

# DemonSeer

A Dark Fantasy Novel

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**DemonSeer** is a dark fantasy novel and slightly comedic, featuring a seer and a young girl who have supernatural powers. It deals with the occult and demons.

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## CHAPTER ONE: FIRE DEMON

Silver bells tinkled as the heavy front door of Ace's Otherworld Books pulled shut behind a customer. Stephanie enjoyed the sounds, thinking that the bells made cold music. Cold but clear as ice, and ice was on her mind because more of it was always creeping into the neighborhood. The ice had been spreading like a deep freeze since it first tumbled from her mother's eyes a year ago.

Spinning a paperback rack, Stephanie plucked out a colorful science fiction novel, thinking it might be a warm story on a balmy planet. A quick riffle showed the book to be thick with incomprehensible laboratory talk, and for a moment, she regretted being eleven years old and not a scientist.

A romance novel might warm her heart. She turned to the rack, her eyes settling on a lurid cover. Stephanie knew love wasn't forever. She knew her stepmother's friend Martha had married a creepy, fat man with a ranch, even though there'd been a poorer, handsome man she could have picked. She also knew that her stepmother had never loved her, and what she knew most of all was that love was mainly a daydream, but she still stepped over, hoping to dream again.

A sunbeam in the window caught her eye. It was like a flicker inside amber. The glass seemed about that thick, like new ice or aquarium glass an inch deep.

Shimmering with gold, the light took on an outline and painted itself over with the likeness of her mother. The word Mother almost formed on Stephanie's lips before she remembered she wasn't allowed to call her that. Tiffany was the name she had to use. She thought Tiffany to be quite safe and happy in there, where she couldn't be touched.

"Keep those sweaty hands off me!" said the tiny Tiffany. "I'm not Chinese like you, and I bet you had those hands between your legs!"

Her stepmother hated to be touched. She feared germs and rarely touched others unless it was to give a spanking with her ice-cube hands.

Stephanie knew her stepfather was cold, mainly because he was dead, and her mother, Tiffany, was bitter about it. She watched the little image throw up its arms. "He's a stiff in a box, filthy as a rotten fish. I wanted clean ashes, but he fixed things against me. It cost a fortune to bury him that way. If he loved me, he would've wanted me to have that money, but he didn't care. His heart was always black as coal."

Tiffany's face tightened to a frown, almost as if someone was garroting her. Stephanie feared her mother might have read her mind. Lately, she'd been dreaming of a handsome boy on a cream Arabian horse. He held a torch to cut through the clouds of gloom and mist her mother exhaled. If fate had it, one day his curls would fall as he kissed every part of her naked body and warmed it, then Tiffany would scream, put out her eyes, and melt like the Wicked Witch of the West.

However, the future was far off. She began to wish her mother would simply burn up, and that's what happened. The image became a flaming fetish, her mother's distorted agony fading behind it.

A molten mask of sunlight slid in the thick glass, and it had to be a fire-eater because its expression was a hungry one as it swallowed the flames. It huffed out smoke that blew back over its pointed ears, cheekbones, nose, and chin. A fierce symmetry made it more than a simple demonic face, and it didn't seem quite alive, like an animate doll. The eyes reddened, and an odd expression melted into place; one that conveyed an alien mood close to laughter. This being was evil, childishly so, like a mocking bully. It told her many things by giving her a sudden awareness of a select portion of its wide knowledge. Yet it didn't have a purpose; it was just there, slowly bleeding into her reflection in the glass.

Stephanie felt no need to resist. She succumbed to its feathery touch and her eyes glazed over. It became a warm breeze in her mind, and it held a hand of warm air over her, and because of that hot touch, she liked it.

"Here we have a young visionary." Stephanie knew the deep, friendly voice well. Glancing right, she saw Julian the Seer emerging from a back room. Sunlight twinkled like the fingertips of a shiatsu spirit on his crystal pendulum. Behind him, a bead curtain swayed, and Ace poked his head through. Both men stepped up to Stephanie, but she was most taken by Julian; his smile was so animated he seemed to possess multiple souls. The seer's eyes were faraway and warm, and they smiled with him. He wasn't like the more important New Earth people whose eyes didn't smile with their faces. Julian's look was genuine, and that made her feel noticed.

Julian the Seer had an attractive sweep of red hair that bounced when he leaned over to talk to her. "So, what did you see in the window? The future, with maybe a robot ice-cream truck?"

"I saw a fire-eater, and my reflection absorbed him."

"Does he talk or is he breathing fire?"

"He knows every funny trick there is."

"That's good, Stephanie. When he's ready to speak, come to me, or Ace if I'm not around."

"Yeah," Ace said, equine nostrils flaring on his gentle face. He looked to Julian. "Maybe she can channel more than health-food-induced dreams. Nothing personal, Julian, but the others have been a disappointment, and you're too philosophical and obscure for a mainstream crowd."

"The mainstream crowd wants to tour the road to enlightenment and not walk it."

Stephanie shivered. "The fire-eater wants to speak now."

"Don't hold it back," Julian said.

"Look out the window," she said, her voice becoming male and dwarfish. "Your pal Rollo is about to cross the street. If he does, he'll die horribly."

Julian had taken Stephanie's hand. He let it go as he looked out at Rollo. Red changed to green; the bright day was momentarily devoid of traffic. Ace was shrugging his shoulders like he couldn't believe bad luck was coming, and he ended up watching as Julian tore out the door and got over to Rollo before he could cross with the green.

Rollo was roly-poly, a lover of black humor, and he did a stand-up routine at the Slap Shack. He was also into New Earth stuff. Usually, his mood ranged from acidic to jolly. Now he was protesting loudly, like a sucker who'd been had, as Julian dragged him back to the bookstore.

Julian looked like he felt a bit crazy about it himself. It probably would've been easier if the buildings were casting unfriendly shadows instead of blue, gentle ones. If Rollo hadn't been a friend, he probably wouldn't have acted.

They emerged in the store, and the bell on the door tinkled as Rollo sighed. Out the window, a red sports car sped into view, skidded across the road, and fire-balled as it crashed into a telephone pole. There were no pedestrians close by, but the driver was mercilessly incinerated, his body thrown out with a shower of windshield glass as the car fell back from the pole.

Julian covered Stephanie's eyes, though it was a bit late for such a move. She experienced a pleasant sensation as the fire-eater glossed the smoking body so it appeared to her as a big flare. The others had no such luck. They were shaken, and Julian felt Rollo tremble as he leaned against him for support. In the hunger of the flames, a demonic face rose. Rollo saw it as the face of death he'd escaped. They all saw it, but it was there and gone so quickly that no one saw fit to mention it.

Smoke and blood hissed over blistered flesh as the odor of burning plastic drifted on the road, then a crowd and dark clouds moved in, following at the heels of death.

Some big summer days passed, and news of Stephanie's power got around on some channeling magic of its own. The result was that her life with her stepmother became almost bearable. Gifts arrived; ordinary items from flowers to a fold-out television set. Then there was the New Earth stuff – special tarot cards, crystals, beads, and plants. She also received a BT5 Brain Tuner, an Orion Electro-Stimulation Device, and an Ecstasy light-and-sound machine. There were other channelers who wanted to take her on tour.

Stephanie's mother didn't believe in occult powers or anything else not purely material. The gifts and money allowed her to admire Ace's New Age people. For further gain, she led them to believe that Stephanie had always been a miracle child. She told them her natural father, Chang, had been a magician in China, and she allowed her to pop over to the bookstore whenever she wanted.

It became a happy time for Stephanie; she had new friends, and the fire-eater inside her was quiet, content to haunt her thoughts and entertain her with wickedly strange dreams. Sure, the new friends were adults, but they'd do since she'd never played much with other children anyway. Tiffany hadn't wanted her exposed to their germs and lice. New Earth people with money didn't have lice, in Tiffany's estimation.

After a week, Stephanie arrived at the bookstore to find a man named Lex Walsh waiting for her. He was sipping jasmine tea with Ace. Lex wore a sleek dark suit, and except for his pearly earrings, he resembled a Protestant minister from the church down the block. Ace told her Lex was an astrologer who would act as her spirit guide, protecting her during a channeling session they were about to hold.

Lex was immediately friendly, all grins, but his smile was too big, too self-assured. Back when Stephanie had been street-proofed, a policewoman had told her that kidnapers and molesters looked like that. Instinct told her to resist Lex, but the fire-eater planted the opposite urge in her, telling her Lex would be warm and wonderful.

Ace's usual backroom crowd was composed of people who had tarot and horoscope parties in their homes. People, young and old, who would pay to see channelers, psychic consultants, and astrologers. Stephanie was something different, an oracle child, and her talents needed proper development. There was the possibility of manipulation, like that of the Salem children, so with that in mind, Ace forced his people to keep their distance.

To get an assessment, he'd gathered an invitation-only crowd of New Agers. Charismatic people, mostly a multi-racial crowd that was interesting and attractive when compared to the usual dull gathering of white astrology buffs. These people valued cultural and religious differences. They hungered too much for affection and esteem, yet despite their flaws and strange beliefs, they were mature, with humanitarian instincts tempering their greed and materialistic lifestyles.

The back room was more like a large tea-and-tarot hall than anything else. Incense and perfume permeated the upholstery and carpeting, and the scent of tea hung in the air. The common area had rice paper lamps, Oriental rugs, silk pillows, and low tables. From the floor, the assembled crowd looked through a miniature theater arch at Stephanie, who sat on a channeler's platform. A sunny day and the weedy backyard were framed in the picture window behind her. Lex stood off to her right, and he had more the air of a man who was lost than a guard.

Stephanie often took shy spells with people, but today she didn't feel withdrawn. The fire-eater burned softly inside her, and her aura was wound like a ribbon into the crowd. As Ace began his introduction, her face took on a mystic cast. Her long dark hair was fastened with a jade clasp, her eyes were vibrant, and a beautiful cream of youth was on her bare legs, arms, and neck.

A sense of communion radiated from the fire-eater. The entity released false spiritual warmth that unfolded as a burst of pleasure in her mind. Her body felt silky and warm. After a few moments, her knees began to tingle, as if tiny crystals were splintering beneath the skin; then there was applause, and Lex took his cue and stepped over to interview her.

"Your knees are shaking. You need not fear me. I'm your guard and protector. Relax and let the spirit speak."

On the surface, Stephanie seemed to have a relaxed glow. Inside, she began to burn. Balloons of fire were at the back of her mind as the spirit took over.

"Tell us your name, spirit," Lex commanded.

"Rumpelstiltskin," the fire-eater said, turning Stephanie's voice male and impish.

"Tell the truth," Lex said.

"No. I'm a fire demon and no one's slave."

"You have powers of fire from the netherworld. Perhaps we can communicate concerning your powers?"

"You mean you want me to beat around the bush like the other channelers do. It's really easier to burn the bush."

An aura of flames appeared, and after a moment, it shrank, crowning Stephanie's hair. Some people gasped, and then she shot up in the air. She had the flexibility of a rag doll, and she began to dance - a crazy dance like something from the Theater of the Absurd. Her facial expressions were ecstatic and contorted, and the sounds issuing from her throat seemed like the work of an evil ventriloquist.

Stephanie was now unaware of Ace's back room. Clouds of fire and hot winds were rushing. She was no more than smoke billowing and swirling. There were no thoughts.

Recovering from amazement, Lex suddenly remembered that he was Stephanie's guard and got up close, seizing her knees and trying to pull her down. He managed to lower her to the platform before he screamed and pulled his hands away. He looked at his palms; they hissed with smoke and were scorched and hardened like fried bacon. Lex was a weak man, his lips twisted, and he

fell to his knees and whimpered. No one rushed forward to help him; all eyes were on Stephanie as the fire demon continued with the bizarre entertainment.

Emerging from clouds of smoke, Stephanie's astral body gathered shape. The scene cleared. She was at the Slap Shack, a place she was too young to enter, looking down from a rafter at Rollo, the comedian her premonition had saved. Rollo was in the spotlights, blue stage smoke blowing in wisps around him, and like the fire demon, he was dancing. He'd finished a series of jokes and was dancing a strange jig to celebrate the roll. His steps were as humorous as his lines, and he had the audience roaring.

Laughter peeled, Rollo's dance grew wilder, and he was on the roll of his life. His heels sparked, and then a flash of fire enveloped his shoes. Flame licked out, and the people assumed it was a stage trick, but when the flames rose up his legs, guffaws turned to screams.

Hysterical laughter grew on Rollo's face like another fire. He couldn't stop, and because of it, there were people who continued to laugh with him. Hungry flames feathered his upper body, and steam began to hiss from his burning trousers. His legs became a smoky blur, and ashes from his suit swirled in radiant heat. Drifting fumes hazed the room, carrying the odor of charring flesh.

Dense smoke obscured the scene, and Stephanie was returning to oblivion. She saw a vision of Rollo's feet as blackened bones clicking on the floor as the dance went on, and his body burned down like a fuse. He collapsed in a smoldering heap as Stephanie's spirit rose and left the building.

Heat uncoiled in long waves, and Stephanie felt like a dry wind taking on form. The fire demon had torn her best summer dress, and her hands moved like alien hands, falling protectively between her legs. Pulling her hands away, she sighed with embarrassment and fell limp. Lex was sprawled on the floor beside her. Cool hands touched her shoulders, dissipating the fever in her flesh and repelling the fire demon. Glancing back, she saw that it was Julian the Seer. He had a firm grip on her, holding her as the fire-eater shrank and became a red-hot seed sinking in her belly.

Rollo had wanted an unconventional funeral, and he was a member of a New Earth memorial society well known for its offbeat services. Because of the publicity surrounding his bizarre death, a mob wanted to attend his wake. Julian was one of the few admitted. He passed through the grumbling people and entered the funeral home with his shoulders slumped. Rollo's death was like a few shovels of earth on his own coffin.

Cloying floral odors, the pallid faces of the mourners, and grief all worked to sicken Julian. At first, he didn't notice that the coffin was open. When he did notice, he stumbled over a decorative urn and hurried up to the front.

Rollo was inside, resting peacefully. Disbelief passed as Julian realized the corpse was a wax effigy. Rollo had taken black humor to its extreme end; his real body had been cremated, and the remains were in a gold bottle on a stand next to the coffin. A white carnation topped the bottle; a fake flower like the ones he'd worn in his lapel. A recorder was with the bottle, and according to Rollo's will, he was going to put a message on it from beyond the grave.

As specified in the testament, the funeral home was plunged into darkness, and the recording was played. It was all white noise, five minutes of buzzing. Rollo had been unable to get his message through from the other side, then the lights came on, and Rollo was there, sitting up in his coffin, waving and rotating his ghastly, grinning head.

Ace was one of the people who lost breath from the shock of it. Others laughed and hooted. Julian chuckled, but with a tear in his eye. He knew Rollo had believed life to be absurd and laughter a man's last refuge - as in the Theater of the Absurd. Spiritualism, he'd tied in with creativity. Julian thought it was a good belief system for a comic, but he hoped it was wrong in general. He had to admit that getting the last laugh from a coffin was the most absurd thing of all.

The fire demon was an imp, meaning he had no master plan for control of the world on behalf of the forces of darkness. He was more of a deviate, fixated on some perverse things, like a person with a foot and telephone fetish. Only the demon was cruel and had powers. His prime enjoyment other than possession had always been in saving people who were destined to die and then burning them alive in his own way. He was also a thief at heart and enjoyed using Stephanie's body.

This time, he was having difficulties. A terrible sickness was draining him, and its source was Stephanie's traumatized mind. As he worked to motivate her, he found himself unable to rouse her into the frenzy he required. Stuck in an aching body, the fire-eater was suffering the side effects of Stephanie's dark mood. Unable to banish the negative drift of her thoughts, he was bitter and feeling nasty. Her pain and memories of her mother were a bruise within and storm clouds above. At the bottom of everything was an uneasy fear of Julian. The seer's powers of exorcism were unexpected, as the demon imp had assumed him a fraudulent psychic. He'd picked up on the minds of the other New Earthers, and none of them had believed in Julian's powers of seeing, and no wonder: Julian gave readings of sacred prose; sometimes he read his own philosophical ramblings. There were other things he did, none of which were in tune with current social norms. Calling his performances channeling sessions had only served to make him disliked by spiritualist people who expected a more sensational act.

Thinking that it'd be best to take a closer look at Julian, the fire-eater rose from Stephanie's bowels and invaded her mind. She fell unconscious as he moved into the neurons behind her eyes. Focusing on Julian, he used her brain to form a vision.

The stained glass above the transom resembled segments of sugared fruit. Beyond the lacquered oak door, Julian sat in a huge armchair. Music was playing: John Coltrane's A LOVE SUPREME.

It was a paneled, one-room bachelor apartment with an adjoining bathroom; surprisingly neat and uncluttered for a bachelor's place. The small picture window behind Julian looked down on an alley that was a passage for street people and ladies of the night. Escort Alley, the police called it. Julian never went down, and at night, he closed the curtains. He had no desire to attempt to raise those seeking drugs and the flesh to spirituality.

Coarse voices were already rising up from the alley, and it wasn't yet sunset. Stealing energy from Stephanie, the demon looked deeper into Julian's mind, getting a snapshot of his personality.

Julian had lived in better neighborhoods, back before life played a cruel joke on him. In younger days, under another name, he'd been an alcoholic, drug user, and business professional. He'd gained success without spirituality. Now he was a changed man, high on the spirit but lacking in the departments of financial security and romance. Most of the New Earth people he knew went for charisma and false sophistication. They were materialists, really, and they were well adjusted in a materialist, celebrity society. With some bitterness, Julian understood that like everyone else, they would prefer the old Julian - his money, cars, coke, and high-flying social life. It was Julian who didn't like the old Julian and had disposed of him.

There were weaknesses the demon smiled upon, but they were ones that required time to play on. Julian had no real hang-ups or skeletons in his new closet. Mainly, he had difficulties adapting spiritualism to his lifestyle. His social life had always revolved around a few drinks. Sober, he wasn't a good communicator. All of his old friends had drifted away, and job opportunities and influence had dried up. His wife had also left, leaving him to discover that most women didn't care for the new Julian. A better person was often a less popular person, the demon knew, and for that reason, Julian could at some time be drawn back to his old ways.

For a fast fix, a quick kill, there were no cracks. The seer had no phobias, sexual weakness, or neurotic gaps. Disappointed, the fire demon found some solace in Julian's misery. Even Ace thought he was a bit of a geek. He only used him for filler. Julian the Seer channeled when no one else could show up. He had good looks and a strong presence and could be a big draw if he'd

fake the entertainment like some of the others, but he wouldn't do that, figuring that he hadn't changed his life to make it the same again.

Julian liked to quote words of ancient wisdom and tell people that life could be transformed into something good now. Each person had to find God through his or her spiritual nature. Perhaps God, Creation, and Nature weren't to be seen as separate things. New prophets and celebrities weren't to be believed, or else people would see them as a higher power and be led astray. He was only Julian the Seer, sand pouring in an hourglass, and like everyone else, he could only try to believe in himself and the higher powers. Most people wanted someone or something immediate to look up to, and saw him as an oddball. Often, he saw the same thing. On rare days, he felt wise, wise enough to know he was forty-one and that his small life wouldn't get any bigger.

As the fire demon left him, Julian was nodding on the fuzzy edge of sleep. The doorbell rang, and he jumped up in his chair. A police bubble light was flashing outside the window. Going to the door, he checked the peephole and was relieved to see his visitor was Ace.

He opened up, and the hall lights showed Ace's face to be sweaty, puffy, and troubled. He nodded and entered quickly, knowing that no one kept an open door in Julian's neighborhood.

Julian clicked the bolt lock back, and when he turned from the door, Ace embraced him.

"I'm so sorry about Rollo," he said.

"Thank God, for a moment I thought you had news of another death."

"The fire-eater is sure to kill again."

"What's to be done about it?"

"An exorcism, before it's too late. Stephanie has recovered physically. I don't know if she'll ever recover emotionally."

"If she survives the fire demon, she'll need friends and support. Her mother has already done enough to wound her. Any more and the girl will be hopelessly neurotic."

"She likes you. We think she'll do better with your support."

"You want me to help her through the exorcism?"

"We want you to perform the exorcism."

"I assumed some of the others would want the job and the publicity."

"The others are terrified, but in a morbid way. Whenever the fire-eater speaks, they'll be drawn to him, and more will die. You've demonstrated power over him, and you should also realize that the publicity could boost your sagging career."

"A career as an exorcist isn't exactly what I want, but I have a plan I want to try on the fire-eater. It's risky, and most likely I'll fail and be another skin on the demon's belt."

"You want to do it for the kid, I suppose?"

"Someone has to do it. And she needs more than an exorcism. If I really want to do something for her, I'll have to give her support after it's over."

"You mean exorcise the second demon - her mother."

Julian nodded, and Ace saw an aura of silent strength in him that was impressive. He hoped it really was strength and not a death wish he was seeing.

Leaves ruffling dryly and the dusty sweep of the sky strengthened the fire-eater's will as he used his powers to manipulate Stephanie. He clouded her thoughts and sent a hot, rushing wind to deafen her. Her vision blurred until the people and plants in Ace's backyard were a bleeding mix of aural colors. A mask was before her, and it was the face of a larger demon - from her mother

to the fire-eater, her world had been a mask of overwhelming evil that only got bigger. Now the demon created hideous extremes of thought that made it too much for her mind to withstand.

Enjoying a pleasant fever, the fire demon basked on the edge of Stephanie's nervous system while he waited for her to retreat to subconscious levels. He considered Julian a priest to be sneered at, and he had no fear of the exorcism to come.

Pollen and flower perfumes were in the air; sweet odors that bordered on the fetid. Heat shimmered, distorting some chimney pipes. The fire-eater could see beyond the lattice-topped board fence that enclosed the back yard. People were already gathered at the bottom of the flagstone steps, in a grassy area with a sundial, rosemary urns, shrub roses, and concrete troughs of flowers. Off to the right, a serpentine path of brick led to a small lily pond.

Jewelry and crystals sparkled, forming ephemeral rainbows. The fire demon could see that it was a mixed group - a long-haired, yellow-cloaked yogi named Shamra Smoke; a bronze-skinned, bearded swami by the name of Amar; a near-naked Zen master with a shaved head; several women of the fabulously tacky fortuneteller type; a WASP dressed like an Indian shaman; some super slick business people who no doubt sold herbs, crystals, and miracle machines. With the exception of a few grey-haired shop owners and the fortunetellers, everyone was young with television good looks. They looked fine indeed, and the demon thought they'd look even better breathing fire.

A number of larger crystals set in granite were arranged in a pentagram in the grass around Stephanie. She sat on a stone bench with her short dress pulled up, revealing much of her thighs - a callous posture of possession. A crystalline glitter of amusement and malice in her eyes revealed the fire demon's presence.

No one had ever tried an exorcism with pentagrams before, and the demon found the idea amusing. In his light mood, the flimsy bands holding Stephanie's wrists to the bench didn't bother him. The day promised to be a fun one at the very least.

Conversation drifted in the emptiness of the afternoon. It was almost as if the people were there to see a play, then things happened to enliven the scene. First, the fire-eater saw Lex step over. He was about to wipe Stephanie's brow with a sponge dipped in ice water. The demon responded with a guttural choke and a stream of steaming vomit that ruined Lex's white shirt and sent him screaming to the lawn. As Lex rolled and writhed, Ace appeared, followed by Stephanie's mother and Julian.

Julian became the immediate center of attention, and Stephanie's eyes ignited with hatred. The fire-eater now found himself despising everything about Julian, especially his cynical way of biting his lip in mild disagreement and his casual manner and dress. He looked far from holy, wearing sandals, faded jeans, a rayon shirt, and an amulet. Yet there was something unsettling about him. His open, slightly effeminate face and wild red hair had been disconcerting from the beginning. He had a way of shrugging off the shadows and standing in a brighter light than everyone else; it singled him out as the man in charge.

There was also cool resignation in Julian's bearing; the emotion and reflection of a man and a life that had failed him. In that sense, he was a religious figure, sort of the walking wounded, with a healing touch. The fire demon's enemies had always been that way. Entering Julian wouldn't be pleasant, and the demon decided he would only do it as a last resort.

Lex was shuddering and frothing at the mouth, his eyes flicking and rolling. Some fuses had blown in his brain, so Julian and Ace began by dragging him clear and putting him in the care of a bearded herbalist.

Stephanie's mother, Tiffany, had stiffened. Her mouth was a thin white line that threatened to vanish. The fire-eater giggled in Stephanie's voice. Knowing it was the hiked skirt that had outraged her, he twisted Stephanie's thighs to anger her more.

Succumbing to anger and stupidity, Tiffany lost control and charged, her stiff arm raised to strike. She got a few steps before the fire demon puffed out smoke. A ring of white heat whirled in the air, and a hot gust billowed into Tiffany. She staggered back as curtains of distortion swept over her, and then she went to her knees. Her hair smoked and curled like burning insulation. Choking up dryness, she rose and retreated over the lawn.

Most of the crowd had been drawn to their feet. Fear and fascination absorbed them, and perhaps they saw a hooded executioner in the backs of their minds.

Stephanie's eyes were mirrors filled with an evil light that brightened as Julian stepped closer. "Don't any of you touch me," the fire demon hissed.

"You fear our powers," Julian said.

"No, the truth is that Stephanie is having a baby and must be treated gently. Here, have a look at the child."

An engine of wind shrieked around the demon, ballooning Stephanie's dress in the shimmering air. It riffled with a tissue-paper sound and took the shape of a distended belly.

"We don't know who the father is," the fire-eater said, and then he laughed in a harsh male voice.

"Let me touch the baby," Julian said, "or else we'll know it's just another of your tricks."

"Better still, I'll give you a peek."

Her dress developed a rose pink glow with a stain like pale blood. Smoke curled at her thighs, rings of red-hot light expanded, then the bulge in the dress went transparent, becoming similar to an amniotic sack. Inside, a fetus was suspended in viscous silver fluid. The form was human, but the head was reptilian. It looked blue and dead, and its mouth dribbled worms.

There were gasps and windmill gestures of surprise, followed by much whispering. Tiffany turned to stone, then cracked, and began to chitter hysterically, wringing her hands. Ace had the look of someone who'd just been poisoned. He fainted dead away under the power of the illusion, hitting the lawn behind Julian like a sack of potatoes.

Julian remained unmoved; he cocked a cynical eye that enraged the fire demon.

"It's the child of the devil," the demon said.

"Lovely," Julian replied, stepping closer.

"Get back, you pervert! You watch those whores do it outside your window!" The fire-eater spat out a molten gob that flew over Julian's head as he lifted his hands. Two ornate crosses were tattooed on the palms. Darkness tore the air jagged between Julian and the demon, then the yard vibrated like a struck gong.

Throwing himself forward in strobing darkness, Julian managed to plant his palms on Stephanie's belly. Her mouth opened, releasing a deafening noise - voices whirling in the hiss of an Inquisitor's bonfire. Pulling up, the fire demon shattered the flimsy cuffs on Stephanie's wrists, then weakness overcame him, and he could do little more. It felt like his devil's baby had kicked with feet of cold stone. Stephanie's ribs were icicles stabbing inward, and as he withdrew, his power of illusion was lost.

Grains of fire and light showered from Stephanie, forcing Julian to duck back and tumble in the grass as her pregnancy ended in sparkles. Mirror-bright shards of light cut and bled the netherworld flesh of the fire-eater. Wind machines howled in his ears. Through a kaleidoscope of afterimages, he saw Julian getting to his feet and that the attack wasn't coming from him. Someone in the crowd had trained a light-and-sound brain stimulation device on Stephanie. It was painful in the extreme; he felt like a voodoo doll caught in a rain of needles.

Concentrating on the source, the fire-eater ended the game. Shamra Smoke howled as his control box melted to plastic ice cream in his hands. He tried to fling the substance off, but

couldn't. Flesh fried, his fingers twisted to black pipe cleaners, and then his lips blued as the liquid plastic poisoned his blood. He collapsed, knocking his machine from the bench as he choked and died on a stream of his own vomit.

Silence followed; the day was like an angry giant temporarily holding its breath. People were afraid to move as it might attract the demon's wrath. Julian was ready to act, and he turned to face the fire-eater, but before he could do anything, shots rang out.

Lex was the gunman; he'd recovered and drawn a small pistol. His expression was crazed, murderous as he emptied a clip with cruel efficiency. But his license to kill proved invalid. The flechettes never struck Stephanie. Stopping in mid air, they hummed like a swarm of bees and became a red streak as they looped and returned. Lex's lips formed a puzzled O, then his head and shoulders smashed like a jar, spilling liquid contents as a splash of cherry red on the grass.

Two men were dead, and vile amusement twinkled in Stephanie's eyes. A twisted, lecherous grin appeared on her face as the fire demon enjoyed the panic breaking out. Frightened people ran in various directions, tripping over the flagstone steps, urns, flower boxes, and their own feet. Two men ran mindlessly up to the fence before they realized it was too high to climb. Licks of scarlet flame sprouted on their arms, clothing, and shoes. Fear fed the hellish flames; smoke blew from hot throats as people howled and beat at patches of scorched skin.

A form of order emerged from the chaos, and eventually they got up the steps and fled through the house. A busty fortuneteller was the last to exit; her jeweled head scarf a smoking chrysalis unraveling to tapers of fire. She spun around on a twisted ankle. Gasping, she fell backward through the patio doors.

Electricity crackled on Julian's skin, vapor trails rose, but his concentration prevented him from burning. He was still in the crystal pentagram, refusing to succumb to panic. Ace hadn't burned, and he'd been too weak to flee. He collapsed on a patio chair, his face flooded with perspiration. The only other person remaining was Tiffany, and she was bound to the scene by a sadistic form of motherly duty. She grew strangely calm, almost as though her frigidity was a demon repellent that had saved her from the fire.

Julian made a dramatic sweeping gesture, and the fire demon wondered if he was casting fate to the wind and surrendering. The question was answered immediately as Julian pulled a glass bottle of blue liquid from his pocket.

The fire demon's reaction was skepticism in the form of a crooked grin, and as Julian came up close, the demon contemplated changing his fluid into gasoline.

Opening his bottle with a pop, Julian wetted a cotton cloth and dabbed some of the liquid on Stephanie's forehead. A sickly odor of lilacs rose on potent ether-like fumes, causing the fire demon to gag. His fiery thoughts reeled as nerve pain drove through Stephanie's brain with the power of ice-cold nails.

Julian dabbed the freezing liquid on the shoulders and knees, then returned to the forehead, repeating the pattern of a pentagram as he spoke slowly. "This child's soul is not a spirit of hell's desert, but of the wintry Earth. Let the deceit of the fire demon be banished into the path of the pentagram to . . ."

It was the simplest of ceremonies, yet the fire demon felt crucified in a rose garden by a snowman spouting a dull mantra. His demonic cauldron cooled fast. The chill passing through Stephanie's body was snuffing him out. There was no alternative but to attack, so he flowed out as heat from her toes and collected himself on Julian's aura. Scarlet flames sprouted on Julian's third eye as the fire demon bored in to possess him.

Froth began to crust on Stephanie's purpling lips; her soul remained in the void. She hung limp on the bench as Julian began to stumble, battling the sizzling of the demon in his brain.

Catching himself before he fell, Julian raised the bottle of liquid and sprinkled it over his face and chest. The last drops he dribbled down the back of his neck.

The demon was merging with Julian's senses, emerging into awareness to find himself sharing pain like frostbite. Hackles rose as frozen quills, nerves stabbed and ached as Julian's body lumped to gooseflesh. In the midst of it, Julian had cleared his mind and was using a meditation technique he'd learned to focus on powerful memories of winter, frostbite, and bitter cold.

Rings of fire became patterns of frost that the demon found unbearable. A spike of ice came down to impale him. He forced Julian to howl and exited, leaving the warmth of his breath behind.

Tiffany was close by and in a weakened state, so the fire-eater entered her with the idea of using her to kill Julian. Her mind unfolded around him, growing like a dark avalanche. A frigid madwoman that no demon could tempt or punish, she had a derangement that had yet to fully express itself. Her body was like a corpse disconnected from her mind, and her scream was like shattering ice.

The fire demon felt like he was sinking in a vat of mind slime, and it gave him the idea of seizing Julian and throwing him in the lily pond.

Limb movements were mechanical and odd; Tiffany's disconnected mind gave the demon the sense of controlling her body from a distant virtual-reality mechanism. He walked her in a stiff puppet-like manner toward Julian, who managed to stumble aside and throw her over.

