer. “Do I have to do everything myself?”

“Of course not.”

But she wasn’t dissuaded. “I will come out with you; I will see that she’s worthy.”

“You’ve already helped me pick them,” he reminded her. Elizabeth, too, had sorted through the pictures of the 
students at All Saints.

“I should never have agreed to the lessers.” She was seated upright now, glaring at him as the bloody water 
drained over her exposed skin, running in red rivulets from her shoulders, over her breasts, to the dark pool 
surrounding her.
Oh, how he longed to lap up that tangy sweetness.

But she wasn’t in the mood. “Don’t you get it?” Elizabeth demanded, hands rising from the scarlet depths. “That’s why this isn’t working, why my skin hasn’t improved. The blood of those whores is tainted, lacking life.”

“They weren’t whores.”

“Then where did you find them?”

His jaw tightened but he bit back a sharp retort, not allowing her to bait him about his previous life, one that she knew intimately. Only she knew his real identity, only she could ruin him.

Only she could make him complete.

“Of course you can come,” he said.

“I wasn’t asking! It’s not your decision. Remember that!” Mollified, she settled into the bloody water again.

This was new. She’d never ventured out for a kill. But then she was always evolving, never content to let things stagnate or become routine. And truth be told, he was a little concerned about the girl who would next give up her life. Once she’d been so avid and zealous about being a part of their inner circle. He’d approached her and she’d leapt at the chance to belong, to connect with someone. Now, however, he sensed she was nervous. Wary. Unsure.

He might have to change his routine a bit to ensure her compliance. Elizabeth wouldn’t like that. It would be best if he acted alone.

“You’re certain about this, that you want to be a part of it?” he asked again, and Elizabeth smiled cruelly up at him, her eyes in this half-light dark and unreadable.

“Of course.” Her red lips twitched a bit as the now warm, bloody water swirled around her. “I thought you understood. The next time, I intend to watch. Not just the mating, but the surrendering of her soul. The sacrifice.”
“Christ Almighty!” Jay stared at the tiny vial and shook his head. “What in God’s name is this?”

“It’s Tara Atwater’s blood,” Kristi said with conviction. She eyed the angling bit of glass as if it were a precious, though cursed stone, and her stomach curdled as she thought about how or why the blood within it had been extracted. “I’d bet my life on it.”

“Then we have to take it to the police.” He transferred the delicate chain carefully from his hand to hers. “And you have to own up to what you’ve found out.”

“There’s still no proof of murder.”

“I know, but it’s a police matter.” He rubbed at the beard stubble on his jaw and wondered what the hell they’d stumbled onto. “You think this is what whoever was in your apartment was looking for?”

“Maybe. They didn’t take anything.”

“Then the place will have to be dusted for prints.”

“Can’t you do it? You’re the police. You work with the crime lab.”

“Not if you want to nail the bastard, whoever the hell he is. We’ve got to do this by the book.”

She sighed. “They’ll take my notes. Confiscate my computer. Check me out.”

“Probably. I called a friend in the Baton Rouge PD. He gave me the name of a detective I think will help us. Portia Laurent. Seems as if she’s taken an interest in the missing girls and thinks they might have come to bad ends.”

“Finally. Someone who doesn’t believe the cock and bull about all of them being runaways. Now if I could give her something more…then maybe they’d work with me.”

The doorbell suddenly pealed and both Kristi and Jay reacted. “I’ll get it,” he said. Through the peephole, Jay spied a teenager with long hair, bad skin, and a nervous tic causing him to wink. He was carrying a flat box in an insulated pack.

“Pizza’s here,” the kid called.

Jay looked at Kristi and they both laughed. He opened the door, paid for the pizza, tipped the kid, then threw the dead bolt. Meanwhile, Kristi was careful with the vial, placing it in a plastic sandwich bag and carefully setting it on a cotton towel in the kitchen. It creeped her out, thinking it held Tara’s blood, but she didn’t want Jay to see how she felt.

“Before we call the cops, I’m backing up all of my files,” Kristi told him around a piece of pizza, her eyes inadvertently straying to the vial. She was having a certain amount of trouble swallowing. “Not only for my homework and personal stuff, but for everything about the case.”

Jay nodded, wondering if they were sitting in the middle of a crime scene. The box of pizza was placed between them on the daybed while Bruno watched their every bite, hoping for any spillage. He, at least, was unaffected by the discovery of the necklace and vial.

“So why was the vial hidden?” Kristi asked, dropping the remains of her slice back into the box. “Or, was it just forgotten?”
“Hidden. The necklace was pushed into a crack near the wall.”

“Why hide it? Some of the girls who have them—and as far as I know, it’s just girls—wear them openly.”

“You think Tara hid it herself?”

“Who else?” Kristi asked. She wiped her fingers on the paper napkins that came with the pizza, then pushed herself upright and walked to the desk. Once there, she began transferring information to a small pocket-sized jump drive. She chewed on her bottom lip as she worked. “If we’re going to the police and Detective Laurent, then I guess we’ll have to call Dad.” She made a face at the thought. “He’ll have a fit, of course, but at least he’ll make sure none of my stuff is ruined or lost.”

“You’re willing to suffer through his lectures?” Jay asked, closing the pizza box and disappointing Bruno.

“It’s not as if I’m not used to it.”

“In the meantime, as I said, I’ll camp out here.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I do.” He was positive.

“But—”

“Admit it, Kris, you want me to stay.”

“Oh, please.” His arrogance knew no bounds, even though he was partially right.

He wasn’t intimidated. “You still want me.”

She made a strangled sound. “Y’know, I’m fine. It’s better if you just go.” Snagging her jump drive from the computer, she capped it with more force than necessary and stuffed it in a small pocket in her purse.

He shrugged, making no move to leave.

“I can’t believe you said that,” she added.

“You’re still thinking about it.”

“Jay, so help me…” She cut herself off as she walked to a closet, where she found a sleeping bag that had seen better days and a tattered throw pillow with the stuffing exposed, compliments of Hairy S., Kristi’s stepmother’s scrappy little dog. Jay watched her with a knowing air that really chapped her hide. She should just toss him out. But he was right in one regard, damn him: she didn’t really want to be alone.

But she did not want him.

“If you’re staying, you’ve got the chair. You can use the coffee table for an ottoman.” She tossed him the pillow and sleeping bag, then stopped for a moment, regarding him seriously.

“What?”

“Just to be clear. I need one more week before I tell Dad or Portia Laurent what’s up. By then, I should have more information for the police, but if we go to them with what we know now, my hands will be tied. To Detective Laurent and the Baton Rouge PD, I’ll just be Rick Bentz’s daughter playing amateur detective. To Dad, I’ll be risking my neck again and he’ll freak.”

“He should.”

“I need some time,” she stressed.
“I can’t give you any, Kris.”

“Sure you can. It’ll ultimately make the case stronger.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. It’s you who has doubts.”

“We should both have doubts,” Jay retorted. “There’s a lot we don’t know. We’re just surmising, Kris. Let the police handle it.”

“I’m only asking for a week. No one seems to have cared about these girls all this time. One…week.” Crossing the room, she walked up to him, only stopping when the toes of her shoes touched his.

Jay tried not to be affected but he smelled some kind of soap mingled with sweat on her skin. Her flesh was so near to his, and in this light her hair was shot with streaks of red. It was a potent combination. Craning her neck to look up at him, Kristi offered the faintest of smiles, that little, sexy grin that always cracked his armor.

“Please, Jay, it’s important. You can keep the vial and all of Tara’s things, if it makes you feel better. But give me a few more days, one lousy week.”

“And then you’ll cease and desist?”

“Then I’ll take a back seat to the cops.”

Oh sure. Like that was her style.

“It could be dangerous.”

“I won’t do anything stupid.”

That, he didn’t believe. “Kris—”

“Come on,” she begged.

He felt it then, that little twinge of desire when he looked into her wide eyes, watching her pupils, dark and large, as they pleaded with him. Damn the woman. She knew what she was doing to him. His gut tightened and deep inside the wanting began, a light tattoo beating inside his skull, a wave of heat expanding within his chest. Desire grew as he caught a glimpse of the slope of her cheekbones, the intelligence in her gaze, the quirk of her lips.

“You’re trying to seduce me into this,” he stated flatly, trying to keep a rein on his emotions.

“That’s just plain insulting.”

“Is it?”

“Yes! When did you become an egomaniac?” she demanded. Her green eyes snapping fire, she looked as if she might slap him. But she wouldn’t. “If you remember, I was the one who broke up with you, right? It wasn’t the other way around.”

“Biggest mistake of your life,” he assured her calmly.

“The biggest mistake of my life was getting involved with you again!” she blurted. The minute the words crossed her tongue, she regretted them, wished she could call them back. He was staring down at her as if he could actually read her mind, the big oaf. Oh, hell! What was it about Jay that drove her nuts? “I’ve changed my mind. Just go.”

“No.”

“GO!”
“You want me to stay, you’re just too thickheaded to admit it.”

“You make me crazy!”

“Good.”

Talking to him, trying to reason with him, only made things worse. Somehow he’d gotten the upper hand. She’d given him the upper hand. And now he was smiling that damnably boyish grin that she found so stupidly irresistible. One side of his mouth lifted and in that second she knew he was going to kiss her. Oh, God, she couldn’t let that happen.

Never.

She warned, “Don’t even think about—”

Too late. In an instant he’d dropped the blanket and pillow and had yanked her hard against him. His lips slanted over hers in a kiss that sucked the breath from her lungs and left her bones feeling weak.

Which was just damned ridiculous!

And that warm tingle that slid through her bloodstream?

Totally out of line!

Totally!

Yet she didn’t pull away when his tongue pressed against her teeth and she heard a soft, almost eager moan escape her own throat. Oh, for the love of God. Stop this, Kristi, stop it now!

His hands splayed over her back, pulling her even closer, and she began to be lost in the moment, in the desire that swept through her. She finally found the strength to push him away.

“Bad form, McKnight,” she said, stepping back, aware her chest was rising up and down more rapidly than normal, her voice disgustingly breathy. “You’re my professor.”

He laughed aloud. “And you’re of age. Try again.”

“We have a history, Jay. And it’s not good.”

“It’s not bad.” He wasn’t giving an inch as he stood glaring down at her, his amber eyes dark with desire, his lips thin and hard.

“Stay back…I’ll think of something.”

“Your excuses are getting weaker.”

“Jay—”

“What?” His mouth was coming close to hers again.

“You’re deluded,” she said, pulling back sharply. “That’s what you are, McKnight. Blind-ass dumb and deluded. And even if I was interested in you—which I’m not—but if I was, I wouldn’t be stupid enough to get involved with you again. Especially now. Didn’t I already tell you this? You know it as much as I do. We’ve got too much to do. And come on.” She mustered up a disgusted glare. “There might be a little something there, between us, okay. But it’s nothing.”

“It’s something,” he argued.

“Nothing.” She picked up the forgotten bedding and tossed it to him again, pointing to the chair. Then she turned
to Bruno and pointed to the rug. “As for you, you sleep there.” He cocked his head and thumped his tail, but didn’t move.

Jay whistled. “Here, boy,” he said, and Bruno ambled to the rug. “The boss has spoken.”

Kristi ignored the jab. “The way I see it, we don’t have much time. I figure whoever was here earlier was looking for the vial. I bet he’s not giving up. I bet he’s going to strike again and soon.”

“And maybe you’re his next target.” Jay’s tone had changed from playful to serious. “That could be the reason he was here earlier.”

“No.”

“Let’s hope not.” He patted the dog’s head absently, then walked to the bike and rolled it in front of the door. He propped the frame against the jamb and lever, ensuring that it would fall over and crash loudly should anyone try to enter. Once the bike was balanced to his satisfaction, Jay turned and looked at the ceiling, as if searching for divine intervention. Shaking his head, he said, “I should have my head examined, but you win.” His eyes returned to hers, their amber irises steady with determination. “Okay, we’ll play it your way. I won’t call the police. For now. You’ve got one week and not a second more.”

Could she go through with it?

Ariel looked around her small apartment and wondered what the hell she’d gotten herself into. Sure, she’d needed friends and the rush of being in some exclusive, secret cult. She’d even loved all the vampire stuff that went along with it.

She’d never felt so alive as when she’d allowed “the master” to bite into her neck, to let some of the blood flow out and to collect those drops into a vial.

The ritual had been exciting, the feeling of belonging, of doing something dark and sensual and out of the norm, seductive. To have been chosen had been heady and she finally, for the first time in her life, felt like she was someone, that she belonged, that she was even better than a lot of her peers.

Now, she had doubts.

Tomorrow night there was another meeting, one scheduled after the morality play, and she was nervous. Though she didn’t really know who was a part of their secret group, a few girls had dropped hints and she realized that Trudie and Grace and probably Zena were all members of the elite few. There were others, she knew, but had no idea who they were.

She felt more than one frisson of fear slide down her spine. Because, damn it, she sensed that some of those girls who were missing, the ones the press brought up every now and again, had been part of their inner circle. Though she couldn’t be certain…who could? The ritual was so bizarre, so…dark…But the girls were definitely missing. And during the ceremony, she’d heard their names…he’d called them each sister and used their names.

Had they been willing members of their group?

Of course they were! Don’t be an idiot. They’re gone because of what they got themselves into, what you, yourself so eagerly embraced. They’re either dead or—

“No!” she said aloud to the four walls of the tiny walk-up where she lived alone. “No, no, no!” He wouldn’t betray them so. Those other girls, Tara and Monique and Dionne…they probably left because they’d been scared after the vampire ritual, that was it. The same with Rylee, the last girl reported missing. Ariel remembered her as kind of shallow, always worried, truly a lost soul.

Could they really all be dead?
Her heart turned stone-cold as she stared at the tiny room she’d called home for over a year, noticed the cheap faux-designer touches she’d bought to try and make the apartment appear homey, the worn, broken-down furniture that had come with the place, the few pictures of a family who really didn’t care about her scattered on the tables and plastic yellow bookcase she’d put together herself.

Scratching at her throat, her nerves stretched as tight as ever, she looked up at the picture of Jesus she had mounted on the wall near the window. She’d once been so religious, so convinced of her own piety, and now…oh, Father…now…she was lost…

Ariel swallowed hard.

Then there was that Bentz girl. Daughter of a cop. Nosing around. Who claimed she’d seen danger in the color of Ariel’s skin or some such crap! What did that mean?

Her skin crawled as she thought perhaps she might be the next one who disappeared, that something was going to happen to her….

“No way.” She crossed to her minifridge and pulled a bottle of vodka from the freezer. Uncapping it, she lifted the mouth to her lips and took a long swig. She just needed to calm down. She was getting rattled.

Kristi Bentz had done this to her. What a freak. Wiping the back of her hand over her lips, Ariel caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. Her skin was pale, her fingers tight over the neck of the cold bottle, her eyes round with fear.

Maybe she should just run.

Like the others.

How long would it take to pack a bag and disappear?

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t done it before.

Leave now, tonight. Before you change your mind. Hop a bus and get the hell out of here.

Could she just not show up?

She walked to the closet and reached to the upper shelf for her big backpack, the one she camped with, the one that could hold almost all of her pitiful belongings. She was dragging it down when her cell phone rang.

Her heart sank as she plucked the phone from her purse, read the screen, and realized that he was calling.

As if he’d known.

Her heart knocked wildly at the thought of hearing his voice, of knowing that he cared, that he loved her….

She didn’t answer, let the call go to voice mail, and within minutes she heard his steps on the stairs and a rap of his knuckles on the tarnished panels.

“Ariel,” he said, his voice low, melodic, and insistent. “Open the door.”

Shivering, water surrounding her, Kristi tried to swim. She was in the middle of a pool, in a building that was dark as night. A few candles had been placed on the tile rim and their little flames flickered and threatened to die in this cavern.

Where the hell was she?

Gasping, feeling as if she’d been treading water for hours, she glanced around. Was she alone? She looked downward, toward the bottom of the pool, but it was deep and dark, and though she saw no one in the Stygian
depths, she felt his presence. As surely as if he were breathing against her skin.

Swim, Kristi, for God’s sake get the hell out of here!

She kicked hard, took a big gulp of the stagnant air, and began stroking. Hard. Toward the nearest edge. She didn’t understand why, but deep in her heart she knew that something, someone evil, was hiding in the water, skulking in the shadows, where a fine mist rose toward a ceiling she couldn’t see.

Don’t think about it, just get the hell out of here. You’re a strong swimmer, you are.

Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!

She forced herself to cut through the water, her legs to kick, but her limbs felt leaden and no matter how hard she tried, she got no closer to the edge. Either it was shrinking away from her or she was just treading water.

Come on, try harder. Gritting her teeth, she threw herself into her struggles and as she reached over her head to pull herself through the water, the tips of her fingers touched something, got wound in something fibrous, like thread. She tried to pull her hand away, but whatever it was came with it.

There in the dark, nose to nose with her, was a severed head. Tara Atwater’s eyes were open and blank in her bluish face, and from her neck a thick stream of blood invaded the water.

Kristi screamed and tried to disentangle her fingers. Panic constricted her heart. Fear propelled her to swim, dragging the damned head only to bump into something that rose from the bottom of the murky depth.

Another head! Even in the weak light she saw the blond hair as the head bobbed and turned, facing her, Rylee’s wide eyes open and staring. Damning.

Kristi shrieked, stroking away, with Tara’s head still caught in her fingers. But as she shot ahead her crown crashed into something hard. She turned to see Dionne’s face staring at her, blood flowing from her neck, her eyes wide and dead.

No!

Dionne’s eyes blinked and she looked down as if in warning. Then Kristi knew, though she couldn’t see the bottom, that evil lurked in the murky depths.

Swim! Get away! Her mind screamed.

She turned again and saw another disembodied head. Not Monique’s as she’d expected. The ashen face that floated on the surface was Ariel’s.

God, oh, God, get me out of here!

Panicked, she started flailing, trying to scream, trying to get away. But the harder she struggled to reach the gleaming tile, the further away it appeared.

Her lungs burned, her body was heavy. She knew she was about to drown. In this pool of bloody severed heads, she would die.

Before she had a chance to tell Jay that she loved him, before she saw her father one last time.

She tried to scream, but her throat was thick and she was being pulled down, deeper and deeper, the water becoming dark.

Oh, God, help me.

Panic gripped her.
She flailed, trying to surface.

She gasped.

And then she noticed the water was turning red, a deep scarlet color….

“Kristi!” a deep male voice said, and she felt his hand upon her ankle, pulling her further down. Into the bloody depths!

“Kris! Hey!”

Her eyes flew open and she found Jay, dressed only in boxer shorts, leaning over her. She was on her daybed, in her nearly dark apartment, and he was shaking her out of sleep.

“Jay,” she whispered tremulously, the effects of the dream so real she was certain her skin was damp. She threw her arms around him.

“It’s okay. Nightmare’s over,” he whispered, pulling her close and holding her tight, but she knew in her heart, it wasn’t. Whatever evil had invaded her mind was very real and existed deep in the soul of the campus.

Shivering, trying to talk herself out of the fear that still enveloped her, she clung to him and, for a second, took solace in the pure strength of him.

He kissed her temple and she blinked back tears of relief. She knew that if he hadn’t been here, if she’d been alone, she would have woken up and dealt with the stupid nightmare on her own, but still, it felt so good to sink against him, to accept his strength.

“You all right?”

“Yeah.” That was probably a lie; she was far from okay, but now that the nightmare had receded a bit and she was conscious, she wasn’t going to fall apart on him either.

“Wanna tell me about it?”

“I don’t want to think about it. Not now.” She let out a long breath and stared at him in the thin, bluish illumination coming from the stove. The room was secure, smelling of lingering garlic and tomato sauce from the pizza and jasmine from the scented candles no longer lit. The vial lay on the counter. “I’ll tell you about it later. Maybe in the morning.”

“Good.” He was sitting on the bed, still holding her, but when he moved to get more comfortable, somehow his mouth was only a breath away from hers.

Anticipation slid through her blood.

His scent filled her head, and her body responded to his nearness in traitorous ways. Her limbs turned to wax and she just needed, wanted, him to lie down with her. She struggled with the thought of pushing him aside, but she no longer had the strength or the heart. He’d accused her of wanting him and she’d told him he was crazy, but, of course, he’d been spot on. And now, she wanted him more than ever.

His eyes found hers in the darkness. Whatever he saw gave her away completely. “Kris—” he whispered.

She turned her face to him and he kissed her. Tenderly at first, as if anticipating her rejection.

But she couldn’t turn away.

Here in the sanctity of her apartment with the evils of the night locked outside, she kissed him back, opening her mouth, feeling his tongue glide between her teeth, sensing him shift so that one of his big hands splayed against the dip in her spine, just above her buttocks.
Memories of making love to him years before poured over her as she tasted him. Salty. Familiar. Sexy. So male. How had she ever thought he wasn’t good enough? That he wasn’t intellectual enough? That he wasn’t man enough?

Stupid, stupid, girl.

Her heart was pounding, not from fear now, but desire. Her limbs, which had been so heavy in the nightmare, were strong. Anxiously she embraced him, drawing him closer to her. Her skin, which had seemed so wet from the dream’s red-stained water, was damp again. And hot. With the warm perspiration and excitement of physical need.

He shifted, his body poised above hers, one hand stroking a strand of hair from her face. She watched as he swallowed, his Adam’s apple working as he tried to contain himself, and she felt the stiffness of his erection against the juncture of her legs. Hard, thick and straining. Separated only by a thin barrier of cotton.

“Kris,” he whispered again, and in the half light she saw the desire in his eyes, the darkness of his pupils. “I don’t want to—”

“Sure you do.”

“I mean—”

“You want me,” she said, throwing back the words that he’d taunted her with earlier in the evening.

With a groan he started to roll off her, but she grabbed his arms, held him fast.

“It’s four in the morning, Kristi. I’m not in the mood for word games.”

“What are you in the mood for?”

“Don’t do this,” he said.

“What?”

“You know.”

“Yes.”

He warned, “This is dangerous.”

“No, Jay, it’s not,” she said, and lifted her head to kiss him hard on the lips. He didn’t respond, but she felt the heat in him, sensed the tenuous hold he had on his emotions.

“You told me earlier that it wouldn’t work and now, after what I would assume was a very disturbing nightmare, you want to make love?”

“I won’t think less of you in the morning. I promise.”

He half laughed. “Goddamn it, woman, I missed you.” Before she could respond, he kissed her again and this time there was no turning back. She skimmed his boxers off his buttocks and he nearly tore her pajamas from her body.

Her arms wrapped around his neck as they wrestled on the small bed, their limbs straining and entwining.

As they had years before.

It seemed so natural as the old bed creaked and the dog, resting on the rug, snored softly.

Kristi kissed Jay feverishly, warm sensations rushing through her veins, her skin heating as he caressed her. Her breath came short and fast. He kissed her lips, her throat, the hollow between her breasts. His thumbs circled her
nipples and deep inside the wanting heated in a liquid spiral and she thought only of making love with him until
dawn, maybe later….

Her fingers traced the sinewy muscles of his shoulders and she felt the scrape of springy hair against her smooth
flesh as he breathed across her breasts only to take a nipple in his teeth.

She arched and he kissed the tight bud, his tongue teasing her flesh, her body aching with need. The sound that
came from her throat was breathy and primal. Blood rushed through her veins in heated spurts.

Lower he descended and her heartbeat quickened as he parted her legs fuller and lifted her up, his hands on her
buttocks. Her own fingers clenched in the bedsheets and her back arched.

How long had it been since she’d loved him? How many years had she wasted? She cried out as he kissed and
laved her, creating a need so hot she began to writhe, wanting more, aching for all of him.

“Jay,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “Jay—oh, oh, God.”

“Right here, darlin’.” And his warm breath reached the deepest part of her before he lifted her further off the bed,
adjusting her legs over his shoulders.

She bit her lip rather than beg for him to come to her and then as she looked at him, he grinned wickedly in the
night, pulling her hips downward as he met her. In one slow thrust, he entered her.

She gasped, feeling her eyes round, her heart pound so hard she thought it might burst. He withdrew, and she
cried out, only to have him push into her.

“Oh, God.”

Again he thrust and again, his fingers dug into her flesh, his body straining with each hard thrust.

And she met him eagerly, her mind spinning, her eyes open as she watched him moving so easily, pleasuring her
while still holding back. Her throat tightened, her entire body heating as he came to her, faster and faster until she
could barely breathe, couldn’t think. Though it was dark, she saw him, felt him, smelled the pure musk of him.

Faster and faster, he pushed into her, pulled her against him, and her legs wrapped around his neck as she gave
more of herself to him, felt his hand, along with his erection, touching intimate parts of her, sending jolt after jolt
through her nerves.

More, she thought wildly, more!

Faster! Faster!

She grabbed hold of his arms and arched her back as the first wave jolted through her and the images in her mind
flashed behind her eyes. She saw Jay’s face now, the younger, roguish smile, and ropey muscles, and…and…and…
She convulsed then, her body jerking as Jay cried out and collapsed upon her.

He bucked several times as she gasped for breath, clinging to him, wrapped in the scent of sex and musk and
 candles that had burned low.

She kissed him then, on the shoulder, and tasted the salt of his sweat. Turning, he pressed his lips against her neck
and then nipped at her with his teeth.

“Hey!”

He laughed, tousling her hair. “Just messin’ with ya.”

“Dangerous,” she said, still struggling for breath as he rolled to the side. “You don’t know what I was dreaming
about.”
“Oh, right, sorry.” But he laughed again and she rolled her eyes. “Are you going to throw me back to the chair?”

“No…though you might deserve it, you creep.”

“That’s Professor Creep to you.”

She groaned. “I forgot how corny you could be.”

“And sexy and manly and—”

She snagged the pillow from behind her head and hit him with it.

“Don’t test me,” he warned.

She arched a brow. “Yeah? What’re ya going to do about it?”

“You want to see?”

“I figure you’re all talk, no action.”

“Oh, hell.” He rolled over again, pressing his body hard against hers. “Then I guess I’ll just have to show you, won’t I?” He kissed her hard and she felt her so recently banked fires start to ignite again.

She was smiling and feeling safe and secure for the first time since she’d moved to Baton Rouge. “Sure you can handle it, Professor Creep?”

For an answer he kissed her again, then lifting his head, deftly turned her onto her stomach and stuffed the pillow she’d flung at him under her hips. Lying atop her, he leaned forward so that his breath ruffled the hair over her ear. “Watch me,” he whispered wickedly, and Kristi buried her face in the bed and giggled until his slow, sensual movements earned an equally slow, sensual response from deep inside her, and she found herself gasping and begging and urging him to love her more…more…more….
Kristi groaned as she rolled over and stared at the clock. Nine-thirty in the morning... Sunday morning. Who would be beating on her door? And why? She wanted to pull a pillow over her head when she realized she wasn’t alone. Jay was wedged in tight against her.

Images of a night of lovemaking slipped easily through her mind and she smiled to herself.

Whoever it was, was insistent. Go away, she thought, cozily snuggled against Jay, then jolted awake thinking the person outside the door could be her father.

Bruno gave off a soft, disgruntled woof.

Jay lifted his head. “What’s going on?” He glanced at the clock and blinked.

“You look like hell,” she said, noting his puffy eyes and hair stuck at all angles.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

The rapping continued and before Kristi could stop him, Jay rolled off the small daybed and yanked on his boxers.

“Don’t answer that!” she warned, her mind clearing, her eyes feeling as if they had sand in the sockets. She didn’t want anyone to see her half-naked professor answering her door. “Don’t!”

But Jay wasn’t listening. He looked through the peephole and started moving the bike.

“Who is it?” Kristi scrambled into her pajamas. What was wrong with him? “Jay... oh, damn... don’t!”

Ignoring her, he unlocked the door just as she pulled the bottoms over her naked body. Her underwear was in the middle of the floor. She swore under her breath as she shimmied into the very unsexy T-shirt with All Saints emblazoned across it.

A rush of cold air entered the room, but nothing else. He stood, blocking the entrance with Bruno nosing past him, wagging his tail. Through the slit of space left between his waist and the doorjamb Kristi caught a glimpse of a red T-shirt and khaki-colored pants.

“Is there something I can do for you?” he asked.

“Oh, uh, I was looking for Kristi... Kristi Bentz,” a female voice asked. Mai Kwan. Kristi made a face. Great. Her snoopy neighbor. On the prowl again.

Kristi rolled off the daybed, hearing it squeak, tossed the covers over what was a mess of sheets and blankets, then kicked her bikini undies into a corner. Pushing her hair from her eyes, she came up behind Jay.

“You’re Dr. McKnight,” Mai said, extending her hand at that moment. “Mai Kwan, I’m a neighbor. I live on the second floor.”

Jesus! She was introducing herself to Jay? Now what?
“Professor. No PhD, at least not yet.”

“Hi!” Kristi tried to sound bright and cheery though she felt anything but chipper. She stepped around Jay, but Mai’s eyes didn’t so much as flicker in her direction.

She was zeroed in on Jay. “And you work in the crime lab, right?”

How did Mai know that?

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know you two…” She motioned her hand back and forth, then finally looked at Kristi again. “I mean…I didn’t know you knew each other.”

“We went to the same high school,” Jay said.

Too much information.

“Was that why you stopped by or was there something else you wanted?” Kristi asked, wondering how to shut Jay up. To her horror he draped an arm over her shoulders. Damn him, he was enjoying this. She shot him a look she hoped would send him the message.

“I was just thinking you might want to go out for a run or get a cup of coffee or something,” Mai said. “But I see you’re busy, that you’ve got company, so…maybe some other time.”

Was it Kristi’s imagination or did Mai actually look slyly at Jay when she made the last offer? “It wouldn’t have worked this time anyway, I’ve got a ton of homework and then my shift at work starts in a few hours,” Kristi said. Why was she explaining herself? What she did was no business of Mai’s. Kristi only hoped to God that Jay wouldn’t be polite enough, or stupid enough, to invite the other girl in.

Jay suddenly snapped his fingers. “Mai Kwan. You called me a couple of days ago, right? About a piece for the school newspaper?”

Kristi stared at Mai with new eyes and Mai lifted her chin just a fraction, as if she knew the wheels were turning in Kristi’s mind. “Yeah, I did. I’m doing a story on criminology. I’d like to interview you, get some of your credentials and background, then tie it all in to what you’re teaching here at All Saints. How what you discuss in the classroom could be applied to real police work. In the field kind of stuff. I was hoping for an interview with you, then maybe with a local detective, maybe even Kristi’s dad since he’s pretty famous and has helped with some cases on the campus.”

Kristi inwardly groaned. No wonder Mai had been buddying up to her. So much for true friendship.

Jay nodded. “I think I can help you.”

Mai smiled brightly at him and said, “Anytime. You name it.”

So Kristi was supposed to believe that Mai had just stumbled onto Jay here? Or had she seen his truck, watched him come in with Kristi last night, and decided to force an encounter this morning?

“I’ll have to check my schedule and get back to you,” Jay said. “I still have your number on my voice mail.”

“Oh. Sure.” Mai couldn’t hide her disappointment as her gaze slid to Bruno. “Your dog?” she asked Jay.

“Uh-huh.”

“He’s cute.” She lowered herself to one knee and scratched Bruno behind his big floppy ears.

Jay said, “Don’t tell him that. He thinks he looks fierce.”
Mai laughed and Kristi wondered if she’d ever take the hint and leave. “Okay, well…look, I’ll catch up with you later, Kristi.” Then she flashed a girlish smile at Jay. “Nice to meet you, Professor McKnight.”

Kristi said, “See ya,” as she pulled the door shut. She then gazed disgustedly at man and dog. “I distinctly remember telling you not to answer.”

“Embarrassed of me?”

“No…yes…Oh, I don’t know,” she admitted. “Look, I just don’t want it spread around campus that I sleep with my professors, okay?” She pushed her hair out of her eyes.

He nodded, but she could tell he wasn’t taking her seriously. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about,” she pointed out, padding into the kitchen and opening the cupboard, though she knew she was out of coffee. “And admit it, you got off on opening the door.”

“Bristly this morning, aren’t we?”

“We’ had a short night. Remember?”

He came up behind her and circled her waist with his arms. “Vividly. And it was a great night,” he reminded her, his breath ruffling her hair.

She thought about kissing him, about falling back onto the unmade bed, but she really didn’t have a lot of time. “There are just some things about Mai that bug me. She asks too many questions, wants to know all about my personal life, and then she doesn’t cop to what she really wants. Now, at least, I kind of understand why: she’s all about Dad being an ace detective.”

“Kind of?”

“Who knows if she’s telling the truth? I just don’t trust her.”

His hands fell away. “You don’t trust anyone.”

His remark cut harder than it should have. She slammed the cupboard door shut and turned to face him. “Oh, God…I’m becoming my father!”

“Isn’t being a detective what you’re trying to do here? All the”—he made air quotes with his fingers—“‘investigating’ about the missing girls. I’m no psychologist, but it seems to me you’re trying to prove something to dear old Dad.”

“I trust people, though, okay? I’m not…like him.”

“No much,” Jay said, his smile quick.

She narrowed her eyes at him. And she was still irritated with Mai, sure there was more to the story than just some interview for the school paper.

Jay wisely let the subject drop and opened the refrigerator door. Bruno was at his side in an instant. “Sorry, Buddy, not much in here.”

“I keep meaning to go to the store, but it’s a low priority.”

“We won’t starve,” he assured her, and managed to pull out what remained of the pizza, three cold slices wrapped in wrinkled foil. “Breakfast.”

“No way.”

“You got coffee?”
“No. I’m out. I’ve got one tea bag and a couple of bottles of beer, but that’s it.”

“Too early for beer. Even for me. And no thanks on the tea. You want a slice?” He opened the aluminum foil and offered up the congealed pizza.

She took one look at the brown hamburger, with its hint of white fat all stuck together, over withered olives and onions and thick tomato sauce, and her stomach turned. “It’s all yours. I think I’ll grab something at the restaurant. They’ve got a breakfast sandwich called a MacDuff, which is kind of a rip-off of a McDonald’s Egg McMuffin. Maybe I’ll try it.” She glanced at the clock as he, still only in his boxers, rested a hip against the counter and chewed the cold pizza without bothering to heat it in the microwave. Bruno, ever vigilant, sat at his feet, eyes on the prize, tail sweeping the floor whenever Jay looked down at him.

Kristi shuddered and turned away. This hanging out in her apartment was a little awkward. And already one person had found out they were lovers. In the past, while she and Jay had dated, they’d never lived together, so this morning was a little difficult to handle. She didn’t really know how this relationship, if that’s what you’d call it, might or might not develop.

“I’m going to shower. I’ve got a lot of things to do today, which, unfortunately includes work.”

He nodded. “Me, too. At the house.” He brushed his hands together and Bruno sniffed for crumbs on the floor. “Then I have to answer some e-mails and grade some papers, including yours.”

“Be kind.”

“After last night I’ll be harder on you than anyone just so no one can claim I’m biased.”

“Don’t get crazy. And no one’s going to know about this, remember?” she reminded him, though she doubted Mai would keep her mouth shut.

“I’m free for dinner.”

She gave him a look. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“My turn.” He crumpled the tin foil and tossed it into the trash, then located a paper towel to wipe the grease from his fingers. “You’ve been doing all the asking lately.”

“The other night, when I smoked you at darts, that was not a date.”

“Right.” His eyes, no longer puffy from sleep, glittered a deep amber at her obvious irritation. “So I’ll meet you back here. When do you get off work?”

“Two-thirty or three, I’ve got lunch today. Depends on the crowd or lack of it. But then I’ve got to finish a couple of assignments, and I want to go online and check out the chat rooms later.”

“So call me and we’ll hook up.” He walked into the living area, grabbing his jeans off the floor as he passed them.

And just like that they were a couple? She wondered at the wisdom of rekindling their romance, but decided, for the moment, to go with it. “Okay.”

“I want to see what goes on in the chat rooms as well. And Wagner House.”

“Yeah, me, too.”

He scrounged on the floor for his clothes, then shook out his shirt. She dragged her gaze from his bare legs, all sinewy muscle, taut skin, and curling dark hair as he stepped into his Levis. Just seeing him dress did strange things to her insides, and the simple fact that he seemed oblivious to his effect on her made him more fascinating. God, what was wrong with her? Surreptitiously she watched as he threw his shirt over his head, stuck his arms through, and stretched slightly, lengthening the flat of his abdomen as he pulled the shirt over his shoulders.
Lord in heaven, he looked good. Too good.

She turned away as his head came through the neck of his shirt. “I thought you promised to tell me about that nightmare,” he said, patting his pockets and making his keys jangle. Once assured they were where he wanted them, he reached for his shoes. “Remember it?”

“Yeah.” She felt as if the temperature in the room dropped ten degrees when she recalled the bloody pool riddled with severed heads of the missing girls. “Oh, yeah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. “Not now…maybe later.”

He was putting on a shoe but stopped and looked at her, concern etched on his face. “That bad?”

“Pretty bad.”

His frown deepened as he wiggled one foot into a shoe, then laced it up. “Want me to come to the diner with you?”

She shook her head vehemently. “I’m fine. Really.” She just didn’t want to go there, not now. “I’ll tell you about the nightmare later, okay?”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“If you say so.” He finished with the other shoe, then said to the dog, “Ready to go?”

Bruno emitted an excited woof and turned circles at the door.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’” He winked at Kristi. “So I’ll see ya later.”

She was nodding, expecting him to cruise out the door any second. But he surprised her. He crossed the few feet separating them and grabbed her so quickly she gasped. “Hey—”

“Didn’t think you’d get rid of me that fast, did you?”

“What?”

He kissed her. Hard. His mouth melding over hers, his arms holding her fast against him, his tongue slipping between her teeth. Memories of the night before washed through her brain. It would be so easy to tumble back into bed…. She wound her arms around his neck as he broke off the kiss and touched his forehead to hers. “Don’t forget me.”

“You’re already just a memory,” she teased.

He laughed. “Remember to be careful.” Before she could answer, he released her, and with the dog at his heels walked out of the apartment.

She heard his steps, light and quick, as he descended the staircase. She closed the door, locked it, then, shaking off all thoughts of making love to him, of getting involved with him, of falling in love with him again, she pulled off her oversized T-shirt. She had too much to do to think about the complications of a relationship with Jay McKnight….

Oh, Lord, a relationship? What the devil was she thinking? And the fact that her mind even skimmed the thought of falling in love with him…well, that was just plain nuts. Dropping her T-shirt onto the floor, she stepped out of her pajama bottoms when she felt it again…that silly little notion that she was being watched.
She shivered. There was no one in the apartment and the window shades were drawn. No one could see her. No one.

And yet she sensed hidden eyes, watching her every move.

“Guilt, for sleeping with Jay,” she told herself, but she yanked the bathroom door closed and locked it.

She turned on the faucet, adjusted the spray, and waited for the water to heat. Stepping into the small glass cubicle, she pushed all thoughts of some unseen voyeur out of her head and took one of the shortest showers of her life.

Aunt Colleen’s house could wait, Jay thought as he drove to the cottage to drop off the building materials he had stored in the back of his truck.

It was threatening rain again, the sky gloomy, the defrost mechanism on his truck struggling with the condensation that had collected overnight. As it was early Sunday morning, traffic was thin, a little heavier by the churches.

As far as Jay was concerned his battling cousins, Janice and Leah, could bloody well cool their jets as well. Oh, they’d probably start pushing him again, especially Leah with Kitt, her do-nothing of a husband. Kitt spent his time getting high and jamming with a garage band and dreaming of becoming a rock star. Kitt saw his dead mother-in-law’s cottage as a gold mine and a way to prolong his status as an out-of-work musician. Jay understood that his cousins needed to sell the place and Jay intended to keep up with the renovations, but right now, he had more important things to consider.

Uppermost on the list?

Kristi Bentz’s safety.

Leah’s damned granite countertops and stainless steel appliances were a far-off second.

As soon as he unloaded the pickup and cleaned up, he intended to return to her apartment and go over it carefully with his evidence collection kit, though what he expected to find eluded him. It had been months since Tara Atwater had lived in the unit, and there was no indication that it had ever been a crime scene. But if a prowler had broken in, there was a chance he’d left a fingerprint or latent shoe print or hair or something…maybe.

Jay didn’t know what to believe. The place had seemed undisturbed.

But the studio apartment had belonged to Tara Atwater and she was definitely missing.

“So we’ll just see what we shall see,” he said to the dog as the clouds grew darker. He stopped for a traffic light and waited for a woman jogger pushing a baby carriage in front of her as she crossed in front of him. When the light changed, he beat out a minivan filled with teenagers. Once ahead of the van, he switched lanes, feeling a sense of urgency he couldn’t quite shake.

Later today he planned to install yet another new lock on the door, one that Irene Calloway, her grandson, or anyone else they thought needed a key, wouldn’t have. He also considered installing a camera for the front porch. Afterward he would double-check on the staff of All Saints, particularly Dr. Dominic Grotto. Jay had already retrieved some information, but it was spotty at best and he wanted to do a deeper background check on the instructors who had taught the missing students. Jay also was going to take the official tour of Wagner House while Kristi was working. Something had been going on there last night, long after the museum doors were supposed to have been locked, something that frightened the bejeezus out of Kristi, who didn’t scare easily.

He turned a corner just as a beagle puppy dashed into the street. Jay jammed on his brakes. Bruno fell against the dash. “Christ!” A sedan coming the other way skidded to a stop.

A tall, thin man in his twenties, running with a leash wound in one hand, sprinted between the cars, yelling as he
chased after the wayward dog.

“You okay, buddy?” Jay asked Bruno, his heart beating overtime.

Bruno climbed into the passenger seat again and barked at the disappearing pup while Jay drove the few blocks to the bungalow. At the house, Bruno pressed his nose closer to the glass and wagged his tail.

“You think this is home?” Jay asked, and parked in front of the dilapidated cottage with its sagging porch and overgrown yard. “Nah!”

But then what was? His sterile place in New Orleans?

That wasn’t any better.

Truth to tell, since Katrina, Jay had been restless, feeling as if he didn’t truly belong anywhere any longer. His renovated apartment had suddenly seemed small and confining, and when he’d stayed with Gayle in those months they’d dated, he’d felt as if he hadn’t belonged at all, always concerned about wearing his shoes in the house or spilling coffee…no, her house had been too perfect, everything in its place except for Jay. He’d been the one thing Gayle had chosen that hadn’t fit into her home or her life.

Then there was Kristi’s studio, where he could pop a beer, eat cold pizza on a Sunday morning, or leave his jeans crumpled on the floor.

“So what?” he said aloud.

Kristi Bentz’s apartment was no more the answer to his need for a permanent home than this cottage that belonged to his cousins.

Not liking the path his mind was determined to take, he climbed out of his truck. Bruno sprang to the ground, ready to lift his leg and mark every scraggly shrub and pine tree leading to the front door. Jay unloaded the truck bed, taking out the bags of cement, light fixtures, and cans of primer and paint. He hauled everything inside, then fed the dog, and headed to the shower.

His thoughts turned to Kristi and their night of lovemaking. After all of his warnings to himself, all the mental admonitions, he’d fallen into the same old trap and had ended up in her bed. Just where he’d really wanted to be. And damn it, as a scientist he didn’t believe in a lot of romantic nonsense. Sex, after all, was sex. Some better than others. But he hadn’t really bought into the emotional connection of it. At some level he’d even hoped that after tumbling into bed with Kristi and spending hours making love, he would somehow, miraculously, be cured of her.

Of course he’d been wrong.

Seriously wrong.

With Kristi, there was more to it than pure sexual gratification. Always had been. In fact, if he were honest with himself, he’d admit his fascination with her was worse than ever. “Good goin’, Romeo,” he muttered, yanking off his clothes and stepping into the shower of the Day-Glo green bathroom. He couldn’t help but wish she was with him, that he could wash her body with soap, feel his hands slide down her slick skin, kiss her breasts while water cascaded over them both, and lift her up, feel her legs wrap around him and…

Oh hell. He was giving himself a hard-on just thinking about it. He scrubbed quickly, turned the spigots to cold and braced himself as his erection softened. Within minutes, he towelled off, then pulled on clean jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt from his duffel bag. Socks and shoes followed, and he grabbed his notebook computer and was out the door again, calling to Bruno, who was lying in the overgrown yard beneath a live oak, where a squirrel had taken up residence on a bough just out of reach.

“Give it up,” Jay advised his dog as the squirrel, tail flickering, scolded noisily. “Let’s go.”

On cool days, he took the old hound with him everywhere. Bruno was content to wait in the car while Jay ran
errands. As long as the temperature allowed, Jay figured it was better than having the dog cooped up in the semi-
gutted bungalow for hours at a time.

He pulled out of the driveway and onto the street. Next stop: the hardware store followed by Wagner House,
which would be open in the afternoon. He thought he might even stop by the diner for lunch, see Kristi in action.

She would hate it.

And he would love it.

Kristi didn’t have much time, but on the bike she zipped across campus, cutting between pedestrians, joggers, and
skateboarders to Wagner House. Today in the gloomy daylight the house appeared less sinister, the sharp peaked
roof, beveled glass windows, gargoyle downspouts all just part of the architectural style of a bygone era.

Before leaving her apartment, Kristi had taken the time to pull up a list of students in the school, locating Marnie
Gage on the roster. Marnie’s picture had flashed onto the screen along with her short bio indicating that she had
graduated from Grant High School in Portland, Oregon, and was an English major working on a minor in theater.

Again, the English Department, Kristi had thought. It didn’t take a PhD to figure out that the girl probably was or
had been in the same block of classes as Kristi and the missing coeds were. Kristi was starting to believe the entire
department was somehow involved in this underground vampire cult or whatever it was.

“That’s ridiculous,” she told herself.

But was it?

Her skin crawled, and she sensed again that someone was watching her. Someone hidden. Someone evil.

She felt a chill, a cold gust of wind brush against the back of her neck. As the clouds overhead threatened rain, she
propped her bike against the wrought-iron fence and tried the gate. It was locked. Of course. No matter how hard she
pushed on it, or fiddled with the clasp, it didn’t budge, and the hours of operation posted on the gate indicated the
museum wouldn’t be open until two this afternoon. Supposedly the museum closed at five-thirty PM.

*But it had opened last night.*

Kristi had damned well been inside. Along with Marnie Gage and at least one other person, maybe more. Had
they been in the basement, down the locked staircase? Was it the meeting of the cult Lucretia had mentioned, then
denied?

“Weird, weird, weird,” she told herself. Staring through the wrought iron bars of the fence, she studied the old
foundation but could only see the tops of basement windows, dark and opaque. Probably used for storage. Not secret
meetings where blood was let and vampires revered.

But the blond girl, Marnie Gage, had gone inside, and someone had been following her throughout the upstairs
rooms. Could Marnie have double back and gotten behind her? But why? Was this place somehow connected to the
missing girls, the damned cult that Lucretia now disavowed?

In that second she felt cold as death. Hadn’t she seen Ariel hanging around here? Then Marnie? Both whose faces
had turned the color of death. That left Lucretia. Kristi didn’t know of any connection she had with the old house,
but she was willing to bet her life that her ex-roommate was somehow involved with this old, dark edifice.

*So how does Dad fit in?*

Kristi curled her fingers around the bars of the fence. As far as she knew Rick Bentz had nothing to do with
Wagner House or anything else concerning All Saints College. He’d solved a couple of crimes connected to the
campus, and sure, his only daughter was enrolled here, again, but that was it. Her vision of his gray pallor didn’t
seem connected.
So, maybe her visions had nothing to do with premonitions of death, and everything to do with something wrong in her own mind, something that had just slipped out of gear after she’d been attacked.

So many questions.

And no answers.

“She nearly jumped out of her skin.”

She nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Two o’clock,” Father Mathias said, glancing to the sky as the wind picked up. “Wagner House opens then.”

“I know, but I have to get to work and I…” She thought fast. “Well, I think I lost my sunglasses here. They’re prescription.”

“I’ll check the lost and found.” He unlocked the gate and as he did, the sleeve of his cassock fell away, exposing part of his arm and a bandage.

“What happened?” she asked automatically. He pulled back his keys and the sleeve covered his arm again.

“Nothing. An accident. From yard work,” he said quickly. “Electric hedge clippers. Guess I’ll wait for the gardener next time. Come back after two when the docent is here. If I find your glasses, or she does, you can pick them up then.”

“But I need them for work. I’ll come with you.”

“Really, child,” he said, “I can’t allow it. Two o’clock isn’t that far away. I’m just stopping by for a second myself.” He slipped through the door and up the steps as the gate swung shut. On impulse she stopped it from latching with her foot and waited until Father Mathias disappeared within.

As soon as she heard the door of the mansion close behind him, she swept into the fenced yard and walked quickly around the perimeter of the house. What she expected to find, she didn’t know, but she peered through the basement windows just the same, spying nothing in the darkness, feeling like a fool.

At the back porch, she considered walking up the steps and trying the door when she heard a voice inside. A woman’s voice. “I told you to take care of it,” she said. “Don’t make it my problem!”

The other voice was muted, farther away. Male.

Father Mathias Glanzer’s?

Or someone else’s?

Kristi strained to listen as the first drops of rain started to fall, but she couldn’t hear what the man was saying, only the woman’s sharp, quick response. “The whole thing backfired, I know, but you should be able to handle it. The sooner the better. Before the police get involved. Do you know what would happen then? Do you?”

Again the male voice.

Arguing?

Explaining?

Coming up with excuses?

Kristi’s heart was pounding, her nerves strung tight. She was about to risk it and climb up the steps when she felt it again—that eerie sensation that she was being watched. Slowly she dragged her gaze up the side of the building, past the kitchen and second floor to a window high above, shadowed by heavy eaves. Her blood ran cold as she saw
a face…a girl’s face…white as death, taut with fear.

Ariel O’Toole?

Or someone else. The image was too blurry.

Kristi blinked and she was gone, the window empty.
“Sunday morning, not even noon, and how did I know that you’d be here?” Del Vernon asked as, holding a manila envelope, he rested a hip against Portia Laurent’s desk at the station.

“Are you insinuating I don’t have a life?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Nah. Just that you’re a workaholic.”

“It takes one to know one.” She leaned back in her chair and stared up at him. Lord, he was a handsome man. Eyes as dark as midnight, long straight nose, a shaved head that seemed flawless, and a mouthful of white straight teeth.

“Possibly.”

“So what brings you in here? It is Sunday morning.”

“Thought you might want to see this.” He handed her the envelope. “I think you might just have your body.”

“My body?”

“Well, part of one anyway.”

She opened the flap and slid out an eight-by-ten photograph. “Sweet Jesus,” she said as she stared at the picture of what appeared to be a slightly decomposed arm. Female arm. Left hand. Polished fingernails.

“Where did you find this?”

“In the stomach of an illegally caught alligator. We’re lucky the hunter, a yahoo named Boomer Moss, had the smarts to turn it in. We’re searching that part of the swamp where the gator was caught, but don’t have a whole lot of expectations. The animal could have moved from one spot to the next, the body drifted down there…. From the looks of it, we’re guessing the arm was in the water less than a week, but the ME isn’t certain, at least not yet.”

Portia was rapidly getting up to speed. She’d come into the department on a Sunday to catch up on paperwork, which she instantly shelved. “So you think it’s one of the girls from All Saints? That our perp captures them, keeps them alive, then finally kills them and gets rid of the bodies,” she said, feeling vindicated, excited, and sick inside all at once. She, too, had held out hope that the girls had run off, left town, hoping to disappear, but as she stared at the picture of the severed arm, she knew better. She could only pray that if the scenario she’d just outlined was the truth, some of the missing coeds were still alive.

Tortured, maybe.

Traumatized, certainly.

But alive.

Del frowned, his jaw set and hard. “We don’t have many answers yet. There’s a chance this doesn’t belong to any of the girls from All Saints.”

She sniffed. Her gut told her this belonged to Tara, Monique, or Rylee. The only missing coed excluded was Dionne, because of her race. The arm in the photo belonged to a white girl. A girl who liked plum-colored fingernail polish.

“If he doesn’t keep them alive, then why wouldn’t the arm show more signs of decomposure?”
“Don’t know, but it doesn’t look like he cut the limbs. It’s ripped and bitten, consistent with the alligator’s jaw.”

Her stomach clenched. None of the scenes running through her mind were good.

“The ME thinks the gator did it. But there wasn’t any more of the body in his digestive system. We checked.”

“So what finally convinced you that this arm belongs to one of the girls from All Saints?”

“Missing persons says no other white girl has been reported missing recently, at least not up here; New Orleans has a few. I’ve already checked with the local hospitals and no one’s shown up missing an arm, from an accident with a hungry gator or otherwise. But here’s something odd: the first thing the ME noticed was that there was no blood in the arm.”

“Maybe it drained out when it was severed.”

“Uh-uh. ME says the severing occurred post mortem.”

“Drained in the gator’s stomach? Degraded by the time in the water or with stomach acid?”

“The ME’s double-checking,” Del said, but he sounded doubtful.

“What about distinguishing marks?” Portia said. “Monique had a broken finger, left index, an old softball injury. If the fingers are intact that should show, and Tara, I think, had an arm tattoo.” Portia scooted her chair closer to the computer monitor and her fingers flew over the keyboard as she pulled up her files on the missing girls. A second later, she was reading the information she’d gathered on Tara Atwater. “Yeah, here it is, a broken heart, but damn, the tattoo is on her right arm.”

“What about the others?”

“I’m looking.” Portia had already started searching all of the notes and documents she’d collected. “You’d think there would be something,” she said, anxious for a clue, any clue as to the girl’s identity. “I assume you’ve fingerprinted it.” She hitched her chin toward the picture of the severed arm.

“Tried. But even if we get a decent print, there’s a chance the girls weren’t fingerprinted.”

“A few of them had records, were busted for drugs…. Yeah, here we go…Dionne and Monique both were hauled in and charged after they were juveniles. Dionne has a love tattoo on her back with a hummingbird and flowers. Surely one of the girls had a distinguishing mark on the left hand….,” But there was nothing obvious in her data.

“I thought I told you to leave this case alone,” Del Vernon said as she closed one of her files.

“It’s a good thing for both of us I ignored you.”

He actually flashed a smile. Del Vernon of the ever-grim, studious countenance and tight butt, rained a quick but sexy grin on her for a second. “It’s never a good idea to ignore me. This time, you were right and I was wrong. You might want to mark this date with red letters because I seriously doubt it’ll ever happen again.”

Uh-huh, Portia thought, as she watched him saunter away.

Ariel? Was it really Ariel’s face she’d seen, looking so scared. And what was she doing inside Wagner House?

Putting her own misgivings aside, Kristi hurried up the steps at the back of Wagner House and tried the door. It clicked open under her hand. It wasn’t locked. Amazed, she stepped inside the darkened kitchen and her heart began to pound. She saw the door to the basement and knew this was her chance. No one knew she was inside.

Yet.

Tiptoeing quietly to the basement door, she reached for the knob.
Too late. The door swung open in front of her. She snatched her hand back as Father Mathias stepped into the kitchen.

“Oh!” he whispered, startled. Then, focusing on Kristi, he scowled harshly. “You again. Didn’t I just tell you the museum wasn’t open?”

“Yes, but my glasses—”

“I’ve already looked in the lost and found. They weren’t there.” Obviously irritated, he closed the door tightly shut behind him. “Now, really, you have to leave.”

“Father?” A female voice. The same voice she’d heard through the window. “What’s going on?” Wrapped in a black coat trimmed in dark fur, a tall regal-looking woman strode swiftly into the kitchen. Deep-set eyes glared down an aquiline nose. “Who are you?” she asked, then before Kristi could answer, followed up with, “And what are you doing here?”

“She claims she lost her glasses on the last tour.”

One of the woman’s eyebrows lifted in superior disbelief. “When?”

Kristi had the lie ready. “Last weekend. I came by with friends.”

“Really?” Her smirk revealed her skepticism. “Well, the staff will certainly look for them. Come back when the docent is on duty.”

“I really need them for work.” Kristi stood her ground. “Today.”

“Yes, yes, so you said, but I told you the house is closed,” Father Mathias insisted.

“So you’re not the docent?” Kristi ventured. She didn’t like this woman, with her perfect complexion and officious attitude, but she wanted to know more about her.

“Of course not,” the woman said. “That’s Marilyn Katcher!”

Kristi pushed. “So why are you here? For a place that’s closed to visitors, there seems to be a lot of people running around.”

“I’m Georgia Clovis,” she bit out. “Georgia Wagner Clovis.” She said it as if it were supposed to mean something to Kristi.

Mathias, like a puppet on a string, said quickly, “Mrs. Clovis is a descendant of Ludwig Wagner and—”

“Direct descendant,” she corrected frostily, her red lips turned down at the corners.

“Direct descendant of the man who so graciously donated this house and property to the archdiocese to establish the university.”

Kristi gave Georgia a bland “So what?” look.

“Mrs. Clovis, along with her brother and sister, still sit on the board of Wagner House. Very important to All Saints. Now, if you’ll come back when Mrs. Katcher is here...”

“Someone’s upstairs,” Kristi said, just to gauge their reaction. She’d come this far, might as well go for broke. She didn’t think she would get another chance and she wasn’t frightened of either of these two people. Father Mathias was often brooding, but he seemed like a weak man. Georgia Clovis, tall, slim, her dark hair twisted onto her head, tried her best to be intimidating—and wasn’t half bad at it—but Kristi wasn’t about to be cowed.

“No one else is in the house,” Georgia said through her teeth. “Not that it’s any business of yours.”
“I saw someone in the window. That’s why I came inside. It was a girl, er, woman, and she looked scared out of her mind.”

“Impossible.” She shook her head, but the perfect facade cracked just a bit. “You imagined it.”

“I didn’t.”

“A play of light,” Mathias put in, shooting a look at Georgia.

“One way to find out.” Without waiting for any kind of permission, Kristi headed through the dining room and up the stairs.

“Wait a minute. You can’t go up there!” Georgia called after her, high heels clicking across the hardwood floors. “Wait!” To the priest, she added shrilly, “What does she think she’s doing?”

Kristi didn’t waste any time. She raced to the third floor and once there, dashed to the door of the room that overlooked the backyard, the one where she was certain she’d seen Ariel, or someone, standing near the watery panes of glass.

Father Mathias’s heavier tread was climbing the stairs. “Miss…please…you aren’t allowed…”

Kristi twisted the knob and the door swung open to an empty room. The one that held the Victorian dollhouse. No one was inside, but the dollhouse, which had been closed, was now open, the perfectly furnished rooms on display.

“Hello?” Kristi called, her voice disturbing dust motes but nothing else. She checked the closet, just to be sure.

Empty.

But near the window overlooking the back porch hung a black cloak with a white bag above it, both facing the window…as it had the night before when she’d searched the house.

Had she been mistaken?

Thought she’d seen a face when it was just this cloak and bag?

“Satisfied?” Georgia demanded, entering with Father Mathias on her heels, her pale skin flushed from the exertion of the rapid climb. “No one hiding in the corners? No ‘scared out of her mind’ girl?” She was shaking her head. “I know the stories that run rampant about the house and yes, in the early 1930s a person was killed here, the murder never solved. I also know about the group of ‘Goth’ kids who hang out around here, fascinated by the architecture and history of the house, but it really is just a museum, filled with very personal and valuable artifacts. Therefore we can’t have anyone, including you, running wildly through it. If you really did lose your glasses, which I suspect is a total fabrication, please return when Mrs. Katcher is on duty and she can help you.”

“Last night, a girl walked into the house,” Kristi insisted. “I saw her. Followed her. She came inside and…disappeared. Maybe…into the basement?”

“Another girl? Or the same scared one?”

“Different.”


“I thought you could tell me.”

“It’s only used for storage.”

Father Mathias hovered in the doorway, almost as if he were afraid to enter. “I was just in the basement and it’s not empty,” he said to Georgia. “I found evidence of rats. I think we should call an exterminator, but other than old furniture and crates, boxes, there’s nothing downstairs.” Reaching into a deep pocket within his alb, he found a
handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead.

“No, call someone to take care of the problem.” Georgia was dismissive. “As for you…” She glared at Kristi. “Who are you?”

Kristi thought about lying but it was too easily checked. “Kristi Bentz. I’m a student here.”

“Well, Kristi, if you really did come into the house last night, you were trespassing,” Georgia said, her lips pursed at the corners. “If we find anything missing, believe me, we’ll contact the police and your name will come up.”

“Don’t you have security cameras?” Kristi asked. “You know, with all your valuable things, I’d guess you’d have some kind of security system in place. Check the tape.”

“Until now, we haven’t had to have one,” Father Mathias said coolly.

Georgia sniffed. “Obviously it’s something we need discuss at the next board meeting. Now, Miss Bentz, it’s time you left.”

“I’ll escort you outside,” the priest offered. “I’m already running late. It’s past time to get ready for mass.”

There wasn’t any point in arguing and Kristi, too, needed to leave.

As Father Mathias ushered her out, including opening the door for her, Georgia Clovis followed, her coat billowing around her as she headed toward a sleek black Mercedes.

Kristi had thought about mentioning Marnie Gage’s name but had decided to keep it to herself for the time being. Maybe she could talk to Marnie. Not interrogate her, but cozy up to her, befriend her, although so far the plan of permeating what appeared to be the inner circle of the vampire “cult” hadn’t worked. Not only Ariel, but now Lucretia, was avoiding her like the plague.

The chapel bells chimed, breaking into her thoughts, as the priest hurried down the steps to unlock the gate and hold it open. “Be careful,” he said under his breath, so low she almost didn’t hear the words. “God be with you.”

She turned, but he was already hurrying toward the church and she didn’t have any time to chase after him. Strapping on her helmet, Kristi swung onto her bike, picking up speed and clicking through the gears as the cold rain began to fall more steadily, bouncing on the pavement and running beneath the collar of her jacket. Father Mathias’s warning echoed in her mind as she headed for the diner. Her tires hummed across the cement and brick walkways, cutting through puddles beginning to form. She skirted the library, then sped across a parking lot before catching a main street and riding the six blocks to the back lot of the restaurant.

What was the priest trying to tell her? Obviously to back off. But there was more, she knew, secrets he wasn’t about to share.

Her heart was beating like crazy as she swung off the bike and locked it against a post. Tearing off her helmet and wiping the rain from her face, she headed inside—and straight into the heart of chaos. The Bard’s Board was filled with the brunch crowd, people standing and waiting for tables, the line cooks working like mad, the wait staff searching for orders and hurrying through tables, the bus people clearing tables as soon as they were vacated.

One of the ovens had given up the ghost the night before and one of the fry cooks, who considered himself a handyman, was trying to fix it. He was on his knees, head inside, his big size-thirteen feet sticking in the small galley so that everyone had to step over him.

Kristi whipped on her apron, washed her hands, and grabbed her notepad. She didn’t have time to think about what had happened at Wagner House.

“Thank God you’re here!” Ezma breezed by with a tray of water glasses. “The new people can’t keep up.”

“I thought I was one of the new people.”
“I’m talking about Frick and Frack,” Ezma said under her breath. “They’re useless.” She slid a glance at two waiters. One, Frick, was a tall thin boy who looked no older than sixteen and was really named Finn. Frack was a girl somewhere around twenty with rosy cheeks, springy brown curls, and curves she didn’t bother to conceal. Her real name was Francesca, but it didn’t seem to fit. Even during this mad rush, Frick-Finn was taking time to flirt with her and Frack-Francesca was eating it up, ignoring her tables.

Kristi scanned the specials. “This is it?” she asked, noting that some of the more popular items, shrimp crepes, crab cakes, and crawfish etouffee had been erased from the chalkboard, the faint outline of their Shakespearean names still visible.

“With the oven on the fritz we’re down to a lot of the stuff that was made earlier or can be sauteed. Push the jambalaya and catfish fritters.”

“Okay.”

“Can I get a clean table?” the harried hostess asked of the kitchen staff. She was standing a few steps from the front desk and door where patrons were clustered, waiting. “What about thirteen? Or eleven? I’ve got people who’ve been waiting out front for a half hour!”

“I’m on it.” Miguel, one of the busboys, hurried past and was picking up dirty plates, glasses, and flatware before Kristi finished tying her apron.

Francesca looked up, spied Kristi, and immediately went into complaint mode. “It’s about time you showed up,” she chastised, breaking up her tête-à-tête with Finn. “It’s been a nightmare this morning, let me tell you,” she said, as Finn, with a quick look over his shoulder, turned back to the tables in his section of the restaurant.

Francesca’s cheeks were flushed as she untied her apron, further showing the area of her blouse where the fabric gapped, offering a peek at her lacy bra and cleavage. “People with kids, and I mean young kids, babies, and the tips have been miserable. Just awful. I should have stayed home and called in sick.” She stuffed her dirty apron in the laundry basket and reached for her jacket.

Waa, waa, waa, Kristi thought, wondering if the lousy tips had anything to do with the girl’s obvious lack of interest in her job.

Unfortunately Ezma and Francesca’s evaluation of the situation was spot on. With one oven disabled and a cook out of commission as he tried to fix it, the finished orders were slow to reach the window where the waiters were to pick them up.

Worse yet, in Kristi’s section, she saw familiar faces. Dr. Croft, the head of the English Department, had just been seated along with Dr. Emmerson, her Shakespeare 201 instructor with the biker dude persona. Today, though, he’d shaved, his usual T-shirt given up in favor of a gray sweater, his hair still a carefully planned mess. The third member of the group was Dr. Hollister, Jay’s boss, head of the fledgling Criminal Justice Department.

A toxic trio, Kristi thought as she greeted them, handed out menus, and smiling, rattled off the specials that still remained. “…and if you’re interested in jambalaya, I hear it’s wonderful today.”

“Is it hot?” Dr. Emmerson asked, his eyebrows lifting, almost flirting. “Spicy?”

“No more than usual, but yes, I think it’s got a little kick to it.”

“Just the way I like it.”

“Down boy,” Natalie Croft said, her lips twitching a bit.

Yuck, Kristi thought. But at least it drove out all thoughts that she was way behind in his class, and she had several assignments that she hadn’t yet read.

“Can I get you anything to drink?”
“Mmm. I’ll have sweet tea,” Dr. Croft said. She was a tall woman, with porcelain skin, dark hair, with just the beginnings of crows feet showing in the corners of her eyes. Her nose was patrician, her demeanor a little standoffish.

“Coffee for me,” Dr. Hollister said, slipping a pair of rimless reading glasses onto her nose as she studied the menu, tucking a wayward strand of black hair behind her ear.

“Yeah, me too, the coffee. Black.” Dr. Emmerson looked up at her and a spark of recognition touched his face. “You’re a student of mine, aren’t you?”

Kristi nodded. That was the trouble with this damned job, located as it was, so close to campus.

He snapped his fingers. “Shakespeare, right? Two-oone?”

“That’s right.”

Kristi didn’t want to get into a discussion here in the middle of rush hour at the restaurant, but she didn’t have to worry as Dr. Hollister inadvertently came to the rescue. “Oh, I’d like cream with my coffee. No, make it skim milk, is that possible?” She gazed questioningly at Kristi over the tops of the half-glasses perched on her nose.

“Not a problem. I’ll be right back with it.”

“Miss!” a petulant man’s voice called from a table in the next section. “We’ve been waiting here for ten minutes and would like to order. Can you help us?”

Kristi nodded. “I’ll get your server.”

“Can’t you just take the order?” he asked, checking his watch. He was seated with a grumpy-looking heavyset woman and two preteen kids who were already beginning to fiddle and slap at each other.

“Stop that!” the woman said sharply.

The older kid ignored her and stuck his tongue out at his sister. She shrieked as if he’d slapped her.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Marge, control them, will you?” the man insisted as Kristi flipped the page of her notepad.

“Sure, I can take your order,” Kristi said to stem the tide of pandemonium that was about to erupt amongst this happy little family. “What would you like?”

“Strawberry waffles!” the girl yelled. “With whipped cream.”

“It has a different name. It’s called——” her mother said.

“That’s okay, I’ve got it.” Kristi managed a smile as she hurriedly finished taking the order. In the kitchen Finn was nursing a cola and looking as if he’d just run a marathon. “No time to rest,” she warned him, tearing off the page for his table. “Take care of this. Table seven. And you’d better not mess around. The natives are getting restless.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Figure it out!” She slapped the order into his hand, tried to ignore his I-didn’t-do-nuthin’ expression, and grabbed the plate of drinks for her table, even remembering the small pitcher of nonfat milk. After depositing the drinks at Dr. Croft’s table, she took their food orders, then stopped by several other tables as well, including a surprise birthday party for an elderly woman with a walker who had trouble understanding the Shakespearean lingo her equally old, but spry, husband found so amusing. Somehow the cook-cum-electrician got the oven working again and with him on the line, orders came up faster and tables could be turned. Even Frick-Finn, after a scolding, pulled his act together.
All the while she worked, Kristi felt as if the professors in the diner were watching her. She passed by their table several times and heard snippets of conversation.

“...might have to make a few changes...” Natalie Croft said as she bit into her beignet and wiped the extra honey from the corner of her mouth.

A few minutes later, she was still speaking. “...well, I know, but it was Father Tony’s idea. Trying to make the school more interesting and Grotto’s a natural. I don’t know why Anthony’s so insistent that we continue with the courses, but it is popular....” She lowered her voice as Kristi stopped by to refill the coffee cups.

The conversation caught Kristi’s interest but she couldn’t eavesdrop as her tables, though clustered near each other, were filled with noisy patrons needing service. However as she carried out trays of plated food, refilled glasses and tallied up bills, she noticed that the three professors were deep in discussion, serious and unsmiling. They declined dessert, gave her a reasonable tip, and left as the crowd finally began to thin.

She was about to close out her section when Jay strolled into the restaurant, big as life. He spoke with the hostess and landed one of the small two-person tables in her part of the restaurant.

Kristi propped one fist against her hip. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Didn’t get much to eat at your place,” he said with a wink.

“Neither did I.” She’d been so busy she hadn’t noticed how hungry she was, but now that things had slowed down, her stomach rumbled.

“So what do you suggest?”

“That you wait for me outside and take me somewhere else for lunch.”

“Better yet, we’ll order from the to-go menu and take it back to your place. There’s something I want to show you.”

“Give me fifteen minutes to close out the section,” she said as he scraped back his chair, catching the evil eye from the hostess who had seated him specifically where he’d requested.

Kristi finished up in no time, untied her apron, tossed it into the laundry hamper, and waved good-bye to Ezma, who was pulling a double shift. A few minutes later, getting soaked by the rain, she steered her bike to Jay’s pickup, tossed it into the back, and pushed Bruno out of the way as she climbed inside. The cab was already filled with the spicy scent of tomatoes, garlic, and seafood. “Don’t tell me, the hostess suggested the jambalaya.”

“Sounded good.” Jay backed out of his parking space while Bruno shifted on her lap and they headed to her apartment.

*Just like a married couple,* she thought idly while the windshield wipers battled the rain. *The husband comes and picks up his wife after work.*

“I was late for my shift today,” she said as the radio played some country song, “because I stopped by Wagner House.” She gave him a quick, abbreviated version of what had happened and Jay listened quietly as he drove the short distance to Kristi’s place. When she’d finished, ending with Father Mathias’s warning, his expression was sober. “Maybe it’s time we went to the police.”

“With what? Some kind of warning about me not trespassing? I don’t think either Georgia Clovis—oh, excuse me, Georgia Wagner Clovis—and Father Mathias Glanzer are any big threats.”

“I’ve met Georgia,” he said. “I wouldn’t underestimate her.”

“You met her?”
“At one of the faculty/administration meet and greets. She was there, along with her sister and brother.” He glanced at Kristi. “As far as I could tell, there’s no love lost between the Wagner heirs. They avoided each other all night. Georgia seems like the alpha dog of the group.”

“Is that your way of calling her a bitch?”

One side of his mouth twitched. “The rest of the clan wasn’t all that much better. Her brother, Calvin, looked uncomfortable as hell, as if he were at the get-together under duress, and the younger sister, Napoli, kept to herself, but I had the distinct feeling she didn’t miss much. An odd group. All hung up on being ‘Wagners’ like the name held the same weight as Rockefeller or Kennedy.”

“Like them, did you?” she teased.

“They were a laugh riot.”

She grinned and scratched Bruno behind his ears. “So what are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I have to work this afternoon. Grade some papers.”

She groaned, knowing hers would be among them. “Give me an A plus, would ya? I could use one.”

“I told you I’m grading you the hardest.”

“Hmmm. What can I do…to change your mind?”

His lips curved and he pretended to think hard for a minute. “I’ll take sex.”

“Sex for an A plus?”

“No. I’ll just take sex.”

Kristi made a strangled sound. “I’m not that easy, Professor McKnight. You might want to call Mai Kwan. She was all about you this morning. I think she’s got a crush.”

“A ‘crush,’” he repeated thoughtfully. “How about you…Student Bentz?”

“Nah.”

“You’re a bad liar. You’ve got a major crush on me.”

“A complete fabrication.”

He grinned like a dope and she had to look away, her heart tripping over itself with stupid joy. All too fast she knew she was falling in love with Jay, something she’d sworn to herself she would never do. And damn it, he knew it. She saw it in the smug smile that settled over his sexy, in-serious-need-of-a-shave jaw. Damn him to hell and back.

Adjusting the wipers to a quicker pace, he said, “So, I thought I’d work from your place.”

Kristi smiled faintly. The thought of being cooped up with him for the rest of the afternoon with rain beating on the eaves, maybe a fire in the grate, sounded like heaven. She needed a break, needed to quit thinking about missing girls and vampires and vials of blood. “Sounds good.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll look very studious, very professorish on camera.”

“On camera?”

“Yeah, film,” he said enigmatically, obviously enjoying her consternation as he turned a corner and the apartment house came into view.
“You want me to, what? Take a movie of you? I don’t have a video camera and even if I did, I really don’t have time—”

“Not you.”

“What’re you talking about?”

The truck bumped its way into the parking lot and Jay pulled into an open space by her car, then cut the engine. “You’ll see,” he said, and suddenly there wasn’t a trace of laughter in his eyes. “Come on up.”

“I’m getting a bad feeling about this.”

“You should. But whatever you do, just act natural when we’re inside, don’t ask any questions.” He handed her the sack of food as she opened her door and Bruno hopped to the ground. “Take this. I’ll get the bike.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothin’ good.”

He was right behind her as they climbed the stairs and she unlocked the door to her unit. Inside, everything appeared just the way she’d left it. He parked her bike near the door as she dropped the bag and her backpack onto the coffee table. “Are you going to tell me why the hell you’ve been acting so weird?”

“I just couldn’t wait to get you home,” he said, pulling her close. In her ear, he whispered, “Play along.” Then said in a normal voice, “Didn’t I loan you a textbook, you know, the one on DNA analysis?”

“What book?” she asked, but he was already looking at the bookcase near the fireplace.

“The one you promised you’d bring back, oh…I think I see it.” He smiled and slapped her playfully on the butt, then headed to the other side of the room.

Wondering what the hell he was up to, Kristi did as he asked, opening the bags, removing the cartons, and locating spoons and napkins. From the corner of her eye, she watched Jay walk to the very corner of the room, hoist himself onto the bottom half of the bookcase and prop some of her books up against the fireplace.

“Here we go,” he said while she scooped the jambalaya onto their plates. He shoved several books closer to the fireplace, then wiggled a brick loose from its place to expose what appeared to be a black box, the size of a cell phone or pager.

She started to say something but caught him shaking his head. What the hell had he found?

Tara’s cell phone?

Then why all the secrecy?

A pager?

Pocket recorder?

Her blood froze in her veins. Had someone been recording her conversations? She thought back to all the conversations she’d had, one-sided on the phone, or…Oh, no, last night with Jay…!

“I guess you don’t have it,” he said, replacing the brick and hopping to the floor. “I’ll get it later. Let’s eat…. Hey, how about some music? You have a radio?”

“My iPod player.”

“Good.” He found the player, clipped in the iPod, and turned the volume up loud enough to cover any of their conversation. Stomach in knots, shock giving way to anger, she sat on the edge of the daybed, and he pulled the big
chair up to the opposite side of the coffee table, his back to the fireplace.

“You’ve been bugged,” he said, hunched over the spicy seafood and rice dish, his voice barely audible over the music. “That little black box is a camera.”

She nearly dropped her fork. Someone had been watching her, was trying to see her even now? As she studied, or watched television or slept or…Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, she looked up at Jay and wanted to fall through the floor.

“State of the art,” he said.

She wanted to die a thousand deaths as she thought that all last night, while she and Jay were making love, someone might have been watching. Recording their every touch or kiss. Getting off while they were in the middle of what she’d thought was a private, intimate night.

She thought she might be sick.

Jay nodded as if he could read her thoughts. “Even though we didn’t know about it, you and I just made our first sex tape. How’s that for dirty pool?”
Oh. My. God.

Kristi couldn’t believe her ears. Someone was actually using a hidden video to tape her? The contents of her stomach curdled. “This is insane!” she sputtered, keeping her voice low just in case Jay wasn’t pulling her leg.

“Laugh like I just said something funny,” he instructed, tucking in a forkful of jambalaya.

While her home was being bugged, she was supposed to act as if she were amused? But Jay, she could see, was serious. She managed a weak, stupid laugh, but her heart wasn’t in it. Kristi had seen a lot in her twenty-seven years. Her father was a homicide detective and all her life she’d been exposed to his cases. Some more than others. Then there was the fact that her life had been threatened more than once and she’d almost died recently, but never had she felt so coldly violated, so maliciously used as at this moment in time.

“Someone’s been watching me?” she whispered, anger burning through her.

“Uh-huh, and, unless I miss my guess, they might have done the same to Tara Atwater as well.”

She wanted to kill the bastard behind the camera. For the love of God, what had he seen? Pictures of the last few days flipped through her brain: She saw herself walking naked from the bathroom to the bedroom, or exercising, dancing like a ninny when a great song came on her iPod, studying at her desk. Then, of course, last night when she was lost in the throes of passion, moaning, crying out, begging for more while she and Jay lay entwined and sweating on the bed. To think some twisted voyeur watched as they made love! Her skin crawled, then flushed hot with embarrassment. “Who?” she demanded.

“That’s what I intend to find out,” he said, and she had to strain to hear him over the music. “It’s a remote camera. I don’t know how much range it has, but the receiver could be anywhere. I made sure I put a book over the lens, so I’m banking that whoever it is will try to get back in here and move things so that his view isn’t compromised. I checked around and I think that there’s only one camera.”

“What?” She withered inside. “You thought there could be more?”

“Of course there could, but they’re not cheap. Someone would have to be pretty intent on spying. I thought maybe the bathroom, but it looks clean.”

“This is outrageous.” She wanted to leave. Pick up everything that belonged to her and get the hell out.

“I couldn’t chance taking out the batteries without jostling the camera and letting whoever it is who’s watching us know we’re on to him.”

“So what’re we going to do?”

“Wait,” he said, and that only infuriated her. She wanted action. Now. To get back at the spying bastard and quick. “Two can play at this game.” He was scooping up his jambalaya so calmly she wanted to scream. His plate was almost empty.

“I’m not great at waiting or pretending.”

“I know. But all you have to do is just act natural.”

“Oh, right.” Like that would happen.

“Or we could go to the police.” His voice was still hushed while the music played loudly and he’d stopped eating
long enough to stare at her and evaluate her reaction. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea to let the pros handle this now, and
don’t—” he said, cutting her off before she began, “suggest that I am a pro. We both know that I’m bending the
rules as it is. The smart thing to do would be to call the police, and have them dust for prints as we hand them the
vial of blood. Yeah, they might seal this place off and confiscate all of your stuff, but you’ve backed up the
computer.”

“You said something about waiting. And ‘two playing at this game.’ What’s that mean?”

He grinned and she felt a little better. The gleam in his eye told her he’d considered the options. “Let’s step
outside.” Loudly, he said, “Okay, Bruno, I get it, you need to do your business. Come on.” He whistled sharply and
headed for the door with the dog and Kristi on his heels. Stepping onto the porch, he looked up to the rafters of the
overhang. Following his gaze with her own, she squinted and saw what he meant. Tucked between the spider webs
and old wasp’s nests, mounted over the door just above the porch light, was a tiny black box much like the one that
was mounted in the bookcase near the fireplace.

“I decided that if he comes back, we’ll get his mug on video.”

“That’s your camera? Where do you view it?”

“My place, actually Aunt Colleen’s. We’ll go there and wait tonight. So you might want to bring your computer
and sleeping bag. Deluxe accommodations, it’s not.”

“As long as we nail the bastard.”

“And just in case we don’t get a clear picture, I’ve got another camera mounted over the window in the kitchen,
looking straight at the fireplace. When he turns to leave, we’ll get him.”

“You’ve been busy,” she said admiringly.

“Thanks.”

“He has to be someone who has access…probably Hiram?” She thought of Irene Calloway’s big grandson. He
really didn’t seem to have the brainpower to pull off something like this. And Irene? Would she really spy on her
tenants?

“He’s at the top of my list, but I’m going to do some checking. I got the name and model number of the camera.
Like I said, state of the art, so I’m going to find out who bought one in the last eighteen months or so.”

“By using your connections with the police?”

“See, you are a bright girl,” he teased, obviously not concerned that their little lovemaking session might turn up
on YouTube or MySpace or God-only-knew what video-sharing site on the Internet. Someone who recognized her
could even send it to her father’s e-mail account.

She winced at the thought.

“Relax,” Jay said, as if reading her thoughts. “The lights were out last night. I don’t think it’s an infrared camera.”

“Oh, God.” She hadn’t thought of that. Nor did she want to consider that whoever this techno-geek might be, he
could be sophisticated enough to enhance the video imagery.

Things were rapidly going from bad to worse.

Jay reached for the door. “So, let’s both go inside and let him know that you won’t be around tonight, give him
plenty of opportunity.”

They reentered and Kristi glanced toward the camera, still blocked by her books. They both made a big fuss about
the dog and returned to their spots. Jay turned off the music and they talked about everything and nothing, then
made plans to go to “his place” without giving out any specifics. She packed her things, including her computer, sleeping bag, the necklace with the vial they found, the bike, and a change of clothes.

Since she intended to attend Father Mathias’s morality play and Jay had a dinner meeting with the head of his department, they took separate cars through the rain to the address Jay had written on a business card and slipped to her, thus avoiding anyone overhearing where they would be staying. It was also important that she take her car so that her own personal voyeur would realize the Honda wasn’t parked in its usual spot, and he would feel safer and hopefully take the opportunity to break inside and reposition his equipment.

The thought of him skulking around her place, maybe searching through her drawers and touching her underwear, made her shiver. Who was the guy?

She thought about the sicko who got off watching her, as she followed Jay’s truck through the rain-washed streets. Had the pervert watched Tara? Had he learned her routine and plotted her abduction, all with the help of his little camera? Did he have tapes of the other missing girls? Did he keep those tapes for his personal use, his twisted enjoyment, or, worse yet, had he made them public, placed them on the Internet?

If he was into this depraved videotaping, could it be even worse? Could he have films of the girls’ abductions? Their abuse? Even their murders?

Dear God, she hoped not. Her fingers tightened over the steering wheel as she attempted to rein in her imagination. “Don’t borrow trouble,” she warned herself.

And besides, she had no basis for these runaway thoughts. If the missing girls had shown up on the Internet, wouldn’t someone at the college have seen them by now? Recognized them? Surely the police and campus security had searched the World Wide Web.

Taillights flashed ahead.

Jay’s truck stopped at the light.

Lost in her reverie, Kristi had to slam on her brakes. Her Honda skidded, tires squealing. Antilock brakes grabbed, released, grabbed again. She braced herself, ready for the impact and shriek of twisting metal.

Her hatchback’s nose stopped less than an inch from the Toyota’s bumper.

“Oh, God.” She let out her breath, then gasped at the screech of tires behind her. Glancing fearfully in the rearview mirror, she helplessly watched a big van shimmy and slide, narrowly avoiding crashing into her.

Kristi exhaled slowly, her heart pounding. Jay, his silhouette visible to her, looked up. She lifted her hands, palms upward, to acknowledge that she’d been an idiot. She hoped the guy in the van who had barely missed hitting her witnessed her silent apology as well.

“Concentrate,” she told herself as rain pummeled the windshield and the wipers struggled to keep up. She had to pay better attention. The roads were slick with rain, the clouds dark and close, the day gloomy and winter-dark.

The stoplight switched to green. Jay eased into the intersection and Kristi followed carefully. She tried her best to keep her mind on the surrounding traffic and road ahead, but the truth of the matter was that her thoughts were elsewhere. Someone had broken into and wired her apartment. Watched her. Videotaped her. Her skin crawled as she imagined him getting off on watching her undress, or sleep or shower or make love to Jay.

“Bastard,” she muttered as she drove through the city, her wipers struggling with the rain. “You’ll get yours,” she added, following Jay onto a side street. The car behind her, only visible as headlights through the rain, made the turn as well.

It was the same dark van that had nearly slammed into her.

Right?
Another turn.

The vehicle lagged behind.

But eventually the headlights swung in behind her.

As if he were tailing her.

Which was ludicrous. Her imagination really was running wild.

Nonetheless, Kristi’s heart clutched. Every nerve in her body tightened. She told herself to let it go, but she couldn’t drag her gaze from the rearview mirror.

Was the guy in the van—if it was still the van, she wasn’t completely sure—was he the same person who had run the surveillance operation on her apartment?

Jay turned onto a final lane, a cul-de-sac, the street sign nearly shouting out the address that he’d written on the back of his business card, the one lying on the passenger seat.

She shot by. Barely braking.

The vehicle behind her stayed with her, didn’t peel off to follow Jay. “Who the hell are you?” she thought, and made certain all her doors were locked. She angled through the side streets of the neighborhood until she recognized one as being a major arterial. Turning left onto the two-way street, she checked her rearview mirror.

Sure enough, the big rig followed.

But it was more cautious now, blending into the increasing traffic. Her phone began to ring, but she ignored it. She had to concentrate. A half mile later, making certain the dark van was boxed between a Taurus and a Jeep, Kristi saw the light ahead turn amber.

Perfect.

Heart thudding, fingers clenched around the steering wheel in a death grip, she trod on the accelerator, reaching the intersection just as the light changed. It turned a blazing red just as she sped through.

The rest of the traffic stopped.

“You son of a bitch! Just keep coming!” she yelled jubilantly. Her cell phone started ringing again but she couldn’t get it. She had to concentrate, keep moving.

She blew past the first side street, and turned a quick corner at the second one, just as she noticed the stoplight, where the van was held up, changing again.

Damn!

He might try to cut her off. She took another right, spied a church parking lot and slid inside, killing her running lights and cutting a three-sixty in the empty lot, so that she was faced out, her foot off the brake, the car idling and partially blocked from view by an overgrown laurel hedge.

Sure enough, the van sped past, the driver, a dark blur.

Turning on her lights, she edged into the street. She saw the van turn the corner she’d taken less than three minutes earlier. “Bastard.” If she could get close enough to spy the numbers on his license plate, then she could have her father or Jay check with the DMV and nail the jerk.

For the first time since she’d started this investigation she felt as if she might be getting somewhere. She reached the corner and turned the wheel sharply, throwing up a sheet of water as her tires hit a puddle. The van was two blocks up and moving slowly, brake lights intermittently glowing red as he searched for her.
She stepped on the gas, her heartbeat thudding. What if he stopped? He would recognize her car. “Too bad.” She speed-dialed Jay as she closed the distance.

“What happened to you?” he demanded.

“Someone was following us…or me.”

“Jesus, Kris, where the hell are you? Are you okay?” She heard an edge of panic in his voice. “I’m coming—”

“No, I gave him the slip and now I’m following him.”

“I’m calling nine-one-one.”

“Just hang on the line.”

“I’m on my way. Where the hell are you?”

“Don’t know…somewhere off the ten…not far from University Lake.”

“That far south? Holy shit!” She heard keys rattling and he was breathless as if he were running. Then a door slammed. “Tell me the next cross street.”

“Hang on! Oh, no…He’s heading for the freeway.”

“Let it go.”

“Can’t do it.” She tossed the phone onto the seat and hit the accelerator as a sports car, roaring around a corner, cut in front of her. “Idiot!” she screamed, hitting the brakes and feeling the car shimmy beneath her. “You son of a bitch!”

The driver, oblivious, cut around another car and Kristi gunned her Honda onto the ramp for the freeway, but she knew before she merged that the chase was over.

The bastard had disappeared.

She picked up the phone. “You still there?” she asked, already searching for the next exit.

“What the hell happened?”

“Nothing, he lost me. I’m on my way back.”

“For the love of God, Kris. Don’t—”

“I said I’m on my way back. I’ll be at your aunt’s house in twenty minutes.”

“You scared the bloody hell out of me,” he admitted, and she heard it in his voice, how worried he’d been. Which made her feel warm inside. She knew she was falling in love with him. Oh, hell, maybe a tiny part of her had never stopped loving him, but she hadn’t been convinced that the feeling was mutual. Until now. “You know, Kris, this is starting to get dangerous. Maybe we should rethink going to the police.”

She imagined her father’s reaction, the fight that would ensue. She eased onto the exit ramp. “How about we wait until we see who thinks he’s the next Spielberg,” she said. “Once we catch him on tape, we’ll have something more concrete.”

“And then?”

“And then we’ll discuss it. Come on, Jay,” she cajoled, as she headed north on River Road, past the old state Capitol building, a Gothic castle-shaped edifice that loomed on a bluff above the slowly moving Mississippi River. “You promised me a week.”
“My mistake.”

“The first of many,” she teased, feeling better. “I’ll see ya in a few.” She hung up before he could argue, or before she let it slip that she was going to set her own little trap. Tonight.

At Father Mathias’s morality play.

She only hoped her plan would work.

“So far, we’ve got ourselves a big potful o’ nothing!” Ray Crawley snorted in disgust and cast an “I-told-you-so” look at Portia Laurent.

A detective for the Baton Rouge Police Department, Crawley was a big, bulky bear of a man who stood six-four and fought the beginnings of a beer gut. He had huge hands and a nasty disposition when he was angry, and now, standing in the rain, he was well past angry and doing sixty toward infuriated. Shoulders hunched, he smoked a cigarette and stared at the swamp where boats with divers and bright lights were searching the water through a relentless downpour.

It was getting dark, the gloom of the day seeping into Portia’s skin, the shadows in the boggy wetlands growing longer as she stood clustered with Del Vernon and Crawley, who called himself “Sonny,” and a hunter by the name of Boomer Moss.

Wearing the raincoat and boots she always kept in her car, Portia huddled under an umbrella. Her boots sinking in the mud, she thought she would just about kill for a cigarette, but decided against bumming one from Crawley, who was just looking for an excuse to round on someone.

“You sure this is where you caught the gator?” Sonny asked with obvious skepticism, rain sliding off the bill of his police department cap. The area had been searched by boat, on foot, and when possible, by divers. With no luck.

But Moss, the poacher, was adamant this was the area in which he’d bagged the bull alligator. That prime gator that the cops had confiscated and trucked off to their crime lab.

“Right through them there trees,” Boomer Moss insisted, pointing toward a stand of ghostly white cypress, their roots twisting and visible above ground and the black water.

“We looked there.” Crawley drew hard on his cigarette.

“I’m tellin’ ya, that’s where I got him.” Moss’s voice elevated an octave in agitation. Dressed head-to-toe in camouflage, he jabbed a finger at the nearest cypress. Even in the gathering darkness, with the cold winter air sitting heavy in the swamp, Portia saw that Boomer was sweating, drips drizzling from beneath his hunting cap and down a cheek stretched over a wad of tobacco. Obviously, he didn’t like dealing with the police.

But then, nobody did.

Portia watched a boat slide noiselessly over the water as a diver, shaking his head, surfaced. It had been that way for hours.

“I just hope to hell you’re not bullshitting me,” Crawley said as he stubbed out his cigarette and it hissed against the wet weeds.

“Why would I even bother to come in?” Moss asked.

“You knew you’d be in trouble. So maybe you were just showing off. Proud of the arm…maybe you’re involved.”

“Well, if I was, I’d have to be a real dumb-ass, now wouldn’t I? I came to you guys cuz I thought it was the right thing to do. My civic duty, or whatever ya want to call it. The arm was in that gator’s gut, and I figured you all
would want it. But I don’t know where it came from before it ended up in that gator’s stomach.”

He was mad now and he spat a stream of tobacco juice to the ground. “I done what I had to. Can I go now?”

“Not just yet,” Crawley said, obviously enjoying the poacher’s discomfiture. That was the trouble with Sonny Crawley, Portia thought, he had a mean streak. But it looked like the hunt would be fruitless, at least for today.

Whatever secrets were hidden deep in this swamp would remain submerged, concealed beneath the murky water for at least another night.
CHAPTER 22

Hours later, Kristi drove back to campus.

She didn’t like lying.

As a teenager lies had slipped over her tongue easily, but now, ten years later, she had more trouble hiding the truth.

She’d had to lie to Jay.

She’d gotten to his house and explained about the van and he’d wrapped his arms around her and held her as if he never wanted to let her go. “You stupid, stupid girl,” he said into her hair.

“I’m not taking that as a compliment,” she responded.

“It wasn’t meant to be one. Who knows who that guy was? What he’s capable of? Oh, for the love of God….” He’d kissed her hard then, his lips hungry, eager, his hair wet from the rain. She’d wound her arms around his neck and returned the ardor of his kiss. “Jesus, you scared me,” he said. “I was afraid—”

“Shh.” She hadn’t wanted to hear his fears. Had only wanted to be reassured by his strength.

He hadn’t disappointed. With his hands firmly splayed over her back, his legs had pressed against hers, and silently, still kissing her, he began walking forward, strong thighs pushing against hers and forcing her backward. They’d tugged at each other’s clothes, yanking them off, breathing hard, as he guided her through an open doorway and into a bedroom painted a hideous color of blue. Her calves encountered something hard and Jay pulled her down so that they tumbled together onto a small cot with a sleeping bag and single pillow.

She hadn’t cared.

She’d only wanted to lose herself in him.

Their lovemaking had been fast and anxious, lips touching and tasting hungrily, fingers skimming hot, fevered skin, desire fueled by anxiety.

Release had come quickly.

They’d collapsed together, spent, sweating, their heartbeats pounding in tandem on the skinny little cot.

Kristi had hated that she needed to lie. Had put it off and put it off, not wanting the afternoon with Jay to end.

“This is ridiculous,” she said, pushing her hair out of her face and staring into his slumberous amber eyes.

He laughed. “And I was going to say it was magical…wondrous…incredible…and—”

“And you’re full of it, McKnight.” Then she kissed him and rolled off the cot to pull on her clothes.

He’d been pretty damned adamant about going to the police again, and she’d had to talk fast and hard to convince him to wait. She hadn’t been completely truthful, at least as far as her plans were concerned. She hadn’t been able to be.

She’d waited until he was distracted with grading papers and watching the computer screens that showed the porch and interior of her apartment, compliments of his surveillance cameras. She pretended to be absorbed as well, double-checking the chat rooms, though it was far too early for any of her newfound Internet “friends” to appear.
Then while Jay was in his study, she retrieved the chain with the vial of what she presumed was Tara Atwater’s blood. Tonight, at the play, she planned to wear the weird necklace. See what kind of reactions she got.

Jay had already tried to lift a latent fingerprint from the tiny vial, but the glass had been clean, so Kristi wasn’t disturbing any evidence—as long as the vial filled with the dark red liquid was intact.

It was slightly horrific, but so what?

So was the camera in her apartment.

So was being followed by a dark van.

If she wanted to break into the inner circle of this cult, she’d better work fast.

The vial of blood had been a godsend.

Or the work of the devil.

So she’d escaped without Jay noticing she’d taken the vial and here she was, driving toward campus, checking her rearview mirror for looming dark vans. Had it been navy blue? Black? Charcoal gray? She didn’t know. She hadn’t gotten a clear view of the plates, but had thought they weren’t from out of state. The windows had seemed tinted but she didn’t know the make. Maybe a Ford. Or a Chevy. Something domestic.

So much for her incredible powers of observation.

The defroster in her Honda had decided to malfunction and was giving her fits. She had to keep the window down in order to see through her windshield to the wet, shiny streets. It was already dark with clouds completely blocking the rapidly setting sun, rain drizzling from the sky, and night coming fast.

Thankfully, traffic was thin and sparse on a Sunday evening and there was a chill in the air that reminded her that it was the dead of winter.

Jay had left for his meeting as Kristi headed to Father Mathias’s morality play, yet another rendition of Everyman, though Jay had made a last protest.

“Don’t like you going to the play alone,” he’d said seriously as she was getting ready to leave. “I can cancel with Hollister. She just wants to discuss how the class is coming along, I think. Compare it to how Dr. Monroe handled it. But it’s not a big deal, I can reschedule.”

“I don’t think it would be good if we’re seen together.”

“Someone already has,” he remarked. “And took a video.”

“Don’t remind me.” She’d grimaced. “Besides, Hollister is head of your department.”

“I don’t have to see her today. Besides, I’ve talked with Dr. Monroe a couple of times since I took over and I’ve got her notes to work with. I’m pretty much sticking to her curriculum. If she comes back next term, she’ll be good to go.”

“Is she returning?” Kristi asked.

“Don’t know. Depends on the relocation of her mother. She’s having trouble finding the right place for her.”

“So you don’t have any idea if you’re going to be teaching next term?”

“Not yet. Though maybe you could convince me to take the job if it’s offered.”

He waggled his brows lasciviously and she laughed as she headed out.
It was dark now, her headlights catching all the raindrops falling in silver streaks to the pavement. She was halfway to All Saints when her cell phone rang. She expected it to be Jay, once again warning her to be careful.

“Hello?” she said, turning into the parking lot of her apartment building.

“A deep voice asked as she pulled into a spot a few over from hers because some jerk had taken hers with his jacked-up pickup and oversized tires. Before she could respond, he said, “This is Dr. Grotto. First, I want to apologize for not getting back to you sooner. I did get your message.” His voice was so smooth, the same tenor as when he taught, and in her mind’s eye she saw him, the tall man with black hair and dark eyes, his strong jaw dark with beard shadow. She forgot being angry that she had to park a few steps further from the stairs. “You mentioned you’d like a meeting and now my schedule has cleared a bit. So how about tomorrow afternoon? Say… four? I have some time then.”

Kristi did some quick mental calculations. She was scheduled to work the dinner shift, but she figured she could find someone to cover an extra hour for her. She wasn’t going to blow this. “Sure,” she said lightly, as if she had nothing more to ask him about than a particularly tough assignment. She thought about the dark van and wondered if Grotto might have been the driver. “I’ll be at your office at four.”

“I’ll see you then.”

He clicked off as Kristi cut the Honda’s engine. She couldn’t wait to talk face-to-face with Grotto; after all he was the last person thought to have seen Dionne Harmon alive.

After double-checking the parking lot to make certain no one was lurking between the cars or behind the hedge of crepe myrtle, she nervously headed into her unit. As far as she could tell everything was just as they’d left it. She didn’t think anyone had been inside.

She felt the urge to stick her tongue out at Jay’s camera, or do a little strip tease for him as a joke, but refrained. Just in case there was another camera they hadn’t found. All she managed was a wink at the camera over the sink.

Houdini came out from his hiding spot under the bed. “I wondered when you’d show your face again,” she said. “Did that big dog scare you? Trust me, Bruno wouldn’t hurt a flea.” She slid a hand over the cat’s back and he quivered and tried to slink away from her touch. He wasn’t as quick to disappear, however, so she poured cat food into his bowl and watched with some amusement as he sniffed disdainfully at it. “Hey, don’t forget your roots,” she said to him. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

The cat stared at her as if she were a complete moron before hopping onto the counter and slipping through the open window. “No good deed goes unpunished,” she called after him, then, in the bathroom, did a quick change into black pants and turtleneck. She threw on a jacket and grabbed her purse, complete with her cell phone and canister of mace, and was out the door.

The weather had let up a bit, though her defroster was still making visibility difficult. She had to use her hand to clear a spot in the windshield, but she saw no dark, malicious van idling in the alleys. Still, she was on alert as she took her car the short distance to campus, another means to make it appear that she wasn’t home tonight, though “inviting” the pervert into her home bothered her a little.

What little daylight there was quickly faded as Kristi parked behind Wagner House. The museum was set to close in ten minutes, but she wanted to check the place one more time.

The gate was unlocked and the front door swung open without a creak. Kristi stepped inside, where a gas fire was burning cheerily. Lights, with their colored Tiffany-style shades, glowed like jewels. Victorian settees, carved mahogany tables and club chairs were clustered in groupings, the dining table set with crystal and silver, as if a dinner party were planned for later in the evening.

Three fiftyish women were oohing and aahing over the furniture and knickknacks while a younger couple with a baby who was strapped to the father in some kind of sling were strolling through the lower rooms.

“Hello.” A slim woman, with an easy smile and streaked hair that swung to her chin, greeted Kristi. She was
wearing a long skirt, boots, and a cowl-necked sweater. Her name tag read: Marilyn Katcher. “I’m Marilyn, the
docent, and I was about to give a little tour of the house before we close. Would you like to join the others?”

Kristi looked around at all the expectant faces. “That would be great.”

After that, she followed along and listened as the docent, with more enthusiasm than Kristi would have believed
possible, walked the small group through the lower floors, explaining the history of the family, making a big deal of
old Ludwig Wagner and his heirs, telling how he’d donated this portion of his vast holdings around the Baton Rouge
area to the church for the express purpose of starting a college. She led the way upward to the bedrooms, explaining
about the children who had resided within and how the current Ludwig descendants had spent much of their own
fortunes restoring the house to the way it had been when Ludwig and his children, including his wheelchair-bound
daughter, had lived here. Some of the pieces were authentic, others used to add to the feel of the home, not all
necessarily period-true.

Once they were downstairs again Mrs. Katcher checked her watch and attempted to usher everyone out. But Kristi
hung back and asked about the basement.

“It was used by the staff, originally, of course, and I think it had some connecting tunnel or other way to access
the carriage house, which is right next door and now houses the drama department. There was also egress to the
stables and barns, but all of those passageways were deemed unsafe years ago, condemned by the parish, so they’ve
been sealed. Today the basement is used for storage.” She held open the front door. “To be honest, I’ve never set
foot downstairs. I don’t think anyone ever goes down there.”

Father Mathias does, Kristi thought. The priest and Georgia Clovis already knew Kristi had seen him appear
through the basement door, and the fact that there were tunnels, condemned or not, beneath the building intrigued
her. What if they still existed? What if Marnie Gage had gone downstairs and used them? But why?

Marilyn Katcher was nothing if not on a schedule. She managed to herd everyone outside and lock the gate
behind them at five-thirty on the dot.

The wind had kicked up as they headed into the dark that had descended while they were inside. A shimmer of
rain flashed by Kristi, and vapor lights glowed an eerie blue as she made her way to the student union. In the
cafeteria-style restaurant she looked for some of the familiar faces in her English block of classes, but she didn’t see
Trudie, Grace, Zena, or Ariel. She remembered then that Zena had said something about being cast in Father
Mathias’s morality play.

Maybe she’d see the girl on stage.

She drank a decaf cappuccino and tried to call Lucretia again. After all, her ex-roommate was the one who’d
originally mentioned the “cult” before her abrupt turnabout. But, as with everyone these days, it seemed her call was
sent directly to voice mail.

Kristi didn’t leave a message. Lucretia was avoiding her.

Powering down her phone, Kristi headed toward the auditorium. If she got there a little early, maybe she could
poke around a bit. All of the missing girls had attended Father Mathias’s morality plays, so there had to be a
connection between them and the vampire cult, right?

It was as good a place to find answers as anywhere else.

Deep in her underground spa, standing naked in front of a tall mirror, Elizabeth surveyed herself carefully.
She was irritated.

Antsy.

Obviously in need of more.
More what? her mind taunted, for she disdained saying that she needed blood, the blood of others.

It made her feel weak, or like an addict, and that wasn’t the case at all. She was strong. Powerful. Vital. But, truth to tell, she did crave more….

She wanted to feel that rush of rejuvenation again. But it was not to be, for the mirror highlighted every flaw, even the faintest. Located in the same area as her bath, it was lit by a few soft lights on a dimmer switch, which she could ramp up should she need to examine any imperfection in her skin.

On a purely intellectual level, she couldn’t believe that blood of younger women would actually retard aging or revitalize her skin, but then again, hadn’t she noticed the changes to her own body?

With a critical eye, she surveyed herself in the mirror, searching for the telltale signs of age: wrinkles around her lips; crinkling at the corners of her eyes; the beginning of a crease at the base of her neck; the sagging of her abdomen despite a regimen of crunches, sit-ups, weight lifting, and cardio workouts. There was a thin line between being fit and slim and just plain skinny. But none of her bones showed where they shouldn’t. Her musculature was perfect and her skin still creamy and taut, her nipples tight and dark. No strands of gray dared shoot through her lustrous black hair.

Yet.

But age, she knew, was a relentless enemy and though she’d used all kinds of creams along with her private regimen, she hadn’t gone so far as to seriously consider liposuction or dermabrasion or a laser peel.

For the moment, she’d refrained from doing anything so radical.

She hadn’t needed to.

Because her remedy was working. Now, studying her flawless, age-spot-free skin minutely, she found it near perfect. Youthful. Vanity caused her to smile. She hadn’t been born beautiful; in fact, she remembered her mother saying she’d been an “ugly” baby, her head misshapen, her eyes too large, her hair patchy, her body frail. But she’d blossomed from an awkward tot and gawky girl into a teenager who had made boys and men twist their stupid necks as she’d strolled by.

It was that feeling, that rush from the power of her beauty, that she refused to relinquish. And so she’d done her research and realized despite her genes, and the help of products, age would try to destroy her. Her eyes would sag and grow puffy and dark, her skin would lose its elasticity, her breasts would droop, and flabby little pockets would try to appear.

Except she had a way to fight back.

Her secret method, she thought, twisting in the mirror and looking over her shoulder at her reflection. Her buttocks were still tight and firm, her waist small. And, from the pictures she’d seen, she looked amazingly like her stunning namesake. Actually, she decided with a tilt of her head, she was even more beautiful.

She’d known about her ancestor, Elizabeth of Bathory, for as long as she could remember and had been fascinated with the countess, but only recently, when she’d realized that her age was beginning to show, had she assumed Elizabeth’s name and regimen.

The story was, loosely, that Elizabeth, obviously a bit of a nutcase, had worried about losing her legendary beauty. Also, the countess enjoyed torturing and tormenting others, and one day, slapped a servant so hard that the maiden’s blood spilled onto her arm. Elizabeth had been even more outraged and raving until she noticed that the area of her skin the blood had stained appeared more youthful and beautiful than the surrounding flesh. From that day forward, Elizabeth found ways of ever more increasing cruelty to drain the blood of others for her own personal use.

Now, obviously, the woman had been deranged. Mental case with a capital M. Sadist to the nth degree.
All that royal inbreeding.

No wonder.

Of course many of the stories or legends about the “blood countess” hadn’t been proven, including the bathing in blood. That she had committed atrocities on dozens of young girls was not in dispute, however, and she was eventually tried and convicted of murder and sent to live walled into her castle. Those who had assisted her weren’t so lucky.

But it was the legend, the folklore surrounding the baths drawn from the blood of peasant girls and her eventual nobility that intrigued this new Elizabeth.

Even if the legends had been embellished with the passing of decades, and despite the fact that some of the more bizarre cruelties ascribed to Elizabeth had no foundation in historical fact, the theory about the blood of younger women wasn’t just intriguing, it seemed to have merit.

Hadn’t she, herself, proven its validity?

Now, staring into the mirror, Elizabeth arched her neck, surveying every inch of her body as she slowly rotated in the light.

Hadn’t the first traces of cottage-cheese-like bumps beneath the skin of her thighs, the barest breath of cellulite, disappeared with her first blood-infused baths? And that little suggestion of spider web veins, near the back of her right knee? Hadn’t they faded after the first bath?

Of course they had. Now, the back of her knee was silken and smooth, not even the tiniest line of her veins visible.

She was so convinced of the rejuvenation of her skin, the restorative powers of the blood, she’d almost agreed to dip into a pool injected with some of the blood of Vlad’s lessers.

But no!

She watched her reflection visibly cringe at the thought. It was one thing to cover her body in the blood of smart, young girls. Elizabeth didn’t kid herself into thinking they were “virgins” or “pure” or any of that rot, but at least they hadn’t pole danced for ogling, drooling, fat-assed men. Or, so she told herself. What, actually, did she know of those she’d helped Vlad choose?

Just that they were intelligent, seeking higher education. Something that escaped Vlad.

She grimaced.

Vlad.

Or so he insisted on being called, though, of course she knew his true identity.

He’d given himself the name of Vlad the Impaler, though he had enough names already. But, fine, if he wanted to be Vlad, she’d go along with it. She had taken Elizabeth’s name, assumed her identity, so he, too, had felt compelled to become someone else.

Always a follower, was Vlad.

But she needed him, just as the original Countess Elizabeth had required the help of others who had been as sadistic as she.

Twisting her dark hair onto her head, she admired her profile, then adjusted a few curls to fall loosely at her nape, to play into his fantasy.
That was the difference between them. She was a practical woman who was only trying to extend her life and her beauty, to keep turning heads and feeling vital. And yes, there was a little sadism involved, but all for a purpose.

Vlad, on the other hand, was into the sensual feel of the killing, the bloodletting, the sex of it all.

Which was fine.

She could get as turned on as anyone, she supposed, frowning a bit as one tendril refused to curl seductively. She caught a glimpse of herself and forced her face muscles to relax. She didn’t need to test her own theory and start new lines from forming, marring her perfectly smooth brow. So far, the blood was working, although Vlad had intimiated the blood supply was running low.

What kind of a moron allowed that to happen?

He was afraid, that was it. Balking at ramping up the killings of the good ones, always talking of his “lessers.” For the love of God, he just didn’t get it. But then he couldn’t. As intelligent as he was supposed to be, honestly, sometimes Elizabeth wondered. But he was her partner and devoted and she could twist him around her perfect little finger. All he asked was to have sex with the women before and after death. Yes, it was a tad odd, but as long as he pumped the blood from their bodies, so be it. And he adored her. Was faithful in his heart and head, if not his dick.

Who cared?

The only thing she needed to ensure herself was that there would be enough. And so she’d suggested that she accompany him on the next killing. Because he was getting nervous. Jumpy. Concerned that the police would take notice. It was a problem, but the answer was obvious: take more than one. Kill several at once. Then start hunting somewhere else. Somewhere less obvious.

But always hunt for smart, supple, clever women who were young enough to still have vitality. And never a mother, like that last lesser Vlad had tried to palm off on her. Come on! Didn’t he know that childbirth robbed a woman of her vitality? That once a mother had given her lifeblood to another, a babe in the womb, and then bled for days or weeks afterward, she was never the same?

Elizabeth finally managed to force the wayward tendril of dark hair into place. Gazing raptly at her own reflection, she decided it was time to tell him. She reached for her cell phone to convey the happy news. Tonight she not only wanted to watch him kill. Tonight she would help and ensure that there would be more than one victim.

Several coeds’ images came to mind.

The clearest belonged to Kristi Bentz.
Jay was just walking out the door for the meeting with Dr. Hollister and wondering how to cut it short when his cell phone chirped.

Sonny Crawley’s name appeared on the small screen.

“What’s up?” Jay asked, hauling his briefcase and laptop outside, where the rain was beating on the overhang of the porch and dripping over the edge of the sagging gutters.

“I thought you’d like a heads-up about those missing girls.”

Every nerve in Jay’s body tightened. “You found something?”

“Maybe, maybe not, but I thought you’d like to know.”

Bruno slipped through the door and Jay pulled it shut. Together they dashed across the wet yard. “Tell me.”

“Well, it all started with a poacher findin’ a damned woman’s arm in a gator’s belly, and we’re thinkin’ it might belong to one of those missing coeds, but we haven’t been able to find the rest of the body.”

Sonny recounted the whole story as Jay loaded his things and Bruno into the cab of his truck. He slid behind the wheel without turning on the ignition, staring out the windshield as he learned the poacher had called the Sheriff’s Department, which had taken the alligator with its stomach contents to the morgue, that tests were being run on the severed female arm, and the police were trying like hell to get fingerprints from the partially decomposed and consumed limb. Search teams were still looking for the body or bodies and the theory was that this arm could have belonged to one of the missing girls. So far, they’d had no luck.

“One of the oddest things about it was that there was no blood in that arm. Not a drop,” Sonny confided. “You’d think there would be something. You cut off a finger, ya got blood. You cut off a guy’s dick, ya got blood. I’m no doctor, no sir, but I figure there should be some blood in those veins and arteries.”

“You and me both,” Jay thought, finally starting the engine of his truck, his mind turning to all the talk of vampires. “So the arm is at the morgue, and the other evidence, like anything under the fingernails, chips of the polish, for instance—that’s at the lab?”

“Yeah. You might want to call Laurent. She knows more about this than I do.”

“I will, but in the meantime, I need a favor.”

“Another one?”

“I’ll buy you a beer.”

“You bet your ass, you will.”

“I’ll buy you a six-pack,” Jay amended, hearing Sonny’s affront.

“Shoot.”

“Can you check if anyone who works at All Saints owns a dark-colored van?”

“Anyone at the college?”
“I’ll e-mail you a list of names.”

“You can’t check this out yourself?”

“I need this yesterday. I was hoping you could help me out. And I’ll need to see if any of them has a criminal record. A deep probe.”

“Might take a while.”

“Put a rush on it, we’re looking at a half-rack.”

He laughed hard, a smoker’s laugh that ended in a coughing fit. “For that much beer, I’ll do it. Let you know what I find. Probably tomorrow on the DMV records, the other as soon as I get the info.”

“Thanks.”

“And I want real beer, you hear me? None of that lite shit.”

“Real beer,” Jay promised.

“Gotta go. Another call comin’ in and it is Sunday night. You know, I do have a life.” Crawley clicked off and Jay let his mind catalogue this new information.

A chill slid through his soul. A severed arm with no blood. None whatsoever. Had it been drained and digested by the alligator, or had something else happened to it, something unworldly? As a man of science he didn’t believe for a second that there were vampires walking this earth, but if Kristi was right, there was a cult nearby with true believers and who knew what they were up to.

Of course, the severed arm might belong to someone other than the girls missing from All Saints.

But he doubted it.

Sliding the truck into gear, he dialed Kristi to give her the news, but her phone went directly to voice mail. “Hey, it’s me. Give me a call,” he said, then hung up, a feeling of restlessness overtaking him. He should never have let her out of his sight. Things were happening too fast. He needed to tell Crawley or Laurent or someone what the hell was going on at All Saints.

Kristi would be pissed, but so what?

He ground his teeth together. He should have blown off his meeting with Hollister and gone with Kristi to the damned play. But it was too late now.

Glancing at his phone, he willed it to ring. “Come on, Kris. Call,” he said. But the phone remained silent, and as he drove toward the college his restlessness and worry only increased.

In the women’s room at the student union, Kristi slid the gold necklace around her neck and wondered if she was making the worst mistake of her life. Beneath the harsh fluorescent bulbs the little vial gleamed, its dark contents looking nearly black.

It felt strange.

Outré.

Almost evil.

With a sound of annoyance she stuffed the necklace beneath her sweater so that the tiny glass pressed against her skin. It felt cold, surprisingly so, for its small size.
Adding a bit of gloss to her lips, she walked purposefully toward the far side of campus, where she joined a crowd of students and faculty members heading to the brick building housing the English Department and a small auditorium not far from Wagner House. Lights glowed around the south entrance and a white sign painted with black letters proclaimed “Play tonight: Everyman.”

The quintessential morality play, Kristi thought as she spied the girl named Ophelia who called herself “O” and also wore a vial of her own blood.

Perfect.

O was trying to buy a ticket from a girl seated behind a long table. Some kind of medieval-sounding pipe music filled the antechamber, and the ticket taker, dressed all in black, seemed to have trouble making both change and eye contact. Her black hair, scraped back and showing light brown roots, was in stark contrast to the thick white makeup covering her face.

“The play’s already sold out?” O demanded, glaring down at the girl in charge of the till.

“Yes…I mean, I don’t know…. Just a second.”

“This is required for my class!” O wasn’t about to be put off. “I have to get inside.”

“I know! Everyone’s saying the same thing.” The flustered girl caught sight of Father Mathias, who was hovering near the curtained entry to the theater. Clad in a black cassock that was probably all the rage for clerics in the 1400s, he pulled at one sleeve, the one covering a bit of barely visible bandage.

“Father Mathias? Could you help me a second, please?”

“What is it, Angel?” he asked, and Kristi wondered if Angel was really the girl’s name. Or did it have something to do with the play? Or, worse yet, was it Father Mathias’s own pet name for the flustered girl?

“Do you know how many seats we have left?”

“A few more,” he said softly. Patiently. Despite the girl’s discomfiture. “We’re setting up some extra folding chairs.” He eyed the gathering crowd. “I was afraid of this,” he said under his breath. Then, in a louder voice announced, “Thank you all for attending. Unfortunately the crowd is greater than we anticipated.”

There was a jostling behind Kristi, and one guy said, “Are you kiddin’ me?”

“The auditorium has a maximum seating capacity according to the fire marshall and we’re at capacity.”

“What?” A girl behind Kristi was beside herself. “I’m supposed to write a paper on this production!”

“Hey, what’s the deal?” another shouted.

Father Mathias lifted his hands and lowered them as he said, “Please, everyone, accept my apologies. We can only sell ten more seats tonight, but we’re planning a repeat performance tomorrow, or possibly Friday, whenever the auditorium is available again and the actors are able to perform, so you’ll be able to see the play.”

“Tomorrow? What the fu—?”

“I work Monday nights,” another voice protested.

“This is bullshit,” an angry boy said.

“Please, please.” Father Mathias was adamant. “I’m sure we can work something out. We’re recording, and if you can’t see the live performance, it will be available in the drama department. The next performance will be posted on the campus Web site as soon as I can get things organized. Thank you, all!”

He slipped away then, leaving the hapless Angel to handle the unhappy throng. O managed to get a ticket and
Kristi, too, was one of the last lucky attendees who, for five bucks, received a thin, slick playbill and entrance ticket. She walked into a small anteroom where a person actually went through the contents of her purse, as if she were attending a rock concert and bringing in contraband. “We ask that you leave your cell phone with us,” the attendant said.

“How?”

“The problems, you wouldn’t believe.” She handed Kristi a colored claim ticket and a pen.

“It’s already turned off.”

“It’s the rules. You have to leave it. Write down your name and a land-line or e-mail address where you can be reached, just in case there’s a mix-up.”

Kristi did not like giving up the phone, but she didn’t have much of a choice if she wanted to get inside. She filled out the information, kept one half of the claim ticket and, surprised that her canister of mace wasn’t confiscated, grabbed her purse and hurried inside, where the temperature seemed to rise twenty degrees. People were jam-packed into the rows of auditorium chairs, but she managed to find a folding chair angled into a side aisle and next to O, who was already positioning her purse near her feet, her eyes fixed on the stage. Faded velvet curtains, once a deep maroon color, were drawn shut, and overhead there were minimal lights trained on the stage. The auditorium held about fifty people at capacity—tonight closer to sixty-five. The heater was working overtime and the damned Renaissance music permeated everything, loud over the whisper and crush of the crowd.

A thirty-something man sitting in front of Kristi had splashed on too much aftershave, possibly to cover the scent of marijuana that clung to him. The Old Spice trick hadn’t worked; it had only made the cloying odor more noticeable.

Feedback screamed through the auditorium for a second, then suddenly all was quiet. Kristi looked around and saw familiar faces, people who were also in her English block. Near the back of the room Hiram Calloway was studiously reading his program. He was alone, it appeared, and she wondered if he’d sold her out, given someone a key to her place, or if he was the one who had been videotaping her unit. She flushed at the thought and shot daggers at him with her eyes. As if he felt her gaze, he glanced up, caught sight of her, then buried his nose quickly in his playbill again.

She remembered chasing the guy she’d seen at her apartment and Hiram just didn’t seem right. He was a little doughy, like an ex-football player gone to seed, and she was an athlete, had always been fast. If she hadn’t been a swimmer, she’d probably have been a track star, so surely she could have caught him as she chased him into the night.

Adrenaline could have spurred him on. Fear of getting caught. If so, it was a wonder he didn’t have a heart attack. Or, maybe it hadn’t been him at all. But the only other person with the key was Irene Calloway, and she was close to using a cane. Surely Kristi could have run her to ground.

Then who?

She stared at Hiram, who didn’t dare send a glance her way. Loser, Kristi thought, and let her gaze drift around the room. She spied Grace near the front of the room. But no Lucretia. No Ariel. She checked her program, thinking Ariel might be in the play, but Ariel was neither listed as a performer nor anyone who worked behind the scenes. A nod was given to Dr. Croft, as head of the English Department, and to Father Mathias, of course, along with Dr. Grotto, who was listed as “an advisor,” whatever the hell that meant. Zena Regent, the next Meryl Streep, was listed as playing the part of Good Deeds, while Robert Manning, an African-American student who was in a few of Kristi’s classes, was the lead. Gertrude Sykes was listed as Death. And at the bottom of the back page mention was given to Mai Kwan, who had designed the playbill and helped with “advertising and press releases.”

Mai had never mentioned that she was connected to the drama department, but then Kristi had never asked too much about her classes or outside interests. Kristi knew little about the girl other than that she was nosy, a journalism student, had been acquainted with Tara Atwater, and dreaded doing laundry in the basement.
Now, Mai, too, was connected to the drama department and therefore Father Mathias and his obsession with morality plays…the plays all the missing girls had attended.

The houselights blinked, and then, within a few minutes, went down altogether. In the ensuing hush, a spotlight appeared and Father Mathias began the introduction.

Kristi had never seen the play before but had read it, or part of it, in high school. The gist of it was that Everyman, symbolizing all men and women on earth, was too caught up in worldly goods and had lost his soul. When called upon by Death, Everyman had nothing. He confronts other characters including Good Deeds, Knowledge, Confession, and more in his quest to take someone with him to the afterlife.

What interested Kristi was not so much the play itself, but the actors who represented the roles. She recognized Lucretia’s friend Trudie, listed as Gertrude in the playbill, as Death. Zena, of course, was emoting all over the stage, and some of the other characters looked familiar, as if she’d seen them in class but couldn’t quite put a finger on their names. One of the characters, Angel, was indeed played, albeit unconvincingly, by the girl who had sold tickets. The audience was also filled with students in some of Kristi’s English classes, and she thought for a fleeting moment that she caught a glimpse of Georgia Clovis lurking in the alcove of a side exit.

Kristi’s eyes narrowed on other attendees. A number of her teachers had shown up as well, a regular Who’s Who of the English Department. Dr. Natalie Croft, head of the department, was seated next to both a man Kristi didn’t recognize and Dr. Preston, who still looked as if he were ready to catch the next big wave. He, in turn, was seated next to Professor Senegal, Kristi’s journalism instructor.

Didn’t these people have lives?

Or was this a command performance?

In the dark, she pulled on the chain around her neck, lifting it upward so that the vial was now on the outside of her sweater. It was still partially hidden by her jacket, but when the houselights went up, she planned to talk to a few people and see if anyone commented or noticed. The play went on, with only minimal flubbing of lines, and the guy in front of her who reeked of musk and weed started to snore. His head was bent forward and the woman next to him jabbed him in the side.

He snorted himself awake, sounding like a ripsaw, and the woman shushed him but good.

Kristi sat on the edge of her seat. Nervously she waited, and when at last the play was over and the cast had come out for a group bow, she was ready. As the applause died down and the lights went up, she stepped around the snorer and caught up with O as she filed out.

“You’re O, right?” Kristi said, as if she’d just seen her that second. “I think we have a class together.”

O rolled one bored eye at her. “Which one?”

“Maybe Shakespeare….or…Grotto’s vampire class.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe.”

“I’m looking for a study partner.”

“I’m not.”

“Do you know anyone who is?”

O turned to face Kristi as they reached the doorway to the anteroom. “Do I look like a fuckin’ counselor?” she demanded. Then her gaze landed on the vial at Kristi’s neck. “What the hell are you doing?” she said, blanching. “Hide that thing.”
“Why?”

“Why?” O repeated. Her eyes narrowed. “You are part of…” At that moment Father Mathias began heading their way and O widened her eyes in silent appeal.

Kristi quickly tucked the vial under her shirt again.

“Enjoy tonight’s performance?” the priest asked.

“Immensely,” O said, though it was an obvious act.

“Good, good!”

“Father Mathias, congratulations!” Natalie Croft made her way through the crowd. She was beaming at the priest. “Job well done,” she said, though Kristi disagreed. No one in the cast of tonight’s performance was going to make any Academy Award thank you speeches anytime soon, or probably in Dr. Croft’s lifetime.

“Everyman is my favorite of all the morality plays, though I’m looking forward to exploring others as well as the mysteries and miracles. I hope you return. Oh, and for those of you who want another viewing, we’ll be adding another performance tomorrow night. Thank you.”

Father Mathias exited the back of the theater as the houselights went up and everyone began picking up their belongings. O was out the door in a flash and Kristi tried to follow her, but got caught in the crush and held up retrieving her cell phone, which was, as promised, ready and waiting for her. She handed another attendant, a girl who had played Knowledge in the play, her claim ticket and was given her phone without any eye contact. Kristi then made her way out the door and into the night, hoping for a glimpse of O. But the girl was gone. As were the others she’d recognized in the audience.

Great, she thought, slinging the strap of her purse over her shoulder. All the girls who had been abducted had attended Father Mathias’s plays, so she’d hoped she’d find some connection, but she was at a loss. Standing in the dark, buffeted by the cold wind, she watched as other attendees left the theater, some heading to the parking lot, others toward the heart of campus. The professors who had shown up had all left, beelining out of the theater as if they couldn’t escape fast enough.

The few stragglers who’d stopped to talk or smoke or just hang out weren’t people she knew. So what about the people in the play? Didn’t she suspect they might all somehow be connected?

Face it, she thought, discouraged, you should leave being a detective to your father.

On the way back to her car, she walked past Wagner House. Dark, angular and looming, it looked even more forbidding at night, with only the faintest of light coming from the windows. She checked the gate again, and of course it was locked. Then she noticed a flicker, just the tiniest bit of light, coming from a basement window.

Was she imagining it?

When she looked again, the glimmer of light was gone.

Had it been a reflection? A figment of her imagination?

Flash!

She saw another bluish light through the dirty glass. It too disappeared quickly.

Storage area, my ass, she thought. Who would be sorting through old crates at night? And why had Father Mathias been down there the other day? He really hadn’t explained himself, except to say that he’d seen evidence of rats, but maybe that was just an excuse to make her stay away. Well, it damned well wasn’t working. She’d been beaten and chained, dealt with snarling, vicious dogs, demented psychos, lost her mother and her biological father, and nearly died. A few rats were nothing.
Skirting the building, she tested the back gate and found it locked as well. Screw it. She was going inside. Climbing the wrought iron fence was a simple matter and she knew there were no cameras. Hadn’t Georgia Clovis admitted as much?

Though the fence itself was comprised of black wrought iron spikes, the top of the gate was decorated in scrollwork. Kristi pulled herself to the top of it and vaulted over, landing in a crouch on the inside brick walk. Glancing around to make sure she wasn’t noticed, she hurried up the steps of the porch and tried the back door.

Locked solid.

Damn. She’d never had any luck with the credit card trick that seemed to work so effectively in the movies, and she had nothing with which to pick a lock.

So now what?

A window?

She tried all of the windows on the porch but they didn’t budge, nor could she reach any from the ground. Maybe she could somehow squeeze through a basement window? She walked around the huge Gothic house, but not one window she reached, nor the front door, would budge. Unless she came back with a crowbar, she was effectively locked out.

And the flickering lights she’d seen?

Flashlights?

Candles?

Penlights?

The illumination had disappeared. The basement was now dark as a tomb.

Disappointed, Kristi climbed back over the gate and walked to her car. As she did, she felt those unseen eyes watching her every move. A bit of wind stirred, causing the wet leaves on the ground to lift and brittle branches of live oak to rattle.

As she reached her car she thought she heard a voice…a soft voice, the barest of whispers quietly crying.

She stopped short.

“All in your head,” it called.

Kristi spun, searching the shadows. “Is someone there?” she responded, looking across the parking lot to the house. She strained to listen but heard nothing over the sough of the wind.

“All in your head, she told herself, but she waited again, listening, skin prickling, feeling as if her every move were being scrutinized. Measured. Second-guessed.

“Is anyone there?” she tried again, rotating slowly, her heart hammering in dread, her fingers unzipping her purse and closing over her canister of mace. “Hello?”

Nothing.

Just the drip of rain from the downspouts as the chapel bells began to peel the hours. Goose bumps rose on her skin and she glanced up to the roof of Wagner House. Was someone in an upper window staring down at her? A dark figure in the shadows, or was she truly imagining it all? She half expected some deranged creatures with bloody fangs to swoop down on her. The vial at her neck felt like it weighed a hundred pounds.

“Get over yourself,” she admonished once she was in the car. She reached for her phone, turned it on, and listened
to two messages. One from Jay insisting she call him, the other from her dad, who tried his best to sound like he was just checking in, but there was an underlying gravity to his voice that couldn't be missed. “…so call me when you can,” he said as he signed off.

“Will do, Dad,” she said, putting the car into gear and glancing once more toward Wagner House.

Vlad watched from the bell tower of the church chapel. Kristi Bentz was becoming a big problem.

Elizabeth was right.

It was time to leave, before they got caught. There were other hunting grounds, but they would take some time to establish, so it would be necessary to sacrifice more than one tonight and again tomorrow. Then they would stop for a while. Make the blood last.

The taillights of the Honda faded in the distance and he licked his lips at the thought of Kristi Bentz and her long, supple neck. He imagined sinking his teeth into her as well as doing all sorts of things to her body.

So Elizabeth wanted to watch.

Who better to start with than the girl who was trying so desperately to unmask them? Wouldn’t there be sweet irony in Elizabeth viewing it all?

Yes, he decided, there was a poetry, a symmetry to it.

As if the taking of Kristi Bentz’s life had been preordained.

But he was getting ahead of himself.

First, there were others to attend to. Beautiful girls who had already pledged their souls.

Tonight, one would be taken.

Tomorrow, if all went as planned, there would be two.

Their images came to mind and he felt a hot lust run through him. He imagined their surrender.

But first, tonight, one was waiting….

Ariel was groggy, couldn’t lift her head, and she was cold, so damned cold. The room was dark, but somehow familiar, as if she’d dreamed it. And she was naked as she lay upon a couch of some kind, the pile soft against her bare skin.

You know what’s happening.

You suspected this, didn’t you?

Why were you so desperate for friends?

Dazed, she sensed a change in the atmosphere and knew she wasn’t alone. She was on a stage of some kind, it seemed, a raised platform, and she felt as if dozens of eyes were watching her, though she saw no one.

She tried to say something, but her mouth wouldn’t form words, her vocal cords seemed paralyzed, just as her body was. Fear screamed through her and she tried like hell to move, to roll off the couch, to do anything.

She’d only wanted friends, had gone out for a few drinks, ordered the “Blood Martini,” which had seemed fine… at first, and she hadn’t really bought into the whole thing, but she’d been intrigued and her newfound friends had assured her the “drinking of the blood” was all part of the ritual, all part of the fun, all part of this whole funky
vampire craze.

But now she was sick with fear and the rising mist that slowly seeped through the floor gave her the creeps.

What was going on?

Where was she?

How had she gotten here, in this dark, cavernlike room?

Who, dear God, who were the people she felt watching her, their eyes caressing her?

Men?

Women?

Both?

Oh, Lord, what were they going to do to her?

She heard a footstep and tried to twist her neck, but failed.

Another footstep.

Her blood ran cold through her veins.

*Help me,* she silently prayed. *Please God, help me.*

Frantically she tried to see who was approaching. One person or more?

“Sister Ariel,” a male voice intoned.

*Sister?* Why would he call her that? She did remember foggily some mention of an initiation rite…that must be what this was. But why did she have to be naked and God, oh, God, why couldn’t she move?

She recognized his voice, didn’t she?

“Sister Ariel comes to us willingly.”

