

Illuminati Halloween

A suspense and sci-fi novel

Supernatural and sci-fi. His girlfriend kidnapped and his best friend murdered, amateur investigator Joe Holiday tracks a mysterious Satanist wing of the Illuminati to the end of the conspiracy, Halloween, and their ultimate horror creation.

Table of Contents

[Part One: Benny and Friends](#)

[Part Two: The Undertakers](#)

[Part Three: Genistorm](#)

[Part Four: Stony Shore](#)

[Part Five: Baphomet's Cradle](#)

Part One: Benny and Friends

We tripped lightly through a week of warm October. Josie and I were back together. She was my steady girlfriend again. I'm not sure which of us showed the least commitment in our on-and-off relationship. We were both reckless then, but perhaps I am suppressing the fact that I was most irresponsible, because she at least had a steady job and a place fit to live in. Josie worked for a hot genetics-based company, so she had the brains, the looks, the skills, and was rising to higher places. What she did exactly wasn't all that clear to me because even when drunk, she wouldn't break her non-disclosure agreement. She always left me guessing as to what she was actually working on.

Why she would hang with a roustabout like me was probably a question most people asked, but behind my back or in a whisper if they wanted to avoid a showdown. My name is Joe Holiday, and maybe the easy name has always had something to do with the fact that I've never suffered from an inferiority complex. Hell, maybe I've never been introspective enough to feel inferior. I have always viewed inferiority as something for the lizards, the suckers that other people manipulate.

Perhaps I should have made it as a confidence man, though I do have a minor honest streak, but I even failed that deal ... meaning I bombed in a job as a car salesman. My license was suspended for dangerous driving during a test run. That was on the way back to the showroom after the customer drove the lemon into a ditch and became too scared to drive. My stint as a nightclub door attendant didn't last long either. Perhaps I'm not cut out for the white-glove concierge stuff, unless brass knuckles and knockdowns go with it. On the junior executive front, I proved to have a shorter lifespan than your average bug. Originally, I was a cop and a homicide detective at twenty-five. I began my descent when an investigation got me into the middle of a robbery that turned into a Wild West shootout, and I killed a robber. I came in for a landing outside the police department front doors a few days after I shot a mental patient who attacked me with a sword.

The fact that he'd already killed two other men failed to silence police critics who couldn't stomach the surveillance camera video of his exploding skull. Those sorts of people are the same variety of folks that don't understand what a Samurai sword will do to a person. There is no safe defense from one. It will cut you in half. The headshot made sure he would not be able to move that arm at all. In the media, they felt pepper spray or a Taser would have stopped him. Being a homicide cop stumbling onto the guy's second killing, I chose the method that made sure he wouldn't kill a third person. If he had been white instead of black, I might have survived. You could mount a white guy's head in your den, and no one would protest.

The point is that I've been squashed on many job fronts just like I squashed Samurai Samim. I do deliveries for security companies now and have some part-time work testing alarm and home protection systems. Sometimes I do the installations. J. J. Holiday Investigations Ltd is my company name, but it isn't much of a company when I really work for other people. It is more of a vanity thing that allows me to call myself a private detective.

I've had criminal offers due to my knowledge of security systems, but I've turned them all down. None of the companies I do business with would issue me a gun even if they could. I'm somewhat unfairly pictured as Dr. Death, yet four of the people I shot were only wounded. Most cops shoot for the center of the mass, and any shot they make is a kill shot. Any cop who ends up in a bunch of situations where shots are required is an unlucky cop. If I hadn't always ended up riding the eight ball, I might've made it.

In the romance field, I was the inferior partner and didn't fully realize it then, as I do now. I was still taking life easy, like on a holiday, on that beautiful summer day. When I say summer, it was really more like Indian summer, as it was well into October and 70 degrees Fahrenheit in Toronto. That entire October will always be summer in my memory because the weather was so unusually warm.

The news used to use the term "global warming" but later changed it to "climate change". A few years back, climate change gave us the coldest winter in a hundred years. The warmest fall in memory felt like something earned. The weather woman said it was a super El Niño transferring warmth to this area in some strange way. Whatever the name, it was working good things for Toronto. Josie had the day off, I always had the day off, and my friend Raj Karris was with us down at Cherry Beach.

The fall sun, the way it beams in at a slant, is brighter than the summer sun in the afternoon, and the glare was blinding me. Josie was on the other side of the picnic table, a corona of light around her loose, long hair framing a face that was already angelic. Behind her, a golden path of dimpled sand stretched off to the turquoise waters of Lake Ontario. With one hand, I was shielding my eyes, and with the other, fanning away the smoke from the joint Raj was puffing beside me.

"I prefer this tall can of cold lager," I was saying as Raj tried to pass the weed to me.

And Josie was saying that October had bought into my name. "This month has bought into the whole Joe Holiday thing. Raj and I get an unexpected day off, and the weather turns back to summer."

Raj chuckled. "As long as Halloween doesn't come in like Joe Holiday with a gun, we'll all survive. I'm surprised they don't have Joe Holiday masks already."

I figured his childish face would make a good October pumpkin. Raj was a funny person, impish in a way, but at other times, I could see how he put it on. Occasionally, he would turn dead serious, like when he was pissed about something. It amazed me how fast his eyes would go from sparkling with laughter to full of murderous intent, as if he'd really been a killer all along. He could look much more like a killer than I could.

"October can have the entire Joe Holiday thing," I said. "I'm tired of it. When I apply for serious jobs, employers read my name and grin."

"I saw your resume," Raj said. "You've got to trim down that grocery list of short-term jobs and fake it somehow. That's why you're only semi-employed. And you should remove the private investigator entry from your resume. If you do work with security systems, it should say that you are a security consultant."

"Yeah, and when I get the dream job, I can do nothing but bitch like you guys working for Genistorm do."

The sun hit Josie's face, highlighting perfect skin and tickling her freckles with a glitter so that they looked painted on. She blew smoke from the joint at me, and I ducked away from the picnic table with my beer. "No complaints today," she said.

I raised my brows, saw Raj lighting a cigarette with his Bic, and took another step back. I'd quit smoking at that time for about the third time. Drinking, I had gone down to beer with only the occasional shot of hard liquor. Josie said too much liquor turned me into a beast. I thought about that as I watched a police boat skate over the water offshore. I saw the lone uniformed cop in it looking over at us. "You guys must have blown some sort of genetic gasket there for them to shut down for a day. I bet they ran out of electricity for that Frankenstein monster you guys are building. By the way, what exactly are you working on there?"

Josie stood up and stretched her arms up, her thin figure elastic in the sun. Her hair still shone so bright I considered that maybe they'd genetically modified it. "You know about confidentiality agreements. You know we can't tell you what we do there. Heck, I don't even know what Raj does. Genistorm has a big grocery list of secret specialties that have nothing to do with genetics."

"You make it sound like you're in the CIA or working with James Bond, when it's probably genetically modified tampons or something."

"James Bond," Raj said. "If he's working today, it is for the corporate bad guys. You know it is a corporate world now. Company power and secrets are everything, at least to them and most of the unconscionable nerds they hire. Multinationals and the banks are the new feudal lords; the rest of us are the serfs. We definitely would not talk about GMO tampons, either. Such talk would be dangerous. Tampons are a product that sells big. That's what it is about, selling units of a product. And the product can be anything from tampons to obscure intellectual property."

"You talk just like one of those nerds, but you really aren't one of them, right?"

"Raj looked at me. He put on phony sophisticated airs; his dark eyes conveyed a blend of serious condescension. "Unlike some people, I care about my career. And that's because I have to."

"Everybody has to," Josie said. She focused her eyes on me in a serious squint, like I should listen carefully. "It is increasingly the haves and have-nots ... you must make the professional class or die. There is no true working class left. They have become a global mass of the underprivileged, controlled by handouts, entertainment, and riot police."

I nodded my head sheepishly. "There is still a creative class, and the way everything is patented and copyrighted, I would say invest in creating something of your own to market on the internet. You don't own anything you make there at Genistorm. Greedy corporations do. You're hired guns and disposable."

Raj took a final toke, flicked the roach away, and then took a drag off his cigarette. "So you're Mr. Creative now. Going to write a book about rough shakes on the police force or learn to sing. I suppose it's the only angle you haven't yet failed on."

I could sing karaoke even then, when hit songs were by people who couldn't sing at all. My natural ego defense mechanism had me not responding but sipping my cold beer, stepping away from the picnic table, and looking around. Raj and Josie giggled as they conversed about other trivial matters. Farther out, the spit curved into the brilliant water, with speckles of lake birds circling above the distant trees. I saw two women at the water's edge, farther down the dimpled sand beach. I strolled around the picnic table in a long, slow circle, taking in the light breeze; it was a fantastic beach scene for a fall day. A few bleached picnic tables were still out on the sand. The beach ended against a soft tree line of sumac and deciduous trees that still carried plenty of colorful leaves. The sand remained mostly clear. The wind had swept it of fallen leaves.

We had carried our table a ways up the beach, where usually only dog walkers showed. Directly behind the trees, there was an unmarked industrial or factory-type structure tucked away in this remote location. As my eyes adjusted, some shadows cleared to reveal a couple of men loitering there in the woods side of the factory by the wire fence and cinder block wall. Farther west, a couple more men were hanging out in some pine scrub. I also noticed that the police boat was near the shore at the end of my vision. For some reason, my mind registered the most likely possibility ... that gay men were again cruising the bushes in this area and the cop, suspicious of any activity he'd noticed on his shoreline patrol, had stopped to check things out. Not that cops cared about gay action; his eyes would be watching for other things, like trespassing into the factory grounds.

That idea of gay cruising seemed to be confirmed when the cop turned away, and the police boat suddenly rushed off out of sight. I turned back to Josie and Raj, without realizing how drastically wrong my assessment of the situation had been.

Raj was up, making like a basketball player as he shifted in the sand and lightly tossed his empty toward a green waste receptacle. His toss connected with the metal rim, the bottle shattered, and I was pissed. His nuisance behavior was disturbing the peace.

"Aren't you going to clean it up?" I asked.

Raj grinned like an idiot and sat down. "I'm creating jobs ... for park workers."

"Bullshit," I said, and went over and carefully gathered the glass. Tossing it in the can, I returned to the table. My general feeling was that their pot smoking and silly behavior was less than mature. I was supposed to be the immature person of the threesome. Raj had finished rolling another joint and was smoothing his fingers along it and winking at Josie like a clown conspirator. I knew he might get Josie started with that babble talk thing of theirs, and that would irritate me even more. He was sitting on top of the picnic table, and she was barefoot, strolling in the sand.

My feeling was she'd had enough smoke. I was about to spout some angry words ... when, in the most shocking instant of my young life, Raj's head suddenly burst like a clay pigeon, only the clay became a spray of blood and bone spattering into the sand to my right. I saw Josie releasing a weird scream, and Raj's headless body falling over the side of the picnic table into the sand. My muscles locked, but my eyeballs flashed in the suspect direction and the four men. They were out of the trees at the edge of the

sand, one of them had me targeted with a rifle and scope, and the others were running for us.

Josie's scream faded into the voice of one of the men shouting, 'Don't move!' His command was of no effect because Josie and I both turned and ran like hell, straight for the water and then along the shoreline. I caught up to her, but we only got a few steps farther before being both taken down from behind.

A stupid person disobeys when under the gun, and Josie and I proved to be both of low IQ in that sort of violent situation. She kept screaming and tore a few pieces out of her attacker before he gained control. I got the better of a fast struggle with the man who'd tackled me and nearly broke his jaw with a solid punch. Unfortunately, the next chap was bigger, slower, and very effective at taking me apart. By the end of it, my shirt was torn up, my ribs felt cracked, I'd taken a crushing punch to the side of the head, and his boot to my knee nearly broke it.

Death seemed certain. They cuffed Josie with a zip tie and dragged her off. They'd stuffed a gag in her mouth. All of this was a blur, as I remained stunned by the punches. But not so stunned that I couldn't see the weapon pointed right at me. It looked like one of those Remington sniper rifles with the big handle like a boat oar. It was something a professional killer would use and major overkill for dealing with the three of us. I knew there was no reason for organized crime or terrorists to be after us. Maybe terrorists wouldn't need much of a reason, but they would need to kill people in a location where it would be noticed and make the news. The words sexual assault and hostage drifted across my dazed mind. A moment later, they kept me too busy to consider those options further.

They had me cuffed and blindfolded quickly, but I listened carefully for a while, at first hearing Josie's continued struggling. I still had enough marbles to try to assess what they were doing. That assessment was complete a couple of short minutes later when I heard a zipper. Damn it if they hadn't brought a body bag for Raj with three of them doing a fast cleanup while a fifth unknown man stood guard over us. It meant it was a fully professional operation.

They carried us quickly across the sand. I could hear Josie gagging and assumed her to be blindfolded as well. Despite the terrifying surprise, they couldn't hide some things from me. I'd seen four of them, and the blindfold simply worked to solidify their images in my mind. The police boat was fresh in my mind, so when we were tossed into a boat, I knew it was that one, and the cop was the fifth man. That added to my confusion, so I let the images of their faces drift against the backdrop of Wham and Pow floating in my head. The fact that they were silent and that Josie went silent helped. The unpleasant thump of Raj's bagged body beside me sped my stomach into a churn, and I had to hold it, knowing I couldn't throw up while gagged. All there was outside the motor of the boat was the sweep of the water and the feeling that we were motoring offshore.

What appeared in my microscope first was the Caucasian cop. His face was a blur, as I hadn't seen it clearly. He would be driving the boat. The gunman appeared to be a big man in a blue windbreaker, jeans, and a checked shirt beneath it. Three days of whisker stubble accented his craggy face. White guy, generally hard in features, but nothing that would distinguish him as more than your usual tough guy. The man who

tackled Josie was Oriental with the smooth good looks of his kind and hair that was perfect even while running. His eyes were wide-set, and he had a confident look. Without doubt, he thought of himself as a star fighter. The fourth man, and he was probably very angry over the sore jaw I'd given him, was Middle Eastern in type. He had yelled 'don't move' when they charged in, and his accent was like Syrian or something Arab. And of course, the last man had to be someone I had no hope of KO-ing. He was a giant black man and bore a surprisingly kind face. It didn't match his body, the scars on his fists, or what he was doing. His face probably bothered me the most. Getting killed by a gorilla with a natural born I'm-here-to-help visage was very irritating.

They weren't cops, but the driver had to be a cop, so there was nothing about the whole deal that wasn't scary. There was no apparent motive in outright massacring Raj and kidnapping us, and that led me to believe that I wouldn't be kept alive for very long. Far out in the water, the boat made a hard turn, so I knew they were going into shore. My estimate being a location about seven kilometers west of the start point. That would put us in west Toronto, not somewhere remote. As the boat neared shore, a wet cloth was placed over my nose. I struggled briefly against the fumes, thinking I was being killed, and then blacked out.

I woke with a thick head that felt like ballooned cotton. My lips were numb, but there was no gag. The groggy state was so complete I thought I was watching a very old movie. The images were semi-dream images, but I didn't know it, and I could hear Vincent Price talking to another man. I floated in that for a few moments, then my vision cleared and I took in a sour dose of reality. Ties bound my feet; my hands were cuffed in front of me with real handcuffs. I was on a sturdy and uncomfortable metal chair in a gloomy room. The two men talking were behind me and not aware that I had recovered consciousness.

I heard an Arab accent, but the dialogue of a Canadian convict. "Let me do him. I don't like this man. I'll do the disposal for free if you give him to me."

The man who replied really did sound like the old actor Vincent Price. "Hang on," he said. "This deal is now a mess. It wasn't supposed to go down this way. You men were supposed to shoot this guy, not the other one. Now we're stuck with one package dead and a loser alive."

"Yes. But you have the young woman. Maybe she will be enough."

"She'd better be. The other one was really for insurance, to make sure he didn't talk, and in case we had further use for him. You know some of the people around me in the Dark Circle. They have even less mercy than I do. If we let this error pass, it will only be because we have further work for you men."

"Remember when you talk to the others. It was Jack's error. He messed up and gave us bad information. He took the shot and killed one of the packages. Even if he'd found the right target, he could have at least used a torso shot instead of making a bloody mess by blowing someone's head off."

Vincent Price lit an American cigarette and said nothing. As the smoke drifted to my nostrils, I considered that for some reason I was supposed to be dead and Raj alive.

The only positive point was that they wanted Josie alive. I didn't see her in the room, though perhaps the room would be an incorrect term. It was a big place, like a warehouse, and mostly empty. It had cinderblock walls with some dusty tube lighting above that lit the place with light that was more like a yellow stain on the gloom. The bulbs were not the usual white fluorescent but off-color bulbs for a freezer or something. There were no doors nearby and only a couple of filmed windows higher up. I faced a stack of long wooden boxes, twenty of them against the wall. A lift truck sat next to them. They had different markings, like they contained different items. The floor was dusty, gray-painted concrete. Only the presence of my captors and the creepy feeling that some of the boxes might be crude coffins made the place exciting. Coffins were a real possibility because the boxes were made of red-stained wood that had that look. If so, these fellows had just enough class to bury people in something a touch better than a vegetable crate.

I did not know whether to be frightened, angry, or just in pain. Tears fell on my dusty cheeks, so I guess sadness won out. I was thinking of Josie. Her life, at least to this point, had not been one of hard knocks; parents fairly well off, the sort of clean and honest mom and dad who disapprove of guys like me. We'd been together since our late teens, and when we first met, all we did was hang out in High Park, listen to music, make out, go to movies, concerts, and the library. It was summertime then, just after I'd smashed up my motorcycle. We were alike, but she was brighter. Top marks in school, while I was barely above average. We were both casual, lacking in flash, and didn't wear designer-label clothing or anything showy, just good-quality basics. She rarely wore jewelry. I never gave in to the fad of guys wearing earrings, and both of us had hair that wasn't styled but was naturally combed into place. Beyond that, Josie was fashion-model attractive, and nothing could hide that. Probably the reason she always came back to me was that we'd known each other for so long.

Youth used to be a radical phase. Josie said the world was a stronghold of corruption, control, and big money that couldn't be changed. One had to adapt to it. I agreed; I failed to adapt. Though she had stated that negative perception of the world, she didn't associate with criminals or power brokers, though I was beginning to suspect the company that employed her.

I shifted from weeping about Josie to crying about myself, because not only had I failed to adapt, I was now dead in the water and had done nothing to especially earn that either. Somehow, the sharks had gotten to me. I used to call other people losers. Guess it takes one to know one. These guys were prime losers. Vincent Price was probably someone big, but anyone in the killing business would be brain-damaged in some way.

The air was blue with Mr. Price's smoke. "The phone call should come in any time," he said. "Then you'll know. I asked for another quick check on this man's background. Sometimes we like to keep people like him alive. Use them as slaves or in the occult ceremonies. We may need him if mind control doesn't work on that girlfriend of his. You might want to drug him to make him easier to control."

"My teeth hurt like hell from that punch he gave me. He should've been a boxer. At my pay grade, we simply erase men like him."

“Yes, and that’s why you are at that pay grade,” Vincent Price said. Then his phone jingled. He walked off and did some hushed talking. He returned a minute later. “I’m thinking about it. For now, you can drug him. Use that experimental stuff; see what it does to him. Here comes Benny. You can do that now.”

The next act involved one of them suddenly turning the chair around and smacking me hard in the face. A stupid bitch slap. It was only then that I realized the chair was a wheelchair, though it felt like something designed for electrocutions in the Middle Ages. He stepped back, and the slimy Middle Eastern bastard had drool coming out of his teeth. “Good, you’re awake,” he said. Then he turned and stepped away to join Vincent. A distant door was closing. I could see across the room. Vincent had his back to me, and three men came in. The police boat cop wasn’t among them. But one of them was a priest. Like a Catholic priest. I took in the priest’s classic good looks and wondered why he was present.

Jack, the intense gunman with the craggy face, was the second man, and the oriental man who had taken Josie down had to be Benny. There were a couple of grimy windows off to the left and far across the room. It was a grey day now, and all I could see out the window was some clumpy, hard ground decorated with weeds, fallen leaves, and trash, the yard ending at some rusty barrels and a line of shedding trees. Vincent had a full head of snow-white hair and a long trench coat like in a spy movie, only his coat was a little too dark. I could still only see his back as he signaled with a hand in the air and used the name, Mohammad. That told me the chap with a Syrian accent was Mohammad.

Mohammad wheeled me behind the rest of them to a vault-like door. It fit neatly into the cinderblock wall. The sort of door only a battering ram could take down. It opened silently, and we entered. There was no gold in storage; the room was a medical area of the sort Dr. Frankenstein would use, and it was very cold. Much colder than it was outside in the warm fall weather. It was also gloomy, lit with the same weak piss-yellow lights. I immediately noticed a couple of body bags, zipped and dumped side by side into an open closet door. That told me one reason they kept the area refrigerated.

We ended up in a circle in the center of the room, but I doubted there would be any circle jerk. I didn’t like the idea of amateur doctors working in the semi-dark, but made no comment. I finally got a look at Vincent Price’s face. He wasn’t Vincent Price, of course ... he was sixtyish with a clever comb-back of white hair. The big black guy from the beach wasn’t around. I remembered his unnaturally kind face, but only because it was the perfect contrast to Vincent’s cruel face. Vincent had a strong nose that widened at the snout and a thin-lipped mouth. His eyes were focused slits even in the semi-dark. His mustache was sparse, and he had a tuft of white hair below his lower lip that seemed to perfect a look of severity more than anything intellectual. It would be called a soul patch on other men, but this man didn’t appear to have a soul. He was supposed to be of a higher pay grade than the others, and he was about 50 degrees creepier for sure. Being creepier than hitmen and terrorists was an accomplishment only a few people could achieve. This man was someone special in a bad way. He was an evil spirit in the form of a man.

The small group was of one mind in that they all hit me with a cross between a grin and a leer. My eyes went from face to face, and I was generally satisfied that they were bad company. I had not spoken a word yet, and they weren't saying anything either. Benny broke away from the group and opened a locker. When he pulled out a white medical smock and put it on, I said, "Oh fucking no, it's Fu Manchu's bus boy."

Benny's happy face flashed mean real quick. "You are going to pay for spouting that racist remark. Boy, will you pay."

For some reason, my eyes went from Benny to Mohammad. There were hard diamonds in his pupils, and I knew if I decided to pop out any chance remarks about Muslims, I would be even sorrier. In my peripheral vision, I noticed something else: Jack taking a package out of a fridge and handing it to the priest. The priest nodded and left the room with it. It seemed final; he wouldn't return, and that ruled out any Catholic inquisition-style torture.

Vincent Price and Jack moved off and lit Yankee smokes and engaged in some of the idle chatter people like them would favor, like maybe discussing how to poison the local water supply. Vincent passed him an envelope that I assumed was his pay for killing Raj by mistake. So Jack was a hire and probably leaving the picture until the next call from Vincent. They continued discussing a few things, then Jack left, followed by Vincent thirty seconds later.

Mohammad wheeled me over to Benny, who had opened a large aluminum cabinet door. It was a mini fridge full of glass bottles with rubber tops. A wide array of syringes sat in holders on the inside of the cabinet door. They were various sizes, from a pen-needle syringe to an elephant-gun syringe, with plastic caps in various colors. When Benny selected the elephant-gun syringe, I winced and closed my eyes. I didn't want to open them. I heard him moving bottles around, and he began to hum a silly Asian pop tune like he was a chef preparing a light lunch. I heard him say, "I'm just about ready, hold him, Mohammad," and I took that as my cue to open my eyes. Benny loomed over me, grinning, holding that huge syringe while Mohammad held me firm from the rear. I could see a dose of blue liquid in it.

"Please don't stick me with that. You probably don't even know what's in it," I said.

Mohammad eased off and rolled up my sleeve for a shoulder shot like it was for the flu or something. Benny was enjoying himself with the syringe, holding it up to terrify me as he spoke. "It's something special; a new hallucinogenic designer drug. It stays in the body for months. The user gets high and comes down very slowly over a long period. We plan to sell it to soft customers who don't like killing people. It silences witnesses because once someone is screaming about the Martians, anything else they say loses credibility. Consider yourself a test subject. We're hoping it works right this time."

Struggling was of little use. Mohammad seized my head like he was going to tear it off if I moved. The syringe bit into a nerve, and a small cry eased through my lips. Then they both stepped clear and waited. Mohammad and Benny stood before me; they both crossed their arms and watched as though they really were doctors. The drug did not have the instant effect of a narcotic injection; it came on more like a slow form of electrocution. All the hairs on my body felt suddenly electrified, a shock hit my brain,

and I blacked out. It wasn't for long because they were still standing there when I came around. My perception was altered, weird, and dreamlike, and everything had an electric glow to it. They were grinning now, probably at my expanded pupils. I closed my eyes, and as I did, a kaleidoscope of colors dizzied me. An ocean of unreality was sucking me away, so I opened my eyes. My clarity of vision with my eyes open was so extreme that it gave me another shock. Faces seemed to swim in the air. The two faces I could see repulsed me. Probably because the faces belonged to Mohammad and Benny. I could see right through their wicked grins to their evil inner beings. Despite total disorientation, I felt that getting out of there was the priority.

"Hum, except for the dilated pupils, he looks normal," Benny said. "The last subject wouldn't stop screaming about bugs. Maybe this guy takes to the drug better."

Mohammad came over and studied me closely. He waved his hand, and I saw about fifteen hands flashing by. "How many fingers am I holding up?" he said.

I didn't reply, just stared.

"I'm going to put him on ice until the drug takes full effect," Benny said. Then his phone rang.

He shuffled off with Mohammad walking beside him. I knew the long, muffled telephone conversation was bad news, like I'd gained PSI power with the drug, though it could have also been predicted from the certainty that there was no good news that ever emanated from these characters.

"Change of plans," Benny said with authority as he turned to face Mohammad. "We're going to snuff him. Mr. Gentry and the Circle want a blood sample. His death has to be filmed for verification, or we don't get paid for it."

Mohammad smiled placidly, but his smile did not make him attractive. He looked like a bottom feeder about feed. "Oh, good, I'll do it. But why film it?"

"They had a problem. A subject was let go a while back. He paid his way out somehow. Now, proof of death is required."

Mohammad began rubbing his hands as if the only thing holding him back was a shortage of nasty ideas. "Say, I know you're gay, Benny. You want to sodomize him."

"Nope. I'll set up the cameras. I have no plans of being in some low-budget snuff film of yours. One that's so bad it doesn't even have a script. It could hurt my hopes for an acting career."

"We have masks ... we could do a comedy routine."

"No thanks. I think what they mean by wanting filmed confirmation is exactly that. Any smart guy stuff could mean we'll star as the victims in another film."

"I'll take my chances. A Halloween film and I'm still going to use the mask."

At that moment, I slipped into temporary oblivion. It faded, and then I could hear and see things. A river of distortion became snow falling in my mind, and the flakes became visual, then auditory, then thought, then touch. It buried me, then melted, and I arrived in reality, shouting something. Opening my eyes brought a return to ugliness; I saw a

grime-filmed window and cars streaking past on a distant freeway overpass; the sunset in the scene was like a cartoon drawing. I'd already forgotten what I'd been shouting. My head was free, but I was bound to a table, and it moved slightly from my struggles, so I knew it was wheeled. I still had the electrified feeling, and could remember being drugged and blacking out. I could raise my head; the vision out the window of the vacant lot and distant freeway was as real as the cold sweat pouring on my face. Unfortunately, my shouts had also been real and had alerted my captors. I heard a door slam as they entered. They had last said something about icing me. They hadn't done it yet. Maybe I still had a chance.

My table glided silently across the room, away from the window into some dim orange lighting. It was the same two guys, and I tried to see as much as possible, but movement triggered the hallucinatory aspect of the drug. I had to be still to see anything much. The table they had me on looked specially made with clamps, so I was not the first victim.

The table stopped rolling; half a minute later, I smelled cigarette smoke and heard Benny and Mohammad talking from half a room away. I lifted my head and saw Benny covering the window with black paper and taping it in place. My eyes darted about, and I saw that Jack-o'-lanterns surrounded my table. I could lift my head and move it enough to see them, but I didn't believe it. It had to be a hallucination, or was it ... because the table next to the biggest pumpkin had a black felt covering and rows of knives. The whole deal was there from a surgeon's kit to a butcher's set.

My captors walked over, and Benny reached over and snapped something, releasing a lock holding my right wrist. Lifting my hand created a flash of pain, but I didn't put it down. Instead, I decided to stretch the fingers.

"Thought you might like a cigarette." The voice boomed in my head like a gong. Benny was offering a smoke, his face over me like another jack-o'-lantern.

As I took the offered cigarette, I heard Mohammed's voice boom as well. "Oh, good. He's coherent. I need a subject who will feel the pain."

"I can feel the pain, alright. If it's a last smoke, how about unlocking my other wrist so I can sit up?"

Benny obliged; my back cracked as I sat up. I could see that my legs were in the same type of snap clamps. Pulling forward to bend my legs caused sharp pains. Benny lit my smoke with a flashy gold-plated lighter, and I inhaled. It was an American smoke, a filtered Camel. Supposedly, I had quit smoking. That made it better. The drug eased the pain, and I figured that under normal circumstances I'd be too sore to move. Powered up on designer stuff, I thought maybe I could escape if any opening showed. I thought that, then I noticed a pallet beyond the cameras with three of those same zipped black body bags on it. I realized they had their own snuff set up, and the others had not escaped. Rather than disgust, I felt depressed by this. These creeps were into everything. Any sex movie produced by them would probably be horrid. But the depression wasn't just from that, but the realization that my chances were about zero. They were heavily armed. Ordinary unarmed people can't fight back against heavily armed terrorists. That's why there are all the feature news stories about terrorists killing

people by the dozens. Unarmed people have no chance. But ... put those bastards up against someone armed and ready, and they usually die fast.

“So what’s with the ghoulish pumpkins? Why don’t you guys just let me go?”

“No chance, you’re the star. You with me, and Benny, in the Halloween horror short, ‘Pumpkin Pie.’ You’re the pie.”

“You mean you and him,” Benny said. “I’m not starring in this, mask or no mask. I’m fucking hungry. The cameras are set up; you just have to hit the button for it all to roll. I’m going down to pick up some food at the diner.”

Mohammed frowned and put on a gorilla mask. “Stay, and you can cook a piece of him,” he said.

“You are already spoiling my appetite. I don’t know why you can’t just beat this guy to death. All those knives ... you think I want to watch that? And those shitty pumpkins”

“Hey, hey ... do you know how hard it was to carve those jack-o’-lanterns. That takes special skill. It proves I can really work miracles with this cutlery. Look how nice and evil I made them.”

“I’m not watching you carve up a human being. I’m out of here, and I hope you’ll be finished and cleaned up when I return.” At that, Benny exhaled in my face, then turned and walked away.

Mohammad shrugged. “One of those karate kids ... no stomach for real blood and guts. In my country, we chop the infidels before we behead them.”

The gorilla mask was high quality, and it suited him. On the drug, he actually seemed more real with the mask on. But no less ridiculous. I wondered why it didn’t occur to him that a Halloween movie with carved pumpkins and a gorilla surgeon was idiotic. Then I figured that people who make bad snuff or sex movies, with no real script, aren’t smart enough to see their lack of talent.

I exhaled. “I see you have long experience in the carving business.”

“Certainly do. I used to be a terrorist. A pro.”

“And you’re not one now?”

“I moved up in the world. I’m a contractor.”

“For who, King Kong?”

“You might say that, because we cause the same mayhem. My jaw still aches from that punch of yours. One thing I learned in terrorism is if anyone even thinks of fighting back, they pay and pay.”

“Since I’m dying anyway, maybe you can enlighten me. Why do terrorists want my girlfriend Josie alive and me dead? Like, why would terrorists care about us at all?”

“First. I’m not a terrorist. As I said, I’m a contractor. I farm out terrorists when they are needed for false flags and so on. But it isn’t terrorists that want you dead. This gig is for the Illuminati. Not the moneyed guys but the Satanists that do all the hard business for

them. I'm not exactly one of their boys because I'm a Muslim, not a Satanist. They recruited me a few years ago."

"Really. I heard about the Illuminati. I mean, a tiny bit ... like they don't even exist. It's just a conspiracy theory. And I always thought terrorists were motivated by ideology and cruelty. You talk like it's a business."

"It's a business. The Illuminati and others can order terrorism like fast food. I don't know what this job is about, really, just that it pays. Sometimes the Illuminati orders terrorism, and guys like me brainwash some drones, give them some military training, and send them on assignments. They know what we teach them and nothing more. Trust me, even if you lived a long life, you'd never figure out some of the evil that happens. It's about control of the planet through a web of wealth and intrigue. It is so screwed up that a sober brain can't grasp it. Your drug-addled mind would never have a chance."

"The Illuminati must be lowering standards these days. Take that boss of yours. He looks more like sinister scum than Illuminati."

"That's Mr. Jules Gentry you are talking about. He is the head of a family cluster and controls a regional council overseas. He is a genuine bloodline Illuminati. But scum is the word that best describes him. Gentry is a hidden hand, even to most of them. The man is a Satanist kingpin, and his involvement runs to the darkest secrets of the Illuminati. Keep in mind that theirs is a worldwide business. Few people see the big players. But enough talk. The latest fad is video proof, so I'm getting it for them. Once they see the style I have, it will mean bigger contracts."

"You'd actually make an interesting actor, the way you talk in the vernacular, yet with a foreign accent. My problem is with your lines. They need a rewrite."

He didn't answer. His eyes went to my cigarette. It had almost reached the filter. He put his back to me and selected what looked to be a large amputation blade. Probably something an old-style butcher would use to carve a shank of beef. The flashes of light from it nearly hypnotized me. He kept that in his left hand while studying other knives. If he started with that one, I figured the rest of the collection would see no work. It would be a quick slaughter, not a painful death.

I was still sitting up, and he suddenly turned fast to sucker punch me with his right. No doubt, that was how he wanted to start the fun, by breaking my jaw. But the strange drug made me a little faster. I'd seen him balling his fist, and I simply ducked back. He swung so hard he couldn't help but follow through, and that brought him right up on the table with me. I was able to grab his left arm and yank it back so hard at the wrist that I heard something snap.

The blade clattered to the floor. He was right on me in an askew position. I felt his hot breath as he yelped from the pain. Letting him get loose meant certain death, so I seized his arm in a wrestling grip and wouldn't let go. His feet came back on the floor, and he tried to pull free. The wheeled table moved with his efforts, allowing me to hold him. We swung right around, and that created a hallucinatory effect that was nearly my end, but I saw the gleam of the bank of knives and managed to grab one as the table rolled by. It was pure luck. It was a solid blade, and I held the hilt ... for about a blurred

quarter second before I plunged it in his back. He was a strong man and continued to struggle rather than die, but it didn't last long, and eventually he fell limp, and I was left still locked to the table at my ankles with a smelly gorilla on top of me.

The cameras were rolling. My head was spinning with waves of dizziness; I clenched my teeth to hold back a sudden urge to freak out and start screaming hysterically. I shook my head, and that sent images of the impish pumpkins spinning into a merry-go-round... and I passed out. It was probably only for a few moments; at least I hoped that was so.

It was deathly calm, only a beep from the recording setup. I glanced at one lens, shoved the filthy body aside, and slipped off the table, nearly wrenching both ankles to sprains as the wheels slipped and the table came on its side. Muttering curses, I tried to reach up at the bank of knives. Finally, I had one of the thinner blades with a point in my hand, and Mohammad's short film drifted into an absurd comedy that would be funny for everyone but me. Trying to reach the ankle clamps was difficult, and my stiff body lacked the flexibility needed for yoga. I was going around in a circle on the floor with the table. The thought of Benny suddenly returning made the situation desperate. Failed efforts taught me a lesson. An eternity passed, then I found a way of holding the end of the table with one hand while using the blade to depress the tiny inset button that held the clamps in place.

Once free, I limped about, giving the finger to the cameras. The building seemed to inhale the silence, and suspense was in the idea that the next sounds heard would likely be Benny. I planned on no further continuation of the film, with him starring as the master torturer. Getting away fast was paramount. Yet I needed things, like shoes and maybe a shirt that wasn't torn up.

Mohammad's foul, bloodstained shirt was not an option. I searched him and found the keys and his wallet. He carried no ID, just a card with an email address and a raised image of a human eye at its top. He did carry cash, four thousand dollars in hundreds that he wouldn't be spending. His key holder was a metallic version of the same eye image as that on the card. I found a concealed handgun strapped under his right pant leg and extra ammo for it in his pocket. The weapon was a Colt XSP 380 Auto. I shoved it and the ammo in my pockets. I figured that anyone sensible would have shot me. But then, most killers wouldn't imagine me somehow escaping. Judging by the way he used up body bags, an escape had not happened before.

It occurred to me that I still didn't know who they were, only what they said they were, and who would believe their BS. Leaving the cameras untouched, I prepared to exit the room as the survivor. I wanted to be sure Josie wasn't in any of the body bags, so I opened them and regretted it. The smell of the first one was so bad that I stumbled back. It wasn't Josie, but a man who'd been beaten to death. The second one was green and looked to be in some form of suspended animation. The rule of thumb is that if it isn't breathing, it's dead, but I zipped that bag back up quickly, fearing the rule wouldn't apply with green bodies. Those samples were enough to tell me Josie wasn't dead in the warehouse. I at least believed them on that one. Mr. Jules Gentry wanted her alive, and he had taken her somewhere else. He'd said something about mind control and keeping me alive if it didn't work on her. Gentry had nixed the idea of

keeping me breathing when he called back, and maybe that meant mind control had worked.

Most of the lights were off, and it was very dark now, with the distant windows looking like glossy black squares. That meant there were also no lights on in the parking lot outside. The Colt gave me some confidence, so rather than racing for the nearest exit, I searched for the medical room. I paused at a metal staircase to a loft level, then decided that poking around up there wasn't a good idea. I found the vault-like door and went inside the medical area. The cabinets and the aluminum fridge they had pulled the goods from were locked. Mohammad's key set wouldn't unlock them. I searched the rest of the place; another heavy door opened to a walk-in fridge. There was a chemistry setup inside and many unlabelled bottles, packages, and canisters. There was a color code with glass bottles and canisters in about fifteen colors. I took it to be a makeshift drug lab, though narcotics were beyond my area of expertise. The person operating it wasn't present, but had obvious skill. It meant that there were probably more gangsters than the ones I had met doing business at the warehouse. One cabinet that I could open in the main area had labeled drugs - mostly painkillers and tranquilizers. I popped a couple of pills from a bottle marked codeine. I didn't want to put myself to sleep, but figured they might work to counter the other drug and the pain. I knew a fight was probably coming up, and it would be hard to fight with pain and inflammation active. The codeine would get rid of that problem.

I searched the large storage area and found my shoes where they'd tossed them, near the door. The crates I'd thought were coffins were packed with illegal goods. I opened one crate, removed enough of the packing to see the handle of a rifle, and left it at that. They would be after me, but I didn't plan on traveling with a very obvious rifle. I found an area of lockers; one of them had a janitor's outfit with the logo of Hernando's cleaning company. It smelled musty, like it had been in there a long time. I took the shirt and a beat-up leather jacket I found in another locker and put them on. The codeine was already starting to mask the pain, and I felt less like I was walking on the moon and almost calm.

The warehouse setup looked busy; they'd been arranging things and moving stuff in and out. I could see many scuffs across the open floor where stuff had been moved. I considered that, and then my momentary calm state vanished with the arrival of a flash of light in the upper flyspecked windows. I ran to the crates and climbed to the top of them so fast it amazed me. I peeked out a window and saw a police car in the parking area out front. The cop was doing a prowl around the place as part of a patrol. The car stopped, and the driver got out and took a piss. My first reaction was to climb down, figuring I could go outside and report my situation to him. Halfway down, I stopped and went back up. The image of the earlier police boat had raced across my mind and flashed a red alert.

As he opened the door to get back in his car, another set of headlights showed. The glare of them hit like a stab in the eyes and faded as a red pickup truck pulled up. I figured it would be Benny back from his dinner, and that was correct, as was my decision not to go out. Benny parked, got out, and walked over to the cop. He was a provincial police officer, and so was the car. I had thought we would still be in Toronto,

and we probably were because the cop would be part of the gang and maybe not the real neighborhood patrol.

They talked for a couple of minutes. Benny pulled a thick manila envelope from his coat and passed it to him. The can of Molson beer Benny sipped confirmed about as much as the envelope. The cop was definitely another one of them, whoever they were, and he was a lone cop with no partner on board. The cop left, but before he did, I took a careful mega-stoned look at his face. He was near retirement, with grey hair and a face both weather-worn and aging, showing jowls and deep wrinkles. "Crap," I thought. "This organization must have been around for a long time."

Benny held a pizza in a Lorenzo's Pizza box that he'd grabbed from the cab of his truck. He'd both eaten and brought back a snack. He carried that along with a brown liquor store bag to the door. His steps were light; he certainly didn't look worried about anything. It irritated me that his only concern would be that Mohammad might not have done a proper cleanup of the mess he'd made of me. Once inside, Benny switched on brighter lights and headed across the room toward the theater area. The bastard had brought the pizza and beer with the idea of enjoying a feature flick in a genre I did not care for much.

He went through the door. I dropped lightly down from the crates and had the Colt ready. I headed over, waited, and was surprised when my guess had been right. There was a shout of 'Oh shit' from Benny, and he ran back out the door with a pistol in his hand. I stepped out and ambushed him as he passed, smashing my gun on the side of his head and putting him down.

He tumbled on the floor and lost the gun. Benny stayed there, out cold. The weapon was a priority. It had skated across the floor. I picked it up, a concealed carry weapon again, and expensive. This one was labeled a Rhino .357, and the gun was like a cannon with a snub nose. Unlike the United States, gun ownership in Canada meant rifles, shotguns, and country locations. This gang was likely all killers, but not like hit men for hire. Only Jack at the beach had carried an assassin's weapon. Benny was probably used to being in situations where he might have to shoot another criminal, at one clandestine meeting or another. He'd failed this time, and when I rolled him over, I had to check his breathing to make sure he wasn't dead. He did have ID in his wallet and credit cards. The name on them was Danny Wong, not Benny, and on a piece of Quebec ID, he was Ming Wong. He had a few hundred-dollar bills and keys with that same eye keychain.

Simply driving away seemed a fine idea, so I walked out the front door. It was dark, but the lights of the distant freeway overpass showed like a circus ride. The cool night air and the rising hook of moon greeted me like a new world. It seemed so much better to be out of that place. The drug lent me understanding of insane people, how they were driven to the streets, sucked out by the pull of the universe ... an inner voice coded somewhere in a mad gene that said, "Come on out and stay out. No sense putting on a coat, either. It's only minus 30. Sit right down and enjoy."

A bat or night bird whooshed by, ending that train of thought. As things settled, I took a moment to study the joint. The warehouse was a large rectangle tacked over with gray aluminum siding. It had a few windows, most of them at the top. There was a loading

door and ramp farther down. Obviously, I hadn't explored the entire place. It was bigger than I thought. The lot was a semicircle in front of the doors. The road out was narrow, and the lot featured aged, cracked concrete with dead weeds sprouting. The place rested in a depression. A haze of distant lights showed beyond a web of shedding branches. The rear of this dump was overgrown with shabby bushes, trees, and weeds, and there was a field to the left that led to pines. I could smell the pines and the lake in the air, so no doubt this was a dead-end location near the city outskirts. Greater Toronto blended from the main city to all the adjoining suburbs, so plenty of dead-end places and industrial areas existed in the belts of sprawl on the outskirts.

Benny's red Ford pickup was near the entry, so I walked over and checked it out. It still smelled like pizza and beer inside the truck. I found nothing in the back, though if a dead body or two had shown, it would not have surprised me. I searched the cab and found a clipboard with blank sheets of paper and cards like business cards with strange symbols, only email addresses, and no names. I pocketed a few cards and left the clipboard. There were two clips of ammo for his gun, so I kept them.

Just as I was starting the pickup, a vision of Josie came through the drug haze in my head. One memory flash, and she appeared, an entire concert crowd, light show, and dry ice smoke of an old heavy rock band. I couldn't even remember the band's stage name. The tickets had been a gift. Josie danced, passed me a joint ... her figure sported plenty of curves even though she was slim, and her long hair had bounce. Josie could make every day happy. Her freckled nose even looked happy like a clown's nose ... but a pretty one. We weren't fans of dated hard rock, but in the right mood, we were fans of nearly everything. And she had me going, dancing with her ... enjoying stuff I wouldn't ordinarily enjoy. A sudden longing for her presence gripped me. She would make escaping in a stolen pickup truck fun. Troublesome days were happy days with her; without her, it was like a hidden vampire had sucked the color out of life.

The memory vanished as quickly as a hard-on met by a puking street whore. Looking out the windshield at the grey siding on the warehouse created the feeling of having arrived on the scene in my pickup for the graveyard shift, a shift in a dead-end job in some shithole of a warehouse. I knew there would be no escaping in the truck. Not right away. I couldn't forget about Josie and leave her to the vultures. Rescuing her was the only thing I had left, now that I had lost my mind. And that meant beating some truth out of Benny. I would find out where they took her and for what, and improvise.

Exiting the truck and slamming the door, I walked back to the warehouse with grim intent on my brow. That faded when I stepped inside. Benny ambushed me, appearing from my left with a punch to the side of the head and an attempt to take me down. I saw the wild look in his eyes as I managed to stumble away. He kept right on me and used a karate trick to throw me. I rolled, pulled the gun, and was up and walking backward, pointing it at him as he advanced.

Benny stopped dead, his shoes squeaking on the floor. "You have no idea of how much trouble you've made for me."

"Ah, excuse me, but the trouble isn't over. I'm pointing your gun at you. You aren't exactly in a position to lecture me."

He eased forward a slow step. A bad poker player's expression of calculation came and went like a mask on his face. "You've never used a gun. Shooting someone is murder. You are already guilty of murdering Mohammad. You are digging a deep grave for yourself. You'll have the cops and people far worse hunting you. Think about it. Maybe you were able to stab Mohammad in a struggle ... a crime of desperation and passion. But I know your type. You can't commit cold-blooded murder. You don't have it in you. You can't shoot me."

One thing was clear. Benny did not know anything about me or my background. Someone who did would be holding their palms out as they begged, due to my reputation as trigger-happy. He took another slow step. I pulled the trigger. The shot only winged his shoulder, but he spun half around and went to the floor. Benny yelled and rolled face up. He held his bleeding shoulder with his left hand and used his feet to scabble back farther from me.

I was liking that shot too much, powering up on it like I'd become ten feet tall, but I didn't let the illusion gain control. Filling Benny with bullets wouldn't get me any information. Playing a movie criminal was a better idea than playing a cop. In movies, the super-bad dude uses the gun like it's a part of his body or his hand as he bosses the victims around. Using that technique, I moved Benny across the warehouse. "I only winged you, Benny. That scratch is nothing to cry over; it is a testament to how well I can shoot with any gun. Next time it's gonna hurt real bad. Now walk through that door. We're going back to your little Frankenstein lab, where you can bandage your wound and get me the antidote for the drug you hit me with."

Benny was amazing in that he could look pleasant while he was killing you, but I'd taken that mask off, and now his features contorted to a hideous visage, and his eyes were slits of pure hate. So long as those eyes told me he knew I would kill him, it was fine with me.

Once inside, he didn't turn on the light, so I did. There was a first-aid kit; I sat on a stool as I waved him over to it. He didn't need instructions; he understood that I was allowing him to bandage his wound. He did that carefully; a slip that said he still had no plans on being killed or telling me anything.

"Stop stalling, that bandage should do. Now, I want to know what the drug you gave me is and how I come down from it?"

Benny deadpanned me. Behind it, his thoughts were racing. His answer revealed his stupidity. "Sure, I can help you there. If you let me go when we're done. Like, I'll just let you leave and not try to stop you."

"Really. It might be a deal ... if you tell me where Josie is?"

"I honestly don't know where she is. Mr. Gentry might know, but I rarely see him. I don't even know where he stays when he is in this area, or exactly where he is from. Gentry works in the background like someone nearly invisible. Only he knows the specifics of why she was taken. They don't pass information down the line. It is set up that way. The drug we gave you is a designer drug and an experiment that failed. The first test subject freaked out because the drug just wouldn't wear off. We developed an antidote. It is in that cabinet."

“Get it, right now.”

Benny again took his time. The antidote was in an unlocked cabinet with a pile of other medical stuff. I watched as he took out a brown glass bottle nearly full of liquid and another sea-green bottle. On a clean quartz countertop, he used a small aluminum cup to pour some crystals from the green bottle. He mixed in a small amount of the liquid. He stirred that with a tiny spoon, then filled an insulin syringe to the 10-unit mark.

“That’s great; now that you’ve prepared it, I want you to inject half of it into your right arm.”

Benny froze. “I have allergies. I didn’t take the drug. I can’t use this stuff.”

I walked over to the cabinet. I’d noticed a larger green bottle next to the small green bottle he’d removed. The big bottle had a small skull and crossbones raised in the glass. “Strychnine ... that’s the mix you were going to hit me with. You really are a bastard.”

Benny lunged for me with the syringe. I realized my mistake in letting the bottle distract me just in time to dance aside. He tried to turn and get me, but when he realized he had no chance, he dropped the syringe and backed off. He held up his hands defensively.

“What was I supposed to do? There is no antidote for that stuff. It has to run its course, however long that is.”

With my free left hand, I swept up a bottle of Valiums I’d taken out when rifling the place earlier. There were about a hundred of the small pills. I dumped them into a baggy and put it in my shirt pocket. “These should take the edge off it for now. Now move. It’s feature film time, starring you. Mohammad’s knives are still there, so I’m going to make you talk, and then leave you strapped there with a film ready for your friends when they return.”

Benny got on his knees and started to beg. I nearly shot him out of pure disgust. “Please, no. You have no idea what they’ll do to me.”

“Start talking, or I’ll do it for them. For starters, who are they? And get off your knees and stand back. I’m not here for a blow job.”

Benny stepped back and sat on a stool. He started talking with his hands as much as his mouth, which caused me to shift the gun back and forth while he talked. “They are Illuminati people. It’s no joke. I used to work for a triad overseas. They got me free of it, but I had to hit a person for them. Somebody much bigger than you.”

“Huh ... everybody’s bigger than me. At least in name. I’m nobody, but you don’t know that, do you? They didn’t even tell you who I am. I can figure that much.”

“Okay. So I did that hit, and the triad cut me loose. Then I’d get calls from my new bosses whenever they wanted something done. I met others like Mohammad and Jack. Those ones are shadowy characters that do nearly every kind of dirty work without being actual Illuminati members. It pays well, but it is worse than the triad. The Illuminati are about a lot more than money or crime. They are about demonic stuff like

Gentry practices. He heads an Illuminati gang of Satanists called the Dark Circle. They once offered me a place in the group, but I was afraid of it and its initiation rites.”