Scraping Tiffany's knees on the bricks, the demon threw her up, and she did a disjointed stagger. Julian was moving in, his hair wild, a film of dust rising on the wind behind him. His stare was otherworldly, like he'd seen through Tiffany's eyes to the fire-eater's netherworld. Not missing a trick, the fire demon gave Julian a taste of that netherworld by sending a blast of hot wind from Tiffany's throat. It sucked down dust and swirled it into his eyes. As Julian reeled in agony, Tiffany grabbed him roughly and gave him a shove that sent him tripping down the path toward the lily pond.

Sputtering, Julian went to his knees, his hands clutching at his eyes. Dropping a rope of drool at the sight of weakness, the fire-eater tried to douse him with flames, managing only to put out enough heat to redden his face and neck with a rush of hot blood. Julian was fading fast; now was the killing time. The fire demon grinned inwardly, and Tiffany's Stephanie-beating smile appeared as she moved in to deliver some clumsy slaps and kicks. Even though the fire demon was weak himself, and possessing a horrible human being, he managed to grab some sadistic enjoyment. It was like using a chilly mannequin to bludgeon someone to death, which was a unique experience, but not so unique that it was preferable to boiling blood and rage. Julian was cringing now, and Tiffany's cruelty was as cold as the ice water that ran in her veins. The fire demon felt like a zombie killer come up from frosted earth, and he had to stir up some of his own hot emotions to maintain his power over Tiffany.

Blood and spittle came to Julian's lips as the fire demon beat him closer to the water. Throwing a wooden kick to the throat with Tiffany's muscular leg, the demon sneered at the seer's cowardice.

Flames jetted from Tiffany's palms, scorching the bricks in front of Julian. He drew back from the heat and was now at the water's edge. A carpet of lily pads stretched behind him.

A foot on the shoulder, a final kick, and Julian would go down with the weeds. Tiffany marched forward, glassy-eyed with possession as her shoe lifted for the kill, and then something sparkled, and she froze. It was ice; the fire demon could see large chunks floating in the pond.

As the fire demon realized that the pond was a trap, Julian grabbed Tiffany's shoe. The demon yanked it back and turned to retreat, then he was hit from the side by Stephanie, tripped by her tiny foot, and sent toward Julian and the pond.

Tiffany's body spun around as she fell, and the demon screeched as Julian caught a leg and hoisted her over into the pond. Stephanie was on the walkway, and the image flashed in the demon's mind as he went under.

The plunge was a long, torturous moment, akin to stepping into a freezing shower. The fire-eater was engulfed by water as cold and thick as gelatin. A truckload of ice was melting in the pool, and it brushed Tiffany's skin with the creepiness of swarming eels.

Gagging and choking, the demon tasted water that had been seeded with a sweet herbal flavor, and then the water went up Tiffany's nose, hitting her brain like hard knuckles.

Breaking the icy surface, the fire demon cried out for help in Tiffany's voice. He suddenly remembered that the crowd had fled. He could see Julian at the water's edge, one arm wrapped around Stephanie and the other extended to show the cross on his palm.

The cross burned like incandescent silver, searing the fire demon. It was a barrier that prevented him from reentering Stephanie. Ace was the only other person nearby, so he focused on him as he went under. Thrashing back through ice to the surface, he tried to leave Tiffany's body, managing to flash out as heat lightning. He made contact with Ace, then a cold shock threw him off, back to Tiffany as she went under.

Cold swampy water went down, ripping Tiffany's lungs like icy claws. Struggling, the fire-eater brought her up for a third time. Water streamed off stinging, bloodshot eyes, and he saw Ace floundering in the water. Ace had jumped in thinking he had to save Tiffany, and had foiled the demon's attempt at possession by accident.

Ace wasn't a strong swimmer; he failed to reach Tiffany, and she went down, taking the fire demon in tow. Silver bubbles filled the water as air escaped her lungs. The fire-eater saw Ace splashing to shore, and a blurry image of Julian and Stephanie turning away.

Stephanie was in Julian's arms and wiping blood from his lip, and the fire-eater could feel the rage in Tiffany's flesh, outrage at being left to drown. The fire demon knew she deserved to be left, and not just because of him. Still, he could gain some power from her hate and perhaps bring her waterlogged corpse up for revenge.

He'd done such a thing before. He steeled himself to withstand the moment of death, then, horror of horrors, Tiffany's life began to flash before him.

Beginning in the early years, when her apelike father had punished her by locking her in the beef freezer at his butcher shop.

The fire-eater howled, knocking mucus and bits of lung tissue into the water. The feeling was of being impaled and spinning on a big frozen wheel. Using the last of his strength, he burned Tiffany's innards and jetted up on the power of the boiling explosion that came from her bowels. The body broke the surface, red smoke pouring from it, and levitated above the rippling water. An exhalation of steam shot from Tiffany's mouth and nose, then the body flipped over like a big fish and sank like a stone.

A gust of wind roared above the pond, dropping ash and tiny cinders. Fearing the fire-eater, Julian and Stephanie fled up the walk to safety. In a final effort, the fire-eater tried to enter Stephanie, but he had no control and was only a hot wind blowing by. He felt the salt of her tears, the mixture of grief and relief she felt at her mother's death, then he was sucked down her nostrils and pushed through a dark portal, his powers cast to the earth as he returned to his ancient home.

## **CHAPTER 2: DRAGON DAY**

Stephanie kept a firm grip on the two diamond planters and walked like she was on a tightrope. She had a fear of falling, an epileptic might have, and since she was a child who had been

possessed and thrown into convulsions by a demon, her fear was to be expected.

Sunshine was honey bright on the varnished door and beaming over the rock garden. Stepping out, she spotted a ruby-throated hummingbird hovering over a bell-shaped blossom. It darted away, and she set the planters down on a creeper-covered boulder, remembering what Julian had told her about hummingbirds. They were creatures that moved and lived so fast that it was questionable as to whether they could see human beings. Stephanie thought that was nice, to think that a world of flowers, nectar, and hummingbirds could exist in a separate reality, one untouched by human ugliness. The planters were the same way. The smaller one was a miniature herb garden, a tiny world with a mint atmosphere - a world as fragile as the water glass, opalescent glass, and brass wire that supported it. The other was a centerpiece of flowers, and she supposed it wasn't completely its own world, since it existed as a decoration.

Escapism was supposed to be wrong, and she knew she was withdrawn to an extent, but she still preferred it that way. Most likely, it would stay that way, since she probably wouldn't be able to attend school in the fall. Ms. Audrey Brown, her counselor, said it was because the other kids would think she was a freak. She'd been in the news, and everyone knew she'd been a demon-possessed child. Stephanie had talked to some of the other kids, and they said it was their parents who thought she was a freak and didn't want her at school. Ms. Brown hadn't mentioned that.

It was supposed to be a terrible blow, and part of Audrey Brown's job was to help her cope with it. The real situation was that Stephanie didn't mind. She loved her new father, Julian the Seer, and she loved the Colonial cottage his New Earth friends had given them. The rock garden, the rubble-stone walls, the ravine path, and the hill; it would be a happy summer at home. Worrying about school and fall wasn't something she wanted to do, and she was used to being separated from friends her own age, since she hadn't been allowed to play when she was with Tiffany.

Memories of the past made her wince; she wasn't sure what was worse - thoughts of her mother's death during the exorcism or thoughts of her when she was alive. She'd been a horrible child abuser. That was what Julian called her, though Audrey Brown wanted to cover that up - perhaps out of misguided respect for the dead. Julian had a clearer picture of her past; there was no doubt, but the court had ordered Ms. Brown in, and she'd have to listen to her and the other mother substitutes until she was eighteen.

The demon was Ms. Brown's weakness. Everything was the fault of the fire-eater, and she liked to bite her nails to the quick while Stephanie talked about it. There were, of course, the horrors the demon had unveiled in her mind, and they could lead to permanent personality disorders if not dealt with properly. So Ms. Brown said, but Stephanie didn't think she was on the edge of madness. Maybe the fire-eater had been mad. Maybe it had just been evil. It was a demon, plain and simple, and Stephanie understood it as such. It was wicked, and it was supposed to be wicked. Her mother, on the other hand, wasn't supposed to be evil. Stephanie had watched her drown in the pond, and she hadn't felt much sorrow or shed many real tears. Nowadays, she could feel close to men but not to women. Her mother still screamed from the bottom of a black well in her dreams, like she had outdone the demon. Ms. Audrey Brown saw herself as being in another world, an old lady's world where the fumes of hot tea took shape as dirty thoughts. Julian said it was a place where people like Ms. Brown fretted about manners and bad little girls while murder was going on.

There was a burst of static, then an antique am radio was clicked off in the house, and Stephanie heard Ms. Brown's footsteps approaching. She stepped out into the rock garden, carrying a silver tray laden with milk and sandwiches. Her blue eyes were unseeing, as if she were blinded by the light; then she smiled as she focused on Stephanie. Her smile had charm, but it came and went too quickly. "The housekeeper's not coming today, so I'm serving lunch. Clear off that bench, please."

"Yes, Ms. Brown," Stephanie said, and then she hurried off, crushing some strawflowers under her heel. Agile as she was, she nearly tripped over a dwarf juniper on her way to the bench.

"You'll break an ankle. Don't run through the rocks again, and call me Audrey."

Stephanie looked up and nodded. She removed some gardening tools from the bench and a pot from the table.

Audrey set the tray down. "Isn't that lovely, a shining silver tray and a shining white table to eat lunch on."

Stephanie sat down and remained silent, knowing that Ms. Brown would carry on gabbing anyway. She studied the sandwiches, which appeared to be bread and butter without filling.

"Your father doesn't appreciate things that are shining white. If he did, he wouldn't be working at that grimy circus."

"Pop says it's only dead people who never get dirt under their nails."

Audrey's eyebrows flickered. "I like a man with clean nails."

Stephanie giggled and almost spilled her milk, mainly because she thought Audrey was too fussy for any man. All of her learning in psychology hadn't stopped her from becoming an old maid. Her short brown hair, long dresses, and lack of make-up gave her the look of an old-fashioned feminist. She was really only forty-five. If you don't get better, you get blander, Julian had said in reference to Ms. Brown and growing old. Stephanie could see that blandness had sifted in to cover Audrey's youth and luster. She was as morally perfect as she was dull, and she didn't like Julian working at the fair because it wasn't dull. More than that, it was mildly illicit, tainted by cotton candy, gambling, and freaks. Audrey wanted Julian to be a clean professional, and she couldn't forgive the man for letting opportunities pass by while he hid, disguised in a booth on the midway.

Biting into her sandwich, Stephanie discovered that Audrey had sprinkled brown sugar on the peanut butter.

"We'll walk through the ravine today," Audrey said. "Our garden is just about complete. Tomorrow we'll plant some moss pink, rock cress, and shooting stars, and that'll be it."

Stephanie swallowed some milk. "I caught Anna trying to use weed killer yesterday. She was even going to call in the weed man."

"Good grief. I hope you stopped her."

"Pop talked to her. Told her he didn't like poison, and that you can't use it in a rock garden anyway."

The sound of a stone crashing through the foliage caught their attention. Turning, they looked over at the quarry-stone wall, seeing only sky and the red clay shingles of the house next door. A moment later, a head emerged, and a figure sprang up, having climbed from the other side.

Audrey saw a little blond girl wearing flower-print slacks, running shoes, and a pink top. The girl was humming, and she didn't see them as she skipped along the wall.

Audrey rose and took a step forward. "Why, that wall is no place for a girl to be skipping," she said.

Gaping at Audrey, then back to the wall, Stephanie wondered what she was talking about. She didn't see a girl skipping. The girl had jumped down on the street side, and something else had come up on the wall. It was a creature with a dragon-like body, diaphanous wings like those of a dragonfly, and a horny dinosaur-type head. The head bobbed, and the face had a human element. It was much more than an animal, and past experience told her it was of demonic origin. It stared at them through shimmering eyes of air and fire, and the vapor puffing from its nostrils revealed a hideous hunger.

Stephanie's neck prickled, the air grew so electric it slithered over her skin and rose to a sinister breeze that shook the plants in the garden. Audrey was stepping over, saying, "Come down from there, girl." And the creature was opening its mouth, revealing fangs dripping with venom.

"Wait, you're seeing things!" Stephanie said excitedly. She jumped up as the beast's talons ripped loose a curtain of vines on the wall.

"Stop it, Stephanie!" Audrey said. "I've got to get her down before she hurts herself."

Frustrated and confused, Stephanie huffed out air instead of words. She gripped the edge of the table, thinking her mind would explode from indecision.

A change came over the creature's face, and distortion poured around the open maw. Behind it, the sky had gone from robin 's-egg blue to grim, and its hide was rippling with muscles as it moved to hang off the wall's edge.

Pebbles and dust rained down into the evergreen scrub. Audrey had picked her way through the obstacles and was stepping up on a stone lantern set near the wall. Her arm was outstretched; she was trying to extend a helping hand, only she was really reaching into the fanged mouth of the demon animal.

Thick dragon smoke puffed from the beast's nostrils. Stephanie screamed as it clamped its jaws over Audrey's forearm.

Her foot slipping from the stone lantern, Audrey dangled in the air, held up by the force of the beast's jaws. The bite had been clean and painless, and she thought she was holding the girl's hand for a moment before the illusion vanished.

Dancing on her toes, Audrey let out a terrible wail. The beast sucked and growled metallically, its eyes rings of emerald fire in the smoke. Coming unglued, Stephanie ran over the garden, banging her toes and scratching her legs on thorns and twigs as she tried to reach Audrey before it was too late.

Drops of blood rained on Stephanie as she circled at Audrey's heels. Her wailing became choked; it looked like she was surrendering to doom, and the demon animal slurped grossly as it sucked her arm up to the shoulder.

Dust whirled overhead. There seemed to be no way out. In a final desperate move, Stephanie jumped up onto the lantern and, from there, onto the creature's lowering head. Catching a horn on its smoking crown, she held on and tried to kick it.

Audrey was gasping and squirming beside her as knife-blade pain shot through her stomach muscles. Steam hissed from the creature's nostrils, and then it roared as it dropped her.

More steam came out like a geyser as it tried to shake Stephanie loose. Flying like a rag doll, she hung on, hearing a loud scratching of claws as the creature retreated up the stone wall.

Clouds of steam swirled into the dark sky overhead as Stephanie fell and tumbled in the garden. She felt a rock bang into her shoulder, cutting it, but she ignored the pain and rolled up.

Audrey was moaning and crawling away, her arm blood-soaked like a melted red crayon. Looking up, Stephanie saw a mass of amorphous darkness spinning in on itself. To her surprise, she still had the beast's horn in her hand. Taking some steps back, she saw the mass begin to creep down the wall. It was ink and shadows, but like an animal sniffing her out. Glancing at Audrey, she saw that she was crawling into the cover of some bushes. Thinking her safe, Stephanie spun on her heels and ran, with the spongy mass of creeping darkness slowly following her.

Julian's room at the World's Fair was in a square barracks-like building, the Lee Bros. Circus had been marked with bunting and a sign naming it THE ELEPHANT HOTEL. Although he was near the lake, it was still sweltering in the room. As he gazed out the window, he had a desire to dash through the fountain over by the horse building, and then maybe grab a beer to wash the dust out of his throat. Dust being one of the main attractions at the fair, so far as he could see - that and litter blowing through the painted cardboard alleys. The other banner circus attractions were silly games of chance and fantastic acts that supplemented the displays of the regular exhibition and fair.

It didn't surprise Julian that people were packing the circus and midway section of the fair. The place was at least as intellectually demanding as television and better because you really did participate in some things. You could win a stuffed animal you had no place to put, or ride a whirling car on the big-wheeled coasters and get crack-addict sick, and your money dumped on the ground. Beneath the spangles, sleaze, and dust, the circus had some childhood magic. You could feel it while watching the elephants, or the strong man, or a trapeze artist doing a magical heel hang.

Childhood innocence was something the city lacked; people only regained it on nights out at the fair, and it was good because nowadays people wanted to consume some easy freedom quickly, like cotton candy. No one really wanted to be young again. Not when they were professionals and had long ago forgotten how to feel like children.

It was a phenomenon Julian was aware of; people were blind and old, having forgotten affection and the human need to share. They all craved applause by mistake, and it led to frustration that boiled over into a mean streak. Julian knew he had adopted Stephanie to satisfy his need to share. He also wanted to satisfy her need for a loving parent who could see her scars and deal with the power she'd captured from the vanquished demon. Stephanie was a good kid. Give a puppy a cruel master, and it would turn vicious, but a child with a good heart could recover from the experience of a wicked mother. Stephanie had pulled free before her heart had blackened.

Hearing footsteps in the hall, Julian turned from the window and saw his door opening. He caught a flash of checked pants, then the white glove and ruffled sleeve of a clown reached in and tossed a rolled-up note over onto the dresser.

The door clicked shut quietly as the clown left. Julian went over to the dresser, took the elastic off the note, and unrolled it. It was a message from Art Lee, the manager, written on the back of a flyer in huge smiling script. Art wanted Julian to come over for a talk at the Red Wagon or else he'd visit him later at his booth. Because of Art's long-winded nature, Julian decided it would be later.

Crumpling the note, he tossed it in the wastebasket. Looking into his mirror was like looking into a cloud; the glass was so old it barely cast a reflection... but it was good enough, even if it did make him look like a ghost. Using a tube of wax, he filled the hollows of his eyes, then browned his face and put on a dark wig and beard. Satisfied that he looked like an honest Gypsy mystic, he stepped away and washed his hands. Since he was already dressed, it was only a matter of slipping into his sandals and stepping out.

A lonely strip of grass and a sculpture marked the front of the building. His eyes fell on the sculpture, and Julian realized for the first time that it was made from the worn parts of old midway rides. The discovery caused him to marvel at the junk construction. An impossible assortment of gears was supposed to power a fanciful assembly resembling a sled or rocket. Metal swirls, hubs, and sunlight gave it the illusion of motion. He thought that a letter B stamped on one metal plate might be from a BULLET that crashed many years ago. The way the piece was positioned, you could see the midway beyond it to the south, with wheels and cars trailing swiftly through heat shimmers; the whole scene slightly blurred and unreal, like a Futurist motion painting. The effect was to make Julian dizzy; even a view of the midway rides was a touch unsettling, mainly because he had a slight inner ear defect that caused disorientation when he was whirled about.

Two days ago, he'd closed his eyes and held on while Stephanie howled from the heights with glee. On the WHIRL-PLANE, he'd thought he was riding up a helix to the moon. He considered midway rides to be some of the suffering that came with being a father, and it had been nice to hear Stephanie scream. It was something she rarely did. He didn't like children who ran about screaming mindlessly, and Stephanie wasn't that sort, but he wanted to know that she was happy, and she was hard to read, and sometimes she appeared to be brooding darkly when she was only thinking. It was a simple gauge, really; at this point, her surface emotions were a judgment of whether he was succeeding or failing as a father, and the idea of failure was like a

mask of death. He'd burned too many bridges and jettisoned too much of his life. You can't reinvent yourself, but he had reshaped himself. He hoped now that the days would prove him more than a misfit. Another failure would snap the camel's back. Nowadays, when he saw men in the gutter, he thought grimly that failure might have destroyed them even before they had opened the bottle. Gifts and money really hadn't changed him; his heroes were still people who were strong despite being poor and disadvantaged. They were real heroes; the usual people of power and influence were no stronger than paper. When the market went to the rocks, they went with it.

So many businessmen were coming to him for readings, he'd been forced to reconsider the whole idea of power. They all wanted an edge that would get them to the top of the company. Status was the currency they trusted; it bought everything, even love. Many New Earth people made their living by exploiting others' greed and desperation. Julian's conclusion was that human relations were getting ground up in the power pecking orders of institutions. People didn't understand that personal and family relationships were more about equality and love than about posturing for power. The whole experience had quickly awakened him to the fact that he shouldn't overdo it with authority and turn a father-daughter relationship into one of master and slave. It was a trap even the best of people could slip into if they didn't reflect on their daily actions. Stephanie's mother had kept her under the whip for long enough. It was time to free the slaves.

Cutting behind the building, he went down an alley at the rear of the game booths. Balls thumped the canvas and chipboard; he heard gun pops and the rap-a-rap of gambling wheels. Greedy gulls screeched as they wheeled overhead, then the faint din of a brass band drifted in on the popcorn breeze.

Stepping over some thick electrical cables, he emerged in a teeming public area. A bandwagon showed over in the field by the helicopter rides, and the drifting music was from circus windjammers warming up. Brass instruments and buttons gleamed, and the notes shone like the sunniest of days. The Lee Brothers Circus had a talented band.

An overweight woman who could've got a job as the fat lady banged a stroller into his shin. Her baby squaled, and her chest swelled as she sucked in winds of indignation. Julian dodged agilely away. A thick crowd was headed mainly in his direction, and he was already drawing glances. In no time, people would be hitting on him for free readings.

Turning left, he cut between two tents, seeing the steam rising from mounds of sawdust, and the red-and-white striped Big Top looming in the haze to his right. He supposed he was an odd seer, not really cut out for the circus. Crowds and too much attention, he didn't like. Due to the recent publicity, all sorts of groups, companies, and individuals wanted to use his services, but he had kept out of the limelight, letting his reputation cool off. Modern-day mystics were just more businesspeople with a product to sell on the market; it was something he couldn't quite come to terms with. He certainly didn't want to be gaped at and asked endless questions about exorcism either, which was why he was working in disguise. There probably had been a time when exorcists were like secret agents for the church. Nowadays, it was more like being the clown that rides around in the polka-dotted beetle. And with a strange exorcism in the news, everyone whispered. Things like - He sold his soul to save her - He plans to do weird things with that young lady - He's to be named a Saint - He killed her mother on orders of the devil - and so on.

The police had favored the negative statements and had followed him everywhere until they concluded he was innocent of wrongdoing. Ace hadn't been so lucky; they'd charged him with staging an illegal magic act and causing death through negligence. Ace had a lot of support. There were many sympathetic backers, so Julian was sure he would get out of the mess without going to jail.

Shortcutting across a beer pavilion patio, he reached the side of the building housing the new booths, or old-age booths in the case of some of the fortunetellers. His booth was the display model, which was out front in the hot sun. A Coney fries booth was directly across from him, and

it added to the misery, as the settling dust sometimes tasted like Coney fries. When he went home, the odor was on his clothing.

Once at the booth, he pulled back the blue-and-white curtain and folded out his sign. Unlocking the rickety tin protection door, he rolled it up, went in, and slid the shutter open. He put his stacks of flyers in place, and then he was ready for business. In the humid shade, he gazed with envious eyes at the cool pavilion. Dust and haze floated above the roof like some mocking specter of the heat. None of the people inside were working as carnny fortunetellers like him. They were business people who rented their stalls from the World's Fair managers ... selling things to do with mind mending, homeopathy, ayurveda, UFOs, astral travel, channeling, astrology, and more. There were also health-food stalls that were a bright spot in a carnival smorgasbord of junk food.

Julian was one of the few who were on the circus payroll. He gave readings, told fortunes, channeled, and promoted the circus. His customers all got flyers, and he recommended the nightly show at the Big Top to clear the mind of worries.

So far, the booth wasn't drawing a second glance. It was often that way in the early afternoon. Business usually peaked after dinner, and the display booth wasn't manned in the later hours, although there was a costumed mystic who handed out flyers on the steps. The crystal ball usually worked to draw in the rubes, so he placed it on the counter beside a laminated horoscope chart and palmistry cards. Stars embedded in the crystal glittered in the sunlight. Julian often wondered if people saw those stars in his eyes as well, so few saw through the psychics' costumes and tricks.

When the breeze was right, cool air wafted down from the pavilion entrance, and if it was busy, the doors were wedged open. Today's first cool blow came from Art Lee, who would also be Julian's first customer. Art was one of those people who was twenty pounds lighter because of self-assurance. His air of command took him easily through the crowd. Art had been born into the circus, and he was capable of doing every job, including substituting on the trapeze, though age had made him a shade too stocky for that now. He had the ruddy complexion of a drinker. Julian liked him, and he guessed that everyone did. Art had a simple, friendly approach to life that put people at ease. Rumor had it that he was gay, but Julian hadn't noticed any lovers. Art had mentioned a bitter divorce, and behind the rumors, it was possible that he simply chose to spend his nights alone, avoiding the pain that might come with a new romance.

His grin polished but crooked, Art stepped up and slapped the counter with a strong hand. The booth shook like a house of cards on the edge of destruction. "Tell me what I need, Wizard?" he said in a Joker's voice.

"A love potion. Bring me a clipping from the bearded lady, a steroid from the strong man, the toenail dung of an elephant, and the tears of a clown."

"You're much too complicated. There's a guy in the pavilion selling ground goat's horn, he says, that will work just as well."

"So, you wanted to have a word with me about something?"

"I just hired some of the more interesting New Earth people in the pavilion. They'll be keeping their stalls with the fair, but in the evening, they'll be doing some displays over by the Big Top. A teaser to get a crowd assembled just before the Top opens."

"So, my booth is going over, too?"

"There will be new booths. What I want is the use of the name Julian the Seer on the banner and newspaper ads."

"I thought we agreed that I was working incognito?"

"There's no reason for it now. Most of the bad publicity has blown over, and your integrity isn't in question anymore. You wouldn't be pressing the flesh in this deal anyway. I'd just want you to

introduce the others. If you say they have abilities, people will believe it. In this deal, you'll be making much more for very little."

"Sounds okay to me."

"I'll get in touch with Ace and draw up a contract. Maybe I can get it to you tonight. Today's your last day on this display. I want to get the new show started tomorrow."

Art walked away, and sun and dust spangled in Julian's eyes. He hoped the brilliance was an omen of success, and for a moment, he wondered if he'd just turned himself into a circus freak, then his attention went to a short man hurrying up to the booth. The man was wiry, bald with a fringe, and wearing a sweater in the heat. It was hard to tell if his hand gesture was a greeting or an attempt to swat away invisible flies. Halting, he drew up a crate, standing up on it so he hovered over Julian like a mad little vulture.

"Do you want your palm read?" Julian said, remaining unperturbed.

"Not quite," the man said with a sharp tongue. "Let me introduce myself - Jannes Cox. I'm a history teacher. What I want is advice on how to banish a spirit."

"I suppose there's nothing on the subject in your history texts?" Julian said, thinking Jannes to be the sort of customer a con artist would fleece.

"Not on dragon spirits, no."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"It's my daughter. She's possessed by a demon spirit that takes the form of a dragon."

"A dragon in the house would be a problem. How solid is it?"

"It projects from her, but never in the house. It's quite an animal. Solid as a rock. She likes it and treats it as a pet."

Jannes' odd appearance tended to reinforce any suspicions of insanity people might have. His facial expressions revealed emotional conviction. He could easily pass a lie detector test, though the person administering it would think he passed because of lunacy. There was a wild-card chance that he was a normal person who became quite neurotic under stress.

"What about astrology?" Jannes said. "Could you transport the dragon to the stars?"

"It doesn't work quite that way. Step inside. I'll give you a reading and work from there."

Rather than wait for Julian to unhook the panel, Jannes vaulted over the counter and collapsed in a canvas chair. "Let's get started. A devil is on the loose, and I don't want to waste time."

Julian pulled up a wicker chair and sat facing him. "Keep silent and follow my instructions," he said.

"Certainly."

"Give me your palm."

Jannes obeyed, but complicated matters with his nervous grin and stiff hand.

"You're too tense. You look like you're grinning because your pants are too tight. Relax and imagine you're a cat and stretch."

Dropping the grin, Jannes unwound some cables of muscle.

"Clear your thoughts. Focus on my medallion. You can pretend it's a sunny day you're looking into and then drift back to the moment just before the appearance of the spirit. Once you have the picture, tell me what happened."

Jannes stared into the medallion, took on a distant look, and spoke, "We were in the back yard, and it was a sunny day. There was majesty in the sky. Some of those clouds that resembled castles of white smoke were drifting in, and clear fans of sunlight were around them. I had a

clear view of the woods and hill beyond our yard. The top of the hill is flattened and heaped with mounds of rubble. Burs, thistles, and scrub camouflage the tumbled remains of an old weapons factory up there. It's a hazardous area, and you can get hurt poking around up there. Pieces of the broken wall are sticking up, and jagged, deep holes have eroded the exposed foundation. Some of the holes are water-filled and swampy and therefore doubly dangerous. I often warned my daughter not to go up there. Alice wasn't allowed to play in the woods either, not out of sight in the woods.

Alice is a problem child. She has always been that way. I was and still am going through a period of parental impotence. While staring at the hill, I realized that Alice might have gone into the woods and removed her top. Sometimes she would do that, no matter how many times I scolded her for it, she'd still do it again. My belief is that a girl should be a little lady, a sharp dresser with manners. It embarrasses me to have a daughter who is like a little ape girl, skipping about topless and barefoot. I've bitten my nails to the quick after catching her playing like that in the garden. I even planted a windbreak to screen our yard from prying eyes and passing motorists.

Everything was like a dreamscape because I'd just been sleeping. I'd been reading one of those university press books of essays. You know, the sort of thing publish-or-perish professors put out. This particular book was a must-read because it was written by friends at the university, and I was asked to comment on it. The book was a ho-hum affair, and it put me right to sleep.

Sleep was still in my head like cotton. I moved to rub my eyes and vanquish a spot. Silver and black spots came from the rubbing, and when they were gone, the initial yellow spot remained. A moment later, I realized that the spot was actually Alice's blond head bobbing to-and-fro up on the hilltop. I could see that she wasn't wearing a blouse, and I feared that she might also be shoeless, leaping through the stones, thistles, and rusty metal of the ruins.

Parental concern threw me to my feet, and I tossed my book in the grass. Just as I was about to run for the woods, the sun was obscured by clouds, and in the darkened yard, I became afraid. It was after some moments that I realized I really had no reason for the emotion. There was nothing threatening my personal safety.

I jogged to the woods, noticing a peculiar skirting of darkness on the hilltop. My head began to spin from the exertion, so much so that I was forced to stop partway into the woods. Small men are supposed to be spry, but I've always been a stumbler. I wanted to be sharp before running on the path, so I'd avoid tripping on rocks and deadfalls. A crow was cawing up in a maple, and when I looked at it, it was glowering at me. Black birds are something I've always hated. I was raised to hate them, and this fellow was positively nasty, his head poking through foliage that was a whirl because of my dizzy state. For a moment, I thought about catching the bird and breaking its neck. As a child, I'd known a priest who captured crows and strangled them. He thought they were the devil's messengers.

The crow craned its neck obscenely, cawed, and flew off. I saw its wings blur in the sunlight and then a dead branch falling. I moved away, and the branch crashed beside me. I kicked it, then it occurred to me that I was wasting time. My vision and balance had settled, and I wanted to catch Alice before she tumbled into a mud hole.

Doing a slow jog, I was down the woods path in a minute. I faced the trail on the hillside. The first part of it was canopied by sumac and tangled with exposed roots. Since I was out of breath, it looked impossible. I think your heart feels a lot bigger when you're a small person, and mine felt like a submarine thumping as it tried to surface through my chest. I thought it prudent to wait and catch my breath.

My fists and teeth were clenched, and as I began to relax, it hit me that I must look like a fool ready to wrestle with the hill. The thought made me grin, then the grin froze on my face. A bumblebee was buzzing in my ear. It swooped right around my head and began to dog me. Dams burst somewhere in my skin, and sweat that'd been held back flowed free and soaked my clothes, and that attracted the bee all the more. Bumblebees are the insect I most fear. I'm

allergic to them, and even with my pills, a bee sting will turn my arm or neck into a pulsing mound of aching flesh.

I tried my luck at swatting it down, but I missed, and my calculated strokes changed to wild jerks as I took off up the hill. The angry bee hung at my shoulder like a devil. At about the halfway point, it tried to land on my lips, and I managed to knock it away. I heard it dive-bomb into the bushes, and at the same time, I noticed that I was running through poison ivy. Not wanting to stop, I kept on, getting nearly to the top before the pain searing my lungs put me on my knees.

I was so weak I crawled over the hump, tongue lolling, and my brain pounding out the notes of a migraine. My mouth grew so dry and thick that only nausea prevented me from licking the residue off some of the milkweed plants.

Groaning, I stood up, finding myself at the edge of the ruins, by a crumbled wall. It was so old that the concrete had decayed to heaps of lime pumice in parts, and as I was looking, the breeze blew some of the acidic dust in my eyes. The pain brought on raving. I shook my fist, swearing like a drunken sailor. Bad luck had brought me to the breaking point.