*Who is “us”?* And *no, no I didn’t come willingly.*

More steady footsteps, and though he was at her back, though she couldn’t see him, she felt his presence. He touched the spot behind her ear and she wanted to recoil, but couldn’t. There was something dangerous and frightening, but also seductive, in his touch.

His finger grazed the back of her neck and a thrill slid through her even though she was revolted. Her heart was pounding loudly inside her head and a red glow had turned the stage, if that’s what it was, to a dark scarlet mist.

It crossed her mind that she might be dreaming, or tripping out on some drug, but deep in her heart she knew this was real. He touched her intimately, leaning closer, breathing across her skin, brushing a nipple with one hand.

Her body responded though she willed it not to. She still could not see him, could not twist to stare into his face. “Sister Ariel joins us willingly tonight to make the final, ultimate sacrifice.”

*No…this can’t be right. Ariel struggled inwardly, but her body wouldn’t, couldn’t, move.*

“Our sister. A virgin.”

*For the love of God, what was this? She wasn’t a virgin…. This was nuts, just plain crazy.*
She struggled wildly, not one muscle moving, and felt his hand begin to stroke her. “Now, Sister Ariel, it’s time,” he said, bending close, so close that his hot breath slid over the bare skin of her neck and she felt herself tingle. With anticipation? Or terror?

No! No, no, no!

His lips brushed against her skin.

“You know who I am,” he whispered, and she did. Oh, Lord, she knew who he was and there had been times when she’d fantasized about him. But not like this…not with…with an audience. Not when fear and seduction were mixed, when she was unable to move, to speak.

There was just the hint of a smile in his voice when he said, “Don’t be afraid.”

But she was. Oh, God, she was afraid.

He bent his head to her and she felt a white hot prick, like a needle into her neck. Her heart fluttered wildly. She tried to cry out but only a moan left her lips.

His mouth held fast to her.

The blood began to flow, even and warm.

Oh, yes. She was afraid.

She was paralyzed, consumed, stricken with fear.

God, help me….
Kristi decided to stop at her apartment for a change of clothes. Once again, it seemed as if nothing inside had been disturbed. Maybe they’d scared the voyeur off. “Good riddance,” she said to the empty room as Houdini, who had been perched on top of the bookcase, dropped down and looked as if he wanted to do figure eights between her ankles. He wanted to trust her but hadn’t quite made that leap of faith yet.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” she promised him, then headed out the door and drove to Jay’s aunt’s mess of a cottage.

Jay was just getting out of his truck when she pulled into the cracked drive, and Bruno was already marking every bit of shrubbery on the way to the front door. Jay grabbed her and kissed her hard enough to make her mind spin.

“Miss me?” she asked when he finally released her and she could catch her breath.

“A little.”

“A lot,” she teased.

“I’m just glad you’re here,” he said seriously, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and shepherding them both around a dripping gutter as they made their way onto the front porch.

Once inside, they checked the taped feed from her apartment but there was nothing other than the cat coming and going.

“You think he’s ever going to show?”

“In time,” Jay said grimly.

Kristi changed into her pajamas, carefully removing the vial from around her neck, feeling faintly guilty about not telling Jay she’d worn it. When she returned to the living room, Jay was building a fire from wood scraps. Eager flames snapped and popped, the scent of wood smoke permeated the rooms, and Jay then cracked a bottle of red wine. They drank out of paper cups and sat propped up against worn furniture covered with sheetrock dust. “Home sweet home.” An ironic twinkle sparked in his eyes.

“I saw Hiram at the play tonight,” she said, staring into her cup. “It was all I could do not to go up to him and accuse him of being a pervert.”

“He would just deny it.”

“I know, but if not him, then he gave my key to someone. Or maybe Irene did.”

“Yeah, like the cable guy or phone repairman, or a plumber. We don’t know who this guy is.”

“It hasn’t been that long since I changed the locks.”

“We’ll get him,” Jay predicted. “Just be patient.”

“You mean, more patient.”

He smiled but didn’t argue. A damned good idea. Kristi knew that patience wasn’t her long suit, but lately, what little patience she possessed had been stretched thin. It seemed as if she were forever waiting, biding her time, hoping for a break.

“You know, I can’t stay here while you’re in New Orleans,” Kristi said. “I have to go back to my apartment.”
Jay vehemently shook his head. “How would that make you feel, knowing his camera’s still there? That he could come for it at any time? It’s not safe. Don’t worry, I’ll drive back after I get off work. Commute.”

“After ten-hour days?”

“It’s not that far.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“We’re talking four nights a week.”

“I can take care of myself,” she assured him, growing slightly testy. It was one thing to have him be concerned for her safety, quite another to have him try to bully himself into her life. Overprotect her. She’d been down that road.

“I’m coming back and that’s that, but I do have to go to the crime lab,” he admitted, then proceeded to tell her about everything he’d learned from Sonny Crawley before she could offer further protest.

Kristi listened, flabbergasted, as he spelled out what he knew from the discovery of the female arm and hand in the gator’s belly, to the search of the swamp where the reptile had been found. She didn’t interrupt when he explained how the police were trying to ID the person to whom the arm had belonged, and that he’d asked his friend in the department to search through DMV and criminal records.

“—so they’re looking for more evidence, more bodies,” Jay wrapped up as he took a long swallow from his cup.

“It turns out that one of the detectives, Portia Laurent, has suspected all along that the girls who are missing from All Saints were abducted. They just didn’t have any evidence to prove it.”

“But now they might,” Kristi said. She was still processing and almost missed it when he changed directions and asked her about the morality play. Slightly distracted, she told him about the events of her night, carefully skirting any mention of the vial because she knew he would demand it back, and she had every intention of wearing it to her meeting with Dr. Grotto the next day.

She finished with her less than productive snooping around Wagner House and her belief that she’d heard someone call for help.

“I’m not crazy about you meeting Dr. Vampire,” he said, pouring them each a little more wine. “And don’t go back to your apartment again.”

Kristi ignored that. “What’s Grotto gonna do to me? I’ll be at his office in the English Department.”

Jay’s eyes had turned dark as he stared into the fire. “But he’s involved in the girls’ disappearances; I can feel it. You seeing him, it just doesn’t feel right.” He rubbed his chin and shook his head. “And what about whoever was crying ‘help me’ outside Wagner House?”

“I said I thought I heard it, but it could have been a cat mewing or…I don’t know, something else. The wind was blowing, it was raining, and I was maybe imagining things.”

“You’re not one to imagine things,” he pointed out, and she decided it was time to set him straight.

“What if I told you I could predict death by just looking at someone?”

“You have some psychic power I’m not aware of?”

“You could say that.”

He smiled lazily and stretched out in front of the fire, his head propped on one hand, his drink in the other, his gaze fastened on hers. “Lay it on me.”

And so she did, explaining about her dreams where her father died and the way she saw people in black and white
before, she assumed, they were to die. When she was finished, she took another long swallow from her cup and noticed that his smile had faded.

“I’m waiting for the punch line.”

“There isn’t one,” Kristi assured him.

“You’re serious.”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

“But your father, and Lucretia and Ariel, they’re still alive.”

“Yes, I know, but there was the one woman on the bus.”

“An elderly woman.”

“I’m just telling you what’s going on. Whenever it happens, I feel cold inside. Like death is cutting through my soul,” she said, her voice lowering a bit, feeling more and more foolish as she tried to explain. “I know it sounds nuts. But it’s as if evil itself were looking through my eyes.”

“Kris—”

“I know, I know. I sound like a psycho myself, that I need years of therapy, but it didn’t happen until after the accident.”

“You told your father this?”

“As paranoid as he is about me? No way. I thought about confiding in his wife, Olivia, because she has, er, had, this psychic thing going on, but then she’d feel obliged to tell Dad, and so the only one I told was Ariel.” She sighed. “Who knows how many people she blabbed to.”

“No one will believe her. They’ll just think you’re loco.”

“Perfect,” she said. “Do you think I’m loco?”

Jay hesitated long enough to raise Kristi’s temper, but then he held up a hand and said, “I think something’s going on with you. This—phenomenon—the gray pallor vision—could be something physical.”

“A sight problem? A brain problem?”

He shrugged. “All I know is I really don’t think you should meet with Grotto. Or at least wait for me to go with you.”

Kristi would have liked to have an all-out argument about her “ability,” but maybe it was enough that she’d at least told him. For the moment anyway. She negated his suggestion about Grotto with, “That would blow everything.”

“I can be outside his office. Nearby. You have your phone on, put it on mute, so he doesn’t hear anything, and I’ll listen in. If anything goes wrong, you let me know, and I’ll burst through the door like John effin’ Rambo.”

“Okay,” she said. Fortunately she didn’t have to work. Flirty Francesca had agreed to take Kristi’s shift at the restaurant. “Wait at the library until you hear me talking to him, just so you know we’re in his office and he won’t see you, then once I’m inside, you can come into the English Department. Closer. Afterward we can go to the student union and talk, then to your class.”

“Sounds good.”

“How we need a code word in case I get into trouble with Grotto?”
“How about ‘Help’ or ‘Jay, get the hell in here’!”

“Those’ll work,” she said, almost laughing. “I’m only mildly crazy, you know,” she added.

“I know.”

She looked into his handsome face and wondered what had taken her so long to get to this point. To trust him. Love him.

She almost told him about the vial, but decided she’d keep that bit of information to herself at least for one more night. Until she’d seen Grotto’s reaction.

Portia was putting on her coat, ready to call it a day, when Detective Crawley, reeking of cigarette smoke and in need of a shave, showed up at her cubicle. She’d never much liked the man, but couldn’t fault him on his skills as a detective. He was just a little rough around the edges, which seemed to work for him, at least on the job.

“You all get a call from Jay McKnight?” he asked. It was after five and Crawley was already wearing his rain jacket, a battered briefcase in one hand, a printout in the other.

“No.”

“He’s with the crime lab, teaches a night class at All Saints. A friend of mine from way back. I gave him your name.”

“Because?”

“He’s got an interest in those girls that went missing. Seems to think they’re more than just runaways, like you. Thought you might want to talk to him. Compare notes. He also asked me to look up some info on some of the teachers who work at the college.”

“What kind of info?”

“Vehicle ownership, specifically he’s lookin’ for a dark van, if anyone who works at the college owns or has access to one. With Louisiana plates. Probably domestic and full sized, I think, not a mini. Claims someone was following Kristi Bentz. She’s a student there, and Rick Bentz of the New Orleans PD’s daughter.”

“What’s her involvement?”

“I think she’s playing amateur detective.”

“Just what we need,” she grumbled. “And how is McKnight involved?”

“He’s her professor. Friend.”

“More?”

“Probably.”

“Great,” she said, thinking the Bentz girl was more likely than not in the way.

“McKnight also wants background checks on some of the professors and staff who work at the college.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “He thinks one of his colleagues is involved?”

“I got the info from DMV, but thought you might want to work on the staff as I’ve got a few days off while my ex is in the hospital—knee replacement. I’ve got the boys. I’ll be back on Friday.” He handed her a sheet of paper with a list of names and another with five vehicles, potential matches. He gave her a quick rundown of what had happened to Jay and Kristi Bentz.
Portia couldn’t help the first tingle of excitement that ran through her blood. For over a year she’d sensed there was more going on than students at All Saints becoming runaways. Now, at least, someone seemed to agree with her.

“I’ll be checkin’ in with ya,” Crawley said, poking a finger at her nose. “And don’t screw it up, okay? I got a half-rack riding on this.”

“Do I get some of that?”

One side of his mouth lifted. “Connect the dots and I’ll buy you a real drink. What do you drink? Cosmopolitan? Daiquiri?”

“Martini straight up. Three olives.”

“A woman after my own heart.”

“Just what I wanna hear,” she said, already taking off her coat and settling in for what was bound to be a long, but promising night.

Elizabeth rarely visited.

It was an unwritten rule: he would go to her. Always.

The last time she’d shown up in his private quarters was over a year earlier, but now she was pacing along the edge of the pool, light from the underwater fixture giving the water a bright aquamarine glow, the reflection casting shifting bluish shadows on her pale, flawless skin. Dressed in a long black coat and boots, she walked from one end of the room to the other.

Vlad finished doing his laps, refusing to interrupt his routine, even for her, then hoisted himself from the pool.

“Something’s wrong,” he said, naked and dripping, allowing the cool air to caress his skin. He’d hoped to spend some time in the freezer with Ariel and Karen Lee, aka Bodiluscious, after his workout, but obviously he would have to change his plans.

“We have to work faster,” Elizabeth said, glaring at him as if whatever was wrong was his fault. “We agreed to collect more and it has to be soon.”

“What happened?”

“Other than the arm being discovered?” she sneered. “I have sources in the police department. That was careless, Vlad. When you dispose of the…corpses, you need to take them far away. Out of the parish. Out of the state.” She whirled on him, her anger visible in the snap of her eyes, the flare of her nostrils. “For God’s sake, what’s wrong with the damned Gulf of Mexico? They could be used to feed the sharks…never found. People fall off boats and are never located again.”

As if it were that easy to dispose of a body.

“The gator incident was unfortunate.”

“And stupid! What’re the chances of the rest of the body showing up? Or the other ones?” She was shaking and it was all he could not to put his hands on her and try to calm her, but he knew from past experience that touching her now, while she was dressed, not in her murky bath, would infuriate her further.

“They can’t link the arm to us.”

She stared at him as if he were a cretin. “Do you even watch TV? What”—she made air quotes—“‘they’ can do is very sophisticated. Maybe not CSI sophisticated and certainly not so quickly, but sophisticated nonetheless. With
enough time, oh, yes, they can link that damned limb to whichever girl it belonged to and eventually to us!”

Scratching her long neck thoughtfully, Elizabeth, ever restless, kept up her pacing, then stopped short as she caught her reflection in one of the mirrors he’d placed in the room. Her fingers curled in on themselves until she realized what she was doing, that she might mar her skin with her scratching. Momentarily distracted, obsessed with her image, she also took in several deep breaths and made her face a calm mask once again. The lines of consternation and frustration between her brows and around the corners of her eyes smoothed, and the expression of seething fury disappeared.

“We have to step things up. Immediately.” She said, more evenly, “You know what to do. We’ve planned for this day, I just wish it hadn’t happened so soon.” Sighing, she shook her head, her dark hair sliding across her shoulders. “This Friday,” she said with a note of wistfulness. “It will be our last performance here.”

“And then?”

She arched a perfect brow. “We start over, of course. We just need to get enough blood to last until we settle somewhere else.” She seemed to have chased away her anger with thoughts of a new future, a new place, new young, supple bodies. “But for now, we must concentrate.”

She crossed the cavernous room to his desk alcove and saw that he’d already strewn campus ID pictures across the top, photographs of those he thought most worthy. Leaning one hip against the desktop, she quickly slid aside those she deigned not pretty enough, or supple enough, or fresh enough. She hesitated over a few and clucked her tongue at opportunities missed.

In the end three pictures remained. “These are the ones,” she said, and he stared down at the beautiful girls in the pictures. Each was a younger, more vibrant version of Elizabeth.

The center photograph was of Kristi Bentz.

“Three will be difficult.”

“Then you’ll just have to hone your skills, won’t you?” She smiled at him, a careful, poised grin that showed few lines. “If you can’t get them all, at least be certain you get the Bentz girl.”

All too gladly, he thought.

“And remember, these”—she swirled a finger over the photographs—“are just the ones we need for their blood. There are others who have to be disposed of as well.”

Of course he knew what she was talking about: the clean up. Getting rid of those who could ruin them. That thought was more than pleasant. He couldn’t wait to get rid of them. They’d been pains in the neck from the get-go.

They deserved to die.

Had been asking for it.

Vlad, with Elizabeth’s blessing, was only too happy to oblige.

Dr. Grotto’s office was in the lower level of the massive building housing the English Department, down a staircase to a corridor in the north wing. This section of the building, separate from most of the classrooms, was quiet. Empty. No students or faculty wandering the halls. Most of the office doors, with their frosted glass windows, were shut and vacant, no light shining through the opaque panes.

Kristi screwed up her courage as she headed down the corridor, her sneakers silent, not making a squeak. So she was finally going to confront Dr. Grotto, one-on-one. She wasn’t certain exactly how she was going to play this, but her mind was cranking out possible scenarios:

An innocent, just asking about her assignment, hinting about some kind of cult?
Straightforward, as if she were an investigator with the police department?

Coy? Flirtatious? Hoping to elicit information while stroking his ego?

Stomach acid burned up her throat at the thought.

_Play it by ear_, she told herself, though her nerves were tight as piano wires, her apprehension growing with each step. She checked her pocket: her cell phone line was open, but muted, and hopefully Jay would be able to hear all of her conversation, even though he might not like it. She hated relying on him, but decided not to be a fool. Grotto could be dangerous. She had no idea how her professor would react if he thought he was caught.

She reached the corner and, hearing voices, partially muted but loud enough for her to decipher, realized an argument was blazing.

“I’m telling you, this is dangerous,” a woman was saying, her voice rising with emotion. Kristi stopped dead in her tracks.

_Lucretia?_

“You have to stop.” Yes, it was Lucretia and she sounded desperate. Kristi chanced peering around the corner and saw that the hallway was empty.

“I know what I’m doing,” Grotto’s voice. Angry. Deep. Coming from behind a door that was cracked just a bit, so little that they probably didn’t realize it was open. Heart thudding, Kristi sneaked along the wall, getting closer.

“Don’t you see they’re using you? For the love of God, Dominic, get out now. Before it’s too late.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know something horrible is happening. Something evil. And…and I hate what it’s doing to you. Please, Dominic, get out now. We can leave. No one will ever know.” Lucretia was scared.

Panicked.

Kristi cringed inside at the thought of how much mental abuse her ex-roommate would take, for what? This creep that peddled vampirism?

“No one will ever know? That’s ironic coming from you,” he sneered, his voice heavy with accusation. “Since you’re the one who opened your mouth.”

“I made a mistake.”

“One that I have to fix.”

Kristi could barely hear over her own thudding heartbeat. They were talking about her! About Lucretia’s original request for Kristi to check into some kind of vampire cult.

“I was worried! About them! About you!” Lucretia was nearly hysterical. “About…about us!”

“You should have thought about that before you decided to talk to your friend.”

“She’s not my friend,” Lucretia said quickly.

“A cop’s daughter, for crying out loud. And not just any cop, but a homicide dick. Homicide, Lucretia. As in murder. What the hell were you thinking?” Grotto was really mad now, his voice rising. “The last thing we need is any more attention from the damned police.”

“I—I just thought she could help.”
“How? By exposing everything? Jesus Christ, Lucretia, you’re supposed to be an intelligent woman. But talking to someone so close to the police, drawing attention to me, asking for help when you don’t even understand what’s going on?”

“Dominic, please—” Lucretia’s voice broke and Kristi almost felt sorry for her.

“I told you it was over,” he said more quietly, like a death knell. The declaration sounded cold and heartless, much worse than if he’d screamed at her, if there had been some tiny bit of feeling in his voice.

“You…you don’t mean it,” she said, sniffing.

Get over him, he’s a stone-cold loser, Kristi thought, inching closer to the doorway. Sexy yes, but cruel, and obviously mixed up in something dark and dangerous, ultimately illegal, something to do with the missing girls, quite possibly murder. She wondered how she herself could face him after this.

Lucretia tried to defend herself. “I—I told her you were…innocent. Persecuted.”

“But she didn’t buy it, did she?”

Silence.

Damning silence.

“Now I have to deal with her. I’ve tried to avoid her since the beginning of the school year, ever since I realized who she was, but she’s relentless and”—he drew a breath—“she’s coming to see me in a few minutes. On some pretense about her assignment.”

“Don’t meet with her,” Lucretia pleaded softly.

“I have to. So, go. Now. She’ll be here any minute. Use the back, in case she comes early. And call me in about twenty minutes. I’ll use the excuse to cut the meeting short.”

“Oh, no, please, Dominic—”

“Leave, Lucretia. Get the fuck out. Before you ruin everything for me.”

She gave a little squeak of protest and Kristi started backing up, faster and faster, down the length of the hallway. Her heart was racing, a cold sweat running down her spine. There was no place to hide, no closet to slip into, no stairway she could climb. She had to pretend that she’d just arrived and hadn’t overheard the argument. She reached the corner, backed around it and waited, running in place, already coming up with an excuse for being late.

In the distance, she heard a door bang shut and assumed that her ex-roommate had taken her ex-lover’s advice and fled through the entrance that led to the back of campus, near Greek Row and away from the quad. A few other students came down the stairs and Kristi headed back up, plucking the phone from her pocket as she stepped outside.

“You there?” she whispered, all the while jogging in place.

Jay didn’t answer.

She realized then that the call had been dropped. “Great.”

It didn’t happen often, but when it did it was always, it seemed, at an inopportune moment. Just like in the commercials. Quickly she redialed Jay.

“What the hell happened?” he demanded, sounding frantic.

“Couldn’t you hear?”

“What?”
“Never mind, I’ll fill you in later.”

“I’m on my way over there.”

She searched the darkness, looking toward the library, but didn’t recognize him in the groups of people hastening from one building to the next.

“Wait. I haven’t gone in yet. Grotto had company. I’ll tell you about it later. Where are you?”

“Just leaving the library.” She squinted and recognized him hastening down the wide steps. He walked briskly under the security lights toward the English Department. Lamplight caught in his hair and she saw his expression was hard and intense.

“Good, then you can wait inside the doors of the English Department.”

“Unless you want me closer. Like on the other side of the door to his office?”

“Only if you hear me say, ‘I’m in trouble.’ Then you can play Rambo to your heart’s content.”

He was now close enough to her that she knew he was looking at her. She gave him a little wave, then hurried into the brick building once more and down the steps. Before Jay could argue, she hit the mute button again, tucked the phone in her pocket and, glancing up at the clock in the hallway, noted that it was almost ten minutes after her scheduled meeting. No time to lose. Not if she wanted to catch Grotto. Kicking it up a gear, she hurried down the hallway, half running, as if she were trying to make up for lost time.

Rounding the corner, she spied Dr. Grotto at the door to his office, locking up. Dressed in black slacks, T-shirt, and jacket, holding his briefcase in one hand, he looked ready to split.

“Oh! Dr. Grotto, I’m so sorry I’m late,” she said in a rush, hoping her cheeks were flushed. “I had a phone call from my dad, and he held me up.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s just a little overprotective.” Breathlessly she managed an apologetic smile. “I had to tell him I had an important meeting with you to get him off the phone.”

“Unfortunately, I, too, have another meeting,” Grotto said. Probably a lie, but she had no choice but to let it slide. “I just need to talk to you for a minute or two. Really.”

He studied her for a second, then unlocked the door again, straightening to his full height of six-two or-three. “I was about to give up on you, but I suppose I can spare one minute.” His voice was calm, evenly modulated, as if he hadn’t recently been a part of an intense argument.

He made a big show of checking his watch, trying to make her feel bad about being late, obviously already coming up with excuses to cut out of their meeting as fast as possible.

Fine. She’d make it quick.

“Have a seat.” Waving her into a small rolling desk chair, he settled into a worn leather chair on the other side of a small black writing table and snapped on the desk lamp. The entire room was cramped, little more than a closet with a window cut high into the wall and a computer desk crammed into one corner. A bookcase covered one wall, every shelf filled to capacity with information on vampires, ghosts, werewolves, and anything the least bit paranormal.

“So, what can I do for you?” He folded his hands over the desk and stared at her with an intensity that, she suspected, was supposed to make her squirm. It did. His eyes were deep set and mesmerizing, his face all bladed angles, his mouth so thin it appeared a crease in a strong, sharp-cut jaw. A handsome man, he seemed used to banking on his looks and size to take control of the conversation.

She decided to play it straight. Kind of. “I wanted to talk to you about some of your students.”
He cocked his head, his hair glistening black in the lamplight. “It’s against the policy of the college to give out information about anyone. I assume you know that.”

“I’m talking about the ones who’ve gone missing,” she said. “You remember? Dionne Harmon, Tara Atwater, Monique DesCartes, and Rylee Ames? All of them, while they were students here, were enrolled in your class on vampyrism.”

“I said I wouldn’t discuss them.”

“I’m just talking about their curriculum,” Kristi forged on. “They were all English majors. They had many of the same classes. Yours was one of them. It’s a very popular elective.”

“The most popular elective in the department,” he agreed with a taut smile, his white teeth stark against his swarthy skin. He seemed to relax a bit. Except for the tiny, telltale tic that had developed near one eye. “Maybe even on campus.”

“Even more than History of Rock and Roll.”

“I couldn’t say. Is this going somewhere, Ms. Bentz?”

“You were one of the last people to see Dionne Harmon alive.”

He froze. “Are you saying she’s dead? Did they find her body?” His cool facade cracked and something akin to panic washed over his face. “Dear God, I didn’t know.”

“I’m just saying that you were one of the last people to see her before she disappeared.”

“Say what you mean the first time,” he snapped. “That’s a big difference. And yes, apparently I was one of the last people to see Dionne before she disappeared. But this is really no business of yours, is it, Miss Bentz? If you have some questions about your assignments, or class, please”—he waved in a “come on” gesture—“ask, but that’s all I’ll talk about.” He no longer made any pretense at smiling. “I am a busy man.”

“What do you know about a cult of people who worship vampires? Here, on campus.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve never seen one of these before?” She dug beneath her turtleneck to flash the vial of blood.

He glared at the vial as if it were the embodiment of evil. “What is that?” he asked in little more than a whisper.

“A vial of blood. Human blood.”

“Oh, God.” He closed his eyes for a second and drew in a long breath. For a long time she didn’t think he would answer, but then he surprised her by admitting, “I’ve seen it, or one like it.”

“Where?”

“A student. Her name is O.” He looked about to confide in Kristi, then shook his head. “I can’t discuss her or anyone else. But I know she’s very outspoken and wears the vial almost militantly.”

That much was true. Kristi’s own father had interviewed the girl on an earlier case and she had proudly shown off her unique jewelry.

“Where did you get that?” Grotto asked.

“I found it in my apartment.”

“Your apartment?”
“Tara Atwater used to live there.”

“And you think it was hers?” he said, the corners of his mouth tightening, the temperature in the room seeming to drop ten degrees.

“I do. DNA will tell.”

“You’ve had some of the blood tested?”

She nodded.

His gaze was cold. “If the police were going to run any tests, they would have taken the necklace. You’re bluffing, Miss Bentz.”

“I sent drops in…claimed they were my own. I have a friend who works in the lab.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Don’t you care what happened to your students, Dr. Grotto?”

“They’re runaways.” He said it as if he believed it. Or as if he wanted to believe it.

“You think all four just left town? All four who attended your class? All four who were English majors? All four just up and decided to take a hike? That’s one helluva coincidence, don’t you think?”

“It’s more common than you think. They’re young and, from what I understand, troubled.”

“And missing.”

“It’s possible something happened to them, I suppose, but far more likely that they took off.” Grotto seemed torn between the desire to throw her out and a need to talk about the missing girls.

“Without a trace?” Kristi questioned skeptically.

“Ms. Bentz, even in today’s world, if someone wants to disappear, it can be done. Maybe not forever, but for a while. I think all of the girls will turn up. When they want to.”

“That’s such bull,” she said.

“Easy to say. You had a loving family, right? Father and mother who doted on you?”

She didn’t respond, didn’t want this turned on her. She refused to mention that her mother had died years ago in a single car accident and that her father, after pouring himself into a bottle, finally pulled himself together. Neither did she mention that she was adopted. The less Grotto knew about her, the better.

At that moment, his phone rang. Lucretia.

“Excuse me,” he said. Into the receiver, “Hello? Oh, yes…I’m on my way…sorry, running late. I’ll be there in”—he checked his watch—“fifteen minutes…yes…bye.” He hung up and stood, signifying the interview was over. “I really do have to go.” He picked up his briefcase again, walked to the door and held it open.

She’d pushed it as far as she could.

And had come up with nothing.

“Say ‘hi’ to Lucretia for me,” she said as they walked out, “and tell her I’d appreciate it if she’d return my calls.”

He glared at her and in that second she witnessed the paling of his complexion. Had she hit a sensitive spot? But the blanching went further than just a moment’s shock. Grotto’s entire face bled of color and she had the distinct hit
that he, like so many others she’d seen on campus, might soon be dead.

“What?” he asked when he found her staring at him.

“Be careful,” she said, and saw the questions in his eyes. “I don’t know what you’re into, Dr. Grotto, or how deep, but it’s dangerous.”

He half laughed. “You’ve made up your own myth, haven’t you?”

Had she?

She could tell him that he’d turned gray—a signal, she was certain, of impending death or doom. But he would just laugh at her some more, think she was a real whack job, just like Ariel had.

What had she expected? That he would turn over and spill his guts, tell her about some dark, demonic cult? Admit that he killed the girls and what—drank their blood? Or drank it first and then killed them?

Grotto locked his door. If she’d thought she was going to get some soul-cleansing confession from him and break the case wide open or even gain information for her damned book, she’d been sadly mistaken.

She climbed the stairs to the first floor and found Jay seated on a bench near the stairwell. Less than fifty feet from Grotto’s door.

“Way to go, Sherlock,” he said, and she tossed him a don’t-mess-with-me look.

“You heard,” she said as they walked through the front doors and a blast of cool winter air hit them.

“I heard that you took the vial in there, taunted him with it, screwed around with evidence!”

“I thought it might be effective.”

“Damn it, Kris, that wasn’t part of the deal.”

“I should have told you,” she admitted as they walked along the brick path where other students were busily crossing campus. Bikes and skateboards whipped past and a jogger with two dogs on a leash raced in the opposite direction.

“But if you had, you knew I wouldn’t let you mess with it. What were you thinking?”

She wasn’t about to try to make excuses. Instead, she said, “I thought you were supposed to be waiting outside.”

“Yeah, well, I wanted to be a little closer, just in case.”

“Of what? That he might attack me?”

Jay shrugged, his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket. “Maybe. You did bait the hell out of him.” He took her arm, pulled her closer to him as a bicyclist cut through the quad. “From now on, no secrets. If we’re in this together, we have to be honest with each other.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He looked as if he didn’t believe her, but he didn’t release her arm as they walked briskly toward the student union. Jay pulled open the door and they stepped inside. A swell of warm air hit them and the sounds of laughter, music, and conversation filled the open area where students were hanging out, some studying, some plugged into iPods, others meeting friends. They seemed so innocent, so unaware of the evil that Kristi believed lurked in the crevices and corners of the campus.

Who would be next? she wondered, and thought of how pale Dr. Grotto had appeared.
“Did you believe him?” Jay’s voice brought her back to the moment.

“Grotto?” She shook her head. “He was hiding something.” Despite the warmth of the low, well-lit building, she felt a whisper of cold deep in her heart. She looked up at Jay and saw that his eyes were troubled. “And he was lying through his fangs.”
Jay sat in his office and, using a magnifying glass, studied a picture of the severed arm. He’d seen the real thing, of course, but it was being kept frozen in hopes the body from which it had been detached would be found. There were computer pictures as well, those that could be enhanced, but sometimes the old-fashioned way was most familiar.

He’d been in the lab for ten hours on Tuesday. It was nearly quitting time now and he was testy. Edgy. Hadn’t felt right about returning to New Orleans despite Kristi’s insistence the night before. She hadn’t listened to any of his arguments, wouldn’t consider living in his aunt’s bungalow or even keeping his dog. She’d moved back to her apartment against all his protests. He was in constant contact with her, either by phone, text or e-mail, and so far she was all right.

So far.

So how will you feel if something happens to her?

He tried not to immediately go to the worst case scenario, but it was always there, looming in the background of his brain, ready to pounce on his consciousness again. He had to quit worrying about Kristi. As she’d told him time and time again, she was an adult. Could take care of herself. She swore that the idea her would-be video-taper might try to access her apartment didn’t bother her. Said she almost welcomed it.

“Bullshit,” he muttered, focusing again on a discoloration between the elbow and wrist.

“You talkin’ to me?” Bonita Washington asked as she walked into the lab area, eyeing the microscopes and careful not to touch the gas chromatograph.

“Talking to myself, I guess,” he said, rolling his chair back.

“Notice anything unusual about that arm?” She pointed to the picture lying on his work area.

“It’s missing a body.”

“Smart ass. Anything else?”

“Her fingernail polish doesn’t go with her lipstick, oh, wait—”

Washington, usually stoic or grim, actually cracked a smile. “I was talking ’bout this,” she said, stabbing a finger at a spot of skin in the lower arm. “What’s it look like to you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“How about freezer burn?”

Jay looked again.

“Like when you put chicken in the freezer and the package isn’t sealed, or even if it is, if it’s been in there a good, long time?”

He rolled his chair back to the desk area and, using his microscope, studied the blemish on the arm. “You think the arm...no, the body was frozen before being dumped into the swamp.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So our perp doesn’t keep them alive,” he thought aloud. His hope that they would find the missing coeds alive
took a direct hit.

“Don’t know what he does to them, but at one point, I’d be willing to bet my new Porsche that this woman was frozen.”

“I thought you drove a Pontiac.”

“So far. But if I had a Porsche I’d make the bet.” She nodded, as if agreeing with herself. “Couldn’t take a chance on losing the Grand Am.”

Why would the killer keep the bodies on ice? Why not just dump them fresh, after the kill? Did he not want them to rot and smell, could he not get them to a dumping ground fast? And why was there no blood in the severed limb?

Jay tapped the eraser end of his pencil on the desk.

What kind of a nutcase was behind all of this?

Again, he thought of Kristi and this time, he couldn’t keep his dread at bay.

By midweek, Kristi was no closer to the truth than before. No one had dared come into her apartment; her meeting with Dr. Grotto had left him unruffled; he’d even had the nerve to call on her in class and smile almost benignly. The chat rooms, which she frequented every night, hoping to catch DrDoNoGood or JustO online, were a bust. They’d gone fairly silent, maybe with midterms looming in the next few weeks. Things on campus were quiet.

Almost too quiet.

The calm before the storm, she told herself as she rode her bike through the quad, heading for her writing class. She locked her fifteen-speed in the rack, then hurried into the building, a few steps behind Zena and Trudie.

Perfect.

They were in no hurry and she walked briskly, closing the gap between them so that when they reached the door to the classroom, she was on their heels. Zena found an empty desk. Trudie took one next to it and Kristi snagged one nearby. She glanced around the room. Wasn’t Ophelia—JustO—in this class? If so, she was nowhere in sight. Kristi definitely wanted to try and buddy up to her after their last meeting at the play. O, she thought, had secrets to spill.

Nor was Ariel anywhere to be seen. In fact, as Kristi thought about it, Ariel hadn’t been in any of her classes all week.

And Kristi had witnessed her changing from color to black and white, which, recently hadn’t meant much.

Still…

If it weren’t flu season, Kristi might have gotten suspicious. Instead, she made a mental note to check on the girl.

As Preston started his lecture, she glanced over at Zena again but didn’t catch the other girl’s attention. She would have to wait. She pretended interest in Dr. Preston as he lectured on the importance of perspective and clarity when writing, and she hoped she didn’t fall asleep.

Today, he seemed more content to rest his jean-clad hips on the edge of his writing table, rather than pace. Still, he flipped the chalk, his expression affable enough, but beneath his tan and California good looks, she thought she noticed a harder edge.

But then hadn’t she experienced just that same feeling with Dr. Grotto and Emmerson? Even Professor Senegal, the mother of twins, seemed to have a darker side to her, one she hid behind her sleek glasses and burgundy-colored lips.
Most of the students seemed to be in the same Zombie-like state as she. Kristi was beginning to recognize some. A few desks over was Marnie, the blonde she’d followed into Wagner House. Marnie, it seemed, was also a part of the group of friends including Trudie and Grace. Then there was Bethany, another girl in most of Kristi’s classes. She was busily taking notes, her fingers flying over the keyboard of her laptop as if Dr. Preston were giving out the answers to the universe.

One of those, Kristi thought as the girl asked a question to clarify a point on symbolism. A real suck-up.

Hiram glowered in his chair, and Mai was tuned into the lecture, taking fastidious notes.

Save me. This class was too basic for her taste. She’d already sold articles on true crime and she just wanted to hone her skills for the book she was putting together. She wasn’t certain Dr. Preston was the answer.

He must’ve read her thoughts. “Miss Bentz?” he said, his voice simmering with authority.

She froze.

“Am I boring you?” he asked, and when he stared at her, she wanted to melt into the floor. “Or you?” he said, swinging his gaze back to Hiram Calloway.

“Yeah,” Hiram said insolently. “You kinda are.”

“Kinda?” Preston said, snapping his chalk into his fist.

“Okay, no, you are. You’re boring me. I just want to write. I don’t think we need to study symbolism or imagery. We all took that in high school. Isn’t this supposed to be a college course? Sheeeiiiit.” With that he closed his laptop, stuffed his books into his backpack, kicked back his chair, and left the classroom.

Kristi thought all hell would break loose. But the anger in Preston’s face quickly disappeared. “If anyone else feels the way Mr. Calloway does, I invite you to leave at this time.”

The room went absolutely silent. No one even dared cough.

Preston’s glare traveled over each student and once he decided no one else was intent on leaving, he cleared his throat. “Good. Let’s continue…”

Once again he began flipping his chalk and pacing.

Kristi tried her best to pay attention. But it was hard. Hiram was right, the class was seriously boring.

She glanced at the clock and spent the next forty-five minutes noting that Trudie and Zena pretended interest in the class while texting each other. They held their cell phones just under the desk and were adept enough at working the keyboards to effectively “pass notes” without getting caught, which was a little weird. This was college, not junior high. But Kristi did her part as well, trying her best to read the information they sent back and forth.

It proved impossible, for the most part. The screens were too small, but she did pick up a line or two and quickly jotted down the piece of shorthand she saw. WH came up frequently…Wagner House? Or was she just willing it so? She also saw: Grto, which she assumed was in reference to Dr. Grotto, and a series of numbers, which, she thought, referred to Friday, which was more than just the start of the weekend, it was also the date of the last performance of Everyman. The rest of the information made no sense whatsoever, but she jotted notes down just the same.

When class was over she was once again behind the two girls but saw no reason to break into their conversation, nor did she overhear anything worth noting.

It was as if the whole world were holding its breath.

Outside was the same. The air was still. The sky filled with pewter clouds that didn’t seem to move.
The hairs on the back of her arms raised and though there was nothing obviously wrong, she knew, deep in her heart, that evil was lurking in the shadows.

It was after four on Friday and Portia was a little jangled from the eight—or had it been nine?— cups of coffee she’d had throughout the day. She had to ease back on that. Today, she’d stopped counting when she’d reached six, even though she’d switched to decaf in the early afternoon. She was still feeling the effects as she parked her car in the lot at the station. Probably more from lack of sleep than the caffeine. She’d been working twelve-hour shifts, eight on the clock, four on her own time. When she got home, she walked on the treadmill for forty-five minutes, ate some microwavable, fat-free, low-carb, vitamin-fortified, tasteless meal, then hit it again, only taking a break for a glass of wine with the news. All to get rid of the twenty pounds that had crept on once she’d turned thirty and given up cigarettes.

Sometimes she wondered if she’d made the right choice.

The rest of every evening, she was buried in her work and she didn’t even want to think about what she really earned per hour. It would be too depressing. “Remember the benefits,” she reminded herself over and over again as she sweated on the treadmill, cranking up the music with her increasing pace. And then there was the simple fact that she loved her work. Loved it. Nothin’ better. Even if it meant sleeping in her big king-sized bed alone most nights.

She had to remind herself of that fact as she walked through the doors to the station house the following afternoon and made her way to her desk. She’d spent the past four hours talking to witnesses in a domestic violence case, and she was cranky from the conflicting testimony. Half the people at the party where the alleged incident had taken place insisted the wife was at fault; she’d baited her husband by flirting with his brother, then really heated things up by punching him in the gut. The other half said the husband, a possessive jealous type, known to use a steroid or two, had overreacted: he’d grabbed his gun and shot his wife dead.

Overreacting…no shit. How could people be so stupid?

Portia had about two hours of paperwork, and then she was going to call it a day. Shifts were about to change and there was a lot of activity in the office: phones jangling, computers humming, suspects in cuffs and shackles seated at desks protesting their innocence and bad treatment by the cops.

She passed by one of the young secretaries’ desks. A burst of color in the form of carnations and roses indicated that someone was thinking of her. Portia peeled off her raincoat and hung it on a peg near her desk while laughter erupted from somewhere near the fax machine. Then she stared at what appeared to be a mountain of reports to be processed.

So much for the whole “paperless society thing.”

She plowed through some of the files. Reminding herself she did not want a cigarette, she sorted through the paperwork as well as a butt-load of her e-mails.

The phone rang sharply. She picked up the receiver, her eyes still on her computer monitor. “Homicide, Detective Laurent.”

“This is Jay McKnight from the crime lab. I got your name from Sonny Crawley. I think he made a request for me.”

“Ok, right. I’ve been wanting to talk to you.” Her interest was immediately diverted from her paperwork and she started typing commands on her keyboard. “It just so happens I was gonna give you a buzz a little later. Just had some final loose ends to tie up…here we go.” She found the correct file and brought it up. “Let’s see. It’s taken a little time but I’ve got a list of potential vans, all domestic and dark, Louisiana plates, owned by people who work at the college. I’ll send them if you give me your e-mail address.”

“Great.” Jay rattled it off. Portia would verify it before sending, even though she recognized the URL as belonging to the state police.
“I’m driving up tonight,” McKnight added. “I could stop by the station, exchange information.”

“Good idea. Maybe by then I might have more info on the background checks you requested. Still working on those.” She pulled up Jay McKnight’s file on her computer. Though she’d never officially met him, she’d seen his name and observed him once at a crime scene. So far so good.

“It’ll be late. I work until seven. By the time I get there it could be close to nine. As long as things stay calm and I don’t have to pull any overtime.”

“Doesn’t matter, I’ll be here,” she assured him, grateful that someone in the department was starting to believe they had a problem at All Saints. A big problem.

“See you then.”

Portia hung up and not only sent the list of vehicles to McKnight but printed out another copy for herself. She was surprised at how many of the workers there owned a dark van. Along with a gardener and a security guard, the parish owned a black ’98 Chevrolet full-sized van; an assistant professor named Lucretia Stevens owned an ancient Ford Econoline that looked like it had once belonged to someone else in her family; another person named Stevens, Natalie Croft’s husband, owned a dark green van that he used in his construction business; and Dr. Dominic Grotto’s brother, too, owned a black van. Portia had widened the swath a little, just because she was suspicious of the guy. She’d interviewed him twice. He was too smooth for her. One of those who thought he was smarter than the rest. His conversation with her had been brushed on supercilious, though he’d acted concerned, as if he wanted to help.

But Grotto wasn’t the only person on campus she thought was hiding something. The whole damned English Department was filled with secretive sorts. Even the woman in charge, Natalie Croft, was a lofty, self-important academic whom Portia didn’t trust for a second. The curriculum had been changed to add in the popular “hip” and “cutting edge” classes such as the vampire thing, a class on the history of rock and roll, and others to draw students to All Saints. Then there were the Wagner descendants. She could have a whole file on them alone. Georgia Clovis was a major pain in the backside, acted as if she were royalty. And her brother, Calvin Wagner, a rich bastard who didn’t hold a job as far as Portia could tell, was certainly an odd duck. The third child, poor frail Napoli, was only one short step away from a permanent breakdown.

Beyond the Wagners was the clergy. Father Anthony “Tony” Mediera was a forceful priest with his vision of what the college should be, and Father Mathias Glanzer, the burdened priest in charge of the drama department, seemed riddled with secrets.

Portia would love to hear what each of them needed to confess.

There were others as well, new faces in the college. She was doing background checks on all of them, not that she had found anything even hinting of illegal activity. But then, she’d only gotten started and everyone had something they wished to hide. Everyone.

Besides, who was to say that the suspects were limited to the faculty of the college? What about other students? Or someone who wasn’t enrolled but used the campus as his personal hunting ground?

_Slow down, you still have no bodies... just a single arm wearing nail polish that, according to the lab, was about as popular as grits for breakfast._

She looked again at the list of dark vans and wondered if any of the vehicles could be connected with the missing girls.

She was about ready to run to the employee lunch room in search of a diet soft drink when her phone rang. Sweeping the receiver to her ear, she balanced it between her chin and shoulder. “Homicide, Detective Laurent.”

“Yeah, this is Lacey, in Missing Persons.” With the fire-engine red hair and tight clothes. The one with the attitude. “I was hopin’ to catch y’all.”

“What is it?” Portia asked, but she felt that tingle, that little sensation telling her more bad news was on the
horizon.

“I figured you’d want to know ’bout this. We have another missin’ person, over to the college. All Saints. A student. Ariel O’Toole. Her mother faxed over the report from Houston, that’s where they live, well she and the stepfather. They’re on their way. She hasn’t heard from her daughter in over a week and none of her friends, the ones she knows, have seen her. The daughter’s not returning her calls and that’s supposedly unusual,” Lacey said with a bit of sarcasm in her voice. “Imagine that.”

“Are you sending a uniform over?”

“A car’s already been dispatched. Thought you might want to tag along.”

“You got that right. I’ll pick up a copy of the report on my way.” She hung up. Another one. Damn it, another one.

Sliding on her shoulder holster, she strapped in her sidearm, then threw on her coat, and grabbed her purse. She was heading toward the hallway to Missing Persons when she ran into Del Vernon. She gave him the abbreviated version of what was happening as he fell into step beside her.

“I’ll come along,” he said, jaw set, dark eyes cold. “I hate to say it, Laurent, but there’s more to this than kids disappearing by choice,” he said, holstering his weapon and grabbing his overcoat.

“Glad you finally got there, Vernon,” she said as they walked toward the doors of the station together.

“We’ve got a floater.” Montoya, coffee cup in hand, strode through the doorway of Bentz’s office sometime after four. Wearing his trademark black leather jacket and diamond stud in one ear, he added, “A bit upriver from here. Still in the city limits. Female. African American. Been in the water awhile. They just fished her out.”

Bentz looked up from his pile of paperwork and saw that his partner was holding back. He dropped his pen. “And?”

“And she had a tattoo on her back, just over her buttocks. The word ‘love’ along with hummingbirds and flowers.”

Bentz sat up straighter. “Dionne Harmon,” he said aloud, and that bad feeling that had been with him ever since he’d heard about the girls missing from All Saints just got worse. Lots worse.

“Looks like.” Montoya leaned a shoulder against Bentz’s filing cabinet, one rescued from the aftermath of Katrina. Repainted and now rust free, it served as a constant reminder of how bad things could get. “They’re sending divers, seeing if the victim was alone, or if she had company.”

“Shit,” Bentz muttered, already rounding the desk. He snagged his jacket off a hall tree. “Let’s go. I’ll drive.”

“No, I’ll…never mind, you drive. And there’s more.”

“More?”

“So you haven’t heard of the arm they found in the belly of a gator?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Bentz’s gut twisted because he knew what was coming. The day took a nosedive.

“I’ll explain on the way.” Montoya finished his coffee and dropped the paper cup into a trash can in Bentz’s office. They walked amid the cubicles and desks and Bentz caught sight of a TV monitor, where, sure enough, the local news was showing shots of a search and rescue boat on the Mississippi. It was getting dark, but the crew had set up lights and cameras.
“Son of a bitch,” Bentz muttered. He reached into his pocket for a pack of Juicy Fruit, unwrapping a stick as they headed downstairs and outside to the parking lot, where rays of a fast-dying winter sun were struggling to pierce the clouds. A few managed to reflect in a myriad of puddles strewn across the asphalt, but darkness was coming fast.

Bentz took the wheel of the Crown Vic. As Montoya, over the crackle of the radio and thrum of the engine, explained about the arm discovered in the swamp north of New Orleans, Bentz drove to a spot in their jurisdiction where crews had taped off an area of the levee.

Camera crews had already gotten wind of the discovery and had set up shop. Overhead two news helicopters, blades whirring loudly, spotlights illuminating the gloaming, vied for a better view of the scene. Uniformed cops held back an ever-growing crowd.

Bentz almost wished for worse weather to keep the lookie-los at bay. The water was thick and muddy, the dank scent of the Mississippi filling his nostrils, a cool breath of wind starting to pick up.

“Detective Bentz!” He turned to see a pretty woman reporter brandishing her microphone and making a beeline for him.

“Can you verify that a woman was found in the river?”

“I just got here.”

“But it appears as if a body had been pulled from the Mississippi and there’s speculation that it might be one of the girls who went missing from All Saints College in Baton Rouge.”

“That’s a mighty big leap,” he said, trying not to snap.

“And isn’t it true that a body part was recovered in the swamp closer to Baton Rouge?”

Son of a bitch, he thought, but turned briefly and said, “I’m not at liberty to say, but I’m certain the public information officer will give some kind of press briefing.” He offered the woman an all-business smile, then ducked under the crime scene tape.

“Detective Montoya!” the woman called.

“No comment.” He, too, slid beneath the tape and together they approached the water’s edge, where members of the crime scene and the coroner had already gathered. Bonita Washington nodded at them, her face a stern mask.

“Dionne Harmon?” Bentz asked.

“Tattoo’s the same. African American. About the right age, size, and shape.” Washington walked over to a body bag, unzipped it, shielding the contents from view overhead with her own body.

Bentz stared at the partially decomposed face of what had once been a pretty black woman. Someone’s daughter. Sister. Friend. Though no one, especially not her jerk of a brother, seemed to care. Got herself involved with a snake of a boyfriend, too, from what he’d heard. Naked, her hands bagged by the criminologists in the hope that she’d fought her assailant and there was still a trace of DNA under her fingernails, she lay eyes open, lifeless inside the heavy bag.

Above them the copters hovered, disturbing the thick water.

Bentz held out little expectation of getting enough of the killer’s DNA that wasn’t degraded to do any good.

His stomach roiled. He looked away.

“Son of a bitch,” Montoya muttered.

“Dionne Harmon went missing around a year ago,” Bentz said, mentally calculating the state of decomp.
“Yeah, I know.” Washington was way ahead of him. “This body, it only looks like it’s been in the water a few days, and before that…” She shrugged.

“She was alive,” Bentz said, his mind spinning ahead. “So he keeps her alive, locked away for a year, then decides to kill her?”

“Maybe.” Washington was obviously as puzzled as he.

“Do you know the cause of death?”

“Not yet, but I did notice some puncture wounds on the body.”

“From what”

“Don’t know yet, but she’s got what appears to be a bite mark on her neck.” Washington pointed to two holes beneath the dead woman’s ear. “And then another, larger and single, here, over the jugular. And another at the carotid.” She glanced up at him, then rezipped the bag.

Bentz straightened. “What’s that mean?”

“Nothin’ good,” she said, her face a knot of worry. “Nothin’ good.”

“Hey!” A shout from the boat.

Bentz braced himself as the helicopters swooped in for a better look. He knew what was coming. The officer on deck yelled over the whomp-whomp-whomp of the copter’s rotors: “Looks like we got another one!”
Kristi cut through the water, swimming hard, her strokes even and quick as she tried to figure out a way to break into the inner circle of students she was certain were involved in the vampire cult. She’d even gone online and posted a plea: Searching For Lost Souls. Then, in want-ad fashion on the Internet, she made a request as ABneg1984 to link up with other believers in the reign of the vampire. She didn’t know if she’d have any takers, didn’t even know if her request would make any sense, but she was fishing and she would be interested to find out what she might catch.

_Probably nothing but weirdo losers, likely all of them under the age of thirteen._

But the good news was that, so far, she hadn’t seen any video of her apartment on the Internet. She’d searched through MySpace and YouTube and a few other Internet sites and hadn’t found any grainy, dark movies of her and Jay making love. Hopefully that’s the way it would stay. So who had put the camera there? She’d tossed it around in her mind hundreds of times and always came back to Hiram Calloway. Who else could it be? Someone posing as a repairman? She didn’t know but it made her nervous as hell, a fact she kept from Jay as she didn’t want him insisting she should move out.

At the far end of the pool she submerged, pushed off, and started her last lap. All the while she was thinking about her next move and how she was sick and tired of the waiting game she’d been playing. It was time for action, and she planned to start it at the final production of _Everyman_. Then she intended to have a face to face discussion with Father Mathias. He seemed to be on the fringes of all this somehow. She’d spotted him at Wagner House, coming up from the basement. And he was close with Georgia Clovis, as well as Ariel O’Toole, who had been missing all week.

When Kristi had spied Ariel’s friends at the student union yesterday afternoon, she’d purposely stopped by Trudie and Grace’s table to ask about her. Chomping on chicken strips and ranch dressing, they’d insisted Ariel’s vanishing act wasn’t in the least bit strange. Ariel liked her space and sometimes, especially when studying for a major test, she would disappear, only coming out for a needed Starbucks run. That piece of wisdom had been dispensed by Grace, the near-anorexic with braces and electric-shock red hair.

Trudie had nodded, agreeing with Grace’s assessment. “Everybody needs some downtime,” she’d said, dipping a fried piece of chicken into a small plastic cup of dressing. “Ariel just needs more than most of us.” She’d bobbed her head, as if agreeing with herself.

Kristi had tried to strike up more of a conversation without turning the girls off, but they seemed more interested in their food than worrying about Ariel the Studious. But they’d been a little friendlier than usual, making room for her to pull up a hard plastic chair, so Kristi considered it progress. As she sat down they gabbled on about how they couldn’t wait for the second performance of “hot” Father Mathias’s play, offering up a few wishful, sighing comments about it being a “shame” the priest had taken his vows of celibacy. Then they mentioned meeting for drinks before the show. They always had a drink or two at the Watering Hole, just off campus, before they watched the play.

“You should join us sometime,” Grace said, obviously trying to be polite. Trudie shot her a look and Kristi lifted a shoulder as if the invitation wasn’t a big deal.

“Maybe I will. Someday,” Kristi agreed, ignoring the increased look of wariness on Trudie’s olive-toned face.

“Good.” Grace had been pleased, or so it had seemed.

Not so her friend. Trudie, obviously agitated, had yanked on her sagging ponytail with both hands, forcing the rubber band higher on her head, so that the thick black shank of hair hung higher and brushed her shoulders. All the while she fiddled with her hair, she glowered at Grace.
Kristi had acted as if she didn’t care one way or the other. She wasn’t sure how to take this thin olive branch of friendship, but Ariel’s “friends” knew something; she was sure of it. She just had to gain their confidence, pretend to be like them. That would be a trick because the more she knew about the girls who seemed prime candidates for the vampire cult, the less she liked them.

She hoisted herself out of the pool, showered quickly, towed off, and slipped into street clothes. Her muscles, which had been tight for two days, were more relaxed and the exercise had exhilarated her a bit, lifting her spirits, focusing her on what she needed to do to find out the truth about the four missing girls and the damned severed arm. It didn’t hurt that Jay would be back tonight.

She’d actually missed him.

Who would have ever thought?

With minimal makeup, her hair twisted into a damp knot on her head, and the vial she’d sworn to Jay she wouldn’t touch dangling from the chain surrounding her neck, she left the locker room and stepped into the night. In the time she’d worked out, the darkness that had been threatening had fallen and fallen hard. No stars were visible above the street lamps, and the wind, which had been quiet all day, was now blowing with force, rushing through the trees, chasing a few dry leaves across the campus lawns, and biting at her nape.

Shivering, she walked briskly through the alley near Greek Row, crossed one of the busier streets near the campus, and pushed her way through the glass doors of the Watering Hole. She spied Trudie, Grace, and Marnie, the blonde she’d followed through Wagner House, seated at a tall café-style table in one corner of a darkened room. All three girls were huddled over stemmed glasses filled with a brilliant red concoction.

Kristi headed in their direction, forced a smile she didn’t feel, wending her way through the tables.

Ready or not, it was showtime.

Ariel O’Toole’s apartment didn’t look like anyone had been inside in days. Dishes were piled in the sink, the bed unmade, a bag of chips tucked into the bedclothes, the cheese dip in a container by the bed old and crusted over.

“Something’s not right,” Portia said as she, the uniformed officer, the apartment manager, and Del Vernon moved slowly through the studio with its wall of decorative bricks and a curtain separating the bedroom area from the living room. “Look at this place.”

“No sign of a struggle,” Del remarked.

That much was true.

“So she’s a slob,” Del said. “Hasn’t cleaned up in a few days.”

Portia opened the single closet. Everything was neatly organized, her clothes arranged by color, her shoes polished and kept in tidy pairs. Her drawers, too, were meticulous, books in the shelves straight and alphabetized. “Don’t think so. This girl is a neat-freak who just hadn’t cleaned up from a late-night snack.” She opened the door of a small refrigerator, saw the contents were arranged carefully. She stepped aside so Del could see.

“Not a slob,” he agreed.

Portia turned to the door where the apartment manager had slowly edged. “When’s the last time you saw her?” Portia asked him.

Bald, with a fringe of graying reddish hair that matched three days worth of stubble, he was nervous having the police on site. “Don’t know…uh, I saw her for sure last weekend, taking a load of trash to the cans outside and then again…oh, hell…” He rubbed his head and his scrawny shoulders jerked up and down as if pulled by strings. “I think she was hauling laundry up…Let’s see, I’d been raking up some old leaves. Guess that was Sunday afternoon.”
“And since?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got forty units here, I don’t keep track of everyone. Do I look like a house mother?”

Defensive, Portia noted. “You got a key to her mailbox?”

“Well, yeah…”

“Let’s check it.” She glanced around. “No phone.”

“Most of the kids just use cells,” the manager said.

“Can’t check her messages then, and she doesn’t get a paper.” But there was a smell to the place, an empty, almost musty smell, and a forgotten cup of coffee was sitting in the microwave.

They walked outside to the mailbox. Bills and junk mail were piling up. According to the report, Ariel didn’t hold down a job, but she should have been going to class. Portia had talked to the mother, who was battling a case of hysteria and was flying in early in the morning, hoping to locate her girl. Portia had called the woman and explained that the police were on the job. They’d called all Ariel’s friends, her neighbors, and checked with the local hospitals. She didn’t have a car, but she did have a cell phone and a bike. Campus police were searching for the bike. Portia had also double-checked with the bank, seeing if there had been any activity on her credit cards, but so far there had been no new purchases.

Ariel’s mother wasn’t convinced enough was being done. She gave Portia the name of her daughter’s cell phone company and said Ariel’s phone was equipped with a tracking device, but she wouldn’t be consoled.

“My daughter’s not like those other girls,” she argued. “I’ve read about them, those…those girls who have no one who cares about them. It doesn’t matter that Joe and I are divorced, we both love our daughter and…and we’ll do anything, anything to find her!”

“I’ll call you as soon as I know anything further,” Portia assured her, more determined than ever to find Ariel.

She just hoped the girl would be found alive.

Her cell phone rang as they were locking the apartment. Caller ID indicated the number belonged to the New Orleans Police Department.

“Laurent, Homicide,” she said automatically as she walked outside, one step ahead of Del Vernon, who was still talking to the anxious apartment manager.

“Detective Bentz, New Orleans, Homicide,” a low, serious voice informed. “I heard you were working on the missing girls from All Saints as potential homicides,” he said without preamble.

Portia drew a breath as she stopped under an overhanging eave on the outside of the tired stucco building. Del was saying something to her, but she shooshed him with a wave of her hand.

“That’s right. I am.”

“It looks like you were right,” Bentz said. “In the last hour, four female bodies, one African American, three Caucasian, all in the same state of decomp, all appearing to be in their twenties, have been pulled out of the Mississippi down here. One of the Caucasian girls was missing an arm.”

Portia’s exhale was a sigh of resignation and dying hope.

“Physical characteristics, hair and eye color, tattoos and scars suggest that they are the girls who’ve gone missing from the college.”

“Okay,” she whispered. Though she’d suspected they had come to bad ends, she’d hoped she was wrong and that
everyone else in the department was right, that Dionne, Monique, Tara, and Rylee were still somewhere safe and
alive. “You said all in the same state of decomp? But they were abducted months apart.”

“We’ll know more once the ME examines them,” he said, his voice tightly controlled.

“Cause of death?”

“Don’t know that yet. Preliminarily it looks like they haven’t been in the water more than a few days, possibly a
week. Hard to tell.” He hesitated and she knew something was on his mind.

“What else?”

“There are strange puncture wounds on the bodies. You know that there wasn’t a drop of blood in that arm you
guys found in the swamp?”

“Yes.” She suddenly felt cold inside. Steeled herself for what she knew was coming.

“It looks like these bodies might not have any blood as well.”

“Severed arteries?”

“No exactly,” he said, and she felt his anger radiating through the wireless phone. “But it could be that the
corpse were ex-sanguinated.”

“Drained of blood,” she said, thinking of the puncture wounds.

“You might want to see for yourself in the lab.”

“I will, but now we’ve got another missing girl.”

He drew in a quick, swift breath. “Who?”

“Student at All Saints by the name of Ariel O’Toole. Parents can’t locate her and from the looks of her apartment,
I’d say she’s been gone for several days.”

“Don’t tell me, she’s an English major.”

“That’s right.”

“And she took that vampirism class?”

“Yeah.”

He swore hard. “I’m on my way up there. The lab can call in their report. My daughter’s a student at All Saints.
An English major.”

“I wondered if you’d show up,” Grace said, sipping from her drink as she sat at a table in the noisy bar, where
music was playing loudly and a band was setting up in the corner. “Join us.”

Trudie’s face tightened. She made fleeting eye contact with Kristi, clearly not as thrilled to welcome her as Grace.

Marnie tossed her hair from her shoulder and said, “Yeah, have a seat.”

Kristi ignored Trudie as she settled into an empty chair, eyeing their drinks. “So what’re you having?”

“Blood red martini.” Grace lifted her glass and twirled the long stem in her fingers, the scarlet contents
threatening to slosh over the rim.
“What’s in it?”

“Blood, of course.” She licked her lips, then took a long swallow. “Mmm.”

Kristi nodded. “Yeah, right, like blood from a pomegranate or cranberry or——”

“It’s human.” Grace laughed at her joke, but Trudie’s mood turned even darker. She shot her friend a “shut-the-hell-up” look, which Kristi guessed, from the glint in Grace’s eyes, she was ignoring. Grace was enjoying this.

As was Marnie. “That’s right, we’re all into it. The whole vampire thing, you know.”

Kristi decided to play along. “I’m in Grotto’s class, too. Is he, like, the greatest teacher or what?” Before waiting for an answer, she added, “I guess I’d better have one.”

She looked around just as a waitress dropped off a pitcher of beer and four frosted mugs at a nearby table. Once finished, the girl, a slight brunette with a streak of fuchsia in her hair, turned around and Kristi thought she looked familiar, as if she’d seen her on campus. “You’re in some of my classes…?” she asked her.


Kristi pointed at Trudie’s drink. “I’ll have one of those.”

“Good choice.” She nodded her approval. “My personal favorite.”

“Really?”

“Blood red martini.”

“Made with?”

“Gin, vermouth, cranberry juice, and just a hint of grape juice.”

“No real blood?” Kristi asked.

“Sorry,” Bethany said, one side of her mouth lifting. “The board of health frowns on that.”

“I imagine.”

She glanced at Trudie and Grace. “Refills?”

Trudie shook her head. “I’ve got to get to the theater before Father Mathias has a heart attack.”

“You’re in the production, right?” Kristi asked.

“Trudie’s character is Death,” Grace said, and Marnie nearly choked on a sip of her drink.

“Fitting, isn’t it?” she joked.

“Whatever.” Trudie finished her drink in one swallow and grabbed her purse.

Bethany was still waiting, and Grace said, “Why not? And make mine a double.”

“Are you crazy?” Trudie said, horrified. “You have to go to the play!”

“I know, but I already saw it.” Both Grace and Marnie seemed amused by Trudie’s concern, as if they had already swilled down several drinks. “I know the whole gloomy plot.”

“I’ll be right back with those,” Bethany said, heading to the bar.
“Why go to the play again?” Kristi asked.

“Required.” Marnie picked up a few peanuts from the dish at the center of the table and tossed them into her mouth.

“It’s required to see the same play twice?”

Trudie glared at Grace, willing her to shut up. “Not if you’re drunk, it isn’t.”

“Oh, get over yourself, ‘Death,’” Grace said, and she and Marnie laughed uproariously.

Trudie, flushed, muttered, “Screw you, bitches,” then swept through the surrounding tables in outrage, nearly running into a busboy with a tub of dirty dishes.

“She’s pissed,” Marnie said, and they laughed again.

“You know,” Kristi said, as someone changed the music from hip-hop to country. A Keith Urban ballad could barely be heard over the conversation, “I almost believed you. About the drinks.”

Marnie exchanged glances with her friend, then whispered barely loud enough to be heard, “Grace wasn’t lying. We doctor ours.” To prove a point, she actually pulled a small dark bottle from her purse, then surreptitiously unscrewed the lid and added a few drops of dark liquid to her glass. “It’s kind of salty.”

“Like a margarita,” Grace chimed in.

“Yeah, right.”

Grace shrugged, as if she didn’t care what Kristi thought, and took a sip. Either the two friends were certifiable, or they’d decided to have a little fun at Kristi’s expense. Kristi didn’t comment, but waited for her drink as the music changed again. There was a loud eruption of noise at the nearby pool table when one of the players missed a shot.

A few seconds later, Bethany returned, left fresh drinks, and swept up the empty glasses.

Marnie reached into her purse again and lifted her eyebrows, offering a bit of the “blood” to Kristi. Though she wanted to appear to be part of their group, Kristi wasn’t about to drink down some concoction of unknown origins. She shook her head. Besides, both Marnie and Grace were already acting so giddy and drunk, Kristi wondered if whatever they were putting into their drinks might be a street or prescription drug that enhanced the effects of alcohol.

“Come on, Kristi. You’ve been asking all the questions,” Grace said. “Don’t you want Marnie to add a little bit of real blood?”

“Nah. Got too much to do tonight.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.” Marnie shook several drops into her drink, then some into Grace’s as well. Lifting her glass, she said, “To vampires,” her eyes gleaming with mischief.

“To vampires,” Grace agreed, clinking her glass to her friend’s.

Kristi hoisted her stemmed glass. “To vampires,” she intoned, and they all took a sip.

The drink was strong, tasting of cranberry and gin, warming its way down Kristi’s throat. Marnie and Grace giggled all the more and licked their lips. They acted like they really believed in the vampire stuff, or at least found it incredibly hilarious. Kristi watched them as she sipped her drink, then put in casually to Marnie, “I thought I saw you go into Wagner House the other day.”

Her own words “other day” seemed to reverberate a bit, and Kristi looked around toward the band, wondering about the sound. And was that right? Was it the other day? Or, had it been at night? She couldn’t seem to rightly
remember. “It was after hours,” she added, for clarification.

“Really?” Marnie’s smile wobbled a bit…looked like a snake crawling across her lips. A blood red snake. No, it was just her lipstick running…or…?

“We all go there,” Grace said over the loud music, and she seemed to be having trouble staying on her chair.

“Yeah, we meet there.”

“We’re meeting at Wagner House tonight.” Grace again. “Maybe you’d like to come.”

Grace’s words sounded funny, as if coming through water. And her image kind of wavered. Feeling uncomfortably warm and off balance, Kristi licked her lips and tried to respond but the words felt stuck in her throat.

“Oh, God, it looks like the drink really hit you hard.” Marnie seemed concerned. “Let’s get her out of here.”

“I’ll pay,” Grace said, and flagged over the waitress…what the hell was her name? Bethany…the girl in Grotto’s class…She came over in a hurry and they began talking together. They grabbed Kristi under her arms and helped her toward the door. Lord, she was drunk, her legs hardly working. She heard phrases like, “Can’t hold her liquor…we’ll get her home…”

But that wasn’t right.

She’d been drugged. She knew it.

Somehow, someway, they’d slipped something into her drink and she’d been foolish enough to have trusted the waitress. Damn it all…

No one in the bar seemed to notice as she was hustled out a side door and into the dark, cold night. She tried to yell, but no words came, and when she managed to fling one arm out, nearly swiping Grace’s chin, the other girl laughed it off.

She looked like just another wasted college girl.

Now what? she thought, but even as the words crossed her mind they escaped again. Her mental acuity, at least for the moment, had disappeared. Blackness pulled at the corners of her consciousness and she thought she might pass out.

Don’t! Stay awake! You have to keep your wits about you!

“Here ya go,” Bethany said, opening a door as the two other girls guided her outside, keeping her moving while her own legs became less and less steady.

Outside the air was crisp, in stark contrast to the thick, noisy, warm atmosphere in the bar. “We’ll take it from here,” Marnie said.

“I’ve got to get back inside....” Bethany, sounding pissed.

“If anyone asks…” Grace’s voice, as if from a distance.

“I know what to say. Just get her out of here now, before someone comes.”

Bethany had been the one to put something in Kristi’s drink.

Fool! You knew she was in Grotto’s class as well!

She tried to yell, to call for help, but only the smallest sound escaped her lips.

The door slammed behind them and Kristi realized she was being held between Marnie and Grace and she
couldn’t move at all, couldn’t command her muscles to do what her brain was asking.

For the other girls, all the joviality, the silliness of the evening, seemed to have worn off.

“Stupid bitch,” Marnie said, forcing Kristi along a dark alley. “Stupid, snooping bitch.”

“You want to know about vampires?” Grace asked as Kristi’s dread increased. “Believe me, tonight, you’ll learn.” She grinned down with a malice so cold Kristi’s heart quivered. Behind her braces, just barely visible, were a set of glistening white fangs.

Kristi blinked again, tried to scream, made one last attempt to kick out at the two girls dragging her down the alley, but she was helpless as a kitten. Her limbs refused to move, her voice was mute, the world distorted, blackness threatening to overtake her.

She thought they’d shoved her into a car…but she didn’t know if that was right.

She was lying across a backseat, headlights flashing on the ceiling of the car, Marnie and Grace in the front seat. Was Trudie dressed as the character of Death, with her in the back? Or, was it Bethany?

Her mind spun and, try as she might, Kristi couldn’t find reality. Jay…oh, God…she thought of Jay. Where was he? Had she told him she loved him? And her father…was he alive? Hadn’t she seen Rick Bentz’s face in black and white?

Where the hell was she?

She blinked and realized the car ride, if that’s what it was, was over. She was being half dragged again.

Where were they taking her?

What did they have planned?

The chapel bells tolled loudly…so close she knew they were on campus…. She blacked out for a second—or was it longer?—only to realize that she was alone.

And she was naked.

Lying on a couch of some kind.

A mist rising all around her.

How the hell had this happened? Her mind began to clear a bit, but she couldn’t move, couldn’t open her mouth to speak. There was a red light, basking everything in an eerie, reddish glow. She searched the area she could see, but aside from the ever-growing fog, she could make out nothing above or beyond this velvet-feeling couch upon which she rested.

How had she lost her clothes?

Was this a dream?

Vaguely she remembered being in a bar, sipping blood red drinks, talking and laughing with girls from her classes…who were they? Grace, yes, Grace with the spiky hair and…and oh, right, Marnie, the blonde. She thought she’d been so clever, trying to win their confidence and now…oh, God now…how was she going to get out of this?

*Think, Kristi, think! Don’t give up!*

Closing her eyes, she strained, attempted to move her muscles, but nothing happened. No response. She was trapped here.

She heard the scrape of a shoe, a little sniff.
She wasn’t alone?

Where? Where were they? She tried her best to see, but beyond the veil of the fog, there was nothing…not a damned thing.

Panic shot through her. Her mind, clearing, began to think. Obviously she’d been drugged, but certainly it would wear off. This paralysis couldn’t be permanent.

Or could it?

New horror shot through her.

With supreme effort, she tried to raise her arm and though she strained, willed her heavy limb to move, it remained still and lifeless.

A tiny cough.

Reminding her that she was being viewed.

Laughed at.

_Goddamn it, Kristi, move your damned arm!_

Again she tried, pushing so hard inside she thought she might explode.

Nothing happened.

_Oh, God, help me. Help me!_

Her heart pounded erratically, spurred by adrenaline, echoing in her ears. This is what had happened to the missing girls, she was sure of it, just as she now believed for certain that they were dead.

And, she, too, would soon be.

Unless…

With all her might, she strained to move her muscles but nothing happened. The footsteps were louder now, echoing through her brain.

Slow.

Steady.

Approaching.

She tried to turn her head as the red light pulsed, a visual interpretation of her heartbeat.

What was this?

Again, she attempted to look over her shoulder, to force her immovable head to turn. She felt the slightest response, as if her shoulders had shifted minutely. Or was it her imagination? A hair’s breadth shimmer in the cool air. Digging down, she tried again.

Nothing happened.

But she wouldn’t give up. Damn it, she would fight as long as there was a whisper of life in her.

“This is Sister Kristi,” a deep, male voice intoned.
She knew him! The voice was familiar. She just had to think, to place it. Why was he introducing her? To whom? She forced her gaze to the blackness beyond the shifting veil of smoke and fog but saw nothing. She sensed that there were more than one person hiding in the shadows, as if there were onlookers, an audience.

Her blood ran cold as death.

_Audience! Dear God, that was it!_

This was part of some macabre show!

Sweet Jesus, she had to get out and get out now. He was so close. So familiar, yet her mind couldn’t grasp his name. She felt him stand behind her and a hand slid onto her bare shoulder.

She experienced a tingle.

Oh, how sick!

Strong fingers trailed along her skin.

What was this? A seduction? Onstage with who knew how many people staring on? Or maybe he was just the first of many…. Kristi’s guts revolted at the thought and she tried to cringe, to draw away.

“Sister Kristi joins us tonight willingly,” he said with conviction.

_Willingly? What?_

Couldn’t they see that everything he was saying was a lie, that she was a prisoner in her own paralyzed body?

_Of course not, Kristi. Remember: they want to believe._

“She is ready to make the final, ultimate sacrifice.”

Her mind flew to all kinds of torture, of rape, of death. Ultimate? As in final? Jesus, was he going to “sacrifice” her right here? Slit her throat like a sacrificial lamb? She struggled with all her might.

To no avail.

His fingers moved sensually against her skin and she felt her body responding. Oh, God, this was so sick, so damned sick! He had the gall to touch her breasts, to watch her nipples respond and she knew in that second, if given the chance, she would kill him. Despite the desire starting to pulse through her body. She would. She would kill the sick bastard!

He was leaning downward now, his breath ruffling her hair as his hands slid lower and harder.

If she could kick. Could bite. Could spit in his face. Who was he? _Who?_

She felt her head rotate a bit, almost of its own accord, and in that moment her eyes met his, and she stared into the dark eyes of Dr. Dominic Grotto.

Grotto…

Kristi fought to scream and flail, to hit or recoil, but she remained motionless.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

_Sorry? For what? Let me go, you miserable son of a bitch!_

He leaned closer, his breath as hot as all the fires of hell, his lips curling back to show off his fangs, bright and glistening in the thin red light.
She screamed, but no sound passed her lips as he bit into her flesh. Her skin was punctured by the awful fangs and then...oh, God...then, her blood pumped to the surface.

And he began to feed.
Vlad had his work cut out for him.

No doubt about it.

And Elizabeth was nervous as a cat, watching over his shoulder, certain that any second they would be “found out.” Not that she didn’t have some cause for concern, he thought as he slipped through the shadows of the campus, but he was handling everything. Didn’t he always? It irritated the living hell out of him that she, the one whom he adored, couldn’t, or wouldn’t, trust him.

He’d been working on the details for a very long while. It was time she had some faith in him.

Control freak, he thought as he felt the shift in the atmosphere, the calmness of the night slipping away with a gust of wind. Wispy clouds rolled over the moon, becoming thicker and moving more quickly as the minutes passed. The promise of a storm was heavy in the air, and it sent his blood singing through his veins.

He crept close to Adam’s Hall, hiding in the shrubbery as he made his way to the chapel. As he slipped quietly through the night-soaked umbra, he thought of Kristi Bentz…beautiful, frightened, supple Kristi…she’d had just a little taste of what was to come. He licked his lips at the thought of her blood, how sweet she would taste, and couldn’t help imagining what he would do to her. The images in his mind caused an immediate response between his legs and he had to tamp down the lust that boiled through his veins.

But first, there was work to be done.

He couldn’t be distracted.

Afterward he would savor her, all of her…alive and dead.

The storm picked up, gusts chasing across the campus, bending the grass and weeds, threatening rain and more…thunder perhaps. The bells began to chime and clouds swirled over the moon as he slipped into the chapel. Inside, the rush of the wind was muted and row upon row of candles, their tiny flames flickering in the vestibule, greeted him. He smelled their burning scent, noticed the wax turned liquid.

Yes, he thought, padding silently up the stairs that curved off the vestibule, he would take care of everything. As he had since he’d been a child. Elizabeth should calm herself and trust him. Had he not always provided and protected? Though often he’d been in the shadows, had she not been able to rely on him?

Yes, he thought, as he reached the balcony. Yes, he knew that four bodies had been discovered, and it pained him to think that the police were even now touching and cutting into the bodies of those he’d chosen so carefully. Yes, he realized that soon the authorities with their sophisticated equipment, trained detectives, dogs, and determination would eventually find their way here. They could no longer linger.

They had to leave.

But not until he tied up a few little loose ends. It wouldn’t take long, but those that knew the truth, or suspected it, would have to perish.

To sacrifice themselves, little though they might be.

Now, he slipped between the folds of the heavy velvet curtain and waited. The final performance of the morality play was over and the priest would soon come to pray at the altar before taking the back path to his private residence, where he would pray for forgiveness, absolution, and mercy.
Vlad smiled in the darkness.

Mercy.

He kept his gaze trained on the door. As soon as Vlad was certain Father Mathias wasn’t altering his routine, he would follow him and ensure that the priest’s tormented soul was released.

Father Mathias would no longer suffer.

Jay whistled to the dog, opened the door of his truck, and once Bruno was inside, slid behind the wheel. He kicked himself up one side and down the other for being such a fool and tried to keep from panicking.

Checking the glove box, he found his Glock and shoved it into a pocket of his jacket, all the while thinking of Kristi—beautiful, athletic, sassy, and stubborn Kristi. How had he let her talk him into leaving her alone in Baton Rouge?

He switched on the ignition and, grinding the gears, threw the old Toyota into reverse, squealing onto the street. Then he rammed the truck into drive, hit the accelerator, sped out of the cul-de-sac onto the main street, and headed for the freeway.

He’d been delayed at the lab with the discovery of four bodies—the missing girls from All Saints. The evidence found with the bodies had taken quite a while to collect and process. And as he’d worked he’d tried, over and over again, to call Kristi, to no avail.

Where the hell was she?

One more time, he hit her speed dial number.

One more time he was thrown to her voice mail.

“Hell!” He nearly tossed the phone across the seat as he kept one eye on the road, skirting around a tractor trailer. Why wasn’t she answering the damned phone? Had she forgotten it? Had it run out of battery life? Or had something happened to her?

In his mind’s eye he saw the bloodless bodies of the girls in the morgue and sent up a prayer that she hadn’t become a victim of the psycho who was behind the killings. Why hadn’t he insisted she go to the police when they found the damned vial of blood? What kind of an idiot was he to allow her to stay in Baton Rouge, alone, when they both suspected that a serial killer was stalking coeds. And that someone was videotaping her apartment!

Like you could have stopped her! No way. Not that bull-headed woman.

But he couldn’t shake the guilt. He should have stayed with her. Now…oh, God, now…

“Son of a bitch,” he bit out, driving like a madman, ignoring the speed limit, hitting the gas whenever a light turned amber. Bruno, unperturbed, stared out the window as Jay’s headlights cut through the night.

He’d left three messages for Rick Bentz, too, none of which had been returned, but then Bentz himself was up to his eyeballs in this case, the press, and the resulting chaos. As Jay understood it, the New Orleans Police Department, as well as the Baton Rouge PD, had issued statements to the press and general public that there was a serial killer on the loose. The university had been contacted, so hopefully a warning had already been issued to the students to stay indoors or in groups, and a curfew had been imposed.

Jay had finally connected again to Portia Laurent, who had given him all the information she had over the phone. The upshot was that Dominic Grotto had access to a navy blue van, one he borrowed from his brother-in-law upon occasion. Jay was convinced the vampire-loving professor was their man; Portia Laurent was reserving judgment. She was still doing background checks and Grotto, so far, was clean. She had another couple of leads she was following up, something that was bothering her, but before she could explain, another call had interrupted her and
she cut him off, saying she’d phone him later.

So far, she hadn’t.

Jay was nearing Baton Rouge when his cell phone rang. He picked up before the second beep, his hand gripping the damned thing as if it were a lifeline. He hoped to God that Kristi was on the other end of the wireless call, that she was safe, that his worst fears were unfounded.

“McKnight,” he answered.


“Yeah. I’m on my way to Baton Rouge, but I haven’t been able to reach Kristi. I was hoping you had.”

“No.” The single, damning word echoed through Jay’s head and until that moment he hadn’t realized how much he’d hoped that Kristi had been in contact with her father. “I thought she might be with you,” Bentz went on. “She’s not picking up her goddamned phone and I’m on my way up there right now.”

“Me, too. I should be there in about forty minutes.”

“Good. I know the Baton Rouge PD is stretched to the limit, FBI’s been called in. The public’s being made aware, police working with the press to get the word out. I’m surprised you got out of the lab.”

“I worked it out. I’m officially in the field.” Jay had put in over forty hours in the crime lab this week and Inez Santiago had taken over for him. Inez had been insistent that he leave when she’d arrived and had assured him that she, Bonita Washington, and the other criminologists on staff could handle anything that came up.

Jay hadn’t needed any more encouragement. Not after finding bodies drained of blood, their necks showing evidence of bite marks measuring the size of an adult male human, the puncture wounds consistent with razor-sharp cuspids. Bruising on the necks of all four victims was identical and the hope was that the police could match the mark on the victims’ skin with the killer’s teeth.

The work of someone trying desperately to make them believe that there were blood-sucking creatures of the night attacking girls at All Saints.

Jay’s hand clenched over the wheel and he braked to avoid rear-ending a motorcycle that had cut into his lane. He said to Bentz, “You know that Kristi was in a class on vampires in society or some such crap.” Checking his side view and switching lanes, he tromped on the gas and sped around a sedan driven by an old guy in a hat.

“Yeah?”

“I think someone’s taken this vampire thing to another level.” Quickly, he explained to Bentz about Lucretia tipping Kristi off about a campus cult, and how he and Kristi had found a vial of blood in Kristi’s apartment—Tara Atwater’s previous home. While Bentz listened silently, Jay explained about discovering the video camera and setting a trap. He added that Kristi was convinced Father Mathias, the priest who staged the morality plays, was somehow involved in the coeds’ disappearances. Jay finished with, “Kristi believes that Wagner House is at the heart of the cult.”

“Someone might have told me,” Bentz stated grimly.

Jay didn’t respond. Let Kristi’s father make of it what he would.

“And you left her there?” Bentz charged quietly.

“My mistake.”

“You bet it was.”
Jay let it go. The exit sign for Baton Rouge caught in his headlights just as the first drops of rain pelted his windshield. He accelerated onto the ramp and decided he’d been the brunt of Bentz’s rage long enough. “So where are you?”

“A half hour from Baton Rouge. With Montoya.”

“Good. I’m already there. I’m going directly to Kristi’s apartment. I’ll call you when I get there.”

Pushing the speed limit, Jay cut through town, past neighborhoods that had become familiar since the first of the year. But all the while he was driving by rote, spurred on by images of the drained, bloodless corpses dragged out of the Mississippi.

His hope was that the killer had kept them alive for a long time before taking their lives. The delayed decomposition suggested as much.

_Unless they’d been frozen._

He couldn’t forget Bonita Washington’s assertion of freezer burn on the severed arm, which, as it had turned out, belonged to Rylee Ames, the last victim.

Unless Ariel was the last one to go missing.

Until Kristi…

He took a shortcut to the campus. The rain was heavy now, coming down in sheets. News vans and cop cars were parked around the gates of the All Saints grounds, where, it seemed, every officer on the campus security force was visible. Students were far and few between, but klieg lights had been assembled by the news teams, and reporters dressed in rain gear stood with microphones at the ready.

All in all it was a damned circus.

The campus of All Saints wasn’t officially a crime scene, at least not yet, but the presence of the police and the news teams announced to the world that a killer was on the loose, one who considered the private school his personal hunting ground.

“No, you prick,” Jay muttered as he drove to the old house where Kristi lived and felt a second’s relief when he spied her Honda parked in its usual spot. Maybe she was home. Maybe she’d lost her cell phone. Maybe…Oh, God, please. He shoved open the door of his truck before it had even stopped rolling. “Stay,” he ordered Bruno, then ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time, his key already in his hand. He was on the third floor in an instant, unlocking the door, throwing it open.

“Kris!” he yelled, stepping inside.

It was dark and quiet, the smell of old candles in the air, the window over the sink open wide, a stiff breeze stirring the curtains.

His stomach clenched and he reached for a gun.

“Drop it! Down on the floor!” a female voice ordered. Mai Kwan stepped out of the shadows, directly in his path, the pistol in her hands leveled straight at his heart.

“Vampires?” Montoya, in the passenger seat, stared at Bentz as if the older detective had lost his mind. Light flashing, siren screaming, their Crown Victoria with Bentz at the wheel was flying up the freeway toward Baton Rouge. “Are you serious? Vampires? As in blood-sucking creatures that morph into bats and sleep in coffins and can’t be killed without silver bullets or a stake through the heart or some kind of crap like that?”

“That’s what he said.” Bentz squinted into the night and drove as if Satan himself were on his ass. The rain was
thick, his wipers slapping it aside as the police band radio crackled and spat. In the distance streaks of lightning sizzled through the sky.

“You believe this?”

Bentz felt Montoya’s gaze drilling into him. “What I believe is my kid is missing and some crazed son of a bitch has her.”

“But vampires?”

Bentz muttered tautly, “Those bodies pulled from the river had only traces of blood in them. Traces. And the puncture wounds. No one’s reported finding any bloody crime scene without a body.”

“Except for our stripper, Karen Lee Williams aka Bodiluscious. There was blood there. And she went missing.”

Montoya scratched at his goatee. “You think they’re connected?”

Bentz scowled. “Don’t know. There was blood there, yeah, but not six quarts. Not a whole body’s worth.”

“So, this fuckin’ vampire worshipper probably drank the rest. And then turned into a bat and flew off on bat wings to a vault somewhere and slept in a coffin while he digested his meal.” He reached into an inside pocket of his leather jacket and found a pack of cigarettes, the ones he saved, Bentz knew, for nights like this. His sarcasm couldn’t quite disguise the hint of uncertainty he felt. Neither of them knew what they were up against.

Bentz saw the exit for Baton Rouge and angled the Crown Vic toward the ramp. “All I know is my kid’s missing and there’s a whole lotta weird shit going on.” He thought of Kristi. Her smile. Her green eyes, so much like her mother’s. The way she loved to bait him, or play up to him and call him “Daddy” when she was trying to wheedle something from him. Inside he felt empty. How many times would he have to go through this? She was the light of his life, and he suddenly felt a jab of guilt for the happiness he’d found with Olivia. Had he ignored Kristi, his only child? Shit, he’d even blamed Jay McKnight for abandoning her when he’d really been pissed at himself.

“Don’t beat yourself up over this,” Montoya said, lighting up, the smell of smoke drifting through the car. “And don’t say you’re not. I see it in your face. I’ve been through this with you before. We’ll find her.”

_Death or alive._

The phrase cut through Bentz’s brain, but he didn’t repeat it. Couldn’t think that he’d never see his daughter alive again.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Mai demanded, her gun trained on Jay, who’d immediately dropped to the floor.

“I’m the boyfriend, remember? I think I should be asking you that question. I’m with the crime lab, for Christ’s sake.”

“FBI.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I’m a field agent with the FBI. I’ve been working undercover on the missing coed case ever since the second vic went missing.”

He looked up at her and saw the hardness in her small face. She was dead serious as she pulled out a badge. “Get up.” She motioned with the gun, then crossed to the door and pulled it shut.

As she slid her sidearm into her shoulder holster he got to his feet and examined her badge. He’d seen enough in his life to recognize its authenticity. “What’s going on?”
“I’m not at liberty to say—”

“Kristi’s missing,” he snapped. “I don’t know where the hell she is so don’t give me any federal crap. What the hell do you know?”

“I can’t tell you.”

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “Then you can explain yourself to Rick Bentz.”

“Stop it! You can’t intimidate me.”

“We don’t have any time.”

That seemed to get to her. She pushed a hank of black hair from her eyes, glanced at him, and mumbled something about a loss of protocol, but sat on the edge of the couch and said, “Tit for tat, McKnight. You spill everything you know, and we’ll work this together.” She held up a finger. “Just for now. I need clearance.”

“Deal.” He didn’t hesitate.

“I’ve been working this case for months, undercover, and then your girlfriend comes along and starts screwing everything up, jeopardizes and threatens everything I’ve been doing for half a year!”

“You had the camera in here?”

“It was already in place. Hiram, the so-called manager, used to watch it for fun. His own private girlie show.” She couldn’t hide the sneer in her voice. “Should’ve run him in, but once again, I was working things out. We discovered the camera after the Atwater girl went missing and left it up, just in case the killer returned.”

“You used Kristi as bait?”

“We did not put her in harm’s way,” Mai insisted.

“Nor did you warn her off.” Jay was furious, ready to throttle the little woman.

“Couldn’t blow our cover. You obviously discovered it, so I came back to adjust the books you put over the lens.”

“You came in through the window,” he guessed, and she nodded, a hint of a cold smile twisting her lips. “So where’s Kristi?”

“Don’t know. I thought she might be with you.”

“You didn’t have anyone following her?”

Mai met his gaze. “You don’t know where she went?”

He shook his head. “She mentioned going back to see Everyman, Father Mathias’s production—”

“I work on the crew,” she cut him off. “We know something is up with Mathias, but nothing we can prove, and no, Kristi, wasn’t at the performance tonight. We tape them.”

“You tape them?”

“With the administration’s approval.” She was stone-cold serious. “We don’t know everything about this guy, but we’re pretty sure he’s a whack job of the highest order.”

“But you don’t know who he is?”

“We’re working on it.”
“And you haven’t arrested Dominic Grotto?”

“He’s not our guy.”

“He’s the one who’s into all the vampire crap!” The cat hopped through the open window, took one look at the strangers, and shot under the couch. Jay pulled the window shut and rain slid down the panes.

“I’m telling you we don’t have a case against him.”

“You mean you didn’t,” Jay pointed out. “That’s changed. Now we have bodies,” Jay said. “Bloodless bodies with evidence of homicide. Bite marks on the victims’ necks. I’ll bet my right arm those bruises match Dr. Grotto’s bite impression.”

Mai stared at him. Weighing her options, as if she might renege on her previous agreement. Finally, glancing at her watch, she said, “Okay, let’s do this thing. We’ll go talk to Grotto and see what the Vampire King has to say. On the way, you tell me everything you know and don’t leave out a word.”

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” Father Mathias whispered as he knelt at his bedside. How had he been so tempted, so easily led astray? He’d thought it was all for the greater good.

Or so he’d tried to convince himself.

But God knew. The almighty Father could so easily view the darkness that was Mathias’s soul and recognize the deceit, the evil, that lingered deep inside.

How many times had he attempted to confess all his sins to Father Anthony? How often had he wanted to seek the counsel of a wiser and more devout man than himself? And yet he hadn’t.

Coward, he mocked, knowing his weakness.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, his hands clenched in heartfelt supplication. “Please, Father, hear my prayer,” he whispered, hearing the sound of the rising wind, the approach of a heavy storm. Already rain was beating on the windowpanes and running through the gutters, gurgling noisily in the downspouts.

Somewhere above, a branch was pounding, banging against one of the attic windows.

Evidence of God’s fury.

His all-powerful rage.

A reminder of how small and insignificant Mathias was.

He lost himself in his prayer and missed the soft tread of footsteps slipping along the hallway. He was unaware that he was no longer alone. Absorbed in absolving himself of his wrongdoings, offering up his repentance, he didn’t realize an intruder had entered until it was far too late.

And then, the creak of one floorboard made him freeze, his intonation lost….

The hairs on the back of his scalp prickled as he turned, looking upward into the face of evil. Dark, soulless eyes stared down at him. Liver-colored lips drew backward into a hideous grimace. White fangs, seeming to drip with blood, caught in the dim lamplight.

Mathias gasped, but it was too late.

Lucifer incarnate had descended upon him. The devil to whom he’d sold his soul so willingly had returned to collect his due.

Mathias started to rise, but the creature lunged, its fangs bared.
Mathias screamed to the heavens, throwing up his arms to ward off the evil. But he was no match for the devil, this maniac with a thirst for blood.

Vlad bit down. His teeth ripped into the soft flesh of Mathias’s throat, biting off another scream. Blood sprayed.

Searing pain tore through Mathias’s body. He scratched and clawed but Vlad, having satisfied his taste for the priest’s unholy blood, unsheathed his knife.

He raised it high in a deadly arc.

Lamplight glinted against the blade.

Mathias wriggled in fear. He was sweating, nearly urinating on himself. This wasn’t supposed to happen. No… he wanted God’s forgiveness, expected to live long and repent his sins and—

Slash!

The blade sliced downward in a silver arc.

Father Mathias was dead in an instant.

The feds, Jay thought, of course.

The FBI had been at work all along.

And still hadn’t arrested Grotto.

Jay drove with Mai Kwan on the seat next to him, Bruno relegated to the backseat. She knew Grotto’s address, and as Jay told her everything he and Kristi had discovered, she showed him where to park, a block away from the vine-covered Victorian where Grotto resided. The house was fitting with its sharp angles and pitched roof and gargoyles decorating the downspouts.

“I just don’t think whoever pulled this off would point a big red arrow at their head by teaching vampirism,” Mai said. “Our killer seems too smart for that.”

“Ego,” Jay said, taking out his pistol. “God complex. He thinks he’s brilliant, more clever than everyone else. Now he wants to rub our noses in it.”

“Or he’s being set up.”

“Either way, he knows something.”

Mai snapped a clip into her weapon. “Agreed. Let’s go.”

They didn’t wait for backup. She had already phoned a higher up, asked for a warrant, and when told to “stand down” had said that of course she would. Which was a bald-faced lie. Jay figured the guy on the other end of the phone had known it.

“Looks like he’s not alone,” Mai whispered, frowning when she spied a car parked in the driveway. “We’ll have to wait.”

“No way. Kristi could be inside.”

“We can’t risk it.”

“You mean you can’t risk it. I’m going in.”
Kristi woke up slowly.

Her entire body ached.

Groggy and disoriented, she opened one eye to darkness.

Pain slammed through her head and she wondered faintly where she was.

Shivering, she realized she was naked, lying on a cold stone floor, her hands and ankles bound, the dank smell of the earth deep in her nostrils.

The world spun a bit and she had to work to think clearly, if at all. As if through a long tunnel, she heard water dripping and muted voices rising in anger. An argument?

She started to cry out, then held her tongue as images—sharp, kaleidoscopic shards—cut through her brain so painfully she winced. She remembered being on the trail of a vampire.

Wait! What? A vampire? No, that wasn’t right, or was it? Her skin pimpled at the thought.

*Think, Kristi, pull yourself together.*

She remembered a bright red drink, a dazzling concoction that someone called a blood red martini…and…and…there had been others with her. Her memories were coming back now, faster and faster. She’d been duped by two girls, Grace and Marnie…no three, that damned waitress, Bethany—she’d been in on it and then there was the surreal image…Dr. Grotto approaching her on the stage, bending over her in the mist, showing an unseen audience what he could do to her before he plunged his teeth into her neck.

She recoiled at that memory.

She tried to croak out a sound but her throat still wasn’t working. It was all so surreal. Maybe just a bad trip? Whatever Bethany had slipped into her drink had given her hallucinations…of course that was it.

*Then why are you lying naked on a stone floor?*

Her eyelids, at half mast, flew open and she tried to see, to gain some vision in the near-total darkness…. Where the hell was she? Why had she been part of that horrible ritual?

*Why are you still alive?*

Panicked, she tried to stand, but she wasn’t strong enough.

She couldn’t get her stupid limbs to do what she wanted.

Grotto’s image came to her again.

He’d called her by name, told the unseen audience of one person? Five? A hundred? Told them that she was ready to make the ultimate sacrifice.

And then he’d apologized to her. Whispered that he was sorry. For what? Sticking his goddamned teeth into her? Abducting her? Holy God, what the hell had she gotten herself into?

So dizzy she thought she might throw up, Kristi forced herself onto her hands and knees. If she couldn’t walk, she could damned well crawl. Head pounding, holding one eye closed against the incredible pain, she started to move. Maybe this was only a dream. A really bad dream. She stopped for a moment, wobbling on her knees, and reached up with her tied hands to touch her neck.

She bit back a scream when her fingertips came into contact with the wound: two holes in her neck, not bandaged, just crusted over with her own blood.
Her stomach revolted and she had to swallow back the bile that burned up her throat.

It hadn’t been a bad trip or a nightmare. Dr. Grotto had actually bit into her neck and sucked her blood. She touched the tracks of the blood that had dripped down her shoulder and over her breast. Sick, sick!

Fighting the blinding headache, she told herself she had to find a way out of this dark, stone hole.

*A tomb, Kristi, you’re in another tomb.*

Her skin crawled at the thought, the memory of the last time she’d been sealed away, certain of her death.

*Don’t give up.*

It hadn’t happened before and it damned well wasn’t going to happen now. At least not without a damned good fight.

She eased across the cold rocks, moving slowly, feeling with her bound hands. She listened for any noise over the drip of water, but heard only the scratch of tiny nails, as if rats or mice were scurrying out of her way.

Inching her way, she finally ran into a wall. It, too, felt made of stone. There had to be a way out, she reasoned, her mind clearing bit by bit. Somehow she’d been placed in here and unless she was in some huge reservoir with only an outlet in the ceiling, there had to be a door. She just had to find it.

*Don’t give up. You’re not dead yet.*

She was just getting her bearings when she heard the footsteps, coming closer.

She scooted back and lay down again. She wasn’t strong enough to fight, not yet. She’d have to feign that she was still unconscious.

This was it.

Her chance.

A key rattled in the door.

Kristi closed her eyes. *Give me strength,* she silently prayed, *and help me kill this son of a bitch.*
CHAPTER 28

So it had all come down to this, Dominic Grotto thought as he sat, cell phone in hand, the ice cubes in his untouched drink melting. Even the Vivaldi drifting from the hidden speakers mounted on the bookcase of his study could not soothe his soul. What had begun as a unique way to get kids interested in all kinds of literature had ended up in death.

Four girls dead so far.

Probably more. No doubt Ariel O’Toole and Kristi Bentz had died and would be found in the river as well.

He knew it now. The blind eye he’d so willingly turned could now see perfectly. No more did he delude himself into thinking that he was doing the right thing and helping girls whose lives were a shambles start over.

Since returning from his own personal performance, his last performance to his private audience, he’d switched on the television and caught news reports of bodies being pulled from the Mississippi. There had been few details, no names listed until next of kin were notified, but he knew. Deep in his heart he knew exactly what had happened to those girls.

And it was his fault.

Even now, he tasted the blood of Kristi Bentz upon his lips. All part of the show. All part of the plan. All for the greater good.

Like hell.

All part of your own personal aggrandizement.

He’d gotten to know the girls personally and told himself that they were willing participants, that the fear he’d seen in their eyes was all part of the show, that the reason they’d been paralyzed and weak was only their acting ability.

He’d convinced himself that nothing illegal had happened, that there were no victims, that no one had been hurt.

But deep down, he’d known.

But he might be able to save Ariel O’Toole and Kristi Bentz. There might still be time. He might be able to stop this horror from ever happening again. Even if he had to turn himself in for his part in the debacle—his very integral part.

Outside the storm was raging, rain lashing at his windows, and the flash of lightning lit up the sky in sizzling bursts, thunder rolling afterward.

He should have come clean when Kristi Bentz had visited his office, wanting answers. Oh, hell, he should have come clean a year ago, when he’d first heard that Dionne had gone missing.

He’d suspected that things had gone wrong then.

Over the soft music and angry storm, he heard the front door creak open and his heart clutched. He’d locked it, hadn’t he? Or had he forgotten?

They’re coming for you.

They know.
A drip of fear slid down his spine as he climbed to his feet to investigate. “Hello?” he said, disgusted with himself. He was a strong man. He’d never known real fear in his life.

Footsteps clicked determinedly down the hallway.

“Who’s there?” He was at the den door when it swung open in front of him and the woman he’d claimed to love stood before him in trembling fury.

“No more, Dominic,” Lucretia said, her voice hoarse, her eyes sunken, skin as pale as death. Her head was bare and wet, mascara tracking down her cheeks. Rainwater ran down the folds of a long black raincoat. She hadn’t bothered closing the door and it banged open against the wall, cold winter air rushing through the hallway. “No more lies. No more disappearances. No more making me think I’m crazy.”

“Lucretia, I’m going to the police—”

“Now? When they’ve found the bodies? Now you’re going?” She shook her head from side to side. “I loved you,” she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

“I know. I loved you, too—”

“Liar!” she spat, nostrils flared.

She pulled her hand from the pocket of her raincoat, her fingers curled around a small black handgun.

He froze. “Oh, Christ, Lucretia, what’re you doing?” he asked, but he knew. In his heart, he knew. “Don’t!” His stomach dropped as she raised a pistol, the one he’d given her months before.

“You killed them,” she said, her voice trembling, her hand shaking.

“I tried to save them! I just put on a show for the others, but it was all an act, I swear!”

“No…” The pistol wobbled in her hands.

Maybe he could talk her out of this. Maybe he could take the weapon from her.

“Just listen. There might be time. Kristi and Ariel might still be alive.”

“Kristi? Kristi Bentz? You dragged her into it? And Ariel? Her, too?” Her eyes hardened as she aimed the gun at his head. “She’s missing. Has been since last week… and it’s your fault. Oh, God, she’s dead. I know she’s dead. I should have warned them, told them.”

He took a step toward her, but her fingers moved on the gun’s trigger. He stopped. Held up both hands in an attempt to calm her. “We just have to find Preston. He’s… he’s the one who got to know the girls, who helped them… He has a place, it’s connected to the Wagner House by the old tunnels that Ludwig Wagner used.”

“They’ve been sealed for a hundred years,” she said dully. “This is another lie.”

“No, no, I swear. Preston claimed he was helping them all start over, gain new lives, disappear….”

“Helping them die.”

“Lucretia, I didn’t know. I swear, I did not know,” he said, trying to keep her engaged in conversation as he thought of a way to strip the weapon from her, to tackle her and take his chances.

“But you suspected. Just as I did.” She focused on him, the gun steady but lowered to his chest again.

His heart shuddered and for just a second, over the howl of the wind that shrieked down the hallway from the open door, he thought he heard something. Footsteps?
“You’re guilty, Dominic. We’re both guilty.”

“No! Lucretia, just wait. Listen to reason. I’ll call the police and tell them all about Preston, about the girls, about my part in it. I’ll confess. Please, my love, just give me a chance,” he said, changing tactics, smiling at her, stepping toward her. She wanted to believe he still loved her, so he would give it his all. “I’m so, so sorry,” he said in the voice that always had made her melt. “I’ve always loved you. You know that. I’ll tell the police about Preston and the plays and the tunnels from Wagner House. They might be able to find Kristi and Ariel. They could still be alive. Come on, honey. Trust me.”

She flinched, then looked him straight in the eye.

“Lucretia, baby—”

“I’ll see you in hell, and when I do, I’ll remember to spit on you.”

She pulled the trigger.

Jay didn’t wait.

He and Mai had seen Grotto’s open door and considered it an invitation. They ran through the rain, up the steps of the front porch. Weapons drawn, they surged into the building. A light emanated from the end of the hall where voices rose in an argument that could be heard over the rise of the wind and the slamming rain.

Mai signaled to him to stay back, that she would handle it, but he was right beside her, hearing every word of the conversation, hearing Kristi’s name and mention of tunnels running from Wagner House. Grotto’s statement, “They could still be alive,” propelled him. Glock raised, he pushed open the door.

Bang!

A gunshot boomed through the house.

Thud!

“FBI!” Mai yelled, rushing the room behind him. “Drop your weapon!”

Bang!

Jay watched helplessly, yelling to no avail, as Lucretia fell to the floor. The weapon slipped from her fingers, blood oozing from a self-inflicted wound to her head.

Grotto was down, bleeding from the chest, a red stain spreading over the carpet. His eyes were open, staring blankly toward the ceiling.

Jay punched 9-1-1 on his phone as he knelt beside Grotto. “He’s still alive!” he yelled, finding a pulse as the emergency dispatcher answered.

“She’s gone.” Mai removed her fingers from Lucretia’s neck and came to Grotto’s side.

Jay stayed on the line with the operator, giving the address, explaining what happened.

“Stay with me, Dr. Grotto,” Mai said. “Hang in there.”

Sirens shrieked over the keening wind, and through the window Jay, still talking to the operator, watched police vehicles, lights flashing, screech to a halt in front of the house. An ambulance and fire truck arrived in tandem.

“They’re here,” Jay said into the phone, his mind still racing. “Thanks!” He dropped to a knee as footsteps thundered through the hallways.
“Back here!” Mai yelled.

“Where is she?” Jay demanded, leaning over Grotto, his face only inches from that of the wounded man. “Where’s Kristi?”

“With…Preston…”

“Where?” Jay demanded.

“Tunnels…” Grotto wheezed, his voice faint.

“Out of the way. Step back.” An EMT muscled in, taking over, trying to save the bastard’s life. “Get these people out of here!”

Frustrated, Jay backed away from the wounded man, his fear for Kristi more acute than ever. He stepped into the hallway—right into the path of Rick Bentz.

“Where the hell is Kristi?” Bentz demanded.

“With Preston.”

“Who’s he?”

“Dr. Charles Preston. A professor at the college, English Department,” Jay explained. “Grotto says Preston has her, maybe somewhere in Wagner House. I’m guessing the basement, which is always locked. It leads to old tunnels, at least that’s what Grotto claims. Kristi was convinced there were some kind of weird vampire rituals taking place there.”

Mai Kwan joined them. “Those tunnels have been sealed for a century. I know. I checked. We’ve looked into Wagner House.”

“Who the hell are you?” Bentz demanded, ready for a fight.

“Mai Kwan, FBI. And you?”

Jay wasn’t interested in pleasantries. While Bentz, Montoya, and Kwan straightened out jurisdiction, levels of authority, and fucking protocol, he walked into the night.

If he ran, and cut across campus, he could reach Wagner House in less than five minutes.

Portia Laurent had spent all day going over information from the school concerning their employees. She’d found several who owned dark vans and, of course, she’d immediately thought of Dr. Grotto, Professor Vampire himself, as the primary suspect. But it just didn’t make any sense. Why would he be so blatant? He’d never struck her as an idiot. An egomaniac, yes, certainly, but not a cretin.

So she’d dug deeper, finding nothing, hoping for another shred of evidence that hadn’t come through. She’d placed calls and e-mails, searched the Internet along with criminal and banking records, DMV, anything she could think of.

“Strike three hundred and three and you’re out,” she told herself, and placed a call to Jay McKnight. He didn’t pick up. “Story of my damned life,” she thought. Then she glanced up and saw an e-mail that had been written earlier in the day but, probably because of all the spam filters, had taken hours to get to her.

She read the damned thing three times before she realized what it was saying. It was from a private college in California and said simply:

You must have made some mistake; the person you’re asking about is deceased. We’re sorry to
inform you that Dr. Charles Preston passed away on December 15, 1994.

Portia immediately checked the Internet, finding the obit and confirming the story. Preston had died in a surfing accident. The photograph was clear and there was no way that he was the same man who taught writing at All Saints.

On her way to the car, she called Del Vernon and left him a message. No way was she waiting for him. She and Charles Preston—or whoever he was—were about to have a heart-to-heart.

The door to Kristi’s prison opened silently. She didn’t move. Her heart was slamming into her ribs and she had to force her muscles to go slack. Her eyes remained closed except for the tiniest crack that she allowed herself, just a glimpse of her surroundings.

Until a flashlight was trained on her face.

“Hey!” A man’s voice echoed through the chamber. “Wake up!”

Dr. Preston?

The surfer-dude writing teacher?

Not Grotto?

Her head still pounded, but her mind was beginning to clear. She knew her arms and legs worked, but not completely. She’d never be able to overpower her captor. But Dr. Preston?

“Kristi! Wake up!” he yelled at her as he approached. He bent down, grabbed both her arms and gave her a little shake. “Wake up. Come on.”

She let her head loll forward, then back as he shook her. Though she wanted to kick his teeth in, she knew she had to wait until just the right moment, when her faculties were sharp, when her body obeyed her mind.

But what if it’s too late? What if he kills you first? Are you going down without a fight?

She thought about trying to overpower him and knew she should wait. She had to, if she wanted to escape.

“Dumb cunt,” he muttered, and left her on the floor. He closed the door again and turned the key.

You missed your only chance! You should have fought, tried to run!

No…she knew that wouldn’t have worked. Shaking inside, she took deep calming breaths. She had to outsmart the son of a bitch.

She remembered little of the previous hours. She had fuzzy memories of being nude on a stage of sorts and Dr. Grotto biting her neck, but after that, after she’d passed out from fear, from the drugs she’d been given, or whatever else, she remembered nothing.

She tried her legs again. They wobbled, bound as they were, but she could move her hands, and if she could somehow untie the ropes…no, not ropes or chains, but tape, thick duct tape that held her ankles together.

She sat on the floor and wished for the first time in her life that she had sharp nails. But her fingers were nearly useless as she tried and failed to tear at the plastic-coated tape.

She thought of Jay. Why hadn’t she told him she loved him? Now, there was a chance, a very good chance, that she might never see him again and he’d never know how she felt, how she’d fallen in love with him.

You have more important things to think about.
Again she tried to rip at the tape, but to no avail. But her body was responding now; she could give it commands and her muscles did as they were bid.

She levered her legs upward, pulling her ankles as close to her torso as possible, then leaned forward. She was flexible from years of athletics. Tae kwon do and swimming had helped. She stretched her spine and positioned her mouth over the tape between her ankles. Then she bit down hard and flung her head backward. Her teeth skated over the tape. No purchase.

*Damn!*

She tried again.

*Failed.*

One more time, concentrating hard. Straining. Sweating. She had to get herself free before he returned. If so, if she could stand, catch him off guard, sweep his legs out from under him.

*Do it, Kristi, just effing do it!*

She bit down hard. Drew her head back fast. This time her tooth scraped through the plastic, caught and she was able to make a little tear. She grabbed both of the tiny ends with her fingers, which promptly slipped off the tape. *Damn!* She was damp with sweat, her heart knocking, time running out.

She grabbed the ends of the tape again and pulled.

*Rrrrriiiip.*

She was through!

She flung herself to her bare feet just as she heard the sound of footsteps in the hall beyond.

*Come on, you cocksucker,* she thought, still slightly unsteady. She clasped her hands together, intended to use them like a club once she’d knocked the bastard off his feet. *Come on, come on.* She was keyed up. Ready. Every muscle taut when she heard keys rattling on the other side of the door.

As soon as the door swung open she rounded on him, her bare foot slamming into his shins.

He howled in surprise, but didn’t go down. Kristi didn’t bother hitting him, just sprang through the open door and yanked it shut behind her.

Locks tumbled into place.

Breathing hard, she felt a rush. She’d turned the tables on him! But for how long? She took off down a darkened hallway and didn’t look back. She only had a few seconds.

He still had the keys.

Jay flew up the back steps of Wagner House and tried the door.

*Locked.*

No problem. He kicked in the nearest window and flung himself through just as he heard other footsteps clamoring up the porch: Bentz, Montoya, and Kwan. Jay found the doorway to the basement and tried it.

*Another damned lock.*

This time he kicked at the panels, but the door wouldn’t budge. He swore, looked around the kitchen, and found a metal stool. He was about to crash it into the knob when Mai Kwan climbed through the window he’d just broken.
Mai rolled to her feet and shouted, “Stand back.” Her weapon was already out of its holster. She shot at the handle of the door, springing the lock and shattering wood as Bentz, too, heaved himself through the broken window. Montoya was on his heels.

Jay didn’t wait. Using a penlight, he hurried down the stairs, half expecting a sniper to be waiting, ready to pick him off. But with Mai one step behind, he made it unscathed.

Bentz hit the lights and everything came into sudden, sharp relief.

The large, open room was filled with crates, old furniture, boxes of knickknacks, even photographs. A behemoth of a furnace with ducts stretching upward like metallic arms filled one corner, an empty coal bin another, a fuse box, wires long cut, sat next to a newer electric panel.

“Search the walls,” Mai ordered. “Look for another way out.”

There were several doors, all boarded shut, dusty and obviously unused. None that would open. Mai shook her head in frustration. “I told you we already searched down here.”

“There has to be a way.” The dead air of the basement filling his nostrils, Jay shoved a hand through his hair and stared at the doors. He started trying each one again, more slowly and deliberately, but none of them would budge. Bentz was shoving boxes and crates, and Montoya stalked the perimeter of the room.

Had Kristi been wrong?

Jay checked his watch, felt time slipping away. He’d pinned his hopes that he would find her here, but now… what?

“We need to talk to Father Mathias. Kristi seemed to think that he knew something.”

Mai nodded. “He lives just behind the chapel. I’ll go.” She was already heading up the stairs.

Montoya followed after Mai. “I’ll back her up.”

Jay and Rick Bentz looked at each other across the dusty, moldering basement. “If Kristi said something was going on down here, then something was,” Bentz said. He squinted as he eyed the window casements placed high, near the rafters, where spider webs and old nails were exposed in the ancient beams.

Jay, too, was eyeing the perimeter of the building, looking for something they’d missed, something right under their noses. He studied the furnace and began to sweat as the minutes ticked by. Nothing seemed out of place. Bentz moved a stack of crates out of the way to study the floor while Jay made his way to the electrical box. Inside all of the circuit breakers were thrown to the “on” position. He tried a few. Nothing happened except that the basement was thrown into darkness for a second.

“Hey!” Bentz yelled.

Jay flipped the switch. Nothing there. And the old fuse box wasn’t connected, its wires visibly cut. Nonetheless he opened the metal door and stared at the panel of old fuses, a thing of a bygone era, still in place. He pulled out the first and nothing happened. Waste of time. And then he noticed that one tiny wire, a newer wire, ran out the back of the box.

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He felt a little spurt of hope just as he heard footsteps overhead. More police no doubt, drawn by the gunshots.

“Hey!” a big voice shouted as feet pounded through Wagner House. “What the fuck’s going on here?”

He pulled another fuse plug. Nothing. Then another. And gears suddenly started grinding. Jay stepped back as a section of the wall, one devoid of doors, began to slide open.

Swearing, Bentz was across the room in a flash.
Without another word he and Jay walked into a tiny room with a narrow staircase. The door shut slowly behind them, plunging them into near total darkness.

Kristi had no idea where she was going. The tunnel was long, narrow, and lit by thin, flickering lights on a track overhead. She’d made it to a corner when the door behind her opened and she heard a shout.

Dr. Preston!

Adrenaline spurred her on, but she was still weak, her hands bound, her brain not firing on all cylinders.

*It doesn’t matter. Just run. Until you come up to a dead end, just run. You have to escape.*

He was chasing her, his footsteps ringing on the cold stone floor, echoing through this narrow hallway, a tunnel of sorts. How did she get down here in the first place, she wondered, but just kept running.

“Stop, bitch!”

She didn’t bother to look over her shoulder, knew only that he was gaining on her.

*Faster, Kristi, faster!*  

Her heart was beating wildly, her feet slapping the uneven floor, scraping on the stones. She was a runner…she could do this!

And still he pursued her.

Oh, God, she had to get away from him. Ahead was an opening, she saw it. Lights beyond. Maybe a way out!

With a final burst of speed she raced through the archway and found herself in a huge room…like a dark, underground spa. The dark cavern was filled with candles and mirrors and a stone tub filled to overflowing, water cascading over its sides.

A woman, a beautiful woman with dark hair and sharp features, was reclining in the water. She was taking a damned bath, for the love of God.

“You have to help me!” Kristi said in a rush, and again wondered if this was all some weird dream or if she were still hallucinating from the drugs she’d been given hours ago. Maybe this was all just a weird, horrible reaction.

“Of course I’ll help you,” the woman said, her eyes gleaming with a malevolence that made Kristi’s insides curdle.

Wait. This naked bather was no friend.

Kristi started to back up, but couldn’t; the doorway was now filled with Dr. Preston.

“So, Vlad, do you want to try something new?” the woman asked.

Vlad? She’d called Dr. Preston Vlad?

Kristi was damned sure, like Alice before her, she’d fallen into a nightmarish wonderland. “What is this?” she asked, afraid of the answer as she scanned the room wildly, looking for escape. There was only one doorway and it was firmly blocked by Dr. Preston or Vlad or whoever the hell he thought he was.

“Something new?”

“Let’s pump her directly into the tub,” the woman suggested. “Just contain her, slip her into the water with me, and slit her wrists. So much easier than pumping all the blood out and dripping it into the tub.”
Kristi’s mouth went dry as she backed away. Surely she’d heard wrong. No way were they going to pump the blood from her veins.

Dr. “Vlad” Preston turned to Kristi. “Elizabeth wants to bathe in your blood.”

Kristi could only stare, her brain devoid of rational thought as she tried to make some sense of this. “Elizabeth?” she repeated.

“The name I’ve taken. Of an ancestor. You might have heard of her? Countess Elizabeth of Bathory?”

Instantly Kristi recalled what she’d learned from Dr. Grotto’s class. About the sadistic woman who had killed young girls, innocents who worked for her, and bathed in their blood in an attempt to rejuvenate her own flesh.

Elizabeth rested her head on the tiles and sighed as if she were in ecstasy. “She was right, you know. I’ve seen a difference since I’ve been using her treatment.”

“Blood baths,” Kristi said, scarcely recognizing her own fear-choked voice. From the corner of her eye, she saw Vlad approaching. He gave her wide berth, but closed in. “That’s what happened to the others? To Monique? Dionne?”

“Yes, yes, and Tara and Ariel, those that are good enough.” She sat up then and said, “But I wouldn’t have the lesser. No tainted blood.”

“Karen Lee wasn’t tainted,” Vlad said.

“No good enough for me, then.” Elizabeth settled back in the water and said, “Let’s do this before I shrivel up like a prune.”

Kristi wasn’t giving that whacked out woman one drop of her blood. As Vlad approached, she reeled, kicking him hard in the shin again. She tried to sprint past him, but he was onto her plan. He threw himself at her and they went down in a heap, wrestling and fighting. He was strong as an ox and heavier, forcing her to the floor.

“Vicious bitch,” he growled, grabbing hold of her bound wrists and forcing them over her head so that she was heaving and sweating beneath him.

Elizabeth stood. “Don’t ruin her! Don’t crush her vessels…I want…”

“I know what you want!” Vlad spat out, but he was staring down at Kristi. To her horror, she felt his erection, stiff and hard, through his black pants. She fought the urge to heave as a smile slid snakelike over his lips and he pushed his groin down a little harder, making certain she knew what was about to happen.

She was going to be raped and drained of blood.

Oh, God, she had to fight. This couldn’t happen!

She tried to squirm, but got nowhere, and within seconds he’d bound her feet again and forced a pill down her throat by holding her nose until she gasped and coughed.

Within minutes the drug, whatever the hell it was, started to take effect again and she was weak as a kitten, her brain disengaged as if she were drunk.

She tried to flail, but her swipes found only air as he cut off the tape surrounding her wrists. While she wanly protested, he hauled her into the warm, almost soothing water.

“About damned time,” Elizabeth complained petulantly.

“I had to wait until the drug took effect.”

“I know, I know.” Elizabeth slid to one side, her skin slick against Kristi’s. “Look at her skin. Flawless.
Perfect…” She glanced up at Vlad. “She’s the one. Her blood will do it.”

Do what? Save her from aging? “Nope. You’re done,” Kristi managed to say, but they ignored her, and though she tried to wriggle away, she couldn’t. To her disbelief, as if from a long way away, she watched as Vlad very carefully slit her right wrist.

In a swirling plume, her blood began to stain the water.

Mathias was dead. Murdered. Apparently while he’d been praying at his bedside.

A statement? Mai Kwan wondered as she called in a report to her superior, then searched through the priest’s small rooms, trying to come up with a clue as to why the man had become a victim. And why did Kristi Bentz think he was involved with Wagner House and some kind of weird vampire cult?

No vampire had been at this murder scene.

Too much blood left behind.

Montoya was with her every step of the way, through the slashing rain as thunder cracked, backing her up as they’d entered Mathias’s rooms. He hadn’t said much but had taken in the entire gruesome scene.

“What do you think?” he asked as she bent over the body.

“He pissed off the wrong guy. Look at this,” she said, pointing to the priest’s neck. “His throat is slashed, jugular, carotid, hell, nearly to his spine.”

“Almost decapitated,” Montoya said grimly.

“Rage. Whoever did this was in a blind fury.”

“At a priest?”

“This priest. It’s personal.”

Which didn’t bode well for Kristi Bentz and Ariel O’Toole.

Mai stepped over the body, walked to the priest’s desk and started going through his files, all the while wondering what Bentz and McKnight had found. If anything.

Mai hated to think it, but she sensed that Kristi Bentz was already dead. And, judging from the state of Father Mathias’s body, violently murdered.

Kristi tried to force her eyes open, to find some energy to fight, but she could barely stay awake, her muscles refusing to aid her as she lay in the soothing bath, the water turning scarlet.

“I feel it,” Elizabeth said into her ear as Kristi tried to move away from her slick, clinging limbs. “I feel it rejuvenating me.”

Oh, for the love of God. No way! Again she tried to push away even though she thought that without Elizabeth’s arm around her she might sink into the tub, slide beneath the murky surface and drown in her own blood. The mirrors in the room allowed her to watch in horror and disbelief as her own face went white. Vlad the Horrible stood at the edge of the tub, ready to climb in with them.

Her skin crawled at the thought and she wanted to scream, to rail at the heavens, to call for help. But it was too late. Her voice let out only the barest of whispers and Vlad, as he glared down upon her, knew it. The smile upon his wicked lips, the light of anticipation in his eyes, told her he enjoyed her suffering, her ultimate fate.
He was a monster. A mortal who envisioned himself as something more. Who was this sicko who licked at blood, who pretended to be a vampire, who taught a class at the college all the while preying upon his students? There was no doubt that he adored Elizabeth, who almost seemed to be his mistress. Almost.

“You’re like a dog on a leash,” Kristi said to him. “She uses you.”

“As I use her,” he replied, irritated. He reached down toward her neck and Kristi expected him to try and choke her. Instead one finger locked on the gold chain and he ripped it from her neck. “This belongs to me,” he said, clasping the vial of blood in his hand much as he’d held a piece of chalk during his boring lectures. He slid a glance at Elizabeth. “We’ll have to save a few drops for one more.” His lips curled into an evil smile, revealing his needle-sharp teeth.

“You’re such a fake,” Kristi said, feeling dizzy, hardly able to concentrate. As Vlad leaned forward again, she spat in his face, the spittle dripping into the tub.

“What! No!” Elizabeth nearly freaked. “The water can’t be tainted!”

Effortlessly, he scooped up the floating spittle and snarled, “It’s fine.”

“But—”

“Shhh. I said it’s fine,” he said more sternly, and Elizabeth, though irritated, quieted.

Light-headed, Kristi spat again. This time the globule landed on Elizabeth’s leg.

The woman screamed, and Vlad showed his teeth once more. “I’ll rip out your fuckin’ throat,” he warned, eyes blazing.

*Good! Get it over with!* But the words didn’t form, with Kristi’s strength seeping away. Vlad saw her weakness and he gloated over her, his smile triumphant, his wicked, fraudulent fangs glistening in the candlelight. “She is ours,” he said, so loudly his voice echoed in the underground chamber.

Kristi opened her mouth to argue, to scream, but only a small sound escaped.

It was too late.

She saw her own skin leeching of color, knew she was shivering despite the warm bath, felt herself slipping out of consciousness. Darkness closed and in a way it would be a welcome relief from this torment.

No help was coming.

She couldn’t fight.

Her blood flowed, coloring the water a darker hue.

She was, she knew, dying, slipping away.

She would never see Jay again.

Never argue with her father.

All was lost….

As the black curtain slid behind her eyes, she wondered faintly if there was a heaven. Hell? Would her soul rise and would she see her mother again? Jennifer Bentz, who had become little more than a memory as faded as the pictures in the old album she’d found in the attic. Would she actually see her again?

Her throat clogged with unshed tears as she thought of the mother she barely remembered while being held afloat by a psycho who wanted, of all things, her blood.
Dear God…maybe she should just let go.

Never had she felt so alone.

Jay, she thought weakly, and nearly cried with the thought of how much she loved him.

She was cold inside and the blackness that was teasing at her began pulling her under. All her life Kristi had been a fighter; maybe, finally, it was time to succumb.

Voices.

Jay heard the sound of voices.

He lifted his hand to Bentz, who nodded.

Nerves strung tight, crouched and ready for an attack within the darkness, they each took one side of the long tunnel that opened to a large, dark chamber. The room was empty except for half a dozen chairs placed in an arc around a raised platform, like a stage, upon which a worn velvet lounge rested. A hazy mist rose from the floor and a red light pulsed, almost throbbed, as it illuminated.

The voices emanated from an open doorway that led back to the tunnels.

Without a word they split, each taking one side of the next tunnel. There were offshoots, doorways that appeared locked. But at the end of the darkened hallway a room glowed in flickering light, as if lit by a hundred candles.

On silent feet, they headed toward the doorway, and the voices reached Jay’s ears.

“Her blood flows, Elizabeth…washing over you…it’s almost finished.”

Jay’s heart nearly stopped.

Jaw set, he exchanged glances with Bentz, nodded, and they burst into the room where Kristi lay, white as a sheet, in a tub that overflowed with thick red water and was occupied by another woman who was looking upward at a naked man who was about to step into the tub.

“Hands over your head!” Bentz roared.

Dr. Preston’s head snapped up.

The woman turned and Jay nearly faltered.

Althea Monroe? The woman he’d replaced? The professor who was supposed to be taking care of her frail, displaced mother? She was in a blood-filled tub with Kristi?

“On the floor!” Bentz ordered. “Now, cocksucker!”

“Vlad!” Althea screamed. “Kill them!”

As if she had complete control over him, Preston whirled, knife in hand. With incredible precision, he threw the knife at Jay and in the same motion, launched himself across the room, straight at Bentz. Hands outstretched, teeth bared, he leapt.

Jay ducked, the knife glancing off his shoulder, pain shooting down his arm.

Bentz fired, unloading into the naked man as he fell upon him. Jay was at the tub in an instant, dragging Kristi from the murky, red water. She was unconscious, her body limp and pale, the slits on her wrists dark with smears of crimson. He tore at his shirt, making strips for bandages. He couldn’t lose her now. No way. He had to save her. Frantically, he wound the fabric over her right arm.
“No!” Althea raged. “I need her!” Climbing from the tub, she pounced, her eyes bright with her madness.

_Blam, blam, blam!_

A gun fired and Althea’s body jerked as the bullets ripped through her flesh.

She gasped, covering her wounds as she fell, screaming, “No, no…oh, no…Scars…I can’t have…scars….” Blood bubbled from her mouth with the final words.

Montoya stood in the doorway, his weapon still aimed at her.

“Call 9-1-1!” he yelled as Jay wrapped the strips of cotton over Kristi’s wrists.

“They’re on their way.” Mai was already at Bentz’s side as he pushed Preston’s body away. “You okay?”

“Fine.” He was on his feet and crossing the room to kneel beside Jay, who was cradling Kristi. The slightest pulse was visible at her neck, but Jay knew she’d lost too much blood.

“Hang in there, Kristi, you just hang in there. Don’t you dare leave me.” His throat was thick and though he knew Bentz wanted to touch his daughter, to hold her, Jay couldn’t let her go. She was breathing, but just barely, and he willed her to survive as Althea Monroe breathed her last.

Through the veil, Kristi heard the crack of gunfire, smelled the acrid odor of cordite, and heard voices…frantic voices. People shouting. People running. People screaming. She felt herself being dragged from the water and one voice was louder than the others.

_Jay?_

She tried to open her eyes but couldn’t, and though she felt his arms around her, heard his muffled voice telling her to hold on, it was impossible.

_“Don’t you dare leave me….”_

Another voice. Her father’s?

If she could just pull back, if she could find the strength to open her eyes, to push back the curtain to…

_“Kristi! Stay with me, darlin’! Kristi!”_

Jay’s voice was steady, determined, as if he were willing her back to him, but it was too late. She wanted to tell him she loved him, that he shouldn’t worry about her, but her lips wouldn’t move, the words wouldn’t come, and she felt herself slipping ever deeper, floating away…

It seemed to take forever for the paramedics to arrive, but when they did, Kristi was still breathing. Shallow breaths, but still alive. The EMTs administered to her, placed an oxygen mask over her face, and carried her out on a stretcher.

“I’m going with them,” Jay insisted.

“Me, too.” Bentz was covered in blood, Charles Preston’s—Vlad’s—blood, but otherwise unhurt. Jay’s wound was slight and he assured the EMT that he would be fine until they reached the hospital. He asked Mai to check on Bruno in the truck, then hurried to keep up with the stretcher.

Outside the storm howled and keened, lightning striking wildly. Bentz watched as Jay climbed into the ambulance with Kristi, then walked to the front of Wagner House, where he’d parked the Crown Vic. Rain poured from the heavens, the wind screamed down the streets.
“I’ll drive,” Montoya said as Bentz paused to take one final look at Wagner House.

In that instant, lightning forked in the sky. As if thrown by angry gods, a bolt struck a huge live oak in the front yard.

“Watch out!” Montoya yelled.

Bentz dived as the wood cracked and smouldered. The tree split in two and as Bentz and Montoya scrambled out of the way, a huge branch crashed to the ground.

Bentz dived as the limb struck, heavy wood cracking against his back, a broken limb piercing his clothes and flesh. Pain sizzled up his spine and for a second he couldn’t breathe.

Then there was nothing but blackness.

Kristi opened a bleary eye.

Jay was staring at her.

“Welcome back,” he said, managing a smile.

Her lips were dry and cracked, her tongue thick. “You look like hell,” she croaked out, and realized she was in a hospital bed, IVs strapped to her wrists.

“You look beautiful.”

She started to laugh, coughed, and managed to ask, “What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Not everything, not what happened earlier, but last night…” She looked at him and he shook his head.

“Three nights ago. You’ve been out awhile.”

“Tell me. Everything,” she insisted, and felt his hands touch her fingers.

He did. He explained that Althea Monroe, who had died of her wounds at the scene, had been in league with Dr. Preston, killing girls for their blood in an effort to keep Althea young and beautiful.

“Elizabeth of Bathory,” Kristi said.

“Exactly.” Jay told her that Dr. Preston was a fraud. He’d been DOA at the hospital, but his fingerprints had identified him as Scott Turnblad, a man with outstanding warrants in California, where the real Dr. Preston had resided before his death.

Dr. Grotto had been a part of their plan. He’d been involved up to his pointed eyeteeth, though he, still alive, insisted that what he’d done was for the greater good, that Preston had convinced him that he would help the troubled girls disappear and start new lives. In exchange, Grotto got to stage his weird production and play out his own sick vampire fantasies. His audience—the girls he played to—were just as bad as he was and under his spell, finding “new blood” and not caring that the unwilling participants disappeared.

“You mean Trudie and Grace and Marnie?” she asked.

“And a couple of others, including the waitress who added a little something extra to your drink. They all were half in love with Dr. Grotto and got off on his fantasy.”

“More Elizabeths in the making,” she said, and he squeezed her fingers.
“More jail time in the making. They’ll be up on charges, too.”

“What about Father Mathias? And Georgia Clovis?”

“The Wagner heirs are apparently innocent, but Mathias is dead, probably killed by Vlad because he knew too much. We’re not certain but it looks like Mathias might have turned troubled girls toward their deaths. Probably inadvertently. The conjecture is that he heard their troubles during confession or maybe counseling. He tried to help, gave them parts in the plays and allowed Dominic Grotto to ‘guide’ them, and I use the term ‘guide’ loosely. Even though Grotto might not have known about what ultimately happened to the girls, he was no saint. He probably had affairs with them.”