“I have a feeling that I don’t want to know about them but have no choice other than to find out.”

“Neither of us will know much for long. You’re dead. I’m dead. We were told to kill you fast and record it. That fucking Mohammad had to opt for revenge. I can’t tell them you ached him, while he played gorilla and I was eating a steak dinner down the road. They don’t tolerate mistakes like that. The only way you might find your girlfriend is to get it out of Mr. Gentry or his people. Even then, it is possible he delivered her to someone else.”

“How is it that people like you and Mohammad work on stuff and don’t know what it is all about?”

“These people have been around longer than triads. Everything is in compartments. Any one person only knows what he is doing on a job, and possibly, what a few others are doing. The CIA and the Mafia do it the same way. Core members and higher members are always protected. Mr. Gentry is protected. He finds me; I don’t find him, and I don’t ask questions. I know he came in from New York once, but that means little. Let me explain just a little of how the Illuminati works. It is very complex, weird, and most of it you simply don’t want to know about. Understanding it is to understand that your entire concept of how the world works is wrong.”

“I’m tracking Josie. Just give me the basics. Put me on the trail. My concept of how the world works is that it works against me. It always has.”

“Maybe if we burn this place and do a really good job, they’ll think we’re all dead. It would give me a chance to start fresh in Japan.”

“Tell me what I need to know first.”

“Okay. If the worldwide Illuminati took Josie, you have no hope. They have family clusters in nearly every important city and are within the most powerful institutions. There are things like high priests or priestesses of local orders, national leaders, and the highest hidden group of the families.”

“I can’t think of any reason for the worldwide Illuminati to take Josie. Gentry used you guys to take her, so let’s focus on him.”

“Gentry appeared along with accelerated Illuminati activity in this area. Whatever it is, the Dark Circle is running it. That is another super-big problem for both of us. They are not an elite social club of Illuminati celebrities. They are the Satanist underground of the Illuminati.”

“How would Josie fit in with that sort of outfit? I can’t see why they would want her.”

“Their motives are always hidden. I assure you, if they took her, they have a solid reason for it.”

“So the most sensible way to look at it is that I am up against Jules Gentry and his crew. The other Illuminati around the world aren’t likely to come online in this situation.”

"If they didn't transport Josie out of this area, you likely won't have to worry about others. But don't count on it, and it makes little difference. There is no crime group in the world more deadly than that circle of Gentry's. I ought to know."

Benny's cell phone rang. On that first ring, I realized I was questioning him when I should've taken his phone and gone through the calls and app contacts he'd used. It rang a second time. I could see that he didn't want to answer it, so I gestured with my left, and he took it out of his pocket and tossed it to me.

"Hello," I said. I got silence, so I said it again.

"Who is this?" the person said, and if I smiled at that brief message, it was because the voice was Vincent Price's voice.

"Ah, Mr. Gentry ... this is Joe Holiday, and we have a problem. Either you release Josie to me, or I'm going to shoot your pal Benny."

The answer was curt. "You're both dead already," he said, and then he hung up.

Fear animated Benny's eyes. He stuttered a couple of words, then went silent. "It appears, Benny, that Mr. Gentry is not only being uncooperative, but he also considers your life to be coming to a close."

"We're screwed," Benny said. "He'll send Dark Circle ice men, we gotta run."

"Okay, move out that door. We'll burn this place. Maybe once we're on the road, your memory will improve, and you'll tell me where she is."

Benny walked, but too slowly, so I started jabbing him in the back with the gun. The makeshift theater room was starting to smell, but I remembered a set of cuffs being there. Benny obeyed and cuffed his hands in front. Not the best option, but good enough, since it would allow me to relax in the main storage area. As soon as we got there, lights flashed in darkened windows above, and Benny said, "Oh-oh, a car."

I hurried Benny to the front doors and made sure they were locked. I then did another quick climb up the crates and looked out the window. The cop again, but alone, and coming across the lot to the door. He didn't have his gun out, so I scrambled down and put the gun in Benny's back while I whispered in his ear. "It's your cop friend. Ask him what he wants and then let him inside."

The cop tried to enter, shook the handle, then the door. The sound echoed in the warehouse, echoed in my brain. Then the cop shouted, "Benny!"

"I'm here. Who is it?"

"It's Nate. I'm here to pick up that video, remember. Is it done?"

"Sure, it's done," Benny said as I eased the gun barrel along his left ear.

"Then open up, for fuck's sake!"

Benny had my OK, and he unlocked the door. But it turned out that Nate was not kosher or cool. As soon as he knew the door was unlocked, he shouldered it and stormed inside. He knocked Benny right over, and I flew to the side. For an old cop, this Nate chap was fast. Gun drawn, he covered nearly all the angles in an instant. But he didn't get my angle quick enough. I fired; I hit his gun with the shot. His weapon was

faulty because it exploded as it flew from his hand. He screamed, went to his knees. Benny got up and tried to run back deeper into the warehouse, but his sneakers squeaked to a halt when he heard me yell.

Nate's hand was a bloody mess; he was moaning, and tears streamed from his eyes. He looked at me, and then he looked forward, eyes to the floor, waiting for me to execute him. I didn't do it. I used the gun and the word, 'Outside!' to command Benny, and we went out the open door.

Already, Benny was saying, "You can't leave that cop alive. He'll put in a phony report and get every cop in the city after us."

"Shut up. I'm going to search his car first. Then I'm going to get the delivery address. I'll deliver that video."

"Duh, duh ... don't do that."

"Wait here on the walk and don't try to run, or I'll pick you off."

The cop car was about twenty yards away, but on the drug, it felt like half a kilometer. Gravel crunched underfoot like I was walking on crackerjacks. Shadows tunneled before me. I smelled a skunk in the night breeze and figured that I smelled just about as wild. I got in the driver's side and spotted a thick leather-bound black book in the passenger seat. The interior reeked of sweat. I seized the book, then looked through the glass to see whether Benny had decided to run off. He hadn't, but something else had happened. The cop, Nate ... the bastard was proving to be a tougher opponent than I imagined. In that brief interval, he'd managed to get a rifle from inside the warehouse. He staggered with blood smearing his face, out the open door, trying to prop the weapon on his damaged hand to take a shot at me.

I stared in disbelief; there was a flash of headlights from the direction of the entry road ... then a powerful burst of light and racket as the warehouse exploded. Being inside a car with rolled-up windows saved my ass. The extended moment came with a shocking vision that hit like a lightning strike. Instead of getting a shot off, Nate flew from the doorway, riding a ball of fire. The force of the explosion webbed the car window glass but didn't break it. A wave of gravel and debris that rode in on its tail sounded like machine gun fire. Flung forward, Benny somersaulted in the gravel, but he wasn't on fire like Nate, who'd gone right on past as a flaming human cannonball.

Fortunately, the secondary explosions weren't right at the front doors like the initial blast but deeper inside. The initial blast force had hit my ears like a gloved boxer's punches. Red and blue flame bursts appeared in a cloud of smoke and dust, and I saw a melting face in it as it rose to the sky. The moment was eerie, with the warehouse having morphed to the embodied fire and smoke of hell.

As the melting visage of fire vanished, a big slat of the warehouse's aluminum siding bounced over the car, and the dust cloud enveloped the area. I kept one hand on the book and the other on my gun as I escaped the car and began to run away from the warehouse. My feet pounded through the gravel to an area of cracked asphalt. As I cleared the smoke cloud, a shot winged my trousers. Its speed meant it was a bullet, not flying debris.

I remembered that the first flash of light had been from car headlights up at the entry, and that vehicle was still present there with someone from it shooting at me. Being a moving target in an area of fiery distraction aided me as I turned and ran off the edge of the fractured asphalt portion of the lot, into high weeds, and finally into the trees.

The first screen of trees opened in a field of dead grass and weeds. I raced toward distant pines and didn't bother trying to look back. Shadows and the rustling weeds kept spooking me, and my peripheral vision registered evil things leaping for my knees. I knew they could not be real. Reality existed in Mr. Gentry. The bastard had triggered the explosion, and at least one of his men had fired the rifle shots. It hadn't occurred to me that they would have the whole place rigged to blow.

My decision to search Nate's cop car had been the lifesaver. But perhaps not for long if they were tracking me. When I did look back, I didn't spot anyone, so I stopped and caught my breath. I knew someone was out there, hunting me. I slowly tracked around to where I expected the shooter's car to be.

Sirens heralded the quick arrival of a train of emergency vehicles and aided my escape. Gentry wasn't sticking around or sending out men to hunt me deep in the woods. Huge billows of smoke and licks of fire continued to consume the warehouse, and I watched some of it through the trees. Several fire trucks came on scene, but they had no hope of putting out the fire. Mr. Gentry had real power and money if he could afford to blow up a profitable local operation. I pondered that as uniformed cops gathered around Nate's blackened corpse and ambulance attendants were moving Benny to a vehicle. The brightness and fear that the police would start searching the area started me moving. A loner like me picked up near a major fire would look like the arsonist. I had to run.

It still felt like I had filters on my ears, but my vision was better on the drug. I could see in the pitch black as I went into a ravine. A string of lights meant houses were high above, but I didn't climb to them. Mr. Gentry could already have men cruising in the nearby streets. The book remained in my hand, and I used it to swat a brush out of my face. Two kilometers later, I was in a clearing near a brook, and I sat there exhausted, listening to the water trickle. Traffic on a distant overpass jangled my nerves. There were occasional sounds in a nearby web of branches that led to thicker brush. Every snap of a twig or bough creaking gave rise to fearful thoughts of pursuers creeping up, hunting me like some alien menace come down from the sky.

As the night cooled, my sweat-soaked clothing dried, and I began to move. My drug-addled mind electrified the darkness, and I saw visions in it. I babbled as the earlier scene on the beach began to pass in my mind like a repeating waking nightmare. Raj's exploding head became the exploding warehouse; Mohammad leered with a carving knife, his gorilla-masked face floating above me like a ghost; the cop held up his bloody hand, his mouth opening on his blackened face, his eyes looking up to a demon of fire in the sky. The ravine began to feel like the face of a pit, drawing me down to the embrace of some final death trap. I pictured Mr. Gentry and an assortment of ghouls waiting, his white hair aflame and his slit eyes feral as he sniffed in search of my damned soul.

Falling to my knees in soft earth, I took my head in my hands and shook it, shaking away the bad images. When I looked up, a group of stars took off in a pinwheel, so I closed my eyes again for a minute, then opened them and spotted a path leading up. It was time to get out of the dark wilderness. I had traveled far from the warehouse, so I estimated it would be safe above. Fragrant spruce and odors of the woodchip path cleared my sinuses. The hike up was brief, and at the top, I found myself in a tiny park at the ravine's edge. The tree-lined side street it opened on was dead quiet. Rustling leaves, not a single house had interior lights on, and there was no traffic down at this dead end. Smoke like a bonfire was in the air, and I would be the only person here who knew it was from the warehouse fire.

Setting off on a brisk walk, I hoped to reach a busy intersection and catch a taxi quickly. Good fortune arrived two blocks later. I practically tried to shrink into the ground when headlights showed, but it was a cab, and it turned into a bungalow just ahead of me. The headlights lit up the perfect fairy-tale house with a porch front. A young couple exited the cab and stepped across the lawn to the patio at the front.

It seemed hard to believe anyone could be on the run in this hidden corner of autumn peace. But I was, and in my wild, drugged state, I felt like Michael Myers returning for Halloween. It was a bit early, but I felt as haunted as that movie serial killer, my previous life killed off, and this new incarnation more dead than alive.

Before the cab could leave, I crunched through the brittle leaves on the white stone driveway and got into the back. The cabby, a man of indeterminate race, nearly jumped out of his seat. I saw his startled eyes in the mirror, and that he was reaching over for something.

"Relax. I just need a cab," I said calmly.

He did ease up, and he looked back at me. His eyes were moody and his skin brown. I took him for a Pakistani or something similar, but the Canadian version of it. That was confirmed when he spoke.

"You scared me. Man, I didn't see you. Sure didn't expect someone to jump in the back at this dead end."

"I didn't expect to be at this dead end or in this bad shape." I flashed a hundred-dollar bill. "Whereabouts are we?"

His eyes appeared in the mirror again. A knowing look. He took me for a stoner or a drunk. "Nearest major streets are Lakeshore Boulevard, Lake Promenade ... you're in the west end, buddy."

"That's what I thought. Take me to a hotel, something small and obscure. Somewhere no one would find."

"I can do that ... drive you from one dead-end to another."

Waves of paranoia hit me when the taxi hit Lakeshore. The driver had taken a scenic route down Lake Promenade and up and down some numbered side streets. I would have argued with him, but I didn't want to stand out in his memory. He checked to make sure I wasn't asleep, as I stayed low behind the seat. The small hotel he found was nearby. It was on the water, but it did not have beachfront. Just beyond it, a line of

yachts owned the shoreline. The Star Residency matched its name. Not really a hotel, so give it one star. Though new, it resembled a small condominium complex, with additional curves in the design. The large neon sign on the rooftop and the ostentatious strip sign above the entire first floor distinguished it. I counted seven stories, and only the center rooms had balconies. Other rooms had huge floor-to-ceiling windows that my paranoia did not adore. The place was three establishments, as the front strip had a pharmacy and a corner bar, both closed.

I passed the cabby the hundred, and he snapped it away and pocketed it about as fast as a magician would. After waving him away, I walked across the small front promenade to the hotel entrance. The lobby was Spartan and empty. A long concierge counter was off to the side. Two huge droplights shone like massive radiant diamonds, and I felt exposed as I walked quietly to the desk. The man behind the desk was asleep in a chair with a tablet in his lap. A sign said ring-for-service, so that's what I did. He woke and glanced over at me. His eyes said, "Go away and die somewhere else," yet his tight lips issued the words, "Can I help you, sir?"

I nodded. He got up and almost came to life. This was a man of my generation, not much responsibility, definitely resented doing his low-wage job, probably spent most of his lifetime playing video games and firing off resumes so he'd be in the pool for any easy union or government job that might open up. He had a long horse face and a twinge of Canadian French in his accent. He went through the motions of renting me a room and informing me that I'd have to order via fast-food places listed on the suite TV if I wanted anything. I mumbled okay, paid cash for one night, and topped it off with a large cash tip, courtesy of Mohammad. Perhaps a siren would not have alerted him completely, but the cash did. He was suddenly at my service.

"If anyone, no matter who it is, pops by looking for someone of my description, you get rid of them."

"No problem." He walked off and returned with a door card. "It's 555 to call the desk if you need anything."

I didn't call him or the desk, but clicked to order a pizza from the menu pages on the room television. Six cans of Heineken beer came with the pizza delivery. I ate and then spread myself out on the bed. The lights bothered me, so I turned them off. But rather than sleep, I tossed about, somewhat delirious. Outside, the night air had kept me sharp. The room seemed hot and sweaty. Television in the dark was another failed idea. I saw through the fakery of the contrived shows. There were educational channels, but a person marked for death doesn't care much for Edu vids and the bland style of them all.

The only peace came in silence and sitting in a lounge chair by the window. A breakwall and yachts in slips showed below. The wind had died, leaving the lake a smooth black mirror. The lights of a city of condo towers on the western curve of the lake reflected and shimmered in that mirror. Where TV failed, the show of lights in the water didn't disappoint. My mind entered a state where thoughts were incomprehensible, and images tumbled. My eyes swept the row of yachts below, and suddenly the sun beamed in, and I was on my friend John Dean's boat in those same waters. John blasted synthetic pop music, and like always, Josie drank more gin and

ginger ale than she could handle. She had a hand on the gunwale as she vomited into the water. A seagull swooped down and scooped up some of it as she wheeled away laughing. Then she started dancing on deck. Topless and wearing only tight white shorts, she drew the attention of some guys on the nearby beach. She was happy then, but she was on too many pills and only feeling the pain of them with the hangovers. And she felt the pain of the sunburn the next day, but she went out on the water again, long-sleeved with a sun umbrella, claiming the freckles on her nose had peeled off. The party was on the beach past St. Catharines, near Niagara, and even though she was dressed like a Muslim, she had too many guys coming on to her. I nearly got into about five fights. We were alike in bad behavior, but I remember telling John that my next girlfriend would be plain or I'd be dead. Time passed; there never was another serious relationship. Josie and I had goodbye sex every time we said hello.

The sheet of black water, the wavering moon, and the floating stars spilled into my empty mind. I entered a state of meditation at the edge of sleep. When light began to seep into the sky, I began to think. All I had to go on was Benny's story of Gentry and the Illuminati. The book suddenly came to mind. I had tossed it on the side table by the bed without even opening it. It occurred to me that the logs or records in it, by Nate the cop, might lead me to Josie, so I stepped over and picked it up. I leafed through it ... a hefty title with about 400 pages. I couldn't read a word of it, though I could study many of the illustrations. At first glance, I thought I was too stoned to read. The letters moved on the pages. When they settled, I realized that the language was foreign, something old like Latin with pictures of symbols and priests, demons, and monsters. It was a total disappointment. Nate, the cop, had been either a scholar or a warlock. Yet it tied into Benny's crazy story, and it was possible Nate had only been delivering the book somewhere. And that somewhere would likely be an address belonging to Jules Gentry and his Satanists. It was exactly the type of book they would treasure.

The book was the only immediate lead, so I needed an analysis of it. Maybe a code or something was hidden inside it. An old college friend came to mind. He ran a downtown bookstore with antiquarian and other old books, alongside a larger display of weird occult antiques. Wesley Crake referred to himself as a journalist, though he really did freelance stuff. He wanted to be known as a writer. Everybody called him by his last name, Crake. The name Crake was British. Despite that, the guys mocked it. In school, he'd been simply Crake, an oddball. Crake always had an unusual opinion or a weird answer to any question. Picturing Crake as a journalist at a media scrum or questioning a politician or celebrity would not be easy.

Cleaned up, and with the dead-end hotel eating at my nerves, I decided to exit with the book and pay a visit to Crake. A Crown taxi waited out front, so I grabbed it and headed into the city. Editions Seven Books and Antiques was on a side street off Queen Street in the downtown core. I got off at the corner and walked down. Crake would not be there at 7:30 am, but I remembered that his phone number on the storefront was also his personal phone number. I needed that number, as he did not have a listing online. According to Crake, web listings weren't antique and weren't appropriate for his type of store. Such a listing would only invite thieves and people who would only browse. Most of his customers were referred to him from elsewhere. He dealt with people who could pay a lot for unusual stuff.

Leaves from a nearby oak rained down on me in a gust of chilly wind. I stopped and looked at the gold lettering on the frosted glass, noticed that a light was on inside, and decided to go around back. Crake did most of his business out of the back door, and I knew he was into some shady stuff. Most of his shop was there, too. The front was just a display window and an entry door to the first book display. I stepped over a rumbled drunk sleeping on a grate in the side alley. The back was a wide alley with warped and cracked asphalt layered with litter, acorns, and leaves. There were already cooking odors from the Chinese restaurant next door. The windows of Crake's place were all high up, barred, and unwashed. The back entrance was a heavy service door with no window. No buzzer either. I knocked hard and waited, then knocked again. The door opened a crack, and I heard Crake saying, "Beat it, or I'll call the cops?"

"Hang on, it's Joe Holiday."

Crake opened the door and gaped at me. His eyes immediately fell to the book in my hand. Crake is kind of fish-faced, and it shows more in his blue-green eyes. "What the fuck. This early in the morning, you show up with a book. You're lucky I answered. There have been robberies around here."

"I didn't expect you to be in. I saw a light on."

"Of course I'm in. This is where I live and write now. I sold the condo. I'm in predator mode. Other than the occasional big sale, I race off about seventy articles a day. It pays the bills."

"I don't usually deal with predators, but I'm a paying customer. I want to pay for your opinion on a book and some other things."

"You going to pay with real money?"

"Of course." I put the book under my arm and pulled out my roll of bills. I peeled off five hundred-dollar bills and handed them to him."

Crake's bloodshot eyes popped; he ran his left hand through his whisker stubble as he took the bills. "Come in, come in ... it's always nice to see an old pal."

I banged the door, sealing out the wind and the blow of leaves. We passed through a storage area to his large back room. The first impression one gets is that the man is a tremendous hoarder rather than a collector. Closer inspection reveals valuable items buried like gems or framed by cheaper ones. He had rearranged the place since my last visit. The south wall was all masks, and so many of them were pinned up that they overlapped, forming layers in places. The layers were of voodoo, Halloween, native, and other strange masks. My personal knowledge of masks wasn't that great then, though I at least knew that I didn't favor gorilla masks. He'd crowded the north wall with dusty shelves full of occult tokens, tiny statues, and other pieces. A table of polished oak stood in the center of the room with six handcrafted ladder-backed wooden chairs around it. The table displayed a chessboard only. Off from it, Crake had a nook for his laptop and a large screen connected to it. Crake pulled two chairs aside, and we both sat at the table.

"So what exactly is the deal with that book?"

"Take a look at this first," I said, tossing him Benny's keyholder.

Crake turned it over in his hands. Though it looked simple to me, he spent a long time studying it. Crake was handsome in an unusual way. Longish, slightly curly, light-brown hair framed his face. His metal-rimmed glasses sat propped on a nose that leaned left over full lips and a well-defined jaw line. No matter the weather, he wore solid-colored long-sleeved shirts, usually with a designer label, and trousers of a similar kind. His shoes were always Nike. Like me, he never combed his hair; it sort of fell in place. I noticed that Crake's designer shirt of the day was similar to a classic Oxford shirt.

"This item is real gold, though framed, with the eye set into it in jade and other stones," Crake said. "It is a fine piece of work and probably worth at least two thousand bucks. I collect offbeat occult pieces like this one. It is an Illuminati symbol. You know. Like the pyramid and eye on the old USA dollar bill. Except this one is a modern design and more hidden. It doesn't shout Illuminati. Most people wouldn't even realize what it is."

"Illuminati. That's where my problem comes in. The Illuminati tried to kill me; they kidnapped Josie."

Crake chuckled. "I doubt that. If they had you targeted, you would be dead."

"How so?"

"Well, in theory, it is a worldwide occult group of the richest and most powerful people. They would certainly be able to kill you. But saying the Illuminati is trying to do it is like saying the US Postal Service is trying to kill you. I mean, you are talking about too many people. You would have to narrow it down and say that maybe some faction of that group is out to ice you. This trinket is unique. If it weren't for it, I'd think you were smoking something."

"You like the keyholder, keep it as part of your payment."

"I'm not sure exactly what I'm paying you for. I can examine that book of yours."

I handed him the book. Crake gave the binding a long fish-eyed examination, front and back. He pulled a loop out of his shirt pocket and examined it more. It was an eternity before he even opened it to the inside cover.

"How long is this going to take, Crake?"

"A long time. I need a couple of hours just to do a preliminary examination."

"Okay, tell you what. I had an exciting night. I'll go down the street and eat breakfast. Give you some private time with the book."

"Do that. We'll talk about it when you get back."

Crake's side street and two others dead-ended at Trinity Gardens, a tiny circular park, walled on the far side by gargantuan condominium complexes. I shuffled into it with my hands in my pockets. As soon as the stores opened, I planned to buy new clothes, though the cleaning company shirt I was wearing was a good cover. I had the jacket open; anyone who saw me would think I was a cleaner leaving or going to work.

Patches of grass shifted as if they were alive and springing away from my feet. I felt dizzy, and my stomach churned with stale pizza and beer. The idea of eating breakfast faded away. I sat on a bench and watched pigeons doing a bobble-head walk about

me. Obscured from traffic, I felt secure. Only folks walking into work early were passing through the park. Over on the next street, a Marionite Church touched the park. As I was more in a visions-from-hell state, it only served to alienate me. I immediately became alert when a priest exited the rear doors and cut over the grass. I didn't feel like being spotted by any priests, so I stood up and strolled over behind a maple tree. The man didn't notice me, but I got a close look at him when he passed. I felt my scalp tighten. This was the priest from the warehouse. There seemed to be no doubt about it or the certainty that no amount of holy water could cleanse such an ungodly associate of Mr. Gentry.

It was incredible luck, like maybe God was revealing him to me to punish him. My feet started moving to follow him, but I willed them to stop. My mind swam in confusion, but the gut feeling remained that trying to follow him now would be a bad idea. Perhaps I could somehow catch him inside the church later. It would likely be mostly empty then, too.

No healing had come from the priest either; he'd cursed the park with his presence, and I could not relax. I felt watched, there were eyes everywhere, so I got up and left, stopping in the China Kitchen next to Crake's store. The restaurant was comfortably small and dim, with two-person tables off to the side where a man could eat alone. Nibbling on a basket of dumplings and sipping tea, I passed some time. Most of their business was takeout, even in the morning, so I didn't feel exposed. Two of the takeout customers were cops, but I had no reason to think they would have my description to look for me. At least not honest cops. The meal definitely helped, and I felt well enough to read a newspaper, though it irritated me when the blocks of type kept moving around. It took concentration to focus on the text. I kept tapping my finger down to hold sections in place. I irritated the man just over from me, who thought I was killing bugs.

Two hours later, I was back at Crake's rear door. He answered right away and was definitely looking at me from a different perspective.

Inside, I took the same chair. "Stop staring at me like I just came from Mars. Because I didn't. I came from the China Kitchen next door."

"So where did you get this book?"

"Why is that important?"

"It might be."

"Okay, I stole it from a crooked cop named Nate. He's sort of dead and not around anymore. Don't worry, I didn't kill him."

"That crooked cop probably stole it, too. You were right about the Illuminati. It connects to them or some of them." Crake displayed the book and leafed through various illustrations, pointing them out to me. "This drawing is of the 666 hand signal. Next up is the pentacle, then fire, and the eternal flame. Three pages have the Baphomet. It is a core Illuminati symbol. The Baphomet is any version of the horned, Satan-winged man-goat making the as-above-so-below sign. Taken from the Emerald Tablet, as-above-so-below is an invocation of alchemy. Nowadays, it is often a vain symbol. It promises that the initiated will gain the unity of the higher and lower realms to use as power in this world. The Baphomet nearly always has a pentacle on its forehead and snakes

entwined on its lap. Other pages have the owl idol. There are real-life examples of it at places like Bohemian Grove. This page has the Phoenix or double-headed eagle. Three pages have the skull-and-bones and inverted cross. The book details all the hand signs. That is the triple six. Also, the hand pyramid, El Diablo. This occult script has been embedded around the hidden eye or eye of Lucifer. The V sign is of Pan, the horned god. Newer images at the end of the book are the umbrella, a symbol of assassins, and the butterfly of Monarch mind control. All through the book, the pages have a checkered border or the representation of black and white ... like the black-and-white floors they have in all Masonic lodges.”

“You know, it’s nice that it has all that stuff in it, but it’s all Greek to me. I’m trying to use it to track some people, not learn how to make symbolic hand signs.”

“This book is worth a fortune, and it is written in Latin, not Greek. You probably won’t have to track anyone; they will be tracking you.”

“Hey, that’s good news. I trade them the book. They return Josie.”

“It’s not exactly great. There is a ceremony detailed at the end in illustrations and language. I haven’t seen it depicted before, but it appears to be an ancient alchemy-numerology thing that, when performed, brings demons through a portal to possess a man. It and other Satanist stuff in the book are keys to the book’s value. It means you have somehow attracted the attention of some of the world’s most evil people. Please tell me you were not followed here.”

“Nobody followed me, and your analysis isn’t sound. The vilest people in the world wouldn’t come around to shoot me, and then by mistake kill someone else and kidnap Josie.”

“Shit, you mean people are dead already?”

“Yeah, they’re sort of dead. That’s another reason why I need your help.”

“Let me explain something. Rich and powerful people around the world, who may be Illuminati, don’t ice small fry like you or your friend. They would simply buy you off if need be. You must be cursed. You have somehow attracted members of the occult underground of the Illuminati ... and that is very bad. Listen, I’m going to photograph some pages of this book, stash it here, and go see a couple of people. By this afternoon, I should have a better idea of what it means.”

“I can wait here for a few hours. I’m staying off the streets for the moment.”

“Okay, do that. Get some rest, your eyes are wild.”

Sitting back, relaxing, I watched Crake snap photos of the book’s pages and split into about four people as he raced around in the dim light, pocketing this and that, then putting it back ... then scribbling something on a sheet of manila paper, balling it up, and tossing it. He stopped once to grin at me, and I experienced that strange effect of the drug again. Every detail of his face became a vivid imprint on my mind, and when my perception of it was at its peak, it shifted into hallucinations. The wall of masks framed him, and his face became that of another strange animal, then the masks spun in a mad carousel, and I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths.

The spinning masks, images of tiny Buddhas, devils, and every other weird item raced in my mind with the Illuminati images from the book. Crake's voice echoed, saying, "cursed, cursed." When I opened my eyes, he was going out the door wearing a black faux leather coat down to his shins, with the collar up like he was the Grim Reaper.

He slammed the door, and it shook the images from my mind like leaves from an autumn tree. I got up and looked at myself in an antique mirror. I didn't look as bad as Crake said, but the cleaner's shirt definitely had to go. Studying it in the mirror made me aware of its horrid, musty odor. Crake had some shirts heaped on a chair that looked clean, so I put on a blue one. I didn't care much for Crake's intense button-down style, but at least it didn't smell like a mop bucket. I tried on a baseball cap that had the word BLING on the front, then tossed it aside. One of Crake's fall medium-length jackets went well with the shirt, so I kept it on. Feeling a whole lot better, I began to fidget. His cluttered joint would start eating at me again if I stayed. Going out for a walk seemed like a better idea. I had some time to kill.

The brilliant fall sun nailed me like a burning cross to a vampire, and I quickly ducked back into the cool shade. Silver tinsel floated in my blinded eyes, then faded. Wind gusted, and a dust devil of leaves cavorted down the alley. Moments later, a blow of slate clouds filtered the sun. It only took me a moment to find Crake's secret key stuck in a crack in the brickwork, so knowing that getting back in wouldn't be difficult, I left the alley. I headed for the parkette again, and an irritating thought about how bums always find a park passed in my head. I needed a dose of self-respect, but just couldn't find the medicine. Even the distant church had failed me. The lowest tramp could find a meal and comfort there, and not the sins of the fathers that I had discovered.

For Freudian reasons, I was drawn to the church, and carelessly so. The church was older and majestic, with two towers centered on a connected main building, all of it built of huge stones of a light brown shade. A withered old man ate his lunch on one of the two benches at the back. I took the other bench, pulled up my collar, and sat there in the gusts, wondering if there was a way I could talk to that priest. I stood up and paced back and forth, thinking that he might have returned.

I could walk into the main chapel like anyone else, so I went over and down a path of hard earth beaten into the grass at the side. I went in through a side door, nearly buried by evergreens. The door had a big brass handle and plate, but it wasn't locked. Scones done in stained glass lit the entryway, and I emerged from an arch into the main area, which was a blaze of gold light. Sudden guilt and vertigo hit me, and I sat down in a pew, feeling small inside the huge structure. One other man was sitting in the pews. Inner turmoil began to rise, and the church seemed like a bad idea. Rising, I cut across the pews and found another exit. At the turnoff to go back to the park, I hesitated as a priest stood there with his back to me. He was looking out at the park. Blue smoke from his cigarette curled in a sunbeam at the exit. An antique confessional sat under a vaulted ceiling off to the right, so I went over and inside, closing the door.

"Fuck, fuck," I muttered, knowing that I shouldn't have left Crake's hidden alcove. For some reason, priests and churches were giving rise to paranoia. Hiding in a confessional wasn't a cure for it. The confessional was not my gig, or anyone's, in my opinion. More like a devil's trick, so the whole of society would be at the mercy of

priests who knew of every dirty deed. The apostles never sweated it out in any dirty confessional. That thought, and others, told me time moved slowly on the drug. There was too much ugly stuff coming to mind in the time a man spent having a smoke. The booth quickly became a prison cell.

My calculated wait was about over, and I prepared to move. I was about to rise when another door shut and someone sat down. I knew it had to be a priest. The confessional was classic, no kneeling screen, but the full outfitted box. Only a shadow showed through the thick confessional latticework, but I somehow got the impression that the priest was elderly. He seemed to be all darkness, like something evil. I said nothing, was about to leave when he said, "You must be in trouble, son."

He probably said that to everybody, but it still suckered me into replying. "What makes you say that?"

"The time of day. I saw you come over from the park. You aren't someone I've seen here before. I have the feeling that you haven't spoken to God lately."

"That is correct, and I think I will be moving on."

"Without asking for forgiveness of your sins? You need to make a proper confession, a full confession admitting to every sin you have committed."

"Tormenting another person with that would be sin in its own right."

I heard a chuckle. Maybe the old man was okay. I began to rise to leave, then noticed I was stepping on my untied shoelace. As I bent down to fasten it, I heard a zip noise and felt part of the latticework shatter above my shoulders. My motion to bend over suddenly became a forward roll out the door. The urge to run was overruled by a flash vision of a shot in the back, and I turned and rose against the other opening door, slamming it hard into the priest as he burst out. He fell on top of me and dropped the gun. We were both down on hard stones and madly scrambling for the weapon. I won the race, lifted it smoothly, and swung around on him. The priest stopped dead, and we both slowly got fully on our feet. We both glanced around and saw nobody else. It wasn't an old man either, but the same priest from the warehouse – neat dark hair, classic Italian good looks, maybe thirty-three years of age. He must've spotted me coming in from the park and used the church cameras to follow me.

"Start walking toward the park," I said, wagging the gun. "I'll be three steps behind you. Any fast moves and you'll be as zip dead as I was supposed to be."

His lips drew tight to a thin, pale line. He thought of attempting to disarm me, but didn't go for it. Turning, he stamped his right foot down angrily and started walking. One glance at the gun, then I hid it under my jacket. I wondered why a priest would carry a Remington model with a custom silencer attached. The weapon would suit an up-close hit man, but a real hit man wouldn't shoot someone on home turf where the body would stick out like, well, a stinking dead body. He did know the church, so maybe he knew a way to drag a body quickly out of sight.

A couple of office suits were passing through the park. I directed him to two benches partially screened by a willow and a scruff of trimmed bushes. We both faced the church, but on different benches. He cut a fine profile; clean-shaven with the forehead,

nose, lips, and jawline neatly sketched. He glanced at me with suspicious blue eyes, like he saw the killer in me that others wouldn't see.

I opened the conversation. "You were at the warehouse. Why?"

"What do you mean by why? Drugs, the same reason you were there."

"Really. What did they tell you about me?"

"That you are a rip-off artist. Stole shipments, tried to cut in on their territory. You were getting what you earned."

"Some of them got what they earned, including the warehouse, which isn't there anymore. It burned. I'm also not partial to priests who try to murder me in the confessional."

"You torched the warehouse?"

"Look, you want a full confession. I killed Mohammad. Benny and that cop, Nate, are also fried. But I didn't torch anything. Your friend Mr. Gentry did it, and I plan on finding him."

"Look. I have no idea who you are. Just what they told me. My connection was through Nate and Benny. I didn't want anything to do with them, either. They gave me no choice. Nate set me up a while back, forced me to work with them."

"Ah, I get the picture now. I used to be a cop, by the way. Good old Nate nailed you with the altar boys, eh. After that, you worked for him. Drugs ... so let me guess. They use your church as a distribution point. You hand off to the local street pushers for them."

"I wasn't with the altar boys; that cop planted the porn on my computer. They wanted me to work for them. I had no way to escape them. I never expected to see you. I had to deliver cash and pick something up. I talked to Jules Gentry once, and I don't want to meet him again. I don't know what he does, just that he's beyond creepy. He stopped here with Mohammad once. There were two other men with him, big men dressed in black and dark glasses. One of them had a crooked scar on his face. When he took off his glasses, his eyes were evil, as if he were possessed by a demon. They were the most dangerous people I've ever seen. No one hunts them; people run from them. You must be crazy."

"Crazy, and a little on the high side. Thanks to your associates. Speaking of dangerous, how about you with this fancy gun, trying to hit me in a church in broad daylight?"

"The warehouse fire hit the news, so I knew people died, but not what went down. Then you appeared, loitering in the park this morning, like someone tracking me. I thought you were here to finish me. They gave me that gun weeks ago. If anyone tries to rob the stash at the church, I'm supposed to shoot them."

"Jules Gentry ... so you know the man. Did you hear him say anything about a woman named Josie?"

"No."

“What do you know about the Illuminati and the Dark Circle?”

“They didn’t use those names, but the people connected with Gentry are Satanists. I know because they wore gold necklaces with that evil goat’s head on them.”

“You mean the Baphomet ... that’s the evil devil goat the Illuminati folks worship. Satanists also have a liking for Baphomet. Listen, I’m not going to shoot you, but I’ll be back. If any of them show and you say you’ve seen me or talked to me, they’ll kill you. Get it? Keep your ears open for any information on a woman named Josie.”

He got that and his gun, which I tossed to him minus the cartridge. I noted that the sun had broken through the clouds, sending beams of divine light onto the church, as if his absence had returned temporary holiness to that sanctuary. Heading north, I walked around the block. I didn’t want the priest to trace me to Crake’s place. I would visit this priest again because, no doubt, the gang would send some new faces to work with him now that Mohammad was gone. If so, he might pick up some information on Josie. I realized that I didn’t have much hope, and the clouds above congealed around the sun to add to that gloom. Cops know that when someone goes missing, the trail can go cold if a tangible lead isn’t found in 24 hours. Josie seemed gone like my mind. I had to remind myself that her case was not something from the police manual. Not from it at all ... terrorists, Satanists, drug-dealing priests, hit men ... all of them part of the show right from the get-go. Standing in the alley in the drift of leaves and trash, my mind went back to Raj. They were supposed to grab him, not ice him; maybe I could turn over his apartment and find clues about the backstory of this whole deal.

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Part Two: The Undertakers

the photos in your book, they believe I can get inside. I plan on inserting some photos of pages of that book into mine.”

“You mean you are using Josie’s disappearance to make money?”

Crake sipped his tea, then held up his left hand defensively. “We can’t do anything without money. You can’t go to the police or any other organization. That means we have to investigate, and costs have to be covered. Getting Josie back from a group like that won’t be easy. She may already be under mind control.”

“It sounds like you are under mind control. I don’t want my name in any shocker you write.”

“Names would be changed to protect the innocent, or in your case, the not-so-innocent. And to protect me from lawsuits. Before any book, we have to follow this thing through, which is what you want, right?”

“I do. But this group may not be the Illuminati. The Illuminati are a bunch of globalist bankers or suits that control the world’s finances in secret. Then some celebrities get painted up as something cool by using their symbols. I’m digging into a creepy group of occult lunatics somehow tied to them. They aren’t suits, and they aren’t pretty. They’re more like Satanists.”

"It's the same international gang. No one wants a book about Illuminati bankers. Readers are excited by the evil occult, the Satanists, their rituals, and other unsavory details. The wealthy and famous attend a couple of occult ceremonies a year, if any. They meet and greet at elite gatherings, often with an occult ceremony on one of the nights. It is that aspect or dirty underside that has always been hidden. If they kidnapped Josie, it isn't because they want her to be some banker's secretary. It is something nefarious, something evil."

"Maybe you should give me a full rundown on what exactly the Illuminati are ... I mean, what am I up against other than a bunch of bankers making secret Satanist hand signs? I have some info from you, and some info I forced out of a guy, but not enough." I didn't use the spare key but hung out, checking if anyone was watching the place. After about five minutes at Crake's back door, he appeared in the alley. He looked hurried, walking fast, his long coat catching the wind. Back inside his place, he boiled water and made green tea. My preference was a cold bottle of beer from his fridge. Crake pulled open a bookcase like a door, and a closet of guns stood behind it, and most of them were antiques, though some were new. The book, he stuffed in a small drawer there, and then he swung it shut.

"Guns ... you're selling guns. Open it back up. I need a shoulder holster for one of mine."

"Relax," Crake said. He pulled the closet open, took an antique gun from a shoulder holster, and tossed me the holster. "I only sell to collectors or security people who need something here in gun-control city. I have to survive. Books and other antiques only bring in so much. However, thanks to you, money isn't an immediate problem. I've received an advance."

"What in the fuck are you talking about?" I said as I fitted the holster and put the Colt in it.

"Atlantis Age Books is what I'm talking about. A while ago, I skimmed the internet and compiled a couple of books on the Illuminati. They want another book on the Illuminati. A deep cover thing. Their dirty secrets. I sold them one. Based on

"Okay. Think about it. A hidden worldwide organization mainly concerned with money, power, and control is a very busy organization. Nearly all of its members are nothing but busy. The top people are businesspeople, celebrities. You name it. They wouldn't know about you or think about you. Unfortunately, you appear to be dealing with the occult wing. They've been underground, controlling people for centuries, even longer ... killing people, using drugs, and all sorts of witchery and weirdness. The book you found shows that you've tapped into the occult core. I need to investigate and find out what they are up to and reveal it to the world."

Crake's eyes lit up, and I feared that shine could be the beginning of lunacy. "Look. I'm looking for Josie. I'm not here to reveal warlocks and devil worshipers to the world. You know I used to be a cop. We have to focus on any investigation. Hope to get tangible results. I still need to know about this group, though. Give me the basics on their history."

“Basics. Okay.” Crake waved his hand like a magician with a wand. “The Illuminati underground is thousands of years old. Many people in history have been Illuminati agents. Some fanatics claim that written history is an outside view of the schemes and struggles of the Illuminati. It began in ancient Egypt with the pursuit of immortality and the spirit world. This was through alchemy, mummies, pyramids, and tombs. They attempted to enter the spirit realm and hoped to return from it. The Illuminati remained hidden, making brief appearances in history through the Druids, Knights Templars, and their offshoot, the Freemasons or Masonic Order. Popular books have the Illuminati Order being founded in 1776 by an occultist named Adam Weishaupt. But it existed long before his time. Somewhere along the line, maybe right from the beginning, the higher Illuminati order entered into pure Satanism, unifying the disparate occult flavors into the children of the fire. The Hidden Hand is an inner group belonging to one of the thirteen bloodlines that have ruled the world since the dawn of time. The bloodline Houses have areas of specialty like military, government, spiritual, scholarship, leadership, and sciences. Today, it all mingles inside the deepest occult group of them. They blend all things in their attempts to seize the divine. They experiment with things as diverse as artificial intelligence, medically enhanced minds and bodies, alchemy, genetics, cyborg attachments, and anti-aging technologies. The key is the power of Satan behind the Illuminati. They devote themselves through rituals and gain worldly power.”

“So Satan puts the hot air in their balloon, eh. No wonder they keep it secret. Most people don’t believe Satan exists, and even those who do think worshiping him is nutso.”

“They are breastfed on it. Satan is their God. In movies, books, and religion, they usually portray a battle between Satan and God. They always paint the hopelessly corrupt Catholic Church as representing the divine. The Illuminati believe there is no God other than Satan. They have always believed that. Blood sacrifices, symbols, music, drugs, and special meditation permit a higher level of demonic attachment and consequently, more spiritual powers to the follower.”

“Okay. That book is most certainly something they want, so we hold it. A warehouse burned this morning. I want you to see what you can find on it, and a man named Jules Gentry. Josie worked for a company named Genistorm. See if anything amiss comes up on it. Find out what they do there. I’m going out to do a check on an apartment. We’ll lay out the next move when I get back.”

“Sounds fine to me. I have some people who are picking up big Halloween orders. I can deal with them, then do the research.”

Clouds like slate saucers hurried across the sky, creating a brisk gray day full of sudden bursts of sunlight. It was a touch cooler, but again heating up to another unusually warm October day. The El Niño effect would usher in a warm winter for once. Armed with one of Crake’s extra cell phones, I had ordered an Uber car for a drive to Cherry Beach. The driver was pale-faced, thin as a stick, and he knew that I would be doing some backseat driving. I told him to cruise in and go down the road, passing the beach, then sailing clubs, to the entrance to the Spit. From there, we would go back out into the city.

It definitely looked more autumn than summer now. The drive wouldn't take me past the spot of the attack, as it was to the west with no road leading up to it, but I would pass my car as I had left it parked in a dirt lot with a grassy area and picnic tables behind it. Poplar trees and the beach were in front of it. The car was a Pontiac GTO Concept, a sporty, powerful vehicle built from an older model. As we eased in, I saw my car. I knew the city would take a good long while before noticing my vehicle derelict at the beach in the fall. It had no ticket on the windshield. So far, so good. I scanned the beachfront closely and saw two joggers spilling sweat as they ran at the water's edge. They passed a man strolling with his pug dog. One Nissan was kicking up dust as it pulled out of the gravel lot. A 300 lb woman wearing stretch pants waddled near a picnic table.

I was about to tell my driver to slow down and let me off at my Pontiac when I saw a man near another picnic table. A thick tree trunk hid him so that a person approaching the car from the entry road wouldn't see him. The person he was hiding from would be me, so I soaked up as much of him as I could in a passing glance. The impression was of a big man, straw-colored hair cut nearly to a brush. His skin was deeply tanned and weathered, and his clothing was all black, including his cap, which he didn't have on but held in his hands. He wore black leather driving gloves, but I saw no car. The Uber driver's Lexus had tinted windows, but the man still stepped out and studied the car as we passed. This person exuded power and danger; his eyes were deep-set and shadowed, and they crawled over the car the way a really good cop's eyes would, gathering all the details and the plate number. His long black coat could be called understated compared to the one Crake had been wearing earlier, but it also had a high collar. And it went well with his casual black shirt, pants, and shoes.

No one who was striking would just happen to be hanging out there near my car. The loose fit of his pants and the tough style of everything he wore gave him away. He would surely have a concealed weapon. He was outfitted to run and fight, but he wouldn't be seeing any action unless he planned on breaking out into a run after the Lexus. The man probably had a car hidden nearby, so I told my driver the cruise was over; I wanted to be at the next address in record time. That address was downtown east, or Raj's apartment, but I gave the driver an address on the parallel street. I wanted to check out Raj's place, and the fact that he had lived alone made it easier. Also in my favor was the fact that his place was a loft, not one of those modern converted lofts, but the upper floor of what had once been a small carpet warehouse. Raj had lived there a short while with the floor below him under constant renovation.

I knew of a tiny park just off the alley that ran behind the place. From it, a short walk down would take me to Raj's place. Since my car hadn't been kosher, there was the possibility that Raj's loft might also be under surveillance. The Uber man pulled over at the required address, and I paid him and warned him not to tell anyone he'd driven a customer of my description. I knew he'd probably have problems soon, as the big dude at the beach had taken note of his plate. Perhaps the poor saps at the address we'd arrived at would get a knock on the door, because the Uber man drove off as I walked up the driveway. He didn't see me go around the shed and over the backyard.

I had to vault a mesh fence into the park. Raj's building came into immediate view on the other side of the park and down. There were no cars parked in the back lot, and no one was hanging around in the park. I walked straight over the brown grass and then

stood in brittle leaves, looking up at the four rectangular rear windows of Raj's loft. Those windows had wooden pull blinds, and they were shut, leaving me a view of nothing but brickwork and sills. I knew something was amiss and that someone might be inside.

The park opened on the back alley on Raj's side. There was no fence. I kept my eyes on the windows as I walked to the building. Slowing to a stroll, I went into the alley space between two buildings and peeked. The front was mostly a parking lot, and two men were walking out from the building to a black Lincoln. With gray clouds now dominating the day, it was like I was beginning to see in grayscale. These men were big and dressed in black. I ducked back so they wouldn't see me when they turned to get in the car. They both wore thigh-length black jackets and loose black pants that I could tell were belted tight at the waist, and they both wore sunglasses, though the sun was buried in gloom. Their footwear consisted of waffle-soled boots, rugged but passable as dressy. I'm big, but they were both bigger and carried no fat. They were the sort of strutting steroid he-men that could land roles in an action movie or do security at a violent nightclub. Both had short locks neatly combed back. One had auburn hair, while the other man's hair was the color of steel. With everything else black and white, their hair created a surreal aspect. It glowed.

They would send out alarm signals to just about anyone, yet most people wouldn't know why that was. There was no cop feel about them, and they certainly didn't look like common criminals. The black Lincoln drove off quietly and turned left on the street, going away from me. That brought relief, but I made sure they didn't return before I stepped out. There was an entry to Raj's place from a fire escape on the other side. I walked out onto the lot, checking the building front. There was no landscaping where anyone could be hidden, just some sickly shrubs and a strip of dead lawn. The portion of the building below Raj's place was now empty. An Excel Personnel sign was still up, but the curtains and the furniture were gone. The two front windows above showed closed blinds.

I strode over to the fire escape but went up it silently. Raj, being sloppy with keys, sometimes left that side door unlocked. If that were the case, it would save me from breaking the front door. At the top, I looked back at the lot and road. A flash of sunlight from the clouds swept me and became a fiery balloon racing in my mind. I blinked, shook my head, knowing that tumbling from a fire escape wasn't in the plan.

I didn't enjoy the bad omen. I turned the tarnished knob and gently pulled on the door. It opened and didn't groan or squeak. Even with the blinds closed and lights off, enough light filtered through to illuminate the loft. I was at the far end. My eyes swept the place, and I immediately noticed the disarray. This was a big loft with a high ceiling of clean crossbeams supporting wood slats. A big square rug with an understated pattern defined the living area. Black-and-chrome tube chairs and a black piano were on the park side, as were most of the windows. A leather couch and a coffee table filled the space across from the tube chairs. Off from that portion, on a polished hardwood floor, he had a rectangular dining table with six chairs. A white pseudo-wall with a huge rectangular entry led into his tiny library at the far end. The place had been turned over carefully. Paintings and art had been taken off the walls. Books had been taken down in

the library nook and heaped on the floor. A huge pile of his personal belongings rested on the floor outside his bedroom door.

Raj's place had a small bedroom and kitchen, and the entrances were closer to the far end. I couldn't see into those areas, so I began to move cautiously across the room. There were faint odors of marijuana and cigarettes, and something else – aftershave. Raj didn't wear perfume, so I assumed it was the lovely fragrance of the strange men who'd just left. As usual, I was not correct.

What I should've expected but didn't was that another man in black would be inside. After all, they were appearing everywhere else, like the daily special. The one that had been hiding in Raj's open kitchen appeared as a sudden but giant shadow lunging under the lintel into the dim room. For some reason, my mind painted the head area with Mohammad's gorilla mask. His arm was out, and he was swinging something. When I worked as a cop, I would've had my gun out when entering such a place. As a civilian, I behaved too much like one, always wanting to keep the weapon out of sight.

I didn't even go for my gun; instead, I instinctively grabbed one of the tube chairs and swung it at him. The chair was lightweight. Both our swings met, and there was a clang as I hit the item he was swinging, which turned out to be a machete. It chopped right into the tube-metal of the chair, stuck there. The machete and the chair flew aside. We grappled. His momentum dominated, and I went down, flattening the coffee table, but managing to toss him aside as I did. He went down face-first, and that allowed me to rise faster and to smack him with a hard downward right as he rose. That nearly broke my hand, but it put him back on his knees. He managed to scramble away from me, then he rose. Instead of launching another aggressive attack, he pulled the cord of one of the blinds.