Grit was stuck in my eyes, and though I could open them, my vision was filmed with tears. Stumbling over the broken wall, I found myself down in a portion of the foundation -- a huge square that had sunk a foot and was rich with purple clover. Rusty metal beams protruded at odd angles from the brick heaps on the far side, and up on a heap I saw Alice, her legs dangling from a concrete ledge.

Fatherly instincts returned, and I became filled with fury. I wanted to give her the spanking of her life, which would've been her first spanking since I don't believe in corporal punishment, and it's illegal. I yelled, telling her to come down from there.

She'd been caught unawares, startled, and tried to scramble out of sight. She slipped, and I watched in horror as she slid over the ledge. A mass of pebbles rained down, dust smoked up. My heart went to the bottom, but Alice didn't. She remained in the air, in a state of levitation, and darkness, in the shape of a star, haloed her.

Rolling with a liquid effect, the darkness split from her. It was like watching a cell divide. A rectangle formed, stirring terror, as if it were an expression from a bleak and cruel world.

Patterns of purple flowed into the rectangle, then the creature appeared, beginning as little more than a splash of color. It put me in mind of a Fauvist painting.

Lizard-like proportions were slowly revealed, along with its fiery nostrils. The face was a shifting mass of smoke with a predatory aspect. I call it a dragon for lack of a better term. It resembles a dinosaur in an alien way. A fragrance came from it that wasn't an animal odor. The smell was evil and as thick as poison gas. You'd expect a monster from the netherworld to smell like that.

There was a blinding flash, and two things happened. Alice was thrown into the clover, rolled into a sitting position, and kept still. At the same time, the dragon leaped down the field to the bottom of the largest rubble heap.

A cloud of flies hung before it in the clover, and the sight made me gasp. They were feeding on a carcass and had likely been there all along. I could've stumbled into it, and the thought of it made me shiver.

The crow was cawing miserably overhead; most likely because it wasn't getting its share of the carcass. It distracted me for a moment, and then I hurried to Alice with the idea of leading her to safety.

My eyes were drying, and I was getting a better picture of the carcass, though the dragon stayed shielded by some form of light distortion. What I saw looked like a man, only his pitted flesh was coated with sticky blood and grass. He was bowed over, completely backward - his feet on the ground and his hands behind his back.

Most horrible of all were his eyes, which were swollen like soap bubbles and shimmering like bluebottle flies. I'd read about men dying like that after being poisoned by a stone fish and wondered if the dragon hadn't killed him with an earlier poisonous bite.

As the dragon moved closer, the flies began to disperse and buzz over the field. A bee appeared, and I knew I had to get out of there before it got me, and as it flew near, I turned and fled, forgetting completely about Alice. I could hear the creature feeding all the way across the field, the crunch, tear, and snap of powerful jaws, and the sound of the flies rising to an alien hum. I jumped over the wall and tore through the long grass to the side of the hill, and then I went tumbling through a mesh of branches and crashed into a boulder. It hit me like a fist and put me out."

"I've never heard a story quite like it," Julian said. "But it's true because I had you in a trance. People who channel entities are usually older, and the beings are never monsters. The beings usually sound too good to be true. Your daughter's creature is unique, and, like a demon, it's undesirable. It doesn't sound like possession. I would say it's more a form of channeling where the entity uses Alice as a window or filter. The principle is simple. If a being from another world wanted to enter here, it would know that the safest door would be a human being who would be certain to be in a safe place. It wouldn't want to materialize on a freeway, at the bottom of the ocean, or a mile high. A child would be preferable to an adult, as a child would be open and would accept the entity as a playmate or pet. If it intended to harm you, you would probably already be dead. You describe it as a force of evil that has already devoured a person. If that is true, then it must be sent back. It's possible that Alice could consciously block it and refuse it entry, if she wanted to."

"She doesn't want to block it. To her, it's like a spider or snake or some other ugly pet a little girl keeps. She says it speaks using telepathy and that it's brighter than a dog but not as clever as her."

"In order to gain her trust, it communicates at a simple level."

"That's what I thought, but what can I do to get rid of it?"

"Tell me more about it. I need all the facts before approaching it. I need to contact your aura to trace it in your memory. Put your forefinger in my palm."

Jannes looked at his forefinger as if it might be a magic wand, then he placed it in Julian's palm and continued his story about the dragon entity. Emotion, strain, and the heat had caused his face to redden. His eyes revealed a train of thought as tense as piano wires.

Alice had brought some of the neighbors, and they had carried Jannes back to the house. He came to shivering from stress and found his misfortune compounded by the fact that no one believed him. They all believed he'd been hitting the gin or else had delirium tremens and was pursuing Alice's invisible playmate. Alice did verify the existence of the entity, but that only caused people - old Jake in particular - to widen their grins. Drinking had already led to a separation, so for Jannes, there was real fear that his snooping wife would get wind of the story and use it to have Alice taken out of his custody. The possibility of insanity was another monster gnawing at his brain. It did seem like a drunkard's hallucination in retrospect.

Putting the question of insanity aside, Jannes began to tell of another manifestation of the dragon entity. Julian now knew that taking his finger in hand had been a mistake. Jannes's emotions were a tap that ran hot and cold at once. The man had bundles of nerves instead of veins, and they siphoned off most of his energy. Julian's energy was also being siphoned off. He felt his mind slip out of its usual meditative calm and into the electrical storm of conflicting impulses that controlled Jannes's brain. A sense of unreality began to steal the meaning from Jannes's words. Julian lost all comprehension of them and heard only garbled noise.

Glancing left, Julian saw a darkened fairground beyond the booth. The sun was still out, but it was muted at the corona. He knew he was picking up on a vision. Midway rides brightened against the sky like constellations; dust blew in long feathers; and the booths and buildings

drooped and melted into a lava flow of shadows that became an alien landscape. Black smoke eddied, reptilian tails wagged in deep mud, geometric forms shot into the sky like strange fireworks.

His chest convulsed slightly. It felt like a tentacle had entered at the solar plexus and sucked him dry, leaving him a parched husk. He felt lonely, abandoned, like someone damned or in exile. Images were shifting, a twisted abstract of viscera, like this place existed in the bowels of a beast. If this underworld was the home of the dragon entity, it was a demonic creature.

The sudden change had overwhelmed him; he tried to shake off the vision, and that triggered a gestalt flip. Twisted lines and images fell into place as the perspective changed, and he realized he'd been looking at his own house all along. A cloud in the shape of a dark hand was moving over it, and down in the rock garden, something inky was creeping. A malformed thing shrouded in darkness and distortion. Leathery wings rippled and blurred; a sheath of horny scales glittered, then faded as the thing returned to form a splotch of darkness approaching the back wall of the house.

Stephanie was in the house, and a brief sunbeam glossed her dark hair. She was up in the second-floor window, closing the shutter panel. Over on the far side of the garden wall, a blond girl was sitting in the weeds. He knew Audrey had to be there somewhere, but he couldn't spot her. He tried to scan the grounds, but before he could, the whole picture broke and tinkled down like pieces of a shattered stained glass window, and he found himself back in the booth listening to Jannes.

"It's a case of synchronicity!" Julian said. "Devilish synchronicity! We've got to get there before it's too late!"

"What! Something's happened to Alice, hasn't it?"

"Alice is fine, but my daughter might not be."

"My car is parked outside the gates. We can use it."

Both men vaulted the counter, and Julian took the lead as they ran off in the direction of the gates. They weren't able to run far; the midway was already crowded, and they were plunging into a human wave.

Halting, Julian collared Jannes. "I've got an idea, follow me to the tents."

Jannes was too out of breath to answer. He followed at Julian's heels as he hurried to a blue-and-white-striped tent. Entering, they found themselves in a crowd of clowns. Some of them were half-dressed, smoking, and drinking beer.

"Here for Hula Hoops?" said a cigar-smoking clown, or is it hair you need?" The clown offered Jannes his fright wig. The others paid them scant attention. Circus people were always dashing to and from little emergencies.

Julian glanced around. He had no time for jokes. "I need a car," he said, spotting a line of vehicles parked on the far side of the fence.

"You're the first guys who ever wanted one of them," the clown said, watching as they ran through the shavings.

Julian dashed to the largest vehicle, which was a polka-dotted clown car with two seats. The key was in it, so they hopped in, jerked it to a start, and sped past the amused clowns.

Horn-honking like an angry goose, they muscled through the crowd. Getting into some of the back alleys helped them reach the delivery entrance faster. Since Jannes had parked a block away, they ended up weaving through traffic on a side street, listening to a blaring chorus from drivers who weren't amused by their antics.

"They probably think we're a couple of crazy people," Julian said. "Oh-oh, there's a traffic cop ahead."

"Turn up that driveway just before the cop. My car's on the front lawn there."

Julian noticed that cars were parked on most of the front lawns. People in the fair area were making a good buck off the overflow crowds. The cop was still looking the other way, yet Julian had the feeling of being observed by something negative; something in the darkness behind the windshields of the parked cars, or in the shadows by the houses. The dragon entity used creeping darkness as one of its forms, and he supposed he was picking up on that. It wasn't likely that Stephanie could hide for long from a creature that could transform itself, so his only hope was to get there fast.

They ditched the clown beetle on the sidewalk and hurried to Jannes's car. Even though the traffic cop was nearby, Jannes tore up the grass and backed out to the road dangerously fast. The man who had rented his lawn for parking, a short, stocky guy, burst out the front screen door and swore in German as he ran down to try to collar them. He was no match for Jannes, who gave him a quick get lost wave and sped off, going the wrong way on the one-way street.

The traffic cop blew his whistle furiously, the sound Dopplering as Jannes turned and roared down an alley. Coasting over some bumps, they emerged in a shopping mall parking lot. Swinging around some pedestrians, Jannes headed for the highway.

"I don't know where you live."

"72 Parkhollow Road. Do you know the way?"

"Yikes! Now I get it. You're near me, that's why your daughter is in danger."

It didn't seem possible that they'd make it without getting into an accident or being arrested. Jannes was running lights, cutting people off. A rollerblader skated into some bushes to avoid him, and on one avenue, he drove on the sidewalk to get by a jam. Sweat poured from his furrowed brow, and the scary thing about him was that he didn't look like a reckless hothead. He wore the grimace of a freaked lunatic, one who might be driving according to his hallucinations, and the drivers that did see his face didn't grow angry like the others - they just got out of the way swiftly.

There was no traffic on Parkhollow Road. The car raced down, weaving over the line. It had taken them about twenty minutes to get there, and it had been enough time to make the dragon seem impossible, no more than a phantom vision of the heat. Julian was shaken, his lips dust-crusting, his stomach rolling. He held the dash like he was coming home on a roller coaster, and he wondered how he could fight the creature. It was hard to conjure up a picture of himself as Lycia slaying the fire-breathing chimera.

Jannes slammed on the brakes, a spine-whipping jolt. "There's Alice," he said. Then he jumped out.

She looked dazed, crouched in the shade cast by the wall and some wisteria. Jannes hadn't been kidding about her going barefoot. A series of red scratches ran across her neck, obviously from a recent tumble. She could've fallen from the wall. If so, it hadn't hurt her much. She seemed to be in a mild trance, like a child studying fantasy shapes in the clouds. Jannes's stumblebum approach hadn't roused her. She stayed in the grass, her expression placid until the very moment her father was upon her. Then she saw him, sprang up, and ducked into the bushes.

Having no desire to crash around in the bushes with Jannes, Julian got out, went straight to the garden wall, and picked a spot where the rubblestone was pitted and easy to scale. At the top, a dogwood tree blocked his view of the house. Leaping to a soft flowerbed, he began to move quickly through the rock garden, getting only a few steps before tripping on a human leg.

Gasping and stumbling, he spun around. Looking back, he saw that it was Audrey. Her arm was coated in scabrous blood, and she looked to be dead. Stepping back, he dropped to his knees and rolled her over carefully, finding her to be unconscious but breathing well. There were no other wounds, so he guessed that she'd need skin grafts on the arm, but would otherwise be okay - as long as the entity didn't return to finish her off.

There was no time to attend to her, and the terrible parental fear that Stephanie might already look like that arm put hackles on the back of his head and neck. Turning, he dashed across the garden and popped up on a boulder for a clear view of the house.

What he saw was so strange his hackles might've been hypos injecting a hallucinatory drug. He slipped from the boulder and staggered a couple of steps before leaning on a brass lantern for support. Some deep breaths only heightened the intensity of the sight. The dragon entity hadn't gotten into the house yet, but it was there. It was a merging of various deformities that were as crude as they were monstrous. Greenish smoke wound in tentacles at the base of the wall, forming a huge, rooted foot that supported the body above. Scales covered exaggerated musculature on the torso, and the skin had a resinous sheen. The head of the beast shifted in smoke at the top near Stephanie's shuttered window. Two tusks protruded from a wart-mottled jaw that was fused by cartilage to horny ears that were like a growth of shells.

Part of the shutter was torn loose and hanging. Talons the size of pry bars were splintering the other panel. Julian first assumed that the entity knew by sense of smell that Stephanie was there. Then it came to him that the dragon wasn't after meat this time. Its senses had probably tuned in on her aura and the psychic energy she exuded. The power she'd inherited from the fire demon was what it wanted to feed on.

Adrenalin was shooting through his veins, and he was trying not to panic. His mind was a blank when it came to ideas for attacking the creature, and he thought that perhaps it was a blank because there was no way a mortal man could battle such a monster. Anxiety akin to anger burned in his brain, agony that forced him to do something desperate. Picking up a lump of volcanic rock, he heaved it at the dragon.

His aim was good; the rock struck the dragon's jaw, stayed embedded for a moment, then became an explosion of grainy red light that enveloped the dragon's head. The dragon wasn't even flea-bit; it had gained power from the rock. It didn't even turn to Julian. Reaching in the window with a griffin foot, it began crushing objects in the room.

Julian tried shouting to get its attention, but it did no good. Moments fled faster than frightened birds escaping a forest fire, and then the dragon's claw emerged, holding a fan of splintered furniture.

Julian wiped his brow, relieved that Stephanie hadn't been in the room. The next thing he saw was Jannes racing over the garden, waving a mint-new handgun like some sort of crazy tenderfoot in a Western movie. Angered at coming up empty, the dragon let out a roar that sounded like a Farfisa organ going up the scales of pain, then it began to turn its head and lower itself. Jannes got a bead on its emerald eyes and opened fire. He stepped forward aggressively as he emptied the clip. The projectiles disappeared in the dragon's smoky beard, and the last one hit it in the eye, cracking the cornea like a mirror. Light flared out, and a moment later, blood oozed into the cracks.

Jannes's moment of courage ended as suddenly as it had begun. Now he was terror-struck, looking up at the monster, the gun still in his shivering hand. Its head twisting around unnaturally, the beast suddenly sprayed out a red mist of hybrid lava and blood. It showered over Jannes before he could run and adhered to him. He fell back, stiff as a manikin, to the grass as the substance bubbled and tightened on his skin.

A flash of white, and Julian saw Alice leap from the wall and run toward her father. The sight of her calmed the dragon entity. It took note of Julian, then turned back toward the house.

Julian was closer to Jannes, and he rushed over, getting to him just before Alice. He bent down and ran a hand over his chest, finding the substance had hardened into a cocoon-smooth coating. When he tried to tear it off the inner layer moistened and burned his fingertips. Wincing from the pain, he wiped them dry on the grass, picked up a stick, and used it to tear the milky web at the top of Jannes's head.

Alice was now standing beside him, looking pale and ill. He seized her hand and pulled her down. "Rip it loose!" he said, placing her hand on the tear. She obeyed, and the coating ripped away like moldered cerements.

Jannes's head came free, but he wasn't breathing, so Julian gave his chest a couple of pumps. It worked, and Jannes started to recover. Julian wiped his burning fingers in the grass again. It was as he had expected; Alice was immune to all of the dragon's powers. The creature had made it that way to ensure that it didn't harm its gate to its home world.

The dragon roared again, a noise that sounded electronic and otherworldly. Julian turned and saw its tentacles coiling in as it lowered itself further. At ground level, wisps of smoke cleared, and he saw Stephanie stepping out the side door. She was right beneath the hungry jaws and was aware of it. To Julian, it looked like she was committing suicide, and the fact that her face bore no strong expression lent weight to the idea.

Alice clenched her fists, shouted, "No!" and hurried forward a few steps. Julian choked and shook so hard he twisted his Adam's apple, and as the pain stabbed in his neck, he saw the dragon seize Stephanie and lift her to its mouth. She looked strangely calm as it swallowed her whole.

Alice let out a cry, wilted, and then collapsed face-first into the grass. A wheel of fire spun in Julian's mind; the shock was crippling. His knees buckled, and he went down in the grass, watching in stunned silence as the dragon thickened its body in a squat and stretched its neck to swallow.

The neck swelled like that of a snake. Julian could see the bulge of the body and that it wouldn't go down. The dragon emitted a frustrated squeal through its nostrils, then it tried harder. Its neck convulsed, but the bulge stayed in place. Rings of smoke popped from its nostrils, and its eyes began to roll. Veins came to the surface and turned blue and varicose in its neck, and then it vomited, sending Stephanie flying out in a river of steam.

She tumbled in the air and landed on the slate tiles of the house. Violet liquid poured off her, and she began to roll off and caught herself at the eave trough. Julian felt his muscles relax, then freeze again as he watched her scramble up the tiles to the peak. Her escape was like a miracle, and he knew that more than one miracle might be required. The knowledge had his bowels turning to wax.

Below Stephanie, the second miracle was already taking place. The dragon belched out steam, unable to stop, like a vat boiling over. It was as if it had sprung a leak and the substance of its body was pouring out as gas. Lights twinkled over its scales as its illusion of form shifted through a concatenation of serpentine shapes. It was like a cosmic snake shedding endless bodies and humming with the high notes of some eerie tuning fork.

Within twenty seconds, it was beginning to levitate, and in ten more, its steamy breath became a vapor trail as it took off, flying in the air like a shrinking balloon. Death gave it the appearance of a paper kite, catching the light like vanishing gossamer as it sailed through a thousand dragon forms.

It went down the scale to a form the size of a dragonfly, trailing a thread of smoke and whirling madly. It fell silent and looked very real in the smaller form. A final lunge took it straight down to Stephanie on the peak of the house, and there it flew straight into her open mouth.

Stephanie closed her mouth, and smoke puffed from her nostrils; she swallowed, licked her lips, and smiled like it had all been a game. Julian's mouth fell open, and he felt like punishing her for taking it all so lightly, though punishment seemed ridiculous after all that had just occurred. His heart softened. She looked adorable up on the roof, then his scalp stiffened as he realized he'd have to get her off the roof before she fell. Then there were Jannes and Audrey, who needed medical attention. Alice was rising in the grass, and he nearly tripped over her as he ran to the shed for a ladder.

## CHAPTER 3: FAT LADY

The oak tree in Julian's backyard was about a hundred years old, and it was carrying the summer winds like the canvas sails of a mighty ship. a sea-like hum and rustle of leaves that told of the immensity of the season. Julian stood beneath its boughs supposing that summer was an entity, a temporal bubble of warm winds, dust, foliage, flowers, and sunbeams. It was an intricate clock; a billion tiny events were contained within it. They would pass like sand through a glass and come up slightly transformed in another year. The flags snapping in the sunlight and the ghost winds blowing were the only things that were permanent - they were the entity's perpetual motion.

He could see the white fringe of Stephanie's dress moving like something ephemeral in the darkness as she filled the bird feeder, and he wished the warm, easy days of youth and summer were forever. Old men were like petrified trees, unable to feel the world through their hardened casing, and most people got old when they were young. They misinterpreted the meaning of parenthood, believing they had to act old. Julian did it the other way around; one of the reasons he'd adopted Stephanie was because she made him feel young.

He knew he was indulging wistful thoughts, whereas a proper father would be using the moment to tear himself apart over Stephanie's problems. If Audrey weren't in the hospital, she'd have him beating his breast and gnashing his teeth. On his own, he'd let events run their natural course, and when the police and ambulances had gone, he'd talked it over with the girls before sleep overcame them. He'd avoided fatherly white lies, telling them he had no real answers for their questions. Answers were something that couldn't always be given. There was some old advice that suited the occasion better: grow up with the questions, live with the questions without being too troubled, and hope that someday you'll have lived your way into your own answers.

A sudden rush of wind and leaves gave him the feeling that the tree was agreeing with him. His thoughts seemed settled, then a fence board banged, a cat hissed, and his nerves were on edge again. He scanned the darkness for an intruder and saw a masked one - a raccoon, squared off against a stray black cat on the fence. Another hiss, and the raccoon leaped into the bushes, and at the same instant, he felt Stephanie brush up against him.

"The raccoon wants to get to the garbage, but the cat thinks he owns the fence," Stephanie said.

Julian brushed her hair, then picked her up and set her on the fence. "The raccoon will get his way later."

The cat ambled over, twitching a curious nose at Stephanie. She scratched its ears. "Alice is still asleep," she said. "The way she's flaked out, it looks like she'll be out until tomorrow."

"The dragon demon drained away her energy when it traveled through her."

"Yeah, like she had a monster child."

"Something like that. I've been meaning to ask what happened to it. Is it dead, or did you send it back?"

"It was transferred to the fire world where the fire-eater is from."

"How did you manage that? You never had that power before."

"When the fire-eater vanished, it scorched me, and part of it remained inside. I didn't really know it until the dragon attacked. Then I felt the fire mask grow in my chest. It worked automatically. I didn't burn, but the dragon overheated and shrank until it was swallowed. That's what the fire-eater used to do to other demons it encountered - send them down its throat to the fire world."

"The fire world is a good place for it."

"Alice was crying more because her pet turned out to be evil than she was for her father."

"Her father isn't very close to her. Somewhere along the line, he distanced himself from her. That's why she was closer to her nasty pet. I think she'll get over it eventually."

"Maybe not if it's evil - I mean, I never got over it when I found out my natural father was evil. I didn't want to have his wickedness in me, but now so much evil is in me it doesn't matter."

"There's no evil in you. That's just energy, some coloring on your aura. I remember you saying you remember almost nothing about your natural father - so how could you know he's evil?"

"My step-parents told me. They said I wouldn't ever see him because he's evil."

"That's likely a story they made up. Lots of adopted kids aren't allowed to know about their parents. It's supposed to root them better in their new life."

"Then my father didn't want me because he hates me. I bet he wanted a son."

He probably had personal problems, and he couldn't keep you. It's more likely that he hates himself because he feels he failed you."

"What if you failed, like when the police were going to say you killed Tiffany? -- Then you'd give me away."

"I'd never give you away, because I'm not the sort of person who believes a setback is a failure. When I was younger, I thought every tiny problem meant absolute failure. I thought I was better than everyone else was then, and I only liked people I saw as being successful. I believed in the wrong things, and because of it, my life was a failure, and I didn't even know it."

"Maybe my father wasn't really a failure, but he thought he was and made the big decision to get rid of me. People are stupid, thinking they know all about themselves, and then in the end, they know nothing. They were just adrift, making mistakes all the time."

"So long as they keep afloat. The truth is that you can't expect much from other people, but you should expect a lot from yourself. You can't let yourself be blind, but if others are blind, you have to forgive them and say they're limited. If you don't forgive your natural father for whatever flaws he had, you'll hate him and yourself."

"If he didn't love me, it's hard not to hate him."

"Don't worry, you'll find out about love when you get older. Everybody loves pretty girls, but you'll hate many of the people who love you because their love isn't true and they're really mean-spirited. In some ways, it's better to be ugly and only have a couple of people who really love you instead of a lot of pretenders. As far as your natural father goes, he probably loved you, but he's gone now, and I'm your father. It only matters that I love you."

Julian lifted her down from the fence, and she hugged him hard like she didn't want to let go. Through the thick darkness, he saw headlights flashing at the front.

"We have a visitor," Stephanie said.

"Yeah, it might be somebody unfriendly, so keep behind me."

They strolled around the side of the house, and Julian found himself walking directly into high beams. Pausing by the side door, he opened a panel in the wall and turned the spotlight on. It illuminated a red Aerostar van, and as the headlights clicked off, he saw a young black man behind the wheel. The man got out, slammed the door, jingled his keys, and approached with an air of athletic ease. He wore a light-brown suit and running shoes. Though his hairline was slightly receded and his eyes big and watery, Julian judged him handsome in a buffoonish way. A fierce expression played across his face, and Julian and Stephanie could tell it was put on, as if he were trying to compensate for his non-threatening features.

"I'm here for Alice," he said in a stern, affected voice.

"Who are you?" Julian said.

"Jackson S. Rosfield is my name. Most people call me Skip. I'm with the Global Detective Agency. I guess I should show you my badge."

Skip produced a flip wallet, his badge embossed into a silver-gray area of the plastic.

"I've never seen a plastic badge before," Julian said. "It looks like you bought it at a garage sale."

"It's the new, elite credit-card style."

"It doesn't matter anyway. I can't hand Alice over to any detective agency. For all I know, you want her for a sheik's harem."

"I represent Alice's mother, Janet Wilson. My job is to take her home."

"I don't see any legal papers, and the truth is, I know nothing about her mother. Give me the number of your agency so I can make a phone check on you."

"Well-uh," he coughed and smiled nervously. "You wouldn't be able to get through. Global is actually a one-man operation. I'm the only employee. That's temporary until I get a secretary."

"So you're an ex-cop playing gumshoe?"

"Not really. I've never been on the force. I was a stand-up comic before I took the course in detection. That's where I got the Skip tag."

Stephanie giggled. "He's the funny man."

"It's starting to look that way," Julian said. "I'd be crazy if I handed Alice over to some sort of Keystone cop."

"I resent the stereotyping. Just because I was a comic doesn't mean I'm clumsy, reckless, or perverse."

"Yeah, but there's something odd about you," Stephanie said. "Why are you here in the middle of the night?"

"It's just a work habit. I used to do a lot of divorce cases."

"You seem to be sneaking around," Julian said. "Why didn't Alice's mother come in person?"

"She's doing archaeology work in Europe. She just got the news of Jannes's hospitalization, and she wasn't told what happened to Alice. I had to track you down."

"You mean you phoned the police and got the info. They should have told you that Alice is in my custody until Jannes's lawyers or a judge somewhere says different. She certainly couldn't travel to Europe in her present condition."

"Oh crap! What've you done to her?"

"She's just tired," Stephanie said.

"Your little witch daughter has done something to her. I have the right to see her."

"I thought you said you resented stereotyping," Julian said. "And you're forgetting something."

"What's that?"

"That you have no legal papers or authority here. Your legal rights are on par with the bogeyman's."

"Yeah. I'll show you authority. I can dog you day and night. And I know your background, you used to be a big-time stock swindler before you became Mr. Seer. Don't think for a moment I can't see through this scam you're running. You've even corrupted your own daughter, turned her into a Salem child. It won't take me long to get something on you. I can watch this house with infrared binoculars ..."

"Cool it for a moment. I'll let you verify that she's well."

"I've got a laser trained on your house right now. It can pick up a little girl's screams from a mile away. Huh, what was that you said? I can verify that she's well?"

"You can come in for a coffee. If she's awake, you can see her. If not, you'll have to wait until the morning."

"You mean you've been letting strangers in just like that. What if I wasn't legit? I suppose you go by your crystal ball. I don't know what to tell my client."

"If you don't stop it, you'll be reporting that the police removed both you and your license. The reason I was going to let you in is that I know a criminal wouldn't come up with a front as stupid as yours. That's without using my crystal ball. I believe you're exactly what you say you are - a hired man from the Slap Stick School of Detection."

"There you go with the stereotypes again. Okay, I'll come in, and we'll work from there."

A beacon illumining the clouds high above caught Julian's eye, and as he turned to follow Stephanie inside, he hoped it wasn't an omen that he'd be back in the limelight again. The circus lights were enough; he liked to keep off camera and out of the papers. Skip was someone who might cause bad publicity if he were around for too long. He was the sort of joker who would draw attention without even trying. He did have likable traits, a spot of humor in his eyes, but he worked to kill the advantage with his aggressive detective routine. His comic personality had likely made him a loser in the employment field. Bosses would see him as lacking sobriety and keep him at the bottom of the totem pole, which meant he had to be his own boss. He was a lone wolf and a private eye, partly out of necessity.

Skip kicked off his shoes and made a big show of slapping the dust off his pants.

Stephanie didn't bother taking her shoes off. "I'll run up and see if Alice is awake," she said.

"Nice little house," Skip said. "Too bad you can't afford air conditioning."

"Air conditioners are for out-of-shape detectives," Julian said. "And I do have one. I rarely turn it on. I'm not what you would call technological in outlook."

Skip followed Julian into the living room. "What do you mean by that?"

Julian directed him to a wingback chair. "I mean that I don't rely on air conditioners or cars - fresh air and footsteps can be better. Same with my computer. I have some use for it and the other devices. But I don't over-rate gadgets. They change the world by putting new grinning faces on the hordes of idiots. I believe in the inner person."

"You sound like a mystic, but you won't convince me easily. The inner person is just a program. I believe in technology and gadgets. I spend hours reading magazines listing the latest in detection equipment."

"You mean like that laser beam of yours that detects a little girl's scream from a mile away?"

"I don't really have that one. Wish I did. It reads sound vibrations from window panes."

"Talk about an invasion of privacy."

"In the detective magazines, they talk about redefining privacy."

"It is what it is, so how do you redefine it?"

"If there aren't any personal secrets anymore, there isn't any privacy. Redefining is the intellectual way of saying they're taking privacy away. In the future, privacy will be something you buy. A detective debugs your house, tracks down computer files, erases them, and so on. I read a news story recently about vigilantes who smash out surveillance cameras in the interest of privacy."

"Looks like you got into the detection field at an interesting time."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Skip looked to the door. "In the old days, they did a lot of phony moralizing about communism. Now that there are real moral issues, most detectives are finding that they really don't care about morality or human rights."

Stephanie poked her head around the door. "She's not awake," Skip said.

"How'd you know?"

"I only heard one set of footsteps on the stairs."

"She's snoring like a piglet, and she's a real mess. You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"How about something to drink?" Julian said. "You want pop or beer?"

"Beer. It might calm my nerves. I'm worried about that girl."

"Why worry?" Stephanie said. "Heck, you could sit in your truck and listen to Alice snore through your laser beam."

"I wouldn't do that," Skip said, watching Stephanie grin as she headed for the kitchen.

"I hope not," Julian said. "Thinking of you guys going around listening in on divorce cases makes me ill."

"It's even worse when you're the one doing the listening."

"How many divorces have you caused, anyway?"

"None. Figure it out - by the time you get to putting a detective on your mate, it's already over."

Stephanie appeared with two cans of lager, her eyes glittering as if she might have had some. "If my husband spied on me, I'd poke his eyes out."

"I bet you would," Skip said. "But let's forget about divorces. I do many clean cases. With Alice, her mother wants to see that she's well and get her back, and you have to admit, Jannes is a kook. No wonder his daughter is weird, with a father like him. I'm surprised she hasn't been put away."

"You say clean cases, but to my way of thinking, it's another nasty separation case."

Skip twitched an eyebrow, considering Julian's words. "You may be right. By clean cases, I mean that most of my cases - my bread and butter work - are simple stuff. A shopping mall needs extra security, or an entertainer needs a man familiar with the city. I've had wealthy people pay me to clean their guns, witness objects transferred from a safe, and I do every sort of little thing. They teach you that at detective school. Never turn anyone down when it comes to a favor, and the money pours in when they give you small jobs. There aren't really any detectives like the guys in fiction bestsellers. We're not heroes, believe me. I don't often have direct contact with criminals. The police do that. If you get involved with criminals, you usually become one of them."

"I could send you customers," Julian said. "I get people all the time who need a detective and not a reading."

"So long as they aren't nuts." Skip's eyes shot to the curtains. A breeze was puffing them open, and a sudden flash of headlights in the driveway seemed mildly sinister. Stephanie wasn't fazed by it. She ran over and peeked out into the night.

"I hope it's not the police dropping by again?" Julian said.

"It's not," Stephanie said. "It's Art Lee, and he looks unhappy. Should I let him in?"

"Might as well. I guess working late is the in-thing now. If he's unhappy, it might be that the show isn't drawing well."