She shuddered, thinking of the innocent victims.

“But the real maniac in all of this was Vlad, aka Dr. Preston aka Scott Turnblad. We’re guessing that too many people knew too much. Lucretia took care of Grotto, but that left Father Mathias. Vlad couldn’t let him escape.”

“He was beyond sick. And Elizabeth.”

“Althea. Yeah. She duped us all. Turns out her mother never even lived in New Orleans. She just wanted to spend more time being Elizabeth.”

“Where does that come from?”

“She was a distant relative of the countess, I guess.”

“And crazy.”

“Certifiable. She got all caught up in trying not to age. We found her diaries. Besides being related to the Blood Countess, Althea was convinced she could turn back time, regain any lost youth by bathing in the blood of younger women.”

“Nutso.”

“Yeah, on top of that, she’d been married and the husband left her for a younger woman, just as her father left her mother twice for trophy wives.”

“So what? It happens to a lot of women. They don’t turn into homicidal maniacs.”

“You said it yourself. ‘Nutso.’ Althea aka Elizabeth found her soul mate in Vlad. Their relationship started young. We’ve been digging into Turnblad’s sordid past. His killing may have started young, with his own parents. And he got away with it.”

“So he learned from a young age that he could.”

Jay’s lips twisted at the thought, the way they always did when he encountered a problem he couldn’t understand. “Turns out he and Althea—”

“That would be the nouveau Elizabeth of Bathory?”

“You are paying attention,” he said with a wink. “We found out that they’ve known each other since they were kids.”

“I can’t imagine what kind of games they played.”

He grimaced. “Don’t even go there. Anyway, Detective Portia Laurent put two and two together and found Vlad, er, Preston’s lair under an old hotel. Ariel’s body was there, on ice, as was another woman, a stripper from New Orleans by the name of Karen Lee Williams, whose stage name was Bodiluscious.”

“Does everyone have an aka?”
“At least one,” Jay said with a smile, then explained to her about Mai Kwan and the FBI, and the camera in her apartment. It was Mai they’d chased that night because she hadn’t wanted to reveal her true identity.

Kristi absorbed this with disbelief. “I knew that Hiram was a first-class creep, but Mai…FBI…” She shook her head and started to smile, but then saw Jay’s taut expression. “What aren’t you telling me?” she asked, her smile disappearing. When he didn’t immediately respond, she urged, “Jay?”

“It’s your dad.”

Her heart froze.

“He’s in a hospital in New Orleans. Back injury.”

“Back injury?” she repeated slowly, remembering how many times she’d seen his face turn from color to black and white.

“He’s going to be okay.”

“You’re sure?” Dear God, no…she couldn’t imagine life without her father. She held Jay’s hand in a death grip.

“I think so.” But he was hedging; she saw it in his amber eyes.

“Damn it, Jay, tell me!”

He sighed. “Okay, here’s the deal,” he said. “Your father’s spine is bruised—”

“What?” Oh, God, no! Her father could never stand not being able to get around on his own.

“Hey, slow down. I said ‘bruised,’ not severed, so he’ll be okay eventually.”

“Eventually?” she asked.

“The paralysis will be temporary.”

“Oh, God.”

He held her hand a little more tightly. “The doctors feel confident that he will walk again, but it’ll take some time.”

Kristi couldn’t believe her ears. Had her father survived death only to be paralyzed? “But…he will walk on his own again,” she said anxiously.

“That’s the prognosis.”

“Then I want to see him. Now.” She looked up, trying to find a nurse. “I need to be released.”

“Kris, you’ll have to wait until you’re better.”

“Like hell! This is my dad we’re talking about. He was there, right? He came to save me! And…and what, he gets shot and…” Her voice failed her. “Oh, God…there was a storm that night.” She saw the image as clearly as if she’d witnessed it herself. “A tree was struck by lightning, that’s what happened, right?”

Jay just stared at her.

“Right?”

“Yes, but—”

“And a limb hit him?”
“I said he’s going to be all right.”

“I know what you said,” she admitted. “Now do what you can to get me out of the damned hospital. I need to see my father.”

“Okay, okay…hold your horses. I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I know,” he snapped. “I don’t have to do anything, but I want to, okay? And I’m not letting you go through whatever it is you have to go through with your dad alone. I’ll be there.”

She was already out of the bed, reaching for her clothes when she stopped short. “Jay—”

“I love you, Kris.”

She turned and saw that he was smiling. “You do?”

“Uh-huh. Just like you love me,” he said confidently.

“I love you?”

“That’s what you kept saying over and over while you were out of it.”

“Liar!” she charged, but couldn’t help but nod. “So, yeah, okay, I love you,” she tossed back at him. “So what’re you going to do about it, McKnight?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well…like maybe ask me to marry you?”

“Mmmm. Maybe.”

She laughed. “You’re bad, McKnight,” she said, and reached for her jeans.

“Perfect for you, then, right?”

“Humph.”

“Come on, let’s go see your dad and on the way, you can try to convince me to marry you.”

“Yeah, right!”
“...he’s holding his own....”

Rick Bentz heard the words but couldn’t open his eyes, couldn’t move a muscle to indicate to those around him that he was waking up. He’d heard them, of course, the doctors and nurses with their hushed voices, and his daughter, Kristi, who must have recovered, thank God, because she’d been around often…talking to him, insisting that he was going to get better, that he had to walk her down the aisle because she was going to marry Jay McKnight and write some damned book and...

Dear God, how long had he been here? A day? Two? A week?

He tried to open an eye. Montoya and Abby had been by and Olivia, of course, who’d been ever vigilant. He’d heard her soft voice, known she’d been reading to him, noticed every once in a while her words had faltered or her voice, that sweet dulcet voice, had quavered a bit.

Jay McKnight had been by as well, and he, like Kristi, had talked about marriage, asking for Bentz’s blessing or something like that. Or had he dreamed it?

It was about time his daughter settled down, stayed out of trouble....

The doctor left on squeaky shoes and he was alone again. He heard a steady noise, a soft beep, beep, beep, as if he were hooked to a heart monitor, and he wanted to move, God, he wanted to stretch his muscles.

His mouth tasted like crap and he was vaguely aware of footsteps in an outer hallway, a cart rattling, people talking…he drifted for a minute…an hour? A day? Who knew? Time, for him, was suspended.

Kristi was there again, talking softly to him about the wedding…the damned wedding. He wanted to smile and tell her he was happy for her, but the words wouldn’t come.

Her words slowed, her voice softened, and then was gone entirely. Had she left? If he could only open his eyes.

He tried and failed.

There was a slight stirring. Just a breath of cool air.

In that second he knew he wasn’t alone.

There was someone else in the room, someone other than Kristi.

His skin prickled. The temperature plummeted, as if a soft gust of wind had slipped through an open window. Within the cold was a fragrance…something familiar and vague that teased his nostrils, a woman’s perfume with an underlying scent of gardenias.

What was this?

He felt someone take his hand, then link smooth, slim fingers through his. “Rick,” a woman whispered in a soft voice that teased his psyche. A familiar voice. A faraway voice. “Honey, can you hear me?”

His heart nearly stopped in his chest. The room seemed suddenly silent, all noises of the hospital muted.

The fingers slipped from his and the stirring gust of wind kicked up again, brushing his cheek, as if someone had left an icy kiss upon his skin.
The perfume floated past him…the same intriguing scent Jennifer had worn whenever they’d made love….

Jennifer!

His eyes flew open.

His breath fogged in the coldness. He blinked his eyes several times, wondering at the phenomenon. He couldn’t move his head, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw the doorway to the room and beside it a chair. In the chair, Kristi slept, her head lolling forward.

In the doorway, backlit by the outside hall, was a woman in a black dress.

Tall.

Slim.

Mahogany-colored hair falling down her back.

Oh, God! It couldn’t be….

She looked over her shoulder and smiled.

That sexy, come-hither smile he knew so well crossed her red lips.

He felt as if he’d been thrown back in time. His heart nearly stopped.

“Jennifer,” he whispered, saying his dead ex-wife’s name for the first time in years. “Jennifer.”

He blinked.

She was gone.

“Dad?”

He slid his eyes toward the only chair in the room. Kristi was staring at him, her own eyes anxious, a line of worry creasing her smooth brow. Jesus, she looked like her mother!

“You’re awake!” Kristi was out of the chair in an instant, tears catching on her lashes. “Oh, God, you’re okay!” she said, standing over the edge of his bed, taking his hand and squeezing it. “You old fart, you nearly scared me to death!”

“You’re awake!” Kristi was out of the chair in an instant, tears catching on her lashes. “Oh, God, you’re okay!” she said, standing over the edge of his bed, taking his hand and squeezing it. “You old fart, you nearly scared me to death!”

“You’re awake!” Kristi was out of the chair in an instant, tears catching on her lashes. “Oh, God, you’re okay!” she said, standing over the edge of his bed, taking his hand and squeezing it. “You old fart, you nearly scared me to death!”

“Your mother,” he said anxiously, wondering if he was losing his mind. “She was here.”

“Mom?” She shook her head. “Wow, what kind of drugs are you on?”

“But she was here.”

“I’m telling you that’s the morphine talking.” Kristi was laughing through her tears.

“You didn’t see her?”

Kristi shook her head. “No one was in here, I was here all the time. Yeah, I dropped off, but…Jesus, it’s cold in here.” She shivered. “But I’m just glad you’re back,” she said. “I was so afraid…I mean, I thought you might not make it…But then you’re tougher than most.”

Bentz wasn’t deterred. “But she was here…your mother…I saw her…just walking out the door….”

“No way, Dad, it’s me. You’re confused.” She eyed him a little more critically, then glanced to the doorway. The empty doorway. “You know,” she said, turning back to him, “you’ve been in a coma for nearly two weeks and I
know what it’s like. Weird as hell. Sometimes when you finally wake up, you’re all messed up in your head.”

“You didn’t see her?” He tried and failed to pull himself into a sitting position. His arms were weak and his legs…Hell, they still weren’t working. He couldn’t even feel them, not like he could his arms and shoulders.

“She wasn’t here,” Kristi said anxiously, and quickly. As if she, too, knew something odd had happened. “Look, I need to call the nurse and the doctor. And Olivia. She’s on her way back here already, but she’d kill me if I didn’t call her. And the staff. I need to let everyone know you’re awake.” She was already walking to the door, the very doorway in which Jennifer had stood only seconds before.

“She was here, Kristi,” Bentz said, certain he was right. This was no hallucination. No bad trip. No confusion from medication. Whether anyone believed him or not, he knew the truth.

Jennifer Bentz was back.
Dear Reader,

I loved writing Kristi Bentz’s story and it was a lot of fun to walk through the halls of All Saints College again. From the epilogue you know that there’s another book coming in the Bentz/Montoya/New Orleans series. That book is MALICE and I think it’s one of my best yet. I’ve never written anything like this before, but I think it’s an interesting concept.

You all know Detective Rick Bentz of the New Orleans Police Department. He’s Kristi’s dad and Detective Reuben Montoya’s partner. He’s also one of my most popular characters and right now he’s in a heap of trouble. If you’ve followed the series, you know that Bentz was first introduced in HOT BLOODED. In the next book, COLD BLOODED, he was the hero of the story. He met his future wife Olivia in the pages of COLD BLOODED, but we, as the readers, never really saw how he dealt with the death of his first wife, Jennifer.

That’s changed. In MALICE, Rick faces his most deadly enemy yet in a psychological game of cat and mouse. Jennifer Bentz seems to be back, even though Rick was the man who identified her body when she was killed in a single car accident.

So who is the woman he swears is her? Is Jennifer dead? A ghost? A figment of Rick’s imagination? Just who is the alluring female who takes him back to a time he’d rather forget? And how does his new-found obsession with this woman who’s haunting him affect his marriage to Olivia just when she wants to have a baby of her own?

Rick Bentz is torn and tortured. He’s determined to get to the truth behind “Jennifer” but he has no idea that he’s in for an emotional roller coaster that leads from the bayous surrounding New Orleans to secrets hidden beneath the glitter of Los Angeles. What he doesn’t expect is an enemy so seductive and deadly, everyone he loves is suddenly in mortal danger.

You can read on for an excerpt as well as visit www.lisajackson.com for more information on MALICE, which will be available in hardcover from Kensington Publishing in April 2009. While you’re visiting my website, you can learn more about MALICE as well as my other books. I think you’ll like this new book. It’s a bit of a twist for me, but I can tell you straight up, MALICE is truly one of my favorite books. I hope you agree.

Lisa Jackson
PROLOGUE

A suburb of Los Angeles
Twelve years earlier

“So you’re not coming home tonight, is that what you’re getting at?” Jennifer Bentz sat on the edge of the bed, phone to her ear and tried to ignore that all-too familiar guilty noose of monogamy that was strangling her even as it frayed.

“Probably not.”

Ever the great communicator, her ex wasn’t about to commit.

Not that she really blamed him. Theirs was a tenuous, if sometimes passionate relationship. And she was forever “the bad one” as she thought of herself, “the adulteress.” Even now, the scent of recent sex teased her nostrils in the too-warm bedroom, reminding her of her sins. Two half-full martini glasses stood next to a sweating shaker on the bedside table, evidence that she hadn’t been alone. “When, then?” she asked. “When will you show up?”

“Tomorrow. Maybe.” Rick was on his cell in a squad car. She heard the sounds of traffic in the background, knew he was being evasive and tightlipped because his partner was driving and could overhear at least one side of the stilted conversation.

Great.

She tried again. Lowered her voice. “Would it help if I said ‘I miss you’?”

No response. Of course. God, she hated this. Being the pathetic, whining woman, begging for him to see her. It just wasn’t her style. Not her style at all. Men, they were the ones who usually begged. And she got off on it.

Somewhere in the back of her consciousness she heard a soft click.

“Rick?”

“I heard you.”

Her cheeks burned and she glanced at the bed sheets twisted and turned, falling into a pool of pastel, wrinkled cotton at the foot of the bed.

Oh, God. He knows. The metallic taste of betrayal was on her lips, but she had to play the game, feign innocence. Surely he wouldn’t suspect that she’d been with another man, not so close on the heels of the last time. Geez, she’d even surprised herself.

There was a chance he was bluffing.

And yet…

She shuddered as she imagined his rage. She played her trump card. “Kristi will wonder why you’re not home. She’s already asking questions.”

“And what do you tell her? The truth?” That her mother can’t keep her legs closed? He didn’t say it, but the condemnation was there, hanging between them. Hell, she hated this. If it weren’t for her daughter, their daughter…

“I’m not sure how long the stake-out will be.”
A convenient lie. Her blood began a slow, steady boil. “You and I both know that the department doesn’t work its detectives around the clock.”

“You and I both know a lot of things.”

In her mind’s eye she saw him as he had been in the bedroom doorway, his face twisted in silent accusation as she lay in their bed, sweaty, naked, in the arms of another man, the same man with whom she’d had an affair earlier. Kristi’s biological father. Rick had reached for his gun, the pistol strapped in his shoulder-holster and for a second Jennifer had known real fear. Icy, cold terror.

“Get out,” he’d ordered, staring with deadly calm at the two of them. “Jesus H. Christ, get the hell out of my house and don’t come back. Both of you.”

He’d turned then, walked down the stairs and left without so much as slamming the door. But his rage had been real. Palpable. Jennifer had known she’d escaped with her life. But she hadn’t left. She couldn’t.

Rick hadn’t returned. They hadn’t even fought about it again. He’d just left.

Refused to answer her calls.

Until today.

By then it had been too late.

She’d already met her lover again. As much out of retribution as desire. Fuck it. No one was going to run her life, not even Rick-effin’-Bentz, super-hero cop. So she’d met the man who was forever in her blood.

Slut!

Whore!

The words were her own. She closed her eyes and hung her head, feeling lost. Confused. Never had she planned to cheat on Rick. Never. But she’d been weak; temptation strong. She shook her head and felt black to the bottom of her soul. Who was she so intent on punishing? Him? Or herself? Hadn’t one of her shrinks told her she didn’t think she deserved him? That she was self-destructive.


“Neither do I. Not anymore.”

She saw a swallow left in one martini glass, and drank it down. Did the same with the second. The noose tightened a notch, even as it unraveled. God, why couldn’t it be easy with him? Why couldn’t she remain faithful? “I’m trying, Rick,” she whispered, gritting her teeth. It wasn’t a lie. The problem was that she was trying and failing.

She thought she heard a muffled footstep, from downstairs, and she went on alert, then decided the noise might have been the echo in the phone. Or from outside. Wasn’t there a window open?

“You’re trying?” Rick snorted. “At what?”

So there it was. He did know. Probably had seen that she was tailed, the house watched. Or worse yet, he himself had been parked up the street in a car she didn’t recognize and had been watching the house himself. She glanced up at the ceiling to the light fixture, smoke alarm, and slow-moving paddle fan as it pushed the hot air around. Were there tiny cameras hidden inside? Had he filmed her recent tryst? Witnessed her as she’d withered and moaned on the bed she shared with him? Observed her as she’d taken command and run her tongue down her lover’s abdomen and lower? Seen her laughing? Teasing? Seducing?

Jesus, how twisted was he?
She closed her eyes. Mortified. “You sick son of a bitch.”

“That’s me.”

“I hate you.” Her temper was rising.

“I know. I just wasn’t sure you could admit it. Leave, Jennifer. It’s over.”

“Maybe if you didn’t get off bustin’ perps and playing the super-hero, ace detective, maybe if you paid a little attention to your wife and kid, this wouldn’t happen.”

“You’re not my wife.”

Click.

He hung up.

“Bastard!” She threw the phone onto the bed. Her head began to pound.

You did this, Jennifer. You yourself. You knew you’d get caught but you pushed everything you wanted and loved including Kristi and a chance with your ex-husband, because you’re a freak. You just can’t help yourself. She felt a tear slither down her cheek and slapped it away. This was no time for tears or self-pity.

Hadn’t she told herself a reconciliation with Rick was impossible? And yet she’d returned to this house, this home they’d shared together. Knowing full well it was a mistake of monumental proportions; just as it had been when she’d first said “I do,” years before.

“Fool!” She swore under her breath on her way to the bathroom where she saw her reflection in the mirror over the sink.

“Not pretty,” she said, splashing water over her face, but that really wasn’t the truth. She wasn’t too far into her thirties and so far, her dark hair was thick and wavy as it fell below her shoulders, her skin was still smooth, her lips full, her eyes a shade of blue-green men seemed to find fascinating. All the wrong men, she reminded herself. Men who were forbidden and taboo. And she loved their attention. Craved it.

She opened the medicine cabinet, found her bottle of Valium and popped a couple, just to take the edge off and hoped to push the threatening migraine away. Kristi was going to a friend’s house after swim practice, Rick wasn’t coming home until God knew when, so Jennifer had the house, and the rest of the evening to herself. She wasn’t leaving. Yet.

Swoosh.

An unlikely noise traveled up the staircase from the floor below.

The sound of air moving? A door opening? A window ajar?

What the hell was going on? She paused, listening, her senses on alert, the hairs on the back of her arms lifting.

What if Rick were nearby?

What if he’d been lying on the phone and was really on his way home again, just like the other day? The son of a bitch might just have been playing her for a fool.

The “stake-out” could well be fake, or if he really were going to spend all night watching someone, it was probably her, his own wife.

Ex-wife. Jennifer Bentz stared at her reflection in the mirror and frowned at the tiny little lines visible between her eyebrows. When had those wrinkles first appeared? Last year? Earlier? Or just in the last week?

It was hard to say.
But there they were, reminding her all too vividly that she wasn’t getting any younger.

With so many men who had wanted her, how had she ended up marrying, divorcing, and then living with a cop in his small all too middle class little house. Their attempt to get back together was just a trial and hadn’t been going on long and now…well, she was pretty damned sure it was over for good.

Because she just couldn’t be faithful to any one man. Even one she loved.

Dear God, what was she going to do? She’d thought about taking her own life. More than once and she’d already written her daughter a letter to be delivered upon her death:

Dear Kristi,

I’m so sorry, honey. Believe me when I tell you that I love you more than life itself. But I’ve been involved with the man who is really your father again and I’m afraid it’s going to break Rick’s heart.

And blah, blah, blah…

What a bunch of melodramatic trap.

Again she thought she heard something…the sound of a footstep on the floor downstairs.

She started to call out, then held her tongue. Padding quietly to the top of the stairs, held onto the railing and listened. Over the smooth rotation of the fan in her bedroom, she heard another noise, something faint and clicking.

Her skin crawled.

She barely dared breathe. Her heart pounded in her ears.

Just your imagination—the guilt that’s eating at you.

Or the neighbor’s cat—that’s it, a scraggly thing that’s always rooting around in the garbage cans or searching for mice in the garage.

On stealthy footsteps she hurried to the bedroom window and peered through the glass, seeing nothing out of the ordinary on this gray day in LA where the air was foggy, dusty, and thick. Even the sun, a reddish disc hanging low in the sky over miles and miles of rooftops, appeared distorted by the smog.

Not the breath of a breeze from the ocean today, nothing stirring to make any kind of noise. No cat slinking beneath the dry bushes, no bicyclist on the street. Not even a car passing.

It’s nothing.

Just a case of nerves.

Calm down.

She poured the remains of the shaker into her glass and took a sip on her way to the bathroom. But in the doorway she caught sight of her reflection and felt another stab of guilt.

“Bottoms up,” she whispered and then seeing her own reflection with the glass lifted to her lips, she cringed. This wasn’t what she wanted for her life. For her daughter. “Stupid, stupid bitch!” The woman in the mirror seemed to laugh at her. Taunt her. Without thinking, Jennifer hurled her drink at her smirking reflection. The glass slammed into the mirror, shattering.

Crraaack!

Slowly, the mirror cracked, a spider web of flaws crawling over the silvered glass. Shards slipped into the sink.
“Jesus!”

What the hell have you done?

She tried to pick up one of the larger pieces and sliced the tip of her finger, blood dripping from her hand, drizzling into the sink. Quickly she found a single, loose Band-aid on the shelf in the cabinet. She had trouble, her fingers weren’t working as they should, but she managed to pull off the backing and wrap her index finger. But she couldn’t quite staunch the flow. Blood swelled beneath the tiny scrap of plastic and gauze. “Damn it all to hell,” she muttered and caught a glimpse of her face in one of the remaining jagged bits of mirror.

“Seven years of bad luck,” she whispered, just as Nana Nichols had foretold when she’d broken her grandmother’s favorite looking glass at the age of three. “You’ll be cursed until you’re ten, Jenny, and who knows how much longer after that!” Nana, usually kind, had looked like a monster, all yellow teeth and bloodless lips twisted in disgust.

But how right the old woman had been. Bad luck seemed to follow her around, even to this day.

Spying her face now distorted and cleaved in the shards of glass that remained, Jennifer saw herself as an old woman; a lonely old woman.

God, what a day, she thought thickly.

She needed the broom and dustpan, and started downstairs, nearly stumbling on the landing. She caught herself, made her way to the first floor and stepped into the laundry room.

Where the door stood ajar.

What?

She hadn’t left it open; she was sure of it. And when her lover had left, he’d gone through the garage... so...? Had Kristi, on her way to school, not pulled it shut? The damned thing was hard to latch, but...

She felt a frisson of fear skitter down her spine. Hadn’t she heard someone down here earlier? Or was that just the gin talking? She was a little confused, her head thick, but...

Steadying herself on the counter, she paused, straining to hear, trying to remember. Good God, she was more than a little out of it. She walked into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water and noticed the hint of cigarette smoke in the air. No doubt from her ex-husband. How many times does she have to tell him to take his foul habit and smoke outside? Way outside. Not just out on the back porch where the damned tobacco odor sifted through the screen door.

But Rick hasn’t been here in two days...

She froze, her gaze traveling upward to the ceiling. Nothing... and then...a floorboard creaking overhead. The crunch of glass.

Oh, God, no.

This time it wasn’t a guess.

This time she was certain.

Someone was in the house.

Someone who didn’t want her to know he was there.

Someone who wanted to do her harm.

The smell of cigarette smoke teased at her nostrils again.
Oh, Jesus. This wasn’t Rick.

She slid on silent footsteps toward the counter where the knives were kept and slowly slid a long-bladed weapon from its slot. As she did she thought of all the cases Rick had solved, of all the criminals who had vented their revenge upon him and his family when they’d been arrested or sentenced, how they had vowed back at Detective Bentz in the most painful ways possible.

He’d never told her of the threats, but she’d learned from other cops on the force who had gladly repeated all the horrid threats.

And now someone was in the house.

The back of her throat turned desert dry.

Holding her breath, she eased into the garage and nearly tripped on the single step when she realized that the garage door was wide open to the driveway, an open invitation. One the intruder had used.

She didn’t think twice and slid behind the wheel where the keys were in the ignition.

She twisted on the keys.

The engine sparked.

She threw the car into reverse and gunned it, tearing out of the driveway, nearly hitting the neighbor’s miserable cat, just missing the mailbox.

She glanced up to the master bedroom window as she crammed the van into drive.

Her heart froze.

A dark figure stood behind the panes, a man with a cruel, twisted smile.

“Shit!”

The light shifted on the blinds and the image was gone—maybe just a figment of her imagination.

Or was it?

She didn’t wait to find out, just hit the throttle, racing down the street as old Mr. Van Pelt decided to back his ancient tank of a Buick into the street. Jennifer hit the brakes, her tires screeched, and then once past the startled old man, floored it.

“There was no man in the window. You know that,” she tried to convince herself. “No one was there.”

She reached for her purse and, while driving with one hand, searched for her cell, which, she now remembered was lying on the rumpled bed in the bedroom where she’d seen the tall man standing.

“Just your imagination,” she said over and over as she drove out of the subdivision and onto the main highway, melding into traffic. Her heart pounded and her head throbbed. Blood from her hand covered the wheel. She checked her rearview often, searching for a vehicle following her, looking through the sea of cars for one that seemed intent on chasing her down. Metal glinted in the sunlight and she cursed herself for not having her sunglasses with her.

Nothing looked out of the ordinary. Tons of cars heading east, silver, white, black sedans and sports cars, trucks and SUVs…at least she thought that was the direction she has going. She wasn’t sure. She hadn’t paid a lot of attention and she was starting to relax, to think she’d eluded whoever had been after her. If anyone really had.

Just another Southern California day. She spied a dark blue SUV coming up fast and her heart jumped, but it sped by, along with a white BMW on its tail.
She flipped on the radio, tried to steady her nerves, but she was sweating, her finger still bleeding, her mind numbed. The miles passed, nothing happened and she started to relax. Really relax. She drifted a bit, nearly side-swiping a guy who laid on the horn and flipped her off.

“Yeah, right, whatever,” she said, but realized she shouldn’t be driving, not in all this traffic and at the next exit, she turned off…dear Lord where was she?…in the country? She didn’t recognize the area, the sparseness of the homes, the stretches of brush and farmland. She was inland somewhere and the Valium had kicked in big time. Blinking against the sunlight, she looked in her side view mirror and saw another big blue SUV bearing down on her.

The same one as before?

No!

Couldn’t be.

She yawned and the Explorer behaved, following her at a distance on the two-lane road that led into the hills.

It was really time to turn around.

She was so damned tired.

The road before her seemed to shift and she blinked. Her eyelids were so heavy. She’d have to slow down and rest, try to clear her head, maybe drink some coffee…

There was a chance no one had been in the house. Geez-God, the way she was imagining things, the way her nerves were strung tight as guy wires these days, the way guilt was eating at her, she was probably letting her mind play tricks on her. Her thoughts swirled and gnawed at her.

She saw the corner in the road and she braked, and as she did, she noticed the dark Explorer riding her ass.

“So pass, you idiot,” she said, distracted, her eyes on the rearview mirror. The rig’s windows were tinted and dark, but she caught a glimpse of the driver.

Oh, God.

Her heart nearly stopped.

The driver stared straight at her. She bit back a scream. He was the same intruder she’d seen in the upstairs window of her house.

Scared out of her wits, she tromped on the accelerator. Who the hell was he?

Why was he following her?

She saw the corner and cut it, hoping to lose him, but her judgment was off and one of the van’s tires caught on the shoulder, hitting gravel. She yanked on the wheel, trying to wrestle the car onto the road, but the van began to spin.

Wildly.

Crazily.

Totally out of control.

The van shuddered. Skidded.

And then began to roll.
In slow-motion certainty, Jennifer knew she was going to die.

More than that, she knew she was being murdered.

Probably set up by her damned ex-husband, Rick Bentz.
LISA JACKSON

MALICE
Books by Lisa Jackson

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Final Scream
Wishes
Whispers
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Left to Die
Wicked Game
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If I’ve missed anyone—hey, no surprise there, but please accept my apologies.
Author’s Note

I know I’ve bent the rules and played around with the police department procedure just to keep my story moving; this book in no way reflects the actual police departments of Los Angeles, California, or New Orleans, Louisiana, or their procedures.
So you’re not coming home tonight, is that what you’re getting at?” Jennifer Bentz sat on the edge of the bed, phone pressed to her ear, as she tried to ignore that all-too-familiar guilty noose of monogamy that was strangling her even as it frayed.

“Probably not.”

Ever the great communicator, her ex wasn’t about to commit.

Not that she really blamed him. Theirs was a tenuous, if sometimes passionate, relationship. And she was forever “the bad one,” as she thought of herself, “the adulteress.” Even now, the scent of recent sex teased her nostrils in the too-warm bedroom, reminding her of her sins. Two half-full martini glasses stood next to a sweating shaker on the bedside table, evidence that she hadn’t been alone. “When, then?” she asked. “When will you show up?”

“Tomorrow. Maybe.” Rick was on his cell in a squad car. She heard the sounds of traffic in the background, knew he was being evasive and tight-lipped because his partner was driving and could overhear at least one side of the stilted conversation.

Great.

She tried again. Lowered her voice. “Would it help if I said I miss you?”

No response. Of course. God, she hated this. Being the pathetic, whining woman, begging for him to see her. It just wasn’t her style. Not her style at all. Men were the ones who usually begged, and she got off on it.

Somewhere in the back of her consciousness she heard a soft click.

“RJ?”

“I heard you.”

Her cheeks burned and she glanced at the bedsheets twisted and turned, falling into a pool of pastel, wrinkled cotton at the foot of the bed.

Oh, God. He knows. The metallic taste of betrayal was on her lips, but she had to play the game, feign innocence. Surely he wouldn’t suspect that she’d been with another man, not so close on the heels of the last time. Jeez, she’d even surprised herself.

There was a chance he was bluffing.

And yet…

She shuddered as she imagined his rage. She played her trump card. “Kristi will wonder why you’re not home. She’s already asking questions.”

“And what do you tell her? The truth?” That her mother can’t keep her legs closed? He didn’t say it, but the condemnation was there, hanging between them. Hell, she hated this. If it weren’t for her daughter, their daughter…
“I’m not sure how long the stakeout will be.”

A convenient lie. Her blood began a slow, steady boil. “You and I both know that the department doesn’t work its detectives around the clock.”

“You and I both know a lot of things.”

In her mind’s eye she saw him as he had been in the bedroom doorway, his face twisted in silent accusation as she lay in their bed. Sweaty, naked, she was in the arms of another man, the same man with whom she’d had an affair earlier. Kristi’s biological father. Rick had reached for his gun, the pistol strapped in his shoulder holster, and for a second Jennifer had known real fear. Icy, cold terror.

“Get out,” he’d ordered, staring with deadly calm at the two of them. “Jesus H. Christ, get the hell out of my house and don’t come back. Both of you.”

He’d turned then, walked down the stairs, and left without so much as slamming the door. But his rage had been real. Palpable. Jennifer had escaped with her life, but she hadn’t gone. She couldn’t.

Rick hadn’t returned. They hadn’t even fought about it again. He’d just left.

Refused to answer her calls.

Until today.

By then it had been too late.

She’d already met her lover again. As much out of retribution as desire. Fuck it. No one was going to run her life, not even Rick-effin’ Bentz, superhero cop. So she’d met the man who was forever in her blood.

Slut!

Whore!

The words were her own. She closed her eyes and hung her head, feeling lost. Confused. Never had she planned to cheat on Rick. Never. But she’d been weak, temptation strong. She shook her head and felt black to the bottom of her soul. Who was she so intent on punishing? Him? Or herself? Hadn’t one of her shrinks told her she didn’t think she deserved him? That she was self-destructive?


“Neither do I. Not anymore.”

She saw an inch of liquid remaining in one martini glass and drank it down. The noose tightened a notch, even as it unraveled. God, why couldn’t it be easy with him? Why couldn’t she remain faithful? “I’m trying, Rick,” she whispered, gritting her teeth. It wasn’t a lie. The problem was that she was trying and failing.

She thought she heard a muffled footstep from downstairs and she went on alert, then decided the noise might have been the echo in the phone. Or from outside. Wasn’t there a window open?

“You’re trying?” Rick snorted. “At what?”

So there it was. He did know. Probably was having someone tail her, having the house under surveillance. Or worse yet, he had been parked up the street in a car she didn’t recognize and had been watching the house himself. She glanced up at the ceiling to the light fixture, smoke alarm, and slow-moving paddle fan as it pushed the hot air around. Were there tiny cameras hidden inside? Had he filmed her recent tryst? Witnessed her as she’d writhed and moaned on the bed she shared with him? Observed her as she’d taken command and run her tongue down her lover’s abdomen, and lower? Seen her laughing? Teasing? Seducing?
Jesus, how twisted was he?

She closed her eyes. Mortified. “You sick son of a bitch.”

“That’s me.”

“I hate you.” Her temper was rising.

“I know. I just wasn’t sure you could admit it. Leave, Jennifer. It’s over.”

“Maybe if you didn’t get off bustin’ perps and playing the superhero ace detective, maybe if you paid a little attention to your wife and kid, this wouldn’t happen.”

“You’re not my wife.”

Click.

He hung up.

“Bastard!” She threw the phone onto the bed as her head began to pound. You did this, Jennifer. You yourself. You knew you’d get caught, but you pushed away everything you wanted and loved, including Kristi and a chance with your ex-husband, because you’re a freak. You just can’t help yourself. She felt a tear slither down her cheek and slapped it away. This was no time for tears or self-pity.

Hadn’t she told herself that reconciliation with Rick was impossible? And yet she’d returned to this house, this home they’d shared together, knowing full well it was a mistake of monumental proportions. Just as it had been when she’d first said “I do,” years before.

“Fool!” She swore under her breath on her way to the bathroom, where she saw her reflection in the mirror over the sink.

“Not pretty,” she said, splashing water over her face. But that really wasn’t the truth. She wasn’t too far into her thirties and her dark hair was still thick and wavy as it fell below her shoulders. Her skin was still smooth, her lips full, her eyes a shade of blue-green men seemed to find fascinating. All the wrong men, she reminded herself. Men who were forbidden and taboo. And she loved their attention. Craved it.

She opened the medicine cabinet, found her bottle of Valium, and popped a couple, just to take the edge off and push the threatening migraine away. Kristi was going to a friend’s house after swim practice; Rick wasn’t coming home until God knew when, so Jennifer had the house and the rest of the evening to herself. She wasn’t leaving. Yet.

Swoosh.

An unlikely noise traveled up the staircase from the floor below.

The sound of air moving? A door opening? A window ajar?

What the hell was going on? She paused, listening, her senses on alert, the hairs on the back of her arms lifting.

What if Rick were nearby?

What if he’d been lying on the phone and was really on his way home again, just like the other day? The son of a bitch might just have been playing her for a fool.

The “stakeout” could well be fake, or if he really was going to spend all night watching someone, it was probably her, his own wife.

Ex-wife. Jennifer Bentz stared at her reflection in the mirror and frowned at the tiny little lines visible between her eyebrows. When had those wrinkles first appeared? Last year? Earlier? Or just in the last week?
It was hard to say.

But there they were, reminding her all too vividly that she wasn’t getting any younger.

With so many men who had wanted her, how had she ended up marrying, divorcing, and then living with a cop in his all-too-middle-class little house? Their attempt to get back together was just a trial. It hadn’t been going on long and now…well, she was pretty damned sure it was over for good.

Because she just couldn’t be faithful to any one man. Even one she loved.

Dear God, what was she going to do? She’d thought about taking her own life. More than once. And she’d already written her daughter a letter to be delivered upon her death:

_Dear Kristi,_

_I’m so sorry, honey. Believe me when I tell you that I love you more than life itself. But I’ve been involved with the man who is your biological father again, and I’m afraid it’s going to break Rick’s heart._

And blah, blah, blah…

What a bunch of melodramatic crap.

Again she thought she heard something…the sound of a footstep on the floor downstairs.

She started to call out, then held her tongue. Padding quietly to the top of the stairs, she held on to the railing and listened. Over the smooth rotation of the fan in her bedroom she heard another noise, something faint and clicking.

Her skin crawled.

She barely dared breathe. Her heart pounded in her ears.

_Just your imagination—the guilt that’s eating at you._

_Or the neighbor’s cat. That’s it, the scraggly thing that’s always rooting around in the garbage cans or searching for mice in the garage._

On stealthy footsteps she hurried to the bedroom window and peered through the glass, seeing nothing out of the ordinary on this gray day in Southern California, where the air was foggy, dusty, and thick. Even the sun, a reddish disc hanging low in the sky over miles and miles of rooftops, appeared distorted by the smog.

Not the breath of a breeze from the ocean today, nothing stirring to make any kind of noise. No cat slinking beneath the dry bushes, no bicyclist on the street. Not even a car passing.

_It’s nothing._

_Just a case of nerves._

_Calm down._

She poured the remains of the shaker into her glass and took a sip on her way to the bathroom. But in the doorway she caught sight of her reflection and felt another stab of guilt.

“Bottoms up,” she whispered and then, seeing her own reflection and the glass lifted to her lips, she cringed. This wasn’t what she wanted for her life. For her daughter. “Stupid, stupid bitch!” The woman in the mirror seemed to laugh at her. Taunt her. Without thinking, Jennifer hurled her drink at her smirking reflection. The glass slammed into the mirror, shattering.

_Crraaack!_
Slowly, the mirror split, a spider web of flaws crawling over the slivered glass. Shards slipped into the sink.

“What!”

What the hell have you done?

She tried to pick up one of the larger pieces and sliced the tip of her finger, blood dripping from her hand, drizzling into the sink. Quickly she found a single, loose Band-Aid on the shelf in the cabinet. She had trouble as her fingers weren’t working as they should, but she managed to pull off the backing and wrap her index finger. Yet she couldn’t quite stanch the flow. Blood swelled beneath the tiny scrap of plastic and gauze. “Damn it all to hell,” she muttered and caught a glimpse of her face in one of the remaining jagged bits of mirror.

“Seven years of bad luck,” she whispered, just as Nana Nichols had foretold when she’d broken her grandmother’s favorite looking glass at the age of three. “You’ll be cursed until you’re ten, Jenny, and who knows how much longer after that!” Nana, usually kind, had looked like a monster, all yellow teeth and bloodless lips twisted in disgust.

But how right the old woman had been. Bad luck seemed to follow her around, even to this day.

Spying her face, now distorted and cleaved in the shards of glass that remained, Jennifer saw herself as an old woman—a lonely old woman.

God, what a day, she thought thickly.

Heading for the broom and dustpan, she started downstairs, nearly stumbling on the landing. She caught herself, made her way to the first floor, and stepped into the laundry room.

Where the door stood ajar.

What?

She hadn’t left it open; she was sure of it. And when her lover had left, he’d gone through the garage. So…? Had Kristi, on her way to school, not pulled it shut? The damned thing was hard to latch, but…

She felt a frisson of fear skitter down her spine. Hadn’t she heard someone down here earlier? Or was that just the gin talking? She was a little confused, her head thick, but…

Steadying herself on the counter, she paused, straining to hear, trying to remember. Good God, she was more than a little out of it. She walked into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water, and noticed the hint of cigarette smoke in the air. No doubt from her ex-husband. How many times did she have to tell him to take his foul habit and smoke outside? Not just out on the back porch, where the damned tobacco odor wafted through the screen door.

But Rick hasn’t been here in two days...

She froze, her gaze traveling upward to the ceiling. Nothing…and then…a floorboard creaked overhead. The crunch of glass.

Oh, God, no.

This time it wasn’t a guess.

This time she was certain.

Someone was in the house.

Someone who didn’t want her to know he was there.

Someone who wanted to do her harm.
The smell of cigarette smoke teased at her nostrils again.

Oh, Jesus. This wasn’t Rick.

She slid on silent footsteps toward the counter where the knives were kept and slowly slid a long-bladed weapon from its slot. As she did, she thought of all the cases Rick had solved, of all the criminals who had channeled their wrath toward him and his family when they’d been arrested or sentenced. Many of them had vowed to get back at Detective Bentz in the most painful ways possible.

He’d never told her of the threats, but she’d learned from other cops on the force who had gladly repeated various criminals’ promises to seek revenge.

And now someone was in the house.

The back of her throat turned desert dry.

Holding her breath, she eased into the garage and nearly tripped on the single step when she realized that the garage door was wide open to the driveway, a blatant invitation. One the intruder had accepted.

She didn’t think twice and slid behind the wheel, where the keys were already in the ignition.

She twisted on the keys.

The engine sparked.

She threw the gear into reverse and gunned it, tearing out of the driveway, nearly hitting the neighbor’s miserable cat and just missing the mailbox.

She glanced up to the master bedroom window as she crammed the van into drive.

Her heart froze.

A dark figure stood behind the panes, a shadow with a cruel, twisted smile.

“Shit!”

The light shifted on the blinds and the image was gone—maybe just a figment of her imagination.

Or was it?

She didn’t wait to find out, just hit the gas pedal, racing down the street as old Mr. Van Pelt decided to back his ancient tank of a Buick into the street. Jennifer hit the brakes, her tires screeched, and then once past the startled neighbor she floored it.

“There was no one in the window. You know that,” she tried to convince herself. “No one was there.”

Driving with one hand, she searched the passenger seat for her purse and cell, which, she now remembered, sat in the bedroom where she’d seen the dark figure.

“Oh, your imagination,” she said over and over as she drove out of the subdivision and onto the main highway, melding into the thick traffic. Her heart pounded and her head throbbed. Blood from her hand smeared the steering wheel. She checked her rearview often, searching for a vehicle following her, looking through the sea of cars for one that seemed intent on chasing her down. Metal glinted in the sunlight and she cursed herself for not having her sunglasses with her.

Nothing looked out of the ordinary. Tons of cars heading east: silver, white, black sedans and sports cars, trucks, and SUVs...at least she thought that was the direction she was going. She wasn’t sure. She hadn’t paid a lot of attention and she was starting to relax, starting to think she’d eluded whoever had been after her. If anyone really had.
Just another Southern California day. She spied a dark blue SUV coming up fast and her heart jumped, but it sped by, along with a white BMW on its tail.

She flipped on the radio, tried to steady her nerves, but she was sweating, her finger still bleeding. The miles passed, nothing happened, and she began to breathe easier...really relax. She drifted a bit, nearly sideswiping a guy who hit the horn and flipped her off.

“Yeah, right, whatever,” she said, but realized she shouldn’t be driving, not in all this traffic in her altered state. At the next exit, she turned off...dear Lord, where was she?...in the country? She didn’t recognize the area, the sparseness of the homes, the stretches of brush and farmland. She was inland somewhere and the Valium had kicked in big-time. Blinking against the sunlight, she looked in her side-view mirror and saw another big blue SUV bearing down on her.

The same one as before?

No!

Couldn’t be.

She yawned and the Explorer behind her stayed back, following her at a distance on the two-lane road that led into the hills.

It was time to turn around.

She was so damned tired.

The road before her seemed to shift and she blinked. Her eyelids were so heavy. She’d have to slow down and rest, try to clear her head, maybe drink some coffee...

There was a chance no one had been in the house. Jeez—God, the way she was imagining things, the way her nerves were strung tight these days, the way guilt was eating at her, she was probably letting her mind play tricks on her. Her thoughts swirled and gnawed at her.

She saw the curve in the road and she braked. As she did, she noticed the dark Explorer riding her ass.

“So pass, you idiot,” she said, distracted, her eyes on the rearview mirror. The rig’s windows were tinted and dark, but she caught a glimpse of the driver.

Oh, God.

Her heart nearly stopped.

The driver stared straight at her. She bit back a scream. It was the same intruder she’d seen in the upstairs window of her house.

Scared out of her wits, she tromped on the accelerator.

Who the hell was it?

Why was whoever it was following her?

She saw the corner and cut it, hoping to lose the SUV, but her judgment was off and one of the van’s tires caught on the shoulder, hitting gravel. She yanked on the wheel, trying to wrestle the car onto the road, but the van began to spin.

Wildly.

Crazily.
Totally out of control.

The van shuddered. Skidded.

And then began to roll.

In slow-motion certainty, Jennifer knew she was going to die.

More than that, she knew she was being murdered.

Probably set up by her damned ex-husband, Rick Bentz.
“Talk to me in six weeks.” Melinda Jaskiel’s voice was firm. Clear. Propped on his good leg on the back veranda, his cell phone nearly stuck to his ear in the sweltering bayou heat, Rick Bentz realized his boss wasn’t going to budge. Sweat dripping off his nose, he balanced on one crutch, the thick rubber tip wedged between two flagstones. His back ached and walking was a strain, but he wouldn’t admit it to a soul—especially not to Jaskiel. As head of the homicide division in the New Orleans Police Department, she had the authority to put him back on active duty. Or not. It was her call.

Once again, Melinda Jaskiel held the fate of his career in her hands.

Once again, he was begging. “I need to work.” Jesus, he hated the desperation in his voice.

“You need to be at a hundred percent, maybe a hundred and ten to be back on duty.”

His jaw tightened as the intense Louisiana sun beat down on the back of his neck and a fine mist rose from the swampland that backed up to the cottage nestled into the woods. Jaskiel had given him a job when no one else would touch him after the mess he’d left in L.A. And now she was shutting him down.

He heard her mutter something under her breath and thought for a split second she was reconsidering. “Look, Rick, I don’t see you pushing papers at a desk from eight to five.”

“I’ve been in P.T. for a couple of months now, strong as ever.”

“Strong enough to chase down a suspect? Wrestle him to the ground? Break down a door? Hit the deck, roll, draw your weapon, and cover your partner?”

“That’s all TV BS.”

“Is it?” Jaskiel’s voice was skeptical. “Seems to me you were doing just that kind of ‘TV BS’ when you ended up in the hospital.” She knew him too well. “You know the drill. Bring in a doctor’s release and we’ll discuss your reinstatement. Discuss. No promises. You know, retirement’s not a bad idea.”

He snorted. “Gee, Melinda, I’m getting the idea you’re trying to get rid of me.”

“You’re still in physical therapy and you’re wound too tight. End of subject. I’ll talk to you later.” She hung up.

“Son of a bitch!” He flung his crutch across the flagstones of the veranda, where it skidded, clattering noisily and startling a mockingbird from a nearby magnolia tree into flight. “Son of a goddamned bitch.” His fingers clenched over his cell and he considered hurling it into the swamp, but didn’t. Hell, he didn’t want to explain that. So far, the department only questioned his physical ability. He didn’t want to give the powers that be an insight into his mental state.

No shrinks. No soul searching. No pouring out his heart. No thank you.

He stood with difficulty, his balance not what it had been before the accident, despite what he’d told Jaskiel. And sometimes his leg hurt like hell. He knew he wasn’t really ready for active duty, but he was going out of his freakin’ mind staying at home. Hell, even his relationship with his wife Olivia was beginning to wear thin. Her biological clock was ticking like crazy and she was pressuring him to have a kid. His own daughter, Kristi, was in her twenties. He wasn’t sure he wanted to start over.
No, what he needed was to get out of the house and back to work. It had been nearly three months since the accident and he couldn’t take sitting around another second.

“So do something about it,” he ordered himself.

Gritting his teeth, he took a step unaided.

First one foot, then the other.

None of the namby-pamby putting one foot forward with the walker and dragging the second one up to it. No way. He was going to walk across this damned patio one foot in front of the other if it killed him. He’d show them all. In a month he’d be running across these stupid stones. A crow sat on one of the roof’s gables and cried noisily, its raspy caw echoing through the scrub oak and pine.

Bentz barely noticed.

A third step.

Then four.

He was sweating now. Concentrating hard. The heat was oppressive, sun beating down, the dank smell of the swamp heavy in his nostrils. The crow kept up his incessant, mocking caw. Irritating bastard.

Another step and Bentz looked up, away from uneven stones and to the bench, his destination. He was crossing his patio on his own two feet.

Just as he would have if he hadn’t been injured.

Just as he would have if he hadn’t nearly lost his life.

Just as he would have if he hadn’t been forced to consider early retirement.

He moved forward again, more easily, more confidently.

And then he felt it.

That cold certainty that he was being watched.

His gut tightened as he looked over his shoulder. Dry, brittle leaves rustled on the windless day.

The crow had disappeared, its scolding cries silent.

A flicker of light between the branches. Something in the thicket, just on the other side of the veranda, moved. A shadow passed quickly, darting through the undergrowth.

Oh, sweet Jesus.

Instinctively, Bentz reached for his sidearm.

His hand came up empty as he rounded to face the woods.

He wasn’t wearing his shoulder holster.

Not in his own house.

He squinted.

What the hell was it?
Sunlight played through the lacy canopy of needles and leaves. His heart thumped crazily. The spit dried in his mouth.

It was just his imagination.

Again.

Right?

But the goose bumps crawling over his flesh and the tightening of every muscle in his body told him otherwise.

*Idiot! You’re in your own damned backyard.*

He turned slightly, trying to make out if the intruder were an opossum, or a deer, or even an alligator crawling up from the swamp, but he knew deep in his soul that this was no wild creature wandering too close to his house.

Uh-uh.

The shivering leaves stilled on this hot, breathless day.

Bentz squinted into the forest. He had no doubt that he would see her.

Again.

He wasn’t disappointed.

Through the shimmering heat her image appeared. Dressed in that same sexy black dress, flashing him the barest of smiles, she stood between the bleached bark of two cypress trees.

*Jennifer.*

His first wife.

The woman he’d sworn to love through all his days.

The bitch who had betrayed him…And she was as sensual and gorgeous as she had been all those years ago. The fragrance of gardenias wafted through the air.

He swallowed.

Hard.

A ghost?

Or real flesh and blood?

The woman, a dead ringer for his first wife, stood deep in the woods, staring at him with wide, knowing eyes and that sexy little smile…God, that smile had turned him inside out.

His heart went still as death.

An eerie chill slid through his veins.

“*Jennifer?*” he said aloud, though he knew his first wife was long dead.

She arched a single eyebrow and his stomach dropped to his knees.

“*Jen?*” Bentz took a step forward, caught his toe on an uneven rock, and went down. Hard. His knees hit first. *Bam!* His chin bounced against the mortar and stone, rattling his jaw, scraping his skin.
Pain exploded through his brain. The raven cackled, as if laughing at him. His cell phone skittered across the flagstones.

“Shit!” he muttered under his breath as he lay still for a second, taking in a couple of breaths, telling himself he was a goddamned idiot, a freak who was seeing things that didn’t exist. He moved one leg, then the other, mentally assessing the damage to his already racked-up body.

Not that long ago he’d been paralyzed, the result of a freak accident in a lightning storm. His spinal cord had been bruised, not severed. Slowly he’d recovered to this point and he hoped to hell that he hadn’t reinjured his damned back or legs.

Painfully he rolled over and pushed himself onto his knees while staring over the edge of the veranda toward the spot where he’d seen her.

Jennifer, of course, had vanished.

Poof.

Like a ghost in an old cartoon.

Using a bench for leverage, he pulled himself to his feet and stood, solid and steady. Gingerly, ignoring the pain, he walked closer to the edge of the veranda. Squinting into the shadows, he looked for something, anything to indicate she’d been out there. Tempting him. Teasing him. Making him think he was going crazy.

But nothing moved in the forest.

No woman hid in the deep umbra.

No drop in the temperature indicated a ghost had trod upon his soul.

And, beyond all that, Jennifer was dead. Buried in a plot in California. He knew that as well as his own name. Hadn’t he identified her himself over twelve years ago? She’d been mangled horribly in the accident, nearly unrecognizable, but the woman behind the wheel in the single-car accident had been his beautiful and scheming first wife.

His stomach twisted a bit as a cloud passed over the sun. High in the sky jets streaked, leaving white plumes to slice the wide expanse of blue.

Why now had she returned—at least in his mind? Had it been the coma? He’d lain unconscious in the hospital for two weeks and he remembered nothing of those fourteen lost days.

When he’d finally awoken, staring through blurry eyes, he’d seen her image. A cold waft of air had whispered across his skin and he’d smelled the heady aroma of her perfume, a familiar scent laced with gardenias. Then he’d caught a glimpse of her in the doorway, backlit by the dimmed hall lights, blowing him a kiss and looking as real as if she were truly still alive.

Which of course she wasn’t.

And yet…

Now, as he stared into the shaded bayou where shadows lengthened and the steamy scent of slow-moving water filtered through the leaves of cypress and cottonwood, he second-guessed the truth. He doubted what he’d been certain was fact; he questioned his sanity.

Could it be the pain pills he’d been taking since his accident as his daughter—their daughter—had insisted?

Or was he just plain going nuts?
“Crap.” He glared at the woods.

No Jennifer.

Of course.

She was all a part of his imagination.

Something that had been triggered by nearly half a month of teetering on that razor-sharp edge between life and death.

“Get a grip,” he told himself.

Man, he could use a smoke right now. He’d given up the habit years before, but in times of stress nothing gave him a clear sense of what needed to be done like a hit of nicotine curling through his lungs.

Grimacing, he heard a series of sharp barks. The dog door opened with a click, followed by the scratch of tiny paws flying across the stones and a high-pitched yip. Hairy S, his wife Olivia’s terrier mutt, streaked across the veranda, sending a squirrel squawking loudly up the bole of a scraggly pine. Hairy, who had been named in honor of Harry S. Truman, Olivia’s grandmother’s favorite president, was going nuts. He leaped and barked at the trunk of the tree, his mottled hair bristling as the squirrel taunted and scolded from the safety of an upper limb.

“Hairy! Shh!” Bentz wasn’t in the mood. His head was beginning to pound and his pride had already suffered a beating with the fall.

“What the hell are you doing?” Montoya’s voice boomed at him and he nearly tripped again.

“I’m walking without a damned cane or crutch. What’s it look like?”

“Like a face plant.”

Bentz turned to find his partner slipping through the side gate and striding across the flagstones with the irritating ease of a jungle cat. To add insult to injury, Olivia’s scrappy little dog diverted from the squirrel to run circles around Montoya’s feet, leaving Bentz to dust off his pride. He tried not to wince, but his knees stung where his skin had been scraped off. No doubt bruises were already forming. He sensed the ooze of warm, sticky blood run down his shins.

“I was watching from over the top of the gate. Looked to me like you were attempting a swan dive into the concrete.”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so.”

Bentz wasn’t in the mood to be ridiculed by his smart-assed partner. Make that his smart-assed younger partner. With hair that gleamed black in the afternoon light, reflective sunglasses covering eyes that were as sharp as they had ever been, Montoya was younger and more athletic than Bentz. And not afraid to remind his older partner of it.

When he walked, Montoya damned near swaggered and the diamond stud in his earlobe glittered. At least today he wasn’t wearing his signature black leather jacket, just a white T-shirt and jeans. Looking cool as all get-out.

It bugged the hell out of Bentz.

“Olivia at work?”

Bentz nodded. “Should be home in a couple of hours.” His wife still worked a couple of days a week at the Third Eye, a New Age gift shop near Jackson Square that had survived Hurricane Katrina. She’d completed her master’s in psychology a while back and was considering starting her own practice, but she hadn’t quite made the transition
to full time. Bentz suspected she missed the hustle and bustle of the French Quarter.

Montoya found Bentz’s cell phone near a huge ceramic pot filled with cascading pink and white petunias. “Looking for this?” He dusted off the phone, then handed it to him.

Glowering, Bentz muttered, “Thanks,” then jammed the damned phone into his pocket.

“Bad news?” Montoya asked, suddenly sober.

“Jaskiel doesn’t think I’m fit for duty.”

“You’re not.”

Bentz bit back a hot retort as a dragonfly zipped past. Considering his current state, he couldn’t argue. “Is there a reason you came all the way out here, or did you just want to give me a bad time?”

“Little of both,” Montoya said. This time his teeth flashed white against his black goatee. “They’re reassigning me. Making Zaroster my”—He made air quotes with his fingers—“‘temporary’ partner.”

Lynn Zaroster was a junior detective who had been with the department a little over two years though she was barely twenty-six. Cute, smart, and athletic, Zaroster was filled with enthusiasm. She was as idealistic as Bentz was jaded.

“Change of pace for you.”

“Yeah.” Montoya’s smile faded. “Sometimes I feel like a goddamned babysitter.”

“You’re afraid this might be permanent.” Because Bentz was being pushed out of the department.

“Not if I have my say, but I thought I’d tell you myself. Rather than you hearing it from someone else.”

Bentz nodded, wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his shirt. From inside the house, through the open window, he heard the sound of Olivia’s parrot, which, like the dog and this little cottage, she had inherited from her grandmother. “Jaskiel’s been hinting that I should retire.” His lips twisted at the thought of it. “Enjoy what’s left of my life.”

Montoya snorted. “You’re not even fifty. That’s a whole lotta ‘left.’ Thirty—maybe forty—years of fishing, watching football, and sitting on your ass.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter.”

Reaching down for Bentz’s crutch, Montoya said, “Maybe you could retire, draw a pension, and then get your P.I.’s license.”

“Yeah…maybe. And you can keep babysitting.” Ignoring the preoffered crutch, Bentz started inside, the little dog hurrying ahead of him. “Come on, I’ll buy you a beer.”

“Have you gone off the wagon?” Montoya was right beside him, hauling the damned crutch.

“Not yet.” Bentz held the door open. “But then, the day’s not over.”
CHAPTER 2

Bentz was slipping away from her.

Olivia could feel it.

And it pissed her off. Yes, she was sad, too, she thought as she tore down the road in her old Ford Ranger, a relic with nearly two hundred thousand miles that she would have to trade in soon.

She loved her husband and when she’d vowed to stick with him through good times and bad, she’d meant it. She’d thought he had, too, but ever since the accident…

She braked for a curve on the long country road winding through this part of bayou country on the way to her home, a small bungalow built near the swamp, one she’d shared with Grannie Gin before the old lady had passed on. She’d lived in it alone for a few years, but eventually, when she and Bentz had married, he’d moved from his apartment to the bungalow tucked deep into the woods.

His daughter had lived with them for a while, though that hadn’t worked out all that great. Kristi was a grown woman and had needed her own space. But they’d been happy here for the past few years.

Until the damned accident.

A freak occurrence.

Lightning had cleaved an oak tree and a thick branch had come down on Rick, pinning him and nearly severing his spine. Even now she shuddered thinking of those dark days when she hadn’t been certain whether he would live or die.

He’d clung to life. Barely. And in that time she and her stepdaughter had finally bonded, clenching each other’s hands in the hospital when the doctors had given Bentz a dire prognosis.

She’d thought she’d lose him, expected him to die. And in those heart-rending days, she’d regretted not having a child with him, not having a part of him to carry on. Maybe it was selfish. But she didn’t care.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the rearview mirror. Worried amber-colored eyes stared back at her. She didn’t like what was happening.

“So do something about it,” she said. She’d never been one to hold back. Her temper had been described as “mercurial” on more than one occasion. By Bentz. The first time she’d met the man, she’d gone toe-to-toe with him, reporting a murder she’d witnessed though her visions. That had set him back a bit. He hadn’t believed her, at first. But she’d convinced him.

Somehow now, she had to convince him of this as well.

She put the truck through its paces and tried not to dwell on the fact that the warmth in their home had seemed to fade after he’d woken from the coma. He’d become a different man. Not entirely, of course, but somehow changed. At first, she’d passed off his lack of affection as worry. He’d had to concentrate on getting well. But things hadn’t gone as she’d expected. As the weeks had passed and he’d gained strength, she’d noticed a sense of disillusionment in him. She’d told herself his mood was sure to change the minute he was back to work, doing what he loved, solving homicides.
But as the weeks passed she became concerned. Though they had talked about having a baby together, he’d become less and less interested. Bentz had always been a passionate man; not as hot-tempered as his partner, Montoya, but steadfast, determined, and courageous.

In bed, he’d been an eager lover who had derived some of his own pleasure from hers.

But all of that had changed.

She didn’t doubt that he loved her; not for a second. But instead of mellowing with age, their relationship had grown…stale, for lack of a better word. And she didn’t like it.

She flipped down her visor. Sunlight dappled the warm ribbon of pavement meandering through this lowland and a jackrabbit hopped into the underbrush at the side of the road.

She barely noticed.

What her relationship with Bentz needed was a kick-start. Or maybe her husband just needed a well-timed kick in his cute behind.

She turned in to the drive, her tires splashing through a puddle from an early morning shower. She parked in the garage and walked inside where a Bryan Adams song from the eighties was blasting. Her husband, sweating in a T-shirt and shorts, was working out on a small weight machine tucked into the den. He glanced over as she walked to the doorway and leaned against the doorjamb. “Hey, Rocky,” she said, and he actually laughed.

A rarity these days.

“That’s me.” He finished a set of leg lifts, his face straining, the muscles bulging in his thighs. For the past three weeks, ever since his boss had suggested he might want to retire, Bentz had redoubled his efforts, throwing himself into regaining his strength with a vengeance. For the most part he’d ditched his crutch and was using a cane, though sometimes he walked unaided, just as he had when he was supposed to be using a crutch. He’d ignored his doctor’s warnings and pushed himself harder than he was supposed to. Big steps, but not big enough to satisfy him.

Olivia couldn’t help but worry about him, aware that exercise had become one of the few de-stressors in his life. His sleep was restless, his only connection to the department, Montoya, was busy with the job and his own family commitment. Even his daughter Kristi was wrapped up in her own life as she planned her wedding. “What do you say I take you out to dinner?” she asked.

“It’s Monday.”

“That’s why we’re celebrating.”

He snorted but smiled as he climbed off the machine and swabbed his face with the towel. “Life must be pretty boring if Monday is cause for a celebration.”

“I thought you might need to get out.”

He arched an inquisitive, thick brow. Yeah, he was in his forties, and yeah, he’d had more than one life-threatening scare in the years that she’d know him, but he was still a hunk. Big-time. Still turned her inside out when he made love to her, which, unfortunately had been spotty since the accident. She thought about trying to seduce him right here and now, but knew he’d suspect she had an ulterior motive of getting pregnant. Which wouldn’t be too far from the truth.

“How about Chez Michelle?” he suggested.

“Oooh, upscale. I was thinking more like a hole-in-the-wall kind of place where they serve curly fries and spicy Cajun shrimp in buckets.”

His dark eyes flickered with the memory of their first “date.” With a chuckle, he said, “That’s what I like about
you, Livvie, you’re a true romantic. You’re on.” He snapped his towel at her as he passed and made his way to the
bathroom.

Two hours later they were seated at a table in a brick courtyard where doves cooed and pecked at crumbs while
the sun began to set. Shadows crept through the pots of herbs that bloomed and scented the air.

The restaurant itself was narrow and dark, its walls strung with fishing nets, the tables butting up to huge tubs of
shaved ice packed with bottles of beer. Luckily, this place had been spared the wrath of the hurricane.

Olivia sipped from a glass of iced tea and ate heartily from the spicy Cajun shrimp and crisp French fries.
Conversation buzzed around them and rattling flatware echoed through the courtyard. It was her favorite place, one
they patronized often. Bentz had walked into the courtyard without the use of his cane and his movements were
surer now, steadier. But there was still something bothering him, something that he was keeping from her.

And she was sick of waiting for him to open up. It wasn’t happening.

“So,” she said, pushing her plate aside and wiping her fingers on the lemon wedge and napkin provided. “What’s
going on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t do this, Rick.” She met his gaze. “You and I both know that things are strained. I suppose it’s partly due to
the accident. Heaven knows you’ve been through a lot, but there’s more to it.”

“Using your ESP on me?” he asked, taking a slug from his zero-alcohol beer.

“I wish I could.” She tried to keep the irritation out of her voice, but she knew him well enough to sense when he
was being evasive on purpose. “You’ve been shutting me out.”

One of his bushy eyebrows quirked. “You think?”

“I know.”

“See…it’s those extra powers of perception you’ve got.”

“You and I both know that whatever ‘powers’ I had quit working years ago.” She didn’t want to think about that
time, when she’d first met Bentz and she could see the horror of a series of grisly murders through the killer’s eyes.
At first he’d openly scoffed at her visions, but eventually he’d learned differently. And he never let her forget it.
“Don’t try to change the subject. It’s not gonna work.” She shoved her plate to one side and set her elbows on the
table. “It’s more than you suffering from your injuries after the accident. Something’s eating at you. Something big.”

“You’re right. I can’t stand not working.”

“Really?” She didn’t buy it. His attachment to work didn’t explain the distance she felt between them. Besides, he
was too quick with his answer. “Anything else?”

He shook his head. Stonewalling her.

“You’d tell me if there was?”

“Of course.” He offered her that lazy grin she found so charming, reached across the table, and squeezed her
hand. “Be patient with me, okay?”

“Haven’t I been?”

His gaze slid away.

“Is it that I want a baby?” She’d always been a straight shooter, saw no reason not to acknowledge the problem
they’d avoided discussing. For the first few weeks after his accident Bentz had been impotent. Hell, he’d barely been
able to walk, much less make love. But that problem had corrected itself.

“I think I told you about that. I’m pushing fifty, out of a job at the moment, still using a damned cane some of the time, and I’ve got a grown kid who’s about to get married. I don’t…it’s not that I don’t want a child with you, it’s just that I’m not sure the timing’s right or that I want to start over.”

“But I do. And I’m in my late thirties. My biological clock isn’t ticking, Bentz. It’s tolling like thunder in my ears. I don’t think I have time to wait, to mull things over. If I want a child, and I do, then we have to try.”

His jaw slid to the side and he took a swallow from his bottle, then looked away, as if the roofline of the restaurant were suddenly fascinating. She felt the gulf between them widen and when she saw the waiter seating a young couple and their three-year-old toddler, her heart twisted painfully.

“What the hell’s happening to us?”

A muscle worked in his jaw and her heart clutched. He was struggling with something, weighing if he could trust her with the truth. Her stomach dropped. “What is it?” she asked, her voice a whisper, a new fear chasing after her, burrowing deep into her heart. She believed he loved her, she did. But…

And then he closed her out again. “I’ve just got a lot to deal with.”

Translation: Stop bothering me and for God’s sake, don’t pressure me into a decision about having a baby.

“I’m a psychologist. I can feel you blocking me out.”

“And I’m a cop. A detective. Or I was. I’ve just got to figure out a few things.” He looked at her again, the expression in his eyes unreadable. But this time when he touched her, he held fast. “Trust me.”

“I do. But I think you’re depressed and no one can blame you. Maybe we need a change of scenery, a new start.”

“And a baby? Look, I don’t think that will solve the problem.” He met her gaze evenly. “You can’t run from problems, Livvie. You know that. Sooner or later they catch up to you. Mistakes have a way of chasing you down. Even ones from a long time ago.”

“That’s what you think’s happened?” she asked, her mind spinning to tiny references he’d made lately. “Your past in L.A. finally finding you?” She pulled her hand away from his.

“I don’t know what’s happening. But I’m working on it. Right now, it’s the best I can do.” He signaled a passing waiter for the bill and the conversation was effectively ended. They settled up and Bentz walked stiffly, though unaided, through the dark restaurant toward the street where his Jeep was parked. He’d insisted on driving and had done a fair enough job on the way to dinner. Though now, on the way home, Olivia whispered a few Hail Marys as he pushed the speed limit on the freeway and she accused him of driving like Montoya.

He flashed her a grin and stepped on it.

They drove home in relative silence, the radio playing softly, the engine humming, each of them lost in thought. At the house he walked her up the front steps, held the door for her, and outwardly seemed attentive. Even loving.

They went through their usual routine. She took care of the pets and went upstairs to read in bed; he watched the news before coming up to their room. They didn’t say much; uncertainty and the tension between them still simmered in the air.

From the corner of her eye Olivia watched Bentz strip down to his boxers, noticing that he winced a little as he slid into bed. She dog-eared the page she’d been reading, folded the book closed, and placed it on her nightstand. “I don’t want to fight,” she said, reaching to turn out the light. She lay still a moment as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. “I don’t want to go to sleep angry.”

“Are you?”
A breeze lifted the curtains at the window as it blew in from the bayou. “Yeah, a little. And frustrated and… worried, I guess. It seems like…like you’re right here but I can’t find you.”

The mattress creaked as he turned to her. “Keep looking,” he whispered into her hair, his breath warm as it brushed over her skin. One big hand smoothed over the curve of her waist. “Don’t give up on me.”

“Don’t give up on us,” she said, feeling the sting of tears in her eyes.

“Never.” His arms surrounded her as he pulled her close. His lips found hers in the dark and he kissed her hard, with a pulsing intensity that ignited her blood.

She shouldn’t do this, fall into this sexual trap when she was riddled with angst over their future. But his touch, as always, was seductive, the feel of his body comforting. His tongue pressed hard, then slid through her teeth, touching and dancing with hers.

_Don’t do this, Livvie. Don’t fall for this sex in lieu of conversation._

He began tugging her nightgown ever upward, his fingers grazing her skin. Still kissing her, he skimmed one warm hand over her thighs, her hips, and higher still to her waist.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” she whispered.

“It isn’t. It’s a great idea.” He yanked the damned nightgown over her head, tossed it to the floor, then quickly settled over her, his body stretching the length of her. “Don’t think for a second I would give up on us,” he said against her skin as she tore off his boxers, her fingertips skimming his tight buttocks and sinewy legs.

She wanted to believe him. With all her heart.

“Feel good,” he said, and she closed her eyes and gave herself up, body and soul, to his touch.

Later, she was still awake. The ceiling fan whirred above the bed, forcing the air to move.

God, she loved this man. Her heart ached with the burden of loving him. But she wouldn’t let that love destroy her.

She ran her fingers through his coarse hair and listened to him gently snore. His eyes were moving rapidly behind his lids, his body hardening, muscles tense rather than relaxed. “No,” he said aloud. “No…oh…God. Stop!”

“Shh,” she whispered. “It’s all right.”

“Stop! Please! Don’t!” He was frantic, his breathing wild. “Jennifer!” He yelled her name without waking, then settled into a troubled slumber.

But Olivia didn’t sleep a wink.

The sound of his voice yelling Jennifer’s name echoed through her mind. She slid from beneath the covers and walked downstairs. She wrapped a fuzzy blanket around her, stretched out on the couch, and let the dog curl into her lap as she stared out the window at the rising moon.

Olivia didn’t know what was going on with her husband, but realized that somehow, some way, Rick’s first wife was causing a rift between them.

It was ridiculous. She’d met Bentz long after Jennifer had died and though she suspected he carried some guilt for his young wife’s death, for living when she lost her life, he seemed to have handled it well.

Until he’d spent two weeks in a coma.

Something had happened in those lost days when he’d been unconscious. Rick Bentz had changed. Which wasn’t unusual, considering the circumstances. He’d nearly died.
No one could escape such a trauma without some emotional scarring. Withdrawal and introspection were normal. The man had faced death, for God’s sake, so Olivia had granted him ample time to heal, not just physically, but emotionally as well.

But what the hell did Jennifer Nichols Bentz have to do with it?

She must’ve dozed because she was surprised to notice dawn seeping over the horizon. Deep shades of magenta and lilac streaked the eastern sky and she couldn’t stand lying on the couch another second. Her head ached and she decided to start the coffee. Decaf, she reminded herself as she walked into the bathroom and pulled out the small wastebasket beneath the sink.

Lying on the top of a pile of wadded tissues was the remains of her most recent pregnancy test, the package unmistakable, the test stick with its pink line still giving a positive reading, indicating that yes, indeed, Olivia Bentz was pregnant.
“Help me.” Jennifer’s voice was as clear as it had been the last time he’d seen her alive. “Rick...help me.” She was lying in the car, her face bloodied, her body broken, unmoving. And yet he’d heard her voice.

“You’ll be okay,” he said, trying to move closer to her, but his legs were leaden, weighted as if in quicksand. The harder he tried to reach her, the more distant she was, her face disintegrating before him.

Suddenly, her eyes opened.

“It’s your fault,” she said as the flesh peeled away, revealing only a skull with damning eyes. “Your fault.”

“No!”

Bentz’s eyes flew open and he found himself in bed. Alone. His heart was thundering, pounding in his brain, but over it all he heard the rumbling of a truck at the edge of the drive, then the clatter of garbage cans being lifted.

What the hell time was it?

Sunlight burned through the windows and he glanced at the clock. After nine. He’d finally slept. Fitfully, but for a long while. He rubbed a hand over the stubble on his jaw and tried to dispel the nightmare of Jennifer.

Olivia had already left for the day.

Because she still has a life.

He curled a fist, angry at the world, then slowly straightened his fingers.

Oh hell, Bentz, get over your sorry self. This poor-pitiful-me act is wearing thin.

He gave himself a swift mental kick, used the john, then hobbled downstairs where coffee was still warming in a glass pot. She hadn’t left a note, but he knew she was meeting with a friend, a woman who worked with her in the shop. She and Manda had a standing date for café au lait, beignets, and gossip at the Café Du Monde on Decatur. They read the paper and people-watched as they sipped their steaming brews from outdoor tables.

Bentz poured himself a cup of coffee, let the dog outside and, while Hairy S sniffed around the edges of the veranda, he stared into the woods where only a few days earlier he’d been certain he’d seen Jennifer.

Or someone who looked so much like her it stole the breath from his lungs.

Of course she hadn’t been out there; he’d checked the spot where she’d stood between the two bleached cypress trees. There had been no footprints on the ground, no bit of trace evidence left to indicate anyone had recently been in the spot where he would’ve sworn on his daughter’s life he’d seen his first damned wife. Ex-wife. They hadn’t been married at the time of her death.

If she’d really been killed in that freak accident.

Bentz had always thought the “accident” had been Jennifer’s way of escape. A suicide, though it was a damned messy way to take care of things.

He figured she’d felt so guilty not so much about cheating on him—more than once—but because she’d been
caught in bed with another man. Bentz’s own half brother. Even now, years later, he still felt the rage that had ripped through him as much from the sting of her infidelity as the fact that he’d been stupid enough to trust her again.

So she’d taken herself out, left him to raise their daughter alone. She’d even written a suicide note, explaining her actions, her guilt.

At the time Bentz had been certain that the woman behind the wheel of the battered van had been Jennifer, and he’d buried her as such. There had been no DNA tests, no blood taken. Just his word that his wife was the driver.

Now, as he stared at that area at the edge of the swampland where he’d witnessed his latest “Jennifer sighting,” he felt a little tickle upon the back of his neck, as if someone were silently observing him. He turned quickly, teetering slightly, his eyes trained on the windows of his home.

Nothing.

No one was watching him from inside the house.

Or standing behind a magnolia tree outside peering at him.

He let out his breath slowly.

Ignored the sense of panic that gripped him.

_For the love of God, Bentz, pull yourself together!_

Was he going completely around the bend?

He knew he’d seen Jennifer, not just a few weeks earlier in this very spot and at the hospital, but other times as well. Once when he was sitting in the front seat of Olivia’s truck, waiting while she was taking in the dry cleaning, he’d been certain he had caught a glimpse of her. There was Jennifer, handbag clutched to her chest, hair scraped back in a ponytail, hurriedly crossing the street and disappearing into an alley. He’d gotten out of the truck, hobbled to the entrance of the alley, but had only spied a white cat slinking through a rotted fence while trash cans stood overflowing behind an old garage.

Another time he’d been sure he’d seen her strolling through a park, walking slowly around a fountain as sunlight caught in her hair, firing up the dark strands to a rich auburn. She had turned and looked over her shoulder and a slow, steady smile had stretched across her lips.

Her eyes had twinkled with a catch-me-if-you-can dare. He’d stopped his Jeep, double-parked and, using his cane, followed after her past the fountain only to find that she’d once again vanished.

Then there had been the incident in the woods near his house.

She’d seemed so real.

He was cracking up. That was it. Or hallucinating from the drugs he’d been prescribed. Trouble was, he’d kicked those damned painkillers a month ago.

Long before he’d seen Jennifer standing just off the edge of his veranda.

_Or her ghost._

No way.

He didn’t believe in ghosts or anything the least bit supernatural or paranormal. He’d even had trouble swallowing his wife’s visions at the time a serial killer known as The Chosen One had terrorized New Orleans.

Yet he was certain that he’d seen her.
Really? Then she hadn’t aged much in the last twelve years, right? What’s up with that? Come on, Bentz, face it, you’re losing it.

“Hell’s bells,” he muttered under his breath, then took a long swallow before tossing the dregs of his cup into a flowerbed filled with flowers in shades of periwinkle and deep purple.

He was tired of thinking about Jennifer, sick of wondering why his subconscious was so determined to dredge her up again. He’d tried to ignore her. Told himself that he must’ve just caught glimpses of a woman who resembled her, that because he’d thought he’d seen her during the day, his dreams at night had been haunted by her.

But that didn’t explain catching sight of her in the woods the other day. Nor running into an alley or strolling through a park, but here, alone with him in his own backyard. The times he’d caught glimpses of her in public places might have been brushes with someone who looked similar, but the two times he’d seen her alone at the hospital and in the yard had been different—not a play of sunlight and shadow, not easily dismissed.

Was the woman who had been standing in his backyard a figment of his imagination? A product of wishful thinking? Misfiring synapses from an injured brain?

Who knew?

“Get over it.”

Whistling to the dog, he walked inside, showered, shaved, and, spying the exercise equipment in the den, promised himself he’d work out in the afternoon. Today he intended to drive into the city, to plead his case with Jaskiel again, get out of the ever-shrinking rooms of this cozy little cottage.

He brought his cane.

Melinda Jaskiel had asked for six more weeks and half that time had slowly passed. He didn’t think he could wait any longer. He was on his way to try to convince his boss that he was ready to work, at least part-time, but just as he was climbing into his Jeep, ignoring the pain in his leg, his cell phone beeped.

Caller ID said it was Montoya’s personal cell.

“Hey,” he said into the phone.

“Back atcha. You got a minute?”

Bentz waited a beat. No doubt his once-upon-a-time partner was being a wiseass. “Just one,” he said dryly.

“Can you meet me in…say…an hour?” No joking now. Montoya was dead serious.

“At the station.”

“No. How about the Cat’s Meow?”

“I can be there in half an hour.”

“Good.” Montoya clicked off and Bentz was left with a gnawing in his gut. Something was up. Was there a rumor circulating that Bentz was going to be forced into retirement? “Shit,” he said and switched on the ignition.

The thought of turning in his badge soured his stomach. He wasn’t ready for retirement, damn it, and he didn’t see himself as a P.I. He threw his SUV into reverse, did a quick turn, and drove down the lane to the county road, where he stepped on it and headed to New Orleans and whatever bad news Montoya had to offer.

The Cat’s Meow was a bar off Bourbon Street that, after the hurricane, had been restored to its original lack of splendor. The brick walls, even newly scrubbed, looked as if they might crumble. Wood floors, though refinished,
had the patina that comes with overuse and age. Surrealistic pictures of jazz singers hanging over the bar had been retouched to appear as if they’d collected decades’ worth of smoke. The end one, of Ella Fitzgerald, was still hung crookedly, as if the owner of the bar prided himself in all things in the world being imperfect.

The air conditioner wheezed loudly, ceiling fans slowly rotated, and smoke drifted upward from tables where groups of patrons huddled over their drinks.

Montoya was waiting for him in a booth with a cup of coffee sitting neglected in front of him. He gave Bentz the once-over as he tried not to wince while sliding in opposite the younger cop.

“What’s up?” Bentz asked without preamble, then ordered a sweet tea.

“Got some mail for you.”

“You did?” Bentz asked.

“Well, the department did.”

Montoya waited for the server to deposit Bentz’s drink before reaching into his jacket pocket and withdrawing a manila envelope: Eight-by-ten with Bentz’s name written on it in block letters, the address listed as the Homicide Department of the New Orleans Police Department. Across each side was a stamp that pronounced the contents: PERSONAL.

The packet hadn’t been opened.

“This came today?”

“Mmm.” Montoya took a sip of his coffee.

“Scanned?” Meaning for explosives or foreign substances such as anthrax.

“Yeah.”

Bentz’s eyes narrowed. “By you?”

“That’s right. I spotted it in the mailroom, figured it was no one’s business but yours, so…” He raised a shoulder.

“You lifted it.”

Montoya wiggled a hand beside his head. Maybe yes. Maybe no. “It’s postmarked to you. Thought it would be best if you got it before Brinkman or some other jerk-off caught a glimpse.” He slid a glance at the envelope.

“Probably nothin’.”

“If you thought that, you wouldn’t have bothered.”

Again a shrug of one leather-clad shoulder. “You gonna open it?”

“Now?”

“Yeah.” Another swallow of coffee.

“So that’s it, you’re curious.”

“Hey, I’m just covering your back.”

“Fine.” Bentz studied the postmark. It was smudged and the lighting in the bar was too dark to see much. But he had a penlight on his key chain, and as he shined its small beam over the postmark his gut tightened.

The name of the town was unreadable, but he recognized the zip code as the one in which he and Jennifer had
lived before her death.

Using a house key, he slit the envelope open and gently tugged the contents within. A single piece of paper and three photographs.

He sucked in his breath.

His heart stilled.

The pictures, complete with dates, were of his first wife, Jennifer.

Dear God, what was this?

He heard his pulse pounding in his brain. First the “sightings” and now this?

“Is that—?”

“Yeah.” The photographs were clear and crisp. In color. Jennifer walking across a busy street. Jennifer sliding into a light-colored car, make and model undetermined. Jennifer sitting at a tall café table in a coffee shop. The last picture was taken from the street, her image captured through the window of the shop. In front of the window was a sidewalk with pedestrians passing by and portions of two newspaper boxes in the foreground. He recognized one as USA Today, and the other the L.A. Times.

Narrowing his eyes, Bentz looked for a reflection of the photographer in the large window, but saw none.

This was nuts.

“Old pictures?” Montoya asked.

“Not if the dates from the camera are right.”

“Those can be changed.”

“I know.”

“And with Photoshopping and image altering and airbrushing, pictures can be made to look like anything someone wants them to. Other people’s heads on someone else’s body.”

Bentz looked up from the disturbing photos. “But why?”

“Someone just fuckin’ with ya.”

“Maybe.” He turned his attention to the document and his jaw grew hard as granite. The single page was a copy of Jennifer’s death certificate. Scrawled across the neatly typed document was a bright red question mark.

“What the hell is this?” Montoya asked.

Bentz stared at the mutilated certificate. “A sick way of telling me that my first wife might not be dead.”

Montoya waited a beat, watching the expression on his partner’s face. “You’re kidding. Right?”

“Does this look like a joke to you?” Bentz asked, pointing at the death certificate and scattered pictures.”

“You think this is Jennifer? Nah!” Then eyeing his ex-partner, “You’re messing with me, right?”

Bentz filled Montoya in. Until this point only his kid, who had been in his hospital room at the time he’d awoken from his coma, had any idea that Bentz had seen his first wife. Kristi had dismissed his vision of Jennifer as the result of his coma and too much medication. After that first sighting, he’d kept his mouth shut and his daughter, caught up in preparing for her wedding, hadn’t brought up the subject again.
“Wait a second,” Montoya said when Bentz paused to take a drink. “You’re saying you believe she might actually be alive?”

“I don’t know what to believe.”

“Otherwise you’re chasing a ghost.”

Bentz scowled. Felt the heat of Montoya’s stare. “I’m not chasing a ghost.”

“Then?”

“And I’m not going out of my mind.”

“Which leaves…what? You believe that someone’s dressing up to look like your ex and then gaslighting you? Is that what you’re thinking, that you’re caught up in some kind of weird scenario straight out of a Hitchcock movie?”

“As I said, I don’t know what to believe.”

“You tell this to Olivia?”

“No.” He looked away. “Not yet.”

“Afraid she might have you committed?” One of Montoya’s dark eyebrows raised as he finished his coffee.

“Nah, just that she wouldn’t understand.”

“Hell, I don’t understand.”

“Exactly.”

Pushing his empty cup aside and resting his elbow on the table, Montoya asked, “So what do you want me to do?”

“Keep it quiet. For now. But I might need some favors.”

“Such as?”

“A few things. Since I’m on leave, I can’t get information as easily as before. I might need you to do some digging.”

“In finding this woman?”

“Maybe,” Bentz said. “For starters, I’ll need someone to have this letter fingerprinted and checked for DNA—lift the stamp and the envelope flap. Can you get me a copy of everything?”

“Sure.” Montoya looked at the document.

“And have the lab check, see if the photographs have been altered. They should be able to tell, right?”

“Probably.” He eyed the pictures. “At least I’ll give the lab guys a run at it. There’s one tech—Ralph Lee—specializes in all kinds of photography.”

“Good. After I take copies, have him look at the originals. Blow them up, sharpen the focus if possible, find details that might help me pinpoint the locations and time they were taken. See if there are street names, license plate numbers, clocks on the buildings, or the position of the sun, anything that confirms the time and date of the original pictures.”

Montoya frowned. “What’re you gonna do with the copies?”

“Not sure. I’m still working on it.”
Bentz returned the eight-by-tens and the death certificate to the manila envelope. He wasn’t even certain himself what he needed, not yet, but he was sick of jumping at shadows, of feeling that his brain was fraying, bit by bit. He just couldn’t sit back and let whoever was behind this run with it. “So, for now, don’t say anything. If Jaskiel or anyone else at the department thinks I’ve been seeing things, it’ll take a whole lotta convincing for me to get back to work.”

Montoya scratched at his chin and pushed his chair back, the diamond stud in his earlobe catching the light.

Bentz saw a flicker of doubt in his partner’s dark eyes. “You don’t believe me.”

CHAPTER 4

The postmark from Southern California really bothered Bentz. Burned in his brain as he drove away from Bourbon Street. He’d found a Quickie Print and taken several copies of the photographs and death certificate, even using the enhance and enlarge options to get more definition. Then he’d handed the originals to Montoya.

He was convinced that someone from his past, or Jennifer’s past, was tracking him down. But who? Why? And why screw with his mind?

He slowed for a red light, brooding as the Jeep idled. Overhead, dark clouds scudded slowly across the sky and the smell of the Mississippi River reached his nostrils through the open window.

He remembered Jennifer’s image as she’d stood in the woods skirting his backyard. So close to his house—Olivia’s home. And now the photographs. He glanced to the passenger seat. The picture of Jennifer crossing the street met his eye. Either the woman in the photo was his ex-wife or a dead ringer.

Ghosts don’t show in photographs.

Crazy manifestations aren’t real images and therefore cannot be caught on film.

So she was real?

His gut tightened.

So who had been in the backyard of his home, the house that Olivia had brought into the marriage? All in all, this latest encounter was too close for comfort. Too close to Olivia.

He didn’t like the thought of his wife being dragged into this, whatever the hell it was. She lived here, too, and just the inkling of her safety being the least bit compromised didn’t set well. Olivia had always felt safe at this house. Though Hairy S was useless as a guard dog, they did have a security system Bentz had insisted she install years ago. They rarely used it, but that would have to change.

The light turned green and he waited for an elderly woman on a scooter who was still in the crosswalk. Once she’d eased out of the way, he took the corner fast, then stood on the brakes. A jaywalking teenage boy in a baggy T-shirt and shorts loped across the pavement while plugged into his iPod. The kid never noticed that Bentz had nearly mowed him over.

Bentz cruised past the station and noted that Brinkman had parked in the spot Bentz usually claimed. No big surprise there; Brinkman, though a good cop, was always a pain in the ass. And who could blame the prick? It’s not as if Bentz could use it anyway. “Have at,” he said, then drove to a coffee shop with Internet access. He linked up as he sipped iced coffee. Crunching ice cubes, he searched for any information he could find on his first wife, even Googled himself in the process. For the most part, he was considered a hero, having solved more than one serial murder case since being hired by the New Orleans PD.

But there was some bad press, too. From L.A., stories surrounding a cop with a tarnished badge, who had left the department with a high-profile case still unsolved.

Then there was the shooting when he’d mistaken a twelve-year-old boy with a toy gun for a killer intending to take down his partner. Bentz had warned the kid, then fired.
The boy, Mario Valdez, had been pronounced DOA at the hospital.

Bentz had poured himself into a bottle and, his badge blackened, had left the department. Thankfully Melinda Jaskiel here in New Orleans had seen fit to give him a second chance.

So he’d relocated.

The rest, as they said, was history.

And now someone was intentionally drawing him back to L.A. He didn't doubt for a second that whoever was behind the photos and mutilated death certificate was intentionally luring him to Southern California.

But why? And why now?

He finished his coffee, then phoned Montoya’s cell and left a message on his voice mail asking Montoya to return the call. He scanned the small bistro where people clustered around tall café tables or sat in overstuffed chairs near the window. Two women in their forties were sharing a doughnut. Three teenagers, a boy and two girls, were slouched in the big chairs and sipping mocha-looking drinks piled high with whipped cream drizzled with chocolate. Without a break in their conversation they were all sending text messages at the speed of light.

Fortunately, his first wife—or her ghost—was nowhere to be seen.

Not that he’d be surprised when she showed up again.

However the answer to the enigma of Jennifer rested in California. He pulled out the photos again. Definitely L.A. There was a palm tree visible in the corner of the shot of her running across the street, and a California license plate on a parked car. In the photo of her in the coffee shop, there was a bit of a street sign visible and he saw the letters ado Aven. Some avenue, probably. It could be many places, he thought, but his mind raced, old memories surfacing. Mercado, or Loredo or…His stomach dropped as he thought of Colorado Avenue in Santa Monica.

If that was it, someone was really screwing with him.

He and Jennifer had spent a lot of Saturday afternoons at the Third Street Promenade just off Santa Monica Boulevard. About a block and one major shopping mall away from Colorado Avenue. If he remembered right, the mall was accessible from Colorado. He felt that little buzz, like a caffeine rush, at the thought that he was connecting the dots.

Too easily.

He wasn’t that smart.

But it was true that Santa Monica, with its outdoor shopping area, long beach, and trendy restaurants, had been one of Jennifer’s favorite cities, and significant to them as a couple.

“Crap.” He rubbed a hand around the back of his neck and knew that, like it or not, he had to return to Southern California.

Someone was luring him.

Someone wanted him back.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered under his breath. He’d left a lot of turmoil in Southern California. A lot. Most of it unresolved. Few people in the LAPD were sorry to see him leave.

And now he was seeing ghosts and getting anonymous mail from the area near his former residence, a place he’d sworn never to set foot in again.

Something definitely smelled rotten in the Golden State.
And he needed to find out what it was, even if that meant he was playing right into some sicko’s hands. That bugged the shit out of him, but there was no way around it.

He clicked off the computer and realized Olivia was due to clock out at the shop in fifteen minutes. Which was perfect. Like it or not, it was time to tell her what the hell was going on.

Outside, the day had taken a turn for the worse, the clouds overhead thickening darkly. The air was dense and sultry, threatening a storm. He climbed into his car, rolled up the windows, and drove toward the French Quarter, where he managed to find a parking spot two blocks from Jackson Square.

Using his damned cane, he made his way to the shop, little more than a tourist trap, at least in his opinion. Olivia liked meeting people and working with Tawilda, a thin, elegant black woman who had been at the store forever, and Manda, a later addition to the staff at the Third Eye. So Livvie had decided to stay on while finishing school and setting up her practice.

The place gave Bentz the creeps.

The little storefront was filled with shelves displaying an assortment of New Age crystals, religious artifacts, books on voodoo, Mardi Gras beads, and tiny alligator heads complete with glittering eyes. Then there were the dolls—all kinds of dolls that reminded him of dead children with their painted faces, false smiles, and eyes that were shuttered by squared-off fake lashes. The dolls were a recent addition to the store and, according to Olivia, a hit, the rare, high-priced ones boosting the shop’s profits.

Bentz didn’t get it.

He’d once made the mistake of asking, “Who the hell buys this voodoo garbage?”

Olivia, standing at the kitchen window while adding seeds to her parrot’s feeder, hadn’t been offended. She’d just looked over her shoulder, offered him an enigmatic smile, and said, “You wouldn’t want to know. Careful, Bentz, someone you crossed or sent up the river might want to place a hex on you.”

“I don’t believe in that crap.”

“Not yet. Just wait until you break out in a rash, or…your eyes turn red, or…oh, I don’t know…you lose your ability to make love, even to the point that your favorite appendage just drops off,” she’d teased, raising a naughty eyebrow. That was all it had taken.

“You’re asking for it,” he’d warned, advancing on her.

“Oh, yeah, and who’s gonna give it to me?”

He’d grabbed her then, swept her off her feet, while the seeds scattered over the counter and floor. Chia had squawked and the dog had barked crazily as Bentz carried his wife up the stairs. Squealing, Olivia had laughed, her sandals falling to clatter noisily on the steps.

Once he’d reached the bedroom, he’d kicked the door closed and fallen with her onto the bed. Then he’d gone about showing her that his male parts were still very much fully attached and working just fine.

God, he loved her, he thought now as the first drops of the rain fell from the leaden sky and he made his way along the busy sidewalk skirting Jackson Square. Yet now their relationship was strained and lacked the vitality, the easy, flirtatious fun that they’d enjoyed.

And whose fault is that, Detective Superhero?

His leg began to ache as he walked past the open doors of restaurants, hardly noticing the strains of jazz music and the peppery scents of Cajun cooking that wafted into the street.
He had considered confiding in her about the whole weird Jennifer thing, but he’d never been much of a talker, wasn’t a person who expressed all his hopes and fears. Now all that had changed. Push was definitely coming to shove.

He wended through a collection of artists displaying their work on the outside of the wrought iron fence surrounding the square. As a saxophone player blew out a familiar song, his case open for donations, a tarot reader was hard at work laying down cards in front of a twenty-something eagerly listening to the fortune-teller’s every word.

Another day in the Quarter.

As the rain fell, Bentz crossed the street behind a horse-drawn carriage, then stepped into the open doorway of the Third Eye. Olivia was just ringing up a sale, several T-shirts, a little box of sand complete with stones and a rake for relaxation, and a baby alligator head. Along with two antique looking, frozen-faced dolls.

Eyeing the ghoulish merchandise, Bentz thought it was high time his wife started expanding her psychology practice. Time to get out of this shop of weird artifacts and start talking to people with problems.

“Hey.” Olivia spied Bentz as he tried to move out of the way of the customer, a bag-toting woman who bustled past a display of oyster-shell art on her way to the door.

“Hey back at you.”

Olivia grinned, that same smile that could stop his heart. “What’re you doing here? Slumming?”

“Looking for a hot dinner date.”

“Moi?” she asked coyly, pointing an index finger at her chest.

Frowning thoughtfully, he pretended to look her over, head to toe. “Yeah, I guess you’ll do.”

“Nice, Bentz,” she said with an easy laugh. “I guess you’ll do, too.”

“Damned straight.”

“The male of the species, always so humble,” she said to Manda as she clocked out. That done, she crossed the shop and gave her husband a quick kiss on the cheek. “What’s this all about?”

“You asked me what was going on and I thought it’s time you knew.”

Her smile faded. “Should I be worried?”

He hesitated, wanting to reassure her. But in the end he decided to play it straight. “Not really. At least not yet and not about our relationship, but there is something pretty weird going on.” He spied her umbrella by the door and snagged it, then, taking the bend of her arm, escorted her out of the shop. Rain peppered the sidewalk and coursed through the gutters. Artists, tarot readers, musicians, and performers quickly covered their wares with plastic tarps or folded up their tables for the day before scurrying for cover.

Bentz opened the umbrella and held it high over Olivia’s head as they dashed along the sidewalk. Rain slid down his back as he tried like hell to avoid both puddles and pedestrians. A bicyclist raced by, cutting in and out of traffic. A horn blasted and somewhere a horse whinnied nervously.

In a second the shower turned into a downpour.

Half-running to the restaurant, Bentz felt the familiar pain in his hip, a constant reminder that he wasn’t a hundred percent.

The shoulders of his jacket and hems of his pant legs managed to get soaked despite his efforts.
Olivia was laughing, her eyes sparkling with wicked delight at being caught in the storm. “You’re soaked,” she said as they reached the doorway of the restaurant.

“That’s because I was being gallant and keeping you dry.”

“Which I appreciate. Thanks.” She winked at him. “I’ll return the favor sometime.”

“Yeah, right.” Beneath the cover of a striped awning, Bentz shook the rain from the umbrella, then held the door for her. Inside, tiny lights were strung from the open rafters, appearing like stars overhead, and the walls were paneled with warm reddish wood complimenting areas of exposed brick.

A hostess led them to a far corner where they were seated at a window table. Outside the rain continued to pour down, gunmetal-gray clouds huddling over the city, water running wildly in the gutters. Inside, beneath lazy paddle fans a waiter brought water and menus, then lit the single candle before promising to return.

“So, about what’s happening,” Olivia prodded, once they were alone again. “Why do I have the feeling I’m not going to like it?”

“Because you’re a very smart woman.”

“Mmm.”

“And you’re some kind of kook psychic.”

“Whom you love,” she reminded him.

“Right.”

“Make that adore.”

“Now you’re pushing it.”

“You’re avoiding the subject.”

“Waiting for the right moment,” he said, eyeing the menu and not bringing up Jennifer until after they ordered. Once the waiter had retreated again, Bentz laid it all out. He started with the moment he’d woken up in the hospital and felt the drop in temperature before witnessing his dead wife in the doorway. He told Olivia about the other sightings as well. Finally, he admitted to spying Jennifer again just off the veranda a few days earlier, then just recently receiving the marred death certificate and photographs.

With each of his confessed sightings, Olivia became more and more serious. “I don’t understand,” she whispered, her gaze seeking his. “How? Why?”

He handed her the copies he’d kept and watched her face turn ashen. “I wish I knew the answer to that.”

“Jennifer’s dead.” She glanced up at him for confirmation.

“Yes.”

“There was a suicide note, you made the ID on the body.”

“I know.”

“Then...?”

“An imposter, probably.”

“Or...your imagination.”
“Don’t think so.” He tapped the pictures with a finger. “These are real.”

“Or someone faked them.”

“That’s possible.”

“Rick, she’s not alive!” She cleared her throat and leaned back in her chair. “Did you…have you told Kristi?”

“She was there when I woke up and she thought it was hallucinations from the drugs or aftereffects from the coma. Said it was all a ‘bad trip.’ I didn’t want to upset her, so I haven’t mentioned it again. Neither has she.”

But then his daughter was caught up in writing her book and planning her wedding. Kristi didn’t want to think that her father had lost his marbles. Because, even though now he was certain he was being tormented by an outside force, he also suspected deep inside that some of his visions of Jennifer had been conjured in his mind.

Maybe outside influences had tripped a latch in his brain and, though he was loath to admit it, he didn’t know what was real and what was a figment of his imagination.

“She hasn’t seen these?” Olivia motioned to the photos.

“No.”

Slowly letting out her breath, Olivia stared at the marred death certificate, then the pictures once more. Her eyebrows pulled together to form little lines in her forehead and her full lips twisted in revulsion. “This is really sick.”

“Can’t argue that.”

“Do you have any idea who sent these?” She held the photos and certificate up, then shook her head and handed everything back to Bentz.

“No. But Montoya’s having the lab check out the originals. Fingerprints, DNA, photo-altering—anything else the department can find out including what kind of red pen was used to write the question mark.” He tucked the envelope into the inside pocket of his jacket just as the waiter delivered the first course.

“You think she’s alive?” Olivia asked.

“No.” He stirred his seafood stew and shook his head. “But I don’t think she’s a ghost, either.”

“Obviously. So…an imposter. Someone messing with you.” She nodded to herself, picking up her fork. “Who?”

“That’s the million-dollar question.”

Irritated, she stabbed bits of lettuce and shrimp onto her fork. “So you think there’s someone here in Louisiana pretending to be Jennifer, and she makes herself visible to only you. And you think she showed up at the hospital months ago, at the precise moment you woke up. Nonetheless, the pictures and death certificate were mailed from L.A.” Her eyes narrowed as she bit into her salad. “Is that about it?”

“Yeah. About.”

“So why go to all that trouble? Why not mail the package from here in New Orleans?”

“Jennifer died in Southern California.”

“If it was her in the van.”

“It was.”

“You say she hasn’t aged, right? But how close were you to her?”
"Good point. “Not close enough.”

“Hmm. And the photos, they make her look young, but again, they could’ve been doctored. Or her face superimposed over another woman’s body.”

“The answer is in L.A.”

“Although you saw her in Louisiana?”

“These shots were taken around L.A.”

“Maybe.”

The whole Photoshop thing again. “Her body is buried in California,” he said and watched her reaction.

“Jesus, are you thinking of exhuming her?” Revulsion showed on her face. “Because you think you saw her? Because you received some pictures and a marked-up death certificate with a postmark from the town where you lived. Isn’t that a little extreme? I mean, would anyone even order it?”

“I don’t know, but I think so.”

“So you’re thinking of going to California,” she guessed, shaking her head.

“Yeah. While I’m off duty.”

“So soon.”

He nodded. “Montoya will watch my back here, look after you.”

“You think I need looking after?”

“No. But…”

“But just in case I feel abandoned, he’s around. Right?” she mocked. “In the off chance that I feel you’re on a wild goose chase, or following a ghost or…I don’t know, dealing with all those old feelings you haven’t quite laid to rest, I can count on your partner, not you. Is that what you’re saying?”

He felt the muscles in his back tighten.

“I don’t need to be babysat or coddled, okay? I’ve lived in that house most of my life. A lot of it alone. I don’t need ‘looking after.’ Sometimes I wonder if you’ve lost your mind!”

That makes two of us.

“Maybe you should just let the cops handle this.”

“I’m a cop.”

“No, not this time.” She shook her head, golden strands of her hair catching in the candlelight. “This time I think you’re the victim.”

"That makes two of us."

"Maybe you should just let the cops handle this."

"I’m a cop."

"No, not this time." She shook her head, golden strands of her hair catching in the candlelight. "This time I think you’re the victim."

"Listen, Livvie—"

"To what? Some excuse to go chasing after a woman who’s dead? Some trumped-up rationale? This is a situation for the police," she said, pointing to the death certificate and photographs of Jennifer. "And as for ‘seeing’ Jennifer, maybe you should take that up with your doctor or, heaven forbid, a shrink. These photos…they have to be fakes!"

"Olivia—"
“I hear what you’re telling me, Bentz. Word for word. But it’s what you’re not telling me that is drumming through my head, pounding in my brain, and ripping a damned hole in my heart.”

“Wait a second.”

“No, I’m not waiting. Not a second, not half a second. You’re going to hear me out. The way I see it, what’s going on here is that you’re hell-bent for leather to chase after your past. Face it. If we’ve had a problem in our marriage it’s been Jennifer. Kristi’s mother. A woman you divorced because she was cheating on you, then took back, even though she couldn’t be faithful. You’ve been fighting emotions that have been eating at you for over a decade: Guilt. Guilt that you’re alive and she’s not.”

“Is that your professional opinion?”

“Nothing professional about it. Common sense.” She looked about to say something more, then pushed the rest of her salad aside. “Look, if you need to go, then go. Figure it out. Because, you know, I’ve tried to be supportive and understanding and upbeat, but this has been eating at you. So go. Find out what it is. That’s important, yeah, but what’s really important to me is that you deal with the past and put it away.”

He felt a tic near his temple. “If you don’t want me to go—”

“Oh, no, you don’t. Don’t you dare go there. This is your deal, not mine. You feel this is something you need to do, then do it.”

“I thought you wanted me to open up, to tell you what was bothering me.”

“Yeah,” she admitted, nodding, then waiting as their entrées were served. “I did want to know, but I thought it might happen a little earlier, you know, before you’d already mentally packed your bags to take off for La La Land.”

“I told you, if you don’t want me to go, just say the word.”

She hesitated, then leaned forward. “No, Rick. I want you to go. As happy as we’ve been, and we have been happy, there’s always been that little bit of doubt on my part. And guilt on yours. Look, if Jennifer were still alive we might not be together. So now we get to find out just how strong our marriage is.”

“I think it’s damned strong.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“But you can’t commit to a child.”

“I have a child.” He was about to say more but saw by the darkening of her eyes that he’d wounded her. Instead he reached across the table to take her hand. “This just isn’t the time.”

She pulled her fingers from his. “But it is for me, Bentz,” she said, her jaw jutting a bit. “It’s really now or never.”

He considered giving in. After all, she’d make a wonderful mother, he knew that. And so what if he was so old he’d qualify for Social Security when the kid graduated from high school? People did it all the time. He slid his jaw to the side. “I’ll think about it.”

She grabbed her purse and pushed away from the table. “Then think fast.”
CHAPTER 5

She should have told him.

She shouldn’t have chickened out.

Olivia stepped out of the shower and towed off. Steam covered the window in the bathroom and she cracked it a bit, all the while second-guessing herself. Bentz had left earlier in the morning and even now was winging his way to Los Angeles.

She never should have let him go without mentioning the baby. But the thought of being that woman, a clinging female who would use any excuse, even her unborn child, to try to keep a man from doing what he wanted stuck in Olivia’s craw. She didn’t believe in reining in someone she loved. It just didn’t make sense. She wasn’t into using guilt to hang on to him, and he’d certainly made it clear how he felt about becoming a father again.

It wasn’t as if she’d intentionally gone behind his back and gotten pregnant. There’d been no trick involved; she simply wasn’t taking any measures to prevent pregnancy. He knew she wasn’t on the pill. Though Rick usually took care of birth control himself, there had been a few times he hadn’t bothered with a condom, several instances where passion had overruled sanity. And, Olivia thought, brushing her teeth and seeing her reflection in the foggy mirror, she was thrilled to have this new life inside her, having been worried that, given their ages, it might be difficult to conceive.

Nonetheless, she hadn’t used the baby as a means to stop him from going on his damned quest to L.A.

She spat, leaned her face under the faucet, rinsed her mouth, and straightened. The woman standing in the misty reflection stared back at her and silently accused her of being a coward. Guilty. But she’d kept mum for good reason. She had wanted to avoid a fight, and couldn’t bear to witness the disappointment—even resentment—in his eyes. She didn’t believe he’d suggest abortion, but she couldn’t begin to deal with the idea of terminating her pregnancy.

“And I thought you were a straight shooter,” she said aloud to her own watery image. “Aren’t you the one who never backs down? What the hell happened to you?”

She let her hands fall to her flat belly.

A baby…a life that right now was growing inside her.

And her husband didn’t even know she was pregnant. Didn’t want to know.

“Jerk,” she muttered under her breath. “Good riddance.” She pulled a comb through her hair, wrapped a towel around her body, then opened the door and nearly tripped over the dog. Hairy S had camped out in the hall in front of the bathroom. “Not smart,” she said to the dog and petted his furry head. “But don’t worry about it; there’s a lot of stupidity going around in this house these days. A lot. You’re not the Lone Ranger.”

Hairy thumped his tail against the floor, then followed her to the bedroom, where she dressed and tried not to think about the fact that her husband was nearly a continent away, chasing demons who had haunted him for twelve long years.

The flight was uneventful.
Once, after dozing, Bentz thought he smelled gardenias. He took a long look around the cabin of the 727, eyeing all the passengers, half expecting Jennifer to be calmly seated near the window, reading a book. She would, of course, upon feeling his gaze upon her, look up and smile with that sexy little grin that had always gotten to him. Without saying a word she would tell him that she knew he’d follow her.

It didn’t happen.

No one on the plane remotely resembled his first wife...ex-wife he reminded himself. Ex. They had been divorced, though living together, at the time of her death. But those arrangements had been about to end. Because she hadn’t been able to give up her lover.

The plane touched down at LAX with a soft bump as the back wheels hit the tarmac, then even less of a jar as the wheel under the nose of the plane found the pavement. As the 727 taxied to the gate, most of the passengers were already turning on cell phones, unbuckling their seat belts, and shifting the luggage at their feet. After spending the entire trip with her nose in a book, the woman in the seat next to Bentz swung a purse the size of Guatemala onto her lap and scrounged for her cell frantically. Touchdown propelled her into frenzied mode and she hastily dug through her huge purse. Bentz barely avoided being knocked over by the bag as he pulled his computer from beneath the seat in front of him and she located her phone and clicked it on, immediately making a call.

He couldn’t help but overhear her conversation, a one-sided affair in which she was trashing her ex’s latest girlfriend.

Fortunately, the plane emptied fairly quickly.

On the way to baggage claim Bentz called Olivia and left a message that he’d landed safely. He found his one bag, then rented a small SUV with a G.P.S. already installed. He’d done it all without using his cane and, though his hip ached, he ignored the pain and threw the damned walking stick that he’d brought along into the backseat.

As he exited the rental lot in the Ford Escape, he slipped a pair of sunglasses onto the bridge of his nose. The scenery was familiar, the tightness in his chest new. Years ago he’d left L.A. with a bad taste in his mouth; now all those old feelings came back at him in a rush. Guilt over Jennifer’s suicide, remorse over the death of a twelve-year-old kid with a toy pistol, gnawing frustration that he would have been able to solve the Caldwell twins’ double homicide if he’d been at the top of his game, and the fog of too many numbing shots of whiskey.

He’d been a mess. Jack Daniel’s had become his best friend and that friendship had damaged every other relationship. It had also compromised his job performance and his ability to see clearly.

Though officially he’d quit the LAPD, the pressure to resign had been palpable, the tension in the department thicker than the smog that blanketed the city. Even his remaining friends, the few coworkers who “had his back,” had been relieved to see him leave. His departure had been better for all concerned. Especially him.

Except that he’d left some unfinished business behind.

It had been years since he’d been in Southern California, and though the area had changed, the royal palm trees and space-age arches of the Encounters restaurant at LAX were reminders of a time he’d tried hard to forget.

As he maneuvered onto the freeway he couldn’t see the surrounding hills through the layer of smog that hovered over the area. He fiddled with the air conditioning to combat the rising temperature as buildings rose ghostlike through the shimmering heat waves. By instinct he headed toward his old neighborhood, which wasn’t too far from Culver City.

The area had changed a little. The shrubs and trees were larger, the neighborhood as a whole seeming to have gone a little downhill, evidenced by the cracked sidewalks and wrought-iron bars on some windows.

His old house looked pretty much the same. Sometime in the past twelve years, it had been painted a dove gray, but now was in dire need of another coat. The garage door was blistered and didn’t quite close, the yard overgrown and dry. Weeds turned brown in the sun-bleached bark chips near the tired front porch. A FOR RENT sign was wedged into the grass, but it too was fading beneath the intense California sun.
Leaving his cane in the rental, Bentz walked around the house and peered through the dirty windows to spy dusty floors and dingy walls, some the same color they had been a dozen years earlier. Stepping backward and shading his eyes, he gazed up to the window and was bombarded by memories of images within his former bedroom, the scene he’d walked into more than a decade ago. Twisted sheets of the unmade bed and slivers of broken glass spattered beneath the gaping hole where a mirror once hung. In his mind he retraced the path to the spare bedroom on the second floor, the guest room Jennifer had used as her office. He remembered that it had taken a while to find the note that she’d left, not in an obvious location on a table or a counter, but tucked away in her desk drawer, written to Kristi and signed in Jennifer’s flowing hand.

He’d always wondered about that.

The suicide note to their daughter that had been tucked away in the pages of the latest self-help book Jennifer had been reading. The Power of Me, or something just as self-centered.

All the advice in the world hadn’t helped his screwed-up ex-wife.

But she hadn’t left the note out in the open.

As if she’d had second thoughts.

Or was waiting. Hadn’t yet made a final decision.

At the time he’d discovered the note he’d pushed aside the nagging questions and had rationalized that in her pursuit of death, as in so many facets of her life, Jennifer had done a lousy job. But now he had renewed doubts. What if Jennifer’s death hadn’t been suicide? What if she hadn’t been driving the car? What if the woman he’d identified as his wife and buried six feet under had been someone else?

Just who was decomposing in that grave?

His gut twisted at the thought and he didn’t let his mind wander too far down that dark, rocky path.

He returned to the Escape and drove nearly five miles to a cemetery, the spot where he’d thought Jennifer had been laid to rest. Parking in the shade of a live oak tree, he fished out his wallet and found a battered card for Detective Jonas Hayes of the LAPD. He’d carried the damned card around for twelve years and remembered the day Hayes had pressed the card into his palm. “Hey, if you ever need anything,” he’d said after the burial as clouds had rolled in and rain had started to fall. So long ago…and now Bentz wondered if Jennifer were truly entombed in the casket lying under the granite headstone.

He walked through the drying grass and found the plot, read the simple inscription, and felt a strange pang in his heart. Had he made a mistake? Did the corpse beneath his feet belong to someone else? He glared down at the grass, as if he could see through the sod and six feet of dry earth to the casket where a woman’s body had been decomposing for twelve long years.

A whisper of a breeze slid across the back of his neck and the scent of gardenias was suddenly heavy in the air. Did he hear someone whisper his name? He turned, expecting to see Jennifer beckoning with that come-hither naughty smile that had been her trademark. But she wasn’t leaning against one of the taller headstones, her auburn hair shimmering in the afternoon sunlight. Nor was she standing anywhere within the wrought-iron fencing surrounding the silent graveyard.

He was alone at his ex-wife’s final resting place. The cemetery was empty, not a soul besides himself visible. Some of the plots displayed fresh flowers. A few had been adorned with plastic bouquets and others were festooned with tiny American flags that had faded in the harsh sunlight. However, no other person, nor ghost for that matter, stood inside the ominous black wrought-iron fence.

Of course not.

She’s dead, Bentz. Dead. You know it. You identified her body with your own eyes, for Christ’s sake! And you don’t believe in ghosts. Try remembering that one, will ya?
He lingered a few more minutes, trying to piece together what was happening to him. He didn’t think he was cracking up, and he knew he didn’t believe in ghosts. Dead women did not just reappear.

So why come here, to the cemetery?

Without an answer he returned to the car, which was now sweltering from the sun. Leaving the driver’s door open, he sat behind the wheel and turned on the engine to get the A/C pumping. As the car cooled, he eyed Hayes’s business card. On one side was the official information for Detective Jonas Hayes of the LAPD; on the other was a phone number scratched hurriedly a long time ago.

Bentz punched the private number into his cell and was rewarded with a message from a lifeless voice that told him it was no longer in service. “Great.” Bentz flipped the card over and tried again, this time phoning the police department directly and asking for Detective Jonas Hayes.

Without too much fuss he was put through to Hayes’s voice mail. He left a message saying he was in town and wanted to meet. Afterward he called and left another message for Olivia. As he hung up he had the uncanny feeling that he was being watched, that hidden eyes were observing his every move. He scanned the cemetery as he drove off, checked his mirrors and saw no one tailing him, no one tracking his movements.

“You’re an idiot,” he told himself, then went in search of a cheap, clean motel.

Jonas Hayes swore under his breath. He was tired. Dead tired. He’d spent too many hours the previous day trying to hammer out details for the custody of Maren, his daughter, then hadn’t slept a wink before pulling a full shift. And now he had Rick Bentz calling him.

“Hell,” he muttered. There were a lot of reasons he didn’t want to return the call. He waited until his shift was over and he was in his car miles away from the department before he dialed the cell number Bentz had left.

On the third ring, Bentz answered. “Rick Bentz.”

“The death-defying Rick Bentz, who lives through a lightning strike?” he joked, though truth to tell there wasn’t anything remotely humorous about Bentz calling.

“Not exactly accurate, but close enough. Bad news travels fast.”

“Gossip has no bounds. These days with the Internet, cell phones with cameras, traffic lights with cameras, security cameras everywhere, you have no privacy. You can’t take a leak in New Orleans without someone putting it up on YouTube for all of us out here to view.”

“Is that right?” Bentz said. “Then how the hell don’t we get the suspects on film?”

“We do. A lot of times. At least the stupid ones. That is, when we get lucky.”

“So you got dinner plans? I’m in town and I’ll buy.”

Hayes saw it coming. Big as life. And he didn’t like it one bit. “Sounds like you need a favor.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybees about it. That’s why you rose from the dead, Bentz. Admit it.”

“We’ll talk about rising from the dead over steaks. How about Roy’s if it’s still around?”

Roy’s had once been a hip, happening place, an homage to the days of the great westerns. “It’s around and seedier than ever. But the food’s still good and happy hour drinks are five bucks.”

“That’s a bargain?”
“In Hollywood? Yeah. But tonight won’t work. I’m already booked. Is the offer still good tomorrow?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you there...say, around seven?”

“That’ll work. Tomorrow at seven. See ya there.”

Hayes hung up, opened the console between the two front seats of his old 4Runner and found a bottle of Rolaids he kept in the glove box. His heartburn was acting up and the call from Bentz didn’t help. Hayes poured out a few and popped them into his mouth, downing them with the remainder of this morning’s coffee, the dregs of which had settled into the bottom of his travel cup. The taste was bitter, but tolerable. He slid his shades onto his nose, glanced in his rearview, checking traffic, then eased onto the street.

If Rick Bentz was in L.A., something was coming down.

Something that wasn’t good.

I really have to congratulate myself.

*Job well done!*

Rick Hot-Fucking-Shot Bentz is back in L.A.!

No big surprise there.

Like a hungry lion leaping onto a weak gazelle, Rick Bentz took the bait. Just in time.

I check the calendar and nod to myself. Feel a little thrill race down my spine. It didn’t take long and he’s still recuperating, not quite agile or fleet-footed, still using a cane, which is just damned perfect. I can’t help but experience a wave of pride. In myself. Not just for this, his return, but for my patience. I had to wait until the timing was right, but now I think I can pour myself a drink, a strong one.

Let’s see...how about a martini? That would be fitting. I walk to the bar and find the vodka and curse myself for being out of olives. Oh, damn...well, who cares? I find the vermouth and pour just a whisper, then shake the concoction with ice and pour...mmm. Since there are no olives I settle for a twist of lemon...perfect.

I walk to the full-length mirror, where I see myself and lift my glass toward the woman in the glass. She’s beautiful. Tall. Willowy. The ravages of age not yet apparent. Her dark hair falls to her shoulders in easy waves. Her smile is infectious, her eyes those of a woman who knows what she wants and always gets it.

“To new beginnings,” I say touching the rim of my glass to the mirror and hearing the soft little click of glass on glass. “You and I, we’ve waited a long time for this.”

“That we have. But no longer,” she replies, arched eyebrows lifting conspiratorially.

I tingle inside knowing that everything we—I—have worked for is about to come to fruition.

The window is open and I feel evening settling in the rising moon, a ghostly crescent glowing in the twilight sky.

“Cheers,” my reflection says back to me, her eyes twinkling in naughty anticipation as she holds her glass aloft. “May we be successful.”

“Oh, we will,” I assure her, smiling as she grins back at me. “We will.” Then we drink as one, feeling the cool cocktail slide so easily down our throats. Together we think of Rick Bentz.

Handsome in a rugged way. Athletic and muscular rather than thin. With a square jaw and eyes that could cut through any kind of lie, he’s smart and pensive, his emotions usually under tight rein.

And yet he has an Achilles heel.
One that will bring him down.

“Bravo,” I say to the mirror. Because I know that soon, that sick son of a bitch will get his.
Bentz had a lot of ground to cover and he didn’t want to waste time.

First things first: He had to find a place to stay. He decided to stick close to where he’d lived with Jennifer and in the area of the zip code on the envelope that had been sent to him.

Though hotel prices in Southern California were through the roof, he found a motel in the older part of Culver City that advertised, “inexpensive, clean rooms.” The So-Cal Inn was a long, low-lying stucco building that, he guessed, was built in the decade after World War II, and offered, along with weekly rates, a swimming pool, air-conditioned rooms, cable TV, and wi-fi. The place also claimed to be “pet and kid friendly.”

Everything he needed and more.

Bentz parked in front and walked into the small reception area, where a glass pot of coffee sat congealing on a hot plate. A kid who looked no more than fourteen was working, fiddling with the remote to a television mounted on the wall over a display of brochures for activities in the area. “Mom,” the teen yelled toward a half-open door behind the long desk, then pointed the remote at the television and pressed down over and over again, in rapid-fire succession, with the agility of the generation that grew up with text messaging and video games. However, the TV channel or volume didn’t change and the boy’s frustration was evidenced in his red cheeks and set jaw.

As Bentz reached the counter a woman slipped through the open door. Her red hair was piled high on her head, her mascara so thick her eyelids appeared weighted down. She looked to be in her mid-thirties. Perfumed by cigarette smoke, she was trim and lithe in shorts and a print top that wrapped around her chest to tie under one arm. Pinned over one of her breasts was a nametag that read: REBECCA ALLISON—MANAGER. “Can I help you?” she asked, her shiny lips curving into a friendly smile.

“Lookin’ for a room. For one. Nothing fancy.”

“We have a few that have wonderful views of the pool,” she said, quickly flipping into salesperson mode. “They’ve each got a sliding door to a private sitting area that opens up to the pool.”

“Are they the cheapest?”

Her smile didn’t falter. “Well, no. If you’d like something less expensive, I’ve got several that overlook the parking lot,” and she quoted him the daily and weekly rates.

“One of those will do fine,” he said. “For the week.”

“Great.” She ran his credit card while the kid muttered something under his breath about friggin’ cheap-ass remotes, and the deal was sealed.

Rebecca sent the boy a sharp look, then turned back to Bentz. “Here’s a map of the area. We serve a continental breakfast here from six until ten in the morning, and coffee’s available all day.”

He resisted another glance at the sludge pot.

“If you need anything, just call the main desk.”

“This damned thing—” the kid said.
“Tony!” Rebecca said sharply. “Enough.”

The boy went immediately into pout mode, turning his back on his mother and shaking the remote as if he could somehow make the bad connections spark.

Bentz walked out and squinted into the white haze. For the next week, at least, he was a resident of Southern California.

Hayes strode across the lush lawn in front of his ex-wife’s apartment as the sun settled over the hills to the west. He clicked the remote lock for his SUV and nearly ran into a woman walking two beagles who tugged their leashes taut. “Hey, watch it,” she said, sending him a withering glare. He barely noticed as he yanked open the driver’s door.

The interior of his car was blistering, the steering wheel almost too hot to touch. But the temperature inside his 4Runner was nothing compared to the heat churning in his gut. Jesus, he was mad. Who the hell did Delilah think she was, pulling out of the marriage because she couldn’t hack being married to a cop any longer? She’d known he was a career man with the LAPD when she’d married him twelve years ago.

But then she’d been pregnant.

And they’d both wanted the kid.

That part, he thought, considering his daughter, they’d gotten right. The rest had been up and down, a roller-coaster ride exacerbated by his career and Delilah’s mood swings.

So now they were divorced. Shit. Making him a two-time loser. He’d already been married once before to Alonda, his college sweetheart. That had ended when he’d found her in bed with her best friend and she’d admitted to him that she was gay. Had been all along. It wasn’t that she didn’t love him, but…

Great.

He’d stormed out and filed papers the next day. At least there were no kids from that first doomed union.

Two years later he’d met Delilah and fallen head over heels. But he’d been careful. He hadn’t wanted to make the same mistake twice. He hazarded another glance at the apartment building, a four-story pink-tinged stucco building with arched windows and tile roof, a nod to old California. She was on the top floor, two bedrooms and a thousand square feet of vaulted ceilings and new carpeting. There, she asserted, she could “start over” and “find what she really wanted in life,” whatever the hell that meant.

With a flick of the ignition his Toyota fired up. He pulled out of his parking spot, a rare commodity here in Santa Monica, twenty-six blocks from the beach. High rent, in Hayes’s estimation, but Delilah had money. She owned half of a modeling school, where runway moms sent their daughters to learn the tricks of the trade. Delilah, once a print-ad model herself and a natural salesperson, had helped make the school a raging success.

What did she need with a workaholic cop for a husband? Their divorce, had been finalized six months earlier. Now if they could just straighten out the custody schedule.

To be truthful, Jonas had already started dating. This time he’d taken up with Corrine O’Donnell, a fellow cop, a woman who understood the rigors and demands of the job. She’d been a detective, but since her injury she’d been assigned to a desk job in missing persons. She claimed she didn’t mind. He wondered.

He slid his SUV into traffic, attempted to rein in his fury over Delilah’s latest custody demand, and angled the 4Runner toward the Santa Monica Freeway. He wanted to do a little more checking on Bentz before he met with him tomorrow.

Rick Bentz hadn’t just shown up out of the blue.

The few quick calls Hayes had made earlier had confirmed what Hayes suspected: Bentz was on leave from the
New Orleans Police Department and there was talk that he wouldn’t be returning. He’d been injured, spent a couple of weeks in a coma and a few months in physical therapy. If he ever got back to work, he’d probably be stuck behind a desk and the Rick Bentz Hayes had known, back in the day, would have shriveled up and died if he hadn’t been in the field.

Hayes surmised that hadn’t changed.

But he’d do some checking. The way he remembered it Bentz had fallen apart after his ex-wife’s death and the shooting of the Valdez kid. Bentz had been cleared of any charges; the boy had been taking aim at Bentz’s partner, Russ Trinidad, but the weapon had turned out to be a very authentic-appearing toy. Though exonerated of any crime, guilt had eaten away at the detective and it looked as if his ex-wife’s suicide had pushed him over the edge. He’d lost interest in anything except his kid and had left the department with a couple of black eyes—the Valdez kid’s death and a double-murder investigation that had gone too cold too fast.

Bentz had given up his badge in L.A., and though no one could really pin the blame for either event on him, people took their shots. Even some of those closest to him had thought he’d lost his edge when he’d taken his ex-wife back. After the fact, people had blamed the Valdez kid’s death on Bentz’s lack of good judgment, his lack of focus, but, bottom line, it was just a tragedy.

Hayes didn’t know what to think as he cut toward the Ten. He saw his entrance and passed an old Volkswagen bus belching blue smoke before gunning it onto the freeway.

His cell phone rang and he snagged it. “Hayes.”

“Hey, how’d it go?” Corrine asked. She was one of the few people who knew he was still hammering out a change in the custody arrangements.

“It went,” he said and smiled a bit. Corrine, another cop who knew the ropes, had become his rock.

“You okay?”

Never, when dealing with Delilah. He hated to think it, but his shrink seemed to think he was still hung up on her.

“I will be.”

“So, you’re coming over later? I’ve got First Blood on DVD. Thought it might help get out some of your aggressions.”

He actually laughed. “I’ll bring the raw meat.”

“I think you need to come up with something…uh, what’s the quote…about what Rambo ate?”

“I think it’s something that would make a billy goat puke.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” She chuckled. “We can barbecue whatever it is…roadkill maybe.”

“I’ll work on it.” He felt a little better as he glanced at the dash board clock. “Look, I have a couple of things I’ve gotta do. I’ll be there in little over an hour.”

“Why do I have the feeling that this is because Rick Bentz is in town?”

He probably shouldn’t have told her that Bentz had called, especially because she and Bentz had “a history.” But the truth would have gotten out sooner or later, and Bentz had dated several women in the department before he met and married Jennifer. Hayes decided it was best if Corrine heard it from him first. If he’d learned anything from his two failed marriages, he now knew it was better to stick to the truth. It was also a whole lot better to be the bearer of bad news than let the woman in his life be blindsided from some other source.

“You figured out the Bentz connection,” he teased. “Proof that you’re a crack detective.”
“Yeah, right. Missing Persons wouldn’t be the same without me.” She played along. “Don’t think that kind of sweet talk will make up for the fact that you’ll be late.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I’ll fire up the DVD player. At least I can count on Rambo showing up.”

“Ouch! I’ll be there. Soon.”

“Just as long as you know I’m not the kind of woman who sits around and waits forever.”

“What’s wrong with ya?” he joked and she chuckled.

“Jerk!”

“Yeah, but you love me.”

“And that’s the problem. I’ll see you soon.”

He hung up feeling better. Corrine O’Donnell wasn’t the love of his life and he doubted that she ever would be. Besides, he’d sworn off marriage for good. Twice was enough and being a bachelor wasn’t all that bad. She seemed to feel the same; at least for the time being she wasn’t making noises about moving in together or getting married. But then, she, too, had taken her turn in the divorce department.

Jockeying through traffic, Hayes turned his thoughts to Bentz again and decided the guy deserved some kind of break. Hayes would meet with him and see what Bentz wanted. Even if he already knew he wasn’t going to like it.

To say Bentz’s new accommodations were less than five-star would be a vast understatement. Room 16, overlooking the sun-cracked asphalt with its faded parking stripes, would be hard pressed to earn two stars, but Bentz didn’t care. The two double beds had matching, if washed-out, paisley spreads and faux oak headboards screwed into the wall. There was a sad desk and bureau from which a TV straight out of the eighties eyeballed him. The attached bath was tiny, with barely enough room for him to turn around. The towels were thin, but it all looked clean enough. Probably not up to Olivia’s standards, but good enough for Bentz.

He was unzipping his bag when the phone rang and the number of Olivia’s cell flashed on the display.

“Hey,” he answered. “I was beginning to get worried.”

“Were you?” She sounded lighthearted, and for that he was relieved. In the past few days she’d tried to be supportive, even joke with him. Most of her attempts had fallen flat and he knew she was concerned, even troubled, about the trip. Twice he’d offered to cancel and both times she had insisted he follow through. “You just do what you have to do, and when it’s over come back home, okay?” Olivia was not the kind of woman who would sit around and wait for a man. This time, though, she was attempting to do just that, though it went against all her natural instincts. He appreciated her sacrifice and had promised her he’d wrap things up and return as soon as he could.

“You’d better be working ’round the clock,” she said sternly.

“I’ve only been here a few hours.”

“And it’s seemed like an eternity,” she whispered. For a moment he almost bought into her act, but she blew it by chuckling. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help that.”

He swallowed a smile. At least she was joking, kidding around with him. “Okay, fair enough. You got me.”

“So what do you know?”
“Nothing yet.” They talked a few minutes and she told him she’d had dinner with Lydia Kane, a friend she’d met while in grad school. He gave her the name and number of his motel and promised to call her the next day.

“Be careful,” she said. “To be honest, I don’t know what to wish for. That you find Jennifer is dead and that someone is just playing a sick game with you…or that she’s really alive.”

“Either way will be messy.”

“I know. I mean it, Rick. Don’t take too many chances. We need you.”

“We?”

She hesitated just a second. “Yeah, all of us. Kristi and me, well, and Hairy S and Chia, too.”

“I’ll be home soon,” he promised, but they both knew he was just placating her. He had no idea when he’d return to New Orleans.

“Just let me know how many wild geese you catch.”

“Funny girl.”

“Sometimes,” she said.

“Most of the time. I’ll call you.”

He hung up and considered taking the next plane east. Why not? She was right. He was still chasing a ghost and he was either being set up or losing his mind.

He bet on the first.

And knew he was going to ride it out.

He had to.
FOR BENTZ, DINNER CONSISTED OF THE PREPACKAGED CHEESE AND CRACKERS AND DIET COKE HE FOUND IN THE VENDING MACHINE IN THE BREEZEWAY LEADING TO THE POOL AREA.

HE BIT OFF THE CELLOPHANE AS HE WALKED BACK TO HIS ROOM, THEN WENT TO WORK. HE’D ALREADY MADE LISTS OF THE PEOPLE JENNIFER HAD BEEN CLOSEST TO. HE WOULD START TRYING TO TRACK THEM DOWN WHILE MUNCHING ON THE OILY CRACKERS AND PROCESSED CHEDDAR.

HE FIGURED SOME OF JENNIFER’S NEAREST AND DEAREST MIGHT STILL BE IN THE AREA, SO HE COULD SET UP MEETINGS. THAT WAS, IF ANYONE WAS WILLING TO TALK WITH HIM. NO DOUBT HE’D BE CONSIDERED PERSONA NON GRATA WITH MOST OF THEM. AS FOR THE ACQUAINTANCES WHO HAD MOVED, HE’D HAVE TO HUNT FOR THEM AND MAKE AN ATTEMPT TO CONTACT THEM BY PHONE.