I had the Colt drawn, but the sudden bright light of the sky partially blinded me. The man didn't move, so I didn't shoot. A second passed as my eyes made a quick adjustment, but stayed in black-and-white mode for him. Meaning his clothing was black and his skin pale. His shave was rough, and as I moved my lips to say freeze, I noticed his eyes, and the word didn't come out of my mouth. The eyes were his distinguishing feature. The right eye was larger and bluer. I thought it might be a glass eye, then changed my mind. His other eye was a shrunken slit eye, also blue, with a tiny bead for a pupil.

He suddenly smiled, and his slimy smile was lopsided toward his smaller eye. I realized that I wasn't issuing orders or controlling him with the gun. I couldn't do it. I tried to speak again and choked. My throat had gone dry. A wave of the gun to put him in a chair also didn't happen. The temporary freeze-up I was experiencing wasn't there for him as he rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles. He continued to smile as he opened his hands in a classic strangler's pose. He spoke, saying, "Don't be surprised like everyone else. It'll make it easier. You'll feel warm and cozy. You'll tell me where the book is, and then I'll snuff the life from you. Think of it as a favor. I'm saving you from the others."

My thoughts moved like an ice jam, and though the impossible was happening, I was not able to grasp that some form of hypnotic power from the goon's eyes had brought it on. The man was treating me like easy prey or child's play ... maybe like an animal paralyzed by a sting that would be dimly aware while being killed. My life was about to

be over once again, then a flock of pigeons wheeled out of the sky from the park and sailed in an arc near the window. His eyes flicked to them as they fluttered upward, and so did mine. For an instant, the spell was broken, and I fired ... a hit that tore into his shoulder and slammed him over and down. I'd fired from so close I staggered back. When he didn't get back up, I took a cautious look at him. The man wasn't dead but unconscious. His salami breath revealed the life force remaining in him.

"Shit," I muttered, because I wanted to question him but felt that Raj's place was too hot now. The other men might return and surprise me.

I rifled his pockets. He had an Illuminati-eye key set and weird sunglasses that I tossed aside in disgust. I found a dog-eared photograph in his shirt pocket. I studied it in the light from the window. Raj was in the photograph. Details were a bright summer day, a dock with yachts, and a lake in the background. The photo had likely been taken in Toronto. Raj had his arm buddy-style around a big Caucasian man wearing a polo shirt. I didn't recognize him. His aura was one of wealth. I did recognize the man in black standing off to his right. His identity was unmistakable because he wore the same unique dark glasses that I'd just tossed aside. The glasses were high-quality and had a designer look, but not Ray-Ban Aviator or one of their other styles, as there was no logo. These dudes in black all wore well-designed clothing with no designer label. What Raj would be doing with one of them led to wonder. They obviously didn't want any trace of the relationship to exist because they'd rifled his place for the photograph and other reasons. I figured the other two had taken care of most of the job, and then this last man somehow fished out the photo. Most people don't keep photo prints anymore, just digital storage, unless it is something they want to use as a framed photo or art. I noticed that all of Raj's electronic devices were gone, so they had any digital files they wanted and probably the passwords to pull down anything he had put online. It occurred to me that a print might be specifically kept to blackmail someone ... a copy to show at a clandestine meeting or send by mail.

My thinking on it didn't stretch much farther. The goon on the floor was beginning to stir, and the black Lincoln and a moving truck appeared on the roadway. Both vehicles turned into the lot. They pulled to the south end, and as I ducked away from the window, I calculated that I had just enough time to get away via the fire escape. Since the other option was a shootout, I moved fast. It was not a winding fire escape but angled straight down toward the rear of the building. Using my arms and keeping my feet up, I slid down the railing, landed softly in the gravel, and ran to the park. I reached a screen of trees and bushes just as the moving truck came around back. The other car remained at the front.

It was a risk, but I had cover and decided to wait a moment to see what was happening. Glancing right, I spotted a bench and a man sitting on it. I had to make sure he wasn't a spotter for them, so I walked over and nodded as I sat beside him on the bench. He wore dark clothes, but close-up, it was obvious that he wasn't with them; he was more like a junkie. He'd even carelessly ditched his needle beside him in the grass. There were too many street sources of opiates, so I was used to encountering people like him.

"I'm not a cop," I said.

All he did was nod, his lids having a turtle's droop. My eyes went back to the lot. I could see part of it through the bushes. Two mover men in buff overalls emerged from the Cargo Cabbie moving truck, and one of the men in black emerged at the side. He didn't look anxious, so they probably hadn't gone up and found their buddy yet.

The junkie noticed him right away. "Some bad action happening over there."

"What do you suppose they're up to?"

"Moving something for one thing. Say, you look whacked. I'm always in need, pal ... of anything to keep me moving."

"What I'm on, you never come down from."

"Wow, you selling any of that stuff?"

"No, and trust me, you wouldn't want it. Have you seen any of those guys in black before? I mean like that one over there?"

"They appear, somebody dies. I've seen Cargo Cabbie trucks before, too. They do runs to a shady storage depot in the Junction. Jiffy Jules Storage, it's called. A bunch of us used to squat in the ravine behind it. Once Cargo Cabbie and those men appeared, we were chased out. Street people know about them – call them the undertakers, and run fast when they see them."

"So they are a gang."

"Something like that. Weirdos that are scarier than bikers and street gangs. It's like they're no-name so we gave them a name. Gangs always have colors, flashy tattoos, and a name they are pushing. But those people are from the darkness. That's why we call them the undertakers. And those guys don't do street-style business. They are at a higher level, and people who mess with them suddenly disappear."

I nodded, watching as the movers and the men in black opened up a back service door. As they entered, I got up. "It's time to leave, and if you're smart, you'll leave, too. They aren't going to be happy about what they find in there."

The junkie suddenly came to life. "Shit, man, you're messing with them." He got up and walked away fast, pulling his hood up. By the time I rose from the bench, he was already going over the fence.

I pushed through a hedge at the far end of the park, cut straight across the road, and through a couple of other properties to the parking lot at Finest Fried Chicken. The greasy odors of chicken and fries haloed me as I waved in a Beck taxi. On the easy ride back to Crake's place, I smiled at the thought of the undertakers futilely searching for me. Having been a cop, I knew how frustrating trying to nab a criminal could be when it was one with experience. It was nice for things to be the other way around for once. My thoughts drifted again to the idea of bringing in the police. Possibilities of their help drifted into the gutter as fast as the blowing fall leaves did. I knew how my story would wash at any police station. A report of Raj being hit and my girlfriend vanishing would put glaring lamps immediately on me as the star suspect. Without anything hard, they would release me and follow every move I made. A mention of the warehouse would

mean no release. In jail, cops or convicts under Illuminati control would likely get to me. I'd be another statistic gleaned from a toe tag in the morgue.

I didn't get off at Crake's place, but nearby, so I could walk over and be sure I wasn't followed. A strange effect came in, always looking over my shoulder like a paranoid schizophrenic. The drug delivered a shaky feeling like I might be nuts and about to lose control. Crake's place remained a safe house. I sure as hell couldn't go home or drop by Josie's place. Her condo wasn't my style anyway. We had lived together in a rented house before the split and planned to move back together. Our history would be best described as hot periods of passionate lovemaking punctuated by furious quarrels. A door wreath replaced the mistletoe one year when she grabbed it and started smacking me with it. I have a way with words and manners, and it led to me being dumped by Josie in the most embarrassing public places when her temper finally snapped. A Blue Jays game could lead to a victory for hecklers, heckling me for wearing the king cup of beer and the hotdog Josie hit me with before walking off. Or even at a cremation service for my friend Andy, where my wit earned me the job of pallbearer, walking off under a sky made gray by the scattered ashes of our failed relationship. There were the steamy days of wine and roses, a six-month period where neither of us worked but drowned in alcohol, lovemaking, and lazy delusions. I remember putting out boxes of bottles for pickup every day, going out the back door and past the rose bushes to the street. One day it ended, I can't remember why. I don't drink so much anymore. Maybe you can't buy love in a bottle anymore. So there was a time when our lives were beds of roses, and now there are only thorns stinging me, and the briars biting me. Most people live in a dream world with lyrics similar to 'Imagine' by John Lennon, painting the vision. But not me. Somehow, I imagined evil and conjured it up. Hidden out there in the shadows are people and organizations that are evil; the dark, mostly invisible web of the spider that people don't see. People are conscious of the Frankenstein monsters presented in living color by the media and the government, and little else.

The Chinese restaurant pumped fragrant steam into the alley. A Siamese cat sat on a trash can at the back, and perhaps it was like me, watching for big black rats. What we both saw was Crake coming up the other alley. He'd changed his outfit to a suit jacket over jeans and a casual shirt. His shoes were new and not his usual brand. Dr. Scholl's all-weather shoes that don't hurt your feet, but are useless if you have to run. He carried a strapped folder under his right arm, and his eyes were flicking to higher windows of the shabby apartments beyond, as if he feared snipers might have already been put in place. His greeting was a nod, and he produced his key and had the door open so fast it was like he'd greased his fingers, the bolt and hinges.

I followed him in. He tossed the folder on the table, then microwaved a couple of cups of water and opened a jar of herbal tea bags. His place was starting to ride easily with me, but I wished he would start thinking of coffee instead of tea. All of the clutter became a comfortable blur, though there was always that occasional flash when one of the masks or occult icons would suddenly become vivid. The drug tended to exaggerate any situation; if relaxing, too relaxed; if exciting, things would seem lightning fast. Then, for mundane daily life stuff, the drug went underground, waiting to rise. I always knew it was there, that it hadn't left my system. There was the fear of long-term side effects, especially when I knew the drug quickly finished other test subjects. But that could have

been bullshit, too. Maybe the dose was higher. A key reason for not selling it would of course be that there was no profit in it. A moneymaking drug brings a fast high followed by a crash that has the addict in dire need of another hit. No drug pusher wants a customer who walks away high for weeks. Even the most legit drug companies want human engines that always need more of the juice.

Crake passed me the tea, and I started seeing faces in the wood grain of the table. That bugged me, so I kept my eyes on him and rambled on about the undertakers in black and the junkie. I gave him the photo of Raj. He had never met Raj, but he studied it carefully.

Crake's face shifted in distortion. I had to keep blinking and hoping the period of visual confusion would pass. "Corporate executive type with the yacht. Your man in black grabbed that photo for an obvious reason."

"It ain't so obvious to me."

"I thought you used to be a detective. They obviously don't want any connection between that man, your friend Raj, and any of the creepy people in black to be made. He's a wealthier and higher member they want protected."

"Creepy, you say. You looked almost like one of them before you jumped into a phone booth and changed into your writer-journalist casuals. Any idea who these people are?"

"Drink your tea. I have one fast check to do on the internet."

I did as he said, watching as he typed away for a while over at his computer nook. Computer stuff was another of his hobbies. Even though he didn't advertise it, he could find stuff that I could never find. I'd used him from time to time when I was a cop.

Crake suddenly swung around and rolled to the center of the room on his wheeled chair. "Magnifico," he said, throwing his hands up. "It's all connected. See what I mean."

"All I see is a double image of you rolling around on a padded chair. Details, please."

"The warehouse that burned, Cargo Cabbie, and Jiffy Jules Storage are all owned outright by a company called Rothsbairst Group, which also owns a majority of the shares of Genistorm, where Josie worked. Your friend Raj Karris suddenly began to exist four years ago, so that was just an alias. There is, of course, more than one Jules Gentry in the world, but I'm pretty sure that the one you are talking about just uses that name inside the local organization. That unknown executive in the picture could be any of many wealthy Illuminati-connected super-rich guys they protect."

"I get that Raj was never Raj. Gentry, if that really is his name, is like the boss of the undertakers. They told me the gang is the Dark Circle, but the name is rarely mentioned."

"There is much more under the surface. Those undertakers will have a mark somewhere on their skin. It will be either an assassin's umbrella or the monarch butterfly of mind control. Those people are specially bred and brainwashed, and if Gentry is running them, he is a big boss on the dark side of the Illuminati. The name Dark Circle seems to fit, too. That dark wing pops up from time to time to eliminate people or put them under mind control, but they are usually working in secret on the

current occult goals of the Satanist Illuminati. Best way to put it, you have the devil on your coattails. And you stole his book of spells.”

“What. They stole my fucking girlfriend. The bastards turned my friend Raj into someone else. If Gentry is behind it and wants a book of spells, he must be a warlock or something crazy.”

“They didn’t turn Raj into someone else. He was already someone else and masquerading as Raj for a reason. He worked in there at Genistorm with Josie, so he was likely planted there four years ago to either watch or guide what they were doing there.”

“Yeah, and Josie never told me what in the hell that was. I have no real idea what they do. I didn’t really think about it.”

“All info I gleaned on them is just corporate gobbledegook about pushing for advances in genetic science in the medical field, healing, and at the cellular level. They do GMO food work but don’t reveal much about that either. Never does the info list any tangible product. Everything is experimental. Whatever they do is hidden in plain sight. The Illuminati works like that. They are right in plain sight, but no one sees them because they blend in like chameleons everywhere. Genetic research and development are notoriously unregulated, and by marketing no tangible product, Genistorm avoids interference. They may do all the dirty questionable work, and any products suddenly appear in some other related company once the methods are clean enough for government inspection.”

“People see those undertakers. They aren’t invisible or hiding, and they come across as scary, yet people don’t know exactly why or what they do. To me, they’re about death and being a pain in the ass. I ran a check and found that my car was just towed off the beach to a city lot. If I go to pick it up, they’ll likely have someone there. Same if I go home. I wish I hadn’t disconnected my home camera. It would have shown me when they arrived to trash the place. All of my passwords are in my head anyway, so grabbing my laptop won’t help them. Other personal information I keep in my head. I used this new phone you gave me to change everything anyway. They probably have the old phone because it was in the car, but there is no call list on it. I’ve always kept my phone clean.”

Crake nodded and stared off at a shelf, deep in thought. “They know about your concern for Josie. Meaning they know you’ll come to them or at least try to do so. But they aren’t waiting. They have a hard-on for you, and I think it’s more than the book. Sure, they want it, but they want you out of the way quickly. You pissed them off.”

“It goes back to Josie, remember. They want the scene on the beach buried with me. They don’t want the murder uncovered, but they also want Josie alive for something. Maybe they don’t want it known that she has been kidnapped. As long as I’m around, they could be exposed.”

“Yeah, but you can’t go to the police.”

“Not yet ... but they don’t feel good about me. They think I might find a way to get them. They credit me for being better than I am; I wish their estimate were true.”

"It'll have to be."

"How so?"

"We have to get to them with them looking for us and knowing we might be coming. But neither of us has anything to lose by investigating. If we just try to hide, they will eventually nail us both. To stay alive, to recover Josie, for me to get dope for my book, we have to outfox them. They want the book, but attempting to blackmail them straight out and then arranging a meeting would just lead to us being picked off. The book is an option we should put on hold until we think it out."

"Okay ... they probably know I might try to investigate Genistorm. Rothsbairst Group, what in the hell are they, Scottish Jews? Should we check there?"

"It's a shell company, appeared four years ago, just like Raj did. I checked the online Street View of the building. It's on the waterfront, part of an ancient Liquor Control Board building converted to a small office setup. My guess is that Illuminati money is funneled through a phony fundraising setup, which then funds shady operations in this city and the surrounding area. We wouldn't get in there; they'd keep any data under super protection."

"I say we head for the storage joint. Look around. They don't know that I know about it. It's like a transit point. Stuff may move from there or come to there from other locations. We might be able to track Josie's location."

With a plan worked out for a fast check on Jiffy Jules Storage, Crake and I walked a few blocks to grab a rental car. There was a fresh lake breeze, and it had filled the sidewalks with shoppers and loiterers. The car rental place was in a strip lot sandwiched between the street and a commercial building cube composed of gleaming glass and marbling. Twenty parked cars, a hut with big wooden shingles, and a flashing SuperDeal Rentals sign were the meat of this place. Inside, Crake put down a credit card, and a sales clerk with a Pakistani accent and a flashy sports coat studied it for a moment. Asking for a look at the card was just a ruse to give him a moment to talk Crake into renting his most expensive vehicle. The clerk's eyes flicked to me in a quick assessment that felt like a credit check. I looked away out the window with the feeling he might try to sell me a condo if I passed. The grease of hucksterism smoothed his quick words. His swarthy face was like creased leather or rubber, capable of making amazingly quick emotional transformations. Crake didn't buy the sales pitch; he rented a metallic-blue Honda he'd glanced at in the lot. The salesman followed us out the door and to the car, but with so much traffic passing on the street, my eyes were on it, and his words went through my ears like my head was broadcasting him elsewhere.

"Takes his business seriously," Crake said, watching him wave as we pulled out.

"Maybe he was born to deal cars. Why'd you rent this shitty Honda?"

"I'd prefer a bulletproof BMW. The second choice is a car that won't attract attention. I like the tablet display. The windows and reflection of the metallic color make it hard to see who is inside."

A stop-and-go ride took us to the Junction. Crake drove like my Grandma. We cruised past the storage place a few times, and then Crake said, "So are we going to drive back and forth all day? You said you had an idea."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. The junkie said street people used to hang out in the ravine at the back, so drive around and find it. I'll come up that way, then you enter at the front. We saw one man in the office when driving by, so you go in and keep him busy. Bullshit him. Tell him you're waiting for a friend, driving Cargo Cabbie, or anything that comes to mind. Then step out, phone me, and tell me how many people are in there."

On the cruise around, the ravine wasn't immediately obvious. We found it at the back of an abandoned strip mall that had a mountain of gravel piled in its empty front lot. A bulldozer was parked at the back. Crake stopped beside it. "Wouldn't it be easier for you to wait in the car and then come in once I check it out?"

"Too risky for me because they have my description. There are cameras on the lot. I spotted one at the front. This way I come up the back with the hood on this windbreaker up like I'm a bum."

I got out and looked around. Crake drove off. This pocket of the city was a dead zone all right. I had to go over a collapsed fence and some old railroad tracks. An area of flattened bushes with litter everywhere showed, and I knew the storage place was up the ravine. I went through it and up toward the sun glare at the top; the place still stank like bums and junkies, even though there was none around. It had the feel of contamination. There'd be no cops around either, but there might be security people for the storage place above. An earthen path angled up through a tangle of bushes to the top. It ended at a brand-new board fence. A pine stood like a sentinel on the other side. The fence wasn't really a security fence in appearance, but it would work to keep most transients off the lot. A peek through revealed an obvious scare camera on the back wall.

I shuffled back and forth with my hands in my pockets, and then Crake called with the news that he'd seen two men. One he'd talked to in the office, the other one lurked in the storage area behind the office. Crake mentioned that he felt the place to be a waste of time. I told him to wait near the car, and then climbed over the fence. I had a brown bag under my arm with one of Crake's masks, which I put on under the cover of the pine. According to Crake, the mask was of an Indonesian demon.

I quickly covered the empty back lot, noting that some windows higher up were barred. There were two large roll-up doors that were fob-opened, and one security door with an alarm-warning sign. Since there was no easy way in, I was about to go around to Crake and go in the hard way with the mask and gun. About two steps later, the security door opened, and a man came out. He turned the other way and lit a cigarette. It was fortunate that he hadn't noticed me. His work clothes were black; he wore only a T-shirt, had long curly dark hair, and a lot of tattoo ink on his arms. He looked to be the sort of person who would be working with the undertakers, but a lesser breed, almost like a biker type, and with no glasses. This gang, at its various levels, had been male so far.

The man was exhaling when the butt of my gun crunched on his head. After dragging him aside, I called Crake, told him to go back in and keep the man at the desk busy. My

victim had his keys on a belt-loop ring, and I used them to open the door. A big loading dock was inside. I saw a camera overlooking it, but took a chance and walked in, encountering no one. Hurrying across the dock, I got through a door to a hallway with a long line of storage cages. This was mostly small storage with a few bigger cages, and nearly every cage was empty. There was a camera in this hall, too. Heading through a door, I went up the stairs to the second floor, found another big line of cages, and all but three of them were empty. Only the large one in the center had furnishings, and it was Raj's furniture. The gleam of one of the same tube chairs I'd used to whack one of the undertakers was the first thing to catch my eye.

These cages weren't locked, and even though I knew I should move lightning fast, I didn't. The two cages to either side were packed with crates, so I went into the first one for a closer look. The crates were fastened, banded, and big enough to be coffins. There was no way to open them, and I knew something ugly or illegal would be inside, so I ducked out and into the cage with Raj's belongings. No neat packing in this storage area. They'd shipped his stuff here and were still rifling through his belongings. Some papers had been neatly wrapped in a couple of elastic bands and placed on a dresser. A gun rested beside them. It looked like a ray gun from a science fiction movie because it had a suppressor that extended as a wide section of the barrel. The make was Springfield. It fired bullets because it had a fifteen-round 9 mm magazine. There was a case below it on the floor, so I picked it up and snapped it open, finding it to be a specialty case fitted with the components of a classy sniper rifle. Pulling the elastic bands off the papers, I went through them quickly and found a passport and an Ontario driver's license. Raj's picture was on them, but the attached name was Sanjit Singh.

A sharp state of shock had been slowly giving way to a feeling of unreality. So Raj wasn't Raj ... maybe I was someone else, too. This whole case belonged in a book of riddles. Again, I ended up shaking my head physically to shake the nonsense out of it. Crake and his talk about Illuminati mind control and all the rest was making me doubt even myself. But with a clear head, I had no doubts. Joe Holiday was Joe Holiday, but Raj had never been Raj.

My luck was sure to run out if I kept taking chances with cameras. The angle of the hall camera didn't appear to cover the cage, so I stayed inside it while pocketing the ID. I picked up the spacey Springfield gun and checked it over. I decided to keep it, then I left and paced to the stairwell quickly and silently, like a cat, but a nervous one, as the cameras felt like pointed rifles. I planned to go out the same door, but I heard voices and one of them was Crake's. It sounded like he was pleading.

A slow approach gave me a view from the dim inner light into the bright, sparsely furnished office. The clerk, if you could call one of those gorillas in black a clerk, was over on the customer side beyond the counter. He had a gun pointed down, and I couldn't see Crake but knew he was on his knees and about to be shot. I realized at that moment that Crake had saved my ass because the clerk's camera display was on my side of the counter. The camera feeds showed like postcards on a 30" monitor. Because the goon had been directly watching Crake's every move since he drove up, he had forgotten to keep an eye on the camera display. Probably he made a phone call before taking Crake at gunpoint.

The goon was asking Crake, 'Where is he?' and I had to assume that he wanted to know my whereabouts before icing him. Crake was stuttering something. Time for him would have been razor sharp, and for some reason, I stood there staring at the clerk's greased hair. It was greased right back to a ducktail at the neck, and it shone. Before I got even more lost in the details, I raised the Springfield and pulled the trigger. The sound was a loud popcorn pop, and the bullet cracked as it hit the back of his spine, where it connected to his head. The bullet hole was neat and not a big show of gore and splatter. It jolted his head and shoulders, and then he remained there like a statue for a couple of moments before collapsing. I didn't shoot him like that because killing people was fun; I made the shot because severing his spine would prevent him from pulling the trigger on Crake.

Crake was up and running out the door before he saw me, and I had to yell to halt him. He turned; he was halfway out the door with an expression of hair-raising horror lifting his face. He looked better than one of his own fright masks. "Let's get out of here!" he shouted. And I was already running for him as he said it. I had heard something behind me. Bullets raked the counter and took out the camera monitor, barely missing me. I didn't follow Crake out the front door but turned and fired as the man I'd just knocked out appeared from the hall. The shot popped through the side of his head, and he sprayed the wall with bullets as he stumbled and fell to the floor. My accurate shot proved to be a lifesaver that stopped his minisubmachine. I realized that I beat him because I turned. Most people run and keep running when one of those guns sprays, so he hadn't expected me to be facing him as he came around through the door opening, but assumed I'd be hurrying out the front door to be shot in the back. I wondered how many other killers had died because of assumptions that underestimated the opponent.

I walked across the lot carrying the box with the video backup. No one saw us leaving the storage lot, and I took the wheel because Crake was cracking up. He had his face in his hands and was muttering, "Shit, we can't get out of this ... they'll get us."

I stopped at a red light. A police cruiser with its cherry light and siren on raced past, but it wasn't headed for the Jiffy Jules place. The sun raked my eyes with fury, so I put on Crake's sunglasses. "I hate to mention this, pal. But you came up with the idea and book contract to ensure we'd get deeper into this crap hole we can't get out of."

"I wasn't thinking, but struck by delusions of grandeur and of writing a bestseller. I thought we could investigate this thing, like in a mystery novel. Now I see that the reality is murder and mayhem."

"With a splatter ending for us ... if they get their way. Maybe this Jiffy Jules Storage deal went violent, but it is only because of them. I got a solid lead."

"You call that fancy gun a solid lead. It just means more killing. How many guns do you need?"

"It's Raj's gun. I got ID pieces, too. Raj was somebody else. They were in the process of burying his history. I never suspected, so the guy was a great actor. He played a fool, but he was a serious hit man or terrorist if he carried a gun like this one."

"He was almost certainly an Illuminati plant, so where does that take us?"

“Not far. I need to question one of those undertakers, but they keep getting themselves killed. We’ll head to my place. That should do it.”

“What? Are you nuts? They’ll have your place staked out. They’ll kill us ... or I mean kill you, because I’m not going there.”

Crake threw himself back in the seat and went completely silent, his face starting to turn purple like a breath-holding child’s would. My reaction was to pull into a liquor store, go in, and buy a bottle of Canadian Club. We remained parked in the shadows at the far side of the lot, hearing the tapping of a bum sitting at the front of the liquor store with a toy drum. I’d also bought two shot glasses, and my unwrapping of them in the car broke the ice.

“Good plan, we become like that alcoholic panhandler out front so you can drive drunk and be at the top of the game at your place when we get iced.”

“That’s not the plan. Your nerves look shot, and I need something to take the edge off things. We don’t get drunk, just a couple of shots.”

Crake took a glass and looked it over like he was the sort who didn’t want to drink from anything not double-washed. “What the hell,” he said, allowing me to pour him a shot. “I probably won’t live long enough to die from a contaminated glass. Cheers.”

We downed two shots then sat there. Crake sighed and eased up. I outlined the next move. “You take the wheel, and like the storage place, we cruise by and check my place out. If it’s clear, I’ll get out and walk over. You keep your distance and drive off completely if anyone seems to be on you.”

“Okay, but I don’t feel good about this.”

“Neither do I. But what else can I do? If we keep following this up, we’ll come up against people with endurance, killing skills, and a ruthless mindset. Unless outsmarted fast, beaten on a quick draw, they’ll massacre us. Any situation involving a long endurance test will be fatal. Capture is almost certainly fatal. These are people who expect someone like me to just run. Instead, I’m hunting them, and you can be sure it is really pissing them off.”

My apartment was on the ground floor of a big house off Madison on a tiny side street called Wanda Lane. Grand old maples lined the streets, and the breeze swept us with soft shadows and tumbling leaves. Two blond teen girls walking Spot were the only people on the street near the house, and no one was outside on the postage-stamp front yards. No suspicious cars with passengers had parked on the street, but that meant little, as there would be no obvious signs of intruders. My apartment had a large backyard, and I could cut over to it on foot from the parallel avenue. That option made more sense than strolling up the front walk. We cruised around the block again, and I saw nothing suspicious, so I stepped out of the car and told Crake to keep circling the block and phone me if he saw anything troubling.

Approaching places via the rear had been working for me, so I tried it again. Not that I’m a back door man, but more of a person who knows that even crooks expect you to stupidly park at the front and come up the walk. It’s human nature to watch the front first. I stepped out from the shadow of a residential high-rise and walked around to the

parking garage belonging to a detached house. The back fence touched the base of the monstrous maple in my backyard. Its grey trunk and elephantine branches shielded my approach. Stopping behind it, I looked at the yard. The peaceful scene was of just a backyard with a green-painted picnic table and shin-deep drifts of reddened leaf fall. The rear door was secure, the curtains drawn on the picture window, and no lights on. An airline pilot named Marsden rented the apartment above. He wouldn't be home, so any prowlers, spies, undertakers ... whatever Illuminati people were called, could easily be hiding in his place. But somehow, with my honed senses, I knew they weren't. The gut feeling was that someone was in my place. I could feel it, though there were no visible signs of it. It was like I had a new power of seeing psychic emanations through walls and an ability that might be just another illusion of the drug.

I checked my back, sniffed the wind like a hound dog, climbed the wood fence, and went over, coming down below the first branch of the big tree. Through the side alley on Wanda Lane, I saw Crake slowly drive by. No one was shooting at me or charging out, so it probably wouldn't happen. They were hiding inside.

Crossing the yard as quietly as possible through crackling leaves, I reached the back deck. It went into the kitchen, but leaning over from it, I could peek in the picture window. I cupped a hand on the glass to cut glare and got a view of the living room, which was easy on the eyes because everything in it was brown to buff, even the floor, which was seamless tiles. The gas fireplace was on, my native paintings were still up on the walls, and of course, somebody was there. Three people, actually. They were the first thing I'd seen, but I hadn't jumped aside because two of them were on my lounge chairs, and they were bound at the wrists and ankles with black duct tape. Their mouths were also duct-taped. One was a man, the other a woman with red-streaked hair. The third person was my friend from the beach and warehouse, the assassin who had blown Raj's head off.

Jack sat confidently in an armchair, overlooking the other two. He hadn't changed much. The whisker stubble and jeans were the same as was the hard, craggy face. He'd changed the plaid shirt for a flashier one with big buttons, and his new windbreaker was buff-brown, matching the chair he sat on. His gun, a handgun this time, was on the table, and his powers of observation were as good as mine because he'd immediately spotted me. He knew who it was, and he hadn't gone for the gun. Instead, he had a sly smile on his face, and he was waving for me to come on in. He had one of my bottled beers open in his other hand. It was absurd, his behaving as if we were old pals and he just happened to be hanging around having a few beers, doing me a favor by binding the other two, who were no doubt assassins that wanted me and the book.

With the absurd image still in my mind, I shrugged and opened the door. This Jack fellow had me baffled. At the beach, I'd thought he was a terrorist assassin. To be doing what he was now doing meant he knew I had discovered that Raj had never been Raj, and that I needed something – a lead. It also meant he needed something from me, possibly the book, so I would have to make sure it wasn't a situation where he would no longer need me after we met. If it came to that, I would finish him. Not just for being involved in Josie's kidnapping, but also for thinking it mattered so little that he could drop by my place for a visit.

Jack sipped his beer as I stepped into the room. The man he had bound was a big, bony fellow. His dark eyes were desperate; sweat gleamed on his brown skin. He wore black jeans, a black shirt, a jacket, and custom boots. The woman was flamboyantly attractive, or would have been if her green eyes weren't on me like daggers. I could see her furtively working her wrists, which she had between her knees. Jack knew that, but wasn't worried. She wore a short black jacket, matching flared pants, and leather sneakers. Her naturally red hair was streaked with flaming red, and she had a dangerous feel to her. The man had a sort of lizard look to him, like he would rather kill you slowly with venom.

My favorite armchair was available, so I took a seat on it, feeling less violated but not relaxed. "So you knew I was coming, that they were here. What's this about?"

The woman struggled fiercely against her bonds. She obviously took this personally and was of a higher caliber than the dudes at Jiffy Jules Storage. The lizard man kept still; even his eyes were still, revealing no emotion. Repulsive thoughts filled my mind, dizzied me as I looked at him. I tried to shut them out. It worked, and I gathered that he was another Illuminati brain-wave creep, something like the last undertaker with the hypnotic eyes. Jack was about to speak. My phone rang. It was Crake. I told him to stick around and keep watch. He'd learn what I was up to later, if there was a later.

Jack took another swallow, like his throat was dry. When he spoke, his voice was deep and authoritative. "By now, you've discovered that your pal Raj was a fraud. The fact is, he was never a real friend. He was one of them." Jack nodded to the other two.

"And they are?"

"Genuine underground Illuminati, monarch mind control wing. They're taken when they are kids. Some are used as sex slaves, but others are run through special programs to be enforcers, assassins, or even special agents with occult powers. These two belong to the Dark Circle."

"Occult power – maybe creep power is a better description."

Jack chuckled. "Good description. These two agents work well together. The creep clouds your mind, and the lady cuts out your heart before you know what happened. They unfortunately uncovered me, which is one reason why I'm here. Raj was a hitman and special agent of the Illuminati. You probably wonder how he played the Raj personality so well. It is because they programmed his mind to switch at a command from one personality to another. There's more, but let's step out back for a moment. I don't want these two to hear anything until I decide what to do with them. You and I have to talk about how we're going to escape this organization."

I remained baffled, but willing to listen. Jack and I got up. He swung his gun toward the woman as a warning to keep still, and nearly caused me to shoot him. I knew she wouldn't obey, but Jack had them taped up really well, so I wasn't worried. We went out back and across the yard to stand by the picnic table. I made sure I always had him covered with my gun, even though he'd put his weapon away.

Jack opened the conversation. "We aren't escaping their organization. I just wanted them to think that we were running. Back to Raj. They programmed him to do kill jobs and other things, too. They planted the Raj personality at Genistorm to watch that

girlfriend of yours and keep records on the operation. It is under arms-length Illuminati control. Josie, of course, didn't know that. I appeared on the scene as an external hire. They had issues internally. Raj was somehow a fuck up. He was supposed to execute you and make it look like a drunken suicide two weeks before that kidnapping on the beach. For some reason, he stopped responding to their subliminal commands and trigger commands via phone call. His kill personality failed to activate. They brought me in to hit you and bring him along with Josie for transfer to a secret location. They wanted Raj for one other reason as well. An occult book of theirs went missing, and the thief was demanding a high price for it. They believed the thief to be Raj, working through an intermediary. The Raj personality was getting greedy, defying them."

"I have that book now. Nate, the cop, had it in his car, so he must have been working with Raj to extort money. I grabbed it when he got killed at the warehouse."

"You have it. Do they know that?"

"I believe he was dropping it at the warehouse for pickup. So they know I probably have it."

"That makes you top of their most-wanted list."

"So you're a hit man. Why didn't you do what you were paid to do? And the secret location, where they took Josie, where is it?"

"I don't know the location, and I'm not a hit man. When I was younger, the Illuminati killed my parents and used my sister as a mind-controlled slave in Satanist rituals. I escaped them. I was only seventeen and lived as a transient in New York. I spent years positioning myself, getting close to them. My appearance has changed considerably, so none of them would recognize me now. I was unable to save my sister. They killed her last year. Finally, the opportunity arrived to get in deeper as an external hire, to hit you. I'd been tracking a large Illuminati move into this region and got lucky when Jules Gentry hired me. He wanted an outside man for the job on you, and for his dirty games against other Illuminati players. They pay large sums to have any trouble buried quietly."

"You say you are not a hit man. You sure looked like one there on the beach."

"I didn't hit Raj by mistake. They used him to kill my sister. Call it straight-up payback. They didn't want Josie dead and foolishly decided to play with you, allowing you to escape. On the inside, my game was tight. I wanted to find out why they moved into this area and destroy as many of them as possible. I couldn't ask them where they were taking Josie, or they would've been tipped off. I would have followed them, but they had a tracker on me. They were on to me, watching me. Gentry wasn't easy to fool. Time became my enemy. He realized I could not have made such a mistake as shooting the wrong man on the beach."

"Ah, so now you are back on the outside. With them hunting you. Just like me."

"I'm on the outside temporarily. You're my ticket in. They have your girlfriend, so you must somehow know why they value her. Gentry will have to come to you because you took that book of Satanist magic. These people are mad Satanists, and Jules Gentry is the warlock. He will work to get that book. They think they need it for something soon, probably by Halloween, because there was talk about something big happening then."

We can use their desperation against them. If they want the book, they must have a ceremony, some magic stuff planned. We need to find out what and where it is.”

“Maybe they have a big black pot and plan to cook up some demons, but I’m only in this to find Josie. I’m not on a hunting trip to bag witches and warlocks at some black magic ceremony.”

“It all connects in my mind. I think that if we find the black magic, we’ll find Josie and the rest of the setup, which is usually something underground or hidden, where they perform their creepy experiments.”

“My friend Crake is already working with me, so there are three of us.”

“So you’re willing to work with me?”

“I’ll chance it. Having my own working hitman with inside knowledge is an asset when dealing with undertakers. I need help if I’m going to find Josie before she ends up like your sister.”

“Can this Crake person be trusted?”

“He’s solid, and he knows Illuminati stuff, like their history, even how to read black magic. But right now, we have those two inside the apartment to question. They must have information.”

“I already checked it out. They came in from out of town to take me out, as well as you. But they didn’t come for only that. It’s hard to crack into what is being done in this area because everything is in its own compartment. It is definitely something super secret. I tried to trace shipments from that warehouse and follow movements, the same with their storage place. But they always had a man glued to me and a tracker planted on me. It was a condition of working with them.”

My phone rang; I didn’t expect good news from Crake. “A suspicious white van has parked two houses up from the front. A man and a woman are inside, and they are dressed in black. It has a dish attachment like a flying saucer on its roof. It must be a surveillance vehicle. I’ve already pulled out and am going to the other side where I dropped you. You should get out of there fast.”

“Okay. I’ve got someone coming with me,” I said, and then I looked to Jack. He opened both hands to say, ‘Tell me.’ “Crake says a van with a saucer on its roof pulled in to the curb two houses down. Mean anything to you?”

Jack squinted, looked up and around like a gunfighter spotting for snipers on the rooftops. I followed his gaze but saw nothing. Then the curtains on my back window moved, and lizard man was standing there.

“They’re loose. Run!” he said.

I ran with Jack right behind me. We used the knotty tree trunk to swing over the fence quickly, then ran across the neighboring backyard and out to the next street. Crake was already pulling up, and he slammed on the brakes and turned in by the high-rise. Jack drew his gun, and I waved it down. Just as I was getting in the car, I looked back between the house and garage and saw a scene from a 50’s science fiction movie. A flying saucer was rising over the roof of my house. It shot into the backyard and nearly

collided with the gnarled branches of the old tree. From there, it wobbled, rose high, and then came down in a spiral. It disappeared at the front, then returned over the roof, skating through the tree's branches and releasing a fan of beams.

The air cracked with unreal booms. A reverberating pop-pop-pop preceded an explosion of breaking glass and rattles from flying debris that swept in a wave along the side of my neighbor's house. Dust smoked past me, and the next sound was the slam of the car door as I got inside. I didn't think Crake's rental car could burn rubber, but it did. He squealed out and took a hard left at the first intersection, nearly slamming into a van taxi. He continued through a red light.

Jack was wedged in the back; he'd thrown himself inside. I had my head out the window, looking back, relieved that the saucer wasn't on our tail. It had blown the windows out of my neighbor's house and destroyed most of his garage before fading back to my house. Its controller hadn't been sure where we were, or it would've been right on us with more beam shots.

Crake pulled over to the curb a few blocks later, then got quickly out and studied the sky. Jack and I also spilled out. The saucer wasn't tracking us, but I wondered what was left of my apartment. I had no plans on returning any time soon to find out.

Jack kept looking up. He brushed his hair and some sweat off his brow. "Man, we are lucky. They didn't miss us by much."

"Yeah. I bet they wrecked my apartment, too."

"They'll clean it up if they can. By tomorrow, the only thing that will exist is a flying saucer report that no one will believe. And maybe a cell phone video of it online if someone got one without being vaporized."

Crake visibly shook. "Who is this man and what in the hell is going on?"

"Believe what you see. Jack is our new partner. What's going on is they just tried to beam us up to the Death Star."

"Partner or not, three's a crowd in that car," Jack said. "But you drove in the right direction. My vehicle is parked right up there around the corner."

"So what do we do now?" Crake said.

"Let's drive over to Genistorm," I said. "See if we can pick up any clues there."

We waited a couple of minutes while Jack grabbed his car, then we headed east to the Genistorm building with Jack following. Crake's eyes were on the rear view more than the road ahead. He was making sure no one appeared as a third party, bringing up the rear of Jack's big Chevy, especially not any third-party flying saucers.

"So Crake. You should've mentioned that the Illuminati use flying saucers."

"That thing is an armed drone, but the weapons on it are from Star Trek. The flying saucer angle makes a good cover. Since you mention it, the history of the Illuminati does include the promotion of aliens and contact with them. They supposedly love to promote all things thought to be a conspiracy or superstition. Anything from Bigfoot to

Elvis-is-Alive-on-Mars stuff. They even promote conspiracy theories about themselves. But many of them really do believe aliens exist.”

“Why would anyone do that? It makes no sense.”

“Ah, but it does if you want the public to be eternally confused and brainwashed, with minds so full of superstition that they are never aware of the actual reality, which is their own serfdom and control by the wealthy and elite. The Illuminati know that an enlightened public would be the supreme danger. Democracy is representatives they control, so they can meter out how much of the wealth will be shared. Obviously, they have their idea of a better world, which is to provide you with some bread and circuses, but never a slice of the real pie.”

The Genistorm complex was located at the end of a dead-end street behind huge co-op housing complexes. Rail tracks and a rising freeway loop clipped the sprawling lot at the rear. In my pre-teen years, a run-down food-processing plant and the dilapidated standalone buildings that belonged to it populated the weedy lot. One of our hideouts for illicit smoking, drinking, and sex had been over at the tangle of greenery by the rail tracks.

There were still many standalone structures in the sprawling lot, but they were all prefab, new, and varied in shape, from rectangles to domes. I had no idea what was inside them or the main building, a fortress-like structure that had replaced the demolished food plant. Stern concrete walls, high slit windows, and a cap of mirrored glass created a new look that was somehow just as spooky as the abandoned food plant had been. The grounds were now weed-free and manicured around the main building. A surrounding security fence became a tall wall at the far end by the rail tracks and freeway. At that end, the grounds contained tall deciduous trees, shrubs, and meadow grass. To get into the parking lot, we had to pass a manned guard post with a gate arm. I had already told Crake what to say. We were here to see the personnel manager on a private matter.

While Crake engaged the duty guard, I got a look at a second guard smoking by the bushes behind the post. The uniform was paramilitary style, so I knew these guards were not concierges or parking attendants. The guard smoking carried a riot gun. My guess was that it fired rubber bullets or beanbags that would probably break the bones of bums sneaking onto the grounds from the wasteland over by the tracks and freeway.

Getting inside wasn't easy. The guard asked probing questions and spoke to someone inside via a custom device that resembled a gargantuan hybrid of a cellphone. Checking the rear, I saw Jack driving by to check the place from the outside. He wasn't coming in.

Genistorm's secretive nature surely served some purpose. Josie had once mentioned how squeaky-clean it was regarding most things. I didn't expect they would go for any trouble on the site itself. I still had no real idea what Genistorm created as far as products or services. They were a cloak-and-dagger outfit. I did know they did medical work and spin-off stuff in that regard; perhaps working on products that would take the world by storm, like self-cleaning diapers. Josie's education touched on genetic engineering. She had done some work in a chemistry lab inside Genistorm. I knew that much but had never really asked for details, and she liked that. Her social contacts outside of work had nothing to do with her areas of study, and she had never liked to

mention Genistorm. That strange personality quirk of hers led to my being with her. Another woman in the same field would pick a four-eyed professor of nuclear chemistry for a companion.

The place had a small outdoor lot for visitors while employees parked underground. Crake pulled into a space, and I got out in the fresh air and studied the building. We'd passed one of the aboveground employee entrances on the way over. It looked like the entrance to a prison: a slate walk angling down to a concrete tunnel, and it was mostly shielded by shrubbery and vines, so you didn't even see it unless directly passing by. The visitor entrance was straight ahead, and the large corporate logo there caught my attention. Josie's stationery items bore the logo, so I had seen it many times without really thinking about it. In larger print, it was revealing. It had a stylized eye in a triangle, a sunburst behind it, and the Genistorm name in a hand-drawn font beneath it.

Crake also studied the logo. He lit a cigarette.

I pointed at the logo. "That's an Illuminati symbol, isn't it?"

"Yes. They have many forms of their symbols in the logos of related corporations, often so stylized that you see it yet it is hidden. That Genistorm logo is more open and obvious. You remember the incomplete pyramid on the old US dollar with the all-seeing eye as the floating cap. It is a repeating Illuminati symbol. A pyramid is three-sided. Now, from one angle, you see the occult past symbolized by Egypt with the all-seeing eye of the god Horus at the top. From a second side, the pyramid shows us the Illuminati of the near past up to the present, where the thirteen layers of bricks represent the thirteen ruling families of the world, though it also encompasses 300 other families, powerful groups, and organizations. In it, the all-seeing eye is the master builder of the Masons. Some say the all-seeing eye has represented a number of things over time. A third view is the full occult through all of time, with Satan's eye being the all-seeing evil eye. In that view, the top and bricks of the pyramid are separate compartments of evil that may not be much aware of each other, though they all work in unison to control the destiny of the earth on behalf of Satan."

"Man, you saw a lot in an old US dollar bill."

"The phoenix was on it. George Washington, pictured, was a Mason."

"Your theory about them all working together toward evil, yet not being aware of each other. How is that possible?"

"Because some of them have knowledge, and that would be the members most into the occult. Celebrities, politicians ... many are controlled, and they use the Satanic Salute or other hand symbols. Most of these are wannabes in that the real power does not reside with them. They are pawns with money but vain and corrupt, too. The occult power takes to those with a wicked nature, and they use it to rise to the top in their respective fields. They are the invisible glue that binds them all together."

I had never passed through a phase of conspiracy-theorist worries about secret cabals controlling the world. Common sense dictated that people other than me would always control the world. Most likely, they would be rich and corrupt people. Because I did not really care, Crake's words droned through my head until the mention of the horned hand symbol stuck in my mind.

While Crake was exhaling and I was avoiding the smoke, I saw one of the Genistorm guards signal to two others crossing the grounds from the rear of the main building. It was the horned hand signal. My vision, honed by the drug, suddenly scoped in on the closest of the security men. On arrival, I had noticed the paramilitary attire. Corporations in the city hired guards from a pool of companies, both local and international, with varying uniforms. Some armed, some not. Yet Genistorm had its own guards, as the black uniforms all bore the corporate logo. They also had their own communications system, and not the usual cells or radios. They were more like SWAT cops, with the big belts bearing tools and weapons, solid boots, and mirror shades for the sun. The one I was looking at wore a gun, probably a Glock. I couldn't see any reason why Genistorm would need its own paramilitary force armed with everything from Tasers to guns. Not at this site. It was located in a pocket where transients might come from the rail and freeway area at the back, but a few ordinary security guards using camera surveillance and batons could probably handle them. Genistorm had either priceless corporate secrets or some other reason for the guards. Perhaps something tangible was present on site that required guards.

Crake tossed his cigarette, and under watchful eyes, we confidently headed for the entrance. A huge lintel hung over the entrance, composed of the same volcanic glass as the walk. Crystalline lights were embedded in the garden to either side; they weren't on, but still cast an irritating glitter to my peripheral vision. The entry doors were opaque glass with silver decorative handles, and they opened automatically, allowing us into a glaringly bright, sterile vestibule that served no purpose unless we were about to be gassed or showered clean. A dazzlingly attractive female concierge sat at a counter desk just through the next set of glass doors. I gave my name, and she frowned when I said I wanted to see someone from personnel about an employee. She had more of an eye for Crake, but a suspicious eye, as he identified himself as a journalist wanting to speak to someone handling public relations.

Crake, she kept at the desk because his inquiry required an appointment. Meaning he probably wouldn't get in to see anyone. She accommodated me because the personnel director had no current visitors. I hadn't noticed it on entry, but a piece of artwork to our right in the form of metal musical notes screened another inset counter. Two Genistorm security officers appeared from it, giving me the feeling of being led to an appointment for termination. They took my right and left to escort me to see Ms. Hampers, director of personnel. I remembered Josie saying the management had a squeaky-clean corporate appearance that hid bum-stabbing morality. The security men took me into a lounge area and not to her office. I noticed that from the entry to the concierge desk, hallway, and lounges, visitors would see nothing of the operation and its employees. It all dripped of polish and in such a smooth way as to arouse no suspicions. But I didn't care much for it; the effects of the drug were stronger indoors, and I did not favor the bright artificial light and soulless odors of an environment designed for corporate robots. It was the cleanliness and moral vacuum of mannequins.

The guards left me imprisoned in the lounge, as the only way out was through them. I looked around at the rubber plants and a fern shifting in a blow from a vent and got an uneasy feeling about the place, like it wasn't kosher at all and that at any moment the brain-eating amoebas blown in through vent might start to take effect.

The door opened, and Ms Hampers came in with her own female paramilitary guard, though possibly I could describe it as two paramilitary guards, as Ms Hampers wore a pantsuit that was more severe than chic and her hair in a sleek knot. She carried a briefcase about the right size for the appropriate gun and death certificate. I automatically stood and offered my hand, which she shook coldly. Rather than greeting me, she directed me to another chair with a table beside it and set her briefcase on it. We both sat and faced off for a moment, then she opened the case.

"I'm Sam Hampers. I allow people to call me Sam. Your name is?"

"Joe Holiday." All that got me was a curt nod from her as she sifted through a pile of papers from the case.

"I don't seem to have your resume," she said as her expression changed from lukewarm to that of someone who'd found a bug in her lunch. Her eyebrows were painted on and worked to exaggerate her negative facial expressions. She was a perfect fit for the building, being not quite human, maybe an android. But if so, an android named Sam.

"I didn't send a resume, Sam."

"Mr. Holiday, this is not a company where gate crashers can apply. The rules are spelled out on our website. You must submit a formal resume with references through our secure system, including a one-page summary that can be printed out for fast access by personnel."

"It's not about a job; it's about an employee who has left your employment. Josie Diaz. You may not be aware of this, of course, as no formal letter of resignation has been submitted. She has left the country and won't be returning. As her common law spouse, I will be cleaning out her desk of any belongings, including her notebook computer."

Sam Hampers listened, revealing no emotion at all, and then she signaled her bodyguard with one raised finger. A moment later, the other escort guards were in the room.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull, Mr. Holiday. We are certainly aware that Josie Diaz has left the country temporarily after requesting leave. We have a signed letter that arrived yesterday regarding a man named Joe. As it happens, I gave it a quick read just before you arrived." Fishing in her briefcase, she retrieved a letter and waved it at me. "This letter states that nothing is to be released to Joe or anyone sent by him. That means any personal effects on her desk. She did leave this for you: a memory stick with a video explaining the final terms of your separation. I didn't view it, but I'm certain it will inform you of the consequences should you continue digging for ways to profit from a relationship that has ended."

Ms. Hampers tossed me the memory stick, and I stared at her and it in disbelief. Then I stood and took a step toward her. Her female protector immediately got behind me and held me, her breasts pressed into my back like hard little falsies. "But ... but," I stuttered. "Josie didn't send any letter. That's not possible. The person who wrote that didn't even know my last name."