At the door, Stephanie clicked the handle, and a gust of wind blew in. Art grunted "Hello" to her, his eyes cloudy like he didn't quite see her. His ruddy face was paler than usual, but it wasn't

from lack of booze. He reeked of whiskey and a little of smoke and animal sweat. Wind and humidity had made a tangled sculpture of his hair. As a stranger at someone's door, he would be frightening.

"Pop is in the living room," Stephanie said.

Art nodded. He brushed past her and made his way to Julian

"You look like your wife threw you out. Only you don't have a wife," Julian said.

"I feel like I have a wife." Art's eyes fell on Skip. "You'd better watch out for this guy. He was around at the show asking questions about you."

"I know about him," Julian said. "He's a professional snoop, or an amateur snoop - depends how you look at it."

Stephanie entered carrying three more beers. She looked at Art with mild disgust, feeling he needed a bath more than a beer.

"Don't mind if I do," Art said, seizing a can. He popped the snap and went over to the couch.

"Is there some sort of emergency?" Julian said.

"A problem. I would've phoned, but with this story I was afraid you'd think I was drunk."

"Try me with it. Nowadays, I might believe anything."

"Get rid of the kid. I don't want her to hear this."

"The kid has probably seen worse than you can tell," Skip said.

"Get rid of the snoop, too."

"Don't worry about Skip. He's not interested in your business. His case is something different."

"I won't repeat anything," Skip said, enjoying the way he could put people on edge.

"You better not, or you'll be meeting the strong man," Art said.

"Your story couldn't interest me anyway. I heard enough crazy stories when I was around asking for Julian."

Art rubbed his chin with a callused hand. "The problem is with one of my acts - Miranda. I don't know if you ever met her?"

"The super fat sorceress, I know of her," Julian said. "She never comes out in public, so I haven't talked to her."

Art swallowed some beer, took a moment to straighten his shirt, and watched as Julian kissed Stephanie good night. She was already on her way upstairs by the time Art finished clearing his throat. No one heard her sneaking back down the stairs, not even Skip, but he didn't have to hear since he knew that was what she'd do.

Nearly crossing his eyes in an attempt to think straight, Art continued. "I gave Miranda a tent on the midway, mainly to fill a gap between the Sled-to-the-Center-of-the-Earth ride and the Monster Slingshot. She does some illusions. There's a Medusa one with rubber serpents that look real. She also swallows snakes and lengths of heavy chain, produces birds from her mouth, and does juggling tricks. I've never investigated her methods.

Her act was going well. She was a small draw, the way I had intended. Whenever I popped by for a look, she seemed quite competent. At the time, I wished she weren't so fat so I could use her in the Big Top display. One thing I've found is that a magician can't be fat, especially not a female one. It doesn't please the crowd.

Things changed late last night. I started getting complaints at the Red Wagon from people who'd heard about her show. There have been no complaints from the people who attended it. One woman, a nurse, said her husband became vicious and sexually assaulted her in the parking lot

as he tried to act out something he'd witnessed in Miranda's tent. A complaint came in about another man who took off his clothes and tried to mate with a flagpole. All the complaints involve obscene things - like the teenage girl who decided to begin a new career as a stripper on the midway."

"Hold on," Skip said, "there's no fat magician that can cause people to do that type of stuff."

"I thought that too. To me, they had to be loonies. The loonies all come to the fair. I sent my assistant, Benny, over to check. Julian knows Benny and how he acts."

"Yeah, Benny goes around dressed as a clown, troubleshooting problems. His smile is really all paint. He's a dull guy with no sense of humor at all."

"Could you imagine him doing anything crazy?" Art said.

"Not really. I'd say he's as sober as a judge if his judgment wasn't poor so often. Personality-wise, he could bore an undertaker."

"When he didn't return, I went over to check in person. The joint was closing up, so I talked to some of the midway boys on the way down. They hadn't seen her act but said she's now known as a freak draw."

"What's a freak draw?" Skip said.

"Someone who appeals to weirdoes. In the circus, you want to appeal to a mainstream crowd or rubes, never weirdoes. I didn't spot any weirdoes, but when I got to her tent, I spotted moths. It was covered with moths like she'd become the bug lady or something.

Not that moths are the most unusual occurrence at the circus in the summer. I had a queasy feeling that was more than moths. Canvass flaps over the empty stalls were fluttering. Revelers were shouting near the exits. I was beginning to feel isolated. Half the time, I'm so lost in memories that I see the world as a kind face that's made from them. Somehow, my memories turned ugly, and Miranda's tent resembled some freakish growth from a darker part of my mind. Mild revulsion hit me, prickling my skin with raised hairs. It was getting to the point where I was afraid to enter the tent. I made to steel myself then I shivered like I was shaking off a ghost. 'Benny!' I shouted as I walked up. When there was no reply, I moved the cover, opened the flap, and went in.

It was dark, and the air was so rank and humid that I could feel its weight. I could see nothing really, and then a tiny light began whirling in a far corner. The end of a cigarette, I thought. 'Benny', I said again, and I moved closer, realizing that it couldn't be a cigarette because there was no smoke. Sweat and stale perfume were all that I could smell.

Bursting into sparkles, the light suddenly pin-wheeled like a colorful little comet, and in the shadows I could make out some human forms. Before I could recognize anybody, the sparks vanished, and spots floated before my eyes. Confused, I took a step back and felt someone grab my leg. Not like they were trying to trip me. It was a sensual touch. The hand went up my pant leg and caressed my shin.

Jumping away, I felt in my pocket for a book of matches and found some damp ones. A couple whizzed out on the emery paper before one caught fire. In the flickering light, I saw a clown on the floor near my feet. It wasn't Benny. His grin was a leer, and he was half naked. His eyes were piercing like sharp glass, and he jumped up and came for me with startling agility. The match was snuffed out as I threw him aside. His skin was oily, and the assault he'd intended was violent and sexual. It made me wonder what sort of crazy house I was in.

While the match was lit, I had spotted a globe lamp a couple of feet away, so I stepped over to it. My hand touched the paper, and in a moment, I had the chain. Dim orange light filled the tent, and I turned to take in the view. Miranda's displays were folded up, and the floor was open and covered with large diamond-patterned runners. She was there near the center of the tent and appeared to be in a trance. A garish melt of makeup was on her face, her skin oiled and

painted; more rolls of buttery flesh than you could count showed. She was some elephant of a sight.

But she wasn't as weird as the rest of the scene. Several half-naked clowns were on the floor in front of her. They were painted and silently engaged. It was like accidentally popping onto the set of a weird movie. Benny was one of the actors, and he was with a black clown. It struck me as grossly absurd - I mean, them doing that silently while she looked on like some spaced-out guru of gluttons. I didn't quite know what to say, or whether anyone would pay attention if I did. The clowns' faces were twisted as if in a state of possession ... a strange power had them.

There was nothing I could do other than to leave, and I was turning to do so when hallucinations took me. Miranda's eyes widened, and I saw her transform and become a voluptuous blonde. A woman I thought I remembered from an old movie. You could call her my dream girl, and she was making eyes at me. The clowns had also changed, and instead of men, I saw an interesting display of lesbians kissing. At that point, rational thinking was vanishing. My dream girl's arms were opening for me, and the sight of her breasts behind thin fabric was irresistible.

I was taken. I couldn't stop myself from going to her. I couldn't even remember to try. When I was nearly in her arms, I tripped on a lump in the flooring and went to my knees. The shock shattered the illusion. I saw Miranda, flaps of fat on her open arms and her toothless mouth. A hideous clown was crawling nearby, one with unnaturally hairy hands. And I saw him reaching down for a cloven hoof that showed on the floor beneath her.

I didn't wait to see more. I turned and ran. On the way out, I crashed against the tent with such violence that the moths were stirred up, and I ended up running down the midway with a cloud of them whirling above me.

Back at the Red Wagon, I drank a double. I didn't feel like talking to anyone about it. Who'd believe such a story? In the morning, it wasn't quite as real. I started believing it was an illusion she'd worked and that I was being laughed at for being had. I had it in mind to check on her act this evening, then complaints started coming in before I got to it. For the present, I've ordered her act shut down. She's still there in the tent, and I haven't gone back."

"It's an illusion she hit you with," Skip said, nodding like he believed it doubly. "For a small fee, I could go in as a rube and pick up on the nuts and bolts of her hypnotism and tricks."

"You'd end up with the clowns," Julian said. "It's not an illusion because Art didn't supply any special equipment for illusions not included in her act. It could be a powerful form of hypnotism, but why would she produce illusions to put her show out of business?"

"I don't know," Art said. "She must be mad or possessed in some way. That's why I'm here. I need an expert opinion."

"You sure this isn't a new show you created that went wrong?" Skip said.

"Get real."

Julian rubbed his tired eyes. "I think she's been possessed by a revolting being. It could be that she was into witchcraft of the black sort all along, and her illusions had to do with it."

"I doubt it," Skip said. "There's a simple explanation in there somewhere."

"I know Art. He knows every trick in the circus business. If he's baffled, it's likely more than a trick."

"You'll take a look at her?"

"I need some sleep, Art. Tomorrow afternoon would be a good time, only I have no sitter for the girls."

"I thought you had only one girl?"

"Stephanie's friend is staying with us."

"I can watch them," Skip said. "You go to the fair."

"Not a chance."

"Okay. How about we all go? While you doctor the fat lady's demon, I can take the girls on some rides."

"Sure, but we'll take your van, and I'll be holding the keys while we're there."

"Tomorrow then," Art said, and as he stood up, a pleased Stephanie tiptoed upstairs to bed.

When Julian came down the stairs, the house was alive with the smells of eggs, toast, and tea. Stephanie and Alice were two bright spots moving in the kitchen, and for a moment, he thought he was seeing double. The girls were wearing identical summer outfits and running shoes. Skip was already back, and Julian felt a pang of jealousy as he watched the girls wait on him. He had the feeling that Skip had used the news of the day at the fair to win their favor, like it had been his unique idea.

Stopping at the door, he said good morning. He went to the side door and popped his head out. It was hot, not too humid, and the entire sky was banded with angel-hair clouds that filtered the sunlight.

Back in the kitchen, he frowned at Skip, who seemed a little too happy. "Fine day," he said. "A few clouds are better for the fair. I guess you popped in early and told the girls?"

"We didn't know, but we suppose we're free," Stephanie said.

They both giggled again, and Skip grinned with a mouthful of toast.

"Milk might be better for Alice than tea," Julian said.

"It has milk," Alice said. "It's chocolate coffee."

"I never get a breakfast spread that nice," Julian said, looking back to Skip.

He dragged a fork of eggs through ketchup and nearly swallowed it whole. "It's your breakfast, but you weren't up, so I saved it from getting cold."

"How thoughtful of you. All I need is a muffin and coffee anyway."

"I see. You're one of those guys who can run on empty all day."

"My appetite shifts through several phases."

Skip's Aerostar van was a plain vehicle on the outside. The monochromatic paint scheme gave people a nothing-fancy first impression, but when Julian got inside, he saw that Skip had an instrument cluster fit for a spaceship. The hybrid van had power everything and a dial to adjust the tint level of the windows. Stephanie and Alice looked like tiny butterflies in the plush backseat, and Julian could see that the seat was also an extra one that folded down into a bed. Behind the girls, he saw some stuffed canvas bags, a chest, and a notebook computer that displayed a fish-tank pattern.

Skip clicked a dash button that turned off his laptop and another one that started an air conditioner that was whisper-quiet.

"This is quite a vehicle," Julian said. "You could even hook in that laser spying device you were mentioning."

"I wouldn't do it. I know all about gadgets, laser devices, epoxy bugs, telephone fixes, and other things - only I don't need them for the standard cases I do. I like reading about them and dreaming of being a super secret agent. I have lock pins, binoculars, a tiny super-sharp knife, and pepper spray, but no Uzi machine gun or high-powered weapon. A Taurus .22 pocket pistol is my only gun, but I don't carry it. The pick set and the spray are illegal - I've never used them. What you're really seeing in here is a mobile office and crash pad. I use the computer for files and a wireless internet connection. The mobile detective is the way of the future."

"Looks like you could put this thing on autopilot and it would drive itself."

"People who've driven with me wish that were true. I did ask about autopilot for cars and was told it wasn't perfected yet because our highways are crude constructions with no margin for safety that a designer can work with."

The cruise to the fair proved Skip a liar; his driving was flawless, even when he was paying more attention to the girls than the road. Julian felt another pang of jealousy when he saw how well Skip got along with the girls. He was more like another kid than a detective, and he had a knack for pointing out funny people on the sidewalk and creating silly names for them. Julian couldn't belittle other people for a laugh, but he wished he could do things like that instead of playing the serious father role all the time.

They used Julian's pass for admission and parked in the field over by the helicopter pads. Julian took them on a shortcut that would get them to the Red Wagon without plunging into the crowd. They walked along the perimeter; the Big Top was like a distant, festive illusion in the haze. Rides towered. Bullets, pods, hammers, spangled cars, arms, and wheel spokes reached into the sky, their combined movement strangely coordinated but a touch jerky - like they were an invasion of crusher robots or odd giant insects. A sea of noise flowed to them; loudspeakers, bells, the clanging of machinery, the hum of motors, chains and the crowd blended to a general din. Neon-painted cardboard was tacked to the back of the booths in the sand-and-sawdust alley they followed to the Red Wagon. The Wagon was about the size of a railcar, with simple lettering spelling LEE BROTHERS CIRCUS. A strip of red tarpaulin was rolled across the grass to the steps.

"I'll go in and get Art," Julian said.

Skip and the girls turned and looked back at the midway. Julian went in and came out a moment later. "He went somewhere. Maybe he's already at Miranda's tent."

"So what now?" Skip said.

"We go on some rides," Stephanie said. "We can come back later."

"Remember the deal?" Julian said, holding out his open palm.

Skip pulled out the keys to the van and tossed them to Julian. "You're going over to the tent now?"

"Yeah. You take the girls through the midway."

"Pop isn't much for rides," Stephanie said.

"I love rides," Skip said, giving Julian a third pang of jealousy.

"Me too," Alice said.

"Make sure you keep your shoes on when you're up there," Julian said as he turned to leave.

Dirty steam was rising from the huge main gear of the Sky Whirl, and Art could smell the hot grease. The noise was deafening, like a beat of trains or thunder underlying the metal guitars blaring from the ride's speakers. He'd been watching Miranda's tent, but so far no one had entered or left. The canvas was faded and stained, and he figured the moths had probably wrecked it. The fat lady and her tent were a dead appendage now, bloated and ugly, fast on the way to non-existence. The sooner they were gone, the happier he would be.

He checked his watch. Julian would be arriving soon. It would be embarrassing if he took him to Miranda and all was normal. He decided to make a quick check, despite the voice in his head telling him not to. His face sweaty and serious, he stepped from the cover of the ride and pressed through the crowd. People were happy and shouting as always, but today Art saw only litter, grime, heat shimmies, and a melt of evil faces traced in the shadows of the booths.

Sawhorses guided the crowds away from Miranda's tent, and he stepped over one and stopped. There was a bad smell in the air, the sweetness of something dead. The tent seemed to rot before his eyes and slide in the dust like the severed breast of a hairy beast. His stomach rolled,

and the faint sun was a fevered hand on his forehead. When he moved forward, his feet were reluctant lumps of clay, but despite his weakness, his dogged determination carried him on. There were many ugly jobs in the circus, and Art had done all of them - he couldn't stop himself from doing this one.

Pushing the canvas aside, he went in with the feeling that he was stepping under the foot of an elephant. It was dim; he could hear muffled voices. As his eyes cleared, he saw that much of the tent was curtained off. Directly ahead of him, Miranda was up on her chair, which resembled a cheap throne. Bunting lined the stage, and the floor sagged, looking to be on the verge of collapse. He recognized Miranda by her bulk only.

"Miranda," Art said feebly.

"Yes," she replied.

"I closed your show because of reports I was getting. Maybe you want to tell your side of it."

"I do. Come up and listen."

Art hesitated; her voice was slippery like a snake, her tongue coating the words with scales of dishonesty. She hadn't sounded that way in the past.

Her huge body shifted, and the stage groaned dangerously. Art moved closer. "I've been wondering about your illusions and magic. I've never been able to figure it out. You don't have much equipment, so I assume it's from eye-contact hypnosis. You don't have to tell me all your secrets, of course."

"Of course," she said in the same slippery voice, and he was close enough now to see that she was nearly naked. Her flesh was painted, and she had a face that would've been pretty if it hadn't been swollen by her obesity and distorted by heavy make-up. Her hair was full and lustrous, but even it couldn't hide the hills of flesh at her neckline.

An unnatural silence developed. Art was at a loss for words and ways to approach this weird lady.

Mad laughter suddenly broke out behind the curtain; a single voice, then a string of voices that quickly died away.

"Hey, what's going on here?" Art said, a low tremor of fear moving up his spine.

"Look and see," Miranda said.

He thought she meant the curtain and glanced at it. It was just clownish laughter, like a schoolkid's joke, but it had an evil tone, like the laughter of Jim Folds, the school bully who tormented him in his childhood. He was afraid to go over.

The stage groaned, and his eyes went back to Miranda. Sweat spilled on her mountainous belly. A belly button jewel was knocked into the air as a hairy claw sprouted there. Art's head spun with surprise and disgust. He simultaneously felt like vomiting and passing out.

"He wants your love," Miranda said. "Come and touch me."

Art tottered. A rainbow flashed in her eyes, and he found himself believing her doughy rolls of flesh to be beautiful. He wanted to caress and squeeze them. Beckoning love was in her eyes, and the claw moved hungry fingers.

When he tried to back off, strange electricity held him in place. Faint images flashed in his mental phosphors - bizarre replays of sexual fantasies. Dancers strutted, cheerleaders began to strip, the breasts of a trapeze artist jiggled, and as the images played on, the hideous claw twitched in his brain. Miranda had opened her heart to him; she was begging him for love. It filled him with revulsion, but desire still controlled him, forcing him to his knees and forward like he was an animal with no will of his own.

Julian frowned at the clown, then shrugged. "He's not here."

The clown shook his fright wig. His painted smile seemed real, as if he wasn't disappointed. "Sorry, I thought he'd be here. He stops here every day at noon for a beer and a snack."

It was wasted time. Julian wasn't happy. He should've gone straight to Miranda's tent. Instead, one of Art's clown minions had approached him, and he'd made the mistake of listening to him ... the result being a journey across the grounds to Art's favorite tavern.

"He must be at Miranda's tent like I thought."

"Want me to take you there?"

"I know the way, and it's a private matter. Art wouldn't want you to come."

The clown nodded. "I've heard things about that tent. It's better that Art or you go in than me. Guess I'll stay here and have a cool one. Be seeing you around, Julian."

Thumbing his suspenders to hitch up his pants, the clown walked into the air-conditioned gloom, headed for a huge tin beer ad. Turning from the tavern, Julian looked back at the midway. The Big Top and rides were inside a bubble of dust that didn't extend out to the World's Fair grounds ... to the southwest, sunbeams were lancing through clouds and illuminating the domes of another portion of the fair. Rubbing his chin, he calculated the shortest route to the tent - judging it to be about a seven-minute walk.

Somewhat drained by the humidity, he walked away from the tavern, shortcutting over a lawn by a display building. The gloom and dust hovering over the circus made it seem as if he were walking downhill to a lower place. He was almost certain the clown had led him away from Miranda intentionally. If that was the case, Art was probably in trouble.

He could hear the rush of cars over on the expressway and the squalling of a few wheeling seagulls, then the din, dust, and dirt of the carnival slowly rose to his ears. He continued following shortcuts - alleyways the winos and runaway teens would find at night to avoid being tossed out by the horseback police. Trashy weeds, the flash of discarded bottles and wrappers, bare earth, stones, neon-painted cardboard, cheap bunting, junk food, and canvas odors - the elements blended well and gave the fair a reckless and sugary nature of its own.

As he got closer to Miranda's tent, bees appeared; a number of them buzzing around a wire waste bin, a swarm on a rotten hunk of watermelon, then an even bigger swarm resting on the upper portion of Miranda's tent. They crawled on it like it was discarded food, and he began to believe that she really was a bug lady.

The fair was home ground for Julian, but he didn't feel comfortable about confronting Miranda. A seasick roll had hold of his stomach ... a hand of gastric juices shaking his innards. It was a gut feeling strong enough to be a premonition. A ride thundered and chugged beside him, and from its shadow, he could see the tent clearly. It wore an envelope of unnatural gloom, but because it was saw-horsed off from the main crowd, the people simply didn't notice it.

An invisible insect tickled up the hair on the back of his neck as he went up to a sawhorse and jumped it. The sun suddenly felt very hot, an ember touching him through the gloom, but he still pressed on, bees buzzing in his head.

Screams from people plummeting on a nearby roller coaster rang in his ears as he entered. Since it was gloomy outside the tent, his eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness inside. The place smelled like a garbage-pit whorehouse with the humidity lifting the rank odors to gagging fumes. His hand went to his nose, and he fought to keep his gorge down. Several feet in front of him, a plump and nearly naked clown was on his knees using a paintbrush and palette to do work on Art. Art's shirt had been removed, and his arms were painted with a half-moon pattern. His upper body was wrapped in tattooed tentacles that didn't seem quite real. He wasn't struggling, but sat there with glazed eyes, sweat pouring down from his forehead. Miranda's bulk loomed behind him. She was on her cheap throne with her mouth open - a maggot-like tentacle wagging out of it in place of her tongue. She didn't see Julian at all as her eyes had rolled back to the whites.

Julian felt his scalp lift, as if it were floating off his head with the devilish fumes. Miranda was obviously possessed by a demon spirit that thrived on control and mad forms of perversion. Art would end up in a state that made disease and death look kind if he remained in her power.

The clown turned his head and stared at Julian, grinning like an artist asking for praise for his work. Julian's eyebrows went up as he realized the clown's own face wasn't painted. It was all cut in, including his smile. Dim light and makeup hid the mutilation to some extent.

Dropping his brushes, the clown rose and stood in front of Art, looking him over. Julian took a step forward. The clown grinned. "You're just in time for our party," he said.

Julian's uneasy stomach forced him to halt. Slow and strained breathing came from both Art and Miranda, as if they were asthmatic and in a trance. He decided it would be best to grab the clown and force him aside, but as he took a step, he heard wicked laughter behind a curtain to his left. Dodging over quickly, he yanked it, causing it to slide a foot before it fell completely. A bed of mud and slime was behind it, and a few possessed men were inside, grinning and slowly shifting through various positions as they beckoned to him. A longer look brought something else to his attention - a large serpent with a cloven hoof at the end of its tail was slithering in the mud not far from the men.

No one emerged from the pit to attack him, so he turned back to the clown, Art, and Miranda. The fat lady's eyes were rolled forward now, and she was staring at him with hypnotic intensity.

Julian swept his hand up and snapped his fingers. Long ago, he'd hypnotized himself and placed a command in his subconscious mind - a counter for hypnosis. Illusions that were drifting into his mind from Miranda faded, and her spell was broken before it had a chance to settle and render him helpless.

He rushed forward and seized the clown, throwing him aside with such force that he stumbled over and fell into the mud pit. He didn't attempt to free Art. To drain Miranda, he had to touch her - an unwholesome thought and stomach-churning fact. Moving through the gloom, he stepped up on the small stage. Boards groaned as her flesh rolled. Her tongue shot out, white and snakelike, and whipped his forearm.

It stung like a bite, and he jumped down from the stage. Fearing venom, he bit into the red mark, sucked, and spat out the juice. Close to panic, he tore off a strip of bunting and tied his arm.

When he looked up and scanned the tent, he saw that the snake thing had crawled out of the pit and was moving to block the exit. Miranda stirred and glared down at him. Julian knew he was trapped. He couldn't get to the fat lady or safety, and he began to feel lightheaded as some of the venom flowed into his bloodstream.

Skip had a bad feeling about the clown. He'd been tailing them since they'd left the Red Wagon. Now he was toe-tapping a milk carton in front of the shooting gallery, doing a poor job of hiding his motive. Suddenly deciding to collar him for a few questions, Skip stepped over. Although the clown was supposedly looking at the dust, he spotted Skip's movement instantly, panicked, and took off, dashing through a space in the booths.

A bit miffed, Skip went back to the girls. He suspected Julian of having him watched. It was possible, but not very likely, since Julian had his keys and probably believed he was stretching the case as much as possible to collect more fees from Alice's mother. Maybe there was a clown tailing Julian, too.

Stephanie wasn't impressed by Skip's behavior. "Stop chasing the clowns," she said.

"I'm certain he was following us. Keep an eye out for clowns. It's a disguise a kidnapper could use."

"I thought you were the kidnapper?" Alice said.

"No, I go by the law. I can't take you to your mother without the proper papers. If I did, I'd get tossed in jail and lose my license."

"Let's go on the Whirl-Shot again," Stephanie said.

"I'll watch," Skip said. "I couldn't stand another round."

Stephanie leaned against the booth, getting dust on her shorts. She brushed it away. "Next time I come, I'll wear black," she said.

"There was a Skip at my last school," Alice said. "He had huge ears and was afraid of the pool. We called him chicken man. Maybe he was related to you."

"I'm not a chicken. I've been on the biggest rides in the world."

"You wouldn't take us on the Super Zipper," Alice said.

"The Super Zipper is dangerous. You could get bruises or even be killed in it. Then Julian would go ballistic."

"Why don't you ride it alone, and we can watch?" Alice said.

"I'm supposed to be watching you." Skip looked at their doubting faces. His virility seemed to be in question. "Okay, see that big ride over by the funhouse."

"The Looper," Stephanie said.

"Yeah. See the way it stops up there, and you just hang. Look at those people hollering, like they really wish they hadn't gone up. I'll get two ice creams, and if you two promise to stay by the ticket booth, then I'll go up and wave upside down to you."

"Sounds neat," Stephanie said.

"Yeah," Alice said.

It was hard to watch the girls in the thickening crowd, and if Skip was naturally paranoid, the clown had given him a reason to be really paranoid. He had the girls lock arms and walk in front of him as he scanned the passers-by. His wide brown eyes settled on suspicious customers, and he drew ugly return glances from people who took him for a leering weirdo. He was glad the girls were dressed in bright colors, as it made it easier to watch them. What he didn't like was the clash of loud music from the various rides and booths - it mixed with the crowd noise, ride sirens, gun pops, whoops, and mad haw-hawing from the funhouse and made it hard to talk. If the girls were to get away from him, it would be hard to yell to them. Normally, this would've been an opportunity for Skip to have a lot of fun, and he did want to show off, but was beginning to wish he hadn't suckered himself into going up on The Looper. If some clown snatched Alice or Stephanie, he'd never be able to explain it to Julian. The police would come, think he'd planned it as part of the deal with Alice's mother, and charge him. And that would mean the end of his new detective career.

They made it to the ice-cream wagon without incident, so Skip began to ease up. They ordered, and a knot-muscled man with a white cap and tattoos filled the first sugar cone with a swirl of strawberry ripple. He handed it to Stephanie, grinning at her like an ogre, then he made a chocolate cone for Alice. The high-powered ice-cream nozzle could fill a cone with a single squirt, and Skip couldn't help but think what a potent weapon it would be in a food fight. When he was told the price of the cones, he wished he could use it to drown the vendor.

On the other side of the streaming mob, The Looper was spinning back down to unload. Skip nodded and led the girls across, this time taking the lead so their ice cream cones wouldn't be bumped into the dirt. He already had a string of tickets, so it was only a matter of getting on. There was a platform around the ticket booth, so he took the girls up on it and had them stand at the rear, where they could watch the ride without being noticed by people in the line-up or crowd.

Skip leaned over, hands on his thighs, his expression serious. "Remember what I told you - stay right here until I'm down."

The girls nodded, looking at him with innocent eyes for a moment before they resumed work on their ice creams. Feeling somewhat satisfied, Skip went over to the board. He'd already timed the ride at five minutes. Even one minute could be an eternity when you were upside down, but Skip wasn't afraid of heights, especially not when he was fastened into a padded car. Trying to show off for girls from high up was nothing new for him either. When he was younger, he would've waded to Sally Marsh and gotten right out of the car. The thought of it made him grin momentarily, and then he winced. Memories were like that for him. His young life had been a full life, but he'd been such an ass it hurt to remember too much of it at once.

He was happy to get the front seat of a big car, and he clamped himself in while the attendant aided two teenage girls taking the seats behind him. More doors slammed and locked as the rest of the passengers were taken care of, and then the train of cars jolted forward. Skip heard the rising whir of the electric motor; it was musical enough to be a special effect on the rock score blaring from the ride's speakers, and it died when the cars were halfway up the loop.

The cars hung in the air, then they rolled back down and went up on another loop. At the high point, Skip had a glimpse of the girls biting into their cones. Screaming began as the cars zoomed back down, doing a double loop and a spin. Skip was careful that nothing that could be taken for fear showed on his face.

Once the train began to spin loops, he couldn't see much of the girls or anything else, and the screaming of the teens behind him hurt his ears. By the third minute, an unwelcome hand was on the back of his neck, and fingernails were beginning to dig at his scalp. Reaching around, he grabbed the hands and ended up in a brief struggle. The ride continued looping, and the hysterical red-headed girl behind him kept clawing pieces out of him so that he felt like screaming himself.

Then the ride stopped dead. They were at the top of the largest loop, upside down. Taking advantage of the moment, Skip turned and knocked the girl's hand away. He saw that she was now frozen in terror, like someone with agoraphobia on a mountaintop. Looking down, he saw Stephanie and Alice laughing and waving. Putting on a grin, he hollered and moved his arms like he was trying to swim, and while he was swimming, he heard the motor die, and the rock music die. It all hummed down to zero like the life had been squeezed out of the ride, leaving him with a sudden awareness of the rest of the fair, big wheels turning, cars gliding on the sky wires, the Big Top, and the noise from the shooting galleries.

"I think the power has gone out," the girl behind him whispered.

"What'll we do?" her friend said.

Skip's focus came back to the immediate; the ride had disoriented him more than he'd thought. "Don't panic," he said. "You'll get used to being upside down."

Instead of having a calming effect, his voice was a trigger for hysteria. Both girls started crying, and nearly everyone on the ride began shouting. Nails ripped into the back of his neck, and he started swearing as he tried to fight the girl off.

Five minutes of mayhem went by. Sweat like tears poured from Skip. His clothes were soaked, but he'd finally gotten free of the girl, and there was some relief in that - he watched her for a moment to make sure she was settled. Her face was now pale, her cheeks quivering, and she breathed in gasps as a phase of frozen panic held her down.

Wiping his brow, he looked below and saw the ride men studying the drive motor. "Shit!" he said, knowing he'd never get down if it was the motor. He rapped his knuckles hard on the door and resisted an urge to shout, and then he did a check on the ticket booth. Stephanie and Alice were still there, but they weren't looking up at him. They were looking south toward the Big Top, like they'd seen something there. From high up, he could see nothing there but dust. Looking back at

the girls, he saw Stephanie pointing at something. They hopped down from the platform, went across the shooting gallery, and disappeared into a space between the booths.

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Stephanie grinned like a naughty angel as she watched Skip riding up on The Looper. Alice giggled as it began to loop. Some crazy girl behind Skip was pulling his hair. It was as good as a bad movie, then the ride stopped, and after a struggle, Skip managed to wave. Stephanie knew Alice was impressed, but she wasn't. If anything, Skip was easy to manipulate and was more like a kid than an adult. She thought Skip was okay, but she preferred mature men like Julian. Immaturity meant instability to her, and if she had a goal in life, it was to find some lasting security. Julian and the new house were like a rock to her. Maybe Julian was dull, but if Skip were her father, she'd go crazy. He'd make a good father for Alice – nearly any father would be better than Jannes – but even that might not make any difference because Alice was odd and didn't care about parents at all.

Something went wrong with the ride. The music distorted and died. The power went out, and soon Skip had his hands full as the girl behind him began to tear at him again. Stephanie glanced at Alice, who was giggling like it was a cartoon episode. Then she heard the ride attendant hollering to the man in the ticket booth.

Another ride man, this one in denim overalls, hurried onto the scene, looked at the switch equipment and motor, and shook his head like he was worried.

“What did Skip say about people being sorry they went up there?” Alice said through more giggles.