AND WHAT WILL YOU SAY TO THEM? THAT YOU THINK YOU’VE SEEN JENNIFER EVEN THOUGH YOU BURIED HER TWELVE YEARS AGO?

HE DIDN’T HAVE AN ANSWER FOR THAT ONE, HE THOUGHT. HE SET UP HIS LAPTOP WITH ITS INTERNET CARD ON THE SCARRED FORMICA DESK, CRACKED THE BLINDS SO THAT HE COULD VIEW THE PARKING LOT, AND SETTLED INTO THE STRAIGHT-BACKED CHAIR.


ONCE THE DOOR CLOSED, BENTZ TURNED HIS ATTENTION BACK TO THE LAPTOP AND THE ISSUE AT HAND—JENNIFER’S ACQUAINTANCES. HE’D HAVE TO PLAY IT BY EAR WITH THEM. HE DIDN’T PLAN TO TELL ANY OF JENNIFER’S FRIENDS THAT HE’D THOUGHT HE’D SEEN HER, NOT UNLESS THEY VOLUNTEERED SOME SORT OF INFORMATION ABOUT FAKE “HAUNTINGS” FIRST.

BUT GETTING THEM TO OPEN UP WOULD BE A TRICK.

ANYONE WHO KNEW ANYTHING ABOUT JENNIFER’S DEATH WOULD HAVE MAINTAINED SILENCE FOR TWELVE YEARS, KEEPING THE TRUTH NOT JUST FROM HIM BUT FROM HIS DAUGHTER AND THE POLICE. BENTZ, EX-COP AND EX-HUSBAND, WOULD BE HARD-PRESSED TO PRO ANYTHING FROM THOSE WHO HAD KNOWN HER.

HE’D ALREADY PUT TOGETHER A SHORT LIST OF FRIENDS PARED DOWN FROM ALL HER KNOWN ACQUAINTANCES. THESE WOMEN HAD BEEN THE CLOSEST TO JENNIFER. THEY WOULD MOST UNDERSTAND HER, MOST LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN HER CONFIDANTES.

SHANA WYNN, WHOSE LAST MARRIED NAME HE KNEW OF WAS McINTYRE, HAD BEEN ONE OF JENNIFER’S BEST FRIENDS AND, AS BENTZ RECALLED, A REAL BITCH. BEAUTIFUL. SMART. OUT FOR NUMBER ONE. SHE AND JENNIFER HAD BEEN COLLEGE ROOMMATES AND THEY’D HAD A LOT IN COMMON. IF ANYONE KNEW THAT JENNIFER HAD FAKED HER OWN DEATH, IT WOULD BE SHANA.

TALLY WHITE ALSO MADE THE “MUST INTERVIEW” LIST. TALLY’S DAUGHTER MELODY HAD BEEN A FRIEND OF KRISTI’S IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. JENNIFER AND TALLY HAD GOTTEN CLOSE. REAL CLOSE. BOTH WOMEN HAD BEEN DIVORCED.

FORTUNA ESPERANZO HAD BECOME A FRIEND OF JENNIFER’S WHEN THEY’D BOTH WORKED BRIEFLY AT AN ART GALLERY IN VENICE.

THEN THERE WAS LORRAINE NEWELL, JENNIFER’S STEPSISTER, WHO HADN’T LIKED BENTZ FROM THE GET-GO. A DARK-HAIRED PRIMA DONNA WITH A PRINCESS COMPLEX, LORRAINE HADN’T BEEN PARTICULARLY CLOSE TO JENNIFER, EITHER, AND HADN’T BOtherED TO KEEP IN CONTACT WITH KRISTI SINCE JENNIFER’S DEATH.

CHAPTER 7
There were others as well, but these four women were at the top of his list. He just had to find them. Which was easier said than done. So far his online searches had only turned up one plum: Shana McIntyre’s current address. He clicked open a file with information on her and jotted the street number and name on the envelope he used to carry his photos. Hopefully, Shana was in town and would be willing to see him when he paid her a visit.

Bentz slid the photos out of the envelope and fanned them out on the desk. Tapping the photo of Jennifer looking out of the coffee shop, he did an online search of coffee shops on Colorado Avenue. Bingo! Plenty to choose from. A cup of coffee would be his first order of business in the morning.

He worked late into the night, finally gave up, and flopped onto the thin mattress with a sinkhole in the center. Propping himself up with pillows, he turned on the television, watched some sports updates, and, with the latest scores flashing across the screen, drifted off.

The remote was still in his hand when the bedside phone rang, jerking him awake. He picked up, knowing it couldn’t be good if someone was calling so late, phoning at the motel and not on his cell. “This is Bentz,” he said, cobwebs still in his mind, some kind of cage fighting on the TV screen. For a second he heard nothing. “Hello?”

He hit the television’s mute button.

Soft crying was barely audible.

“Hello?” he said again. “Who is this? Are you okay?”

More muffled sobbing as he pushed himself up in bed. “Who are you trying to reach?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice raspy and raw. For a second he thought she was apologizing for calling the wrong person, but then she said, “Please forgive me, RJ. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

*What?* His heart nearly stopped. “Who is this?” he demanded, his pulse pounding in his ears.

*Click!*

The phone went dead in his hand. “Hello?” he said, and hit the button on the receiver’s cradle in rapid succession. “Hello?”

Nothing.

“Hello? Hello? Damn!”

She’d hung up. With suddenly sweating hands, he replaced the receiver and felt as if a cold knife had sliced through his heart. The voice had been familiar. Or had it?

*Jennifer.*

She’d been the only one in his entire life to call him RJ. Holy crap. He swallowed hard. Told himself not to panic. *It has to be someone impersonating her.*

What the hell was going on? He rolled out of bed, threw on a T-shirt and the pair of khakis he’d draped over the back of the desk chair. Zipping up, he walked barefoot to the office under the lone security lamp mounted high over the neon sign for the motel. Only a few cars rolled by and the night air was cool, felt good against his skin.

Inside the reception area the lights were on—dimmed, but on. Less than a cup of coffee sat like oil in the bottom of the glass pot in the coffee maker. No one was behind the desk. Following instructions inscribed into a metal plate on the counter, he rang the small bell. After waiting half a minute, he rang it again, just as Rebecca slipped through a locked door marked *employees only.*

Devoid of makeup, her lipstick faded, her hair falling past her shoulders, she looked much younger than she had
earlier. And crankier. “Can I help you?” she asked, then glanced pointedly at the clock. “Is something wrong?” She was already reaching for another key to his room, assuming that he’d locked himself out.

“I just need to know if you have a record of incoming phone calls to the rooms.”

“What?” She stifled a yawn, trying not to sound cross but failing. Obviously the staff at the So-Cal was stretched thin.

“Someone called me and didn’t identify herself. I need to know where the call came from.”

“Now?” Looking at him as if he were certifiably crazy, she opened a drawer and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“I know. It’s important.” Reaching into his pants pocket, he withdrew his wallet and showed her his badge.

“What?” She was suddenly wide awake. “You’re a cop?” Worry slid through her eyes as she slapped the cigarettes onto the counter.

“New Orleans Police Department.”

“Oh, Jesus, look, I don’t need any trouble here.”

“There won’t be any.” He second-guessed flashing the badge, but at least it was getting her attention.

“Look,” she said, licking her lips nervously as if she did have something to hide. “This…this isn’t a big operation. We’re not, like, the Hilton, you know.”

“But you have a central switchboard that calls come through, right?”

“Yeah, yeah…we do.” She was thinking hard.

“I assume there’s some sort of caller ID on it.” She was nodding. “So, I need to see origin of the calls that have come to my room.”

She pressed two fingers against one temple. “Can’t this wait until morning?”

“If it could, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Okay.” With a tired sigh, she nodded. “Just give me a sec, okay?” She disappeared behind the door again. Bentz paced through the lobby past brochures of fishing trips, movie studio visits, and museums. He could only hope the badge had made an impression. Nervously jangling the change in his pocket, he walked to the large plate-glass window and peered out. He saw only a few cars parked between faded stripes in the parking lot.

“Okay, here ya go.” Rebecca returned to the lobby with a business card. Handing him the card, she said, “Only one call.”

“Only had one. Thanks.” He scanned the number jotted in her neat handwriting. A local number.

“Anytime,” she said without the slightest bit of enthusiasm. “Anything else?”

“This’ll do.”

“Good.” She scraped her pack of Marlboro Lights and her lighter from the counter, then followed Bentz outside.

He heard her lighter click as he reached his room.

Inside, using his cell phone, he dialed the single number listed on the printout. It rang ten times. He hung up; hit redial. Twelve more rings, no answering machine, no voice mail. He hung up and tried one last time, counting off the rings. On the eighth, a male voice said, “Yeah?”
“Who is this?” Bentz demanded.

“Paul. Who is this?” Indignant.

“I’m returning a call.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Someone called me from this phone.”

“Big surprise,” the guy said, his speech slightly slurred. “Duh. It’s a pay phone.”

A pay phone? Probably only a handful of those dinosaurs left in the country and you get a crank call from one.

“Where?”

“What?” the stranger, Paul, demanded.

“The phone you’re on right now. Where is it?”

“I dunno…uh…in L.A. What do you think? Here on Wilshire. Yeah…there’s a bank on the corner. California Something, I think.”

“What’s the cross street?”

“Who the hell knows? It’s around Sixth or Seventh, I think…hey, look, I gotta use the phone, okay?”

Bentz wasn’t going to let the guy go. Not yet. “Just a sec. Did you see a woman using this phone, say, twenty minutes ago?”

“What is this?” The guy on the other end was getting pissed.

“I thought you might have been waiting for the phone and seen someone. A woman.”

“Shit, dude, I said no! Oh, for Christ’s sake!” He hung up, severing the connection.

Bentz clicked off his cell phone, gathered his keys, and slipped into his shoes. He didn’t know what good driving around L.A. in the dead of night would do, but he sure as hell wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep any time soon. Rebecca was just crushing her cigarette into the large ash can by the front door. The night air was still tinged with the faint smell of smoke as she watched him climb into the Ford.

Familiar with the area, he drove to Wilshire and cruised down the wide near-empty boulevard. A cop car screamed by, lights flashing. He kept his eyes on the street-level storefronts of buildings rising to ward the night sky. In the blocks around Sixth and Seventh his gaze swept over the sidewalks and plazas of the massive buildings of steel and glass, searching for a damned pay phone. He wasn’t sure what he expected to find, but he knew he wouldn’t spot the woman who had called him. Unless she was an idiot. His gut told him that she’d be long gone by now. Still he felt the need to view the pay phone for himself.

He missed it on the first pass, but then, spotting California Palisades Bank, he wheeled around in their empty lot…and there it was. His tires squealed slightly as he tore from the parking lot and steered straight to the modern booth. Three sheets of dirty, graffiti-covered Plexiglas on a pole, in front of an edifice with a Korean market on the first floor.

Few people were on the street, but he parked and walked around the pay phone as a city bus sat idling at a bus stop.

Who was she?

Why had she called him? What was the purpose? To get him to track her down here? He scanned the area, dubious. No point in getting him here among these office buildings sitting like sleeping giants in the night, security
lights casting eerie beams beyond tinted glass. On the avenue only a smattering of cars passed. Traffic lights glowed green and red down the broad boulevard while tall streetlamps rained down a fluorescent lonely atmosphere.

He saw nothing unusual.

Only that someone was seriously messing with his brain.

Who the hell was doing this to him?

And, more importantly, why?
“I just don’t know why you didn’t tell me,” Kristi fumed on the other end of the wireless call.

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Yeah. Eight in the morning.”

“There. It’s barely six here,” Bentz grumbled, eyeing the digital clock as he rolled to the side of the uneven mattress. He’d barely slept since falling into bed after his late-night drive down Wilshire Boulevard. “Two hours difference, remember?” His back ached and he hadn’t gone to bed until nearly 2 A.M. and now his kid was calling at dawn.

“Okay. Sorry.” She didn’t sound it. “But come on, Dad, what’s this all about? I asked Olivia about it, but she was kinda secretive. You know how she gets, all ‘this is between you and your father,’ which is just such BS.” Kristi must’ve been standing outside, maybe outside the apartment she rented in Baton Rouge while attending All Saints College. Bentz could hear the sounds of traffic and the soft call of a mockingbird in the background.

“I just need to work things out.”

“So this is like…what? A separation?”

“What? No.” He rubbed a hand over the stubble on his jaw and walked to the window to crack open the blinds. Immediately bright sunlight streamed through the dusty glass. “I just have some things to do.”

“What things?” Kristi demanded.

“Just catching up on some old cases. I’m meeting with one of the guys I worked with tonight.”

“Why? I thought you hated L.A. The way I remember it you couldn’t get out of the place fast enough.”

“I was going stir crazy.”

“So suddenly, after all these years, you hop on a plane and head west? Save me, Dad,” she said with a theatrical sigh. “Just tell me this doesn’t have anything to do with Mom, okay?”

“It doesn’t.”

“And you’re a bad liar. A real bad liar.”

He remained silent, wondering what had tipped her off. Of course…he’d told Kristi he’d seen Jennifer in his hospital room after he’d woken from his coma. Though they’d never discussed it since, Kristi was bright enough to put two and two together. She was also on the verge of being paranoid now that she possessed her own little bit of ESP. Ever since an accident that nearly took her life, Kristi claimed she knew when a person was about to die, that the victim would “bleed from color to black-and-white.” That had to be scary for her, and Bentz didn’t want to add to her worries.

“ Aren’t you supposed to be planning a wedding or something?” he asked.

“Don’t deflect, Dad. It doesn’t work with me.”
“So why did you call? Obviously not just to tell me to have a nice trip.”

“Very funny.”

“Thought so,” he said as he moved to the bathroom where a single-cup coffeepot was wedged onto a slice of countertop. Tearing open the packet of coffee, he listened as Kristi kept firing questions at him: Why was he in L.A.? When was he coming back? Were there problems with Olivia? How worried should she be? He plopped the packet of “fine roast” into a basket, added a cup of water to the pot, and pressed the on button.

“I’m fine. Olivia’s fine. Nothing to worry about,” Bentz insisted as the coffeepot gurgled and hissed. He needed to take a leak, but decided not to freak his daughter out any further and waited until she hung up.

It took another five minutes, but she finally told him “to keep in touch,” before taking another call. He relieved himself, hopped in the shower, and dressed. With his cup of coffee in hand, he decided to hunt up breakfast. He figured a coffee shop on Colorado Avenue might be a good place to start.

After breakfast he would continue trying to locate the women on his list. First up: Shana McIntyre—well, after some digging last night he discovered that her name had changed a couple of times. She’d been Wynn before she married her first husband and became Mrs. George Philpot. After that divorce she’d become Mrs. Hamilton Flavel, and now, she’d taken the name of her current husband, Leland McIntyre. Bentz recognized her type—a serial wife.

Last night he’d found a number for her and had tried it, only to get her lofty voice on the answering machine. “You’ve reached Leland and Shana. Leave a message. We’ll get back to you...sometime.”

Nice, he’d thought and didn’t bother leaving his name or number. His cell would show up as “restricted call” and he wanted to catch her off guard. Didn’t want to give her time to make up answers or avoid him.

By the time he walked outside, the sun was already rising in the sky, glare bouncing off the pavement. His car was warm, its interior collecting heat more quickly than a solar panel in the middle of the Sahara. He rolled out of the parking lot and headed toward Santa Monica and Colorado Avenue, which he’d tentatively identified in one photo of Jennifer.

He’d already done some Internet research. An online map had shown three coffee shops in a twelve-block stretch.

Within twenty minutes he spotted it—a cafe on a corner that matched the photo. The Local Buzz, it was called. Two newspaper boxes stood by the front door, and tall café tables were positioned near the windows.

This was too easy, he thought. Whoever had taken the picture had lured him here without too much finesse.

He parked on a side street and made his way inside, where the smell of ground roast was overpowering. Jazz competed with the hiss of the steamer and the gentle din of conversation. The booths were full and several patrons had their laptops open, taking advantage of the free wi-fi connection. Bentz ordered a black coffee and waited while a surge of customers ordered lattes and mochas, everything from macchiatos and soy caramel lattes to plain coffee.

Once the crowd dissipated, he approached the baristas again, this time showing them his pictures of Jennifer.

Neither coffee server claimed to have ever seen her. They were certain. The tall girl in frumpy suede boots and shorts barely glanced at the photos as she wiped off the hot milk nozzle and shook her head. But her partner, a shorter, rounder woman of around fifty, studied the shots thoughtfully. Above her rimless glasses her eyebrows drew together. “She could have come in when we were busy or when someone else was working, but she’s not a regular. At least not a morning regular. I would know her.” She went on to explain that there were six or seven servers on staff, so someone else might have helped the woman in the picture.

He glanced at the table where “Jennifer” had sat in the photo, went to the window and stared out at the street. To the left, a dozen or so blocks from here, the streets ended at the Pacific Ocean. He and Jennifer had spent some lazy afternoons there, walking the Santa Monica Pier and the path that cut alongside the beach. Long ago he’d considered Santa Monica their special place, a spot where, near the jutting pier, he and Jennifer had first made love in the sand.

He sipped his coffee and tried to imagine what Jennifer—no, make that the woman posing as Jennifer—had been
doing here, and why he’d been led to this spot. What was the damned point? He stared out the window for a few minutes more, then left with his too-hot coffee and a feeling that he was being worked.

Shana, breaking the surface after swimming underwater the length of her pool, drew in a deep breath, then shook the wet hair from her eyes. Forty laps. She was congratulating herself on keeping in shape when she heard the doorbell peal.

She wasn’t the only one. At the first bong of the dulcet tones Dirk, her husband’s damned German shepherd/rottweiler mix, began barking his fool head off. He’d been lying at the edge of the pool, but was instantly on his feet, the hairs at the back of his neck bristling upward.

*Great.*

Just what she needed—a surprise visit by some stranger. She hoisted herself onto the tile strip near the waterfall, then climbed to her feet. She was naked, not even the small pieces of her string bikini covering her body. The housekeeper had had the day off, the gardener had already left, so she’d taken her alone time to sunbathe for a perfect tan, one completely devoid of lines or shading. She’d just swum her laps after lying on her back on her favorite chaise. Had she not been interrupted, she would have lain facedown, toasting her backside.

“Later,” she promised herself as she scooped up her white poolside robe, jammed her arms down the sleeves, and cinched the belt around her slim waist.

The doorbell rang once more, setting off Dirk all over again. “Hush!” she commanded to the dog, then louder, “Coming!”

Quickly wringing the excess water from her hair, she slid into her low-heeled mules near the French doors before clicking through the sunroom, hallway, and foyer. Dirk was two steps behind. The loyal dog loved her for some unknown reason when she really didn’t much care for him, or any dog for that matter. All that hair, the dirt, and the poop in the yard bothered her. When the big mutt drank from his oversized water dish, the laundry room floor was splashed with a trail of drool-laced water that ran to the entry hall. If it were up to her, there would be *no* pets, but Leland wouldn’t hear of getting rid of his 150-pound, often snarling “baby.”

“Stay,” she ordered and the dog stopped dead in his tracks. Peering through the beveled glass sidelight, she locked gazes with her visitor.

“I’ll be damned.”

The last person Shana had expected to find on her doorstep was Rick Bentz. But there he was in the flesh, arms folded over his chest, legs slightly apart as he stood between the gigantic pots overflowing with trailing red and white petunias. A pair of aviator-type sunglasses were perched on the bridge of a nose that had been broken at least once, probably a couple of times. He’d trimmed down, too, lost maybe fifteen or twenty pounds since she’d last seen him a dozen or so years ago at Jennifer’s funeral.

He’d been a mess then.

Pouring himself into a bottle.

Filled with self-pity and self-loathing, or so she suspected from the psych classes she’d taken at the community college after George, her first husband, had left her for a little flit of a thing named, of all things, Bambi. For the love of God, how much more clichéd could a guy get?

Well, at least she’d learned from that experience.

Now, she unlocked and opened one of the heavy double doors. “Rick Bentz.” She felt her lips twist down at the corners, though a small part of her, that ridiculous, jealous, super-competitive feminine part of her, was secretly interested. She’d told herself that she’d never liked the man. He had a way of staring at her and, without words, urging, almost forcing, her to speak. She became much too glib and nervous around him. It was the whole cop thing.
Cops always made her uneasy. But she had to admit he was sexy. In that raw, rugged way that Hollywood was always trying to exploit.

“Shana.” He nodded. Forced a smile. “It’s been a while.”

“More than a while. What’re you doing here?”

“In town for a couple of days. Thought I’d look you up.”

“And what? Catch up?” she asked, feeling one of her eyebrows lift of its own accord. She knew bullshit when she heard it. “Come on, what is this? Some kind of official business?” She stood in the doorway, blocking Bentz and also keeping Dirk, who couldn’t keep from growling a bit, at bay.

“Nothing official.” His smile was damned near disarming. “I’d just like to talk to you about Jennifer.”

That floored her. “Really. Now? After she’s been gone for what? Ten or twelve years? A little late, isn’t it?” She folded her arms under her breasts, felt them lift upward. Good. They were incredible and she knew it. “You know, it seems to me you didn’t pay her a whole lot of attention when she was alive, so why would you want to talk about her now?” She eyed him critically. The guy favored one leg as he stood. What the hell was his deal?

“That’s what I’d like to talk to you about.”

Hmm.

More out of morbid curiosity than an urge to help, Shana moved out of the doorway, grabbing Dirk’s collar and dragging him toward the patio. She figured she might as well work on her tan while she was at it. The dog gave off another low warning growl as she led Bentz down the hallway and through the French doors to the patio. Dirk definitely didn’t make it easy, the big beast. Behind her Bentz limped a little, she noticed, though he tried like hell to hide it.

Once outside, she let go of the dog. “Leave us alone, Dirk. Go!” she said and snapped her fingers, motioning toward the side of the patio where a thicket of palms provided some shade. The dog hesitated for just a second, then padded obediently to a spot in the grass. After a quick circle he laid down, chin on his paws, eyes focused on Bentz.

“Pretty big dog,” Bentz observed, staring at Dirk’s massive head.

“My husband’s. Has him for protection.” A little stretch of the truth there, but hey, why not? “Really, all he does is bark at the neighbor’s yappy little Chihuahuas. I guess I should offer you something to drink. Something…nonalcoholic?” she asked, smiling through her barb at his affinity for the bottle.

“I’m fine.”

She doubted it. Otherwise he wouldn’t be here. “So what’s up?” She settled into one of the faux-wicker chairs surrounding a large glass table and motioned him to have a seat. “What is it you want to know about Jennifer?”

Bentz sat in the shade of an oversized umbrella. “Her suicide,” he said.

Shana frowned, felt her lips pull into a knot of frustration.

“You were one of her closest friends. I thought you could tell me her state of mind before her death—did she really want to end it all?”

“Wow. That’s it? You want my take on what she was thinking?”

“Yeah.”

Okay, he asked. Shana rolled the years back in her head, remembered Jennifer—fun and naughty and terminally sexy. “It never made sense to me. She was too full of life, too into herself to want to end it.”
“We found a note.”

“Oh, pooh!” She swiped at the air as if a bothersome fly were buzzing around her head. “I don’t know what that was all about. Sure, she told me she fought depression at times, but…I didn’t think it was that serious. Maybe I was wrong, but I would have bet at the time she wrote the note it was just a way to get attention, you know? She was big on that. I mean who kills themselves by driving into a tree?”

He was listening, not bothering to take notes.

“She could’ve had an accident, I’ll grant you that. She was known to drink a little and then there were pills, but…” She looked him straight in the eye. “If you’re asking me if I think Jennifer was capable of suicide, I’d say no. Just like I said pretty loudly at the time she died.”

Bentz nodded. As if he remembered.

“I lived with Jennifer at Berkeley and then afterward when…you know she was dating Alan Gray? No, not just dating. I think they were engaged for a while, right?”

She saw the narrowing of his eyes, the quiet assent behind his shaded glasses.

“But she didn’t move in with Alan, probably because she met you. Personally, I thought she was crazy. I mean, Alan was this super-rich real estate developer. God, he must’ve been worth tens of millions. Yet, she fell for you. A cop. Threw the millionaire over. Go figure.” Shana sighed theatrically. “But then who could figure our girl out? Jennifer was nothing if not a dichotomy.” Shana remembered Jennifer the flirt. Jennifer the extrovert. Jennifer the wild. But never could she recall Jennifer the morose. “However, I never considered Jennifer someone who would hurt herself. Not intentionally. I mean I just don’t think she was capable of it. She would do a lot of things for attention. A lot. But never really self-destructive.” Shana caught herself and sighed. “Well, unless you mean the affair.” She met his gaze, but she doubted it so much as flickered behind his shades. “James was definitely her Achilles’ heel.” She looked away to the pool where sunlight danced on the water, clear and aquamarine. “Look, it’s been a long time and really, I don’t know what was in her head at the time. I just doubt that it was suicide.”

Bentz asked her a few more questions about her friendship, then, when she looked at her watch, came up with the bombshell.

“What?” She was shocked. “Are you kidding?” But he wasn’t. His face was stone-cold sober. “No way. I mean, how would she go about it?” Her thoughts swirled. Goose bumps rose on the back of her arms. Was this some kind of trick question? But Bentz’s expression told her differently. “Okay, I don’t know what you’re getting at, but no, I don’t think she could have…what? Staged the accident? Put someone up to it? Killed another woman? No…that’s nuts, Rick.” She felt her insides churning. This was just too weird. “Weren’t you the one who identified her body?”

He nodded, his lips tightening just a bit.

“Well, then, did you make a mistake?”

“I don’t know,” he said and she let out a long breath. “She didn’t talk to you about it? Didn’t show up afterward?”

“No! For the love of God!” Was the man bonkers? Holy crap! “What kind of dope are you smoking, Bentz? Jennifer’s dead. We both know it.”

“If you say so.”

Shana leaned back in her chair and eyed the man who had been Jennifer’s husband. He hadn’t been known to hallucinate. At least, not before all his problems. At one point he’d been the shining star of the LAPD, but that star had been tarnished, along with his badge.

Today, though, he looked like the old Bentz. Handsome and hard-edged. Oh, he was a little more shopworn
around the edges, the years starting to show. But this Bentz was clear-eyed and determined. Passionate. Some of the qualities Jennifer had been drawn to in the first place.

“What makes you think Jennifer is alive?” she asked. This conversation was weird, weird, weird.

He withdrew something from an envelope—photos that he fanned over the glass-topped table. Shana’s heart nearly stopped. The woman in each shot was Jennifer, or her goddamned identical twin. “Where’d you get these? I mean...you’re saying these are recent?” she asked, her mind boggled. Jennifer was dead.

“Someone sent them to me. I thought you might have an idea who.”

“Not a clue...but...this can’t be...I mean, she’s dead. You were the one who—” She picked up the shot of Jennifer crossing the street. A chill slid down her spine.

“I’m just looking into her death,” he said as she eyed the pictures, looking for flaws, some hint that this was a twisted hoax.

“Where did these come from?” she asked.

“Postmarked Culver City.”

“Where you lived.” She swallowed hard. Heard the dry wind rustling the palm fronds. Felt cold as death inside. “This has to be an illusion.”

“I know, but I have some time, so I thought I’d check into it a little deeper.”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer, just asked, “Is there anything you can tell me about the last week or so of her life that was unusual or different?”

“Aside from the fact that she died?” Shana asked bitterly, then eyed the pictures again. The truth of the matter was that she missed Jennifer. She wasn’t crazy about talking to Jennifer’s ex-husband, a real son of a bitch who’d been distant from his wife, always putting his work before his damned family.

She felt an allegiance to Jennifer, even now when she was no longer with the living. Discussing her with Rick seemed a betrayal somehow. Shana glanced away from Rick Bentz’s intimidating glare to the garden where heavy-blossomed bougainvillea clung to an arbor, the leaves rustling in a soft breeze.

But what was the point to keeping mum now? Her allegiance was long over. Jennifer was gone.

“All I know is that Jennifer talked about leaving a lot. She mentioned giving herself a break and you your freedom.” To his credit, the man winced, if only slightly. “She thought you were more cut out to be a parent than she was, even though you worked too much, got too involved with your cases, and drank a whole lot more than you should.” Shana lifted her hair up, letting the breeze skim across her nape. “She was smart enough to realize you were a good father. For what that’s worth.”

Crossing one leg over the other, she wondered, could those pictures be real? No way. The woman in the pictures was too young. Or she had an exceptional plastic surgeon. Shana dragged her gaze away, got back to skewering Bentz. “You already said you know she had a lover.” From the tightening of Bentz’s jaw, Shana knew she had hit a nerve. “She was planning to cut it off with him, too. Her life was getting too complicated and since James was your half brother...”

“And the father of my daughter.”

Jesus, he was way ahead of her. Shana shrugged and wished she’d made a pitcher of margaritas. She was suddenly thirsty as well as nervous. “Well, she knew that her affair, with him being a priest and all, only spelled trouble for both of them.”
“Did he know she was going to end it?” Bentz asked gravely.

“Suspected it, I think. She hadn’t actually done the dirty deed, but he’d sensed it was coming. He was beside himself.”

Bentz’s jaw slid to the side and she knew she was getting to him. Good. The bastard deserved it for ignoring his wife, probably sending her to an early grave, and then showing up here on Shana’s doorstep out of the blue. He was sexy, though, in that earthy way she found fascinating, if a little dangerous. Rugged and tough…despite the fact that he was a cop. Shana leaned forward, making sure her robe gaped open a bit, displaying a hint of her perfect décolletage, her latest investment since her damned boobs had started going south sometime after thirty-five.

“So what did he do?”

“Father James?” she asked coyly, suddenly glad to get back at this bastard.

“Yeah. Him.”

“He was upset, of course. They had a couple of fights. He was…out of control.”

There was a slight tic in Bentz’s jaw. “You think he had something to do with her accident?”

“I…I wouldn’t say that,” she hedged, but then what had she known about a priest who had continually broken his vow to God and church? Hadn’t she asked herself that very same question? She decided to change the subject. “You know, that brother of yours, he was damned sexy and passionate. A problem, I think, since he happened to be a priest.” She fluttered her fingers. “That vow of celibacy tends to get in the way. It can be a real bummer.”

Bentz was silently seething and she loved it. She decided to push it a bit. “You know, they sometimes met up on the Santa Monica Pier, or somewhere around there. I believe that’s where they first really hooked up. On the beach maybe, not far from the amusement park.” She saw Bentz flinch and knew she’d hit a mark. Good. She went on. “Let’s see, and then…Jeez, what was it that she was always talking about?” she asked and noticed the tightening of the corners of Bentz’s mouth. “Oh, I know! This was a biggie for her for some reason. They used to meet at some inn at San Juan Capistrano, I think.”

He tensed even more, his eyes, behind his shades, squinting. “You know the name?”

“I…I wouldn’t say that,” she hedged, but then what had she known about a priest who had continually broken his vow to God and church? Hadn’t she asked herself that very same question? She decided to change the subject. “You know, they sometimes met up on the Santa Monica Pier, or somewhere around there. I believe that’s where they first really hooked up. On the beach maybe, not far from the amusement park.” She saw Bentz flinch and knew she’d hit a mark. Good. She went on. “Let’s see, and then…Jeez, what was it that she was always talking about?” she asked and noticed the tightening of the corners of Bentz’s mouth. “Oh, I know! This was a biggie for her for some reason. They used to meet at some inn at San Juan Capistrano, I think.”

He tensed even more, his eyes, behind his shades, squinting. “You know the name?”

“No, but I remember Jennifer saying it was part of an old mission. Not the main one that’s there. It’s a smaller church that was sold and remodeled into an inn.” She tried to recall the details. “Wait a sec. Didn’t she tell me they always stayed in room number seven? It was, like, their lucky number, or something.”

“Number seven?” he repeated tightly.

“Yeah, I think so, though why I remember that, I don’t know.” But suddenly a conversation she’d had with Jennifer after one of her trysts came back to her now. Jennifer’s eyes had been bright with mischief, her lips curved into an aren’t-I-naughty smile as she sipped a martini and spilled a few juicy details of her secret life. And the name of the motel in Capistrano? It floated to her, then away. So damned elusive. “I think the name of the inn was Mission San…San Michelle.” That didn’t sound right. What the hell was it? “No…no. Wait!” She snapped her fingers as it came to her. “Mission San Miguel, that was it! It was special to them. They’d been there the first time, you know, when she got pregnant and then again, when they restarted the affair.” She saw the revulsion that Bentz was trying so hard to mask and she felt a thrill of satisfaction.

The jerk deserved a dose of cold, hard reality. He was the reason Jennifer had been so messed up; his distance had forced her into the arms of another man. She leaned a bit closer and said in a throaty stage whisper, “It’s kind of ironic, don’t you think, being as Father James was a man of God and all. I guess he could sleep with Jennifer, break all kinds of vows, and then head on over to the confessional to cleanse his soul.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’m not Catholic, but that is how it works, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know.” He seemed to be making a mental note. “Any other place?”
“Oh, I think there was some little no-tell motel over on Figueroa, somewhere near USC, but I’m not really sure.” Maybe she was telling him too much. Maybe she should keep her mouth shut. Nothing she said would bring Jennifer back.

His jaw was set. Rock hard. Eyes as steady as his voice. The cop. Cold. Distant. Had seen it all. “Anything else you remember?”

“Only that she was sorry,” she said in a moment of bare, honest-to-the-bone truth. “For hurting you.”

He looked at Shana as if she were yanking his chain again.

Who could blame the guy?

“I’m serious, Rick. She loathed herself for what she referred to as ‘her curse,’ her need to throw away all that was good in her life. Yeah, she was self-centered and vain, but deep down there was a very good person. In her own weird way, Jennifer loved you. A lot.”
CHAPTER 9

That day Bentz saw Jennifer for the first time in L.A.

After leaving Shana’s Beverly Hills estate he’d driven southwest, deciding to find Figueroa Street and satisfy his own morbid curiosity.

He was still mentally digesting everything he’d learned from Shana, trying to cull the facts from the fiction, or at least from Shana’s very slanted view of things, as he wended his way through the early afternoon traffic. One thing was clear from his meeting with Shana McIntyre; the pictures of Jennifer had unsettled her. No way had Shana faked her reaction. That had to mean something.

And in her catty way she’d reminded him to check out Alan Gray, the man Jennifer had professed to love. For a while.

A developer who had made his money in the seventies and eighties, long before the recently stalled economy, Alan Gray had been in and out of Jennifer’s life. Bentz reminded himself to look the mogul up and see what good old Alan was doing these days. He would be in his late fifties or early sixties by now, possibly retired.

Bentz would check.

Squinting against the bright sun, he flipped down his visor and spotted several motels that could well have been one of the spots where Jennifer and James had met for their trysts. Unfortunately, there would be no records to prove that any of the stucco-faced buildings had been the private spot where they had met.

And so what if they had?

It had been over twelve years.

In that span of time places had changed hands, old buildings torn down and new ones sprouting up. He was just about to turn toward Culver City when he caught a glimpse of a slim, dark-haired woman in a yellow sundress and dark glasses standing at a bus stop.

So what? he thought initially. But as he drove past, he saw her profile and his heart stopped. The nose and chin…the way she held her purse as she stood near a bench, her eyes trained down the street where the approaching bus lumbered and belched blue smoke. She lifted one hand to her forehead, shading her eyes even further.

Just as Jennifer had always done.

Shana’s words rushed back to him: “In her own weird way, Jennifer loved you.” He’d been stunned then and was still.

This is crazy, his mind warned. It’s not her. You know it’s not Jennifer. Power of suggestion, that’s all it is!

With one eye on his rearview mirror and the other trained ahead, he searched for a parking space as the bus slowed to a stop.

“Oh, hell.” Gunning his car into a parking lot for a strip mall he nosed his rental into the first available space, an area that warned that the lot was for customers only. The doors to the bus were open. Two teenaged boys plugged
into iPods laughed and pushed each other as they hauled their skateboards onto the bus.

Bentz threw himself out of the car and hitched his way across the street.

She was gone.

The woman in the yellow dress was nowhere to be seen.

The doors of the bus closed and the driver turned on the flashers to signal that she was heading into traffic.

“No!” Bentz pushed into the street, his bad leg aching as he hobbled after the city vehicle. He reached the stop just as the bus rumbled noisily away.

Was she aboard?

As it pulled away from the curb, Bentz stared through the dusty windows. He scanned the face of every passenger he could see, but recognized no one. There wasn’t anyone remotely resembling his ex-wife.

Bentz took note of the bus number and the time, then studied the surrounding landscape. No dark-haired woman in a lemony sundress was strolling along the sidewalk or walking quickly around a corner or climbing into any of the vehicles lining the streets.

He felt a prickle of déjà vu run through his soul.

As if he’d been here before.

As if he’d been chasing Jennifer along these very streets.

He stared after the bus as it disappeared from view, considered chasing it down, trying to outrun it and board at the next stop.

Get a grip, he silently told himself. It wasn’t her. It’s just the power of suggestion, all because of Shana, the bitch. Jennifer, living or dead, is not on that bus. Come on, man, get real! When in known history did Jennifer ever take public transportation?

“I just don’t like it, that’s all,” Kristi admitted. She was driving with one hand, her cell phone in the other as she talked with Reuben Montoya, her father’s partner.

“He needed to get away.”

“Why?” she demanded, working her way through the narrow streets of Baton Rouge as she drove toward All Saints College.

“He just said he needed some time away. He was going stir crazy not being able to work.”

“Why go back to L.A.?”

“Ask him.”

“I did and he stonewalled me.” Kristi was beginning to panic. Something was wrong, really wrong. Ever since the accident her dad hadn’t been himself. She’d thought—no, hoped—that after he worked through physical therapy he would return to normal, but that wasn’t the case.

“Your father can handle himself,” Montoya said. “Don’t worry about him.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to.” She hung up and drove into the parking lot of her apartment building, which faced the campus. A once-grand old house, the building had been cut into single units, each one becoming a basic collegiate apartment. She lived here alone with her cat, punctuated by the occasions when Jay taught forensic science at the
college. Those nights he stayed with her. The rest of the time he lived in New Orleans and worked for the crime lab.

Once they were married this December and she was finished with school, they would live in New Orleans. Fingers crossed that the first draft of her true-crime book would be finished by then.

But first, her father. God, what was Bentz doing? She mulled it over as she pulled out a sack of groceries from the back of her Honda hatchback and hiked up to her third-floor studio. She toyed with the idea of calling Olivia, her stepmother, but their relationship hadn’t always been smooth. It would be better to talk with her in person, but who could find the time?

As she was placing the last of her cheapo low-cal meals-for-one in the freezer, she saw Houdini outside the window. The black cat slunk inside and she picked him up, stroking his head as her phone chirped. “Hello?” she said as her quirky feline hopped down to the floor.

“Hey, Kristi, it’s Olivia.”

*Perfect.*

“How’re things at school?”

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Hey.”

“How’re things at school?”

What was this? Olivia never called. “All good,” Kristi said tentatively.

“And the wedding?”

“Everything’s on target.” Kristi kicked out a chair at her café table and sat down. “How about with you?”

“Good.”

Time to cut out the crap. “So why’s Dad in L.A.?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I can’t really say,” Olivia admitted, “but it seemed like something he had to do.” Her voice faded for a moment, as if she were looking away from the phone. Kristi’s heart began to drum as she anticipated what was to come: that her father and Olivia were getting a divorce. “He didn’t tell you about it?”

“He didn’t tell me anything. Just some BS about old cases in L.A. and that he’d be back soon. It all seemed bogus and I was wondering what was going on. Thought maybe there was something wrong between you.”

A beat. No answer. Kristi’s heart hit the floor.

“Your dad...he’s struggled since the accident. Can’t stand sitting around here, so I think he needed to do something to give himself a new perspective or...think things through.”

“What things?” Kristi asked cautiously. There was an undercurrent to this conversation she didn’t understand.

“I’m not sure. I don’t even think he knows, but when he does, I’m sure he’ll tell us.”

*I wouldn’t bet on it.*

“Anyway, I was calling to see if you wanted to get dinner sometime, or coffee? Maybe the next time you’re in New Orleans.”

“Sure.” It wasn’t as if Olivia hadn’t tried to bridge the whole stepmother gap with her before. They’d done some things together, but usually Dad was along. This was a little out of the ordinary. “I’m coming down in about a week,” Kristi offered.

“Then let’s make a date. If your dad’s back, maybe we’ll let him join us.” She paused a second, then added, “But maybe not.”
“You got it.” Kristi hung up. If your dad’s back, Olivia had said. So she was in the dark, too. Kristi didn’t like it. Whatever her father was going through, it wasn’t good.

After a long day of classes Laney Springer threw her books onto the tiny café table one of her roommates had donated to the cause of their shared apartment. God, it had been a day from hell, starting with Professor Williams’s dullsville lecture on the Korean War. Why she’d ever thought Modern History: American Politics in the Twentieth Century would be an interesting way to fill her schedule was beyond her. Thankfully, the semester was wrapping up. Professor Williams would soon be history—literally.

She walked to the refrigerator and peeked inside. The contents were pathetic: dried-out pizza in its box, the pieces of pepperoni already picked off. A bag of celery was turning brown beside some half-drunk bottles of Diet Pepsi. Gross.

She shut the door and decided she shouldn’t eat anyway. Not if she wanted to fit comfortably into her tight, tiny, shimmery silver dress tonight. And she did. If nothing else, she wanted to look hot, hot, hot.

Forget the old pizza.

This was her big night. Well, technically not just hers, but her twin sister Lucy’s, too.

At midnight both of them would turn twenty-one. Finally legal!

Of course there were still over six hours of waiting until the clock struck midnight. The witching hour. Kind of a reverse Cinderella syndrome. She had fake ID, but tonight, she was going to burn her fraudulent Oregon license.

The good news was that she wouldn’t have to wait an extra fourteen minutes after her twin sister took her first legal sip. Lucy always lorded it over Laney that she had been born at 12:47 while Laney hadn’t come along until 1:01. But tonight it didn’t matter. It was the date, not the time.

There was going to be a big party; all her friends would be there, even Cody Wyatt, the really cool guy in her English Lit class. Good. Because she knew she’d have to put up with Lucy’s creep of a boyfriend, Kurt Jones. What a loser! A thirty-year-old high school dropout who had never married the mother of his kid and, according to Lucy, didn’t want anything to do with his three-year-old son. Now Kurt was hanging out with Lucy and she was making all kinds of excuses for him. No doubt he was her dealer. Lucy was really getting into weed and who knew what else.

It worried Laney.

A little marijuana was one thing; the other stuff could be a huge problem. But tonight, if Kurt showed up, Laney figured she’d ignore the prick. Who cared what he did?

Weed, meth, coke, pills, he does it all.

She hoped Lucy would dump his ass.

For good.

Keyed up, she decided to work out, stretch muscles that had been cramped into uncomfortable desks all day. She’d get enough cardio tonight on the dance floor, but she wanted to tone her body. So first she’d lift some weights, then she’d pop in her yoga DVD and stretch out. Afterward, she’d take a long shower and wash her hair and spend as much time as she wanted with her makeup. It was, after all, almost her birthday. Correction. Make that their birthday. Hers and Lucy’s.

She found her iPod in her book bag and slipped the player into the sound system her roommate Trisha owned. The music was loud, but all the renters in the triplex were college kids; no one complained about music, parties, or even pets that were strictly forbidden.
On her way to the bedroom she shared with Trisha, Laney grabbed the communal free weights from the bookcase. Kicking a clear spot on the rug in the small space between the foot of her unmade bed and Trisha’s dresser, Laney started working on her arms to a song by Fergie. No flapping wings for this girl. Not ever. If she had to do a thousand triceps curls when she was eighty, so be it. Eighty. Wow. Like sixty years into the future. Fifty-nine as of tonight!

The reps came easy at first and she closed her eyes. The song and mood changed. She got lost in the beat and melodies of Justin Timberlake, then Maroon 5…

One more set; she was really feeling it now.

*Come on, come on,* she encouraged herself as the music pounded through her brain. *You can do it; don’t give up.*

She was breathing hard, sweating big-time.

Once her biceps and triceps were screaming, she stretched out on the floor and started with leg lifts.

She thought she heard someone come in and yelled, “I’m in here!” over the throb of bass and a long keyboard riff, then kept working out until her body was covered in sweat and her legs ached.

Only after doing all the reps she’d planned did she spring to her feet. *Good girl! Way to go!* She grabbed her towel and headed to the living area where the music was still blasting. Time to stretch these muscles. Besides, she wanted to give Trish or Kim a chance to wish her a happy birthday.

But she didn’t see either of her roommates flopped on the secondhand couch Kim had found. And they weren’t nuking popcorn or boiling ramen in the kitchen.

*Odd.*

Hadn’t she heard one of her roommates return?

Dabbing at the sweat on her face, she strode over to check Kim’s room. Empty.

*Snap!*

A strange sound. Muted.

Had her iPod skipped?

She backed out of Kim’s room, pulled the door shut behind her, and headed back to the living area. On her way to the stereo she noticed a hint of cigarette smoke in the air. No big deal. They all had taken up cigs.

*Snap!*

Behind her?

In the hallway?

Fear sprayed through her blood.

“Kim?” she said starting to turn.

In a split second she saw that the door she’d just shut, the one to Kim’s room was open and someone was looming in the darkened hallway. Someone who hadn’t been there an instant before.

“Hey! Who the hell are—” The words died in her throat when she noticed the belt in his hands. “Oh, Jesus!”

She screamed, but her attacker was on her in an instant. He slipped the thin belt over her head and looped it around her neck in a snap, cutting off her air, stifling her cry.
Oh, God! This jerkwad was going to hurt her! Rape her! Kill her! Fear curdled her insides.

She kicked, landed one blow with her heel and her assailant let out a hiss of pain.

*Good!*

She tried again but was jerked roughly to one side, her airway cut off, the pain in her lungs hot and tight.

*This can’t be happening,* she thought wildly. She was coughing and gasping, digging at the strap, struggling and flailing, throwing her weight around. Anything to loosen the ever-tightening collar!

*No! No! No!*

Kicking crazily, trying to land another blow on his shin, she slipped. He used the chance to wrench her up by the belt, holding her in the air. Dangling like a doll.

*Hit the creep. Get the belt off your neck! Save yourself!* Though her lungs were on fire, she flung her fist backward, trying to hit the monster in the nose or eyes or anything! The fingers of her other hand were scratching at the strap on her throat.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think.

*Help me. Please, someone, anyone help me!*

She wasn’t a wimp, but her strength was fading, the pain excruciating.

Passing out would be better.

*No!*

*Don’t give up!*

*Fight!*

*Oh, God, the pain…I can’t breathe! Help! Please help me!*

She gave up hitting and used both hands to try and free herself from the constricting strap.

Her fingers clawed at her neck.

Dug deep.

But it was too late.

Her lungs were bursting.

Pain screaming through her body.

Her heart thudding.

Blackness converging over her.

In that horrid instant, Laney knew. She knew she would never see her twenty-first birthday.
CHAPTER 10

Hayes had been right.

Roy’s had definitely gone downhill, Bentz thought, driving past the restaurant.

Still a little shaken from his recent “Jennifer sighting,” he found a ridiculously small parking spot a couple of blocks from the restaurant. He wedged the Ford Escape into it and fed the meter. Ignoring the pain in his leg, he managed to avoid a couple of speeding skateboarders who whipped by, the wheels of their boards grinding against the concrete as he hitched his way to the front doors.

Named for its original owner and not Roy Rogers as many people thought, the place still had a western facade complete with Dutch doors that looked as if they belonged on a barn. There had once been a plastic rearing horse mounted over the front awning, until some smart-ass had climbed up on the roof in the middle of the night and painted the white stallion’s private parts fire-engine red.

That had been the end of the white stud.

Now the awning displayed a sign that simply said: Roy’s.

Good enough, Bentz figured as he pushed open the doors and stepped back in time.

Inside, the dark restaurant seemed dingy. Twelve years ago all the cowboy memorabilia gathered from the sets of old westerns and television shows had been retro-cool. Now the worn saddles, fence posts, cowboy hats, and chaps that adorned the place looked dusty and worn.

The crowd had changed, or at least aged, just like the old plank floors.

A long bar, complete with brass foot rail, swept along one side of the establishment. Tables and booths took care of the rest.

He found a booth, settled in, and ordered a nonalcoholic beer from a waitress who was splitting the seams of her cowgirl costume.

Before she could return, Bentz spied Jonas Hayes pushing through the front doors. Hayes, too, had aged. African American and six-four, he was still imposing, if slightly thicker around the middle than he had been when he was a rookie cop or a running back for UNLV. His close-cropped black hair showed a few bits of silver, and when he took his shades off, crow’s feet were visible at the corners of his eyes.

But he still dressed as if he were a model. Expensive suit, polished shoes, silk tie knotted to perfection.

Bentz waved him over and stood, stretching out his hand. “Helluva long time.”

Hayes nodded and clasped Bentz’s fingers in a strong, sure grip. “What’s it been? Eleven? Twelve years?”

“‘Bout that.”

They sat down on opposite sides of the booth. “And then you show up outta the blue. Lookin’ for a favor.”

“You got it.”
Waitress Pseudo-cowgirl returned, her mood not appearing to have improved as she took Hayes’s order for a scotch on the rocks.

“Friendly,” Hayes observed once she’d huffed away.

“Don’t think she likes the getup she has to wear.”

“Can’t blame her. You still on the wagon?” Hayes nodded toward Bentz’s bottle.

“Yep. Gave it up after Jennifer died.”

“Probably a good thing.”

Bentz raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. Well, most of the time. Trinidad still with the department?”

“A lifer and then some.” Hayes was nodding as the waitress, forcing a false smile, returned with Hayes’s drink and plastic-encased menus. She rattled off a couple of specials and was about to turn away when Bentz asked, “You still have the T-Bone and steak fries?”

Without an ounce of enthusiasm, she said, “It’s, like, been on the menu forever.”

“Thought so. I’ll take it. Medium rare. Blue cheese dressing on the salad.”

She didn’t bother writing it down, just looked at Hayes, who scanned the menu and folded it closed, ordering the barbecued pork chop special.

Once she’d disappeared again, he turned dark eyes on Bentz. “Okay, so what gives? What’s this ‘favor’ you want from me?”

“I want you to look at Jennifer’s death again.”

“Jennifer? As in your wife?”

“Ex-wife, but yeah.” Bentz settled back against the cushions and took a swallow from his bottle.

“That was twelve years ago, man. She died in a single-car accident. Probable suicide.” Again Hayes searched Bentz’s face with those black eyes. Cop’s eyes.

“That’s what we all thought at the time, but it’s a helluva way to kill yourself. Messy. Sometimes doesn’t get the job done right and you end up a vegetable, or taking someone else out with you, or spending the rest of your life in a wheelchair. Not a usual form of suicide. Why not just run the car in the garage or take pills? Slit your wrists in the tub? Hang yourself in the closet?”

“She was your wife. You tell me.”

Bentz was shaking his head. “Besides, she wouldn’t have wanted to mess herself up that way. Too vain.”

“She was killing herself, man. On pills and booze. Not thinkin’ right. She didn’t give a good goddamn about how she looked and she might have taken the car out cuz she didn’t want you or your kid to come home to it, y’know? Not a good thing for her daughter to find her dead.”

“She didn’t have to do it at home. There are other places. Motels.” He thought about the shabby condition of the So-Cal Inn, a perfect place for a suicide. Cheap. Private. Poolside view if you wanted it.

Hayes rotated his drink between his palms. “Okay, let’s cut the crap here. What’s going on?”

Bentz took another swallow of his beer, then reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a copy of the marred death certificate. Quickly he explained that it had been sent to the station, mailed from Culver City.
“So what?” Hayes said. “Someone messin’ with ya.”

Bentz nodded. “But it’s more than that.” He placed the photographs of Jennifer on the table. “I think someone is gaslighting me.”

“Oh, hell! These are Jennifer, right? And recent, I assume?”

“That’s what whoever sent them to me wants me to think.”

Hayes looked at him. “Dead ringer?”

“Perfect.”

“But…dead ringer from twelve years ago? No extra pounds, no more wrinkles.”

“You got it.”

“Son of a bitch.” Hayes stared at the pictures, then gave the death certificate a longer look, his eyes narrowing. At least he was listening now.

“Someone’s pretending to be Jennifer.”

“But why?” Hayes asked.

“Don’t know, but she’s not in this alone. Someone’s taking pictures.”

“So now it’s a conspiracy? To make you nuts.”

Bentz nodded.

“This is so far-fetched,” Hayes said, though his eyes strayed to the photographs again. “Man, oh, man. You and JFK? Okay, I’ll bite. Start from the beginning.”

Bentz filled him in. From waking up in the hospital, to see and smell and feel Jennifer in the room, to the sighting in his backyard. He left out the woman at the bus stop, worried that it was too vague, that she could have been anyone.

As he was wrapping it up, Hayes said, “And you think this person has been in New Orleans and L.A. She somehow knew the moment you would wake up from your coma…and then she hurried back to L.A. for a photo shoot around town?”

“No. If the dates on the photos are legit, she was back and forth between L.A. and New Orleans.”

“Then there should be plane tickets.”

“I’ve got someone looking into it; so far nothing.”

“Could’ve used an alias.”

“Jennifer Bentz is the alias,” he said, trying to convince himself. “I’ve got to find out who she really is and what she wants.”

“And you need my help.” Hayes was wary.

“Yeah.”

“How?”

Bentz brought up the call from the pay phone. “So what I’d like to see is photos from traffic cameras in the area,
or security tapes from local businesses, or better yet, satellite images of the street.”

“You don’t want much, do you? As far as I can see, no crime has been committed.”

“Unless the woman in Jennifer’s grave isn’t her.”

“That’s a big leap.”

Bentz couldn’t argue the point, though he tried. The waitress returned and slid large platters onto the table. She warned them that the plates were “really hot,” asked them about refills and if they needed anything else.

“I’m good,” Bentz said and Hayes nodded, agreeing.

“Okay, just let me know if you change your mind.” With a quick turn, she moved toward a table where four women were being seated.

Once she was out of earshot, Hayes said, “So you want me to use the resources of the department to help you find whoever’s screwing with you.”

“You could work with Montoya, in New Orleans. As I said, he’s already started.”

“Right. We’ll form a joint task force to solve…oops, there’s been no crime.” Hayes stared at his pork chop, cornbread, and applesauce. “So basically you came to California because of a postmark and some photographs.”

“Seemed like the logical place to start.”

“As I said, someone’s just fuckin’ with you.”

“No doubt. But why?”

“You tell me.”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.” Same old Hayes; the guy needed a firm push. “So the long and short of it is I need to know if Jennifer is in that casket.”

“What?” Hayes nearly dropped his fork.

“She was buried before we could do the DNA matching we do today,” Bentz said around a mouthful of steak. “All the testing was still in its infancy.”

“And you want her tested because you think what?” Jonas asked, his fork tines jabbed in Bentz’s direction. “That Jennifer might not be in there? That she might really be alive?”

“This is just a place to start.”

“Hell.”

“So you’ll get me the file on her suicide?”

“Remind me again why I would do this for you?”

“Because I saved your sorry black ass more than once in the past.” And it was true. When Hayes had been going through his divorce with his nutcase of a first wife, Alonda, Bentz had covered for him. The fact that his wife had left Hayes for another woman had really messed the guy up. Bentz figured adultery was adultery, no matter who you slept with, but Hayes, always a ladies’ man, had been devastated. He’d spent a couple of months partying until dawn, proving his manhood by picking up a lot of different women, and literally fucking up.

Fortunately he’d pulled himself together, but it had been touch and go for a while.
“Okay,” Hayes said reluctantly. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“And I might need a little help with the exhumation order.”

“Exhumation? Lord, this just keeps getting better and better,” Hayes complained, but he didn’t offer further argument as he finished his drink, ordered another, then cut into what had to be a cold piece of pork.

_Snap!_

Lucy Springer turned, eyeing the edge of the park as she hurried along the sidewalk to her apartment. She saw nothing alarming in the shadows, just an old man walking his dog about a block down the street. The dog, a skinny greyhound, it seemed, was relieving itself on a tree. But the night was thick and dark, the hint of fog rolling in, making everything in the bluish glow of streetlamps appear out of focus and ghostly.

Goose bumps pimpled her scalp. Her pulse elevated.

The street was just too…quiet.

“Jeez.” Inwardly she told herself she was being a big wuss, or pussy as her boyfriend Kurt would say. She needed to get over her case of nerves. Cell phone in hand, she paused at the corner, waiting for the light to change.

With the press of a button, she located her sister’s cell phone number and started texting.

_Snap!_

Her head whipped up and she looked over her shoulder. What was that sound? Not someone stepping on a twig. More like a sharp, hard click. Something she should recognize.

But she saw no one. Just the old man and dog ambling off in the opposite direction.

There wasn’t much traffic so she stepped into the street against the light and kept texting Laney.

_Where R U?_

_Almost 21._

_Legal._

_Meet at Silvio’s! 11 p.m. Drinks on me @ midnight._

_Party on!_

It was strange that Laney wasn’t texting or calling back. They’d been planning this celebration forever! Well, make that twenty-one years. Finally she and her twin were going to be adults! So why the hell was her sister avoiding her?

It was odd.

Not like Laney.

Lucy unlocked the gate to her building and walked through as her phone chirped. She glanced down to check it, vaguely aware of the gate clanging shut behind her.

A text from Laney!

Finally.

It was a picture-text and she clicked it open to see a fuzzy shot of her sister. Laney’s eyes were wide and round
with fear and some kind of red gag was pulled tight over her mouth. She looked scared to death!

What?

“Oh, God,” Lucy whispered, her heart pounding crazily, horror creeping up her spine.

What was this?

And then she got it.

This sick picture was Laney’s idea of a joke. “Bitch,” Lucy muttered under her breath. Though she had to hand it to her younger twin; the look on Laney’s face was one of pure terror. Well, of course. Wasn’t Laney going to USC and majoring in theater? Didn’t she have an acting scholarship, for God’s sake? Hadn’t she done a few acting jobs in commercials? Laney knew how to convey emotions perfectly and she had friends in the school who were experts in makeup and film.

Still, it scared the crap out of Lucy. “Not very funny,” Lucy said aloud and then stiffened as she heard the tiniest of noises…Breathing?

No way. The gate had latched behind her…right?

She reached her door and as she mounted the steps, began texting like crazy.

U really had me going for a sec.

C U later!

She reached in her purse for her keys and saw the neighbor’s cat perched on the rail of Chuck’s small porch. It stared at Lucy, its round eyes reflecting the porch light. “Hey, kitty.”

The silver tabby froze for a second, then dropped to the concrete and started to slink under the bottom rail. But it paused at the edge of the shadowy bushes, turned its sleek head toward Lucy and let out a long, low growl.

Crazy cat! “Hey, Platinum, it’s me, Lucy.”

Arching her back, Platinum hissed, showing needle-sharp teeth and round, wild eyes before scurrying madly under the fence.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Platinum, what’s wrong with you?” Lucy asked before she smelled it, a whiff of something foreign in the air. Cigarette smoke? Or…

Snap!

This time the noise was so close to her ear that she actually jumped.

She nearly screamed

From the corner of her eye, she saw something move in the darkness. A figure, shadowy and shimmering, leapt at her.

What!!!

In its big hands was a thin leather strap.

Oh, God, no!

She tried to yell for help, knew she should run, but it was too late. He grabbed her arm, yanked her hard against him. “Oooph,” she gasped, forcing a weak scream from her airless lungs just as the strip of leather slithered around her neck and grew taut.
What was this?

Pain sliced through her.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t scream. Couldn’t cough. Oh, dear God, the pain!

She clawed at the noose, trying to get her fingers under the smooth leather. The deadly strap didn’t budge.

She felt her attacker breathing fast and hard, getting off on her pain, yanking the leather hard.

Who? Who would want to kill me?

Why?

Her lungs burned and strained for oxygen. She kicked wildly, crazily, hoping her heel would connect with her attacker’s shin or anything nearby. She gasped hoarsely, trying to drag in any whisper of air.

Help me! Please, someone, help me!

Tearing at the damned ligature, she scratched her throat. A finger-nail ripped. Blood welled. Her head was in a vise. And her lungs, oh, God, her lungs…her lungs were about to burst! With a cruel jerk her assailant pulled tighter and the leather bit into the soft flesh beneath her chin.

Her eyes bulged.

Raw, searing pain ricocheted through her body.

She was going to die! Right here at her own front door!

She kicked frantically, hoping to hit her assailant or the door, to make some noise! Wake the neighbors! Anything she could!

Her thoughts swirled, rapid images of her parents back home, un aware that they would never see her again, and her Nana in Santa Barbara, and then there was Kurt, her sometime boyfriend…

Her eyes rolled back in her head, her lungs screamed silently as the will to fight back drained from her body. Her arms were heavy, her legs leaden, her entire being centered on the overwhelming need for air. It was over. She couldn’t fight, couldn’t remain conscious.

Her hands fell to her sides and she was vaguely aware that whoever was holding her was letting her fall onto the concrete stoop.

As the merciful blackness rolled over her, Lucy’s last thought was of Laney…dear sweet, trusting, stupid Laney.
“Bentz is back in town?” Russ Trinidad frowned into his drink, swirling the scotch and studying it as if it held the keys to the universe.

Hayes had asked Trinidad to meet him after work for a drink, which was unusual in and of itself. So Trinidad’s normally suspicious nature was on high alert. “What the hell is he doing back here?”

“It’s about his ex-wife.”

“Jennifer?” Trinidad snorted as water ran through bamboo stalks in a small waterfall near the entrance and soft Japanese music played in the background. “Piece of work, that one. Though I never really knew her.”

“Consider yourself lucky,” Hayes said.

At six feet, Trinidad was shorter than Hayes, but kept up a military physique. In Trinidad’s world black was beautiful and bald was sexy as any head of messy hair. They were seated in a corner booth in a bar in Little Tokyo, not too far from Parker Center, the building housing the Robbery-Homicide Division of the LAPD, yet far enough away not to be a cop hangout. Trinidad was into his second glass of scotch while Hayes worked his way through his first sake.

Hayes had decided to confide in Trinidad, Bentz’s ex-partner, because the near-retiring detective was one of Bentz’s few allies in the department. However at this point Bentz had been gone so long, even Trinidad was iffy.

“Okay, I’ll bite.” Trinidad took a sip from his drink, saw a fleck of something foreign floating in the scotch, and flicked it out with a practiced finger. He drank again, didn’t bother complaining to the waitress. “Fill me in on our old friend Bentz.”

Hayes did.

Told him about meeting with the former LAPD detective the night before, about the photos Bentz had received showing his dead wife out and about in L.A.

“So he thinks his ex-wife might still be alive?” Trinidad said, frowning and finishing his drink. “He IDed her.”

“Yeah, but she was real busted up.”

“You’re buying into it?” Trinidad’s eyebrows rose. “Sounds like bullshit to me.”

“I’m not buying into anything, but I checked. The only person to request a death certificate on her was Bentz himself. No one else bothered.” Unsettled, Hayes twisted his cup in his palms. “I mean it’s possible he’s gone off his nut. The guy nearly died in a freak accident. In a coma for a while.”

“And comes out of it only to be visited by his long-deceased ex-wife,” Trinidad scoffed. “How nice.”

“Or nuts.” Hayes took a swallow of the sake and watched a young Asian couple enter and take seats at the bar. “He gave me a copy of the envelope and death certificate that were sent to him. He’s having ‘em checked for fingerprints and to see if there’s any DNA on the seal of the envelope through the New Orleans PD.”

“So you’re not stickin’ your neck out for him, are you? Nothing you can do unless you’ve got the originals and
even if he gave them to you, I’d say you’d be making a mistake getting involved with this.”

“No problem since he didn’t. But I thought you were supposed to be his friend.”

Trinidad lifted a shoulder. “Friends don’t help friends become paranoid.” He leaned across the table and lowered his voice. “Rick Bentz is a loose cannon. Nearly lost it when he killed the Valdez kid, and, hey, that’s understandable. But afterward, he never pulled himself together. I thought maybe he’d got a handle on everything when he settled in with the New Orleans PD. Rumor has it he’s some kind of hero, solving difficult homicides. But, I’m telling you, there was a time he was this close”—he held up his thumb and forefinger so that they nearly touched—“to snapping. Looks like he finally did. My advice, even though you don’t want it: You’d be smart to avoid whatever it is he’s peddling.”

“Haven’t done anything yet.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the ‘yet’ part that’s the problem, isn’t it?” The edges of Trinidad’s mouth tightened.

At the bar, the Asian girl laughed as she ordered her drink and her boyfriend rubbed the back of her neck gently, but firmly, never letting up. Hayes bet he was already getting a hard-on. Young love. He’d been there a couple of times.

Trinidad patted the pocket of his shirt and found his cigarettes. He took one out, fingered it, and signaled for the waitress, not bothering to fight Hayes for the tab. Together they walked into the early evening light where the hazy sunset was reflected on the glass wall of a new condominium building. Farther down the street, the domed tower of the Cathedral of St. Vibiana was visible, its ornate Spanish architecture a contrast to the geometric skyline of downtown Los Angeles.

Trinidad lit up, drawing smoke deep into his lungs as they walked along the crowded sidewalk. “Bentz was a good cop. The Valdez thing really fucked him up.” Shaking his head, he added, “Then his wife messin’ around with his brother. Hell. Who wouldn’t go off the deep end?” They turned a corner to a spot on the street where Trinidad had wedged his Chevy Blazer. “But I’m about ready to retire.” He let out a cloud of smoke. “Looking up old records? Exhuming a body when everybody knows who’s in the casket? I don’t need this shit.”

“What if Jennifer Bentz didn’t die?”

“She did. We don’t need DNA to prove it. Her car. Her body identified by her husband. No other missing person who matches her description.”

“We don’t know that.”

“I’m just sayin’ that Bentz had a tendency to bend the rules until they broke, and I’m not that guy anymore. I’ve got less than a year until retirement. I don’t want to fuck it up.”

But his words didn’t match his expression as he tossed his cigarette onto the street and stomped on the smoldering butt with a little more force that was necessary. “Shit.” He looked up at the sky and shook his head. “Goddamned Bentz. Why the hell is he back now, seein’ ghosts, makin’ waves? That son of a bitch left me holding the bag, y’know. And other officers, too. Walked away from a couple of cases, some messy ones that never did get solved.”

Hayes remembered one high-profile case, a double-murder investigation that went stone cold when Jennifer Bentz’s accident derailed her ex-husband. The Caldwell twins…The killer had gotten away, leaving little evidence behind other than their mutilated bodies. At the time of the double homicide, Bentz had been a mess, a rabid drunk.

“Bentz would never ask you to do anything illegal,” Hayes said as Trinidad opened the door of his Blazer.

“Yeah, right.” He jabbed his key into the engine and looked up at Hayes. “You know the old saying: If you believe that, I’ve got some swampland I’d like to sell you in Florida.”

“It worked for Disney.”
Trinidad grinned, showing off a mouthful of big teeth. “You keep thinking that way. But be careful.”

“So, you’re not gonna help him.”

“Help him find his dead ex-wife who faked her suicide and killed some woman in a car wreck?”

“Yeah.”

Trinidad shook his head. “No way, man.” With a roar of the engine, he was off.

Hayes climbed into his SUV, twisted on the ignition, and gunned it just as his cell phone chirped. Roaring into a sea of traffic, he glanced at the display.

Riva Martinez’s name came onto the screen.

His partner.

“Hayes,” he said. “What’s up?”

“We’ve got a double. Two female bodies found in a storage unit in one of those facilities under the 110.” She gave him the cross street and address of an on-ramp to the Harbor Freeway—the 110—then added, “Looks like the vics are twins.”

“What? Wait a second.” His mind raced ahead and he told himself to slow down. He was making connections that didn’t exist. Seeing Bentz again had reminded him of the Caldwell case, the unsolved double murder that had occurred twelve years earlier.

“Got a problem?” Martinez asked.

“Twins?” Hayes spoke slowly as adrenaline rushed through his veins. “Identical?”

“I’d say so. We’ll know for sure soon. You’d better get down here.”

She hung up, leaving Hayes with an overwhelming sense of doom. He hit the gas.

Bentz had never solved the Caldwell murders. The killer of those twins had never been caught. Somehow he’d disappeared from the face of the earth, or at least left Southern California. Of course there had been hypotheses cast about. Some people thought that the guy was in prison, caught for some other crime, and had never been fingered for the Caldwell murders. Others believed that he’d died or moved on. There was speculation that the killer had just up and quit, but that didn’t come from cops. No one in the department really believed a sadistic murderer had just given up his avocation for fly-fishing or golf.

“Damn.” Ignoring the speed limit, Hayes set his lights on the dash and put in a quick call to Trinidad. His thoughts were dark and jumbled as he plunged through an intersection where the light was changing from amber to red.

How was it possible that within forty-eight hours of Rick Bentz returning to L.A., a killer had nearly duplicated the double murder that had led to the end of Bentz’s career?

Coincidence?

Or diabolically calculated?

The last twenty-four hours had proved fruitless for Bentz. One dead end after another. He’d driven to Santa Monica again, parked, and walked the length of the boardwalk. At the end of the pier he stared out to sea and imagined Jennifer here. With him. With James. By herself.

He’d even driven by some of the places he and Jennifer had frequented when she’d been alive. A burger joint
where they’d shared baskets of fries not far from West Los Angeles College. A bar on Sepulveda where she’d introduced him to martinis. A romantic Italian restaurant where they’d sat next to each other in a dark booth, Jennifer’s hand on his thigh. Ernesto’s was no longer. The building itself had gone through many transformations and now was a Thai place that specialized in “to go” orders. Out of some twisted sense of irony, he bought a bowl of gai yang that was heavy on the garlic.

He’d cruised past the pay phone on Wilshire knowing nothing would come of it and had even driven to the spot where he’d last seen the woman who looked like Jennifer waiting for the bus on Figueroa. He’d spent two hours at the stop, arriving an hour before the time he’d seen her the day before, and leaving an hour afterward. To no end. No woman in a lemon-colored sundress. No Jennifer. And though he’d determined the route that particular bus took each afternoon, it didn’t cast any light on his investigation.

He’d grabbed a pizza to go, brought it back to his motel room, and ate a couple of slices as he went over his notes, focusing on the information he’d gathered from Shana McIntyre. She’d given up more than he’d expected, but still, he didn’t get the sense that Jennifer had been in touch with her.

He’d tracked down the bus driver on the route where he’d seen Jennifer. The driver, a woman in her late forties with spiky gray hair and a bored attitude, didn’t remember a woman who looked like Jennifer in a yellow dress. She hadn’t been certain, of course, but she knew that the woman in the photos was not a regular bus rider on her route.

Another dead end.

Bentz had placed calls to the others on his list but didn’t reach anyone, and he didn’t leave messages. He wondered about the rest of Jennifer’s friends. Would they be any more help than Shana had been?

And what about Alan Gray? Where had that rich prick landed? The Internet told him little, but piecing together information from several magazine and newspaper articles, it seemed Gray had a place in Palm Desert and played a helluva lot of golf. Good golf, judging by scores from some recent amateur tournaments.

He’d phoned and left a message for Hayes, but Jonas hadn’t returned the favor; probably didn’t know anything. But then, who did, he wondered as the air conditioner blew the blackout drapes around. They were open, the blinds cracked to allow sharp lines of sunlight through the dusty window.

Nothing made any sense, Bentz thought, glancing through the window to watch a curvy woman in her mid-thirties adjust the sun shade over the dash of her ancient Cadillac. Satisfied that the unfolded sun protector was in perfect position, she grabbed a huge purse from the passenger seat, slung the strap over her shoulder, then locked the Caddy. Looking over her shoulder, she hurried through the breezeway to an interior unit that faced the pool.

He wondered about the other occupants of the shabby motel. Every guest here had his or her secret, furtive truths to keep hidden within the identical units with worn carpeting, toilets that needed their handles jiggled, and mini-refrigerators that would barely hold a six-pack.

Snapping the blinds shut, Bentz tried to concentrate.

All in all, the day had been a dark walk down memory lane, which hadn’t helped him determine whether or not Jennifer was alive or dead.

As he finished his third piece of pepperoni and olives, he wondered why the hell he’d ever come to L.A. Maybe everyone else was right. Maybe he was chasing after a ghost. Maybe whoever was behind the pictures and death certificate was just getting his or her jollies, knowing that Jennifer had been haunting him ever since he’d woken from the coma. Maybe now that perv was just trying to use that information to push him over the edge. To make sure he was really going out of his friggin’ mind.

But who would have known that he’d seen the ghostly image of his wife upon waking? Just Kristi and a couple of nurses. Unless they’d said anything to someone who wanted to get at Bentz, nothing would have come of it.
“Hell.” He closed the pizza box, wiped his fingers, and speed-dialed his wife, the woman he loved. The one waiting for him in their home outside New Orleans. The one who was trying her damnedest to trust him.

Olivia didn’t answer and he didn’t bother leaving a message. What would he say? That he loved her? She knew it already. That he missed her? Then why wasn’t he on the next plane back to Louisiana? That he didn’t know what the hell he was doing in L.A.? Then why was he still here?

He thought of his conversation with Shana. Tomorrow Tally White would be working at the middle school where she was a teacher. As for Lorraine, Jennifer’s stepsister, he hadn’t connected with her, either. There were other friends and acquaintances as well, of course, but Shana, Tally, and Lorraine were at the top of his list as confidantes of his ex-wife. Women who might just know what had happened to her. Not to mention Fortuna Esperanzo, Jennifer’s friend at the gallery.

Of course he would have loved to have talked to Father James about her—James, his own damned brother—but that was impossible. There would be no rising from the dead for James; Father James would not be pulling a Lazarus. Bentz was sure the priest was dead, the victim of a serial killer, and nearly certain he was rotting in hell.

With Jennifer?

That was a question he couldn’t answer.

His heartburn was acting up. He fished a half-used roll of Tums out of his pocket, popped a couple, and found the keys to his rental car.

He frowned at his cane propped against the wall, snatched the stick along with his jacket, and walked outside into the lingering heat of the day. After locking the unit he crossed the cement walkway to his Ford and passed the old man next door who was walking his dog. Spike looked up at Bentz, only to return to sniffing the potholes of the parking lot, either looking for discarded bits of food or a place to defecate. Bentz nodded at the man, then climbed into his rental.

He’d spent enough hours in the So-Cal motel with its four dingy walls closing in on him.

He twisted on the ignition, cranked up the air, and hit the gas. It was time to drive down to San Juan Capistrano. If he was lucky, he’d make it and still have a couple of hours before night fell.

Hayes squealed to a stop under the overpass of the Harbor Freeway. Roadblocks had been set up, changing the traffic pattern around the storage units. Flashing lights strobed the street and the sooty cement pilings holding up the cavernous structure of concrete and steel.

Onlookers, some with cell phones taking pictures, had gathered around the storage facility tucked beneath the on-ramp to the 110. Two officers directed traffic, waving vehicles into the open lane as gawking drivers slowed, threatening to create major congestion. Other uniformed cops guarded the entrance to the storage units strung with yellow crime-scene tape. Orange traffic cones and barricades effectively forced the curious out.

Still, people gathered as vehicles rushed overhead, tires singing, engines rumbling, causing a deafening noise. A KMOL news van emblazoned in blue and sporting several satellite dishes was parked half a block up, two wheels over the curb to allow other cars to pass. The slim blond reporter Joanna Quince and a stocky cameraman lugging a shoulder cam headed toward the underpass. A helicopter for another local television station hovered overhead, the whir of its rotors silenced by the din of the freeway.

Hayes double-parked near the crime scene van and wended his way through the police cars, passing the SID van. The investigators from the Scientific Investigative Division were already at work. They’d search for footprints, handprints, hairs, or any kind of trace evidence that might provide clues to the identity of the killer. Photographs were being snapped, a videographer was filming, measurements taken. Hayes looked upward, searching for a security camera, but the one that was mounted over the units was obviously broken, the camera hanging at an awkward position from a rusted pole.
So much for any film of the storage units.

Martinez, a petite woman with fiery red hair and a razor-sharp tongue, stood at the door of Unit 8 and waved Hayes inside.

“Take a look,” she said with the hint of a Hispanic accent. “But I gotta warn ya, it’s not pretty.”

Hayes braced himself, keeping his eyes away from the victims for a moment. He focused on the dusty cement floor, the jars of nails, and a broken lawn chair that had been pushed into the corner of the unit. After all this time, he still wasn’t comfortable around dead bodies. The scent and look of death bothered him, got under his skin, cut into his brain, lingering there for days. He usually managed to hide it.

Not tonight.

Looking down at the defiled bodies of twin girls who seemed barely out of their teens, he couldn’t mask the raw pain that cut him to the quick.

They had been laid out purposefully, bound and gagged, naked, curled into the fetal position. Bruises and ligature marks were visible on their necks. Facing each other, their eyes open under the glare of a single lightbulb, each girl stared sightlessly at her twin. Their skin was so pale it seemed blue. Each victim’s blond hair had been pulled away from her face and tied with a long red ribbon. The same ribbon bound them. Posed as they were, identical twins, they resembled two macabre wraiths gazing into a mirror.

*Staged to look like they were still in the womb. Just like the Caldwell twins.*

Hayes’s jaw tightened. “Any ID?”

“Yeah…their clothes and purses, even their jewelry and cell phones, all over there. Along with their birth certificates, times of birth highlighted in pink.” Martinez hitched her chin to a corner. There on the floor, the clothing and personal effects of the two girls sat in neatly folded stacks.

A tidy, fastidious crime scene, Hayes thought as he leaned over the folded clothes. This was all too familiar. On top of each pile was a copy of the birth certificates, the date and time of their births highlighted with pink marker. Probably the same pink ink that would be found on the girls’ bodies, Hayes suspected. Assuming, of course, this was the killer who’d torn through L.A. years ago.


Jonas thought of his own kid. Twelve years old and going on thirty, as they said, but still an innocent. It would kill him to lose Maren, but to have someone intentionally take her life…Bile rose in his throat and he turned his attention away from his personal life to the situation at hand.

The photographs had been taken, body temperatures recorded; the victims were ready to be moved. But Jonas knew, with chilling certainty, what they would find when the bodies were rolled over onto their backs.

*Oh, sweet mother.*

“Remind you of anything?” a gravelly voice asked. Hayes looked over his shoulder to see Detective Andrew Bledsoe in the doorway.


“And isn’t that a coincidence with our friend Bentz back in town?” Somehow Bledsoe managed a smug smile, as if the twin girls had never been more than corpses, just another case to solve.

Martinez scowled, her lips tight. She glared up at Bledsoe, her eyes dark with a seething rage. “Is there a reason you’re here?”
Though he was in his fifties, he was one of those guys who looked a decade younger. At five-ten and under two hundred pounds, Bledsoe cultivated a perpetual tan and kept his jet-black hair slicked back. His suits were usually tailor-made and his steely blue eyes didn’t miss much. He was a good cop. And a pain in the ass. “I was on my way back from a scene in Watts, heard it on the scanner.”

“Well, we’re busy here.” Martinez didn’t conceal her disdain for Bledsoe. The guy had always bugged her. Hayes knew it; everyone in the department did. Riva Martinez wasn’t one to hide her feelings.

Turning her back on Bledsoe, she knelt near one of the bodies while Hayes studied the other.

“Ligature marks around the neck,” Martinez noted, almost to herself, “and numbers and letters scrawled across each torso, just under their breasts.”

The message written heavily in neon pink on their torsos was clear. Each victim was marked with her time of birth twenty-one years ago, and her time of death this morning—which was exactly twenty-one-years later. To the minute. As if the killer found pleasure in snuffing out their lives the moment they became adults.

“Goddamn it.” Hayes felt cold inside despite the stifling, suffocating heat of the small enclosure. These girls had been born fourteen minutes apart, so they had died precisely fourteen minutes apart.

Hayes didn’t doubt that the younger of the two—Elaine, born at 1:01 AM—had witnessed the horror of Lucille being strangled at 12:47 AM. Probably strangled by the very ribbon that was now binding her hair, wrists, and ankles, as well as gagging her mouth. Hayes suspected that the ribbons in their hair would contain traces of skin from where the fabric had dug into the soft flesh of their throats. And he knew he would find other ligature marks on their necks. The victims were subdued by some kind of strap, then finally killed with a heavy ribbon woven with thin, sharp wire.

Each girl had lived exactly twenty-one years.

Just like the Caldwell twins, the last homicide Rick Bentz had worked here in L.A. That case had gone ice cold when he’d turned in his resignation.

Hayes hated to admit it, but this time Bledsoe had a point.

Why were these victims chosen to be killed now, only days after Rick Bentz had returned to Los Angeles?
“Stupid!” Olivia glared at her cell phone. It was in her hand, but she hadn’t punched in Bentz’s number because she felt nervous about phoning him. Which was ridiculous! She’d never been one of those women who was timid or shy or the least bit lacking in confidence. Yet here she was seated in her living room, feet curled beneath her, a cup of tea long forgotten and cold on the coffee table, and she wasn’t sure what to do. Hairy S perched on the other end of the cozy couch while one of Bentz’s old Springsteen CDs played in the background, but the homey atmosphere was little comfort.

She was paralyzed.

Didn’t know whether to call Rick or not.

Even though she’d seen that he’d called earlier but hadn’t left a message.

“Oh, to hell with it,” she said and hit the speed dial number that would connect him to her.

He picked up before it rang twice. “Hey,” he said, and he did sound glad—or was it relieved?—to hear from her.

“Hey back at you.”

“What’s up?”

“Just checkin’ in,” she said. *Tell him. Tell him now. You don’t have to wait until he returns. Let him know that you’re going to have a baby. Insist that no matter what his reaction is, you’re thrilled with the pregnancy, that you’ve already started looking at baby clothes and thinking of where to put a bassinet.* “What’re you doing?”

“Driving down to San Juan Capistrano.”

“The mission? Why? Searching for swallows?” she teased, reminding him of the phenomenon of the swallows returning to Capistrano each year. “Didn’t know you were a bird-watcher.”

“Too late for the swallows, I think. They come in the spring.”

“Then?” she asked.

“I needed to get out of that fleabag of a motel.”

“To find Jennifer?”

A pause. “Maybe.”

“Seen her lately?” She couldn’t hide the sarcasm in her voice. Who was he kidding?

“I don’t know.”

She wanted to tell him he was being foolish. Instead she bit back a sharp reply and moved to safer territory. “How’re you feeling? Your leg.”

“It’s still attached.”
“Doing your exercises?”

“Every day.”

“Liar.” She laughed and she heard him chuckle.

“What’s new with you?”

She gathered her strength, told herself she was just going to blurt it out and let the chips fall where they may, when Harry S, hearing something outside, started barking like crazy. “Hey, you, hush!” she said and heard her husband laugh again.

“Great. You call me just to shut me up.”

“I think I’ve told you, I’m one fabulous wife.”

“I…know…Livvie…maybe a million times…” His voice was faint and spotty; she couldn’t catch all the words.

“Hey, I can’t hear you. You’re breaking up.” But she was too late with her message. The call was already lost and she said to the dead connection, “By the way, Hotshot, you’re going to be a father again.” But, of course, he wouldn’t be able to hear her and she decided, once again, giving Bentz that kind of news over a spotty wireless connection was a bad idea.

Lately it seemed she didn’t have any good ones. She carried her cup into the kitchen and left it in the sink while a quarter moon rose over the cypress and pine trees rimming the backyard. A few stars winked and when she cranked open the window she heard a chorus of bullfrogs loud enough to give the Boss a run for his money.

She fed Chia, talked to the bird, and then, still feeling antsy, decided to take a turn on the treadmill. She’d wait until Rick came back to Louisiana, or, if this wild goose chase of his took too long, she’d fly out there and give him the good word about her pregnancy face-to-face.

“Five days, Bentz,” she said, tapping a finger against her chin. “Five days. That’s all you’ve got. Then, California, here I come.”

“Who found the bodies?” Hayes asked. Glad to be out of the tiny claustrophobic closet of a storage unit, he breathed the fresher air of the freeway system during rush hour. So what if their gas and diesel exhaust collected under the overpass? At least the smell of death wasn’t filling his lungs.

“A college student.” Riva Martinez pointed to a cruiser where a young girl stared out the window of the backseat. Her eyes were round with fear, her face pale behind the glass. “Felicia Katz. Goes to USC, but keeps some of her stuff here. She came down here this afternoon intending to take something out of her unit—an old chair, I think. Her unit is number seven.” Martinez indicated the unit next to the one with the bodies. “She noticed the door of eight wasn’t latched, saw the lock was broken. She thought someone had probably broken into it and stolen whatever was inside, so she took a peek.”

“And got an eyeful,” Bledsoe cut in.

Hayes’s stomach twisted as he thought of the victims who were now being preliminarily examined before being hauled away in body bags to the morgue for autopsies. And twenty-four hours ago they were innocent young women, probably getting ready to celebrate their birthdays.

Martinez continued, “Anyway, Katz saw the vics, texted her boyfriend, then called 9-1-1.”

Hayes glanced back at the car holding the witness. “Why the boyfriend first?”

“She claims she freaked.”
“I’ll bet,” Bledsoe interjected.

“Who’s the boyfriend?”

“Robert Finley. Goes by Robbie. Coffee barista by day, grunge band drummer by night. He showed up just after
the first officer—that would be Rohrs—got here. We’ve got Finley in another squad car. Trying to keep him and
Katz separate until we get each of their stories and compare them.”

“You think they had anything to do with it?”

“Nah. You?”

“Probably not.” Hayes shook his head.

“It’s the Twenty-one killer,” Bledsoe interrupted. He’d stuck around and was eyeing the scene.

“Who?” Riva asked. She was relatively new to the department and hadn’t heard some of the old stories.

“That’s what we called him. He killed another set of twins, Delta and Diana Caldwell, on their twenty-first
birthday. They were reported missing two days earlier, so we figured he nabbed ’em, held ’em, and then killed ’em
at the exact minute they turned twenty-one.”

“So he knew them?” Riva guessed, her eyes narrowing.

“Or of them. But he was never caught.” Bledsoe’s expression turned hard. “The Caldwell parents called us every
week for nearly six years. After that, I heard they split up.”

“And no other cases like the Caldwell killings until now?” Riva asked, glancing back at the storage unit. “So this
could be a copycat?”

Bledsoe shook his head. “Some of the details were never released to the press or the public. The red ribbon, the
pink marker. The fact that their clothing was neatly folded, as if Mommy or the maid had taken care of them.”
Bledsoe glanced over Hayes’s shoulder. “Speaking of the press.”

Hayes turned to find Joanna Quince, the determined news reporter he’d seen earlier, talking with one of the
uniforms guarding the barricade. He grimaced and turned away, but not before Quince caught sight of the detectives
and recognized Bledsoe.

“Detective,” she shouted. “Could I ask you a few questions? Is it true this is a double homicide? That two girls
were found in one of the storage units?”

“I’ll handle this,” Bledsoe said. Bledsoe liked the press, that much was true, but he wouldn’t give too much away.
He would refer Joanna Quince to the public information officer, who would issue a statement and field questions
once the next of kin were notified.

That job—telling the family—fell on Hayes’s shoulders, and as far as he was concerned, talking to overwrought
loved ones was almost as difficult as discovering the bodies.

Bentz pushed the speed limit as he drove south on “the Five,” the interstate freeway that stretched from Canada to
Mexico. The sun was low on the horizon and the traffic was thick and swift, a faster pace than he ever experienced
in Louisiana. Bentz had expected to return to Los Angeles and feel at home, if not with the police, then with the area
itself. He’d spent so many years of his life here.

But, no, he was a fish out of water now.

The phone call from Olivia had bothered him and he wondered, not for the first time, if he’d made a big mistake
coming to L.A. Not only had he upset his wife, but if his boss in New Orleans found out that he was on the West
Coast chasing after a dead woman, Jaskiel would have him back in psych evaluations in no time. Or she could put him out to pasture for good, thinking he’d gone round the bend. His career as a cop could be over.

So what? It’s not like the NOPD isn’t functioning without you. Who knows when or if you’ll be allowed back on active duty.

His fingers tightened over the wheel as he switched lanes and a moving van roared past his Ford Escape as if he were standing still. He looked at his speedometer. He was going seventy.

His cell phone rang. He clicked off the radio and glanced at the LED screen. Montoya’s number.

Good. Bentz had been brooding about Olivia ever since their last conversation. He needed a distraction.

He clicked on. “About time you called. You got something for me?”

“Not much. No fingerprints on the envelope or the death certificate, other than yours and mine.”

Bentz swore under his breath.

“You didn’t really expect any.”

“No, but I thought maybe we’d get lucky. That maybe the guy was sloppy.”

“Don’t think so. DNA’s not back, but I’ll bet a year’s salary that the perp didn’t lick the flap of the envelope. These days everyone knows that shit if they watch any truTV or CSI, or NCIS, or Law & Order, or you name it.”

“It was a long shot,” Bentz admitted, spotting his exit.

“I’ve got the lab analyzing the type of ink on the doc, but it probably won’t be something that will help.”

“Doesn’t hurt to try.” Bentz eased up on the gas, flipped on his blinker, and slid into the exit lane.

“You know, this thing you’re doing, you should just give it up.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I know you’re going out of your mind not working, but hell, can’t you do something else?”

“You mean something a little less insane?”

“Yeah. Golf would be good. Or fishing. Hell, we’ve got great fishing down in the Gulf.”

“I’ll think about it. I could buy me a new fancy pole and set of clubs in between my calligraphy and yoga classes.”

“Wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“Then you, too. Sign us both up. And add in ballroom dancing. You’d look fantastic in one of those sparkly gowns.”

Montoya didn’t so much as chuckle. “You think you’re funny?”

“I know I’m funny.”

Montoya wasn’t laughing. He asked, “You see your ex-wife again?” Bentz hesitated as he drove onto the ramp. “Maybe,” he admitted, slowing for a red light. “Not sure.”

“Really?”
“Really. She phoned, too. Called me by the pet name she’d given me.”

“Right.”

“I’m just telling ya.”

“So what’re you doing about it?”

Should he tell the skeptic? Hell, why not? “I talked with one of Jennifer’s friends. She said James and Jennifer met in San Juan Capistrano, so I thought I’d drive down.”

“Are you kidding me? What does that have to do with anything? You think your dead brother is involved?” Montoya muttered some oath in Spanish, before adding, “This is sounding crazier by the second. I’ve been to San Juan Capistrano. A couple of times. There’s a history to it, man. The whole town is supposed to be rife with ghosts.”

“Kinda like New Orleans.”

“I mean it. That so-called friend of Jennifer is messin’ with ya. San Juan Capistrano? Come on. You tell this friend you’ve been seeing ghosts and she sends you to Capistrano. Give me an effin’ break.”

“She’s not a ghost,” he said, though in truth he was feeling haunted. Exactly what whoever was behind this wanted.

“Look I gotta go.” Bentz’s ridicule capacity was on overflow.

“Great. Walk about the hallowed grounds, talk to the white lady or the faceless monk or the dead guy in his rocking chair. Or Jennifer, since you obviously think she’s hanging out with them. Listen, if you ever get close enough to talk to her, give her my love.”

“Screw you, Montoya,” he said as the light turned green and he eased ahead toward the mission.

“You should get so lucky.” His partner hung up and Bentz felt his lips twist upward a bit. He missed that cocky son of a bitch, just as he missed his job, but not quite as much as he missed Olivia.

“Check the cell phone records, include the texts and read what they say if anything,” Hayes said as he and Martinez left the crime scene and walked toward their cars. “They should give us a window of time when the girls were abducted. If this is like the Caldwell case, then we can assume the vics were killed somewhere else and brought here to be staged and discovered. We need to find out who owns the facility and who rents units here, not just Unit 8 but all of them. See if there’s any connection to the Springer twins. Or if anyone saw anything suspicious.”

“I’ll have all the traffic cameras checked as well, and some of the security cameras in nearby businesses.”

They would canvass the area using uniformed police and detectives to try and locate anyone who had seen anything. A convenience store and gas station were in clear sight of the underpass and storage units. Maybe someone, an employee or customer, saw something that would give them a lead. Anything to go on. If the times of death on the bodies were accurate, the victims had already been dead over twelve hours, and each minute that passed was critical to the investigation.

“And we should contact those groups dedicated to twins in the area. The killer knows they’re twins. He had to know when they were born to abduct them just before their birthday. That takes planning.”

“Online groups, too,” Martinez suggested, and the scope of the investigation just got a whole lot wider.

“Right.”

“Our doer is organized,” Martinez observed as she took in the scene. “Meticulous. Probably a neat freak.”
“Who only kills once every twelve years,” Hayes reminded her.

“We think. I’ll check with other agencies, in other states, the F.B.I. He might be spreading his love around. See if there are any murders of twins in the surrounding states. Hell, make it the entire United States.”

“And recent releases from the prisons. Maybe he’s been incarcerated for the last twelve years. I’ll run a check of prison records. We should look at the psychological profiles of anyone who’s been released for a violent crime in the last year.”

“Could be a long list.”

“Amen.” He hated to think how much time it would take.

They reached Martinez’s car and she opened the door, then asked, “So tell me, what was the meaning of that crack by Bledsoe? What the hell does Rick Bentz have to do with this?”

“Nothing. Probably coincidence.” Hayes reached into his pocket and slid his shades onto his face. “The connection is that Bledsoe worked with Bentz and Trinidad on the Caldwell twin case.”

She was nodding. Getting it.

“Bledsoe always needs someone to blame.”

“That’s it? Not because Bledsoe was shut down by Bentz’s wife?” she asked. “Detective Rankin said something about it when his name came up this morning.”

“Rankin has her own ax to grind,” Hayes said. He didn’t want to get dragged into department gossip, especially not twelve-or fifteen-year-old rumors.

“Yeah, she said she dated Bentz, too.”

“Along with others.”

“Including Corinne O’Donnell,” she pointed out.

“That’s right.” He nodded, leaning a hip against the car and feeling heat from the back panel through his pants. “And there were a few more. One was Bonita Unsel. Worked Vice before she came to Homicide. Others. I can’t really remember. Ancient history.”

“History that happened before Bentz left town.” Little lines gathered between her eyebrows as an eighteen-wheeler rolled up the ramp to the freeway. “Maybe our guy isn’t so much about killing twins as in putting another murder in Bentz’s face. Maybe he knows Bentz is back in town.”

“It’s possible,” he agreed.

“So how did it all go down back then—the Caldwell twins’ murders?” Martinez asked. “Was it Bentz who dropped the ball on the case?”

Hayes shook his head. “Nah. The guy was a mess, believe me. But it wasn’t his fault, at least not entirely, that the case went cold.” Though he’d never admitted it, Hayes did think that Bentz should have resigned from the double homicide early on, leave it to Bledsoe or Trinidad. At the time Rick Bentz had been a pale version of his once sharp self, dulled to the point of not caring about his work. The LAPD had taken the position that Bentz, as lead investigator was responsible for finding the killer of two beautiful twenty-one-year-old coeds. The case was in the public eye, which made the failure to make an arrest that much worse. “He became the scapegoat.”

“Bledsoe still seems to blame him.”

Hayes lifted a shoulder. “Bledsoe and Bentz never got along. They worked the case together, but, as I said, Bentz
was the lead. When he left, Bledsoe took over, but always blamed his old partner.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, no love lost between those two.”

Martinez’s cell phone went off. “I’ll call ya if I find out anything.” She clicked on the phone. “Martinez.”

Hayes glanced back at the scene, crossed an alley, and jogged to his car, thinking about the long list of calls to be made and records to be checked in this early process of tracking down a killer. With the mountain of work ahead of him, he’d be lucky to see his daughter again before she turned thirty.
The night was muggy and the scent of the Mississippi River rolled through the streets of New Orleans. Tonight, driving through the French Quarter, Montoya felt as dark and disturbed as the slow-moving water, his conversation with Bentz echoing through his mind.

Bentz was being a damned fool, off chasing the ghost of his dead ex-wife when he could be home, here, with his real, living, flesh-and-blood spouse. It just didn’t make sense. Bentz, usually pragmatic, was definitely not playing with a full deck. No doubt his near-death experience had messed with his mind. Big-time.

There wasn’t much traffic this time of night, but the lights of the city, revitalized since the hurricane, blazed, as he pulled into his driveway.

Pocketing his keys, he walked up the sidewalk and into his house, a double-wide shotgun that he’d been renovating when Hurricane Katrina had struck with all the vengeance of hell. God, the place had been a mess, though not hit as severely as some of the homes that were nearly obliterated. Still, the damage was enough that he hated the thought of another hurricane. He’d rebuilt, like so many others. His renovation plans included retaining as much of the original charm of his shoebox of a house as he could, while updating to accommodate his new family. Not only had he gained a wife in Abby, but she’d come with a skittish gray tabby named Ansel who hid beneath the furniture, and a happy-go-lucky chocolate lab, Hershey. The dog now danced at his feet, his tail wagging so wildly it swiped precariously at everything on the coffee table.

“Hey, boy,” he said while scratching behind the Lab’s ears. “Wanna go outside?” With a deep bark, Hershey raced him down the long hallway that bisected the house and led to the enclosed backyard.

Following Hershey, Montoya put in a call to Abby. She was a photographer and tonight she’d scheduled a late-night photo shoot in her studio outside the city.

The dog was running back and forth, a bundle of energy. “I get it, man,” Montoya told the dog, tossing a yellow tennis ball into the yard as he waited for Abby’s voice mail to kick in. Hershey took off at a dead run and found the ball in the darkness while Montoya left his wife a message. The big lab then galloped back and dropped the ball at Montoya’s feet. His tail wagged until Montoya snatched the ball up and tossed it so the dog could pounce on it again. Another throw and an equally quick retrieval, again and again. They played the game for nearly half an hour, the dog a bundle of energy, Montoya thinking about his ex-partner and Bentz’s emotional suicide mission to L.A.

What was the guy doing? Bentz’s first wife Jennifer had been no angel. And she was dead and buried. Fortunately. The way Montoya understood it, she’d been a bitch of a thing when she’d been alive. Bentz had divorced her, hadn’t he? Montoya had never met Jennifer but he’d heard from Bentz himself that she’d cheated on him, over and over again, even with Bentz’s damned half brother. A priest, no less.

“Bitch,” he said, throwing the ball into the air and watching the dog take off, nearly flying.

Ironically, Olivia had been attracted to that same man once, Father James McLaren, before she’d married Bentz. But she’d come to her senses and they’d been happy together.

Until recently.

Ever since Bentz had awakened from the damned coma, the one his daughter had insisted would take his life, he’d been a changed man. Remote. Almost haunted.
Montoya had chalked it up to inactivity; not being able to work, not having the strength to fight or walk on his own. Now Montoya wasn’t so certain. **Maybe when a guy brushes up with death that closely, he comes back to life with a new, dark attitude.** Because that was how it was. Rick Bentz had not returned to consciousness with a newfound appreciation for life, a revitalized *joie de vivre*. Nu-uh. None of that getting called to the light shit. No born-again Christian was Bentz.

Instead he’d awakened with an urgency to find his dead ex-wife, a bitch if there ever had been one. Bentz was a good man who’d definitely gone around the bend.

It was all a flippin’ mess.

In Montoya’s opinion, Jennifer Bentz should bloody well stay dead.

Before driving to San Juan Capistrano, Bentz had done his homework. He’d searched the Internet as well as the public records of Orange County and the town of San Juan Capistrano, looking for anything relating to an inn or hotel dedicated to Saint Miguel or San Miguel. He’d thought Shana McIntyre might have been lying—jerking his chain. But no. He’d found reference and pictures of a small chapel that wasn’t a part of the larger mission.

He’d also found that Saint Miguel’s Church and grounds had been sold by the diocese in the early sixties and renovated into an inn. Over the past forty years it had been sold and resold. The latest transaction in the public records indicated that the inn had been purchased by a Japanese conglomerate eighteen months earlier and wasn’t open for business.

Using his G.P.S., he navigated the streets of the quaint, famous city. Gardens flourished and red tile roofs capped stucco buildings throughout the town. Twilight was settling in as he drove through the historic district where people window-shopped or dined outside at umbrella-covered tables.

Across the railroad tracks, Bentz drove several miles, angling away from the heart of the town and into an area that hadn’t flourished. He passed warehouses on the old San Miguel Boulevard and crossed a dry riverbed to a squalid dead-end street.

Although the rest of the town was charming and bustling with activity, this area felt tired and worn. **For Lease** signs faded in empty storefront windows. He slowed as the old inn came up on his right, the lawn now thick with waist-high weeds, the stucco and brick exterior crumbled and tinged with soot. Apparently hard times had hit this part of the neighborhood.

Bentz turned his rental car around in an alley and parked in a pockmarked lot serving a strip mall that held a used bookstore, some kind of “gently used” clothing store, and a small mom-and-pop corner market going to seed. One of the shops, formerly a pizza joint, according to the signs, stood vacant. Now a **For Rent** sign with a local number was taped to the window.

The single business that seemed to be thriving was an adjacent tavern that advertised “Two For One” night on Tuesdays. A couple of beater pickups, a dirty van with the words **Wash Me** scraped into the dingy back panel, a dented red Saturn, and a silver Chevy with a faded parking pass were scattered sparsely on the broken, dusty asphalt. The aura of the neighborhood was gray, wrought with desolation and desperation, as if this little patch of the town were clinging to dreams of a bygone time.

From his car he viewed a few people on the street; a couple of kids were skateboarding on the cracked sidewalks and an older guy, in shorts and a broad-brimmed hat, was smoking a cigarette while walking his caramel-colored dog, a one-eyed pit bull mix who tugged on the leash. The dog lumbered along and sniffed the tufts of dry grass and wagged his stump of a tail any time the old guy so much as said a word.

Bentz climbed out, left his cane, but picked up a small flashlight and a pocket-sized kit of tools in case he needed to pick a lock. Hitting the remote to lock the Escape, Bentz walked back to the old inn where an ancient chain-link fence encircled the grounds. Barely legible, a **No Trespassing** sign creaked in a slight breeze that kicked up the dust and pushed a torn plastic sack and a few dry leaves down the street.
He checked the gate.

Locked tight, of course.

Searching for a way inside, he hitched his way around the perimeter of the building while aiming the beam of his flashlight on the fence. He moved slowly, inching around the perimeter until he discovered a spot where the metal mesh had been torn. He slipped through. His arm brushed against the sharp broken links, his shirt tearing, his skin scraping. He barely noticed. His hip and knee were protesting as well, but he ignored the discomfort, intent on his mission.

Inside, he stared somberly at the crumbling, decrepit building. The bell tower was one of the few sections still intact. Most of the windows had been boarded over and tall weeds choked what had once been a lush yard and manicured grounds. Some of the roof tiles had slid off and splintered on the overgrown pathways and gardens. A fountain in the heart of the circular drive had gone dry; the statue of an angel poised to pour water from a vessel into a large pool, now decapitated and missing one wing.

_This was the location of their trysts?_

_Their romantic rendezvous?_

Narrowing his eyes as he stared at the run-down buildings, Bentz had a hard time turning back the clock, thinking about the old mission as it once had been with manicured lawns and gardens, stained-glass windows, and flowing fountains.

He stepped over a pile of debris and worked his way through rubble and brush to the ornately carved front doors. A rusting chain snaked through the handles, its lock securely in place.

To keep out the curious, the homeless, or looters.

_Or a cop with too much time on his hands who might be obsessed with his dead ex-wife._

Ignoring the voice in his brain, he picked the lock and found his way through an archway into what had once been a courtyard, a square surrounded on all sides by the two-storied inn. Each long side was divided into individual units, complete with doorways on the ground level and balconies with boarded over French doors on the second. The courtyard was already in shadow, the gloom of evening seeping around the chipped and broken statue of St. Miguel as the sun sank low behind the bell tower.

_So far, so good_, Bentz thought.

The place seemed empty.

Lonely.

Walking along the portico, peering through a few dirty panes of the remaining windows, he nearly stepped on a rat that scurried quickly through a crack in the mortar.

Not Bentz’s idea of a romantic getaway.

At least not now, not in the inn’s current condition. The place was downright creepy, a great setting for a horror film. Testing each of the doors along the covered walkway, he felt the prickle of apprehension on the back of his neck.

All rooms were locked firmly.

Number seven, a corner suite, was no different. The number dangled precariously from the frame and looked ready to drop into the debris collecting on the porch.

Using his set of picks, he sweated as he worked the lock and it finally sprang open, the old hinges creaking eerily.
Now or never, he told himself, but he felt as if he were walking upon Jennifer’s grave as he stepped into the stuffy, stale suite. In an instant he was thrown back to a time he’d tried hard to forget.

A table was broken and cracked. A television stand was overturned, the floor scraped and filthy. Cobwebs collected in the corners and the dried corpses of dead insects littered the windowsills.

The entire place was near being condemned, Bentz guessed, his skin crawling. Stairs wound upward and creaked with each of his steps as he painfully climbed to the second floor, where a landing opened to a bedroom. There were two other doors. One led to a filthy bathroom, where dingy, cracked sinks had been pulled from the wall and a toilet was missing. The second door was closed, its latch broken, but when Bentz pushed on the old panels, he discovered it opened to an inside hallway. In one direction was the emergency exit stairs. In the other a long corridor stretched along the back wall of the building. He walked it and found the hall eventually funneled into a staircase that dropped into the area that had once been the lobby and office of the inn.

Handy, he thought. A secret entrance for a priest who didn’t want to be seen going through the front door of unit seven to meet his mistress.

Bentz returned to the bedroom, dark and gloomy.

Their bedroom. Where the memories and despair and guilt still lingered.

The place Kristi may have been conceived, if Shana McIntyre could be believed. There was a chance Shana was lying, of course, that she knew of this place from her own romantic trysts. Shana had never made any bones about the fact that she didn’t like him. She would thoroughly enjoy playing a sick joke on him, just to watch him squirm.

Almost smelling the odor of forgotten sex, he eyed a dusty bookcase that lined one wall. A few forgotten books were scattered on the shelf, their pages and covers yellowed. Other books had fallen to the floor, and from their mottled edges it appeared that something had been nibbling on them. He picked one up, a legal thriller from the nineties. A novel Jennifer had read. He remembered discussing it with her.

Her copy?

His throat went dry as he flipped through a few pages, then tossed the book aside, the ever-darkening room creeping into his soul.

Coincidence, nothing more.

And yet…

He felt as if she’d been here. Almost.

“Fool,” he muttered as his gaze landed on a desk. It had been pushed in front of the closet and was missing a few drawers. On the scarred top was the base of an old telephone, the receiver dangling over one side.

Had Jennifer really spent hours here? Nights? With James? He crossed to the French doors, the glass boarded over on the outside, many of the panes cracked. The doors had once opened onto a small, private balcony overlooking the courtyard. Thinking they might open inward, he tried the levers.

Neither door budged.

It was getting darker by the second, the room musty, dragging the breath from his lungs. He ran the beam of his flashlight over a worn chaise. Foam stuffing bloomed crazily from the frayed velvet that had once been ice blue and now was a dingy, dirty gray.

Bentz’s muscles tensed as he trained his small light on the bed, nothing more than a stained mattress on a rotting frame. It had been shoved into a corner beneath a broken stained-glass window, then forgotten.

Staring at the mess, cleaning it up in his brain, Bentz imagined what the room would have looked like nearly
thirty years earlier. A time when Jennifer and James had first started their affair.

Don’t even go there, he warned, but couldn’t help imagining how the area would have looked. Surely a carpet would have covered the plank floors. The chaise, in a soft blue, would have been new and plump, the desk, a shiny rosewood antique. The bed would have been turned down and inviting, with smooth sheets and a cozy coverlet.

He thought there had been a desk chair, perhaps upholstered in the same blue as the chaise. He imagined a black cassock and clerical collar recklessly discarded over the chair’s back.

One fist clenched.

He considered his half brother. Father James McClaren had been a handsome man with an altar-boy smile, strong jaw, and intense blue eyes that many women, not just Jennifer, had found seductive. There had been those, like his ex-wife, who loved the challenge of it all, the act of bringing a priest to his knees. Then there had been the frail or weak-willed who had turned to their priest in times of need only to be seduced by the unscrupulous James.

Self-righteous sinner.

Bentz could almost hear his half brother’s deep laugh, imagined the whisper of his footsteps on the bare floor. In this room, alone with Jennifer, James had probably stripped naked, then with her giggling and backing away, had followed her, kissed her, and begun undressing her.

Or had it been the other way around?

Had she, dressed in scanty lingerie, waited in the bed for him, listening for his footsteps, eyeing the door until he stepped into the room?

It didn’t matter. Either way, they’d ended up in bed, making love over and over again.

So much for the vow of chastity.

Odd, Bentz thought now as he played out the scene in his mind. Much of his anger and outrage had dissipated over time. That burning sense of betrayal had been reduced to dying embers.

It had been so many years.

And now there was Olivia.

His wife.

The woman he loved.

Dear God, why was he here when she was waiting for him in New Orleans?

There was nothing for him in California.

Jennifer was dead.

Yet, for just a split second, he smelled the scent of gardenias, a whiff of her perfume.

Yeah, right.

Then Jennifer’s voice came to him. The barest of whispers. “Why?” she asked and he knew it was all in his head.

Dear God, maybe he really was going off his nut.

He turned toward the French doors and in his mind’s eye he saw sunlight playing through the gauzy curtains. A bottle of champagne chilled in a bucket of ice on a bedside table while James and Jennifer rolled in the sheets and the bells of the chapel rang joyously…
“Jesus!” Bentz jumped, snapped out of his reverie by the very real peal of church bells from a nearby parish.

Telling himself he was a dozen kinds of a fool, he shined the beam of his flashlight over the rubble and asked himself what he expected to accomplish by coming here. He’d found nothing concrete. Not one reason to believe that Jennifer was anything but dead.

Mentally berating himself, he walked to the French doors and peered through a slit in the boards covering the broken panes to the courtyard below.

His heart stopped.

Ice water slid through his veins.

Jennifer!

Or the spitting image of her.

Or her damned spirit, standing on the far side of the courtyard, caught in the long twilight shadow of the bell tower.

Disbelief coursing through his veins, Bentz hurried to the stairway and raced downward. He shoved open the door and dashed across the porch and into the courtyard, his damned leg throbbing painfully. Heart pounding, he flew across the uneven flagstones. The toe of his shoe caught on the edge of a stone. He didn’t go down, but the twinge of pain slowed him.

He shot a glance to the edge of the courtyard, but it was empty.

No Jennifer.

Damn!

No woman, earthly or otherwise, stood in the silent, darkening enclosure. He turned, looking all around, cursing himself as he considered the fact that he’d conjured up her image, possibly caught a glimpse of the statue of St. Miguel. Had his willing mind transformed the broken statue into what he wanted to see? What he expected to witness?

Had it all been the power of suggestion?

No way!

His wildly pounding heart, accelerated pulse, and goose bumps on the back of his neck confirmed that the vision was very real. He dragged in deep breaths of the dry air and tried to think rationally, rein in his thoughts. Find sanity again.

Good God, he’d always been so rational…and now…now…Shit, what now? He shoved his hands through his hair, told himself to calm down. But as he did, he glanced up at the second story of the old inn. One of the balconies was different from the rest; its door hadn’t been barricaded.

Why?

A shadow moved within.

His eyes narrowed.

Was it a play of light, or a dark figure lurking in the shadows, hiding behind the tattered, gauzy curtains?

“Oh, hell,” he whispered. He took off again, forced his feet into a dead run. His bad leg was on fire, his breathing
ragged as he leapt over the step and across the porch to the doorway of room twenty-one.

The door was ajar.

His heart nearly stopped.

He reached for his sidearm, but wasn’t wearing his shoulder holster. His pistol was locked in the glove box of the rental car.

He didn’t have time to run back for it. Take it easy. Slow down. Think this through. It could be a trap! Carefully, he pushed on the door.

Sweating crazily, he swung the beam of his flashlight over the rubble within. It was similar to the other room, squalid and neglected.

And smelling of gardenias.

What the hell?

Thud!

The sound of something falling in the room above reverberated through the living area.

He shot forward. Reminding himself that he might be walking into a trap, and that he should have brought his sidearm, he started up the stairs. He didn’t bother to test for rotten wood or broken railings, just hurried upward.

The smell of her perfume was stronger here. His throat tightened. On the landing he paused, feeling exposed, an open target. Back to the wall, heart pumping wildly, he shined the beam of his small light over the empty bedroom, then inched toward the closed door of the closet. He braced himself. Then flung the door open.

Empty.

What had he expected?

Sweating, swallowing back an unsettling fear, he zeroed in on the bath. One, two, three! He kicked the door open.

With a shriek and flap of frantic wings, an owl flew from his roost on an old towel bar and soared out the broken window.

Bentz’s knees nearly gave out. Jittery, he backed out of the room where feathers, dung, and pellets, the regurgitated undigested pieces of animals the owl coughed up, littered the floor.

Then he thought of the back stairs.

Damn!

Nerves tight, he backtracked to the upper hallway and heard the sounds of fast breathing and quick steps down on the first level.

Flinging himself over the rail, he half-stumbled down the stairs and cast his narrow light beam down the murky corridor.

Empty.

No one.

Dead or alive.

His leg on fire, he hitched his way to the nearest exit and found himself in what had been the lobby of the old inn,
the main entrance to the small mission.

The air was stale and unused.

Except for the slight scent of Jennifer’s perfume.

*For the love of God, what was this?*

He knew before he tried the front doors that they would be locked. He also knew that he could wander around this old structure, search the chapel and wine cellars, the individual rooms and reception hall and he wouldn’t find her.

She was gone.

And he knew nothing more than he had when he’d left L.A. earlier today.

*Perfect!* I think with a smile. I peer through binoculars from a hiding spot in the upper story of an abandoned warehouse that reeks of must and oil. But the smells don’t bother me. Not today. I focus on Bentz, who is still limping his way around the inn checking doors and flashing his light into the dark corners.

*Go ahead, Bentz.*

*You’ll find nothing.*

It’s getting darker, the shadows lengthening, but I can still see him studying the crumbling exterior of the mission. From here I’m safe to imagine him puzzling out the mystery of his first wife.

*Good!*

“Keep looking,” I say in the barest of whispers, adrenaline pumping through my body. “But, uh-oh, be careful… who knows what you’ll find.”

I can feel my lips twist in satisfaction because I read him so perfectly. I know now that I can manipulate him however I want. And it feels good.

About time!

“Good boy, RJ,” I coo softly, as if to a collie who’s mastered a difficult trick. “Good, good boy.”

God, how I love to see him squirm!

He’s already walking away from the inn, so I step away from the window just in case an ancient, watery streetlight might reflect in my field glasses.

I can’t afford to be careless.

Rick Bentz might be a lot of things, but a fool he is not.

I know that.

He’s just a dogged, single-minded bastard of the lowest order. He deserves this and I can’t wait to see him twist in the wind. Oh, yeah. How perfect will it be for him to know the sheer terror, the mind-numbing fear that overcomes you when you’re haunted? He will get to experience the confusion and horror of thinking he’s losing his sanity.

And there are ways to ratchet up his torment. Oh, yes.

It’s time to add a little pressure on the home front.

Olivia…she is the key, I think, the coup de grâce. There is no better way to get to Bentz than through his damned
wife.

I see him slip through the opening in the fence and head down the street to the parking lot. His shoulders are still broad, but his once purposeful gait is now uneven.

A coldness settles in my heart.

*Do you feel me, you sick son of a bitch?*

*Do you have any idea what you did to me, the pain you put me through?*

*No?*

*Well, you will, Bentz, you damned well will.*

*In fact, and I promise you this, the pain and suffering and guilt will be so intense, so excruciating that you'll wish to heaven and hell that you were dead.*
Bentz found his car and made note of a few changes in the parking lot. One of the twin pickups had left and there was now an old Datsun with expired plates idling in front of the bookstore. A teenage girl was behind the wheel, gabbing on her cell phone. WASH ME was still in prime position in front of the tavern, but the silver Chevy with the stickers was no longer parked near the dirty van.

He wondered if one of the cars could belong to “Jennifer” or whoever she was. If so, she certainly was no ghost. As far as he knew the State of California only issued licenses to living people and, if folklore were to be believed, ghosts really didn’t need wheels.

On a whim, he walked into the tavern, glanced at the waitstaff and few patrons huddled over a long bar or staring at a big screen in the corner. Satisfied that whoever he’d been chasing hadn’t taken refuge in the establishment, Bentz ordered a zero-alcohol, made small talk with the waitress, and asked if she knew who owned the Chevy. She gave him a blank stare that was almost identical to the expression of the bartender when Bentz posed the same question to him. If they knew anything, they weren’t going to give it up, but his gut told him they didn’t have any idea of the answer and didn’t really care.

Ignoring the beer and leaving some bills on his table, he left the tavern and headed to the bookstore, where a shopkeeper nearing eighty was waiting to close. Now the girl who had been in the Datsun had moved inside and was still talking on her cell as she cruised the aisles, concentrating on a wall of books in an area labeled “Vampires and Ghosts.” Without a break in her conversation, she picked up various books, thumbed through them, then replaced them on the shelf.

The bookstore was nearly empty, one balding guy near thirty poring over computer texts and a woman with a little girl in pigtails perusing the children’s books section.

No one here could have played the part of Jennifer.

The grocery, too, was devoid of customers. Bentz bought a sixteen-ounce Pepsi and checked the aisles. Two teenaged boys in long hair and baggy shorts were checking out the candy section while stealing peeks and whispering about the “hot” girl at the till. A harried young mother, toddler on one hip, eyebrows knit in concern, was shopping for disposable diapers and scowling at the price.

They were the only patrons.

No Jennifer.

Of course.

Outside, behind the strip mall, two men in their early twenties stood smoking near a Dumpster.

Nothing surprising there. Bentz drank his soda and wondered why the hell he’d come down here. What, if anything, had he learned?

_Just that you’re a gullible ass, willing to chase shadows._

He climbed into his rental and kicked himself for not having the presence of mind to take pictures of the woman he’d been chasing; even a dark image on his cell phone would have helped.
He twisted his key in the ignition, then looked at the empty spot in the lot where the silver Chevy had been parked. There was something about that car that had seemed out of place. His cop instincts were in overdrive, which happened whenever he experienced an anomaly—something that didn’t seem to fit.

He tried to recall anything about the vehicle. It was an Impala, he thought, maybe a 2000. He tried to visualize the numbers on the license plate, but only remembered that it had current tags issued in California. There was something unique about the plates…two or three sixes in the number. He wasn’t certain. But there was some kind of expired parking pass on the front windshield, a hospital permit of some kind, though part of the information had faded to the point that it hadn’t been easily visible, and he’d been in a hurry. Yet he sensed there was something about the pass that was a little out of the ordinary…what the hell was it?

He tried to envision the damned thing. Failed and gave up. Whatever had caught his attention was now gone. It would come to him. Probably in the middle of the night.

Again, he should have taken pictures. With that thought he cut the engine and got out of his Ford to snap photos with his cell phone. He took shots of the license plates and makes and models of the cars parked but also in the lot and on the street leading to the old inn. All told there were only eight, and one of them was on blocks, the plates long expired. A no-counter.

Then there was that old parking pass thing.

Bentz decided to check out any hospitals in the area. There was a good chance that whoever owned the Chevy had some kind of hospital or medical facility connection. Unless the sticker belonged to a previous owner.

He was driving back through the quaint town when his cell phone rang and he picked up, barely registering that the screen read **UNKNOWN CALLER. “Bentz.”**

“Hi, Rick,” a woman said, her voice vaguely familiar and frosty as hell. “This is Lorraine. You called.”

Lorraine Newell. Jennifer’s stepsister.

“That’s right. I’m in L.A. and wondered if we could get together.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“I have some questions about Jennifer’s death.”

“Oh, for the love of God. You have a helluva lot of nerve.” She let out a long-suffering sigh. “I knew calling you back was a big mistake. What do you want?”

“I’ll tell you when we meet.”

“Come on, you’re not going to try and be coy now, are you? It’s so not you. Let’s not mince words. I’ve always thought you were a straight shooter. A miserable son of a bitch, but a straight shooter.”

“Can we meet tomorrow?”

“I’m busy most of the day. Work and appointments.”

“Tomorrow night, then.”

She hesitated. “Why do I know I’m going to regret this?” She paused as if second-guessing herself, then said, “Okay. Fine! Can you be at my place around…four-thirty? I’ve got a dinner meeting, but I suppose I can give you a few minutes. For Jennifer.”

**Big of you.**

“I live in Torrance now.”
“I’ve got the address,” he admitted.

“Of course you do.” There was a bitter sneer in her voice.

“See you then,” he said, but she’d already hung up.

As he merged onto a highway, he let his mind sort through new information. He didn’t have much to go on. A Chevy Impala with some kind of parking permit, a vehicle that might or might not be a part of this Jennifer fraud. A few other vehicles as well.

And then there was Shana. She was the only one in L.A. who knew about Saint Miguel. Either that or she fed him that information to direct him there, so that “Jennifer” could show up. What part was Shana really playing?

True, he still didn’t have a lot to go on, but it was a little more than he’d had two hours earlier. Nothing might come of it, but then again, it was a start.

“You’re telling me this new double is like the Caldwell twins all over again?” Corrine asked as Hayes hung his jacket on a hook near the door of her apartment. With two small bedrooms and a killer view of the mountains, the unit was compact but breathtaking, clean and neat. Just like its owner.

“Identical. Down to the way the clothes were folded, the ribbons in their hair, the damned way their bodies were positioned.” He was tired and hungry and grouchy.

She shook her head. “You know the names?” she asked and her eyes had turned dark.

“Yeah, he left their ID. Elaine and Lucille Springer.”

“Damn!” She let out a breath. “I remember seeing the missing persons’ reports, from Glendale.”

“Yep.”

“Son of a bitch.” Shoving her hair from her eyes, she glared out the window. “Both dead. Like before.”

“Just like.”

“You tell the next of kin?”

“Yeah. I talked to the parents,” he said, remembering their denial, their worst fears confirmed, then the horror and grief. “Nice people. He’s some kind of insurance salesman. She’s a teacher.”

Corrine nodded slightly, her jaw tight, her eyes shadowed as if she felt the pain of these people she’d never met. “I remember,” she said softly.

“They came to the morgue, made the IDs, and you could see it killed them.” He shook his head, wiped a hand over his face. “Killed them.” He recalled the Springers: the father, Greg, dressed in khakis and an Izod golf shirt, his face pale beneath a tan. His wife, Cathy, the mother of the twins, had walked in quietly, like a zombie, face masked with an expression of denial. Oh, God, it had been bad.

Hayes slumped into the recliner positioned in front of the television. It sat near the high counter and stools that separated the compact kitchen from the living area. Corrine came up behind him and rubbed his shoulders.

“It’s never easy,” she said.

“Both kids. Gone.” One minute they’d been parents, happy and secure in life, the next they were totally bereft. Hayes had tried and failed to erase the vision of Cathy Springer’s face, the denial in her blue eyes giving way to horror, her knees buckling as she collapsed into her husband’s shaking arms.

“Nooooo!” Cathy had wailed over and over again, her grief-stricken cries echoing down the long corridor. Her
fists had curled, pounded frantically against her husband’s chest as he’d tried to calm her.

And the father. Greg’s demeanor had been riddled with defeat and pain, his gaze accusing as he’d stared at the detective. Hayes had known what he was thinking. Why my girls? Why mine? Why not yours? Or anyone else’s? Why my sweet innocent babies?

It was exactly what Hayes would have thought if anything ever happened to his Maren.

“You’ll catch the bastard who did this,” Corrine reassured him.

“I hope so.”

“Have faith, if not in divine intervention, then in the skill of the department. Forensics and technology are a whole new ball game. Twelve years ago we didn’t have half the forensic tests that we have now. The perp is toast. And if he turns out to be the Twenty-one killer, then it’s a two-for-one. Cause for celebration.”

He wanted to believe it.

Corrine was massaging his shoulders, trying to ease out the knots of tension in his muscles. “How about a drink?” she suggested. “I’ve got pasta, those bowties—”

“Farfalle.”

“Yeah, I guess. With pesto and an Italian sausage or two.”

“This from the Irish girl?”

She laughed. “And I’m fresh out of corned beef and cabbage.” Her fingers were strong and comforting, but his head was on the case. Why had the killer struck now? Why the Springer twins? Who the hell was he? Would he kill again soon or wait another twelve years?

“Talk to me,” she said, still massaging him. It was a ritual they practiced when a particularly tough case was getting to either one of them. “You really believe the murders are connected.”

“Have to be.”

“Noooo. Don’t close your mind.”

“How would a copycat know the details of a twelve-year-old cold case that weren’t released to the press?”

“Cops talk.”

Hayes looked up at her. “To killers?”

“Unwittingly. Or maybe whoever was talking had one too many beers and was overheard.”

“Long shot.”

“Okay then, maybe conversation in prison. The Twenty-one is locked up for another crime but shoots his mouth off. Now his cellmate is on parole and thinking he’ll take up where the Twenty-one left off.”

“No.”

“I’m just suggesting you keep your mind open. It could be a copycat.” Still kneading the tension from his shoulders, Corrine leaned forward and kissed his forehead. “Or you might be right. Maybe the Twenty-one is back, from who knows where, ready to rock and roll. Maybe you should check recent parolees.”

“Already doin’ it.”
“Of course you are.” He looked up and she was grinning.

“Bentz is back in town,” he said.

Corrine nodded. “I heard the news. It’s all over the department.” When Hayes lifted an eyebrow, she shrugged. “Trinidad put the word out, I think.”

“Some people aren’t thrilled.” He looked pointedly at her and she smiled.

“You mean Bledsoe?” she teased.

“I was wondering about you.”

“Well, I’m not exactly president of the Rick Bentz fan club, but I figure what happened is ancient history.” She winked. “Besides, I got myself a new guy and he’s lots cuter.”

“You haven’t seen Bentz.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right. The jury’s still out on that one.”

“He’s still recuperating from an accident. Sometimes uses a cane.”

“So now you want me to feel sorry for him since he and I both are gimps?”

“That’s not what I meant. And you’re no gimp. Not anymore!”

“Good.” Corrine sighed and shook her head. “It’s weird. Who would think it would matter? He’s been gone what, ten years?”

“Twelve.”

“Really? Oh, yeah, he left around the time of the Caldwell twins’ murders…That is a coincidence.” She pulled a face. “Gotta be a coincidence.” She looked at him and he could almost see the gears turning in her mind. “Right?”

“Has to be.”

“I will admit this, though: Bentz’s visit is causing a bit of a stir. While you were out at the scene, the gossip ran like wildfire through the department. Isn’t that weird?”

“Who would care?” he asked.

“To start off with, Bledsoe. He’s pissed as hell, though I don’t know why. Give me a break. It’s not like Bentz is coming back looking for a job.”

“Bledsoe’s always pissed.”

“Yeah, and I think Trinidad is nervous…why, I don’t know. Probably because he was Bentz’s partner and friend. Doesn’t want any of his old stink to rub off.”

“What about Rankin?” Hayes was thinking aloud.

“Who knows? It’s been a long, long time.”

“She had it bad for Bentz.”

“Didn’t we all?” she teased, then said, “Stick around for dinner. You know I make a mean pesto.”

“I do know, but I’m not hungry. Sorry.”
With a sigh she nodded. “Yeah, I know. I get it.” And she did. Corrine O’Donnell had been a crack detective, the lead on several high-profile cases, until she’d broken her leg and blown out the ACL on her knee during a chase when she’d been hit by a car. Lucky to be alive, she was now reduced to pushing papers in the department. Active duty was out. Despite the fact that she worked out, was strong and otherwise healthy, the knee was still an issue. Though she tried to hide it, she sometimes, though rarely, walked with a bit of a limp. What really bugged her, Hayes knew, was the fact that she couldn’t wear three-inch heels any longer.

“I’ll get you the drink.”

“I should go back to the station.”

“Tomorrow’s early enough,” she said, rattling around in the freezer for ice cubes. “You’re not going to bring those poor girls back.”

That much was true, yet they both knew that the first hours after a murder were the most crucial. As the time between the commission of the homicide and the gathering of evidence lengthened, the chances of catching the killer diminished.

“It’s so weird that the Twenty-one killer would show up after all these years.” She appeared holding out a short glass with three fingers of whiskey, then handed him a cold can of ginger ale. “You can do your own mixing.”

She winked at him and he smiled for the first time since seeing the bodies. Being with her was easy; she didn’t make too many demands and understood him, far better than either of his wives had. And she was pretty. Trim and lithe, with the build of the long-distance runner she’d once been, Corrine O’Donnell was a force to be reckoned with. Her eyes were large and deep-set, a flinty gray that, when she was aroused, smoldered deep and dark. If he hadn’t been so gun-shy, he might just let himself fall in love with her, not that she was asking for any commitment. Yet.

“Look, Hayes, you’re off duty. Have a drink…maybe nothing quite as strong as this, though, since you and I both know you’re going back to the station.” She plucked the glass from his hands, carried it back to the kitchen, and returned with a light beer. “Okay, so relax, have a little dinner, then go back and hit it again.”

“You’re okay with that?” he said, skeptical. Delilah would have had a fit; but then, Delilah had never been a cop.

“Okay with it? Well, I’m not thrilled, but yeah, I’m okay. However, the minute you catch the creep, you throw his ass in jail and you hightail it back here.”

“It could take longer than a few hours,” he said, but took a swallow from the long-necked bottle of Coors light.

“For a super-detective like you?” she mocked, walking around the chair and throwing her bad leg over his to sit on his lap. “Naaahh.” Then she kissed him, hard, her lips warm and pliant.

His body, racked with tension, responded instantly. He kissed her back, felt her tongue join his just as his cock came to life. She was already working at his tie and buttons and his hands were all over her ass, ripping off her jeans.

For the next twenty minutes, Jonas Hayes forgot all about the double homicide.

Bentz stopped at a take-out deli in Culver City that was only a few blocks from the motel. He ordered pastrami on rye with a side of coleslaw and a Pepsi from a kid who looked to be all of sixteen. The kid, Robbie, according to the tag pinned on his shirt, had a severe case of acne and an expression that said he would rather be anywhere but behind the counter at the Corner Deli. The place was almost empty, with any luck because of the late hour and not lack of quality. Another kid swabbed the floors while Robbie put together Bentz’s order.

Fifteen minutes later, Bentz was back in his motel and eating at his desk. Between bites of his sandwich, he sat at his laptop and made a list of the car descriptions and plate numbers he’d photographed in the shopping center and
near the inn. He kicked himself for not paying attention to the Impala, but he was able to get the other cars’ plates from the pictures he’d taken.

He didn’t have a printer, so he sent an e-mail to himself that he could print later. Then he’d see if Hayes could run the plates and find out who owned the cars parked near the abandoned inn.

He finished the sandwich and wiped his fingers on a napkin before running a search of medical facilities in the area, just in case the silver Impala was somehow connected to his sighting of Jennifer. His search, which included the greater L.A. area, came up with hundreds of names.

There had to be a way of narrowing it.

He finished his soda, rattled the ice in the cup, and thought about the cars in the parking lot, a fixation, he decided, but something to work with.

He doubted the driver of the Impala was from San Juan Capistrano, so he centered his search in L.A. Culver City was an obvious choice, but too obvious. Again, the list was long.

Frowning, he leaned back in his desk chair and stared at the screen. What was it about that permit on the Chevy that bugged him?

Something unique. It had been faded and sun-bleached, the numbers nearly impossible to read, as if whomever had used the permit hadn’t updated it in a long while. Maybe a hospital worker who had retired, or moved to another job, or sold the car?

Tapping a pen on the desk, he closed his eyes, drawing up the image. There had been numbers and a date, and the name of the hospital, and something else…a logo or picture of…what? Some familiar symbol that scurried around in the dark, murky corners of his brain but wouldn’t come to the fore. Crap! He concentrated to no end. The symbol eluded him and he gave up. Sooner or later, he knew he’d remember something important about it.

He hoped.