Then all three guards had me. The two males each had an arm, and the female guard remained close behind as I was marched out the door and down the hall. Sam Hampers

had followed because, as we reached the concierge desk, the guards suddenly turned me around, and she was there.

"You're crazy, lady," I sputtered. "I suppose Raj is returning, too. And you've grown him a new head to replace the one that was blown off."

"I don't know what you are talking about. You are warned, Mr. Holiday, that your every move from entry has been followed by full surveillance. Any legal actions alleging bodily harm or exposure to hazardous materials will be easily disproven. If you are seen at any Genistorm location or office, you will be arrested by security and removed. Your photo will be distributed."

I attempted to reply, but was turned so fast by the guards that only spittle came out of my mouth. They marched me out the door to the car, where I was told to get in and leave.

"I can't leave," I said to the female Genistorm Nazi. "My friend has the keys."

"Friend," she said, puzzled. And before she said any more, a siren began to sound, and all of the guards outdoors were running for the main building.

My importance diminished, and I went from magnificently unwanted to being abandoned. Crake had somehow dropped a pin or mussed somebody's hair in there and created a security nightmare. The wait was about five minutes before he emerged surrounded by a clutch of guards. Even though it was a bum's rush, it made Crake look important to an onlooker. Almost like he was a captured espionage agent or sophisticated terrorist. As they drew closer, it became clear that it was Crake's hair that had been mussed. He was close to hysteria as the guards rushed him forward. As they reached the car, Crake exclaimed, "They tasered me, the bastards! I'll sue."

That exclamation got him slammed against the side of the car as a guard with supervisor epaulets patted him down. "You already searched me in there, you idiots. If anything's on me, it's those germs you're harvesting."

Ignoring Crake, the supervisor turned his attention to me. He had Crake's keys and wallet, which he handed over. "Drive him out of here," he said sternly. "Don't come back."

Still protesting, Crake was forced into the passenger side by the guards, and he howled when they slammed the door on his hand. I said nothing, just got in and quickly drove out. In the rear-view mirror, I saw the gathering of guards grow larger as they all converged on the parking lot to watch us leave.

"What happened in there? You pissed them off for sure."

"After you left, the lovely lady concierge went to get someone, and since the immediate guards were escorting you, I used the opening to do a quick walk around. I sort of borrowed a pass card from her desk drawer and used it to get inside. Every single door is coded in that place. There are a few underground floors, but the card didn't have security clearance to take me down, so I took the elevator up. I got inside a large lab area and got in, passing as a new staff member. Only one person questioned me as I looked around; an imperious, short, bald fellow who was some sort of manager. There was a display up at his end, and a quick look at it told me his department is working on

medical stuff. Some sort of technology or serum in the blood that greatly reduces a body's resistance to transplanted organs. I got that far, then alarms went off, and security people burst in and Tasered me. God, that hurt. I still feel fried. My threats to sue were just to get out of there. They could charge me with trespassing, but I think we're free because they don't want any real police on the scene. I'm sure that a key job of their security is to make sure there is no situation where that happens."

We were about a block off, and I noticed a Genistorm security car on our tail. I ignored it and continued with Crake. "You can bet they are doing ethically questionable stuff. Probably working on how to make people live forever, with fattened heads or some such thing."

"You make it sound sick, but in modern science, it is big stuff. They are probably doing solid amounts of advanced research. What we think of as repulsive, doctors and scientists eat for breakfast. A breakthrough serum that makes organ transplants harmonious would be worth billions and probably a Nobel Prize. Think of it, a way to do multiple transplants on a person with no rejection."

"I'm thinking, but only the pain and horror of it come to mind. Okay ... we know they are into advanced R&D. I don't particularly care for the idea of people living forever as a conglomeration of organs sprouting from cadavers and swine. But whoever listened to me. I think we are facing a future where the lucky people are those who die and don't have to live on as the swamp thing."

The Genistorm cops followed us a few blocks, and though they dropped behind, my concern was that they had the plate. Crake was chiding me about Jack, saying he had to be a chicken shit to just get cold feet and take off. I believed he had a reason, and as we pulled back in the rental lot, he suddenly appeared. We were walking across the lot when he wheeled in and got out. We didn't engage him but left him waiting while we went into the hut and arranged to switch to another vehicle. Since we paid extra for the Chevy Malibu, the rental man was beginning to like us. He liked us even more when we bribed him to give a story to any security men or others who showed. He was to say that we paid and walked off, heading south.

As Crake grabbed the Malibu, I asked Jack why he made a quick getaway from Genistorm.

The rental lot was on the corner; Jack studied the stream of traffic as he leaned against his vehicle. My eyes flicked to a rough character coming out of the alley across the street. He went into a place that was a cyber café and billiards hall.

"There was no reason for me to stick around. Better not to be spotted. I knew you and your pal would pull through with your con job. I did a slow run along the fence and grounds, and that's all I needed. The best point of entry is that wall at the back, but even that has a security system attached. The sign there said protected by Bearpaw Security."

"I hope this talk doesn't mean you plan on going inside the grounds. I suppose I could do it since updating Bearpaw systems was one of my part-time jobs after getting terminated from the police force."

“Just getting over the wall and taking a brief look at what’s in those exterior buildings might help. We probably wouldn’t want to attempt the main building with all those guards.”

“The wall is not an obstacle. Bearpaw uses a pressure-sensitive strip along the top. It is perfect at detecting humans climbing over, yet doesn’t alarm for things like squirrels or even a raccoon.”

Crake pulled up, leaned out the window, and said, “Where to next?”

“Your place. I have a video on a stick to view. The hatchet lady at Genistorm said it was a beat-it video from Josie to me, but that is impossible.”

“Get in,” Crake said. “I’ve been in that café across the road before. There’s parking in the back. We can view it there.”

Ten minutes later, we had a sporty gaming laptop at our table in the café. Jack and I sipped dark beers, and Crake gulped lemonade. The place was big and featured three game areas. One area was pool tables. The next section was gaming with classic video game machines, and virtual reality was gaming near the front in a curtained-off area. The café was the smallest area and right at the front. It was a split between drinkers and cappuccino types, and we were in the best section in a booth that could seat four with plenty of extra space. Décor featured rough wood grain, dark browns, mahogany, and signs made of colored neon tubing. A big sheet of tinted glass with big sign letters frosted on it was to my left; it was the front window. The car rental lot and hut were visible across the street, and I kept an eye on the lot while we talked.

Crake had Jack involved in a long discussion about the Illuminati, and that somehow deteriorated into a talk about other dimensions. As I looked out the window, Crake was saying, “Portals on earth are a belief that has existed in all generations. According to some secret societies, reality is composed of nine dimensions that overlap in space but are separate in practice. The Illuminati think that Lucifer is the only being that can visit the ninth and highest plane. He is their god. But I believe the portal they want to open is not to the higher realm, but to a lower one, to obtain the power and force of the demons there. That is the portal the Egyptians opened, a portal to a netherworld. As far as secret societies go, many arose from the Babylonian and ancient Egyptian mysteries. The Masons actually rise from the pyramid builders, who were the great early stonemasons, but building was only one area of their knowledge. The Catholic popes destroyed most secret societies over time. The church had knowledge of secret societies because the original pope in Rome wasn’t Peter the Christian at all; he was Peter the pagan. Before Christianity, the popes were pagan leaders and holders of the keys to the pagan mysteries. The Illuminati, in the period of Catholic persecution, preserved knowledge, keeping it from the destructive hands of the Vatican. But there was a dark side of the Illuminati from the beginning; the mummies and netherworld worship of the Egyptians that somehow transformed into the Satanist core today. The Knights Templar worshiped the Baphomet, which Satanists later incorporated.”

Jack swallowed a mouthful of beer and released a mouthful in answer to Crake. “When they talk of other dimensions, it has nothing to do with the ten dimensions of modern science’s string theory. They use the word “dimension” to describe complete, alternate

planes of reality. Robust environments like the cosmos we see, but areas of the cosmos we can't enter. Now, if you go to the Bible, it talks of three heavens, roughly meaning our Earth, then all of outer space, and finally God's dwelling place. The Illuminati would not believe that because they do not believe in God, or rather believe Satan is God. Like you, I believe that the portal the occult wing of the Illuminati wants to open does not take anyone to a higher plane of being but to a lower Hades."

As they rambled on, the only thing I became certain of was that they were both nuts. I jumped into the conversation. "I don't understand this Satan portals stuff or how it relates to Genistorm or even the Illuminati. A minute ago, you were talking about how people had to believe in a higher power to join the Masons and Illuminati-related groups, but the higher power could be anything. Sort of the all-roads-lead-higher deal."

Jack shrugged and answered. "That would describe them as they are on all roads, whether science or the occult, to reach for power ... whatever they think leads higher. The idea is of elite people becoming like gods. That idea somehow gets out into the mainstream and becomes a homogenized and politically correct harmony of religions. They will eventually enable a worldwide church composed of all religions that will give them godlike control over the masses. But the occult wing wants to do more than control people and gather wealth; they want to gain genuine supernatural power. The worldwide church is just a tool; they believe in Satan and the supernatural. Now, when I say supernatural, it doesn't exclude science, because once science makes leaps, it is like magic. A TV would be supernatural magic to someone living two hundred years ago. Alchemy and Satan worship are science to them as well. They believe Satan can grant them superhuman powers."

As Jack was saying that, my eyes had strayed out the window to watch a withered old man in a rumpled dark suit and big dark glasses limp across the car lot to the sales hut. Before he went inside, he stopped and turned. The wind caught his long white hair. He took off his glasses and stared across the road toward the café. His eyes were blind, so he couldn't see me, but I had the feeling he somehow did see me. His face altered into a quick hallucinatory flash of a demon's face, similar to a face I'd seen on one of Crake's masks."

I suddenly slammed my hand on the table, nearly spilling my beer. "Damn, you guys and your talk about Satan is conjuring him up. Let's forget that subject and play the video."

Crake raised an eyebrow, and Jack nodded. The computer booted up, and I slipped in the stick and raised the volume. Since the arcade was noisy, I wasn't worried about anyone else violating our privacy. A glance around showed everyone nearby occupied. I slid the computer across the table so we could all see, and then we watched the brief video.

The sun-rippled waters of a small lake appeared, the camera backed off to a shoreline of polished stones, then over to a sand beach. A motorboat and a dock were visible in the background as the camera continued moving. Then Josie came into view. She was sitting on the remains of an old concrete pier, and an older man sat beside her. He had dark hair with a sprinkling of grey on the sides and a handsome face like a TV doctor. He wore a blue long-sleeved shirt, buff pants, and black shoes. The clothes looked like

he'd just taken them out of the wrappers and put them on for the film shoot. He was big and in good shape, with well-defined muscles. There was a creepy aspect to him. I instinctively knew he was phony.

Josie looked to be in great shape but sort of spaced out. Her eyes sparkled. I could see the sprinkling of freckles across her nose. She wore new jeans, a pullover sweater, and a glittering necklace, as if where they were was a little colder than Toronto. The camera zoomed in on her face, and she had no marks or cuts. She waved, then began to speak. "Joe. I'm sorry to do it this way, the hard way. To make it short but not sweet, it's over between us. Rael is my new love." She glanced to the older man beside her and patted his knee. He smiled reassuringly with his mouth, but his eyes did not carry the smile, so I knew it was put on.

Josie continued. "He's mature, strong, successful ... all the things you are not. They have given me some time off work, but I'll be returning soon. When that happens, don't look me up or come to my place of work. There really is nothing more to talk about. I'm sure you'll forget the past and move on, just as Raj has moved on to a new and better life. Goodbye, Joey."

The words 'Goodbye, Joey' actually had a fadeout. As the screen went dark, it was like my sanity had faded out. The three of us remained speechless. Josie had been so convincing that both Crake and Jack eyed me. They wanted to understand my reaction before saying anything.

I said nothing. Jack cleared his throat ominously and turned to Crake. "I blew Raj's head off. We kidnapped Josie. She looked so much like she believed what she was saying in the video that for a moment I almost believed her."

I didn't reply immediately. Fiery explosions, gun pops, canned screams, a mingling of music and voices, the general hubbub of the place rose like a tidal wave. I put my hand over my eyes. I'd never been totally rejected before, and my heartbeat rose with a panic attack. I became certain I was insane; the drug had fried my brain. I peered through my fingers at Crake, thinking that maybe he wasn't real but another of my hallucinations. What I thought had happened must not have happened. Even Jack, maybe the Illuminati had planted him to play games with my head. What hurt most, even more than madness, was that I was the loser. A loser in love, and I wanted to kill this Rael character. Yet even if I did, what good would it do? Josie had said it was over, not to try to patch things up or look for her.

Since I couldn't speak, Crake did. "Hang on, Joe. You're freaking out. It's just a head game. They can't fool three of us. Jack knows Raj was a plant. I've seen the ID and his gun. The flying saucer was a real drone, and the rest was real, too. They might have messed with your mind some at that warehouse. They softened you up with that drug, but we've seen and know enough to be sure you don't have false memories."

The panic started to pass. "But Josie doesn't want me anymore. No matter how you look at it, there is no point in my pursuing it or pursuing them."

"Ah, I see why they did it," Jack said. "The psychological impact of such a video would be to destroy your ego. You're supposed to lose faith, think your sanity is gone, and give up so they can move in and pick you off."

“But Josie must be in with them. How else could they make that film? And who in the hell is Rael?”

Crake looked off into space for a moment, then concluded. “Look, I could examine the video. It is probably a complete fake. But I really don’t have to check it because logic destroys it. I’m certain that they have her hypnotized or on mind-control drugs. They made the video thinking they’d only be dealing with you, and you would be easy to drive crazy because they gave you that drug. They want to turn your brain into mush. It even fooled me for a moment. They didn’t know Jack would split from them, giving you a direct witness to collaborate your story.”

Jack rapped his knuckles on the table. “This thing is more about Josie than we first thought. Thinking it through, I see that she was somehow working on special research that interested the Illuminati. She wasn’t partying with any Rael or planning to dump you. She was working, and they had Raj planted inside that company, following her and the whole operation. I was supposed to hit you because they knew Josie had no plans on ditching you. We have to go back to Genistorm and find out what she was doing. And we need her location. From that video, I read that she isn’t far off. It was a mistake sending it because it actually tips us off. It looked a bit colder where they were, but once you go outside Toronto, it usually gets a little colder. Whatever location they have her at is sure to be the mother lode. We have to find it. It showed her in good shape as well, and that is unusual for people like them. Anyone else would already be dead or a specimen in their lab. That indicates mind control, and they can do it because I’ve seen it before.”

My sanity began to return. The idea of the mother lode and what it might be drifted in my mind. It sailed out of my mind just as fast because, as far as I knew, it could be anything from another warehouse torture chamber to an alien landing pad. Crake and Jack’s description of the Illuminati and what they might be up to was so broad that it made them nearly impossible to investigate. I knew I had to get my focus back on three things – Jules Gentry, Dark Circle undertakers, and Genistorm. Tracking them would lead us to the mother lode.

Looking up, feeling better, I was about to say something, then I felt compelled to look out the window. The old man emerged from the hut. He limped slowly away. I felt a breeze brush the side of my head, almost like someone was blowing on my ear. “That old man. Over there in the car lot. I think he has a message for us.”

“What?” Crake said, turning and glancing out the window. Jack also looked. The old man stopped and turned, facing us. He took off his glasses, and the sun beamed down on his face, revealing eyes filmed with cataracts. The rest of that face was a mass of carved wrinkles, almost like scars.

“He can’t see anything, he can’t see us,” Crake said. “What makes you think he has a message?”

“Somehow I just know. It’s like he put the idea in my mind, but so subtly that it seems like my idea.”

“I don’t pick up anything,” Jack said. “But the guy is staring this way, like if he doesn’t see us, he smells us.”

The man moved to turn away, then lifted his cane, pointing it at the curb. He held his left hand palm up to the sky. After a few moments of that pose, he went around the corner and out of sight.

I was already on my feet. "Don't go after him. It's a trap," Crake said.

"Don't worry. I won't be long. I'm going to dash into the rental hut, see what he was there for, and come straight back."

Jack followed me through the tables to the front door, but he stayed in the entrance alcove and visually checked the area while I hurried across the street. The sun flashes from the office complexes beyond the car lot felt like the sudden gaze of a thousand eyes. An SUV's horn blared at me, and started other drivers honking. I ran through the car lot against a gust of dusty wind, went up the steps, and into the hut. The salesman was present, leaning back in his padded swivel chair, the ad section of the newspaper out, his eyes closed. I rapped my knuckles on the counter, turning his snore into a snort.

He woke and nearly fell off his chair. "Sorry," he said. "Just a little siesta."

I tapped my fingers nervously. "That great grandpa that just came in, what did he want?"

"Huh," he said, looking truly baffled. "I didn't talk to anyone like that. Say, didn't you just leave with your friends?"

It was then that I noticed I was rapping my fingers on a piece of paper on the counter. I knew the old man had left it. "My friend forgot this," I said, waving the sheet as I turned and left. I closed the door and stopped on the steps. There was nothing on the sheet but a drawing. Almost like a child's sketch done in fine black pen. I searched for words on it as I walked to the street. A pickup truck swerved in and nearly hit me as I reached the curb. Jack stepped out, whistled, and waved an urgent warning, so I dashed back across the road and went back inside with him.

Crake came over, and we talked at the entrance. "They know we're here," Jack said. "The driver of that pickup was a goon of some variety."

"He almost ran me down. Man, am I getting careless."

Crake snatched the sheet from my hand. "They are toying with us. You shouldn't have taken the bait and gone over there. After seeing this sheet, I'm doubly sure. What in the hell is this? It looks like a child's drawing. A church in a park, an open book, an old man, a bottle corked with a message."

"And the setting sun," I added. "The old sorcerer man drew it. The church is the one off the park near you with the two towers. We know what the book is. See the pentacle on it. The message in the bottle means they are offering me info about Josie. The setting sun means this evening. They want to trade. The old man is the one making the switch with us."

Jack led the way as we left the café through the back pool hall. There were no obvious hostiles lurking in the parking area or watching it. We stood behind the pay booth discussing the situation.

"Sounds like a rip-off," Crake said. "They can do better than that. A priceless book is worth more than a nibble of information."

“Yeah, but we don’t know what the information is. I think it is Josie’s location. Your priceless book will only attract more people like them if you try to list or sell it. If I wanted to kill someone, I’d give it to them.”

“I don’t feel good about that old man,” Jack said. “He could find us anywhere. He’s like a blind bloodhound, but he’s not one of Gentry’s people. He doesn’t fit the mold. This deal is offered by mercenaries. They probably want to profit from that book, sell it back to Gentry’s crew, or exchange it for something.”

I shrugged. “Maybe they have their own use for it. Probably many weird people want to conjure up Satan. The way I see it, our hand is forced. That wizened mind-reader man is too dangerous. I felt him. If Gentry grabs him, our every move will be known. We have to deal with him before something like that happens.”

Jack and I wanted to do the trade, so Crake lost out. We drove through town without problems or tails. Crake slipped into his place to pick up the book and found that his store was untouched. We left quickly as we didn’t want to be tracked there. To kill time before the exchange at the park, we drove back to Genistorm, but not to the gate. Instead, we parked on the far side where rail tracks, a gully, and a curve of rising freeway swung around near the security wall Genistorm had constructed at the back. We walked in and found an observation point on a rise above the tracks. Bushes shielded us, and a hovel for transients near us would cause any guards spotting us from far off to think we were some of the smelly residents.

Jack studied the place carefully with binoculars while Crake sat on a boulder smoking and studying the scene in his own way. I considered how the three of us were not alike. Jack was seasoned, his face worn by weather and the hard life fate had delivered. He’d worked on every type of labor and job while on his mission to upend the Illuminati and rescue his sister. A standard cop would see him as a murderer or gunslinger, but the word cop no longer described me. The world contained colors other than black and white. At least it did when the undertakers weren’t around. Perhaps some of Jack had rubbed off and made me better. His deadly serious edge worked to keep me away from the old carefree and foolish Joe Holiday. Crake had also suddenly matured, and his boyish dreams of being a hard-nosed writer or journalist had been exposed as unrealistic. The reality was hammering him like the scarred fists of that kind-faced black giant I’d battled on the beach.

The view of Genistorm from our perch didn’t seem quite real. It was as if someone had painted a science-fiction scene into this back-alley landscape. From our angle, the buildings off from the main structure showed as much bigger than they’d looked from the front, and there were a lot more of them in view. It was impossible to guess what they contained, as some were refrigerated and others heated. Others had tanks of various fuels or gases alongside them. They were also varied in shape, and none of them had windows. Some looked like they’d been converted from railway cars. An elongated dome stretched next to a smaller upright dome. The oddest structure had a ribbed octagon for a roof. One building was a gleaming aluminum cube, and four larger rectangular structures surrounded it. A series of asphalt walkways connected them. From the rear, they could only be seen from a higher perch like ours as the wall, shrubbery, and trees shielded them. I watched two guards, one male and the other

female, do a patrol. I didn't see anyone entering or leaving the structures. Human activity was nearly all over at the main building and its parking lot.

Jack put down his binoculars. "See those two Securican Air & Heating vans and the men beside them. They service those outside buildings. The side of the truck has its logo and the Genistorm logo, so Genistorm must have bought its own security service company."

"I know where they are located, and it's not far from here," I said. "I haven't done any work for that company."

"If we go in after dark, we have to shut down the cameras," Jack said. "I have a jammer, a good one. I can pick out the routers, shut off the wireless cameras, but leave their other communications intact so they won't be suspicious."

Crake gave me a nervous glance. "That place has so many guards, and they've got my number. Going in is a serious risk. See those huge gates in the wall and the section shrouded by trees. They have a rail loop running into the grounds. They must ship stuff out; those three parked rail cars look outgoing, waiting for pickup."

"Yeah," I said. "I've been studying them. They're unnaturally large and all specially built. They look more like passenger cars that have been converted for special freight. Genistorm is producing more than research. We need to find out what they're shipping out and where."

Jack nodded. "We'll try the exchange with the book first. If it doesn't pay off, we hit this place after midnight."

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The sunset arrived with warm autumn power, sending blinding beams through the quiet park. I entered on a path from the condominium towers on the north side into long shadows and a blanket of dry leaves. We had scouted the area in advance and spotted nothing out of the ordinary. Communication was through the earpieces provided by Crake, which were static-free at short range. He was driving up on the south side in the Toyota van we'd rented, and Jack had a perch on the back of the concrete hood that covered the entrance of the underground parking garage just outside the park. His location was to the east, and he was shielded by tree branches. The Marionite church was to the west, its two towers bathed in the heavenly glory of the sunset.

Carrying the antique book like an ordinary library book as I strolled over the grass, I waited for a sign. If bad omens arose, I had two guns hidden by a thigh-length fall jacket. The Colt was in an under-the-shoulder holster, and Raj's Springfield was in the jacket's large inside pocket. I'd given the Rhino to Crake.

I didn't trust this deal because there were too many ways it could go wrong. Our side was trustworthy, but all the others were treacherous. Jack was watching my back with a Ruger sniper rifle, and he'd said that facing the sunset from his position wouldn't affect his aim. Crake couldn't hit anything farther than a few feet away. I was sure of that. He was another lookout, and he would drive the van right over the grass to get me if needed. My plan was to wait on one of the benches in the park if the old man didn't show immediately. Now that I was actually in the park, my feelings were that I should've

listened to Crake, even if his motives for wanting to keep the book were greed. We already had photographs of it for study if needed. Without a doubt, those photographs would be used by Crake to forge fake antique copies for sale, but the originals were most valuable.

I was about twenty yards in when Jack's husky voice tickled my ear. "A man. He's up in the church tower to your left. It's a priest."

"I've met him. He must be their lookout. The old man will probably come out now."

Crake weighed in from the van. "Neither of you can see it. A police cruiser just blocked Freeport Street at the front of the church. Right behind that tower, where Jack says the priest is standing. The division markings on it are wrong. It's not a downtown car."

"I don't like it. It could be routine, but if it is crooked cops, they are in with Jules Gentry. Warn me if any cops get out and head for the park."

"Be ready, in case you have to run," Jack said. "The old man is now in view, coming down from a side entrance, north side of the church. You'll see him in a few seconds. Wait. There's a second man, hidden. It's Harley. Remember the giant black man with me that day on the beach. He's Gentry's man. So they're either on to the old man or they set up this deal through him to get the book."

Crake cut in. "Two people not far from me, suspicious, black clothing. One is female, athletic figure, red-streaked hair. She's with a big man, brush of blond hair, long dark coat, sunglasses."

"It's the undertaker from the beach that staked out my car, and the woman from my apartment. This is going to be tight. Those are Gentry's people. He's on to the trade. I still think the old man is legit, but they tracked him. I need to get it done before they rush in on us. Fuck, I see the old man now. I wish he would walk faster. He walks like the living dead."

"Maybe he has zombie blood in him," Jack said. "More bad news. Jules Gentry is here. He just got out of the back of that police car. There were no cops in it. Two undertakers just got out of the front doors."

"What's Gentry doing?"

"I'm on it," Crake said. "Evil bastard, isn't he. Looks like the captain of a CIA black site. He has something in his hand. It's not a phone or a gun. Don't go near those trash cans. Stay in open grass. It might be a detonator. Blondie and his woman have stopped, just loitering, and looking on. I think they're going to let you make the trade and then hit the old man for the book."

"Man, I hope I don't blow this job like I've blown every other job."

Jack grunted. "You belittle yourself. Doing many things and failing at them means you learned more than most people."

"If I fail on this job, I think the lesson is death. Okay, I'm at the bench, but I'm not sitting down. Shit, the old geezer is stopping and looking back. Here he comes. I'll try to get a clear recording of anything he says."

The old man wheezed like the short walk was about to kill him. Up close, he was striking, but in an unsettling way. He had white hair, but not neat like Gentry; his was limp, wispy, thin, and yellowed. His lips were pulled back and purpled against stained teeth like those of a man in pain. Dark glasses thankfully hid most of his pocked face. Whether he was armed was impossible to tell because his buff coat was shin-length and belted tight so that it puffed out above and below his waist.

He kept his distance, tapped his cane, and spoke in a raspy voice. "Is there anything you'd like to know?"

"Yeah. Back in that car lot, you put an idea in my head. You knew how to find us. So you must know that Mr. Gentry is here, too?"

"I know he's here. I didn't invite him. Put the book down on the bench, Mr. Holiday. Relieving yourself of it is your only way to remain alive."

"Not until you keep your part of the bargain. News about Josie."

"I will give you more than that. First, I have a map." He took a folded piece of paper from his pocket and put it on his end of the bench. "The note I've placed there has a map of the place where she is. That's all I have to offer. The map does not tell you how to get there. I can see the place to draw the map, but they have a way of blinding me as to exactly where it is. And it comes with a challenge."

"What challenge? That wasn't part of the bargain. Your note only indicated a meeting. I'm not here to figure out puzzles or do challenges."

He lifted his dark glasses with one hand, revealing cataracts. Yet the right eye was an evil eye, seeing with something other than sight. He smiled with grim satisfaction. "You knew that if you came here you had to get out alive, and I knew that I would have to get away with the book or make some other arrangement."

"Jules Gentry is here, so I hope you made some other arrangement."

"Perhaps," he said, and then nodded for me to put down the book.

What he didn't expect was how fast I would do it, which was in the blink of an eye. I had the sheet of paper, the book rested there on the bench ... and then the deal went sour, and the place went nuts.

Like a viper, the old man had his cane up, and I dodged to the side as he fired a projectile from it. It went over my shoulder and speared a tree trunk. He didn't get a second chance because I shoved him away, causing his cane to fall to the paved path. Rather than retrieve it, he threw his body over the book.

Having no need for the book, I stuffed the paper in my inside coat pocket and pulled the Springfield. But I didn't shoot him. The old man struck me as too pathetic to shoot.

Two bullets ricocheted off the bench behind me. My eyes went west to the brilliant sun, the tower, and the priest standing there. He had a rifle, but he didn't get another shot. I saw his shoulder explode. He stumbled sideways and tripped. He went down to one knee, then got up, waving the rifle wildly. I knew Jack had shot him, but the next shot wasn't from Jack. Two people came into view on the second tower of the church. I saw

a woman with a rifle silhouetted against the sunset, and her shot knocked the priest right off the tower. He fell backward down into the garden and out of sight.

“Gentry and two undertakers charging toward the park,” Crake announced.

“Who in the fuck are those people on the tower?” Jack said.

“Shit!” Crake yelled. “The other two are running for the van. I’m outta here.”

I wasn’t sure what to do. Gentry and two undertakers were coming around the side of the church. Jack fired three shots. He didn’t hit them but forced them to stop and duck for cover at the church side. Off to the south, Crake was driving the Toyota van in a crazy half circle in and out of the park with two people chasing him and shooting.

Then the second person on the tower, a tall man, rose into view and fired something that pulsed with crimson and flew high over the park. I hit the grass, hearing Jack yell, “Going to ground, position compromised.”

And that was an understatement, because I looked east and saw the portion of the concrete hood Jack had been positioned on explode into a cloud of debris. I couldn’t see Jack; I assumed he’d jumped down into the bushes and trees on the park side. Crake had escaped in the van and was disappearing from view on the side street running straight south off the park. Now his two pursuers had their attention turned to me. They were still far off, as were Gentry and the other men. I put my focus back on the tower, saw the woman about to fire a rifle shot at me, and ducked behind a tree. She missed. A second shot pounded the tree, and then I burst out, rolled on the grass, and fired several shots from the silenced Springfield.

The woman fell, I’d hit her with at least two shots, but the man with the strange gun wasn’t hit, he was taking aim, so I ran and dived again. A couple of seconds later, an incendiary shot hit the tree trunk beside me, setting it on fire.

The situation looked hopeless; Gentry and the others were slowly closing in, looking around warily because they didn’t know where Jack was hiding. Their diligence paid off because Jack wasn’t out. He fired a series of shots, staggering one undertaker with three nasty hits to the torso. He went down, causing Gentry and the others to take cover again. But they were closer now, behind trees and in control of the south and west ends.

And there was more trouble arriving; any escape via the condominium path to the north was blocked by three undertakers rushing in by the north garden. That left east, where Jack was hiding, but that end was blocked by a wall, and the man on the tower had already shown how easy he could hit a target in that parking lot or on the roof to the underground entrance just over the wall. I’d put trees between us to block his shots, but soon Gentry would be close enough for accurate shots.

Retreating to Jack and hoping Crake would come back up the road and drive in seemed the only option. I turned to move, then heard the old man speak. He’d risen from the bench with the book in his hand. A freak wind gust blew his hair in his face. He nearly stumbled but caught his balance.

“Leaving so soon,” he rasped. “I promised you a message, not just a map.”

“Yeah, well, make it fast. Like about one second fast.”

“No,” he said, raising his arms in the air. “We’ve got all night!” He was shouting now. He looked like a scarecrow, and one about to be shot to puffs of straw. “All night!” he yelled as his glasses fell off and his blind eyes blazed with light. I saw flames behind the cataracts, and then something unexplainable happened. He’d touched my mind again, and this time things went completely weird. To the west and south, Gentry and his people had broken cover and started a rush in. But as I watched, they all stopped and remained standing at various spots in the autumn duff. They had their guns out. They didn’t shoot. It was like they were frozen. Twilight time had arrived, and a glance up to the tower showed the man there also still. He didn’t move, but he held his funky needlepointed weapon in firing position.

“Listen, old man. I don’t know how you do this magic or why. If you have a message, give it. And maybe you should consider that your message isn’t worth much if you don’t let me leave here alive with it.”

“You mean the cane.” He picked it up and tapped it against the bench. “That was just a small test of your reflexes, to see if you are worthy.”

“Worthy of what?”

“Of this ... a message from the angels. Behold!”

He didn’t swing his cane to fire at me this time, but raised it and pointed it in the air in the direction of the church. An angel appeared in the air between the two towers, and I knew I had to be hallucinating. I stared; the angel flew right to us and descended with a flutter of wings. As it landed, any thoughts of beauty vanished. The rippling of wings settled, and what stood there in the grass, thankfully five yards away, was some hideous androgynous thing. It had a broad chest and thick thighs like a man, but partial breasts. Tight, light-blue fabric clothed it from the feet to the hips. The upper body was naked, and its face was hideous, almost reptilian. Slit mouth, eyes slanted and emerald green, it was more alien than human.

The old man walked up close. I couldn’t move. He looked into my eyes, breathed on me with foul breath. “The message is that the angel can’t speak. He is one of their failed experiments, just as I am. But I am the first to escape them, and that was long ago. You see Jules Gentry over there, he can’t move any more than you can. He has no protection here.”

Somehow, the old man released me. I could move and speak. I rubbed my eyes gently, then looked again. “What is that thing? Why are you showing him to me?”

“You wanted to know about Josie, what they need her for. It is to make more of their monsters. There would be no other reason.”

“That can’t be true. Josie wouldn’t do that, and you wouldn’t care anyway. You said they created you.”

“Yes, and I hate them, but I can’t harm them or unleash my full powers onto them. They built it into me.”

“Who are they, and where is Josie?”

“She is in an underground facility of the Illuminati run by their Satanist leader, Jules Gentry. This is a new facility they built for an unknown purpose.”

“If you aren’t partying with them, why come to me?”

“You look promising. I wanted to have a look at you. They had to come because they wanted the book. I won’t keep it from them because I’m hoping the magic in it will destroy them when they try to use it. I’m like most things they created. With me, they took me when I was a child. Gentry’s predecessor was in charge at the time. I can defy them to some extent, and I have. Now you have your message. I gave you a map, but I can’t tell you how to get there because I don’t know the way. They blinded me to that as well. I doubt you’ll find their lair or even get out of here alive, but since you had the courage to oppose them, I’m giving you and Jack a chance. Get ready to run.”

The old man retrieved his fallen glasses, put them on, and again raised his arms. His angel or demon came to life with a rush of wings as it sailed to him. It seized him and carried him slowly aloft. Gentry and his people returned to life and immediately continued their rush in my direction, with weapons drawn, but not firing at me. They fired at the rising angel and the old man. The shooter from the tower sent out a stream of fire orbs that burst around the angel, but it looked to be unhurt as it fluttered around a condominium tower at the edge of the park and disappeared out of sight with the old man.

As the focus returned to me, I saw the book where it had fallen. I decided to leave it and run, but I only made it three steps before feeling blazing heat at the side of my head. I knew a bullet had grazed me, and I got another step, saw stars, and fell to the grass.

A long black moment followed. I was on my back and heard voices. I sat up quickly and realized that it was too late. They had gathered around me in a semi-circle, and the twilight had deepened. Three of the undertakers were already walking away, melting into the park landscape and shadows. The woman with the red hair had her silenced weapon pointed at me. She was smiling, overjoyed to have this opportunity to get even. Jules Gentry stepped up to the group around me. He held the book to his chest like a preacher. The twilight transformed him. At the warehouse, he’d looked like an evil crime boss, but now, under a purpling sky, the man resembled an evil warlock. Like the book properly belonged to him. He stared down at me, and I had the feeling that he pitied me. Harley, the big black man, stood beside him, and this time his face didn’t look kind. He’d seen more than enough of me and wanted this to be the final viewing.

The undertaker with the blond crew cut did the talking. “Any last words before she blows your head off?”

They had their backs to the church and its tower. I saw a flicker of light there that they didn’t see. Then I said. “I have four final words.”

Gentry sneered. “And they are?”

“Look out behind you.”

They all turned, even my red-haired executioner, and as they turned, the fireballs hit. The undertaker beside Harley burst into flames, and Gentry and the others were thrown.

The bitch executioner tried to pivot back and shoot me even while being knocked by the blast, but I got out of the way fast, and then I was running.

As I ran, Crake sped the van up the side street onto the grass. He drove with his head down, going right through a flower garden and some bushes. Dashing around to the side of the van, I got in, and he tore up turf as he turned in the park. Shots pinged off the sides, the rear window exploded, but he continued driving, nearly crashing into the east wall. A hard turn nearly tipped us over. Kicking up dirt and sod, the van lurched forward on a race along the wall for the side street. A sharp turn, and we went off the curb and up the street just as the police cruiser sped down from the church. It reached us just as more fire from the tower came, and the cruiser got the worst of it, bursting into flames as we drove around it. I had my head out the window, but ducked back as the police car exploded. Then we were in the clear, turning and stopping at the front of the church as we waited for Jack to escape from the tower. Stained glass shattered in a second-floor window. Jack came down with it, rolled in the grass at the front, and ran to the van.

As we sped down the street, I wanted to know how Jack did it.

“A dead fast run is how I did it. I shot the undertaker that remained guarding the path you came in on. Two others followed me out and went the wrong way after me, thinking I was fleeing the scene. I never stopped running. I went around a condo tower and got in the same church entrance the old man emerged from, and up to the tower to surprise their shooter. It took about ten seconds to figure out how to fire that gun of his. It fires a form of incendiary rounds. I have no idea where they got it.”

Crake slowed and drove nervously past a theater crowd. He glanced at me. “How can you be so calm? When you went down, I was sure you were dead.”

“It’s a nine lives thing.” I touched the line of congealed blood on my right temple. “When a black cat starts a new life, he does it fearlessly.”

“That so,” Jack said.

“Not really. When the old man called that freak angel in, I nearly lost it. Now I’m a new me. After experiencing Gentry and that old man, I believe in magic and demons. Get us clear, Crake, we need to stop somewhere and discuss the old man’s message.”

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Part Three: Genistorm

Crake routed the van through a number of residential side streets. When we were sure no tails were on us, we went to Jack’s suggested location, which was Jeremy’s Auto Repair on Mary Street. The place was off Dupont Road, and the side street was a hidden, dingy pocket of poverty that few people would ever discover. The shop stood next to a small junkyard, which made it even more remote. Dead bugs and dust coated Jeremy’s outdoor lights, even in autumn, and they lit the seedy scene with unnatural bluish light. At the back of the junkyard, a humongous flashing sign up on a platform

spammed the nearby freeway with its parade of ads. The garage itself was a concrete-block structure with faded, rusted signage and a concrete front apron that was cracked and angled from shifting earth beneath it.

Crake and I waited in the van while Jack went inside. A couple of minutes later, one of the dented doors began to squeak and tremble as it rolled up. A stocky man wearing grimy overalls waved us forward. We parked, hopped out on oiled earth, and Jack introduced us to a mechanic named Sacha. As Jack had explained on the way, Jeremy was dead, and Sacha hadn't changed the name for business reasons. He was the owner and the only mechanic permanently on site. He slept in a dumpy apartment above the garage that overlooked the front and part of the junkyard. The interior of his repair garage was spacious, with conveniences to make it a live-in garage.

Sacha's hair had been buzzed short. It looked like he cut it himself. His English was fair, and he displayed fine hospitality, immediately producing some folding chairs and a stool. He poured shots of Crystal Head vodka into some chipped rock glasses and pulled a bottle of orange juice from a beat-up fridge.

We discussed a price regarding the Toyota van, and Jack offered to pay the usual bonus for keeping it quiet.

Sacha walked around the van, tapping it here and there with his boot toe to rattle his brain into calculating what the job would entail. "She took some heavy gunshots. And her ass is scorched. Broken glass is easy to replace." He cleared his throat and spat a big gob into the greasy earth. "To mask it, paint the same color and make it new - three days."

"Cash payment in advance," I said. "We paid a week's rental fee at the car lot, so you have more than three days. When done, drop it off at the lot. Here's the card. It's not far. We'd pick it up, but we probably won't be around."

"If you work like this, no, you won't be around. Seeing where those bullets hit is seeing that your balls got a haircut."

Crake poured a second shot of vodka. "Sacha, the demons were coming for us. I think I need some time off."

"No deal. We're on overtime," Jack growled. "Remember the midnight shift work we discussed earlier."

Crake put his hand to his tired red eyes. "We haven't discussed the info Joe picked up. Nightshift might not be necessary."

My eyes went to Jack's. He knew what it was about, and I read in them that Sacha could be trusted to keep a secret. "Okay," I said, looking slowly to each of them. "If I stared at that sheet the old man gave me most of the way here, it's because I don't know what in the hell it is about." I displayed the first side of the unfolded sheet so everyone could see it. "It's a pentacle with a circle around it, and another small circle at its center. It has a measuring scale beside it, and an inverted cross outside the pentacle. At the top, the name is Baphomet's Cradle." I flipped the sheet. "This side is like native art. The old man drew a sort of native shaman thing."

Sacha rubbed his greasy hands on a rag. "Give me the sheet. I see something there."

I was reluctant, but I gave it to him, and he studied it for about twenty seconds, flipping the sheet side to side. “The side with the native shaman drawing, I don’t understand. But this side is a crude map of an underground structure. The scale at the bottom is missing the measurement units. But I think it is big, very big. Like someone built this thing underground.”

Crake took the sheet and felt its texture. “One thing is for sure. It’s not a message from Josie. But maybe a map of where she is. I need to do some checking. It’s impossible to build a large structure underground in secret. Maybe Josie’s employer built something underground. If so, why like a pentacle with an inner circle?”

I grabbed the sheet back. “There is a reason they would do something like that. It would be that all of the people we have been dealing with are totally fucked up.”

Jack agreed. “It fits exactly with Jules Gentry and his people. The Illuminati have many underground lairs, but as far as I know, they have never had one in this region. The darkest wing of the Illuminati isn’t here to build a new yacht club for bankers; they are here working on something sinister.”

Jack tossed back his shot. I put out my glass, Sacha poured, and then I did the same.

“The night shift is on,” I said firmly, staring at Crake. “We go in, we find out what they are doing in those exterior buildings, and we check those rail cars. I think that if we find out where those cars go, we will find their new hideout, which is where Josie must be. That name, Baphomet’s Cradle. Is there any significance to that? From what Crake told me so far, Baphomet is just some obscure demon god that Satanists have a hard-on for.”

Crake twitched his nose and lips in a partial snarl. “You have a knack for turning my most elaborate descriptions into one-sentence crap. The goat is a fertility symbol, but not the sort that appeals to me. It is also symbolic of the Magnum Opus in alchemy, or of harnessing the greatest spiritual energies. Spiritual alchemy originates in ancient Egypt and is the transformation of the human soul into the godhead. Through the magic of Baphomet, they want to further the work of their creator god, Satan.”

I raised my eyes to the ceiling. “Great. They have an underground lair to further Satan’s work. If we uncover the place, we’ll be the unfortunate people who find out exactly what that work is.”

Jack clapped his hands, showing excitement the rest of us lacked. “We will destroy that work. We need a vehicle, another van, for my method to work. Sacha, you have those two old VWs in the side lot. I want to rent one.”

Sacha shrugged. “Those are in poor condition, the bodies look good because I did the work. You drive one of them like you drove this one, and it won’t get far.”

“We need it for a service call, that’s all. Throw your stuff for lettering the sides in the back. We’re going to set it up at my place. I have some special equipment to pick up.”

Crake was finishing a chaser of OJ. He nearly spat it out. “Your place! Wouldn’t your place be about as hot as Joe’s place?”

“No. When I dealt with Gentry, it was out of a motel. They don’t know I have a place here. I rented it under a phony name and set it up weeks ago.”

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Twenty minutes later, we were in with the scenery of the back streets as Crake chauffeured us to Jack’s place on the beaches. Sacha was right about the van, though he’d repaired the body and refurbished the interior, the engine had a rough feel like it might break loose from the vehicle. That worsened in the hilly section of the beach. But the engine didn’t die, and we cruised to the bottom of a final steep hill and Jack’s place. The house was large, detached, with a big picture window on the right side. It was all in shades of gray – two tones of dark slate for the shingles on the double-peaked roof, and the walls done in two tones of lighter gray brick paneling that looked like real brick. He had cement steps to a centered front porch. Off to its left was the door to a large built-in garage. His driveway and walk were also done in light two-tone gray stone. His explanation for having a house in this pricey neighbourhood was that a friend owned it and he had moved his family to Sydney, Australia. The house had been vacant for a year, and Jack had it for the remaining year before they returned.

A six-foot board fence ran next to the garage, separating it from the neighboring house. Jack walked a couple of steps along the fence to the right of the garage, and I followed. A piece of the false brick snapped off, and he entered a code to disable the security system. The garage door opened, and then Jack got back in the van and drove in. He had a spacious garage, full of tools, and it was neat and clean. There were no ceiling tiles. The rafters arched up to give more clearance, and even though they were clean and new. A two-car garage, it was probably big enough to fit three cars, with two widely spaced gray mats marking the parking spots. One wall was lined with hanging tools, and he had a large workbench with adjustable overhead lighting.

Crake stretched his legs. He was obviously awed by the place. “I want to see the rest. This is the style of house I wanted to buy, back when I opened my store. Right here on the beach. Business never got that good.”

“Don’t be too jealous. I don’t own it. Look upstairs, grab a drink ... I have a few things to set up. It won’t take me long, and we’ll be out of here.”

Crake and I went inside for a look around. The interior featured dark hardwood flooring, with walls in shades of buff and dark brown. It was obvious that Jack didn’t spend his time at home, as only the garage and his ranch-style kitchen looked lived in. The best part of the house, in my opinion, was the fridge full of beer. I felt thirsty but wanted something light. I opened two cans of Budweiser and left Crake exploring the house while I went back to Jack.

The man moved fast. He was already at the bench, working on a sheet of some kind of material. “It’s a special vinyl lettering kit, hard to get. Sacha had it, though. I’m placing the Securican Air & Heating letters and the phone number. I’m going to cut the logo from memory.”

I put his beer on the bench. “I didn’t know you were an artist.”

“I’m not. I have to concentrate on this. But I’ve done it often. Phony vans and repair IDs are something I’ve used before.” He handed me some rags and a spray can. “Clean

the sides of the van. Spray and clean three times. I want the lettering to go on perfectly. Even with the camouflaged van, we're not going in the front but from the back, covertly. The service company's camouflage is to aid us once we are inside."

Half an hour later, the three of us sat on stools by Jack's workbench waiting for the vinyl to dry so we could do the peel-off. Jack had a device in his lap, part of his jammer. He looked it over and put it in the back of the van. Opening a box, he took out three key-chain stun guns. "One for each of us," he said. "These are special models. Even a big man will go out for about fifteen minutes after a hit with one of these."

I palmed mine, looked it over. Jack produced two more items. "Fury tactical flashlights for blinding guards and Fury leather saps for knocking them out."

Crake was hesitant, but he took the items. "I'm not really a physical person. I don't feel comfortable electrocuting people or bashing them on the head."

Jack folded his hands and looked Crake in the eye. "Just don't panic. Keep the items in case you need them. Joe and I will handle any rough stuff. We want to get in and out without shooting anyone. If it's done perfectly, we'll get what we want without conflict."

Crake wasn't convinced. "What about doors. There are rail cars, those buildings."

Jack lifted a special pry bar from the toolbox. "You're right. We don't have time for any fancy lock-picking or noisy door-kicking. Even guards may not have entry to those buildings ... at least not all of them. This burglary tool will open most doors and windows quietly and effectively. I have two of them."

Though watching and listening to Jack, my mind had been drifting elsewhere for a while. My thoughts were of how simple my life had once been. Though I was a cop, a detective, the crimes I encountered were on the outside, far from the easy nights of boozing and watching movies with Josie. We spent a lot of time together then, but even out on the streets or in the clubs, it was with a small circle of friends. Crime popped up elsewhere. When we were out together, the world gained a sugar coating. Murder only concerned Josie when we watched it on television. And it only affected me when I was working. It seemed like that then, but now the fabric of reality had come unglued. Only yesterday, Josie had white magic and not the dark spells of Satanists. Yesterday, she was about doing crazy things like making out on the beach or at a party, even if people were probably watching. It was our world, our streets, and there were no bad guys in our personal space. They belonged to a hideous reality TV show called My Working Hours, and perhaps that was why I started to hate everything to do with work. Work arrived in the early morning with a hangover, me staring at a corpse or some sweaty cons with tattoos for brains. Work got uglier over time. Yet now I was out of work, and in an unreal nightmare of demons, undertakers, and burglary tools. Not only that, but I'd become one of the freaks. My doll Josie had become a voodoo doll and one so deadly that maniacs like Jules Gentry put a high price on her. Slowly, it was sinking in that she had to be in some way involved. They say that if a person is open and close, it is easy to picture them naked. I could picture Josie naked in an instant, but usually I pictured her in her better outfits, the sexy ones. I had a framed photo of her in a formal dress. I never pictured her that way. Today, the world was asking me to picture her as the bride of Frankenstein, and I was having a rough time doing that, too.

Jack snapped his fingers. "Joe, you getting this?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking. Josie is involved somehow. I just don't think she has any criminal intent. The way they kidnapped her shows that they want to force her to do something she wouldn't ordinarily do. It's hard to figure; half the stuff outfits like Genistorm work on should be illegal even if it isn't."

"I hear you," Jack said. "The window is closing on her. We have to move in somehow. Once we know exactly what's going down, we can deal with it."

Jack provided full-coverage overalls for the three of us, and the only issue was that Crake's were black while Jack's and mine were navy. They were extra-large in fit, and we wore them over our street clothes. They had no logo but did have a Be Repaired slogan sewn over the front pocket, which was someone's idiotic rewrite of the old Boy Scout 'Be Prepared' motto. Jack drove and took the long route to the Genistorm property. We did not want to be pulled over by cops who might feel the rattling van needed a safety check. Any former cop can tell you that it is always best to avoid cops. They might decide they want a look in the van, and they remember faces and license plates. Other people are usually flawed observers. They are terrible witnesses. They rarely get a license plate and often misidentify another innocent person at the scene as the perpetrator.

Coming up the quiet road to Genistorm, we got a view of it in the night. The main building was well lit, imposing, and nearly impossible to approach without being seen. There was an alien feel to it in the dark, the lights giving the modern structure another dimension that hadn't been apparent in the daytime. The grounds, especially the area stretching to the back wall, were like a moon base of odd structures. Strange lighting was focused in bright cones on key parts of those buildings. The terraformed landscape provided bushes, trees, and plenty of shadowy cover, especially at the far end. They had spotlights on the interior wall there, but not much light on the grounds below.

"Looks like doom's outpost," Jack said. He didn't turn left to take the side street to the guard post but kept driving straight, taking us along the east side of the Genistorm fence, which was farthest from the main buildings and the guards. The road dead-ended near the rail tracks running east to west behind Genistorm. A triple-length embedded sawhorse marked the end of the road, but that didn't stop Jack; he drove around it and through the weeds and ruts of CN railway land and parked with headlights off.

From there, we saw the freeway's pronounced curve brightly lit in the distance, with heavy traffic moving along it. The wasteland behind Genistorm's rear wall looked impassible, but Jack said there was a tire-track road through the dead weeds there, and he got out and found it with his flashlight before getting back in and turning for it.

"Getting this clunker stuck in a deep rut wouldn't be good," he said.

Crake was in the back of the van. He stuck his head forward, jerking it side to side like an odd bird that detected danger. "Joe goes over the wall. Not me."