“That's what can happen when you try to show off,” Stephanie said. She grinned, then started to feel peculiar. Men were shouting and hurrying about beneath the ride, and their activity seemed to charge the air. Little gusts of wind puffed up dust like smoke, and the day now had a hollow cast that the crowds couldn't fill; sort of like the emptiness days had when she was with Tiffany. She tried to shake the feeling, but it hung on. Just thinking about Tiffany was evil magic. Memories of those days came flooding back with a renewed sense of dread. The gloom of the day rose like Tiffany's corpse, and she felt her breathing constrict. Somewhere inside, the old Stephanie was still locked in a steel box, and the screams of the people on The Looper were her screaming to get out. There seemed to be too much hate trapped inside. She couldn't hope to get it all out. It rested like bruises under her ribs. It hurt. And she heard Tiffany laughing – pleased because she'd known about the hate all along. She'd planted it there to grow and give her victory in the end.

Alice kept giggling even when things weren't funny anymore, and Stephanie felt weak, like she was going under from heatstroke. Her brain felt sore like it'd been rubbed with pumice – like memories of Tiffany were making it bleed. She stared up at the ride, her legs trembling, and she saw the big ring begin to smoke. Then flames erupted, and it became a ring of fire and shrank.

Air whooshed in her ears, the ring passed over her, smoke rolled in her mind, and cleared on a vision of Julian and the trouble he faced.

“We've got to go!” she suddenly shouted.

“Ouch, you hurt my ear. Where do we have to go?”

Stephanie pointed at a dust cloud. “Follow me. I'll explain later.”

The premonition told Stephanie exactly where to run. Miranda's tent became a throbbing lump in the back of her mind. Pushing through the crowd, she cut between two game booths. At the back, they emerged by some trampled weeds and a heap of broken concrete. Some of the circus mobile homes were to the right, but Miranda's tent was near a section of the midway that was on the other side of the pavilion, directly ahead of her.

As she ran for the pavilion, she glanced back and saw Alice keeping pace with her, and behind Alice, a clown was emerging at the back of the shooting gallery. It looked to be the same clown that Skip had chased.

"Hurry up!" Stephanie hollered. "There's a clown after us!" And they were managing to stay ahead as they went around the back of the pavilion and dashed along the side toward the public area at the front.

Barricades had been erected to seal the back off from the public. They were forced to stop. Too winded to speak, they looked for a gap as their breathing steadied. There was one small space, a hole in the barricade, but garbage cans were blocking most of it, and the spilled garbage swarmed with bees - hundreds of them on what looked like coffee grounds.

Spinning about, Stephanie saw that the clown was only a few yards away. He was slowing to a walk and really smiling now that he was sure he had them.

Alice took a worried glance back. "I'll stir up the bees. Bees don't light on me. My old demon pet fixed it that way."

"Hurry up, do it quickly!"

Stumbling over a clod of earth, the clown managed to seize Stephanie's arm, and his face went stupid for a moment as he watched Alice run up to the swarm of bees. Stephanie kicked him in the shin, and he swore and tightened his grip. Then he began to drag her toward Alice. After a few short steps, he halted, amazement on his face as he studied the devilish swarm of bees Alice was stirring up. The swarm rose in an angry cloud, then fear wiped the painted smile off his face. His grip loosened, and Stephanie struggled free as he began to take steps back. The bees sounded like a tinny lawnmower, a sound that panicked the clown. He turned and ran, and the colorful flash of his clothes caught the swarm's attention. The bees spilled forward, patterning out a long arc, and they sawed into him with such force that he fell on his face. He rolled about in the dirt, thrashing at the insects and screaming. Stephanie and Alice didn't stay to watch - turning, they dashed through the hole in the barricade.

With the clown and the barricade out of the way, the girls were free to run through the crowd like a couple of wild Indians. Popcorn and stuffed toys flew as Alice tripped over a man while trying to catch up. A helicopter was flying overhead, and Stephanie could see that it was about to go right over Miranda's sagging tent. They were close enough to see more bees and the darkness enveloping the canvas, but Stephanie didn't allow herself time to be afraid. She ducked a sawhorse and went straight up the hard earth path. As she pulled the flap aside, Alice caught up, running straight into her from behind.

They tumbled into the tent and got quickly to their feet. Stephanie checked Alice first to make sure she was all right and noticed that in their summer outfits and by the entrance, they were the brightest objects in the tent - they practically glowed.

"Stephanie, keep back!" It was Julian's voice, and instead of ducking back, she looked in his direction. Her eyes adjusted, and she saw him standing in the gloom near the stage and a horrible, fat lady who had to be Miranda. Then a large snakelike creature reared up and coiled as it fell on her.

Alice gasped and twisted quickly out of the way, but Stephanie put her hands on the thick body of the falling snake. Then the power of the fire-eater rose inside her like the heat of a flaring star. She felt the skin of the snake scorch as her fingers began to shimmer. Ghastly heat waves and sizzling sounds shook the tent as the serpent floated, spun around Stephanie, smoked, and burned. Its coils glowed red for a moment before they blackened, shriveled, and perished, falling to the floor like a toasted husk. Julian had gotten halfway to Stephanie. He halted and turned back to Miranda. A worm of ugly emotions twisted on the fat lady's face, and she began to choke uncontrollably. She regained strength as her complexion shifted through greenish tints. Possession had turned to poison, but it was a sting that was empowering her. Moving swiftly, Julian leaped back to the stage, hoping to put hands of exorcism on her before she could recover.

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The attendants and repairmen had stopped work on the ride and were staring up at Skip. He'd picked open the safety lock and was now hanging by both hands from the loose bar. His face was desperate like that of a suicidal maniac, and his every twist drew exclamations from excited onlookers.

The ticket taker was most concerned. "Don't do it, pal!" he hollered. "Get back in the car!"

"He can't get in. It's too late," the electrician said. "We'd better get clear before he falls."

Skip paid scant attention to the shouting. The noise of the fair roared like river rapids in his ears, and everything revolved like he was back on the Spin Coaster. He could see the ride men below him. It was like they were in the center of a bull's-eye, and his reason for holding on wasn't from fright but because he didn't want to fall on them.

His hands were slipping on the stainless steel. Suddenly, the men ran clear, and he let go, positioning himself for a landing as he fell. The screaming of the crowd tore into his ears, and it almost ripped up the earth before he hit it. He landed, rolled in the soft sand and sawdust, and popped to his feet. From the crowd's perspective, it had looked like he was going to impale himself on the ride mechanism. When he didn't, there was a collective gasp of relief and amazement. Some people cheered, and for an encore, Skip ran off, glad as hell that he'd learned every type of fall in his teenage years and in his comedy and karate classes.

Ducking across the way, he ran along the booths to the alley Stephanie and Alice had gone through. Emerging from behind some trailers, he paused to wipe the dirt off his pants. It was just a vacant lot. They wouldn't have gone into any of the mobile homes, so they must have cut across. The back of a pavilion was on the far side of the lot. It was quite large, constructed of white-painted cinder blocks with a sculpted roof, and the back was a bit of a garbage dump. Guessing that they'd gone through the barricade there and back into the fair, he ran across the field, getting halfway before he stumbled upon a tangled body and a fair sweeper. A glance showed that the body was a man, a clown. The same clown he'd chased earlier. He could tell by the fright wig, not by the face, because it was swollen. The eyes stared blankly, embedded in purple-red lumps of bee-stung tissue. Some bees still crawled on him, and there was no movement; the clown was stone dead, killed by the swarm.

"Found him just now. He's dead," the teenage sweeper said.

Rather than hang around, Skip squeezed through a space in the barricade, the image of crawling bees still in his mind. He re-entered the crowd, shaking his head - something strange was happening, and it was confusing him. He caught sight of an information booth at the top of the pavilion steps and ran up. When he tried to speak, he choked. His mouth was as dry as dust, so he took a moment to catch his breath and clear his throat. "I-I," he stuttered. Looking desperate, Skip grabbed the scrawny information clerk by the lapels of his white shirt. "I'm looking for an eleven-year-old blond girl?" Skip coughed hard. "And a little Chinese girl? I need them."

"You need a doctor, pal," said the clerk. "You're another one of them weirdoes from Miranda's tent, aren't you? Get out of here before I call the cops."

"Miranda's tent, where is it?" Skip said, guessing they'd gone there.

The clerk sneered knowingly. He raised an arm and pointed toward the tent.

Skip raised his eyebrows, turned, and ran down the steps, drawing a lot of following glances as he plunged into the crowd. He felt about as crazed as he looked, and the dust in the air was making it worse by stinging his eyes and throat. The wide avenue narrowed, and at the first bend, the tent came into view. It sagged in the gloom behind some sawhorses. Dark stains had seeped through the canvas at the top, and bees were erupting from a tear.

Halting, he stood for a moment with his hands on a sawhorse. The ugly stains and the eruption of bees were certain grim preludes to something even more revolting happening inside. Hot

blood crept up the back of his neck, a push of breeze clammed on his sweaty back. He vaulted the sawhorse and went down the path, wondering if he was any match at all for the trouble he was sure was inside.

An element of surprise was needed, so when he reached the flap, he threw it back and dived inside. Rolling up on his feet, he took a karate cat stance and tried to see through the shifting shadows. A creepy clown was right beside him, reaching out for him, so he seized his arm and hip-tossed him, sending him rolling into a huge pit of mud.

The clown went down in the mud like it was quicksand. It was also swirling like a whirlpool, and Skip was certain that it had to be an illusion. He blinked, but the mud continued to whirl, and he could see the limbs and torsos of other bodies shooting up in splashes of dark liquid.

There was movement to his right. Spinning on his heel, he saw Stephanie and Alice standing near Art. Tentacles that smoked and reeked like burning insulation were fastened to him. Beyond the wisps of smoke, he could see Julian, up on the stage. He was behind the fat lady, his hands locked around her temples. Her eyes were hypnotic in effect, shot through with electric-bright veins, and her fat limbs were moving in epileptic spasms. Low growls issued from her throat, and there were the sounds and expressions of more than one person - like she was vomiting up a legion of demons.

The stench of rancid mud and smoke grew viler by the moment. He took his eyes away from Miranda, groaning from the effort, and looked back at Stephanie. Both she and Alice were unaffected and seemed to be concentrating. He believed they were destroying the tentacles on Art with a type of psychic heat.

Miranda had the pull of a magnet, and his eyes dragged back to her. He could see the strain on Julian's face. His neck muscles were corded as if he were holding her great weight off the floor. Her spastic contortions continued, and Skip found himself rooted to the spot, forced to watch while his pulse gunned so hard the veins stood out on his head and neck. Clenching his teeth, he felt like screaming, then his legs began to shake, and his calves turned to wax. Irresistibly, his eyes were drawn down to Miranda's belly; slime as thick as snakes was pouring there, and something else was emerging.

The mud pit swirled, pulling bodies down. The whole tent whirled in a dark illusion. He saw Miranda's belly burst open, releasing a clawed demon. It emerged quickly and crawled over to the swirling mud in an attempt to escape Julian. Then Skip gasped, his legs gave way, and as he collapsed, he saw the demon sucked down into the vanishing pit. He hit the floor and rolled on his side, fever and hot darkness suddenly overwhelming him, and then his consciousness was swallowed up.

## CHAPTER 4: COUNTRY GIRLS

A push of breeze pillowed the curtain, tickling Stephanie's nose with the fragrance of fresh-cut grass and pine sap. She wished the wind could lift her mood as easily as it rocked the maple bough above the screen, but instead, the leaf shadows were dappling her with melancholy. She felt tiny and insignificant, like one of the moats in the sunbeam lancing across the polished floor. It had started with a dream of her natural father. A dream in which she was trying to see his face to find whether he loved her, and could see only hollow eyes and a beard of shadows.

She bit her lip as she penciled in the final details of her sketch, then she slid it across the table, sent the pencil rattling, and watched Alice turn from the computer. Alice's curls were hanging loose - her hair needed doing. She was sitting in a swivel chair, wearing a faded skirt and no top. The thought of her showing up at the hair shop in such an outfit caused Stephanie to grin.

"He looks like a devil with a beard of bugs," Alice said.

"I couldn't really see his face in the dream."

"I think you should stop thinking about him. He's history."

"I'd like to."

Alice turned the monitor, and Stephanie checked the face she'd drawn on the screen. "All of the faces you do are sunken. Like the people are dead. No smiles or emotion. There's a guy at Julian's fair who puts pins and nails through his nose and cheeks. Your people look like him when he's got them in."

Using the screen baton, Alice placed two arrows on the cheeks of her drawing and made the face expand until it looked like it would explode. "Now he's alive," she said.

"Call up the picture you did of your father, and we'll compare."

Alice nodded, then looked for the picture, while Stephanie leafed through her sketchbook for her own drawing.

"Your picture of Jannes is impossible," Stephanie said. "His face is blank like a lollipop, and he's running with his arms crossed. No one ever looks like that."

"Hah! Yours is impossible, too. Julian's hair looks like a rooster comb."

"I'm not too good at hair yet."

"Julian makes a nicer picture than my father."

"Why? Jannes actually looks funnier."

"That's not what I mean. You drew Julian with his arms open - because he loves you. My dad is running away with his arms crossed because he's afraid to love anyone. I put his face blank because he hides his feelings."

"Some people are that way - they're shy."

"Not with their own family. My mom is the same way. Her work is all she cares about - digging up old bones and dead cities. I don't know why she left dad. They were two peas in a pod. They cared about rules and nothing else. Your pop never goes on about the importance of rules."

"Pop says the rules will rule you if you don't watch out. Maybe that's why things went rotten - your mom and dad had different rules telling them what to do. Then there's drinking. If Jannes drinks too much, then your mother had to leave him."

"She always calls him a stinking drunk, but I never cared about his drinking. He just tries to pour some love and emotions into himself. He's a crybaby drunk, but I like him better crying than when he's normal."

"If you can talk to him at the hospital today, what are you going to say? Like, whether you want him to release you to your mother or not."

"First, Skip isn't allowed in the room. I won't let him report what I say to my mother. I'll tell pops I'm sorry he went into a coma and that I want to stay here because I have a sister here. He won't be able to argue because he always complained about me playing on the hill by myself. I don't want to live with Mother because I'd have to be prim and proper all the time and eat dinner with snobby museum people."

"I doubt you can stay here long. Julian doesn't have anyone to help him."

"Yes, he does. He has Skip. The lunch Skip made today wasn't bad."

"Skip is just giving free help so he can keep tabs on you for your mother. He's a spy, is what he is."

"What are their plans for us - did you find out?"

"They appear to be confused. I think they're down in the den. Maybe I'll pop down and do some spying right now. Once we find out what they're up to, we can find ways to change their minds."

"Okay, check on them. I'll meet you outside. I'm going down by the secret passage."

"What secret passage?"

"Climbing down the tree is the secret passage."

Stephanie opened the bedroom door, her eyes fixing on a corner piece at the end of the hall. It was a lion with a globe in its jaws. She did her usual hops on the cube-design rug - even melancholy couldn't break her of the habit - then she stared up at the lion. The globe seemed doubly fragile in its jaws. It was like her life, and maybe Alice's. The lion snaps its jaws, your world is broken, and you have to start again. She felt the world should offer security, but she also felt it was right that you could anchor yourself only by loving others and being loved. Her stepmother hadn't been able to offer any kind of love, and her security was the security of a prison. She put warts on your soul, made you ugly with your own bitterness, and turned your heart crooked. She didn't want that to happen to Alice. If Jannes didn't want her and her mom was a cold fish, then she belonged here with people who really cared about her.

The stairs were new, and her feet moved soundlessly on the steps. She stopped and froze as she saw Skip passing at the bottom. He was still playing housekeeper, wearing an apron as he took a glass of lemonade to Julian in the den. She waited, and when he didn't come back out, she went to the bottom and slipped into the closet by the den door. The hollow wall amplified voices like a speaker, and she had to slow her breathing because it sounded too loud. She tried to imagine herself as a detective like Skip, but couldn't. She knew she spied because she was insecure, and that made her even more depressed.

"I'm starting to think that Alice likes it here too much," Skip said.

"It's better than having her hate it here."

"You should have a talk with her. Outline to her that she can't stay here long."

"Her mother already told her that on the phone. There's no need for me to repeat it."

"I'll talk to her and remind her."

"No, you won't. You're not a counselor, and you're being paid to give her certain ideas. You should stop trying to force things and let events take their natural course."

"I'm just trying to be helpful. I think it would be better for her to go. If she gets too close to Stephanie, it'll be painful for her when they part."

"Not as painful as it'll be if she keeps growing up without any friends. And they wouldn't be parting forever - she could still visit."

"I suppose. Maybe it won't bother the kid much. You know what? When I look at you, I get the feeling you're a man who ignores his own advice."

"What do you mean?"

"You say let events take their natural course, but you're working on that computer stuff. It seems to me that the natural course would be to pursue your career as Julian the Seer."

"I worked in the business world in the past, as you so clearly pointed out when we met. I need to know the newest computer investment and accounting programs to work again. The way I see it, Stephanie needs a father who is more than a circus freak. And I have to look at my own goals - I mean, is my goal to end up as a wax figure in Ripley's Odditorium? I'll still be doing work as Julian the Seer. I just won't be doing it all the time."

"You should go big with it while you're getting a name. All little girls want a father who's a big star. That's what makes them happy."

"I think Stephanie is smarter than that - big stars are a dime a dozen nowadays."

"Maybe you should find a wife. That'd help the kid. She needs a good mother. You could put an ad on the net."

"I'd never do that."

"You don't want a wife?"

"Only if I happen to meet a woman and fall in love with her. I'd never try to order one like a hamburger."

"It's not like that. I've got lots of dates from ads."

"Doesn't look like you married any of them, or built any sort of relationship."

"Women see me as unstable. Believe me - I'd be married if I were easier to get along with. As it is, I'm the sort of bachelor that married guys envy. Since I've been here around the girls, it hurts me that I don't have a family, children of my own. I find myself envying the married guys. It's just about the most terrible feeling I've ever had."

"I know the feeling, but you shouldn't be experiencing it until you're a little older."

"Yeah, I guess so. But I like kids. The reason I stayed on this case is the kids. I was offered more money to do some industrial spying. Union-busting stuff."

"You should stick with clean cases. You'll get a filthy reputation doing that sort of stuff."

"I want some time off soon anyway, a vacation. I've been handling too many cases."

"I was planning a vacation myself."

"Yeah, maybe we could go together."

"Maybe, but right now we have to get to the hospital. I'd better round up the girls."

Cirrus clouds lightly feathered the deep blue sky, almost like whitecaps on a lake. Stephanie had once heard that crazy people were drawn to look at the sky, and bums were drawn to look at the ground. She decided she'd rather be crazy so a beautiful void could overwhelm her and transport her away from the cruel things in life. Bums thought they needed things, like the dirty cigarette butts they picked from the gutters. Most adults were bums, just like the ones in the park they were now passing - that was because they craved rotten things they didn't need.

Jannes had been transferred from Scarsdale Hospital to St. Michael's, so they had come over the valley bridge to Queen Street, into a neighborhood near the hospital. A poor area, it held many homeless people. Beyond the hospital, a wall of high-rises towered. Stephanie's old dance school was over there. She remembered how it was bum-proof, with locked fire escape doors, stairwells, and security guards at the main doors.

She'd been taught that homeless bums were ogres that lurked in alleys and only thought of snatching little girls and running off with them. Tiffany had always kicked drunks she saw passed out on the sidewalk. Because Tiffany hated them, Stephanie didn't, but she still saw them as ogres - fascinating monsters. She stared wide-eyed at a leather-faced drunk stumbling off the curb. Skip hammered the horn, and for a moment, she wondered how anyone's face could get so rough and creased. Right before the parking lot, she spotted a bag lady on the bench. They were the most fascinating of all. Tiffany had always liked to show her bag ladies and tell her she'd eventually become one - mainly because she didn't work hard enough at school. It used to frighten her so much that she'd wash for ten minutes, thinking she smelled like a bag lady. Nobody could love a bag lady, and that's what frightened her the most - that she might already have the seed in her and her father hadn't loved her because of it.

Tiffany had practically bubbled with stories as to why her wicked father hadn't loved her. Her feature story was that Stephanie's mother had died miscarrying her second child and that her father hated all children because of it. It was actually the story Stephanie preferred because it was the only one in which she wasn't directly at fault. It was also the story that she found hardest to believe.

Alice punched her shoulder as Skip bounced into the patched lot. "Wake up," she said.

"I don't feel like going up," Stephanie said, and she really didn't. "I don't want to see sick people. It's depressing."

"I need to have a private chat with Father, anyway," Alice said.

Skip pulled out the keys. "I'll take Alice up," he said to Julian. "You can wait down in the lobby with Stephanie."

"I'd rather go up with Julian," Alice said.

Skip pouted, and Stephanie could see that his hurt look was false. Obviously, he wanted to go up to see what Alice said to Jannes. "Look," Stephanie said. "There's a juggler over in the park. Skip can take me over to watch while pops takes you up."

"Sounds good to me," Julian said. "I need to have a word with Jannes anyway. Come on, Alice, we'll go up."

They got out into bright sunlight, and Skip frowned as he watched Julian and Alice head for the steps. Stephanie could practically hear the gears grinding in his brain. She guessed he was probably planning to plant a bug on Alice from now on. Either that or he was trying to think of an excuse to follow them inside.

"I told you I feel sick," Stephanie said. "I don't want to look at the hospital. Let's go over to the park."

Skip turned to her, and his frown dropped; he'd given up for the moment - his face opened in relief. "Yeah, hospitals make me sick, too. I don't need to know what Jannes says, either, if that's what you're thinking. I know he'll lose custody of Alice. The case is simple. He can't care for her, and her mother can. It's just a matter of waiting until the legal work goes through."

The asphalt had softened in the heat, and the smell of tar was strong. They went into the park, finding it much cooler, and stopped at the first bench. Most of the winos and homeless people were flaked out under the willows on the far side. A small crowd was gathered at picnic tables just over from their bench. They were watching a juggler toss balls and pins. He wore a loud print shirt, a vest, a top hat, and baggy pants. A little boy assisted him, tossing in new balls and pins as he juggled. The boy was also brightly dressed, but he had a rogue's face that Stephanie didn't like. He looked to be too aggressive. Unlike other girls, Stephanie preferred boys who were shy.

A tan popcorn-and-nuts wagon rolled up, and Skip got up and bought popcorn and chips. He sat back down and pulled a notebook from his shirt pocket.

"Why do you list everything in that book?" Stephanie said.

"Expenses. One bag of Cape Cod potato chips for Alice. Believe me, the small items add up. If I didn't bill my clients for them, I wouldn't make a profit."

"Suppose I hired you - how much would you charge a day?"

"Depends on the case. First, I'd have to hear your story, and then I'd decide on a fee. I found a lost dog for a little girl once, but it was her parents who paid."

"I wouldn't want Julian to know about my case."

"You mean you really have a case?"

"You have to promise not to tell Julian."

"Okay, I promise. You have my professional word."

"I want you to locate my father and ask him why he abandoned me."

"I could do that. Sometimes it's easy to find people, sometimes it's very hard, but I can't see the point of it really."

"It's important for me to know if any of the stuff Tiffany told me was true."

"Your stepmother was crazy. I doubt if anything she said was true."

"I want to know which of the stories are the lies."

"I could start with a couple of phone calls, but you better not tell Julian either - or I'll be in trouble. And I can't have that because I have to be near Alice."

"Just start with it," Stephanie said, knowing that once she got Skip started, he'd probably get hooked into the case.

Sunset's amber haze was fading to red over the wispy clouds in the west. A distant plane slipped toy-like through the light. Other jet trails had blown to twisted ribbons and banners that celebrated the journey into Valhalla, or so it would be if Stephanie were watching the end of a movie. In real life, she believed there were only ordinary people, and they journeyed into nightfall, the darkness of the mind, and eventually death. At dinner, she'd asked Julian how a person became a bag lady. His view was that personal failure, lack of a full life, and the indifference and cruelty of others could inflict wounds - deep emotional wounds. The person shut out, or shut up inside, would react with antisocial behavior. If the wounds became terminal, then the person couldn't reconcile it all and would live at the bottom in a legal state of insanity. People that wouldn't be helped couldn't be helped, so Stephanie found herself believing that bag ladies were cripples who existed because people were mean-spirited in general.

She'd thought it over in detail and had become convinced that Tiffany had planned to make her a bag lady. If Tiffany had lived, her cruelty would've inflicted the irreconcilable wounds, and she would've become first a delinquent - like Alice wearing no top half the time - and then a nasty lunatic on the road to bag lady land. She was sure Tiffany had known what she was doing, and that wound itself was irreconcilable - tears came to her eyes at the thought of how much her mother must've hated her. Tiffany's formula was a simple one - the unloved would become uglier and uglier until they would never be loved. And the formula was working already.

Some sparrows flew up in a cloud, and as she turned to watch them, she caught a glimpse of someone coming around the side of the house. Not wanting to be caught crying, she ducked over past some scrub pines, sat on a slate shelf, and wiped her eyes.

It turned out to be Skip. He stepped noisily through the lilac bush instead of walking around it, and he was smiling with some sort of sunset daydream. His easy manner revealed him as a person life had failed to wound. Stephanie admired that quality - he'd spent his life ducking the axes others threw at him, and if he got hit, he'd bind the wound. Never had he let the unworthy penetrate his heart. He'd told Alice he saw life as an obstacle course and himself as a ninja. Just trying to picture him as a ninja made Stephanie smile, then she remembered the phone calls he said he'd make and became anxious.

Skip stopped and looked just about everywhere Stephanie wasn't before he saw her waving to him from behind the pines. "I was hoping you were out here," he said. "I have some news. There isn't anyone else around, is there?"

"No, Alice is in the bedroom, and Pop went for a walk."

"I phoned around some. Got a few dead ends, then a weird lead. Your old neighbors, the Bakers, picked up on some of Tiffany's gossip. Your father was last known to be living in Ontario in a town called Tionaga. They're quite sure he isn't there now."

"What makes them sure?"

"He was involved in a weird religious group that has since disbanded. They were located near Tionaga."

"Is there any way you could check?"

"I'd want to do more than phone the town. Hmm, there is one way. Julian has already talked about heading to the country for some vacation time. I'm supposed to be going along. There's no reason we couldn't just happen to come across Tionaga in the travel book and want to go there. The whole area is a great place in the summer, so there would be no reason for Julian to object. I could ask some questions and look around while we're there. It's very unlikely that your father is anywhere near there, but we may well find out some things about him, and maybe where he went. I guess the first thing I want to check is whether he's still alive."

"That's great. Alice and I will both want to go to Tionaga."

Julian had an uneasy feeling - the sort you can get just before losing your balance. Long experience told him a feeling of being lost would follow. A glance at Skip showed him alert and confident, still thinking his shortcut would take them through to Tionaga. Despite its sturdy shocks and suspension, the Aerostar van still bounced. Julian felt it as a series of kicks in the pants. He was surprised it didn't wake Stephanie and Alice. "This shortcut is a real cattle trail," Julian said. And it did look that way - there was no scenery on it other than tall crab grass, weeds, and two walls of green. Deadwood trees and branches choked the forest, and there were gnarled oaks that had to be one hundred years old. In some places, islands of lichen-covered rock jutted from the scrub, revealing the terrain as unfriendly. It wasn't a hunter's forest; it didn't look like a guide could get through it. And it was unnaturally silent - not even a cricket chirped, shadows from the high boughs played across the ruts like quiet hands, and if there were birds and animals about, they were hidden by the dense brush. A tiger moth was the only creature Julian had seen for half a mile.

A deep rut thumped the suspension. Deciding to stop, Skip checked his map set. "According to the map, Tionaga is just around the bend."

"It sure doesn't look like it," Julian said.

"That's because few people know about this road. It's not on the regular map, so it's been neglected."

As a private eye, Skip had been moved to visit a map store in Toronto to get a super-detailed map of the vacation area. Now Julian was beginning to wonder if Skip could see past the map to reality.

Birdsong killed the silence as Skip rolled on farther, then the road leveled out, and Skip sped up. Now they could hear crickets and distinguish the calls of numerous birds. A bend was ahead, and Skip took it without slowing, then he slammed on the brakes. Dust smoked up, they'd stopped on the edge of an embankment belonging to a rushing stream. The fresh water was the source of the birdsong. A foot or two more, and they would've been in it with the foam and the rainbow trout.

The words SILVER TRAIL MINES were on a faded sign on the far side. CLOUDY CORNERS was barely readable on another of the sign's arrow boards. The signpost was rotted, like it had been there for forty years. Below the sign, the road was choked by vines, weeds, and monster-big pumpkins.

Stephanie groaned as if she were having a bad dream. "Guess there's no bridge," Skip said.

Julian could see the cribbing of a washed-out bridge beneath the water. "Guess not," he said.

"Guess I know why this map has so many more roads on it," Skip said.

"Yeah, why does it?"

"It's because the extra roads are ones that pass through ghost towns - those are ghost towns listed on the sign over there."

"Look at the size of those wild pumpkins. I've never seen bigger. They're all ribbon winners."

"They're so big you could never pull one out of there," Skip said. He wiped his brow with his handkerchief. "I guess I'd better turn back and keep to the main roads."

A return journey through the silence took them to Highway 16 and a big change of scenery. Orchards and farms with tilted barns and hay rolls ran for a stretch, then they passed some roadside fruit-and-vegetable stands, a couple of trailer parks, a flea market, some service stations, and a motel. A green-and-white Tionaga sign appeared, then the town and its small lake showed through the gaps in the trees on a downhill stretch. The town was idyllic: a country place with church spires. There were white, frame houses, a rail museum, and a town hall clock tower huddled on the shore of a small, oasis-like lake. Satellite dishes and the cars were about the only things newer than 1975.

"Julian, what's the name of that resort we picked?" Skip said.

"The Blue Hills Hotel. It must be on the other side of town."

"This is the main drag we're on now, so don't blink."

Julian touched his watch, setting off the alarm, which caused Stephanie and Alice to mumble some sleeper's nonsense. Stephanie's eyes were runny; she rubbed them while Julian tousled her hair.

"We're in Tionaga," Julian said.

"There's a burger pit," Stephanie said. "Let's stop for pop."

"I could use a bite myself," Skip said.

"Let's check in first - get it over with. Then we can have lunch."

"Sure, no problem," Skip said.

A number of motels were on the far side of town - mostly fishermen's joints that also rented poles and trolling boats. The Blue Hills Hotel was the biggest by far, a hotel-and-cottage area set back from the highway. A tree nursery and a field of lawn ornaments blocked the front of it. The main building was a rambling three-story structure, with a playground and a tree-lined sand beach. As the brochure said, it was adjacent to stables, a hiking trail, and a beach store.

The office was set apart from the main building on the entry road, so Skip pulled up there. Julian got out and watched in dismay as the girls clambered out and ran off to the playground, which was more for young kids than girls their age. He'd already made reservations through the website and paid from Toronto, so it was only a matter of verifying it. Horse flies buzzed around the screen door. He swept them aside before entering. The office was plain, just a waiting room, a counter, and a mailbox rack holding the keys to various suites. The clerk was a man of indeterminate age; his neck muscles were rosy like those of an old man, but his hands were younger.

"Howdy," the clerk said. "We've got vacancies. My name is John Hopper - you'll be seeing me if you need anything."

There was no sparkle when John Hopper spoke. His voice was flat and dead. Julian wondered if it was the local accent. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Julian Braddock. I booked from Toronto."

"The hotel or a cottage?"

"Cottage."

Mr. Hopper pulled out a big registry book. He sat at a desktop computer and began to type a form. His face was big and sweaty - he kept glancing up at Julian as he typed. His eyes were round, deep set, and overly moist - they gave Julian the feeling of being ogled by a frog or some other creature that lacked human emotion. Mr. Hopper's mouth was a flat line, revealing no emotion either. Wryly, Julian thought of him as a man waiting to be discovered by a director of B movies for a part in a zombie flick.

"Okay, Mr. Braddock, just sign here, and we'll be all set. You're down the beach road in Cabin 6. It's our best. More than a cabin, really. It has all the conveniences."

Julian got the impression that Mr. Hopper had drawled through the word conveniences as a way of calling him a soft city feller. "Good," he said. "I have two little girls. I need those conveniences, especially the washing machine."

Mr. Hopper shuffled over to the key box for cabin six, and then he paused, looking off into space like there was something he couldn't quite fathom. Either that or his brain had seized up. Julian noticed a dark patch of scar tissue under his neck and a growth next to it. The growth was mole-brown - he was sure it wasn't skin cancer as he'd seen that before.

Suddenly becoming animate, Mr. Hopper tossed Julian the keys. Julian said thanks, picked up his bill, and went out. He felt pity for Mr. Hopper as he was certain some disease had sucked half the life out of him.