He wadded up the trash from his meal, tossed it into a wastebasket. After cranking up the A/C a few notches cooler, he did some exercises on a towel stretched over the thin carpet. His leg already hurt, but he kept at it until his muscles ached and he was sweating. Finally he gave up on the repetitions and hit the shower.

With his tiny, complimentary bar of soap and a thimbleful of generic shampoo, he washed off the grime, dust, and sweat of the day. The spray was weak, but warm, and he let the water run over his hip and knee, both of which were beginning to throb and remind him that he was getting old, hadn’t yet recovered. He couldn’t go chasing ghosts upstairs and across courtyards and through dirty, dark corridors and expect not to pay the price.

He managed to dry himself with another impossibly thin towel, then flopped onto the bed and used the remote to turn on the TV.

He found a station with “breaking news.”

Video of a crime scene. The camera panned an overpass of the freeway, police officers worked a roped-off area, a warehouse behind a reporter in a blue jacket. Holding a microphone and staring soberly into the camera, she said, “Today, here in a storage unit beneath the 110 freeway, officers discovered a grisly scene. The bodies of two girls, whom sources have revealed are sisters—twins—were discovered, victims of a tragic double murder.”

“What?” Bentz froze, his hand still holding the remote, his gaze riveted to the tiny screen.

“The names of the victims have been withheld pending notification of next of kin. A source close to the investigation, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told us that the girls had been reported missing early this morning, the day of their twenty-first birthdays.” The reporter paused meaningfully, then added, “Unfortunately, they never made it to their party, the one they had planned to celebrate with family and close friends.”
“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” Bentz sat bolt upright and stared at the TV. Déjà vu cast a stranglehold on his throat. *Twins? On their twenty-first birthday?* The footage changed to a different camera angle and Bentz watched as Detective Andrew Bledsoe, a few pounds heavier than Bentz remembered, flecks of gray showing in his black hair, talked to the reporter. Bledsoe, appearing serious and troubled, offered her nothing concrete, but Bentz knew the truth.

He fell back on his cheap pillow and felt sick inside.

The cops weren’t saying much, but Bentz could read between the lines.

The Los Angeles Police Department feared that the Twenty-one killer, the madman who had taken lives in the past and gotten away with it, was back.

And back with a vengeance.
CHAPTER 15

“I’m sorry!” Bentz said, his voice echoing as it reached her from the other side of the tunnel, “This is something I have to do.”

“No! Don’t go! Rick, don’t leave me! Don’t leave us!” Olivia ran after him through the darkness, her legs pumping but feeling wooden, her feet tripping on the rails and gravel of the track. She pushed forward, her heart pumping. He wasn’t that far ahead of her, but he was backing up, still facing her, but running away.

“Rick!” she screamed. “Stop!”

“I can’t.”

“But the baby. Rick, we’re going to have a baby!”

Another noise, loud and fierce. The thunder of a heavy engine, the clack of wheels against rails.

Bentz turned away as if he hadn’t heard her and continued moving through the cavernous tunnel, leaving Olivia gasping, racing, trying to outrun the huge engine with its ominous light bearing down on her.

No!

A whistle blasted, shrieking so loudly she thought her eardrums would shatter.

No! Oh, God, no!

“Rick! Help!” she cried as the end of the tunnel seemed to shrink, becoming smaller and farther away.

Her heart drummed and her legs were heavy, so heavy.

“Bentz!” she tried to scream, but her throat was strangled, her voice a whisper.

He turned back toward her for a second and she saw his badge, catching in the bright sunlight. “I can’t,” he said as the day turned to night and suddenly he wasn’t alone. A woman was with him, a beautiful woman with long dark hair and crimson lips. She took his hand, linked her fingers through his, and smiled with malice and glee as she pulled him away.

“No! Wait! Rick—”

The train thundered ever closer, the tracks quaking. She stumbled, barely able to right herself.

A horrific whistle shrieked while brakes squealed. The sound of metal screeching against metal was deafening, the smell of burning diesel acrid in her nostrils.

Steam swirled all around her.

Help me! Help my baby!

But her prayer fell on deaf ears as steam and shrill noise reverberated through the tunnel.

“No!” she yelled, startling herself awake.
Her heart was pounding, her body drenched in sweat, the sheets of her bed twisted. Dear God. It was a dream. Only a flippin’ dream. Taking in deep breaths, she glanced at the clock. Three-fifteen. Still a few hours before she had to get up and dressed for a day at the shop.

She sat upright, pushed her hair from her eyes, and realized her fingers were trembling, the residual effect from the nightmare.

From his dog bed on the floor, Hairy S lifted his scruffy head. His ears pricked forward and his little tail beat against his bed hopefully. “Oh, sure,” she said. “Come on, jump up!”

He didn’t need a second more of encouragement. The dog hopped from his bed, made a running leap, and landed near Olivia’s pillows. After washing her face enthusiastically, he burrowed under the covers and she stretched out again. With one hand she scratched Hairy behind his ears. His warm body curled close to hers.

A far cry from her husband’s embrace, but it would have to do for now. Her husband. What the hell was he doing in L.A.? Chasing after a ghost, or a dream? She tried not to think that he was still harboring feelings for his dead ex-wife, but she knew better. His guilt, she thought, was swallowing him whole and someone was preying upon him.

Who?

The same nagging question that had been with her since he’d shown her the mutilated death certificate kept poking at her brain relentlessly. It’s not that she didn’t believe in ghosts; she just wasn’t certain. She’d had her fair share of dealing with unexplained, if not paranormal, activity. Hadn’t she, herself, seen through the eyes of a twisted, sadistic serial killer?

Oh, for some of that insight now.

She glanced at the clock. It was only one-twenty in the morning in L.A. Was Bentz still awake? Was he thinking about her? Chasing down a dream? She touched her still-flat abdomen and wondered if she and Bentz and the baby would ever have a normal life.

Yeah, well, what’s that? You knew what you signed up for when you married a workaholic.

Sighing, she closed her eyes, determined to relax and find sleep again. She was just starting to doze when the phone rang. Smiling, she said to the dog. “I guess he can’t sleep, either.”

She picked up the receiver and said, “Hey,” a smile audible in her voice.

“Do you know what your husband’s doing in California?” a woman’s hoarse voice whispered.

“What?” Olivia was suddenly wide awake, the hairs on the back of her neck prickling in fear. “Who is this?”

“He’s looking for her. And do you know why? She’s his true love, not you. Jennifer. He’s never forgotten her.”

“Who is this?” she demanded again.

But the phone went dead.

“Bitch!” Olivia hissed into the receiver. Of course Bentz was in L.A. She knew that. She also knew that he was looking for Jennifer or a woman who was impersonating his ex-wife. She looked at caller ID; the display flashed UNKNOWN CALLER. “Great.” No name. No number. No area code. No way to figure out who had called her. It’s no one, just a crank call, someone who knows Bentz went to L.A. to determine what happened to Jennifer.

But there weren’t many people who knew that fact. At least not here in New Orleans. Only Montoya and herself. So the call must’ve come from somewhere else, and she’d bet her life savings that it had originated in Southern California.

Bentz, it seemed, was rattling a cage or two. Which was what he’d hoped to do.
As she set the phone onto the nightstand, she thought about calling her husband and explaining what had happened, but decided to let it go.

For tonight.

Instead, she tossed back the covers and padded to the kitchen, where she poured herself a glass of water and drank it down. She stared out the window over the sink to the backyard, watching the play of moonlight through the cypress trees.

Afterward, she set her glass in the sink and double-checked that all the doors were locked and the windows latched.

Only then, did she return to bed.

She glanced at the digital read out one last time and decided that in five hours she’d call her husband and find out what the hell was going on.

Bentz stayed up listening to news reports, soaking up any information he could find on the Internet. Why the hell had the Twenty-one killer or some damned copycat decided to strike again, after all these years? It was too late to call Olivia, so he spent several restless hours thinking about the case surrounding Delta and Diana Caldwell’s murder. It had been a travesty, a horror for the shell-shocked, grief-ridden parents and older brother, another D name…Donny or Danny, no. Donovan! That was it. The girls’ brother had been eight years older and at the time of the tragedy had been forced to hold his shattered family together. Apparently it was an effort destined to fail, as years later Bentz had learned through the grapevine that the kid’s parents had divorced.

When Bentz closed his eyes he could still see how the victims had been posed: naked, facing each other, bound in a red ribbon that reminded him of blood. Bentz had nearly thrown up at first look.

Whenever he thought back on the Caldwell murders he worried that he hadn’t given the investigation 100 percent of his focus. He had worked the case as best he could, considering his own mental state, but it wasn’t enough. Bledsoe was right. Bentz had left Trinidad holding the bag. And now, it seemed, two other girls had lost their lives to the same maniac.

Maybe if he’d been more on his game with the Caldwell twins, the new double homicide wouldn’t have happened and two innocent girls would still be alive today.

After a sleepless night Bentz decided to offer up his help on the new double homicide investigation. He knew he wouldn’t really be a part of the LAPD, but certainly he could help, “consult,” as it were, as he’d been the lead at one time in the Caldwell twins’ murder.

He said as much when he called his old partner for information.

“Shit, Bentz. You know I can’t talk about this,” Trinidad said. “As for the reasons you came back to L.A.—I heard some of it from Hayes—I can’t be a part of it. I got to think about my retirement. I can’t do anything to screw it up, and I’m not talking about the new murder case. Not with you. Not with my wife. Not with the press. Not with any-damned-body.”

“I worked the first case.”

“That’s assuming they’re related.”

“They are.”

“You know this because of a news bulletin, a thirty-second sound bite at eleven? Give it a rest, Bentz. I gotta be straight with you. No one here wants your help.”
Bentz didn’t give up. Remembering the Caldwell twins’ tragedy spurred him into making another call. This time to Hayes.

“I figured you’d call,” the detective said. “This is police business, Bentz. Got nothing to do with you. I’m already sticking my neck out for you as it is. So, don’t even ask. We’ll all be a lot better off.”

Bentz hung up, but he wasn’t able to leave it alone. So he phoned Andrew Bledsoe.

He wasn’t pleased to get a call.

“Jesus, Bentz, you’ve got a lotta nerve calling here after how you left me and everyone in the damned department hangin’. Now, you want information? Are you out of your frickin’ mind? You know I can’t talk to you. Shit, didn’t you do enough damage back when you were on the force? You remember that time, don’t you? When it was legal for me to talk to you? I didn’t like it then, and I don’t like it any more now. What is this? You calling me? Why? No one else will talk to you?” Bledsoe raged. “Shit, you’re really scraping the bottom of the barrel, aren’t you? Don’t forget, dickhead, you almost got canned, so you can damned well read about this one in the papers like everybody else!”

Bledsoe hung up, still muttering under his breath.

Bentz hadn’t expected anyone to bend over backward for him. Nonetheless he was frustrated as hell that he wasn’t allowed any information about a double homicide that in all probability was linked to his last case with the department, the murder investigation he wasn’t able to solve.

He was stewing about it when Olivia called. On her way into the shop late, she had decided to phone him around nine West Coast time. At first, his wife was evasive about the reason for the early morning call. But Bentz suspected something was up and said as much.

“Can’t I just phone to say I miss you?” she asked.

“Any time.” But it really wasn’t her style.

“I’m just hoping that you’ll wrap this up soon. How’s it going?”

“Not as fast as I’d hoped,” he admitted. He didn’t tell her about seeing Jennifer at the old inn; he didn’t want to discuss it with anyone until he knew what he was dealing with, had some concrete evidence that she’d been there. However, he did fill her in on the case of the murdered twins and how it seemed to mirror the last case he’d worked on in L.A. twelve years ago.

“And you think because you returned to California this sicko is on the hunt again?” she asked, skeptically.

“I don’t know what to think,” he admitted.

“Does the LAPD want your help?”

He laughed. “What do you think?”

“That bad?”

“Worse. They want me to get out of Dodge, I think.”

“Are you considering it?”

“Well, yeah, I’m thinking about it, being as you miss me so badly.”

“Hey. Don’t put this on me. You’re on some kind of mission out there, so you stick it out until you’ve done whatever it is you have to do. I’m fine here. I’m not going to have it on my head that you returned for me and left unfinished business. Uh-uh. No way.”
“I’ll wrap it up as soon as I can,” he promised. And then they hung up and he was left with the feeling that Olivia was holding out on him. He sensed that something more was going on and with all that was happening here in L.A., he was concerned. New Orleans was nearly two thousand miles away, but he’d seen “Jennifer” in Louisiana more than once, and the death certificate had been sent to the NOPD, so whoever was behind this knew him inside out and probably realized that he was married.

Although Bentz knew he was the primary target of this head game, whatever it was, the easiest way to hurt him was through those he loved, which only added to the worry gnawing a deep hole in his gut.

Like it or not, he had the feeling that Olivia or Kristi could be at risk.

By noon he’d drunk several cups of the coffee brewed in the motel’s office and bought a copy of every paper he could find in the boxes on the street. He had spent hours reading news accounts of the double homicide and had learned the names of the victims and some of the details of the crime. Of course some information was missing, kept under wraps by the LAPD so that they could flush out the true killer when the time came. Sick as it was, attention-seekers looking for their fifteen minutes of fame sometimes claimed responsibility for vile acts. They lived off the attention, the media frenzy, or were deranged enough to believe they had actually performed the crime, no matter how horrendous. A double homicide of this nature got a lot of press and therefore attracted a lot of false claims.

It was all a pain in the ass.

Montoya had spent his morning finishing the paperwork on a homicide. The night before there had been a knifing at the waterfront just off the river walk, not far from the New Orleans Convention Center. The victim had died, but with the help of witnesses the killer had been apprehended. Montoya was finishing the crime report when Ralph Lee called from the lab. Despite being ankle-deep in forensic evidence attached to real cases, Lee had taken the time to examine and test the death certificates and pictures that had been sent to Bentz.

“There’s not a lot you can work with,” he said as Montoya leaned back in his chair, stretching out his neck and shoulder muscles. “It looks like the photographs haven’t been tampered with. I haven’t been able to see any evidence of alteration.”

Montoya didn’t know if that was good or bad.

“What we were able to determine was that the car the subject was getting into was a GM product, probably a Chevy Impala. You said you thought the shots were taken in California and that’s consistent with the vegetation, license plate numbers, and street signs. The one we saw was for Colorado Boulevard. I enlarged the photos so that I could read the headlines on the newspapers and then I double-checked. The USA Today and L.A. Times were dated two weeks ago on Thursday, and the headlines are consistent for that date. We tried to get a reflection of the photographer from some of the shots, but couldn’t get any images. I have a few partial license plates for cars parked in the area and I listed them along with make and model in case your shutterbug inadvertently caught his own car on film, assuming it wasn’t the Impala.

“As for the death certificate, no DNA was found on the envelope flap. We ran the fingerprints through the national database. No matches on AFIS. The red ink is consistent with ink found in a Write Plus pen, and they’re sold all over the country and into Canada, but are more popular in the western states. The document—the death certificate—is authentic and over ten years old; we can tell by the paper. That’s it.” Lee sounded almost apologetic. “I don’t know if that helps you or not.”

“You guys went above and beyond,” Montoya said. “This will definitely help.”

“Good. I’ve got the report. I can e-mail it to you or you can pick up a hard copy when you swing by to retrieve the original documents, since this isn’t an active investigation.”

“I’ll get them this afternoon,” Montoya promised and hung up. He’d done all he could for Bentz and his damned ghost hunt. Montoya would call and pass the information on. Then, maybe Bentz would wise up and come home to his real flesh-and-blood wife.
Time to give up looking for a woman who no longer existed.
Lorraine Newell lived in an aging tri-level home on a cul-de-sac in Torrance, south of the heart of L.A. The apricot-colored paint was blistering and peeling in the sun, and the lawn was patchy, the green grass bleached in spots where the sprinklers hadn’t quite reached. A far cry from the palace Lorraine, a would-be princess, had hoped for.

Although Bentz was fifteen minutes early, the minute he punched the doorbell the door flew open. It was as if Lorraine had been perched on the steps off the entryway, waiting for the sound of the melodic chimes to announce his arrival.

“Rick Bentz,” she said, shaking her head, dark hair brushing her chin. Jennifer’s stepsister hadn’t aged a day since he’d last seen her. Like minor royalty, she still carried herself imperiously despite the fact that she was barely five-five in heels. Lorraine had never liked him and had never made any bones about the fact. Today she didn’t bother with a fake smile or hug, which was fine by Bentz. No reason for pretense.

“You’re the last person I’d ever expect to show up here,” she said.

“Things change.”

“Do they?” She moved out of the doorway and led him into a living room that was straight out of the late eighties, when her husband Earl, a car dealer, had been alive. Bentz remembered the plaid chairs clustered around a long forest green couch, a marble-faced fireplace surrounded by a wall covered in mirrored panes that gave the room a weird funhouse feel. Fake plants gathered dust, the coffee table books of California and wines were the same ones he remembered from nearly a quarter of a century earlier.

“Sit,” she said, waving him into a chair while she took a seat on the arm of the couch. She was dressed in tight fitting jeans, a black tank top, and ballet slippers. Not exactly what Bentz would call business attire, appropriate for a dinner with a client, but then again he never had understood the studied casualness of Southern Californians.

Lorraine got right to the point. “What is this about Jennifer’s death?” Using finger quotes to emphasize her point, she said, “You know her accident never set well with me. And I never bought the whole suicide angle. You know that. She was a drama queen, but a car accident? You know that. She was a drama queen, but a car accident?” She shook her head. “Not Jen’s style. Pills, maybe…but I think even that is a stretch. Though she was a little self-destructive, I grant you, I couldn’t see her actually taking her own life.” She looked up at Bentz. “Jennifer was the sort of person who might have attempted suicide as an attempt to grab attention. But to actually drive into a tree? Let her body be thrown through glass? Mangle herself? No way. She didn’t have the guts for a stunt like that. She could have survived, been scarred, or crippled.” Lorraine shook her head emphatically as she folded her arms around her midriff. “Uh-uh.”

He showed her copies of the pictures, but held back on the death certificate.

“Oh dear God.” She was shaking her head as she eyed the photographs of her stepsister. “These...these really do look like Jen. I mean, yeah. But it has to be an imposter; someone who looks so much like her that one of your enemies, maybe someone you sent to prison, decided to play a practical joke on you.” She looked up. “Seems as if it worked.”

If you only knew. He thought about the woman in his backyard, the dreams he’d had of Jennifer. “I’m just trying to figure it out.”

“A few pictures of a look-alike do not a case make. They wouldn’t bring you all this way.” She frowned. “There’s something else, isn’t there? Something that drove you to come back to California.”
“I have a little time off.”

“Another department trying to get rid of dead wood?”

“It’s not just the photos, Lorraine. I think I’ve seen her.”

“Oh, Jesus.” She pressed a slender hand to her forehead. “This is really getting nuts. So, what? You want to know if I’ve come into contact with her? Maybe gone out for a drink? Had her over for dinner?”

He didn’t say anything; he often found it was best to let people rant and rave. He frequently learned more from silence than from a series of direct questions. “Well, you’ve really lost it this time. This is just plain nuts.” She paced over to the plate-glass window that dominated the living room. Outside, a hummingbird was flitting along the deep purple blooms of a climbing vine that wound its way to the eaves.

“You know, Rick,” she said. “You’ve lost it. Really. If Jennifer were really alive, I would know it. She would have contacted me. Where has she been hiding all these years? And if she wasn’t the woman in the car, who was? Why did you identify the wrong woman? Don’t tell me you were drunk.”

“Of course not! I thought… I still think she was behind the wheel.”

“But now you’re not sure? Because of photos of a woman who looks like her? Because you think you saw her?”

Bentz ignored the question. “What do you remember about the last time you saw her?”

“Oh, God, do you really want to go into all that?” she asked, retracting into her hard shell.

“Sure, Lorraine. Why mince words?”

Her lips pulled into a knot of dislike and her nostrils flared. “Okay, she did call me a few days before the accident. She was obviously troubled, maybe drunk, I don’t know. But not right. When I asked her what was wrong, she blamed you. Said you didn’t believe that she loved you, and it was eating away at her. I knew about the infidelity, of course, but for some reason she had it bad for you. Well… you, and the priest. Your half brother, was it?”

Bentz’s guts twisted, but he kept his expression bland. “Anything else?”

“Nothing that involves you. Sometime I think back and wish she’d stayed with Gray. If she would have stuck it out with Alan Gray, she’d still be alive today. Alive and rich. Instead…” She shrugged. “I told her she was making a mistake when she broke it off with Alan, but she wouldn’t listen.”

Getting to his feet, he tried not to wince, didn’t want to let on to Lorraine that he felt any pain whatsoever.

As she walked him to the door, she said, “You know, even if Jennifer is alive, why the hell are you doing this? Give it up, already. Let sleeping dogs, or dead ex-wives, lie. If you’re really bothered, you should leave it to the professionals. Tell the police what you know. Let them handle it. You’re married again. Go home. Pay attention to your new wife.” Lorraine opened the door and waited for him to walk onto the cracked cement porch. Spying a dying petunia blossom, she deadheaded the shriveling pink bloom and added, “Don’t make the same mistake twice. If you give your new wife some attention, maybe she won’t stray the way Jennifer did.”

Bentz ignored that last bit of advice. “If you think of anything else or hear from her—”

“For the love of God, Bentz, she’s dead. D-E-A-D. And I haven’t heard of anyone coming back since J.C. did it oh, what was it? A few thousand years ago!” She closed the door but before it latched tossed out, “Say hi to Crystal for me.”

He didn’t bother correcting her. Kristi had only vague memories of her mother’s stepsister. Not once since Jennifer’s death had Lorraine called or sent a card or tried to contact Kristi in any way. Bentz saw no reason to change that now.
He drove away from Torrance without much new information. Lorraine had been insufferable in the past and she hadn’t mellowed much with age, but the key question was, had she been honest with him?

He wasn’t sure. She, like Shana, had wanted to get her licks in and she had. But she certainly hadn’t seen Jennifer. He kept his eyes on the road as he headed north toward Culver City. Traffic on the freeway was moving at a good clip despite the yellow haze that had settled over the area. In the west, the orb of the sun glowed in the dingy smog. He cracked the window and fiddled with the air, still thinking about what Lorraine had told him, which was essentially, “Take your ball and go home.” But then, they’d never gotten along. And what were all the references to Alan Gray? He was someone Bentz hadn’t thought of for decades. But Lorraine hadn’t forgotten.

As he spied signs for his exit Bentz realized he was making great time. Just a few more miles. The phone rang as he was moving onto the ramp. Catching site of Montoya’s cell number, he answered. “Bentz.”

Montoya gave him a quick rundown of everything he knew, which wasn’t a lot. Except for the silver Chevy. An Impala, in fact. Just like the car that had caught his attention in the parking lot in San Juan Capistrano. He explained as much to Montoya. “So what I’m looking for is a six-or seven-year-old car, California plates, with an expired parking pass to a hospital.”

“You didn’t happen to get which hospital?”

“No. But there was a symbol on it…” What the hell was that image? He couldn’t remember. Just flat out couldn’t remember.

“I saw on the news that there’s another double homicide. Twins,” Montoya said. “Same doer?”

“Looks like.” Bentz’s hand clenched hard over the wheel, so tightly his knuckles blanched as a black BMW crawled up his ass. Montoya knew the story behind the Caldwell twins’ murders twelve years earlier. Bentz had confided in him long ago.

“Copycat?”

“Not buying it.” Bentz switched lanes to the exit ramp, sliding in behind an old pickup filled with gardening tools. He let the bastard in the black BMW fly by. The car had to be pushing ninety.

Another car was in its wake. Keeping up.

A streak of silver.

Bentz saw the taillights and recognized an older model Chevy Impala. A dark-haired woman was behind the wheel…a sticker on the windshield.

Holy crap!

Jennifer!

He dropped the phone. “Son of a bitch.” Signaling as a red Volkswagen beetle’s blinker started, indicating the driver wanted to edge toward the exit ramp, Bentz gunned his engine. With inches to spare, he swerved out of the lane marked exit only and accelerated.

“Come on, come on,” he urged his rental. The silver car, a quarter of a mile ahead, was darting between lanes.

Could it be?

No way.

Jaw set, he drove as fast as he dared, cutting through cars and trucks and vans, keeping the silver car in his sights. As if the driver knew she was being followed, she began even more evasive moves, slipping between cars, passing on the left or right. She didn’t seem to care, just as long as she was putting distance and vehicles between her car and
But Bentz bore down on her, gaining ground.

Suddenly, she cut to the right, skidding and nearly missing the Sunset Boulevard exit. Brake lights flashed. Horns blasted.

The Impala disappeared down the ramp. Jaw set, Bentz tried to follow, cutting over to the right, but a minivan blocked his way. A woman wearing a cell phone headset, oblivious to everything around her, drove her minivan right on the bumper of a lumbering flatbed that was taking the off-ramp. There was no time to speed around both vehicles, so Bentz was stuck.

He slammed a fist into the steering wheel.

God, what he wouldn’t do for lights and a siren right now!

To make the exit, he was forced to slow down and drop behind the minivan. Once off the freeway, he had to stop for a red light that the Chevy slipped through on amber and red. While Bentz gripped his steering wheel in frustration, Minivan Mom sat gabbing into the mouthpiece of her phone.

Bentz looked down the road and saw the Impala speed under an other yellow light. He’d never catch her.

So close, but so far away…

California plates…He squinted. The last two numbers looked like 66, but he couldn’t make out the rest.

By the time the light changed and Bentz was able to pass the boxy minivan, the silver car was gone, out of sight.

Adrenaline racing, nerves stretched to the breaking point, Bentz prowled the area. As he waited at a red light, his cell phone rang.

“What the hell happened to you?” Montoya demanded and Bentz explained.

“You think you saw the same woman on the freeway? Come on. What’re the chances of that?”

“She knew I was at Lorraine Newell’s.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. She probably followed me. Second guessed what I would do.”

“L.A.’s a big city. Lots of dark-haired women. It wasn’t Jennifer or the woman who looks like her.”

“I’m telling you—”

“What? You’re telling me what? That in a city of millions of people you just ran across the one you were looking for on the freeway? You’re talking needle in a haystack.”

“It was the same car, damn it. And a dark-haired woman driving, but no, I didn’t see her face. I did catch a glimpse of that parking pass. It had a cross on it, like the hospital was affiliated with some Christian church.”

“If you say so.”

“The license plate ended in 66, but I didn’t catch any of the other letters or numbers.”

“You’re sure that wasn’t 666?”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes.”
“That’s the problem, Bentz. This whole thing is some lame-ass joke this woman is pulling on you. When are you going to wise up and get back here? Look, I got work to do here. Real work. Call me when you come to your senses.” Montoya hung up, leaving Bentz to cruise the side streets for nearly an hour.

He checked parking lots and streets and traffic, searching out the silver Chevy. There were lots of silver or gray cars, all catching light in the sunny, hazy day, but none of them were the Impala.

Giving up, he stayed off the freeway to wend his way back to Culver City through Westwood and Beverly Hills. He was nearly back at the inn when his phone rang again. This time no caller was listed.

“Bentz,” he said.

“Catch me if you can, RJ,” a breathy female voice whispered.

His heart leapt to his throat. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“You heard me.”

“Who is this?” he demanded.

“Oh, I think you know.” She laughed, a deep, naughty chuckle that caused his blood to run cold. “You just have trouble believing what is right in front of your face. I’m back RJ, and the good news is that you still want me.”

I glance in the rearview mirror, catching my own smile. “Good job,” I tell myself. Rick Bentz is running around in circles, chasing down all of his ex-wife’s old acquaintances, digging up the past. Which is just damned perfect.

It’s a good feeling, knowing I finally got to him. “You bastard,” I say, thinking of his chiseled face. “You deserve it.” Still driving, I kick off my high heels and drive barefoot, my toes curling over the accelerator. I sensed his frustration through the wireless connection and it was a rush. Following him at a distance, watching him tear after a ghost.

I’m still on an adrenaline high, one I plan to keep going.

Approaching the freeway overpass I toss the phone into the passenger seat and roll down my window. Yes, it’s a little smoggy, but it’s L.A. Of course there’s haze. It doesn’t stop the wind from rushing through my hair as I wind my way toward the ramp.

The prepaid cell phone is perfect.

No way to trace a call.

Poor Bentz. He won’t be able to find me; not until I want him to.

He fell right into the trap that I laid for him. Maybe he’s losing his edge.

Good.

He never knew that I watched him; followed him. I knew exactly when he was visiting Shana McIntyre and, today, that bitch Lorraine Newell. Jesus, she’s a miserable human being.

And as for Bentz?

Dear God, the man is predictable.

Always has been. These people never change.

I punch the throttle, then check my speed and ease up a bit. This wouldn’t be a good time for a ticket.
But my heart pounds wildly.

It’s time to ramp things up a bit.

I warm inside at the thought. My reflection winks at me. “Smart girl,” I say into the wind as I consider my next move.

Bentz will never know what hit him.
Hayes slapped the files shut and leaned back in his desk chair. It squeaked in protest, adding to the cacophony of sounds—computer keys clicking, phones ringing, conversations buzzing. And beneath it all was the ever-present rumble of the ancient air conditioning system.

Someone laughed as a printer clicked out pages a few desks over. Trinidad was taking a statement from a long-legged black woman, most likely a witness in one of the open cases. They had more than their share of homicides to solve, but the buzz in the department was about the Springer twins’ murders. This was a crime that had captured the attention of the media as well as the horrified public. Reporters had been calling, keeping the Public Information Officer as busy as the detectives solving the case.

And time was sliding by without any serious leads.

Hayes picked up the remainder of his iced tea, a drink that had been ignored, the ice melting since lunch. He took a long swallow and felt the paper cup getting weak.

He’d spent the day rereading the cold case file on the Caldwell twins’ homicides, trying to find some bit of evidence that had been overlooked twelve years earlier.

He’d come up dry.

After Bentz had bailed, Trinidad had been assigned another partner, a female detective named Bonita Unsel, who had since left the department. She and Trinidad, with Bledsoe’s help, had handled the case by the book, but the Twenty-one killer had literally gotten away with murder. Twice.

Absently, his mind on the case, Hayes finished the drink as he scrolled through the crime scene photos on the computer. A box of evidence had been pulled, and as he’d combed through it he’d noted that the ribbon used in the first killings appeared identical to the ribbons that had bound and gagged the Springer twins.

The son of a bitch had kept his killing kit intact, down to the heavy red ribbon with wire running through it, the kind used to wrap fancy, expensive Christmas presents. Years ago the department had hunted down the manufacturer of the ribbon, checked with distributors and local stores, only to come up with a big goose egg.

Nor had they been able to find any fingerprints or trace evidence to link the suspects. They’d spent hours interviewing friends and acquaintances of the victims. Boyfriends, girlfriends, family members, classmates. Lots of interviews leading nowhere.

The primary suspect had been a boy named Chad Emerson who had dated both girls at one time or another, but his alibi had been solid and he’d seem genuinely devastated by the Caldwell twins’ deaths. Same with the older brother, Donovan, whom Bledsoe had been certain was involved. Nothing concrete. So he’d been envious of the attention his sisters received; jealousy itself wasn’t a crime, and it wasn’t unusual. Nonetheless Hayes intended to check out both suspects and see if they had any connection whatsoever to the Springer twins.

“Hey!”

He looked up to see Dawn Rankin, one of the other detectives in the department, walking toward his desk. She dropped a report into his in basket. “I sent this to you via e-mail, but thought you’d like a hard copy. The shooting in West Hollywood. Witness statements.”
“Not an accident?”

She shook her head. “Looks like we’ll get an indictment. Weird, huh? Best friends and one ends up killing the other over a woman.”

“Stupidity has no bounds.”

“I guess.” She flashed him a wicked little grin. “Hey, I heard that Rick Bentz is back, digging into his wife’s death.”

“Ex-wife, but yeah.”

“What’s that all about?” Dawn’s eyebrows drew together. She was a pretty woman. Petite, smart, with a smooth complexion that required little or no makeup, she forced a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Not sure. Thinks he’s being gaslit, that someone’s manipulating him into thinking Jennifer is still alive.”

“He made the ID.”

“Yeah, he knows.” Hayes felt a twinge of a headache coming on. “He never struck me as the kind who would fall into this kind of trap. I mean if someone was messin’ with him, he’d blow them off.”

“Unless he wants to believe she’s still alive.” She threw up a hand. “Not that I could ever figure him out.”

Hayes remembered now: back in his younger days Bentz had hooked up with Dawn. Aside from a passing interest, she seemed long over him, though at the time of the breakup, according to rumors, it had been messy.

“Anyway, I spent the afternoon talking to people who knew the vics in the Springer case. I even tracked down the boyfriends of both the Springer girls. They both, conveniently, have alibis, but the one who dated Lucy, Kurt Jones, has a record. Nothing serious or violent, but drug charges. The word on the street is he’s a dealer.” She shook her head. “Small-time stuff. I don’t think he’s our guy.”

“Not likely to be linked to the Caldwell twins.”

“He’s old enough, just not the right kind of nut job.”

Bledsoe overheard the tail end of the conversation as he walked into the squad room. “Don’t tell me, you’re talking about my favorite ex-dick Bentz.” He pulled a face. “Wouldn’t you know he’d show up when the Twenty-one comes out of the woodwork? I’m thinking the killer came out because he knows Bentz is here, just to rub it in his face and piss him off.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s how serial killers work,” Dawn said, obviously irritated at the intrusion. Bledsoe had that way about him, an ability to aggravate without trying. “Next you’ll be saying Bentz killed the Springer girls.”

“Nah. He’s a bastard, but not a killer…but then again, there was the Valdez kid. Bentz nailed him.”

“Accident,” Dawn said. “That’s low, even for you.”

“I’m just not a big fan of coincidence,” Bledsoe said, holding up his hands as if in surrender. “I’m just sayin’.” His phone rang, and he left, walking smartly away, cell jammed to his ear.

“Jerk,” Dawn said, watching the other detective leave while scrounging in her purse for her pack of Marlboro Lights.

“I didn’t know you were a Bentz fan.”

Her eyes slid back to Hayes. “A fan? No. He’s another son of a bitch. But Bledsoe?” She said, retrieving her new pack. “They have special spots in hell for his kind.”
An hour before dusk Bentz drove to Santa Monica, a place that kept coming up in conversation and had been a part of his life with Jennifer. A pretty damned important part, considering they’d first made love here, before they’d been married. Had that memory been Jennifer’s fascination with this quaint seaside town? Or was he kidding himself? He found a parking spot on the street and was about to lock up when he noticed his cane in the backseat. Since the nagging pain in his leg had intensified after chasing “Jennifer” through Saint Miguel’s Inn at San Juan Capistrano he grabbed the damn thing and headed toward the sea.

He passed under the archway spanning the approach to the long pier. Though it wasn’t yet dark, the neon lights of the amusement park already glowed over the water. A roller coaster climbed high above the arcades and other rides. Passengers’ screams rose over the rattle of cars on steel tracks. Larger still, the gigantic Pacific Wheel turned more slowly, rotating high above the water, giving patrons a bird’s-eye view of the beaches and storefronts as it spun over the ever-darkening ocean.

Rick stared at the brilliant display looming above the beach and water. How many times had he and Jennifer brought Kristi here? How often had they taken her to the aquarium? Eaten hotdogs? Walked barefoot in the sand? His gut clenched.

He remembered several nights when he and his wife had come here alone, without their daughter. They’d walked along the pier, feeling the salt spray of the ocean after stopping for a drink at one of the hotels near the beach. And still she’d found time to meet James here.

Now, he twisted the kinks from his neck and decided against strolling along the beach while mentally walking down memory lane. The pain running down his leg wouldn’t allow him to tromp through the sand and reminisce. He settled for dinner in a noisy Cuban restaurant decorated in brilliant primary colors, as it had been for years. The square tables were angled throughout a main dining area separated by half walls and potted palms while the up-tempo melody of a Caribbean-flavored song swept through the rooms. Although the restaurant was crowded, he lucked out and was led to a table near the windows where he watched what remained of the sunset through the glass.

The setting sun wasn’t one of the Pacific’s best displays as the fog was rolling in, blurring the horizon, distorting sea and sky, causing most of the pedestrians along the beach and pier to disperse.

He and Jennifer had been in a couple of times, even celebrated one of her birthdays here, but the memory was fuzzy and he didn’t work too hard at calling it up. He wondered if she’d dared dine here with James, not that it mattered. Not anymore. Long ago, he’d been wounded by her affair. The second time around, the pain had been much less. He’d half-expected it and he’d been prepared, enclosed in his own emotional armor or some such crap.

So what about the woman driving the silver Impala? How the hell had she found him? Or had she? Was he making more of it than it was?

Maybe the erratic driver was little more than a figment of his imagination, an image incited by this whole damned mess. It could be the woman just resembled Jennifer and his freaked-out psyche had morphed her into the real thing.

You’re losing it, his conscience taunted, and that pissed him off because he was certain it was just what the person behind this elaborate fraud wanted.

He ordered a cup of black bean soup and pork adobo, both of which were as good or better than he remembered. The pork was succulent, the soup spicy, the memories bittersweet.

As night descended and the lights came up, he walked along the pier, using his damned cane. He peered at the carousel without much interest, not really seeing it through the fog. His thoughts churned about the woman in the silver car, the murder of the twins, the crank calls, and the “ghost” he’d seen outside the crumbling building in Mission San Capistrano.

This was personal.

Whoever was behind the hoax knew just how to get to him and had spent a long while pulling the scheme
together. He doubted the mastermind was anyone he’d arrested and sent to prison. If one of the thugs he’d collared had a hard-on to get back at him, the jerk would have just done it. Taken a potshot at Bentz, knifed him in the street, blown up his car. Something deadly and finite.

This was different. Someone wanted to play psychological games with him. Someone he’d wronged personally.

Jennifer.

She was the one person he’d never forgiven and had let her know it. Even when they’d tried to get together a second time, Bentz had been guarded. Untrusting. Ready for the other shoe to drop. And drop it had.

Big time.

He passed a store selling sunglasses and beach paraphernalia, but barely paid attention as he reached the part of the pier that jutted out over the water, an arm that stretched into the Pacific and the thickening mist. Though there were streetlights offering illumination, the fog swirled and rose, creating an eerie luminous veil. One he couldn’t see beyond.

Only a handful of other pedestrians were around. One young couple, a guy in a stocking cap and baggy shorts was all over a blond girl whose hair was clipped to the top of her head. Entangled on the park bench, the two kids seemed oblivious to the rest of the world.

Young love, Bentz thought and flashed on Olivia and the way she made him feel whenever they were alone. As if he were the only man in the universe. Older love. He pulled out his phone to give her a call and noticed an old man smoking a cigar and resting against the rails. Sporting a trimmed goatee and shaved head, the man nearly drowned in a jacket that was several sizes too large for him. A slim runner in a baseball cap was leaning forward, his hands on his knees as he caught his breath from a workout. Farther west, closer to the end of the pier, shrouded in haze was a solitary woman.

Bentz stopped short.

In a red dress with long dark hair falling down her back, she faced away from him, staring out to sea.

Jennifer! She has a dress like that.

Bentz’s heart skipped a beat.

Had, he reminded himself. She had a dress like the one this woman was wearing, a knee-length shimmery thing with a nipped-in waist and no sleeves...Holy shit, it was identical to his ex-wife’s. He remembered Jennifer showing it to him after a day of shopping. “What do you think?” she’d asked, twirling in front of him, allowing the candlelight to play upon the soft folds of red silk.

“It’s nice.”

“Oh, come on RJ,” she’d cooed. “It’s way more than ‘nice.’”

“If you say so.”

She’d laughed then, throwing back her head. “Yeah, well, I do say so. I think it’s probably sexy. Or damned gorgeous.” With a lift of one dark eyebrow she’d backed her way down the hallway and into the bedroom and he, like a fish to a lure, had followed.

Now, his fingers curled over the handle of his cane.

Don’t go there, he told himself as he noticed the woman on the pier was barefoot. Jennifer always went barefoot at the beach. Oh, hell, don’t assume every shoeless slim woman with coffee-colored hair is Jennifer...no! He corrected himself. Don’t assume she’s the woman impersonating your ex-wife.
Nonetheless, drawn to the vision, he started walking west, toward the sea. His eyes were trained on her, searching for something that would expose her as a fraud, but she was too far away, the mist too dense. He walked faster. As if she sensed him following, she backed away from the rail and started walking quickly toward the end of the pier, where heavy fog rolled in, masking her image.

Bentz swallowed hard, tried to figure out what he would say to her. His pulse was pounding, thudding in his brain as he followed. This time, damn it, she wasn’t going to get away. There was no place to run.

And yet she seemed intent on escape.

He felt it.

Faster and faster he hurried, his cane hitting the planks of the boardwalk in a staccato beat, his leg throbbing.

He had no time for the pain.

_Hurry, hurry, hurry_, his brain screamed, _catch her._

And what would he do when he tapped her on the shoulder and she wasn’t his ex-wife?

_For Christ’s sake, don’t worry about that. Be more concerned if she is. What then, Bentz? What if she’s the damned look-alike or worse yet, Jennifer herself in the damned flesh? No ghost. Your ex-wife!_

She, too, was hurrying, running barefoot toward the end of the pier, her legs flashing beneath her red hemline.

His leg was screaming in pain, thigh muscles on fire, hip aching, but he went into a dead run as he saw her, plunging into wisps of hanging fog.

Where was she going? She was running straight into the darkness, headed for the black night at the end of the pier.

Bentz’s lungs burned, his leg aching as she finally paused and braced the rail. At last! Now, finally he would have a chance to confront her.

But a moment later her hands reached out to the railing, bracing against it.

What the hell?

Without hesitation, she climbed onto the top bar, then over.

Oh, for God’s sake, she wouldn’t jump. Or would she? This was Jennifer. Daring crazy Jennifer.

“No!” he yelled.

For a heartbeat she balanced on the tiny edge, teetering. In that instant she glanced back, and Bentz drank in her beautiful face, her gaze locking with his. A split second later, she looked at the black water swirling around the pilings, gauging the distance, the depth. _Oh, God, she was really going to jump!_

“No!” he yelled.

One minute she was standing there, caught in a swirl of fog.

Then, before his eyes, she disappeared.

As if she’d actually leapt over the edge.

“No! Jen!” He rushed forward, running with dread prodding him on. “Oh, God!”

What the hell had happened? His eyes searched the gloom.
Did he hear a splash over the lapping tide?

Yes?

No?

God, where was she?

Confused, convinced he’d find her hanging from the railing, he grit his teeth and hurried to the rail to the very spot where she’d climbed over. Below the shifting water was dark as ink, no swimmer or body visible.

No Jennifer.

He yelled. Called her name.

He had nothing but a penlight. Still, he had to look. Moving gingerly, Bentz climbed over the rail and planted his feet on the thin ledge. The fingers of his left hand gripped the rail as he shined the small beam downward, but it did little to pierce the damned fog or illuminate much of the black water.

“Jennifer! Jesus, God! Jennifer!” he screamed at the dark swirling tide.

“Hey you!” some guy shouted frantically.

But Bentz didn’t look up, his eyes on the black churning waters below. Was she there? Hiding? Caught under water?

Or had it all been a vision of his willing mind? Had there even been a woman on the pier at all?

He didn’t know, but he couldn’t let her drown, whoever she was.

“Son of a bitch!”

He let go. The sea air rushing up at him, swift and furious.

He hit the water hard, the jolt of landing rattling his aching body. The cold began to seep through his skin as he sank fast, downward into the stark black depths.

Down, down, down. Into the night-black sea. Salt water closed around him as he kicked off his shoes and jacket, his eyes open and burning as he tried to penetrate the infinite darkness of the vast Pacific.

Nothing!

He searched the inky water, holding his breath, knowing she had to be here, somewhere. Close. Where are you? For the love of God, Jennifer!

His lungs were near bursting as he kicked, propelling himself upward, letting out a stream of air as he broke the surface. He gulped in air and cursed as he hunted for her.

Where the hell had she gone?

Where, damn it?

He shook his hair from his eyes, willing her to appear.

Come on. Come on!

Give it up, Bentz, his mind taunted. She doesn’t exist. You know it. You’re chasing a damned figment of your imagination.
Fear, cold as the ocean, slid through him. He was cracking up. That was it. Oh, sweet Jesus…

Don’t give up! You saw her!

Treading water, he scoured the surroundings with his gaze—under the pier, along the pilings, near the shore, and beneath the shifty surface of the murky depths.

There was no sign of a woman in a red dress.

Or anyone at all. He spun around in the water, his bad leg dragging, his lungs tight as he eyed the undulating sea to no avail. Where was she? Where had she gone?

As people shouted above, he let the tide push him under the pier and through the supports. He swam, head above water, looking for any sign of her, any clue to where she’d been. He scanned the entire area. The beach was empty here. No one clung to the pier overhead, and he didn’t see anything bobbing in the water.

“Jennifer!” he yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth, his voice echoing crazily over the water and rush of the tide. He held fast to a barnacle-laden piling, searching again and again, breathing hard, willing her to appear. Come on, come on! Where are you?

“Jennifer!” he shouted again, spitting salt water. The smell of brine stung his nostrils as waves slapped over him, his wet clothes moving with the tide. He didn’t see anything or hear a response other than voices high overhead, feet pounding on the boardwalk. Still he tried to find her, or any evidence that she’d been here. He kept searching, releasing the piling and treading water as he squinted through the fog, straining to see any sign of movement along the long stretch of darkness beneath the pier.

Nothing but darkness…the play of shifting shadows beneath the pier, but further out, beyond the overhang, streetlights cast an ethereal glow. The thin light was caught in the shifting fog while the neon glow of the amusement park rose like a blazing specter in the mist.

All unworldly.

All surreal.

Jennifer, or whoever she really was, had disappeared. He searched around each support post, eyeing the shadows and feeling as if cold death were lurking nearby. He held fast to one of the supports and called her name again and again, but it came back to him, his own voice, echoing hollowly over the rumble of the sea.

Shivering, he felt a fish glide past as he released the piling and swam toward the shore.

His heart thudded at the prospect of finding her, dead from the leap into the water, dead because she’d been running from him.

After luring you onto the pier…this is all part of her plan. Don’t go into the blame game; not yet.

And she’s not here. You’re alone.

The voices overhead were louder now, more of them, though, from down here they seemed disembodied, muted by fog and tide.

She’s not here. She was never here. You imagined her again. The red dress…it’s symbolic. Jennifer casting herself into the vast darkness of the water punctuated by the skeletal pier…

Dear God, what had happened to her?

Now the shouts on the boardwalk overhead were audible.

“I saw him, I tell you. Some guy jumped into the water.”
“You saw him? In this fog?”

“Yes! Damn it, some lunatic did a swan dive off the railing.”

“So now it’s a dive. Barney, you’ve been drinkin’ bad tequila again.”

“For the love of Christ, I’m tellin’ ya, a guy in a suit jumped off the goddamned pier!”

“There’s nothin’ down there.”

“How can ya tell? It’s so hard to see with the fog,” Barney insisted. “I called 9-1-1. The police should be here any minute.”

Good, Bentz thought. He could use a little help. He swam from under the pier, toward the shore, rolling with incoming waves. He was relieved to see the flickering lights of emergency vehicles on the ridge above the beach. As he clambered through the shallow surf a flashlight beam caught him from above.

“There he is!”

“I told ya!” Barney again, and other voices joined in as a crowd gathered overhead on the pier. Over it all, the sound of a siren screamed through the night, getting closer. Bentz dragged himself out of the water and up the beach. Cold to the bone, he slogged his way up the wet sand and turned back toward the water.

The lights of the city were blazing, the Ferris wheel casting an eerie reflection on the shimmering waters. He wondered about Jennifer in that cold dark bay. Was she hiding in the shadows, laughing at him, pleased that she’d goaded him into leaping from the railing? Or was she caught beneath the surface, entangled in seaweed, staring sightlessly upward as the red shroud of her dress billowed against her deathly white skin?

For the love of God, get a grip! He swiped a shaking hand over his face as several people ran up to greet him.

The couple he’d seen on the pier was the first to arrive.

“Hey, dude, are you okay?” The guy was in his twenties, his stocking cap pulled low over curls that sprang from the edges. He seemed genuinely concerned and called over his shoulder, “Hey, anyone got a blanket or something?”

“I’m fine.” Just cold, tired, and afraid I’m going out of my friggin’ mind! Bentz coughed. He couldn’t stop shaking. “There was a woman on the pier—she jumped into the water and I went in after her.”

The blond girlfriend shook her head. “I didn’t see a woman.”

Bentz nodded as the sirens screamed closer.

“Is that why you were running?” Girlfriend asked. “I saw you throw away your cane.”

Bentz nodded as the sirens screamed closer.

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know, but we need a search.”

Bentz’s teeth began to chatter and he was shivering. The police cruiser, lights flashing, screeched to a halt at the end of the beach and two officers climbed out.

“He’s going into shock,” the older man who’d been smoking his cigar said.

Bentz shook his head and held up a hand to stop further nonsense. “No. Really. Just cold. I’m serious about a woman leaping off the pier, damn it! I saw her. She jumped in.”

“Let’s go!” Several guys took off running to the waterline, though Bentz had little hope they would find anyone.
Jennifer, or whoever she was, had disappeared.

Again.

The old guy ripped off his too-large jacket that smelled of burned tobacco. “Here. You need this.”

Grateful, Bentz thrust his arms into the warm sleeves of the jacket, never taking his eyes off the shoreline, where the men were beginning their search.

“Sir?” called a low voice.

Bentz turned to see two officers from the police cruiser striding across the expanse of sand as a fire truck and rescue vehicle arrived.

“We have some paramedics here to assist you,” one of the uniforms said.

“It’s all right. I’m a cop.” Bentz dug into his pocket and found, thankfully, his waterlogged wallet and badge. He handed it to the officer. “I don’t need the ambulance. I’m okay, really, but you might want to get your search and rescue team in. I saw a woman jump from the pier.”

The cop nodded, his eyes assessing Bentz. “But, sir, you need to get checked out.”

“All I need is a smoke and someone to call Detective Jonas Hayes. LAPD Homicide.”

“Someone dead?”

Bentz shook his head. “Hayes is a friend of mine.” He forced a smile as the young kid came up with a Camel and a light, the first cigarette Bentz had smoked in a long, long while. He drew hard on the cigarette, felt the warm smoke curl in his lungs. Exhaled. “I used to work for the LAPD.”
“Hell, Bentz, I’ve got better things to do than babysit you.” Hayes was pissed and didn’t try for a second to hide his irritation. It had been Hayes’s idea to meet in the bar half a block away from the So-Cal Inn in Culver City.

Bentz stared sullenly over the bar into the huge mirror that reflected the entire length of the long, narrow establishment. The bar top was tile with pendant lights straight out of the sixties hanging over it. He asked, “How’s the Springer double homicide coming?”

“You know I can’t talk to you about it.” Hayes nursed a Manhattan while Bentz ignored his nonalcoholic beer. “But…we haven’t got any really good leads. Lots of bad ones.” He waved away the topic of the double homicide. “So you still think Jennifer is alive, haunting you? And she took a flying leap into Santa Monica Bay.”

“I don’t think it’s Jennifer, but I can’t be sure. Not unless there’s an exhumation. I’m going forward with it.”

“Whatever.” Hayes was still steamed, his forehead lined with wrinkles of worry, his lips pulled into a frown. “Your gun get wet?”

“Wasn’t wearing it. Locked in the glove box. But my cell phone’s deader than a doornail.” Bentz counted himself lucky that his pistol and the envelope with the photos and death certificate had been locked in the car, safe and dry. Even his cane had survived, but his jacket and good shoes were somewhere on the bottom of Santa Monica Bay. Now he was wearing his battered old Nikes.

He was also grateful that Jonas had smoothed things over with the cops. Although the search team had not found a body or evidence of a female swimmer, Jonas had been able to convince the Santa Monica Police that things were “cool.”

Even if he hadn’t believed it himself.

After a peripheral search of the area, the fire truck and ambulance had been sent off and the officers had taken Bentz’s statement without any citations being issued. Hayes had even given him the time to shower and change clothes at the motel before they’d met at this dive.

Now, though, Hayes was pissed. “Your obsession with your dead wife isn’t gonna be my problem, okay?”

“I get it.”

“And you can’t go callin’ me, pulling in favors if you’re gonna keep dragging the police into your own weird fantasies.” Bentz was about to protest, but Hayes held up a hand. “I know why you’re here, Bentz. Someone’s fuckin’ with you. But until some law has been broken in my jurisdiction—no, make that until some homicide has been committed in my jurisdiction, I don’t want to be involved.” He looked across the table, dark eyes deep with concern. “Sane people don’t go jumping off piers in the middle of the night. Or breaking into old inns and nosing around for ghosts. And they don’t chase after people getting onto a bus or driving down the freeway, regardless of how many crank calls they get in the middle of the night.

“As for looking up a dead ex-wife’s family and friends? Or calling old partners at the department who think you bagged out and left them holding the bag? That’s not investigation, Bentz. It’s masochism.”

Bentz couldn’t argue that point. Trinidad and Bledsoe had let him know what they thought of him when he’d called offering help.
Hayes, some of his anger spent, finished his Manhattan, draining the liquid slowly. He set his glass on the table and shook his head. “Take my advice, Bentz. Go back to New Orleans, to your wife. Remember her? The one who’s still alive? Do that and forget all this.”

*If only I could,* Bentz thought.

“Thanks for the drink.” Hayes left and Bentz took a long draw on his zero-alcohol beer.

Leaving L.A. wasn’t an option.

At least, not yet.

The shower feels good. Hot water streaming down my body as I think about what happened on the pier. I knew Bentz would take the bait, and it was heartwarming to watch him as he struggled to catch up with “Jennifer.”

“Fool,” I whisper. I scrub my hair, lather, and rinse it. Then once more I grin as I recall the tortured expression on his face.

*Perfect!*

I turn off the spray and wrap a towel around my body, all the while thinking of my next move. God, how I’d love to hurry things along. But I’ll be patient, I think, squeezing my hair with the cotton towel.

Naked, I lean over and dry my hair with the blow dryer, its high-pitched hum drowning out the music I’ve had blasting for hours. A mixed set of sounds from the eighties—Journey, Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, The Pointer Sisters, Madonna, and Michael Jackson—have been playing, the volume cranked up and the window cracked open. The neighbors must have heard my tunes, as well as anyone passing by. Anyone would swear that I was home all night. My car, parked outside, would only convince them further. Smart of me to leave my vehicle. I walked to the bus stop, then rode the bus as far as I could before switching to a cab that took me to Santa Monica. I returned the same way.

My plan had been on hold until Bentz finally decided to return to Santa Monica, as I’d suspected he would. I had to wait for the right moment and thankfully tonight it happened. I smile thinking about how well I executed my scheme.

I waited, knowing he would eventually show up at the pier. I made certain everything was in place. I watched as he went into the restaurant. While he ate dinner I had just enough time to put my plan into action.

Sure enough, after dinner Bentz decided to stroll down the boardwalk. Leaning on his cane, no doubt remembering Jennifer.

I dangled the bait. He snapped at it. He chased after Jennifer like a wolf after a lamb. Only things didn’t turn out his way, now, did they?

I stretch, wipe off the glass, and then check out my reflection in the damp mirror. My head moves in time to the beat of a Fleetwood Mac song, one of Jennifer’s favorites.

Bentz would appreciate the irony, I think.

What an idiot.

Trying to resurrect a dream.

Feeding on his own damned guilt.

Serves him right.
“Just you wait, Ricky-Boy,” I say into the mirror. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

Bentz slid closer to Olivia, pulling her close, feeling her naked body against him in their bed. “I love you,” he whispered, but she didn’t respond, didn’t open her eyes, wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

It was there again, that secret she kept, the one that forced her into silence.

But, with her eyes closed, she instinctively tilted her chin up and he couldn’t resist. Just being this close to her caused his blood to fire, his heart to pound. Desire made him hard. Hot and wanting, he kissed her with a passion that fired his blood and consumed him.

She responded. Moaned into his open mouth, her hands scraping away his clothes, her fingers running down his arms.

“I love you,” he said again and was met with silence once more. Though her body was trembling, her skin hot, her lips wet, she didn’t speak.

Beneath her passion he felt something more, something intense and longing but so distant. She was a million miles away.

He was losing her.

Somehow, despite their lovemaking, she was sliding way.

The smell of her filled his nostrils. He ran his tongue along her neck and lower still, tasting perfume and the salt of her body.

He kissed every inch of her, feeling her response, noticing her quiver. Inside he was burning, his cock already hard, so damned hard.

He told himself to take it slow, to pleasure her, but she was as frantic as he, her lips full and warm, her fingers insistent as she kneaded his muscles.

Skimming his thumbs over her ribs, he kissed the tips of her breasts, and then drank in a full view of her. She finally opened her eyes, the gold irises nearly invisible, her pupils black and round as they dilated.

He breathed across her abdomen, his head sliding down her body to the red lace of her panties—a tiny thong that barely covered any of her.

Her muscles had tightened. “You really can be a bastard,” she whispered and her voice was off…not quite right, even though she’d finally spoken. He caught the whiff of gardenias, the faintest scent in the air.

“Just for you,” he replied, his breath hot over her panties—that little bit of naughty lace. She writhed beneath him as he took the scrap of lace in his teeth and pulled it off.

“Really?” And her skin turned cold. “Seriously. Just for me?”

“Who else?” he asked, sliding up her body as her fingers dug deep into his head, adding a pinch of pain to the pleasure. God, he wanted her and she was quivering with her own desire, moving beneath him.

“Livvie,” he whispered and parted her legs with his knees.

In a breathless moment he thrust deep into her and lost himself, body and soul, in the magic of his wife. His blood was thundering in his ears and he breathed in short, fast gasps. Faster and faster he moved, but she was no longer responding and the flesh he’d felt cooling was now stone cold.

When he looked down at her, she’d changed, her features having morphed into Jennifer. White skin, dark hair, the
scrap of a red thong now a tattered bloody dress.

“I love you,” Jennifer said, but her mouth didn’t move. She smelled of brackish water and death. Her glassy eyes shifted to zero in on him.

His skin goose-pimpled and his blood ran cold as the sea. He tried to roll off her, but her hands came up and held him tight. Held him in place like a vise.

“It’s your fault, RJ,” she said with lips that didn’t move. “Yours!”

Bentz bucked, trying to break her hold as his eyes flew open.

He was in the bed at the motel.

Alone.

No Olivia. No Jennifer.

Just his guilt. His damned guilt.

Letting out a long breath, he realized he was saturated in cold sweat. The dream had been so real. So evocative and terrifying. He wanted to call Olivia but glanced at the clock. 12:47. Nearly 3 A.M. in Louisiana. He would wait.

Climbing out of bed, he walked to the window and opened the blinds to look at the night-washed parking lot.

It was empty aside from the usual vehicles.

Quiet.

Still unnerved, he went into the bathroom and threw water over his face. Telling himself he’d been through a lot worse in his life than bad dreams, he popped a couple of ibuprofen for the pain in his leg before returning to bed. He clicked on the television and searched for any inane show to occupy his mind. But he didn’t believe for an instant that some late-night talk show host would dispel the dream.

He figured nothing would.

He’d just have to live with it.

The next morning, after a fitful night, Bentz found a place where he could replace his cell phone on his current plan. He was the first customer to enter the strip mall for the day and he looked like hell. But he ended up with a new phone.

Two doors down there was a casual-wear store, so he picked up a new pair of khakis and a cheap sports jacket.

He’d have to wait on shoes.

He returned to the motel, showered, shaved, called and left a message for Olivia, then spent the next few hours spinning his wheels, thinking, and reentering numbers into the new cell. He pieced together the events of the last few days and wondered how the woman—“Jennifer”—had known where he would be. As far as he could tell, his room wasn’t bugged. He didn’t find any listening devices tucked into hidden niches. Not that it mattered. To his recollection he hadn’t mentioned his plans while talking on the phone here. He did a second peripheral check of the rental car and couldn’t find any tracking device in the undercarriage or wheel wells.

But somehow, “Jennifer” had known where he was going, where he had been.

How?

And why was she doing this?
In the motel room with the television tuned to an all-news channel, the blinds open so that he didn’t feel completely cut off from the world, he sipped his tepid coffee, his mind turning back to the night before. What the hell had happened on the pier? She’d been there. He’d seen her, but Hayes had said that the cops had questioned the people on the pier, the old man who’d been smoking a cigar and the kids who had been so into each other. When Hayes had asked about the runner, he hadn’t been found and no one remembered him.

Bentz made a note of it, though most likely the missing jogger wasn’t any big deal.

Great.

Using his laptop computer he Googled images of the Santa Monica pier and found the webcam, a camera that photographed the entrance to the pier every four seconds. Maybe he could get photos of the pier from last night, as well as from traffic cams. Though he was no longer a cop in L.A., he still had a badge and some pull. He was certain he could talk his way into getting the information.

By eleven he’d talked to the security company that ran the camera on the pier and been promised that they would review the images from the night before. Afterward Bentz had made his way through a pot of coffee while searching the Internet for a hospital or clinic that might have issued the outdated parking pass he’d noticed on the gray Chevy. Then he used his new phone to leave messages with Fortuna Esperanzo and Tally White, two of Jennifer’s close friends who hadn’t bothered calling him back.

Tally was a schoolteacher and Fortuna still worked in an art gallery in Venice. Neither woman was a fan of his.

A motorcycle backfired on the street. Through the thin motel walls Benz heard Spike get off a round of quick, sharp barks before he was shushed by his owner. Bentz stretched, felt his spine pop, then stood and tested his leg.

Picking up his keys, Bentz wondered how long the old guy next door was staying. He grabbed his damp wallet and slipped his sidearm into its shoulder holster beneath the cover of his new jacket. Then, because his leg was still aching, he snagged his cane from its spot by the door.

Outside, he felt the heat of the day though it was barely noon. He eyed the dusty parking lot, recognizing four cars other than his own that seemed to be regulars. Besides his rental and the older guy in the driving cap’s Pontiac, there was a bronze Buick parked at the far end of the lot. A white MINI Cooper was often gone all day, but returned every night. The older navy blue Jeep Cherokee never budged. The rest of the vehicles came and went, but these four always returned. Just like the damned swallows of San Juan Capistrano, he thought, remembering the legend and his own trip to the mission town. He’d already made note of the license plates and talked to Montoya about them. Since the woman impersonating Jennifer seemed to know his whereabouts, he wondered if she’d been following him from here each day. He was going to make certain that these cars were legit.

He also took a good long look at the area.

As far as he could see, no one was watching him. No one loitered. There was a gas station and convenience store next to another motel across the wide boulevard. A little farther down sat a three-story building that looked like it had shops on the street level and offices above. Then came the bar where he and Hayes had met last night.

But no silver Impala anywhere in sight.

Restless, itching for something to do after spending hours on his laptop at the battered desk in his motel room, Bentz walked to the car.

So Hayes thought he should pack it all in and return to New Orleans.

No damned way. Someone was baiting him, impersonating his dead wife, and following him.

He intended to find out who.

With the help of Montoya and his cell phone company, he tried to track down the owner of the phone who had called him, the woman impersonating Jennifer. It appeared to be one of those untraceable prepaid phones that
criminals were so fond of.

So he was left to his own devices and hungry as hell. He bought a few newspapers, then stopped at a local diner that served breakfast all day. Over the clatter of silverware, sizzle of the fryer, and buzz of conversation, Patsy Cline was singing “Crazy.”

*Perfect,* Bentz thought as he used his cane to help lower himself into a booth with a table straight out of the fifties: Slick green plastic top rimmed with chrome, matching napkin holder, and bottles of ketchup and mustard at the ready. He scanned a faded menu, ordered from a tall woman with a pile of red hair adding three inches to her height, then spread the newspapers on the table.

While reading the most recent accounts of the Springer girls’ murders he dived into his “All-American-All-Day-Breaker” which consisted of two eggs, five sausage links, a heap of hash browns, and a mountain of toast. His coffee cup was never empty, though he had to ask for ice water.

The food was substantial and filling, if not gourmet.

Once he’d forked up the last bit of potatoes, he flipped the newspaper closed and caught a glimpse of an ad that stopped him short. It was for a thrift shop, a Catholic thrift shop, and the symbol in the corner of the page, a cross with the letter A attached, was sickeningly familiar.

It was the same symbol from the sticker on the Impala he’d seen at San Juan Capistrano. A symbol for St. Augustine’s.

He stared at the information for a second, then asked the waitress if they offered wi-fi service here. She looked at him as if he were nuts, so he paid quickly, then drove to a nearby coffee shop where he knew there was free Internet access.

After ordering another cup of coffee he really didn’t need, he sat in a worn couch and fired up his laptop.

Over the sounds of soft jazz, grinding coffee, and the hiss of the steamer, he connected to the Internet where he searched for any mention of St. Augustine’s hospital or clinic in the L.A. area. For the first time since coming to L.A., he felt a ray of hope that he might have a way to discover who was tormenting him.

He found a parish in West L.A. on Figueroa Street, a school in Culver City, and several other institutions, but no hospital or clinic.

The fact that one of the schools was on Figueroa and the other in Culver City bothered him. Jennifer had lived with him in Culver City and supposedly, according to her friend Shana McIntyre, had met with James in a little motel somewhere near the USC campus on Figueroa St. It was the same major street where he’d thought he’d seen her at the bus stop.

Possible? Had he seen her? He clicked his pen, wondering.

There were too many connections. Too many coincidences. Too many possibilities.

Doggedly he kept at it, searching the Internet until he came to the mention of St. Augustine’s Hospital, which had closed five years earlier. Bingo! He stared at the information for a second, then jotted down the address, and was out the door.

He had several stops on his agenda. First, he planned to drive to the old hospital, just to get a closer look. Then he would try to catch Fortuna Esperanzo at work in the gallery in Venice. Afterward he planned on heading to Hoover Middle School, where Tally White was a teacher. He remembered Tally had befriended Jennifer when her daughter Melody had been in the same first-grade class as Kristi.

He punched in the address, headed for the freeway, and barely moved. The 10 was jammed in the middle of the day, but he kept at it, inching past an accident, then picking up speed.
As he headed east he checked his mirrors, on the lookout for a tail, watching to see if he was being followed, particularly by a silver Chevy.

Using his cell, cognizant that he might get pulled over as he wasn’t using a hands-free device, he left a message with Montoya, asking him to look up more on St. Augustine’s Hospital and see if there was some way he could get personnel records from the archdiocese or whatever institution or attorneys or board oversaw the hiring or firing of the staff. There had to be records somewhere. True, there would be a lot of staff to sift through, but only for a couple of years. He explained that the Impala was seven or eight years old and the hospital was closed five years earlier, so even if the car was bought new, the window of time when the sticker could have been issued was relatively short.

A plus.

He also left the license plate numbers and hoped that somehow there would be a match. If Montoya used the police department’s computers, databases, and DMV records, they might be able to find some shred of evidence to help him sort out the mystery.

Bentz knew he didn’t have a lot to go on, but he figured it was a start. Tedious work, but a slight inroad. His cell rang. Bentz saw it was Montoya and grinned.

“Got an answer for me already?”

“Up yours, Bentz. It’s not like I don’t have a job to do here.”

“Just see what you can do.”

“Great. Anything else?” he mocked.

“Not yet.” No reason to tell him about last night’s leap into Santa Monica Bay. Yet.

“Well, just let me know because it’s my mission in life to be your bitch.”

“Fulfilling, isn’t it?”

“You owe me, man.”

“Always have, Montoya.” He hung up just before taking his exit off the freeway, then wound his way around the surface streets to the site of the old hospital.

It wasn’t a large piece of property. The crumbling stucco building that had once housed St. Augustine’s Hospital was now surrounded by mesh fencing and warning signs that trespassers would be prosecuted “to the full extent of the law.”

Fine.

Ignoring the warnings, Bentz climbed over a gate and jumped onto the packed dirt inside the enclosure. Pain jolted his hip as he landed, reminding him that he still wasn’t a hundred percent. But he kept on, making his way toward the abandoned hospital.

The stucco exterior was just a shell. Limping a bit, he walked around the rubble and ducked into a gaping doorway. Inside, the building was skeletal, torn down to the studs. Tired floorboards creaked beneath his sneakers, and he saw evidence of bats in the rafters. Some of the old plumbing was intact, rusted pipes running up and down between aging two-by-fours and beams. Whoever had started this renovation had stopped suddenly. Because of the failure of the economy?

Outside again, he paused by a huge sign that faced the road and advertised a strip mall that was to be built. But the intended date for opening had already passed and it was obvious whoever was backing the project had pulled out. So here sat the remnants of St. Augustine’s Hospital, a sad ruin of a building.
Using his cell phone, he took a few photos of the sign, of the crumbling building and the surrounding area. He saved them, then text-messaged them to Montoya.

He wished he could bring Hayes in on this. It would make a lot more sense to work with the cops in California rather than depend upon Montoya in New Orleans. But he just couldn’t count on the LAPD.

Yet.

Slipping his phone into his pocket, he returned to his car, his leg aching as he slid inside and pulled away from the desolate construction site.
Olivia didn’t feel pregnant. Her body hadn’t changed at all, at least on the outside. She wasn’t suffering nausea, wasn’t tired, and wouldn’t have had a clue that she was carrying a baby other than the pregnancy test. Or tests. She’d taken the same test three different times, each kit made by a different manufacturer. Every one of them had confirmed that yes, she was pregnant. Which she’d already known after the first strip had turned a brilliant hue. But, she figured, better safe than sorry. Or in her case, better sure rather than uncertain.

The only difference Olivia felt was the weight of her secret. Not telling Bentz was killing her. She didn’t like secrets or, for that matter, surprises, so as she drove to the Third Eye she made a definitive decision. Today she would make arrangements to take a week or two off and fly to California.

Though Rick had only been gone a few days, Olivia knew he wouldn’t be back for a while. It was as if he were running away. From her. From their life.

Oh, yeah, he had an explanation. He had this sudden obsession with his first wife and he was out chasing ghosts in California. On top of that, a gruesome double murder had taken place in L.A., a killing that was nearly identical to the Caldwell twins’ double homicide. He’d never felt right about leaving Southern California with that case still wide open, and he’d taken a lot of heat about it. She knew her husband well enough to realize that he saw the possibility of solving this new crime as a chance to redeem himself, an opportunity to catch the killer and put him behind bars once and for all. Not that the LAPD would appreciate his efforts.

But he was still running away and it was time to find out why. He’d been acting weird ever since he’d come out of the coma, and unfortunately she was never able to call him on it. At first, she’d been relieved he was alive. While he was recovering she’d forced herself to remain patient, understanding that he was not only suffering pain but also dealing with loss of purpose. She had been encouraging, tolerant, supportive.

But she was sick of it.

It was time he bucked up.

Beneath his distracted, distant exterior was the man she had fallen in love with, and she was determined to find him again.

What he needed, she decided, was what her grandmother referred to as “the two-by-four by the back door. Sometimes ya need it to get their attention.” To Olivia’s knowledge, Grannie Gin had never kept a piece of lumber propped on the sun porch. It was just her way of saying “a kick in the pants” or a large dose of reality.

And that was just what Olivia planned to hit Rick with. The truth.

She parked her beat-up truck in a lot, then walked toward the Third Eye. On her way down the street she passed a baby boutique and paused to look at the window display. There was a quaint assortment of layette sets, cute little one-piece sleepers, and bibs deco rated with all kinds of animals. One bib, decorated à la New Orleans, was embroidered with a grinning baby alligator with a bow around its neck. It was surprisingly adorable.

Her own reflection, a watery image, superimposed itself upon the window. She was going to be a mother! Her husband needed to know.

What the hell was she waiting for?
Why in the world was she scared?

She put her hand over her flat stomach, walked into the shop, and, on a ridiculous whim, bought the alligator bib.

It was the first thing she’d bought for the new little Bentz—well, unless she counted the multiple pregnancy tests. Her appointment with her doctor wasn’t for another couple of weeks. That didn’t matter. She was going to quit being a wimp and tell Bentz that he was going to be a father again.

And he’d damned well better like it.

Unlike its Italian namesake, the city of Venice, California, still had just a few of its original canals. Most of the waterways built back in 1905 had since been paved over when the city of Los Angeles decided it needed more real streets for cars. However, the remaining canals and stretch of sandy beach were enough to lend character to the seaside community, which was packed on this sunny, warm day. Mild weather had brought out the bicyclers and skaters, along with an array of street performers who reminded Bentz of the musicians who peddled their talents in the squares of New Orleans. Like his home, this town boasted a carnival atmosphere, a sense of “anything goes.”

The art gallery where Fortuna Esperanzo worked was only a few blocks from the beach, tucked between a tourist shop that sold everything from T-shirts to cameras and an “authentic” Mexican restaurant with a sprinkling of outside tables. The panorama was much the same as it had been a dozen years earlier.

Bentz parked the rental, eyed his cane, left it on the floor of the backseat, and jaywalked across the wide street. The salty scent of the ocean wafted to him, reminding him of his dunk in Santa Monica Bay the previous night. When he’d lost Jennifer. Again.

He stepped under an awning and through the open door of a gallery filled with abstract and modern sculpture and seemed empty. Bentz hitched his way up a wide wooden staircase which led to an open second-floor loft. It was filled with paintings, mosaic work, and tapestries by local artists.

In one corner Fortuna Esperanzo stood on a ladder, replacing the bulb of a light that was trained on a huge, unframed canvas. Wild black strokes slashed across a field of orange and red. The painting was called simply Rage.

“Nice,” Bentz remarked sarcastically.

Startled, Fortuna dropped the lightbulb and it shattered. “Oh shit!” She glared down, eyeing him over the top of the ladder with small, dark eyes framed by perfectly plucked, pencil-thin eyebrows. Her pink glazed lips pursing into a tight knot of dislike. “I figured you would take the hint when I didn’t call you back, Bentz.” Slowly she descended the rungs to stand on the floor, carefully avoiding the shards of thin glass.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Oh, yeah, right.” She skewered him with a stare of disbelief. She was thin to the point of being bony, her taupe size-practically-nothing skirt and sweater hanging off her thin frame. “You really expect me to believe that after twelve or so years you’re just dropping by for a chat? Give me a flippin’ break. Where the hell is my broom?” She walked to an alcove and retrieved a push broom and dustpan. “You want to talk?” she muttered as she began cleaning up the mess. “About what?”

“I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Jennifer.”

“Oh, God, why?” She stood suddenly and stared at Bentz as if he’d just flown in from Jupiter. “What good will it do now? That poor woman.”

Downstairs another patron wandered into the gallery. Bentz saw her through the open railing. A silver-haired woman with red reading glasses perched on the end of her tiny nose, she wore a perpetual scowl along with white capri pants and a sleeveless top. She wandered through the displays only to stop and contemplate a glass mosaic cat
that might have been the ugliest piece of so-called art Bentz had ever seen.

Jesus, was she serious? A piece of crap with a price tag that probably exceeded what Bentz made in a week?

Fortuna leaned over the railing and called cheerfully, “Hello, Mrs. Fielding! I’ll be right down.” She left her broom and dustpan propped against the ladder and glanced at Bentz. “You know, I really don’t have anything to tell you.”

“I’ll wait.”

Rolling her eyes as if to say “whatever” she headed down the stairs at a quick clip. Once on the main floor, she began showing the dour Mrs. Fielding pieces of colored glass that resembled African beasts. Ugly lions and gazelles and elephants. At least, that was his interpretation. Who knew what the artist really had in mind?

Bentz took it upon himself to clean up the mess, hauled the broom and dustpan back to the little closet, and even found another lightbulb. He’d just screwed it in so that it showcased the black and red mess of a painting when Fortuna walked up the stairs.

“Oh, don’t think you’re getting on my good side just because you played janitor,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

“I could have done it myself.” She spied a piece of glass he’d missed and picked it up before folding her arms over her chest. “Just what the hell is it you want to know?”

“Jennifer’s state of mind before she died.”

“Are you kidding me? I don’t know.”

“You were one of her closest friends.”

“What does it matter now?”

“Someone’s been calling me, saying she’s Jennifer.”

“Oh, so what? Someone’s just having a little fun at your expense.”

He hauled out the copies of the photographs and Fortuna eyed them. “These were sent to me.”

“And? The woman looks like Jennifer, yeah. So what? Oh, God, you don’t think? I mean you wouldn’t believe? Oh, no, I mean, that’s rich.” She laughed, though there was no mirth in her tone. “You actually think Jennifer might still be alive.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then who the hell is in her grave?” She shook her head. “This is too much. Someone’s really screwing with your mind. And you know who would have loved this? Jennifer. You’re finally getting yours.”

More than you know, he thought, but didn’t say it. “I just thought you might remember something she did or said that was out of character for her in the week or so before she died.”

“Nothing that I can think of.” Fortuna sighed. Ran red-tipped fingers through her thick hair. “She did everything she normally did, well, I think. You know, the regular stuff. A haircut, I think. I was there the same day and she had gone shopping and visited her astrologer.”

He felt the muscles between his shoulders tighten. “Astrologer?”

“Oh, yeah, you remember…Phyllis Something-Or-Other.” She was staring at him. “You didn’t know?”
“That my ex-wife went to a psychic? No.”

“I said astrologer. There’s a fine line.”

He knew all about it. Olivia’s grandmother had read tarot cards during her lifetime. “Okay, Phyllis the astrologer. Who checks star signs. Moons rising and retrograde and all that stuff.”

“I think it’s a little more involved than that, but personally I never got into it too much.”

“Just Jennifer?”

“Yeah, near as I can tell she went alone, but at least once a month, sometimes twice.”

“For how long?”

“Years. Since college I think.” Fortuna nodded as she tried to remember. “Yeah, I recall her saying something to that effect.”

Bentz was thunderstruck. In all the years he’d known his first wife, all the secrets they’d shared, never had she said a word about consulting an astrologer. Not that it was a big deal, but he wondered what other secrets Jennifer had held so tight. “What did she learn from Dr. Phyllis?”

“Oh, God…I can’t remember,” she said, then snapped her fingers. “Oh, wait! I do remember Jennifer mentioning that Phyllis told her she’d only have one child and…” Her voice trailed off.

“What?”

“Well, I don’t know if the astrologer had anything to do with it, but for some reason Jennifer always thought that she’d die young.”

“What?” His heart stilled. Jennifer had never mentioned any such fear to him.

“She’d make throwaway comments. Like, ‘I know I’ll never see Kristi graduate.’ Or ‘I know I’ll never go to Europe, there’s not enough time.’ And one time…Jeez, it gives me chills just to remember it, she told me, ‘You know, I’m glad I’m never going to grow old.’” Fortuna’s voice dropped and she looked away from Bentz. “God, I hadn’t thought about that in a long, long time.” She cleared her throat. “I really can’t tell you anything else.” She headed down the stairs just as two men who looked to be in their thirties entered the gallery below.

A genial smile pasted onto her face, Fortuna went into salesperson mode. The finest Hollywood actress had nothing on her.

Resigned that Fortuna had revealed everything she could remember, Bentz followed her down the stairs and left a business card with his cell number at the register, then walked out of the gallery.

Outside, the sun was intense. Pedestrians strolled along the sidewalk, peering into shop windows. Next door, a few patrons of the restaurant sat at the outdoor tables where umbrellas shaded drinks and platters of spicy Mexican food. Two laughing kids on roller skates nearly knocked over a slim woman walking a kinky-haired dog that probably outweighed her. They whisked by without a second thought even though the dog took off after them.

Bentz lunged forward to help, but the slight woman caught herself and managed to pull her frantic dog back into the “heel” position.

Life went on.

Except for Jennifer.

Something was definitely off there.

Rick clicked on the remote lock for his car as he crossed the street. He was bothered by what he’d learned, about
things he hadn’t known, things important to Jennifer. Her friends all seemed to know her much better than he had, even, perhaps, better than she’d known herself.

Did it matter?

So what if Jennifer had kept her visits to the astrologer to herself? Big deal.

Nothing he found out about her surprised him any more, but he couldn’t help but wonder as he slid into the hot interior of the Ford what other secrets he would uncover. Lost in thought, last night’s nightmare still chaffing at his subconscious, he nosed the Focus out of the parking space, then made a quick U-turn. He realized she probably kept a lot of her life tucked away, hidden from his scrutiny. Just because she’d told him the truth about Kristi’s paternity, didn’t mean she’d been honest about other facets of her life. The damning truth of the matter was that he hadn’t really known his first wife at all.
“No way he’s going to have his wife’s body exhumed.” Bledsoe barked out a laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation. “Bentz has really lost it.”

“He could petition as a family member,” Jonas Hayes said while pouring himself another cup of coffee from the pot in the kitchen area of the squad room. Why he was defending a man who had yanked him all the way down to Santa Monica at night to work things out with their PD, Hayes didn’t understand. He must really hate himself.

“Ex-family member,” Bledsoe reminded him, rankling Hayes even further.

Hayes had always thought Bentz got a raw deal way back when, blamed for not solving the Caldwell case and shooting a kid while protecting his partner. Yeah, the guy got jammed up with the department. But those mistakes didn’t add up to making him the scapegoat for everything bad that had happened in homicide twelve years earlier.

Hayes stared down into his inky coffee. “If he finds out it’s not his ex-wife in that grave—”

“It’s her, for chrissakes! He fuckin’ identified her. Why the hell are you playing fuckin’ devil’s advocate?” From his chair at a table with the L.A. Times spread across it, Bledsoe pointed at the carafe in Hayes’s hands. “Any more in that?”

“Empty.”

“Shit.”

“You could make some more,” Martinez suggested as she walked into the kitchen and rinsed out her cup.

“Yeah, right.” Bledsoe snorted at the idea.

“Have you ever made the coffee?” she demanded.

“Yeah, I think so…back in ninety-seven,” Bledsoe said with a snicker.

Paula Sweet, a detective who sometimes worked with the K-9 Division, swept into the lunchroom. “I remember that.” In her mid-thirties, Sweet had been divorced twice, seemed content to be on her own, and was known to take in stray dogs and cats. She glanced at Martinez. “Believe me, you don’t want Bledsoe anywhere near the coffeepot.”

“Hey! It wasn’t that bad.”

Sweet gave him the you-are-so-full-of-it stare. “No, it was worse. You got the crossword in there?” She was already pushing pages aside, searching for a section of the newspaper.

“Somewhere.” Bledsoe shrugged and turned his attention back to Hayes. “Maybe an exhumation wouldn’t be such a bad idea. We pop the coffin, take some DNA samples, and find out the corpse inside is really his ex-old lady. Then Bentz can crawl back under the rock he came from.”

“If it’s her,” Hayes said.

“Don’t tell me you’re buying his crap now.” Bledsoe snorted in disgust. “Of course it’s her. As I said, he positively identified her. Him.” He pushed his chair back so hard it scraped against the floor. “Once a bad cop, always a bad cop.”
“Ouch.” Sweet found the section of the paper she wanted and swept it off Bledsoe’s table. “Didn’t mean to tick him off,” she said to the room as a whole.

Bledsoe scowled, obviously disgusted that no one was jumping on his let’s-all-blame-Rick Bentz bandwagon.

“Don’t worry about it.” Martinez grabbed the empty pot and began rinsing it. “He’s always in a bad mood.”

“And you’re always a bitch.”

Martinez swallowed a smile, pleased that she’d goaded him. “Don’t ever want to disappoint,” she mocked.

“I’m outta here. I have work to do.” The senior detective left the table in a mess and strode out.

“And good riddance,” Sweet whispered, glancing conspiratorially at Martinez, who grinned even more widely.

Hayes rubbed the back of his neck. He understood the tension in the air.

It was late in the day. Everyone in the homicide area of the Robbery-Homicide Division had been logging in overtime. The detectives’ nerves were strung tight as bowstrings, their tempers pushed to the limit. Because the truth of the matter was that they were getting nowhere fast solving the Springer twins’ homicides.

Yeah, it hadn’t been long since the murders had been committed, but not one solid lead had developed. No one had seen anything, heard anything out of the ordinary, or sensed anything was wrong. Interviews with friends, family, and neighbors had produced zero suspects. They had zip to go on. The press was squeezing their public information officer, and in the meantime they’d dragged the old Caldwell twins case back to page one.

All the attention to the Springer twins’ double homicide didn’t change the fact that it was just one of many as yet unsolved homicides. Some were older, others fresh. A domestic violence homicide had happened just last night while Hayes had been in Santa Monica, saving Rick Bentz’s ass, as well as trying to convince him to go home.

In the domestic case, the husband was the primary suspect, his wife of three years the victim. Then there was the nineteen-year-old kid in the morgue who’d taken five to the chest in the early hours of the morning.

All those were just the tip of the iceberg.

Everyone’s caseload was getting heavier by the second.

Hayes walked back to his desk, glanced at the clock, and inwardly groaned. He wouldn’t be home early tonight, and he’d probably have to cancel his plans with Corrine.

She would understand, of course, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t be a little pissed.

He settled into his desk chair and started clicking through pictures of the Springer crime scene, trying to see something new. He flipped to the statements of the people closest to the girls, including the last people to see them alive. In Elaine’s case, it was her roommate, Trisha Lamont, who had caught a glimpse of Elaine, or “Laney,” as Trisha called her, cutting across the quad after their last class together. Trisha had assumed she’d gone straight home, and no other evidence or statements discounted that.

He checked the statement from Cody Wyatt, who, according to Trisha, was the closest thing to a boyfriend Laney had. But Wyatt hadn’t seen Laney since early morning when they’d met for coffee at the student union the day she’d been abducted.

The person who’d found the bodies, Felicia Katz, was a blank; seemed like the girl was just unlucky enough to have her storage unit next door to the crime scene.

There was one guy, Phillip Armes, who had been walking his dog in the park near Lucille Springer’s apartment. He claimed to have seen a tall man whose race was undetermined walk across the street toward Lucille’s apartment house. But it had been far away, dark, and old Phillip was pushing eighty with thick glasses. Not much of a witness.
Lucille’s neighbors hadn’t heard or seen anything, but scuff marks on the porch of the girl’s apartment might be consistent with an attack.

The only sure thing was that Lucille and Elaine had been text-messaging that night. Around the time Phillip Armes said he’d seen Lucille with the guy following her, she’d been busily sending messages to her sister. Both cell phones had been discovered at the kill site, their messages intact, messages that corresponded to the records obtained from the cell phone company.

The bastard who had abducted Elaine had sent a picture of her, trussed and terrified, to Lucille just before the attack.

Twelve years ago, during the Caldwell investigation, the victims didn’t have cell phones. It was one deviation from the current crime, but you could chalk it up to recent changes in technology, availability, and pop culture. That one factor was about the only difference in the crimes, though the Caldwell twins had been left in an abandoned warehouse, and the Springer girls were found in a storage unit.

Hayes was eyeing the reports, tapping the eraser end of a pencil against his lips, only vaguely aware of people coming and going. He felt, rather than saw, Dawn Rankin stop by his desk. Her purse was in one hand, a sweater tossed over her arm, as if she intended to leave for the day. “Guess who I got a call from?” she asked, her tone serious.

“I give.”

“Donovan Caldwell. Remember? The brother of the victims?”

“Yeah?”

She had his attention now and she knew it. Her big smile showed a bit of a gap between her front teeth. “He’s calling up with the same old story his family used to peddle; that we haven’t done enough. Now two more innocent lives have been lost because we’re inept and blah, blah, blah.”

“After twelve years.”

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“Just like Bentz.”

“What?”

“He shows up and the killer strikes again. What’s that all about?”

“Two separate instances.”

“Maybe.”

She bit her lip as she thought. “I’m not sure. As Bledsoe pointed out—only if you believe in coincidence. Me?” She frowned darkly as she walked away. “I’m betting there’s a connection.”

Hayes watched her go and reminded himself she had a personal ax to grind with Bentz, as did Bledsoe and a few others. Could it be that Hayes’s faith in the guy was unfounded? Even his old partner, Russ Trinidad, wanted nothing to do with Bentz. “I hate to say it,” Trinidad had confided in Hayes just this morning, “but the guy’s bad news. I already told you I’m too damned close to retirement to get caught up in his mess. He wants to dig up his ex-wife? Fine. But leave me out of it.”

Maybe Bledsoe had a point, Hayes thought, tossing his pencil onto the desk. It might be best if Bentz dug up Jennifer’s corpse, had a DNA test done, and settled the matter once and for all.

If Jennifer Bentz was buried in that casket, all well and good. And if she wasn’t?
He figured it was nothing short of the damned gates of hell opening.

The school was a long, low brick structure that could have been a county building in the Midwest except for the shady row of royal palms lining the drive. Also, one of the two flags gave the location away. Alongside the stars and stripes of Old Glory waved the flag for the state of California with its field of white and large grizzly bear in the foreground.

Bentz drove slowly past the main doors of the school. He avoided the bus-only lane and passed a long porch designated as the student pickup and drop-off area. On the far side of the drive he located a parking lot marked FACULTY ONLY.

Ignoring the sign, he pulled into an empty spot, cut the engine, and waited. From his vantage point he viewed one long wing of the school and beyond it caught a glimpse of the curved end of a track.

He had a hankering for a smoke. Maybe it because of the butt he’d smoked last night on the beach. Or maybe it was because he was so close to a middle school, where, at twelve, he had coughed his way through his first cigarette.

School was out, the area devoid of any but a few kids with backpacks or skateboards making their way across the adjoining lots and sidewalks.

Bentz figured most of the teachers and administrators were still inside finishing up, making lesson plans for the next day, correcting papers, or whatever it was that teachers did.

In groups of two or three, or even singles, members of the staff filtered out. They were chatting, laughing, rattling keys, and putting on sunglasses. A few looked at him quizzically, probably making note of his license plate and features…a lone guy hanging around near a school.

One prim woman dressed in a red skirt, white shirt, and blue over-blouse seemed ready to accost him. Even her sandals had the patriotic theme down, straps of red, white, and blue surrounding her feet. However instead of confronting him, she gave him an icy glare reserved for the likes of a pedophile, then climbed into her green Honda and roared off. She was adjusting the earbud of her cell phone, ready to make a call. Bentz figured she might be dialing 9-1-1 and the police might show up to question or arrest him at any second.

*Have at,* he thought watching a scrap of paper kick up in her wake.

Before the cavalry arrived, though, Bentz noticed Tally White emerge through the glass doors. She was walking alongside another teacher and they were engrossed in their conversation. Tally was tall, nearly five-ten, and had put on a few pounds over the years. She’d always been a little too thin, runner-lean, but now curves were evident beneath her peach slacks and matching shell. Her brown hair showed bits of gray and was cut into one of those wedge hairdos, where the back is shorter than the sides.

Her friend was a good five inches shorter than she, a square-bodied black woman whose oversized sunglasses hid half her face. Wild corkscrew curls were untamed by the headband that forced them away from her forehead. The two teachers were laughing and talking, lugging book bags and heading toward cars parked a few spaces from him.

“Showtime,” he told himself as he stepped out of the car and said, “Hi, Tally.”

She looked away from her companion, and upon spying Bentz, nearly tripped.

“Oh, God. Rick?” She wasn’t sure and squinted, as if she needed glasses. “Rick Bentz?”

“Good to see you.”

“But why are you…? I mean I know you called and I should have phoned you back, but I didn’t know you were here, in California.” She glanced nervously around the parking lot, as if looking for an escape route, or that she was afraid someone might see her speaking with him. She visibly squared her shoulders as if ready to take on the world. Or at least Bentz’s part of it. “Wow. I…I never thought I’d see you again.”
“I wanted to talk to you,” he said. “About Jennifer.”

Beneath her tan she seemed to pale and she glanced around the emptying parking lot. A minivan with two men in the front seat slid out the gate. “Here?”

“I’d buy you a cup of coffee. Or a glass of wine?”

“Oh, no…” She suddenly remembered her coworker. “Oh. Sherilou,” Tally said, motioning toward Rick with the fingers of the hand holding onto the book bag. “This is Rick Bentz, an old…the husband of one of my friends. Rick—Sherilou. She and I both teach English.”

Sherilou shifted her purse and books, then shook hands with Bentz. “Glad to meet you,” she said, though it was a patent lie. Her eyes were filled with suspicion and her handshake was weak. Unsure.

“I’d better scoot,” Sherilou said with a false smile at Rick.

“Nice to meet you,” Bentz said as sun glinted off the hood of Tally’s VW.

“You, too.” To Tally, she added, “Look, I’ve got to get going.”

“See you tomorrow,” Tally said and Sherilou hurried off, easing her book bag into the back of a blue Prius before sliding behind the wheel. Tally watched her go, then turned to Bentz and squinted up at him. “How’s Kristi?” she asked. “She and Melody lost touch.”

“Good. Getting married later this year.”

“I’ll pass that along to Melody. She’s married, too. Has a three-year-old and expecting another.” Tally rolled her eyes as she pulled pictures out of her wallet and proudly showed Bentz two snapshots of a towheaded little girl. The smiling imp posed with a stuffed animal, a white rabbit, in front of a blue backdrop.

“Cute,” he said and meant it.

“Yeah. Who would have ever thought of me being a grandma?” She stuffed the wallet back into her purse, but her eyes twinkled. “It’s so weird. I love it.”

“I’ll bet.”

She caught his sober tone and let out a long sigh. “So. Tell me. What do you want to know and why?” As she loaded her book bag and purse into her Volkswagen Beetle, Bentz told her. While the sun lowered and a few straggling kids hurried from the school, he explained everything. Except about the fact that he thought he was actually seeing his dead ex-wife again; he kept that little detail to himself.

She was quiet. Stunned as he passed her the copies of the pictures he’d received as well as a copy of the marred death certificate.

“For the love of St. Peter.” Shaking her head in disbelief, Tally held the photograph of Jennifer sliding into her car up for closer inspection. “It—it can’t be Jennifer,” she said, slightly unsure, squinting up at Bentz for confirmation. “You and I both know that. We were there…at the funeral. She was in the coffin.” The picture in her hands began to tremble as Tally stood at the open door of her car. “I mean, it’s just not possible.” But her voice was faint, a whisper. She cleared her throat; squared her shoulders, took control again. “This woman in the picture, she, um…she’s a dead ringer.”

“It appears.”

“But not Jen.” Tally didn’t sound convinced. “Someone…someone’s playing a game with you. Yeah, I get that, but honestly, I don’t know what you want from me, what I can tell you.” She glanced down at the picture again. Visibly shivered.
“Just anything in the last few weeks of her life that you thought was incongruous. Out of character. Any confidences.”

“Oh, God…this is so weird. Surreal, you know?”

“Yeah, I do know, but is there anything you remember about Jennifer that I might not, anything that happened the week before she died?”

“Oh, Lord, it’s been so long…” She let her voice trail away and he thought for a second she might not answer, but she finally said, “Jennifer was nothing if not incongruous. You know that. One day she was this way, the next, another, and the third something different still. I’m not sure she was happy,” Tally added wincing.

“I figured.”

“Those days when the kids were still in school were difficult, to say the least.”

“She didn’t do or say anything out of the ordinary?”

“Oh, gee.” Looking down at the open toes of her shoes, she frowned, deep in thought. “As I said, it was a long time ago. She was struggling, I guess, because she’d…um…she’d taken a lover.” She glanced up at him, her cheeks burning, but Bentz didn’t react except to nod, encourage her as she seemed to be having second thoughts.

“James.”

“I…I’m not sure. She never said his name, but I think so.”

“My brother, the priest.”

Licking her lips nervously, looking away, Tally seemed reticent to say any more, so he helped her along. “I know that James was Kristi’s biological father.” Even after all these years, that admission stuck in his craw. The betrayal had been deep, two pronged, coming at him from both his brother and his wife. Hell. “I know that they met at San Juan Capistrano, an inn down there.”

“Mission Saint Miguel, yeah. That and somewhere in Santa Monica.”

Shana had mentioned the pier before and it burned in his gut as he thought about how many times Jennifer had suggested they spend the day at the beach. How they’d taken Kristi to the famous amusement park located on the pier, the restaurants they’d frequented as the sun had blazed before settling into the horizon.

“She was big on the beach,” he offered.

“Oh, yeah.” Tally’s eyebrows quirked up for an instant. “Jennifer was never cut out to be a cop’s wife. She was frustrated, I think, as she gave up her aspirations as an artist to raise Kristi. Not that she was a bad mother…”

Oh, right. Saint Jennifer.

Tally went on, “She loved Kristi, I know that. But she hated the fact that she wasn’t your kid, Rick. She’d said that time and time again. Guilt ate at her.”

“Not enough to change her behavior.”

“No,” Tally said with a sigh. She was still squinting as two girls half ran by and yelled, “Hi, Mrs. White.”

“Hey, Brinn. Marcy.” Tally raised a smile on them before turning back to Bentz. “No, the guilt was bad, but it wasn’t enough to change anything, I suppose. Maybe nothing would have been. She loved you, but she was obsessed with James, if that makes any sense.”

Not on a dare, but he didn’t say as much.
“I’m sorry but there’s not a whole lot more I can tell you. You knew her as well as anyone.”

“I don’t feel like I knew her at all.” And that was the understatement of the century.

“Then you’re no different from anyone else.” She touched his arm, thought better of it, and drew her hand back. With a sigh, she added, “This has nothing to do with you, I know, but Jennifer once told me that the reason she married you was to get away from some other guy.”

“James?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Someone she knew before you.”

“Alan Gray?” Bentz wondered why his name kept coming up.

“I don’t remember…” She hesitated, leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb of her car. “No, you’re right. I think maybe that’s the name. One time when we were together Jennifer had a few too many martinis and she said that the reason she married you was that Alan had a cruel streak. That he was obsessive and even handcuffed her to the bed once, wouldn’t let her go. After he’d sobered up, he’d apologized, but she never forgave him or forgot it.”

Bentz didn’t move. Rage burned through him. At Gray. At his damned ex-wife.

Jennifer had never confided this story to him.

Was it the truth? Or a quickly fabricated lie to gain sympathy, come up with a reason why she threw over a millionaire for a cop?

He didn’t know. Trying to understand Jennifer was like trying to walk on quicksand; his footing was never secure.

“She said she suspected him—Alan—of being into more than real estate. She thought he might be into illegal stuff. What, I don’t know, but that’s the impression I got. Of course with Jennifer, I was never sure. She made a big deal of it, swore me to secrecy. Lord, I thought she was going to make me cross my heart and wish to die.”

Bentz was irritated that he’d never heard this before. “You didn’t think of saying anything when she died.”

Tally snapped her head up, suddenly worried. “No. Why would I?” And then she caught on. “It was a suicide, right? That’s what everyone thought. There was a note.” She was suddenly anxious, as if she realized she’d said far too much. “Look, I really don’t know what difference it makes now. And I’ve really got to get going. I don’t know anything else, really. And I don’t know how this could help you.”

He didn’t either. But it was something.

“Thanks,” he said and slipped a card from his wallet. On the back he slashed out the digits of his cell phone. “If you think of anything else.” He handed her the card and she nearly crushed it in her fist.

“Of course,” she promised, but they both knew it was a lie.

Tally White wanted nothing more to do with him, nor the memories of his dead ex-wife.

He stepped away from her car as she pulled the driver’s door closed and jabbed her keys into the ignition. A moment later Tally gunned the Volkswagen out of the faculty lot, putting as much distance as she could between herself and Bentz.

So what else was new?

He had that effect on people.
CHAPTER 21

I’m alone in the elevator.

Slowly, with a loud grinding noise, the large car ascends. When I reach the second floor, no one is there to meet me.

Good.

The stark hallway is empty as well.

Perfect.

Quickly, on noiseless footsteps I make my way down the pressboard corridor to my private room, the windowless space where I am totally alone. The place that no one knows about, that no one would link to me. The walls and floor are pressboard and a single bulb gives off a harsh, unshaded glow.

I close the door.

Lock it.

Test the lock to make certain it’s solid.

Then I let out a deep breath and survey my surroundings in this, a place many would see as a cell. But in here, by myself, I’m free. I usually hate being alone, but not here. Not in this one place that is my sanctuary. Here, I’m finally at peace.

On a previous trip to this quiet place, I hung a full-length mirror on one wall—just so I would have company. Across from the reflective glass, I stacked big plastic tubs of clothes and makeup. I also assembled a short rod, screwed it into the walls so that I could hang plastic garment bags of nicer clothes, the dresses and jackets and pants that I kept for my special purpose. I even have a computer in here, a laptop that I can use while sitting on my faux leopard beanbag. The chair sits in one corner with a small battery-powered lamp on a TV tray. All the comforts of home.

There’s a small bookcase, one I put together unassisted. The only books on the shelves are photo albums and scrapbooks, collections I’ve been keeping for years.

After rechecking the lock one more time, I find my iPod and plug in. Today, I’ll listen to R.E.M. and feel the thrum of music run through my body. As I hum along, I drag the heavy tomes from their resting place, plop myself into the chair and open the pages. Some of the pictures and articles have yellowed with age, but they are all in perfect order, as I have so carefully placed them. Photographs of Bentz. Articles about him. His entire life as a police officer captured.

There is one of a crime scene where Detective Bentz, standing just on the other side of the yellow tape, is talking with two other officers. In the background sits the house where the victim was found. But I’m not interested in the little bungalow with a blooming wisteria running over the front porch. Nor do I pay any attention to the blood still visible on the front steps.

No.
I focus on Bentz.
The good-looking prick.

In this shot, his face is in profile. His features are harsh and rugged, his stern jaw set, his razor-thin lips flat in anger. Always the tough cop.

Yeah, right. “Bastard,” I say, keeping my voice low.

I spy another photograph of him on the Ferris wheel at an amusement park. Kristi is at his side. She is all of seven in the photo, and Bentz’s lips are wide in a grin—a rare shot of him having fun.

The photograph, not clear to begin with, is around twenty years old. I run my fingers over the images. As I have done hundreds of times.

Twenty years!
Twenty effin’ years.

The child a grown woman.

It’s true, I think ruefully, time flies.

But no more. Time is about to stand still.

These pages with their clear plastic covers are filled with his life. Old wedding photos of his first marriage are fading, washing out, the fashions worn by the happy couple evidence of another era.

As the music runs through my brain I flip forward quickly, my fingers urging the years to spin past, faster and faster. Until I stop at the present. Here the more recent pictures of his new wife, Olivia, are fresh and clear.

New wife.

New life.

We’ll see about that.

One picture of the bitch, a photograph where she’s looking straight into the camera, catches my eye. In the shot, Olivia is serene and smiles slightly, as if she knows a secret, as if she can read my mind.

What a nut case!

And to think that Bentz actually believes he’s happy with a woman who has several screws loose!

A psychic?
If so, then she should be worried.

Really worried.

But then, of course, she’s a fraud.

Do she and Bentz believe her “visions?”

Well, then how about this, Olivia? Tune into what’s happening to you, will you? What do you think about lying six feet under, huh?

Rick Bentz won’t be able to save you.
And he’ll know what real mental anguish is.

I glare at the woman staring up at me. So smug. So self-satisfied. As if she really thinks she can see the future.

Oh, like, sure.

“No way,” I whisper to her. “No damned way.” But her curved lips get to me and I remember that somewhere in her past she had a twisted ability to see murders committed as they happened.

How will she feel about her own? I wonder.

The thought is thrilling, brings a zing into my veins, not so much for her pain and suffering but for Bentz’s.

He’ll be the one who will have to deal with the torment, the pure, soul-sick torture of knowing that, because of him, the woman he loves will be subjected to excruciating, mind-shattering fear and deep, abysmal pain.

But I can’t get ahead of myself.

Everything is falling into place, but my mission is far from over. Still undone.

There are those who need to be destroyed, those who have served their purpose by leaking information about Jennifer to Bentz, those who knew her well and now are of no further use. I take a deep breath.

To remind myself of my mission, to stay on target, I reach into my pocket and pull out my Pomeroy 2550, a sweet little multipurpose tool that disguises its sharp blades in an innocuous plastic shell. Designed to look like a pink manicure kit, the tool can become lethal with the flick of a tiny lever. It boasts a corkscrew, screwdriver, nail clipper, a pair of petite scissors, and a tiny little knife as sharp as a surgeon’s scalpel.

My favorite.

The razor-thin blade is perfect.

Grinning at this newfound ritual that solidifies my determination, I hum along to the refrain of “Losing My Religion” as I slowly draw the blade across my inner wrist.

A sharp sting.

I suck in my breath in a hiss, losing track of the words to the song. But it’s a bittersweet pain and I locate the melody again, catching up to the band.

With eager eyes, I watch the blood bloom. My blood rise against my skin.

Reverently, almost mesmerized by the image I’m creating, I drizzle the thick red drops onto the photograph of Olivia.

She smiles up at me through a nearly opaque sheen of red.

Unknowing.

Fearless.

I smear the blood over the plastic that protects her image and yet she grins.

Poor, dumb bitch.

“Don’t tell me you need another favor,” Montoya said when Bentz phoned him as he drove with the pack on the clogged L.A. freeway. He had the window cracked but closed it and cranked up the A/C.
“You’re off work anyway.”

“And I thought I’d go home, spend some time with my wife, and relax. This is your deal, Bentz, not mine.” Despite his complaints, Montoya didn’t sound pissed off.

“Okay, okay, but I could use some help.”

“What?”

“Some more searches of Internet and police records.”

“Great.”

“I need the name of an astrologer who may or may not still be alive or practicing. All I have is a first name: Phyllis.”

“No last name. Nothing else?”

“She was somewhere in the Los Angeles area. And then, if you can, find out if Alan Gray is still in business. He’s a developer in Southern California. At least he was twenty-five years ago.”

“Alan Gray?” Montoya repeated “Have I heard of him?”

“Probably. I might have mentioned him. He’s a big shot. Multimillionaire, owned a house in Malibu, I think, and maybe had an apartment in New York, and a place somewhere in Italy, too. Even a yacht that he kept moored down at Marina del Rey, if I remember right. He was involved with Jennifer before she and I became an item, and I’d like to see if he’s still around.”

“You don’t ask for much.”

“Only what I need,” he said and hung up.

It was late in the afternoon, the sun sitting low in the sky, the heat of the day settling into the pavement. Bentz decided to grab some dinner at Oscar’s, a restaurant he and Jennifer had often frequented in their old neighborhood. He needed a quiet place where he could find some vestiges of the past and try to put together everything he knew about his ex-wife. Which changed day to day, as if Jennifer really had been a chameleon. Bentz hoped to mesh the old with the new to get some idea of the woman who, with each passing day, was becoming more of a stranger to him.

Even in death, Jennifer Nichols Bentz was the ultimate enigma.

Shana McIntyre was pissed as hell as she walked into her cedar-lined closet and yanked the headband from her hair.

She should never have talked with Bentz, never have confided in him, never have told him one solitary thing about Jennifer. The woman was dead, damn it. She had driven herself into a damned tree and, thankfully, was at rest.

In the dressing area of her massive closet and connecting bath, Shana stripped off her tennis skirt and sleeveless tee to stand naked in front of the floor to ceiling mirror. Not too bad for a woman on the north end of forty, she thought, though she’d have to consider some boob work and a full face-lift in the next five years to add to her tummy tuck and lipo. She pulled her breasts up to a spot where they were perky again and thought she could use another cup size as well. B to C. That would be nice. Then she drew back the skin around her chin and mouth. The lines there weren’t too bad yet, but there was a bit of sag that would only get worse. At least Jennifer Bentz would never have to worry about laugh lines, age spots, or cellulite. Early death, though scary, in some ways was seductive.
Shana believed that Jennifer was dead and had been for twelve years. Whoever had sent Bentz those photos was just mind-fucking him.

So why had Shana thought it necessary to play with Bentz? True, she’d had her own doubts about Jen’s death, but come on, there was no way the woman was alive today.

*It’s because you were attracted to him,* her mind silently accused, though she would never admit as much. A cop? Come on. But, then, Bentz always had been and was still undeniably sexy, and lately Shana had been more than a little denied in the sex department. Leland had once been a wild man, insatiable, but with advancing age and a few health issues his interest in sex, along with his ability, had diminished.

No amount of talking would get him to go to a doctor and inquire about Viagra. It was as if even suggesting the idea were an affront to his manhood.

*What manhood,* she thought unkindly because, truth be told, she was losing interest in the man she once would have killed to marry. Hadn’t she seduced him away from his first wife, that imbecile Isabella?

And Rick Bentz, even with his uneven walk, oozed virility. He caused her mind to wander down twisted and darkly seductive paths she didn’t dare follow. Jennifer had hinted that he was a great lover. She’d insisted that she hadn’t strayed for sex so much as for forbidden sex, with a priest, no less. Her husband’s half brother.

But then Jen had been one messed-up woman. Shana had thought so when they’d hung out together.

God, that seemed like another lifetime.

It was ancient history, long before she noticed the strands of gray in her hair and the evidence of sagging in certain areas of her body that had once been firm.

Christ, it was hell growing old…older, she reminded herself. She wasn’t yet fifty and she knew a lot of women who were over sixty and looked fabulous, though they had to work at it.

“Ugh.” She eyed her figure again and told herself to buck up. She was told over and over how beautiful she was, how great she looked, and so far no one had dared tacked on the “for your age” line that diminished the compliment.

She threw a cover-up over her body, though there was no reason. The maid had left long ago, the gardener wasn’t scheduled for a few more days, Leland was out of town again wooing some big client in Palm Springs.

Hurrying down the marble stairs, she cut through the sunroom and out to the yard, where Dirk was barking loudly at the neighbor’s Chihuahuas, who were yipping from the other side of the hedge and fence. “Enough,” Shana said and dragged Dirk into the house. She stuffed him into the laundry room and closed the door.

She just needed some time alone, without the aggravation of Leland’s dog giving her a headache. These days she spent more time with the damned animal than she did her husband.

She eyed the refrigerator and thought of the chocolate mousse pie within. It was a ritual she allowed herself. Each week she bought a different decadent dessert and left it calling to her on the third shelf of the refrigerator. She allowed herself one bite of pure heaven, then left the rest to slowly dehydrate and turn dark. Lemon meringue or key lime pie, coconut or Boston cream or fudge cake or eclairs. They all rented space on the glass shelf at eye level, then were evicted on the next Saturday night.

Her ritual of self-deprivation and control.

Today she wouldn’t even bother opening the door but hurried back outside and crossed the patio to the pool. It was twilight, the pool light glowing at the far end, the aquamarine water smooth and welcoming.

She dropped her cover-up and kicked off her flip-flops near the edge of the pool. Descending the mosaic tiled steps, she slid into the warm water and relaxed as it surrounded her calves, then her hips, and finally embraced her waist.
Vaguely aware that those nasty little Chihuahuas had quit their incessant yapping, she began her nightly ritual, her second workout today, with even strokes. Freestyle to the far end, breaststroke back, sidestroke for two laps. That was one set. She’d do five sets and then, only then, would she allow herself a drink. For next to the white box containing the chocolate mousse was a pitcher of martinis, already made and chilling.

It was another test of her willpower, waiting until after her exercise regimen before allowing herself a tall drink with exactly three olives. She’d suck the pimento out of each. God, Jennifer had loved martinis.

Stroke, stroke, breathe, stroke, stroke, stroke, breathe, turn.

She headed back, changing her rhythm as her body movements altered for the breaststroke. Night was closing in, the moon high. The subdued outdoor lighting cast small pools of light near the walkways. Brighter beams washed up the trunks of the palms, and the huge arched windows of the house were illuminated from within.

It was a gorgeous place to live.

Even if her life had become lonely.

Stroke, stroke, stroke.

She lost herself in her routine, silently counting off the turns, knowing instinctively from the way her muscles strained when she was coming to the end of her self-imposed exercise regimen.

She could almost taste the martinis as she completed the final lap. Letting water drip from her body, she started up the steps. She was reaching for her cover-up when she heard something.

A footstep?

A chorus of barking arose from the other side of the fence as the Chihuahuas started up again. Inside the house, Dirk responded with a low, warning growl.

“Great,” Shana said, intent on marching into the house and giving the dog a piece of her mind. What the hell was wrong with him? He never engaged the yappy rat-dogs from inside the house. It would serve the neighbors right if Dirk ever got loose and attacked those ankle biters. God, she hated them.

From the corner of her eye, she saw movement.

What?

Something dark.

A shadow in the side yard.

Or was it?

Her skin crawled as fear slithered through her.

She peered, staring at the side of the house, telling herself that nothing was out of the ordinary, there was nothing to be concerned about. And yet…

Just beyond a circle of decorative light, she caught a glimpse of movement again, something slinking near the undergrowth.

Heart hammering, she peered through the darkness, told herself she was being a ninny, one of those frightened little women she detested and then she saw it again. Something or someone creeping closer.

Something was definitely wrong.

“What the hell—?”
In a flash, a dark figure lunged, running, footsteps slapping across the cement.

Shana started to scream, as the sprinter rushed forward, eyes dark and glittering.

The attacker hit her mid-section, ramming her hard enough that she tripped, fell backward into the pool, her assailant pushing firmly.

\textit{Bam!}

Shana’s head hit the side of the pool.

Pain exploded behind her eyes. She nearly passed out, but tried to hang onto consciousness. To fight.

Still the maniac was on her, in the water with her as she flailed. Gloved hands circled her throat. Held her under. She saw the features of an angry face through the curtain of water. Features twisted in hatred. Oh, God, she should recognize the monster but she couldn’t think, couldn’t draw a breath.

\textit{Dear God, help me. Someone, please help me, this psycho wants to kill me!}

She struggled and tried to roll in the water, to twist so that the attacker was under the surface. Shana was strong, a swimmer, but she was already tired and she couldn’t battle the fierce determination of this would-be killer.

\textit{No! Sweet Jesus, no!!!}

She was already coughing. Trying to keep her wits. Find a way to survive.

But she was losing ground. Sputtering. Her strength drained even as she tried to pry the steely hands from her throat, hoping to land a blow with her feet. \textit{Kick him, Shana, kick! Or bite. Do something, anything!}

But the water was heavy.

Her assailant was agile, even in the water.

Her lungs and nose were burning. Her throat on fire. She was trying to cough again, but couldn’t expel the air trapped inside. Her throat was raw, her lungs screaming.

\textit{Oh, God, oh, God...no, no, no!}

Everything was going black, swirling above her, the stars and moon circling her head as a jet cut across the inky sky. \textit{I’m going to die}, she thought with sudden understanding and surrender. Her arms moved more slowly, her legs stopped kicking.

She was floating on her back, staring upward as the blackness consumed her and she finally caught a glimpse of the person who had fought so hard to kill her.

\textit{Why?} she wondered. \textit{Why me?}

Far in the distance she heard someone yell. “Rico!” her neighbor screamed at the dogs. “Daisy! Little Bit! You all hush!”

But the Chihuahuas were rabid and kept up their high-pitched barking and wails as the night closed in on Shana. She struggled for a breath, then finally blackness took away her pain.
CHAPTER 22

The day was warm. Despite the breeze blowing off the Pacific. Bentz was back in Santa Monica, walking on the pier, slowing at the very spot where he knew he’d seen “Jennifer” jump into the bay. Here, he felt a chill and as he looked downward into the water, imagined he saw her ghostly image in the inky depths, her skin pale and blue, veins visible, her red dress diaphanous and floating around her like a scarlet shroud.

He blinked. Of course she wasn’t there, the water once again a clear aquamarine shimmering as it caught the sunlight.

His cell phone rang.

According to caller ID, it was Jonas Hayes’s private cell.

“Bentz,” he said, still scanning the sea and feeling the pain in his leg. Worse since his midnight swim. Age was creeping up on him, though he was loath to admit it, except to Olivia who thought he was still young enough to father another kid. If she could see him now, limping along the boardwalk, conjuring up wraiths in the water…

“We need to talk.” Hayes’s voice was tight, all-business. He obviously hadn’t warmed up since their last conversation.

“When?” Bentz squinted as he looked downward to the shadowy area under the pier where a fisherman was casting out a line and where, if he figured right, Jennifer would have landed when she plunged into the water and disappeared. As far as he knew, the Coast Guard had not recovered the body of a woman in a red dress, so he had to assume the woman impersonating his ex-wife was still very much alive. Ready to haunt him again. Just as she’d disturbed his dreams.

After doing some work on the Internet, searching for information regarding Alan Gray, he had called Olivia, then watched some mindless television. He’d dozed off with the television on, falling into a restless sleep full of disjointed images of his ex-wife…Jennifer reaching for him from the water in a sopping wet red dress. Jennifer at the wheel of a silver car with smudged plates.

Wanting some closure, some hint of how a woman could leap from such a high vantage point and completely disappear, he had returned to Santa Monica today in search of answers. Today the sky was clear, the sun so bright he was wearing shades against the glare. A soft breeze ruffled the huge fronds of the palm trees near the beach. He checked his watch—his new watch, as his old one had given up the ghost after his swim. “What time do you want to meet?”

“I’ll find it. What’s up?”

“I’ll tell you when you get there.” Hayes hung up and Bentz was left with a bad feeling.

It wasn’t like Hayes to be cryptic or curt. Something was definitely going on. And definitely not something good. Bentz turned and, using his cane, headed to his car. He was still suffering from his late-night swan dive and swim. His leg was definitely acting up, and he’d already downed double the dosage of ibuprofen this morning, washing the pills down with a large cup of coffee.

Of course, all this walking and trudging through sand hadn’t helped. But he had wanted to explore the underbelly of the pier by daylight, hoping to find an escape method the woman might have used. A ladder, a rope, a catwalk. Unfortunately, when he’d hitched along the beach, he’d looked up and seen only the guts of the massive dock, pillars covered with creosote and tar. No means of escape.

By light of day Santa Monica Bay was a different animal. The other night the whole area around the pier had been eerie with the lights of the amusement park muted and fuzzy in the fog, but bright enough to reflect in the black waters. This morning the pier wore an entirely different face. Yes, there was a carnival atmosphere, but it seemed far less sinister. The amusement park bustled with noise and the shouts of delighted riders. There were lots of people walking, riding bikes, jogging, or window-shopping on and around the beach. Men fished off the pier, people strolled on the beach, kids played in the sand. Nothing menacing or dark.

Almost as if he’d dreamed the horrid situation. He’d checked with the webcam people twice, and there was some hitch in locating the film. “Just give me another day,” the technician had told him. Bentz wasn’t sure if the holdup was about authorization or technical issues, but he was skeptical that he’d ever get access to the webcam records.

He looked out to sea one last time.

How does a woman plunge into the water and disappear?

Maybe Hayes would help answer that question.

“Yeah, right,” he muttered, climbing into the warm interior of his rental car. After a quick U-turn, he stepped on it and was lucky enough to stay ahead of a few yellow lights. Traffic, for once, was light and he didn’t spot a tail or catch one glimpse of Jennifer.

As he drove he toyed with the notion that Hayes might want to talk to him about the old Caldwell case, to pick his brain to see if there was something the files didn’t hold. Maybe Hayes was hoping Bentz had a forgotten piece of information that might be the key to unmasking the Twenty-one killer and solving the new case with the Springer twins as the vics.

He thought of the grief-stricken parents, the hell they must be going through. A few times in his life he’d almost lost his daughter and the horror of it was branded in his memory, even though she’d pulled through. And now Olivia wanted another child. Of course she did. He didn’t blame her; she was younger than he and had never been a parent.

Maybe…

If he survived whatever was going down here on the coast.

He ended up at the restaurant five minutes before they were supposed to meet, but Hayes was already inside, waiting at a booth with vinyl seats, a plastic-topped table. Fake bamboo screens separated tables. The restaurant smelled of jasmine, tea, ginger, and curry and from the kitchen came the sound of rattling pans and voices speaking in some Asian tongue.

Hayes looked up from his small, steaming cup of tea. He didn’t bother smiling, just nodded as Bentz slid onto the bench across from him and slid his cane beneath his feet. They were nearly the only people in the restaurant, which had just opened for the day.

Hayes eyed the cane. “You feelin’ okay?”
Bentz lifted a shoulder and kept his face impassive as the waitress, a petite Asian woman with a friendly smile and long black hair wound onto her head, brought another cup of tea and two plastic menus. Hayes ordered without looking at what was offered. Sensing the other man’s intensity, Bentz said, “I’ll have the same.”

As soon as the waitress left, Bentz eyed a somber-faced Hayes. His gut clenched. “Something happened.”

“Where were you last night?”

“What?”

Hayes didn’t respond. Just waited. Dark eyes assessing, lines showing near the corners of his mouth and around his eyes. His big hands rotated the tiny porcelain cup around and around, steam rising in fragrant swirls.

“I was here in L.A. Culver City, to be exact. At the motel.” What the hell was going on here?

“Anyone able to confirm that?”

“What?” Bentz asked, not liking where this conversation was leading. He waited as a busboy delivered soy sauce to their table, then said, “I don’t know, but I got in around…seven maybe, or eight? I didn’t check with the desk.” He stopped short and eyed the man he’d counted on as a friend. “What the hell happened, Hayes?”

“You know Shana McIntyre, right?”

“Jennifer’s friend. Yeah. You know I do.”

“You visited her?”

“A few days ago. What? She complain that I was harassing her?”

Hayes shook his head. “It’s more serious than that, Bentz. Shana McIntyre was killed last night.”

Bentz was stunned. He tried to soak it all in as the waitress returned with steaming platters of spicy vegetables, meat, and rice. She placed them on the table, then smiled expectantly. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked as if from a distance.

Shana was dead? But he’d just seen her…

“We’re fine,” Hayes said.

Bentz sat back, having lost his appetite. A feeling of doom settled like lead in his gut. He couldn’t believe it. As the waitress disappeared, clicking off on high heels to another booth, Bentz pushed his platter aside and lowered his voice. “Wait a second.” He was still trying to wrap his mind around what Hayes was saying. “Killed?”

“Murdered.” Dark eyes drilled into him. Silent questions—accusations—in their dark depths.

Jennifer. This has to do with Jennifer. The dark idea snaked through his brain as he understood the unspoken accusations in Hayes’s eyes. What?

“Holy Christ. You think I did it?” he asked, shocked all over again. “No.” Bentz shook his head, feeling for the first time in his life like a damned suspect. “Wait a second.”

“Look,” Hayes said seriously. “This is a courtesy, okay? One cop to another. Your name was found on her computer. She keeps a calendar there.”

“I told you I saw her.”

“And you never went back?”

“No.” Bentz’s gut wrenched. This was madness. He couldn’t believe for a second that anyone who knew him,
who had worked with him, for God’s sake, would think him capable of killing someone.

*What about Mario Valdez? You killed him, didn’t you? An accident, yes, but the kid died. At your hand. You are capable, Bentz. Everyone here in L.A. knows it.*

“Tell me what you discussed with her.”

“Jennifer, of course.” He told himself not to be paranoid. Hayes wasn’t trying to nail him. He was just doing his job. The hostess was leading two men in business suits to a booth nearby. Bentz watched them pass before settling his gaze on Hayes again.

A dark eyebrow raised. “That’s all?”

“Yeah.” Bentz recounted their discussion, explaining about the conversation from the time he was met at the door by Shana and her mammoth dog to his departure. He even recounted that shortly thereafter he’d spied “Jennifer” at the bus stop on Figueroa.

Hayes’s face didn’t change expression. “Did Shana buy it that your ex-wife might be alive?”

“Nah. She thought Jennifer was dead, though she always had her doubts that she committed suicide.”

“She thinks Jennifer was killed?” Hayes’s underlying message was clear: She was killed and you were involved.

“I get where you’re going with this, but I wouldn’t be here, looking for the truth, if I had any connection to Jennifer’s death. And I have no motive to kill Shana McIntyre.”

Hayes was unmoved. “You have to admit, these are strange coincidences. The Twenty-one killer strikes again, and now Shana McIntyre is dead…all within a week of your return to L.A. Any detective worth his salt would be making some connections.”

Bentz’s jaw tightened. A storm roiled inside him and it was all he could do to hang onto his temper. “When I left Shana, she was alive. That was a few days ago…check her calendar. I never went back and never saw her on the street and never so much as talked with her on the phone. You can check my cell records.”

“We will.”

“Good. Then you’ll see that last night I was on the phone with my wife in New Orleans. The cell tower in the area should have caught the signal. Jesus, listen to me. I don’t have to explain myself to you or anyone else.”

Hayes held up a hand defensively. “I just thought you’d rather hear it from me first.”

Bentz bit back a comment, trying to restrain his anger. No need to shoot the messenger. “First and last. I wasn’t at Shana’s place last night. But you would know that if you checked her security system,” Bentz said. “The place is gated like she’s a celebrity. Anyone think to get into the system, see what those cameras all over her house picked up?”

“We’re looking into it.”

“Well, do, because I wasn’t there. And while you’re at it, you might check out some of the information I sent you about that silver car and the license plates. Someone’s fuckin’ with me, Jonas, and that person’s playing the LAPD for a fool. I didn’t kill Shana McIntyre, but someone wants to fuck me over. Someone orchestrated this whole thing. They’re probably watching us now.”

The waitress came by with more tea and her ever-present smile, but Hayes shook his head and she moved on as three middle-aged women were seated at a table not far from them.

“You’re paranoid,” Hayes said, his voice still low as the women scraped their chairs back, his accusations echoing Bentz’s own very private fears.
“That’s right, but I’ve got a good reason.”

“I’m here as your friend.”

“You know the old line about, ‘with friends like you, who needs enemies?’”

“Just watchin’ your back.” Hayes’s dark eyes flashed and his lips drew tight. “More than a few people in the PD would like to see you go down, Bentz.”

“So what else is new?”

“As I said, I’ve got your back.”

“Prove it. Get me that information. We’ve done here.” Bentz stood up, grabbed his cane, and shoved his plate toward Hayes. “You might want to put this in a ‘to go’ bag.”

Bentz had a point, Hayes thought grudgingly as the clock ticked toward five and he still a stack of paperwork looming on his desk. The air-conditioning system was working overtime, the cold office emptying as detectives signed out and the night shift dribbled in. For the third time Hayes scanned the statements collected from the neighbors and friends of Shana McIntyre, trying to make some sense of the events surrounding her death. An impossible task, he thought, clicking his pen nervously.

Although he didn’t see enough evidence to string together any kind of case, all factors did point to one thing: someone had lured Bentz here and, once he’d landed on West Coast soil, a homicidal rampage had begun.

Were the Springer girls part of it?

He didn’t know. His frown deepened as he clicked his pen even more rapidly.

Thinking he was missing something, he flipped through the reports one more time. The neighbor to the north of the McIntyre property owned dogs that had gone nuts around ten-thirty the night before, an event consistent with the time of death. But, of course, that neighbor had seen nothing out of the ordinary. No surprise, as the hedges and fences made it impossible to peek into the abutting yard.

Another neighbor three doors down had spotted a dark pickup on the road, but that vehicle belonged to one of the lawn care companies who serviced the neighborhood. The truck had broken down and was later towed—all legit.

Hayes stretched his neck and rotated his shoulders in an attempt to dispel some of the tension mounting in his upper back. Between his caseload and his ex-wife’s most recent custody demands, he needed a break. He used to have time to run or play pickup ball, but lately he’d been too busy to squeeze in a workout.

He reviewed the information he knew about the McIntyre murder. The department had gotten the call around eight in the morning, when the maid had found a very dead Shana McIntyre face up in the pool. The maid had dialed 9-1-1; a uniformed cop had responded, then called in RHD.

Hayes and Bledsoe had caught the case and arrived about the same time as SID, the Scientific Investigation Division, rolled up. Of course a T.V. camera crew showed up shortly thereafter.

Shana McIntyre hadn’t just hit her head on the side of the pool, though there was blood on the tile near the stairs. The bruising at her throat and other evidence suggested that she’d been attacked.

Later, while searching the place, they’d found his-and-hers laptop computers in the den. The pink Mac had been logged onto Shana’s calendar, where Bentz’s name had appeared in capital letters.

“Interesting,” Bledsoe had remarked. “The guy’s in town less than a week and three people are dead. Two vics of the Twenty-one and now this woman has him on her calendar. Bentz is batting a thousand.”
Hayes hadn’t been so quick to judge. “You don’t think he had anything to do with the Springer twins’ murders.”

Bledsoe had glowered at Shana McIntyre’s monitor. “Didn’t think so. But this one…” He’d scratched at his chin and looked up over the rims of his reading glasses. “I don’t know. Look, I’ve never pegged Bentz as a killer. But something’s off, Hayes. You and I both know it, and somehow it’s connected to the fact that good ol’ Ricky Boy is back in L.A.”

On that point, Hayes didn’t disagree.

The husband, Leland McIntyre, who drove back from Palm Springs, had seemed genuinely upset. He had an alibi, but then murder-for-hire wasn’t an impossibility. An insurance broker, Leland McIntyre had taken out a whopper of a policy on his wife, over two million dollars. Then there was the list of her ex-husbands and the previous Mrs. McIntyre, Isabella, who, if you could believe the neighbors, had held a grudge against Shana for stealing her husband. It was hard to tell. There were so many ex-wives and husbands in the mix, it nearly took a flowchart to keep them all straight.

And all the suspects from dysfunctional relationships didn’t change the fact that Rick Bentz had visited Shana only days before her death. *He’s in town less than a week, and she ends up dead.*

The last person to see Shana alive was the gardener, earlier in the afternoon. The final call on her cell phone had been to her husband in Palm Springs. The phone records for her cell, the husband’s cell, and the home phone were already being checked.

No signs of forced entry at the house, but the killer had probably climbed the gate and walked around the house. Of course there were four security cameras in and around the house, but they had been inoperative for years.

No break there.

The McIntyre homicide was a tough one, Hayes thought, even if you pulled Bentz from the pool of suspects.

*Damned Bentz. He was proving to be a real pain in the ass. Still, Hayes would give Bentz the benefit of the doubt and track down some of the information Bentz wanted. There was a chance it might even help with the case.*

Just as soon as he fought his way through the statements and evidence of this latest crime.

He glanced at the clock again and figured it would be a long one. If he was lucky, he’d be home at midnight. Great. He glanced down and a note on his calendar caught his eye: *Recital. Oh, hell, Maren was singing tonight at some church near Griffith Park in Hollywood. Hayes had promised his daughter he would attend and he couldn’t stand facing her disappointment or Delilah’s scowl of disgust. He had to show up. Somehow he’d take off an hour for the kid.*

*It was, as Delilah was always delighted to remind him, his responsibility.*

Montoya was sweating, his muscles aching from running on the indoor track for half an hour, then working out on the weight machines—a new exercise regimen his wife had initiated by giving him a membership to a gym for his birthday. Yeah, it was a great stress reliever, and yeah, he was more toned, but this new “healthy” lifestyle was about to kill him. *After all, what was wrong with a smoke and a beer?*

On the way to the locker room he waved to a couple of guys he knew, then showered, letting the hot water run over his body before he toweled off. He dressed in khakis and a polo shirt, then slipped his arms through his leather jacket and headed out.

*Into the warm Louisiana rain.*

Fat drops pounded the parking lot as he dashed to his Mustang, unlocking it with his keyless remote on the fly. Nearly soaked again, he considered driving straight home, where Abby was waiting, but decided to detour to the office to check on the information he’d requested for Bentz. Having seen the press release about the latest L.A.
murder, he didn’t want to delay.

“Damn,” he said, flipping on his wipers. Bentz was in trouble. Montoya could feel it. People were dying. People somehow connected to his partner.

Streetlights glowed, casting shimmering blue pools of illumination on the pavement as he nosed his car into the street and pushed the speed limit, running amber lights, thinking about Bentz in California.

The guy was stirring up trouble.

But then, that wasn’t exactly a news flash.

Though Montoya had thought Bentz was out of his mind, the events of the last few days had proved him wrong. Bentz might be stirring the pot, but something was hiding just beneath the surface, something murky and decidedly evil. It was all Montoya could do not to buy an airline ticket and fly out. He had some vacation time he could use. Abby would understand. She always did. But he hadn’t been invited. This mess in California was Bentz’s private deal. He was figuring out his own past, exorcising his own damned demons. If he wanted his partner’s help, Bentz wouldn’t be shy about asking.

And yet, what if Bentz needed help and didn’t realize it? What if he were getting in over his head. Jesus, the man was an idiot where women were concerned.

Taking a corner fast enough to make his tires squeal, Montoya slowed a bit to call Abby.

“How’s my favorite detective?” she asked.