Jack gave him a searching glance, obviously wondering whether he should have brought him along. "That was my plan. Up there, a segment of track curves off into

Genistorm. There are pad gates, like big barn doors, in the wall. Joe's going to jump from a limb of the chestnut tree there and go inside without touching the wall. Remember the detection strip on top of the wall. He goes over after I jam the signal to their outdoor cameras and motion detectors. He'll open the gates, and we'll park inside. Any guard that comes along and sees the truck will see the logo on the side. There are several other vehicles there, so it should blend in. Technically, we are not thieves or burglars, just investigators. If we find any key evidence, anything we need, we toss it in the van and take it out."

Crake seemed satisfied, but as Jack drove us through the weeds in the dark, I considered how risky the plan was. Genistorm guards at the post could have noticed the van when we drove in, sent a car down, and ended our business right then. They didn't, and the van bounced to a stop near the pad gates. I got out in the night air and felt protected by the darkness. Jack remained in the back, working to jam the signal. He said his device could jam their system for up to an hour. Even with the signal jam, we were relying on lazy guard syndrome. Security people get complacent over time. Cameras have gone out many times before, and they become convinced nothing will happen and sleepwalk through shifts.

Crake gave the word, and I started climbing the chestnut tree in the dark. It wasn't difficult, but up close, the wall looked formidable. Jack had made it sound easy. It wasn't. The jump was difficult, and for a moment, I would be in the lights, and probably partially blinded before coming down in shadowy bushes. Something moved above, and I halted. A watching raccoon, it moved away from me up the tree trunk. Out on the sturdy limb, I checked as much of the dark grounds as possible. The mix of spotlight glare and semi-dark worked both for and against me. The camera failure had not caused a rush of patrol guards to emerge from the main building. I could see through the trees to the end of it and the guard post in the distance.

Things wouldn't get better, so I did the jump, closing my eyes as I went over the wall into the spotlight. Then I crashed into bushes, and tumbled as one foot hit soft garden earth and the other a hard patch. My ankle twisted, thorns whipped my side, and I went down and rolled. Twigs stabbed me. I got up fast, whispering curses and hobbling on one foot. A dark shape rushed in on me, a guard I hadn't detected. He'd been lurking there in the dark by the side of a rectangular trailer building. He took me down silently with force, coming right on top of me in the bushes. This guard was going by the book on a physical takedown, using the element of surprise, coming up in a squat on me while the impact stunned me. He whipped loose a baton half an instant too late. I had the leather sap around my wrist, and a quick, silent hit to the side of his head ended his assault.

A smarter guard wouldn't have broken cover. He would've waited and brought in backup. I did a quick pat-down on him, found keys, an entry card, and a little bag of zip ties. I studied his face in the faint light, not pretty but pug-faced. The strong garbage ties made perfect handcuffs, so I used two to cuff his wrists and ankles. I took duct tape from my pocket, sealed his mouth, and dragged him deep into the bushes. I glanced back at the branch I had come in on and realized why it was there. The guards could have reported it and had it trimmed away, but they wanted the occasional transient from the homeless hovel nearby to get in, and get hammered by a hidden guard out for

some brutal fun. It would take the edge off things for some guards. It would be a way to pass time on those long, lonely nights, and they could practice that hobby safely, as city cops couldn't care less about transients.

On the ground, the glare of the lights was nasty. It was better to move around the glare to avoid being exposed and blinded. The lighting was another poor security feature, no doubt in place because cameras would filter out the glare for a clear view. Security managers in the camera room wouldn't realize their lighting scheme sucked and made it difficult for patrol guards.

I moved toward the pad gates, using the three huge rail cars on the inside as cover. That back area was clear, so I moved over to the gates and prepared to break the lock with the pry bar. It wasn't clipped shut; another security error. All I had to do was lift a big iron hook latch and slowly ease open one pad gate. The van was out there in the dark. Jack saw me wave and drove in slowly alongside the tracks. I watched him park over in front of the second railcar by another service van sitting there in the dark, then I closed the gate and walked over.

Jack and Crake emerged quietly from the van. With the overalls over my clothes and stuffed pockets, I felt like a gorilla, and in the dark, they resembled two more apes. The air was stagnant; smog from the freeway, enhanced with BO and urine odors from the homeless camp, settled in this lower area like a damp piss blanket. Some of the odors were from the trailers, domes, and other prefabricated structures scattered here. They were also smelly, as if they were fermenting some foul brew inside.

There was some nervous gesturing from Crake, but we came to a quick agreement. Jack and I would move into the other buildings, Crake would stay back and try to enter the rail cars for a look-see. Jack passed him a pry bar, then we moved along behind the cars with the dome as the key target. Two of the aluminum trailers facing in on the dome structure were in dim light due to a failing spotlight. Three steps led up to a door at the rear of one of them. These trailers had the look of refrigeration units. Tanks in an attached container had symbols for toxic and compressed gas. I fumbled with the keys I'd taken from the guard. None of them fit, so I used the pry bar to snap the lock. The stiff door opened, and there was no light inside. Jack grabbed my hand when I reached for my flashlight. He clicked his on, and I realized he'd toned the setting way down. A flash from mine in a super-bright setting would probably have alerted the guards.

It was a refrigeration unit, but not a freezer. Biting mist swirled in the soft light. Reflections from transparent objects crowded my peripheral vision. The place smelled like sour dog food, and the odors reached deep and tickled the vomit urge in my stomach. I felt like I'd swallowed some bad moonshine. Huge semi-transparent plastic cylinders were to either side of us in neat rows. They had none of the markings required by law. We could hear liquid pumping and gurgling. Jack fanned the light across a few of the cylinders. They were large, the liquid shades of green and blue, and spotted with ferment. The hoses and tubes fed something down at the end of the trailer, which we couldn't see because of the mist.

"The place is a witch's brewery," I said. "It looks like life support for a dragon."

"At least no one is in here. Let's see if we can figure this thing out."

The floor had a bronze corrugated surface to prevent slipping. We moved slowly toward the other end until the mist ended abruptly, and we saw a complex filtration apparatus. There were no labels or markings on anything in this trailer, and it all connected as one huge unit, with a control panel angled above the filtration unit. At the very end, it merged into tiny hoses that fed into an elongated aluminum bulb with a needle beak at the bottom. The beak pierced a blob of tissue contained in a massive glass jar. The tissue looked alive, pink and glowing, but not healthy. It was foul, repulsive. The sight of it shocked me, and I nearly knocked Jack over as I jumped back from it.

"I'm definitely not taking a sample of that gross thing or going anywhere near it," I said. "None of this can be legal. Nothing is marked. There are chemical reactions galore, all to refine some weird blood serum that feeds into a mass of crap. It leads us nowhere. We'd need a team of scientists just to figure out what this setup is."

"It looks like they are growing the Blob, like in that old movie."

"Except the Blob came from outer space, and it was frozen and dumped in the Arctic in the end."

"Think about the layout. Four of these refrigeration trailers face around that dome. The other trailers are probably more of this stuff. The dome might hold the answer. Let's exit and check it. Genetic science can be big money stuff. Genistorm might have something secret and worth potential billions going on here."

"I'm not buying any shares yet because it is also potentially unethical stuff that could put many people in jail."

I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I turned and forged ahead to the door, went out into the dark, and suddenly saw fireworks as my brain electrified. Tremendous heart-stopping pain came with the jolt, and I went down to my knees and fell forward. The next thing I heard was something hard slam beside me, and then Jack was pulling me up. My muscles didn't want to work, going from locked to quaking. I glanced right and saw a guard on the ground. Jack was turning me as he lifted me; I saw a shadow moving in behind Jack, pulled my flashlight out, and flicked it on, then off. It hit the guard right in the eyes with a blinding beam. He was swinging a big baton down on Jack from behind, but the light threw him off, and the blow glanced off Jack's shoulder. The guard stumbled, and then I was on him with a sap to the side of his head. He went down and out.

Jack immediately hurried to the side of the trailer, and I staggered behind him; we didn't see any guards coming. Four of them were talking by the guard post and hadn't noticed anything. I'd been Tasered and remained disoriented. Jack was okay, only a sore shoulder, so I gave him the zip ties to bind the guards. We gagged them with duct tape and put them in the scrub.

Some people talk about karma, and I figured the guards' bad karma was coming back on them. They did rogue patrols, not keeping in touch with one another, and I knew it was because they delivered the occasional fun beating on homeless trespassers. In the dark, Taser man thought I was just in from shantytown and due for a covert beating.

“What in the fuck are those guards doing now?” I whispered. We were watching as a group of them gathered off from the guard post. Others emerged from inside, and they disappeared, heading for the west side.

“They’re not coming our way. We’ve got a bit of time, let’s do that dome.”

One guard remained at the distant guard post, but the entrance to the dome faced away from it. The dome had a ring of small LED lights around its circumference that gave it the look of an obese flying saucer about to spin and take off. Dizzy spells shook me, rising from a strong sense of euphoria. The jolt had weakened me, causing the drug in my system to gain strength and a hallucinatory edge. The last thing I needed was a wave of hallucinations, and I knew one was coming on because the shadows outside of the dome were coalescing into ghosts of security guards.

I wanted cover, so I rushed up the platform to the door. There was no handle. It was a huge metal sheet. I tried clicking the security guard’s fob, and it worked. The door rolled sideways, but to me it seemed like being on a merry-go-round, and the platform was moving, not the door.

Jack stepped up. We faced darkness. I glanced back, a spotlight danced in my eyes, and then I clicked on my flashlight and stepped inside with Jack. The door immediately slid shut behind us. Faint light came on in the entire dome, so I shut off the flashlight.

“Think the guards will notice the lights on?” I said.

“No. The place is a shell, no windows, and those glaring lights ring it on the outside.”

We were in a tiny vestibule or corridor. Another door of thick plastic or glass was in front of us, and it was semi-transparent, revealing a creep show of shadowy movement beyond. Decals with symbols for reactive and biohazard were on the glass, and before I could warn Jack, he touched something I couldn’t see. The transparent door slid aside, and he stepped inside the open area.

I followed, knowing that entering this place was a dumb idea. The air felt tropical, a blend of plant perfumes like a warm meadow and pungent jungle odors. Greenery, vines, and creepers were all around us. A ceiling of blooming flowers strung on webs of vines was above. The entire mass of greenery pulsed. It moved, though the movement was barely perceptible, creating the feeling of walking into some giant Venus flytrap.

I tapped Jack on the shoulder. “Maybe we should get out of here. It’s just a plant freak show. It doesn’t help us.”

“Look at how thick those growths of vines and creepers are. Be careful, I see a big spider up there. Say, there’s a pond in the center. We have to check it out.”

I felt like retreating, but Jack clapped me on the shoulder, and we walked forward twenty-five paces. The webbing of greenery pulsed closer, we moved carefully but didn’t stop, and reached the rim of a big pool. It was the size of a large fountain, but its sides were all metal in a tan aluminum shade, so it wasn’t a pool but a large tank. It didn’t have water in it, but a red liquid that looked like blood. Not human blood because it had an industrial smell, like it was some manufactured equivalent. The odor of it tricked my sense of smell so that one moment I smelled fresh blood and the next

moment a clinical smell. Mist floated on the surface, and as I looked closer, I saw things floating in it ... white fleshy things, like dead fish, though there was no dead fish smell. Something suddenly broke the surface. It looked like a human lung. It swam a ways under some hidden power, then it submerged.

I thought my mind might be playing tricks on me. Before I could speak, a large, thick vine swung from the webbing and put its end down into the pool. The movement looked willful, like an octopus's arm. There was a sudden sucking noise, the inserted vine turned from green to red, and another vine whipped out and into the pool. Then dozens of them did. One whipped by close to my head, and at that moment, I knew I wasn't hallucinating. I turned and ran for the exit.

Jack came up behind me as I pounded at the thick plastic entry door. He seized my arms. "Stay calm, use the fob," he said. I glanced back and saw quivering tendrils descending, so I used the fob. The door opened, and we burst into the vestibule, a mass of vibrating tendrils following. Then the door snapped shut like a sideways guillotine, cutting right through the mass. We watched bunches of tendrils squirm like worms on the floor as they slowly died.

"I guess the days when I thought Genistorm made self-cleaning tampons are over. Now I wonder if anything this fucking company does is legal."

"You'd be surprised at what is legal nowadays," Jack said, giving me the feeling he was defending the abomination we'd just seen. At the very least, he was talking as if we'd just taken an interesting trip to the science fair.

Instead of leaving, Jack continued to poke around. "Say, I didn't notice those handles before. This vestibule is a vault of some kind, and all the handles are to compartments."

Before I could say no, he grabbed a big plastic knob and pulled it. It slid open, and the contents were silver pouches, not the horror I'd expected. Jack studied a couple of packages, put them back, shut the drawer, and opened a few more drawers, all of which had similar vacuum-sealed packets with small labels.

"Okay, we'll keep a couple of those seed packets, but we sure won't plant any of them. This dome is experimental, and they are obviously keeping the seeds of every minor modification of the plants."

"It's a lead," Jack said. "See the top. Each has a file number and the name of a seed vault. Hiawatha Seed Vault is the name on every package. Seed vaults are underground; I'm sure about that. If Genistorm is affiliated with one, we need to track where it is."

"Okay, we'll put Crake on it. They should call it the Vault of Doom, because that's likely what will happen if many of those freak seeds are planted."

"Remember the small entry on the other side of the dome. When we were in at the tank, I saw another vestibule over there. We could try to go around and check it out; it might hold samples from that feed tank."

“Let’s not do that and say we did. Because it’s too risky. The guards will spot us, and even if they don’t, I do not want to carry any samples of what I saw in that tank. We’ve got a lead, so let’s hit the rail cars and see what Crake has uncovered.”

We exited quickly but with caution. We were lucky this time as no guards were close by or waiting to ambush us. We ducked into shadowy cover and went over by the back wall. A carpet of dry acorns fallen from an overhanging tree nearly tripped me. Jack eased out, then returned, saying only the gate guard was visible. The others were still either around at the west side or gone inside the main building. He said he wondered if he’d jammed more than cameras. Perhaps he’d knocked something out in the main building.

Hunched and hurrying through the shadows, we reached the rail cars. Wearing bulky overalls gave me the definite look of a criminal B&E artist. With the drug electrifying the night and the weirdness of the Genistorm lot combining with the muscle spasms from the Taser, I felt mutated and freaky like Mr. Hyde.

The first two rail cars were regular-sized and looked like converted passenger cars in shape, but they had no windows. There was no sign of Crake entering them, so I hoped he hadn’t panicked and run off. Clouds fanning across the moon gave me the idea that Crake had somehow got spooked. Enough bogeymen were lurking around Genistorm to cause him to flee.

The cars had yellow tags fastened to the sides that read, “Incineration Transfer.” Jack pointed them out, and the long number code under the words.

“This whole place should be incinerated,” I said.

Jack nodded in agreement. “I’d be interested in what they’re incinerating, but it also might be toxic stuff we shouldn’t be touching. Apparently, Crake felt the same. He must be in the other railcar.”

We crept to the largest car. This one was triple-length, and it looked more like the silver trailers we had just exited, except that it was a railcar, beveled at all edges. Its top was high and rounded. Accordion-like connectors joined three segments into one long car. It had no windows, so we assumed it was a container car. There were doors on both sides and both ends of the car. I knew that because we’d glanced at it on the way past. It wasn’t tagged like the other cars, and its doors were unusual for a railcar, fitting almost seamlessly into the sides of the car. If Crake had entered, it was up at the far end. I’d expected him to check the other cars instead of cracking this difficult egg, but then Crake went for unusual items, so he probably couldn’t resist opening this Pandora’s Box.

That assessment proved correct. Crake had entered through the door farthest from guard activity and observation. How he’d opened it wasn’t at all obvious. The inset panel had slid back, and the drop-down steps were out. There was no light inside and no sounds.

I turned to Jack. “We’d better whisper his name softly and use a dim flashlight. We shouldn’t have given him a gun. That was a mistake. If we spook him, he might shoot us.”

Jack didn't want to surprise Crake either, so he entered and moved ahead, calling softly. It was almost like he was calling for a lost dog or cat. I'd adjusted my light before going in and stayed back, examining the car as we moved along. The first section had sealed containers along both walls. All of them had locked roll-open doors of corrugated metal. The air reeked of a strong industrial pine fragrance from the built-in air freshener. Crake wasn't in this car. We reached its end, and though it was joined to the next car, we had to go through two sliding doors.

The second section was more interesting. It smelled like death, and it was cool. An air conditioner hummed faintly and blew a soft breeze. It hit the nostrils like a giant's foul breath. There were no containers on the side, but it was packed with bags and trunks everywhere. Jack stopped by four bags piled side by side. They looked exactly like body bags.

He walked ahead a few steps, saying, "Crake, Crake, it's us."

I halted, took the light in my left hand, and bent over to unzip one of the bags. It did it fast, ripping the tab along the zipper. Jack turned back and shone his light down, so I put mine in a pocket and pulled the covering aside. The fumes sent an immediate shock to my nostrils and lungs. It was like someone had invented a death inhaler. The effect was like glue fumes: my lungs froze, and I stopped breathing. It affected Jack, too, because the light flashed away as he took hard steps back. In that moment, I glimpsed the contents, which registered in my mind as a dead body that had somehow melted to a horrid mass. The shoulders and neck had been burned all over with acid. It had a face, and the face belonged to my old pal Benny. Though the face wasn't acid burned, the eyes were open, and the wild expression conveyed insanity. Yes, it certainly looked like Benny's days of painting the town red were over, yet he was still hanging around to give me that last punch in the head and bruise to the soul.

My fingers fumbled, and I couldn't breathe. In the dark, I managed to find the zipper tag and close the bag up. Then I turned left and stumbled to Jack's faint light. He was moving ahead quickly to the next car like he'd seen enough of this one. We reached another sliding door and stopped there. I was gasping, he was wheezing. Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"Wait a second," Jack said. "You might have to open the other body bags. Just in case."

"Just in case what?"

"I don't like to bring this up, but maybe your girlfriend is in one of them."

"But we've been operating on the news that they want her alive." It pissed me off that he had brought that subject up. Now that he had, I knew there were three other body bags to check. I'd gone through the same deal at the beginning, at the warehouse. I knew Josie wasn't in any body bag and didn't like Jack, causing me to have doubts. I wished I had Gentry's phone number so I could give him and his undertakers a lecture on how to dispose of bodies. Starting with rule one, you get rid of them right away and don't leave them hanging around and stinking somewhere.

"Listen, Jack. You can look, just check if any of them are female."

“No,” he said. “It’s a religious thing. I can’t touch anything unclean.”

“What? You never said anything about religion before. Never mind.” I stamped my right foot as I turned and went back. I had to roll bag number two over. I zipped it open to what would be the neck, peeled it aside, and closed it quickly.”

“So?” Jack said.

“So what?”

“What was in it?”

“Not a woman. It looked like the coyote man. A longer look isn’t recommended. Here goes with body bag number three.”

A pale face, gasping, the eyes opened in black-pupil horror, hair like grey wire, it wasn’t Josie ... it was the zombie from outer space.

Jack took on a smug look. “Now open bag number four.”

I did, and the quick look showed a horrible acid-eaten skull. The hair was long; it was probably a woman, but the coal-black hair ruled out Josie.

We said nothing, just turned and moved on. Jack slid open the door, and again there was another door. We paused there, steeling ourselves for what might be next. He opened that door, and we stepped inside into a rush of warm air.

The door slid closed behind us so fast I had to snatch my hand away, and the sound was a thump followed by soft bumps, as it sealed airtight. The fragrance drifting in the air smelled almost like marijuana but sweeter. There were no heat lamps, so if anything was growing, it grew in the dark. There were no containers fastened on the sides of this car, so we stood abreast, adjusted our flashlights for wide beams, and panned them around. The interior of the car, walls and ceiling, and most of the floor were webbed with leafy vines and white flowers. An aisle of moist flooring stretched in front of us, and the blooms were just over our heads on the ceiling. They looked like the blooms of roses, but there were no rosebushes or thorns. We couldn’t see Crake or the end of the car because the mist blown out of a vent obscured our view.

Jack elbowed me. “Maybe Genistorm is trying to corner the flower market with GMO flowers that grow without soil.”

I hadn’t thought of that, but he was right. There was no soil, but strong leafy vines grew with healthy blooms above, and a spray of fine mist appeared to be the only food. “There’s no light either. Maybe this is the sleep cycle.”

“This isn’t a railcar for shipping things out to incineration. I think they just converted some cars to make this big experimental flower tank.”

“Dammit. Where is Crake? We can’t search this whole complex for him.”

Jack shrugged. He had no clue. These vines didn’t quiver and shiver with tendrils, so I moved ahead, reached through the vine curtain, and passed through the blow of mist. Jack followed. It was still hard to see, so I used the special flashlight, adjusting it to a wide, bright beam. It immediately cut through the gloom, revealing a tableau at the end of the car. The way the flashlight spotlighted it in cold light made the effect ghastly. The

scene was so nuts it nearly knocked me over. The way the vines spun around the walls of the car and its roof, leaving only the narrow aisle in front of me, gave me the strange sensation of standing at forty-five degrees instead of straight up. I could breathe this time, but I couldn't speak, at least not right away. The whorls of vines browned and stopped at the end of the car, and a thing was planted against the wall. It had once been human because it had a head, neck, torso, arms, and legs ... but no hands or feet because the stumps at the knees and elbows continued as thick growths of vines. Its head rested in a mass of blooms, and it looked alive, though its eyes were closed as if it were sleeping.

The surprise left me focusing on the monstrosity before me, so it took a moment before I noticed Crake. He was present on the floor near its right leg and the vines bursting from it. He had fallen back on his rear-end, and he had his arms outstretched, clutching handfuls of vine. His mouth and eyes were open in terror. Fear-induced catatonia had locked his muscles. He'd been there long enough for a bunch of vines to form a loop around his right foot. The vines were obviously predatory and drawing Crake in, but they could only move very slowly. The human brain connected to this freak plant controlled it. As an entity, it was a repulsive experimental form of life; a human being merged with plant life.

It could be said that my young life had been lived in a rush. I'd never taken time to smell the roses. But the odor of roses in that car confirmed that I never wanted to smell roses again. The immediate physical and psychological response would be to scream in horror, flee, or do both. Jack was undergoing the same emotional conflict, and like me, while that conflict was numbing the body to instant action, the horror was growing. Why I did what I did, I still don't know, but that was to take the stun gun Jack had given me out of a pocket, reach down, and press it against the vines that had seized Crake's ankle.

The charge not only knocked the moist vines loose, but it threw me back against Jack, and jolted Crake out of his horrified stupor. And that wasn't a good thing, because while I was falling back to the floor, Crake was recovering from the double dose of electric shock and horror. Before I could rise, he was up and screaming. He did a hysterical dance, knocked Jack aside, and jumped over me as he ran to the other end to escape. Jack reacted last, and he did a stupid thing, too. He drew his gun and fired two shots into the head of the thing plastered against the wall. Though my light had fallen, it was still lighting the end of the car, and it lit the thing's head as it burst into a shower of black liquid.

All of the vines started to writhe; Jack turned and ran in Crake's direction. I scrambled up, grabbed the flashlight, and took off after them. Crake was there at the other end, clawing hysterically at the door. Jack did a poor job of pulling him back. The foolish scramble went on for a few more moments before I managed to pull them both back. Then I pushed an inner button that unlocked the door. They were both riding my back as I slid it open, but the rest went smoother. We went down the cars, through the other doors, and out the same way we came in.

Jack and I hurried to the end of the car's exterior and peeked out. The guards had been alerted but weren't certain where the shots had come from. One guard was

running to the post. A group of four more headed out for a jog to the dome and trailer setup. Four others ran around from the west side. The smart move was for us to wait until they were in the trailer and dome array so we could break unseen for either the van or the pad gates. The problem was Crake, he'd been dancing around behind the railcar gibbering, "Oh God, Oh God!" And initially, that was okay because he couldn't be heard. The guards' shouting to one another drowned out the sound.

We were almost clear and ready to break, but Jack and I had been watching the guards too closely. We failed to keep Crake in line, and he danced right out under a spotlight, in open view, and fired his handgun in the air. He shouted, "Burn this place, burn it down to hell!" There was a second shot from Crake, Jack seized him, and the gun flew into the bushes. We each took an arm and rushed Crake in a football race for the pad gates.

Our run to freedom could have been filmed as an action movie scene. Two guards stopped in firing pose and ripped at us with rubber bullets. They were such bad shots that turf and stones exploded at our heels and beside us. One shot knocked out a key spotlight, lighting the wall, giving us more cover. The side of a train car gave off a bass drumbeat as shots pounded it. I saw a couple of rubber bullets hammer the pad gates as we rushed up. A ricochet winged my shoulder, and I realized that the fact that they were rubber bullets wasn't much help. Fired at high power, they could knock a person's head off.

They were really meant for body shots, and since the stream of fire began to hit high, it meant the guards were trying for coma shots. I glanced back as we carried Crake through the opening of the pad gates. The running guards were closing, but a good way off, and a security van was burning rubber across the grounds as it headed for the pad gates. Separated from the van, our only chance was to escape on foot.

Outside the gates, Jack swung Crake against the wall and slapped him hard on the cheek to quiet him.

"Listen, Crake," I said, noting his blank eyes and wondering if he was now communing with the plant life. "We've lost the van. Either follow us on a run to the underpass, or those guards will get you, and put you back in with that disgusting thing."

That sentence worked, his eyebrows went up, and he came unhinged, following as Jack and I ran under the oak tree and off through the scrub. Jack hit his car key to light up the van, and that bought us time as some guards ran straight for it. The rest of the guards swung the pad gates wide open, allowing the guard van to speed out, hit some heavy ruts, and come to a clumsy halt in the weeds.

We kept sprinting, hearing flustered shouting, and by the time we looked back, the guard van was backing inside and up to our parked vehicle. The guards had decided to swarm the van rather than pursue us. Maybe their boss was in the guard van, and they were awaiting commands. One senior guard separated from the rest and took a position just outside the gate, firing shots in our direction. I couldn't tell if they were real bullets or rubber bullets, but it worried me. He was probably the only smart guard, as he had his night-vision goggles on and at least knew where we were. Lucky for them,

we weren't killers. If we'd stopped, taken cover, and returned fire, we could have killed most of them.

The night-vision guard gave up as we were out of range. He returned to the others. Pressing on, we reached a small gulley that contained mostly dead weeds, fast-food litter thrown from the nearby overpass curve, and exhaust odors. We climbed out of it near the squatters' camp but avoided it because they had a bonfire burning, and we didn't need a confrontation with street-hardened people who might feel we were invading their turf. The trunk of a huge, shattered tree stood like a sentinel in the darkness, and we used it for cover. Guards had our van confiscated, and others were fanning through the weeds and scrub outside the Genistorm wall. They slowly headed in our direction.

"They aren't going to call in the police," Jack said.

"No kidding," I replied. "There are about a dozen rough guys in that homeless camp that will keep them busy if they keep coming this way."

"Van's a write off, but they'll never trace it. I pulled the plates before we went in. Still have them in my pocket. I say we scam out of here and discuss our next move."

The late October night had warmed, which was unusual for a month that usually brought steep nighttime temperature drops. Accustomed to the Canadian cold, I was not accustomed to wearing heavy overalls unless it was very brisk outside. I felt sticky, scratchy, sweaty ... about as rank and sweet as the stinky updrafts from the homeless digs. Removing the bulky garment brought instant relief. Crake discarded his overalls by the shattered tree, but Jack and I wrapped ours because we needed the items in the pockets.

Moonlight shone from above, revealing every pore in Jack's cratered face. It paled his skin and darkened his whisker stubble, creating the feeling that the moon was bringing out the animal in him. In the distance, the security guards had managed to start our van, and it, along with the guard van, was moving toward the front of Genistorm. The remaining guards were moving vigorously through the pad gates to join the others in a serious pursuit of us.

A glance at the homeless camp showed two drugged and drunken men engaged in a wrestling match on the flattened mat of earth their lifestyle had created out front of the hovels. Coarse shouting began. The Genistorm guards began moving in that direction. A sort of homing instinct where security guards automatically head for bums, and it was possible they thought we were there and the cause of the trouble.

The discovery of the jammer should have tipped them off as to our sophistication, but perhaps they couldn't shake old habits. Maybe the shabby van and the sight of us in the dark and in overalls caused them to think that we were bums pulling a B&E.

Outdoor lanterns fixed to tree branches cast an orange glow over the homeless camp, and the trashcan fire, flaming at its center, made it seem as if they were inside a big pumpkin of light, carrying on like an early arrival of Halloween rowdies. Jack and Crake watched the scrappers for a moment but said nothing. Jack sniffed the air, and I wondered if he could smell the wine they were drinking. The guards were quietly closing in on the camp, and I didn't want to see any more of this very low-budget flick

or the brutal climax. It would definitely aid our escape, which was one good thing about it.

Ducking low, we crept west, took cover behind a small rise, and then silently followed a hobo path beaten in the sandy dirt. We emerged behind a west-end hotel known for hookers and as a joint where the government stashed refugees. A noisy club was just up from it, along with a Star pizza joint, the golden arches, and an all-you-can-eat Mandarin. I wasn't hungry; the reek from Genistorm, the freeway, and the hovel had settled deep in my sinuses. It came to life with every waft of humid air.

An icing of dirty clouds was coming in from the west, and the sky now spat fat raindrops. We spotted an Imperial van cab in the Mandarin parking lot and flagged it. Crake's place was closest, so we headed there and had the cab do a patrol of the nearby streets. The cabby reeked of booze, grunted questions in what sounded like a Romanian accent, and drove in a trance. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary; a few people were scurrying out of the rain. We saw no one on our tail. We got out of the cab two blocks away from our destination, strolled silently up Robson Street, and entered via the back alley.

Crake's shop was intact, meaning our enemies knew him if they saw him, but they didn't know who he was or where he resided. At least not yet. Inside, we discussed that but weren't particularly worried about it. Mainly because we were going to them, not waiting for them to track us down. We had to figure out where their underground joint was buried before we could do any damage.

Crake's place hadn't changed any from damp, dusty, and musty, but it sure felt good in comparison to life in a Genistorm creeper trailer or a urine-soaked freeway underpass with adjoining squatters' camp. Jack sipped a tall ice beer and spent time fishing around like a kid in a toy shop. Old parchment, carvings, trinkets, ivory, and ebony ... Jack felt occult objects and antiques had a warm feeling if the owner was a collector like Crake. I felt the same and liked the occult or the fantastic as something that might be possible but not likely ... the way collector comics were groovy because nothing in them was real. Illuminati Satanists who revealed the occult as an ugly fires-of-hell reality, and had a dungeon somewhere, were not my cup of tea. They took the beauty out of fantasy. I could not figure out how Josie fit in with it except that maybe she'd hit the jackpot, where one of her experiments for Genistorm just happened to produce the joy juice Gentry's pet demon needed. And if she produced the fuel, what did it power?

Crake didn't care much for stark reality either. The spells cast by Genistorm and Gentry had withered his soul. His bony hands shook, and perhaps the nervous twinge in his voice came from the realization that he had almost joined the row of shrunken heads hanging on the inside of his closet door. He wasn't reading tea leaves now but drinking gin and tonic water from the teacup. Occasionally, his head would jerk right or left or up and down like he was a nervous hen. With each sip of gin, he skinned his lips back like elastic bands, his eyes clouded, and he remained still like the alcohol was seeping down and killing the devil worms that had invaded his stomach.

After a few minutes of rummaging around, Jack looked satisfied and sat down. I took a long drink of cold beer as the discussion began with Jack's take on things. He waved an ebony whale carving as he spoke. "Genistorm obviously does freak R & D stuff. I

don't think they do much of it inside the main building. They have labs there for legit stuff. The outdoor facilities are for the obviously illegal work they do. My guess is that most of their employees don't even know what happens there, but some obviously do. The security people do, but they handpick their guards. There are Illuminati-controlled corporate entities that would fund that sort of mad-scientist stuff because moneymaking products could spin off from the research. The Satanist underground would definitely be involved in it. They probably run it, but at arm's length."

Crake interjected. "I've never heard of a Satanist plan to keep us alive as plant things."

"Neither have I," I said. "I doubt they plan on growing a crop of Josies or Satan from a seed. But they must have some evil master plan."

Jack grinned broadly, revealing strong teeth, slightly yellowed and chipped. "I'm not quite sure what that plan is ... maybe raising the dead or something else repulsive. Your false friend Raj was in there keeping a finger on the pulse of the operation and watching people. He had a close eye on Josie and used you as a sucker. He was never your friend, Joe, that's for sure. He only played that role."

"I think we are getting off the track. Crake's unauthorized tour in the main plant led him to research on harmonizing organ transplants. He said they were developing a serum or something. Josie's strong point was certain forms of chemistry because I remember she initially went deep into chemistry in school. When she joined Genistorm, she mentioned applying her skills to genetic research conducted by experts in the field. Then she clammed up altogether. The deal that Crake liked so much in the railcar could even be related in a way."

Crake clattered his cup on the saucer. "How could that monstrous thing be related to humane science like making a patient's body not reject a transplant?"

"You're all nerves," I said, studying his trembling hands. "Some people don't think advanced organ transplant science is humane. In many nations, it only helps the wealthy live on with multiple transplants bought from poor people who die very young. The monstrous thing, as you call it, was quite horrible. It was a human body melded with a plant, before Jack terminated the experiment. If Genistorm can do that, then they have probably gotten even farther with straightforward organ transplant technology. Maybe they have a way for Illuminati billionaires to replace nearly everything with new body parts."

Jack didn't quite agree. "Jules Gentry certainly looks like he needs a full body replacement. And he's the sort of salesman who would sell them. However, I doubt the Satanist underground of the Illuminati is working on that in particular. Legitimate medical assets can operate in countries with almost no regulation. Gentry wants some spin-off of that science for something. That something will definitely be creepier than some of the Illuminati super-rich farming organs to live on."

"The seed pouches," Crake said. "Let's take a look at them."

Jack's overalls were folded neatly on the table beside the ones I had worn. He unfolded them and took the silver pouches out of a large pocket. He passed a packet to Crake and one to me. I shook mine and heard the rattle of small seeds. Studying the label, I took note of the number code and the name, 'Hiawatha Seed Vault.' Crake handled his

packet with trepidation, as if it were full of venom. He put it on top of an empty ashtray, then went over to his computer and ran a search. Jack and I were still toying with the seed pouches a couple of minutes later when Crake came up with info.

“There is a Genistorm press release and some items in local news about a Genistorm seed vault. They began construction three years ago and finished it a few months ago. They built a small seed vault at Stony Shore on the Thorn Lake Peninsula. Construction progressed slowly because of a dispute with the Ojibwe tribe, which claimed burial grounds on parts of the land. The graphic here shows a fancy façade jutting out of a hillside, but it is just a small seed vault. We could go there, but even if we got inside, we would probably find only seeds. Probably the variety no one would want to plant.”

My thoughts became suddenly lucid, and I saw an image, almost a vision. It was impossible to think of Genistorm building a generic structure underground. They would put in something perverse. I imagined a dungeon, and another idea popped into my mind. “The seed vault is just a front. To build anything, to dig, they would need permits. Sure, they built a seed vault, and it is probably just that. But once they had the equipment up there, they could easily have dug and built something else nearby. Think about it. Stony Shore is a tiny town. I know because I’ve been through most of that part of Ontario. The Ojibwe lands, where they actually reside, are a ways from the Thorn Lake Peninsula. Once Genistorm got permits and equipment out there, no one would be around to see what they were actually doing in some of those remote locations.”

Crake’s eyes sharpened with calculation. He put a hand up, then extended a finger and tapped the right corner of his 30” monitor. “That news item there, about Genistorm attracting protesters and vandals ... whatever you choose to call them. They had an anti-GMO group called Gene Saviors peppering them with bad publicity regarding experimental fields of GMO corn growing up there. People from the protest group, dressed as grim reapers, performed stunts, cutting down crops. They finally burned them out. Police couldn’t identify the culprits, but they knew it was Gene Saviors’ people. Geeze, I think I’m on the protesters’ side. This other article says the vault contains no GMO seeds, yet the seed packets we have sure aren’t classic organic seeds. So they lied about the vault, too. They have GMO seeds in it, or at least in a section of it. That is important because Genistorm constructed the vault as a propaganda thing to take the heat off the GMO work they did at the time. After that experience, Genistorm went underground and avoided the media. Now, everything they do is kept quiet.”

I almost snorted out the big sip of beer I was taking. A jolt of pain shot up my nose. “Kept quiet! Of course, it is kept quiet. Can you picture a smooth PR man announcing Genistorm’s creation of the plant thing?”

“I’m talking about their legit work ... the medical work, smoothing organ transplants and that sort of work.”

Jack shook his head. His expression was a cross between sadness and disgust. “That’s why I hate modern genetics. It branches out into areas where there is no ethical control or public safety included.”

Crake showed signs of intoxication. His hands had gone from shaky to clumsy, and he spilled half of the double he poured. "No safety out there. Those people will be hidden and in control. I think we should end this hunt. Maybe Josie will turn up."

"No," I said. "I won't give up now."

"Maybe you should admit that you've done all you can do," Crake replied.

I didn't answer right off. He caused me to question myself. I thought back, and it came clear. Failure described me, but I did not give up, even at times when it would probably have been better. My first memory of it was as a kid in wintertime, walking on the frosted ice in a creek bed that led down to the river. Some bullies showed up, and one named Larson shouted from above me on the bank. "I know what you said about my little brother!" I can't remember if I said anything, but I do remember him yelling that and me telling him to let his brother settle his own score. That led to them sliding down the bank and a scrap with three big kids, which ended with them putting me down near the edge of the ice where fast water flowed. They dunked my head in the freezing water a few times. They'd pulled my hat off. It was a dork's winter hat; duck-billed with flaps that go over the ears. Larsen yanked me back up, laughing about the cap. Then he started slapping my face with it. The funniest part was that I stood up against that early form of waterboarding, but I couldn't take being mocked with the winter hat. I knew it was a stupid hat. I hated wearing it. My mother forced me to wear it. She'd catch me at the door and scold me for going out without my hat on. I saw red, plowed into Larsen, threw him into the flow. It wasn't deep, but enough to scare him. The other two ran off with me, briefly chasing them. When I turned back, Larsen was up the bank running through the snow. I never bought the standing-up-to-bullies bit. It got me in a lot of trouble, and I became more afraid of my temper than of bullies. Since then, I have been afraid of seeing red. When I was a cop, I worried about it every day, about what I would do if I lost it. Now I worry about sticking to things I should leave behind. Crake's idea of giving up would suit most people. Hell, maybe Josie had been in with the wicked all along, and I was fooling myself by thinking differently.

Jack tapped me on the shoulder. "I don't like that look, Joe. You can't give up now. Everyone has doubts. We agreed that Josie isn't part of it. They never told me much, but I'm almost certain her involvement through Genistorm was innocent. You know that, but the longer the separation, the more doubts will rise to the surface. If you think back, probably other things'll make you certain she's a victim. That she knew nothing about people like Gentry. I'm certain she knew none of them other than Raj."

I thought back again, and a memory came to mind, like waking and suddenly remembering a dream. Josie and I were at the Toronto Reference Library because she wanted to look up an obscure chemistry-related book. We walked over from a large park across the way, and we were somewhat intoxicated, having shared a bottle of merlot while sunning in the open. The park thing went reasonably well; we were getting romantic, frisky, until she ruined everything by talking about her job. That talk went through my ears without fully connecting while my eyes watched an old man tossing bread to the pigeons and squirrels. Josie said something about magic. She said that when she was a child, she made angels in the snow, and it saddened her because the angels wouldn't last. In the library, with her chemistry book, she touched on the subject

again. She said something about the science she pursued being magic that would make people real angels in the future. They would be attractive, live very long without fading away. I should have pressed her for more about what she was doing, but I didn't. Instead, I sat there wondering how anyone could love work, because all of my jobs ended like a night's drinking. They'd become the shabby hangover of high times ... times that seemed great when lived and painful in reflection. I should have listened to her then. I wouldn't be asking questions now. She thought she was doing great things with Genistorm. Her outlook was so optimistic that she didn't see the real world. She wouldn't have been able to participate in the horror happening in the trailers out back or in creating angels like that thing that I saw in the park. Jack was right; my memories couldn't be all false.

"Did your brain freeze?" Crake said. "Give us an answer."

"Well, the problem is there is no closure without knowing the truth about Josie. No way to stop myself. Jules Gentry and his army of undertakers are trouble, but they aren't ready for what happens when I see red."

"Now you're talking," Jack said. He used the flat of his hand to burst one of the seed packets. He looked Crake in the eye. "They don't stop if we don't go after them. They will find us. They don't give up, so we don't either. I know your ideas of writing a book or being a star journalist are now tarnished. But the cards have been dealt, and we're in the game. We can't get out. We play aggressively to win or defensively to lose."

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Part Four: Stony Shore

We cruised out of the city an hour after sunrise and made good time. A warm wind painted the landscape with fluttering autumn leaves. The car was brand-new. Well, not quite new. The leaseholder had cracked it up, creating a collision repair job for Sacha. That job had been nicely done, and the car wasn't due back at the dealership for another month. The man liked Jack too much. I would never rent a car out to people like us, especially not if I needed it back in good condition. Fortunately, I wasn't driving and wouldn't be responsible for any damage. Jack had the wheel. Crake didn't like the car at all. A red Dodge Challenger, with a Hellcat V8, it wasn't exactly inconspicuous, but more the sort of vehicle that draws the immediate attention of highway cops, traffic helicopters. It wasn't the car that a person keeping a low profile would drive into a tiny town like Stony Shore. Small-town gawkers would definitely notice us.

"It doesn't matter what we drive. There's no way we can go into that area without the whole town noticing us," Jack was saying to Crake as I lay sprawled across the back seat. Autumn forest fanned past outside the window, and I kept shutting my eyes as it dizzied me. I needed sleep and relief from drug-fueled insomnia. Swallowing a few beers hadn't helped. A strange illusion of sinking into my grave kept preventing me from sleeping. Like a bad dream, it would be there every time my eyes started to close. Then I would snap awake, and the fatigue would increase.

“Sure, we would never be completely unnoticed,” Crake said in reply. “But we could slip in and do our business quietly. This way, we look like hotdoggers, zooming to town in our racecar. Every eye will be on us, and half of them will think we’re there to rob the bank.”

Bile rose in my sour stomach, and I opened heavy lids as we raced downhill past a country mansion done in the New American style. There were many luxury homes, country houses, along this rural route, cloaked in autumn golds, and speaking of the enormous hidden wealth that exists outside the cities and towns. It didn’t impress me or trouble me; there was no cure for being Joe Holiday anymore. Even a mountain of gold wouldn’t soothe the three-eyed beast composed of my vile stomach, aching head, and broken heart. If I were saving Josie, it felt like I was saving her for herself, so she could go on to a better life while I stumbled off to the elephant bone yard.

“Stony shore doesn’t have a police force,” Jack said. “You said it yourself, Crake.”

And Jack was right. Crake’s research of the town had revealed that. The Stony Shore community had shrunk over the last quarter century, so the lack of a police force likely meant they lacked the money to pay for one.

Crake shook his head. “Provincial police, probably RCMP, too. They’ll cover it.”

A swampy area floated by outside the window. I saw cattails, marsh birds, and had a sinking feeling that ended when a sliver of blue lake came into view. Weather-beaten picnic tables were along the bank there. “Pull over for a minute. I feel sick.”

Jack turned in fast and braked in the gravel, kicking up a cloud of dust. We got out and walked down to the water. A birdwatcher’s boardwalk ran behind two enormous maples into the swampy section. I could see a farmhouse with a small dock on the other side. Stopping on the bank, I tossed a polished rock into the water. It hit with a plunk, then I sat at one of the picnic tables. The sickness passed, but I felt fatigued, on the verge of sleep. Crake paced back and forth at the water’s edge. I don’t think he noticed the scenery. It didn’t calm him. He started talking, but more to himself than others. “Now I see this journalist’s dream is impossible. No one cares. No one wants to know. If I write a book, would it enlighten anyone? I have no idea what we’re doing out here, what we are supposed to find. Maybe Josie working at a vegetable stand. If Gentry did build a bunker other than that seed vault, it would be hidden. The area is vast, mostly forested, ridges and meadows, impossible to search”

Crake continued muttering as his brain fell into a partial meltdown. Jack tried to calm him. “Keep it simple ... we’re helping Joe rescue someone, that’s all. You’re getting beyond yourself.”

But Crake didn’t seem to hear at all ... he kept on, and he strolled up to the road. Jack went the other way, behind the maples to the boardwalk, into the reeds and duck soup.

The farther away they got, the better I felt. Maybe I just wanted to be alone for a bit. And when I thought it, birds started singing and flitting in the nearby evergreens. I looked out at the simple plate of blue water and the farmhouse on the other side, thinking maybe Jack had it right. Keep it simple. But even simpler than he wanted. Maybe do one thing right every day, and it would add up to success. We had agreed to

come here on a simple investigation following a simple lead. Do just that. Crake's big scoop had always been a big scoop of his personal delusions.

I thought that, sitting there by the bank of the lake, maybe just to distract myself. Some philosophical speculation is often medicine that relieves grim reality ... and insomnia. I knew the insomnia came from the drug. I'd been hoping it would fade, wear off, that they'd lied. But the scorpion sting was still with me. Spending the rest of my life on the edge of a freak-out wasn't a friendly proposition. The farmhouse across the way was starting to look like the earthy home I could not get back to ... I needed the poison out of my system, to get off the flying carpet.

The sun surfed some autumn cumulus clouds, the bummer seemed to lift, and I felt dreamy. It relaxed me almost as much as light sleep. Something floated on the water just offshore. Initially, it looked like a big mass of reeds, mud, and debris. It bobbed on gentle waves; it became a tiny island, then the hump of a big weed-covered rock. The breeze lifted and blew in off the swamp, sending a foul waft up my nose and turning the hump into an image of something decayed. As the breeze died, I took my eyes away from the lake. Something had drawn my gaze right, to the pines; a web of shadows there that took form like a ghostly mask. The feeling drew me in so slowly. I didn't realize it was an effect of the drug. I saw features, a voodoo face, but the sort of wooden face that would be on one of Crake's masks. I'd seen them so often they didn't frighten me ... but this one was somehow different. It moved like the mask was about to speak, and it suddenly came to life as a human face laughing wickedly. It floated behind a tinted windshield, behind the wheel of a car.

A premonition, I heard a car approaching on the road and propelled myself off the picnic table. Jack was still off in the swamp. Crake paced up the road. I yelled and ran towards him. "Crake, duck out of sight!"

He stopped, threw his hands up in a what-the-fuck gesture, and stood there like he thought I was having an attack of paranoia. The road curved just before the picnic tables and roadside nature area, and the sound of an engine preceded a speeding car that appeared on the turn. A black BMW coupe with tinted windows, and it flashed in at high speed, swerving off the road to run Crake down. But it didn't quite get him. I knew that because there was no thump. Visually, I saw Crake coming out of the cloud of dust the coupe kicked up as it went onto the shoulder.

If the Joker in my vision was driving, I couldn't see him through the tinted windshield. The face coming to life was Crake's as he rolled up and ran toward the shoreline. At the same time, I heard the squeal of tires and knew the coupe was turning and coming back to finish the job. It burst into view. The driver came off the road and knocked up a cloud of dust as the rear end fishtailed, and the vehicle slid to a sideways halt. Crake turned his run toward the evergreens. Jack yelled something from the boardwalk, somewhere in the swamp, and I foolishly ran for the car instead of taking cover. The passenger-side door of the coup flew open as it halted, and a very thin and very quick man in black shot out. He had one of those pistol-sized spray weapons that would take out most armed opposition immediately. But it didn't work for him, because I slid to one knee, pulled the Colt from my holster, and hit him with an uphill shot. He had actually fired first, but failed to take into account the drop to the shoreline, and his shots went

an inch over my head. Skinny was the right description, and made of brittle bones, because my shot nearly took off his entire shoulder and right arm. His gun bounced over the back of the coupe. As he fell dying, I hit the coupe's windshield with a shot, only to find it bulletproof.

The driver hit the gas, and I ran toward the pines. A dive and roll took me clear, and when I looked back from the duff, the car was hard turning. It stopped by the roadside, and the driver fired a shot from his side window, but not at us. He was making sure his armless buddy was tapped out, unable to breathe a few last words. With that nasty business done, the coupe raced off.

Jack's boots thundered on the boardwalk. He came around the maples, and I waved him over. Crake remained cowering in the evergreens for a few moments, then slowly sauntered out when his ears told him the car wasn't returning. Jack looked surprised, worried. He used his right hand to shield the sun and looked up the hill across the road. Crake stayed three paces back while I squatted, searched the dead man's pockets, and found only money. He carried a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills, nothing else. Dark tan, mixed race, and probably Canadian-born, the man was skinny as a junkie but not one. He wore brand-new black straight-leg jeans, a black T-shirt, a black nylon jacket, and black athletic shoes. He had a wrist tattoo of Baphomet and bullet scars on his left arm.

I stood up, holding the cash. A passing cloud created ephemeral gloom, as if a few moments were allowed for reflection on his demise. There was no one to give a eulogy. We'd never seen him before. And the swamp, well, very shortly, a new floating hump would be inspiring the next person in for a rest stop.

"Hit man," Jack finally said. "Probably one of the best around."

Crake rocked on his heels. "That's because the only other people around here are hillbillies."

I kicked some dust over the sticky blood. "A better one wouldn't be dead. Isn't a star hitman supposed to wait and target you long-range? That sort of thing?"

Jack shook his head no. "You're talking about a political assassination. There are no security forces out here to stop them from coming in close. They underestimated you, again."

Crake spat in the dust. "How did they know we were here?"

Jack pointed to the hill slowly rising beyond the curve. "They were parked up there."

"I had a premonition. I knew they were coming."

Jack shook his head. "Maybe you noticed them up there, but it only registered subconsciously."

"It wasn't like that."

The sun returned like a bright death ray. I looked over his gun and decided I didn't want it. Jack and I took care of the unclean business of dealing with the body, as Crake wouldn't touch it. We washed our hands in the clean water away from the marsh and the corpse. We didn't hang around but left. I was in the back again, and the difference

rested in Jack's driving. The Challenger had a dual-gauge speedometer. The gauge registered up to 180 miles per hour on the old scale, and Jack was pushing it up on the straight stretches and scaring the hell out of Crake.

Crake pounded on the dashboard. "Slow down. This is crazy!"

"No, it isn't," I said calmly from the back. "We don't have bulletproof windows. The best way to avoid an ambush by that coupe is high speed. It might be fast, but not as fast as this beast because it is carrying a lot of extra weight due to the armor and thick glass."

"But our car just had collision repairs. This thing might come apart."