Skip was standing by the van toying with his camera. Across the yard, Stephanie and Alice were talking to a woman by the swings.

"I hope you're not going to film everything," Julian said. "It'll drive me nuts. Say, let's go over and see who the lovely lady is."

Skip cocked one eye. "Maybe I'll make a film of her. She looks like the type that's looking for fame."

"You'll scare her away. Put the camera away, pull around, and pick us up."

Julian strolled across the grass under trees that towered unusually high. The Tionaga area had temperate forest and wildflowers that fed on soil unusually rich in nutrients. The result was jungle-lush greenery. It was an area that never let you forget the power of summer. Alice was now flying on the swing, and the beauty of the surroundings, fluttering leaves and wind combing the grass, charged her so that her motion was a flowing aura. Stephanie was still chattering with the woman; snatches of their conversation came to him like fragments of music on the breeze. The woman was about his age, with dark hair in a pageboy style, and it added to her femininity rather than a boyish effect. She had a nice smile that broke like a wave across her face and a graceful way of making small movements and gestures. Her emotions surfaced easily, and they were beautiful. She was an open person who didn't hide her inner being. Not many people were like her.

They watched him approach, and since they were both so cheerful, he felt happy as well. "You never look this happy in Toronto," Julian said as he stepped up to them.

"Who would be?" Stephanie said. She looked to the woman. "This is my father, Julian," she said, and continued without giving them a chance to speak. "This is Sandra, Dad - she knows just about everything there is to do around here."

"Glad to meet you," Sandra said.

"I take it you're from the area," Julian said.

"Actually, I'm not. My sister Dana works at the rail museum. I visit her nearly every summer."

"You must know the area inside out."

"I know the area well enough. Blue Hills used to be for the wealthier people of this area. The beach cottages were their summer homes. Twenty-five years ago, the mines died and the area emptied out. Tionaga attracted some industry and vacationers and survived. Cloudy Corners became a ghost town and finally a pile of rubble. Most of the better estates have been renovated, but there are a few tumbled mansions around."

"Maybe you can show us some of the sites?"

"How many people are with you?"

"Just the girls. Stephanie is my daughter, and Alice is temporarily in my care. Oh, I forgot Skip - he's that grinning man coming over from the van."

"He's a private eye who follows Alice," Stephanie said.

"Really?" Sandra said.

"No, not really," Julian said. "He's supposed to be something like that, but it's more like he's a friend I brought along."

"Talking about me again," Skip said, and then he introduced himself.

Julian was glad that Skip came across more like a grinning schoolboy than a private eye. He feared the private eye stuff would give Sandra second thoughts.

Conversation drifted back to the sites and events around Tionaga. "There's a rail museum I mentioned," Sandra said, "and a dolls' house gallery."

"What's that?" Stephanie said.

"It's a house with rooms full of doll houses. Some of them are very beautiful."

Alice kicked up dirt as she skidded to a halt on the swing. "We'll go there for sure," she said.

"There's also a Huron Indian village," Sandra said. "Then there's Rushing River Park and the forest observation tower. Here at Blue Hills, there's a hiking trail. Horseback trips and the usual fishing and canoeing are available."

"Canoeing is what I want," Stephanie said. "Promise, Dad - we'll go this afternoon."

"We haven't even had lunch yet."

"I mean after lunch."

"You should try lunch at the hotel," Sandra said. "They have good meals for a price that's next to nothing."

"I'll go for that," Skip said. "Let's check the goods at the cabin and chow down. Why don't you join us, Sandra?"

"Sure, can do. What cabin are you in anyway?"

"Cabin six," Julian said.

"I'm in twelve. It's up the beach. I like to be closer to the wilderness."

Skip shuffled back and forth on the beach, kicking up loose shells. He paused to study a huge driftwood tree embedded in the sand, thinking of it as a marker, a spot where you could bury your treasure and find it a year later. Two yellow canoes bobbed out on the water. Julian was captaining one, and Sandra the other. They were in the middle of the lake, and Stephanie and Alice were little more than dots below the red improvised sails they were holding. The sails were one of Sandra's ideas - they would use the wind to aid in crossing the lake and save paddling energy for the way back.

Skip felt unkind, jealous even - it was the male instinct. It always hit him when a woman went for another man. Sandra, he liked, but she was too beautiful, and maybe too different culturally. But how many black women would he find out here anyway? He remembered Sandra saying she had a younger sister who was also single. Maybe he'd like her. For a moment, he wondered why two nice women would be without husbands. Then he checked himself, remembering that people always wondered why he was without a wife. He wasn't supposed to have his mind on women anyway - he had a small job to do for Stephanie. Kicking a piece of rot off the tree, he checked himself again - he was supposed to be watching Alice. Maybe he should've been whining to Julian, saying canoes were too dangerous for the little tomboy. "No, I'm not her mom," he muttered. The truth was, he wasn't really even needed on the case. Alice's mother only needed a lawyer. Julian could take care of the girls. Sure, the idea of her daughter being in the hands of a

weird circus performer was a nightmare for Alice's mother. She probably thought he was going to kill her in a knife-throwing act or something. But he knew better.

There was no sense in trying to smother Alice. Sitting down under a tree, he took a final glance and decided to head into town. He had a name - Donald Hopper. Hopper owned the gun collectors' shop. Hopper had been around Tionaga longer than a wooden Indian and was the man to question regarding Stephanie's father. From what Skip had heard so far, he was afraid to find out more. For sure, he didn't want to bring Stephanie bad news. She had an emotional problem concerning her father - that was really what the case was all about. Resolving it lay more in satisfying her need to believe she was worthy of love than in finding her father's history. The logical thing to do was to get the story and sweeten it for her. And even then, it might not help. She probably had fears that Julian would turn on her and abandon her. The best cure would be for time to pass, and eventually she would grow secure.

Skip took the van into town, following the shore of Beartooth Lake. It was really only a short run into Tionaga. The town looked lazy in its setting behind the disc of sparkling water. A number of boats bobbed on the waves near the docks, and he figured that the trout and pike must spawn like hell here to survive. Boats also dotted the shore in the rustic belt of farms and orchards that stretched from the other side of the lake. The remains of Cloudy Corners were over there somewhere. One building stood out on a strip of sand beach, so he pulled over and checked with his binoculars. A crumbling mansion came into focus. It had all the beauty of a rotten tooth. The roof sagged with mold. He figured the next big storm would probably be the end of it.

Humming a silly tune, he passed the population sign - TIONAGA, POP 10,000 - and cruised up the main drag. More people were on the street now, and they weren't much different from people in Toronto, except that they were nearly all white and a lot of them favored straw-woven hats. He knew their sort - they'd be very friendly to a black guy from out of town, as long as he didn't pose a threat to the virginity of their daughters.

Beartooth Guns and Accessories was the name of the shop he was looking for. He wasn't quite sure where it was, so he decided to drive around until he came to it. The drive turned out to be a short one - the rail museum attracted his attention, and while he was cruising over for a look, he spotted the gun shop on a side street.

The building was of simple design, a square frame like the general store you'd see in a movie set in a cowboy town. It had a fresh coat of gray paint and a flowered walk that looked too dainty for a gun shop. A hand-carved and varnished sign hung above the door.

Skip parked on the curb, popped out, and went inside, finding himself in an air-conditioned room set to frost mode. No one was at the counter or anywhere in the store that he could see. The back room was behind a wine curtain, so he figured the owner was in there.

He looked around. Guns were set everywhere on the walls and marked with label plates. There was no apparent order. The first row he studied held a Luger, a squirrel rifle, an Indian Matchlock musket, a Spanish Flintlock, a Winchester carbine, a Mann 25 palm pistol, and a double Derringer. He found the Derringer fascinating; small guns were the only guns Skip liked, and he didn't like them much. Guns meant you were handling a case wrong, or else you were handling a case that really belonged to the police.

Taking down the Derringer, he strolled over to the counter. Most likely, he wouldn't buy it, but he could at least use it to get the man talking. There was still no clerk, so he rapped the counter with his fist, then studied the goods in a glass case while he waited. The case contained the usual gun collector's goods - Marbles Brand gun oil, Stoeger barrel grease, rust remover, powder solvent, and a type of rubbing paper meant to bring out worn markings.

Rifleman's magazine was in the turn rack, so he took a copy down and leafed through it, then the curtains moved, and Donald Hopper appeared. He was an old guy, about seventy, with grey hair that was smoke-yellowed. Years on the sauce had made a deformed strawberry of his nose,

and when he smiled, a webbing of wrinkles stretching from the corner of his mouth deepened to crevices. His perfect teeth looked oversized behind his thin lips and had to be false.

"Afternoon, I'm Donald Hopper," the old man said. "I see the Derringer has caught your fancy."

"It has. I thought it might make a nice concealed weapon."

"Action needs tuning. You'd never get a quality shot out of it. You need a newer weapon."

"I'm not just here for the weapons. My name is Skip Rosfield. I'm a private eye, and I'm trying to trace a guy who used to live in town. Chang Kung was his name. His daughter is trying to locate him."

"Chang, yeah. I remember him - but I don't know what happened to him. He had a thing for swords. I sold him dress swords, a Mexican war saber, a Civil War NCO's sword, some ivory-handled moderns, and a 15th-century rapier. Those are the ones I remember."

"He belonged to some religious group, didn't he?"

"They were over by Cloudy Corners and didn't associate much with the townspeople. Chang was a Buddhist, while most of the others were into weird witchcraft. In the end, they expelled him from the main camp, and he stayed in a cave somewhere in the wilderness. That was before the disease got them."

"What disease?"

"Don't know exactly - it was horrible. Most of them died. I saw one victim. Growths like bruised mushrooms were on his face. They were all mad and deformed when they died. Rumor was that Chang had it too, but he used his powers of meditation to heal himself. Then he died some other way."

"You sure it's not all rumor? I've never heard of a contagious disease like that."

"It's not a rumor, but few people here will talk about it because the town relies on tourism. Generally, people think the disease was the result of witchcraft. They called up a force, and only Chang was able to fight it off."

"You sure he's not around?"

"Couldn't be. I heard he's dead."

"Where would I look if I wanted to check?"

"The remains of the settlement are out by Cloudy Corners. But you couldn't look for Chang. You'd just get lost in the woods."

"You don't have much confidence in me. Guess I don't look much like a detective."

"You'd have to look like Chief Red Cloud before I'd feel smooth about you going out there. Nothing lucky happens out there."

"I'll chance it," Skip said.

Donald Hopper's eyes suddenly gained a knowing fire, and Skip began to feel that there was a weird side to him that you couldn't see but sensed - hidden somewhere in the infrared. It dawned on him that the deformed nose might be from something other than booze, and the thought of it aided the chill air and sent shivers rippling up his back.

"Sorry about the cold," Mr. Hopper said. "I had pneumonia years back. I can't breathe in the heat."

"Thought it was something like that."

Reaching under the counter like molasses in motion, Hopper came up with a palm pistol. One that was brand-new and super light. "Take this with you," he said. "If you return it, I'll know

you're okay. It's a handy little gun - fires fléchettes that can rip a man's head off, yet it's as light as a packet of keys."

"Thanks," Skip said. He gave his eyebrows a flip, took the gun, and slipped it into his shirt pocket. "The thing that scares me is rabies. I saw a movie about a guy lost with rabies." He patted his pocket. "This little iron makes me feel better already."

Skip left the gun shop and headed out of town. Deciding to pick up some instructions, he pulled into a gas station. Standing on packed crankcase earth, he told the gas jockey he was a lawyer checking out some land in Cloudy Corners.

"Shit!" said the smear-faced jockey. He wiped a greasy hand on his shirt like he meant to signify something by it. "If your client bought land out there, he's been suckered. You can't even drive out to it - the roads are all washed out, rutted, or blocked by deadfalls. Take King's Highway 3 to the forest observation tower. You can view the whole area from there. Don't try to go in on foot or you'll get lost."

Heat was softening the roads, and there was the stink of tar spray on the unpaved stretches. Sweat had suddenly flushed his skin, so he put on the air conditioner. The heat hadn't bothered him earlier, so he figured it was a reaction to Hopper's freezing shop. Air hissed out, touching him like sticky fingers.

As he turned onto King's Highway 3, he saw a gray cloud like a grave marker in the sky. Suddenly, he didn't feel good about the investigation or about Chang Kung. He had the feeling Chang was a criminal like Stephanie's stepmother had said. If so, he could only disappoint his child. Stephanie would probably believe there was bad blood in her. He supposed that because of the endless possibilities of genetics, some people could be put together with tendencies toward evil. But it wouldn't run from father to daughter. Most criminals learned their craft in Skip's opinion, and there were the insane ones who'd been thoroughly warped by trauma in their younger days. Sometimes he wished he had more conviction concerning criminals he came in contact with - he should want them to burn in hell forever. Only he really didn't believe in jails. They were schools of crime and debauchery. Criminals were people who hated authority, so an authority system wasn't the cure. They came out filled with resentment, ready to nail it to an innocent victim. Leaving them out wasn't an option either. There really was no answer, and he was someone who lived without one, even though everyone in the detection business had solid solutions for criminals.

He had that general feeling in him - there was no answer - like he was picking it up from the air out here. A farm slipped by, then there were no more houses, only dilapidated trailer homes half hidden by trees. At the bottom of the embankment, the waters of Beartooth Lake glittered. He could see some pines growing on high rocks beside a lonely sandy beach. Farther on, the remains of a covered bridge lay collapsed in a dried-up streambed, and the road twisted south. His thoughts were beginning to take on the nonsense language of an uneasy dream. In bright daylight, he felt like he was riding down a dark country road, the shadows of the trees like sentinels. That the area was spooked, there was no doubt, only he found himself forgetting it like he was becoming one of the spooks himself.

A sign announcing the observation tower appeared after a turn. There was also a ROAD ENDS sign that he found reassuring. It meant he wouldn't have to drive any farther in. He didn't like driving while he was spooked; there was paranoia to it like he'd been drugged, and at any moment the hallucination would begin. Going in on foot was the better option. Some sort of mist was in the trees ahead, and as he got closer, he realized that it was caterpillar tenting blown through the wild apple trees like cobwebs. He didn't know of any late-summer caterpillars and began to wonder if nature worked backward out here. A field of pumpkins was beyond the apple trees, and the tower rose, looking strong in contrast with the aging trees. The sight of it excited him, and he sped up. A huge clearing surrounded the tower. There were no cars in the gravel lot, so he supposed no one was there. He'd been hoping for someone to chat with - he'd have

questions and no one to answer them. His powers of observation would have to be brought to the forefront, and the view from the top would have to tell him something of a story.

There was no reason not to pull right up to the stairs. On getting out, he looked up at the tower top and the feathery whirl of clouds it pointed to. He felt for his binoculars and realized he didn't have them. They were on the passenger seat, so he retrieved them and made for the steps.

The planks were new, solid hardwood that had almost no give underfoot. The scent of the wood was nice, and it cleared the road-tar odors from his nostrils. He felt in good shape and rather enjoyed the walk up. The exercise took his mind out of its morbid drift and made him feel more like a keen detective. He now realized that the enemy in detection wasn't criminals, it was anything that took the razor edge off the mind. He hadn't considered it before. He supposed it was why the supernatural couldn't be investigated. You'd be like a weeping drunk studying a leaf and believing it to be a suffering butterfly.

At the top, he paused to catch his breath. The exercise had brought about exhilaration. Wind and inner warmth made for a strange euphoria. It felt like he was rising from the earth, like the tower was a silent rocket. This high up, the beams of the sun weren't spooky arms like they were below.

Pacing to the rail, he took in the view. He was looking back at Tionaga. A gradual haze deepened on Beartooth Lake; the tower and steeples of the town stood castle-like above it. The rail museum was a smear of red and the brightest object in the town.

Turning and walking directly across, he looked in the direction of Cloudy Corners. It was like the world had been divided in half, and he was just over the line; Rushing River Park and the Huron Indian Village in the clear area, and from there on, a dense and blighted forest. Some of the trees were diseased. He saw groves of maples that were spotted with silver and other dull autumnal colors of the blight. Some shattered giants had simply withered from lack of groundwater. Even in a healthy canopy, deadwood trees protruded everywhere like matchsticks.

He focused on a weed-covered rail line and a crumbled rail kiosk. Farther off, the ruins of Cloudy Corners stood at the center of a ring of dead oaks. Many buildings were tumbled, some fire-blackened, others had roofs of mold and toadstools. Heaps of rubble, rusted trucks, farm machinery, and mining equipment littered the fields. Entrances to some of the old silver mines were set in rocky terrain nearby.

Going over the patchwork of forest carefully, he came to a clearing he'd overlooked. It was closer to the tower, and the buildings were newer. It had to be the site of the religious colony Chang Kung had belonged to. The buildings were a poor work of carpentry; shabby, many of them connected by ugly add-on constructions. Totems were in the field, and he saw drawings on huge boulders. The boulders made a wall, and behind it, monster pumpkins grew by the hundreds. There was something creepy about the pumpkins; he supposed it was that many of them sported deformities. It was a stirring scene overall, like looking into a well at his reflection and suspecting something hideous to be grinning beneath the surface.

He could get over there by way of the shore of Beartooth Lake. Although he had to consider that the route probably looked easier from above. Checking his watch, he decided he had plenty of time for a fast hike over and back. Even if the place was abandoned, he was sure he'd find out most of what he wanted to know.

A bluff blocked the lakeshore near the tower, and farther along it flattened in a crescent to become a stony beach. Skip cut over a field of rocks, thistles, and wildflowers, following the tree line while avoiding the forest itself. The rough terrain took its toll on him immediately. He began to sweat, and thistle barbs and snake holes ripped at his ankles. Forced to pause, he saw that the field was breaking to clover and sighed with relief.

Marine-blue harvester butterflies were flitting by, and there was a cloud of other butterflies in the deeper clover. He believed they were painted, ladies. As he lifted his binoculars for a look, a

thistle cut into his foot, causing him to stumble. More objects pierced his runners, and he howled and danced backward.

Sitting on the shady side of a small granite outcropping, he pulled off his shoes and socks. The skin was only scratched. It made him think of himself as a city boy with sensitive feet, and it was a thought he took no pride in. Looking up, he saw that it wasn't thistles after all. Bails of barbed wire had been unrolled to make a hidden carpet through the clover. A ways past the wire, there was a field of very tall weeds. He'd noticed them before, but he hadn't really seen them clearly while he was fascinated by the butterflies. It was hemp, a field of marijuana. Skip snorted; wild Canadian grass was the world's best for making rope and not that great for smoking. The growers were likely cutting it with powerful hydroponically grown stuff and reaping big bucks from volume sales.

Picking his way through burs of rusty wire on tiptoe, he moved into deep clover and then into Indian hemp plants a foot taller than him. The cloud of butterflies whirled above in curved patterns like they were shot out of a particle accelerator, and the sticky-sweet air was heavy on his lungs. As long as he kept going straight ahead, he would eventually reach the beach and be able to cut back into the abandoned compound.

Skip was sure it was someone from Chang's old cult that had planted the grass. He was beginning to get a better picture of their religious activities. Cults he'd studied in his detective course. There were thousands of rural cults scattered across North America, but only a few were dangerous enough to justify rescue and deprogram operations. This group had somehow deprogrammed itself - they all did eventually - he was probably approaching a scene that was all too common.

That was what he wished, but his nerves were seeing things differently. He was feeling spooked again. Plant tops flowed in the breeze, and a river of butterflies passed in honey light. Something wasn't quite right about the butterflies, but he didn't know enough about butterflies to know what it was. Perhaps it was nothing, just a mood of the land. He was susceptible to moods. Even when his life was in perfect order, there were moods that made him sad. And if he was at the bottom, there were moods that lifted him to the top. You couldn't buy happiness because it had to be in you already. That was part of it. There was no happiness in the resins of this ganja forest, for sure - it left you feeling as empty and transitory as the leaf shadows. And he could sense a presence, like there was a huge stone underneath him that was pulling everything down.

He arrived at a small clearing in the field. It would be a good spot for smoking the stuff if it were smokable. Not that Skip wanted to smoke anyway. Grass made music sound better, but it also put him to sleep. Since he'd started in detection, he'd been stone sober most of the time.

A strange sight at the center of the clearing took his mind off the grass. It was a pumpkin, one that weighed about 300 pounds. Hundreds of butterflies were walking on it, their wings shivering, and the wing markings were striking. He looked around suspiciously, as if he was half expecting a little green man to jump out of the plants and bite his ankle, but there was nothing other than the pumpkin and the butterflies.

Stepping up close, he watched the butterflies crawl on the pumpkin. He touched the shell, finding it warm and soft. It was spotted with rot. The sun was making a nice pumpkin pie of it.

A stray butterfly landed on the back of his hand, and as he was about to shake it off, he saw something peculiar in the markings. His vision shifted, and he understood what had been giving him the creeps. The pattern of the markings formed could be seen as a face or mask. Devilishly ugly. A check of several other butterflies showed that they all had identical markings.

The realization of it scared him, and he stepped back. So that was it - he'd been aware of it subconsciously the whole time. A new sense of loathing came over him as he watched the winged mass move; then he saw the mask again, in a larger form. The markings of the entire colony had reformed it - like a fractal - and he was being looked down at by a huge devil. It made him gasp, and as he moved back, he slipped on a piece of rotten shell and fell forward. He

tumbled into the pumpkin and tried to use it for support, but the section he hit was rotten, and his hand and arm sank through the shell and into the warm pulp.

His balance regained, he yanked his arm back out, splattering himself with golden pulp. The butterflies had sailed up in a cloud, and when he looked at them, blood rose to his head, and he almost passed out. The earth yawned beneath his feet like it was splitting, but he didn't guess it to be more than his own dizziness. He stumbled away, dark spots obscuring his vision. In the back of his mind, he saw an evil eye open.

The eye vanished, and a strange sensation was added to his dizziness - darkness, it seemed like his shadow was whirling above him like a bat. As he caught himself, he heard an enormous belch and saw the pumpkin split in half. Pulp oozed out of the crack, bubbling like soda overflowing, and he could see maggots in the golden bubbles. It made him sick to know his arm had been in there. He checked it hastily; there were no maggots, but his arm and sleeve were gum-sticky. The reek from the pumpkin was of fermenting mash, like moonshine had been brewing in the shell. The way his legs were shaking, he was sure he was standing by the power of the smell alone.

His preoccupation went back to his shadow, which was there but seemed to be missing. A sense of loss took hold of him, and also a belief that his behavior was ridiculous. It had to be an oddball hallucination, and maybe that was worse. Drugs might somehow be in his system. He felt a black wave of panic rising, and he saw a spot at the back of his mind and something ugly descending like rain in his thoughts. The sun also blackened, and light akin to laser rays struck him. Spots passed in his vision, and with shaking hands, he stared at his feet, watching the spots flow past his toes and slowly remake his shadow. It took shape, and he thought of blood pooling as it spread to a final form.

Normalcy returned with the speed of a camera flash, and it made him think he'd recovered from a brief hallucination. Here he was in a field of dope with a rotten pumpkin. If anyone found him, they'd think he'd smoked his brains out. The pervading air of paranoia was similar to a drug state - only worse, because instead of feeling watched, he had a feeling that someone was looking over his shoulder. A crazy and irritating feeling that grew until he felt pressure on his shoulder - almost like a small creature or man was perched there.

Brushing the nothing from his shoulder, he began to wonder if mad whispering in his ear would be next. Standing around wasn't helping, so he moved out of the clearing, back into the hemp plants. Leaves brushed his sweaty face, and he found it uncomfortable - a tickling and itching sensation that was as creepy as spiders on his skin. Hot air stayed trapped below while the breeze shook the tops. It was an oven that rustled, boiling his brain like an egg.

Near the end of the field, he began to choke. Lung pain came with the choking, and he was sure it was an allergic reaction. When his throat was clear, he eased in a deep breath and inhaled a butterfly by accident. Spitting it out quickly, he began to choke again.

He'd had enough of the marijuana field. He began to run, finding it difficult. In fact, he was certain that lumps were rising on the ground and trying to trip him. High steps saved him from falling, then the plants broke, and he was running in long grass, straight for a tree. He dodged to the side, missed the tree, and then he was flying.

It was the edge of the bluff, and he'd dashed right over it. Gravity snatched him, and he did a flailing roll down the sandy side. Rocks were at the bottom, but he rolled to a stop before he hit them. It meant he had some luck, but it wasn't enough to calm him. He swore like a truck driver with a flat. Getting up, he felt his scraped face, then he checked that the gun was still in his pocket and began to brush his clothes off.

A sound of splitting wood grabbed his attention. Looking up the bluff, he saw the glare of the sun and a rotten branch falling from the tree he'd dodged. The branch was so rotten it burst apart and came down as a rain of twigs and rot. There was no dodging all of it. He could only curse at the jester gods that were doing this to him.

Now he was filthy as a tramp. Glancing at his shoes, he saw a blob of wormy rot stuck to his right foot. A kick didn't remove it, so he stepped over to the water. From the edge of a boulder, he stuck his toe in and swirled it around. The result was sharp pain. He nearly slipped off the boulder, and then he raised his foot. He couldn't believe his eyes - he'd caught a pike with his toe.

A hard kick shook it loose, and it skated on the surface and disappeared in a splash. Skip's gaze grew sad. He studied his toe; his eyes were wells of confusion. His luck was too incredible, and it had to come at a time when he felt like garbage. He had no intention of carrying on in such filthy shape, so he took his shirt off, shook it, and placed it on a clean boulder. Seizing a large rock, he heaved it in to scare off the fish. Then he washed his face, hair, and upper body.

With his shirt over his shoulder, he went down the beach, following the bluff until it broke to occasional outcroppings of rock and pine and finally to nothing. Ring-billed gulls spotted the sand beach, and he strolled down it until he came to a trail leading into the forest. From the tower, he'd observed that all trails at this beach led to the cult settlement. He went down the trail, figuring that only a short walk remained.

The path had so many forks it was hard to follow. He realized that he could be circling around and not getting anywhere, so he took out his pocketknife and began to mark the trees. Taking his direction from the sun, he moved ahead. He felt stronger in the cool shade, but as he got deeper in, mosquitoes appeared, so many that he couldn't shake them off. He could smell swamp water nearby, though he couldn't see it. Frustrated by his blood-smeared arms, he began to jog, going a few hundred yards before he came to the end of the path.

The duff ended abruptly at a small canyon, and since he'd been jogging down an inclined section of the trail, he'd nearly gone over the edge again. A stream raced over the rocks at the bottom, and he could see drawings like Indian paintings on the canyon face. Putting his memory to work, he recalled seeing the canyon from the tower. Somehow, he'd circled around the compound. He'd have to go back.

After angrily splattering a mosquito, he turned. Before he could take a step, he heard a snap. A ways up the path, a pumpkin had broken free of its vine and was rolling down the path toward him. It was another 300-pound beast. He dodged to the side, and it bounced, changed direction, and came directly for him. Skip barely managed to squeeze out of the way, and he spun and looked as the pumpkin flew over the edge and went down. It smashed on the wall and hit as a rain of pulp, then a buzzing swarm of flies flew out of the pines and down to light on the pulp.

That something on his shoulder was getting to him again. It was an unwanted sixth sense. More than the forest seemed to be towering over him. Wind-rocked boughs created a movement of shadows, and at odd moments, he jerked his head, thinking he'd spotted someone standing near him. A sinuous shift of deeper shadows was all he found. Now that he was going uphill, the passage was rough. He was sticky and soggy all over. A man sweating blood and oil would feel about the same. This journey was one he sorely regretted.

The new branch he took ended at a rusty wheelbarrow and a field of long grass and timothy. Rusted hulks of old farm machines were parked at odd angles. A mostly overgrown path led to a bent-up metal gate and another field of pumpkins. Its surrounding grounds were interesting. Boulders and outcroppings were marked with graffiti and Indian pictographs. There were totems and trees that had died from being carved alive. Bare earth formed circles he assumed had once been places of ceremony. The main building was a mismatched construction, now mostly a dilapidated monstrosity. He didn't like the idea of entering it. If it collapsed, he'd be buried in termite rot and wormy mold. One taste of rot was enough for one day.

Moving across the field, Skip kept a cautious eye on the rusted machinery, thinking that someone might be crouched behind it. When he got to the gate, something did spring. He did a startled jump back and tried to pull the palm pistol from his shirt pocket, but the button was fastened, and he failed to get it open. It was only a jackrabbit anyway. He wiped the sweat off his brow

and watched as the rabbit bounded behind a heap of grass, then he unbuttoned his pocket so he could get the gun if he needed it.

The old gate wobbled open on one hinge, and he avoided the rabbit hole behind it. Now he was going into the pumpkins and had a bad feeling about it. The ground was flat, so none could roll free, and the ugly butterflies weren't about, and he was thankful for that. Still, the sun was beating down, and he could practically taste the hot juice. His appetite was soured by it; he'd had enough of the scent of rotted pumpkins. And they didn't seem to be laid out in a natural formation. There was an organized pattern in the vines and pumpkins, with younger yellow ones mixed with fully aged orange ones. It struck him that he might see that devil's face in the pattern if he were looking down from above. Or maybe the vines would form spider-web patterns around the pumpkins.

A tingling in his hand caused him to stop and check it. The flesh was mildly swollen and bruise-tinted. He could see the blood pulsing in it. There must've been poison in the pumpkin he'd punched through. The pain wasn't much, but it troubled him that poison might be working its way into his bloodstream. While he was thinking it over, his eyes slipped beyond his hand, and he saw a stone in the grass. Kicking some vines aside, he found it to be a gravestone - fallen and crumbled. Hairs stood up through the mosquito gore on the backs of his arms. He realized that this was an old, untended graveyard, and with the realization came a loathing of the pumpkins.

A gross hissing noise broke the silence, and he went for his gun. Spinning on his heel, he aimed at the source, which was a pumpkin with a geyser of steam at its top. Lowering the gun, he scratched his head. He took a step and felt the earth give. Dodging left, he saw his footprint and a hole beneath it. He'd almost gone into a sunken grave. "Shit!" he whispered, and he knew he'd have to tread carefully to avoid unstable turf.

Tapping the ground ahead with his toe, he found it a bit squishy. He was afraid to drop his weight there, then a pumpkin behind him exploded like a bomb, and he panicked and began to run. A chain reaction ensued as pumpkins shot up geysers of steam and the fattest ones splattered apart. Banging his ankle on a stone, Skip hit the ground. Streams of pumpkin pulp shot over him. Scrambling forward, he got up and running, gasping for air. Burning gas filled his lungs, ground collapsed behind him, but momentum carried him on to a half-collapsed fence. Diving over it, he rolled and then lay on his back, breathing hard as streamers of pumpkin gas drifted in the air above him.

Obscene sputtering from the pumpkins was all he could hear. Noises that were piggish, and they firmed up his belief that the countryside was a cruel joke come alive. The land was a mocking beast. He sat up, wondering just what Chang Kung and the other cult members could've been worshipping out here. This was the sort of place that lent credence to the idea of God as a squat devil ruling over his freaks - the humans. A circle of bare earth was close by. Rocks from an old fire pit were at its center. No doubt, it had been used for ceremonies of some kind. He stood up, feeling the need to investigate. Pumpkin seeds slid down his shirt. After pausing to slap them away, he walked into the circle. He found himself facing a totem pole in the untended grass beyond the pit. It was warped, not made from the right kind of wood, and the faces carved in it were malformed. A sad version of Raven was at the top. No artist would carve faces with such a screwball look. He believed the wood had breathed in rainwater and dried unevenly so many times that the distortion had occurred.

One of the bottom faces - a weird bear - appeared to have hair. It couldn't be. Skip stepped out of the circle and walked up to the totem. It was hair, sure enough, and a bright red jewel glittered in it. Breeze shifted the locks and sent a shiver up his spine. He could see that they were scalp locks fastened there by a jeweled dagger.

The rustling of leaves was like a whisper of murder. He didn't like this place at all. Here, the day was fragile, about to break like a mirror and reveal something ugly. Stepping away, he went up to a painted boulder. The likeness of a horse and rider was on its side. He studied the faded drawing, then noticed movement in the grass at his feet. Parting a dried clump with his toes, he

saw a snake slithering - a copperhead, and he knew they were deadly. As he stepped back from it, he noticed other ripples in the grass. The boulder was a damn snake nest. He ducked back quickly and then looked to the compound - his thoughts weren't really on it. He could've sworn his shadow had followed him a little too slowly then. He'd left it behind, and it'd dragged back up to him. Were his senses cheating him? It was a possibility he didn't like. It was either that or a presence of some sort was with him, and he didn't exactly prefer that.