“Fine as ever,” he lied.

“Still have a tiny ego, I see.”

“It just needs a little stroking.”

“Your ego? That’s what you’re talking about?”

“Naughty woman.”

“And you love it.”

She was right. They both knew it. “Look, I’m gonna be running a little late,” he said as he drove past the Superdome and had to stop for a red light. People with umbrellas dashed across the crosswalk and splashed through puddles.

“Let me guess, Hotshot. You’re officially off the clock, so now you’re going to work for nothing for Bentz.”

“Something like that.”

“Should I wait up?” she’d said with a trace of sarcasm.

“Might be a good idea.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.” The light turned green. He hung up chuckling. She was the first woman who’d been able to give as well as she got, and he loved that about her. As the police band crackled and the wipers slapped the rain from the windshield, he drove through the city to the station. Easing into an available parking slot, he cut the engine. Turning his collar against the downpour, he raced into the building and up the stairs.

The squad room was quiet, only a few detectives were still working, most having already called it a day. Montoya sat at his desk, fired up his computer, and searched his e-mail for the documents he’d requested.
Sure enough, a few answers had come in, answers he hoped would help Bentz. He checked the wall clock: 8:47, not even 7 P.M. on the West Coast. He dialed quickly and Bentz picked up on the third ring.

“What’s it going?”

“Not good. Shana McIntyre was murdered.”

“I heard.”

“Yeah, well, the LAPD isn’t happy.” Bentz’s voice was tense.

“No one is. Look, I might have some information for you. I’ll send it via e-mail, but thought you might want to hear it directly.”

“Shoot.”

“The long and the short of it is that Elliot, our resident computer whiz, went to town with the information you gave me on the parking pass, partial license plate numbers, and car description.”

“Did he get any hits?”

“Bingo. The god of all things technical just sent me the information. Says he sifted through federal, state, and private records to find it.”

“Lay it on me.”

Montoya scanned the monitor. “So the silver Chevy that’s been dogging you could be a vehicle once owned by an employee of Saint Augustine’s Hospital. Her name was Ramona Salazar.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, that’s the kicker. She died about a year ago.”

A beat. Then Bentz asked, “What happened to the car?”

“Still registered to her.”

“Got an address?”

“Yeah, but it’s the old one where she lived when she was still alive. The car could have been sold, but whoever bought it never bothered registering it.”

“I wonder why.”

“Me too. Someone might be using her ID, or some family member could be driving the vehicle even though it’s still in her name.”

“I’ll find out.”

“Good. And I’ve got some info on a few astrologers named Phyllis, nothing concrete. There’s a Phyllis Mandabi who reads tarot cards in Long Beach,” Montoya said, checking his notes. “And there was an astrologer who practiced in Hollywood about fifteen years ago—Phyllis Terrapin. She left there for Tucson, got married, and doesn’t have her shingle, if that’s what you want to call it, out any longer.”

“Got it.”

“And you shouldn’t have any problem finding Alan Gray. He’s still a big shot in the Los Angeles area. Got a new
firm though, named ACG Investments. He’s the CEO.”

“Thanks.” Bentz said. “I already tracked him to ACG, but haven’t figured out what he’s into.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Great. You did good.”

“I know,” Montoya said, and with a few clicks of his mouse, forwarded all of the information to Bentz’s personal e-mail address. He was about to hang up, but said, “Hey, Bentz?”

“Yeah?”

“Watch your ass.”
CHAPTER 23

She’s dead!

As I shake a fresh pitcher of martinis, I give myself a pat on the back for how neatly the killing went off. Without a goddamned hitch. Despite those miserable yapping little dogs.

That bitch Shana never knew what hit her.

Her reaction, a look of surprise melding into a mask of sheer horror, was priceless. Our eyes met for a heartbeat, then I sent her reeling and fumbling and splashing into the water.

Perfect!

I hum to myself as I add a little vermouth, very dry, just a whiff, then pour myself a drink.

Bentz is sweating now, I know. He’s wondering about the trap he’s fallen into, searching for a way out. What a joke. His little stunt at the pier followed up by Shana’s unexpected, and oh, so unfortunate, death.

“Boo-hoo,” I whisper aloud.

Smiling to myself, I dig in the refrigerator, find a jar of olives, and drop two into my glass. Drab green, stuffed with pimento, they dance in the clear liquid and slide to the side. Like little eyeballs staring at me.

“Proud of me?” I ask the drink, then take a sip. “Ummm. De-lish!”

I pluck one olive from the glass and suck the pimento from it, savoring the taste and smell of gin as I walk into the living room and drop into my favorite chair.

I taped the news coverage of Shana McIntyre’s death and I play it over and over, listening to that imbecilic reporter, Joanna Quince from KMOL, trying to stutter her way through the story.

“Idiot,” I say to the TV, dangling the other olive over my mouth as Joanna tries to pronounce McIntyre. “It’s Mac-En-Tire,” I say, irritated. I’ve watched it three times before, waiting for the on-camera flub and it grates on my nerves. “Shana would be soooo upset if she heard you screwing up,” I say to Joanna, and that’s the truth. Shana was so proud of stealing Leland away from his first wife. It seemed that getting him down the aisle was payback for the same thing happening to her.

“What goes around, comes around,” I say, then click off the moronic reporter and think about the next one who will have to suffer a similar fate to Shana’s.

It should happen soon, I think, to make my point.

Yes, sooner better than later.

So that everyone understands that the latest spate of killings are not coincidence, that they are directly tied to Rick Bentz.

I already know who will be the next traitor to be sacrificed, and this one will be child’s play. It could happen as quickly as tonight.
That's an appealing thought, and it could work. After all, I've planned it for so long. Another long sip of the cool martini. But I'll just have one. For now. Later, I can have another for my next celebration.

I'm tingling inside, anticipation sliding through my body. How long I've waited, but oh, it was worth it. That old quote about revenge being best served up cold was right on the money.

So, so true.

I finish my drink, savoring the last drop. Bottoms up! Lowering the glass, I get to work. I'll need to make a phone call before I leave and then...oh, yeah, and then...

The fun is just beginning.

Ramona Salazar.

The name rang no bells for Bentz, none whatsoever.

Using his damned cane and feeling his knee twinge, he walked the short distance from the sandwich shop to his motel in the new shoes he'd picked up at a store in Marina del Rey. Like everything else in this part of the world, the loafers were outrageously expensive. He could easily go broke trying to find out if his ex-wife was dead or alive.

At least he had a name to start with, a lead, if a very shaky one. He had spent the afternoon staked out in his motel room between the television and his laptop, taking notes as information about Shana McIntyre was released. Old footage of her wealthy husband had flashed across the screen, and Bentz had taken note, knowing that the husband was always at the top of a suspect list.

But real detective work entailed more than watching news reports on KMOL or Googling Leland McIntyre, and frustration was beginning to burn in his gut. He hated having his hands tied like this. When Montoya had called, he'd been relieved to have another venue to investigate.

Ramona Salazar.

It was already twilight, the sun setting in the west, the noise of the San Diego Freeway resounding off the hills as he reached the parking lot of the So-Cal. Closer he heard the sound of water splashing. He guessed more than a couple kids were in the interior pool judging from the cacophony of the whoops, hollers, and laughter reaching him.

Vaguely he registered that the car belonging to the old man who owned Spike was missing. He hitched his way along the porch, unlocked the door to his room, and walked inside. It was just as uninviting as ever.

“Home,” he said sarcastically as he placed his cane near the door and dropped his food onto the desk. According to Montoya, Ramona Salazar had died about a year earlier. Bentz powered up his laptop and opened up some kind of wrap sandwich he'd picked up just before Montoya called. The “Californian,” as it was so imaginatively named—a green tortilla slathered in some kind of lemon/Dijon sauce and filled with free-range smoked turkey, whatever the hell that really meant, a slice of pepper-jack cheese, avocados, tomatoes, and sprouts. It was all pretty damned bland, but he barely noticed as he clicked onto his e-mail and found the information Montoya had forwarded.

Sure enough, Romana Salazar was connected to the car, at least he'd hoped this was the right woman and the right car. Otherwise he was back to square one.

He didn’t have a printer, but figured he might be able to use the “business office,” which was really just a small PC for guests shoved to the side of the registration desk in the So-Cal office. Rebecca would be on duty, and she'd told him he could use the ancient desktop and printer any time. As long as she was around and her son Tony wasn’t online playing computer games behind his mother’s back.

First up, he thought, connecting with a search engine and typing in Ramona Salazar’s name, he’d collect any and all information he could find on the woman, including her obituary.
If he was barking up the wrong tree, so be it. At least he finally had a scent to follow.

Maren sang like the proverbial lark, her mezzo voice rising to the rafters of the little church in Hollywood. Hayes focused on his daughter’s shiny face in the rows of Miss Bette’s students as they sang as an ensemble for several songs, harmonizing on an old spiritual, then rocking out with songs from the eighties and nineties. Hayes recognized a few Michael Jackson numbers and a couple by Elton John.

After the group sang and harmonized, each of the students individually sang solos on the small, old-fashioned stage that looked like it had come right off the set of Little House on the Prairie.

Hayes had slipped into the little church in Hollywood late, caught a disapproving glare from Delilah, then turned his cell phone to “silent.” From that moment on, he’d listened raptly while his daughter, at least in his opinion, outshined everyone.

The singers were all were coached by the same statuesque African-American woman who accompanied each either at the piano or on an acoustic guitar. Hayes suffered through the individual performances. All of the kids could carry a tune alright, but none of them could hope to make it past the first round of an American Idol competition no matter what their proud, smiling, nearly smug parents who filled the pews thought. Well, except Maren, of course. She was the star. Hayes figured he was as bad as the other proud mamas and papas, except, his daughter really was talented.

Three boys and four girls each were spotlighted before Maren took on a Toni Braxton song. Hayes watched her, his little girl, only twelve years old, belting out a number like a pro. She’d barely developed, still wore braces, but she was as beautiful as her mother and a helluva lot more talented.

Maren moved to the music, her mocha-colored skin shimmering under the lights. Her straightened hair streamed down her back, and her dark brown eyes seemed impossibly large and expressive in her sweet face. She was tall and thin, like both her parents, her newfound curves in proportion, her dimples “cute” rather than sexy. At least he hoped so.

She sang a soulful rendition of “Unbreak My Heart” that nearly brought down the house, then finished with the upbeat Whitney Houston song “How Will I Know?”

Hayes jumped to his feet and clapped wildly. After the bows and brief words of thanks from Miss Bette, Hayes carried some flowers he’d picked up at Safeway to the stage and handed them to his daughter. Maren’s gasp of delight and Delilah’s cool look of surprise said it all.

“Good job, honey! You were incredible. Move over, Mariah Carey.”

“Oh, yeah, right,” one of the other mothers muttered.

“Oh, Dad.” Maren rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t stop that infectious grin from stealing across her lips. “I thought you were working.”

“I was.”

“Mom said you wouldn’t come.”

Hayes shot his ex a quick don’t-do-this glare. “Mom was wrong.” He hugged his daughter.

“I just didn’t want her to be disappointed again,” Delilah said.

Hayes wasn’t going to be pulled into it. Not here. Not now. “Well, she wasn’t. What do you say I take you out for pizza?”
He expected Delilah to argue that it was too late, or that Maren had homework, but instead she stiffly agreed. There was no doubt that she could be a bitch sometimes, but Hayes believed her motives were all about protecting Maren. She might’ve turned into a grumbling, unhappy, never-satisfied wife, but Delilah was still a damned good mother.

For that, he supposed, he should be thankful.

Once they were outside, he flipped his phone on and saw that he had messages. He was about to answer them when he caught Delilah’s meaningful glare. “I just have to listen to these,” he said, walking to his car and leaning against the hood. “I’ll meet you at Dino’s.”

“Sure,” she said tightly, obviously disbelieving as she ushered Maren to her white Lexus SUV.

The calls were from Riva Martinez. Donovan Caldwell had been phoning the station demanding information on the Springer twins’ homicides, insisting that he should be privy to everything the LAPD had on file as they’d “royally screwed” the case of his sisters’ murders twelve years earlier.

Hayes called her back on the way to Dino’s. “I think you should refer Mr. Caldwell to the Public Information Officer,” he suggested.

“Already did, and he told me to go scratch,” Martinez informed him. “He’s figured out that Bentz is in town again. Caught some write-up online about Bentz’s stunt on the Santa Monica Pier. Anyway, this Caldwell guy is out for blood. He wants to talk to Bentz, to Bledsoe, to Trinidad, or anyone associated with his sisters’ case. If you ask me, he’s a damned psycho.”

“He lost his whole family over the bungled case.”

“Hell, Hayes, listen to you. We didn’t bungle it; we just haven’t solved it. Yet.”

She had a point. Hayes checked his watch. “I’ll talk to him. I just can’t do it right now.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can handle him, but I thought you’d want to know.”

“I do. Thanks.” Hayes hung up and tried to push all the thorny pressures of the job aside. He had more pressing matters to worry about. Pepperoni or sausage pizza…and how to step carefully through the verbal minefield of the next hour or two with Delilah.

Bentz hit a dead end.

Ramona Salazar, whoever she was, meant nothing to him, and he couldn’t find any association between Salazar and Jennifer. He stretched out on the ugly bed, pointed the remote at the TV, and watched an all-news channel. Again they replayed footage from Shana’s house: the ambulance parked inside the gated driveway, the swimming pool from an aerial shot, the McIntyres in happier times. Bentz sank into the mattress with a pang of guilt. If he hadn’t come to L.A. would she still be alive? Or was this a random act of violence?

He didn’t believe that for a second.

He called his daughter, left a message, and Kristi phoned back within five minutes.

“Hey, Dad, what’s up?” she asked.

Bentz couldn’t help but smile as he conjured up her face, as beautiful as her mother’s. Rolling off the bed, he walked to the window. “Just hanging out.” He peered through the blinds to the parking lot where darkness had settled in, the big neon sign for the So-Cal Inn glowing brightly over the asphalt.

“Still in L.A., right? Working on an old case that doesn’t involve Mom. Right?” He heard the sarcasm in her voice. “You know, Dad, it’s really weird that you can’t confide in me. I don’t like it.”
There was no way out of this. She was too smart and he didn’t like trying to deceive her. “Fine, you’re right. I’m looking into her death.” He picked up the remote and muted the sports report. The basketball players still jumped, but they did it all in silence.

“Why?” Kristi asked. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m not sure your mother committed suicide. I think she might have been murdered.”

There was a beat, a pause. Kristi, who was usually quick to rush in, even finish his sentences for him, was uncharacteristically silent. “And why do you think that?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Five minutes long or five hours long?” she asked as the television flickered noiselessly. “Come on, Dad, give.”

“Okay, I guess you deserve to know.”

“Duh.”

“The truth is, I’m not even sure it’s your mom in her grave.”

“What! Are you serious?” There was an edge of panic to her voice. “Now you’re freaking me out.”

No surprise there. It was the reason he hadn’t wanted to confide in his daughter in the first place.

“Holy God, not in her grave? What the hell is going on?”

He told her. Starting with the death certificate and the photos he’d received, including the “sightings” of Jennifer or her impersonator, ending up with his jump off the pier and Shana McIntyre’s murder. “So that’s what I’m doing in Southern California.”

“I can’t believe this,” she said, obviously upset. “I mean, Mom’s not alive. You know that, right? We went through all this. I thought you were just tripping on the meds. Come on! If she were alive, she would have contacted us, or at least me. And if you think you’re seeing her ghost…I guess I can get that,” she grudgingly admitted. “It’s not like you, but I’ve seen things I can’t explain. I still see images of people in black-and-white and then they die. That’s pretty damned eerie. And Olivia, she saw through the eyes of a killer, so…just because you saw Mom or thought you saw her, doesn’t mean she’s alive.” She took in a deep breath and he imagined her pushing the hair from her eyes. “I can’t believe this.”

“I’m just sorting it out. Obviously someone wants me here in L.A. Whoever it is lured me in.”

“Why?”

“That’s what I’m trying to unravel.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

He snorted. “That makes two of us.”

“You’re not like the Lone Ranger, are you? Tell me there are people helping you.”

He’d never felt so alone in his life, but he wouldn’t admit that. He’d already burdened her with enough difficult information. To worry her further wasn’t necessary. “Yep. Montoya in New Orleans and I’ve still got a few friends in LAPD.” He sat on the edge of the bed, ignoring the television and the fact that he was beginning to hate this place. The four walls of the little motel room were closing in on him and he missed his daughter. Missed his wife.

“Who? Who are your friends there?” she demanded, because she’d been old enough to remember when they’d lived in Los Angeles. She knew her father did not leave on good terms by any stretch of the imagination.
“Jonas Hayes, to start with. You remember him?”

“No.”

“Well, he’s got my back.”

“I don’t know if I believe you. I assume Olivia knows all this.”

He squeezed the back of his neck. “Uh-huh.”

“So the daughter is the last to know.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I would,” she said, steamed.

She was really pissed off. Nothing Bentz could do about it now.

“Is that why you called?” Kristi demanded. “Something about this case?”

He felt the anger radiating through the connection. “I thought you might remember if your mom ever mentioned a woman by the name of Ramona Salazar?”


“What about Phyllis?”

“Just the astrologer.”

“You knew about her?” Bentz’s muscles stiffened.

“Sure. I even called her once for a reading, but Mom hit the roof, thought you wouldn’t approve, so I never got the reading and Mom told me to keep it on the down low, that it was ‘just our little secret’ or some other melodramatic phrase. You know how she was.”

_Apparently not._

“Jeez, I’d nearly forgotten all about her.”

Bentz mentally kicked himself. Of course Kristi would know things about Jennifer that he didn’t. Montoya had already mentioned a woman named Phyllis Terrapin. “So, how into this astrologer was she?”

“Oh, it wasn’t that big of a deal. Just something Mom did. Like her hair and her nails. I only saw her a couple of times when Mom had picked me up.” Kristi laughed. “I called her ‘the Turtle’ behind her back because of her name and she kinda looked like one, short neck, big glasses. Mom didn’t think it was funny, which I thought was weird. She usually had a pretty wicked sense of humor, but not when I teased her about the whole astrology thing.”

“Of course she didn’t,” he said. How many other secrets had mother and daughter shared, secrets he’d been totally oblivious to?

They talked for a while longer, but Kristi had nothing more to add about Phyllis “the Turtle” or anything else he’d been investigating out here. “I’ll call you in a few days,” he promised, and they hung up. “Phyllis the Turtle,” he muttered under his breath. Probably nothing, but he’d check her out.

He stood, stretched out his back, and noticed the remains of his Californian wrap drying out on the desk. He scooped the wilting lettuce and soggy tomatoes into the white sack, wadded it into a ball, and tossed it into the trash. Then he settled into his desk chair again, placing the laptop on his thighs and turning so that his heels were propped on the bed. This way he could catch the latest TV news and scores as he did his thousandth Internet search.
He’d just typed in Phyllis’s name when his cell phone rang again.

Caller ID showed that the phone was registered to L. Newell. Lorraine? Jennifer’s stepsister?

He answered before the damned thing rang twice. “Bentz.”

“Oh. Hi. It’s Lorraine.” She sounded tense. Breathless. What was this all about? “I…thought you should know… Oh, God…”

“What?” he asked, his senses on alert, an eerie feeling crawling along his skin.

“I saw her. I saw Jennifer.”

Bentz’s feet dropped to the floor. He slid his laptop onto the desk. “What?”

“I said I saw—”

“I know, but where? When?” He couldn’t believe it. His heart was thudding, adrenaline spurting through his veins, his hands clutching the phone as if it were a lifeline.

“Just a few minutes ago. Here. On my street. In Torrance,” she said, her voice quavering. She sounded scared as hell. “In…in a gray car.”

Really? Bentz was already grabbing his keys and wallet with his free hand.

“I don’t think she expected me to be looking out the window.”

“Did she see you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Wait a minute. You saw a woman who looked like Jennifer in a gray car?” Again, he glanced through the blinds to the dark parking lot illuminated by the motel sign. Something felt wrong about this.

“Yes!”

“How could you see her?”

“Uh…the streetlight. The car stopped under the streetlight and she looked right at the house. Right at me.”

“Is she there now?”

“I don’t know. She drove past slowly, around the cul-de-sac, only three or four minutes ago. I’m frightened. She’s dead, Rick. She’s supposed to be dead.” Lorraine’s voice was hoarse with panic. “I didn’t know what to do. I thought I should call you.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour. Sit tight.”

He hung up and threw on his shoulder holster, new jacket, and shoes. His cell phone was just about out of juice, but he pocketed it along with his badge. Ignoring the ache in his leg Bentz flew out of the room and into the parking lot. Inside his car, he snapped on the ignition and drove out of the lot, squealing onto the street.

Someone else had seen Jennifer, or the woman who looked like her. Finally.

Once he was on the side street heading toward the 405, he phoned Jonas Hayes.

The call went directly to voice mail and he explained what he was doing.

Then he hit the freeway heading south, weaving through taillights to move ahead, pushing the speed limit. The
night was clear and somewhere above the lights of the city the stars shone. He saw the moon and the blink of airplanes cutting across the sky, but his mind was on the phone conversation with Lorraine.

Was it possible?

Was “Jennifer” showing herself? Or casing Lorraine’s house?

Or was Lorraine just freaking out?

Imagining things?

Like you? His mind teased while the speedometer inched past eighty.

As he maneuvered around a shiny red BMW another theory struck him. “Damn.” Shana was already dead. Could “Jennifer” be looking for her next victim? That thought hit him hard. Was the woman he’d been looking for a murderer? His stomach twisted into a painful knot and he stepped on it, flying past a semi hauling milk and smelling of diesel, just as an idiot on a motorcycle blew by him and the eighteen-wheeler as if they were standing still. The biker had to be doing a hundred, maybe more, cutting through traffic. Idiot!

Minutes ticked by and Bentz willed his cell phone to ring. He needed to talk to Hayes, or someone from the department, he thought just as he saw his exit ramp and some girl driving a Honda sped around him while texting. He barely noticed.

Bentz couldn’t take any chances with Lorraine’s life. There was no way of telling what this “Jennifer” was up to, but his gut told him it wasn’t good. As he neared his exit ramp, he slowed and put another message to Hayes’s voice mail, asking the L.A. detective to return the call immediately.

Bentz needed this confirmation. That he wasn’t going out of his mind. That he wasn’t conjuring up and fantasizing about a dead woman. Lorraine’s sighting of Jennifer could do just that. At least now, if nothing else, by the time he left Lorraine’s place tonight, the LAPD would know that Lorraine had been frightened, maybe even threatened by a woman who resembled Jennifer Bentz.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, easing down the ramp into a clog of traffic at the stop light. A small man wearing an overcoat, camouflage pants, and a hat with a long feather slowly pushed an overflowing grocery store cart across all the lanes of traffic while Bentz felt time slipping by. Precious time.

At last the man rolled past, the light changed, and the idling vehicles were able to move again. Bentz gunned it, his heart hammering crazily. Fueled at the prospect of coming face to face with Jennifer.

Lorraine Newell knew she was a dead woman.

Shaking, she watched as her assailant, the woman who had held the phone to her ear and a gun to her temple, hung up the phone in her living room. All the shades were drawn. They were alone. And she’d lied to Rick Bentz, begged him to come over. She should have warned him, told him the truth, but she’d been afraid, so damned afraid. Either way this witch was going to kill her.

Trembling inside, she looked at the woman holding the gun on her, the dark, deadly muzzle only inches from her forehead.

“He’s coming,” she whispered and thought she might pee all over herself. How had she been so foolish to open the door to this woman, to agree to let her use her phone? She was just being a Good Samaritan. She’d wanted to help. When she’d opened the door, handing her phone through the crack, the woman who had pleaded that she’d needed to call a tow truck and that her cell was out of batteries had turned into a demon. She’d slammed the door in Lorraine’s face, pulled a black gun from her jacket, and rammed the steely muzzle deep into Lorraine’s ribs.

Once in the house, she’d bound Lorraine’s hands behind her back, then held the phone to her ear and forced Lorraine to read from a careful script, only improvising when she had to.
And she had.

Oh, God forgive her, she would have done anything to save her life. But it was for nothing. She knew it now.

“You…you can leave me out of it,” she said, in a desperate plea, sweat running down her back, her insides quivering. “I won’t say anything to anyone. I promise. When Bentz gets here I’ll…I’ll tell him it was all part of a joke.”

“It is,” the woman said cryptically.

“Please.”

“Shut up!”

If only she could run. Could knock the gun away. But it was too late. She didn’t doubt for a second that this fiend would blow her to kingdom come.

Without a modicum of mercy her captor snatched the paper away—the script she’d forced Lorraine to read. Lorraine had searched the woman’s face for a shred of compassion, a crack in her icy veneer. But the woman’s expression was stone cold as she then prodded Lorraine forward, down a short hallway, and into the kitchen.

Where it was dark.

Oh, God.

There had to be a way to save herself. Had to!

“Move!” she ordered, the unforgiving nose of the pistol hard against Lorraine’s back.

Tears ran down Lorraine’s face. Her heart, beating so rapidly, so erratically, felt as if it would explode. She said a silent prayer, begging God for mercy.

“Please. Don’t do this,” she whispered, physically quaking with fear. She didn’t want to die. Not now. Not this way. She was too young, had too much to live for. “Please,” she begged, desperation cracking her voice. “I won’t tell a soul. I swear. You can trust me.”

“Shhhh. It’s going to be all right.” Slowly her attacker ran the cold muzzle of the pistol up Lorraine’s spine, from the small of her back to the base of her skull.

Where it stopped.

Oh, sweet Jesus!

In that horrifying second Lorraine knew it was over.

Nothing she could do or say would change this demented criminal’s mind.

She closed her eyes just as the gun blasted.
CHAPTER 24

Something was off.

Way out of kilter.

Bentz felt it in the air, in the silence of the night. When he pulled up in front of Lorraine’s home the street was empty—no silver Chevy prowling the neighborhood. A few lights glowed from the tri-level house, but the curtains were drawn. Hadn’t Lorraine said she’d seen Jennifer from her window? Worse yet, as he approached he noticed the front door was ajar.

Had she left it open for him?

No way. When he’d talked to her, Lorraine had been scared out of her mind. Every muscle in his body tensed. “Lorraine,” he called, slowly and silently withdrawing his weapon from his shoulder holster. “Lorraine? It’s Rick Bentz.”

Silence.

Carefully, sensing danger, he nudged the door further open with his weapon, and hearing no sound from within, slipped into the house. Lights were on in the living room, and he stiffened at a subtle movement across from him until he realized that it was his own reflection in the mirrored wall. The room was empty, a book facedown on the worn green sofa.

“Lorraine?” He listened but heard nothing.

Moving silently through the hallway toward the back of the house, Bentz passed an empty dining room with mail piled on the table. As he approached the darkened kitchen he smelled it.

The distinctive, metallic odor of blood.

His stomach dropped to the floor.

Bracing himself, he stepped into the kitchen doorway and caught a glimpse of feet, one slipper kicked off, poking out from behind a cabinet. He stepped closer. Her body lay facedown, blood matting the back of her head.

Lorraine.

Bile crawled up his throat. Bentz flicked on the light and quickly checked to make sure the room was empty before kneeling at her side. But he knew she was dead. He felt for a pulse.

Nothing.

“Holy Christ.” This was his fault. He knew it. “Son of a bitch.” Yanking his phone from his pocket, he dialed 9-1-1, identified himself, and gave the dispatcher the pertinent information.

Who had done this to Lorraine?

No doubt the same person who had offed Shana McIntyre. The connection was obvious: Rick Bentz.

And Bentz knew he was the cause. The catalyst. “Jennifer” had shown herself to Lorraine, knowing full well that
Lorraine would phone him. Then, after Lorraine had reported the sighting, “Jennifer” had killed her with flawless dispatch. Even now she could be watching, enjoying the show.

Twisted bitch.

Though he sensed that the house was empty, the murderer long gone, he couldn’t be certain. He hung up and checked the rest of the house. Moving carefully, trying not to touch anything or disturb any fingerprints or evidence the killer may have left behind, he searched closets and did a perfunctory check of the back deck, but the perp had fled the scene. Of course. Bentz put in another call to Hayes and left his third message within an hour, then returned to the living room. A loud, unworldly screech reverberated through the room.

Bentz ducked behind the hallway wall, then peered out in time to see a gray cat streak from the back of the couch and bolt behind a plaid upholstered chair. From behind the worn cushions it hissed, glaring at him with glittering gold eyes.

Bentz’s skyrocketing pulse slowed a bit. He’d forgotten Lorraine had always kept cats, having seen no evidence of the animal when he’d visited.

Shaking inside, craving a cigarette, he waited outside on the porch near a grapefruit tree. His leg throbbed and he tried to maintain calm by focusing on the sounds of the night. Over the buzz of insects and the barking of a dog a few streets over, the wails of sirens split the night air. Good. He shoved his hair away from his face, noticing a nervous neighbor peeking out at him through blinds.

*The show’s about to begin,* he thought while a jogger ran past the entrance to the cul-de-sac. His eyes followed the movement. The runner was a slim woman—or was it a man?—in a baseball cap and dark clothes. No reflective gear. She glanced toward him, but she was too far away to see her features.

Yet, there was something about her that seemed familiar.

*What?* The thought stopped him cold. *Familiar? Are you out of your mind? You can’t even make out the runner’s gender. Get a grip, Bentz, and figure this thing out before another one of the people you interviewed winds up dead. Think, for God’s sake. You’re going to have to answer a lot of questions.*

As he watched, she turned down a side street. Maybe she’d seen a silver car cruising the neighborhood. “Hey!” he called after her, but she was too far away. He’d never catch her on foot, and he couldn’t leave in the car. Not after calling the cops, who, by the sound of screaming sirens, would arrive within the next thirty seconds.

*Forget the runner for now.*

Bentz turned off the voice in his head and, still longing for a cigarette or a stiff drink or both, walked toward the curb.

*Why had Lorraine phoned him?*  
*Had she really seen Jennifer?*  
*Or was it all a ruse?*  
*He stared down the dark street where the runner had disappeared just as flashing lights strobed the night and a police cruiser screamed around the corner.*  
*Who had killed Lorraine?*  
*Jennifer?*

Bentz knew in his gut that Lorraine’s murder had everything to do with the death of Shana McIntyre. Both women were dead because of their relationship to his ex-wife. Both women were dead because of him. Because they’d spoken to him. Guilt squeezed the breath from his lungs. If he hadn’t called them, hadn’t shown up on their
doorsteps, would Shana and Lorraine be alive today?

Bentz rose as the police car screeched to a stop at the curb. Two Torrance police officers exploded from their vehicle and wheeled toward him.

“You Bentz?” the driver asked, a young buck with his weapon drawn. His lips were tight, his eyes narrowed, suspicion giving him an edgy appearance.

“Yeah. I’m a cop. New Orleans PD. My firearm is in my shoulder holster. Badge in my wallet.”

“What happened here?” the second cop asked, a woman as in tense as her partner, her gun pointed dead center at Bentz’s chest.

“Shooting. Looks like a homicide.” The words rolled off his tongue, business as usual. So cold and routine, Bentz thought. But you knew her. You knew this woman. “She called me…was scared by some thing she saw. I came right over, found her dead.”

“The vic inside?”

“Yeah. In the kitchen. Back of the house. It’s clear, aside from a cat.”

“I’m on it,” the woman cop said as the wail of another siren cut through the night. She took off for the house.

Across the cul-de-sac a neighbor, a fat man in a tight sweatsuit, drifted onto his front porch, to eye what was happening while the male cop still kept his weapon at ready.

“Don’t move,” the first cop ordered Bentz. The muzzle of his pistol didn’t waver. “’Til we sort this all out, I don’t want you to friggin’ breathe.”

Olivia clicked off the television, stretched on the parlor sofa, and whistled to the dog. She’d stayed up later than usual, watching the end of a sappy movie she’d seen twenty years earlier.

Upstairs she changed into her nightgown, noting in the bathroom mirror that her body showed no signs of pregnancy. She was just turning down the bed, wishing Bentz were home, when the phone rang. “Speak of the devil,” she said to Hairy S, who was poised to jump onto the mattress. “Only someone on the West Coast would call after midnight. Right?”

But caller ID told her it was a restricted call and her insides tensed a bit as she said, “Hello?”

For a second no one responded, and Olivia felt that same drip of fear that was always with her when Bentz was on a dangerous case. “Hello?”

“He’s getting himself into trouble,” a woman’s voice rasped in her ear.

Olivia’s scalp pricked. For a second she couldn’t speak.

“People are dying,” the voice informed her.

“Excuse me? What?” Her heart was suddenly racing, her palms damp. She knew this was the same crank caller who had phoned a few days earlier. The woman intent on rattling her.

“There’s been another murder.” The voice was little more than a hiss.

“No!” Her stomach hit the floor. Rick? Had something happened to Rick? For the love of God, what was this woman saying? No, no…of course the caller had to be talking about Shana McIntyre. Right? “Who is this?” Olivia demanded, some of her fear bleeding into anger.

“Take a wild guess,” the sandpapery voice suggested. “Or ask RJ. He’ll know.”
“Ask whom?”

She heard a hollow, sultry laugh.

Jennifer. Bentz’s first love.

“Why are you doing this?”

Click.

The phone went dead in her hand. Olivia felt herself shaking inside, not from fear, but from rage, white hot and seething. A fury so deep it nearly blinded her. To think that someone would dare mess with her husband, then try to intimidate her in her own home. “You sicko,” she hissed, wishing she could confront the bitch, then slammed down the receiver.

Incensed, she wanted to punch out Rick’s number, then thought better of it. Whoever had called her expected her to go crying to RJ, as Jennifer used to call him. The caller wanted Olivia to play the role of the frightened little female.

No way.

Olivia wasn’t going to give the bitch the satisfaction.

For now she’d sit tight. But in the morning she would dial her own phone company and see if they could give her any information about this pathetic call. Until then, if the coward called back, Olivia was ready to tear into her.

“Get over it,” she muttered, either to herself or her tormentor, she didn’t know which.

To cool off, she headed downstairs and double-checked all the locks on the doors and windows. A little obsessive, but it helped her feel safe. Reassured that everything was in order, she climbed the steep steps back to her room, the bedroom she shared with Rick.

She hated to do it, but for the first time in a long, long while, Olivia shut her bedroom window. Somehow it felt like giving in and that really pissed her off, but she flipped the latch, wanting to play it safe. No longer was there a cooling breeze off the bayou slipping into the room, no rustle of the cottonwood leaves, no scent of magnolia drifting inside. Nor could she hear the soothing sounds of chirping crickets and croaking frogs.

Irritated that she had to change her routine for some whacko, she slid between the sheets and patted the mattress. Hairy S didn’t need a second invitation. He hopped onto the bed and burrowed deep under the covers to lie unperturbed next to Olivia. “Good boy,” she said absently as she scratched his furry little head. He let out a soft grunt of pleasure, but Olivia didn’t even smile. She was too aggravated, too frustrated. She thought again of flying to California to tell Bentz about her pregnancy.

She was tired of this separation.

Sick of the secrets.

Maybe she should leave tomorrow. Or at least in the next few days…

Plumping her pillow, she decided that first thing in the morning she’d go online and buy herself a damned airline ticket. She’d fly to L.A. and reconnect with her husband. Whether he wanted to or not.

That was what marriage was all about, wasn’t it? Connection. Communication. Trust. Oh, God…she was losing him; she could feel it in the emptiness of their dark bedroom.

But not without a fight, damn it. She wasn’t going to give up on him.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to sleep, and was about to drop off when the phone blasted again.
“Son of a…”

Before the second ring, she steeled herself for another creepy onslaught and yanked the phone from its cradle. “Now what?” she snapped.

“And I love you, too,” Bentz said.

Her heart softened instantly and her throat grew thick at the sound of his deep voice. God, she missed him. “Hey,” she whispered, tears burning her eyes. Good Lord, she was acting crazy. Tears? It had to be her hormones, right? But it was just so damned good to hear his voice. Clearing her throat and pushing herself to a sitting position, she asked, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing good.”

Her heart turned to stone.

“I’m at the Torrance Police Department.”

“Torrance?”

“Yeah. I thought you should know. Hear it from me.”

“Hear what?” she asked, suddenly frightened.

“Oh, Jesus, Livvie, it’s a mess,” he said and she heard the weariness in his voice. “I got a call from Lorraine, Jennifer’s stepsister, saying she’d spotted Jennifer outside her house. I drove down there and when I got to the house, Lorraine was dead. Homicide.”

“Oh dear God,” Olivia whispered, holding the phone against her head in one hand, twisting the covers with her other. This couldn’t be happening. Couldn’t! “Jennifer?” she asked, but felt the truth hit her deep inside. Jennifer Bentz, real or imagined, ghost or person, was behind the carnage.

“Who knows?” He explained the events of the night while Olivia, feeling cold as death inside, listened, trying to concentrate while feeling as if a vise were tightening around her chest. Though she no longer had visions of murders from the victim’s eyes, she still felt the mind-numbing dread run through her as she thought of the dead women and the torture they’d gone through.

Bentz was saying that his friend Jonas Hayes had driven down from L.A. He’d been sympathetic when Bentz had complained about having his firearm confiscated and being forced to endure questioning in the interrogation room. For the first time in his life, Bentz had been questioned on the other side of the mirrored window.

The Torrance police had believed his story, though there were still a lot of questions in the air because Bentz had visited both Shana and Lorraine in the past week and since then both women had been murdered. Bentz was, without too many doubts, under suspicion.

Olivia felt sick inside.

“…it took hours,” he said, his voice tense with a hardly-restrained anger, “to explain about the whole Jennifer-thing and how someone wanted me in the L.A. area, the murderer most likely, so he could start his rampage. The long and the short of it is, I’m being used as the excuse, or even motive, for the killer to strike.”

“Wait a minute. You’re saying you think Jennifer or whoever is impersonating her is killing people and trying to make you look like you’re involved?”

“That’s about it.”

“Good Lord, Bentz. That’s not only far-fetched. It’s just plain nuts.”
“And would take incredible planning, as well as luck.” He paused as if thinking things over. “Look, as I said, I just wanted you to hear it from me, rather than from someone else or on the news. Once the media ties Shana to Lorraine to me and Jennifer, things are really going to heat up.” He hesitated and she imagined him running one hand in frustration through his thick hair, his eyebrows drawn together, his jaw set.

“I’m glad you called. I’ve been worried.”

“Is that why you answered like you did?”


“Like you were all pissed off. What was that all about?”

She hadn’t wanted to confide in him, to worry him, but since he asked, she saw no read to lie or sugar coat what was going on. “Well, Hotshot, you weren’t the first call I had tonight.”

“No?”

She wanted to lie to him. The last thing he needed was any more stress, but she already felt guilty enough about keeping the news of the baby a secret. They couldn’t have any more secrets between them. Their relationship was fragile enough already. “My favorite prank caller phoned earlier tonight.”

“Who?” His voice was low. Hard.

“I don’t know.”

“The same woman who called before?”

“I think so. No caller ID and she didn’t say who she was.”

“Damn it, Livvie. You can’t stay there. Not alone.”

“This is my home. And besides Hairy S—”

“Is useless. We’ve had this conversation. I’m coming home now…Or tomorrow. With everything that’s going on here, people being killed, I don’t like the fact that you’re alone.”

“It’s all happening in California, which is, what? Fifteen hundred miles away? Someone committing murders in L.A. isn’t dangerous to me.”

“It’s a plane ride.”

“But you’re in L.A. She won’t leave.”

“Humph.” He hesitated, as if tossing that over in his mind.

Olivia finally reached over and flipped on the bedside light, and the dog crawled upward, his wet nose peeking out of the covers.

Bentz asked, “So what did she say when she called?”

“That ‘he’s getting himself into trouble.’ I figured she meant you, since she called you RJ. And then she said there was another murder. I thought she was talking about Shana.”

“Not likely. She was probably patting herself on the back for Lorraine. Damn it, I just don’t understand what she’s doing.”

“No one does, but you will. You’re like a dog with a bone when you go after something.”
“What time did the call come in?”

“After midnight, maybe a quarter to one. I’d stayed up watching a movie. Just a minute, let me check.” She hit a few keys on the phone pad, read the display for the restricted call, then clicked back to him. “Yeah, twelve fifty-two, I was just going to bed. The call was short. Twenty-eight seconds. I plan to call the phone company in the morning to find the source of the call even if the number is restricted.”

“Good idea, but I still think you should leave.”

“It’s the middle of the night. I’ve locked up, double-checked the windows. Besides, the murderer is in California. You have more to worry about than I do.”

“There’s a pistol in our room. Locked in the closet.”

“I know.”

“Get it out and keep it in the nightstand.”

“Rick—” she protested. Now he was beginning to sound crazy. “I don’t even know how to shoot it.”

“It’s easy. Aim. Pull the trigger.”

“After I load it and flip off the safety.”

“You lied; you do know how.”

“But——”

“Humor me. Just until I get home, okay?”

“And when will that be?”

“Soon,” he vowed, conviction ringing in his voice.

“Okay. Good. We have a lot to talk about.”

“I know.” He hesitated a second. “Be safe, Livvie. I love you.”

A pang of emotion tightened in her chest. Stupid tears again stung her eyes. “Love you, too. You be careful.”

She hung up and stared at the ceiling. Maybe she should have begged him to give up his damned quest and come home. Not that he could now, with those women he’d talked to now murder victims. Unfortunately, he needed to stay there. She wanted him to finish whatever it was that had drawn him to L.A. Then he could come home for good and she’d tell him about the baby. Not before. She knew that if she had mentioned her pregnancy he would have been on the next plane home. If that were the case, he would always regret that he hadn’t been able to find out what the hell had happened to Jennifer.

She switched off the light.

Olivia wanted this murderous, heart-wrenching rampage over. Forever. Never did she want Bentz to have regrets, to think he’d abandoned someone who needed him, to wonder if he’d left a part of him, his heart and dreams, in sunny California.

She needed all of him, or none of him. She wasn’t willing to settle for second best to his ex-wife.

Jennifer.

“Damn you,” Olivia whispered to the empty, dark room. How the hell did Bentz’s ex-wife figure into all of this?
She rolled over and stared through the window to the inky Louisiana night.

Bentz needed to finish this. Put Jennifer’s damned ghost to rest.

Before anyone else died.

Before Olivia lost him forever.
“I already told all this to the Torrance police,” Bentz said as he drove Hayes back to Parker Center, where Hayes had left his SUV.

It was pushing 3 A.M. Bentz, tired as hell, drove along Sepulveda, then eased onto the 110 heading north. Despite the late hour the freeway was still busy, red taillights glowing on the gently sloping lanes ahead.

Hayes had come with Riva Martinez, who had joked that Hayes picked the absolute worst time to turn his cell phone off. “Better late than never,” Bentz had told the LAPD detectives, grateful that they’d responded at all. If they hadn’t shown up, Bentz would probably still be at the Torrance Police Station, shifting uncomfortably on the wooden chair in that damned interrogation room.

At least they hadn’t cuffed him. After handing over his gun to the first-responding officers, Bentz had been detained at the crime scene, where he watched as the cops had put up barriers, roped off Lorraine’s home, and interviewed the neighbors who had drifted onto the sidewalks.

Once the neighbors had emerged, the cul-de-sac’s glum mood had taken on a surreal note, a carnival atmosphere colorful enough to rival the amusements on the Santa Monica Pier. Gathered under a streetlight, decked in bathrobes and sweat suits, flip-flops, and fluffy slippers, residents gossiped among themselves. Smoking and shaking their heads, they eyed the emergency vehicles with wry speculation and offered to give statements to the cops.

Bentz had overheard many of their comments about Lorraine.

“A lovely woman,” an elderly woman had intoned.

“A good neighbor,” a man who lived next door had said. The Owl, Bentz dubbed him, with his round glasses, a thin beard, and a dour expression. “I just can’t believe that someone broke into her home. This is a nice neighborhood. Safe.” The Owl paused as the gurney and body bag rolled past. “I mean, it always has been.”

Another woman had put in her two cents’ worth. “Don’t know a lot about her. I think she was married once.” With a cloud of white hair and a matching bathrobe, she’d introduced herself as Gilda Mills, had lived in the neighborhood twenty-seven years. Nervously, she’d stared at Lorraine’s home as if it were the den of the devil. “But I’m not sure.” Gilda’s bony fingers were forever at the side of her mouth as she said, “No kids, at least none that she ever spoke of. She had a half sister. No, I think it was a stepsister who died. Committed suicide or something…oh, dear, I really can’t remember.” She had taken two steps away from the curb, seemingly afraid that whatever evil lurked within might ooze over the lawn and onto the toes of her pink slippers.

Bentz had inwardly groaned when the news van had arrived. Fortunately Hayes and Martinez had pulled onto the cul-de-sac a few seconds later. A lanky twenty-something reporter for the television station had taken notice, smelling a story as he recognized the cops from L.A. outside their regular jurisdiction. Watching as the reporter tried and failed to get a statement from Hayes, Bentz had realized he was just too damned tired and shell-shocked to find it amusing.

Soon thereafter Bentz had been escorted to the station in Torrance, where he’d spent three hours answering questions and waiting in the interrogation room. The lieutenant had explained that they needed to do a quick background check on Bentz, verify that he was an officer in good standing with NOPD and that he had permission to carry a firearm. Although the cops had treated him with respect and professionalism, Bentz had not liked spending time in the perp’s seat. Not even for one minute.
Hours later, the lieutenant finally had told Bentz he was free to go. About damned time, Bentz had thought as he holstered his firearm and signed the receipt for his possessions. By the time Bentz had climbed behind the wheel with Hayes in the passenger seat, it was after 2 A.M.

“Just humor me by going over it one more time,” Hayes said, bringing Bentz back to the here and now as they sped along the freeway in the darkness. Bentz had cracked the windows so that the night air rushed in, cool and bracing. Something to keep him awake. “Tell me what happened tonight. Start with the facts. Then your take on it.”

“First I got a call from Lorraine Newell, Jennifer’s stepsister.” Bentz was sick to death of going over the same information, but now that Hayes was ready to listen to him he would churn through it one more time. One more round to enlist Hayes’s help.

Staring through the bug-spattered windshield, Bentz recounted the night blow by blow, from the minute he got Lorraine’s call to the nightmare of finding her body on the kitchen floor. He even added in the fact that Olivia had been the victim of harassing phone calls since he’d traveled to the West Coast. “It’s a female caller and she refers to me,” Bentz said. “Calls me RJ just like Jennifer did. It’s meant to spook Olivia.”

“Does it?”

“Not much. Mainly pisses her off.”

“Sounds like your kind of woman.”

“She is,” Bentz agreed. “But it worries me. I’m going to call Montoya and have him keep an eye on her until I get home.”

“She probably won’t like having a keeper.”

“Doesn’t matter.” It was the best he could do for now, though it didn’t seem like enough. He’d never forgive himself if Olivia got dragged into this mess. He couldn’t have his wife in danger. Spying the sign for his exit, Bentz pulled into the right lane.

“You saw a jogger.” Hayes stared out the window to the lights of downtown Los Angeles, where skyscrapers rose into the blue-black sky. “Same guy you saw the night you jumped off the pier?”

“One was a man; the other a woman.”

“You sure? You said they were both slim and athletic. Both wore baseball caps, no hair showing.”

That much was true. And he had questioned the gender both nights. “Could go either way, I guess.”

“I got the tapes from the Santa Monica Pier webcam.”

Bentz, easing down the ramp, slid Hayes a glance. “You got them? And I didn’t? When I was the one who requested them?”

“The company that owns them wanted to go through the local police and the Santa Monica PD called me.”

Burned, Bentz asked, “See anything interesting?”

“No woman in a red dress, not for two hours before or after. No woman matching Jennifer’s description, but all the other players were in place. The old man smoking his cigar, the guy and the girl sucking tonsils, and a jogger. The runner didn’t just pass by, but stopped and stared the length of the pier about the time you were running along the boardwalk. That, in and of itself, isn’t a big deal. I didn’t make anything of it until you mentioned seeing a jogger tonight.”

“Could be a coincidence.”
“Could be, but something’s going on.”

“That’s the understatement of the year.”

“Okay. Something big’s going on. And I don’t put much stock in coincidence.”

“Me, neither.”

“So it all seems to be about you and your first wife.” Hayes rubbed at his jaw, pinching his lip as he thought. “Why now? Why would someone wait twelve damned years to get back at you?”

“I wish I knew.” Bentz slowed for a red light at the end of the ramp.

“I’ll want all the info you have. Everything.”

“It’s yours.”

“And you’ll have to stand down.”

“Don’t know if I can do that.”

“Look, let’s get real. The department’s still gonna consider you a person of interest and really, you can’t blame them. You can’t compromise our investigation, Bentz. You know that. No detective works his own case. And as it is Bledsoe wants to rip you a new one.”

“He’s always ready to rip someone a new one. May as well be me,” Bentz said philosophically, though there was an edge in his voice.

“Be that as it may, everyone in the department agrees that you showing up in L.A. triggered some of these homicides. We need to sort everything out.”

“It’s about time,” Bentz said, thinking that finally, with the help of the department, he’d get some answers. Hopefully before another person ended up dead.

“So you talked to Shana McIntyre and Lorraine Newell since you’ve been in town. Anyone else?”

Bentz nodded, one step ahead of him. “I also spoke with Tally White, an old friend of Jennifer’s. A schoolteacher. They met through the kids. Tally’s daughter Melody is the same age as Kristi. I also got in touch with Fortuna Esperanzo, who used to be Jennifer’s friend. They worked together in an art gallery in Venice. Fortuna is still employed there.”

“And that’s it?”

“Yeah,” Bentz said, fighting off a feeling of foreboding. “I’ve got information on them at the motel. We could swing by and I’ll give it to you.”

“Let’s do it.”

Bentz moved into the next lane so that he could take the 405 toward Culver City. Despite his exhaustion, adrenaline fired his blood and he knew that he wouldn’t be able to sleep. Nor would he really stand down. He would continue to pursue his investigation, steady and low key. He wouldn’t impede the LAPD’s work, but he intended to stay abreast of their progress. It would be easy enough to do. He still had Montoya and a few other friends back in the New Orleans Police Department, people who were willing to check files and run facts for him, stay on top of what was happening here. Hell, Montoya lived and breathed for this kind of shit.

Hayes could tell him to back off all he wanted, but Bentz wasn’t stopping now. Not when the stakes were rising, lives were being brutally ended, all because of Bentz.

Two women were dead and now his wife had been harassed. Threatened. His grip clenched hard over the wheel.
The truth of the matter was, Bentz was scared to death, and the only way he knew to shatter that fear was to cut to the source.

Find the killer.

But, for now, he’d at least appear to play by the rules. He turned onto the street that led to the So-Cal Inn. The lights of the motel blazed bright in the night, casting a glow over the cars parked in the lot. Bentz scanned the cars parked there, noting that all the regulars were present as he pulled into his slot and cut the engine. “So looks like you just caught a new case,” Bentz said, pocketing his keys. “What are you going to do first?”

“Eat some crow.” Hayes threw Bentz a dark look. “I hate to say it, but looks like you were right. I think the first step is to exhume your ex-wife’s body. Let’s see who’s in that casket.”

Fortuna Esperanzo was an insomniac. Sleep forever eluded her. Her mind would never slow down enough, was forever spinning. Even with a deluxe personalized mattress, the ambient sound of a tiny waterfall trying to soothe her, and heavy draperies that completely blocked out all traces of the Southern California sun, she never slept well. Tonight she’d given up the fight after a few hours of restlessness and taken the sleep medication her doctor had prescribed. Now she was drifting off at last, falling to a level of sleep so relaxing that she didn’t hear the sounds of her own snoring. But she felt her cat, Princess Kitty, move on the bed beside her.

Groggily, not even bothering to check the clock, Fortuna rolled over, unconcerned by the white Angora’s antics. Nocturnal by nature, Princess Kitty had been skittish ever since Fortuna had found her wandering the streets of Venice, her long hair matted, her tiny body thin as a rail. That had been twenty-one years ago and the cat was still going strong, jittery and nervous as ever.

Suddenly Princess Kitty hissed.

What? Fortuna pulled herself from the thick veil of sleep.

A growl and another hiss.

“Shh,” Fortuna said, forcing one eye open just as the cat jumped off the bed. What the hell was the matter with Princess? “I’m not letting you out.”

She caught a whiff of something sweet and cloying, and her skin goose-pimpled.

“Kitty?” she said, her voice trembling, fear clutching her heart.

That awful smell! What was it? Gas? Oh, Lord, was there a gas leak in the house?

Was there someone in the room with her? Oh, God no! She strained to see, but she wasn’t wearing her contacts and the room was nearly stygian, pitch black. She couldn’t make out anything but darkness, black on inky black.

Did something move by the closet?

The hairs on the back of her arms lifted. She reached for her cell phone, which sat charging on the night table.

At that second, she felt rather than saw movement. Whatever was there leapt across the short span of tiled floor to the bed.

Fortuna started to scream. To move.

But she was pinned face up on her bed, a body in black holding her down, a cloth that reeked of that horrid smell forced over her nose and eyes. She gasped, dragging more of the foul stuff in.

*Ether!*
Panicked, she flailed her arms and legs, trying to rid herself of the weight straddling her. Her heart was racing, beating a thousand times a minute as terror gripped her entire body. She had to fight this! But the hand over her face wouldn’t budge and Fortuna was out of breath, the insidious gas flowing into her lungs with every gasp. Scared out of her mind, she dragged in a long breath of the sickly sweet fumes and, oh…It made her mind swim, made her limbs feel so heavy.

She couldn’t black out now. Wouldn’t!

Frantic, she kept fighting, trying to roll away from her assailant’s viselike grip. To no avail. The person, strong and lean, didn’t budge, just kept applying pressure.

The fumes were horrible, burning down her windpipe and into her lungs, searing her throat.

Why? Fortuna wanted to scream. Why are you doing this to me? But she knew deep down this attack had to do with Rick Bentz’s visit and all his questions about Jennifer. Nothing good ever came from that woman, even though she was long dead.

Supposed to be dead.

Fortuna had known she shouldn’t confide in Bentz. Some secrets are better left unspoken. Fool! Fortuna’s arms moved more sluggishly. Her legs felt like lead, and blackness pulled at the corners of her subconscious.

Move! Fight! Don’t give in! her brain screamed at her, but her muscles refused to listen, her arms barely twitched. It was all she could do to keep her damned eyes open despite the terror that invaded her body and soul.

“Nighty-night, bitch,” her attacker whispered.

Fortuna felt the sting of a needle pierce her bare arm. Oh, God, please…no…

But it was too late.

Fortuna sensed her body sink into the mattress as her attacker sighed. A sigh of contentment. Fortuna imagined her assailant was smiling, though she couldn’t see anything, her eyelids were so heavy, so damned heavy.

Her languid mind swirled slowly with bits of thoughts, fragments of fear as she stared up in the darkness, trying to get a glimpse of this person pinning her to the mattress.

But it was too dark. Too hard to stay awake. She needed to sleep. Fortuna gave in to the overwhelming desire and let her eyelids ease shut as her assailant slid off the bed.

Fortuna tried to move.

Couldn’t.

Not even when she felt her skimpy nightgown being slid over her head. Oh God, I’m going to be raped, she thought, but found she really didn’t care. Her pulse was slowing…the drug oozing through her blood. The prayers of her youth came to her, prayers she hadn’t uttered in twenty years…

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed—

And then she felt herself being dressed. As if God had already responded.

From the red pain in her eyelids she knew there was light in the room now as the intruder slid a garment over her head, pulled her arms through sleeve holes.

Why?

This is crazy.
Or maybe she was hallucinating, feeling the effects of the drugs flowing through her bloodstream.

She felt a slim ray of hope pierce her heart. Perhaps there was a chance she wouldn’t die after all, she thought, fighting to stay awake. Her attacker might not want to do her ill. Surely this person who was lifting her off the bed and carrying her through the house was an angel of mercy.

Yes, that had to be it.

Surely she wasn’t going to be trussed like this if the intent was to kill her. If death were the objective, certainly she’d already be dead.

*There are worse fates than a quick death,* her mind warned, but the thought was fleeting.

In a heartbeat she slid completely under the welcoming blanket of unconsciousness.
Bentz woke up with a bitter taste in his mouth and a strong resolve to get home in his gut. What the hell was he doing in Los Angeles when Olivia was being threatened in New Orleans?

He’d only gotten a few hours’ sleep, but in the light of day the cheap motel room looked more alien and inhospitable than ever. Why was he still here, chasing some impersonator when his wife needed him back home, was possibly in jeopardy?

Still in bed, Bentz reached for his cell phone on the nightstand and called Jonas Hayes. The call switched to voice mail, and he left a message that he was out of here, headed home. Easing out of bed, Bentz knew it was the right thing to do, the only thing to do.

He dragged himself into the shower and stood in the hot stream of water, ignoring the razor. Then, feeling almost alive, he wrapped a towel around his waist and started slamming clothes into his bag. He knew leaving L.A. wasn’t a great idea. It would look suspicious if, after all his protests about being innocent, he took a jet out of California the day after Lorraine’s body had been discovered.

Too bad.

He’d spent most of the night and the early morning hours laying out his notes at Hayes’s office in the Center. So now LAPD was officially in charge of the investigation of Jennifer’s death. Jonas had made a copy of everything, including his photographs, his list of Jennifer’s acquaintances, plate numbers, addresses, and phone contacts. Bentz had given them a blow-by-blow of the events that had happened since he’d landed in Los Angeles less than a week earlier.

“You sure cut a big swath,” Bledsoe had observed, his smile twisted when he’d arrived for the morning shift. “Anyone who talks to you ends up dead.”

“Up yours, Bledsoe,” Bentz had said, his hackles up. “Do you honestly think I’m stupid enough to kill Lorraine, then call the police?”

“I just think you bring a string of bad luck, that’s all.” Bledsoe had backed down a bit.

Dawn Rankin had showed up at the station just as Bentz had been leaving. She’d managed a cool smile that didn’t quite touch her eyes. But that was expected. She and Bentz had been lovers and their breakup years before hadn’t gone well.

At all.

Their affair had been hot, stormy, and cut short because of Jennifer. Dawn had never forgiven him and made no bones about it. That she had smiled at all was something.

While at the station he’d also passed on the name of Jennifer’s dentist, in case Hayes could manage to get the body exhumed. Finally, some progress. Now, rubbing a towel over his wet hair, Bentz wondered if Jennifer’s X-rays would match the teeth of the remains buried in that coffin. One way or the other at least one question would finally be resolved…

Before crashing this morning Bentz had called Montoya and left a message asking his partner to check on Olivia until he returned. Then Bentz had put in a call to Melinda Jaskiel, his superior, asking for home surveillance.
Though he and Olivia lived outside the city of New Orleans’ limits, he had enough friends in the department that someone would check on her.

Olivia would be mad, of course. She thought she could handle herself, but things were getting dangerous and he didn’t like the thought of her being alone, even if she was nearly two thousand miles away from the recent killings. Before falling asleep early this morning Bentz had thought that would cover things, take care of Olivia.

But no, after a few hours he realized he needed to get home, needed to make sure Olivia was safe. It wasn’t that he wouldn’t return to California, but for now he needed to physically reassure himself of her safety. Who knew what this psycho had in mind? The psycho who’d reached out to Olivia over the phone…

He wasn’t going to take any chances.

He would fly home and see his wife in the flesh. Make love to her. Reaffirm his life with her. He even thought fleetingly of her need to have a child and did the mental calculations all over again. Hell, he’d be over sixty when the kid graduated from college.

*So what? You can retire in ten or fifteen years and enjoy watching the kid grow up. Would that be so bad?*

No. But the truth was he couldn’t imagine retiring any more than he could wrap his mind around starting all over again with a baby.

He finished packing up his gear, placed his shoulder holster and pistol inside the bag with his clothes, then unhooked his computer and slid it into its case. The last thing, of course, was the damned cane. He wanted to throw it into the trash, but instead hauled it with him. With one last cursory glance around the shabby room, he closed the door.

After checking out of the motel, he drove to LAX through traffic that slowed and stalled while the Pacific sun battled through the smog to beat through the windshield. Time seemed to stand still and he was crawling out of his skin.

Now that he’d made the decision to return home, he found himself impatient, anxious to get there. Some of his irritability could be attributed to lack of sleep, he supposed, and the fear that two women had just died because he had come to Los Angeles. But truth to tell, his underlying sense of urgency was all about seeing that Olivia was safe.

The minutes dragged, but he finally saw the airport tower, then Encounters restaurant, the landmark for LAX. “It’s about time,” he muttered under his breath.

He turned in the rental car and hauled his things into the terminal to buy his ticket. Inside, the terminal was crawling with travelers, the lines to the counter snaking around to the door. *Serves you right for not buying a ticket online,* he thought.

Bentz told himself to hold on, be patient. He’d get on the next plane, though the only daily nonstop flight had already departed. He chose the airline on which he’d flown west, getting into what had seemed a short line. But, of course, there was a holdup. Slowly he inched forward behind a woman in tight jeans and a short jacket, a cell phone glued to her ear, a designer bag at her feet. Every so often she would nudge the carry-on forward with the pointed toe of a boot. The protest from inside the bag came in the form of a nasty little yip. “Just a sec,” Tight Jeans would say into the phone. Then she’d look down at the bag and coo, “It’s okay, Sherman.”

Sherman didn’t think so and yapped all the louder. Through mesh in the top of the bag, Bentz watched the dog spin crazily within his confines as Tight Jeans went back to her phone conversation. It would be just his luck if dog and owner ended up flying to New Orleans in the seat next to him. Not that it really mattered, as long as he got home.

The woman in front of him reached the ticket counter and clicked off her phone. “We’ve got a big problem,” she began, her tone already a challenge. “This ticket is all wrong. If I connect through Cincinnati, I won’t get to Savannah in time for my cousin’s rehearsal dinner. I need a direct flight.”
“I don’t think we have any directs to Savannah, but let me see what I can do,” the rep for the airline said and began typing on her keyboard.

Bentz shifted from one leg to the other and glanced down the length of the crowded terminal, past knots of people lugging backpacks, roller bags, or suitcases. A teenager toted an odd-sized guitar case while three men pulled what appeared to be golf bags. Near the doors, an attendant pushed an older man in a wheelchair past a solitary woman standing before the departure and arrival information board. Her face was tipped up as she searched the monitors. A beautiful familiar face.

Bentz froze.

She was the spitting image of Jennifer.

Don’t even think it!

But she stood there, eyeing the large screen through her sunglasses.

No way. Not now.

“No, that won’t work, either,” Tight Jeans was whining as if from a distance as Bentz squinted, trying to control his thundering pulse.

He told himself he was imagining things, conjuring up her image because he was leaving town. But as he stared the tanned woman with her coppery-brown hair pulled into a ponytail glanced toward him, the hint of a smile on her lips.

His felt as if a ghost had walked across his soul.

Then she turned and walked briskly in the opposite direction. White shorts, pink, tight, sleeveless T-shirt, shimmery flip-flops.

It could be anyone. A tourist on her way to Disneyland. Someone picking up family members. A woman waiting for a delayed flight.

Or someone pretending to be Jennifer. His long-dead ex-wife.

“Son of a bitch,” he said under his breath and broke away from the line to follow her. He couldn’t let her get away now—this imposter who’d been playing with him. Especially now that she was linked to the deaths of at least Shana McIntyre and Lorraine Newell, maybe even the Springer twins.

She looked over her shoulder again and his heart nearly stopped. If she wasn’t Jennifer, she was his ex-wife’s long-lost twin.

He dropped his cane near a trash receptacle and walked even faster, keeping up with her long strides as she disappeared amid a cluster of travelers. Faster and faster, pulling his damned roller bag with the computer case balanced atop it as she headed for an outside door. He wanted to drop his luggage, but couldn’t. His gun was tucked into his bag and he couldn’t risk leaving it.

She slipped through a group of Asian tourists moving down another terminal.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he whispered, keeping her in his sights. Adrenaline surging through his blood, he wended through the throng of travelers, cutting between a handful of Goth teenagers and a matronly woman with cheetah-print bags.

What the hell was “Jennifer” doing here?

Reeling you in, you moron. It’s no coincidence that she’s here at the airport, waiting in the same terminal. She had it planned.
But how had she known he’d come? What was this ridiculous cat-and-mouse game? The bait. The tease. Never letting him get too close, always lingering just out of his reach.

_Murder, Bentz. She’s up to her beautiful eyeballs in murder._

She made it to the exterior doors, but Bentz was gaining on her, breathing hard. He was nearly jogging now, his heart pumping, his eyes trained on her. Without a word he swept past an airport police officer. He didn’t want to draw any attention to himself. He couldn’t risk being hauled in and questioned all the while knowing “Jennifer” was slipping away.

Nu-uh.

This time he was going to catch up with her.

_Come hell or high water._

His damned leg was beginning to throb, but he gritted his teeth. As soon as the door closed behind her, he stepped through and dragged his luggage over the rough cement of the passenger pickup area.

Where the hell did she go? He stared past the smokers, the weary travelers sitting on benches, the people talking on cell phones and waiting for their rides. Airport security attendants waved cars on, trying to keep the traffic moving.

Then he spotted her, crossing to the short-term parking lot. She moved out of the shade and into the bright sunlight. Bentz hurried after her, nearly tripping as his bag caught on the edge of the curb.

“Hey!” he shouted. But she strode on, cutting through the parked cars baking in the sun, not once looking over her shoulder. “Hey! Jennifer!”

She sped up, digging inside her purse. A moment later keys flashed in her hand.

Bentz scanned the parking lot ahead and spotted the car—the silver Chevy Impala with a faded parking permit.

Ignoring the pain in his leg, he sprinted now, his luggage jerking along beside him. “Stop!”

Frantically, she was unlocking the door.

Dropping his luggage beside the Impala’s bumper, Bentz lunged and stripped the keys from her hand. “Not a chance.” Breathing hard, he stared at her through sweat beading between his brows.

Who was this woman, this younger version of his ex-wife? Flesh and blood; no unearthly wraith.

She tried to get by him, but he blocked her exit by filling the space between her car and the minivan parked next to it. “Who the hell are you?” The smell of her perfume, gardenias, permeated the air and messed with his mind, but he refused to be seduced by the past. He was putting an end to this game, here and now.

She turned her beautiful face toward him and his insides turned to jelly. She looked so much like his ex-wife, she could have been Jennifer’s identical twin. Except that she was too young.

“I need my keys back,” she said firmly, without fear.

“Not yet, lady.” He grabbed her arm and held on tight, wanting to shake the truth from her.

“What’s your problem?” she asked.

“You are.”

“Me?” Her eyes narrowed in a scowl as she deliberately pulled her arm from his grasp.
For a millisecond he wondered if he’d made a mistake, if she really had no idea that she resembled Jennifer so closely. Except that she was in the same damned car he’d spotted in San Juan Capistrano and on the freeway. This woman had been dogging him.

“Give me back my keys,” she demanded as a man walking toward his car, jacket tossed over one shoulder, eyed them suspiciously.

Realizing that he might appear to be assaulting her, Bentz released her arm but stood his ground. “You’re not going anywhere.” He pushed her keys into his pants pocket.

“Do I have to call the police?” she said, and the man in the distance slowed down to watch.

“Great idea.” He pulled out his badge, flipped it open. “I am the police.”

That seemed to satisfy the man, who slung his jacket under one arm and kept walking. “But then you know that, don’t you?” Bentz pressed her.

Her glossy lips turned into a pouty frown.

“Hey, if this badge isn’t good enough, then we’ll talk to someone from L.A. Fine with me. We’ve all been looking for you.”

“Then you already know who I am?” she asked, one eyebrow lifting over the frames of her sunglasses.

“I know that you’re trying to play some sick mind game with me.”

“Is that so?”

“You’ve been taunting me, trying to make me think you’re my dead ex-wife.”

“You sound like a lunatic. Give me back my keys.”

“Not on your life.”

He flipped up her sunglasses and found himself staring into eyes as green and vibrant as Jennifer’s. And yet something was off, something not quite right.

His heart was pounding in his eardrums, a million questions sizzling through his mind. Who was she? Why was she doing this? Where had she come from? “Two women are dead because of you.”

Something flickered in her eyes and she pulled back slightly. “What? Dead? No.”

“Shana McIntyre, killed in her pool. You heard about it, right?”

She seemed genuinely shocked. “You think that I…? Oh, God, no. I had nothing to do with that.”

“And Lorraine Newell. You remember her?”

The look she gave him was blank, as if she’d never heard of the woman.

“She’s dead, too. Took a bullet to the head last night. Just after she called me about you. She spotted you last night, right before you killed her.”

She seemed slightly unnerved. “I don’t know anything about that.”

The faint trembling of her lower lip was convincing. But then he’d had a taste of her acting ability. “You and I, we need to go downtown.”

“What?”
“There are some people you need to talk to. Detectives who have some questions for you.”

She closed her eyes a second. “Listen RJ, I—”

“Why do you call me that?”

Her smile faded, and for a second she became Jennifer again. “Because it’s what I always called you. Don’t you remember?”

He almost bought her act. Almost. But he couldn’t believe her gall. “Are you really still trying to make me think you’re her?” he asked, dumbfounded that she would try to keep up the ruse. “Why the hell are you doing this? Why are you haunting me? What do you want? Why did you show up at my house?” Although Bentz was usually taciturn, preferring to let a suspect ramble on and on while he sat quietly, he couldn’t keep the questions that had been plaguing him from tumbling out of his mouth.

“At your house?”

“You remember—the cottage outside New Orleans?”

“What?”

“And the hospital…You were there, too. In the doorway. When I was waking up from the coma. And then again on the pier in Santa Monica. Oh, and yeah, at the old inn in San Juan Capistrano.”

She remained silent as a flock of pigeons scuttled to a landing on the pavement beyond her car. In his peripheral vision Bentz noticed them pecking at the street, then scattering as a car cruised by.

When she didn’t respond, he felt his fists clench in frustration. “You’ve been calling me, harassing my wife, and you’re a person of interest in two murder investigations. So that’s it. We’re taking a ride down to police headquarters.” He reached into his pocket for the Impala’s keys. “Get in. I’ll drive.”

“Wait a minute.”

“Not comfortable with that, Jennifer?”

“I, uh—” She looked away, across the tops of the vehicles, their windshields reflecting the bright glare as travelers scuttled in and out of the terminal.

Could he trust her? No way! But there were so many questions…

“All right. We do need to talk.”

“No shit.” He held the keys fast in his hand. His heart pounded like a drum and his thoughts spun in wild circles, nerve synapses jangling. Jesus, she looked like Jennifer. So much. She smelled like her and walked like her and teased like her. “So talk.”

A jet thundered overhead, its roar receding as it cut upward through the blue sky.

“Not here.”

“Here’s fine. Or, better yet, at the station.”

“I was thinking somewhere a little more…private.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“How about Point Fermin?” she asked, and one corner of her mouth lifted in a way that cut straight to his heart.

As it always had.
“Why there?” he asked, but he knew the answer. He and Jennifer used to take road trips past the old lighthouse. There’d been so many lazy afternoons strolling the acres of shaded lawns, finding secluded spots beyond the colorful gardens.

“Because, RJ, it’s special for us, isn’t it?” she said, her grin widening. “You must remember all the times we drove there, working our way down the coast. The picnics. The sunshine. The lovemaking.”

It was true…but how did she know? How could she recount the most intimate details of his life?

He squeezed her car keys so hard, the jagged metal edges cut into his palm. Now that he’d met this woman Bentz had more questions than answers.

But that was going to change. Starting now.

“So Bentz is gettin’ out of Dodge,” Bledsoe said, catching up with Hayes in the stairwell of the stationhouse. “I don’t like it.”

“You didn’t like it when he was in town, either. Face it, Bledsoe, nothing makes you happy.”

“The guy’s a prick and I wish he’d never shown up. But that was before he was connected to all these homicides. Now, I think he should stick around.” They reached the ground level of the station house and Hayes pushed open the door, the warmth of the afternoon a change from the air-conditioned interior of Parker Center. Outside, Bledsoe adjusted the waistband of his pants, hiking them up. Then he shook out a cigarette and offered the pack to Hayes, who declined.

“I quit, remember? When I married Delilah.”

“She’s history, isn’t she? Corrine won’t mind.”

He let that pass. For some reason Bledsoe seemed jealous of his relationship with Corrine. Why, Hayes couldn’t fathom, but Bledsoe’s enigmatic motives were usually best left unexplored.

Bledsoe lit up as they walked to the parking lot. “I just don’t get Bentz. He flies in here all whacked out about seeing ghosts, hangs out and stirs up trouble, and people start dying. Then, after he’s found at a murder scene, he decides to take off. Make sense to you?” he asked, drawing hard on his cigarette. “Or is it just a tad suspicious?”

“It’s not like he’s skipping the country.”

“Nah. Just L.A. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“I can’t.” Hayes called over to Bledsoe, who had reached his convertible. Older BMW. The top was down, black leather interior baking in the sun. “You go over any of his notes?” Hayes asked.

“Yeah,” Bledsoe said grudgingly. “Saw what he got out of McIntyre and Newell. Looks like they didn’t think much of him, either. Our boy Bentz isn’t winning many popularity contests, but then he does seem to have more than one screw loose, if you know what I mean.”

“Anything else?”

“Just the same info he gave us before. The photographs, doctored death certificate, notes about a silver Chevy with an old parking tag for St. Augustine’s, and questions about Ramona Salazar, another dead woman.” He took another drag and let out a stream of smoke. “A whole lotta nothing, if you ask me. Unfortunately there wasn’t anything linking his being in town to the Springer twins’ homicides. At least nothing I’ve found so far.” Bledsoe crushed out the rest of his Marlboro on the pavement, then found a pair of sunglasses in his jacket pocket. He slid them onto his nose. “What I want to know is, if Bentz isn’t our killer, then who the hell is? This chick running around the city, chasing after him?”
“Could be.”

“The one helpful thing Bentz supplied was the plates and reg on the mystery woman’s car. Silver Impala registered to Ramona Salazar.”

“I’d like to find that car,” Hayes said.

“I’d like to find the driver,” Bledsoe amended. “Since the owner’s dead. See how Bentz’s mystery woman shakes out. Bentz said Lorraine Newell called him last night, claiming she spotted the Jennifer imposter. We’re checking the phone records now, but he’s too smart to lie about that. So, how did the murderer anticipate that?”

“Maybe the killer was there. Maybe it was a ploy to set up Bentz.”

“Have Newell call him, then off her?”

“He claims someone’s playing head games with him.”

“Head games my ass. They’re fuckin’ with him big-time.”

Hayes couldn’t agree more. He loosened his tie and squinted at the passing traffic. “You know we’re having him followed.”

“A lotta good that’ll do. So he goes to the damned airport. Turns in his car.” Bledsoe shook his head. “Talk about a waste of department funds. Better call our guys back.” Bledsoe opened the door to his car and slid inside. “You know, Hayes, this is all off. Nothin’ seems to fit. I talked to Alan Gray, another name on Bentz’s list. He’s in Vegas this week, had a hard time even remembering Jennifer Nichols Bentz.” He glanced up Hayes. “But then, a guy like that, with all his money, probably has more women than he knows what to do with.”

“Maybe.”

“Can’t expect him to remember them all.”

“Sure you can.”

Bledsoe fired up the BMW’s engine. “I should be so lucky.”

“Sometimes more women means more trouble.”

But Bledsoe didn’t hear his words of wisdom. He was already backing up to head out of the parking lot.

Hayes unlocked his 4Runner remotely, then climbed inside. He folded the sun visor and tossed it into the back, started the engine and adjusted the temperature as he drove out of the lot. He’d already phoned Fortuna Esperanzo, gotten no answer, and left a message, then contacted Tally White. He had set up a meeting with her later this afternoon.

Afterward, if things went well, he would be back in Culver City at the cemetery.

All the paperwork had been filed, the red tape cut. Jennifer Bentz’s former dentist was sending her records over. It looked like Bentz was finally going to get his wish of having his ex-wife’s body exhumed.

God only knew what they’d find.
CHAPTER 27

Through the window, Olivia noticed a patrol car rolling slowly along the country road that ran past her home.

Out here. In the middle of no-damned-where. The road was quite a distance from the house, barely visible through the trees, yet she recognized that the cruiser belonged to the City of New Orleans.

Great. So Bentz was running a security patrol clear out here. While he was looking for his damned ex-wife in California.

After she’d told him she’d be fine. She grabbed the phone and placed a call, but, as expected, he didn’t pick up. Typical. Whenever he was on a case, he was hard to reach. That part she understood. His whole fascination with the ghostly Jennifer was the thing that bugged her.

Yet he’d obviously called in a few favors to have the police drive by the house. He was just such a control freak when it came to security. No doubt because of his line of work. He’d seen the worst of human nature and cruelty time and time again. Not to mention the times that danger had hit close to home, when she and Kristi each had been victims of madmen.

She sighed, releasing some of her indignation.

Maybe the security detail wasn’t such a bad idea.

After all, she had received some harassing calls.

She poured herself a cup of tea, walked into the den, and logged on to the computer. She’d already scouted out the best deals on flights to the West Coast and had found one that would be perfect. It left this afternoon, putting her in L.A. around 7 P.M. Just in time to take Bentz to dinner and give him the news that he was going to be a daddy again.

She clicked on the Web site and found the reservation that she’d placed on hold. With another click of the mouse, she purchased the ticket. One more click and the e-ticket was printed and in her hand. She had about four hours to pack and get herself to the airport, and then she was off to Los Angeles.

She’d already asked Tawilda, who knew where the spare key was hidden, to stay at the house for a couple of days and look after Hairy and Chia. The only loose end was letting her husband know she was coming, and that was proving difficult. She’d tried to reach Bentz this morning and had come up dry. He hadn’t answered his cell phone and when she’d called the motel, she’d been a little alarmed when the clerk told her that he’d checked out.

Why?

Was he switching to another motel?

Was he coming home?

Or flying off somewhere else?

She didn’t want to travel all the way to L.A. only to find out he’d flown to Seattle, or Boston, or Timbuktu. The fact that he’d checked out of his motel bothered her.

She tried him again and the call switched immediately to voice mail.
It was time they had a heart-to-heart. Before he got into too much trouble.

“Oh, Rick,” she sighed, carrying her cooling tea onto the veranda. The dog was on her heels, the smell of the bayou thick in the mist rising between the cottonwoods and cypress. A mockingbird was trilling softly, a heavy breeze fluttering the leaves and teasing at her hair.

She loved it here and, damn it, so did her husband.

So it was time he quit chasing after ghosts and come home where he belonged.

Before some other innocent woman was killed.

Montoya couldn’t believe his eyes. He stared at the computer screen on his desk and whispered, “Gotcha.”

“Got who?” Brinkman asked on his way to the kitchen with his empty coffee mug. He paused at Montoya’s desk, his interest piqued.

“Nothing.” Montoya wasn’t going to confide in the one detective he despised—Brinkman, with his thick glasses and a horseshoe of dark hair around his freckled pate. The guy did his job, but he was a pain in the butt know-it-all. One of those guys who had all the answers. Montoya couldn’t stand him. “It’s personal.”

“Well, right. Probably has to do with Bentz getting himself into trouble in L.A.” Brinkman’s eyebrows arched above the rims of his glasses. “Oh, you didn’t think I knew about it? It’s all over the department.” He snorted in his irritatingly supercilious way, then took the hint and strolled toward the kitchen. No doubt to bug the living shit out of the next person he ran into.

Montoya watched him leave, then cooled off slightly as he looked back at his monitor. There it was, the answer to the puzzle, or at least the start of the answer. Hopefully this was the tiny thread that, if tugged gently, would cause the whole carefully knotted mystery to unravel.

After days of fruitless research, following up on the information Bentz had gathered and looking for a lead, he had caught a break. Court records indicated that Ramona Salazar’s next of kin was her brother Carlos.

Carlos Salazar…now Montoya just had to find the guy. He checked Salazar’s address of record and, when that didn’t work, he started sifting through phone and address records. After five calls to people who told him he had the wrong number, he hit pay dirt.

“This is Carlos,” a man answered in a thick Spanish accent.

“Do you know a Ramona Maria Salazar?”

“Yes, I was the brother of Ramona, rest her soul,” Carlos said without a second’s hesitation. “Who wants to know?”

Montoya almost came out of his desk chair. He identified himself, then spoke in Spanish for a few seconds, assuring the man he was a police officer with the New Orleans Police Department. He told Salazar that he was working with the LAPD on a case involving a 1999 silver four-door Chevrolet Impala. That was a bit of a stretch, but the old man seemed to buy it, especially when he gave him the license number. “So, what I need to know is, did you inherit this car from your sister?”

“Sí, I did.”

“And do you have that car with you now?”

“Oh, no, I sold it to my cousin’s son, Sebastian. For his wife,” the old man said.

“Does she still have it?”
“I think so.” But he didn’t sound sure, as if he were second-guessing the strange caller, worried about giving out so much information over the phone.

“The car is still registered to your sister?”

“I… I never bothered with the paperwork. I thought Sebastian would take care of it, but he’s very busy…” Carlos’s voice faded and he sounded even more uncertain now, as if he’d realized he was making a mistake and was going to stonewall any more questions from Montoya.

“It’s okay. I’m just trying to locate the vehicle. We think it was used in a crime.”

“Dios,” Carlos whispered, then turned his head away from the phone and rattled something off in Spanish. It was muffled; Montoya only caught a few words that indicated he was worried. Another voice responded—a woman’s voice—but he couldn’t make out what she was saying.

After the rapid-fire conversation, Carlos returned to the phone. “I think it is still with Yolanda.”

“That’s her name? Yolanda?” Montoya quickly wrote down the information.

“Yes, yes, Sebastian’s wife.”

“Do they live near you?”

“No… they own a place in Encino. Look, if there is a problem, you need to talk to them. I have a bill of sale for the car. I have done nothing wrong.”

“No problem,” Montoya assured him. “Just give me their phone number and address.”

Carlos balked. “I don’t think I should be talking to you.”

“Does your cousin’s boy have a problem with the police?”

“No. They are good people. Leave them alone. The deal was legal. I will see that the car is registered.” He hung up before Montoya could get any more information from him.

Still, it was a start. Montoya tried to call Bentz with the information, but once again he couldn’t reach his partner. Montoya left a short message on Bentz’s voice mail and said he’d keep digging. He felt the same adrenaline rush that surged through his blood any time he made progress on a particularly vexing case. Damn if he wasn’t getting closer.

For his next trick, he was going to locate Yolanda Salazar.

Could she be the woman who was haunting Bentz by pretending to be his ex-wife?

If so, the jig was just about up.

*Make the call,* Bentz told himself as he studied the woman who resembled his ex-wife. He should have dialed the police ten minutes ago when he first spotted her. Let them lock her up and end the ruse now.

But he didn’t want to let her out of her sight until he had what he’d come for…

Answers.

Answers she promised to give him, if he would just indulge her in a short ride.

“If you want the truth, I’ll tell you on the way to Point Fermin,” she said, folding her arms. “After that, after you and I talk alone, then I’ll go with you to the police station. But if you call the police now, I’ll lawyer up and you’ll never know the truth.”
He didn’t like it, didn’t trust her. “I don’t think so.” He pulled his cell from his pocket. “I’m calling the cops now. I’ve got a friend in Homicide who wants to talk to you.”

“He can talk all he wants, but I won’t tell him anything. Stop the call now, RJ, or else you’ll never know.” Her lips twisted in that Jennifer way as she pointed at his cell phone. “You’ll never know the truth. And it will eat you alive.”

God, she knew how to play him.

But then she always had.

Reluctantly, he agreed. After all, he had the gun. She couldn’t get away. However, that didn’t mean he wasn’t anxious, that he didn’t hear the nagging voice in his head scolding him for being a fool.

“I’ll drive,” he said, unlocking her car. “You can ride shotgun.” He retrieved his gun and shoulder holster from his bag, strapped it on, then tossed his luggage into the back. As he slid into the driver’s seat of her car, he tried not to think of all the things that could go wrong. This was not the way a suspect was transported, but then, here in L.A., he was not a cop working a case. Just a man playing out some surreal nightmare.

She gazed at his weapon and pursed her full lips. “Nice.” Her voice dripped sarcasm, but she didn’t seem particularly rattled. In fact, he thought as he drove toward the airport exit, she sat beside him with the assurance of a woman who knew exactly what she wanted.

And that made all the more wary. Was she was leading him into some kind of trap?

He had to stay on alert. Ready.

But it was weird as hell. Her profile was so like Jennifer’s—straight nose, deep-set eyes, high cheekbones, and sharp chin. She was the right size, too, but she looked as if she was closer to thirty-five than forty-five, and he would have bet that it wasn’t due to any kind of plastic surgery.

For the thousandth time he wondered if this whole scenario had been planned, an intricately molded ruse to get him into the car and to Point Fermin. Either way, he wasn’t scared. Intrigued, yes. Concerned, definitely. But not in fear for his life, which might have been just plain stupid.

He knew the route from memory, from the many times he and Jennifer had ventured this way. He didn’t bother with the freeway, instead driving south on the surface streets to the Palos Verdes peninsula that rose high over the sea.

Beside him, she rolled down her window and released her ponytail, letting the wind rush through her hair. “Remember the lighthouse?” she asked, casting him a knowing look.

His throat turned to sand as he recalled the way Jennifer had stripped off her blouse near the white Victorian house with its distinctive cupola and red roof. It had been twilight in winter, the park nearly empty. She’d laughed at his reaction, then had turned and run barefoot through the trees of the grassy park. By the time he had caught up with her, he had been breathless with exertion and anticipation. There in the shade of a spreading tree they had made love just after the sun had set over the Pacific.

“Yeah, I thought you would,” she said with a naughty grin.

How did she know these things? he wondered as he guided the Chevy up the steep road that wound over the cliffs overlooking the ocean. To the west was the vast Pacific. To the east, huge houses with sparkling stucco facades and swimming pools crowded the hillside.

She kept the window down, letting the soft breeze over the Pacific Ocean seep into the warm car, the wind tangling her auburn tresses.

The ocean was a valley of blue stretching forever west. Sunlight sparkled on the surface, waves rolling and
crashing to the shore far below. A few vessels were visible on the horizon.

Bentz told himself to snap out of it; he refused to be a part of her twisted fantasy. He was here to get answers.

“So really, who are you?” he asked, his elbow pressing against his ribs, subconsciously checking the weight of the weapon stowed there.

Over the rush of wind she flashed him a smug look.

“You’re not Jennifer.”

One of her dark eyebrows lifted, silently disagreeing. “Is that what you think?”

“She’s dead. About to be exhumed.”

She shrugged. “Then you’ll know,” she said in that breathy voice that could well be his ex-wife’s.

Know what? That you’re a fraud? He wanted to snap at her, but the salt from the ocean spray and the scent of her perfume gave him pause, brought back vivid memories of a time he’d tried so hard to forget.

“So talk,” he said, trying to focus on his purpose. “Who killed Shana McIntyre and Lorraine Newell?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sure.”

“Really,” she insisted.

“You’re saying their deaths are unrelated to your… reappearance?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, then, what do you know?”

“That this is getting more complicated than I thought. More dangerous.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

He watched as she swallowed hard, her fingers curling tight over the seat belt. She was finally nervous. Good. Bentz kept his hands steady on the wheel, determined to pin her down.

“How did you know Ramona Salazar?” he asked.

“Who?”

“The last registered owner of this car. How do you know her? How did you get this damned vehicle?”

“It was a gift.”

“From whom?”

“A friend.”

He snapped out of the fantasy. “Don’t do this, okay? No more games. I only agreed to come here with you if you’d talk to me, tell me what was going on, and now you’re talking in circles and riddles. Oh, hell, forget it.” He dug out his cell phone and speed-dialed Hayes.

“No, don’t!” she cried.
“Too late.”

Her lips twisted and she shook her head. “Who are you calling?”

“Who do you think?”

“The police.”

“Bingo!”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Yeah, right.” He put the phone to his ear and waited.

Hayes answered on the third ring. “Hayes.”

“It’s Bentz. I’ve got our girl.”


“Jennifer. She and I are heading down the coast. To Point Fermin.”

“Why the hell are you going there?”

“Just meet us there.”

“Wait a second, what is this? What the hell’s going on?”

But Bentz clicked off and smiled coldly at the woman. “Better get your story straight, Jennifer. You’ve got a helluva lot of explaining to do.”
“Hold on!” Hayes said, pressing on the earbud of his cell phone. He’d been on his way to interview Tally White when he’d caught the call. “Meet you at Point Fermin? You mean on the peninsula?” But Bentz had already hung up. Hayes tried to call him back, but the son of a bitch wouldn’t answer.

“Jerk!” Sometimes he wondered why he still had Bentz’s back. Bledsoe was right; the guy was a loose cannon.

Hayes made a quick U-turn and received a horn blast from a woman in a gold Mercedes, followed by a quick middle finger from a kid in baseball cap driving a lowrider pickup.

He threaded through traffic on his way to the 110 and San Pedro near Point Fermin, far to the south of the city.

What was Bentz up to, calling in with such disjointed information? Bentz thought he was with Jennifer? That was just plain nuts.

Which would be proved in just a few hours when her remains were exhumed.

But maybe Bentz hadn’t been able to say what he’d really meant, Hayes thought, running an amber light as he maneuvered his Toyota toward the freeway entrance. He called for backup, though he wasn’t sure it was necessary.

“Martinez,” she answered.

“Hey. I might need assistance. Not sure yet.” He filled her in and his partner let out a low whistle.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I’m starting to think that Bledsoe’s right. Bentz has gone loco.”

“I was just thinking the same thing. Just be ready for another wild goose chase.”

“Just the kind of thing I love.”

Olivia took her seat on the jet, tucked between a bulky man who spilled over into her space and a mother with a squirming toddler on her lap. The little girl, a dark-haired cutie with big eyes and pigtails, stared at Olivia intently as the mother dug into the diaper bag tucked under the seat in front of them. The guy near the window gazed out the glass while baggage thumped and bumped as it was being loaded beneath them.

Olivia tried calling Bentz one last time, left a message that she was on her way to Los Angeles, and turned off her phone. No use worrying. So he wasn’t answering? So what? Nothing new there.

She’d left a message with the motel and with Jonas Hayes, the detective who was Bentz’s friend in LAPD. She’d even put in a call to Montoya to tell him what her plans were, just in case Bentz talked to him before Olivia landed on the West Coast. A few minutes later, the plane was pushed back from the terminal. The little girl beside her started to cry, and the big guy by the window held tight to his iPod so he could plug in the second it was allowed.

Olivia leaned back and closed her eyes, felt the little girl brush up against her. She smiled at the thought that in less than two years, she would be in the same position as the somewhat harried mom, searching for pacifiers and diapers, trying to keep the attention of an active pre-toddler.

A little girl?
A boy?

It didn’t matter.

In a few hours she’d see Bentz again and give him the news.

Smiling, she found she couldn’t wait.

Yes, he might be taken aback, even shocked, but he’d get over it. In the end he would love the idea. And yes, when she saw him he’d fill her in and bring her up to date on what had happened to his ex-wife. Olivia might feel a ridiculous pang of jealousy that he’d spent nearly a week of his life reliving his past with a woman he’d once loved passionately, but she would get over it.

At least they would finally be together again.

And then they waited.

While the big guy next to her sweated and the little girl fussed, the captain announced that there would be a delay. A mechanical difficulty needed to be addressed. Twenty minutes, or maybe a half an hour.

Olivia found her book and opened it. She was anxious, ready to get this trip behind her. Now that she’d decided to fly to Los Angeles to see her husband, she found waiting excruciating.

“It’s no big deal,” she told herself. Not like an omen or anything. Relax. A few minutes won’t make any difference. You’ll be with Bentz soon.

And for that she could suffer the noise and discomfort of a few hours on a plane.

“How’s Kristi?” asked the woman who resembled Jennifer.

*Leave my daughter alone,* Bentz wanted to snarl as his hands tightened on the steering wheel. The Chevy’s engine whined as the car sped up the sharp hills rimming the ocean. “I don’t think you should bring her up.”

“I miss her so—”

“Bull-fucking-shit!” he growled. His voice was low. A warning. “Don’t go there. Got it? Do not go there. As if you’re her long-lost mother.” He was beyond disgusted. ‘Just leave my daughter out of this, you goddamned imposter! Now, tell me why the hell you’ve been ‘haunting’ me; what’s the point? Who are you and what do you want?”

She wasn’t rattled in the least, no sweat on her forehead, no death grip on the arm rest. One side of her mouth lifted in that damnable Jennifer way and she cooed, “Oh, RJ, get over yourself.”

He was raging inside, his blood boiling. This fraud had promised him answers, and he was through waiting. “We’re done,” he said with a finality that must have finally gotten to her. “Hear me. This is over. Now.”

“Okay, okay…I get it. You want answers. Just…just pull over up here. There’s a place where you and I went down to the beach, up ahead at Devil’s Caldron. Remember.”

Jesus, God, how did she know that? He remembered the time, on their way to Point Fermin. Jennifer had teased him by touching him in the car. Hot and bothered, he’d pulled over.

Now this woman was sending him a coy look, as if she knew what he was thinking. Dear God, she was so damned much like Jennifer it chilled him to the marrow of his bones.

“There…” She pointed to the sign near the corner. Hands sweating on the wheel, heart thudding, he drove into the turnout perched high over the ocean.
Only one other car was in the lot, an empty white Datsun with a surfboard strapped to its roof. He pulled the Impala beside it, pushed the gear shift lever into park, and cut the engine.

Dust swirled over the hood of the car as, before she realized what he had planned, he reached down and scooped her bag from the floor beneath her.

“Hey!” she protested.

“Just checking your driver’s license, Jennifer.” He rifled through the purse, his hand closing over a slender wallet. Driven with urgency he flipped the wallet open, only to find it empty. No ID. Not even a credit card. “What the hell?”

She laughed. Raised a teasing eyebrow. “Come on, RJ. You of all people should know that a dead woman doesn’t carry identification.”

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, tossing the purse at her. Gritting his teeth, he leaned forward and flipped open the glove box at her knees. There had to be a registration for the car. Maybe she’d stashed her license there, too.

But the compartment was empty, skeletal metal and plastic lit by a small bulb.

“Give it up,” she advised. “You’ll never find what you’re looking for.” She laughed, deep and sexy and naughty. “You’ll never find it because you don’t want to face the truth. You don’t want to believe that I’m Jennifer.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts.” He slammed the glove box closed. “And I don’t fall for cons.”

“You did twelve years ago.”

In the distance waves crashed, punctuating the sickening feeling in his gut.

“I staged my own death, RJ. I left the suicide note, the whole thing. My life was unraveling and I wanted…I needed a way out.”

Bentz couldn’t believe her. He wouldn’t believe her. “Then who was driving the car, huh?” he demanded. “Who was wearing your rings? Who am I going to find in your coffin? You mean to tell me you found another woman who looked like you, put her in your car, and made her crash?” He shook his head. “Your story is a tough sell.” He wasn’t buying a single word of her fairy tale.

“But I am Jennifer,” she said in that tone that sounded so like his ex-wife. “And I can prove it.”

“This is gonna be good,” Bentz said, shaking his head. “How?”

“You and I first made love on the beach in Santa Monica.”

He didn’t move as her words rolled over him.

“That’s why I jumped off there. I…I thought you’d get it. I know you probably thought it had something to do with James…but it was because of us.”

The temperature in the car seemed to heat ten degrees. No one knew about that first time, long before they were married.

“Face it, RJ,” she whispered. “I’m back.”

“What?” With a click her seat belt was unhooked and she leaned over, her lips hesitating for just a second, hovering, until she kissed him. Filled with ardor and the desire of youth, she grabbed his head and held him fast.

Images blazed inside him. Wild. Erotic. Sexy. In his mind’s eye he flashed on Jennifer’s naughty smile, her smooth, fiery skin, the curve of her neck. With the memories came the pain, reminiscences of the nasty way she cut him down, her secret, haughty way of diminishing him, the way she’d so brazenly taken lovers…
God, he’d loved her.
And he’d hated her.
But this woman wasn’t Jennifer.
With that realization his erotic fantasies turned hollow and cold.
What was he thinking? Who was this fake?
In a split second he thought of Olivia, the woman who fired his blood and interlaced his dreams. It was Olivia’s face he saw in his mind, an image of blond curls, sexy pink lips, whiskey-colored eyes that could gaze deep into his soul. A simple brush of her finger against his nape could make him hard and wanting.

Disgusted, he pushed the imposter away.
“Something wrong?” she asked.
“Everything.”
She smiled then. “You are so right.”

With a click, her door popped open and she was outside in a heartbeat.

“Hell,” Bentz growled, unbuckling his seat belt. After fumbling with the handle he threw the door open and burst out of the car.
“Wait!” he yelled.

But she was already running toward the brush, disappearing down a path.

“Shit!” He took off after her, his leg throbbing as the soles of his shoes slid over the sandy pavement.

“Wait!”

_Damn it all to hell!_ He ran after her as she disappeared over the edge of the cliff, her feet kicking up dust.

“Son of a bitch!” Bentz was on her heels, but slipped at the first turn, his new shoes giving him no traction on the steep gravel and dirt trail cut into the hillside.

He caught himself, but felt something pop in his bad knee. Pain exploded up his leg.

Great.

He kept running, agony searing his muscles.

Gritting his teeth, he pursued her, wincing and limping and cursing as he half ran, half slid down the path with its sharp switchbacks.

Somehow, he kept her head in his sights, her coppery hair glinting in the sunlight.

“Stop!” he yelled into the wind, but she ignored his order and continued to descend the hillside, down the treacherous trail.

Cursing himself for being a dozen kinds of fool, he followed. Bentz knew he was losing ground, but he would catch her on the beach. The strip of sand at the base of the cliff was a small crescent, one end cut off by the point where tidal waters swirled and crashed, the other end a wall of rock leading up to the cliff. The only land access to the beach was via this slippery path.
Once she got down there, there was no escape. No exit. She would be trapped and he would haul her ass into the nearest police station.

Ignoring the pain in his leg, he scrambled down, following until she was nearly out of sight. “What the hell is your game?” he wondered aloud, his jaw tight.

He caught a glimpse of her approaching one of the lower switchbacks on the trail. The precipice at that turn was so dangerous that a platform had been constructed, complete with safety railing. From that point tourists were able to look down to a spectacular view of the roiling sea in the cove known as Devil’s Caldron.

He was gaining again.

Saw her reach the platform.

Panting, pushing himself, he hurried faster.

Ahead of him, she paused, waiting at the platform. For a second he thought she was waiting for him. Then, to his horror, she swung one leg over the railing.

Oh, God, what was she thinking?

But he knew.

Holy Christ, he knew.

“No!”

His heart clutched as she climbed onto the railing and perched on the edge, high above Devil’s Caldron.

Oh, no. Please. He skidded to a halt, watching in horror. “Don’t!”

She looked over her shoulder and blew him a kiss. Then she turned back to the ocean and lifted her arms over her head, poised like a ballerina. A moment later she jumped, her body a tiny needle of a woman soaring down past the cliffs. Bentz forced himself to watch as she disappeared from view and fell into the roiling furious tide far, far below.
It was like watching Jennifer die all over again. Bentz stared into the churning waters, feeling sick as he clutched the railing. His heart was pounding, his mind screaming. Why had she jumped? Why?

His gaze scraped every inch of the shoreline and water, trying to locate a trace of her—a scrap of pink or white bobbing on the angry swirling surf so far below.

No. For the love of God…

“Hey!” he heard from somewhere, as if through a long tunnel. “Hey!”

Blinking, trying to focus, he turned and saw someone running down the hillside. No, two people. A long-haired boy in his twenties and a leggy girl chasing after him.

“I saw her jump. Jesus Christ, she jumped!” the boy said, his face red from the run, his eyes round with fear. “Is she okay?”

“She couldn’t be,” his companion said. “I mean, it’s got to be fifty feet.”

“More. Maybe seventy-five!” The kid was emphatic and ran to the railing, even if he was a poor judge of height. Then he noticed Bentz’s gun. “Oh, whoa…” He stopped abruptly, raising his hands. “Easy, man.”

“I’m a cop,” Bentz said, digging out his badge and flipping it open. Something he’d done hundreds, maybe thousands of times, but today it felt awkward, surreal, as if he were watching himself. “Rick Bentz. New Orleans Police Department.” His own voice sounded disembodied. He kept looking down at the sea. Surely she would surface. She had to. But his gaze scoured the raging tide, rocky shoals, and sweep of beach.

Nothing.

The boy said, “Oh, so…like you were chasing her. She was a criminal?” Obviously the kid wasn’t buying it.

“From New Orleans?” his girlfriend said as she stepped behind her boyfriend and peeked coyly around his shoulder.

If you only knew, Bentz thought wearily and reached for his cell, his gaze still on the ocean. Where the hell are you? Come on! Silently he willed her to surface, to live, this woman he’d already buried.

“No service down here, dude,” the kid said eyeing Bentz’s cell. “You have to go up top to connect to a tower.”

Bentz nodded, but he couldn’t drag his eyes from the sea and the surging waves pounding the shore, sending up clouds of spray. Holy God.

There was no sign of anyone in the surf.

Once again, like the night in Santa Monica, “Jennifer” had disappeared. “Damn it all,” he muttered between clenched teeth, then turned to the boy and girl and tried to concentrate.

“What’s your name?” he asked the kid.

“Travis.”
“Good. Here, Travis, take the phone, climb up to the top, and call 9-1-1.” He slapped his cell phone into the kid’s hand. “Tell them what happened, that a woman jumped into Devil’s Caldron, then if they want to keep you on the line, stay. If not, hang up and speed-dial number 9. It’ll connect you to Detective Jonas Hayes, a friend of mine and a detective for the LAPD. Tell him what happened here and that I won’t be making it to Point Fermin. Tell him we need a search-and-rescue team. ASAP!”

Travis nodded, obviously relieved to have something to do, anything to help.

“But where are you going?” the girlfriend asked Bentz.

He nodded toward the swirling sea below. He knew it would be fruitless, but he had to try and find her. She couldn’t have just vanished. No way!

Montoya’s diligence was finally rewarded.

He’d spent so much time on the Internet and phone to California that his shoulders ached from inactivity. But it had paid off. He glanced to the window and saw that it was dark, most of the detectives from the day shift long gone.

But the long tedious hours had been worth it, he thought now, twisting the kinks from his neck.

Earlier, through the California DMV, he’d located several Yolanda Salazars who resided in Encino.

He’d weeded through them and zeroed in on the woman he was looking for. Just like Carlos had told him on the phone, Yolanda was married to his cousin’s boy, Sebastian. He’d pulled all the records he could on her, found her to be clean, a student at a junior college, studying accounting while she paid the bills as a hairdresser.

But the bit of information on Yolanda that caught Montoya’s attention was her maiden name. According to her marriage license she was born Yolanda Filipa Valdez.

Valdez? His heart skipped a beat as he made the connections. He leaned back in his chair and clicked the pen he was holding as a copy of her California driver’s license appeared on the screen.

A pretty woman. Thirty-two, according to the driver’s license. A model citizen.

Nothing to make her suspicious whatsoever.

Aside from not registering her car, which wasn’t that big of a deal. But there was another piece to the puzzle, a factor that made the lack of registration more interesting.

Yolanda just happened to be the older sister of Mario Valdez, the boy Bentz accidentally shot while he was still working for the Los Angeles Police Department.

Montoya clicked his pen again, put in another unanswered call to Bentz and Jonas Hayes, the one detective Bentz felt was on his side in L.A.

Montoya considered flying out to the West Coast to help, then discarded the idea. Bentz was a grown man, able to handle his own problems, even if people were dropping like flies around him. He’d figure it out.

If he needed help, he’d call. Right?

He stared at the picture of Yolanda Valdez Salazar. “What’s your deal?” he asked the image. Did she look enough like Bentz’s wife to fake him out? Had she been involved with the deaths of Shana McIntyre and Lorraine Newell? He clicked his pen again and eyed the screen. And what about those twins who were killed? Was she the mastermind behind the double homicide that looked, on the surface, identical to the murders twelve years earlier? She would have been around twenty when Mario was killed, and the same age when the first double homicide was committed. Younger than her victims.
“Nah,” he said aloud, leaning even further back in his chair and frowning. That didn’t add up.

The picture on the screen just stared at him blankly. A killer? The mastermind behind the entire Jennifer Bentz haunting?

If so, she would have had to have made a trip or two to New Orleans to “appear.” He figured he’d help the L.A. cops out and check her credit card statements, find out if she’d taken a trip to the Big Easy any time in the last year. And then he’d e-mail all the information he’d gathered about the woman to Detective Jonas Hayes of the Los Angeles Police Department.

He smiled, imagining that he was tugging on her string a bit, unraveling her master game. “It’s over,” he told the image on the computer monitor. “You screwed with the wrong guy.”

“So what the hell happened here?” Hayes demanded over the rush of the surf and wind and the steady whomp, whomp, whomp of the Coast Guard helicopter hovering high overhead.

“I wish I knew.” Bentz felt numb inside, disbelieving. They stood on the sand, the afternoon sun warm and bright as a crowd of rescue workers scoured the roiling waters of Devil’s Caldron. The California Highway Patrol was coordinating the search with the Coast Guard.

“But you’re saying that this woman jumped into the water from up there?” Hayes pointed at the platform some forty feet above the water swirling in the cove.

“Yes.” Bentz eyed the decking with its railing from below, seeing the posts and beams that supported the platform as it jutted over the cove.

“No one could have survived that.”

A muscle in Bentz’s jaw worked. He wanted to protest, to think that the woman was alive, that her leap into the churning waters wouldn’t have taken her life.

He’d already explained his conversation with her, but of course he would have to make a formal statement to that effect. Hayes had asked him the reasoning behind the aborted drive to Point Fermin. He’d questioned how Bentz had been fool enough to get into the car with her.

A good question.

Bentz had thought about everything that had happened in the last few hours, turning the events over and over again in his mind. But he had no answers as to why the woman had finally let him approach her, only to elude him here. For the past two hours he’d scoured the rocky shoals, beach, and tidewaters hoping against hope that the woman who’d sworn she was Jennifer had survived the horrifying descent to the cove. But so far no one had found any sign of her.

“So where’s the body?” Hayes was saying, staring out to sea. “Shit, we’ll have to send divers down if the Coast Guard doesn’t come up with anything. If they can even get down there. Shit.”

Bentz reached down and cupped a handful of sand, thinking that she could not have disappeared without a trace, without leaving behind a patch of clothing, a trace of hair or skin. How was it that this woman defied all laws of forensic science?

“Nothing more we can do,” Hayes said, shaking his head. “Okay, let’s get out of here.”

As they headed to the trail, Hayes couldn’t help lecturing Bentz. “So you get into a car with her. Taking a little afternoon drive? God almighty, Bentz. I guess we’re lucky she didn’t take you over that cliff with her. But I don’t get this woman trailing you, then disappearing. And why is it that this ghost of yours is so hell-bent into diving into water?”
“She’s not a ghost,” Bentz said as they started up the steep incline to the parking lot. “And I don’t know.” He was hobbling as he climbed the path, his knee and thigh on fire. No doubt he’d reinjured himself.

“When we get to the top, I’ll need your weapon,” Hayes said. “Just to make sure it wasn’t fired.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Just the same.”

“Yeah, I know.”

It took nearly fifteen minutes to reach the parking lot. Bentz was sweating, his leg throbbing. He eyed the silver car that Jennifer had driven, the one “Jennifer” had said was a gift. Everything about her story was all smoke and mirrors, nothing being what it seemed. The police had already roped the vehicle off, a tow truck on its way to take the Chevy to the police garage where it would be examined thoroughly.

His cell phone beeped, and he realized he had several messages. Mostly from Olivia, the last stating she was on a plane to Los Angeles. “Damn.”

“Bad news?”

“Olivia’s on her way. Her flight lands in a couple of hours. I need to pick her up at LAX.”

“I don’t think that we’ll be done in a few hours,” Hayes said. “There’s a lot to go over. And I know she’s coming in. She called me, too, when she couldn’t get hold of you. We’re sending a cop to pick her up. She can meet you at the Center, if you want. Afterward, I’ll take you to rent a vehicle.”

“Or she could rent one herself.”

Hayes waved off the idea. “No, her pickup is all arranged. And I left her a message. You might want to call her and explain.”

Bentz started to dial just as he heard shouts rising from the beach below. Turning, they saw the Coast Guard helicopter hovering over one spot in the ocean where a diver bobbed in the water. Bentz’s stomach turned over.

Hayes’s gaze was fixed on the basket that was slowly being lowered from the chopper to the ocean’s surface. Squinting, his jaw tight, he stated the obvious: “Looks like they found Jennifer.”

Sherry Petrocelli answered the phone and confirmed that she would pick up Rick Bentz’s wife from LAX. She was off duty, but hey, she owed Jonas Hayes a favor or two. Not that she gave a damn about Rick Bentz. She didn’t know the guy, but she’d heard the rumors, and now that he was back in Los Angeles, all hell seemed to be breaking loose.

The truth of the matter was that she wanted to be transferred to RHD, and Jonas was her “in.” Her friend and fellow officer Paula Sweet had assured her that Jonas had the keys to the kingdom; he was well respected in that division, and his input and recommendation would help her land the transfer. She also knew Corrine O’Donnell, who was dating Jonas, and Corrine had agreed that Hayes could help. So if hauling Bentz’s wife around was a way to get closer to homicide, so be it.

But first, she was going to dinner. Olivia Bentz’s plane was delayed, so Sherry figured it was fine to meet her friend at Bruno’s, an Italian spot in Marina del Rey, not too far from the airport.

They split a fried calamari appetizer, then Sherry ordered spaghetti with clam sauce. Throughout the meal, she ducked outside to make a couple of phone calls, checking in with the sitter and tracking the progress of Olivia Bentz’s delayed flight. She didn’t even have a sip of wine, opting for sparkling water, just to make certain she didn’t mess up. If this was a step to improve her career, she was taking no chances.
So it really pissed her off when she started to feel sick.

Surely not the clam sauce or the fried squid. She’d never had a reaction to seafood in her life.

But her stomach was acting up, her head a little light.

“Wow,” she said. “I feel like crap.” She drank more of the sparkling water, hoping to settle her stomach.

“Let’s get out of here,” her friend said, then tossed back the remains of her martini. “Come on. I’ll buy.” She flashed Sherry a smile and dropped some cash onto the table. “But next time, you’re on.”

“Okay.” When Sherry stood up, her legs were wobbly, her head spinning. Almost as if she were drunk. Which was crazy. And then there was the stomachache. She walked out of the restaurant unaided, but when she reached her car, she knew she couldn’t get behind the wheel. “Oh, man, I can’t drive,” she said, pissed as hell.

“I can take you home.”

“But I’m supposed to be at the airport in less than an hour.”

“You want me to do it?”

“Oh, God, no.” They were outside and even the fresh air coming off the ocean didn’t help. That salty, fishy smell…If anything she felt more nauseated, her legs more unsteady.

“How about if I drive you?” her friend offered.

At first Sherry thought the whole idea was odd. “You would do that?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t even know if I’ll be able to go in and get her.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

Sherry, sweating now, didn’t argue as she fell into the passenger seat. God, she felt awful. “Maybe you should just take me home.” She even thought about a hospital, but that seemed extreme.

“I will, just as soon as we ferry Bentz’s wife around.” For the first time, Sherry noticed the sound of disgust in her friend’s voice as they pulled out of the parking lot and the first real doubts about her friend pricked at her consciousness.

They headed not in the direction of the airport, but north, away from the city.

“How are you doing?” she demanded and caught an icy glare. Oh God, this is a setup! Sherry fumbled in her pocket for her cell phone, but it was too late. She couldn’t think fast enough to get it; her reactions were already off. “You,” she said sluggishly, her tongue thick. “You slipped me a mickey…” Oh, shit. The interior of the car spun.

“More than one, Sherry,” her friend said with a calm, nearly serene smile. Her hands gripped the steering wheel so hard her knuckles were white as twilight fell and the dark night rushed past.

In that second Sherry Petrocelli felt a chill as cold as an Arctic wind blow through her soul. Her gun was locked securely in a safe at home, but even if it had been with her, she wouldn’t have been able to reach for it, to fire. She was too far gone, her reactions all off.

If there were a way to stop this madness, she would. But it was too late.

Scared out of her mind, with no way out, she thought of her seven-year-old son, Hank, and her husband, Jerry, a goofball she’d loved for fifteen of her thirty-two years. Jerry and Sherry; they’d thought their rhyming names were so funny, so corny. Who would take care of them if she were gone? Who would raise her boy? Love silly Jerry?
“Please,” she said, suddenly desperate, but it was far too late. Her mind was swimming away from reality.

“Please, what?” asked her friend, and the woman had the audacity to laugh at her. “Good night, Sherry,” she said, sounding so pleased.

Sherry felt a tear slide down her cheek. *Oh, Jerry, I’m sooo sorry.*

In the next second, Sherry Petrocelli’s heart quit beating.
CHAPTER 30

Once the jet touched down at LAX, Olivia couldn’t get off the plane fast enough. The flight had been delayed by nearly two hours, making everyone onboard nervous while they repaired some kind of temperature gauge. Then the ride had been bumpy and loud. As the minutes had ticked away, she’d experienced a steadily increasing feeling of dread.

What if Bentz had already left Los Angeles?

What if he’d connected with this person posing as Jennifer?

What if another friend of his ex-wife’s had been killed?

She pulled her carry-on from the overhead bin and shuffled her way behind the mother and toddler along the narrow aisle of the 737. Things didn’t move much faster along the jetway, but by the time she reached the gate she’d dug out her cell phone, turned it on, and was listening to a bevy of messages, one of which was from Bentz. He was the most recent caller and his message confirmed Hayes’s offer of a ride to the police station, telling her to look for an officer who would be waiting for her with a sign at baggage claim.

A little odd, she thought, trying not to press the panic button. No one had told her why she was being escorted by an officer rather than renting a car or taking a taxi herself. Or, since Bentz knew her flight number and arrival time, why wasn’t he picking her up himself? Why meet at the police station?

Because there’s trouble. Serious trouble.

She tried Bentz’s cell and wanted to scream in frustration when he didn’t pick up. Then she dialed Hayes’s phone and again was sent directly to voice mail.

So much for the convenience of cell phones, of always being in touch. She slammed hers back into her purse and pulled her roller bag behind her as she followed the signs to baggage claim. Something felt off about this and if she hadn’t heard her husband’s request herself, she would have rented a car.

And gone where? He already checked out of the So-Cal Inn, right? You probably would have met him at the station anyway. Just be thankful that he’s still in L.A. You’ll see him soon. Less than an hour, probably.

Good!

Her cell phone rang and she saw it was Bentz’s number. Thank God! “Hi.”

“God, it’s good to hear your voice. I was worried.”

Her heart squeezed. “Yeah, I know.” She felt tears against the back of her eyes and ridiculously her throat thickened. “The, uh, the flight was delayed, a mechanical problem that took a couple of hours to fix. But I finally made it.”

“Good.”

She could barely hear him with the sounds of the airport filling her ears, announcements for flights over the loudspeakers, the squeak of wheels on roller bags, and the excited hum of conversation as throngs of people moved through the wide concourse.
“Why are we meeting at the station house? I thought you would pick me up.”

“Yeah, I wish, but I’ve got to make a statement. Some loose ends to tie up.”

“Oh, God, someone else died,” she said, knowing it was true. She stopped dead in her tracks and a woman pushing a stroller nearly ran into her.

“Sorry,” the woman said, diverting around Olivia, who moved to the side of the wide hallway to stop by a T-shirt shop. “Am I right?” she asked, her heart drumming with dread. “Was someone else killed?”

“I think so. It’s the person who impersonated Jennifer.” He sounded weary and distracted. “It’s a long story, but I saw her jump from an observation platform into the ocean, a good thirty or forty feet below.”

“She jumped?”

“She was running away from me.”

“Oh, God,” she whispered, the cacophony of the airport turning into the rush of the sea, the people fading as, in her mind’s eye, she witnessed a woman leaping to her death in the water below.

“A few hours later, the Coast Guard found a body.”

Olivia leaned against the wall and closed her eyes for a second. “So she’s dead? The person who’s been gaslighting you?” Olivia couldn’t believe it.

“Yeah. I think so. I’m going to have to ID the body in the morgue, which is kind of a joke. I mean, I only met her up close once. I don’t even know her real name.”

“You spoke with her. Had a conversation?”

“Yeah.”

“Face-to-face, not one of those midnight prank calls.”

“I was with her earlier today,” he said. “I caught up with her and she was going to tell me the truth, or so she claimed, but…oh, hell…listen, I’ve got to go.”

“No, wait! You met with this ‘Jennifer?’”

“Yes. Look, Livvie, I’ll tell you everything soon. Once I ID the body, I’ll probably have to answer some more questions, but that will be at RHD, at Parker Center, so we’ll hook up there. It’s not far from the morgue. I’ll meet you as soon as I can.”

Someone was calling her, a number she didn’t recognize, trying to cut in. She ignored the interruption and watched as two parents shepherded their bags and stair-step children wearing Mickey Mouse ears toward the main terminal.

“A police officer is picking you up,” Bentz was saying. “Name’s Sherry Petrocelli. She’s a friend of Hayes’s. She’ll drive you to Parker Center. That’s where the LAPD has their Robbery-Homicide Division.”

“I know that.”

“Good. I’ll meet you. Hayes gave Petrocelli your cell number, so she’ll be calling.”

“I think she just did,” Olivia said.

“Good. I’ll see you soon.”

“I can’t wait. Love you.”
“If you only knew.”

Those damned hot tears touched her eyes again. Her throat was thick, choked with emotion. She whispered, “Maybe it’ll be over now.”

There was a pause on the other end of the connection. “I don’t know if it will ever be over.” And he hung up.

“Rick—” But it was too late. She stood there with the phone in her hand, feeling like an idiot. On the verge of a crying jag again.

That just wouldn’t do. Her emotions and hormones be damned. She couldn’t function in such an overwrought emotional state, near tears. She was a grown woman, soon to be a mother. Setting her jaw, she started walking again.

For the first time since touching down on California soil, she felt a measure of renewed determination to see this through. She told her self she was up for the challenge, whatever it was.

*Bring it on,* she thought, slipping her phone into her purse and sliding a pair of sunglasses onto the bridge of her nose. *I’m ready.*

*Come on, come on, answer the damned phone.*

I watch the passengers as they stream into the baggage claim area, hustling, herding, searching for their luggage. Loud and oblivious to me, they corral the children and guard their laptops as they wait for the carousel to spin, delivering their bags to them.

*Where is she?*

For a second I panic. Maybe she didn’t make the flight. Perhaps I got the information wrong.

Or worse yet, I’m a suspect and they’re waiting for me. Because Sherry Petrocelli didn’t call the office to check in. My heart races at the thought that I could be caught before I’m finished, before I complete my task of utterly destroying Rick Bentz.

But a quick scan of the area assures me no cops are loitering on the chairs or hiding behind an open newspaper. These business travelers and families are not undercover detectives.

No, the baggage claim area looks clean.

I take a deep breath. I have to remain calm. Appear sincere. Make certain she believes that I’m Petrocelli. With that in mind, I force a smile that feels as false as plastic. But it will have to do.

It’s essential that Olivia Bentz trust me, buy into the fact that I’m chauffeuring her to her beloved husband.

God, that thought makes me want to puke.

I study the entrance to the baggage claim area, eyeing the faces of the travelers, hunting for the one that is forever burned into my brain.

For the love of God, where is she? I start to pace, then stop. I don’t want to attract attention; as it is I’ve been carefully avoiding the security cameras, keeping my back to them and my face covered. The wig and glasses help, but I can’t take too many chances.

My palms are beginning to sweat.

*Where the hell is she?*

Damn it, could the bitch just show up?
I called her, left a message from Petrocelli’s phone…

The cell phone jangles.

Finally!

I answer quickly, forcing the name off my lips. “Officer Petrocelli.”

“Hi, this is Olivia Bentz. I think you tried to call me. My husband said you were going to pick me up at the airport, somewhere in Baggage Claim?” She sounds harried and tired.

Perfect.


“I’m here near the United carousel.” Then I spy her approaching the area. Wearing sunglasses, her hair pulled away from her face, she’s carrying a purse and pulling a single overnight bag.

She packed light.

Smart girl.

We both smile and hang up our respective phones.

“Olivia Bentz?” I call out as I flag her down. “How was your flight?”

She shrugs. “Delayed.”

“I’m Sherry, a friend of Jonas Hayes. He asked me to pick you up.”

“So I heard.”

She eyes my uniform and I say, “You know I’m with the LAPD. Right?” She nods politely when I flip open Petrocelli’s wallet with her badge. With my wig, I look enough like Sherry to satisfy her.

“I appreciate the lift, Officer Petrocelli,” she says. So well-mannered and polite.

“Call me Sherry. The car’s right outside,” I tell her, and we walk through the doors to the parking area where the police cruiser awaits. I open the back door.

“You can put your things back here,” I say, and she does, even her purse, which, I assume holds her phone. While she moves toward the front seat I spy her phone in a pocket of her purse. I remove my hat, and while I’m stowing it on the backseat I pick up her cell phone, click it to off, then tuck it back into the purse as I straighten. She’s already slipping into the passenger seat.

Perfect.

Unafraid, she doesn’t hesitate for a second and I feel a sense of well-being. How long I’ve waited for just this moment. But I can’t get too cocky. Not yet. I’ve got a narrow window of time, so I hurry to the driver’s side. The sooner I drive away from the airport with all its damned security cameras and wannabe cops, the better. I can’t foul up now. Not when I’m so close, so damned close.

“How far is it to the Center?” she asks as she straps on her seat belt and I climb behind the wheel.

“Not far.” I flash her a warm smile. “It’s after rush hour, so it shouldn’t take long. Half an hour at most.”

“Good.”

“Ever been to L.A. before?” I ask.
“Once, a long time ago. In my early twenties. I lived in Arizona—Tucson—for a while. While I was there I drove to San Diego a couple of times, and once I made it to Los Angeles. As I said, it’s been a while.”

Perfect. So she won’t have any real sense of direction. Because she’s not going anywhere near Parker Center.

She just doesn’t know it yet.

How long had they been in this sterile interrogation room? Bentz shifted in the wooden chair, thinking it had been an eternity since he’d talked to Olivia on the phone.

The coffee in front of him had gone cold, but Bentz wasn’t interested. Hayes, who’d been conducting the interview, had stepped out to see if Olivia had arrived. Bentz imagined her sitting in the squad room, waiting patiently. It wasn’t fair to drag her into this, but he was glad she had come. Couldn’t wait to see her. Touch her.

Bentz stood up and stretched, sick of the small, airless interrogation room. So typical; there was at least one in every precinct. A camera mounted high in the corner near the ceiling had recorded the entire conversation. Bentz could have asked for a lawyer or kept his mouth shut, but he had nothing to hide.

He knew it.

He sensed Hayes knew it. His account of the events at Devil’s Caldron had been confirmed by Travis and his girlfriend. This was an exercise in futility, but one that ensured Hayes didn’t make any mistakes.

He glanced at his reflection on the wall. God only knew who was standing behind the two-way mirror. Andrew Bledsoe and Riva Martinez were probably there, waiting for him to slip up and make a mistake. Maybe the DA was there, along with other detectives. Hell, maybe even Dawn Rankin was watching.

It was ridiculous, but Bentz understood procedure. Rake Rick Bentz over the coals. Prove that he’s a good cop gone bad, someone insane enough to show up in Los Angeles and start killing people who had known his ex-wife.

Even though he’d talked things through with Hayes earlier, this was official, “for the record.” So he’d suffered through the questions about his marriage to Jennifer, her betrayal, the divorce, the fact that while they’d been living together a second time, trying to see if it would work, she’d cheated on him all over again. And around that time, the accident that had taken her life. He understood that it was necessary to rehash this dark period in his life, though that hadn’t made it any easier.

Then Hayes had segued to Jennifer the ghost, and Bentz had recalled how he’d seen her in his hospital room back in Louisiana. How he’d determined that the woman “haunting” him was actually a real flesh-and-blood imposter, one he’d stupidly driven along the coast. They’d stopped at Devil’s Caldron, the park overlooking the sea, where she’d made the tragic leap into the ocean that had killed her.

“Well, tomorrow morning we should have some answers about your ghost. Or at least, your ex-wife,” Hayes had said. The detective had cut through bureaucratic red tape and arranged for the exhumation of Jennifer’s body, scheduled for the next morning. A step in the right direction.

Bentz was questioned about Shana McIntyre and Lorraine Newell. Hayes brought up the Caldwell twins, asked what he knew about the double homicide so similar to the Springer twins’ case. “We’ve been through this before,” Bentz had said, knowing that Olivia was waiting for him. He was tired, hungry and could offer them nothing more than the truth.

“Look, I can say all this a million ways,” he’d said, “but it won’t change what happened. I had nothing to do with Shana’s murder or Lorraine’s, and I don’t have a clue what happened to those twins. It sounds like the Twenty-one or a copycat. That they were killed after I returned to Los Angeles…I agree, there seems to be a connection. Am I a catalyst? I hope to hell not, but I don’t know. It would be quite a coincidence, and I don’t have a lot of faith in those.”

Bentz looked up as the door opened and Hayes stepped in. “Is she out there?” Bentz asked.
“Not yet,” Hayes said.

An icy dread chilled Bentz. “What do you mean? They should be here by now. Would you give me my damned cell phone back?”

“Procedure, man.” Hayes held up his hands defensively. “You’ll get it back just as soon as we’re done here. Martinez is tracking down Petrocelli right now.” Across the table, his tie loosened, Hayes looked as bone weary as Bentz felt. “I just need to get a few more things on the record.”

Bentz raked one hand through his hair. “And that would be?”

“At Devil’s Caldron today, did the victim know you were armed?”

“She saw my gun. Made some comment about it earlier in the car.”

“So you were chasing her with a gun.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t take it out of my holster. She knew I wouldn’t fire at her.”

“How would she know that?”

Good question. “Because she knows me. She knows things about me only Jennifer knew.” His guts ground as he admitted, “It seems like every time I learned something I didn’t know about Jennifer from one of her friends, that friend ended up dead. Almost…I know this sounds crazy, but it’s almost as if they were expendable and had served their purpose.” He looked at Hayes and shook his head. “It’s pretty damned freaky. Like she was one step ahead of me. She seemed to figure out my next move before I even made it. Damn it, Hayes, she knew I’d be at the airport.” And as he said the words, a new horror crawled through him. “Oh, God,” he whispered, “Olivia.”

“What?”

His mind was racing ahead, fueled by adrenaline and stark, gut-churning terror. If “Jennifer” knew his whereabouts, would she have been tracking Olivia’s, too? “My wife. I told you about the menacing calls she’s been getting. What if this psycho’s after her, too?”

“But Jennifer or whoever she is, is dead now, right? You witnessed her jump into the sea.”

“I know.” But he couldn’t shake the feeling of dread that clung to him.

“We’ve been over this,” Hayes reminded him. “Petrocelli met her at the airport.”

“Then where the hell are they?” He couldn’t help the terror pulsing through his veins, pounding in his ears. He glanced at his watch. “They should be here by now.”

“Maybe Olivia decided to check into a hotel? Get settled in somewhere instead of waiting around here.”

“No way.” Olivia had been as desperate to see him as he was to see her. He’d heard it in her voice.

Hayes sat back in the chair and slung his loose tie over one shoulder. “Look, you saw this Jennifer jump off the cliffs into Devil’s Caldron, right? So your wife is safe.”

Bentz wasn’t certain. Nothing made sense anymore. Everything he believed in had gone sideways or turned upside down. He rubbed a hand over the stubble covering his jaw and tried to think clearly. Logically. Find the nugget of truth woven into so many lies. “Let’s just get this interview over.”

“We’re done here.” Hayes rose, straightening his tie. “But I’ll need you to ID the woman we found at Devil’s Caldron. The morgue isn’t far.” He opened the door and nodded toward the squad room. “Martinez will help you get your vouchered possessions, and then we can go.”

While Hayes went over to his desk, Riva Martinez led Bentz down the hall to the property desk.
“Hey, my wife didn’t show up yet, did she?” Bentz asked her, trying to keep a cordial tone. “Olivia Bentz?”

“Not yet. I called Petrocelli’s cell, but she didn’t pick up.” Riva Martinez smiled at the property clerk, then started filling out the paperwork. As she handed him his gun, the look she sent Bentz could have cut through granite.

Bentz slung the holster over one shoulder, wondering what he ever did to piss off Riva Martinez. Maybe it was just the fact that her caseload had doubled since he’d returned to L.A.

“They should be here by now,” he said, concern mounting. “It’s not that far.”

With a shrug, she handed him the bin containing his cell phone, wallet, house keys. “Probably traffic. Last week there was an accident on the 405, made me forty minutes late for my shift.”

She nodded toward the paperwork. “Sign here to verify that you got everything back.” After he signed, she gave him a copy of the receipt, then turned and walked briskly down the corridor.

Bentz watched her leave, the bad feeling in his gut worsening as she disappeared behind a tall rubber tree. Something was wrong.

As he headed back to the squad room, Bentz powered up his phone. No messages from Olivia. “Damn it.” He dialed her. Got nowhere. “Come on, come on,” he whispered as uniformed cops and detectives passed by. His call went to Olivia’s voice mail box and he asked her to call him ASAP, then hung up.

This wasn’t like her.

Relax. She’s with a cop. Who knows what’s holding them up? Maybe a problem with her luggage, or they stopped to get something to eat. Maybe her cell phone battery is dead… But he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. He speed-dialed Montoya, who picked up before the second ring.

“Montoya.”

“Got your call,” Bentz said.

“Yeah, I just talked to Hayes. I sent him information on the owner of the Chevy, Yolanda Salazar. A relative sold it to her for cash. She never changed the title, which isn’t a big deal, but the kicker is this: Her name is Yolanda Valdez Salazar. She’s the older sister of Mario.”

“What? Are you kidding me? Mario Valdez’s sister,” Bentz repeated, stunned. But he knew from the tone of Montoya’s voice this was no joke. In a second he was back in the dark alley, a person aiming a gun at Trinidad…

A silver glint of moonlight on the black gun barrel.

Panic tearing through his heart.

“Police. Drop it!” he yelled in warning.

But in the next instant, the gun didn’t fall away.

He’s going to shoot! He’s going to shoot Trinidad!

As the realization throbbed in his brain, Bentz pulled the trigger.

And the gunman went down…

Now, a dozen years later, that fatal moment was still emblazoned in Bentz’s memory. The rush of relief that he’d saved his partner’s life had quickly given way to horror when he saw that the gunman was just a kid, a boy with a toy pistol. It was a nightmare Bentz would never be able to put completely behind him. “Sweet Jesus,” Bentz said, half to Montoya, half to himself.
“She lives in Encino,” Montoya went on. “I e-mailed and faxed all the info to Jonas Hayes. It should be there by now.”

“Good. Thanks.”

Yolanda Valdez. He clicked off, saw that Hayes was still on the phone. Pacing the corridor, he tried to remember the older sister. There had been three kids in the family, right? Mario was the youngest and Yolanda quite a bit older, maybe twenty when the accident had occurred. And there had been a brother, too…what the hell was his name? Franco? Or Frederico? Or…no, wait…Fernando, that was it. But he didn’t remember Yolanda looking like Jennifer…no, this wasn’t making any sense.

Salazar? That didn’t sound right. Hadn’t she already been married? And the name had been different. He tried to come up with it, but her surname eluded him. Now she was Salazar? He rolled that around in his mind, tried to make some connections. Something didn’t make sense.

He called Montoya back. When his partner answered, Bentz told him his concern. “I think she was married to someone else. Not Salazar. I think the name was Anglo…something like Johns, no that’s not right. Can you double-check?”

“You got it, but everything I found only mentioned her maiden name, Valdez, and Salazar. But I’ll dig further.”

“Thanks.”

Bentz hung up, disturbed.

He stepped around two cops talking in the hallway, then found Hayes at his desk, papers spread around him. Montoya’s e-mail had gotten through. “Take a look.” Hayes showed Bentz the driver’s license photo of Yolanda Salazar. “You think that she’s your Jennifer?”