"She's purring like a tiger," Jack said, confidently slowing for a curve and nearly not enough as it was a dead-man's curve. The car fishtailed, but Jack regained control and hit the gas. As we passed a limestone outcropping with a splash billboard for a TV comedy show perched on it, bullets raked the asphalt at our tail end. I shot up, looked back, saw the coupe coming out of hiding, and was thankful that we were traveling at high speed. The race was on, and it was a short race. The coupe probably would have caught just about any other car on the county side roads, but it couldn't catch Jack. The Hellcat V8 tore into asphalt and gravel. The car handled perfectly. We left them behind and out of range.

Crake had his worried face in his hands. Jack was obviously thrilled at beating the coupe so easily. "After this string of villages, we'll be on the run in," he said. "We'll be into Stony Shore well ahead of them, if they know we're going there. They underestimated us again and waited in ambush on the assumption we'd approach at normal speed."

Jack abruptly slowed the car. We were approaching the town, though we couldn't see it. Crake began to relax and recline in his seat. At the crest of a forested hill, Thorn Lake appeared. Though the sun was out, mist shrouded the peninsula. The road dipped through a patchwork of open fields, farmhouses, and forest, creating a long rural run into the town and into history. Stony Shore existed at the end of a time tunnel. While other places grew into cities or the modern era, it remained planted about half a century in the past. The sleepy town and the shoreline of Thorn Lake, where it resided, had received a facelift or two, but the features were unchanged. Connected red-brick structures formed a main drag of two and three-story buildings in most places. Neat rows of pole lamps and trees lined both sides of the street. Variety was in the various styles and colors of store awnings overhanging the sidewalks. Side streets radiating out from downtown were all tree-lined and lined with the big-style of frame houses that looked almost like farmhouses. The population sign said 4,500, and the people on the sidewalks were mostly white. Obviously, the many waves of newer immigrants to Canada hadn't flocked here. The people were mostly Anglo, French, and native. Stony Shore had decreased in size and importance, and its remote location ensured its obscurity.

We cruised past a grey-stone clock tower inside a small park at the town's heart and found a small hotel across from it. Jack pulled around to the park side of the road, and we studied the hotel. It had a newer look ... brick but painted yellow with all the trim in bright red. The roof was a high cap done in red with a series of arched attic rooms at

the top. An awning covered the ground-floor entry, and two big arched windows were to the right and left. The right window was for the hotel bar. It wasn't a chain hotel; the name was the Stony Beach Hotel. It wasn't on the beach either, but the shore of the lake was only a couple of blocks away.

I glanced at the park and some people sitting on the row of benches at its front. Older people, and they were sitting out enjoying the unusually warm fall weather. They knew the hazy days of this golden October would break soon, and if November didn't bring an Indian summer, the long, icy winter would come early. The town sure didn't look like the heart of Satanism; some of the store windows sported Halloween jack-o'-lanterns, but since it was Halloween, that was expected. We weren't investigating the town itself but Genistorm's involvement nearby. Genistorm didn't have an office listed in town, but they had a couple of buildings out by the old cornfields.

Jack pulled up to the curb, and we got out for a better look. As soon as we did, a plump, grey-haired man wearing a plaid hunting jacket propelled himself from the nearest bench and approached us. He whipped out a huge cell phone that looked even bigger in his small, fat hand. "Say, boys, mind if I grab a selfie with that car?"

"Go ahead," I said. "I don't want to be in it."

"That's okay. This feller will do fine," he said, grabbing Crake's arm.

Photos of any of us in town I didn't like, but I was also sure that if the man had a social media page, no one browsed it other than him. Crake didn't seem to mind; he thought it was funny. The man tried to sit on the fender with him and looked like Humpty Dumpty.

Jack and I stepped aside, and I spoke quietly to him. "Crake is making sure the plate isn't in those snaps. Parking out here isn't going to work. There has to be overnight parking around the back of the hotel if there is none here. Let's get away from this main street. We're attracting attention already."

Jack cruised around the block, we found an underground parking lot on the back street, and we pulled into it. It gave the option of paying at the gate arm with credit or registering at the hotel. Since we were using cash, we took the hotel option. Even though the lot was nearly empty, we parked in the most remote spot and then got out. We found a walkway that led out of the parking lot to some storefront offices on Main Street, so we took that. All three of us looked around as we stepped out on the street from an obscure door. The sun remained bright; the shadows in the park looked blue to me. I saw the lakeshore off beyond the clock tower, but the breeze wasn't off it. It swept from the south, gently blowing leaves up the street and bringing an aged odor. I could smell how long this town had been retired and sleeping, and it wasn't a foul odor but more sweet, something like the grasses in a hot open meadow. Probably it was the fragrance of the nearby farmland.

As we walked under the hotel walkway awning, I felt eyes on me, but when I looked around, it seemed clear. I saw a few old people minding their business, and no one was loitering on the street or under shop awnings. Jack stopped to look back, so he was feeling it too.

The hotel lobby featured a very old, interesting design that made the interior much more remarkable than the exterior. Essentially a false atrium with a drop chandelier

coated with strings of pearl lights. The oculus above it was also false; it created the illusion of opening to the sky but was backlit glass inside a dome. The room centered on it with three grand archways defining destinations. Directly ahead was the concierge counter that at least one of us would have to approach. A journey to the right would take us to the restaurant bar marked by a stained-glass sign reading "Fabulous Firkin". A journey through the left arch led to the elevators, a conference room, and amenities. Seating at the center, where we were standing, was for people waiting or undecided as to what they were going to do.

Crake took me for undecided, because I remained there looking around and up at the glittering chandelier. Jack was on the way to the desk but stopped and turned back. Crake punched me on the shoulder and spoke in a nasty whisper. "Stay with us and stop looking around like a thief casing the joint. You plan on stealing the chandelier or what?"

"Relax. The place has an odd design. I was just checking out the surveillance cameras hidden in the chandelier. It doesn't take three of us to book the rooms. You do it. I want my own private suite." I handed him the thousand bucks I took from the hit man. "Pay and keep the change."

He raised his eyebrows and walked off. Jack and I sat down. We watched as Crake did business with an attractive blond clerk wearing a gray suit jacket. A decorative silk scarf replaced a tie in her outfit.

"We're in early," Jack said. "We check in, get settled, and then figure things out. It won't be easy asking nosy questions in a small town like this one. Eyes and ears are important."

We took the elevator to the third floor. As it inched up, Jack ribbed Crake, pointing out that the time he'd spent doing bookings was the time a man trying to get a date would spend. This irritated Crake. "Who better to question a hotel clerk than me? I already have a lead, and she didn't notice I was probing her."

Jack grinned. "Oh, I think she noticed your hot breath."

The elevator groaned. "That protest group has a cottage near here. We should check it out. She says they aren't around anymore, though."

Our suites were side by side with a view out toward the clock tower and Thorn Lake. I closed the curtains before checking anything else in the room. The latticed windows were definitely preferable to the huge floor-to-ceiling windows in many new hotels. We were in the large suite booked for Crake and Jack, which was about three times the size of my single room next to it. It was mostly taken up with a spacious main room, all done in gold and buff. A big, round glass-topped table sat in the center of the room. There were four pole lamps, a huge generic landscape on the south wall, and a big bronze sculpture of a shell beside it. Two buff couches faced the center table. The design was smart and would work for business or leisure. We were here on business, but wished it were leisure. The locals would probably call it monkey business.

Crake didn't waste any time getting comfortable on a couch. He took his laptop out of its case and started doing some research. Jack shuffled over to the window and peeked out. "I'm going to watch who comes and goes for about an hour," he said.

“So long as it isn’t me,” I replied, and then I went next door and stored a few things in my room. I planned to rest and gather my thoughts, but it felt like being locked in a closet. I paced back and forth, watching a beat-up fishing boat crawl south on the water, and then decided to drop down to the bar. I took the stairwell rather than the slow-motion elevator. The Fabulous Firkin was a dim place in the Irish style, lit only by sconces on the walls. One plump female server wearing a short plaid skirt and a black pullover top served a few people at the tables. I went to the bar, ordered a pint and a club sandwich. No one else was at the bar, and the old soldier managing it obviously wanted paying company. He had a brutal hairline with a lick of greasy salt-and-pepper hair breaking loose at the front. Even with rough and wrinkled skin, he was florid-faced, and his nose had been flattened to one side like he’d taken a few solid punches in his younger years. He studied me with sharp, blue, observant eyes. I noticed that his gray suit was tailored, and he wore it with an open-necked light gray shirt. He immediately tried to sell me on the local fishing.

“I’m Beck Stewart. My son Alf runs some local boats. I can get you a cut rate at this time of year.”

“A girlfriend of mine used to hang out in this town. Name’s Josie. Have you seen her around?”

“No. I don’t know a single Josie in these parts. Guess it’s not a common name here.”

“Who would I ask that might know?”

“I can’t say. Usually, I know everyone who stays in town for any length of time. I own this hotel.”

“You own it, then why work the bar? You could easily put someone else on it and retire, do a lot of fishing.”

“I’m not so big on fishing. I’m a bit of a shut-in, and I like to talk to out-of-towners. People here don’t like that or me. Though born here, I left young, spent decades in the military, saved enough money to return, and set up the hotel. The locals think anyone who hasn’t been around for about thirty years or so is an out-of-towner. Imagine that in the world we have today.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. It looks like that sort of town.”

“They have a local culture. But I’ve never fit with it. Neither has my son. He came with me when I returned. Our business has been mostly with out-of-towners.”

“I haven’t really seen anything, a few people out there on the benches when we arrived.”

“The loonies all come into town at night. Nothing much happens in the daytime.”

“There were some out-of-towners from a protest group. Gene Savors was the name. Know anything about them?”

“Say, mister. You aren’t some kind of investigator, are you?”

“I’m not a cop. I’ve played at being a private eye. Didn’t succeed with it. My name is Joe Holiday. Anything you tell me is just between us.”

“Keep your voice low. You don’t want anyone to hear you talking about that group. Ask around about them, and you’ll end up where they are.”

“And that is?”

“Nobody knows. They came into town protesting the experimental corn crops Genistorm used to grow. Mostly young, faces constantly changed. They were in and out, and then they began to stay. Some of them came from abroad to protest. Locals hated them, which led to trouble ... the vandalism, fires. Then Genistorm ended work with the corn and started work on the seed vault. They say that smoothed things over some in the end. The protesters were banned from town at one point, so they bought a cottage, and not just any cottage but a pricey one. I hear it’s empty now, but they still own it.”

I turned over the paper placemat and handed him a pen. “Draw me a map, where the cottage is, where the old corn fields are. Guess you can’t draw me a map of where the protesters are if nobody knows.”

“I can draw it. If anyone asks, you didn’t get directions from me. You aren’t the first investigator to come to town. Some of the last group of protesters didn’t return home, but no one can prove they went missing here. You know that sort of transient type. Hell, the missing ones could be in Europe, Australia, anywhere. Funny thing, though. Anyone who investigates is out of town by the next day. I expect that’ll be happening to you. You’ll become part of the pattern. It’s the nature of things here.”

“I usually take precautions to prevent my becoming part of the pattern. Any special reason why you’ve never managed to fit in with the townspeople?”

“When I’m not here, I putter around in my woodworking shop at home. My son sells my lawn ornaments. My place is remote, nearest neighbor a kilometer off. Then there’s the first reason I gave you. Anyone without Thorn Lake water for blood is a suspect. But that never stopped people from visiting here. With me, my bar business started drying up when the protesters booked at the hotel and drank in this bar. The locals decided to shun me. I should have expected it. Genistorm provided many local jobs then. There are still people who work at the seed vault and manage their land, which is currently dead land for crops. They have stuff that comes in and out of their lot by train. I don’t know what it’s for, but I see the rail cars sometimes when I pass the buildings out by the old cornfields. The protesters used to eat here because no one else would serve them, and no one else local has a vegetarian section on their menu. I ended up caught in the middle. RCMP undercover cops from out of town spoke to me and wanted me to keep the protesters here. They added camera surveillance. They spy on all protesters and probably added bugs to the rooms then, too. I didn’t enjoy helping them, but giving them surveillance kept them out of town. People hereabouts hate cops, investigators, and protesters. Many people don’t pay taxes, run businesses that aren’t exactly legal, and that sort of thing. The locals kept me under constant pressure to get rid of what they called protest bums, and now that the shit is settling, they still avoid this place.”

“That corn Genistorm planted drew more than the usual amount of protest. Any reason why?”

"I heard talk about the corn. Locals were riled at protesters because that corn was supposed to grow strong crops to feed the Third World. It was a good thing we were doing for the poor. One of the protesters told me another side to it ... said the real purpose of the corn was to decrease fertility rates."

"Interesting. Especially if it is true. Feed the hungry and secretly decrease their numbers. Then protesters find out, and it all goes to hell. Or maybe not. Maybe they already have the seeds they need. Could be just another myth, too."

"Mr. Holiday. Please don't tell anyone you heard it from me. Don't mention anything. This place is watched. They are always watching. Even in the daytime, they're out there on the benches across the road, watching everything. They are all up to things. Can't say what because I don't get out much anymore."

I pursed my lips at that one, and then took a bite of my sandwich and a big gulp of beer. I figured old Beck had a case of paranoia if he thought those old coots out there on the benches were the leading edge of anything other than town gossip. And there wouldn't be much of that at the Fabulous Firkin while the locals were shunning it. Having cameras hidden up in the entry chandelier wasn't very normal either. The RCMP couldn't have put those in because the job was done sloppily. I noticed he was fidgeting, as if having told me so much worried him.

"Ever have weird people that dress in black come around here?"

"I figured you'd be asking about them." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "They are not good people, and sometimes the whole crew pops into town. Some of them are women, but most are men. Even mouthy protesters were scared of them."

"I see." And what I did see was that this Beck fellow was only telling me a portion of what was going on in the area.

Old Beck stayed at the bar, watching me eat like he might be a manners coach. Then he quietly said, "The whole question out here is 'Which elephant is in the room?' Everyone thought a big elephant was trampling the county under, but no one envisioned the same elephant. The locals said protesters were the elephant, and they were attracting the eyes of cops and feds. Protesters said Genistorm was the elephant and up to secret things. Then it was the corn because it brought violence. When the seed vault started, it became the elephant, and there was a fight about where to put it. Genistorm brought in heavy equipment and dug all over the place on the land they bought. That pissed off the Ojibwe because they claimed Genistorm was stealing land and desecrating burial mounds. Maybe the real elephant is like a big ghost, hiding out there in the haystacks, and it always brings in new trouble."

Beck probably knew which elephant was currently trampling on things, and he was pissing me off by using that cliché. It sent my mind spinning back to the reason why it bugged me. In my late teens, I didn't want to bring any friends home. We had a house that was tacky but okay, but after my father died, the stork delivered a 280-pound stepfather. Ray had a big baby face, but with drooping jowls, and he looked especially repugnant when he didn't shave. His whiskers resembled tree bark. Everything caused him to sweat. His remaining red hair stuck down like a skunk stripe across his head. Since my bedroom was in the basement, I was able to hide from him some of the time.

The meat of the problem began when he became a nudist. Initially, that left me home alone a lot. Then my world came crashing in when he started walking about the house wearing bikini underwear. He would not listen to my protests. Always said, 'I'm legal here, got something on.' He looked grotesque in anything less than a full suit tailored to his size. Fortunately, he didn't go out in the yard often. But he would come out the side door to go to his car. He was so lazy that he drove his car to the corner variety store and to his pal's place two houses away. Josie had been pressing me as to why I didn't want her to meet my father. I never took her inside the house. Sometimes we'd be in the back yard by the stream, and I would find a reason to leave fast over the field when I heard the side door open.

Ray at least wore knee shorts when he came out, but they were pale purple, and since he wore no shirt but would have on laced boots, he looked ridiculous. One day, he emerged, his arrival covered by the music we were blasting. I saw the laughter in Josie's eyes. My face has never been redder. Later, we smoked a joint near school, and she was joking around, saying, "Now I know what the elephant in the room has been all along and why you always change the subject when it comes to your new father."

She giggled more. I was endlessly embarrassed. A week later, Ray suffered a coronary heart attack while eating pizza in the lounge chair out back. He died on a sunny afternoon. He was buried on a rainy day. Josie was with me at the funeral. I didn't shed any tears. I told Josie that one good thing about Ray was that he let me run my own life. He left me in charge.

She said her father was perfectly trim and perfectly unbearable, driving her to top grades and to success with the whip of daily lectures. She said Ray was better than her father, and maybe she was wrong about that because leaving me to run my own life left me free to ruin it.

Beck stared, bug-eyed; he'd expected a strong reaction to his mention of the big Halloween elephant, hiding out there in the haystacks of Thorn Lake. If he'd talked to other investigators, no doubt they'd bitten into that one with a flurry of interest. My response had been to fly off in a daydream.

I looked Beck straight in the eye. "If there's something rotten out there, you know what it is. It isn't a ghost."

"Okay." He leaned in to whisper and bait me more. "Tell me. What is in every small Ontario town that you didn't see when driving into this town? I won't tell you. But if you guess, you might figure a few things out."

I thought about it. I'd had an excellent view of the town from the hilltop when we came in, and I'd taken in as much as possible on the drive down the main street. I let the images shuffle in my mind like a deck of cards. "Churches," I said. "You always see churches in small towns, but I haven't seen even one steeple or church front. And people, there are too few people in town in the daytime."

My answer amazed Beck. He pulled a clean cloth from under the counter and started polishing a rock glass. "No one ever answered that question before, except those who

know that aspect of Stony Shore. Protesters, guests, and investigators couldn't answer that question."

"Yeah, so if anyone is watching this place, I guess they aren't from the church choir."

"If I were you, I'd leave town, Mr. Holiday. Get out while you still can."

Beck walked away, unhappy with my simple shrug. My sandwich finished, I swallowed the rest of my beer. Crake and Jack were entering the bar, so I got up and joined them at a table near the window.

"I thought we'd find you here," Jack said. "Get anything from the barman?"

"Yeah, he drew a crude sketch, showing where that protester cottage is located. You two eat, have a drink, then we'll drive out."

Jack studied the sketch. "It's a good way from the seed vault. We can pass the vault first. Maybe stop for a look."

I noticed Beck passing instructions to the server, which led to her being very cold and quiet while serving us. I had another beer. Crake irritated me by ordering spaghetti and telling a tale about a protest he attended in Toronto while he ate. His protest involved a hundred people riding bicycles around the headquarters of a bank, protesting the use of slaves in mines somewhere in South America. During that story, I pulled my chair to the left and stared out the window. The old folks on the benches were gone, replaced by people strolling through the park from the other side of the clock tower. A couple of minutes passed, then two familiar men appeared, each coming from a different direction to meet by the clock tower. The man coming from the Stony Shore waterfront was the same man who had staked out my car at Cherry Beach ... big with straw-colored hair, cut to a brush, deeply tanned, rough face, and dressed all in black. He'd also been there at the shootout in the park. The second man was the one from Raj's apartment. It was like seeing a ghost because his skin in sunlight was so pale it was like he was dead. Even from a distance, I could make out his one larger eye. I'd wounded him with a gunshot to the shoulder, but there was no sign of that now. Beck saw them too because he strolled to the window and looked out.

Getting up silently, I walked over to Beck and startled him. He hadn't heard me coming. "Strange fellows over there. I've seen them somewhere before. Any idea who they are?"

Beck's lips tightened to a line. He didn't want to say anything. Then he spoke in a near whisper. "The blond man is Kosar. He lives just outside of town. He's a local. The other one is Sabbou, and I don't want to know where he comes from. Stay away from them and anyone else from the Dark Circle, if you know what is good for you. I mean that stuff isn't unusual around these parts, but those who get in too deep regret it."

"Dark Circle ... what exactly do they do?"

"I really have no idea. Don't want to find out."

"Weird religion, like Satanism ... is that it?"

"I thought you knew about the local religion ... or practices, to make it clearer. You knew there were no churches, so I assumed you were connected to one of the local circles."

"Circles and Dark Circles ... what are you talking about?"

"Wiccans. This town has been a blend of that practice since the late '50s. No church has ever survived here; the Wiccans burn them down before they open. There are several circles of them, and they meet at various places ... farmhouses, the woods, hilltops. The Wiccans are traditional, rooted in the town's history. In other places, they have covens, but here it is circles. The ones you see over there can control the others. They are not traditional but newer, and called 'Dark Circle.' Wiccans aren't really Satanists, but those people probably are that. I don't ask, and especially not what they do or where they meet. No one smart would want to be seen to be prying into their business. The Dark Circle isn't local. Only Kosar is. He has a house on the peninsula. The others arrive from elsewhere. Been a lot of them around town the last year, but there aren't any booked here at the hotel. They never favored this place. They hole up somewhere outside of town, and they aren't people you try to look up; they are people to stay away from."

Beck shuffled back to the bar. Crake and Jack were in an animated discussion when I returned. "Saw a couple of undertakers out there," I said. "On foot, walked somewhere north. Beck knows their group is the Dark Circle, but not exactly where they hide out."

Crake went suddenly silent. He'd probably been hoping we'd avoid serious trouble. Jack wiped his lips with a napkin. "They kept the Dark Circle name quiet when I contracted with Gentry. They don't advertise the name. You only hear the name if you're initiated into the group or somehow get close to them. We'll exit via the back, drive out to the vault. We won't follow those people right now, but if they show, we hit them hard."

The highway followed an easy route with gentle curves along the shoreline of Thorn Lake out to the peninsula. We took a right off it to the Hiawatha Seed Vault. Deciduous trees thinned and nearly vanished, and pine and fir trees began to dominate the many outcroppings of Precambrian rock on this southern edge of the Canadian Shield. The vault was on a short side road that dead-ended at it. Jack parked in the big lot at the front, and we got out of the car but didn't go in. The vault was set into the rock with the big arched entrance at a downward angle. Behind it, a series of rock ledges rose gradually to rocky hills. Twelve cars were parked in the employee section of the lot. Two guards stood at the front, familiar Genistorm guards, dressed in black security uniforms, just like those at the headquarters in Toronto.

Crake lit a smoke, and we loitered by the car. We didn't go over to the entrance. Crake puffed out two smoke rings and watched them vanish. "It's a good front," he said. "There's nothing much to see inside, just some tunneling with temperature control, and shelving layouts for the seed storage. All the plans are available to the public, but few people would ever look them up. They couldn't hide anything in there because it has to be open to occasional government inspection. They may have their own freak seeds illegally stored in there, but it's not up to us to expose that. Protesters do that sort of job."

Jack laughed quietly. "Except that the last of the protesters conveniently disappeared."

I nodded. "Crake, I have a feeling that your Genistorm rail car experience has removed your desire for tours of any Genistorm facilities. Especially those with seeds. Don't worry; I don't want to try to get in there either. The guards have probably already been warned about us. They'll trap us inside if we attempt any illegal entry. Josie won't be in there either. They use that as a front, not for dirty work. They might have had her there for a short time like overnight, back when they first took her. But their reason for taking her wouldn't be to sort seeds. They need her skills for something, so she's at a working location. That Beck fellow at the bar said Genistorm caused trouble by digging all over the place out here. It is as you said earlier; they used the seed vault construction as a cover to build something else underground. Maybe we can find a lead to an underground lab at that protester cottage. They haven't sold the place; maybe there are some records there."

The guards became suspicious and started walking toward us, so we got in the car and drove off. Looking back, I saw a guard talking on his radio, but they didn't get into their car and try following us. The drive to the cottage was longer than I expected, and it was through rocky, mixed-forest terrain. The only other houses anywhere close to the cottage were farmhouses and other cottages. The highway ran out from the lake on that portion of the run, and the cottage was on a side road that turned back into the lake. We were a ways down that when Crake plopped Beck's crude map on the dash and said, "There it is ahead, the only place around this bend. It's a great hideaway if you think about it. This is a nowhere country road with a few houses and farms. It comes in off Kings Highway 6 to the lakeshore and curves back to it. No one without business on it would ever use it because it's not a shortcut to anywhere."

Jack pulled over on the shoulder without pulling in, as half the place was shrouded by evergreen and birch trees. He studied the entry for a few moments, and once he was satisfied, he rolled forward, turned, and drove in. "Wouldn't have stopped out on the road if we had bulletproof windows. I don't really trust anyone around these parts, but it looks like nobody is here."

My eyes sifted the shadows, and I tended to agree with Jack. "I think that last group of protesters may have made the mistake of trusting some of the locals and ended up victims of the Dark Circle. There is no kind explanation for this place to be abandoned or for other investigators to disappear even faster than protesters."

Jack shut off the engine. We got out and took a walk around, doing an initial check of the place and the grounds. Crake took in the view and whistled with amazement. The house could hardly be called a cottage. Beck had said it was pricey. He was right, and part of the price was due to the place's large size. The wall and a wide rectangular chimney at the south end were made of white, gray, and tan stones. Its front-facing wall was composed of larger versions of the same stones. Under the peak of the roof at the front, a second peak set to the left created the overhang for the porch. A growth of ivy up the porch pillars to the roof increased its shade. A raised wooden deck connected to the house on the south side. Walks at the front and the side were lined with huge, irregularly shaped gray stones, with tufts of brown grass sprouting between them. The side walkway curved and ran into a cleared area of long grass. Two large maple trees

were directly behind the house at the bottom of a steep slope. A fifteen-foot outcropping of granite protruded from the slope at the rear beyond the maples and ran to the south. A brook curved around from the other side of the slope, going into the trees and through a culvert under the road to the lake. True to the name Stony Shore, the visible piece of the lakeshore was stony.

Jack's eyes left the house; he was looking up the slope, but like me, he saw no one there. "I wonder how a protest group could afford to buy this place or why they would want it."

"It's remote," I said. "That would cut the price a lot. The townspeople chased them out of town, so that could be the reason. They could also keep it as a retreat. Protest groups often have wealthy backers behind them. That would be where the money came from. Maybe one of Genistorm's competitors funded them to disrupt the corn program."

There wasn't anyone around to stop us from having a look inside. When we tried the front door, it wasn't even locked, as if the people had stepped out and never returned. At least that's the feeling I got. Once inside, the interior seemed to confirm that story. The place was rustic, especially the living room, which had a massive stone fireplace with no second story above. A coffee-table book with pictures of Africa was open on a side table; an empty pint glass containing a cigarette butt sat beside it.

Windows high above filtered in soft light, creating a homey feel that became ghostly because the place looked lived in, only the residents had vanished. Two vanilla jean jackets were on the throw rack, a pair of plain running shoes sat below next to an expensive pair of pink women's Nike Airs. The ceiling there had huge wood-stained crossbeams, and a bronze chain screwed into one beam had a corkscrew and regular bottle opener attached. The reason for the openers was booze; empty bottles were here and there on tables and overturned on the floor.

The dining room was also beautiful, with wood floors that complemented the stone walls. The dining table was a twelve-foot slab of white oak, polished to a deep sheen, with six wicker chairs around it. Five of them were pulled out as if people had been sitting at them, then left. Crystal ashtrays contained cigarette butts and roaches. The two overhead chandeliers were fitted with wax candles, and there were electric lights. It was possible to light the whole place with the fireplace and candle chandeliers if a person wanted the feel of living before electric lighting. These people didn't use either; they had a number of wine bottles with coasters on the table. The candles in them had been used. A huge drawing of a grim reaper with Genistorm Kills styled in letters on it was spread out on one end of the table. No doubt it was to be pasted on a signboard or would have been had the protesters not suddenly left. The reaper stood in front of a sketched version of Genistorm's Hiawatha Seed Vault.

Two seven-foot sliding doors, inset with glass panes, provided access to the back patio. None of us had spoken yet, and we remained silent as we went outside. The patio was smooth slate stone with lawn chairs under the shade trees. One section of it was under a rain roof. Again, there were many empty bottles, but also beer cases full of empties. That gave me an idea, and I went back in and looked in the fridge. It had food and beer, so I grabbed a Budweiser and used the hanging opener in the dining room.

Crake had come in and was checking the bedrooms and bathroom, so I went out back. Jack was there, studying the granite outcropping and the rise.

“They have stuff still here, and they didn’t clean up before they left. People leaving for a long time always clean up.”

Crake emerged on the patio. “The bedroom area is a mess. They have clothing and supplies still here. Someone went through it all.”

“I don’t see any sign of violence,” I said. “The investigators, Beck said, were in town at various times, looking for the protesters; they probably tossed things about.”

Jack turned and looked the patio over. “They have a comfortable pad here, and they weren’t planning on leaving. That poster they were working on in there tells me they were going to protest the seed vault. That means they knew some of the stuff we know, maybe more. Genistorm certainly has a motive to be rid of them.”

Crake whipped out a notepad and started taking notes. He turned to me. “According to my research, Genistorm has a small regional office not far from here. That’s where their main cornfields are or were. It’s early afternoon, a good time to pop by and ask a few questions. If no one is around, we can do some snooping on the property.”

“Jack can drive you over. If it looks in any way dangerous, come right back. We may have to spend a day searching the various cornfield locations and anything else we hear about. If you get started on that while I do a full search here, we’ll kill two birds with one stone.”

“Okay, I can drive him,” Jack said. “I don’t have a good feeling about the protesters, I mean, finding any of them alive or at all. Josie, they wanted her alive, so we still might find her. Genistorm certainly has no use for protesters, not ones that were getting too close for comfort, and out here where those undertakers have some business going, too. If the protesters decided to investigate the Dark Circle or got involved with some of them, then that would explain their disappearance.”

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I listened as the car engine growled and Jack pulled out. Thoughts of horrible things that Genistorm and the Dark Circle might have done to protesters passed through my mind like skeletons leaping from closets. I sat in a lounge chair on the back patio. It was warm enough; the stone absorbed the sun’s heat. I slowly sipped my beer and enjoyed the lazy sunshine for a few minutes. A bunch of noisy crows appeared and settled in the trees on the rise, so I went back inside and looked around. The bedroom had been tossed. Crake had mentioned that. Even the sheets had been pulled from the beds and dumped on the floor. I found empty American cigarette packs, assorted casual clothing, both male and female. There were paperback thrillers, lighters, tools for drawing, and sign-making. Nothing remained that personally identified any of the protesters, no electronic devices, notebooks, or journals. Someone had cleaned that up. Maybe the other investigators Beck mentioned had picked up relevant items and disappeared with them, never to be seen again.

The futile search depressed me. I went to the fridge and took an unopened bag of corn chips. I pulled out a cold Newcastle Brown and went back to the patio. The crows took

flight, so I sat down and relaxed. I still had the hand-drawn thing from the freaky old man in the park. It was folded in my back pocket, so I took it out. The first side was a sketch of an underground structure shaped like a pentacle with outer and inner rings. I doubted it existed in that form, but I felt Genistorm or Jules Gentry had something underground out here. Beck's info was that the Dark Circle or undertakers holed up somewhere, and what better place than underground. He'd also mentioned that Genistorm dug all over the place and had stuff coming in by rail. If what Genistorm kept in rail cars at its HQ was an example, I wondered what they would be sending out here. I also wondered if I would really want to find out.

I flipped the sheet to the other side and the so-called native sketch. We hadn't focused on it at all because it was enigmatic. I studied it carefully. It was a tiny work of art and more than a sketch, similar to some native paintings.

In this one, the drawing featured a native Shaman on the left, reaching out with arms, hands, and fingers elongating into tentacles. A coyote's mask floated out from his face as he reached for a big orb like a moon, but the orb was not the moon. The orb contained another picture done in black pen as a silhouette in the bottom half of the circle. The silhouette of four tall fir trees on a slope showed a howling coyote on the bluff at the top.

The drawing was a testament to the old man's skill with a fine-tipped black pen, but I couldn't gather much else from it. As I felt the paper, I noticed it was high quality, some form of artist's parchment. I turned it back to the other side and began to wonder if it was all symbolic. The pentacle-like sketch of an underground place on the front might not mean it was actually made in the form of a pentacle, but that it was an occult place. The Shaman on the other side seemed to be pointing out some sacred place.

I munched on stale chips, thought about it for a while, and then I folded it back up. I got up and started looking around the place again. I spent a long time on it and came up with junk and no leads. I figured I had some time left, so I went out back and began climbing the rise next to the big outcropping of rock. A few minutes later, I was at the top with a view out over the lake. I could see the clock tower of Stony Shore across the water, the highway, and some fishing boats. I turned and faced the wilderness behind me, but couldn't see much. Scattered pines, browned meadow grass, weeds, and mounds were in my immediate view. More pines, leaf fall, twigs, and dead grass covered the mounds. I remembered something Crake had said about natives disputing Genistorm's ownership of some of the land because of burial mounds. These were probably some of them, but they seemed very big for burial mounds. Any bigger and they would be small hills. I walked the distance to the first mound, slowly climbed it to the top, and saw about thirty other mounds. Some had small pines and scrub on them; others only grass, as if they had been cleared for some reason.

Descending, I passed through them and reached a brook; the same spring-water brook that flowed out to the lake near the cottage. This was its source, where it bubbled out of the rocky ground in a cool arbor under some tall maples. Cigarette butts and liquor bottles had been scattered on the ground. It seemed to be evidence of a protester hangout, but I remembered that the bottles at the cottage were all beer and wine bottles. There were no Canadian Club bottles at the cottage.

Whoever had been at the brook was long gone. I didn't see or hear anything other than crows flying over. Heading back up the bank, I walked to the end of the mounds and found a vast open meadow. A high hill and some firs were far ahead to the left, with the meadow running past it. I thought I saw something like a statue out there in the distant meadow, but it was hazy. While I was squinting, I tripped. My knee hit a rock, and I stumbled about on one foot, quietly cursing. I noticed I had tripped on a big track in the ground; a heavy tread like one an earthmoving machine would make. The track was now mostly filled in and grown over. I looked back at the mounds and suddenly realized something. Some rows of mounds had been there for a long time, while others had not. The newer mounds were the ones with only meadow grass on them. There had been digging near here, and the excess earth made up half of these mounds. It meant a lot of digging because the mounds were enormous. They took earth from underground and put it here. It made for perfect camouflage, too. The plan was probably to add more mounds to the mounds already present, and out here, no one would ever notice. That was until the Ojibwe tribe noticed. They had left this part of the peninsula long ago, but weren't that far away. Definitely close enough to cause Genistorm a headache when they started moving earth. It created the news article Crake saw, except that it mentioned the seed vault in the controversy and failed to note that Genistorm was digging in various places. I had the feeling that if there were native claims filed against Genistorm, more than a few shamans would disappear long before any judgment was made.

I stood there looking off at the distant meadow, but the view ended in a shimmer of sunlight and haze. A shadow moved off to my left, and I turned suddenly and nearly drew my gun. The shadow was a coyote, and it was out in daylight, looking hungrily at me. It sized me up as too big for a challenge and took off at a slow run, heading across the meadow. I watched it disappear in some pine scrub, feeling glad it ran off. I didn't want to shoot any animals. 'What next, bears?' I thought. Then a picture formed like magic before my eyes. It was almost like a mirage. I pulled out the drawing, flipped it, and saw that I was correct. It was the landscape silhouetted in the old man's drawing. The weird shaman was symbolic of the burial mounds, and the distant landscape matched the silhouette in the inner drawing exactly – four humongous fir trees on the rise up to a bluff. There was no howling coyote at the top, but the coyote was a symbol, too. My bet was that an entrance to something was up there.

It was too far off for me to strike out for it immediately. I needed Crake and Jack with me. If it turned out to be the location we were hunting, it would be too risky for one man to investigate. I also knew very little about coyotes, and if many of them were around, I needed a way to avoid them. I figured that if three of us were together, any local coyotes or bears would be scared off.

I walked farther in, moving slowly in long, springy grass. I thought I saw something in the haze at the bottom of the rise and wanted to see a little closer. It was probably just a tall rock outcropping, but I wasn't sure of it. I felt an odd fear of being stalked, and I paused and looked back at the mounds. A shadow moved swiftly in the sumac scrub at the side of one mound. Maybe another coyote or the same one had doubled back. I took a few steps backward, then continued walking in the same direction. Nothing showed, so I turned and walked a few hundred yards into the meadow. The view

became clearer. A statue of some sort stood in the meadow there near the tall fir trees. Outcroppings of rock jutted from the soil, blocking the rest of the view.

I'd seen enough and turned to return to the cottage. Instead of following the same path back, I swung north, where pines, scrub, and jutting rock provided some cover. I reached the last pine tree, made to step out to walk the short distance to the mounds, but it was only a half step, and I immediately ducked back and squatted. An explosion hit the pine about where my head had been, and I instinctively rolled back farther. I drew my gun and scrambled madly for cover behind some limestone. I felt nerve pain in my right leg, looked, and saw three splinters embedded in my thigh. As I pulled them out, the top of the pine fell over into the grass.

There wasn't much blood; I'd been lucky to survive the shot. The problem was that I didn't know what the weapon was or who had fired it. If it had busted a pine trunk, it would have knocked my head off my shoulders had I not ducked.

The shooter didn't just want to kill me but obliterate me. Moving quietly, I went around the rock, looked out, and saw nothing. I calculated the shot's direction and realized whoever had fired it had already moved. I still had the Colt out and decided to take a chance. I stepped out in the open. Nothing happened for a couple of moments, and then I saw movement over at the first row of genuine burial mounds. It meant there was either more than one of them or the person who had fired the first shot could move fast.

I instantly decided there was more than one, at least two. As I thought that, a person appeared ... slim figure wearing loose-fitting dark clothes and a dark floppy hat. I didn't see any weapon, and the hat shadowed the face. This man was far enough off to be hard to hit with a pistol shot, and I had the feeling he knew it. His right arm moved as though to draw a weapon, but I caught something off to the left in peripheral vision and instinctively turned and fired at it. With the recoil, I understood their plan.

The first man was a distraction, allowing the second man to step out and pick me off. The weapon was a crossbow, and the man was huge, an undertaker with golden-brown skin and longish dark hair protruding from a broad-brimmed hat. My glimpse of him told me very little other than that I hadn't seen him before. The rest of the glimpse was a fiery explosion. I'd not only beat him to the draw, but my shot connected with his drawn bow and caused the explosive arrow he'd been about to release to take him out in flames. The blast savaged most of his head and torso as it threw him violently along the side of the mound.

The luck of my draw shocked both me and the other hostile. I should've immediately tried a second shot to take out the second man, and he should've tried to get me with whatever weapon he had concealed. That weapon revealed itself as a large caliber handgun, and the man turned out to be a woman. "You bastard, you're dead!" she yelled as she moved forward sinuously, swiftly, went to one knee, and aimed for a difficult shot.

She was right. I was dead. I had failed to react. I knew she would make the shot. Only she lost her aim as another completely unexpected thing happened. A coyote had been skulking there behind a boulder, and when she lunged out near the beast, it attacked. It took her gun forearm with its jaws, causing her to fire a wild shot and lose her gun in

the grass. The sound of the shot saved her from a struggle with the coyote. It immediately let go, pulled back, turned, and ran off. I saw her gather herself up, curse the coyote, and dash for cover. Her escape was to the brook, following it toward the lakeshore. I didn't try to pursue her, and somehow I knew she wouldn't double back and try to get me. She was skinny like a junkie but too healthy to be one. I didn't get a good look at her face as the hat always shadowed it.

I walked back to the cottage, thinking that coyotes might be a good luck animal for me. With that thought came a dislike for slim females of the treacherous sort. I knew I should have shot her. Not having done so would certainly register as a mistake to anyone with a professional eye. You don't leave someone alive to come back and try to kill you again. To me, it wasn't a mistake but just part of my character. I'm a big person, tall and strong, and I got into many fights in my younger years. The trigger-happy, tough-guy label wasn't my own label. People out to damage me created it. I felt that way. Coarse, vulgar, pushy people weren't my style. Other guys caused fights, and there was no special merit in winning them, just much humiliation in losing. No matter who you were, someone bigger could come to town and take your heavyweight belt. Being just a muscle head was of no merit. Mellow culture had always been my culture, except at times when others forced me to get mean.

I climbed down the outcropping, spilling loose stones, sand, and nearly slipping twice. I reached the cottage patio with some wits still about me. I had my gun out and ready. I checked the front. Jack and Crake weren't back, and I didn't want to step out in the open. It pissed me off because I realized that we should have stayed together. Now I didn't know if they were ambushed or on a sightseeing tour. Even worse, they might have found a hot lead and be on it, with me left behind.

I decided that for the rest of this cottage outing, I would shoot first and ask questions later. Sort of like a cop with a partner, but an imaginary one in this case. A partner guarantees that you will shoot because you have to cover him. I figured that I wasn't enough of a psychopath to work well alone, and a bitch was still alive because of it. I'd let the coyote or one of the protester ghosts fill in as a partner for a while.

An hour and two beers passed. I sat inside on a stool by the fireplace. It was a location where no one could approach and target me. I would get off the first shot. I started to get worried, seeing deadly ghosts in the shadows. The cottage was in a cellphone blind spot, and we weren't outfitted with satellite phones.

Hanging around the cottage when obvious enemies knew about it was asking for more trouble. Shooters would arrive. I decided to check the landline and found it still connected, though the connection was terrible. It dropped calls before they went through. I managed to gain a scratchy connection to the hotel front desk. The clerk said there had been a visitor looking for us, an older man, but she didn't think my friends had returned yet. Then, the line went dead like someone had cut the wire. I checked the front from a window, then went out a side door and took cover in an area with bushes and birch trees. Not a single car passed on the road. There was no traffic as it all traveled on the main highway.

I reached the roadside, then stood on the pot-holed blacktop trying to figure out what to do. My decision was to get back to the hotel. They might return to the suite if there was

a problem. It was our rallying point. I suspected that the visitor the hotel clerk mentioned, the older man, was Gentry. He could have set a trap for us and caught Jack and Crake. I calculated a five-kilometer walk to the highway. I'd have to jog, and I was about to take off when I heard a crackle. The cottage was located at a bend in the road, and I was sure the sound came from up ahead. Perhaps the woman was setting up an ambush there.

I moved ahead cautiously on the dusty roadside. It would be easier to see me there, but going into the weeds wouldn't be silent, so I held off on that until I reached the bend. Pines crowded the roadside in that section and ran a ways in and uphill. I walked as quietly as possible through the carpet of pine needles, and then I heard and spotted movement. Someone was coming out of the trees, dragging something. The black BMW coupe was parked on the roadside. Moments later, the thin woman appeared, pulling a body by the legs and feet. She'd gone back and picked up the body of her accomplice and was dragging him to the car. She did it with ease and was much stronger than she looked. I was certain the man was dead. The explosion that took him out could've killed about five people.

My eyes remained on the woman. I saw her clearly enough to see beads of sweat and char streaks on her forehead. Her features were severe, like a wicked witch, but one still young. Her lipstick was black. My fascination with her caused me to get clumsy. My left foot came down on a nest of dry pinecones and made a crackling noise. The woman looked my way, then immediately dropped the body. She ran for the coupe, drawing her gun as she did. I ran for her at a zigzag, using pines for cover. She fired a shot and missed me by about a yard. I fired back, tearing a piece off the arm of the baggy jacket she was wearing. The shot failed to wound her.

I figured it was too late, that she'd be inside and away easily, but her desperation became my good luck. She stopped at the car door and couldn't open it. She didn't have the clicker and keys. I saw her curse, look my way, and then run across the road into the woods. I fired two shots at her and missed, ran to the coupe, and took cover behind it. She headed downhill, out of sight through the pines on the other side of the road. I fired another shot to keep her running, and then hurried over to the body. The man's upper torso was a mess of blood, mud, and pine needles, his head nearly blown off. It was horrible, and an odor of blood and charred flesh came with the vision. I wondered where she was taking the body. His legs and black jeans were intact. I found his key set hooked to his belt loop with the keys in his pocket.

The witch woman came back up, but she wasn't quite fast enough. Jogging uphill slowed her down, but not much. I was already in the coupe with the doors locked when she burst out of the pines and sprang to the roadside, firing shots. She displayed deadly prowess and skill that was of no use as I drove off down the road, glad to use her bulletproof car to my advantage. The interior of the car was painted a beautiful slate gray, but the musk the previous driver had worn ruined its fragrance. I had to open a window to get rid of the smell. I noticed that the round BMW logo piece that was supposed to be in the center of the steering wheel had been replaced by an image Crake called the Sigil of Baphomet, a circle around a pentacle with a goat inside. It was as good a piece of ID as any. The owners of this vehicle were Gentry's people. The

woman probably didn't just look like a witch but was one and a member of the Dark Circle of undertakers.

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Part Five: Baphomet's Cradle

There was no sign of the Challenger at the seed vault, and I didn't know the location of the Genistorm land with its other buildings and abandoned cornfields. A delivery van from the Stony Shore Hardware had parked in the vault lot, and the driver, a hayseed with wild blond hair, was walking back from the entrance. He gave me directions, and they led to a short drive that produced nothing but a view of empty fields and a warehouse-style building with an office front.

The Genistorm building looked new, done in white with red trim. It was a huge structure with very little dedicated to office space. The entry area and office were in the left front corner. The rest of the building stretched off like a large windowless warehouse. A few cars were in the lot, and the Challenger wasn't present.

I drove around the building and down a road through the barren fields. I stopped at a couple of large storage barns and found them bolted shut. Tracks ran in behind them, and there were a few custom rail cars parked there, all of them locked up. No one was around; the whole area spelled dead end, nothing but forlorn crows flying overhead.

I parked at the side of the main building rather than in the lot where they would see me coming in. Dark opaque glass prevented any visual of who might be in the office section at the front of Genistorm. On entry, I found a boutique office with a long black Formica counter. It was nothing like Genistorm's Toronto building in design, but it was similar in that you saw nothing of the place on entry. Everything was hidden in the back. Considering its size and length, it would take a fair amount of time to tour the interior.

I soon found that they weren't offering tours. A thin male clerk at a desk behind the counter was the only employee at the front. Creepy, pale, and with a dry voice, the clerk asked me if I was a 'vendor.' And after I replied by asking what he meant by vendor, he cleared his throat and did his best to shuffle me out the door, informing me that the location was only accessible to Genistorm employees and reps of companies partnering with Genistorm. All public relations and questions were dealt with through the Toronto office. When I asked if two other men had stopped by recently, he said no one had been around.

It was only when I stepped out the door that it suddenly hit me that he was another sort of undertaker, wearing a black designer two-piece suit complete with a silk black tie and a handkerchief in the pocket. "They even come in salesman models," I muttered as I sat at the wheel. Then I considered forcing my way inside, decided against it, and left, figuring they might be back in town.

Back into town, I parked the coupe on the street under a large maple tree not far from the clock tower. I left the dead undertaker's keys in it, got out, and walked to the hotel. My feeling was that a quick check on the hotel might produce a lead. There didn't seem to be anyone watching for me. I looked around and saw a few people on the sidewalks

and a few more in the downtown shops. A tall man stood out front of the barbershop, looking the other way at something on the waterfront. The hotel lobby was clear, meaning I saw no one obviously hostile. Some salespeople were at the desk checking in. I didn't bother with the elevator but hurried up to our rooms. I had the card out to swipe my way into the larger suite booked for Jack and Crake. When the lock clicked, I pushed the door open, but didn't go inside. Instead, I backed away from the door and waited. No one came out. I returned to the door, burst inside, and found the suite empty but in disarray. Jack's suitcase had been rifled, and some of the special equipment he'd brought was gone. Crake's laptop case was there, the laptop tossed aside on the floor, open as if someone had tried to check it but given up when they couldn't get access.

I hurried to the window but saw no hostile activity out on the street. Exiting cautiously, I went to my room next door. I burst in the door, gun out, and found it empty and untouched. They hadn't realized I'd taken a separate, smaller suite, and that brought some relief. I still had some supplies, like weapons, ammo, and military flashlights. I knew the hotel had camera surveillance. Beck would have surveillance on them entering the lobby, but I knew pretty much who they were, so it would be useless. There were no other signs of violence, so Jack and Crake hadn't been here when they arrived. If two undertakers had been dropped near the cottage to take me out, probably more than that had tailed Jack. The situation did not feel good at all.

I washed up and took what I needed, including my weapons and ammo, in a small pack with a carry handle and shoulder straps. It was a special pack that security companies sell and can be worn over the front as a bulletproof vest if needed. After switching to a form-fitting pair of Brooks black leather runners, I checked the garage in case the car might be there. It wasn't, so I exited and went over to the Fabulous Firkin.

The situation had become a stopper, and I felt panicked. It hadn't occurred to me that Jack and Crake could vanish and leave me in a lurch so early in the game. If I had listened to Beck when he talked about investigators vanishing, it wouldn't have happened.

I took a two-person table by the window and glanced over at Beck. He was busy at the bar talking to a salesman. The salesman wore a shabby suit that he obviously slept in while on the road. I picked up some talk about farm machinery. A look out the window unnerved me as I noticed that in the short time since leaving the room, the coupe had vanished. I hadn't planned to use it again, but didn't expect it to be reclaimed so fast. I'd left the keys in it, and one of them had already found it and driven it away. Yet none of them had come over here. It didn't make me feel good. It made me feel like they saw me as insignificant ... so much so, they'd just picked up the car and gone elsewhere to do their business.

The news that I'd just killed one of their warlocks out at the cottage hadn't moved them to rash action. Perhaps they wanted to plan a special death for me first. It was like I could smell them out there, and the hair on my neck prickled like my body detected them even though I couldn't see them.

I turned my head from the window, and my mind faded into the shadows of the dim, almost empty bar. Murky, dark, colored lights, the place felt underwater. The server had changed, and this new one had dark hair and sultry looks. She led the soft-faced

salesman to a table and sat in a chair beside him. Made up like a wench, with her face painted, she was ready for a party. It occurred to me that the place was probably empty because it was about an hour before twilight on Halloween. The town's few bars would be full later. When the kids came in, the adults would go out to play. And some of the kids were already out early as a costumed group of them passed on the street, heading for open stores where the pumpkins were welcoming. Beck's jack-o-lantern was over on the bar, so none of them would enter the Firkin.

I looked up as Beck appeared at the table with a pint and garnished nachos, topped with a tiny plastic jack-o-lantern. I accepted the beer silently and sat there sipping it. I'd made a decision, but it didn't seem prosperous or easy. There wasn't much daylight left; if I exited quickly, I'd be out by the cottage just before dark. Following the lead alone and finding out what they had hidden out there emerged in my thoughts as the next step.

I would need a vehicle. I decided to try Beck. The only other option would be to wait out the night in the hotel room. I'd be ambushed for sure on that one. They'd be watching to see if I tried to leave.

The natural reaction of someone who had come to town with two pals that immediately went missing would be to attempt to get out of town and stay out of town, returning only with strong backup. They would figure I would wait a while, then try to flee in the dark. By now, they would also know that I didn't have a vehicle. Since I had already fled the cottage, they wouldn't expect me to return there. The witch woman would have reported in by now. Maybe she got into town and grabbed the coupe. She moved about that incredibly fast. Out at the cottage, she'd seen me go a ways into the field, and then give up and return. She would probably think I had failed to discover their hidden location. It was a good thing that I went up the rise before they arrived. Otherwise, they might have hit me from behind on the cottage patio.