The compound itself was another presence, a sad one; nothing more than a patchwork of bad wood on the surface. The smaller structures were all connected to the main building and resembled appendages of a decaying organism. A bleached mass of shingles clung to the warped main roof like the coat of a mangy dog. Mold stains and tobacco-colored streaks defaced the walls, windows were boarded with chewed planks, and the connecting roofs sagged into one another like the collapsing lungs of a dead dinosaur. The front door had fallen long ago. It was sunk into the dirt, a wooden carpet that sprouted weeds.

Going inside would be a definite mistake for an ordinary person, but he was a detective, and he considered himself quick on his feet. Working around the snake nest, he approached the compound. Grayness was all he could see beyond the door, and that meant it was dim inside but not dark. Halting, he took out his palm pistol. The scalp lock he'd discovered was probably quite old, but he wasn't taking any chances. Maybe there was a cult member lurking somewhere. One who fancied himself a wild Indian. It could even be Chang Kung - mad, shriveled, and dangerous.

The fallen door creaked underfoot, and he could smell the dry rot before he entered - that and another odor similar to the stench of old urine-soaked mattresses. On the inside, the ceiling was pin-holed. Pencil-thin sunbeams fanned from the rafters. Beyond the first room, there was darkness, as light didn't penetrate beyond the first story. The place had been stripped bare, and charcoal drawings were scrawled on the wall. A cross between graffiti and art, like a child with the reach of a giant had defaced the room. It was more proof that someone was about.

Without a flashlight, he couldn't go in further, and he had no stomach for it either. An encounter with a maniac in this tumbledown joint wasn't desirable, so he took a last look around and then turned to leave, catching something in the corner of his eye as he did. It was coming from the darkness. He spun and fired and saw a rat scurrier away. "Damn it! I might've killed someone!" he said, his breath hot with the implications of it. Guns backfire in jumpy situations - he'd learned that in school. A good detective was supposed to cool a situation and not turn it into a shoot-out. He pondered that with a shaking hand, then plaster rained down, a board slammed into his skull, and he thought no further.

Consciousness returned as a mushrooming ache. He couldn't remember who he was or where he was, but the grogginess meant he was in trouble. It all came back like unhappiness swelling to pumpkin size. Grit was in his eye, and as he blinked, he saw bright sunlight. Somehow, he'd been thrown out the door and was covered with boards and plaster. A nice goose bump was on the back of his head, his hand throbbed, and his butt was sore. Cautious movement told him that no bones were broken. He was hardly even hurt, but he supposed his body was a mess of nasty little abrasions.

He lay there, swallowing odors of dust and rot. Until today, he'd believed the world was neutral ground. Even people themselves had no ill will toward him. People who thought the world was out to get them were paranoid - they were forgetting that they had to shape the day, work around the faults in people and the world to win the prizes. That nature itself had turned on him was an idea he couldn't accept. Grinding his teeth, he decided he would battle the elements and make the world tilt his way.

He struggled some, but nothing bent, and the earth didn't move. It was like a monkey of a devil was on his back. If the world wasn't against him, then some evil presence was. One that did things to you then slipped away and out of mind like a shadow. An ephemeral demon, a lurking

backstabber - that was it, and he needed to stop it before it stopped him. If he wasn't stopped already.

A shadow fell on him, and the surprise of it caused him to jerk under the boards. His legs and hands were hit by spasms, and he groaned. Then he looked up and saw that it was a woman; her curly blond hair a corona against the sun. She had cat-green eyes, full lips, and high cheekbones; beauty that was more passive than intense. She shimmered in his eyes, and he feared she might vanish; then solidity returned. Her body was strong, and for clothing, she wore only sandals, a short red skirt, and a halter top. Cleavage showed as she leaned over to look at him.

"You hurt?" she said.

"Not much," he said, relieved to find she was more than a vision. "See if you can lift these boards away without bringing the rubble down on me."

"Sure," she said, and then she went to work, heaving aside bricks and boards.

In two minutes, he was up and shaking off the dirt. It was glued to his body. He needed a bath in the worst way. She was studying him. He looked to her, and the sight of her caused him to lick his dry lips, putting a taste of stale plaster in his mouth.

She put her hands on her hips. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm looking for a man named Chang Kung. His little girl hired me to find him."

"He's gone. Dead, like most of the others. I remember he said he had a kid. She's better off without him. He had a mean streak and was into the supernatural in a dark way."

"His daughter is into the supernatural, too. She has powers over demons. That sort of thing. She wanted to know if her father loved her."

"Loved her! Chang never loved anyone. If he had her, he'd want her to obey and shut up about love. If she has powers over demons, you could use her now - because you have one shadowing you."

"I've noticed something shadowing me."

"Follow me. I'll tell you about it."

Skip brushed himself off some more, but that didn't kill the itch crawling all over him. She was getting ahead, so he caught up, following her on a path that led to a shack. Her strong thighs had animal grace that soothed his itch. For a moment, he even forgot that he was filthy. She was one of the witchcraft people, maybe the last member, he assumed. No one else would walk around dressed that lightly in this hostile area, like it was totally natural, and be unafraid of a strange man at the same time.

The doors of the shack pulled open barn-style. It was like the carpenter hadn't been quite sure what he was building the shack for. She had living quarters set up inside - old, worn furniture. Stuff you would buy at a flea market. A likeness of a devil carved in jade was set on a log coffee table. Other than that, there were no obvious signs of witchcraft.

Skip let her walk in first. He wanted to see if anything collapsed before he followed, and his lungs almost collapsed in a gasp as he watched the light bounce off her hips. He'd always had a weakness for short skirts. She took a seat on the couch and pulled him inside with a wave of her hand. He sat beside her without hesitation.

He found himself looking out the broad doorway at sunlight in the pines and wildflowers in the field. Fragrances of nectar and cooking pumpkins were in the breeze. He didn't feel much like watching the birds. His felt on the dreamy edge of sleep like he was about to pass out.

"My name is Mindy," she said. "What's yours?"

"Skip."

"I used to live in the compound before it became unsafe."

"This whole area is unsafe. Accidents keep happening."

"I know. The pumpkin spirit is everywhere. It doesn't bother me, but the others were all either killed or driven off. I saw most of my friends in the group die."

Her tone was sad, a tear grew in the corner of her eye, and her face was radiant even in grief. Skip was touched by her sorrow and attracted to her at the same time. He tried to keep his eyes off her breasts.

"I have to warn you, the demon will kill you if you stay here."

The demon, he'd forgotten about the demon. He tried to reshuffle his thoughts. She had a strange power of attraction over him and something more to complete the spell. Normally, under such a power, he'd be out of control, but his strange state kept him calm. Mindy was in control, and she had him following her leads like a helpless puppy.

"The demon," he managed to say. "Yes, I heard in town that some terrible disease destroyed the cult."

Mindy gave him a desperate look. "It was the demon. The original cult members were people of Chang's sort; spiritual in a dark way - austere and cruel. But the direction moved to witchcraft. Old-style witchcraft - we were never a branch of the Wiccans. The demon was called up in a ceremony. A giant pumpkin was hardened and used as a cauldron. In essence, the spirit was supposed to protect us from the townspeople. No one saw it, but fields of pumpkins grew as it moved on the perimeter like a shadow. All intruders were cursed by it, and it worked like an evil joker, using accidents, tricks, and illusions to cripple people. Later on, it began to use the disease. Witch grotesquery is the disorder. Horrible growths and pains afflict you until you go mad and die. We weren't the first people to get it - there are cases of it recorded in history."

Skip nodded as he listened and at points nearly drifted off into a hallucination or sleep. "Why did it kill the people it was supposed to protect?"

"There was no one in control. Some new people joined the group, and infighting began. The new people had loose morals and behavior. Purists like Chang believed sex to be a weakness that drained away power and spirit. Putting people to death with a sword didn't bother Chang, but sex did. His tiny faction was driven off. He lived somewhere in a cave before he came back to die. His grave is near the compound. It is the only stone that the vandals were afraid to break. Chang also had a power over the demon and was able to fight off the disease. He died by hara-kiri at what he believed was the appointed time. He was very bitter in the end. Many of the others believed it was a trick of his that turned the guardian demon against us. He had a motive for it in that he wanted the cult consumed to end what he viewed as corruption."

"Yes, I understand," Skip said, even though he couldn't fathom it at all. Trembling had come over him like his whole body was in a quake zone. He had one hand on her shoulder, the other at his side, almost certain that he was dreaming.

He nodded off, and in the dream, Mindy's face was ecstatic. They were making love, but it ended abruptly when her face suddenly grew mottled, brown, and green; a mass of ulcers. Throwing himself back, he tried to pull free. They struggled, and as they were rolling off the couch, he saw the face of the demon in a shadow on the wall. It panicked him all the more.

As he jumped to his feet, he tripped, but he scrambled up, and then he flew out the door. A glance back told him Mindy wasn't following, but he didn't slow down because of it. Wicked laughter echoed in the back of his mind, and he wasn't quite sure what had been real - her beauty or the horror. No matter what the truth was, he was scared right through his bones and soul. He planned on running all the way back to the van.

A rockslide came down from an outcropping, deadwood fell, and snakes reared up, but now that he was expecting it, Skip managed to dodge everything. The only black thing that got him was a

crow that bombed his head with a dropping. He kept his eye out for the shadow and saw it a couple of times by the pumpkins. Mindy had said the demon used illusions, so maybe her beauty was an illusion, or was it her ugliness? Stephanie would be expecting a report, but he couldn't tell her the truth. She'd be sure he was crazy if he said he'd been necking with a beautiful woman in the deep forest, who transformed into a hideous witch. Her father's cruel nature was another thing he didn't want to tell her about. Perhaps it would be best if he told her Chang had been like a priest, a kindly man who wasn't permitted the luxury of keeping a little girl.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CHANG'S GRAVE

Cumulus clouds rolled over Beartooth Lake and deepened to a brow of darkness above the calm sheet of water. Julian was out on the lawn, looking at the cottage; with its bright white paint, it resembled an angel on the shore. Mr. Hopper had said the cottage was large, but he hadn't expected it to be as large as a house. It was a summer cottage only in the eyes of the extremely wealthy people who built it, back when Tionaga was veined with silver.

The strip of sand beach was positively idyllic in the twilight, and the light breeze was exhilarating. He would find it hard to believe that Skip was experiencing the opposite just over the water. Canada in the summer was Julian's favorite place. There were parts of Ontario that were without equal, and they were home. He needed that sense of belonging, and for that reason, foreign lands had never had much pull on him.

He took a sip from a bottle of sweet local beer Mr. Hopper had sent over. He spotted Sandra, Stephanie, and Alice coming up the beach. The breeze at her back, Sandra's hair was flouncing in her face. She was carrying a plastic bird feeder they'd filled with blueberries and was having some difficulty with it. The girls were holding what he first thought were stones. A closer look showed them to be conch shells.

Stepping lightly from the shadow of a tree, he crossed the lawn to meet them. Twilight enhanced the flushed creaminess of Sandra's face and sparkled in her eyes. Her smile and evening magic had caused more than one man to fall in love - he was sure of that - and for a moment, he looked away. He was afraid to fall in love. Then he looked back, returned her smile, and took the bird feeder.

"You've picked enough blueberries to fill a store," Julian said.

Sandra laughed. "Once we got started, we got carried away."

"Is Skip back yet?" Stephanie said.

"Not yet," Julian said, eyeing Stephanie and Alice with suspicion. "He isn't on some impossible errand for you two, I hope?"

"I think he's selfish," Alice said. "He's probably pigging out downtown."

"That might be it," Julian said. "But you'll have to keep in mind that he's a lone wolf. He probably doesn't even realize he's abandoned us."

"Leave the blueberries on the lawn," Stephanie said. "I want to wash them with the hose."

Julian obeyed, leaving the bird feeder in the grass. They went up to the porch, except for Stephanie, who went to the side and got the hose. Sandra took a white wooden chair beside Julian's lawn chair, and Alice sat on the railing, causing it to squeak dangerously. Since Alice was a little girl who liked to live dangerously, Julian said nothing. A tumble to the grass wouldn't hurt her anyway. He was still working on a strategy for dealing with Alice. She was a kid like a cat. She wanted your affection, but she didn't want your rules. She was also a stray cat, looking for surrogate attachments to fill the gap left by her parents. If her life didn't soon stabilize, she'd get

hurt a lot as her bonds shifted from one adult to the next. Stephanie was more like a cat that'd been run over and abused. Her nine lives had saved her from turning mean, scrungy, and one-eyed, but she still approached everyone with caution. She wanted to think she was unlovable rather than believe those around her had been totally worthless. But worthless they had been, and the blow of it had left her emotions on a tilt. Seeing the world through her eyes was something Julian feared - his suffering and failures belonged to adulthood and were easier to shoulder. Sure, she looked like the prettiest kid in the world, at home in the dusk, innocently washing blueberries with a hose - but he knew it wasn't that simple. Like that abused cat, she could turn mean if adults threw any more stones at her.

"You didn't find those shells on the beach, did you?" Julian said.

"No," Sandra said. "I had them at my cottage. We each picked the shell we thought suited our personality."

Alice was chipping at the railing with hers. It was an auger shell - white with brown markings. It was as long as a small dagger, and she was holding it like a dagger. "In my past life, I was a mermaid," Alice said. "I used to lure sailors to my island. Then, when they went to sleep, I used my shell on them." Grinning widely, she made slow stabs in the air.

"She's horrible," Stephanie said as she came up on the porch.

"No, I'm not. I didn't kill them all. I picked one for my husband and kept him in a silver cage, so he could admire my beauty while I sat naked in the sand."

"Didn't you even kiss him?" Julian said.

"No. Men are like ogres - they love girls because they can't love themselves."

"That's why I picked mine," Stephanie said. She had a spiraled conch. "It's knobby and weird on the outside, but it makes beautiful music on the inside. I'm like an ogre too, but beautiful on the inside."

"Don't be silly," Sandra said. "The last thing you look like is an ogre."

"I wish I looked like an ogre," Alice said.

Julian looked to the golden cowrie in Sandra's lap. "You picked it because it's beautiful all over," he said.

Sandra blushed. "No, I didn't," she said. "I just felt that it looked feminine, like the shell a woman should be."

"Coral is what I'd pick," Julian said. "I want to think of myself as bright and colorful."

"Like a movie star," Alice said.

"No. I want to be a colorful person, not a colorful image. The people who count like you better when you're not overexposed."

"Your hair is bright and colorful," Stephanie said. "Maybe that's enough."

"Enough about me. What shell do you suppose Skip would choose?"

"I know," Stephanie said. "He'd choose the shell of a snail because he could hide a tiny electronic bug in it."

"Speak of the devil," Julian said as lights flashed on the sand road. Skip's Aerostar turned and bounced in the rutted driveway, the high beams blinding them as they swept across the porch. Skip drove straight to the back and cut the engine. They heard two doors slam as he went inside.

Unable to restrain herself, Stephanie hopped off the porch and ran around back. Some moments of silence followed, then they heard a loon on the lake and faint strains of music drifting up the beach.

"There's an outdoor dance every other night in the summer," Sandra said.

"I see," Julian said. "Sounds like it's at the patio by the beach store. I wondered what they used it for."

Stephanie appeared at the front door. Disappointment was on her face as she came back out on the porch. "Skip went straight into the shower. I didn't get to talk to him."

"There's a dance up by the store. Want to go up with us?" Julian said.

"Nope. I'm too tired. Alice and I will hang around the cottage tonight."

"Okay. Tell Skip where we are. If you change your mind, you can walk up with him."

Julian and Sandra kept silent, letting the faint music drift to them as they walked to the road. Two bats winged overhead, and they stopped to look. Dusk was fast turning to sooty night on the unlit road, and bands of light from the rising moon were rippling on the lake. Out on the peninsula, a dead oak stood like a shattered giant against the sky. Under lonely circumstances, the oak would be a ghostly sight, but with Sandra beside him, he felt pleasant and relaxed and couldn't call up negative emotions. She was at his side like she'd always been there, a feeling that told him they probably belonged together. And he went by feelings. For all the talking in the world, it meant very little in romance - not at the beginning. If he was forming a bond with Sandra, it was invisible and inner, and they shared it at a physical level, too ... a spiritual bond that shattered mere words. Julian knew he was afraid of love because he liked to be rational to a degree, and love wasn't rational. He had wonderful thoughts about Sandra, but he feared she'd sweep him away in a tide of emotion.

Spotlights flashed in the treetops, a bright stroboscopic haze, and the music grew louder. Julian wished he could sing himself, especially on summer nights when pleasant emotions were at their peak. He never listened to older pop music, and that made it better. It was music that was playful like the beach. Undoubtedly, that was why it was still popular. Jazz was the higher form, but he liked to keep in touch with melodic and physical forms too. Getting too cerebral wasn't desirable. He'd known too many spiritualists who'd shed their bodies. Now he thought that he should reach as high as possible while remembering that the meaning of life isn't found in leaving it behind.

"I haven't danced in ages," Julian said, and if he felt light on his feet, it was from the scent of pines and Sandra's perfume on the cool air.

Her face pale and delicate in the liquid darkness, she looked up at him with a smile that drew him close. "Some dancing is what you need. The way you describe your lifestyle - well, I think the New Age crowd at that bookstore is too serious. You've got to shake it off once in a while."

"I think you're right about that. Maybe I should just dance and be who I am - much of the New Age is flawed prophets teaching people how to be perfect. You can't be happy about yourself if you're always trying to be better."

"I don't think I'd like a perfect Julian. If a man isn't flawed, he isn't lovable."

The road wound out of the pines and into a haze of yellow bug lights. They were passing the last cottage before the store and could vaguely see dancing people moving beneath the streamers on the patio. A green pickup blocked the road in front of them, and as they went around it, they encountered Mr. Hopper. He was putting something in a mailbox, and if he'd looked of indeterminate age in the daytime, he'd lost the youthful half of it in the darkness. He looked ancient now, his face heavily lined. The way he moved, with the zombie slowness of old age, was unpleasant to watch.

"Hello, Sandra," Mr. Hopper said. "On your way to the dance, I see. Say, Mr. Braddock - I've been meaning to ask you about your girls. My brother says that the black fellow with you was in town looking for the Chinese kid's father. Exactly whose girls are they?"

"The Chinese girl is my adopted daughter. Alice is with me while her father is in the hospital. She may be with me a while. He's slipped back into a near coma, but his vital signs are very strong,

so it's just a matter of time, and he'll recover. Skip isn't supposed to be looking for anyone's father. I'm shocked to hear it. I'll have to talk to him in the morning and get to the bottom of it."

"Skip doesn't appear to be part of your family. You said he was with you for some reason - what was it?"

"He's along for the vacation, and if Alice's father recovers, he's supposed to drive her in for a visit."

"My brother likes him. Thinks he's a sharp fellow. But my brother is weird. Not many other people are going to like Skip. This is a small town. People here hate snoops, and I don't allow snooping at the hotel."

"Don't worry. I'll be handcuffing him. You can consider his short investigation over."

"I think that'd be best for everyone, Mr. Braddock. I'll sleep easier for it. Pop in, I'll give you a lift to the dance."

"That's okay, we don't need a lift. It's only a stone's throw up the road."

"To me, it's a mile. I can't walk far anymore. Can't dance either. I still like the music though - it puts me to sleep, just like it did when I was a baby."

Julian opened the door for Mr. Hopper, and he got in at about the speed of a lizard. Dead bugs were crusted on the windshield, and they seemed to swim in the aquatic green light from the dashboard. A grey-green tint was on Mr. Hopper's face; a lifeless effect of the sort you'd see on a gutter alcoholic. It made Julian wonder if booze wasn't half of his problem. Hopper pursed his lips, then drove off, the rear of his truck rattling like a trash can.

Lost in thought, Julian stared up the road at the light sweeping over the dance floor. Seeing that he was disturbed, Sandra took his hand. "What was that about?" she said.

"I don't know why Skip would search for Stephanie's father in Tionaga. It's obvious that Stephanie is behind it. I find it upsetting that this has been going on behind my back."

"Maybe we should go back and confront them now."

"No. We'll leave it for the morning. I suspect Skip is in rough shape. I got that feeling when he drove in. He probably kept his high beams on so we couldn't see him, and he must've been dirty if he ducked straight into the shower. He's been doing more than asking questions. I guess I'm not much of a seer, the way they pulled the wool over my eyes. What I see now, I don't like. I'm sure they've opened a can of worms."

They shuffled up the sand road to the dance. A strong odor of French fries was on the breeze. Julian put his arm around Sandra, only now it was more for support than romance. Drinks were being served at umbrella tables, and several people were on the dance floor. Since Julian was still rather confused, Sandra decided for them, and they ended up eating ice-cream cones and standing at the railing with some teenagers, watching people dance. Depression would've set in if it weren't for the fact that the beach was so young and breezy. The world was balloon light, and when Sandra pulled him out on the floor to begin with a slow tune, he forgot all about his problems - at least for a while.

Skip was shaking all over, and he could see nothing but a blur in the mirror. He tumbled into bed with his robe still on and lay there on edge. Random flashes lit his mind as an electric storm revolved in his brain. His body was numb and cold, except for his hand, which burned and throbbed. The day had drained him completely. He felt like vomiting just from weakness, but he held it back as sleep began to clutch at him like a strangler.

Fever dreams swept over him. They were as potent as a session in electric shock. Terrifying images took shape, long, howling faces of demons that grew bigger than the sky and vanished into infinity, but as wicked as it was, he was too tired to wake up.

What woke him was someone shaking him, and he was slow to come out of his dreams. His eyelids fluttered; a ghastly jack-o'-lantern was staring down at him. It startled him, and he jerked his head and twisted his neck. Pain ran an icy spike into his brain, and he groaned. The fire remained in the Jack-o'-lantern's eyes, but the pumpkin shape shifted like smoke and became Stephanie. Alice was beside her, both of them red-cheeked and excited.

Skip groaned even more. "Go away," he mumbled as he rolled over.

He heard their feet patter to the other side of the bed, and the shaking began again. "Oh God," he said, and he felt like letting go with a banzai scream from the torment of it. Only he was too weak.

"Come on, get up," Stephanie said, urgency in her tone. "We want the report on what you found out."

Her words stirred his memory, and he had a grim flashback of the day and remembered Chang. "I'm exhausted," he said weakly. "Alice, get me a glass of milk and something for pain."

He heard her run off. "Where were you?" Stephanie said.

"Okay. Bad news. Your father has passed on. His grave is near Cloudy Corners. He didn't keep you because he joined a religious colony, and he didn't want you to choose your own religion before you grew up. I got lost in the bush, so go away and let me sleep. I'll give you the details tomorrow."

The hoarseness of his breathing bothered him. He heard Stephanie slip out, and Alice return, and he sat up for the milk and pill she had.

"What's one pill going to do? I'm in pain, get me another."

"It's enough. The pill is one of Julian's. It's for a seer's migraine."

"Just what I need," Skip said. He swallowed the pill. Needles of fire shot through his swollen hand as he lowered it, causing him to yelp.

"Hey, your hand is hurt. Let me see it," Alice said. Then she snatched his hand from the blanket, and her touch was like a hot iron. His whole body was jolted in the bed, and he spilled the rest of his milk. The glass slipped away and fell to the floor, but he paid it no attention - he was busy hiding his hand under the covers.

"You'd better see a doctor. It looks like a snake bite."

"Not now. Now go away and let me sleep. My hand will be all right in the morning."

Alice said nothing more; she picked up the glass and went out. Skip was soaked in milk, and his hand felt like it'd been jackhammered to pulp and bone splinters. The pain forced him to grind his teeth, then it slowly faded, and his thoughts went back to Stephanie for a moment before he fell asleep. It occurred to him that he shouldn't have mentioned the grave. He should've said Chang's bones had been carried off to the mountains of China. Now she'd want to visit the grave and that God-forsaken place. His breath rose and fell like the whispering of a curse, then he let out a final groan and passed out.

From the blackest of voids, he rose to dreams, drifting up like a corpse from the silt bottom. Blurred images poured over him like the rushing surface of a stream, and then he awoke and sat up. He was soaking wet, and that was because he'd been sleeping in a stream. It was hard to focus his thoughts or remember how he got there. His brain felt like one of the rotten pumpkins he could see lining the shore. A check on his hand showed that it had changed, mutated in his sleep. It was now twice its normal size - a horrible blue claw that pulsed open and shut when he tried to move it.

He knew he needed medical help quickly and had to get into Tionaga, and then he remembered the demon and thought he could see it at the edge of the forest. Feral eyes beaded with darkness, moving silently near the pumpkins.

A beat, a bass thrum, then strains of music came to his ears. Hip-hop music. Immediately, he got to his knees, and the water rushed around him, spilling over algae-covered stones. Perhaps it was a car stereo, and someone was out here who could rush him in - but he could see nothing, just trees. Bass, drums, distorted guitars, and several vocalists were rapping at once - it was music that was like a crazy dance carnival. The lyrics kept building up. He could practically picture a grinning skull jawing out the crazy lyrics. But music aside, he needed help, so he decided to leave any review of the song for later and find the person with the stereo for now.

Getting to his feet, he began to slosh along in the stream, trying to avoid tripping on smooth stones and streamers of algae. He wanted to go to the shore, but the pumpkins lining the banks frightened him. They ran along the bank as far as the eye could see. Finally, he decided he'd have to pass them.

It was best to do it quickly, so he leaped to a boulder and from it to the bank. There he passed between two drooping pumpkins and headed for the pines. A clear trail was worn into the duff, so he headed for it, but before he reached it, he was startled by an explosion behind him. The sound was sickeningly familiar; he knew it was a pumpkin exploding. Spinning about, he saw several pumpkins pop and send up air-distorting gas. But this time there was no pulp. Instead, animals were inside. Squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons, groundhogs, and rabbits that had one thing in common - they were red-eyed, snarling, and rabid.

Rabid animals were his greatest fear; he could feel his hair uncurling as it rose on his scalp. Turning, he ran like a wild man through the pines. Branches whipped and stabbed at him, twigs cracked underfoot. He could hear the hip-hop tune growing louder and the animals bounding behind him. Frothing teeth were practically buzz-sawing through the trees. The sheer bloodlust of it was a hum in his ears. A vision of himself as chewed meat caused him to run so fast it seemed like he'd catch the sun and pass it. Reaching a field of clover, he turned and fired some shots with his palm pistol, managing to cut down two rabbits that were coming at him like flying pelts. As he broke back into a sprint, he realized that he was in the cult graveyard. Something, black magic perhaps, was forcing the animals back to the edge of the forest. They refused to enter the graveyard, and while he was looking back at them, he nearly went headlong into an open grave. Dodging to the side, he stopped and checked the black marble marker. A name was on it, but he couldn't read it. The carved letters shifted like mist. Stepping over, he looked down and caught a view of an open, empty coffin.

Not even dust was in it. He became certain that someone had risen from the dead, and that someone had to be Chang. The animals had kept back because their instincts were alive enough to prevent them from approaching a risen corpse. If it were a risen corpse? Glancing around, he saw no one, then checked his hand and found it was rotting off. Shriveled fingers fell to the grass, blue gore oozed out like paste. Horrified, he let out a few garbled syllables of shock - then he woke up.

Sunlight was falling on the cottage window, and he could see a tiny blue bird that warbled as it flitted in the dogwood tree. Throwing off the milk-sticky covers, he looked at his hand. It was still swollen, and there was a growth at the knuckles. Two finger marks of healing were across it where Alice had touched it. "That's right," he thought. "Alice is immune to demonic stuff, so she has a healing touch when it comes to damage inflicted by evil beings. She could heal it completely." He got out of bed with that in mind.

Stephanie's eyes fluttered open to a sunny, moderate morning. Since Alice wasn't in the room, she was rising a bit late. She'd dreamed of her father again. This time, he'd been an Indian spirit watching from a cloud - his gaze penetrating and filled with inexplicable emotion, his left eye crooked and morbid. Now that she knew he was dead, his love wasn't as important to her emotionally. Even if he hadn't loved her, he could be forgiven. The grave was a place of forgiveness. You could accept many things about the dead you wouldn't tolerate in the living. And with her father, Chang - he seemed suited to the grave. Perhaps he'd always appeared to her as a monster in dreams because somewhere inside she'd known he was dead. Maybe his

personality had been that of an unloving monster; now she thought that wasn't so bad. After all, some girls had fathers who were ogres, crushing and molding them with the perversity of their love. A moment's more thought put the word yes on her lips. Yes, he hadn't loved her, but now she would visit his grave, lay down the flowers of forgiveness, and end this sordid chapter of her life.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she gazed out the window at a small bluebird flitting in the choke cherry bushes. She was certain it was her lucky bird. Back at the new house, she'd seen the bird on many mornings. It was a bird of happiness. She'd always felt warm inside when the bird appeared on its morning perch in the rock garden. As the days had passed and she'd grown more and more concerned about her father, the bird had shown less often - until one day it no longer came. Now it was back, and she felt it to be a sign of good luck, like brighter days might be coming.

Popping off the bed, she pulled off her nightdress and put on shorts, a T-shirt with a sunburst on the front, and sandals. In the kitchen, there were breakfast smells and dirty dishes, but everyone had already gone out. She wasn't hungry, so she gulped down a glass of apple juice and went to wash up.

From the porch, she saw that everyone was sitting in chairs they'd carried down to the beach. Scooping up a piece of driftwood, she batted twigs and the sand as she made her way over.

Alice was grinning; a telltale smirk that meant something was up. Stephanie glanced at Julian for a clue, but he was focused on a laptop and seemed to be contemplating something. Sandra was relaxed, gazing dreamily at the waves. It was Skip that Alice had to be smirking about. His hand was bandaged, and his expression was bleak. His eyes met hers, and the message was clear. He'd been found out, and Julian knew about the secret investigation they'd been conducting.

Stephanie wasn't going to lead into the subject. "My bluebird was back today. It must mean good luck."

Alice giggled and put her hand over her mouth. Skip went cross-eyed for a moment, and Julian and Sandra gave her unhappy glances.

"Skip has had bad luck. He was injured trying to carry out a mission for you," Julian said.

Stephanie glanced at Skip's bandage. "He knows about it," Skip said. "Mr. Hopper squealed on us."

"I didn't ask Skip to take risks. He was only supposed to get information."

"I could have done that," Julian said. "The way you two did things wasn't very honest. I hope I haven't been teaching you to trick people."

Stephanie pouted. "You wouldn't have understood."

"I might have. But it doesn't matter now. And what did you learn anyway? Some things about Chang, but not how he felt about you."

"I learned enough. I've decided to forgive him."

"You've been taking the wrong approach to love anyway. We all want to be loved, and we hate people who reject us. What everybody forgets is that it's the ability to love that's the gift. Love itself should be earned, preserved, and constantly renewed. Once you were separated from Chang, the living relationship was broken, and love became a ghost of the past. If he were still alive, you'd have to build a new understanding and earn one another's love all over again. And there has to be trust to do that - trust you haven't been giving me by going behind my back with this thing."

A tear came to Stephanie's eye. "She's just a kid," Skip said. "You can't expect her to know all that stuff."

"I guess I can't expect you to know it either," Julian said.

"I thought I was solving a problem," Skip said.

"The idea of my father was eating at me," Stephanie said. "I don't think it'll haunt me much anymore."

"Okay," Julian said. "Do you remember what day it is?"

"It's the day we visit the doll house gallery," Stephanie said.

Alice laughed. "It's your birthday, stupid."

"Happy birthday," Skip and Sandra said in unison.

"Come here, I'll show you my present," Julian said.

Stephanie was stunned; she'd forgotten all about her birthday. She went up to Julian, wondering what kind of present he could have inside a laptop computer. Looking at the screen, she saw a photo of herself, with a weird drawing of the dragon demon shrinking as it flew in the background.

"Alice and I drew it," Julian said. "We'll make a print of it to frame."

"It's neat," Stephanie said. "I guess Alice is exceptional on that computer drawing board."

"Sandra got you a dollhouse," Alice said.

"It's not here," Sandra said. "We'll show it to you when we visit the gallery. It's a replica of one of the collector's items."

"Really. Thanks a lot," Stephanie said. And in her excitement, she kissed Julian instead of Sandra.

"Skip has given you enough," Julian said. "So don't expect a present from him."

"I forgot," Skip said.