“You got it, but everything I found only mentioned her maiden name, Valdez, and Salazar. But I’ll dig further.”

“Thanks.”

Bentz hung up, disturbed.

He stepped around two cops talking in the hallway, then found Hayes at his desk, papers spread around him. Montoya’s e-mail had gotten through. “Take a look.” Hayes showed Bentz the driver’s license photo of Yolanda Salazar. “You think that she’s your Jennifer?”

“Not on a dare.” Bentz rubbed the stubble on his jaw as he shook his head. “I don’t know how this woman is connected to the Jennifer who’s been trailing me.”

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“We’ll have to dig deeper, but right now they’re waiting for us over at the morgue.” He motioned to the papers. “Bring those with you. We need to get over and ID our jumper.”

Bentz tried to read the information Montoya had sent as he followed Hayes to the parking lot, where security lamps were already raining down soft blue light. “Anyone hear from Petrocelli?” Bentz asked as they reached Hayes’s 4Runner.

“Not yet.”

“I don’t like this,” Bentz said as he climbed into the passenger seat.

Hayes dialed his cell phone with one hand and started the engine with another. “Hey, Sherry. Hayes here. Just wondering what’s the holdup. Give a call. I’m on my cell.” Then he hung up. “I don’t know, man. She’s not answering.”

Bentz glared at him. “LAPD’s finest?”

“She’ll be here when we get back.”

“She’d better be. With my wife.” Bentz stared out the windshield as Jonas eased out of the parking lot and pulled into moving traffic. Olivia. Where the hell was she?

Safe. With a trusted police officer. Relax.

He tried her number again, but the call went straight to voice mail. Damn it, Olivia, where are you?
A slow groaning terror thrummed through his bloodstream and it was all he could do to stay calm.

At the morgue, while Jonas Hayes had the coroner set up the body for viewing, Bentz paced, steeling himself. He'd never gotten comfortable around corpses, always felt a little nauseated when faced with death, a character flaw he'd attempted to hide from his peers. If other cops had gotten wind of it, he would have suffered years of razzing. Still, he'd been through this procedure enough to know how it went. Right now one of the attendants was wheeling a sheet-draped gurney into the viewing area, checking the toe tag to make sure they had the right Jane Doe.

“You ready?” Jonas asked.

Bentz steadied himself. “Yeah.” It was a lie, of course. The last time he'd seen Jennifer she'd been so vibrant; naughty and teasing and running like a gazelle. So alive. And in a few short hours she'd been reduced to a draped, dead body on a cold slab.

“I don't know her name, you know,” he reminded Hayes.

“Doesn't matter. Just let me know if this is the same woman.”

Bentz nodded and Hayes motioned for the attendant to pull the sheet away.

Slowly the woman’s face was uncovered. She lay staring upward, unmoving, her skin cast in a bluish hue.

Bentz felt bile climb up his throat as he gaped in disbelief.

Jennifer wasn’t on the slab.

Instead he found himself staring into the decidedly dead face of Fortuna Esperanzo.
“It’s not Jennifer,” Bentz said, forcing the words out, his fear and confusion mounting. What the hell was this? Fortuna? Dead? Oh, hell!

Hayes’s head snapped around as he stared at Bentz. “What?”

“It’s not the woman I was chasing. This is Fortuna Esperanzo. Jennifer worked with her in an art gallery in Venice.”

“This woman?” Hayes pointed at the body. “Esperanzo?”

“Yes!” Bentz leaned against the wall and closed his eyes for a second, only to open them again and still find himself in the middle of this nightmare.

Hayes rubbed his forehead, frustration and exhaustion evident. “No wonder I couldn’t reach her.”

“Are you certain this is the woman they fished out of the ocean?” Bentz asked.

“Yes. She still smells of salt water,” the attendant said. “Don’t know how she died yet. Not until the autopsy.”

Frustrated, Bentz shoved a hand through his hair. “What was she wearing?” He looked at the attendant. “You have the clothes?”


“Son of a bitch,” Bentz said.

“What?”

“The outfit. Exactly what the woman I was chasing had on. I mean, I don’t know about the underclothes, but she definitely had on a pink sleeveless tee and white shorts. Someone knew. The killer. He or she knew.”

“You don’t think Jennifer’s the killer?”

“How could she be?”

“Who else?”

“Damned if I know.” As a wave of sickness roiled inside him, Bentz turned away. “Let’s go talk to Yolanda Salazar and see what she knows. Maybe she can make the connection between Fortuna Esperanzo and the woman who jumped off the cliff.” He was already walking toward the exit, a deep soul-numbing fear holding him in its icy grasp. Olivia, oh for the love of God, where was she? God help him if she was dead. To Hayes he said, “But first, we need to stop at the Center and find my wife.”

As I stand on deck of my boat with my precious cargo below, I can’t help the tremor of excitement that skims through my blood. So far, so good. Everything is going perfectly.

No thanks to that Olivia.
When we drove away from the airport, “Livvie” was checking out the road signs, a cause for some worry. What if she was more familiar with the city than she’d let on? She pressed me to do this sooner than later. I just couldn’t take a chance that she would get wise and ask to make a call. I needed to have the element of surprise on my side.

As soon as the airport was in the distance, I slowed for an amber light and sneezed. “Oh, Jeez, could you get me a tissue?” I asked her as the light turned red and I braked to a stop. “There in the box?”

“Sure.” She opened the glove box and began searching through the maps and napkins stuffed in there, not realizing that I had pulled out my trusty little Pomeroy Taser 2550. I had bought it on Craig’s List, under an assumed name, of course. “Oh, here we go,” she said as I hit the automatic door locks.

I struck quickly, placing the electrodes against her neck and pulling the trigger. Her mouth was open, her eyes bulging. Then her body reacted and she lost control of her appendages. Her breathing went wild, her eyes round in horror.

This was where it got tricky. I had to do this all while I was driving the car. Reaching into my purse, I pulled out a piece of pre-cut duct tape and slapped it over her startled mouth. Then I grabbed Sherry’s cuffs and placed them over her wrists. I had to work fast, so there was no time to try and wrestle her arms behind her back. So Livvie got cuffed in the front.

That was when the asshole driver behind me laid on the horn of his Porsche and I realized the light had turned green.

“Take a chill pill, bastard!” I mumbled, too busy to care. I had my hands full, Olivia staring at me, her mouth working behind the tape, and that jerk wants me to peel out.

Blasting his horn again, the newest Dale Earnhardt wannabe screeched around me. Yelling filth, he flipped me off and burned rubber. Much as I would have loved to bash in the sleek car’s rear end and take out the driver at the same time, I tamped down the urge. Right then I had a full plate.

Once Olivia—oh, excuse me, “Livvie”—was subdued, I stepped on it and headed to the marina. With her delayed plane, I had lost a lot of time. People would be calling. I had to give her another shock so I could shackle her. Then I loaded her onto the boat, which was no easy task. She weighs a helluva lot more than I had imagined.

Now, on the deck, Olivia secured in the hold below, I can breathe a little easier. I feel a little thrill and wonder if Rick Bentz has any idea that his precious wife isn’t going to meet up with him. In fact, she’s never going to see him again.

“Take that,” I say under my breath and hope to hell that he’s sweating bullets.

Olivia wasn’t answering.

Bentz told himself not to panic, but even Hayes was starting to worry. He’d called Bledsoe from the car and asked him to get a unit down to Venice to cordon off and search Fortuna Esperanzo’s house. They would check with the gallery where she worked as soon as they opened their doors in the morning. He’d also called Tally White, who was very much alive and scared to death. Tally was so freaked out by the pattern of killings that she’d booked a morning flight to Portland, Oregon, for a visit with her sister.

Hurrying inside the Center, Bentz eyed Riva Martinez, who was still working at her desk. “Bledsoe and Trinidad are going to Venice,” she told Hayes as she twisted her red hair into a knot at the back of her head and secured it with a long-toothed tortoise shell comb. “Uniforms have already secured the scene.”

“If it is a scene.”

Bentz’s jaw was rock hard. Three women dead since he’d arrived in Los Angeles, and that didn’t include the Springer twins.
And now…Olivia?

Fear gnawed a hole in his gut.

But he couldn’t, wouldn’t let it get the better of him.

“My wife still didn’t get here?” he asked.

Martinez shrugged. This time her dark eyes revealed a shred of concern. “I’ve been calling Petrocelli, but she doesn’t pick up.” Martinez’s eyebrows pulled together as she stared at her computer monitor, where a picture of Shana McIntyre’s body filled the screen.

Bentz had to look away. It had been bad enough seeing the dead corpse, worse yet to think his wife might be in the hands of the maniac who had killed Shana, Lorraine, and now Fortuna.

“I talked to Petrocelli a few hours ago,” Hayes said, checking his watch. “Maybe four hours ago? She knew the flight was late, but said she’d get to the airport in plenty of time.”

“It’s been too long.” Martinez reached for the jacket slung over the back of her chair. “I’ve already put a BLOF out for Petrocelli’s vehicle; I figure I’d rather err on the side of caution.”

“Good idea,” Hayes agreed.

Bentz felt time slipping by, precious seconds that could be the difference between life and death for Olivia. “We have to find her.”

“We will,” Hayes assured him.

But Bentz wasn’t satisfied. He felt restless, needed to do something, anything other than wait around. God, if Olivia was in danger because of him, because of this Jennifer fiasco…

He put in a call to his daughter and felt his knees go weak when Kristi answered. “Hey, Dad, are you home?”

“Oh, God, Kristi, I wish I was. Back in Louisiana with Olivia. Christ, what was I thinking?”

“Still out chasing ghosts?”

“I guess.” He didn’t tell her about Olivia, didn’t want to worry her. In truth he had only called to assure himself that someone he loved was safe, that he hadn’t put his whole damned family in jeopardy.

Just Olivia.

Dear God, the thought that she might even now be in the hands of a murderer…Fear gnawed at his gut but somehow he was able to keep up the conversation with his daughter. After hanging up, he made another quick call. This time to the airlines. He was connected to a representative and, after arguing about legalities, the rep told him that Olivia had been on the flight and that the plane had touched down hours ago, which only confirmed what he’d already known as he talked to her. The airline had no more information for him.

She’d gone missing between LAX and here.

“The airport has security cameras,” Bentz told the other detectives. “Cameras at the door and at baggage claim. I want to see the tapes.”

“We’ll get ’em. If we don’t locate Petrocelli,” Hayes agreed.

Bentz didn’t know if he could stand the waiting. He didn’t like this, didn’t like the feeling. He’d experienced it too many times in his life before, when someone he loved was in danger. This wasn’t the first time he’d been worried sick over Olivia’s fate. He couldn’t let anything happen to her. Couldn’t.
And he couldn’t sit around here, waiting for other people to call the shots. “Come on,” he told Hayes. “We need to have a chat with Yolanda Salazar.”

“I’m way ahead of you. Already working on a warrant. But you’re not talking to anyone. This is our case, and you have a personal ax to grind.”

“You bet I do. My wife is missing!”

“I’m talking about the shooting, Bentz. The department settled with the Valdez family, but I don’t think it would be wise for you to get into it with them. In fact, I don’t want them to know you’re a part of this. At least until we know where we stand. If you go on the interview, you’re a bystander. Lucky to be going along. You know the rules; you just need to play by them.”

“Your rules.”

“Shit, man, I’m glad to have you ride along, but it’s my jurisdiction. My case. You’re right. My rules.” He stared long and hard at Bentz. “Now, are you going to ride with me or not?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Bentz said sarcastically.

He tried like hell to stay calm, not go to the worst case scenario, but he was worried as he climbed into the backseat of the 4Runner, with Hayes driving and Martinez riding shotgun.

He checked again: No phone call. No text. Nothing. He tried to make sense of the events of the afternoon and failed. “Any prints or evidence found in the silver Chevy?” he asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Martinez admitted.

How the hell had Fortuna Esperanzo ended up in the Pacific Ocean, so close to Devil’s Caldron? In his mind’s eye he witnessed Jennifer jump. And then again. And again. Leaping from the railing, soaring into the air, vanishing from view. How was that possible?

He tried to imagine scenarios that might solve that mystery, if only to distract himself from the one question that throbbed through his body with every beat of his heart.

Where the hell was Olivia?

Exhausted, Olivia could barely move.

And she was scared to death as she lay in a dark, smelly enclosure, a cage deep inside a boat of some kind.

This madwoman Petrocelli, or whatever her name was, intended to kill her. Because she was married to Rick. That’s why the other women were dead; because they’d known her husband.

No. That wasn’t quite right. All of the dead women had known Jennifer, a woman Olivia had never met.

And they were killed. Murdered. Just like you will be if you don’t find a way out of this.

Her limbs were useless, her head spinning. Though she was awake, her eyes wide open, her body still wouldn’t do what she wanted. It was as if her brain were completely disengaged from her muscles, her nerve synapses misfiring.

Oh, God, how had she been so stupid to have trusted the woman? Why hadn’t she checked her ID more carefully? Surely her captor, this lunatic, wasn’t a real police officer with LAPD.

How do you know that? Cops can go crazy, and Petrocelli might just be the psycho.

It didn’t matter. Whoever her abductor was, she was deadly.
Earlier, as she’d been yanked from the car and slipped into the sleeping bag, Olivia had gotten a glimpse of a dark street and looming buildings in an area that smelled of the sea. She had heard her attacker grunting and puffing with exertion as she had lifted Olivia into what seemed to be a cart of some kind. A cart with at least one creaky wheel.

Olivia had tried to yell, to scream, to flail her arms and legs, hoping to either hit her assailant or to attract the attention of anyone who passed by.

But her brain hadn’t been able to force her body to move, hadn’t been able to issue any commands her muscles would obey. The stun gun’s jolt had knocked her senseless, rendered her useless. She’d thought of the baby inside her…Oh, dear God, had it survived the surge of voltage that had rendered her helpless? I’m sorry, she thought, Oh, I’m so, so sorry.

The cart bumped and jangled, her attacker breathing hard as she was rolled over a rough surface. Listening, she heard a jet rumble overhead and then the blast of a foghorn from a boat.

Trying to think, working to pull together her shattered thoughts, Olivia attempted to figure out her surroundings, but it was so dark, so claustrophobic, so damned hot in the sleeping bag, she was having trouble breathing.

Think, Olivia. Don’t give up. You’ve been in tight spots before and when the shock to your system wears off, you can use your hands; at least they’re cuffed in front of you. Don’t give up. Don’t let fear paralyze you. Think of the baby, of Rick. You can’t stop fighting.

Pull it together. There has to be a way!

The surface under the wheels changed, and the cart rolled more smoothly. Then she was hauled upward and, still in the sleeping bag, dropped to a hard surface before being dragged downstairs. It took all her willpower to curl slightly, protecting her abdomen with her flimsy arms. Protecting her baby…

“You could stand to lose a few pounds, you know,” her captor muttered.

At the bottom of the steps, Olivia was dragged for a short distance, then released onto the floor. Through the thick fibers of the sleeping bag she smelled something acrid and foul…urine?

“Welcome home,” the woman taunted with a smug tone in her voice. She was breathing hard from the exertion.

Olivia heard metal jangling. Keys? She strained to listen, all the while flailing wildly as she worked her way to the top of the sleeping bag. Her wrists were still bound, her mouth taped. Frantically, breathing with difficulty, she was able to reach upward in the bag, her fingers slowly and unwillingly tracing the trail of closed zipper teeth to the top, where she found the inside tab and started tugging downward. Time and time again her fingers slipped, her body still not responding to her brain’s commands, her nerves jangled and jumpy, closing in on a full blown panic.

Don’t stop. Work at it. The taser won’t last much longer.

Finally, she pulled hard, lowering her body, dragging the tab, forcing the clenched teeth of the zipper to part.

Tough!

Olivia wasn’t giving up without a fight.

She kept tugging, pulling on the tab until a rush of urine-tinged air stung her nostrils. The bag opened to reveal the hold of a boat. One lamp gave the room a weird yellow aura, showing Olivia that she was trapped inside a cage with steel bars from ceiling to floor. A cage for animals, judging from the smell and bits of straw wedged into the floorboards. An empty bucket was pushed into one corner near a jug of water. Obviously for her, she thought, her insides turning to ice.

A barred gate was the only access into the cage. As Olivia watched in dull horror the woman who had abducted
her inserted a key and locked her inside.

*Click!*

To Olivia, it sounded like the very knell of death.

“Fool,” the woman said and pulled off a blond wig.

“Make yourself comfortable. You’re going to be here for a while.”

*Good.* Olivia would rather be alone to plot her escape.

As if reading her thoughts, her captor said, “Oh, and you can work like the devil to take off your gag so you can scream at the top of your lungs, but it doesn’t matter. No one will ever hear you down here.”

She smiled almost beatifically, and fear clamored in Olivia’s chest.

How long did the madwoman plan to keep her here? A day? Two? A week? Forever?

And what then? Surely this wasn’t an elaborate kidnapping. No. Olivia knew the harsh truth; her abductor planned to kill her. And her baby. Oh, dear Lord. It was only a matter of time.

“I wonder what your husband is doing, Olivia? If he’s figured out that you’re missing.” The woman seemed to extract a deep-rooted satisfaction from that thought.

“Oh, I see.” the nut case was saying, “You think he’s a hero. Made a name for himself in New Orleans as some kind of ace detective, didn’t he? Fooled everyone. Every-damned-one.” She was getting agitated now, her eyes glittering with hatred. “I don’t want to burst your bubble about that fantasy of living happily ever after with your hero. But the truth of the matter is that Rick Bentz is a prick. A has-been cop and not even a good one at that. He killed a kid, did he tell you that?” Her eyebrows lifted as she practically oozed satisfaction over the chance to rant about Bentz to a rapt, captive audience.

“Your husband is a loser, Olivia. And you? It’s just your dumb luck that you married him. Wanna know why? Because your husband is such a major fuck-up, you get to pay the price. You and the others.”

Then, glancing at her watch, she swore and seemed to panic. She searched the hull for a second, lifted a gas can from the rubble, and smiled. “A little no-no I had hidden.”

Olivia wanted to rip her to shreds. Now, she forced herself to deal with the maniac.

“Your husband is a loser, Olivia. And you? It’s just your dumb luck that you married him. Wanna know why? Because your husband is such a major fuck-up, you get to pay the price. You and the others.”

Then, glancing at her watch, she swore and seemed to panic. She searched the hull for a second, lifted a gas can from the rubble, and smiled. “A little no-no I had hidden.”

Olivia’s fear turned to sheer terror.

This maniac was going to set fire to the boat!

While she was trapped inside.

“No,” Olivia sputtered behind the tape. “No!” Angrily, she pulled her hands to her face, scratched at the duct tape until she’d lifted a corner. Then, willing her fingers to work, she yanked the tape off her mouth, peeling skin from her cheeks and lips. “No!” she cried again, but her captor ignored her pleas and hurried up the stairs, her footsteps ringing on the metal rungs.

*Oh, God, oh, God, oh God!*

“Don’t do this!” she cried.

At the top of the stairs, the woman hesitated for a second. Had she heard Olivia’s pleas? Was she considering giving in to them?

“Please!” Olivia screamed, desperate.
Then she heard the madwoman say, “Screw it!”

Oh, no! Sheer terror coursing through her veins, Olivia screamed and pulled on the gate, hoping to open it. But her hands slipped, her motor skills still affected by the shock. “No! Please.”

With a click, the woman flipped a switch.

The lights went out.

Olivia’s prison and the entire hull of the boat was suddenly black as pitch.

A door clanged shut.

Tears rolled down her face.

Olivia waited for the sound of liquid being splashed above, for the horrendous whoosh as a match was tossed and hungry flames ignited.

But there was only silence.
Hayes figured he was in for a long night as he drove to Encino. While Bentz and Martinez stared at the passing landscape, he called Corrine and bagged out of their late-night plans. Corrine had known he’d be working late and had suggested that he come over and crash at her place. Normally a good idea, but now that he had no idea what time he’d be done, he let her off the hook.

“You’re working overtime again?” He heard the irritation in her voice, hoped the others in the car couldn’t hear her. “I guess I’ll take a rain check. Again.”

Corrine wasn’t happy, but there was nothing he could do about it now, on his way to Encino with two other detectives in the car.

He didn’t like making personal calls in front of other cops. Martinez and Bentz had tactfully looked the other way, but it was awkward. Especially since Corrine used to be hooked up with Bentz. Still, it was a choice of call while he was working the case, or not call at all.

That’s what happens when you have no life, Hayes thought as he took the exit for Encino. “Let’s hope Yolanda and Sebastian Salazar are home,” he said. A few blocks off Ventura Boulevard, the houses were small and compact, single-story, post–World War II, with big yards where the grass was beginning to turn brown.

The Salazars lived on a corner lot, the stucco covering their house painted a light color that resembled ash in the bluish glow from the streetlights. A large chain-link fence circled the side yard, where a sign in bold letters read: BEWARE OF DOG.

“Great.” Martinez shrank into the front seat. “I hate dogs.”

Hayes scowled. “How can you hate dogs?”

“Got bitten as a kid. Had to have plastic surgery and a lot of physical therapy. Harriet, the neighbors’ dachshund. Nasty little thing.”

“You can’t judge all dogs by Harriet.”

“Wanna bet?” she said as Hayes cut the engine.

“You know that they smell your fear, Martinez,” Bentz persisted. “As long as you’re afraid of them, you won’t be able to go near them.”

“Fine with me,” she said. “I’m happy to keep my distance.”

Before they opened the Toyota’s doors the dog in question began barking and snarling wildly from the other side of the fence. The furious creature was black and tan, with jaws as wide as Arkansas and teeth that flashed angrily. A Rottweiler mix from the looks of him, Hayes guessed.

“Oh, yeah, he’s gonna be a real sweetheart, this one.” Martinez’s hand was frozen on the door handle. “Let’s just call him Fluffy.”

In his rearview mirror, Hayes saw Bentz starting to get out of the backseat.
“Don’t even think about it,” Hayes told him. He couldn’t have Bentz go off half-cocked. As far as Hayes was concerned Bentz was advising on the case, nothing more. Although he didn’t side with Andrew Bledsoe and Dawn Rankin, who had insinuated that Bentz was somehow involved in the murders, he couldn’t allow Bentz to investigate for the LAPD. Bentz was no longer on the payroll here, and it would seriously compromise the case. He probably shouldn’t even have brought him here, but Hayes had to give the guy some credit. So far, Bentz had been the only one to make some real headway in this case.

Hayes barely glanced at the side yard as the dog created a ruckus loud enough to wake the dead. From the back of the house a man yelled, “Rufus! You hush!”

Rufus ignored the command. If anything, the big dog seemed more agitated than ever, running in circles and drooling anxiously as he kept up his incessant barking. Judging by the lack of grass on Rufus’s side of the fence, this wasn’t a new routine.

“So much for the element of surprise,” Hayes said under his breath.

Martinez glanced at the fence. “Let’s just hope the gate holds.”

As they reached the porch, a light over the door flipped on and the cement steps were bathed in a fake yellow glow. The door opened, leaving the grillwork of a screen door separating them from a slim woman with dark hair falling past her shoulders. She was wearing a white tank top, orange capris, and a bad-ass expression.

Hayes recognized Yolanda Salazar from the information Montoya had sent over. Her driver’s license didn’t do her justice; she was a helluva lot prettier in person, even in her bad mood.

“Can I help you?” she asked without a smile.

“I’m Detective Hayes, this is my partner, Detective Martinez, with the Los Angeles Police Department.” They showed their badges. “Are you Yolanda Salazar?”

A slight hesitation, then she nodded, barely moving her head. “Why are you here?”

“We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“About what?” In that instant her anger fled, to be replaced by fear. “Fernando? Is it my brother? Oh, Dios, don’t tell me he’s hurt or in trouble.” Without thinking she made a quick sign of the cross over her chest.

“No, nothing like that,” Hayes assured her. “We need to ask you about a car that you own, a 1999 Silver Chevrolet Impala, registered to Ramona Salazar.”

“Hey, is something wrong?” From within the house a man appeared. He was twice her size, all muscle and brawn, his tight T-shirt stretched over the broad span of his shoulders. His denim shorts hung low, almost falling off his slim hips. “What’s going on?”

“It’s the police,” she said, casting her husband a fearful look.

“You’re Sebastian Salazar?” Martinez asked.

“That’s right.” His accent was thick.

“We’re here to ask your wife a few questions about a car that belongs to her.”

Sebastian flinched. He turned to his wife and said something in rapid-fire Spanish that Hayes didn’t catch, but he figured Martinez might understand.

“Can we come in?” Martinez asked.

Husband and wife looked at each other, then Sebastian muttered something in Spanish before opening the door.
“Please,” he said, white teeth flashing beneath a thick moustache. “Have a seat.” He waved them into matching chairs.

Remaining at the door, Yolanda peered out curiously. “Is your friend coming in?”

Glancing over his shoulder, Hayes suppressed a groan. Bentz was out of the car, standing in the pool of light at the chain-link fence, murmuring something to Rufus, who had finally stopped barking. “He’s fine out there,” Hayes said, trying to distract Yolanda Salazar. “Sorry to bother you, but if you could just—”

“Wait a minute.” Yolanda’s eyes were cold, black pebbles as her face hardened into a scowl. “Sebastian!” She motioned him toward the door, a stream of Spanish erupting between them. “Bastardo!” she hissed.

Alarmed, Sebastian crossed to the door and gaped at the atrocity his wife indicated.

Hayes ground his teeth together, knowing what this was all about. Bentz.

Yolanda wheeled on Hayes and Martinez. “Get out of my house! You bring a baby killer into my home? The hombre who killed my brother? Shot him dead?” She pointed an accusing finger to the street. “He is the cop who shot Mario, a twelve-year-old boy! An innocent.” Her upper lip curled into a snarl of distaste. “Leave now,” she insisted. And then, to Hayes’s horror, she flew out the door.

Pacing along the chain-link fence, Bentz was on the phone. “…I think her name was Judd. Yolanda Judd,” he said to Montoya as Yolanda herself burst out of the house. Bare feet flying, she cut across the yard and lunged toward him. “Baby killer!” she accused. “What are you doing here?”

Hayes and Martinez were on her heels with a big guy, most likely her husband, following.

“I’ll call you back,” he said to Montoya and hung up.

“Can’t you leave us in peace? Isn’t it enough that you killed my baby brother and ruined my mother’s life?” she said as Bentz swung around to face her.

She spat then, hitting him square in the face.

Bentz’s hands clenched into fists. Crazy bitch! He could barely contain his fury.

“Back off!” Hayes shouted. He waved Bentz toward the car, motioning for him to return to the backseat in a feeble attempt to defuse the situation. “Mrs. Salazar, we just need to ask you some questions about your car,” he insisted to Yolanda.

“Then why is he here?” She hooked a finger at Bentz as he wiped his face.

Certainly not to endure your abuse, Bentz wanted to say.

“Do you know where your car is now?” Hayes stepped between Yolanda and Bentz.

“With Fernando…oh, Dios. Fernando. Where is he?” Her anger appeared to morph into genuine fear.

“I don’t know, Mrs. Salazar. But we have your vehicle.”

“Where?” She seemed stunned.

“At the police lot. We’re looking through it for evidence.”

“Evidence of what?”

“It could be linked to three homicides.”
“What?” She glanced at Bentz, but some of her hostility had evaporated. “Homicides?”

“That’s right. Who usually drives the car?”

“I— I do.”

Hayes looked at the driveway where a pickup with a canopy was parked beside a shiny Lexus. “Who drives those?”

“The Nissan truck is mine,” the husband said and Yolanda sent him a withering look. “Yolanda drives the Lexus. We use the Chevy as an extra car, bought it from Carlos because it was a good deal. Lately Fernando has been borrowing it.”

“He lives here?” Martinez asked.

Yolanda’s lips pinched in disapproval, but Sebastian nodded and answered, “Most of the time.”

“Does he have another vehicle?” Martinez had taken out a small notepad and was jotting down the information.

“His Blazer is in the shop; needs a new transmission. He hasn’t decided if it’s worth it yet.”

“Where’s Fernando now?” Martinez asked, risking a look at the dog, who was now standing on his hind legs and digging at the meshed steel of the fence.

“I don’t know.” Yolanda shot a nervous glance up the street, as if she expected her brother to appear at any second.

“Is he at work?” Martinez asked.

“School,” Sebastian said, wrapping a big arm around Yolanda’s shoulders. “He takes night classes at the junior college. Like my wife. He usually comes home after work at the restaurant, The Blue Burro, but today he didn’t. Called and said he was going straight to school.”

“You got a phone number for him?”

“No!” Yolanda said, obviously scared, but Sebastian placed a hand on the back of her neck and rubbed it as he gave Martinez the number.

“Damn it, Sebastian!” Yolanda said, pushing his hand away.

Her husband wasn’t put off. “If he’s in trouble, we need to know about it.”

Hayes tried a different tack. “Does Fernando have a girlfriend? Anyone he would loan the car to?”

“No one serious,” she said.

Sebastian scowled. “Fernando, he knows lots of girls. But I don’t know about loaning the car to any of them. He should know better than that, you know? The car, it belongs to my wife.”

Hayes asked, “Do you know a woman named Jennifer Bentz?” When Yolanda shrugged, he continued. “Come on back inside, I have some pictures I’d like you to see.”

Yolanda shot Bentz one last hateful glance, then begrudgingly returned to the house.

Still seething, Bentz climbed into the back of the Toyota, leaving the door open so that a breeze slid into the car.

He wondered about Yolanda and the damned car.

She hadn’t been driving it earlier today.
Nor had Fernando.

But Fernando Valdez was the next person on Bentz’s list to interview.

Despite Hayes’s warning, he put in a call to the phone number, but Fernando didn’t pick up.

Bentz leaned against the seat, wondering if Yolanda was telling the truth. Something he doubted. He watched a bicyclist in reflective gear whiz past while a cat in a neighboring yard slunk through the shrubbery, hunting.

Meanwhile, Rufus had settled down to whining and pacing.

Bentz used his cell phone to reserve another rental car. He also called the So-Cal Inn, hoping against hope that Olivia might have slipped through the cracks and come looking for him there.

No such luck, of course.

He rented another room, one facing the interior pool this time, and gave Rebecca specific instructions to phone him if she heard from his wife. It was a long shot, of course, but he had to cover all his bases, even the most obscure.

Twenty minutes later, Hayes and Martinez were emerging from the house when Bentz’s phone rang. He picked it up, hoping to see Olivia’s number on the screen. Instead he saw Montoya’s.

“Bentz.”

“You were right,” Montoya said. “I pulled up some records on Yolanda Valdez in Los Angeles County, dug a little deeper, and it seems that she was married to an Erik Judd for a short period of time. Erik was a roofer and he had an accident; fell four stories and died before the divorce was final.”

“They were getting a divorce?”

“Had filed the papers.”

“How do you know this?” Bentz said, looking outside to the night. No county offices would be open.

“You just have to know what you’re doing, who to call, and how to work the Internet. Public records can be located.”

“If you say so.”

“I do, and the kicker is this: He had a five hundred thousand dollar insurance policy on him. Half a million. The beneficiary, none other than his soon to be ex-wife.”

“Anything fishy about the accident?”

“The insurance company didn’t balk. According to bank records, Yolanda owns her house in Encino outright and still has eighty thousand in the bank.” Montoya sounded pleased with himself. “No student loans for this girl.”

“Thanks,” Bentz said. “Now, do me a favor. Find out what you can about the brother, Fernando Valdez. He’s been using the car that Jennifer was driving. I think he lives with his sister and brother-in-law, but right now he’s MIA.”

“I’ll see what I can find.”

“Thanks.”

“You owe me a beer…. No, wait, I think the debt is more than that. You’re up to half a case already.”

“I’m good for it,” Bentz said. “You haven’t heard from Olivia, have you?”
“No. Why? Didn’t she show up?”

“Nope. She landed at LAX. We talked on the phone. She was meeting Officer Petrocelli and I haven’t heard from her since.”

“You’re sure she was on the plane? If she was on her cell, she could have been anywhere.”

“Yeah. I checked with the airline.”

“So what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Bentz admitted, refusing to be defeated. “But I’ll find her.”

“Of course you will, man,” Montoya said but there was an undercurrent of worry in his voice, one that was echoed in Bentz’s own fears.

I have to work quickly, and I’m getting a little rattled. I feel it and I don’t like it. It’s not that I’m not fast on my feet; it’s that I prefer to have everything worked out to the finest little detail. That’s why it’s taken twelve years to execute this plan. Twelve, long, torturous years.

I can’t blow it now, I think, stripping off my clothes in a cabin on the boat and seeing my reflection in the slim mirror. I’m in good shape, better than anyone would guess or know, and I give myself credit. It’s taken years to hone my muscles, to look just how I want.

Like so many things in my life, my strength and appearance took patience, timing, and determination. I didn’t give up cigarettes for nothing.

Sometimes, unfortunately, it’s necessary to take chances, to react to the moment. It’s nerve-racking, I admit as I stuff my hair into a baseball cap. So after those risky moments, I just have to gain my equilibrium again, retain my focus, remember my ultimate goal.

I pull on my running pants and zip up my jacket, then sneak off the craft. No one’s around at this hour, so I slip into the car unnoticed.

In the backseat, Sherry is all ready to go. Her clothes, badge, and purse sit beside her. “It’s very quiet back there,” I tell her.

Checking the rearview mirror, breathing slowly, I drive to a dead-end street about a mile from the restaurant where I met Sherry earlier. She and I go way back and it was a shame she had to be sacrificed, but the truth of the matter is that she always bothered me, a cop without any grit.

I park in a back alley and wipe off the areas where I might have left prints when I drove her away from the restaurant. I drop the latex gloves onto the backseat, douse it all generously with gasoline, and strike a match.

Hisssss!

The little flame glows bright for a second and I toss it through the open window onto the gloves. Combustion! The backseat ignites, burning quickly, setting the entire vehicle aflame.

Perfect, I think, starting to run when I see him. A guy on a motorcycle, cutting down the street behind me.

Oh, hell. My pulse skyrockets. Sweat beads on my forehead and hands. What if he saw me at the car? What if he can describe me? What if…

Calm down! He didn’t see you. He might find the burning car, but that’s what you want, remember? Just keep running.
Spurred by my own pep talk, I head out, cutting down back alleys, jogging at my regular pace, fast enough, considering everything I’ve been through.

I’m almost at the restaurant when I hear the sirens screaming. Fire trucks. Police cars. Probably a rescue vehicle. “Have at it,” I say as I spy my own car parked in an alley several blocks from the restaurant, as it has been for hours, patiently waiting.

I drive home without a hitch. After stripping off my running clothes and tossing them into the washer, I take a long warm shower, giving myself a little time to think about Bentz and how he’s suffering now. He’s sick with worry about his precious little wife. He’s all messed up about his dead one.

“Having fun yet, RJ?” I laugh while the steam rolls through the bathroom. As I shampoo my hair, then wash my body, my mind seizes on my next move, tomorrow’s plan. Bentz is in for a few more heart attacks before I’m done. Olivia is going to die...oh, yes, I think, running the loofah over my back and down my arms, inhaling the scented soap. But before she bites it, I want Bentz to twist in the wind until he nearly breaks.

I scrub my feet, then let the warm water cascade over me, washing away all traces of dirt, grime, and sweat. Finally, I step out of the shower and towel off, thinking of Olivia rotting in the bowels of the boat, scared to death, probably screaming her lungs out to no avail.

Didn’t I tell her not to waste her time? After grabbing my robe from the hook on the back of the bathroom door, I throw it on and cinch the waist.

Now, time for the news. I walk to the living area with a quick pause at the refrigerator where I find a chilled pitcher of martinis waiting for me. I drop two olives in my stemmed glass, pour the cool concoction over them, and settle in the living area where I click on the television. There should be a lead in with “breaking news” about a car fire at Marina del Rey. I cross my legs and wait and see a familiar face on the screen.

Donovan Caldwell, that whiner, is being interviewed about the most recent double homicide—the Springer twins. He and the reporter are seated in a studio, backdropped by a huge screen upon which pictures of the two sets of twins are displayed. Four girls, their eyes wide as puppies’.

An obvious tug at the viewers’ heartstrings.

The reporter, a young woman with dark hair, huge eyes, and a concerned expression asks, “Do you think the killer who murdered your sisters is also responsible for the latest double homicide?”

“That’s exactly my contention,” he says fervently, an irate brother jabbing the air passionately. He’s a small, fit man in an Izod golf shirt and khaki pants. A perfect little goatee covers his chin and a faux-hawk of dirty blond hair keeps him “hip.” But he’s not out to impress anyone with his looks. No, he’s upset and flushed, all bristly anger. “I’m saying that if the LAPD had done its job right the first time and arrested the killer who murdered my sisters, two other lives wouldn’t have been lost.”

The camera zooms in on the victims, pretty girls with smiles so full of life.

“Oh, wah, wah, waah.” I take another cool, calming sip and search for another channel with my remote. Of course I realize that the dead twins are news, but they’re old news. Especially those Caldwell girls. They’ve been dead for over a decade...ancient history. And the little prick on the screen bugs the hell out of me. The nerve—grabbing my headlines. And that crack about the police department. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

I stare at the television and take a swallow.

Let’s get to the good stuff.

Where in the hell is the reporter who should be covering the car fire on the streets of Marina del Rey?

That’s the only story worth my time.
CHAPTER 33

“We need to find Fernando,” Bentz said as Hayes drove back to the Center to drop off Martinez before taking Bentz to pick up his rental car. “I put in a call to him, but he didn’t pick up.”

“I thought I told you to back off.” Hayes was irritated. “This is my case.”

“And my wife.” Bentz was equally upset, worried sick.

“I know.” Hayes sighed, loosening the tie at his neck. “We’ll put a tail on Yolanda as well as watch the house for Fernando.”

“I’ll check with his job and school,” Martinez said. “We’ll try to track what he did today,” she was saying when Hayes’s phone rang again and he took the call.

In the backseat, Bentz was quietly going out of his mind, trying to piece together the disjointed case. Though it had started out with him being lured to Los Angeles in search of his first wife, it now involved Olivia, he was certain of it. And now finding her was his number one priority. But with no leads to go on he figured the best way he could find her was through working this case, tracking down the person who obviously had a vendetta against him.

If he could pull his emotions out of it and study what was happening with a cool, cop’s eye rather than his own passionate ardor, he could see that he was at the center of the case in the eye of a murderous hurricane. The person behind it all, the mastermind of the operation, was targeting Bentz.

From the ongoing investigations, the LAPD could find no reason for either Lorraine Newell or Shana McIntyre to be murdered individually; the link was Bentz. Though it was too early for the police to connect Fortuna Esperanzo, Bentz knew the deal. She wasn’t left in the ocean in clothes identical to those that “Jennifer” had been wearing because she’d decided to go swimming. No, she’d been murdered, and the killer wanted to make certain that Bentz knew Fortuna had been a target, linked to this mess with Jennifer.

However if the woman who looked so much like his ex-wife were behind it all, then why hadn’t it all come to a head earlier today, before she’d leapt into the ocean? Why risk her life? And how could she have been at the airport at the same time Fortuna had been dumped into the ocean?

Everything that had happened had taken calculation. Patience. Long-term planning.

Someone who held a very personal grudge was playing him, had spent years creating the perfect scenario. He discounted anyone he’d sent to prison. Most of those guys, if they had escaped or been released, would have run in the opposite direction as far and as fast as they could go. If they wanted to satisfy a grudge, they would have killed him and been done with it. Whoever was behind this string of horrifying events was getting off on his torture, watching him take the bait of Jennifer over and over again.

And that fact made his blood congeal. Yolanda Salazar?

Did she have the burning hatred to serve up her revenge ice cold? It didn’t seem so. She seemed too much of a hothead, as witnessed by her act of spitting on him. She’d been scared and angry, but that wasn’t the reaction Bentz expected from the killer.

So if not Yolanda, who?
What about someone close to the Caldwell twins?

Maybe this is the old “eye for an eye” thing.

Again, he was stopped by the killer’s intimate knowledge of his ex-wife, of his relationship with her.

And now…Olivia was missing. Someone had the balls to call her and taunt her until she felt compelled to fly to L.A. That took confidence. Knowledge. And pure damned luck. How did the killer know Olivia would hop a plane?

Because whoever is behind this knows everything about you, about your life, about your wife. Damn it all, Bentz, this is your fault. Yours.

Absently he rubbed his leg as it had been aching since the chase down Devil’s Caldron. He felt like a fool, following some woman down the ridge. Chasing an elusive truth while his wife had felt obligated to fly to California to reconnect with him, her ever-distant husband. Hadn’t she mentioned they needed to talk? Hadn’t he, too, felt the rift in their marriage?

Guilt tore a hole in his heart and all their arguments now seemed petty. Stupid! Even the one about kids. Hell, if she wanted kids, he’d give her a whole passel of them.

If he got the chance.

Hayes hung up. “We’re not going back to the Center yet.”

“What’s up?” Martinez asked.

Hayes frowned, searching for the next exit. “Someone torched Sherry Petrocelli’s car.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Martinez pressed her face in her hands.

“It gets worse. Looks like they found a body in the backseat.”

“What? No!” Bentz shouted, coming up in his seat so fast, his seat belt clenched around him. Sick inside, rage and fear burning through him, he thought of Olivia. Beautiful, fun-loving, wickedly smart Olivia. Oh, God, please, no! He could hardly draw a breath. “Swear to God, Hayes, if something’s happened to Olivia, if she’s the person in that car—” He couldn’t finish the sentence, couldn’t think. Dread tore at his soul as the miles sped by and Hayes, breaking every speed limit, sped toward Marina del Rey, where the fire had been reported.

Bentz tried to calm himself. It’s not Olivia. It’s not Olivia. She’s alive and well. Somewhere. It’s not Olivia!

But he was frantic, fear eating him from the inside out.

The street was cordoned off, police barricades in place. Two fire trucks idled, their hoses snaking over the wet pavement, water running in sooty rivulets to the gutters. The blackened shell of a car still smoldered while the horrid stench of burnt rubber, melted plastic, and, worse, charred flesh filled the air.

Bentz flew out of Hayes’s 4Runner the minute it stopped. Ignoring the barrier, he found a policeman in charge and demanded, “The body inside the vehicle. Who is it?” he demanded, frantic. Oh, dear God…

“Who the hell are you?”

Bentz pulled out his badge just as Hayes and Martinez showed up and identified themselves. Satisfied, the officer said, “We don’t know. The body’s already been taken to the morgue, but I gotta tell ya, it’ll be hard to make an ID.”

Bentz thought he might be sick. “A woman?” he asked.

“We think so. There was ID with her, most of it consumed in the fire, but she had a badge with her. It’s pretty blackened, but I already checked the numbers. It belongs to the owner of the car, Officer Sherry Petrocelli. I’m thinking it’s her body we found in the backseat.”
Bentz nearly sank to the ground in relief. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists, trying to get a grip on his own sanity. Desperately he clung to a thread of hope that Olivia hadn’t met such a horrible, grisly end.

Yet, with that relief came an onslaught of guilt. Someone had died tonight. If not Sherry Petrocelli, then some other woman who had parents, possibly children, a husband, or friends who loved her. And he knew, deep down, that the victim was dead because of him. Because of his ego, his obsession with his first wife. His tunnel vision about Jennifer had brought death to several women and thrust his wife into harm’s way. Someone had personally damned him to a living hell.

“I have to see,” he said to Hayes, his voice rough, his teeth clenched.

“What?”

“I have to see the body.”

“You’re sure about this?” Hayes obviously disagreed. Shook his head.

“I need to know, Jonas. You understand.”

“No I don’t. For the love of God, Bentz, this ain’t gonna be pretty.” Hayes was still shaking his head, then seemed to realize he wasn’t going to dissuade his mule-headed friend. “All right, I’ll take you. But, for the record, I think this is a big mistake. Shit man. Oh, hell. We’ll do it and afterward, then we’ll pick up the rental and you can go back to the motel and get some sleep. You look like hell.”

At the morgue, the Assistant Coroner tried to warn them. Her preliminary examination indicated that the Jane Doe’s fingerprints had been burned beyond recognition. Eighty percent of the body had been charred, and there were no visible scars or tattoos. “We’ll probably use dental records to confirm her ID,” she said.

Still, Bentz had to see for himself.

The attendant, a different one from the person who’d pulled back the sheet on Fortuna Esperanzo hours before, waited for a sign from Hayes.

Bentz braced himself as a thunderous sound like a train in a tunnel roared through his brain. Powered by dread, it clamored down his spine and caused the back of his throat to turn to dust. What if he were wrong? What if the stiff, blackened body hidden by the thin sheet was actually Olivia? Oh God, no! He nearly backed down, but clenched his fists and set his jaw.

With a nod from Hayes, the attendant drew back the cover.

“Oh, shit,” Martinez said and turned away.

Hayes winced.

Bentz’s stomach roiled at the sight of burned flesh and white, staring eyes. Singed hair surrounded a nearly unrecognizable face. Teeth visible through blackened burned lips.

“Not Olivia,” Bentz said, swallowing back the bile rising in his throat. He was certain. Felt relief tinged with guilt. Thank God she hadn’t suffered the fear and pain this poor woman had endured.

“It’s Petrocelli,” Hayes said. “Officer Sherry Petrocelli. Oh, man, I wasn’t expecting that.” He was shaken, his lips flat against his teeth as he motioned for the attendant to cover the scorched remains again. “I know they found her ID, but somehow I didn’t believe it.” Hayes wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of one hand. “Her husband needs to know. I guess I’d better make the notification.”

“I’ll go with you,” Martinez offered, casting a horrified glance at the draped gurney as it was rolled away. “What a friggin’ nightmare. I hope to holy hell she was already dead when that car was ignited.”
“Amen,” Hayes agreed. He took one last look at the gurney then said, “Come on, let’s get out of here. I’ll take you to pick up that car if the rental place is still open. Then Martinez and I will go and give Jerry Petrocelli the bad news.” He let out a long sigh. “God I hate this.”

“You and me both,” Martinez said.

The pink light of dawn was just streaking through the small port-hole in the hull of the ship, a tiny window Olivia hadn’t noticed until daylight began to stream into the foul place. Vermin had taken over the boat during the night. The sounds of tiny feet on the floorboards and claws scratching at the wood had accompanied the creaks and moans of the boat moving slightly on the water. At one time during the pre-dawn hours Olivia had thought she heard someone come aboard. But if that had been the case, no one had hurried down the stairs to either rescue or attack her, despite her yells and screams.

She’d barely slept. Her nerves had been jangled all night, expecting the boat to be ignited into a hideous conflagration that would kill her with deadly smoke, squeezing the air from her lungs, or, worse yet, burning her alive.

She couldn’t let that happen. And yet, when she closed her eyes it overcame her…the horror, the pain. She saw her skin crinkling and charring, felt her muscles and tissue consumed by hungry, excruciating flames. Her eyelashes and hair would singe as she screamed deep in the belly of this empty boat.

And no one would ever hear her.

The vision was so horrifying, so vividly real that Olivia tried to keep her eyes open. Even the grim reality of this dank, smelly hold was preferable to the images her willing mind conjured.

However, facing reality meant dealing with the inevitable. Olivia knew she would have to fight. When the time came, she would have to attack the woman who had detained her here. She’d rather take her chances against a knife or gun rather than be caged like an animal, forced to wait while the sick bitch decided her fate.

At least now, after enough hours, not only was her brain working again, but her limbs were doing what she asked of them and she felt no residual effects from the stun gun.

As the sun rose, she tried to plot her escape. She refused to be intimidated by a weapon if her abductor brandished one. Let her try.

Who was this sick, deadly woman?
What did she want?
Why was she holding Olivia prisoner?
Worse yet, what did she have planned?
Nothing good, Olivia knew that much.
And that scared her to death.

Don’t let it paralyze you. Think, Olivia. Figure out how to get out of here. You’re a smart woman and there are tools available. You just have to figure out how to retrieve them, use them.

She eyed her surroundings, but they were sparse, only cluttered by bits or debris and rat droppings that confirmed the presence of tiny beasts living in the nooks and crevices of the boat. Great. She tried not to dwell on the vermin. She assumed that she was in a cargo hold of some kind, locked in a cage used for hauling animals. She was supposed to use the bucket to relieve herself, the jug for drinking water.

She hadn’t used either.
So far.

But that would change soon.

A mop hung on one of the walls, a harpoon and life vests and oars on the other. There was a built-in cabinet, the doors shut tight. Otherwise the hold was empty, bisected by the narrow, steep stairs.

She checked the steel bars surrounding her. They were firmly attached, too strong to move, too close together to slip between. The gate, too, was solid. It wouldn’t budge without a key. She lifted her bound hands and tried to prod the pins in the hinges, but they were set firmly. She couldn’t knock them loose.

No. Right now, she was locked up tight.

And going out of her mind.

Cuffed as she was, Olivia was able to test the strength of the cage, but she couldn’t get out. She’d tried to reach through the bars to grab the spear gun or oars from the wall, but of course, it was impossible. The valuable potential weapons stared at her, taunted her.

No, she had to find another way out. If her abductor returned, which Olivia assumed she would, then Olivia had to lure her into the cage, somehow steal the keys or physically restrain her.

It wouldn’t be easy. The woman who’d abducted her was not only clever, she was tough. Athletic. Stronger than she looked, Olivia knew, by the way the woman had wrestled her into this prison of a boat.

You’ll have to outwit her. It won’t be easy, but you’ll have to feign that your spirit is broken, gain her trust, then ambush her. Do not let it slip that you’re pregnant. She’ll use the baby against you, against Bentz, so not a single word.

Whoever her captor was and whatever she wanted, the bitch had planned her revenge on Bentz, step by step.

She wouldn’t be easily duped.

But Olivia would find a way. She had no other choice.

I can’t sleep. I am too keyed up, too excited.

Now, more than ever, I can’t afford a slipup. One wrong move and everything will be for naught: all the planning, all the waiting, all the salivating at the thought of Bentz’s unraveling. Caution is the word for the day. I must look normal, as if my routine hasn’t been altered.

Just in case anyone is watching.

After staring at the clock all night long, I get up only half an hour early. I make a quick power shake for me and a sandwich for her. I would like to kill her and be done with it, but I can’t, not yet. So I have to go through the motions of keeping her alive.

I even manage to drive to the club for a quick workout, including time on the weight machines and swimming a mile in the pool. The people I swim with recognize me, nod, and chat. It reminds me how important it is to stick to the schedule. Routine is everything.

So far, nothing I’ve done appears suspicious.

I wave and talk to the few type-A early risers I know, then get on the scale and make a loud disgusted sound as I read the results. Of course, my weight is perfect, my body fat lower than most female athletes.

Afterward, though I’m anxious and eager to see how Bentz’s pathetic wife is doing, I shower and change as if I’m
not in a hurry, not rushed. But I can barely restrain myself from running to the car. I drive five miles over the limit to the storage unit, where I grab a few essentials. Checking my watch, I return to the car and race as fast as traffic will allow to the dock where the boat is moored.

People are out and about, dockworkers and fishermen predominantly, but no one is really watching me or giving me the least bit of attention. Why would they? It’s not as if I don’t belong on the boat; I’ve boarded a thousand times before.

I am pushing it time-wise, but can’t wait to see how little “Livvie” is doing. I have my taser with me, just in case she somehow gets violent. But really, she doesn’t have a prayer.

Which is perfect.

I love having that power over Bentz’s wife.

With my athletic bag slung over my shoulder, I head inside and check to make certain I’m alone. Then I climb down the staircase, my shoes ringing on the metal stairs.

She, of course, is waiting for me, sitting on the floor, and from the looks of her, I’d say had a worse night’s sleep than I did. Dark smudges underline her eyes. Her hair is a matted mess. The area around her mouth where she’s torn off the tape is still raw and red in one patch. Her clothes are wrinkled and dirty. In a nutshell: she looks like crap.

Which warms the cockles of my heart. If only her loyal husband could see her now.

Despite it all she isn’t screaming. She’s not begging or crying, which is more than a little disappointing. I’d like to break her spirit. Would love to see her grovel and plead. In fact, it’s one of my most cherished fantasies. Obviously it isn’t going to happen today.

But her time is running out. It won’t be long before she’ll be pleading for her life. Right now, it is still early. She doesn’t really know what she’s in for.

“Good morning,” I say sweetly.

“Who are you?” Defiance in her tone. Even belligerence.

“I thought you might want breakfast.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“Let’s see, I’ve got a sandwich. Peanut butter. Nontraditional for the morning meal, but it’s all I could scrape together.” As I reach in my bag I feel her rising in the cage.

“Let me out.” She’s on her feet, facing me through the bars, staring me straight in the eyes. She’s calmer than I’d expected or hoped.

I lift my chin. “I don’t think so.” What kind of idiot does she take me for?

“I won’t press charges.”

She’s serious. Desperate. Good. I like that attitude much better.

“Oh, yeah, right. I believe that,” I mock. She’s being stupid. “After all the hard work I went through to get you here, do you really think I’m just going to release you? Give me a break, you’re smarter than that.”

“Why are you doing this? Who are you? Not Sherry Petrocelli.”

“Ding!” I say, pushing an imaginary button. “Score one for the blonde in the cage.”

“What do you want from me?” she pressed. She was single-minded. Just like Bentz.
“Nothing,” I say honestly. “From you.”

“This is about my husband.”

“Bingo. Now you’re up to two right answers. Another one and you’ll be in the bonus round.”

“You think this is a joke? A game?” she asks, glaring at me as if I’m crazy, when she’s the one locked up.

“A joke? No.” I feel the boat sway a little, smell the scent of the beasts who were locked up before her. “A game? Possibly. Only I know the outcome and you, I’m afraid, don’t.”

“Fill me in.”

God, she’s ballsy! What the hell is she doing trying to get information from me? Asking questions when she should be submissive and fearful and begging for her life? I’m the one in charge. Doesn’t she get it? “You don’t need to know anything.”

“Do you know my husband?”

“RJ? Oh, yeah.”

“So you’ve been pretending to be Jennifer?”

I can’t help but laugh. Then I make a low, flat sound. “Meeeep. Sorry, you just lost. No lightning round for you! And not even lovely parting gifts. You just get to stay here. Alone. That’s your prize.” She doesn’t even break a smile, the humorless bitch. “Look I don’t have a lot of time, so I thought I’d show you something, give you something to eat, and get going. Let’s see.” I make a big deal out of looking through my bag, then slide the wrapped sandwich and a can of Dr Pepper through the bars. I’m wearing gloves, just in case something goes wrong. You can’t be too careful. I leave her miserable breakfast in the cage, but she ignores it.

Fine. If she wants to starve herself, it’s no skin off my nose.

But I’m sure her tough facade is about to crack. She’ll have more interest in the family album, I’m certain.

I open the scrapbook carefully and turn to one of my favorite pages, the Christmas section. There’s a photograph with Jennifer sitting in an overstuffed chair, Rick at her side, his hand placed possessively on her shoulder. A lit Christmas tree fills one corner of the shot and Kristi, a toddler with a big smile and a cockeyed red bow in her hair is balanced on Jennifer’s lap. “I know it’s not the holiday season, but I thought I’d share this with you.”

I lay the open album on the floor, just out of reach, on my side of the cage. She glances down disdainfully, but her hard shell cracks a little. Fear and outrage begin to show as she looks at the photos in the open album.

“What is this?” she asks in the barest of whispers. The album got to her. Finally. “Where did you get it?”

“Just something to think about,” I say.

“Why?”

“So you can see for yourself that the man you married was obsessed with his first wife. I think everyone should have a little clarity; a little understanding before they die.” I smile again. “It’s only a matter of time, you know.”

And then, while she’s still stunned, I reach into my athletic bag again and retrieve my digital camera. Aiming and shooting quickly, I catch her horrified expression.

The picture is perfect.

“Your husband? He’s going to love this shot,” I assure her, as I look at the picture I’ve captured. “Just love it.” Then, feeling victorious, I pack up my things and hurry up the stairs.
Let her think about her bleak future.

The woman was mad, Olivia thought. Cold, calculating, and mad as a hatter.

And obsessed with Bentz.

As Olivia stood imprisoned in the cage, gently rocking with the boat, fear slithered through her like a nest of tiny worms. She stared at the photo album left only a few feet from her cell. Opened to the page with the twenty-odd-year-old Christmas picture, the leather-bound volume was thick. Its plastic-coated pages had been filled with snapshots and clippings and cards, the work of an obsessed, sick mind.

Why?

Who was she?

Why was she so intent on Bentz?

Not that it mattered; the important thing was that Olivia had to escape. And soon. How, she didn’t know, but she had to find a way because she was certain that she was scheduled to die.

She just didn’t know when.

She noticed something else on the pages. Red smudges like…drops of blood? Crimson drips staining the photographs and smeared over the plastic. Oh, God. Whose blood? This maniac who held her? Or someone else’s?

Jennifer’s.

This woman is consumed with her.

No way! Jennifer was long dead.

Olivia was suddenly and violently nauseous. In an instant, she knew she was going to throw up. She scrambled across her cell and barely made it to the bucket before she retched though there was little in her stomach but acid and bile.

Again!

Her insides protested and she felt weak.

It couldn’t be morning sickness. Not like this.

No, she was certain, this had nothing to do with her pregnancy. She was reacting to the horror that had become her life.
Bentz felt as if he hadn’t slept a wink. He’d spent most of the night trying to find a clue as to what had happened to Olivia. Where she was. If she were still alive.

He’d pulled up Olivia’s cell phone records online and seen that the last call she’d taken was right after he’d spoken with her after she’d landed at the airport. No doubt the brief call was from Sherry Petrocelli’s number. He’d dialed that number just in case he was wrong, but a taped recording threw him into Petrocelli’s voice mail.

According to phone records, after the call from Petrocelli, Olivia hadn’t spoken to anyone; there were only short, one-minute calls from a couple of numbers: his and Hayes’s. “Shit,” he’d said, frustrated as hell. He’d called Hayes, given him the info, then reminded the detective that there was a G.P.S. locator in his wife’s phone.

Bentz had gotten nowhere with the cell phone company on that one; Hayes would have to use his police department influence to pry out any information he could from them.

After digging through the cell phone info, Bentz had been up most of the night on the computer, searching for anything he could find on Yolanda Salazar and Fernando Valdez. He studied the DMV photo of Fernando that Montoya had sent, wondering what the kid was up to. Most of the information Yolanda and Sebastian Salazar had given them the night before had checked out, including the name of the restaurant where her brother worked. Sebastian had told Hayes that Fernando worked the afternoon shift at the Blue Burro, and Bentz intended to pay the guy a visit later in the day. Bentz was tired of playing by the rules; he just wanted answers and he wanted them fast.

Before it was too late. If it’s not already, his mind mocked now as it had all night. In the morning, he tried to wash away the grit from his eyes and wake up his tired muscles by showering and shaving. Then he walked outside to an overcast L.A. day. It was only seven-thirty in the morning and already a thick layer of smog accompanied an unlikely chill in the air, a surprising drop in temperature. He paused at the office door and looked down the length of the porch toward the doorway of the room he’d called home for the better part of a week. In the parking lot, the blue Pontiac was missing; Spike and his owner had probably moved out. A beat-up red pickup was parked in the Pontiac’s spot.

Time marched on.

Things changed.

And Olivia was missing.

Anger mixed with fear, twisting his guts. She had to be safe; had to.

He ducked into the So-Cals’ office for a cup of coffee, then, cup in hand, walked onto the porch to make some calls. Sipping coffee that settled badly in his stomach, he phoned Montoya, who, too, had worked most of the night and had dug up some more information on the Valdez family. Apparently Fernando was a theater major, interested in writing plays, while his sister Yolanda was studying accounting. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Except for the damned car. The one that Jennifer had been driving. He hung up, not knowing much more than he had last night.

Nothing made any sense. Nothing. In a haze of misery Bentz walked to his new rental car, a white Honda hatchback. He stopped at a mini-mart and bought two doughnuts that he ate on the way to the cemetery. He couldn’t remember his last meal, but decided it had to be better than this breakfast.
The backhoe was already at work, men with shovels waiting for the big machine to do its job before they handled the final excavation by hand. Workers stood talking together in the rising fog, laughing, leaning on their shovels, telling jokes, and smoking, while Bentz felt his world collapsing around him.

As the huge machine scooped up dry earth, Bentz flashed back to the day of the funeral, when he had stood next to his grief-stricken daughter and watched as Jennifer’s coffin had been lowered into the ground. The people who had come were a blur now, but he remembered Shana and Tally. Fortuna had attended, as had Jennifer’s stepsister Lorraine, along with other family and friends. Bentz’s brother had presided over the ceremony, looking stricken and ashen. As he’d mumbled prayers, a bank of thick clouds had rolled in, blocking the sun. James had loved Jennifer, he’d said, but, though only a few mourners had known the truth, he’d loved her in ways unbefitting a man of the cloth. His vows of celibacy had choked him far more than his clerical collar ever had. Bentz had clutched Kristi’s hand and locked gazes with Alan Gray, the man Jennifer had nearly married before she’d fallen in love with Bentz and become the wife of a cop. At the burial Alan had stood back from the crowd, a millionaire who really didn’t belong. His expression had been bland and void of emotion, as if he were playing poker in a high-stakes game in Vegas. Bentz had looked away and Gray had left before the final prayer had been intoned. Bentz had thought Gray’s appearance had been odd at the time, but he had forgotten that detail.

Now, watching the back hoe extract soil from his wife’s grave was surreal, the low-laying fog making it more so. Bentz believed with all his heart that the decaying body inside the coffin belonged to his wife.

Who else?

And yet he was jittery. Tense. Expecting the worst. He began to sweat despite the cool temperature. The men with shovels were just getting to work when Hayes arrived in a tan suit that looked as pressed and crisp as if it had just come from the dry cleaners. Dark shirt and matching tie finished the outfit and complemented the polish on his shoes. Always a dandy.

“No word from your wife?” Hayes asked.

“I was hoping you knew something.”

“Working on it.” Hayes touched the knot of his tie. “Tracked down the phone with the G.P.S.,” he said.

“What?”

“No, don’t get excited. Obviously the phone was dumped. We found it in the sand beneath the Santa Monica Pier.”

“Shit!”

“We’re checking with the webcam people again. So far nothing, but it’s still early.”

Santa Monica. Again. Bentz’s guts twisted because he knew why the phone had been left there. Because of Jennifer. Because that pier and town were so much a part of her life, their life together. Whoever had kidnapped her was pointing that out, rubbing salt in the wounds, laughing at him.

“Son of a bitch.” Bentz couldn’t stop the black fury that overtook him. “Jennifer,” he spat out. “She’s playing with me.”

“It’s not Jennifer,” Hayes said, hitching his chin toward the coffin.

“I know…you know what I mean. The woman I was with in the car. She looked a lot like Jennifer. A lot, but her voice was off and she was too young, and once I was that close, I knew she wasn’t my ex-wife. But damn it, she knew so much about Jennifer…about us.” His skin crawled at the memory of kissing her, of touching her. His stomach roiled at the thought of the taste of her and how he’d been duped. Furious with himself, he tried to focus, to move on, to think like a cop, not a husband. “Okay. So the phone’s a bust, what else are you doing?”

“Backtracking mostly. Talking to people at the airport who might have seen Olivia connect with Petrocelli at
baggage claim. We’re checking security cameras at the airport and piecing together Sherry’s schedule yesterday.”

_It’s not enough_, Bentz thought. “Have you called the FBI?”

“The captain’s taking it up with—”

“It’s a kidnapping case, Hayes.”

“It hasn’t been twenty-four hours. Not that our Missing Persons Department plays by that rule.”

“I hope not. Jesus H. Christ! A police officer is dead. Along with a lot of other people. So, not only do we have kidnapping, we’ve got a serial killer on the loose. A cop-killer. I think the Feds should be involved.”

“They’re already checking into the Springer twins’ murder. We’re just not sure that all these incidents are connected,” Hayes admitted. “Bledsoe’s working that angle.”

“Great.” Bentz couldn’t stand to think that Olivia’s safety might hinge on Andrew Bledsoe’s investigative work. “What about Fernando Valdez? Have you talked to him?”

“Still trying to find him. He didn’t go back to the Salazars’ house last night. We watched.” He glanced at Bentz. “I talked to Jerry Petrocelli. He was devastated.”

“I bet,” he said, hoping to high heaven that he wouldn’t be the next husband to learn that his wife had been murdered by this whack job. Not if he could help it.

Bentz watched as the casket was carried to the van by six strong guys…so reminiscent of the burial when Jennifer was originally laid to rest. The dusty box was slid into the back of the vehicle. “At least now we’ll know if it’s Jennifer inside,” he said as the back doors of the van were slammed shut.

“It won’t take long,” Hayes said. “We’ve already received the records from her dentist. Got an expert who’s going to compare them to what we find in the skull.”

_And then what?_ Bentz wondered. No other body had washed onto the beach, so they still didn’t know what had happened to the woman who’d teased him, lured him to the cliffs, and jumped into the sea. God, why would anyone do that? Who was this woman who looked so much like Jennifer? Why was she tormenting him? And what the hell had she done with Olivia?

As if reading his mind, Hayes said, “We’ll find her.” His cell phone chimed. “Later, Bentz.” He fished the phone out of his pocket and took the call as he walked back to his 4Runner and the vehicle carrying the casket took off. Bentz was left staring into the dry, empty hole where he’d thought he’d buried his first wife forever. Even in the hazy morning light, he felt a chill snake down his spine, as if someone were watching him, unseen eyes observing his every move. He looked up and turned, searching through the fog. A human form seemed to materialize, then fade, leaves and limbs of trees shivering. Was someone watching him from the scrub brush on the other side of the fence?

He told himself that he was imagining things, that the exhumation had weirded him out, but he walked toward the area where he’d thought he’d seen the branches move. As he approached he was certain he caught a glimpse of eyes peering at him! Green eyes, so like Jennifer’s, studying him through the thick mist.

His pulse skyrocketed.

“No way,” he said between clenched teeth. But despite his denial, he had to check it out. Picking up speed, he broke into a jog, his gaze fastened on the area where he’d first caught sight of the voyeur. As he spurred himself forward, his knee and thigh protested, but he gutted it out. Upon reaching the fence, he vaulted over, landing with most of his weight on his good leg.

No one was in the scrub brush of the vacant lot. No green eyes were staring at him. But he’d been certain someone had been here, watching…waiting, anticipating that he’d be at the exhumation; someone who knew where
Olivia was.

Hell.

He pressed forward to a small copse of trees that stood still and quiet in the swirling fog. But he had seen her here, before she slipped through the sycamores and scrub brush.

A ghost in the mist.

“Where are you, you bitch?” Methodically, he searched the area, a strip of trees, grass, and brush between the cemetery and the subdivision abutting it.

He strained to listen. No twig snapped, no footstep over the sound of his own heartbeat and breathing. He heard only the sounds of muted traffic and voices from the men working on the exhumation.

Frustrated, he peered over the fence that edged the tree line and again saw nothing. No one.

No one was here, he told himself. *Just you and your paranoia. A mirage you conjured in your tired and willing brain.*

He took one last sweeping look, but found nothing.

“Hell.” He climbed over the fence again, paid no attention to the pain in his leg, and decided he was going to take the law into his own hands. He knew that Hayes and the LAPD were doing their best to locate Olivia, but they were playing by the rules, doing everything by the book, and he didn’t give a damn about what protocol should be used, or whether he was compromising the damned case.

Olivia was missing.

Maybe already dead.

Bentz wasn’t going to mess around any longer.

He’d do whatever it took to find his wife.

“Screw this.” Montoya hung up the phone. He wasn’t one to sit on the sidelines when the action was elsewhere. Bentz was in trouble, seeing ghosts, for God’s sake. Now Olivia was missing. Bentz was going even further around the bend, and there wasn’t a whole helluva lot he could do from here in New Orleans.

*So California, here I come.*

He had the next two days off anyway, and there was some leave he could use if he needed it. He didn’t even wait for the end of his shift, just told Jaskiel that he wanted to take a few hours comp time, and walked out the door.

On the way home he called Abby at work and gave her the same word. Fortunately she was cool with it.

“No what ya have to do,” she told him. “But be careful, would you? Come back in one piece. I’m not great at playing Nancy Nurse.”

“You got it.” He hung up smiling. At the house he packed a quick bag, then jumped into his Mustang again and headed to the airport.

Hayes returned to the office to find Bledsoe on a rampage, trying to build a case to nail Bentz for any and all crimes committed in L.A. and the surrounding area for the last week.

“I’m tellin’ ya,” Bledsoe reiterated when Hayes ran into him in the men’s room. “If Bentz hadn’t shown up, five people that we know of would be alive today.” He zipped up, then made a pass at the sink. “Ask the family members
of McIntyre, Newell, Esperanzo, and the Springer twins what they think.”

“T’、“They’re not cops.”

“Oh, and add Donovan Caldwell, Alan Gray, and even Bonita Unsel to the mix. I’ve talked to them all; they think Bentz is our doer.”

Hayes shook his head. “Again, not cops.”

“Unsel was.”

“With a major grudge. She and Bentz had a thing.”

“Big deal. Bentz was quite a swordsman in his day. Cut a pretty wide swath through the department.” Then with a smarmy grin Bledsoe added, “Even your girlfriend hooked up with him a few times.”

Hayes had expected the zinger; it was just Bledsoe’s style. “You talked to Alan Gray?” Hayes asked.

Bledsoe nodded. “He’s back in town. Well, back in Marina del Rey, where he’s got his yacht moored. Hates Bentz.”

“Then maybe he’s setting him up,” Hayes suggested.

“Gray has too much money and power to be bothered with a pissant nobody like Bentz.”

“Didn’t he steal Jennifer from Gray?”

“You think he cares?” Bledsoe scowled. “Alan Gray has enough girls to make Hugh Hefner jealous.”

“Don’t tell Hef,” Hayes said. “And Gray’s a competitive guy. My guess is he doesn’t like to lose. Nobody does.”

“But to wait so long? What is it…like twelve or thirteen years?”

“Longer,” Hayes said. “Jennifer was with Gray before she and Bentz were married. More like twenty-five or thirty.”

“Alan Gray has better things to do than harbor a thirty-year-old grudge. Christ, Hayes, get real.”

Hayes couldn’t help the irritation that crawled into his voice. “You and I both know that Bentz is innocent. You’re just pissed at him.” Hayes took a position in front of another urinal. “Let it go, Bledsoe. You’re a better cop than that.”

“And you’re not looking at this clearly. You’ve got blinders on, man. We’re searching the wrong direction; we should be looking at Bentz with a freakin’ electron microscope.” Bledsoe pushed open the door and stepped into the hallway as a toilet flushed.

Trinidad, newspaper tucked under his arm, emerged from the stall and glanced at the doorway. “Bledsoe’s a prick,” he said, moving to the sink to wash his hands.

“Old news, Russ.”

“But he’s a good cop. His instincts are usually right on.”

“He’s tryin’ to make a case against Bentz.”

“No, he’s not.” Trinidad reached for a towel. “He’s sayin’ look at the man more closely.” He wiped his fingers and wadded the towel, tossing it into the wastebasket with the skill of a high-school jock. “Wouldn’t hurt.” He paused. “Bentz thought he was saving my life and killed a kid. An honest mistake, but it doesn’t make me think Bentz is a saint. He’s made his share of mistakes just like the rest of us. Personally, I think some sick son of a bitch
is setting him up. That’s who we should be trying to find.”

Hayes finished peeing and shook off as Trinidad left the room. Maybe Bledsoe and Trinidad were right. There was a chance that, in his efforts to defend Bentz, Hayes hadn’t really looked at him, seen his flaws, put together a complete history of the man. He believed that someone was setting him up, he believed that it had to do with his ex-wife, and therefore it was personal.

Someone had a razor-sharp ax to grind.

It was just a matter of finding out who.

Bentz squeezed the steering wheel, trying to reaffirm the line between reality and delusion.

Had he seen Jennifer?

Was that crazy woman who dived into the ocean really still alive and taunting him, or had her vision been a figment of his tired but overactive imagination? He didn’t have an answer as he drove directly to Encino. All he knew for certain was that his last hope, that of locating Olivia through her cell phone’s G.P.S., had been destroyed.

Crushed.

He’d staked so much on the possibility of being able to locate her through her cell phone.

But he’d been wrong.

Again.

So here he was back in Encino, chasing another ancillary lead. He was tired to his bones, lack of sleep and worry eating at his guts, but he couldn’t stop. Not until he found Olivia.

The junior college that Yolanda Salazar and her brother Fernando Valdez attended was only five miles from their house in Encino. And the Blue Burro where Fernando worked stood smack-dab in the middle between home and school. It wasn’t too much of a leap to think that Fernando could walk, bike, or run to the JC, work, and home. He could also take the bus that stopped four blocks from the Salazar home, passed directly by the restaurant, and stopped at the main entrance to the college. Or, if everyone at the Salazar house was lying or hiding information, he could have easily borrowed one of the other vehicles or caught a ride with Sebastian or Yolanda.

The question was, as it had been from the moment Bentz had awakened from the coma at the hospital: who was the woman he’d seen driving Fernando’s car? Today, come hell or high water, he meant to find out. He figured he didn’t have a whole lot to lose. He was already persona non grata at the LAPD, and back in New Orleans, his job was still in question.

Besides, he didn’t give a flying fig about either; all that mattered was his wife’s safety.

He parked in the visitor lot, found the registrar’s office, and by flashing his badge and wearing his dead-serious cop face, convinced a frightened-looking girl of about twenty to give up Fernando and Yolanda’s class schedules.

With the help of the free campus maps on the counter, he was able to determine where and when both of Mario Valdez’s siblings were scheduled to be during the day. As luck would have it, he had missed the early class in Fernando’s schedule but the kid was supposed to be in Sydney Hall for an evening lecture.

Good.

Bentz planned to return before that class started.

He couldn’t wait to have a chat with the kid.
I don’t have a lot of time. It’s broad daylight, the damned fog is lifting, but I have to take the risk.

So I leave work and drive straight home, download my picture of Olivia, and print it out. I’m wearing thin gloves…no reason to get sloppy now. The result is superb. I captured the horrified expression on Olivia’s face perfectly and cropped out anything that would give a hint of where she is being held captive. All you can see are the bars of a cage and a pathetic, broken, frightened woman looking desperately at the camera.

“Phase one,” I say, pleased with myself. Then, before too much time slips by, I erase the image from my hard drive and slip the photo into a manila envelope. Rather than using up a day by mailing the picture to him, I decide it’s time to ramp things up. Push him hard. Let him know what it’s like to feel the hollowness, the despair, of losing someone he loves.

Oh, yes. Rick Bentz will soon learn what it’s like to be truly and horridly alone.

I put on my sweat pants and jacket, tuck my hair into a baseball cap, then find my running shoes and a pair of oversized sunglasses. Not the best disguise, but it will have to do. Even though the sweats will look out of place on this warm day, they help alter my shape, along with a sports bra that’s two sizes too tight. Satisfied, I scribble Rick Bentz’s name across the envelope, then drive quickly to that horrible dive of a motel where he stays in Culver City.

One sweep past the So-Cal Inn assures me he’s not in; his new rental car is not in the lot.

I park several blocks away, then, with the envelope tucked into my jacket, take off at an easy lope. Hiding my face from any traffic camera, I time the lights just right so that I barely have to slow to cross a street. When I reach the corner near the motel, I cut across the parking lot and drop the envelope at the door of the office. From the corner of my eye I see a kid at the desk, but he’s not paying any attention to what goes on beyond the television screen mounted in the corner.

I feel a rush of anticipation as I jog back to the car. From there, I find a place to fill up with gas. I duck into their restroom to change into work clothes. Looking in the cracked, dull mirror, I fluff my hair and pat on some powder to hide the fact that my cheeks are flushed.

Then I pay for the gas with cash, climb into my car, and head back to work. For the first time in years, I long for a cigarette, just to calm my nerves, but I ignore the craving.

How I would love to make a swing by the motel to make certain that stupid kid sees the package. But I restrain myself. No reason to take any unnecessary chances.

I only wish I could be a fly on the wall when Bentz opens the envelope. Oh, dear God, his expression will be priceless!
CHAPTER 35

Bentz was on the road when he got the call. Caller ID flashed the number and name of the So-Cal Inn. “Bentz.”

“Hi, this is Rebecca, the manager of the So-Cal. You asked me to call you if anything odd happened?”

Bentz’s free hand gripped the wheel. “Yeah.”

“We found a package with your name on it at the front door.”

“A package?” he repeated.

“Well, an envelope. You know one of those manila things. Around eight by eleven. I thought you might have dropped it when you left.”

“No.” He thought about the last manila envelope he’d received with pictures of Jennifer and a marred death certificate. He didn’t doubt for a second that whatever was in this one, too, had come from the same source. “Hold on to it. Don’t open it and I’ll be right there. Ten minutes, fifteen tops.” He searched for an exit, switched lanes, and sped to the next off-ramp, barely slowing as he left the freeway until he hit the red light at the cross street.

Another set of pictures? More documents? Oh, Jesus…please let this be about Jennifer, not Olivia.

His guts were grinding, his fingers tapping nervously on the steering wheel.

What now? Just what the hell now?

As soon as it turned green, he made a quick left turn under the freeway, swinging around to the southbound entrance of the 405. The light was with him and he gunned it.

He knew he hadn’t dropped an envelope or anything else at the motel.

So someone had left him a surprise, this time without mailing it. “Son of a bitch.”

Whoever was behind all this madness was getting bolder.

He couldn’t shake the feeling that this time the packet had something to do with Olivia. A ransom request? Or worse? His heart nosedived and he wasn’t able to drive fast enough to eat up the miles to the Culver City exit. Time seemed to stand still and dread burned a hole in his stomach but ten minutes after taking the call, he pulled into the familiar, pockmarked parking lot, cut the engine, and strode into the office.

Rebecca was waiting.

The envelope in question sat on the registration desk. Across the yellowish face was his name written in the same block letters that had addressed the envelope containing Jennifer’s death certificate and pictures.

“I found it when I walked in. I was out checking a room where the key wasn’t working and Tony was at the desk. He didn’t see who left it.”

Warily Bentz handled the thin package. She offered him a letter opener and he sliced the seal carefully. Rebecca watched as he tipped out the single sheet of paper within.
“Oh, God,” she whispered, her hand flying to her mouth as a picture of Olivia slid onto the desk’s Formica surface.

Bentz’s knees nearly gave way. His stomach turned over. He stared at the shot of Olivia, his beautiful Olivia, who eyed the camera dead-on with an expression of stark, cold fear. Pale as death, she was looking through bars, as if she were in some old western jail. Her hair was mussed; her eyes round and bloodshot, a red patch evident over her mouth where it seemed a gag had been taped. All of the life, the fire of her personality, had disappeared. Instead her expression was of pure terror.

“Goddamn it!” he said, his jaw tight, every muscle in his body clenched. If he ever found the psycho who did this, Bentz would personally tear him limb from limb.

But she’s alive, he reminded himself. That’s something!

Insides twisted, he checked the envelope further, expecting a letter or note, but there was nothing more. Just the devastating photograph.

You did this, Bentz. She’s been captured, maybe tortured, and held in this jail because of you and your insatiable need, your damned obsession to chase down your ex-wife.

Guilt and fear ripped through him.

“What…what is this?” Rebecca asked.

“This,” he said, his voice nearly cracking, “is my wife.”

“Oh, God…I’m so sorry.” She licked her lips nervously as she continued to stare in horror at the picture. “Where is she? What is happening to her? This could be a joke, right? A sick one, but a joke?” When she met his gaze, she knew the truth. “Oh, mother of God.” She blinked against a spate of tears.

“Is Tony around?” Bentz asked.

“Oh…yeah…Sorry.” She turned her head and yelled over her shoulder for her son. “Tony!”

“Do you know if Tony got a look at the person who left this?” he asked, motioning to the envelope.

“I don’t think so.” She cleared her throat and took a step closer to the door separating the lobby from the business office and staff quarters. “Tony!” she called again, more sharply. “He’s got a cold, that’s why he’s not in school.”

Yeah, right.

A few seconds later, Tony appeared plugged into an MP3 player, grooving out to music loud enough that Bentz heard the sharp cadence of a rap tune. Hands in his pockets, the kid shuffled into the office from the back as Bentz slid the picture into its heavy envelope. To the boy’s credit he did sniffle and snort a bit as if his nose was threatening to drip. A cold? Or maybe the results from snorting some drug? Coke? Meth? At the moment Bentz didn’t care.

Rebecca pulled one of the earbuds from her son’s ear. “Mr. Bentz wants to know if you saw anyone leave this?”

“Uh-uh.” Tony was looking down at his feet.

“You sure?” Bentz asked.

The kid shrugged. “Nah, I don’t think so.”

“But you’re not sure,” Bentz said, urging him to think of something, anything that would help him save his wife.

“I, uh, I heard something,” Tony said, clearing his throat. “You know, like a slap. Maybe when she dropped it?” He didn’t sound certain.
“She?” Bentz asked.

“Or him.” Tony frowned, concentrated, then acted as if he were afraid to give the wrong answer. “I dunno.”

“But you saw someone?”

“Not really, but there was a runner going by. You know, jogging.”

“And you thought it was a woman?” Bentz’s heart was beating double-time. He wanted to shake the words from the kid’s body. A jogger had been caught on the webcam at Santa Monica Pier the night Bentz had jumped into the water after Jennifer, and he thought he’d seen a runner on the street near Lorraine Newell’s house on the night she was killed. And now?

“Look she, he, was wearing sweats and a cap. I really couldn’t tell. Can I go now?”

“No,” Bentz said. Sweats and a cap on a warm morning…had to be a disguise. Had to. Bentz knew he was grasping at straws but he’d take anything, the tiniest shred of a clue that might lead to his wife. It was all he could do to appear calm, keep his voice even when he was screaming inside. “Look, Tony, I think I might want you to go to the police station and talk with a police artist.”

“Hey, no.” Tony shook his head as if a police station was the very bowels of hell. “The cops? Nuh-uh.”

“He’ll be there if you need him,” Rebecca said firmly.

“No, Mom. I didn’t see nothing, not really. I’m not even sure about the runner. She was crossing the street…I mean, I don’t think she came to the door.”

“But you don’t know.”

He shook his head, bit his lower lip.

“Tony has a tendency to watch TV or play video games when he’s supposed to be working.” Then as if realizing he was underage, she amended, “I give him his allowance if he watches the desk for me.”

Tony’s employment or lack thereof wasn’t any of Bentz’s concern. Not now. Though he was still reeling from the photo of Olivia, he now felt a grain of hope. A drop of adrenaline coursed through his blood. Here, finally, was something solid to go on. “Do you have a security tape?” Bentz asked and Rebecca nodded. “Of the parking lot and front door?”

“Sure, and of the lobby, too. Our security equipment is pretty cheap, but you’re welcome to a copy of the videotape.”

“Right now, can you play it back? So we can watch it?” he asked, suddenly on fire.

“Yeah, sure.” Rebecca was on board.

“I’ll need a copy for the police.”

“No problem.” She gave Tony instructions to watch the front desk and led Bentz to a small area with a TV monitor and tape machine. As Rebecca said, the security system was hardly state of the art, but Bentz didn’t care. He just wanted something, anything, that would help him find Olivia.

Rebecca sat at the tiny desk, pushed a few buttons, and rewound the black-and-white tape. Images reversed quickly on the monitor, people walking and running jerkily backward, cars in reverse. “There,” she said as a jogger appeared. She rewound the tape until the runner was caught in the camera’s eye.

Just as Tony had suspected, the jogger cut across the parking lot, slid the envelope from inside a jacket, and dropped it by the door.
But watching her on tape, Bentz didn’t think it was the woman who pretended to be Jennifer. He wasn’t even certain it was a woman, but it seemed that way. Her clothes were bulky, hiding her shape, but there was something about the chin and neck, no Adam’s apple visible, not a hint of peach fuzz or beard shadow, although it was hard to be sure considering the indistinct quality of the moving image.

Nonetheless, it was something.

“Ever seen this person before?” he asked Rebecca.

“I don’t think so, but it’s hard to tell with the baseball cap and dark glasses.”

“Tony!” Bentz called and the boy, looking bored as hell, returned. “You were right. This is the person you saw, right?”

“Yeah.” He lifted his shoulder again, as if it were his signature move. “I guess.”

“Did you notice anything else about the runner? Color of clothes or hair or car nearby?”

“Nah, but that’s the person. See there? She’s dropping the package.”

“She?”

“Yeah, I think. Hey, I don’t know, man.”

“Tony,” Rebecca said sharply. “This isn’t just Mr. Bentz. He’s a detective with the New Orleans Police Department and his wife is missing. Kidnapped. There’s a good chance this jogger,” she pointed to the monster, “is involved, so please think. Think real hard.”

“I am!” he said, throwing up his hands. “Holy crap, Mom, don’t you ever listen to me? Didn’t I tell you that was everything I knew? And there...there she is on the tape. I didn’t see any more than that.” He eyed Bentz suspiciously, as if he expected to be busted at any second.

“What about the color of her clothes?”

“Nah...” He snapped his fingers. “But I think I thought she was a woman because of her shoes. They...they don’t look like a guy’s.”

Bentz glanced back at the screen and saw a glimpse of a running shoe, not one he would necessarily describe as being made for a woman, but definitely small. A woman’s foot. Or that of a very small man. “Thanks, Tony.”

“Hey, no prob.” The kid shrugged and retreated through the doorway, trying to put as much distance between himself and the cop as possible.

Bentz turned to Rebecca. “You said you can make me a tape?”

“Yeah. No prob,” she said, mocking her son.

Rebecca copied the tape quickly and handed it to him. “Good luck,” she said. “I hope you find her. Soon.”

“You and me both.” Bentz hurried back to his car and didn’t add what they both were thinking: Find her before it’s too late.

“I checked the roster of recent parolees with a history of violent crimes. Looking for suspects who might fit the profile of the Twenty-one killer,” Bledsoe said as he approached Hayes’s desk.

Hayes leaned back in his chair. Martinez perched on the edge of his desk. They were waiting for a call from Doug O’Leary, the forensic dentist who’d been called in to compare Jennifer Bentz’s dental records with the body that had been buried in her coffin.
Bledsoe continued, “These are the guys that have been locked up since the Caldwell twins were killed and before the Springer twins became homicide victims. There are only three who even remotely meet the profile.

“There’s Freddy Baxter. He got out last January, had pled down to Man-One for running over his girlfriend with his car. But he has an alibi, solid. Was with his brother in Vegas when the Springer girls were abducted.” Bledsoe was holding up three fingers on his right hand, his thumb holding his pinkie down. With the dismissal of Baxter as a suspect, the ring finger went down.

“Then we’ve got Mickey Eldridge, cut up his old lady during a fight and was released in December, just in time for Christmas. But that wife, who almost died because of his butcher job on her, swears he’s changed, found religion or some such lame excuse, and she was at his side on the night in question.” Bledsoe’s index finger curled into his fist, leaving his middle one poking straight to the heavens.

“Our last nut job with enough balls and rage to do the job is George St. Arnaux. He’s my personal favorite. Remember him? The whacko who systematically cut off his victims fingers and toes. How the hell did he get out, I ask ya? Because some legal eagle swears she found an eyewitness who claims the killer was a white guy, not a black, so our friend George was released, though the taxpayers are going to be paying for a new trial, I’ll bet. But George, he was with the lawyer, or so she claims. I think there’s something going on there, ya know what I mean?”

“Not everyone’s mind is in the gutter like yours,” Martinez said. “You already said she’s his lawyer.”

“And she’s boinking him, let me tell you.” His voice lowered, “Some women get off on all that crazy, dangerous stuff, know what I mean?”

“Boinking? Grow up, would ya? We’re not in the seventh grade.” Martinez was not one to hide her feelings. “And your point was…?”

“Yeah, right.” Bledsoe put his hand down and sent her a scowl meant to cut her to the quick, but she held her ground. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t intimidate her. “Anyway, I’ve got no parolee in the state of California I can hang this on. Shit.”

Hayes felt the weight of the investigation. It had been too many days since the coeds had been found dead. The trail was getting cold, not that it had been hot or even warm to begin with. The Springer twins’ murders had moved from page one to further back in the paper, but the killer was still out there. Justice was a long way from being served.

Bledsoe wasn’t finished. “I talked to everyone who knew the Springer twins, retraced their steps. We had officers questioning all the neighbors, friends, relatives. We tried to establish some kind of connection between them and the Caldwell twins, but came up with nada.” He rubbed his face with one hand. “Which brings me back to our ‘friend.’” He made air quotes with his fingers. “And I use the term loosely when I call him a detective. This can’t be random.”

“Even if it’s not random, it doesn’t mean he’s the perp,” Martinez said. “If you want to pin it on him, you’ve got to come up with some proof, Bledsoe. Do your job.”

Just then Hayes spotted Rick Bentz, who strode into the squad room and made a beeline for his desk. “Looks like you’ll get a chance to ask him about it yourself.” Hayes smiled for the first time that day. “Knock yourself out.”

“I will.” Bledsoe stepped away from Hayes’s desk, making way for the detective from New Orleans. “Bentz,” he said by way of greeting.

Bentz was having none of it. He sent Bledsoe a scathing glance as he brandished a large manila envelope. “I received this at the motel this morning,” he said and dumped the contents of the envelope onto Hayes’s blotter. A photograph of a terrified woman staring through bars settled near his calendar.

Every muscle in Hayes’s body constricted.

Bentz looked over his shoulder to Bledsoe and said, “My wife.”
Martinez didn’t say a word, just stared at the frightened, captive woman.

“And this is a tape from the So-Cal Inn, where the package was left. The security camera caught a runner who dropped the envelope at the door and took off. I’m hoping you can check the local traffic cameras, find out if they photographed her image anywhere. Maybe caught her getting into a car.”

“She?” Bledsoe said, his eyebrows becoming one line.

“I think so. The tape is inconclusive, but I thought you might be able to enhance it, get a close-up of the face, though it’s mainly turned away from the camera.”

“Another jogger,” Hayes said.

“That’s right. You can compare the image to the photo taken by the webcam at Santa Monica.” He shook his head. “As for the runner I saw on the street at Lorraine Newell’s house the night she was killed, I don’t know. It was too dark. But I’m willing to bet my badge that she’s involved.”

“Is this the woman who you drove up above Devil’s Caldron?”

“No.” Bentz appeared sure of that fact. “But, trust me, they know each other.”

“Holy shit,” Bledsoe said.

“Come on, Jonas.” Bentz stared straight at Hayes. “Let’s nail this jogger. Let’s go find my wife.”

Hayes’s phone rang. He held a finger up to indicate for Bentz to wait a second, then answered. “Detective Hayes.”

“Hey, yeah, this is Dr. O’Leary,” the forensic dentist on the other end of the connection said. “I’ve got your results, detective. No big surprise here. We’ve got a match. The woman you exhumed this morning is definitely Jennifer Bentz.”
Bentz was stunned. And yet it was what he’d expected. Of course the body in the grave was Jennifer. So everything he’d believed for twelve years had been the truth. Jennifer was dead and the imposter had only been a part of a wide scheme to get him to return to Los Angeles.

Why?
To torment him?
To kidnap and torture Olivia? To start a killing spree?
“So this whole thing has been a wild goose chase?” Bledsoe shook his head.
“A smoke screen,” Bentz corrected.
“And you dragged your wife into it? For the love of Christ, it’s dangerous being married to you, Bentz. Not only for your spouse but for the people who knew her.”

If Bledsoe wanted to twist the knife, he was doing a damned good job, Bentz thought. The glint in Bledsoe’s eyes told Bentz the L.A. detective was enjoying his discomfiture. “So let’s go after the person who’s been staging this debacle,” Bentz said.

“Meaning of course that you’re not a suspect.” Bledsoe took a swallow of his coffee to hide his smile.

“I didn’t kidnap my own wife.” Bentz warned himself to play it cool; Bledsoe was just looking for a reason to make him the scapegoat. Again.

To make matters worse, he saw Dawn Rankin walking through the squad room. She caught his gaze and her lips tightened a bit before she forced a smile and approached. “Back again?” she asked. “You just can’t seem to stay away, can you?”

“It’s business,” Hayes cut in, saving him. Dawn, as always, ran hot and cold. One minute Bentz thought she was long over him, had buried the hatchet; the next she was hissing with a forked tongue. He felt lucky that their relationship had been short.

“Let me know if I can help,” Dawn said with just a touch of sarcasm before she left.

“Piece of work,” Bledsoe said. “Maybe you were lucky to have hooked up with Jennifer Nichols after all.”

Bentz didn’t buy the other detective’s stab at camaraderie. Bledsoe, he knew, would just as soon kick him to the curb as help him. Fortunately Bledsoe’s cell phone rang and he drifted off, cradling a cup of coffee.

“So this is what we know,” Hayes said once he, Martinez, and Bentz had a little privacy. “The body in the grave was Jennifer’s. The prints on the Chevy are many and varied, but other than yours, Bentz, they don’t match anyone in the system. We’re still trying. There was no other evidence in the car and our search-and-rescue team did not recover the body of the fake Jennifer in the Pacific Ocean.”

“That’s because she’s alive. I saw her again.”

“What?”
“This morning,” Bentz said. “At the cemetery.”

“And you didn’t think it was important enough to tell anyone?” Martinez said.

“I wasn’t sure, okay?”

Hayes waved the dissension away. “So now we’ve got this photo and the envelope it came in. Since our perp has been careful so far, I’d be willing to wager these materials will be clean, but we’ll check for prints or DNA. And then there’s this.” He held up the security tape. “Let’s have a look, compare it to the pictures we got from the webcam at the Santa Monica Pier. And you,” he said to Bentz, “file a report with Missing Persons. Make it official. I’m sure the FBI is going to want to talk to you, too.”

Hayes as ever was dotting all his Is and crossing his Ts. Running the case by the book. All of which wasted time. As he had from the beginning of this madness, Bentz felt the grains of sand running in a river through the hourglass. The more time that went by, the more likely he would never find Olivia and that thought brought him to his knees.

“What about Yolanda Salazar and her brother?”

“Still trying to locate him. He didn’t show up for work today, skipped his early class.”

“On the run.”

“Looks like.”

Damn! He’d thought Fernando was the key. The kid was the one person who would know the identity of the Jennifer imposter. He was probably working with her, an accomplice. They had to flush him out.

“He has to surface some time,” Bentz said. “Let’s go.”

Martinez hopped off the desk.

Hayes rolled his chair back and said, “Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Martinez was already walking down the hallway, but she paused to throw a glance over her shoulder at Hayes. “Oh sure. And maybe my boyfriend, Armando, will get down on one knee with a three-carat diamond ring and propose tonight.” She snorted a laugh. “Forgive me if I don’t hold my breath.”

The boat had never been set on fire. Not before or after her captor’s visit.

Olivia did not know why she had been spared a fiery death, but now that the day had worn on and she was still alive she felt calmer. Slightly. She knew the maniac who had duped and abducted her would eventually kill her, but not before she got what she wanted.

Which was…what?

Olivia had no idea, but she would be damned if she’d give the woman the satisfaction of killing her.

Reluctantly, Olivia had eaten the sandwich, which she’d half expected to be tainted. But no, she’d survived. And she’d drunk the can of soda as well as used the bucket to relieve herself. It was gross, but worked.

And all the while, she considered her fate.

One way or another, she had to escape. She couldn’t hope for Bentz or the police or someone else to come and rescue her. Nope, she thought, staring at the oar on the wall; she had to do it herself.

She looked around the hold, searching for anything that could help set her free, but there was nothing. Her eyes were drawn back to the oar. If she could somehow get hold of the long-handled blade, she could smack her jailer and knock her down and grab her damned keys. If the woman ever got close enough.
Oh, Olivia would like nothing better than to turn the tables on the bitch and lock her inside this stinky cage, then walk around with a damned stun gun and a gas can.

Again she studied the oar. Wooden, with narrow red, white, and blue bands painted near the blade, it looked heavy enough to knock a five-foot-six woman to kingdom come. And that was exactly what Olivia planned.

If she could just figure a way to reach it.

She felt the rock of the boat on its moorings and knew they were in some marina. She’d been told no one could hear her if she made a ruckus, but that was a lie. She heard seagulls crying and people shouting, engines catching and rumbling, but all the sounds were muted and it was probably because she was alone, aware of every little scrape of a rodent’s claws, or anticipating the sound of footsteps on the ladder.

She had cried out earlier, after the psychopath woman had left and she was certain she was going to be burned to death. She had removed her shoes and banged on the bars of her prison, creating a dull clang. But no one had heard her. No one had boarded the boat, the Merry-Anne if the faded name scrawled on the life jackets could be believed.

Now, her throat raw from screaming, she sat in a corner of the cell, watching the sunlight fade and the hold become dark again. It was unnerving. Creepy. And she refused to let her imagination run away with her.

Instead, she tried to figure a way out of her dire situation. There had to be a logical solution to the problem of how to save herself as well as her unborn child.

As a psychologist, she had studied the human mind. She had learned various therapeutic approaches for people who were losing a grip on reality. That was what she needed: a plan.

Right. She would have laughed aloud if she had the energy. Psychologists did not treat unwilling patients; at least, not with any degree of success.

She pulled her knees up and hugged them to her chest. How do you deal rationally with someone who has lost touch with reality? Someone lacking in sound moral judgment? Someone inherently evil?

“God help me,” she whispered as night fell and, once again, she was alone in the thick, stygian darkness.

“I’m sorry about your wife,” Corrine O’Donnell said as she finished with the Missing Persons report. Bentz had already spent several hours with the FBI and had ended up here, in Missing Persons. The paperwork was necessary, but he was crawling out of his skin, watching the minutes tick by.

“Yeah.” “Sorry” didn’t begin to describe the fear that slithered through him, the cold, stark terror of knowing that Olivia was in the hands of a madwoman.

“Try not to worry. We’ll find her.” She offered a smile and he remembered fleetingly that he’d cared for her, more as a friend than a lover, but they’d shared a lot in their on-again, off-again affair.

“You happy with Hayes?” he asked.

“Well…I’d like to say ecstatic, but, you know, at this age, we’re both carrying a lot of baggage, both careful because we’ve been hurt. Maybe too careful.” Then, as if she realized she’d fallen too easily into the trap of shared confidences, she said, “Just sign, here.” She pointed to a spot on the form, where Bentz scribbled his signature.

“I’ll see that this gets out there,” she said with a smile, and Bentz nodded.

“Thanks.”

“Good luck.” She was already turning away from him, ready to do her part to find his wife.

God, he hoped he didn’t have to rely on luck.
But he’d take whatever help he could get. If it was good luck. Or divine intervention. Or even a deal with the devil himself. No matter what it was, just so that Livvie could be safe.

Montoya landed at LAX, picked up his bag, and went straight to the rental-car desk. As he was taking steps to collect the Mustang, a much newer model than the one he had in New Orleans, he put in a call to Bentz. “I’m in Los Angeles,” he said when his partner answered.

“What? Here?”

“Couldn’t stand being your goddamned gopher another minute. Figured I could help out here. Be more hands-on.”

Bentz barked out a hollow laugh.

“Fill me in,” Montoya said. He listened to the latest in the chain of events that revolved around Jennifer Bentz’s ghostly appearances and Olivia’s abduction, ending with the picture Bentz had received and his fears for his wife.

“So now the FBI is on the case,” Bentz finished.

Montoya snorted through his nose, signed the required paperwork, and grabbed the Mustang’s keys. Bentz got along fine with the Feds, but Montoya would rather work without them. Yeah, the bureau had smart agents, state-of-the-art equipment, and a wide net, but still, Montoya preferred to run his own cases. His way.

“Where are you now?” he asked, heading to the lot.

“At Whitaker Junior College. Fernando Valdez didn’t show up for work or any of his day classes, but I’m hoping he appears tonight.”

“He works at the Blue Burro, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Been there?”

“No, but the LAPD paid them a visit.”

“I might just check it out anyway. Then I’ll try to get a room at the dive you’ve been calling home the last week,” Montoya said. “Once you collar Fernando, call me.”

“If I find him.”

“His got to be somewhere. You just have to dig a little, think like the prick to find him. Be a cop, man.” He hung up and tossed his bag in the tiny space for the backseat. He had a map and a G.P.S. system that would lead him to Encino. Once in the Encino City limits, he’d check out the Mexican restaurant where Fernando worked.

Thanks to his heritage Montoya spoke Spanish as fluently as he did English. With a little luck and some patience, he might just learn something.

At Whitaker Junior College, Bentz parked near the gym, then found his way to the student union. After waiting in line behind two giggling female students, he grabbed an order of twin dogs and fries, bought a bottled Pepsi, and took a booth in the corner, behind a fake potted palm. As he ate he kept his gaze fastened on the door. Clusters of students came and went. Some looked young enough to be in high school, others much older, picking up the missed college credits of their youth or returning to college to make a stab at a new career. Goths, punks, beach babes, computer geeks—you name it—a small mixed bag of a student army attended the JC. He checked each face, but he didn’t see Fernando Valdez in the groups of students who were studying, eating, or listening to music as they filtered in and out of the student lounge.
He wasn’t surprised. Fernando was obviously trying to avoid the cops.

Though he hadn’t eaten all day, he barely tasted the wilted fries or the Polish dogs that had probably been spinning under a heat lamp for hours. His mind was elsewhere, on Olivia, hoping beyond hope that she was alive. Safe. Unbroken.

She’s tough. Remember that. She’s dealt with a homicidal maniac before.

It seemed like a waste of time to sit here on the off chance that Fernando Valdez would show up for his night class, but Bentz didn’t have many leads. Fernando was his best.

But Valdez wasn’t visiting the student union tonight.

Getting up from the table, Bentz felt a twinge in his leg. He ignored it as he tossed the remains of his dinner into a garbage can. Following the instructions posted near the waste cans, he placed his empty plastic basket in a bin marked for baskets and utensils, then carried his bottled Pepsi through the glass doors and into the coming night.

It wasn’t quite twilight, but the fog was rolling in again, settling over the walkways that bisected lush gardens and lawns.

As he thought about his wife, he kicked himself to hell and back again for being such a fool, for wearing blinders about Jennifer, for not realizing what he had in his marriage to the one woman he truly loved and trusted.

“Idiot,” he muttered as he made his way to Sydney Hall, a two-story concrete building that had all the style and grace of a county jail. Exterior stairs led to the second floor and the doors on the ground level opened outward to wide porches. In a quick check of the building, Bentz noticed that there were no interior hallways. Fernando, registered for “Writing the Play,” an English class located on the first level, would have to pass this way if he wanted to get to class.

Finishing the remains of his soda, noticing bugs already gathering near the globe lights at the doors, Bentz waited near the stairs while the students trickled into room 134. There was a chance Fernando wouldn’t show. No doubt Yolanda had warned him about Bentz. And the fact that he was MIA from his job and earlier class indicated he was wary.

Hell, he could be in Tijuana or deeper into Mexico by now. The border wasn’t that far south.

Still, Fernando was a U.S. citizen, born and raised in L.A. Bentz was betting that sooner or later, the kid would surface.

And when he did, Bentz intended to nail him.

Maybe tonight.

Maybe later.

But Bentz wasn’t about to back down.

He only hoped that he’d get lucky. No way could he spend an other night in his motel room waiting for the damned phone to ring, staring at that bone-chilling picture of Olivia. And the thought of Olivia spending another night as someone’s captive...he just couldn’t let his thoughts go there.

Bentz leaned on the wall near the stairs and watched as the door to the classroom opened and closed, slamming behind each group of would-be playwrights as they hurried inside.

The purple haze of dusk deepened into night.

No Fernando.
Come on, you bastard. Show the hell up.

But the noise of footsteps and conversation faded as the stream of students dribbled to nothing. Bentz checked his watch. Ten after seven. No one had entered the room for over five minutes.

It appeared that Fernando was a no-show. Again.

“Damn it.” Bentz drained the dregs from his bottle, watched a moth beat itself against the globe light and was about to toss his empty sixteen-ouncer into the trash when he spotted someone running through the mist. A man, he thought. The guy hurried past the gym and cut across a wide expanse of grass.

Bentz froze. Squinted into the night.

As the runner drew closer, Bentz recognized Fernando Valdez. The little prick was actually showing up.

Gotcha, Bentz thought, his pulse elevating. Finally. A break! Every muscle tense, his gaze glued on the kid, Bentz slid silently to a place beneath the stairs. Peering through the steps he fought to hold himself in check. He had to wait until the kid was close enough to nail. He couldn’t risk scaring the little creep off.

Fernando was breathing hard, running as if the devil himself were chasing him, sweating as if he’d been running for a while.

He was close now.

Just a little bit further.

Fingering his badge, Bentz waited for just the right moment.

Fernando reached the staircase.

Now!

Bentz sprang from under the steps. Holding up his badge, he blocking the kid’s path. “Fernando Valdez? Freeze. Police!”

“Shit!” Fernando started to turn, but Bentz was ready and grabbed him by the forearm. Hard enough to make Fernando cry out. “Ouch! Hey! Let go of me!”

“I wouldn’t resist, if I were you,” Bentz warned him, his leg acting up. Not now! His knee couldn’t give out now. “You’ve got no priors, a clean record. You might even have a future if you cooperate now and give up your girlfriend.”

“What? You’re crazy! Let go of me!” Fernando yanked hard on his arm, but Bentz held on tight.

“Look, you’re going to tell me who, what, when, and where, everything you know about this freaky scam involving the Impala and the woman who is pretending to be my ex-wife. Who’s behind it. Where the hell the girl who’s pretending to be Jennifer is and most importantly where my wife is.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, man.”

“Give it up, Valdez, it’s over.”

Recognition finally registered in the kid’s eyes.

“I mean it.”

“You?” he said, his lips curling in revulsion as he finally put two and two together, putting Bentz’s face to his name. “I should trust you? The pig who killed my brother?”
“You’d better, or I’ll haul your ass into jail so fast your head’ll spin.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Fine. We’ll do this at the station.” Bentz started marching him to the parking lot, figuring he could get some assistance from the guard in the booth there.

As they moved away from Sydney Hall the kid tried to worm away, pulling with such force that Bentz had to will his leg not to buckle as he yanked back.

“Look, don’t think you’re going to get out of this,” Bentz growled. “I’m not messing around.”

“Leave me alone, you prick!”

“Can’t do it.”

“What the hell do you want from me?” The boy’s face was set. Hard. Dusk shadowed the sharp angles of his jaw.

“I already told you, just the truth.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right.” With his free hand, Bentz pulled out his cell phone and pressed the speed dial button for Hayes. It rang. Once. Twice. “Come on, come on!” Three times. “Hell.”

For once the detective picked up. “Hayes.”

“It’s Bentz. I’ve got Fernando Valdez.” They were still marching toward the gym. A few passing students eyed them curiously, but no one stopped to ask what was up.

“What?” Hayes asked. “You found him?”

“At Whitaker College.” He glanced at Fernando. “Seems he didn’t want to miss his seven o’clock.”

Fernando gave a tug and Bentz reciprocated, his fingers digging deep into muscles and tendons.

“Shit, man!” the kid whispered, but he quit trying to break free.

“I’m already on my way,” Hayes said. “I’ll be there in ten minutes. Fifteen, tops.”

“Just get here,” Bentz said. “I’m armed, but I don’t want to have to hurt him.”

Bentz felt the younger man tense, heard him swear under his breath in Spanish. The kid was finally scared, too.

“Meet us at the west parking lot,” Bentz said. “Near the guard booth.”

“Got it.”

Bentz ended the call. As he tucked his phone back onto his belt, the kid tried once more to break away, and Bentz felt the strain on his sore leg. He growled, wincing. Strain caused beads of sweat to form on his brow.

“I didn’t break any laws,” Valdez insisted. The curl of his lip suggested he was glad to cause Bentz some pain.

“I can’t help you until you help me,” Bentz said. “If you’ve got a brain in your head, you’ll start talking about the girl you loaned your car to. The one you set up to pretend to be my wife.”

“You’re crazy. Loco. I have no fucking idea what you’re talking about!” Fernando insisted, but there was a hint of fear in his dark eyes, a second of hesitation, as if he, too, felt the night and justice closing in.
“It’ll go a whole lot easier if you give it up before you’re arrested.”

“Arrested? Are you out of your mind?”

“You tell me.” They reached the edge of the parking lot. From here he couldn’t see the campus security guard who had been patrolling the area on foot earlier. Where are they when you need them? Bentz wondered, scanning the parking lot as he warned Fernando, “You’ve got about three minutes to talk before Detective Hayes shows up,” Bentz said, wishing he could squeeze the words out of this kid. The truth…the answers…the location where he’d find Olivia. “If I were you, I’d want to go on record as being cooperative. Right now the LAPD wants you behind bars.”

“Let them arrest me,” Fernando said. “I got nothin’ to hide.” He glowered at Bentz with a dark gaze of pure hatred. “But you…look at you, sweating like the pig that you are. I hope whatever you’re going through, it stings like a bitch.”

Bentz didn’t release his hold on Valdez to wipe the sweat from his forehead. The Jennifer imposter had escaped him, but he was not going to let this one go. “Cut the theatrics, kid. You don’t have a chance of seeing sunlight from outside a prison wall if you don’t start talking. Tell me where your girlfriend is, and where are you holding my wife. You’ve been working with her from the start, right? Are you the runner? Do you take care of the dirty work?”

“Again, you’re talking crazy!”

“If I’m crazy, why are you the one going down for kidnapping?” Bentz said, thinking of Olivia trapped somewhere in a prison. His grip on the boy tightened. “Kidnapping…and just maybe a few counts of murder.”
The Blue Burro was hopping, the dinner crowd spilling into the bar where colorful piñatas and fake parrots hung from open beams painted in bold primary colors. Dressed in dark slacks and white shirts with bandannas at their necks, the waitstaff bustled through the connecting rooms, skirting around each other and patrons. They carried trays laden with food or opened up portable serving tables to prepare homemade guacamole. Every so often they stopped serving to assemble, plunk a huge Mexican hat on a customer’s head, and sing a special Mexican birthday song.

The place was festive and fun and brimming with customers.

Montoya suspected the police had been here searching for Fernando, so he decided to tread carefully, try to blend in. He pocketed his wedding band and took a seat at the bar, grabbing one of the few open stools next to the doors swinging into the kitchen. He ordered a scotch from a bartender who looked as if she could barely be twenty-one herself.

Lively Mexican music could barely be heard over the hum of conversation and clink of glasses, but Montoya listened intently, trying to hear something that might help him learn more about Fernando Valdez, his sister, the silver Impala, or the woman who had last driven it. Slowly, he sipped his drink, his gaze wandering to the mirror mounted over the bar so that he could unobtrusively watch the action behind him.

For a while inane chatter floated past him. But as he was close to finishing his drink, he heard Fernando’s name come up in bits of conversation floating through the swinging doors from the kitchen.

Something about him not calling in and a waitress complaining about being forced to stay through the crush of dinner to cover his shift. Though she liked the money, she was really inconvenienced and pissed as hell that he, of all people, would make her work a double, which was a real pain in the ass with the baby and all. She’d had to call her mother to bail her out and babysit the kid. Or something close. It was hard to tell, and Montoya only heard parts of the conversation: her side because her voice was so shrill.

Trying not to appear interested, Montoya watched from the corner of his eye. The door to the kitchen swung open again, and Montoya caught a glimpse of the girl with a round face and tight lips. Her near-black hair was streaked with contrasting stripes of platinum and pulled tightly away from her face to a tight knot at her crown. She was seething, and Fernando seemed to be the cause of her exasperation.

“Ouch,” he said to the bartender when the door swung closed again and the girl’s voice still shrilled from the kitchen. “Someone’s not happy.”

“Never. Acacia’s never happy.” She gave him a smile as she filled glasses with ice.

“No with Fernando,” he said.

She quit scooping and studied him. “You know him?”

He shook his head. “Not that well. I took a couple of classes at the J.C., business classes at night, for my job. Insurance adjustor. Fernando was in one. He mentioned he worked here.”

“He won’t much longer if he doesn’t show up,” she said, shaking her head as she pushed the scoop through the ice and drizzled cubes into glasses set on the counter below the bar. “He’s a player. A ladies’ man. Acacia doesn’t like it. Wants him to settle down.”
“With her?”

The barkeep threw him a look that told him his question was asinine. “Of course with her. He’s the father of her child.”

“Is he? Didn’t tell me about a kid.”

“Figures. Acacia, she claims they were together a couple of years back. They hooked up at a company party and she got knocked up.” She glanced at Montoya. “The kid looks just like him. Fernando isn’t arguing about it, he’s just not stepping up.”

A new wrinkle, Montoya thought, as a slightly flustered waitress hurried to the bar and rattled off her order. “Can you hurry that? I forgot to turn it in and the women at table six are getting pissed.”

“Got it.” The bartender nodded and started mixing drinks, first for the waitress, then for a party of four at the far end of the bar.

Montoya decided he’d probably gotten all the information he could from her and he didn’t want to tip her off by talking too much about a guy he “barely knew.”

The door to the kitchen was pushed open by the same harried waitress and Montoya caught sight of Acacia stepping out a rear door.

Quickly, he paid for his drink, left a generous tip, then wandered outside to the cool night, a breeze blowing across the parking lot. Montoya waited for a rush of traffic to clear, then crossed the street to a convenience store.

Hoping to catch Acacia on her break, he headed toward the back of the building, where he caught sight of the small crowd of cooks and waiters clustered under an awning near the delivery door of the Blue Burro. Montoya unwrapped his pack and placed an unlit filter tip in his mouth. He patted his pockets, pretending to be looking for a light as he approached the group of half a dozen workers who were smoking and laughing, telling jokes, and ribbing each other.

Acacia stood among the group, just finishing her cigarette. Under the security light she looked more angry than ever, frowning as she took a final drag.

The laughter and jokes dissipated as he moved closer.

“Can I bum a light?” Montoya asked in Spanish.

One of the cooks, a big guy with a thin moustache and dirty apron, nodded. “Why not?” Shrugging, he flipped a lighter through the air and Montoya caught it on the fly.

“Thanks, man.”

Acacia stubbed out her cigarette and seemed about to walk inside.

Montoya lit up and said, “Anyone seen Fernando?”

Everyone went stone silent.

“No?” Montoya frowned. “I heard he worked here and he owes me money. Thought I might collect.”

At first no one said a word; they’d all apparently heard the cops were searching for him. The big cook in the dirty apron looked as if he wanted to dart inside. He dumped his butt in the overflowing ash can.

“Something wrong?”

No one said anything until Acacia, unable to contain her irritation with the guy, shook her head. “He owes you
money? Get in line.”

Montoya flipped the Bic back to the cook. “So he owes you, too?” he asked Acacia as the big guy slipped through the screen door to the kitchen, a shorter waiter on his heels.

“You wouldn’t believe.”

“Try me.” He offered her a cigarette from his pack.

She shrugged, then took one and lit up as a scruffy cat stole through the shadows, slinking under the Dumpster in the back alley.

“He owes me a life, okay? Oh, and his son. He owes his son a life, too.” She drew hard on the cigarette, then shot a stream of smoke out the side of her mouth.

“You have a boy together?”

“Mmm. Roberto…well, I call him Bobby, but Fernando, do you think he cares? Does he come and see his son? Pay me child support?” She sighed. “Not when he’s running around with that woman.”

Montoya didn’t say anything, just took a long drag on his cigarette and listened.

“She’s poisoned him, you know. Driving his car, meeting him at school. College. He was going there to better himself, become an accountant like his sister and then…then he met this…this actress and all of a sudden he wants to write plays!” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, her nostrils flared. “And what does he do for me? Dumps on me, that’s what. Doesn’t even take his own damned shift because he has to be with Jada.” Her lip curled in disgust and she flicked the rest of her cigarette onto the gravel. “You know, if it weren’t for Roberto, I swear, I’d kill that son of a bitch!”

Olivia heard the steady thump, thump from above.

Over the creaking and settling of everything inside her floating prison came the sound of footsteps.

Someone was on the boat.

She didn’t doubt for a second that it was her tormentor, so she didn’t cry out, didn’t want to risk the chance that the psycho would gag her again.

God, if she only had some kind of weapon.

The best she could do would be to fling her jug of water on the woman and soak her through the bars. But other than startle her or infuriate her, it would accomplish nothing.

Suddenly the lights snapped on and Olivia blinked hard, her eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness.

Her captor slowly descended the stairs, lugging a case with her. “So how’re we doing?” she asked with feigned cheer.

Olivia wanted to respond with “just peachy,” but thought better of it. Olivia reasoned that the best way to deal with the woman was to stand her ground. Not so easy when she was the one confined to this disgusting cage, but if Olivia could keep the woman talking, she could work toward extracting information while letting her abductor vent her frustrations.

If she could keep her cool. Reign in the terror that ate at her.

“So you ate, I see. Good, good. Necessary to keep your strength up.”

Olivia froze. Where was this going? The woman didn’t know about the baby, did she?
Of course not. No one knows. Not even your husband, and the way things are going, he may never know.

She closed her mind to that train of thought. She would find a way out of this damned boat. She had to. For the baby.

“So, hungry?” the woman asked as she pulled a plastic bag from her case. She tossed another wrapped sandwich and plastic bottle of soda into the cage.

Once again Olivia, wanted to slap her.

But she couldn’t.

Keep your cool. Keep her talking.

“Who are you?” she asked again.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” She smiled to herself, as if amused at playing the part of a smarmy seven-year-old.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I would. And that coy thing you’re doing? It’s not working.”

The woman’s lips twisted in a rare moment of fury. “Oh, I think it is. I’m the one outside the cage.”

“Who are you?”

“A friend…well, make that a close friend of your husband’s,” she said with a trace of bitterness.

“But you knew Jennifer.”

The woman’s eyes darkened.

Olivia had hit a nerve. Why? What was she to Jennifer?

“I really wasn’t too into that bitch,” her captor said as she smiled at a sudden thought, “but I’ve become, over the years, close with some of her friends. You know, the kind that just love to share secrets.”

Olivia’s stomach dropped. “You pumped them for information and then you killed them?” Of course she’d suspected this evil maniac was behind Shana and Lorraine’s deaths but saying it aloud in the gently swaying hold of a boat, confirming what she’d surmised, observing this woman’s smug self-satisfaction made it all the more real. More terrifying.

“They never saw it coming.”

Olivia wanted to throw up.

Stay cool. Use your wits.

“And they just got in the way.” She was assembling a camera and tripod, adjusting the legs, securing them with clamps she screwed into the floor and clipping all the pieces into place. Her nose wrinkled and she looked around.

“God, it still smells down here. My father, he used to haul his dogs from port to port. Great Danes.”

“So you called me? You’re the one behind the phone calls, right?” Olivia asked, forcing the woman on topic, trying to learn more.

“My, God, you are just so sharp,” her captor mocked. “Your IQ must be in the stratosphere. Except you can’t be all that clever, can you, considering the circumstances? Here—” She bent down, flipped the photo album to a new page, one of Rick and Jennifer’s wedding, the bride in a white lacy dress and long train, the groom, so much younger than he was now, proud and handsome in a black tux. Again, there were blood drops on the plastic, drops that had been drizzled and smudged over their faces. “Here’s a good one.” She nudged the book forward with her toe and turned back to her camera.
Olivia’s skin crawled. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

“How can you pay.”

“For your husband’s sins.”

“I don’t understand.”

The woman glanced over her shoulder and smiled smugly. “Of course you don’t.”

“Listen. Why don’t you just let me go?”

“Oh, right, after twelve years of planning, of waiting, of searching for just the right person to play the part of Jennifer, I should give it up. Because you think it would be a good idea?” She stared straight at Olivia, her eyes narrowed and cold as a demon’s touch. “You don’t get it, do you? I want Bentz to pay. To feel the pain that I felt. To know what it’s like to lose someone dear, to go forward each and every day of his life realizing that he not only let you die, but he destroyed his own life as well. To be alone, totally and infinitely alone.” She was working herself up, talking more loudly, more vehemently, more passionately, her face reddening, her fists clenching.

She had to visibly force her rage down, straighten her fingers. When she did, she spoke in a harsh whisper. “That man put me through hell, ’Livvie,’ and now it’s his turn. Time for him to feel a little pain. To know what it’s like. He never knew that I killed Jennifer, didn’t so much as suspect. Some great detective he is! All his awards for acts of heroism? Ridiculous!” As if reading the shock registering on Olivia’s face, she let out a disgusted laugh. “That’s right. You didn’t know, did you? Jennifer is still rotting in her grave, at least she was until she was exhumed.

“It’s her all right, in the coffin. That sick, twisted bitch who had Bentz wrapped around her little finger. He loved her, you know. Was obsessed with that two-timing slut! It was sickening. Despite the fact that she cheated on him over and over again…fucking betrayed him, he loved her.” Still assembling the camera, she was shaking in rage. “Even after her affair with his half brother, a goddamned priest, the real father of his kid! Jesus H. Christ, he still came back for more. Talk about a masochist!”

This woman was really off her nut. Filled with hate and a craving for revenge.

“Don’t you even want to know how I did it? How I took care of her?”

“Jennifer.”

“So easy,” she bragged. “I doctored her pills, and her vodka. Waited. Then followed her as she drove and made certain she had an accident.” She paused, savoring the memory. “It was an impersonal attack, I know. The coward’s way out with the car, chasing her down, freaking her out. But it worked.”

“You really killed her.” Olivia wanted to hear the complete confession.

“She killed herself. Remember? And as for the suicide note, I didn’t even know about it. It was something she’d written a while before. Not very stable, our Jennifer. But Bentz…he just couldn’t get enough of her. Divorce wasn’t enough for him. He had to start up with her again. Some men just never learn.” She chuckled coldly. “But he will. Tonight.”

Sick inside, fear congealing her blood, Olivia could barely speak, but she forced the question over her lips. “What the hell did he do to you?”

“You really don’t know?” She paused, thought for a second. “He left me. Not once, but twice, for the same bitch that kept breaking his heart.” She looked toward the wall, but seemed to focus on the middle distance, to a place
only she could see. “I loved him, I took him back, I trusted him, believed in him…” Her voice faced and tears welled in her eyes. “And he left me. Alone. And after Jennifer died, the son of a bitch poured himself into a bottle. Would he let me help him? Hell, no!” She sniffed loudly, straightened her shoulders. “That coward left L.A., went to New Orleans, and found you.” She was shaking her head. “He never looked back. And you, the wife who should know all his secrets, you don’t even know who I am, do you?”

That was the truth. Olivia couldn’t place her.

The spurned lover said ruefully, “Maybe it’s best this way. You don’t need to know,” she said. “But Bentz. He will. He’ll get it and he’ll live with it for the rest of his life.”

Olivia stared at the camera and felt a wave of nausea. Oh, God, she was going to be sick. From the pregnancy? From fear? “What are you planning to do?” she asked in a voice that she didn’t recognize as her own.

“What does it look like? I’m going to film. Well, it’s not really film, all digital, but I’m going to make a movie of you.”

Olivia flashed to all the prisoners of wars she’d seen with the enemy, forced to say things they didn’t mean, beliefs they’d never held, at the point of a gun or risk of being beheaded. She started to shake inside and had to talk herself down. Think rationally. Nothing had happened yet.

“It’s for posterity.” Satisfied that the camera and tripod were secure, the woman checked the viewfinder, and squinting, angled the lens to her satisfaction. “There we go, now we can begin.” She flipped a switch and turned the camera on, then she stood in front of the cage, just out of Olivia’s reach, but in front of the camera’s eye.

“Hi, RJ,” she said, without any of the breathy tone she’d used in her phone calls. “I hope you find this, along with the boat and your wife.”

What? Oh God, no!

“You should,” she continued. “The camera’s not only waterproof, it’s meant to film underwater. As you can see, I captured Olivia…She’s been my guest here on the Merry Anne for over a day now and I was hoping she and I could hang out a little longer, but…gee, I think I’d better not waste any more time and the truth of the matter is, she bores me.” She looked at Olivia. “Say ‘hi’ to Ricky, Livvie. Wave. Show him that you’re fine. So far.”

Olivia didn’t move. Not only was she scared to death but she wouldn’t give this lunatic the satisfaction.

“Oops, seems like Livvie is in a bad mood. Maybe she’ll talk when I leave. You’ll have quite a bit of time alone while I sail out into open water.

“I could kill her as easily as I did the others. My good friends Shana and Lorraine and Fortuna. I did miss Tally, but you know, sometimes you just can’t win ’em all, and I do have Livvie, now, don’t I? They helped me, those friends of Jennifer’s. They helped me learn so much about you, RJ, about Jennifer and your life together. Poor Jennifer. She just couldn’t keep her mouth shut. Told her friends every detail, from what you did together over the weekend to where you first made love. And her friends, they remembered.”

Olivia was dying inside, feeling the betrayal, knowing this psycho set them up to be used, then murdered.

“So you killed them?” Olivia said as the boat rocked slowly, creaking a bit with the motion of the water.

“Of course!” She shot Olivia an irritated glance that suggested Olivia was a moron. Or worse. “For a shrink, you sure have trouble connecting the dots. I had no choice but to kill those women. They might have put two and two together and ruined everything. And this way, the police department had to look at your husband again as the doer.”

“So you murdered five people, three of Jennifer’s friends and those twin girls.”

“Please!” She turned then, her face florid. “I did not have anything to do with that. That idiotic Twenty-one killer, he killed those twins. A repeat of the killings all those years ago, the Caldwell girls. That sick son of a bitch picked
one helluva time to resurface,” she said, visibly shaking. “I can’t believe you would even suggest I would be a part
of that! He’s a serial killer; gets his rocks off by killing innocents.”

“Not like you,” Olivia said, trying to keep her voice cool and calm.

“This is all part of a plan. It’s all about Bentz understanding.”

“But you killed innocents as well.”

“Shana McIntyre? Innocent? Never. Jennifer’s friends, they had to die. It’s different.”

“Dead is dead.”

“This is revenge. The Twenty-one, he’s just a sicko. He deserves to die.”

“You’re as sick as he is.”

For that she caught a malicious glare. “You stupid, stupid bitch. You don’t know what you’re talking about. You
just don’t get it, do you?” She took in a big calming breath, her hands clenching and un clenching into fists as if she
might fly into a rage at any second.

Which would be fine. Olivia would rather take her chances in a one-on-one fight than be trapped in this god-
awful, foul-smelling cage.

“This isn’t about the Twenty-one, you idiot! Not tonight. This is about you,” she said, then looked into the
camera. “And you, RJ. This—” She swept her arm in a gesture that indicated the hold with its cage. “This is the final
act. It ends tonight. All the charades, all the pretending, all the years of waiting. All the time of being alone.” Her
voice quivered a bit: “It’s finally going to be over. And do you know how?” She gloated into the camera. “Well, let
me tell you.” Her smile widened. “I’m going to sink this boat. Tonight.”

“What?” Olivia gasped. A new terror crushed the breath in her lungs. Oh, dear God, she couldn’t be serious. But
she knew in her heart that this woman, this killer with her vendetta against Bentz, was just demented enough to pull
it off. “No,” she whispered, her insides turning to water. “Please, please, no.”

“Oh, yeah, I think so. The Merry Anne is sailing for the last time. With you on it.” Turning to face the tripod
again, she added to Bentz, “I’m going to make sure this boat sinks slowly, and the camera will be trained on your
wife, so that you can watch as the hold slowly but surely fills, water inching upward. Olivia, she’ll be cold at first,
shivering and knowing that there is no escape, but she’ll try to find a way out, be desperate to save herself. You’ll
see her panic and scream and cry, see each detail of her torturous, pathetic struggle as she gasps and chokes for air,
treads water, forcing her lips and nose above the rising water, as she takes her last, dying breath and accepts her fate.
You’ll witness the terror in her eyes, Bentz, and know that her fate was in your hands.”

“No! Oh, please.” Olivia was frantic. She had to stop this woman. “You can’t do this,” she said without thinking.
“I’m…I’m pregnant.” Surely this sicko wouldn’t knowingly take the life of an unborn child.

“Impossible.” But she was shaken. “Bentz is sterile.”

“I’m not kidding! I’m going to have a baby! Another innocent life. You don’t want to be responsible for
something like that.” It took all of Olivia’s strength to steel herself and not reveal that she was crumbling inside.
“You don’t want to be a serial killer, right? A lunatic like the Twenty-one killer. You said that yourself. You’re
different!” She was trying to find any way to reason with the killer.

“A baby?” she said, almost to herself, disbelieving. “Bentz’s? No…but…”

“It’s true!” Maybe she was making headway, appealing to this woman’s warped sense of values. “Please, really,
you don’t want to hurt an unborn child.”

Still blindsided, the woman narrowed her eyes on Olivia. “What a sick, pathetic lie. You are not pregnant!”
Olivia moved closer. “I am. I’m going to have a baby!”

Her captor waved wildly in the air to dismiss the thought, but her equilibrium was shaken, her voice tinged with a new anger. “It doesn’t matter anyway. Even if by some miracle you are with child, well, all the better. Bentz can watch you and the baby die, all in living color. Hear that, ‘RJ’? Her death, and this fictitious baby’s, will be on tape and you can relieve her agony and fear and desperation over and over again. This is just so perfect. Worth every minute of the damned wait.”

“No! Listen, I don’t know who you are or why you’re doing this, but please, don’t,” Olivia said, screaming inside, but trying to keep her voice level. She saw that pleading for her life only fed into this maniac’s ego; she had to try a different tack, a diversion. “Tell me what your problem is with Bentz. Maybe I can talk to him—”

“Talk to him? Haven’t you been listening to me?” The woman clapped her hands over her ears, as if she needed to hold on so her head would not burst. “Don’t you get it?”

Olivia sensed that her captor was at a meltdown point, but she refused to cower. She kept her gaze trained on her would-be killer. “Don’t do this,” she said evenly. “Please. Don’t—”

“Enough!” Her round eyes blazed with renewed fury. “You can blabber and beg all you want, but I’m not falling for it. Got that? It’s over. You’re going to die, ‘Livvie,’ and you’re going to die tonight.”

Jaw set, seething, but in control again, she double-checked the camera, then hurried up the stairs.

This time, she left the lights on.

Now the camera caught Olivia’s every move.

Staying perfectly still she heard noises above and then the sound of a big engine roaring to life. The floor below her shifted as the boat began to move.

“Oh God,” she whispered, spurred into motion. She paced the perimeter of the cage, checking and rechecking each bar, knowing they were sturdy. Immoveable.

No way out.

Her blood congealed as she considered her fate: Doomed to die at the hands of this twisted, deranged maniac, her baby never having a chance at life.

Olivia’s throat grew thick with regret.

She would drown on camera.

Her death recorded for posterity.

To be used to torture Rick Bentz for the rest of his life.

She knew it.

The maniac knew it.

And soon, unless some miracle occurred, it would be over.

Then Bentz would know it, too.
CHAPTER 38

Bentz drove back to the So-Cal wired on caffeine, adrenaline, and just plain lack of sleep. And overriding all that sick energy was fear for Olivia. He was scared to death. The minutes were ticking by and he knew nothing more than he had earlier tonight.

Fernando Valdez had stonewalled them.

Bentz had stood on the other side of the glass ready to tear his hair out as the kid was interrogated for three hours. Hayes and Martinez went after him with questions peppered with some indication of the trouble he might be in, but Fernando responded by slouching in the chair, folding his arms, closing up.

“Who was this woman you loaned your sister’s car to? The silver Impala?” Martinez asked.

“Just…someone I know. A girl at school.”

“You got a name?”

“Jada. I don’t know her last name.”

That sent Bentz flying into the squad room, asking Bledsoe—who, unfortunately, was the only detective available—to run a search on a female, first name Jada, with a criminal record. Back in the interrogation room, Martinez was playing the good cop.

“Nice of you to help her out when she’s low on cash and everything,” she said. “Sounds like you’re a good friend. But did you know that Jada has been linked to several murders?”

Unbroken, sullenly Fernando shook his head.

“Did you help her kill some of those people?” Martinez asked. Her dark eyes softened. “Maybe you didn’t realize it. Maybe you just gave her a ride somewhere, not knowing what she was doing.” She shrugged. “As far as you know, you’re just helping out a friend.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t kill anyone.”