For some moments, I considered that maybe the undertakers were right. The smart move would be to escape, and probably to escape the entire country. I stared out the window. The effects of the drug hit me again. I saw a vision. I was back on the beach, and Josie was smiling at me like sunshine, like an angel. I became filled with great love and pity for her, and then ugly thoughts of what might be happening to her, Crake, and Jack appeared. That rage I had suppressed all of my life was rising. Soon, it would be out of control. I had nothing left to lose, and now I was on a mission. A mission of revenge, and I would kill anyone who got in my way.

I swallowed several handfuls of cheese nachos from the dish on the table and finished the pint. Beck probably thought I was ready for a bigger dinner because he ambled over with a glass of ice water.

I drank most of the water in one long gulp. "Listen," I said. "Our car broke down outside of town. You know where I can get a vehicle for a short ride. I mean right now. I have to be somewhere, but not far."

"There's a Budget Rental on the other side of town. But you had better go over now. Munson, who owns it, moves the cars off the lot on Halloween. Stores them behind his house. Might be closed up already. Drive anywhere tonight, and you will have to dodge

the burning hay bales. Kids put them on the road. Drop them from the overpasses, too. You might even get stopped and harassed by rowdies. There will be parties all over the county.”

“How about your car, can you lend it?”

“Don’t have the compact car here in town. Got a Ford Expedition parked two blocks north of here by my deliveryman’s house on Water Street. You wouldn’t want to use it. Rattles like a train. And it’s pretty big.”

“If it gets me where I’m going, it’ll be fine. I’ll give you a hundred bucks for a short run in it.”

“Spare keys are in the kitchen. I can get them. No charge, if you return it in one piece.”

I said fine just as a weird buzzing noise filled my ears. I somehow knew no one else could hear it. Beck showed no signs of hearing anything strange. It was like a warning, and it pulled my eyes to the window. A few shadowy people were walking from the other side of the clock tower toward a fountain in the little park. As they came out into the open, two black Nissans pulled in quietly. The people gathering were all undertakers, some were women, and the style of dress was far from uniform, though their clothing was all black. The two biggest men wore long coats. Others wore leather jackets and windbreakers.

I turned to Beck. “How many of that gang of ghouls gathering out there have you seen before?”

“I’ve seen most of them, but the gathering this afternoon seems bigger than usual. They must have big plans for tonight. A couple of them were loitering in the hotel lobby today. They were in town a lot when Genistorm was most active with corn and construction. They gather there by the clock tower for a bit, and then they all disperse, head out of town. They’re not gathering there just because you are over here, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Of course, that’s what I’m thinking. I’m naturally paranoid and have more than one reason not to trust them. I’ve never really figured out what their deal is, but I can see why they’re called the Dark Circle. The name fits them.”

“Some of them work on contract with Genistorm. The Negro giant is Harley. They employed him as security chief at the seed vault during its construction. He is one rough character, but he hasn’t been around for a while. The fiery redhead with the flared pants is Ivana. She managed the Genistorm office outside of town for a time. That’s the one out front of the old cornfields. She used to be around the hotel with Harley sometimes. Kosar, the big man with the blond crew cut, I told you about last time ... and Sabbou, the one with the freak eye. The tall, lanky fellow with the fancy boots is Vincenzo, and that curly-haired Arab is Husain. The two of them ran Genistorm’s rail business when they had many cars coming in and out. There is a crowd of those people who work out in the warehouses and with the shipments when they come in.”

“I see. In this remote location, they’re all in tight with Genistorm. Yet Genistorm didn’t keep any of them visible at their main headquarters in the city. I guess they wouldn’t exactly be good for their corporate image. They’re more like silent partners.”

“More than that. I think they run the show, pull the hidden strings for something. Even out here, only they know what their game is.”

Beck kept talking, and the coupe and another car exactly like it pulled up on the other side of the square. For a moment, I thought I had my eyes crossed and was seeing double. The fast moving thin figure that got out of the first coupe was the woman from the cottage encounter. So she did get back to town.

“Salima. That’s the woman with the black lipstick,” Beck said. “I don’t know what she does. Maybe sells drugs to others. When she has the hat on, she looks like the lead witch.”

The door of the second coupe opened, and Jules Gentry emerged, looking as much like an evil secret agent as ever. Standing in the square, his white hair and dark trench coat were highlighted, but the afternoon light was kind to his face, shadowing what I knew were small eyes and a sour twist to the lips. The man wore mystery like an aura, but he didn’t come across as a mystery book anyone would want to open. His entry onto the scene was black magic of a sort, because everyone immediately looked to him and shuffled toward the fountain as he walked toward it. Even the wind seemed to gust with his movement, and clouds scudded past the sun, casting down waves of shadow. Huge golden-red leaves fluttered, and the bright light off the surface of the lake backlit the strange scene. It was as if Gentry’s appearance had transformed Stony Shore to Salem, and its aging frame houses were about to spit poltergeists from dusty closets.

If the atmosphere had become sorcery, I knew it was because Gentry had more of it planned for this night. Beck was right in saying they weren’t there just to watch me. They were there despite me, forging ahead with some abominable plan, in which getting me out of the way would just be a small side deal. I could see the evil out there, blowing with loose parchment leaves of Halloween. The ghouls and goblins had gathered early, and being much more than specters, they held a grim physical reality.

Beck moved close to the glass and squinted, as if Gentry might not be quite real. “Mr. Jules Gentry, he’s the big boss, but no one knows what exactly the enterprise is. He isn’t employed by Genistorm. Never was. I know because I asked Harley about it once. Harley said Gentry’s business is of a confidential nature. The man is an investor and plays with big money. It is never wise to show interest in him. He’s looking this way now, but don’t worry. I don’t know if you noticed, but you can’t see in my window from outside. They can’t see us. It only seems that way.”

“It more than seems that way. He knows I’m in here. Tell me, Beck, in all the time these people have been around Stony Shore, hasn’t anyone noticed that they aren’t exactly in the mainstream? I mean in the sense that most people aren’t dressed like it’s Halloween every day, and most people don’t carry the essence of weird with them as personal atmosphere. Didn’t you ever ask yourself why Genistorm employs people that look like them or notice that they are a cult of some form?”

“This is a town of Wiccans. Gentry’s group projects power, and the pagan people seem willing to go along with them, so I don’t ask questions. I definitely noticed that they are a weird cult. The other pagans or Wiccans are kind of like people who go to a church you don’t attend. They don’t really look any different. Country places have many weird

religious cults, many of them Christian. Gentry's weird cult is the scariest around, but noticing them is like noticing the Hell's Angels are in town. Trying to oppose them or confront them is like digging your own grave."

I had no plans on digging my own grave, and the rage rising in me was being tempered by conversation. I wouldn't go out and confront them because that would give them their wish of the fast kill of a foolish hothead. Strategy and tactics were always the game when facing a big opponent. I looked back at Beck. "Due to the fact that they don't particularly like me, I probably have to get out of here soon, and without them seeing me. It will be much better for your business if I make a fast exit. Know any way to do that?"

"I can think of one way. I managed to get out when police and protesters overran the place. You could try that. If you're sure they're coming for you tonight. You can have a tow company drive my Ford back when you're done with it."

A bright shaft of sunlight appeared between the peaks of two stores, causing the second coupe to shine like a black gem. The driver's side door opened, and a man walked from a spotlight of sunlight to the shade. I recognized him, but it took a moment to sink in. This man was mature and handsome, with hair beginning to grey. The fellow I'd thought looked like a TV doctor, only now he had on a black shirt, casual black jacket, and pants. The neck was open on his shirt, revealing a gleaming gold chain and icon. Something hadn't been right about his face the first time I saw him, and in this setting, he looked more like an undertaker than a doctor. They came in various types, and all seemed to merge as one when in a group. They were always similar and recognizable via some form of aura or presence.

He stopped and looked across the square towards Beck's window. I realized what made him imperfect. His eyes were set too close, and that made it seem too much like he was staring. It felt like he was staring me down, yet Beck said they couldn't see through his front window. He also had incredible nerve. He knew I'd seen him in that video posing with Josie. It meant he was baiting me, hoping I'd lose my temper and run out there.

All that passed through my head. A bolt of anger struck, and then I suddenly jerked to my feet, spilling the remains of the nachos. The table nearly went over, and I realized that I'd been staring out the window, nearly hypnotized. Rael's appearance had tripped a switch, altering the sleepy magic to rage, and it took all my self-control to keep from running out there and attacking him. He knew Josie's location. They all knew. And I knew. She was out here somewhere.

Beck put a firm hand on my shoulder. "You aren't going out there, Mr. Holiday. There are far too many of them, and no one will help you."

I brushed his hand away and grabbed my pack. I ended up caught between acting and freezing. My emotions said to run out and confront them, but my feet glued themselves to the floor, refusing to let me do it. In those few moments, both Gentry and Rael turned and walked back to the coupe. They got in and drove off with Rael at the wheel. My cold and calculating sense of survival had held me inside, and they'd failed to lure me out. They'd put on this little show to mock me, humiliate me. It left me trapped inside, with nothing to do but wait for them to move on me.

Now, Salima and Sabbou were both staring over at the bar window and grinning. I was certain their intent was to fill me with impotent rage. I felt like bursting through the glass and going after them.

“Where is this Rael from?” I said through clenched teeth.

Beck steadied the table with his hands, afraid I would throw it over. “I thought you knew about him. Rael is Genistorm’s public relations man out here. He deals with the media and protester problems. Of course, there’s not much of that now, so I’m not sure why he’s back.”

“He’s dressed a bit like that man I just saw at the Genistorm office. Any idea when he got back in town?”

“No. He’s been gone for weeks, maybe three months. Same with Jules Gentry. They may have been around the odd time. I don’t see everything.”

A few more cars pulled up out by the square, but no one got out of them. The undertaker gang appeared to be about to leave. They piled into the vehicles, and the cars drove off one by one. They didn’t form a convoy, but they all turned west off Main Street. A few undertakers remained and walked back toward the water, disappearing behind the clock tower, making it seem as if they were also leaving the scene. I was certain that they weren’t going far; they were left in town to take care of me. They’d move into position, stake out the hotel, wait, and see if I exited. If I failed to leave, they’d probably come in to ice me just after dark, when it was Halloween night in the hotel.

I turned to Beck. “I need the car key and a way out without being seen, right now. They left those four guys to take care of me, but they likely won’t come in before dark. If they see that I’m not here, they’ll probably leave quickly without causing you trouble. If they press you, say that I asked for the address of the rental lot just before I left the bar.”

I’d said the magic words. Beck worked quickly and quietly on the plan to get me out of his hotel. He didn’t ask me to stay away from the hotel because he was certain I wouldn’t be returning. In his mind, I was already on a journey to that netherworld other investigators and some protesters had discovered. He didn’t want any violent deal to go down in the hotel and was hoping that his car would get me out of town and maybe clean away.

A few minutes later, we were high up, peeking past the curtain of an empty suite, down into the back. The entrance to the neighboring parking garage was covered by an obese undertaker, and he was wearing tight black gloves like he didn’t want to dirty his hands while strangling me. A second tall and grim undertaker stood by a rear lamppost behind the town veterinary office on the other side. A gang of kids hurried past him against the wind and leaves, on their way out for Halloween. Dogs caged inside were barking loudly. Plenty of stuff was happening down there to keep their eyes busy, as cars also rolled in and out of the parking area.

Beck led me to one of the attic rooms up in the capped roof. Going out via its window was supposed to take me close to Water Street and the vehicle he owned. He remained silent as if dropping a word would bring discovery, and he may have been correct. Some of the upper rooms were occupied, and Beck didn’t want anyone to see me with him. The room he opened wasn’t a rental. It had a bed and a lunch table inside and was

obviously a room the staff used at times. He took me to a dusty side window, and I immediately figured out the rest. I could drop to the roof of the parking garage and make my way across. It was so easy that Beck could do it and had done it at times. I opened the window quietly and slipped down to the rooftop, with Beck looking down at me mournfully like an old hound dog, saying goodbye to a friend he wouldn't be seeing again.

The rush of fresh air on the flat rooftop charged me, and I hurried across the exact center of it, where I wouldn't be seen from the streets running on either side. The clock tower loomed in the distance like a prison tower. If anyone was up at the top of it, my escape could be over. I not only wanted to duck out but leave them confused as to where I'd gone. They'd burst into my hotel suite, think I'd performed a vanishing act, and then Beck would convince them I escaped in a rental car. That would leave them with the option of racing to the route to Toronto or tracking me later.

I stepped quietly onto a metal fire escape on the other side. More kids were out and shouting as they passed the alley on Main Street. I nearly forgot to check the back street, and when I did, I ducked quickly back onto the roof. A black Nissan was parked down at that end of the alley with its tail facing me. I couldn't tell if anyone was inside it. The next roof over was a public building, the local land office. I ran and jumped over the lip of the roof, and barely made it. The land office roof was sloped, and I clung to the edge, then slowly inched around it along the front until I reached the other side and a robust maple tree.

Thankfully, my old fear of heights didn't return on the drug, but it caused a problem where nearly all expansive views were overwhelming. I felt a pull like I was being sucked off the edge. Climbing down quickly, I thought I was clear, but I wasn't. Another bunch of costumed kids had been coming up the street the other way, and they began to shout at me as I jogged off. One fat bully threw an apple. I stamped my foot as I stopped. When I turned to face the kids, they halted, then whooped and ran off in the other direction.

I ducked into the dim entryway of a dilapidated rooming house, peeking out occasionally until I was certain it was clear, then I moved quickly and turned right, onto Water Street. I found the address and the parked Ford there in a dirt lot at the side, next to a Starcraft powerboat. The vehicle looked to be in excellent condition, certainly better than Beck's description of it. I wasn't familiar with the model, a Ford Expedition, medium gray with some black and red striping. I popped inside and found the interior to be the same colors, red stitching in the gray solids, even on the steering wheel. As a vehicle, it was huge, but the engine started quietly, and I pulled out without anyone in the house noticing. The wheels went over ruts in the dirt lot, and I heard none of the rattling Beck had mentioned. I liked the vehicle. I cruised down Water Street and turned left, taking a scenic route through streets shadowed by the mostly skeletal branches of overhanging trees. Kids, some with their parents, were on the streets. In the Ford, I felt anonymous. The big vehicle didn't draw eyes in the way a car selected by Crake or Jack would. I wore it as my costume and remained invisible. I checked the rearview for anyone troublesome on the sidewalks, and I quickly drove the Ford left when an overweight, middle-aged superman stepped off the curb and into my path. I missed him. The little ones with him yanked his cape. My eyes went back to the road; a dark figure emerged

from an alley. Startled, I nearly swerved. I thought an undertaker had spotted me and felt relief when the mirror showed him to be a stout Batman leading a gaggle of kids.

I remembered the route to the Gene Saviors' cottage and sped down the rural highways, reaching the turn in less than twenty minutes. Record speed and record time for an Expedition and no undertakers had shown on the highway. I decided not to pass the place or pull in at it because they might be watching for vehicles. There was definitely a turnoff beyond the cottage. It would take vehicles into the area I'd seen beyond the mounds. The element of surprise was something I couldn't risk losing, not now that I'd got this far unnoticed. The pines before the turn were nearly level with the road, so it was easy to drive the Ford into them and park it out of sight. The ground rose just beyond the front end, so I got out and began the climb, which wasn't difficult.

In spring to early summer, mosquitoes and flies would be too thick for comfort in this area, but in the fall, it was easy hiking. The top of the rise opened me to a spectacular view of the bright sunset and fans of red rays that gave the impression of the sun suddenly expanding to a red giant. Twilight and darkness would come down in a quick curtain in the next few minutes, and I wanted to get over the brief bit of ground in that time. I couldn't exactly hurry, as I didn't want to be spotted. This was a mixed forest of tall deciduous trees with massive trunks that screened me from view at the top. Even in the dark, the silhouettes of the giant fir trees beyond the mounds and open meadow would guide me. I stumbled into a sign just behind the first line of trees past the rise. It was a Keep Out - Private Property sign, and the top portion read Genistorm Agricultural Lands. That made it clear that it was Genistorm land, but there was no sign of them planting anything on the tract. If they did plant, it would keep most people out, like Crake, for example, who wouldn't want to encounter any of those creep vines or other special plants Genistorm was preparing for the soil at their Toronto headquarters.

A coyote howled in the distance as I jogged to the mounds. A hungry howl, it almost stopped me in my tracks, but it was far away, so I would be clear. The full hunter's moon of October was two days back, so the coyotes would be out in force as it rose tonight. I had a hunch that coyotes would know enough to stay away from any Genistorm facilities. They would smell the evil.

Deep shadows tinted by declining light created spooks in the mounds, but fortunately, none of them turned out to be deadly. I stopped and looked out at the meadow and decided to go around its edge through the fringe of Staghorn sumac. Edging the forest and meadow, the fiery red-and-orange fall leaves created a screen out from the trees that would hide me from anyone watching on the far side of the meadow. The going began rough and became easy when I found a path animals had cut through the sumac. At about the halfway mark, I detected an odor, somewhat industrial, like there might be exhaust vents from an underground facility nearby. I scanned the remainder of the meadow, saw no mist or steam, but there was a haze of light at the far end beyond the giant firs. My guess was that there was an embankment there with some lights and a side road running in off the highway. It didn't matter; I still would not have driven in.

I began moving fast, my eyes adjusted as night fell, but I wasn't used to seeing so many stars. I preferred to keep my eyes lowered as the sky whirled before my eyes, the Milky Way becoming a kaleidoscope. If I hadn't encountered anyone, it was probably because

any spotters would be watching the road in on the far side. The Springfield with the silencer was my choice for this leg of the trip and maybe the whole night. I had it fastened with a belt hook and pulled it out when I heard something crashing through the bush in the forested area. It sounded big, but it was moving away from me. Surprising a bear wasn't in my plan, so I kept still until it was gone, then hurried ahead, coming out of the sumac near the end of the meadow.

The haze of light was much brighter, and it provided a good visual of the area ahead. The three giant firs marked the rise and a campground of some variety at its foot. I crept to a large granite boulder, peeked around it for a look, and nearly jumped back. Smaller coniferous trees ringed the camp area, and inside them were huge standing stones. Big stones like Stonehenge, but none of them were in an organized circle. They appeared like entryways into areas of the campground. Ten-foot high vertical stones with another slab across the top like a lintel. Those types led to three areas, and a couple of other huge single stones led to two other places ringed by trees. The meadow grass ended where the camp began, and much of the ground became duff and beaten earth paths through shorter grass.

The fan of light rose from the other side of the camp, casting deep gloom and darkness across the grounds. I left the boulder, walked to the biggest set of stones, and through them into an open area that contained the tallest fir. Smaller trees ringed the area, and a towering idol stood right out front of the big fir. It amazed me, and I stopped to look at it. I remembered thinking I saw a statue in the daytime when I'd looked across from the mounds. I'd probably seen one of the larger standing stones. I hadn't expected to find anything this large, but the tall fir hid it from view. This giant was an owl, carved and painted from wood and stone. Its feet rested on a huge stone base that had an assortment of symbols chiseled into it. Parts of the owl carried a faint nightglow, projecting an aura that aroused ancient fears of the supernatural. It wasn't something newly constructed; its age showed.

Blood began to pound in my temples. Reading about idol worshipers in dull textbooks or heathens in the Bible worshipping Moloch wasn't at all like the jitters created by seeing this idol in darkness. It was magnificent in a terrible way, with a look somewhat like native art but with a satanic twist. It conveyed an evil force I could feel, and it seemed almost alive with a spirit infusing it. I looked away from it and closed my eyes. I had to remain calm and not let illusion allow some unnamed form of panic to take hold. The rising supernatural fear reminded me of my old fear of heights. People with no fear of heights can't at all understand how crippling that fear can be. As fear begins to rise, so do mistakes, and then it becomes panic and fatal errors. Fear and phobias are usually to some extent based on reality. There is some danger on a high ledge, and the owl idol reached into the mind with a message of the dangerous people drawn to it. It was present as more than a work of art.

Perhaps I had discovered why there were no churches in Stony Shore. Their places of worship were scattered about the peninsula and mostly outdoors. I thought about that, then realized I was wasting my time standing around. The drawing indicated the top of the rise as the entry point, and it was behind me. I turned and looked. The other two huge firs were on its side, and they rose far above into a face of rock and scrub. I

decided to begin the climb up, but before I could walk out of the idol circle, I heard movement ... definitely the sound of someone prowling nearby.

It broke the spell, and I did a quiet power walk to the cover of the trees. The person had stopped, then resumed moving at a steady pace. Following the direction of the sound, I got closer until I was able to peer out from behind a branch. The walker was a man, and if he hadn't stopped by a huge stone to light a cigarette, I probably wouldn't have seen him. He wore a balaclava and was dressed all in black. The balaclava wasn't plain but a special style that gave him a wicked and powerful look like he was a ninja or a sorcerer, except that he didn't use a sword, a sorcerer's wand, or a fancy crossbow with explosive arrows. He was straightforward muscle with a mini submachine gun strapped over his shoulder. I saw him reaching for the top of his head and ducked back quickly when I realized he had night-vision goggles and was pulling them on.

He blew out a stream of smoke and turned away from me, shielded by the deep shadow of the huge stone as he stepped away. I didn't shoot because a miss would've meant a quick spray from him and my immediate death. I had to get behind him, so I went into Apache mode, creeping on his trail. This undertaker didn't realize it, but he would have spotted me at the beginning if he hadn't removed the night vision goggles. Taking them off to light a smoke left him with eyes not fully adjusted to the dark. I had no plans on giving him a second chance to get me, and the sound of a car engine gave me the break I needed. He turned right to walk toward what I assumed was the embankment over the road. The haze of light gave me a clear shot, and I zapped him in the back of the head, on the assumption his torso would be protected by body armor. A miss would have meant a fail, but the shot was on the mark. His head covering kept the shot from becoming messy; it was just a splat like I'd squashed an armored bug, then he fell to the ground.

Voices, more light, and the sound of car engines and radios filled the night air. I dragged him out of sight into the bushes, took his key set, and then hurried through two screens of trees. I reached another big jagged boulder, this time on an embankment. I zipped his key set into a compartment in my bag so it wouldn't make noise, then peeked out.

The boulder and the grass ended at a steep sandy drop-off. A gravel-and-dirt parking lot was below. It was at the end of a narrow dirt road, and I could see several cars coming up it. One Honda had just pulled into the lot, and people were emerging from it. The driver wore a Zorro costume, the second man was a knight, and the women were princesses. More cars were parked in the most distant part of the lot with lights off like they'd been there a while. I nearly said "Shit!" aloud when I noticed that the empty vehicles were Dark Circle undertaker cars.

The bastards were nearby somewhere, and that meant I'd followed the right lead. I became certain they were underground because they would be visible if doing things above ground. The crowd pulling in was no doubt Stony Shore people coming out for Halloween. Beck had said they were Wiccans. One man emerging from a car was costumed as the Green Lantern, so if they were Wiccans, they didn't favor witch or warlock dress. This Halloween, they were out as partiers, but a bit more extravagant than what one would expect out in the country.

I went around to the back of the boulder. I could see the big rise. It was a long climb, but I would be out of sight. Probably a hidden path existed, too. It didn't show in the dark. I figured the townspeople were here for a gathering at their owl idol, meaning the place served a dual purpose, with the children of Moloch in the clearings and the demons of Gentry hell hidden somewhere else. Josie would be trapped with the demons. With that in mind, I jogged off and began the climb. I figured I could see from above, so if anyone did enter the underground somewhere down here, I would be aware of it. I was placing my trust in the old man. His drawing had the entrance above, perhaps not because it was the only way in, but because it was the safest way in.

Thirty yards up, I found a hidden spot with a lookout point to observe what was happening below. I stood on a log bench for a moment, looking down, and then spotted the path up. The noise below began to rise in a din as I moved slowly and silently, occasionally pausing to make sure none of the people were climbing up my way. It didn't look like it. Most of them had parked and gathered in the parking area. They were drinking and smoking, so it was a Halloween party. A path farther down the parking lot led up to the camp area, and a couple of people with lanterns were already up in it. I watched until I saw them enter the circle with the owl idol, and I was satisfied that it was their destination.

The next leg up was a steep, rocky path cut into the side of the rise; over its edge, I could see the tops of the towering firs. The path began to level out, and the foliage broke, and then I halted in the dark. A structure was ahead on a flat knob of the rise. It was open, a form of gazebo. I walked to it slowly, studying it. Someone had hewed down pines, used their trunks to make this open structure, and then placed and tied fir branches to form its roof. The posts were set firmly into earth and stones, and the structure secured via rawhide straps. Its floor was earth, but one bench, again made of rough-hewn logs, was present. Something gleamed in the starlight. I reached down and picked up a bone. It looked like a femur, and there were more bones, a lot of them piled at one end of the gazebo. They appeared to be human bones, and stepping over by them gave me a view below to the largest circle and the idol. That area was lit by lanterns, and the costumed people had gathered there and were mingling. Glancing at the bones again, I wondered if they had to do with the people at that idol or were some macabre secret of Gentry and his undertakers.

I kicked over some of the bones, uncovering a skull. It was suddenly there, the face of death staring at me. I released a small gasp and stepped back. As I moved, I was suddenly thrown backward by a man crashing into me from my left. I stumbled to a halt, dropping my gun and nearly going off the edge of the knob just outside the gazebo. I immediately realized what had happened. The man had emerged from foliage beyond a dark opening of the gazebo, and he had planned to split my skull open with a blunt object. That didn't happen because my backward stagger on seeing the skull caused him to miss. He'd swung so hard that it caused him to stumble forward from the force of his blow.

He regained his balance and turned quickly to face me, creating a weird standoff. He didn't have a gun. His weapon was a tomahawk. His eyes and mine went to the gleam of my Springfield where it had landed nearby. If he charged, he'd go over the edge for a fall with me, which is probably why a crafty look formed on his face, or what I could see

of it. Black mud or grease streaked his cheeks, and his eyes were feral and reddened. I instinctively glanced away from his eyes, knowing that he was another of the undertakers or Dark Circle. I couldn't afford to be hypnotized. Even at my best, my assessment of his weapon didn't hint at a good outcome for me. Except for the silver edge of the blade, the weapon was all black. It was a form of modern tomahawk with an upswept axe blade at the front and a spike on the other end of the head. I still had my pack hooked over my shoulder, but not enough time to pull another gun.

This man was dressed all in black, but his own rugged style, and he was more agile than the rest of the undertakers. He shifted lightly side to side on his feet, ready to come in at me fast, no matter which way I went. He didn't expect me to go over the side for a fall, but I did. I went back and right, catching one of the gazebo posts with my right arm. He stepped forward then, and I hit him with a flash from the military flashlight in my left hand. He staggered back, temporarily blinded. But he made a good guess as to where I would be because he quickly came in and swung, missing me by an inch as I pulled through at the second post over. His blade sank deep into the post. He strained to pull it out, which was a mistake because it gave me a moment to reach down, pick up the skull, and smash it across the back of his head. It put him down but not out; I had the axe out in a flash, and the spiked end into his head a moment later. His body rolled over the side with the axe still embedded in his head.

I grinned, figuring the coyotes might find him and put him on his way to being the next set of stripped bones decorating the gazebo. Lightly turning, I was about to step away when I slipped on a bone. My foot flew out from under me; I went forward and whacked my head on the gazebo post. It put me on my one knee, and when I tried to rise, I got dizzy and blacked out.

I woke muttering something crazy, clawed at the darkness, and got up. It took a minute for my head to clear. I felt a lump by my temple. A chant of the monotonous form had started below. I glanced down and saw the crowd in a half circle at the idol. I had been unconscious for a while. They had a bonfire burning. Litter and bottles were scattered in the clearing; some people had passed out on the ground. None of the people had come up my way.

It pissed me off that I had been out, but I realized that luck had been with me, and no one had found me. I studied a few more of the bones by the gazebo. Coyotes wouldn't strip bones so clean. It looked like an acid that removed only flesh had stripped them. I wished I had searched the Tomahawk man before letting him roll down into the brush. Climbing down the steep side wasn't in my plans, so I turned and began the last leg up. My feeling was that the idol crowd was composed of pagans from the area. They knew of Gentry but weren't party with him, other than they used the clearing for their worship or ceremonies, and probably had done so long before the undertakers came to town.

That industrial odor that I had noticed out in the meadow was stronger near the top. I hadn't noticed it lower on the path or down by the idol. A level rock shelf was up ahead, and another above it. The climb to the first shelf was steep, and I wouldn't see over the edge until I was there. Drums kicked in below, and with the chanting gathered a strange echo by the time it reached me. This was unsettling because it was like the mood music that slowly rises in a horror film, then suddenly reaches a crescendo when the space

alien emerges from the bushes. I could see the colored lanterns moving below, shifting like fireflies as the people moved about and continued their monotonous chant. I figured it was fine if people wanted to hypnotize themselves, but the bastards were trancing me at a time when I wanted to be fully alert.

I found a good foothold and an excellent handhold that allowed me to get up onto the ledge quickly. I came up fancying myself like a fast cat or brave with a knife in my teeth, ready to pounce on the enemy. But no enemy was present. The stone ledge ran in about twelve feet to dark bushes. Light sand from the embankment above coated the ledge in a ceramic yellow tone. I saw smoke, and then realized it wasn't smoke but steam wafting out through the bushes deeper in. This was the industrial odor, and it was foul up here. It smelled like something half flesh and half plastic had died. I dialed the light down, walked closer, and put the beam on it. Part of a grate showed behind the bushes. It was a lattice of metal bars bolted into the rock with a mesh of steel over the bars. Steam rushed out of the mesh and up into the night air with the sound of a great beast lightly sighing. I crouched and studied it. A venting system that ran down to a system underground, probably from air conditioning for their underground area, or possibly a sump system that removed some groundwater by venting it out as steam. I figured that with Genistorm it could be anything, even some method of spraying chemicals of some type over the nearby landscape. Pulling aside the bushes, I noticed a heavy lock holding the gate in place. It would open if I busted it loose, but I did not intend to enter that stinky duct.

The odor turned my stomach. I stepped back right to the edge and looked up at the final small climb, heard a roar, and nearly fell off the ledge. An animal was inside that duct and it had rushed right up to the grate and growled. It sounded like a strangled dog, and I could see a dark shadow pressing against the mouth of the grate. I had dropped the flashlight, so I picked it up and aimed a dim beam at the grate. That enraged the thing; I saw the entire grate shaking, but it was hard to see past the mesh. The eyes that showed were yellow and fierce, and there was a gleam of teeth. It growled, snorted, scratched, and when I stepped closer, it banged itself against the grate. The thing was doglike, but the head was wide, flat, and rippled. It had a mouth lined with pointed teeth, and it pawed with feet that were big and wide, with claws.

My guess was that the undertakers let that monster out from time to time, and it was the source of the bone pile below. A loose bolt at the top of the grate was shaking, and I feared the thing would break loose. The beast began swinging its hind end around to bang against it. A few hits like that knocked the bolt right out, then the hasp holding the lock came loose, and the whole grate structure bent forward, creating a small space.

I had no plans to battle it on a ledge, so I went to the side of the grate that remained intact and did a quick spurt to the top of it. I was just above it when the grating broke open, and it burst out with such speed that it nearly slid off the edge of the ledge. As it turned on the ledge, I got a momentary look at it. A doglike body about hip high on a man, big, splayed and clawed feet, and a grotesque head with yellow eyes. Its flat snout rested over an abnormally large mouth. As it roared, I pumped four silenced bullets into its throat, knocking its head off and sending the rest of it over the edge to join the tomahawk man, the bones, and the beat of the drums. Another tasty snack for the coyotes, providing it tasted better than it smelled.

“At least it wasn’t half animal and half creeping plant,” I thought as I climbed. The drumbeat was still vibrating from below and throwing me off. I needed to concentrate and do smooth, careful movements. I didn't need any desire to dance with drums. Fresh air blew in, the downdraft removing the smell and some of the nausea. The climb was almost done, and I pulled up on a bush to discover that the way up would have been easy had I gone to the south side of the ledge below instead of straight up. I got onto the last part of the trail and parted some evergreen scrub to reach the top part of the rise. The ledge revealed was twice the size of the one below. My night-adjusted eyes spotted no movement and no mist, but I could not see into the huge cave mouth ahead. Yellow sand coated the open stone ledge like the one below, but here it had a metallic sheen, almost golden.

A marker was positioned to the left of this broad opening. It was ten feet high, made of solid black stone, and in the shape of a cross. Under starlight, the entire scene felt eerie. This was an inverted cross, slightly tilted, and standing almost like a shadow. Combined with the bass pounding from the idol circle below and the renewed ghostly chanting, it gained unholy power. That power seemed increased by its massive size. A depiction of an inverted cross or image on a Satanist necklace would not have had any effect on me, but this huge thing made one fully aware of the as-above-so-below symbolism. Standing straight and upright, the cross would seem like the heavenly marker of a holy place, but here it pointed below like a message to anyone thinking of entering. This was the gateway to some hell below.

I adjusted my light again, this time for a gentle, wide beam. The cave ran in deep, and it looked safe. I entered after pausing and flashing the beam around the cave mouth and ceiling. Crevices, cobwebs, and dust showed in the beam, and the dust delivered an odor that put me in mind of musty books and sour wine. This wasn’t something newly dug but an ancient cave. The floor ahead was of the same dust and stone, but deep brown in color, and there were many footsteps, not all of them human. Some were animal prints as if coyotes came in from time to time. Twenty yards in, I found something interesting. The wide beam revealed a native painting on the wall with the same images from the old man’s drawing, so not only did his sketch reveal the location, but the painting was also here. It was impressive in its larger size. The artist had used a flat portion of the stone wall as a canvas and a form of paint with bright colors. The shaman stood out, his arms and hands elongating into tentacles as he reached for a huge central orb painted in yellows. The wolf mask floated in front of his face. The same silhouette in black showed in the bottom half of the orb - four tall fur trees by a rise with a howling coyote on the bluff at the top. The meaning of the painting had not come to me before because I had been looking at it as a map. It showed the shaman warping to some hideous creature through some cosmic supernatural power. It represented much the same thing Genistorm and Jules Gentry were actually trying to accomplish with that hellish man-plant thing we’d seen back in the railcar. A supernatural aspect was part of it because they didn’t use science only, but alchemy, witchcraft, and madness. It was the Illuminati mindset applied to occult Canada, using its native history as symbolism.

Beyond the painting, the cave narrowed and began to slope downward. I followed it down, and the roof roughened, just above my head, so I kept my head down to avoid surprises. It remained a natural cave for a long way down, and I could see no hidden

lights or doors. I came to a spot where it branched right and left and saw footprints in the dust going both ways. Following the right branch, I went another twenty yards and came to a huge metal door sealed in the stone. The metal was dark, almost ebony, and there was no paint on it. I looked it over carefully with the light and saw no way to open it from the outside. I checked the roof and the walls around it for cameras but saw none, then went back and down the other branch. It took me much deeper and to another door, black like the other, but with an access panel. It had three rows of ivory buttons with no symbols, and a fob-type reader below. I didn't know which buttons to press, but I did have the set of keys I'd grabbed below, and they had a little collection of teardrop fob pieces. I took them out, and none of them seemed to work. I tried touching them directly to the panel, one by one, and the red fob made a click. The door swung in just enough to let me squeeze through. I did that quickly, flashing the beam, ready to shoot.

No one was there; I switched off the beam as the door closed behind me. This was a fabricated tunnel, like a large reinforced tube set underground, and it was wide enough for two men to walk abreast. Even at my height, there was six inches of clearance overhead. The walls were smooth, hard as steel, but black; the floor was flecked with ebony and had no shine. I assumed the tunnels here were made of a space-age plastic-metal alloy that was extremely strong and durable. A strip of tiny lights ran down the tunnel roof and lit it adequately, even though each light was about the size of a marble. The light was in the blue-diamond spectrum, creating the sensation of being on a spaceship or station, and of being at some remote end of it. I'd found an entrance, but my guess was that only a few undertakers who guarded the place used it. Jules Gentry and the others had entered somewhere else at a main entrance I hadn't discovered.

I worried about detection, yet there were no visible cameras or sensors. I believed there were probably some hidden in the upper lighting pieces or embedded elsewhere where they wouldn't be detected. No mechanical booby traps had presented themselves, so I figured that security would be human. That would be undertakers, but with aid from that grate monster and surveillance equipment. It made sense. When I considered how many people would get past the two undertakers and the dog thing I'd killed, I came up with none. And that included me; if not for tremendous luck, I would not have made it.

Moving cautiously, I walked about fifty yards and saw an opening ahead with no door blocking access. I reached the opening and glanced in. The ceiling rose, and the tube widened into a fabricated cavern. The walls and ceiling were deep brown and rough in texture. The area was vented; I felt a rush of cool air. It was hard to make anything out in the gloom, but I didn't spot any movement, so I stepped in.

Overhead lights came on, displaying the peculiar contents of the room. Under the light, the walls became black. A form of medical machine was off to the right. It reminded me of an MRI machine I'd seen in Toronto, but only slightly. It had the massive cylinder and platform that would slide a body inside it, and it was more like Doctor Frankenstein's MRI machine. The cylinder was matte black and covered with silver symbols everywhere, most of them occult. The slide-in bed was a black slab. A nest of cables ran from it into the wall. I considered the possibility that treatment on this machine made the undertakers what they were. Its use as a brain-melting, mind-and-body-warping device seemed certain.

A second machine sat on the other side of the cavern, and it was like a coffin with silver butterfly wings that would close over a body. An attached mechanical arm bristling with needles and probes looked like something stolen from the spaceship of tabloid aliens. Much of the rest of the room was filled with plastic kegs with different markings, none of which I understood. There were smaller devices and assorted equipment I didn't have time to study or speculate about, so I crossed the room and followed the tube to another small, open area for the storage of medical horrors.

The room was circular. Just off the center aisle, two semicircles of specially built aluminum-shaded shelving held thick, transparent jars. A complex array of feed tubes connected to the jars. Silver symbols that resembled runes were stamped on the jars, and their contents were sickening. My startled eyes flashed from one side to the other, and the gleaming shelves felt like rings of death about to close in on me. Many of the jars contained organs that looked healthy in the clear juice, pickling them. Other jars obviously froze their contents, and they were body parts ... whole human arms, neatly severed ... feet, hands, and thighs. Human heads floated in jars on the higher shelves; staring faces, floating hair, eyes open but dead. These heads weren't shriveled but surgically severed and healthy.

My skin crawled as I went through thirty jars containing the heads, and the terror rising from my chest was from the certainty that Josie's head would appear. I had to force myself to look at each face. By the end of the line, my teeth were grinding under their own power. Then a sense of relief relaxed me as Josie, Jack, and Crake were definitely not among the heads... at least not yet. I was certain I had found the missing Gene Saviors protesters, and probably the people who had come looking for them. Sadly, for them, they would have discovered that the horrors they were protesting weren't the half of it, because the other half had been saved to dish out to them.

My desire to see the rest of this Illuminati creep show was quickly vanishing into my turning stomach. I wondered what in the hell they were up to in these tunnels other than freak experiments. Without doubt, they were heavily involved in selling human organs to other Illuminati people; people who probably had dollar signs for eyes. Yet that didn't explain the heads. No one ordered a new head, but someone might buy a face or neurotransmitters or whatever Gentry's mad science could pilfer. Gentry's medical alchemy had to be well in advance of current medical science, and since he wasn't a doctor himself, he would have medical people working for him. Probably all over the world if what Crake said about the Illuminati was correct. Jack had said that activity in this area was recent, and this facility was new. They were probably making a move of labs and freak stuff from some other location that may have become too hot for them. This was a new nerve center ... or perhaps a new hellhole.

I couldn't do anything for headless people, so I moved through the tube to another segment of it that offered two doors side by side. The left door had a high voltage sign, and a yellow fob opened it. Glaring lights ignited; it was a power room, like a substation, and no one was present. It was also a dead end, so I went back and tried the other door. It was a copper-toned security door, and it opened via a gold fob on my stolen key set. I jumped in, panning the area with my gun. Again, no one was present, but someone should have been. I had found a guard post with a wall of security screens and a desk setup designed for manned operation.

The door on the other side was sealed. I sat down and looked around; a metal panel framed the computer equipment, and there were images on a number of wall screens. A large screen to the right gave a camera view of the people in the idol circle. A group of postage-stamp screens at the edge of it could be enlarged to show the entire area and the parking lot. Movement on the far left screen caught my eye. It was another corridor in the complex, and a group of undertakers moved along it. They wore hooded black robes, and the impression was that they were headed for a ceremony somewhere. It wouldn't be the foolish drum ceremony out by the idol, with dopers, wiccans, and costumed drunks, but something serious. Harley and Ivana were among the group, so I had an idea that their event was about to take place in the area that the large center screen could display, but wasn't displaying right now. The current feed on it was fuzzy with the Illuminati eye and pyramid in the center.

I played around with the equipment, but the main screen remained without video feed. Thinking things over, I figured that the undertakers were involved in a Dark Circle event that nearly all of them had to attend. I doubted they would wear ceremonial outfits just to walk around down here. They had left two men outside to take care of any possible intruders and allowed the guard to leave his post at the camera display.

It took a bit of time, but I worked fast, enlarging all the postage-stamp screens, especially trying to get a look around this underground complex. What I came up with frightened me. One camera showed another empty security area somewhere in the complex. Had either of these posts been manned, they would have nailed me on entry. There were hidden cameras on the outside, including ones in the idol and along the path up. The wheel-rutted road that all the cars had come in on had a camera near its end and an undertaker stationed at a high vantage point behind a boulder. He was visible, watching the ceremony in the clearing. Fortunately, I'd done my killing quickly and quietly, or he would've alerted the people down here and then ambushed me. There were also cameras along the path I had followed inside, and in all the corridors. But no one was in the corridors; the people present below had all gone into that off-camera area.

I decided to get up and go on foot, estimating where the central area must be based on the displays. I pulled up one final camera feed and saw an image of a large room with big tanks. Some were ivory, others silver. They were laid out almost like rows of big coffins. As I wondered what the tanks could be, I spotted an armed undertaker walking into the room. As I couldn't see the area, I wondered if there might be cells or something to hold prisoners in the back area he was approaching. The undertaker turned and looked back as I watched. It was almost like he felt me watching him and checked his back. He was the man Beck had called Vincenzo when he named some of the ones gathering in the town square. He was still wearing the fancy black boots, only now he had the hooded robe to match them.

Vincenzo went off camera to the back of that room, and I got up and went out the other door. I knew the corridor was empty, so I ran down it. A sharp right took me through the other empty guard post and then down into a room with four massive vaults in the wall. Two vaults were to the right and two to the left. They resembled bank vaults, and I knew I couldn't open them because all four had glowing handprints on them. To open one, the person would have to place both hands on the prints. An attempt at opening them by

me would likely mean being zapped into oblivion. And I didn't want to open them. I doubted they would keep Josie imprisoned in a vault, and I figured that their idea of something valuable would be maybe a pope's head or Bigfoot on a stick.

My mental map, based on camera placements, told me that the entrance to the room with the coffin tanks and Vincenzo should be a short stretch up the corridor. The corridor floors were sound-absorbent, but I stayed on light feet, not wanting to scuffle up any sounds. I came to two doors side by side again. The sealed door had the power room symbol and opened via a pushbutton panel. A silver vault-style door stood open to my right, and I could see into part of the room, where a big tank stood on the far side. I knew if the door was open, it meant Vincenzo was probably still inside, but he could be anywhere inside. It was a tricky place to enter, as a closer look revealed shadows, dim bluish light, and rows of tanks. I could see clamshell and coffin-like tanks on the right, plus some tall upright copper tanks. Most of the room was obscured from view, so I stepped inside and ducked behind the first tall copper tank for full cover.

The step in was as far as I got before meeting opposition. I felt a numbing force hit me with a slam. I went down in a tumble on the floor. The sensation was jarring and a killer shock. Bright light came with it, and the jolt clenched my hands, then threw them open, causing me to lose the gun I was carrying. I rose slowly from my tumble and turned to face my attacker. A woman stood just inside the doorway. The one Beck called Salima, with the witchy face and black lipstick. The one I should have killed on my first visit to the mounds. Now she wore a black robe and carried a silver gun, completing her outfit. She grinned catlike, and then her expression became unsettled, like she couldn't decide whether she wanted to play with me or finish me with a kill shot. Finish me was probably it because she twisted a dial with her left hand while holding the weapon up with her right.

The gun was something new, but I had no doubts about its power. I'd definitely used another of my nine lives; being hit with that charge while carrying three guns and ammo could have turned me into a roman candle. Instead of being dead, I had become the walking dead. My hands and arms trembled from the shock. My joints felt like they were fused in place. I had dropped my pack and the Springfield with the silencer, but I still had the Colt in my back belt, hidden by my jacket, and of no use if my reflexes wouldn't gear into action.

Her trigger pull was about to come, but she held it because Vincenzo stepped out from cover and slugged me in the side of the head. That put me down hard. I hit the side of a tank, went to my knees. Blood salted my lips. My vision blurred. He loomed over me. My eyes went from his black boots up his tall frame. He resembled a giant bony skeleton, clothed in loose black garments, and his dark brown skin was parchment stretched over a fleshless skull.

I saw huge staring eyes, then his boot coming for my head and right shoulder. I felt my legs scrambling me back some, and I heard Salima yelling. "Get the fuck out of the way so I can fry him!"

But Vincenzo didn't listen or move, and I threw myself up, stumbling towards Salima's voice, seeing only a haze of blood red as Vincenzo gave me a hard shove. I fell left into the tall tanks as she fired, and I heard a sizzle pass by and then a loud crack as her

shot hit the wall. Vincenzo stayed on me, rushing in, pulling me around to throw two hard blows into my breadbasket. I staggered back, then stumbled forward and clung to him.

We waltzed around a tank. He was taller, and his hands were as strong and skeletal as the rest of him. I knew he was trying to get a grip on my neck so he could snap it. That was about to happen. I kned him in the groin. We came out of the tanks, but I still couldn't break his grip, then he slipped and let go.

Stepping back, I stumbled around a tank as Salima fired, her shot ringing the tank like a drum, bursting a hole in it and causing a spray of green steam that caught Vincenzo in the face. He had been stumbling toward me, and the spray didn't break his momentum; it ignited, and his face and hair caught fire.

He kept coming, straight from undertaker hell, with a face of fire. I had time to dodge and let him stumble past me as I drew my gun. I fired at what I could see of Salima behind the steam, and the shot hit her in the throat, creating a geyser of blood as she whirled and fell.

Turning, I finished Vincenzo with a shot to the back of his head, and then staggered away from the hot steam and leaned against the wall, catching my breath. The gun fell out of my shaking hand. They were two opponents I was relieved to see dead. With a hand over my eyes, I got completely clear of the steam and spotted a valve on the bleeding tank. Going low to the valve, I closed it and held my breath as the fiery green haze dissipated.

My focus went to the other side of the room and the clamshell tanks. As I had suspected, there was a holding area beyond the tanks, and I spotted a familiar face behind thick Plexiglas. I walked between two big clamshell tanks and up to the large cell. Crake and Jack were inside, but Josie was not. Crake was on his feet, with his hands pressed against the Plexiglas. He looked roughed up. Jack looked both punched up and doped. He sat on a bench. Bruising swelled the left side of his face. Manacles locked his wrists. The cell was unique, its walls expensive black marble. It was mostly soundproof because Crake was shouting, and I could barely hear him. I saw where he was pointing; another of the fob panels, this one by the exterior glass at the end of the cell.

Crake said a few other barely intelligible things as he pressed against the glass and followed my walk to the fob panel. He had the presence of a desperate monkey, and I ignored him. I tried my fob set one by one, and when none of them worked, I walked over to the corpses and found a set of keys in the pocket of Salima's robe. I picked up my fallen guns, my pack, and the electric gun she had used and went back over. For a lark, I fired a blast at the cell Plexiglas, and fortunately, I fired at an angle. An energy packet the size of a fist but with the look of a bright blue pill ricocheted off the glass and smashed into the far wall, leaving a deep blast hole in it. Crake cowered inside, fearing I would fire again. I didn't do it. I figured it was best not to play with the weird weapon. I also figured that the blast-proof version of Plexiglas they used for the cell would be worth a fortune on the market.

I went back to the panel and found that the pyramid holder for the key set opened the cell. An invisible door slid up in the middle of it. Crake stumbled out and went right past me to the entry door. He came back quickly. "We'd better hurry up and get out of here before more come."

"Hang on," I said. I took the Rhino .357 from the pack and gave it to him. He stared at it like he didn't know what to do with it and then handed it back to me.

"You alright?" I said to Jack.

"Just came around," he said, and his voice was hoarse. He had abrasions on his neck and some swelling affecting his vocal cords. "They hit me with a needle. The Genistorm building fronting the old cornfields... they let us inside, but we didn't see much before they ambushed us. I don't know how long it's been."

"Too long," Crake said. "We need to get out of here fast, before it happens."

I was about to ask what he expected to happen, but Jack said, "Josie is right there in that float tank." He pointed with both hands to one of the clamshell tanks. "Crake just told me about it, before you showed."

"Josie, Josie is in there," I said, hurrying over to the tank. "Is she alive?"

Jack's dry voice became a croak, and what he said was unintelligible. Crake stared up over the tank as if a pink elephant might be there.

"Answer me, one of you, please!"

The float tank resembled a giant ivory clamshell, broad at the rear and marked with a mauve line along the closed lid. Crake waved a nervous hand as he spoke. "There's no lock; you can open it, but you can't take her out. There is a special way to do that, and it takes like twenty minutes. If you pull her straight out, she will die of shock. I know because they had doctors in three of the other tanks. They put Josie back in just after we were brought into the cell. The doctors took out. I watched it all from the cell. I saw how they did it. It is a special sort of tank."

I tugged at the lid, and the clamshell came up silently. The sight left me bursting with excitement and totally confused as to what to do next. Josie was inside in one piece, and she looked alive and unharmed. It was like opening one of those suspended animation pods containing an astronaut who has been in space for years. Josie floated on salty liquid that filled most of the mauve interior. She wore a pearl-white body-fit outfit up to her neck and silver slippers. A form-fit white plastic helmet coated with silver electrodes rested on her head. Leads ran from it to a bank above the waterline on the tank's right side. She floated with open, unseeing hazel eyes, and her dirty blond hair took on an electric glow from the beads of liquid coating it. I saw a flutter of delicate fingertips and wondered if she could hear me. I felt like kissing her, hugging her, but instead, I could do nothing other than stare. I really was the bull in the china shop, certain that if I touched her, I would break something.

Jack managed to get up, and though unsteady on his feet, he walked over. "First, get these manacles off me. I think you've got the key."

Crake started slapping his forehead with his free hand and turning in a half circle on his heels.

“You look like a damn mess,” I said to him. “Stop patting your head. It’s really there. I guarantee it. At least for now.”

“You don’t look any better. If we don’t get out of here fast, we’re doomed. You have no idea how dangerous these people are. They only kept us alive because they plan to chop us up for some grisly experiment they were talking about.”

“I have an idea, believe me. I saw one of their chop shops down the way. I also have the idea that running from them isn’t a lasting solution.”

“Fuck ... you plan on messing around in here, don’t you?”

I didn’t answer Crake. I’d found a metal piece in the set that clicked into a depression in the cuffs and worked like a key to open them. Jack threw them aside and worked his fingers, opening and closing them a few times. Then he reached into the pack strapped to my shoulder and took out my Springfield. He turned to Crake. “Go over what you told me with Joe. I’ll guard the door.”

“Wait a moment, Jack. I’ll clue you in on my entry. I took out some sentries. The rest of them are somewhere inside in an area that doesn’t show on their cameras, so it looks like they’re busy for the moment. The undertakers are wearing black robes with cowls, a form of ceremonial dress. It’s Halloween night. They are in the heart of this place, but I have no idea what else is in there. Just keep by the door and nail anyone who shows up. Crake will tell me about this damn tank. How do I take her out of it?”

“If they are locked into a Halloween Dark Circle ceremony, we have some time. It’s certain they have a busy schedule tonight. Getting her out of the tank is on Crake. Don’t blame me if it goes sour.”

I looked at Crake like it had better not go sour, and he said, “They didn’t drug me like they did Jack, so I saw a few things, and I heard a bit of what they said. The doctors I mentioned finished up with a big project here today. It has to do with transplants and has been going on for a long time. Josie was also working on it, on the chemistry of it. As you may have guessed, the doctors weren’t exactly willing workers, and neither was Josie. Gentry has methods to keep people under his control. That big beast of a man, Harley ... he guarded us at the cell for a while. He said the medical staff was going back to Europe. They were taken out just after we arrived, but whether they went to Europe or into a vat, I don’t know.”

“Get to the point. You saw them work on this technology. How do we get Josie out?”

Crake reached down into the tank, touched something I couldn’t see, and a long black panel of tiny buttons popped out. “You see the helmet. It has about a hundred of those tiny connections. I have to start at the one in the very center, pull it, and hit the tiny button connector for it a few seconds later. One ring is slowly removed, then there is about a five-minute wait before removing the next ring. When that is done, there is a short sequence of buttons that unlock her.”

“But she is just floating there. I see nothing to unlock.”

“It is her brain we will be unlocking.”

“Do you remember that sequence?”

“I watched them do it and memorized the pattern when they took the doctors out. I didn’t see Josie taken out, but it would be the same procedure. Just after they dumped us here, they brought Josie back to the tank. They said something about her having done the final nutrient feed. The tank keeps them in a half-trance for a long time, even after being taken out. Josie knew how to do a nutrient feed on something while in a trance. I watched them put her back in the tank, which is the reverse procedure to taking someone out. I memorized everything. My only hope was that you would arrive. I didn’t exactly have much else to do in that cell, other than worry about where they would transplant my head.”

“What in the hell is the tank for?”

“It’s the perfect prison cell for the type of prisoner she is. Josie is like those doctors or surgeons, whatever they were. This is a sensory deprivation tank with extra features. A prisoner can be held indefinitely without experiencing any stress. Some programming is put into the brain to keep the scientific mind bright and clear, while other emotional memories are dimmed. Josie barely recognized me. Her personal memories were cloudy. She will slowly return to normal once free of the tank and removed from this strange environment. They are holding her because whatever mad experiment they are up to out there, it has to work before they’re finished with her. Her job is the nutrient feed.”

“She just resigned from this job, so get ready to start on her. I’m going to close the door from the outside. I’ll work with Jack to scout and guard the immediate area. In twenty minutes, we will come back in. I expect to see Josie alive.”

Crake tried to object, thought better of it, and sighed. He turned to Josie and the tank as I walked away. I sealed the door, and out in the corridor I talked to Jack. “Crake can do it if anyone can.”

“I don’t think we should just hang here and wait for them to come for us. I’m feeling stronger now. Wouldn’t mind some payback for the shit kicking I took.”

“You’re sure to get some. Perhaps the best defense here is to go on the offense, mainly because we have to be sure that the guards don’t return to their posts and spot us on camera. Let’s go.”

I took the lead, jogging ahead with the overhead lights fanning my watering eyes. The beams were like bright crystal, making it seem like we were racing downhill. Vents lined the walls for a long portion, and I heard a hiss like sand rattling against tin. I went by memory from the camera display and carried the Colt, keeping the captured blaster in my pack. I didn’t follow the exact route back, but an alternate route to be sure no one was present in areas I hadn’t explored. We came to a halt at a large open room, and it was only then that the image of this underground complex popped into my mind. Excluding the entry corridors, it really was in the shape of a pentacle, a form of the Sigil of Baphomet: the image of a five-pointed star with an outer ring at the points and an inner ring, so that all the star-points branched out from it. Gentry and his people were in

the inner ring, and that would be quite a large area in the heart of the pentacle. I had the strange feeling that the inner ring was below the huge owl idol in the clearing.

Jack nudged me from behind. I had stopped at the entry of an unexplored room, and he wanted me to move, so I ducked in right, and he went left. We found no one inside. This impressive vault was a Satanist boardroom. A round table of dark stone sat in front of a wall done in irregular brown brick. A pentacle in smooth stone relief was on the wall. An arch highlighted it. Brass lamp stands stood on either side of the arch, and they burned with fake flames, making them look like oil lamps. Two stone benches in a half-circle shape provided seating. A bookshelf was off to the side of one lampstand, and the books were very old, hardcover, with tan spines embossed with gold letters. They would definitely be a prize for Crake, and I was glad he wasn't here to drool over them. Thankfully, this room was empty, and we could move on out the opposite door.

We reached the guard post, and I clicked through the cameras again, enlarging each image for Jack. The center area remained blacked out with no images, but there was something new - a guard posted at each entry. These entries appeared to be the only way into the ceremonial area. Both guards wore hooded cloaks, but tinted light revealed their faces. I hadn't seen either of the two before, but both were big and young, one black and one white.

"We don't know how many of them are inside," Jack said quietly. "If we split up and each approach one entrance and one guard, we can take them out and have the rest trapped in that area."

"There is no escaping a showdown with them, and we'll never get a better opportunity than this one to trap and kill. We'll have to try to scope this out so the odds won't be overwhelming. There is one undertaker outside the complex, and a crowd of townspeople or Wiccans. It is a Halloween party of some kind, and only the undertaker appears to be dangerous."

We used the cameras to calculate the route each of us would take. Jack's path would be longer as he was going for the far side. I would travel a little slower. Jack took a deep breath and started jogging. I followed, walking briskly. The path to the guards was uneventful but scenic, and I couldn't escape the feeling of being in an occult spaceship. The corridors and rooms aligned along them helped to create that effect. Many segments were like castle rooms, but the corridors between had a new plastic fragrance and air vents above. There were also grates in the floor in places, and I could hear water rushing below. As I grew closer, wisps of smoke stung my eyes.

The main or wider corridors formed the pentacle, and with the inner circle entry, I was approaching being at the lowest intersection point; there was no way I could approach unseen if the guard looked down the corridor. Jack would have the same problem. On camera, both the guards had turned their backs to watch something going on inside the chamber, and I crept to the corner and peered around it, hoping the guard wouldn't be looking my way.

I failed to see through the shadowy gloom, ducked back, then peered again. It was a long way down, the lighting was dim, and smoke billowed out of the arch like a dragon's breath. The guard and his shadow had nearly melted into the wall, but he wasn't looking

my way. I crept ahead, not making a sound, and a monotonous chant emanating from the inner chamber ahead helped to cover me. The guard stood at the entrance, and I wanted to knock him out without the people inside noticing. Almost on him, I planned to club him and pull him back, but that ended when he suddenly walked ahead through the arch and disappeared beyond a crimson curtain.

A haze of incense smoke combined with dim lighting had turned the interior into gloom. There were many large looming objects. Standing in the arch would make me visible, so I followed in on the guard's heels, and quietly ducked left, finding cover in the shadows next to gold-embroidered curtains and a stand that held the bust of a fierce-faced man. I watched the guard walk ahead, checked nearby, and noticed a tarnished brazier with incense smoke pouring from it, emitting a fragrance that reminded me of old linen. A number of these must have been smoking in the chamber to fill it with fragrant smoke. Near the brazier, a long black marble stand stood against the wall. Knives, guns, and other weapons were neatly lined up on it. I couldn't believe my luck. It meant that whatever they were up to, they weren't allowed to carry weapons while doing it.

Recordings of Buddhist chants were something I had heard before. This chant had the same simple repetitiveness but sounded evil in its intonations. The words to it weren't in English but a foreign tongue. Since no one was near me, I peeked out and saw a group of black-robed figures, almost fading into the smoke and shadows. They went down to pose on one knee, continuing the melancholy chant.

I could see their faces, sixteen of them, but not the area in front of them or what they were kneeling before. Harley, Kosar, Sabbou, Ivana, Rael, and the one called Hussain were among that robed crowd, but I could not see Jules Gentry.

Opening fire on them when they were unarmed had the feeling of murder about it, and I was trying to see over to the other entry to find Jack. A robed figure came from that direction and joined the crowd, but I couldn't see the entrance to see if Jack had entered.

Airs of some unholy place struck me as they had when I'd seen the huge inverted cross at the cave entry. If not hell itself, the robed priests here were conducting a ceremony before some gateway to evil. I was sure of that, but for some reason I didn't want to start shooting. Probably because that would be a massacre, and there were too many of them. Suddenly surprising them would create chaos. When the dust settled, I'd be dead or crippled as they'd find a way to overpower me. Acting without knowing where Jack was didn't seem wise either.

I put my gun away and crept slowly to a position where I could view the entire ceremonial area. No one noticed me as I moved to a vantage point at the rear of the chanting crowd. The view from there amazed me to such a degree that I forgot all about conducting an armed assault on them.

Smoke eddied; I was certain I saw ghostly faces in it, and the chamber was immense in size and vaulted. It rose to a dome of polished black stone. The all-seeing eye looked down from the top of the dome, and embedded silver stars glittered around it. Massive squat marble pillars thick as tree trunks rose to this domed ceiling. They were on either

side of the kneeling undertakers. Mounted copper gongs beside each pillar were etched with the Baphomet pentacle, which has the horned goat's head inside the pentacle.

A humongous tank sat at the front and center of it all. It rested on a grey stone plinth, and a silver ring over it glittered like a weird underground rainbow. This tank was more than double the size of the one I had found Josie in, and it had an ancient appearance, almost like a sarcophagus. Some areas of it were mahogany in texture, but most of the surface was plated metal and intricately detailed with a web of occult and alchemical symbols. These symbols were arranged in a way that reminded me of a mathematician's equations, though here the mathematician had likely been the high priest of the alchemists and some of his acolytes. Some areas of the construction were strips of glass or plastic in a light rose color, and through one of those slits, I saw a portion of an arm. This arm was much larger than a man's, somewhat monstrous, and hairy.

A jewel-studded altar, piled with an arrangement of skulls and the statue of a demon with angel wings, stood on the right side, next to one of the huge pillars. It was reminiscent of the flying demon that appeared before the shootout in the park. Jules Gentry stood at the side of the altar, outfitted in a black robe with a cowl. The embroidery on his robe indicated a higher order, and the Halloween garb suited him. It was like seeing the real Gentry, an alchemist or sorcerer holding his staff. The body of the staff had the form of a twining, scaly black snake. Its top consisted of a carved skull mounted on an upside-down pyramid, with the pyramid's point forming the chin.

Movement in the distant shadows drew my eyes away from Gentry. Jack was inside, behind a stout pedestal that held the head of a bull with pointed black horns. I was sure that if I could see him, some of the undertakers had probably noticed him too. But no one seemed startled; it was obvious that they had completed a ceremony of great importance, and everyone was waiting for Jules Gentry to speak.

Gentry remained silent a moment longer. The undertakers rose to their feet, and two of them stepped out and walked to the two gongs, taking the mallets at the side. Harley struck one gong, and the sound was deep, trailing echoes and a feeling of ceremony. Sabbou swung his mallet into the second gong, creating more echoing bass, followed by a loud clang. My scalp suddenly lifted; I knew the two entries had closed, and Jack and I were sealed in with them. The sealed doors were heavy metal, and they had locked with force like prison-cell doors closing.

I don't know why I did it, but I stepped out into the open, and though the undertakers were in front of me, I was in clear view of Jules Gentry. He saw me; he'd probably known I was there from the moment I'd entered, and it didn't frighten him at all. That meant he was holding the winning hand at this junction and knew it. With him, I expected the flush to come from the cheat cards up his sleeves.

The slyest of smiles formed on his thin purpling lips, and then it vanished. His eyes swept over me quickly like a spider's eyes go over its prey, and then they flashed back to his acolytes. It was like watching a demon in its cavernous lair, the place of its power. I became certain that if I spoke, my words would be meaningless. My concerns and hopes of escaping with my friends and girlfriend were the petty urges of a fly spattered on the devil's windscreen. Something incredible was about to take place, and through a

power that pushed everyday reality off the agenda. The awareness was in the air, and if it had form, it was that huge tank and the scary question of what exactly was inside it.

Gentry spoke, the vaulted chamber strengthening, deepening his voice. "At last, the difficult tasks are done, and the scientific obstacles have been defeated. We of the Dark Circle have overcome the world. We have followed through on centuries of alchemy and mapped out and completed the final ritual. All that remains is the fulfillment of the promise ... to open our eyes to the glory.

But we are not alone. We have two new witnesses in our midst. Intruders who hope to block the path"

The undertakers began to murmur and glance around. Kosar was the first to look back and spot me. Harley and Sabbou were already aware of my presence and did not seem troubled. Neither Jack nor I raised a weapon, but I did smile uncomfortably. My strategies revolved around facing a hostile enemy determined on a fast kill. This unexpected twist confused me. Jack appeared to be experiencing the same awe and confusion.

We were trapped in some abominable cult ritual, like flies embalmed in amber. Somehow, we both had to know what Gentry was doing, what his planned outcome was, before we could act. In my mind, a crazed cult leader was capable of anything, even gassing or burning us all while we remained trapped in his chamber.

Gentry thumped his staff and took control. "Remain where you are! The ceremony is complete, the power has been unleashed, and it is too late to undo any of it. All of us sealed in this chamber are witnesses. Willing or unwilling, believers or unbelievers, it makes no difference. Perhaps it is destiny that our old friend Jack has returned, bringing the troublesome Mr. Holiday with him. Both of these men will realize how immoral, how futile their efforts to oppose our grand plan have been."

He swung his staff, creating a trail of shadows; a bright flash of mauve light flew from its skull-head, and the metal rainbow over the huge tank ignited. A bass hum rose, growing in volume and pitch; it became so loud it felt like rocket engines were about to explode with fire and exhaust.

Gentry shielded his eyes from the penetrating light, but everyone else looked to the tank. If it were a spell, it had me blinded by the light. I remained motionless, as did the rest of the crowd. I could not move, and I was certain no one else could either.

With a new glow of fanaticism and ecstasy in his expression, Gentry began to speak, his voice rising as the hum decreased. "What better night than tonight, Halloween. And during a year, we named our most sacred year. We have opened the portal the ancients spoke of, and a thousand spirits await union with our creation.

Think of the centuries of enlightenment, spent conquering physical science, and following in the heels of our predecessors. In this century, we have learned how to create the organs with stem cells, to enhance them, to transplant them ... to construct a body on a frame of carbon and bone. Yet with each victory came defeat. Our creations could not live, and failure became the grim robes we wore. We needed to unify disparate cells and organs, to allow them to form an entire new being and to bring about its birth without rejection.

Now, in the end, through defeat, we have found victory. The breakthrough in creating a new blood serum this year at our Genistorm genetics lab brought us over the final hurdle. It allowed us to bring the unity of life to our ultimate creation and to make a living whole of disparate parts.

A true hybrid of man, animal, and netherworld spirit, we have created the living Baphomet. We have brought our god to life, and now he shall rise supreme. There has never been such a moment on Earth. Through the old ones and my studies of their numerology and astrology, we did the calculations. The window to the netherworld is open, and the glorious hum that fills our ears tonight is the opening of the 90th portal. It names me the alchemist of the highest rank, the greatest to have lived on this Earth. Due to my refining, sifting, and enhancement of the secret knowledge, a creature from the dimension of fire will now rule this realm.

Stand firm and watch with pride as the portal transmits mind and soul into our living Baphomet. The rushing force of a thousand spirits will become one satanic force that brings satisfaction to humankind. Remember our history through the long centuries of struggle, of humankind fighting endless wars, and killing on behalf of gods that did not exist. Idol worship, the pantheon ... all of it was in vain when there was no god on the planet. If there is one thing humankind has strived for throughout all of time, it has been to have a god.

Tonight we see the god that we have longed to worship. We have used the flesh and organs. We have used the machine, artificial intelligence, and genetic science. The brain tissue of five men has been fused, and the blood serum pulses with each beat of its heart ... giving life to the destiny of humankind and the final attainment, which is the creation of a living god that all will bow to and worship.

The great mystery is at last understood tonight in this chamber, and that is that man cried out for a god to worship. For centuries, he bowed down to stone and metal that could not rise. But can our god rise? Yes, he can! Step forward and say it with me, "Rise! Rise! Baphomet, our god!"

Jules Gentry's fanaticism perplexed me as much as the evil hum and faces racing in reflections on the metal rainbow. I did not step forward with the others, calling, 'Rise, Rise, Baphomet!' Retreating to shadowy cover by a smaller curtained post, I watched. I glanced in Jack's direction and saw him also staring, completely dumbstruck and frightened. Neither of us had any idea what to do next, but we should have been trying to find a way to open the exits.

Being trapped is always a frightening experience. Elevators, prison cells, and dungeons, it is always scary being confined. Yet the terror lifting my scalp was more than claustrophobia or even the fear of sudden violence. It was the fear of being confined with Satanists, who were calling forth a hell monster from its coffin, and assuming it would want to be their deity.

Before Jack and I could regain our nerve or even rational thought, in a long, tense moment, the whole scene went from ceremony to black magic, and I couldn't separate the hallucinations from the reality of it. The ribbon of silver over the tank vibrated like a big bass string, and the etched symbols lifted from it like webbing, bursting into bright

dust over the tank. With the air aglow under the ribbon and around the tank, the portal view emerged, and it seemed like the tank was about to be whisked away through a time tunnel.

Smoke spun. I could feel the suction, but the tank held firm on the plinth. It began to shake as the vision reversed and a flow of black things spilled through under the ribbon. The vile swarm shifted from bats and snakes to spiders, then to shadows that penetrated the tank and gave rise to an eerie sweep of hideous voices, whispers, and a language of foul ecstasy.

Gentry had, without doubt, tapped into a well of insanity, and neither he nor his friends were stepping forward saying 'rise, rise' now. They began to step back as though growing fearful that the dark force they had released would spill beyond the tank and plinth and consume them. Even the darkness became sound, the swirl of shadows a ringing in the ears so that my head felt like it would explode. And it nearly did burst, as the ringing became a long, terrible moan that staggered me and dropped me to my knees. My vision clouded with a wave of red blood, and fortunately, it was a hallucination that cleared. I looked up through the melting haze. The tank tilted up on the plinth and shook with the fury of the being contained in it. Another deep moan echoed through the chamber, then there was sudden silence and near-total gloom as the tank began to open.

The urge was to rise, rush forward, and leap on the tank so it could not open. And the feeling was that whatever was inside was too vile to belong to the light of day. But I could not rise, and I could not move. Jules Gentry had been truthful if anything. His sorcery was giving rise to something, but it was not a god; it was an abomination. Without seeing it, I could feel its wicked emanations.

Lifting like a shell top, the lid continued to open, and slowly the contents were revealed. The thing inside was the Baphomet or the living version of it. The beast floated; its body buoyant on the surface of salty, blood-red liquid. It was huge. I guessed well above seven feet if upright. Its eyes glowed with hellish fire, and its chest heaved with asthmatic breaths. The face was that of a mannish goat with the back-curved horns prominent. The mouth was open as though ready to devour or moan. Set within the horns, a cap rowed with dozens of wireless connections worked to awaken it. Its facial muscles twitched, and a growing awareness rose in the eyes as the hellish fire lessened. A haze of mauve light spread from the cap to a bank of controls fixed in the portion of the tank above it, and that haze grew in strength as the beast awakened.

A sudden jolt shook it, and its legs thrashed in the liquid. It released another of its hideous moans, and blood steam rose in a cloud as its lips parted. Dream transformations shifted on its face for some moments, and then its eyes opened wide again. They were eyes filled with horror, of someone awakening in a nightmare, and its breathing strengthened and steadied. It lifted an arm from the liquid and tentatively explored the side of the tank. Blindness in its eyes became sight, revealing its awareness of its surroundings. Its head tilted to look, and it didn't see me, but I was sure it was studying Jules Gentry and his black-robed crew.

From an angle, I could see the expression on Rael's face. He was the closest person to it, and turning away. Rael's look could have been captured as a mask of Halloween

terror fit for a place on Crake's wall. He was a man frozen by fear. Harley turned away with him, and he was trembling and mystified. Without a doubt, the reality of this grotesque awakening had convinced the undertakers that it was not a god they had created. Only Jules Gentry retained full faith in his sorcery. Faith that allowed him to step forward toward the tank when no one else would dare. In my case, simple laws of self-preservation prevented me from approaching. The old rule, ingrained since the times of cave people, that said, let the monster eat someone else first.

The Baphomet's awareness grew quickly. Its face gathered hate but no respect for its watching subjects. The tank had now angled up as far as it could without spilling its contents. As the beast was not bound, it simply raised a large apelike hand and felt the cap on its head. With that touch, the light from the connecting panel died, and the beast slowly pulled the studded helmet from its skull. Then it lifted itself from the tank, aided by a rising bed beneath it, and stepped out on the edge of the plinth. Liquid spilled off its hairy legs and freakishly large genitals. It rocked its neck back and forth to loosen its muscles, stretched its arms up, and moaned. This inner chamber had a natural echo, but the sound it produced was far more than echoes; it was at least ten terrible voices and an unknown language that conveyed a message of agony, causing even my bones to vibrate with fear.

Jules Gentry stood right before this beast, holding out his staff as though he could control it with sorcery. I think Gentry was about to address it, but he never got the chance because the beast swept out its left arm and hit him with such force that he flew into the big gong by the pillar and went with it to the stone floor. The gong clanged as it tumbled; Gentry's staff hit the pillar and broke in two, and Gentry's head smashed against the floor. Blood spurted from his lips as he choked twice, then became still.

Three of the undertakers stayed right near the beast on their knees, lowering their heads so as not to look at it, like maybe that would bring them mercy. Possibly, they were just too scared to move. Those that remained standing were the largest group of undertakers. They'd seen Gentry killed with one fast blow, and they had stepped back, but didn't have the common sense to run. And they got what they were waiting for. They had desired to create a god, and now their god spoke to them, though the voice was more of an eardrum-rattling roar. "I am not your god! There is no god of the dead and abandoned ones! There is only the sacrifice that is living death! It is time for everyone to sacrifice!"

If it was the word of the Satanist god, it was enough for me. Since I had expected evil judgment to come from this beast, I held a gun in my left hand and the fancy energy weapon I'd captured in my right. The cry of the Baphomet was also enough to convince most of the undertakers of its sincerity. They ducked right and left for cover and for the stands near the two exits, where they held their weapons.

Jack had made his way around, and he came to my side. The strength of his hard-pocked face had paled in the smoke and the evil, and he looked drawn, like a cancer survivor. He had the Springfield out, but he said nothing. Maybe because there was nothing to say, and maybe because he feared that even an exhalation might draw the Baphomet on us.

Slowed for a second by the sight of fleeing undertakers, the Baphomet took in a huge breath, and then it went for Rael. The man had cowered up close and only at the last second tried to run. He got about four steps. The Baphomet swept him up with its right arm and leaned down, looking at the other three that had been too paralyzed to run. In that position, it was almost like the beast was going to run through those three, using Rael as the football.

The other undertakers had reached their weapons and were taking positions. Jack and I waited, thinking, let the others start shooting first and attract the beast. I knew the question marks in Jack's eyes when he looked around meant he was wondering about the exits. At least one of the undertakers should have been working to open the doors so we could escape the chamber.

Escape seemed like an especially refreshing idea as Rael's whimpering added disgust to fear. Rael didn't scream, and the Baphomet revealed no mercy, as it stood erect and used its left hand to rip his head off. Blood spurted, gore spilled, and it ended with the sickening gurgle of his beheading.

One of the cowardly undertakers began to wail over the sight of the beheading, and that attracted the Baphomet. The voice belonged to a woman, and flaming red hair spilled out of a cowl as the Baphomet seized her and pulled her face-to-face with it. It was Ivana; she began to scream, and I knew then that there would be no pleasant memories of these killings of my enemies. The Baphomet was despicable, and I found myself wondering what I would feel like once in its clutches, lifted face to face with the monster as it decided how to kill me.

Jack had no plans on ending up in that position. He ducked away to one of the sealed exits. The one I'd entered through. As he searched for a way to open it, the beast half-twirled Ivana, roared, and then threw her like a rag doll against one of the pillars. She fell to the floor broken and dead, just like Gentry, no doubt about that.

The rattle of bullets sounded in the chamber. The Baphomet started taking bullets, but it wasn't dying. It took direct hits to its chest, but they bounced away. Gentry, Genistorm, the devil, and, unfortunately, Josie had given the beast muscle tissue like steel. I watched a strong shot rip a fragment of muscle away from its forearm. A thick black bone showed behind the torn flesh. I remembered Gentry's mad speech. The thing wasn't made of flesh only, but set on a skeleton of carbon steel or plastic, and it had gained more power from the demonic forces the evil alchemy had sent into it.

Kosar stepped right out in front of it, firing a mini submachine gun into its midsection, expecting it to die, but seeing only some ruffling of its hairy hide as the Baphomet rippled its stomach muscles to mock him. Kosar also saw his own end as the thing charged forward, bent down, took him in a strangler's grip, and broke his neck.

Using speed and agility a big cat would find hard to equal, the Baphomet ducked back, went around behind the tank, and came over it in a leap. Racing behind the large pillar, it caught Sabbou by surprise with a downward blow to his head and a knee up into his chest. The crack of his skull sounded, and as the body fell aside, the Baphomet went for Harley, the biggest of the undertakers. Harley fired a shot with his left hand that grazed the side of the Baphomet's head and made a ping noise like it had hit metal. The shot

halted it long enough for Harley to deliver his best punch with his right. The blow was to the Baphomet's breadbasket, and it had effect, giving Harley time to swing in and pull the Baphomet forward by the arm, tripping it through a hip toss.

The Baphomet fell, rolled back up, and howled with incredible rage. It turned to seize Harley, but Harley was gone, so it charged left and got the one Beck called Husain. The thing had learned from Harley because it punched Husain in the breadbasket and followed with a downward blow to the head, knocking him down. It seized Husain's ankles and began swinging him. There was a clatter as tables and stands spilled to the floor, and the beast continued swinging Husain into things.

Jack squeezed my shoulder and pointed. Harley was at the far exit, sliding aside a false panel next to a sconce. He was going to open that door, but we couldn't run across because the Baphomet finished with Husain and ran out, pursuing two more fleeing undertakers. Bullets hit the Baphomet from behind, and a wet spot appeared on the back of its neck, but it didn't stop its pursuit, and it got both men, one in each arm, and turned back toward the gunfire, swinging the bodies out to block the incoming bullets.

A hail of bullets ripped into the two undertakers. The Baphomet then tossed the two men into the open tank. As the red liquid splashed, it grinned evilly and charged for the stands behind a curtain where the remaining undertakers were reloading.

Jack made a run for Harley and the far exit, but it wasn't opening, and it looked like Harley had hit the knob or switch, but it hadn't worked. Undertakers shouted and screamed as the sound of gunfire faded. The Baphomet was finishing them with ease, and in a moment, it would turn and race across in kill mode for Jack and Harley.

Jack grasped that he was exposed and running out of time. Harley, though struggling with the panel, was having no success. Giving it up as a lost cause, Jack slipped behind a stand just as the Baphomet came from behind the far pillar to the center of the chamber. Its eyes went to Harley, and then they flicked to where Jack was hiding. The dumb monster's brain was tied in a knot of indecision, and in that moment I yelled, "Hey Baphomet!" Then I stepped right out in the open. The beast turned to me and released a grunt of surprise that sent spittle flying through the air. It went into predator mode, but the ripple of its muscles made its planned charge too obvious, and I fired before it could move. I used the blaster that I'd swiped, and I had set its rings for what I expected to be maximum power. A blue fireball emerged from the barrel. The boom and power of charged air knocked me back, and the weapon kicked back out of my hand and over my right shoulder.

I had aimed for the head, but the charge arced and caught the Baphomet on the breastbone. The explosion came as a flash of blue fire on its upper body. The force knocked it right off its feet, sending it tumbling between the large pillars. Upper body still on fire, the Baphomet crawled up to the tank, threw a dead body aside, and thrust its head and shoulders into the liquid. Sizzle and steam, the fire went out, and the Baphomet rose and turned, revealing its scorched head. I had stung it, and it didn't rush me. It made a jump from the plinth and dug its claws right into the stone wall. Using feet and hands with sharp nails, it was climbing like a human fly toward the all-seeing eye at the top.

Jack stood beside me, staring up at the Baphomet with his mouth open. I picked up the blaster and tried to aim another shot, hoping to set its hairy balls on fire. But when I pulled the trigger, the gun was dead. It whined like an electric toothbrush, so I tossed it aside.

A purple velvet curtain fluttered loose, and we spotted Harley near us. He was working to open the other entry door. He had opened a hidden panel and was moving a slider with three positions marked by red lines, which I figured were close, auto-open, and manual open. I could see that he was focusing on escape rather than what I was doing. When the heavy metal door didn't open, he left the slider and pounded the door with his fists. That action seemed futile. He was like a kid having a tantrum, except the motivation was the nightmarish fear the Baphomet had aroused.

Harley finally gave up and turned away from the door, and as he did, it blew inward. The force was so great that it was like it had been struck by a three-thousand-pound battering ram. It took chunks of the wall and Harley with it. Jack and I weren't in the direct line of the explosion, and we were quick enough to step away from the blast. We saw the heavy door crash to the floor and slide, a cloud of dust rolling in behind it.

Harley spun off to the left and barely escaped being flattened by it. A spray of concrete dust hit him and whitened his hair and face. He stumbled, staggered around for a moment, and then fell, stunned, to his knees. He remained like that, nodding his head, confused.

I knew there were no battering rams or men wielding them. Only something powerful like a cannon burst could have taken down that door. My gun felt like a pea shooter by comparison. I had switched the blaster for a handgun after the last blaster shot failed. The door-ripping boom convinced me that we'd be facing undertakers armed with a superweapon, so I nearly fired into the dusty opening. But Jack had better eyes. He grabbed my forearm and raised it so I would shoot at the ceiling if I fired.

I didn't pull the trigger. Even though I could see little more than a ghost in the dust and gloom of the opening, I recognized the form as Crake's and hurried over. Crake staggered back a few steps, then slumped against the wall, out of energy. He held a large gunmetal-gray tube against his right arm. The tube had a row of glowing buttons on its side and was the weapon that had taken out the door. How Crake had found it, and us, was a big question, but I didn't ask it right away. Someone else was farther down the hallway; I ran past Crake and found Josie there. She was out of breath like Crake but not covered in blast dust.

Josie looked fragile, like a doll that might break. Her face was pale but gaining color, and her eyes were clear. She was lucky she hadn't been caught in the blast like Crake. "Josie, Josie. Do you know who I am?" I said stupidly. Those words didn't exactly fit my fantasy of a romantic rescue, but she didn't look well, and I didn't want to crush her with a hug.

"Joe, so you found me. No, I'm not well ... brain fog, a splitting headache."

"Wow, that's great."

"How is that great? What in the hell did Crake do to me?"

"I mean, it's great that you remember me. Whatever Crake did, he did it right, or you would be dead. You were in a trance tank. We're going to get out of here and worry about explanations later."

Jack ran up. He pointed back through the opening. Harley was slowly getting up. He didn't look to be in good shape. He turned, saw us, and found the energy to duck out of sight.

"You want to go after him?" Jack said.

"No. That Baphomet thing might jump back down from the ceiling; we need to get out of here fast. Let Harley take his chances with it."

I turned back to Crake. He looked like a plaster ghost. Concrete dust coated him, and he was coughing, spitting, and shaking his head. He couldn't see much with the dust in his eyes. I wanted to thank him for getting Josie out of that tank, but before I could say anything to him, we heard a roar from inside the chambers. I motioned to Jack, and he moved in and took Crake's arm.

I stepped ahead to Josie, but she was too dizzy to walk straight and definitely couldn't run. Scooping her up, I hurried away from the bone-chilling roars of the Baphomet.

We reached one of the guard posts and waited while Crake took his shirt off and shook the dust out of it. I handed him a bottle of water I found sitting on the desk, and he used it to wash his face and clear his eyes. Jack sucked on another bottle of water as he guarded our rear, but there was no sign of Harley or the Baphomet on our trail. We couldn't be sure of that, though. The cameras had gone black, so we had no views of the complex or the exterior.

Jack studied the tube weapon Crake had used and then leaned it against the wall. Crake spat out some more water, gasped, and spoke. "Are we clear, or is there an army of those creeps after us?"

I answered. "The army got ambushed by that monster you heard. That thing back there is worse than an army."

Josie clutched my arm, squeezing it hard. "Then it wasn't dreams. I remember them showing me the tank and that thing resting in it. Most of the time, I was in a lab, focusing on nutrients and blood flow to the organs. It was like working in a dream. It was weird. I remember nearly all of it, but it didn't seem completely real then or now."

"They've perfected mind control now," Jack said. "But things would be better if this were just a dream. That monster is something wicked. If we press on and get farther from it, we should be okay."

"Maybe not," I said, mostly to myself.

Crake shook dust out of his hair, then said, "What do you mean, maybe not?"

"It was climbing up the inner dome. This complex is shaped like one of the pentacle images you showed me. I mean the one with an inner and outer ring added to it. I calculated that the inner dome is beneath a giant owl idol in the clearing outside. It wouldn't go up there unless its animal instincts clued it in to that way as the way out."

Josie stopped squeezing my arm. "I remember more now. It's blurry. When they brought me in here, we came out of a van and walked to a clearing with a giant owl. A hatch entry opened in the back of it, and it led below to a wide walkway that ran in a wide arc down to this place. If we aren't using that walkway, how are we getting out?"

"We'll come out high above the owl, but it's nighttime. There's a crowd of Halloween celebrants where Baphomet is heading. If it finds a way to get out, it will be a very bad thing for them."

"It will also be a very bad thing for us," Crake said. "That cannon might stop it, but I don't advise trying to use it. It blew the door out, but the recoil and exhaust nearly killed me."

"Where did you get that damn thing?" Jack asked.

"Josie recovered faster than I expected. I sped the process up due to the need to get the heck out of here. It gave her a jolt and a headache, but it also brought her out of the trance. Gentry's people did it the slow, careful way to maintain the trance, but I didn't realize that back when I watched them from the cell. Once I got Josie free, we went looking for you two. We found a door I thought led outside, but it opened into a bay with two parked flying saucers. So I guess we now know the backstory of the saucer that attacked us in the city. And that was the small saucer. The cannon was mounted on the big saucer, and I removed it. It had exterior controls for operation when disconnected from the saucer, so I thought I could use it to protect us. We kept trying to find a way out, and then we heard an animal roar. Going on the theory that you guys would be in there with the trouble, I shot the door out. I saw a blue lightning bolt, then the debris blew back on me. I can't believe I'm not dead or blind."

I nodded, quietly thankful for Crake's foolhardiness. "I feel the same way, so let's stay alive. I know how I got into this place, so we'll go out that way. Leave the cannon there; I don't want to risk using it. It'll probably blow up. We'll come out high up, and we should have a sheltered view of what is going on below."

A deep thud like a shock wave hit the corridor, and all the doors opened. I could feel it and see it. Even the heavy brushed metal doors to nearby power rooms and other mechanical rooms opened. My guess was that Harley had triggered them open to aid his own escape. The lighting array suddenly switched to glaring pinpricks overhead as emergency lights replaced the regular lighting. It created a sense of urgency, and we moved faster because of it. The way up wasn't too steep, but it was tiring. Jack kept Crake moving and his hands away from souvenirs. Crake wasn't in the best shape, but he still mumbled about returning when it was safe and grabbing a load of booty. I doubted that would ever happen, but didn't tell him that. My efforts remained on staying sharp and watchful, and I felt great relief when no opposition to our exit appeared.

Josie had beads of sweat on her forehead and red blotches, like an allergic reaction, on her face. I studied her closely as we stopped in bright light at the final exit and figured that spending so much time in a tank had triggered some nasty reactions. Jack pushed us to hurry, as he feared the doors would seal and we'd be stuck inside the final door. But we didn't get stuck. We stumbled through, and he checked the dark cave mouth with a flashlight before we moved into a cool corner and rested.

Crake took my spare flashlight; I had brought two of them, but wished I hadn't because he was using it to study the painting of the Shaman on the wall and talking about selling prints of it via his shop.

"You can't do that," I said to him. "Selling prints will tell other Illuminati people you've been at this place and draw them after you. You could disturb some of the burial mounds out there if you want to bring the full curse on yourself."

"Just speculation ... speculation. Success in my business comes to those who dare to be different. Genistorm and the natives have no plans on paying us compensation for the ordeal we've been through, so perhaps we should claim our own reward."

Josie was back on her feet but hugging me, using me for support. I had so many questions I wanted to ask her, but for some odd reason, we ended up necking there in the cave. Josie hadn't forgotten me, but I was forgetting about the need to escape, and the dark helped that along. In the dark, I didn't notice the red patches forming on her, and she didn't notice the bruises and grass stains decorating me. Since we were both warm and sweaty, I figured we might as well take that to the next level.

Crake turned the flashlight on us. Our romance irritated him. "Enough of that silliness."

I shielded my eyes and said, "What. Screw you ... that light shouldn't be shone in people's eyes. Can't you see the fragile condition Josie is in?"

He turned the beam away. "Yeah, and I can feel the broken condition most of my body is in. Maybe we should think about putting distance between us and this place."

"We'll do that. But Josie and I haven't seen each other in a while. We're doing what's natural."

"That brainwashing is still wearing off. It makes people obedient. She might do that with anyone."

"You really know how to cut another guy's ball off. That's for sure."

"Raj, Raj!" Josie suddenly exclaimed. "I just remembered the terrible thing that happened to Raj."

Crake flashed the light over me, spotlighting me as if I were the one responsible. "Turns out it isn't all that terrible," I said. "Raj just happened to be in cahoots with your captors."

Jack had slipped out in the dark for a look from the top of the rise. We heard faint shouts, screams, and gunfire as he slipped quietly back inside. It was almost like he was bringing the hysterical atmosphere in with him. "Turn off the flashlight and follow me out. You'll see what's happening below, and they won't see us."

We followed Jack out into the night air that carried the fragrance of the bonfire. It was much brighter than when I'd come in over the meadow. The moon was high above and platinum-bright behind filaments of cirrus cloud. We walked around to a perch on sheer rock that fell about thirty feet to the next section of the winding trail. It gave us a view of the grounds below, revealing much more than a bonfire.

We saw a miniature scene of chaos and destruction. The curse of the idol, which had taken form as the arrival of the Baphomet, had left the bodies of costumed revelers

strewn with the trash in the clearing. A man wearing the outfit of a ninja, black with red trim, rested on a pile of pizza boxes near the bonfire. The Baphomet had killed probably half the crowd.

We jumped off the small embankment, not bothering to go around to the path. We couldn't see the Baphomet, but knew that it had found Gentry's secret entry to the inner chamber and squeezed out through the rear of the idol. The beast's exit through the back of the idol may have allowed it to come around and catch the revelers by surprise.

The question of where the Baphomet had gone found its answer seconds later when we heard a cry with the distinct tones of evil madness that only the Baphomet could produce. It had been in the shadows of the tallest fir tree just outside the main clearing. It came back through the trees into the clearing, stared up at the idol, and roared abominably. It then threw its fists up in rage, shook them, and paced up to the idol. It leaned against the owl like it was trying to topple it, and when that failed, it went to the rear of it. We saw the idol begin to rock, but it did not appear about to fall. Then something gave way with a loud crack, and it tottered for some moments until a final nasty push from the Baphomet sent it forward into the clearing.

The Baphomet had leaped right up the back of the idol, and it rode the owl's fall to the ground. The thump shook the ground, and the Baphomet bounded free. The idol of Moloch, the giant owl, had fallen prostrate, its head resting on the right side of the bonfire. Perhaps the Baphomet, as Jules Gentry's new god, was fulfilling its role by destroying older gods. In one sense, it was a step up the evolutionary scale. Dumb statues relied on evil priests to create mayhem and terror, but Baphomet stood in a class with something like the Tyrannosaurus Rex. Gentry's new god held the heavyweight belt when it came to scaring the living daylights out of human beings.

Roaring again, crashing through the trees, the Baphomet emerged and strode toward the parking lot, reaching the embankment before finding opposition. That came in the form of the remaining undertaker and Harley. They were on the embankment, but on the other side of the parking lot from the Baphomet. The reason they weren't running and stumbling in terror like the rest was that they were heavily armed. Luck appeared to be on their side as well because even though the Baphomet saw them, its concern was the other people fleeing and stumbling to their cars. The thing was reacting like a bear that goes after anyone who runs away, but not those who face it down. A few people had started their cars as well, and a flash of headlights swept the Baphomet, angering it further.

Josie gasped, put a hand to her mouth, and then the four of us remained silent while continuing to watch this violent scene. I kept an arm around Josie, Jack's expression remained stony, and Crake trembled like a ghost. He hadn't seen the Baphomet earlier, though he had heard its multi-tongued roar. Even from a distance, it was heart-stopping. Yet for some strange reason, I felt like asking Crake if selling a stuffed version of it online was in his plans. Humor aside, dark thoughts about what would happen to us if it scented our trail were also on my mind. Those thoughts strengthened when the Baphomet seized a huge rock and cut down one of the fleeing men with it. The Baphomet threw the rock the way I would throw a baseball, and it followed up the throw with another. This time, with a huge clod of earth that smashed into the hood of a car.

Harley and his undertaker pal did not plan on perishing. They had thought of a way to destroy it and climbed quickly down the embankment into the parking lot. Harley's gait and posture revealed determination. Without doubt, he was now the self-appointed clean-up man. Charging himself with somehow burying this mess on behalf of his Illuminati masters. It gave me mixed feelings. Seeing the Baphomet dead would be nice, but I also felt someone should pay the price for financing this deal.

The Baphomet did not look like it was about to perish. It had raced to the stragglers, and it busied itself by killing a man dressed in a toga, using the power of the risen moon to throw a punch that crushed the man's chest and sent a burst of liquid through his lips. The spray enraged the Baphomet, and the glare of headlights highlighted its twisted expression as it charged at a car that was trying to pull out. The Baphomet lifted the vehicle's back end, and while that task busied it, Harley's pal threw a grenade. The toss was on the mark. We couldn't see what it was from high up, but the explosion told the story. It knocked the Baphomet from the car, which turned on its side, and the fury of the sustained blast sent the Baphomet sliding in the dusty lot.

A survivor, the Baphomet got back up fast and ran through the blast dust cloud before it settled. It came out of that cloud and ran straight into Harley's gunfire, and that didn't stop it, but it did slow it to a halt. It whirled in a rage in the gunfire, and it looked like Harley might bring it down, but he ran out of ammo, and he hadn't been smart enough to aim for the head. Like the rest of the undertakers, Harley had been trained to shoot for the center of mass and couldn't get past that training and realize that headshots were needed to take the beast out.

Taking advantage of the Baphomet's momentary confusion, Harley ducked away. He did that fast and left his pal standing there. The man gaped like a fool, too terrified to run at a point in time when it was either escape or die. The Baphomet remained at an abrupt halt, and it studied its prey for a moment, then shot its right hand out and picked the man up by his shirtfront. A long, merciless killing followed, with the Baphomet throwing the undertaker all around the parking lot. Harley escaped during this kill match and disappeared in the trees at the top of the embankment. The Baphomet looked around for him a few moments later, and when it couldn't find him, it ran off down the rutted road pursuing the last of the fleeing cars.

With Harley gone back through another hidden entrance to the underground and the Baphomet disappearing around a bend in the road, I decided it was safe, and we began the journey down the path in single file. We didn't rush because we wanted to give the Baphomet time to run farther off. At the bottom of the rise, we found two crushed bodies. Both victims were destroyed, and we realized that there was no one left to save except ourselves. There was no survival after meeting up with the Baphomet. It did not wound people. It killed them mercilessly. All we could do was quietly slip away, shiver over what we'd seen and what might happen to others, and hope to escape.

We turned south, away from the camp and its standing stones, and began a moonlit journey through the sumac towards the Ford Expedition I had hidden in the pines. On the first leg of the hike, we heard the occasional roar of the Baphomet and a few howls from a distant coyote. The coyote howls seemed almost friendly compared to the sound of the Baphomet, which was like ten devils roaring.

We didn't use the flashlights as the moon was bright enough, and we avoided the meadow in case the Baphomet came our way and spotted us from far off. We were passing through the burial mounds when we heard the final, shocking sound of the night. It shook the ground, a tremendous explosion. We turned, looking between two mounds across the meadow, but we saw no fire. The explosion was an underground deal, Harley destroying key parts of the complex, most likely the lab areas, by bringing down tons of earth.

The Ford remained where I had parked it, so we piled inside. Josie, of course, got the front with me, and I was about to fire it up to leave when screams and a roar came to our ears. As desperate shouts and screaming continued, it became clear that the Baphomet was engaged in another slaughter. I knew the source had to be the Gene Savivors cottage as I had parked just down the road from it. The entry road to the area we'd just fled would be a piece up the road from the cottage, so it meant the Baphomet had pursued the fleeing cars and caught up with some of them at the cottage or near it.

I foolishly decided to check it out, started the engine, drove out of the trees, and turned in the direction of the cottage. Doing so when we were about to escape the area was illogical. The designer drug I'd been hit with may have been wearing off, but the death wish was still going strong. That and the fact that I'd had enough of the Baphomet. Someone had to kill it, and others wouldn't get much of a chance. It would come on them by surprise and finish them off before they realized what was happening.

"Hey!" Crake yelled, leaning over from the back. "What are you doing? We're supposed to be running from that monster, not driving to it."

"Just a looksee. There is no way it could catch this truck."

Josie was still a bit out of it, nodding and nearly asleep. Jack shrugged his shoulders, but didn't object, so I kept driving. I eased the Expedition around the bend, and the cottage came into view. It wasn't what I expected. Part of the Halloween celebration must have been taking place at the cottage, and the Baphomet had arrived on the scene and crashed the party. Three dead bodies blocked part of the driveway. They'd been mashed into a spill of glass from broken beer and wine bottles. The Baphomet was perched on the outcropping that rose above the back patio, and I assumed there were many more dead bodies there at the back of the house. Loud pop music still played from the patio, but the screams had ended. A barrel fire and the glow of paper lanterns lit that back area, but we couldn't see into it. We could see a few people cowering inside the house.

Crake put his head out the window for a glance and ducked it back inside. "Drive away, drive away," he said. "Those people are screwed. We can't save them."

I pulled into the driveway, stopping in front of a dead body. I'd already opened my pack to get my other gun. I looked at Jack, and he tossed me the Springfield. "Out of ammo," he said.

I tossed him the loaded Colt. I kept the Rhino .357. "You're a good shot, aren't you, Jack?"

"You know it."

“That big monkey is just sitting up there enjoying the killing, waiting to get the rest. I’m going to call him out. When he comes down, aim for the head and don’t stop shooting. If we miss, we’ll probably be killed.”

Crake was saying, “Oh no, oh no,” as I opened the door. Josie woke and started to stutter something. I stepped out the door quickly, shut it quietly, and Jack did the same. The Baphomet had already gone from a crouch to full standing position on the outcropping. Partially in the shadows and with the glow of the fire and lanterns from the back patio, it looked like a distorted ape, but wary as it had learned that people not running were the ones that could put up a fight.

It sized us up for some moments and hesitated. Then I yelled, “Hey Baphomet! Come and get us!” And that did the trick. The beast probably recognized my voice. It roared and clapped its big paws. I heard Crake whimpering and rolling up his window. The Baphomet hopped up and down, shaking rocks and earth onto the patio below, then did a long hop down from the outcropping to the roof of the house. Watching that, I was hoping the idiot thing would break through the roof and remain stuck there, but it didn’t. Smooth as a gorilla, it did another hop to the stones of the front walk and charged us.

Jack didn’t panic, and we moved almost like twins, taking a firm stance and shifting to get solid shots at its head. It came at us running upright and with momentum. We fired, and the impact of the shots to its head caused its lower body to swing out from under it and up, and as we ducked aside, it slid on its ass end and crashed into the grill and hood of the truck. We heard both Crake and Josie scream, and we didn’t wait to see if it could get back up. Moving in close, we avoided its swinging arms as it raised its head and shoulders and swiped at us. We both put multiple shots into its head and neck. Some of the shots ricocheted, but others penetrated. There would have been nothing left of a human head. This thing’s skull was like titanium, and even that many shots didn’t destroy it. But they did fatally wound it.

The Baphomet collapsed on its back. Its jaw slack and broken, its face ruined. Part of its forehead had broken away, brain matter oozed out, and it shivered and twitched. We stepped back as it began to flail its arms. I had reloaded, but I didn’t fire, and neither did Jack. My hands began to shake, and I felt sickened by the whole experience. From the tank and its rising, to the path of destruction leading to the cottage, the Baphomet had been a vile monster.

Jules Gentry and his Dark Circle had proved that humankind could create horrible things, and pitiful things, but not holy things. The Baphomet, now at its hideous end, released a long mournful exhalation of red blood mist and a rattling of dry voices. I felt a wave of icy air in the final moment, then it went still, and it didn’t rise again.

We heard excited voices from the people trapped in the house, but we didn’t wait for them to emerge. Getting in the Ford, I leaned across the seat and hugged Josie, and waited a few seconds while Jack remained by the Baphomet. It was like he couldn’t believe we’d killed it, and wanted to be sure. When he got in the car, he said nothing, so I backed out slowly and then burned rubber.

I kept up a fast clip right into Toronto, and we never went back, never looked back to Stony Shore. Josie recovered; we’re back together, but not at the beach, as the weather

had grown cold. Josie didn't return to Genistorm, and the only news reports that came out of Stony Shore were tabloid tales of a Bigfoot monster, flying saucers, and aliens. One article featured a man claiming to have been abducted by aliens, and the man in the photo looked just like Harley. The biggest tabloid tale of all, Crake's book, is to be released next week.

----- the end -----