Finally a response.

“Come on, Fernando,” Hayes nudged. “We’ve got your fingerprints now.” The kid had tightened up earlier when Hayes printed him. “I’m sure they’ll match up with prints found in the Impala. Maybe even with prints found at some of the crime scenes.”

“No! I swear.” Fernando turned his body away from them, refolding his arms across his chest. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No one is saying you did, Fernando,” Martinez said in a soothing voice. “Your sister, your professors…everyone says you’re a good kid. That’s why I was thinking you might help us. We need help finding someone. A woman named Olivia Bentz. Blond hair, dark eyes. Did you ever meet her, Fernando?”

Bentz had watched through the one-way mirror and felt his life unraveling while the kid shook his head no.

“Olivia Bentz is missing,” Hayes said, “and we have reason to believe your friend Jada is involved in her
kidnapping. What can you tell us about that?”

“Nothing!” Valdez insisted.

Frustrated, Bentz had wanted to smash his fist through the glass and curl his fingers around the kid’s throat to shake the truth from him. Since Fernando hadn’t lawyered up, the detectives continued questioning him, and Bentz stayed for every second of the tedious process.

Bledsoe checked on the name Jada, but hadn’t found any females with that name who had been booked in the past eighteen months. Another dead end. Bledsoe would get Jada’s photo ID and records from the college in the morning, but he couldn’t work on that until the college’s administrative offices opened.

Finally Bentz left the surly youth to Hayes and the FBI, who would probably release him, then have someone follow him. There was nothing more he could do at the Center.

As he drove he thought about the photos the LAPD lab had been working on. The pictures of the runner from the Santa Monica web cam looked enough like the same jogger who had been caught on the security cameras of the motel. Something about the runner seemed familiar to Bentz, as if he should be able to visualize her face.

A woman? Yeah, they were all pretty sure about that. The police were checking traffic cameras and parking tickets issued in the area around the motel at the time of the letter’s delivery, along with the pier where Jennifer had jumped into Santa Monica Bay and the security cameras near the place where Sherry Petrocelli’s car had been torched, but Bentz didn’t hold out much hope. This person who had killed so easily seemed to know how to avoid detection.

A master criminal?

A cop?

He drove by instinct, his hands on the wheel, beams of headlights washing over him as his mind spun.

It’s someone with a personal grudge.

Someone who’s enjoying this.

Jada, the girl who looks so much like Jennifer, she has the answers. And Fernando won’t give her up.

And right now Olivia was locked behind bars, a prisoner, because no one could find a shred of a clue that led to her captor. Bentz felt his life unraveling, everything that he believed in falling away, the woman who had turned his life around, made him a better man, now suffering because of his actions.

He saw his exit and rolled off the freeway, picking his way through traffic. He wondered if he’d find another disturbing, dark photo of his wife waiting for him back at his dive of a motel.

“Just keep her alive,” he said to the car’s interior. The dash lights glowed on his face as he glanced in the rearview mirror and caught his reflection. The man staring back at him looked older than he remembered. Haunted. By the ghost of a dead woman.

He pulled into his parking spot, yanked the keys from the engine, and looked in the mirror again.

This time, he saw past his own face to a person behind his car, standing on the far side of the parking lot.

Jennifer!

No way. She wouldn’t appear now. He swung around to look.

She was gone.

Shaking inside, he slid out of the car and stood next to it, hearing the ticking of the rental’s engine as it cooled and
the night closed in.

Where had she been?

Under the streetlamp?

Near the ficus tree?

He started walking faster and faster across the dusty, uneven lot, beneath the flickering, humming neon lights of the So-Cal’s advertising board offering free wi-fi and cable TV.

Was that a movement on the other side of the planter?

Someone running?

*It might not be her.*

But he was jogging now, his eyes trained on the image ahead, a fleeing woman with dark hair.

*Déjà vu.*

The eerie sensation tugged at his mind. He remembered following her down the steep trail over the sea, how she’d turned and blown him a kiss before leaping from the cliff to the ocean below. He recalled chasing her shadow through the decrepit mission in San Juan Capistrano. Following her earlier today in the woods beyond the cemetery.

*What do you want, you bitch? I know you’re not Jennifer. You’re a fraud.*

He broke into a sprint, barely aware of the traffic lights glowing red and green, or the cars whipping by. Keeping her in his sights, he crossed traffic against the light, heard a horn honk in protest, and someone shout. But he ignored the driver and picked up his pace. He felt the pain in his leg. Gutted it out. He was gaining on her now, but she was still a block ahead, running full out.

What the hell?

An old memory surfaced and a feeling of *déjà vu* settled over him. Another time. Another place.

He remembered chasing Jennifer, through the sun-dappled park at Point Fermin. How he’d caught her, breathless at a pergola, where he’d kissed her madly, both of them sweating, her breasts, beneath a thin blouse, pressed up against him. He’d hoisted her hands over her head, pushed her back against the rough trunk of a tree, and proceeded to strip her and make love to her in the shadows.

Oh…

Hell…

Another memory surfaced. Of running after her along the beach at Santa Monica just after sunset, the western sky ablaze, the tide lapping at their ankles, as the Ferris wheel spun on the pier jutting over the ocean…

*Fool. Stop it! Forget her. Nail this woman and put Jennifer out of your mind forever. It’s Olivia you love, Olivia who is your life.*

He saw Jennifer turn, cutting into a parking structure.

Gritting his teeth, breathing hard, his leg throbbing, he ran, faster and faster.

Within seconds he reached the entrance to the parking garage, its florescent bulbs sputtering weak light. No one on this level. He stopped, listened.

Over the sound of his own pumping heart, he heard the sound of feet madly slapping concrete, running up stairs.
Spying the staircase, he followed, his knee screaming, as he pounded upward, looking into the spiraling stairs above and catching sight of her dark hair. As if she felt his stare, she glanced down at him, managed a wicked smile over the rail, then turned toward the interior lot.

_Damn!_

Was she on the third floor?

The fourth?

Grabbing the rail, hauling himself upward, he pressed on, his heart thudding, his lungs tight, his skin damp with sweat. _Don’t give up. Don’t let her get away. This is your chance!_

On the third floor, he turned into the shadowy lot, but saw no one, only a few abandoned cars, their paint jobs shimmering beneath the watery lights.

Back to the staircase, running upward, straining to hear anything over the pounding of his pulse. On the fourth floor he thought he saw a glimpse of her, on the far side of the structure, and definitely heard her racing footsteps. He flew toward the sound, rounded a pillar and saw her, still fifty feet away, clicking a keyless remote.

The lights on a dark blue SUV flashed.

_No!_

He couldn’t let her get away.

She pulled the door of the car opened, then turned back to Bentz and grinning provocatively, blew him a kiss.

“Jennifer!” he yelled.

In that second a man stepped out of the shadows, a gun leveled at her head.

Bentz nearly stumbled.

“Police. Freeze!” Reuben Montoya ordered, his face a grim mask, his hand steady as he held his pistol. “Jada Hollister, you’re under arrest.”

As long as the boat was moving, there was still time.

Olivia could find a way to escape...somehow.

Of course she’d been around this cage, searching for a means of escape over and over again with no luck. Now the camera was just out of reach and the only thing close enough for her to touch outside her cage was the damned photo album with its faded pictures and bloody smears. Apparently this psychotic woman got off on dripping her blood, or someone’s blood onto Bentz’s life.

At least the leather-bound album was near. Extending one arm through the bars, she managed to flip the pages. Her horror magnified as she viewed the history of Bentz’s life in photographs: Rick as a child with James, his half brother. Photos from high school showing Rick in boxing shorts and gloves, posing by a punching bag. His college graduation photo and one from the police academy. Then a shot of a younger version of the woman who held her hostage, a faded snapshot of her with Rick at a bar, drinks and cigarettes in hand, all smiles and very much together.

Just as she’d said.

This psycho and Rick had been lovers.

She was a woman scorned—twofold, as Rick apparently had dumped her twice:
For Jennifer.

She’d said as much, of course, but these pictures were confirmation. Biting her lip, Olivia sifted through pages of his life with Jennifer, and pictures of him with other women, presumably after he’d split from his wife. Again, this woman surfaced. And this time her smiles weren’t as wide; not as trusting.

How could someone be so obsessed?

Olivia felt sick to her stomach.

She flipped a few more pictures, seeing the family together again and then…and then there were snapshots of her. The wedding. Photos of Bentz and her at charity events.

Tears filled her eyes as she saw the love that they’d shared, caught in these pictures. The twinkle in her eye, the sexy grin on Rick’s jaw.

Oh, God, what had happened to them?

Her heart twisted when she thought of all she’d lost. And now it was too late. This sick killer’s rage hadn’t stopped with Jennifer’s death. If anything it had intensified, her obsession with Rick Bentz more focused, and Olivia had become her target. Now, just like Jennifer before her, she was going to die in some carefully plotted and executed horrific “accident.”

Olivia closed her eyes and felt a pang deep in her abdomen.

So sharp she sucked her breath in through her teeth. Oh, dear God. She collapsed forward against the cage and held tight onto the bars, her fists clenching, knuckles showing white as the pain ripped through her.

She felt the boat pick up speed, knifing through the water to its deadly destination, water rushing against the hull.

The pain began to subside. She lifted her head and took a long breath. She was going to be fine. She and the baby. Somehow she’d find a way to save them. She just had to work on it—Oh, sweet Jesus!

Another razor-sharp pain ripped through her.

Like a knife twisting deep inside.

She gasped.

The baby?

A miscarriage?

No! No! No!

She pulled in a shaking breath, tried to think, to get hold of herself. She was overreacting.

She pulled in a shaking breath, tried to think. She was overreacting.

Nothing was wrong with the baby or her pregnancy. The baby’s fine.

But the pain didn’t let up. She cast a glance at the open photo album and fought another hard, wrenching abdominal cramp.

The baby’s FINE!

She began to pant, to let out her breath in short little huffs as the cramping continued and she could barely think.

The baby’s fine, the baby’s fine, the baby’s fine!
She gritted her teeth against the pain and the horrid, deplorable thought that she could be losing the tiny life within her.

And then she felt the blood.

Warm and oozing, just a trickle.

She was bleeding. Damn it all, she was bleeding.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bentz demanded as he crossed the stained concrete slab of the parking structure.

“Covering your sorry ass.” Montoya had his service weapon trained on the suspect.

Walking up to her, Bentz still couldn’t believe how much she looked like Jennifer. “Jada…” Beyond her resemblance to his ex-wife, he was sure he didn’t know her. “Who are you?”

When she didn’t respond, Montoya filled him in. “Her name is Jada Hollister and she’s a theater major at Whitaker Junior College. A wannabe actress. Friend of Fernando Valdez.”

“I bet.” Seething, Bentz stared at the imposter. He had to restrain himself from tearing her limb from limb. “Where’s Olivia?”

“What? Who?”

“My wife. My real wife. Where the hell is she?” he demanded.

Her cool demeanor, the act she’d perfected, remained in place. “I have no idea.”

Bentz’s temper exploded. “I’m through fuckin’ around, you got it? Now where the hell is my wife?”

“I’d tell him, if I were you,” Montoya said.

She put her hands on her hips. “But I don’t know.”

“Think real hard,” Bentz advised.

“Oh, shut up,” she snapped at him. “What is that, like a line from a really bad B Western?”

A car drove down from an upper level and the driver, an African-American woman with a flamboyant scarf wrapped around her head, saw the gun in Montoya’s hand and hit the gas of her Mercedes wagon. As she wound her way down, Bentz saw that she was on her cell. She’d be calling 9-1-1.

“The LAPD is going to be here shortly,” Bentz said, his voice deathly quiet. “And I guarantee they’ll go so much easier on you if you tell us where we can find my wife. Now.”

“But I don’t know,” Jada insisted, her brow furrowing. She followed the path of the disappearing Mercedes.

“Your name is Jada Hollister?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“And you’re friends with Fernando Valdez.”

“If you can call it that.”

“He paid you to pretend to be Jennifer?” Bentz asked.

She hesitated and he said, “I’m not kidding about the police. You’re involved up to your neck in several
homicides and my wife’s disappearance. If you don’t start telling the truth, I’ll see that you’re arrested, locked up, and kept in prison for the rest of your life.”

“Bullshit! I haven’t done anything!”

“Really? Because the way I see it, you and Fernando, you’re in this together and you’re both going down.”

Jada looked from Bentz to Montoya before focusing on the gun still trained on her. “Oh, crap,” she said, biting her lip and obviously struggling with her decision.

“It’ll go much easier on you if you tell us about your boyfriend,” Montoya urged.

“Boyfriend? Fernando?”

“He’s the mastermind.”

She laughed. “He couldn’t mastermind his way out of a open bag. He’s not behind it,” she said with a sneer.

“Then who?”

Her eyes narrowed a bit. Calculating. Then she tossed more guilt Fernando’s way and let out a long-suffering sigh. “It was someone he knew, okay? A woman.”

“What woman?” Bentz asked.

Jada sent Montoya a go-screw-yourself glare. “You can put that down now.”

He holstered his weapon, then stripped the keys to the SUV that Jada still had clutched in her fingers.

“Someone paid you to mess with my mind.”

“I guess.” She lifted a shoulder, showed some more of her attitude.

“You know!” God, he wanted to shake the truth from her. “Listen, you’re in big trouble.” How could she not get it? “People are dead.” He yanked out the picture of Olivia being held captive, looking scared out of her mind, and stuck it under Jada’s nose. “Meet my wife. The one who’s missing. Your friend, the person who hired you, abducted her.” There was a tremor of rage in his voice and his hands, holding the picture, shook.

“She’s not my friend.” Jada’s face paled as she stared at the copy of the picture. She cringed as he noticed the terror in Olivia’s eyes, the raw skin around Olivia’s mouth.

“We have other pictures,” Bentz said, his voice low and threatening. “Of the corpses. Maybe you’d like to see Shana McIntyre in her pool, or Lorraine Newell with her brains blown out, or Fortuna Esperanzo—”

“Enough!” she said, tears welling in her eyes. “For the love of God, I don’t know anything about any murders, okay? I mean…I did get involved with this freak of a woman who wanted me to play someone. An acting role, that’s all. She claimed that if I dyed my hair darker, curled it, wore some green-colored contacts, and put in some cheek prostheses, I would be a dead ringer for this Jennifer woman.” To prove her point, she took out her contacts, her eye turning a pale blue, then she extracted false teeth and cheek prostheses, changing her appearance. “She had a vial of perfume she wanted me to wear and so…so I did. You have to trust me. No one was supposed to get hurt.”

“Like hell.”

“Really. She said it was just an elaborate prank. She wanted to scare an old boyfriend. And she was going to pay me big money.”

“How big?”

“Twenty-five grand. Thirty if I’d do the jump into Devil’s Caldron. She thought of that after she heard I used to
“Thirty thousand dollars,” Bentz spat out, disgusted. “What is that, about eight thousand a life?”

“I told you I didn’t know anything about anyone getting killed!” she said emphatically. Suddenly she was serious as she started to finally see how dire her situation was. “I tried to get out of it, but she wouldn’t let me. I really thought it was a joke, one of those elaborate pranks you see on TV. I figured I might get some exposure out of it, jump-start my career. She gave me a script and coached me over the phone, and I got a couple of free trips to New Orleans out of it. Her one rule was that I not get caught. I guess I blew that.” She parted, looking ruefully at the oil-stained concrete floor. Bentz decided she was sorrier for the loss of her fee, as opposed to the loss of life. What a piece of work!

“Who is she?” Bentz demanded. “Who hired you?”

“I don’t know. I never saw her. We just talked on the phone.”

“How did you get paid?”

“Cash…” Jada reluctantly gave it up. “She said she’d been saving it for years. She left it for me in a locker at my gym in Santa Monica, not far from the Third Street Promenade.”

“You got the money already?”

“Part of it. Only five thousand, to help me pay my rent…” Her voice faded as she finally understood the gravity of her situation, and it was finally hitting hard.

“I’ll want the address of the gym where she left the money. You’re a member?”

“Yeah. It was…a perk. I had to look good, be in shape, be able to swim, you know.”

Bentz wanted to throttle the selfish bitch, but he controlled the urge by reminding himself of Olivia. He had to save his wife.

“And we’ll need the script,” Montoya added.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Montoya asked, “How does Fernando Valdez fit into this?”

“He doesn’t,” she said with a shrug. “I was supposed to use him, get to know him, pay him some attention, get him to do things for me.”

“Like loan you the car.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed.

“A smoke screen,” Bentz said, “so I wouldn’t be looking in the right direction.”

Jada said, “I guess. She didn’t want me to have anything to do with the police department, either. And I was told to avoid somebody named Hayes. He was totally off limits.”

“Hayes?” Bentz said barely able to draw a breath.

“Yeah. I thought maybe he was in on it with her.”


“You think?” Montoya said, as if reading Bentz’s mind.
Bentz shook his head. “No. Couldn’t be him.”

“I’m just sayin’.” Jada shrugged as if she didn’t have a care in the world, her bad attitude returning. “She said something once, like, I don’t know, when I asked about what was going on, she told me not to worry, that she had it handled that Jonas would take care of things, or tell her about it.”

“Pillow talk?” Bentz said with mind-numbing certainty.

“I don’t know.” Jada rolled her now-blue eyes. “Maybe.”

Not just maybe. It made sense. Bentz had suspected a cop. And if it was a cop with access to police intelligence, someone with a position at Parker Center, someone who could learn through Hayes how the investigation was going, he or she could be one step ahead.

Someone like Corrine O’Donnell.

A woman he’d dumped twice. For Jennifer. Bentz cringed inside, not willing to believe…then he remembered Corrine’s overly concerned smile and words of encouragement when he’d filed the Missing Person’s report on Olivia. How could he have missed it? Corrine, involved with Jonas, Bentz’s link to the LAPD.

It explained how Jada had anticipated Bentz’s every move. Bentz’s throat went dry as his mind sped through the past week, the images of dead women, car chases, “Jennifer” sightings.

Was it really possible?

Was Corrine the one behind all this?

And Hayes, holy Mother of God, how did he fit in?

Jonas Hayes had known everything Bentz was doing, had insisted they play it by the book. The wail of sirens split the night air, reverberating through the parking garage, snapping Bentz back to the moment. The LAPD was on its way. “You’d better not be bullshitting me,” he warned Jada.

“I just want to get paid.” She eyed him expectantly.

Montoya sent her a look of pure disgust. “Yeah, well, I wouldn’t bet on it. I want to be Brad Pitt, you know, but sometimes things don’t work out the way we plan.”

Her lip curled. “Yeah, well, too bad about the Brad Pitt thing,” she said and Bentz could almost see the wheels turning in her mind. “And by the way, I want my lawyer. I’m not saying another word until we have some kind of deal.”

Martinez stopped by Hayes’s desk and handed him blowups of the picture of Olivia. “This is the hard copy of what they came up with in the lab.”

Technicians in the lab had analyzed the shot, which they’d enlarged and enhanced in an attempt to bring out every detail of the picture, even images that were hidden.

“They sent it to you via e-mail, too.”

“Got it,” Hayes said, bone tired. He compared the images, on the screen, on paper.

“It’s a boat, obviously,” Martinez said. Sliding her finger a bit, she touched the corner of the picture over Olivia’s head. “These puffy things stuffed in here? Life jackets. And take a look at those curved lines on the walls. Seems to be painted with stripes.” She pointed to a detail in another blowup. “They make that out to be the handle of an oar.”

“A boat. So she’s being held on the water somewhere?” Jonas touched the knot of his tie, thinking about that. “So
in a marina probably? Or private boat slip? Or...even dry-docked?” He eyed each shot, looking for more details.

“Or out to sea.”

“Damn.” Something about the blowup nagged at him, tugged at his mind.

“We might have to coordinate a search effort with the Coast Guard.” Martinez brought him back to reality as she tapped another shot. “There’s an image that isn’t visible to the naked eye in this one. The lab thinks it’s a script, probably the name of the vessel on a life preserver. It ends in n, n, e.”

Hayes closed his eyes for a second, then looked again. She was right. The image resembled a life preserver. With the letters n, n, e stenciled on faintly.

The end of a boat’s name?

He blinked again, feeling a sense of dread crashing over him as he studied the original photo. It couldn’t be.

No way.

No fuckin’ way.

But the boat looked so damned familiar.

He’d seen those preservers, those oars. His insides turned to ice...no, it couldn’t be...but the proof was right in front of his eyes. Those letters on the life preserver, they were the last letters of the Merry Anne, the boat he and Corrine had used a couple of times...

Panic swept through him as his mind turned back to all the cancelled dates, the cell phone calls from God-only-knew where, the hot sex that never really became warm affection, the understanding of his job and the questions about his cases, and her keen interest in his work.

“It is a boat,” he said finally and the realization cut to his very soul. How could he have been so stupid? So blind? “It’s the Merry Anne. It was named after Corrine O’Donnell’s mother, Merry, by her father.”

“Corrine?” Martinez repeated, looking at him as if he’d gone around the bend. “But, she—”

“Is my girlfriend. I know.” Bile crawled up his throat, bitter with betrayal.

“I was going to say she’s a cop.”

“Which makes it worse, because she’s our killer, Martinez, and she’s got Olivia Bentz held captive in the hold of the goddamned Merry Anne.” His eyes held hers for a second before he picked up the phone. “I’ll call the marina, make sure the boat is still in her slip.”

“And if it isn’t?”

He didn’t want to think about that, how far Corrine, an excellent sailor, could be out to sea. “Then we’ll call the Coast Guard.”
“The way I figure it, you’ve got two choices,” Montoya said as he followed the flashing lights of the police cruiser hauling Jada Hollister to Parker Center. “One, you can tell Hayes straight out that his girlfriend is a freakin’ killer. Or two, you do an end run around him and tell someone else in the squad about it, just in case Hayes is involved.”

Bentz tapped his finger on the window ledge of Montoya’s rented Mustang. “My gut tells me Hayes isn’t in on it. How could he be? With all the hours he put in with me trying to crack this case? A guy can’t be two places at once.”

“So go with your gut.” Montoya nodded as he took a corner a little too fast and the tires chirped. He slowed for a second, then punched it again as he hit the freeway. “It’s worked for you so far. But we’ve got to cut through the crap fast and get to this Corrine. If she’s the one who’s got Olivia, we need to find her now.”

Bentz nodded, unable to clear the image of his wife, peering through the bars of her prison, from his mind. All because of him.

*Hang on, he willed her. Just keep it together. We’ll be there soon.*

“What really gets my goat is thinking that another cop is behind all this,” Montoya said, staring ahead to the dark road. “Someone from the inside. That’ll be a black eye on the department.”

*Another cop.* That burned Bentz the most. A woman he’d once cared about, made love to. Corrine. She was behind all the death and destruction. She’d kidnapped Olivia and was planning no doubt to kill her, if she hadn’t already.

To hell with playing by the book.

They planned to follow the squad car to Parker Center, blow the whistle on this cop gone bad, and enlist every hand they could to help them find Corrine O’Donnell.

“We’ll get her,” Montoya said, his face grim in the lights of the dash. “We’ll find Olivia and we’ll nail O’Donnell’s hide to the wall.”

No backing off.

No excuses.

No leniency if she pulled the “I’m a cop” card, or looked at him piteously.

And if Hayes was involved, then he’d go down, too.

A muscle worked in Bentz’s jaw. He just kept tapping his finger, his gaze straight ahead as they flew down the freeway.

His cell phone rang, and he glanced at the caller ID—Jonas Hayes. “Hayes,” he said to Montoya, bracing himself for a bevy of lies. If that son of a bitch was involved in the least…

Beside him Montoya glowered, his hands holding the wheel in a death grip.

He cleared his throat. “Bentz.”
“Look, man, I know where Olivia is,” Hayes said, his voice quiet and restrained, as if he were seething with a slow, black fury that was eating him from the inside out.

“Where?” Bentz was wary, slid a glance at Montoya.

“Olivia’s being held on a boat. We got that much from the lab and...oh, hell, there’s more to it than that,” he said tightly. “I recognize the boat from some of the equipment hanging on the walls.”

“You do.”

“It’s the Merry Anne...That’s merry as in Merry Christmas, A-N-N-E. Corrine’s old man owned it. She inherited the boat.”

“O’Donnell?” Bentz asked carefully, though he knew the truth. He had to hear Hayes’s theory word for word so there would be no mistake. “Corrine O’Donnell’s holding Olivia captive on a boat somewhere?”

“Shit, Bentz, I can’t believe it myself but...goddamn it, she’s played me for a fool. Anyway, I’m on my way to the marina now, but it sounds like she’s a step ahead of us. According to the security at the Marina del Rey docks and the harbor patrol, the Merry Anne isn’t in her berth.”

“Where? Where is this marina?” he asked and Hayes gave him the info, which Bentz repeated to Montoya then entered into the G.P.S. “You’re sure it’s Corrine?”

“Fucking Corrine was behind it all. I think...oh, hell I think I fed her information. You know how that is, cop to cop. I never thought she’d...” Hayes’s cool facade cracked. “She’s killed people, people she considered her friends.”

Bentz felt his jaw harden. “Sounds that way.”

“Shit.” In the silence, Hayes seemed to be working to pull himself together. “I’ve called the Coast Guard. They’re on the lookout for her, but she knows how to run that boat. She could be on her way to Mexico by now.”

“And Olivia might be dead.”

Hayes waited a beat and said, “Yeah.” His voice was filled with regret. “Christ, I’m sorry, Bentz.”

“We’ll meet you at the marina,” Bentz said stiffly.

“I’m on my way. Already called backup. Got a boat waiting at the marina.”

As Bentz hung up, his partner was already hitting the gas, following the navigator’s voice on the G.P.S. to head west, toward the Pacific, though Bentz knew the route.

Toward Olivia.

Olivia felt a shift.

The boat’s engine changed speed.

Her heart leapt to her throat. This was it!

The engines died, and the big vessel slowed to a stop. For a few seconds within the hold, it was deadly quiet, the gentle movement slow and eerie. Then she heard the creaking sound of the boat rolling softly with the vast, silent ocean.

How far out to sea were they?

How far from anyone?
She bit her lip and listened. No one knew where she was. No one would ever find her. In the cavernous vessel, Olivia felt more alone than she ever had in her life.

Her cramps had eased, though the twisting ache still hit her every few minutes. Pushing herself up from the floor of the cage, she knew she had to fight.

Somehow…

*Don’t give up. Do not!*

Fighting her fears, Olivia tried to pull herself together. She tried not to think about the fact that she was still bleeding, slowly yes, but bleeding nonetheless. No doubt miscarrying the baby she wanted so desperately.

She forced herself upright as she heard the heart-stopping noise of a running chain, metal being spun out. *Oh Lord!* The killer was dropping anchor.

For a second, Olivia couldn’t move.

This, wherever it was off the shore of California, was where the killer had planned for her to die. A slow and torturous death.

*Think, Olivia, think! You’re not dead yet!*

She reasoned that the boat couldn’t be too far out to sea if the killer expected the boat to be found, her body located, the camera intact.

Her captor was, if nothing else, precise, her plans comprised of minute details, her timeline plotted to the last second. A control freak to the nth degree, she’d chosen this particular spot carefully, had anticipated and savored this moment for years, fantasized exactly how Olivia’s death was to be executed.

“Like hell,” Olivia said. She wasn’t going down without one helluva fight. What was it Grannie Gin had always said when Olivia was growing up?

*Where there’s life, there’s hope.*

And Olivia wasn’t dead.

Yet.

There had to be a way to outsmart this twisted maniac…maybe fake that her spirit had been crushed, pretend that the killer had “won,” breaking her psychologically, so that her captor would become overconfident, perhaps slip up.

*Really? You think for a second a diabolical woman who has been planning this moment for twelve years will make that kind of error?*

*No way, you have to make sure it happens. You, Olivia. You can’t count on anyone but yourself.*

Olivia had to beat the maniac psychologically.

And quickly. Dear God, time was running out. All too soon the boat would start sinking. Wasn’t that her plan? Mother Mary, Olivia couldn’t think of a worse death than trying to save herself, feeling the cold water rush in, push her off her feet, force her to tread water in the cage knowing there was no way out while she was gasping for an ever-dwindling supply of air.

Her heart was pumping crazily and her skin was sheathed in a cold, clammy sweat as she frantically searched the hold for any means of escape.

*Stop it! Calm down. Do not panic! That’s what she wants you to do, what she’s counting on. Take a deep breath, count to ten, and think rationally.*
Above, the woman was moving around, setting her plan into motion. Olivia had to work fast!

Drawing in a shaky breath, forcing back the terror eating at her, Olivia tried to get hold of herself. She knew the killer wanted her to appear miserable into the camera, for Bentz to be able to watch his wife’s desperate, horrifying confrontation with death over and over again. This woman’s goal seemed to be to haunt Bentz for the rest of his life: first by raising Jennifer from the dead, then by slowly and excruciatingly killing Olivia.

That was her whole game.

Control.

Terror.

To thwart the killer, Olivia would somehow have to deny her the ultimate fantasy, her coup de grâce over Bentz.

The answer was simple: She had to stop the filming.

But how?

If she could reach the oars to knock down the camera and attack her jailer…but that was impossible. Olivia had already tried to stretch through the bars and grab them, only to fail miserably. The same was true of her attempt to reach the fishing poles. Or the tripod.

Out of the question.

She could only use the tools she had handy. A bucket, a water jug, and a photo album.

She tried with the water jug, hurling the contents at the camera through the bars.

Water splashed wildly, drenching her hands and wrists.

The camera with its incessant red light didn’t so much as shudder. “Great.” Hurriedly, she tried pushing the plastic jug through the cage, but even pressing the sides together to make it thin enough to get through the bars proved impossible.

She tried to swing it from her hand, stretching her arm through the iron rails so that she could beat the tar out of the camera.

No luck.

“Damn it.”

Determined, she eyed her surroundings one last time and her gaze landed on the album. Faux leather-bound and stuffed with pictures and articles bound in plastic, it was too thick to pull into her cage.

But that didn’t mean it couldn’t be torn apart, the individual pages used somehow. Heart pounding wildly, her mind spinning with her desperate, newly hatched plan, Olivia reached for the album. Her fingers brushed against the pages and she pressed her shoulder into the bars, straining, barely touching. Gritting her teeth, she stretched as far as possible and the pad of one finger touched the album. She pressed down, dragged it forward but her finger, sweaty from her exertion slipped. Another pain ripped through her and she winced.

“Damn.” Determined, she kept at her task, forcing one hand as far outside the cage as possible, touching the faux leather, inching it closer only to lose it. As she strained, perspiring, she heard the sound of footsteps ringing overhead as her tormentor walked on the deck above. Moving things. Getting ready. To ensure that she and the baby drowned.

“No! Olivia wouldn’t allow herself to concentrate on anything but her escape. Nor could she give into the cramps that were wracking her body, reminding her of the fragile life within.
“Be tough,” she said and didn’t know if she were talking to herself or her unborn child. Finally the album was close to the cage. Using both hands, she worked to tear the pages out of their bindings, unfastening the hooks that held the album together.

Her hastily conceived plan had to work!

It had to.

For her.

For Bentz.

For the baby.

Montoya stood on the brakes and the Mustang screeched to a stop at the marina, the frame shuddering. Before the car completely stopped Bentz was out, hitting the ground running, his leg aching, reminding him that he’d already abused it.

He didn’t care. Across the pavement, down the boardwalk, and aboard the sleek Coast Guard cutter, Montoya right behind him. Within seconds, the skipper set sail, easing out of the marina, heading toward open water, moving much too slowly.

_Hurry, damn it! Hurry._

He was worried, his eyes trained on the vast, dark Pacific. God, how could they possibly find her? He swallowed back his fear, told himself that there was time, but he was sweating, his heart beating with dread.

As soon as they were away from shore, the captain hit the gas, and the boat roared to life.

Behind them, the lights along the shore were brilliant and festive, reflecting in the water and thankfully receding as they headed out to sea. The cutter knifed through the water, salt spray and wind pushing against Bentz’s face as he searched the darkness, silently praying that his wife was alive. Safe. That there was still time.

Montoya and Hayes were talking over the thrum of the engines and the swish of water.

_Strategizing._

But Bentz could only think of Olivia and what she was going through. He felt impotent and weak. All his training, all his years working as a cop, and he couldn’t save her.

His hands curled over the railing. _Hang in there_, he thought. _Oh, Livvie, hang in there._

With each sound from above, a footstep, a chair being scraped against the decking, a rattle of chains, Olivia jumped. “Focus, Olivia,” she told herself. “Focus.”

But things had changed, something with the engines…a different noise…Then she saw it. Water seeping across the floor, soaking the pages of the album…still just a little but…“Please, please…no.” Spit rose in her mouth as she thought of drowning.

Where was it coming from? Could she stop it? Plug the leak? Oh, God, where was the source? In a frenzy, she spun around, staring at every inch of the flooring, but saw no gaping hole in the hull, no split in the seams of the vessel. There was nothing she could do to stop the inevitable. Whatever the psycho had planned was already happening. Olivia had no choice but to hope beyond hope her plan would thwart the killer’s deadly intentions. She just had to stay the course.

Setting her jaw, she yanked the last pages from the album and dragged each, along with the leather bindings, into
the cage with her, where she pulled the plastic from each thick cardboard page. Then, with bloody pictures of Bentz
and his family falling onto the wet floor, she rolled one piece of cardboard into a small bat, leaned far through the
iron bars again and started whacking at the camera. It took several swipes in midair before she actually connected.

*Bam!*

The camera didn’t budge.

“Damn it!”

Again!

Nothing.

The camera remained unscathed. Standing. The red light a small malicious and mocking eye staring at her,
recording her futile movements. “You son of a bitch,” she said and took another swipe.

Another hit.

Still the camera stood.

“Bastard!”

Now, there was more water. Sloshing over the floor, wet and cold under her feet. She swallowed hard. How long
for a boat of this size to sink?

An hour?

Two?

Or less?

She took in a long, calming breath.

Concentrated.

Gave the camera another shot.

*Whack!* A solid blow, but the camera barely shimmied. Maybe she was going at this all wrong…she eyed the
tripod and took stock. *Come on Olivia, you can do better than this. Hurry up! You’re running out of time.*

The legs of the tripod were bolted into the floor, yes, but they telescoped and, she thought, might be weak at the
joints.

Only one way to tell.

Rolling up and using page after page of the album, she beat at the tripod’s closest leg, shaking the contraption,
making it wobble as the water and her panic rose. “Die, you bastard,” she muttered, then grabbed the plastic-bound
cover. It was stronger, the frame beneath the smooth simulated oxblood leather either plastic or metal or wood.

It didn’t matter which.

She only stopped to listen once, trying to discern where her jailer was, but she couldn’t get a bead on the woman,
heard only the groan of the boat as it began to list slightly and the horrifying slosh of water as it rose, splashing her
calves.

The boat was going down.

*Fight, Olivia! You can do this!*
Terrified, she started swinging like crazy, smashing the cover into the tripod’s legs, swinging with all her strength, her fingers clenched over her makeshift weapon.

*Whack! Whack! Whack!*

All sounds above stopped.

No footsteps. No scrapes of metal on metal. Nothing but the spookiness of the empty, rapidly-filling hull. Olivia’s teeth were already chattering, her fingers numb, her fear at the quietude complete.

*Give me strength,* she silently prayed. *Please.*

Then the sound of footsteps. Fast and furious.

Olivia froze, the album cover raised for a final assault, cold water sloshing around her knees. Her pulse was pounding in her brain, her senses heightened as she strained to listen. More footsteps. Her gaze turned to the stairs as the door above opened.

“What the hell?” the woman yelled. “What’s that banging? What’s going on down there?”

*Damn!*

Suddenly the footsteps were ringing down the steps.

*No!*

Olivia wasn’t ready.

She threw another blow at the tripod, hitting hard as her attacker descended. Wearing a wet suit, she dropped to the floor of the hold, splashing water.

The camera teetered.

Olivia gave the tripod a final whack!

The legs gave way and the camera flopped off its base and fell into the water.

“Nooo! What the hell is this?” her attacker demanded, an expression of sheer horror on her face. “You miserable bitch, stop it!” She was sloshing through the salt water, trying to reach the camera as it sank.

Olivia fell to her knees, her hands scrabbling outside the cage, trying to reach the camera, water splashing around her face. She held her breath. Scrabbled frantically. Her finger grazed the side of the camera. It floated off. She tried again, sweeping it with a paddling motion toward the bars.

“Hey!” the woman screeched. “No! Stop! What do you think you’re doing?” She lunged through the water to the cage.

Olivia’s fingers curved over the handle and she pulled. The camera hit the bars and she nearly dropped it.

Her attacker sprang forward.

Gulping salt water, Olivia adjusted the camera so that it slipped through the bars to the inside of the cage.

Freezing, she was coughing and choking on the briny seawater, but she didn’t care as she turned the lens on the woman who’d abducted her, the woman glaring at her and standing knee-deep in water.

“Give it back.”

Olivia, seeing the red light was still glowing, kept filming.
“I said, give it back to me right now, you little bitch!”

“Come and get it.” Even if she pulled out a gun, or the Taser again, Olivia wouldn’t give up her prize.

The woman was freaking. “I said…” Her gaze swept the interior of the cage where her pictures were floating in the water. “What? You tore up my album!” Her eyes rounded in pure horror. “No! You couldn’t.” As pages reached the edge of the cage, she reached through, plucking them up. “No…no, this isn’t right! This isn’t how it’s supposed to go.” She picked up each page and held it high overhead, shaking them off. “Oh God, what’s wrong with you? You can’t…” She spied more of the pages inside the cage, far from her, the pictures scattered, the bloody plastic sheaths cast aside.

“No!” She was fumbling with her keys, desperate to retrieve the album. “No, this is all wrong.”

Olivia just kept on filming.

“Look what you’ve done!” She was frantic, desperate to retrieve what was left of the soggy, disintegrating album. “You screwed everything up! You’re ruining everything!” Her frustration and paranoia mounted and for the first time, it seemed, she realized her actions were being caught on camera.

“Give that back to me now!”

Olivia wasn’t in the mood. Shivering, keeping her tormentor in her viewfinder, she said, “You want it, bitch? Then come and get it.”

“There she is!” the skipper yelled over the cutter’s engines and the rush of wind. They were jetting through the dark water, leaving a white wake behind.

“Oh, shit, she’s listing.”

Bentz squinted into the night, saw the Merry Anne in the powerful beam of the search light.

His heart fell to the floor as he saw the skipper was right; the vessel was leaning hard to one side, sinking fast.

“No,” he whispered, disbelieving. “Oh, God, no!” Against everyone’s protests, he’d donned a wet suit with the intent of boarding, but now the captain was pulling up short. “Get closer!”

“No. We’d better leave this to the Guard,” he said. Already rescuers were trying to board the smaller craft. “Just wait.”

Not a chance.

“Pull up closer,” Bentz insisted.

He thought Montoya would argue. Instead, he turned to Hayes and ordered: “Do it.”

The cutter drew alongside the listing boat. “Really Bentz, you should leave this to the professionals,” Hayes warned. They were less than twenty feet from the sinking Merry Anne. “You’ll only get in the way.”

“I am a professional,” Bentz reminded him as he climbed onto the railing. “And it’s my damned wife.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Hayes lunge, ready to restrain him, but Montoya caught the L.A. detective’s arm. “Let him go.”

Bentz focused on the boat, looming larger as they closed in. Twelve feet away…eight feet…five…At that second, Bentz jumped.

The killer’s plan was falling apart.
As her precious photos swirled on the surface of the rising water, she gathered them, one by one. “No, no, no!” she whined, temporarily forgetting her prisoner. “All my work...years...oh, God, this can’t be happening...my photographs!” She seemed near the brink of tears as water sloshed around her waist and Olivia, fighting cramps and freezing, caught her paranoia on film. Plastic pages floated past, photos curled as they became saturated with water. Olivia’s back was pressed against the bars, the boat tilting at a frightening angle. In a few minutes it would be over. She had to get the damned keys!

Plastic pages floated past.

Olivia thought she heard a noise, a thud. Oh, Jesus, was the boat breaking apart?

The woman heard it as well and she seemed to snap back to reality, noticed again that she was being caught on film.

“Give me back the camera!”

“I said come and get it.” Olivia stood firm, propped by the steel bars, the camera trained on the bitch’s face. Water was splashing above her waist now, weighing her down.

“Damn it!” the woman held the wet photos against her with one hand and struggled with her keys in the other.

“Who are you?” Olivia said. “You might want to tell the viewers your name so you get all the credit that’s due you. Let’s see, is your name...Dawn?” Olivia guessed, remembering that Bentz had once been involved with a cop by that name.

“Stop it.”

“Or are you Bonita...was that it?”

“That bitch? No way!” She snorted in disgust. “Bentz must have mentioned me.”

“I don’t think so.”

Another thud...oh, God, the boat was going down!

“Sure he did. Corrine. Right?”

Olivia shook her head. This woman was Corrine O’Donnell? Of course she’d heard the name before, but she wasn’t going to give this twisted killer the satisfaction. The boat groaned menacingly.

“Corrine. I worked with him. Dated him. Jesus, we slept together and...he loved me. We...we dated twice, almost lived together but then he left me. Both times for Jennifer...” Her voice trailed off. “They all leave, you know. Every one of them but Bentz...I was fool enough to have trusted him twice and he left me alone...all alone...” She shuddered, then, as if realizing she was letting on too much, focused on Olivia again. “I should have used the stun gun on you again!” Another picture passed by, this one of her with Bentz.

She let out a little squeak of denial, then snatched it up. She nearly lost the keys, trying to unlock the gate, “But I wanted you to fight. I wanted ‘RJ’ to see you straining to breathe your last pathetic breath, and now...” She gasped as the keys fell from her fingers, drifting through the bars to the inside of the cage.

Panicked, she tried to stretch her hand into the cage to take hold of them.

Olivia, seeing her chance, shoved the woman back. If she could snatch the keys and unlock the gate, maybe make it to the stairs...

The boat let out a long, low moan and the lights flickered. Olivia’s heart sank. It was now or never!

Taking in a gulp of air, Olivia spotted the fallen keys, then dove down. Her hair and clothes floated around her.
On the floor of the cage, the keys glistened enticingly as she reached for them.

To her horror she saw the killer’s hand snake through the bars even further, her index finger catching the ring!

No! Olivia thought, her lungs protesting, her abdomen still cramping. No!

She surfaced at the same moment the killer did and thrust her arms through the rails, her fingers tangling in the woman’s hair and pulling her under.

Her assailant struggled, wrenching back, whipping her head around.

Olivia hung on. If she was going to drown, by God, this woman was going to drown, too! Struggling, fighting, splashing, they fought. Twisting, turning. Olivia’s lungs felt as if they would burst. Oh Lord, help me…

Again she thought she heard something.

But not the boat keening. No…it was different. Shouts?

Footsteps?

Could someone be on the boat? Oh, God, please!

The lights flickered again.

She took in another huge gulp of air mixed with salt water.

Coughing, sputtering, hanging on for dear life, she dragged the killer’s head closer to the bars and swung hard with the camera, connecting with the woman’s skull. Thud! A sickening crunch.

Blood stained the water.

More shouts from above!

“Help,” she screamed. “Help! Down here!”

Corrine grabbed her by the neck and dragged her down. Olivia, gasping, took in air and water as together they sank below the surface.

No! No! No!

Olivia thrashed wildly.

Corrine’s grip tightened. Their eyes met. Corrine was smiling beneath the water, her dark hair and a spreading plume of blood fanning around her, her eyes bright and psychotic. I’ve got you, she said without words. You and your baby are going to die right now!

Olivia’s lungs were on fire.

The world was swirling, swimming. She tried to pry Corrine’s death grip from her throat.

She couldn’t hold on. She needed air!

Feebly, Olivia struck again with the camera, connecting with Corrine’s forehead.

Then the lights went out.

Were those footsteps? Frantic voices? The sound of angels calling?

In the darkness she felt the camera slip from her fingers…felt Corrine’s hands on her throat…felt herself drifting
away in the cold and the blackness…

Her abdomen ached and she thought of the baby and of Rick Bentz. *I love you*, she thought and saw the light, the round white light as if it were in a tunnel.

*We’re dying,* she thought, floating upward. *My baby and I…we’re dying.*

The lights went out just as Bentz and two rescuers from the Coast Guard entered the hold. He caught a glimpse of the two women struggling, separated by the horrible cage, Olivia trapped inside, Corrine on the outside. Blood diffusing in the salty water.

“No!” His voice ricocheted through the dark, cavernous hold as he raced down the stairs, his feet splashing in water covering the lower rungs.

“Hey, wait up, man,” one of the divers said, flipping on a flashlight that gave the interior of the listing bolt a weird, macabre look.

Bentz sprang, diving into the water, thrusting himself toward the cage, guided by the eerie light. He was vaguely aware of the others behind him, rescue workers with flashlights and crow bars and floatation devices.

A horrid gash cut across Corrine’s forehead, still oozing blood as she looked up at him. “Bentz,” she said with a ghastly smile. “You son of a bitch. This is all your fault…she’s going to die, her and her baby, because of you.”

“No way,” he growled and pulled her away, flinging her toward one of the divers. “Arrest her!”

“No! You can’t!” Corrine was sputtering, blood coming up with her spittle.

Bentz ignored her, reaching for Olivia, who was drifting away from him, so blue and cold…He pulled Corrine away, then reached for Olivia through the bars. “Livvie!” he cried, holding her face above water. “Olivia!”

The boat let out a long groan, like a whale in death throes. “Let’s move it!” One of the rescue workers switched on a high-intensity under water light, illuminating the hold, showing Olivia floating inside her cage, her hair a golden mane on the waters’ surface.

“We’ve got her, sir!” one of the divers said as he found the keys and unlocked the cage. The other diver had dealt with Corrine, dragging her up the stairs, bracing himself against the wall as the boat sank deeper, shuddering. “Let her go…we’ll take care of it.”

“No!”

“Sir, please!” the order was sharp but Bentz ignored it. Olivia was his wife. She was barely breathing, but alive. He carried her up the stairs and she coughed.

“Olivia?”

She coughed again, a deep, racking cough, and he held her tight while she spewed salt water all over him as the boat shuddered, a horrid cracking sound ripping through it.

“Let’s get out of here now!” The divers pushed them forward, across the steep deck.

“Hold on,” he said, feeling the seams of the vessel, giving way.

“NOW!” With the help of the rescuers, Bentz helped Olivia into the cutter, just as the *Merry Anne*, with a final horrifying groan, cracked apart, timbers and glass sliding into the sea.

A medic attended to her while another worker wrapped Corrine in blankets in the next berth. She was barely breathing, her eyes fixed. “She’s still got a pulse,” the medic said, though Bentz didn’t care.
He was only concerned about Olivia and the baby…isn’t that what Corrine had said, that she intended to kill both his wife and unborn child?

“Rick?” Olivia whispered as they stripped off her wet clothes and wrapped her in blankets. She was blinking against the bright lights, her hand searching for his, lying on a bunk only six feet from where Corrine lay, handcuffs surrounding her wrists.

“Right here, honey,” he said, his throat thick, his eyes hot from the threat of tears.

“I…I lost the baby.” She looked up at him and swallowed hard. “I was pregnant. I should have told you.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He clung to her hand. “You’re all right. That’s what counts.”

“But the baby…”

“There will be others, Olivia,” he said, bending down to kiss her lips. “I promise.”
Olivia opened her eyes slowly, against soft lights that seemed impossibly bright. She was in a hospital room of sorts and there was someone in the room with her, a glow near the window.

“You’re going to be all right,” the emanation said to her without making a sound. You and the baby, you’re going to be fine.

“Excuse me? Who are you?”

But the figure only smiled.

“Olivia?”

She blinked. Bentz’s voice jarred her back to reality.

“Did you see that?” she asked, turning to the window that was now just a view of pink sky streaked with orange and lavender as the dawn rose.

“See what?” he asked, glancing at the window.

“There was someone…something…” But when she caught the look on his face to see if she was pulling his leg, she shook her head. “I think I was dreaming.”

“How’re you feeling?”

“Like I need to get out of here.” She’d been in the hospital for two days now, under observation for the ordeal she’d been through, but the baby was still viable, and she had suffered nothing more than trauma.

“I’ll see if I can spring you.”

“Please use all of your powers of persuasion.”

“You got it.” He leaned over and kissed her on the lips, a sweet lingering kiss that promised more to come, once they were home in New Orleans again.

She couldn’t wait to get back, to plan for the baby, to put the trauma of Los Angeles behind her. “City of Angels,” she muttered sarcastically, then looked at the window again, wondering about the spirit that she could swear had been there.

According to Bentz, Corrine’s attack was recorded on the camera that was found on the Merry Anne just before it had sunk. No doubt she would be in prison for the rest of her life.

In the two days since then, details about the deranged woman had emerged in the newspapers. Olivia glanced over at the L.A. Times on her night stand, which had published an updated piece today.

Apparently Corrine had faked an injury to get a desk job at Parker Center—a way to gather information about new cases and about former LAPD Detective Rick Bentz. There was now evidence linking O’Donnell to the murders of Shana McIntyre, Lorraine Newell, Fortuna Esperanzo, and Sherry Petrocelli.

“O’Donnell wrought a trail of death and anguish,” the article stated, “which included the kidnapping of a New
Orleans woman who is married to O'Donnell’s former lover, New Orleans Police Detective Rick Bentz.”

Poor Hayes, Olivia thought. He’d been duped. He’d repeatedly told Bentz that he’d been a fool not to have seen the signs and that he was swearing off women for the rest of his life.

“Won’t last long,” Bentz had predicted.

Montoya had already returned to New Orleans to be with his wife and the Los Angeles Police Department was returning to a routine without the agitation of Rick Bentz. Though Fernando Valdez and Yolanda Salazar seemed to have been duped, rather than participants in Corrine’s grand plan, the LAPD was taking another look at them as well as Jane Hollister.

As for the Twenty-one killer, Bledsoe, with the help of two female detectives as decoys and a lot of searching Internet chat rooms, had run a sting operation and caught someone who fit the profile—Donovan Caldwell, older brother of someone the LAPD had thought might have killed his sisters. It looked like he was their guy. The speculation was that the return of Bentz to L.A. had set him off and that he loved all the attention he was getting.

Corrine had been adamant that she hadn’t been a part of his vicious attacks against twins, so the LAPD was treating the case as if it had nothing to do with the string of murders perpetrated by Corrine O’Donnell, one of their own.

Still, Corrine’s killing spree was more than another black eye on the department.

She was alive, in a hospital, under police custody, and the most anyone could speculate was that she was paying back Bentz for dumping her twice, and for the fact that after the second time, her mother, Merry Anne, had been killed on the way to consoling her daughter. Hayes said that Corrine, who had been an orphan and suffered through a string of foster homes before being adopted by the O’Donells, hated being alone, feared growing old by herself, though she’d put on a pretty good act of independence. She’d admitted to him once that after her adoptive mother died and her father, who’d been having an affair for years, married his second wife, she’d felt alone and abandoned.

Her love affair gone sour with Bentz, twice no less, only confirmed that fact.

Apparently she’d targeted not only Jennifer Bentz, whom she’d murdered, but then Olivia as well, the woman Rick had married.

Although Bentz’s leg had not completely recovered, he needed his cane less and less, and he’d been able to hold his own during his Los Angeles investigation. Melinda Jaskiel had called and offered him his job again, as long as he kept up with his physical therapy and a doctor approved his work schedule. “Since you’re bound and determined to get yourself into trouble, then do it here, where I can keep my eye on you,” she’d said.

“Good news,” Bentz said as he strode back into Olivia’s hospital room, barely limping. “As soon as the doc takes another look at you, we’re outta here. Personally, I just think he wants to take another peek at that gorgeous body of yours.”

“Yeah, Ace, that’s it,” she said, but laughed.

“I called Kristi. Brought her up to date,” he said. “Guess who’s excited about being a big sister?” He laughed at the thought. “So Kristi will be married before we know it. And next she’ll have a kid. And our baby will be playing in the sandbox with her own niece or nephew.” He touched his chin. “What’s wrong with this picture?”

“I get it, I get it.” Olivia suppressed a smile. “You’re too old to be a father again. But that’s just too damned bad, because like it or not, Hotshot, a baby’s on its way. Get ready!”

“I am,” he assured her with a wink as he leaned down to kiss her. “You’re the one who doesn’t know what she’s in for.”

“Then bring it on!” She wrapped her arms around his neck and grinned. “I’ve been waiting for this all my life!”
LISA JACKSON

DEVIOUS
Books by Lisa Jackson

SEE HOW SHE DIES
FINAL SCREAM
RUNNING SCARED
WHISPERS
TWICE KISSED
UNspoken
IF SHE ONLY KNEW
HOT BLOODED
COLD BLOODED
THE NIGHT BEFORE
THE MORNING AFTER
DEEP FREEZE
FATAL BURN
SHIVER
MOST LIKELY TO DIE
ABSOLUTE FEAR
ALMOST DEAD
LOST SOULS
LEFT TO DIE
WICKED GAME
MALICE
CHosen TO DIE
WIThOUT MERCY
DEVIOUS

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation
"It's time." The voice was clear.

Smiling to herself, Camille felt a sublime relief as she finished pushing the last small button through its loop. She stared at herself in the tiny mirror and adjusted her veil.

“You’re a vision in white,” her father said.

But he wasn’t here, was he? He wasn’t walking her down the aisle. No, no, of course not. He’d died, years before. At least that was what she thought. But then her father wasn’t her father … only by law. Right? She blinked hard.

Woozy, she tried to clear her brain, wash away the feeling of disembodiment that assailed her.

It’s because it’s your wedding day; your nerves are playing tricks on your brain.

“Your groom awaits.” Again, the voice propelled her, and she wondered if someone was actually speaking to her or if she was imagining it.

Silly, of course it’s real!

She left the small room where she’d dressed and walked unsteadily along the shadowed corridor, lit by only a few wavering sconces. Dark, yet the hallway seemed to glisten.

Down a wide staircase with steps polished from thousands of feet scurrying up and down, she headed toward the smaller chapel where she knew he was waiting.

Her heart pounded with excitement.

Her blood sang through her veins.

What a glorious, glorious night!

One hand trailed down the long, smooth banister, fingertips gliding along the polished rail.

“Hurry,” a harsh voice ordered against her ear, and she nearly stumbled over the dress’s hem. “You must not keep him waiting!”

“I won’t,” she promised, her voice reverberating from a distance, as if echoing through a tunnel. Or only in her head.

She picked up her skirt to move more quickly, her feet skimming along the floor. She felt light, as if floating, anticipation urging her forward.

Moonlight washed through the tall tracery windows, spilling shadowed, colored patterns on the floor, and as she reached the chapel, her legs wobbled, as if she were wearing heels.

But her feet were bare, the cold stone floor penetrating through her soles.

Poverty, chastity, obedience.

The words swirled through her brain as the door to the chapel was opened and she stepped inside. She heard music in her head, the voices of angels rising upward through the spires of St. Marguerite’s Cathedral on this, her wedding day.

Night … it’s night.

Candles flickered at the altar, and overhead a massive crucifix soared, reminding her of Christ’s suffering. She made the sign of the cross as she genuflected, then slowly moved forward.


The words swirled through her brain as the door to the chapel was opened and she stepped inside. She heard music in her head, the voices of angels rising upward through the spires of St. Marguerite’s Cathedral on this, her wedding day.

Night … it’s night.

Candles flickered at the altar, and overhead a massive crucifix soared, reminding her of Christ’s suffering. She made the sign of the cross as she genuflected, then slowly moved forward.


Her fingers wound around the smooth beads of her rosary as the music in her head swelled.

As she reached the altar, the church bell began to toll and she knelt before the presence of God. She was ready to take her vows, to give her life to the one she loved.

“Good … good … perfect.”

Camille bowed her head in prayer, then, on her knees, looked up at the crucifix, saw the wounds on Christ’s emaciated body, witnessed his sacrifice for her own worldly sins.

Oh, yes, she had sinned.
Over and over.
Now she would be absolved.
Loved.
Forever.

Closing her eyes, she bent her head with difficulty. It seemed suddenly heavy, her hands clumsy. The chapel shifted and darkened, and the statuary, the Madonna and angels near the baptismal basin, suddenly stared at her with accusing eyes.

She heard the scrape of a shoe on the stone floor, and her light-heartedness and joy gave way to anxiety.

*Don’t give in. Not tonight…*

But even her wedding dress no longer seemed silky and light; the fabric was suddenly scratchy and rough, a musty smell wafting from it.

The skin on the back of her neck, beneath the cloying veil, prickled with anxiety.

*No, no, no … this is wrong.*

“So now you know,” the voice so near her ear reprimanded, and she shrank away from the hiss. “For the wages of sin are …”

“Death,” she whispered.
Sheer terror curdled her blood. *Oh, God!* Scared out of her mind, Camille tried to scramble to her feet.

In that instant, Fate struck.
The rosary was stripped from her hands, the beads ripping over her fingers and flesh, only to scatter and bounce on the floor.

Camille tried to force her feet beneath her, but her knees were weak, her legs suddenly like rubber. She tried to stand, pushing herself upright, but it was too late.

A thick cord circled her throat and was pulled tight.

*NO! What is this?*

Needle-sharp shards cut deep into her flesh.
Panic surged through her.

*No, no, no! This is all wrong.*

*Help me!*

White-hot pain screamed through her body. She jerked forward, trying to throw off her attacker as her airway was cut off. She tried to gasp but couldn’t draw a breath. Her lungs, dear Jesus, her lungs strained with the pressure.

*Oh, God, what was happening?*

*Why?*

The nave seemed to spin, the high-domed ceiling reeling, the monster behind her back drawing the deadly cord tighter.

Terror clawed through her brain. Desperately, Camille tried to free herself, to kick and twist again, but her body wouldn’t respond as it should have. The weight against her back was crushing, the cord at her throat slitting deep.

Blood pounded behind her eyes, echoed through her ears.

Her fingers scrabbled at the cord around her neck, a fingernail ripping.

Her back bowed as she strained.

She fought wildly, but it was useless.

*Please, please, please! Dear Father, spare me! I have sinned, but please—*

Her feet slipped from beneath her.

Weakly she flailed, her strength failing her.

*No, Camille. Fight! Don’t give up! Do not! Someone will save you.*

Her eyes focused on the crucifix again, her vision of Christ’s haggard face blurring. *I’m sorry …*

She was suddenly so weak, her attempts frail and futile.

Her strong body grew limp.
“Please,” she tried to beg, but the sound was garbled and soft, unrecognizable. The demon who dared set foot in this chapel, the monster who had defiled this holy ground, held her fast. Pulling on the cord. Unrelenting. Strong with dark and deadly purpose.

Camille’s lungs were on fire, her heart pounding so loudly she was sure it would burst. Through eyes round with fear, she saw only a wash of red.

Oh, Dear Father, the pain!

Again, she tried to suck in one bit of air but failed.

Her lungs shrieked.

Brutal strength, infused by a cold, dark wrath, cinched the garrote still tighter.

Agony ripped through her.


No!

Eyes open, again she saw the image of Christ on the cross, a film of scarlet distorting his perfect face, tears like blood running from his eyes.

I love you.

The deluge of sins that was her life washed over her, quicksilver images of those she had wronged. Her mother and father, her sister, her best friend … so many people, some who had loved her … the innocents.

This was her punishment, she realized, her hands falling from her neck to scrape down her abdomen and linger for a second over her womb.

Zzzzt. Snap! A bright light flashed before her eyes; then all was dark.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, wash my soul clean…. Forgive me, for I have sinned…. 
“Oh, for the love of St. Jude!” Valerie clicked the escape key on her laptop again and again, as if she could punch the life back into the hand-me-down computer with its antiquated hard drive and mind of its own. “Come on, come on!” she muttered between clenched teeth, then gave up, unable to turn the damned thing off without taking out the battery.

That did it! Tomorrow she’d go computer shopping despite the dismal state of her bank account. She still had a little room on her credit card, but then, once she bought a new computer, it would be maxed out as well.

The price of divorce, she told herself callously as she shoved the laptop onto the rumpled bedclothes. In her mismatched pajamas, she walked into the kitchen of the small carriage house and dipped her head under the faucet for a drink, then stared through the rain-spattered window at the uneasy New Orleans night.

The air was thick with the coming of summer, sweat dampening her skin. She cranked open the window, allowing the dank smell of the slow-moving river to roll inside. Far away, the hum of traffic could be heard on the freeway, a steady rush that competed with the song of crickets and the low rumble of toads.

Pealing forlornly, the bells of St. Marguerite’s struck off the hours of midnight.

Inexplicably, Val’s skin crawled. Her cop instincts went into overdrive, and she felt, again, as if she were being watched, that hidden eyes were assessing her.

“Too many nights with the sci-fi channel,” she told herself. “Too many nightmares.”

For a fleeting second, a splintered memory with sharp, brittle edges pierced her brain. Looming. Indistinct. But evil.

Her blood chilled with the image. Draped in black, with cruel eyes and a foul odor, the sinister creature grew larger. Threatening. A chain dangling from its clawlike hand.

No one could help her.

No one could save her.

“Husssshhh,” the creature hissed, lowering the silvery noose. “Hush.”

Camille! Val thought in horror. This demon wants Camille….

In a blink, the horrifying image disappeared, shrinking into the corners of her mind. From experience, Val knew it would lurk there until, unbidden, it would rise again.

“Leave me alone,” she muttered under her breath, ignoring the hairs that had risen on the back of her arm. The fiend was a figment of her imagination, nothing more—nothing a sane, stable woman would believe.

Val took a steadying breath as the church bells of St. Marguerite’s continued to toll plaintively through the night. Her insides still cold, she gripped the edge of the counter to steady herself and force the ugly apparition back where it belonged—into the darkest nether regions of her mind, into the crevices where sanity didn’t dare tread.

Don’t go there, she warned herself silently. Do not go there. Dwelling on the insidious pictures in her mind would only create a self-fulfilling and hideous prophecy.

“Everything’s fine,” she said out loud, though her insides were trembling. Quivering with a fear that she tried to keep hidden. No one could know. She was a strong woman. Nightmares or visions conjured by her willing brain weren’t allowed to scare her. “For God’s sake, get a grip!”

Willing herself to let go of the counter and her ridiculous fears, she told herself she was just stressed out. Who wouldn’t be? An impending divorce, a lost career, a business teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, and a sister, her only sibling, intent on taking vows in a convent right out of the Middle Ages! And then there was the e-mail from Camille. Disturbing.

Val thought about St. Marguerite’s, the historic cathedral where her sister would eventually take her vows.

That is, if they let her.

It still seemed so out of character for Camille, the party girl. Always with a boyfriend, always fending off trouble. From what she knew about St. Marguerite’s, Valerie doubted that her sister’s sins would be easily forgiven in that arena. St. Marguerite’s Convent, with its locked gates, antiquated communication system, and strict rules, seemed
more like a medieval fortress than a house of God; it was an isolated place the rest of the twenty-first century had zipped past. The people within those hallowed walls harkened back to earlier centuries where archaic conventions, cruel discipline, and antediluvian opinions prevailed. Probably because of the abbess or mother superior or whatever that old bat Sister Charity called herself. A throwback to the days of wearing dark habits, rapping the knuckles of unsuspecting students, and using threats and fear over praise, Sister Charity was as much a warden as she was a leader.

Why Camille ever decided to take her vows at an institution as rigid as Saint Marguerite’s remained a mystery.

No, it’s not. You know the reasons—you just can’t face them.

Psssst!

A whisper of evil skittered through Sister Lucia’s brain.

Her eyes flew open to the blackness of her tiny room in the convent. Her skin crawled, and her mouth tasted of metal. *Father in heaven, please let this just be the remnant of a bad dream, a nightmare that—*

Psssst!

There it was again, that horrid precursor of what was to come. She tossed off the thin covers and slid to her knees, her nightgown puddling around her as she instinctively reached for her rosary draped over the metal bedpost. She made the sign of the cross with the crucifix and began to silently recite the Apostles’ Creed, her lips moving in the darkness, sweat collecting at the base of her skull. “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth….” And she did believe. Fervently. Usually she found comfort in this ritual she’d learned in her youth. In times of stress or worry or need, she sought solace by running her fingers over the glossy beads and whispering the prayers that brought her closer to God.

Psssst! Again the electric current that hissed beneath her skin brought sweat to her brow.

Not here, oh, please … not in the convent! Her prayer was interrupted and she started over, squeezing her eyes shut, leaning into the thin mattress with her elbows, her brain thrumming.

Once again she touched the crucifix to her forehead and began the succession of prayers that came so easily to her mind.

This has to be a mistake, she thought wildly as the familiar words slipped over her lips. Since she’d entered St. Marguerite’s, intent on taking her final vows, she’d had no “incidents,” as her mother had called them. She’d thought she was safe here.

“I believe in—”

Psssst! Louder this time.

The painful jolt cut through the darkness.

Lucia sucked in her breath and dropped her rosary, her prayer again cut short. She stood, abandoning any attempt to forestall the inevitable. Walking barefoot over the hardwood floors, she sensed the tremor of trouble brewing as surely as a hurricane off the Louisiana coast. In her mind’s eye, she saw the chapel of this very parish and blinked against an onslaught of images.

An indistinct face.

Yellowed gown.

Billowing dark robe.

Twisted, deadly lips.

A heavy door clicking as it closed.

A bloody crucifix, crimson dripping from Christ’s sacred wounds.

Death, a voice intoned over the raw static in her brain.

She flew into the hall, which was dimly lit by scattered wall sconces, and descended the curving staircase. Her fingers trailing along the worn banister, she followed a predetermined path. Pale light passed through the dark panes of stained glass, the heat of the June day still lingering into night.


Her heart pounding like an erratic drum, she turned toward the chapel, the smaller place of worship tucked behind the huge cathedral. With a sense of darkness propelling her forward, she pushed through double doors that parted
easily and stepped into God’s house. The chapel was usually a place of light and goodness, forgiveness and redemption, but tonight she sensed that evil as dark as Satan’s soul lurked here, lying in wait.

“Father, please be with me.” She dipped her fingertips in holy water and crossed herself as she entered the nave, where all of the images congealed. Red votive candles flickered, casting shadows that shifted on the stone walls. A massive crucifix was suspended from the arched ceiling over the altar where Jesus, in his agony, watched over the chapel.

Instinctively, Lucia made the sign of the cross again. The thrumming in her brain turned into a throb.

From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of movement—a dark figure in billowing robes disappearing through a door.

“Father?” she called, thinking the person running from the chapel was a priest. The door clicked closed. “Wait! Please . . .” She started for the doorway. “Father—Oh, no . . .” Her voice left her as she glimpsed a flutter of gauzy white fabric, the scallop of lace undulating on the floor by the first row of pews.

What?
Her heart nearly stopped.
The horrid, rapid-fire images that had awakened her seared through her brain again:
Yellowed gown.
Cruel lips.
A door shutting as the church bells pealed.
Just like before.
The whisper of evil brushed the back of her neck again. She nearly stumbled as she raced forward, her bare feet slapping the cold stone floor, echoing to the high, coved ceiling.

This can’t be happening!
It can’t be!

Stumbling, running, afraid of what she might find, she dashed to the front of the apse, to the altar and the glorious, now-dark stained-glass windows. The crucifix towered to the high ceiling, the son of God staring down in his pain.

“Oh, God!” Lucia cried. “Dios! Mi Dios!”

Horror shot up her spine.
A crumpled form lay in front of the first row of pews.

¡No, por favor, Jesús. No, no, no!

Her blood turned to ice at the sight of the body, supine near the baptismal font. Biting back a scream, Lucia fell to her knees near the bride dressed in a fragile, tattered wedding dress. A thin, unraveling veil covered her face.

Lucia’s stomach wrenched as she recognized Sister Camille, her face pale, her lips blue, her eyes wide and staring through the sheer lace.

“Oh, sweet Jesus . . .” Lucia gasped. She touched Camille’s stillwarm flesh, searching for a pulse at the nun’s neck, where small bruises circled her throat. Her stomach threatened to spew. Someone had done this to Camille, had tried to kill her. Oh, God, was she still alive? Did she feel the flicker of a pulse, the slightest movement beneath Camille’s cooling skin? Or was it only a figment of her imagination?

“Camille,” Lucia coaxed desperately, her voice cracking, “don’t let go, please. Oh, please . . . Mi, Dios!”

The ringing bells overhead sounded like a death knell.

She looked up. “Help! Someone help me!” Her voice rose to the rafters, echoing back to her. “Please!”

To the near-dead woman, she whispered, “Camille, I’m here. It’s Lucia. You hang in there . . . Please, please . . . It’s not your time . . .” But someone had decided Camille needed to die, and despite her good thoughts, Lucia knew of one person who wanted Camille Renard to die.

She whispered a quick prayer to the Father, praying with all her soul; then, tears filling her eyes, she bent close to Camille’s ear. “Don’t let go.” With her own gown, she tried to stop the spreading pool of blood coming from the wounds on Camille’s neck.

Camille didn’t move.
Pupils fixed.
Skin ashen. Cooling.
Blood flow slowed to nothing.

Lucia was frantic. She had to do something! Anything! Please God, do not take her. Not now … not yet … Oh, Father!

“Help!” Lucia screamed again, unwilling to leave the friend she’d known so closely for a year, a woman she’d known of most of her life. She couldn’t be dying … couldn’t be …

Lucia’s mind was awash with images of Sister Camille, beautiful and lithe, with her secretive smile and eyebrows that would arch to show amusement or disbelief. A troubled woman, yes, a nun with far too many secrets, one she’d met long ago before they’d independently decided to take their vows.

Throat closing, she whispered, “It’s not your time, Camille. You hear me? Don’t leave … don’t you …”

But the poor, tortured woman was gone, her spirit rising from the lifeless shell that was her body. Stolen from her.

“No … please … Father—”

Thud! Somewhere a door banged shut as the bells pealed again.

Lucia jumped.

Someone was coming!

Good. “Just hold on,” she said to the ashen body, though she knew intuitively that it was too late. “Help is coming.” Her words hung in the chill night air.

Lucia felt a shiver slide down her spine as doubt clouded her mind. She linked her fingers through those of her friend and sent up another desperate prayer as the church bells in the steeple continued to toll off the hours.

Was help really on the way?

Or was the person who had done this to Camille returning?
Val was calmer now, the quivering of her insides having subsided.

She filled her favorite, chipped mug with hot water, set it in the microwave, and watched as hidden letters appeared. The heavy cup, bought online at ABC.com, displayed the cast members of Lost, her once-favorite television show.

It had been a Christmas gift from Camille, a treasure she’d bought before the show had aired its final episode.

Back in the days when they hadn’t let anything drive a wedge between them. Not even Slade Houston.

“Oh, Cammie,” she whispered, shaking her head at their own ridiculous fights as the microwave dinged. Gingerly gripping the cup’s handle, she scrounged the last tea bag from a box and dunked the decaffeinated leaves into the near-boiling water.

Though it was midnight, sleep, for Valerie, was still hours away, if at all possible. What was it Slade had always said? That her insomnia was one of the reasons the department had kept her on; she was a workaholic who, because of her inability to sleep, could work sixteen hours straight while being paid for eight.

Then again, Slade was known to exaggerate.

Part of his ridiculous cowboy humor.

Twisting the kinks from her neck, she closed her eyes, and for a heartbeat, she saw her husband’s face again: strong, beard-shadowed jaw; crooked half-smile with teeth that flashed white against skin tanned from hours working under the brutal Texas sun; and eyes smoldering a deep, smoky blue. Slade Houston. Tough as old leather, all rough-and-tumble cowboy, sexy as all get-out and just plain bad news.

So why was she thinking of him tonight?

And last night and the one before that and …

“Idiot,” she muttered under her breath as she willed Slade’s image to disappear. The bells had stopped ringing sometime in the past few minutes. Good. Silence. Peace.

But the eerie sensation that something was very wrong tonight lingered, and she couldn’t help feeling on edge.

Tomorrow.

She’d visit Camille tomorrow, regardless of the Machiavellian methods that old bat Sister Charity tried to use to dissuade her. “I’m sorry, but seeing your sister now is impossible. We have strict rules here,” she’d told Val the last time she’d tried to visit Camille unannounced. “Rules we abide by, rules sanctified by the Father.”

Yeah, right. If Sister Charity had any good intentions, Val had yet to see one. In Val’s opinion, the reverend mother was on a power trip fueled by self-importance and a skewed view of religion.

Always a bad combination.

And one, this time, Valerie intended to thwart come daybreak.

The last tolling bell faded to the sound of footsteps emanating from beyond the chapel walls. Lucia’s skin crawled as she stared at the dead girl. She tried to pray but couldn’t find the words. Who had done this to Camille? Why?

And the weird bridal dress, the ring of bloody drops around the neckline—what was that all about?

She glanced to the side door that had shut just as she’d arrived, and her heart hammered. Someone else had seen Sister Camille on the chapel floor. Lucia had crossed paths with either Camille’s assailant or a witness to what had happened. Fear pricked the back of her neck as she wondered if help was on its way … or if the assailant was returning.

Making the sign of the cross, Lucia turned toward the doorway and screamed at the top of her lungs. “Help!”

The side door swept open, banging against the wall. Mother Superior, an imposing woman in a long black habit, hurried into the nave. Her graying hair, which was usually concealed by her veil, appeared fuzzy and disheveled. “Sister Lucy! For the love of the Holy Mother, what’s going on?” she demanded. Her skirts swished against the smooth floor, and her face was a mask of disapproval, her lips pinched. Suddenly realizing where she was, she paused to quickly genuflect at the crucifix and make the sign of the cross over her ample bosom.
“It’s Sister Camille . . .” Lucia rose, her gaze still upon Camille’s body.

“What about . . .? Oh!” The mother superior dragged in a quick breath as she rounded the final pew. “Saints be with us.” Wide skirts swooshing, she ran to the victim’s side and dropped to her knees.

“It’s too late. She’s dead.”

“But how? Why?” Sister Charity whispered, as if she expected God to answer as she fussed over the corpse and said a quick prayer. “Who would do this?”

“I don’t know. Someone was here, before me,” Lucia said, trying to separate fact from fiction, from the images that were real as opposed to those that had been conjured in her mind. “I saw the door to the hallway close.” Yes, yes, that was right. She pointed to the door that led to a back hallway. “And . . . I think Sister Camille was alive at that point.”

The older nun touched Camille’s wrist and placed her ear next to Camille’s nose, listening for any sign of life. Lucia knew she would find none.

“What were you doing here, Sister Lucy?” Mother Superior asked, addressing Lucia in her formal name—the saint’s name she had taken along with her vows.

“I, uh, heard something,” Lucia lied, as she had so often in the past. No one here knew her secret, not even the priests to whom she confessed.

“ Heard something? From your room?”

“Yes, I was on my way to the bathroom.”

As if she realized this conversation could wait, the reverend mother, still kneeling at Camille’s side, ordered, “Go find Father Paul. Send him here.”

“Shouldn’t we call the police?”

The reverend mother closed her eyes as if seeking patience. “Do as I say. After you send Father Paul, then go to my office and dial nine-one-one.”

“But the police should be alerted first—”

“Don’t argue! The best thing we can do for Sister Camille is to pray for her soul. Now, go! And if anyone else wakes up, send them back to their rooms!” Her expression brooked no argument, and Lucia took off, walking rapidly through the very doorway where she’d seen someone exit. Send the other nuns back to their rooms? Cells, more likely. Or kennels. Like dogs. Oh, Lord, she knew she was not cut out to be a nun. Not with impure thoughts like these.

Heart pounding, she closed the door behind her and took off at a dead run—heading straight to the reverend mother’s office. Let them punish her later, but right now she knew Camille was the priority. She pushed open the frosted-glass door and stormed into Sister Charity’s inner sanctuary.

Everything was neatly placed on bookshelves that lined the room—books, candles, crucifixes, a healthy amaryllis with a heavy white bloom, and a solitary picture of the Pope. Lucia rounded the big, worn desk, where far too many times she had sat on one of the uncomfortable visitor chairs, her hands clenched in anxiety, as the mother superior had lectured her across the expanse of lacquered walnut. She reached for the telephone with its heavy receiver, a black dinosaur left over from the sixties or seventies, and dialed quickly, nervously waiting for the rotary dial to click into place.

“Nine-one-one. What’s the nature of your emergency?” a woman’s voice answered.

“Sister Camille is dead! There was some kind of accident here at St. Marguerite’s Convent—no, in the chapel—and she’s dead! I . . . I think she was killed. Please, please send someone quickly!” Her voice, already tremulous, was elevating with each word.

“What is the address?”

Lucia rattled off the street address and, when asked, her name and the phone number.

“What kind of an accident?”

“I don’t know. Maybe . . . maybe she was strangled. All I really know is that she’s dead, and the mother superior is with her now.”

“A homicide.”

“Oh, I don’t know! We need help. Please, please send help!”

“We are. Officers have been dispatched. You need to stay on the line.”
“I can’t … I have to tell Father Paul.”

“Please, Miss Costa, do not hang up. Stay on the line—”

Ignoring the dispatcher, Lucia dropped the phone, letting it dangle as she took off at a full run through the back door of the office, one only Sister Charity used.

Lucia’s heart was a drum as she sprinted through the dark hallways with their gleaming floors, down the stairs, and out the double doors to a courtyard. As if Lucifer himself were chasing her, she raced through the rain-splattered cloister and past a fountain. Wind scuttled across the flagstones, kicking up wet leaves and tugging at the sodden hem of her nightgown.

She couldn’t tell anyone about how she was awakened so abruptly in the middle of the night. What would she say? Anyone who heard about the voice that directed her, the beast she’d somehow unleashed, would think she was certifiable. As she did herself. She figured that voice in her head was between her and God. No one else. Not even Father Paul or Father Frank. They might think she was possessed by a demon, and maybe she was, but she just didn’t want any attention drawn to her.

It’s not about you! Camille is dead! Dead! Someone killed her and left her lifeless body in the chapel. And somehow the voice knew. And awoke her.

Oh, it was all so disturbing.

Through another door and under a dripping portico, she flew to Father Paul’s door, where she pounded desperately.

“Father!” she cried, shivering in the pale glow of the priest’s porch light. “Please! Father! There’s been … an accident!”

Over the drip of rain, she heard footsteps behind her, the scrape of leather against wet stones. From the corner of her eye, she saw movement in the shadows, a dark figure emerging through a garden gate. She gasped, stepped back, and nearly tripped on her own hem as a large man appeared, his face white and stern, his eyes sunken and shadowed in the night.

“Father Frank,” she whispered, recognizing the younger priest. She had clasped her hand over her breasts and suddenly realized that the cool rain had soaked her cotton nightgown, which now pressed flush against her skin. The fabric clung to her body, hiding nothing in the watery light. “There’s been an accident or … or …” She swallowed hard, aware of the secrets that Sister Camille had shared. Secrets about this tall man standing before her. “It’s Sister Camille, in the chapel…. She … she …” And then she saw the blood leeching from his cassock, running in red rivulets onto the smooth, shimmering stones of the pathway.

“She’s dead,” he said, his rough voice barely audible over the gurgle of rainwater in the gutters, his gaze tortured. “And it’s my fault. God forgive me, it’s all my fault.”
“Still up?” Freya’s voice cut into her fantasy.

“Always.” Val tried to ignore the worries about Camille. She tossed the tea bag into the sink and glanced over her shoulder toward the archway leading to the main house. When they’d bought this old inn, Val had been attracted to the small living space of the carriage house, while Freya took over the private quarters just off the main kitchen. Freya, all tousled reddish curls and freckles, appeared in shorts and an oversized T-shirt. She was cradling a cup with whipped cream piled so high it was frothing and running over the lip of her mug. Somehow, Freya managed to lick up the drip before it landed on the cracked linoleum.

Freya was five-three and still had the honed body of the gymnast she’d been in high school and the metabolism of a girl twenty years her junior.

“You look like hell,” Freya observed.

“Thanks.”

“Really, you should try to sleep.”

If only. She turned and leaned her hips against the counter. “Insomniacs R Us.” The inability to sleep was something she and Freya shared in common.

Freya toasted her friend. “Mine is decaf. Though it doesn’t mean I’ll actually fall asleep anytime soon.”

“I’ve got decaf, too. Something called ‘Calm.’ “ Val took an experimental sip. Hot water tasting of ginger and chamomile singed the tip of her tongue. “It’s supposed to help you chill… . Wait a minute, let me see what exactly it’s guaranteed to do.” She picked up the empty box and read the label. “Oh, yeah, here it is. ‘Calm’s unique formula is guaranteed to ease the worries and cares of the world away with each flavorful swallow. With hints of ginger and jasmine, this chamomile blend will relax and soothe you.’ ”


“No, just boring to fans of triple-caramel-chocolate-macchiatos with Red Bull chasers.”

“Very funny.” Freya couldn’t help but grin as she climbed onto one of the two café chairs near Val’s bistro table.

A friend since eighth grade, Freya Martin had convinced Val to invest in this eight-bedroom bed-and-breakfast inn in the Garden District, a few blocks off St. Charles Avenue. Named the Briarstone House, the old Georgian had been minimally damaged during Hurricane Katrina, but the owners, Freya’s great-aunt and uncle, had decided they weren’t about to weather any more Category 5 storms. Actually, they didn’t want to see any Category 1, 2, 3, or 4 storms either.

Auntie and Uncle had wanted out of the Gulf Coast, and fast.

Freya had wanted in.

She’d bought out Uncle Blair and Aunt Susie on a contract. Leaving most of the furnishings, they filled an RV and drove west, into the sunset, searching for a dry climate, new snowbird friends, and endless nights of card games and martinis.

To Val, right now, her nerves on perpetual edge, that sounded like heaven.

Valerie had been at a crossroads in her own life when Freya had asked her to become her partner. It hadn’t taken much to convince her that an investment in a creaking old Georgian manor—rumored to be haunted, no less—was the best idea in the universe. Especially since the inn was barely a mile as the crow flies from Camille and St. Marguerite’s.

Since Freya and her live-in boyfriend had recently parted ways, Freya had decided she needed a business partner. She’d e-mailed Val with the details, and Val jumped on the opportunity.

A deal was struck.

The rest, as they say, was history.

Some of it bad history.

And now, with the gurgle of rain running through the gutters and the church bells now silent, Val wondered if
she’d made the right decision. Again. And the eerie feeling that had been with her earlier still remained. Mentally shaking it off, she glanced at the window but, of course, couldn’t see the church spire in the dark.

“Okay, spill it. Something’s wrong, isn’t it?” Freya asked, eyebrows puckering. “Wait a minute, forget I asked. Something’s always wrong. Let me guess—it’s Slade.”

“It’s not Slade,” she said emphatically, and Freya rolled her eyes, not buying it.

“If you say so.”

“Trust me, it’s not Slade.”

“It’s always Slade. We should talk about him.”

“No way.” Scowling, Val skewered Freya with her best don’t-go-there glare.

“Really, you should know that—”

“We’ve been over this ground before. I don’t want to talk or think about him until I have to. In court.”

“But—”

“I’m serious, Freya. Slade’s off-limits.” She really didn’t want to discuss her ex again. Especially not tonight, when she was feeling so off-center.

Freya looked as if she was about to say something more but thought better of it. “Fine. Just remember I tried.”

“I will.”

“Did he do something I don’t know about?”

“Probably.” Val lifted a shoulder. “Who knows and who cares?”

Freya opened her mouth, but before she could bring up Slade’s name again, Val said, “It’s Cammie, okay? I haven’t heard from her in over a week.” The old timbers of the house creaked overhead, and for a second, Val thought she heard footsteps. The ghost again, she supposed. Freya thought the house was haunted; she didn’t.

“Hear that?” Freya asked. Unlike Val, Freya was a believer in all things supernatural.

“The house settling.”

“It settled two hundred years ago.”

Val rolled her eyes.

Freya got the message. “Okay, okay. You’re worried ’cause Cammie’s incommunicado. So what? I don’t hear from Sarah for weeks, and she’s my twin. If you believe all the twin literature, we’re supposed to be on the same wavelength and have some special”—she made air quotes—“spiritual connection.” She rolled her eyes and took another sip. “They say we formed a psychic bond from our time together in the womb. Somehow, Sarah never got the message.”

Val ran her thumb over the chipped ridge of her mug. “But Cammie is different.”

“Cammie is probably just busy. You know, doing what nuns do. Praying, doing penance, good deeds, whatever.” Freya wiggled the fingers of her free hand as if to indicate there were a myriad of things keeping Cammie from communicating. “Maybe she’s taken one of those vows of silence.”


“Oh, yeah.” Freya bit her lip. “Always in trouble.”

“That hasn’t changed,” Val admitted, the uneasy feeling returning.

“I know, that’s really the problem, isn’t it? Cammie just doesn’t seem cut out to be a nun.” Another sip. “Just like you weren’t cut out to be a cop.”

Val felt that same little bite that nipped at her when she thought about her career gone sour. She wanted to argue and defend herself, to tell Freya that she’d been a good cop, but the effort would have been futile. A gust of heavy wind slipped through the open window, rattling the blinds, reminding her how she’d screwed up. “Well, I don’t have to worry about that now, do I?”

“Hey, I didn’t mean—”

“I know.” She waved a hand in the air, as if swatting a lazy fly. “Don’t worry about it.” But it was a sore subject, one that burned a hole in her brain and kept her up at night. She slid the window down and caught a watery image of herself: pale and ghostly skin, cheekbones high and sharp, wide mouth turned down, and worried hazel eyes. Her curly auburn hair was scraped back into a drooping pony-tail. God, she was a mess. Inside and out. Rain skewed her
reflection as she latched the window tight. “Anyway, you’re right. I do look like hell.”

“Nothing seventy-two hours of sleep won’t cure.”

Val doubted it.

“Anyone ever tell you that you worry too much?”

“Just you.”

“Then you should take it as gospel. Quit dwelling on Cammie, okay? So she’s doing the running-off-to-a-nunnery thing. It’ll pass.” One side of Freya’s mouth lifted. “I’m surprised she hasn’t already been thrown out.”

If you only knew, Valerie thought, sipping her tea and glancing out the window again into the thick night where the spire of St. Marguerite’s cathedral was cloaked in darkness, invisible.

Oh, God, Freya, if you only knew.

Slade Houston squinted into the darkness. The tires of his old pickup hissed over the slick pavement, and the wipers were having one helluva time keeping up with the torrent as he drove across the state line into Louisiana. His old dog, Bo, a hound of indeterminate lineage, sat beside him, his nose pressed to the glass of the passenger window. Every once in a while, Bo cast a bald eye in Slade’s direction, hoping for him to crack the damned thing.

“Not tonight, boy,” Slade said as he fiddled with the radio, which crackled from interference. He found a station playing an old Johnny Cash song, but the lyrics couldn’t keep his mind from returning to his reason for driving in the middle of the night. A fool’s mission, at least according to his brothers, Trask and Zane, who’d let him hear it while he was packing up the Ford just before dusk.

“Why the hell you want anything to do with that woman is beyond me,” Trask, his middle brother, had muttered under his breath. “Only gonna bring you grief.”

“More grief,” Zane, the youngest, had added.

Not that Slade had asked for any advice as he’d loaded his pickup with a sleeping bag and duffel before whistling for Bo.

“Just take care of things. I shouldn’t be gone long,” Slade had said as the dog, with his perpetual limp and gnawed ear, leaped into the cab. Slade had slammed the door shut and felt the heat of his siblings’ sullen glares.

“How long?” Zane had asked.

“Don’t know yet. It depends.”

“Just be smart,” Trask had advised.

“Why start now?” Slade had flashed a grin to lighten things up, but the joke had fallen flat. Neither brother had cracked the hint of a smile; they just glared at him with their jaws set.

Great.

That hadn’t been too much of a surprise. Neither one of them had liked Valerie before the marriage, and their opinions hadn’t changed much over the years.

Slade had tried to let it drop as he climbed behind the wheel. Through the open window, he heard that crickets had taken up their evening chorus and saw the western hills had been silhouetted by the brilliant shades of orange and gold.

Trask hadn’t been ready to give up the fight. “You plan on bringing her back here with ya?”

“Valerie?” he said, just to get under his brother’s skin. As if there was anyone else. “Don’t know yet.”

“If ya do hook up with her again,” Trask said, “then you’re a bigger fool than I took ya for.”

“She wouldn’t be willing, even if I asked.” That was the truth.

“She’s bad news,” Zane reminded him.

“Don’t I know it.” But he’d cranked on the engine of the dusty rig anyway, executed a three-point turn in the gravel drive without a second look at the weathered two-story ranch house he’d grown up in, and hit the gas. He didn’t bother watching the setting sun light the sky ablaze behind the barns with their creaking wild-mustang weather vanes. His old Ford had bounced down the rutted lane, dried sow thistle and Johnson grass scratching the underbelly of the truck as it rolled past acres upon acres of fields dotted with cattle and horses, land he and his brothers had inherited from their father.

A red-tailed hawk had swooped through the darkening sky as he drove past the old windmill that sat solitary and still in the dead air. A good omen. Right?
He’d snapped on the radio, then turned the truck past the battered mailbox onto the county road. He drove through the small town of Bad Luck until he came to San Antonio, where he cruised onto I-10, the long strip of asphalt cutting dead east. He’d left his brothers, Texas, and the sun far behind him.

To chase down a woman who didn’t want him.

He had the divorce papers in the glove compartment of his truck to remind him of that sorry fact.
The call came in not long after midnight.

Montoya groaned as he rolled across the bed and answered his cell. While his wife, Abby, burrowed under the blankets, he kept his voice down and slid out of bed as he had a hundred times before. He was a detective with the New Orleans Police Department. Odd hours and late-night calls were part of his job.

“What now?” Abby asked, her voice muffled before she tossed the blankets off and shoved a tangle of hair from her eyes as she hung up.

“Dead woman. A nun. Possible homicide.”

Abby pushed herself upright, propped her back against the pillows, and clicked on the light. “A nun?”

“According to the officer who responded to a nine-one-one call.” He slid into a pair of battered jeans that he’d tossed over the foot of the bed, then found a clean T-shirt in the closet and pulled it over his head.

“Why would anyone kill a nun?” She scraped her hair back from her face, but wild curls sprang loose.

“Don’t know, but I’ll figure it out.” He flashed his wife a humorless grin and thought back to another time when a nun had been killed— that one being his own aunt. “That’s why they pay me the big bucks.”

“Yeah, right.” She didn’t smile as she tugged at her hair. “Just be careful.”

“Always am.” He started for the door.

“Hey! Aren’t you forgetting something?” she asked, angling her chin toward him, practically begging for a kiss.

“Oh, yeah!” He walked to the closet, found the locked box holding his sidearm, and retrieved his weapon. After strapping on his shoulder holster, he slid his arms through his leather jacket and started for the door.

“You can be a miserable SOB when you want to be,” she charged.

“I always want to be.”

“I know.” But her eyes twinkled and the reddish blond curls that framed her face were sexy as hell. “You’re a father now, so … don’t take any unnecessary risks, okay? I want Benjamin to know his daddy.”

He snapped his Glock into place, then crossed the room and pushed her back onto the mattress. “So do I.” He stretched his body over hers and kissed her hard, his tongue probing her mouth, his hands splayed wide across her backside. “Wait for me,” he whispered against her ear.

“Not on your life, Detective,” she said, and cocooned herself in the blankets again, covering her auburn curls with a pillow. “And whatever you do, don’t wake Benjamin, okay? Otherwise I’ll have to kill you.” Again her voice was muffled, but he got the message. He had no intention of waking their three-month-old son.

Smiling as he left the room, Montoya nearly tripped over Hershey, their big lug of a chocolate lab who, always on guard near the bedroom door, scrambled to his big paws and stood, blocking the hallway, his tail thumping against an antique sideboard. As ever, Hershey was ready for anything, especially to take Montoya’s place in the bed.

“In this case, Cruz was right.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. Be ready.”

“Oh, God, save it, Montoya,” she countered, and cocooned herself in the blankets again, covering her auburn curls with a pillow. “And whatever you do, don’t wake Benjamin, okay? Otherwise I’ll have to kill you.” Again her voice was muffled, but he got the message. He had no intention of waking their three-month-old son.

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“Forget it, okay? She needs her beauty sleep.”

“I heard that!” she said through the open door.

Hershey took her voice as an open invitation and galloped into the bedroom. A small dark shadow, the skittish cat, Ansel, leaped from the sideboard and followed the dog inside.

“Great.” Montoya was struggling with his shoes. He didn’t have time to call the dog back and figured Abby could deal with the animals. With bluish night-lights as his guide, he headed through his long, shotgun-style home, passing through the kitchen and living room to reach the front door. The night was muggy. Thick. The smell of the sluggish
Mississippi hung heavy in the air. Rain was falling hard, running in the street as he jogged across his soggy yard to the driveway and slid onto the familiar leather seat of his Mustang. He closed the door, jammed his key into the ignition, and the engine roared to life.

Wondering what the hell had gone down at the conservative church, he hit the wipers, then gunned the engine. No siren. No lights. Just the windshield wipers slapping away the rain as the car’s radio played and the familiar voice of Dr. Sam, a late-night psychologist, wafted through the speakers. Frowning, he drove the familiar streets and recalled another case in which the host, Samantha Walker, was the intended victim. Fortunately, Dr. Sam was still around to help the people who called in to her show.

Traffic was sparse as he rolled through the wet, muggy night. Montoya arrived at St. Marguerite’s to find squad cars, lights flashing, parked at angles on the street. A fire truck dominated the circular drive, with an emergency unit idling under one of the massive live oaks surrounding the building.

Montoya double-parked and headed toward the cathedral, a looming edifice with spires, bell tower, and tracery windows reflecting the strobing red and blue lights of the parked vehicles. Gargoyles perched high on the gutters, dark, dragonlike sculptures eyeing the sacred grounds with malicious intent, their evil presence in stark contrast to the cross rising high over the highest church steeple.

He paused at the wide double doors, long enough to log into the crime scene and receive directions from one of the uniformed cops controlling the scene. Quickly, he made his way around the larger area of the cathedral proper to a side door and down a short hallway to the smaller chapel, which was tucked between the massive church and what appeared to be a garden.

He stepped inside, and a wave of nostalgia pushed him back to his youth, when his mother would take him and his siblings to Mass every Sunday. The smell of lingering incense and burning candles, their tiny flames offering a flickering, shadowed light, the hushed voices, the cavernous room with its narrow stained-glass windows.

He glanced up at the huge crucifix, and, more from habit than any lingering sense of conviction, Montoya sketched the sign of the cross over his chest.

Officers were talking in hushed tones to several people near the back of the chapel, but Montoya ignored them as he spied Rick Bentz, his partner for many of the years Montoya had been with the NOPD, standing near the altar.

Bentz was at least fifteen years older than Montoya, nearly another generation. Married to his second wife, he had a baby under a year old, and the lack of sleep showed in the lines on Bentz’s wide face and the flecks of gray in his hair. He still had a limp from a previous accident, but otherwise Bentz’s body was honed to that of a heavyweight boxer. Tonight Bentz wore jeans, a T-shirt, a jacket, and a dark expression, his gaze narrowed on the floor near the altar.

As Montoya hurried along a wide aisle, he saw the victim lying in front of the first row of pews. Her face was covered by an altar cloth, only tangles of dark hair showing on the stone floor. Her body seemed to be posed, arms folded over her chest, fingers twined in a wooden rosary. She was wearing a yellowed, nearly tattered wedding gown, her feet bare, a silver band around the ring finger of her left hand.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“One of the nuns here,” Bentz said. “Sister Camille.”

“Killed here? At the altar?”

Like a sacrificial lamb.

“Think so. There are some signs of a struggle, scrapes on her feet, a torn fingernail.” Bentz pointed to her right hand. “Hopefully she clawed her attacker and the son of a bitch’s skin is under her nails.”

Could they get so lucky as to have a sample of the killer’s DNA? Montoya doubted it.

“We haven’t found a secondary crime scene yet.” Bentz looked around the chapel, to the doors. “But, hell, this is a big place.”

And a helluva spot for a murder, Montoya thought, eyeing the massive crucifix towering above the Communion table.

“The cathedral, convent, and grounds take up more than a city block,” Bentz said, still scowling.

“Gated, right? Locked.”

“Everything’s locked at night, even the main doors to the cathedral. Either he snuck in before lockdown or he’s a part of the community.”

Montoya frowned at the draped body. The woman was slim, her arms crossed over her chest, her fingers twined
around a rosary. “We got pictures of this?”

“Yeah.”
Montoya yanked on a pair of latex gloves, bent down, and lifted the long, thin altar cloth to see the fixed, beautiful stare of the dead woman.
A woman he knew.
Intimately.
Son of a bitch.
Sucker punched, he drew in a sharp breath. Blood congealed in his body. For a second, he thought he might be sick.
“You said she was Sister Camille?”
“Yeah. That’s what the mother superior called her. Her legal name is—”
“Camille Renard.” Montoya squeezed his eyes shut for a second. Trying to gain some equilibrium. How had this happened? Why? Jesus, he didn’t even know she was in the city. He had to force his eyes open again. Cammie’s pale visage and glassy eyes met his. “Bloody damned hell,” he whispered between clenched teeth.
“You know her?”
“Knew her. A long time ago.” A flash of memory, one he’d rather forget, sliced through his brain. Camille Renard. So full of life. So fun-loving. So … capricious. The most unlikely woman he’d ever know to take the vows to become a nun. “I went to high school with Camille Renard.”
“Oh, shi—for the love of God.” Bentz’s eyes darkened with concern. “Just don’t tell me you dated her.”
Montoya felt his jaw set even harder. “Okay, I won’t.”
“But you did.”
“In high school.”
Just long enough for him to get laid and for her to lose her virginity.
Sister Maura slid between the sheets of her single bed and set her glasses on the tiny side table, nearly knocking over the stack of books she had positioned under the wall sconce. Her mattress, as stiff and old as the hills, creaked with her weight. She fingered her prayer book, the one she kept under the bedclothes, nestled close to her thigh, but she didn’t close her eyes.

Through the small window, lights were flashing blue and red, strobing from the police cruisers parked outside and washing against the wall by the door. The white walls were now tinged with pulsing colors, the small crucifix mounted over the door in stark relief.

Her heart seemed to beat in counterpoint to the flashing lights.

Good.

She smiled in the darkness, her fingers ruffling the worn pages of the prayer book, but she didn’t pray, didn’t offer up one psalm or hymn. Not now; not when there was so much going on, so much excitement.

Muted voices whispered along the ancient corridors and under her door.

She was excited and couldn’t help herself.

Telling herself to stay in bed, to feign sleep, or if someone had seen her, say that she’d been in the restroom, she fought the urge to get up again. She could even say it was her period that had caused her to wake; no one would know.

Or would they?

She sometimes wondered if the reverend mother, that old hag straight out of the Middle Ages, kept track of all the girls’ menstrual cycles. It wouldn’t surprise Maura. After all, this place was rigid with a capital R, and Sister Charity was tied to her regimen as if it were truly God’s word.

Seriously?

God cared about what time a person got up in the morning? Ate breakfast? Fasted? Maura didn’t buy it. Nor did she believe that he cared what kind of books she read, or how she dressed, or if she cleaned her chamber spotlessly. She just didn’t see God as a time keeper or a jailor.

But the reverend mother did.

It was just such a pain.

But not for Maura; not forever.

Saint Marguerite’s was just a dark stepping stone to her goal, one she would soon pass. She just had to be patient and pretend obedience for a little while longer.

Angrily she tossed back the stiff white sheets. She flipped her unruly braid over her shoulder and slid out of the bed. The floor was cool and smooth against her soles. With a glance at the unlocked door, Maura tiptoed to the window to look outside. Her room had a corner window, and if she stood on tiptoe, she could look over the roof of the cloister into the garden in one direction and, if she craned her neck, to the side of the convent and over the thick walls to the street where she saw a news van rolling down the street, its headlights reflecting on the wet pavement.

She smiled in the darkness as the bells began to toll again.

Maybe now the sins of St. Marguerite’s would be exposed.

Montoya’s throat tightened as he stared at Camille Renard’s bloodless face. Still beautiful, even in death, her skin was smooth, unmarred, her big eyes staring upward and fixed, seeing nothing. Never again.

His insides churned and his jaw hardened as he thought of how he’d known her in high school.

Vibrant.

Flirty.

Smart.

And hot as hell.

“Damn it,” he whispered under his breath. What happened here?
He tried to focus, to stay in the here and now, to ignore the images of Camille as a teenager that ran through his brain.

“Hey!” Bentz was staring at him. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he lied. “What the hell happened here?” He let his gaze fall from her face, to the bloodstained neckline of the tattered gown. Deep crimson drops in a jewel-like pattern.

“Don’t know yet,” Bentz said, his eyes still hard and assessing. “Look, Montoya, if you knew her, you shouldn’t be involved in this investigation.”

He ignored Bentz’s suggestion. For now, he was on the case. Until he heard from the captain or the DA or someone higher up than his partner, he wasn’t budging. “It’s hard for me to think of her as a nun.” He raked unsteady fingers through his hair.

“You hear what I said?”

“Yeah, yeah, but I’m not going to do anything to compromise the case.” Montoya’s gaze was trained on Cammie’s still form, and he couldn’t help but wonder if she’d known her assailant. Had she seen the attack coming? Or had her killer been a stranger?

It wasn’t the first time he’d been at a crime scene where a member of the convent had been killed; his aunt had suffered and died at the hands of a maniac during an earlier case Montoya had investigated, the very case in which he’d met his wife.

A cold finger of déjà vu slid down his spine. He glanced at Bentz, who scowled darkly, the way he always did when he was lost in thought.

The church bells tolled.

One in the morning.

Montoya crouched beside the victim and stared at her still-beautiful face, then glanced at the bloodied lace of her gown. “What’s with the wedding dress?”

“Don’t know yet.”

He motioned to the tiny drops of red that discolored the neckline of the old lace.

“The vic’s blood? He took the time to drop her blood on the dress?”

“My guess,” Bentz said.

“What kind of freak are we dealing with?”

“Sick. Twisted.” Bentz’s eyes looked tired, the crow’s-feet near his eyes pronounced. “Aren’t they all?”

“Yeah.”

“Looks like our guy made some kind of necklace with her blood.”

“Or his,” Montoya thought aloud as his gaze ran over the tattered folds of the gown.

“Nah. We couldn’t get that lucky that he left anything.”

“She raped?”

“Don’t know yet.” Bentz frowned. “I think most nuns who haven’t been married are virgins.”

Montoya’s guts tightened. He closed his mind to the memory of he and Camille on the short sofa in her parents’ home when they were away, wouldn’t think of her beautiful breasts, firm, with dark, aroused nipples. He studied the yellowed gauze of the wedding dress and shook his head. “So where are her other clothes, the ones she was wearing before she put on this dress?” He frowned. “Or did the killer dress her after the attack?”

“Doesn’t look like it was done after she was dead. As for her clothes, I’ve got a couple of guys looking. Best guess is that she would have been in her nightgown. The convent’s schedule is pretty strict. Lights-out and in bed at ten. We’re not sure on time of death, but the body was discovered around midnight. The woman who found her heard the parish church bells striking off the hours.”

Montoya glanced beyond the pews at the small group of witnesses gathered near the back of the chapel. The priest and one nun were fully dressed, while a younger woman shivered beneath an oversized cape. Her hair was wet, and her eyes had that hollow, glazed look of a person in shock. Something about her was vaguely familiar, and Montoya felt his nerves tighten with dread.

What the hell was this?

“The younger one, Sister Lucia, is the one who found the vic. Claimed she heard ‘something,’ but it was nothing
she could really explain. The upshot was she got out of bed to check and found Sister Camille."

*Sister Lucia.*

*Sister Camille.*

*Son of a bitch, this is getting worse and worse.*

He didn’t say it; instead he pointed out the obvious. “The older nun’s wearing a habit.”

Bentz nodded. “Not the most progressive parish.”

Montoya, still crouched, took a last look at the victim. Around Camille’s long, pale neck were a series of contusions and deep bruises, as if she’d been garrotted. Unbidden came the memory of nuzzling that neck, kissing the hollow behind her ear. His stomach knotted.

What kind of monster had done this?

And why? Who had Camille pissed off? Or had she been a random target?

Straightening, he shifted his attention back to the tight group of people sequestered behind the last pew. A uniformed cop was talking to the older woman in the nun’s habit as Sister Lucia listened in, huddled under the cloak. The sixtyish priest with thinning gray hair and rimless glasses had a rumpled look, and even in the dim light, wrinkles were visible upon his high forehead.

“So Sister Lucia found the body. That must’ve been a shock.” Montoya studied the shivering girl, a waif with a pale face and wet ringlets. Yep, he recognized her, too. Lucia Costa. This was damned surreal. The knot in his gut tightened.

“After Sister Lucia yelled for help,” Bentz said, “the mother superior, Sister Charity—that’s the older woman—she responded.” Bentz hitched his chin toward the bigger nun, a mound of black fabric accented by white coif secured by a wimple. “Charity Varisco.” Again Bentz double-checked the notes on his small pad. “She heard Sister Lucia screaming and came running. When she got here, she tried to revive the victim and sent the younger one to call the police and get the parish priest.”

“Who put the altar cloth over the vic?”

“The reverend mother,” Bentz said, and when Montoya opened his mouth to protest any alteration of the crime scene, he held up a hand. “I know, I know. Already discussed. She claims she didn’t think about contaminating or altering the crime scene. She just wanted to be respectful of the vic.”

Montoya cast another glance at the woman in question. Tall and big-boned, mouth set, eyes glaring at the police. “What’s the reverend mother’s relationship to the victim?”

“Just what it seems. She met Sister Camille two years ago when Camille entered the convent.”

“What about the priest?”

“*Priests,* plural. The older one’s Father Paul Neland. He’s the senior priest and lives here on the grounds in an apartment next to the younger one—Father Francis O’Toole.”

Montoya’s head snapped up at the name. “Father O’Toole? Frank—where is he?”

“Already separated out for his statement. Doing the same with the rest of them.”

Two officers were, in fact, starting to force the tight little knot apart. Sister Lucia looked at him pleadingly, then hurried off while the mother superior was ushered in a different direction.

Montoya felt a headache starting to throb at the base of his skull. Too many familiar faces here. First Camille, then Lucia, and now Frank O’Toole? What were the chances of that? “What do you know about the priests?”

“The older guy, Father Paul Neland, has been here about ten years, second only to the mother superior, who’s been in charge for nearly twenty years. Before that, she and Neland worked in the same parish once before, up north—Boston, I think. O’Toole’s the short-timer. Less than five years.”

“I need to speak to him. Frank O’Toole,” Montoya said.

Bentz let out a long whistle and stared at his partner, as if reading Montoya’s mind. “Oh, Christ, Montoya. Don’t tell me you know him, too?”

“Oh, yeah,” Montoya admitted, not liking the turn of his thoughts. “I know him.”

Sitting cross-legged on her rumpled bed, Valerie tried to turn on her stubborn computer one last time. “Come on, come on,” she ordered the struggling laptop. It made grinding noises that caused her to wince as she waited for the screen to flicker to life.

It was nearly one-thirty in the morning. The rain had stopped, and moonlight filtering through high clouds cast an
eerie glow on the damp bushes outside her window.

Her body was tired, but her mind was still spinning. Wired. She wanted to check her e-mail one last time before shutting off the lights and hoping sleep would come. Though it probably wouldn’t. Wretched insomnia. Ever since she was a teenager, sleep eluded her if she was troubled. She’d tried everything from sleeping pills to working out to the point of exhaustion, but nothing seemed to allow her sleep for more than a night or two.

*It’s the divorce.*

*And your worries about Cammie.*

As she waited for the screen to flicker on, she caught a glimpse of the single picture of Slade she’d kept, one of him riding his favorite horse, a rangy gray gelding named Stormy, their scruffy hound dog Bo trailing behind. Silhouetted against a sun that bled purple and orange along the ridge, Slade Houston looked every bit the part of a lonesome Texas cowboy. She’d taken the picture herself and had decided to keep it to remember her marriage. While she’d burned the rest—snapshots and professional photographs taken at their small wedding—she hadn’t been able to destroy this one. She’d told herself it was because it was the only picture she had of Bo.

But deep down, she knew better.

“Masochist,” she muttered, reaching out and slapping the photograph facedown onto the stack of bills that reminded her of the rocky financial condition of the bed-and-breakfast. She didn’t want to think about her sorry bank account right now, no more than she wanted to consider her disintegrated marriage. She glanced again at the facedown picture frame. Tomorrow she’d toss the photo into the trash.

Maybe.

Her computer screen flickered to life, and she quickly went about opening her e-mail, searching through the spam until she saw it, a single posting from SisCaml. “Thank the gods of the Internet,” Val said under her breath as she clicked on the e-mail to open it.

“Oh, Cammie,” Val said, her heart heavy. Of course she knew why her sister was leaving the convent: Camille was pregnant.
“You know Frank O’Toole and Camille Renard?” Bentz asked, his eyes narrowing on Montoya.

“You know Frank O’Toole and Camille Renard?” Bentz asked, his eyes narrowing on Montoya. “Yeah. High school.” Montoya still couldn’t believe it. How did so many people he recognized from a small high school end up here at St. Marguerite’s, with the girl he’d dated for over six months dead at his feet? He swallowed hard as he glanced to the floor, where someone from the ME’s office was bending over the body. Montoya’s gaze found Bentz’s again. “And that isn’t all of it,” he admitted, not liking the turn of his thoughts. “That nun over there.” With one finger, he indicated the shivering Lucia Costa. “I didn’t really know her, but for a while she dated my brother, Cruz. He’s a couple of years younger than me. She was a few years behind him, I think. I was out of high school before she started her freshman year.”

“So it’s old home week?” Bentz’s eyes thinned speculatively.

“Beats me.” Scowling, stepping away from the body, he asked, “Who was the first officer to arrive?”

“Amos took the call,” Bentz said.

Montoya spotted the officer talking to the shivering girl. New to the force, Joe Amos was a six-foot black man with a wide girth and mocha-colored skin accentuated by a shotgun blast of darker freckles across his face. Montoya walked in front of the first pew to a pillar where Amos was listening to Sister Lucia.

“… and so Father Paul and Father Frank and I ran back here, to the chapel and——” she was saying, but her gaze strayed to Montoya and her chain of thought was interrupted. “And … Oh, dear God.” Her eyes rounded and she took a step back.

“And what?” Amos asked.

Lucia blinked, as if she couldn’t believe her eyes. “You’re Cruz’s brother,” she whispered, appearing as if she might faint.

“That’s right.”

Even more lines of worry showed between her eyebrows. “Raymond or …”

“Reuben. I’m with the local police department now. Detective.”

Amos pinned Montoya with a glare. “You two know each other?”

Montoya shook his head. “Went to the same high school. Years ago. She dated my brother.”

“You look a lot like him,” Lucia said, fingers pulling the cape closer around her body. “Like Cruz.”

“So I’ve heard.” Montoya couldn’t deny the obvious, having heard it for years—the family resemblance ran strong.

Amos held up a hand. “Okay, so let’s get back to your statement. Let’s see, you ‘heard something,’ you said. What was it?”

“I … I don’t know.” She swallowed hard. “Something sharp. It woke me and I felt troubled, like I needed to pray.”

“A scream?” Montoya asked. “Or a call for help?”

“No … nothing I can really identify.”

Really?

“But you left your room?” Amos pressed.

“Yes, as I said, I was upset, like I’d had a horrible dream that I can’t remember. I knew I wouldn’t go back to sleep, so I thought I’d go pray in the chapel. It’s calming sometimes.” Lucia looked frightened and small, as if she wanted to disappear into the shadows.

Amos glanced down at notes he’d scribbled in a nearly illegible hand. “So then you find the body, see someone leaving, call for help, meet up with Sister Charity, go to the office, make the call to nine-one-one, then run back to the chapel after waking the priests. Oh, only Father Paul. Father Frank was already up. Right?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding slowly.

To get her story straight or because she was trying to remember?
Amos scratched his chin. “What happened then?”

“Oh!” Lucia dragged her gaze away from Montoya. “Then … we, um, waited. Father Paul checked Sister Camille’s pulse again. Then we all prayed for her.” Lucia’s voice grew husky, her nose reddened, and tears filled her eyes. “Then … then … a few minutes later, I heard sirens and you arrived.” She took in a long breath, pulled the cape even tighter around her, and clammed up.

“You found the body?” Montoya asked.

“I just told him all about it,” she said, looking toward Amos.

Montoya wasn’t going to be put off. “So bring me up to speed.”

She seemed to withdraw, as if her body were shrinking for a second. Then she gathered her breath and explained her version of the events of the night yet again. After the mother superior had answered her cries for help, she’d called the police, run into Father Frank in the cloister, awoke a sleeping Father Paul, and had returned to the chapel with the two priests.

“But you said something about seeing someone leaving the chapel when you arrived,” Amos interjected.

“I … I think so.”

Montoya asked, “You’re not sure?”

“No … sometimes I kind of sleepwalk, so … it can be kind of”— she lifted a small shoulder—“blurry, I guess.”

“Wait a second. Sleepwalking?” Montoya said. “You didn’t say that before.”

“No, I know … . It was different than that, but … ” She looked close to tears and blinked. “Hard to explain.”

“But, in the chapel, you did hear a door close over the sound of the midnight bells tolling?” Amos persisted, not one to be put off by anything, even female tears.

Lucia seemed flustered. And scared as hell. “It seems that way.”

Not exactly firm testimony, Montoya thought. He’d never really known Lucia, though one of her older brothers, Pedro, had been in his class at school. What was it about her that Cruz had found so intriguing? Not just her looks, but a bit of ESP or something. But maybe Cruz made that up. Montoya’s younger and wilder brother had been known to tell more than his share of lies.

They asked a few more questions to piece together the chain of events and time frame; then Montoya and Bentz left Amos to wrap things up.

“Pretty,” Bentz mentioned. “What happened between her and your brother?”

“Car wreck. Cruz was at the wheel. Nearly killed them both.” But there was more to the story, Montoya thought; he just didn’t know it, had been off at college when the accident had occurred.

They met up with the mother superior in the hallway near the chapel, where she was being interviewed by one of the uniformed officers.

Sister Charity’s voice was hushed and well modulated despite the tragedy. In the dim candlelight, her face seemed far more youthful than the sixty years she claimed to be as she responded to Montoya. “I already told one of your officers, Ms. Erwin, here, everything I know.” Her words, though spoken softly, were underlaid with a thread of steel.

“We’re going to need to interview everyone in the building,” Officer Erwin said.

The older woman shook her head slowly. “Everyone was asleep. I can’t see what good waking them will do.”

“They might have heard something. Or maybe someone was up, passing through the hallway on the way to the restroom. There’s a chance someone saw something,” Randi Erwin insisted. “Or maybe one of the residents could shed some light on motive for killing Sister Camille.”

“Oh.” The mother superior crossed herself, as if suddenly realizing the magnitude of the tragedy. “I’ll talk to each of them,” the reverend mother offered. “Father Paul will offer them guidance—”

“It’s not about guidance,” Montoya said crisply as he wondered if the woman was being intentionally obtuse. “Before you speak to them, we need to interview them.”

“All of them?” She seemed surprised.

Montoya nodded. “We want to talk with anyone who lives here and anyone who may have been on the property tonight. They’ll need to give their statements to officers.”

Erwin said, “And I’ll need more information on the victim.”
“We’re a very private order.” Sister Charity frowned. A roadblock.

“With one of your own dead? Murdered. I’d say that overrules privacy.” Barely thirty, Randi Erwin was tough, a small, wiry woman who wore little makeup and kept her brown hair cut short and feathery. Once a gymnast in college, she was now a martial arts expert and took no guff, not from older guys in the department who tended to tease her and not from this imperious nun. “I’ll need a list of the victim’s friends. Can you think of anyone who held a grudge against her?”

“There are no enemies here.” The older nun threaded her fingers in resignation, finally getting it that the police weren’t just going away.

Bentz snorted. “Surely you don’t believe that. People are people; they make others angry, hold grudges, seek revenge, whatever. A lot of wars have been waged in the name of religion.”

She bristled. “Not here.”

“Why is she dressed in that dress?”

“I have no idea.”

“Where did she get it?”

The reverend mother’s eyebrows drew together. “I don’t know,” she said, just as Officer Chris Conway approached.

“The press is here,” the officer said. “A reporter from WKAM.”

“Tell them to wait for a statement from Sinclaire,” Bentz said. Tina Sinclaire was the public information officer. “And that’s not going to happen until we notify the next of kin. They know it’s a homicide if they’ve listened to the police band, so don’t try to stonewall the reporter—just ask him to wait.”

“Got it.” The officer strode across the chapel toward the exit.

Montoya turned to the mother superior. “What about Camille Renard’s next of kin?” he asked, barely remembering the dead woman’s parents. Wasn’t the dad older, a guy who worked with the railroad, the mother a part-time teacher?

“Her parents are gone. She has one sister, who lives somewhere in East Texas, I believe. A small town, I think. I can’t recall now, off the top of my head.”

That was right. Camille did have a sister, a year or two younger than Montoya. “Do you know her name?”

“I should, but … Veronica? Something like that. I’ll check.”

Veronica didn’t sound right, but Montoya could picture her. Around five-seven, if he remembered correctly. Taller than Camille, with big eyes and a stare that cut right through you. Where Camille had always been outgoing and a flirt, her older sister was studious but outspoken, someone who didn’t suffer fools or the stupid teenage antics of her peers. The sister was a girl Montoya avoided, but he remembered her.

“Was it Valerie?” he asked, and the nun looked at him sharply, the corners of her mouth tugging downward.

“Yes.” She nodded, her wimple not moving a bit. “Valerie. That’s it.”

“We need her address.”

“Of course.” She glanced to the doors leading to the chapel and seemed suddenly saddened by the events of the night. More people had arrived. Despite Sister Charity’s objections about outsiders trespassing on holy grounds, the crime scene techs went about the business of collecting evidence. Photographs and measurements were taken; the area dusted for prints; Luminol sprayed; and the floor, walls, and pews analyzed for footprints or scuff marks. The crime scene investigators worked with relentless precision.

“This is such sacrilege,” Sister Charity murmured, her eyes imploring. “Really, it has to stop. The chapel is a holy place, not meant for …” She lifted a hand, palm out, almost in supplication toward the chapel where the medical examiner was examining Sister Camille’s body. “We follow rules and a strict schedule of devotion, and we cannot have …” Her voice cracked, and Montoya didn’t know if the emotion was grief for the death of Sister Camille, concern about the black mark a murder would make upon St. Marguerite’s reputation, or simply an act. “This disruption is unacceptable,” she said, but the conviction in her words was fading. “You’re upsetting everyone here, making a mockery of our chapel, yellow tape and people meandering so close to the holy tabernacle.”

“One of your own is dead,” Montoya reminded her, letting loose a fraction of his irritation. “Looks like a homicide. We have a job to do here, and we’ll do it as quickly and thoroughly as possible, but we will do it. It would be best if no one impeded the process.”
Her chin worked as if she wanted to say something, lambaste him for his impropriety and lack of respect. Instead she whispered, “So be it. I must attend to the novitiates. But please, remember this is the Lord God’s house.”

“And something very evil went down here.”

“We don’t know what happened,” she said in a crisp tone that allowed No argument. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must attend to the sisters.” As she bustled off, skirts rustling and rosary beads clicking, her outfit was meticulous but for the hem of her habit, which showed more than a trace of dirt.

Odd.

Otherwise she was impeccably put together—now, in the middle of the night.

Did the old mother superior sleep in her habit? Montoya made a mental note to speak with her later, when she’d had some time to cool off.

“Sister, wait up!” Bentz said, lunging to catch up with her. “I need to see Sister Camille’s room.”

“There’s nothing there.”

“We don’t know that.”

She paused, then nodded stiffly. “Come along, then.” She was already leading him up the stairs to the living quarters of the convent.

Yeah, Montoya thought, he’d speak to Sister Charity again. Alone. For now, he had bigger fish to fry. To Officer Erwin he said, “I think I’m going to have a talk with Father O’Toole and see what he has to say.”
CHAPTER 8

Cruz’s brother?

Here?

A police detective?

Sister Lucia felt the cold stone in the pit of her stomach growing heavier. She’d thought this night couldn’t get any worse when she’d stumbled upon Camille’s body, but she’d been wrong.

Detective Montoya made it so.

He looked a lot like Cruz—same sharp cheekbones; near-black, suspicious eyes; thick, straight hair; and white teeth that flashed against coppery skin. Too handsome. That’s what her father had said about Cruz. The same was true of his older brother.

At the reverend mother’s bidding, Lucia hurried to her room where she slid into her dry habit and pinned her hair onto her head. She pushed thoughts of Cruz Montoya aside as she went to rouse the other sisters, tapping on their doors, asking them to dress and meet the mother superior in the main dining hall. Several asked why, and she responded with “I don’t know any details, just that the reverend mother wants to see all of us.”

A lie—but just the first of many, she thought darkly. The evil voice that had awakened her was blackening her soul.

Sister Angela woke easily, popping her head out the door, almost as if she’d been waiting. Apple-cheeked, she pressed on a pair of thin glasses and blinked against the dim hall lights. “What is it?”

“I don’t know, just hurry,” Lucia said, lying through her teeth. Again.

“But—”

“Please, the reverend mother is waiting.”

Nodding, Angela slipped inside her room as Lucia hurried down the dark hallway to rap on the next door. Sister Dorothy didn’t respond. Lucia tried again, louder this time, but there was no answer.

The sinister feeling that had overcome Lucia earlier now coiled around her heart. What if Camille wasn’t the only one? What if whoever had killed her had also come up here and taken the life of another? Swallowing back her fear, searching deeply for her faith, Lucia fingered her rosary and called softly, “Sister Dorothy?”

From the corner of her eye, Lucia saw another door creak slowly open at the end of the hall. Sister Maura, her perpetual scowl in place, appeared. “What’re you doing?” she asked, pushing on a pair of thick glasses.

“The reverend mother has asked us to meet downstairs.”

“Why?” Deep creases furrowed Maura’s brow. She was a solemn woman, one Lucia didn’t know very well.

“She didn’t say. Please, just hurry.”

Another door opened. Sister Edwina glared at the small group. “What’s going on?” she demanded, flipping a thick blond braid over her shoulder. Taller than Lucia by five inches, Edwina was an athletic woman with a broad, Nordic face and high cheekbones. Her deep-set blue eyes were always stormy as she constantly needled a bad mood.

“Why are you knocking at Dorothy’s door?”

Lucia explained, “The reverend mother wants us all in the dining hall.”

“Why? It’s the middle of the night!”

“I know.”

“What does she want?”

So many questions … “I’m sure the reverend mother wants to tell everyone herself.”

“And why are you up?” Sister Edwina demanded, glancing across the hallway to Lucia’s small room. “Why did Mother come to you?” she asked indignantly, as if she sensed a personal slight.

Lucia had no time for perceived personal affronts. She had her own worries to attend to. First there was poor Sister Camille, and then, of all the bad luck, Cruz Montoya’s brother was involved with the investigation. Her nerves were as tight as bowstrings. “Please, just dress quickly.”
“You know what’s going on, don’t you?” Edwina charged. She was always direct, always felt somehow as if she were being persecuted.

“It’s up to the reverend mother to say.”

“Right.” Irony dripped from her words.

The door to Dorothy’s room finally cracked open just a space. “What is it?” she asked through the slim opening. Dorothy, plump and always worried, didn’t sound the least bit groggy. Her voice held a whisper of suspicion.

Lucia delivered her short message. Other doors were opening as the noise in the hallway woke some of the others.

Angela swept out of her room and, ignoring the sour look Maura cast her way, caught up with Lucia.

“I’ll help,” she offered while Edwina’s door slammed shut. “Don’t worry about her.” Angela turned away from Sister Edwina’s closed door. “She’s just mad because the reverend mother chose you to be her messenger.”

Lucia couldn’t respond as Sister Angela fell into step with her. Not now. Lucia was too overwhelmed by the darkness in her heart that went far deeper than keeping the news of Sister Camille’s death from them.

So much deeper.

Lucia, fingering the beads of her rosary, knew why she’d been awoken from her fitful sleep, understood why the breath of evil had whispered in her ear, and why Sister Camille, tortured soul that she was, had been murdered.

She knew, but she wouldn’t say.

Montoya found his way down the dim hallway near the apse of the large cathedral. He rapped on the door with his knuckles, then pushed it open without waiting for an answer.

Arms folded across his chest, a uniformed officer watched over the broad-chested man in a black cassock who sat in the amber pool of light cast by a single lamp.

Father Frank O’Toole, sequestered inside this small anteroom, seemed lost in prayer, his big hands clasped together in his lap.

As the door opened, he looked up, startled.

“Reuben?” His voice held a rasp of disbelief, his eyes flickering with startled recognition.

“How are ya, Frank?” Montoya leaned over the small, scarred table to shake his old friend’s hand.

Frank O’Toole’s clasp was still strong and athletic. “I’ve been better,” he admitted as he stood with a resigned smile, so different from the broad grins he’d flashed in high school. His eyebrows knitted. “So, what are you doing here?” he asked; then his eyes flickered as he made the connection. “You’re with the police?”

“Detective.”

“Really?” His smile disappeared. “I never would have thought …”

“Me neither. I never saw myself as a cop, and I sure as hell didn’t think you’d end up as a priest.”

In high school, when Montoya was flirting with the wrong side of the law, his love for athletics was one of the few reasons he’d avoided serious crime. Through sports, Montoya had the good fortune to hook up with Frank O’Toole. A star on the soccer field and basketball courts, an A student in the classroom, Frank O’Toole had seemed to have it all. He’d run with the popular crowd and hailed from a privileged background, his father a prominent attorney.

Frank had caught Montoya hot-wiring his car—a classic Mustang—when he was only fifteen and had threatened to go to the police. Montoya and he had nearly come to blows but had worked things out; Montoya had spent six Saturdays washing and waxing the damned car while O’Toole had let the younger kid cruise through the streets of New Orleans with him. Their friendship had been tenuous at best, Montoya’s envy for Frank’s lifestyle and popularity always under the surface, and Frank’s fascination for Montoya’s rebellion never quite fading. It was almost as if Frank got off hanging out with a kid who was always one step away from serious trouble with the law. Montoya had suspected that the college-bound senior had gotten a vicarious thrill from hanging out with a juvenile delinquent. The preppy and the rogue.

O’Toole let out a long sigh. “You saw Sister Camille?” His hands clenched into fists, his thumbs rubbing his knuckles nervously.

“Yeah.” Montoya nodded. Camille’s image, in death, was branded into his memory. At some level, it would be with him for the rest of his life.

“It’s a shame,” the priest said, rolling his gaze to the ceiling, as if he could literally look to God for answers. O’Toole still possessed the striking physique Montoya remembered. There were a few strands of gray in his black
hair and a few more lines near the corners of his eyes, and his nose wasn’t as straight as it had once been, but, in Montoya’s estimation, the signs of aging only gave Frank O’Toole a more mature and interesting appearance.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Something flashed in the priest’s eyes. Regret? Anger? The start of a lie? “I wish I knew. I was out with a sick parishioner. Arthur Wembley. Stage-four lung cancer. I spent the evening with him and his wife, Marion. When I returned, I ran into Sister Lucia just outside Father Paul’s door. She was in a panic, asking us to come into the chapel.” His jaw tightened and his eyes seemed to sink into their sockets. “We followed her”—his voice lowered to a whisper—and found Sister Charity saying prayers over Camille’s body.” He cleared his throat. “The first officer and the EMTs arrived within minutes.”

“Why the cassock?” Montoya asked.

“The Wembleys are old school. They like tradition. I wore it for them. I usually don’t.”

“Why do you think Cam—er, Sister Camille was wearing a bridal gown?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head, biting at his lower lip, thinking hard. “The dress looked old. Not overly expensive, I’d guess. Like the kind a nun might wear when she was taking her vows and becoming a bride of Christ.”

“Seriously?”

O’Toole lifted a shoulder. “It’s an old custom, and St. Marguerite’s is steeped in tradition, far more than the other parishes nearby. The nuns wear habits, parishioners still abstain from meat on Good Fridays … though that’s something that’s coming a little back into vogue, isn’t it?” He glanced away before Montoya could read any more in his expression.

“But you know Camille in high school?” Montoya asked.

“No,” he said convincingly, finally returning Montoya’s gaze again. “She’s … she was younger than me. I never met her back then, but I did know her older sister.”

“Valerie?”

“Yeah.”

“Date her?”

“No.” A look passed between them. Back in the day, Frank O’Toole, athlete, hunk, and ladies’ man, had cut a swath through the girls at St. Timothy’s. How in the world had he turned to the priesthood, a life of celibacy? It didn’t make a lot of sense to Montoya.

As if he understood, Frank said, “When my older sister, Mary Louise, was stricken with lymphoma, I made a deal with God. I’d go into the priesthood, take my vows, and dedicate my life to him, as long as he spared her.”

“And how did that work out for you?” Montoya asked, trying to remember Mary Louise O’Toole.

“Mary died last year. But not from the disease. With God’s help, she seemed to beat it. She was hit in a crosswalk by an old man who stepped on the gas rather than the brakes.” He sighed and rubbed his face, the stubble of his whiskers scraping against his fingers. “Thankfully she died instantly.”

“Do you think God held up his part of the bargain?”

“Hard to say,” he whispered. “I’m not arrogant enough to believe that I’m so important that the Father would sacrifice my sister as a pawn in a faith-based version of Truth or Dare. But for me, Mary Louise’s death was a test of my beliefs, of my calling.”

“And did you pass?” Montoya asked.

The corner of Frank’s lips twitched, though his countenance remained grim. “That’s for God to decide.”

“What about the victim? What do you think happened to her?”

“I wish I knew,” Frank whispered fervently, though he glanced away, avoiding Montoya’s glare.

“So you knew Valerie, but not Camille?”

“In high school, yes.”

“And Valerie lives in Texas?”

“No. She’s here.”

“Here? In New Orleans?” Montoya asked, making a mental note. Hadn’t Sister Charity claimed Camille’s sister lived in a small town in East Texas?
The priest was nodding. “Owns a bed-and-breakfast in the Garden District, I think. I can’t remember the name, but Sister Camille mentioned that Valerie had moved back to New Orleans sometime in the past couple of years.”

His voice was soft, far away. As if he were remembering the conversation.

“Camille talk to you often?”

“Sometimes,” Frank said.

“How often?”

“A few times a week, sometimes less, other times more.”

“Did she ever mention any old boyfriends?”

“You mean, besides you?” Frank cocked a dark eyebrow.

Montoya held on to his temper. “I mean anyone who might want to do her harm?”

“No.”

“Enemies?”

Father Frank shook his head. “I didn’t know that much about her personal life,” he said. “If you’re asking about her confessions, those are private, between her and God.”

“And you.”

“Or Father Paul.” His smile held little warmth. “You might want to talk to Sister Lucia or Sister Louise. They all seemed to be close.” He appeared suddenly tired, almost irritable. “Is there anything else?”

“I guess that’s it for now. But if I think of anything else …”

“Of course, Reuben. Just call.” He flashed a humorless smile as he rose and walked out the door, his dark cassock billowing, a stain visible near its hem.

“Father Frank?”

The priest turned, his face supremely patient.

“There’s something on the bottom of your cassock.” Montoya pointed at the stain, black on black.

“What? Is there?” He glanced down, saw the almost invisible stain. “I was out in the rain… .”

Feeling oddly like a supplicant, Montoya bent down on one knee and touched the hem. A faint crust of reddish brown smeared his fingertips.

“It’s blood,” he said, looking up at Frank.

The priest frowned, his forehead furrowing. “It has to be Sister Camille’s. From when I bent down over her body. Of course I hoped, prayed, that I could revive her… .” His voice faded and his features twisted with the memory.

“We’ll need the cassock.” Montoya rose, face-to-face with the tormented priest.

Frank’s face was pinched, as if he were about to object, but changed his mind. “Of course. I’ll get it to you.”

Montoya was already at the door. “If you don’t mind, Father, I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t trust me, Reuben?”

“This is a homicide investigation, Frank. I don’t trust anyone,” Montoya admitted.