"You didn't forget. You did enough."

"When does the doll-house gallery open?" Alice said. "We should go over early and get Stephanie's present."

"It opens at noon," Sandra said, and Stephanie thought she looked like a teacher, the way she lifted her finger while talking to Alice. It was the small beauty mark on her cheek that melted her authority. She was too pretty to appear stern. "We can spend an hour there, since there are eight rooms of doll houses."

Skip yawned. "What else is planned for today?"

"I thought we'd visit Rushing River Park and the Native village," Sandra said. "Then we can spend the evening here on the grounds."

"Rushing River Park - that's over on the way to the observation tower and ghost town, isn't it?" Skip said.

"Yes."

"I've had enough of that area. As long as we don't go past the tower, I'll be okay."

"Well, I won't feel okay," Stephanie said. "If we're going to be over there, we might as well go in so I can visit my father's grave. I have to at least put flowers on it and forgive him."

"We could do that," Julian said. "That ought to settle it."

"We can't get in," Skip said. "The roads are bad, and the area is extremely hazardous. The crumbling cult complex, the ruins of Cloudy Corners, abandoned mines and pits, and the worst part is an evil spirit that curses the lands around the graveyard."

"People access that area by the lake," Sandra said. "You pick the right spot on the shore and go in. Hardly anyone goes over there. People around here believe in the evil spirit Skip mentioned."

"So we could visit if we went by boat," Julian said. "How far in from the shore is the grave?"

"Not too far, but you don't seem to be hearing me. We can't visit there. It's dangerous. I barely made it out alive. I still don't know if my hand will heal."

"Tell us exactly what happened there and what you know about Chang," Julian said. "No stories, we want the truth."

"If that's what you want. I found out that Chang was a powerful figure and into the supernatural. He believed the other members of the religious group had become corrupt, fought with them, and was cast out. In the end, he returned there to die, though I don't really know exactly how he died. The demon I mentioned was called up by the cult people to protect them and the lands, but in the end, it became a curse on them. Most of them died from a horrible, disfiguring disease that spread. Only one woman is left over there, and she is beautiful, but she is also disfigured. I think I have the disease in my hand, so now you know why I don't want to go back there. Having one hand injured is enough."

"Interesting," Julian said. "We'll wait until tomorrow and go over around noon."

"What?" Skip said.

"Show us your hand," Julian said.

Mumbling in protest at the idea of another visit to the cult lands, Skip began to unwind his bandage. The flesh that appeared was swollen and numb, bruised, and with a ripe glow. Knobs of wrinkled skin hung from the knuckles, and there were two healthy marks where Alice had touched him. "There's not much feeling. It healed some when Alice touched it. I was going to ask her to do it again."

Julian nodded. "There's no disease that deforms a hand that quickly. You must have contacted an evil spirit. Let's see if Alice can heal it. If not, we'll try crystal healing."

"You think crystal healing would work?" Skip said.

"Ordinary medicine won't, that's for sure."

Alice's giggly mood faded, and trepidation replaced it as she walked over to Skip. Distaste came to her lips. She obviously didn't want to touch the hand. Skip didn't want her to touch it either. He was biting down hard, and he hesitated for a moment before holding it out.

Alice placed one small hand over the knuckles and the other under the palm. It was obvious the hand felt gross; she looked like she was going to throw up. Ten seconds passed in silence, then Skip howled through clenched teeth, pulled the hand back, and nearly fell out of his chair. Steadying himself, he held the hand before his eyes like it was a foreign object. His mouth fell open as he saw that it was bleeding, and that the blood wasn't red - it was more like darkness. It dripped, poured to the sand, and took shape as the shadow of a horned head. A moment later, it slid off toward the water and was gone.

The swelling went down immediately and chunks of skin crumbled like old parchment, but the pain wasn't eased - the hand hurt like hell. It was exactly what Skip had been afraid of - healing that was slow and agonizing. He wished he had tried the crystal method instead.

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Stephanie gazed out at the mist on the water. Most of it had rolled to the far shore, and its color had returned to white. In the early morning, it had been pink, like cotton candy, and looked friendlier. Now ghost forms moved in it, and she could see their faces stretched in terror. Big O's warping their lips as they tried to communicate using the alien emotions of the dead. She'd been seeing ghosts for years, and she'd felt at home with them in the past. They were just beings who'd been cut off from life, maybe in the same way that Tiffany had cut her off from life. Ghosts didn't frighten her any more than cobwebs did - they could only scare others. They wanted to talk to people, touch people again, but they couldn't remember how, so people would run in

terror from their morbid efforts. Chang's ghost wasn't out there on the water, or even on the shore. These were weak spirits she saw, flowing out of the mist to briefly moan. Perhaps they were all that remained of the cult members after they'd fallen to the disease and evil Skip had mentioned. They were unholy spirits, earthbound like fog, doomed to a meager existence of knocking on wood and howling down the chimneys and vents of abandoned buildings.

If Chang's ghost was there, she was sure she'd know it. It wouldn't be like the others. He would still appear as a man. Skip said he was powerful and could fight a demon, and she believed it. She was afraid of him now, the way she had been in the beginning. When she thought of him, she no longer wondered about his love. Now she wondered how much evil had been in him and how much of it had passed to her. She knew it was wrong to believe in such a thing, but she couldn't shake the idea. It was easy to understand why Tiffany had hated him - he had real powers. He could've crushed her like a bug. To Tiffany, he was evil - he had to be - because while she could only think of petty things and nastiness, he could leave his shadow on her and silence her tongue.

A chilling story was buried in the cult graveyard. Of that, she was sure. Julian said cults were made up of children of God who often ended up as bone rattles of the devil. Exactly what Chang had been was uncertain. He'd wanted to swing the cult one way when human nature was taking it in another direction. He had done battle with members he thought were corrupt. Did that make him the better man, or had he been a darker force of evil with no tolerance for weak sinners? She could rely on her feelings only, and they were a current running back in time to a cold shadow of a man. Chang, her father, had been evil - her instincts and the ghosts of memory told her it was so.

His stern expression and almond eyes rose up and vanished. The sunlight became a sword flashing, and behind it all, she saw a statue of the Buddha. It made her wonder. Julian said that if Skip's report was right, Chang had two sides that were eternally at war. He was raised a Buddhist - and they were people of peace - and he was a swordsman, into the martial arts, a man of action and violence. Whatever god he had as a cultist, Stephanie couldn't picture him. It would be a god like Buddha, but riding as a horseman of the apocalypse. Chang was disciplined and wanted control, so Julian said. And that was why he picked a cult of weak witches. When he'd come out to Cloudy Corners, his head was full of dreams of the new cult he would build from the old. Then he found that people without discipline couldn't be molded. They could only become corrupt. What he couldn't use, he fed to the demon. Then, when he was sure his dreams of power could never be realized, he ended his life.

So her father was a failure after all, but far from an ordinary one. He had at least reached out for something. The idea of his violence frightened her, but weren't all men violent? Julian said the fathers of man were much worse than apes, and that fact had to be accepted. Acceptance that is pain, like finding out that a false god is really a monster. Now she had some of her answers, and they were worse than the questions. She wished she had left it alone and stayed safe under Julian's wing.

Skip was on the dock with his hands on his hips. Silent and gloomy, he was looking to the far shore as if it were an enemy camp. Some unnamed fear lit his eyes. He was afraid of more than a demon. Something had happened over there that he wasn't talking about; Stephanie could read it in his actions. He looked the way she used to look back when she'd first moved in with her stepmother and hadn't wanted to tell of the abuse.

The cry of a gull and the sound of waves sucking under the dock were the only sounds, and then Julian stepped into the boat loudly. He offered Skip a lifejacket, but Skip waved it away. Stephanie knew she couldn't wave hers away, so she caught it and put it on. She wished Alice could come, but Julian had refused, sending her and Sandra into Tionaga. Skip said the graveyard visit was dangerous, and he wanted someone to be at the cottage to report them missing if they didn't return on time. She thought Julian had agreed because he didn't want Alice

to be at the graveside - it could cause her to worry about her father. Jannes was in and out of an oxygen tent, so taking her to a graveyard to visit a dead father would probably stir up her fears.

Skip's recovery had been swift; he boarded on light feet and helped Stephanie hop in. The Mercury engine started with a roar, and then they were off, moving fast on the rippled lake. The sudden motion kept them silent, and Stephanie thought about Julian. He hadn't been hesitant about the visit even though Skip had outlined the dangers. She was certain he wanted to know about Chang, just as she did. Not knowing made him insecure. He wanted to be her only father and not in Chang's shadow. Her questions about Chang and her deal with Skip had wounded him. The knowledge of Chang's evil nature probably provided him with some consolation. Another reason for the visit was that they had to see the grave to believe it was real. Chang had to be dead in their thoughts as well as on earth. It was like when her cat Bobby died. Tiffany had run him over. She said it was an accident. Stephanie had Oliver, the boy next door, dig up the corpse. Since she hadn't seen the death, she had to see the corpse to be able to believe in it. Chang wouldn't be dug up, of course, but the sight of his grave would make him more real. She wanted to feel that she was forgiving more than a shadow. Yet Chang was like that; the more she learned of him, the more he slipped away. He was gone between her fingers, and she'd never touched him at all. If anything, it made her prefer Julian, who was very real and always there.

The mist was fading, and spears of sunlight had vanquished the ghosts. They passed two small islands with high rocky shores and towering pines, and then they were closing in on the beach and a sky full of gulls. A long sand bar marked the landing point, but Julian went south of it to a place where the shore was banked, so he could pull up and tie the boat without getting his feet wet.

They glided up to a spot where the bank was indented in a V and a tree hung out over the water at freakish angles. Pulling up to some rocks, Julian tied the boat to a branch and then helped Stephanie out. She went over a granite boulder to level ground and looked down the beach, finding it lined with gulls. There were so many of them, covering every speck of sand, and they were so quiet she believed the ghosts had entered them, and this was their daytime incarnation. Now they could feel the warm sun, but were still stuck here in a lonely place where ghosts were allowed.

Skip came up beside her, followed by Julian, and the three of them were silent as they studied the gulls.

"I've never seen quite so many," Julian said.

"They're possessed by ghosts," Stephanie said.

"You mean demons," Skip said. "The fastest way is to go down the beach, but I know how this demon works. Having flocks of birds attack us is exactly the sort of trick it would pull. It called them here for that - I'm sure of it. Let's cut through the trees and go around them. See those paw prints, I bet they lead into a path."

Julian shook his head. "Okay, we'll take the safest way."

Skip led the way. The paw prints went down a sandy path lined by tall spears of grass. As they entered the trees, they heard a great rush of wings and turned to look back. The gulls had taken flight and were now over the water in a formation that resembled a turning Ferris Wheel. They came back over the land, then went in the direction of the forest observation tower and Tionaga.

It was a mixed forest, but this stretch of it was a maple grove. Leafy boughs tightened to a canopy, and sunlight dappled the woods. Green shoots showed in the clear patches, and duff and pools of dead leaves were in the darker areas. The sweet smell of pumpkins was in the air, and Stephanie twitched her nose at the ripeness of it. There were no pumpkins nearby, so she expected they would find them up ahead; pumpkins and something else - the demon. She could already see its face appearing in the lattice of shadows. Flashing up here, then vanishing to points farther away. It was ephemeral, not quite real, like the fleeting ghosts she'd seen in the

mist, but it was definitely more dangerous. It was a maker of ghosts and ill omens. Julian was aware of it too; she saw it in his knowing glance, but Skip couldn't spot it - he could only fear it. He kept glancing at the underbrush like he expected it to appear in the form of a snake or a rabid groundhog. It was always where Skip didn't look, revolving swiftly around them. Yet Skip had the right conception of it. It was a jack-in-the-box demon that used the element of surprise.

The maple grove ended, and Stephanie saw the demon's face rise up, becoming a dark spot receding in her vision. An image remained imprinted on her mind - a mask, almost humorous in its ghoulishness, like a Halloween or witch doctor's mask. Its evil plans were written in its mocking expression. Goose bumps appeared on her arms, and the hairs stiffened to tiny white needles. Her body was afraid even if she wasn't, and she felt the fire-eater's powers surfacing, responding to the stimulation.

She could feel its molten mask like a shield of hot gold in her breast. It drifted up to her eyes, temporarily blinding her. They had stepped into a clearing where the sun was also blinding, and she was forced to halt and take a deep breath. Dizziness followed, and prismatic colors flashed in the heat, then her vision slowly cleared, and she saw that she was looking down at the footprints of cows or deer in the path.

Skip and Julian stopped and waited, thinking she was out of breath when she was really trying to cool the intense heat the fire-eater was shooting through her flesh. The deep breath did work to calm her, but it failed to put out the fire.

"I'm okay," she said.

"I wish I was," Skip said.

They faced the clearing. It was mostly clover, bending slightly in the breeze. Clumps of wildflowers showed near the middle - violet, white, and red - growing in disarray near a large mound. A few hundred pale-blue butterflies were fluttering over the flowers and clover, all of them with the demon's face patterned on their wings. Stephanie was impressed; she thought it was quite clever of the demon to be hiding on butterfly wings. As a demon of the shadows, it had come up with a way to haunt the daylight.

The fire-eater was also clever, though it was less than a shadow. It was dead in earthly reality, and so it had hidden its presence from the cult-lands demon. Lurking behind Stephanie's breast, and at the molten center of the earth, it waited for a chance to strike at this rival demon. The clover, the butterflies, the trees, and the mound all radiated fire, and she knew she was seeing through the fire-eater's eyes. Shadows draping the tree line were blasted away as jealous powers worked to track the cult demon. It finally came clear in the trees beyond the mound - an oily pool of darkness at the center of a mass of swirling butterflies.

"What's that foul smell?" Julian said, stopping and rubbing his nose.

Skip pointed to some pumpkins at the tree line. "I think they're rotten," he said.

"It's more than them. It smells beastly, like something half rotten and half road kill."

Stephanie spotted bones heaped like sticks under the grassy mound. "The reek is coming from whatever's buried in that mound."

"Dead cows or something," Julian said. "We won't disturb it, that's for sure."

Pressing ahead, they approached the mound. The path wound around it, then through a screen of pines to the field around the cemetery and the collapsed cult compound. From the mound's side, they could see through a gap; broken stones poked above the weeds in the cemetery, and a piece of the compound roof rested at an odd angle in the distance.

"Wait," Stephanie said. "I want to pick some flowers. A nice bouquet for the grave."

Red day lilies and rainbow irises grew in the shadow of the mound, and Stephanie moved through the clover to them, feeling so hot she was afraid the blooms would melt in her hands.

They didn't melt, and she built her bouquet, looking as bright as one of the lilies in her summer outfit.

Skip and Julian watched somewhat sour-faced. The corpse odors of the mound were eating at them. Stephanie kept her bouquet to her nose to avoid that problem. She knew the demon was nearby and that the fire-eater's powers had risen, but despite it all, she smiled, happy with her task and amused by Skip. Skip was nervous and shuffling about so much that his feet never seemed to touch the ground. He also had his hands in his pockets; it was the only way he could keep them under control. If the demon were to appear in the daylight now, she was sure he'd wet his pants.

Not especially in a hurry, Stephanie arranged her bouquet. She'd picked enough flowers to make it a large one, so big it made her look small. She wanted to fuss over it a bit more, but she saw how impatient Julian and Skip were becoming. Deciding it was good enough, she began to step away from the mound, and as she walked out of the flowers, some earth rained down on her. She didn't hesitate; holding the bouquet firmly, she hurried to Julian.

Julian caught her in his right arm, swept her up, and carried her as he made a short dash into the field. At thirty yards, he put her down and stopped to catch his breath. She caught a glimpse of Skip tumbling into a small patch of thistles as sections of the mound behind him burst free, throwing sod and wet earth high in the air.

Fists clenched and shouting some nonsense, Skip popped up and ran to them, then he spun around and glanced back. Trapped gas of some kind caused the explosions. Foul odors drifted like poison feelers in the air, misted and grew rank until the smell was similar to the rancid breath of a beast that had devoured a fill of blood and raw meat. It caused Skip's skin to crawl and clouded his mind with visions of ugly possibilities. The thing emerging from the mound wasn't a creature of the daylight, and it was coming out with full moon power.

Clods of earth pattered in the field at random. A moment later, there were no more explosions. A large hole gaped in the mound's side. Sunlight glistened on bones and something wet and greasy like sticky blood or raw meat. A jellied mass oozed up; it slowly bulked out and pooled in the grass.

"We'd better run for the boat," Skip said, drawing his tiny gun. His hand shook, and Stephanie feared he was going to shoot Julian by accident. "You two go ahead. I'll hold it back with bullets."

"Hold on," Julian said. "I don't think it can move fast enough to catch us. Let's hope it can't because your pea shooter sure won't stop it."

"Maybe it isn't fast," Skip said, "but the demon will trip us up so it can get to us."

"We won't run yet," Julian said. "The cult demon would expect us to run and fall into another trap."

Stephanie watched as the ooze continued to gather and take shape. Animal bones, cow skulls, and human skulls poured out with the jelly. Tattered cloth, sticks, and bark formed a crust of decay over pudding made from mud and decomposed flesh. It was like zombie tissue, expanding into a giant head with faceted eyes. The face of the demon was repeated in splotches of cherry and broken bone in the facets, and the sight unnerved Stephanie. She felt her own bones shaking loose to join the mass.

She glanced at Skip and saw that he was quivering like he was also jelly. Julian was open-mouthed and partly hypnotized by the sight. Stephanie found it more startling than hypnotic, though the evil eye was compelling and might have kept a lock on her had her hands not been growing hot and distracting her. Her fingers felt like fire, so she dropped the bouquet at her side before it could burn, then she saw another vision through the eyes of the fire-eater.

The head was a big jack-o'-lantern, and the eye became its gaping mouth. She remembered that it was a demon called up by witchcraft and a pumpkin cauldron. Its laughter rang in her ears, and there was no doubt that it wanted to devour them and thought that destroying them would

be a whole lot of fun. She was frightened, yet its rude attitude inspired anger, and there was also the fire demon already boiling in her blood. Trick or treat, the ghastly mass seemed to say as they stood and watched, then the bones and sticks it was perched on started to move, working like clicking feet and rollers to carry it slowly to them.

Long shadows swept over the field, flung like swift vultures from a claw-shaped cloud that had moved over the sun. Looking up, Stephanie saw glare, darkness, and then fiery lights flashing on an azure background. The demon continued its slow advance, growing more ghastly by the moment. Teeth made of broken skulls were in its mouth, and its tongue was thickened with gore and earth. Blackened things rolled in the throat, its obscene laughter gurgling over them. A vision rose in its eyes, which were now like bright yellow windows of tombstone shape. Images of a steamy zombie world shifted and grew gigantic. An overwhelming sight that nearly caused Stephanie to fall to her knees. Fleeing seemed a forgotten option; she could see earth splitting and freakish things rising with traces of blue mist - insects with human faces, feelers twitching in the eye sockets. Trees that bled swung low with slimy tentacles, and the backs of lizards moved in the rolling mud and shadows. It was a movement of creepy carrion-eaters, jaws dripping as they hoped to feed on new flesh.

The fire-eater's instincts told her that the demon was really one of the lizard-like carrion eaters, or had been before witchcraft gave it a new form on Earth. The thought of being devoured by such a creepy thing caused her muscles to freeze with terror. She wanted to run to Julian, but she couldn't even turn her head. Unable to stand any more of the vision, she forced her eyes shut.

Only it was like her eyelids were transparent. She still saw clearly, but then she was burning, and smoke stung her eyes. Flames licked out from her toes, carpeting the grass and flickering in a way that seemed more illusion than real.

Reddening and glowing brighter, the monster jack-o'-lantern closed in, its grin rolling on its mouth. Flames died before it, becoming hot coals, and it slowed for a moment before sliding over them.

Stephanie saw the mask of the fire-eater patterned in the coals and knew it had taken on the form to trap the enemy. The heat was intense now, hot fluid rushed behind her eyes, and colors swam, drowning her vision. Sight was a confused kaleidoscope, but she could see enough to know the jack-o'-lantern was beginning to wilt. Gas began to hiss from holes in its body, and a chorus of distorted growls filled her ears as its eyes burst into flame.

Bulges became more pronounced as the shell of bones wilted. A bubbling crust formed at the cracks, and curling ash blew free and drifted. The whole thing was shrinking; more bones and char were vomited up as it deflated, beginning to resemble a giant shrunken head. Smoke coiled from the sunken cheeks, the whole thing blackened, and chunks of cooked rot crumbled off the forehead. It was sinking now; the bed of coals had burned trench-deep.

Wind began to gust, dispersing the smoke. Stephanie's hair sailed up, and she found relief in the cool blast. It took her from red-hot to normal in moments. The fire-eater was shrinking to its own grave in her breast, and above the sun was floating free of the clouds.

Tremors shook her as the trench closed over the demon. Even its odors of death were sealed up. An agreeable scent of scorched grass remained in the air.

Her bouquet was lifted as a gust of wind looped in and scattered ashes. Free of her paralysis, she jumped and tried to catch it. She saw that Julian and Skip were just behind her, face down in the grass, but they were stirring, and after a moment, they got to their knees.

They rose slowly, looking dazed, while Stephanie moved quickly, gathering up the spilled flowers.

Skip groaned, but his face showed more relief than pain. "What happened? Feels like I was hit with a hot iron."

Julian's hair was as tangled as the crabgrass. He smoothed it back and wiped leaf dust from his face. His skin had visibly paled, like he'd seen the devil close up.

"The demons went underground and elsewhere," Stephanie said.

Julian and Skip studied the charred field. The spot in front of them resembled raked charcoal; a rectangular shape, a grave.

Skip frowned. "After that attack, I feel like kicking its grave."

"Don't bother," Julian said. "You might go in with it. Let's forget about it and get on to Chang's grave."

Stephanie had her flowers together, and, somewhat weakened, they continued on their way. They found the atmosphere much improved. The path took them through the trees, and they came up to the graveyard fence. The lot was overgrown with weeds, and the stones were broken - the way it had been for Skip on his first visit. Now something had changed - the pumpkins. The burst melons sprouted white flowers, thousands of them in clusters by the stones.

The picture silenced them with its beauty. They went through the gate awed. Wind, shadows, sun dapples, grass, and the flowers were blowing - it was one of those days of high summer that are uplifting even in a graveyard, and the effect was healing. They'd forgotten about the demon already.

One stone stood out, a black obelisk at the center of the lot. They approached it slowly, reverence in their step as they passed other markers, eroded and water-stained. It proved to be Chang's stone; his name was carved beneath a pattern of shuriken stars. As they stopped at its foot, Stephanie heard cymbals sounding faintly on the breeze. It was a sound she'd heard at the funeral of another Buddhist.

She knew the cymbals were a trick of her hearing, a memory real enough to be heard, and although the sound was gentle, it brought the fierceness of Chang into recollection. It made her feel as fragile as one of the bobbing flowers she was holding. The strength of her father had always accentuated her weakness. She wondered how she could've been afraid of being like him ... afraid that his fiery blood was in her veins. She'd never been like him in spirit, and now she remembered how he'd despised her shy nature. He'd tried to coax her out of it, tried to make her his daughter. Chang played at being a magician for children, then, when he was really more of a ninja, a lifelong student of the martial arts. Any sleight of hand he had came from that training. But Stephanie had never been physical; her shyness had been a wall of gloom she couldn't pass. The active, playful child Chang wanted was never in her. It was like his spirit hadn't passed to her - she didn't have the inner fire, no strong command of others. It was like she'd been born to let her father down, and in a way, she was sad about herself. In another way, she was happy, glad to have lost him. His expectations couldn't have been met. She'd really been Julian's daughter all along, because he only wanted a shy little girl who loved him, like love was his expectation.

Summer breeze rustled the maples and oaks, the clash of cymbals was gone, and she realized she'd been staring into space. A grasshopper leaped in the grass on the belly of the grave, and the marker gave her a peaceful feeling. Another part of her soul was sleeping there with Chang, and it had to pass, like the emotional turmoil she'd buried with Tiffany. Now she was like a butterfly, coming alive to a new and better life, and she hoped she had real colors and not the face of a sad demon in the pattern.

Julian touched her, and she turned to him. He was smiling and seemed content. He'd been busy and was holding a makeshift vase he'd fashioned from bark, sticks, and vines. Taking it, she inserted her bouquet, noticing that Skip was a few yards away, staring vacantly into a grave that had collapsed into a hole. Gazing at the flowers, she sighed unexpectedly, then she stepped over to place them at the head of the grave.

Her vase cut into the soft earth with ease, and it looked natural in the weedy graveyard. She admired the black stone for a moment, and then she said a prayer for Chang's soul. Her prayer probably wasn't much like anybody else's prayer, but it worked. With her eyes still closed, she felt something winged flutter from her breast and rise as light to the sky. She hoped that it was forgiveness freeing her father's soul from its purgatory, and maybe freeing her own as well.

Opening her eyes, she saw that Julian had gone over to join Skip. They were staring at something shiny stuck in the tree. Turning, she touched the smooth surface of Chang's stone and whispered goodbye. Then she walked over to see what was up.

"Watch your step," Skip said. "The ground is unstable in places."

"I'm watching it," Stephanie said, and she was, as much as she could when the long grass was up to her shins.

Skip had seized the object and was twisting it, trying to pull it out.

"What do you have there?" Stephanie said.

Splinters and bark sprayed out as it came loose. Skip wiped it clean with his fingers and held it out for Stephanie to see. It was a throwing dart, made in the style of a firebird, and the metal still gleamed like new. "It's a dart, a martial arts weapon," Skip said. "I bet it belonged to Chang. He was into weapons, especially swords."

"I want it," Stephanie said.

"Sure, it's yours, kid," Skip said, handing it over.

"We could probably find a lot of interesting artifacts around here," Julian said.

Skip shrugged. "We should avoid looking around. That totem and the rock paintings in the field over there are interesting, but there are poisonous snakes in the grass there. They nearly got me when I first came out. The compound is in even worse shape than it looks. The sound of a canary could collapse it once you're inside. We'd do better to cross the field here, where the grass is short, and the ground is flat." To demonstrate his point, Skip walked a few yards south of the graves and jumped up and down on the scorched bed of grass. "Even here the turf's a bit springy," he said. "The soil must lack clay and stones." He bent over to scoop up a handful of the sod, and as he did, the ground sagged under him, and he went down.

Skip yelped, and his arms flailed up as he disappeared. Julian and Stephanie immediately dashed over, stopping short of the hole and taking careful steps up to the edge. "Damn it all!" Skip said from below.

He'd gone down into a pit eight feet deep. They could see him staring up from the darkness. He flicked his lighter on, illuminating his surroundings.

He glanced up again, and then some of the fear washed off his face as interest appeared. "There's an opening into a tunnel down here. Yikes! I can see skulls stuck in the wall. I'm getting out of here."

Stephanie grinned, amazed and amused as she watched Skip leap and scramble toes and hands up the side. He wouldn't have made it if it weren't for fear and some roots he caught hold of.

Julian caught his hand and pulled him over the side. Popping to his feet, he began brushing off his clothes. "What a morbid gang of cultists they were," he said. "I think that tunnel leads to the compound. Guess if one of them felt like a cheerful walk under the graveyard at night, it was the route to take. No wonder Chang didn't like them."

"This graveyard is not right," Stephanie said. "It needs tending, and the holes have to be filled."

"We could talk to Mr. Hopper," Julian said. "He could get workers to do it."

"Yeah," Skip said. "He could get men out now that the evil spirit is gone. We'll point that out to him. Maybe we should look into buying the land and holding it. People will likely start moving

back here now."

"Good idea," Julian said. "We can buy the land around the cemetery for next to nothing. Any future profits will pay for the tending of the graves."

"We should get a lot of land. There's good farmland here," Skip said.

"We'll wait and see," Julian said. "We don't even know who owns the land."

"Uh-oh," Skip said. "I think I see the person who owns this land."

Stephanie and Julian followed Skip's eyes south, shielding their brows against the glare. A woman was standing under an apple tree across the field. She was like a witch or an apparition, wearing a long, hooded cloak. The outfit was pale green, a thin material that suited the warmer weather.

"It's Mindy," Skip said. "She's the last of the cult people."

"She looks the part," Julian said. "Straight out of a cult movie."

"She looks the part without the robe, too," Skip said, the words slipping out before he realized what he was saying. "Uh, I mean, she's diseased. She has her body covered because it's gross."

"Let's go over," Julian said. "I want to talk to her about the land."

"I'd rather we didn't," Skip said. "She's not the sort of person Stephanie should meet."

Stephanie observed a nervous tremble in Skip's hands. He was afraid of Mindy, or else he was trying to hide something. She didn't believe she had to be shielded from her. Skip looked down at her with big eyes, like he was hoping she wouldn't get involved, and she responded by letting displeasure curl her lips. Huffing out some air, she started over the field.

Julian fell in behind her, and Skip sighed and remained frozen for a moment before he also followed. As they neared the tree, Stephanie noticed that Mindy was wearing red sandals - not a good match for a green robe. She looked like a witch, a pretty one with green eyes, full lips, and high cheekbones. The wind ruffled her cloak, revealing her figure, which was hourglass perfect. Her breasts were also nicely shaped. There were no signs of any gross disease, so she figured Skip had been fibbing.

"Hello, Mindy," Stephanie said. "Skip told us about you and his first visit here."

Mindy laughed musically. "I guess he told you how he kissed me and ran away?"

Skip was turning white with embarrassment. He tried to say something, but only a stutter came out.

"He told us you have a disease," Stephanie said.

"I did have a disease, but I've been healed. It happened just now. Take a look."

Mindy undid three large pearl buttons at the front. She tossed her hood back and opened the cloak. Skip jumped back with his hand ready to cover his eyes, fearing she'd be naked and he'd be shamed. It looked like he expected to see germs the size of scorpions leap out. But there were no germs, and she was wearing a dress and a halter top.

Stephanie and Julian remained unmoved by Skip's antics. They studied her carefully, looking for scars or healing, and found only clear, creamy skin.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?" Mindy said, grinning. She'd never been happier. "It's not an illusion this time, Skip."

"Okay, that's enough," Skip said. "Please cover yourself."

"He's afraid of women," Stephanie said.

Mindy giggled. "I know."

"We've buried the demon, so to speak," Julian said. "That must be why you're healed. Its powers of disease went with it."

"Great. Then it's not just temporary. I can leave this place now. Only I have nowhere to go."

"Don't you have any family?" Skip said.

"No, they disowned me years ago."

"What about money?"

"I own this worthless land and whatever assets the cult has in the bank. I haven't checked on it, but there should be some money."

"We want to buy some of this worthless land," Julian said. "Stephanie's father is buried here, so we want the graveyard tended."

"You can have the graveyard. I'll sign it over. So you're Chang's daughter - I can see the resemblance, but I doubt you're much like him."

"I'm not. What was he like anyway?"

"He was the strong type, but he was too serious, not lighthearted at all. It was as if his life were a holy mission. His viewpoints were fixed. He saw things his way only. I guess you never knew him."

"I remember very little. How did he die?"

"Suicide. Chang bettered the demon. He got around all of its traps using his martial arts skills. Once, he told me he liked the demon because it kept him in shape. When he got the disease, he went to a cave and healed himself, using a Buddhist meditation technique he learned when he was young."

"It doesn't make any sense," Julian said. "Why would he go to great lengths to stay alive and then end it all?"

"Madness, that's what I call it. He started believing he was like a god, and in a way, he was. The others couldn't understand him. They didn't share his Eastern background, so it was impossible for them to think like him. Maybe it broke him when the people went to a form of witchcraft he despised. He became his own focus and said he'd been wrong all along. It was the individual who was a god; cults and churches were only a way for people to share their vices. In the end, he believed he had the power to rise from the dead. That's why I call it madness. He killed himself with a sword, fully believing he would rise again as a god."

"If I could've talked to him, I might have saved him," Stephanie said.

"He wouldn't have listened."

"I think it was the demon," Julian said. "Chang may have healed himself physically, but the strain of the ordeal took his sanity."

"You may be right. I hope you people don't lose your sanity from whatever it was you used to banish the demon."

"Don't worry about us," Julian said. "Listen, I think you should come back to the cottage with us. We can talk some more, and it'll get you away from this place. You're going to have to mix with people again, so you might as well start with us."

"I'll come along if it's all right with Skip. He doesn't look too thrilled about it at the moment."

Skip cleared his throat. "You might as well come. It's all right by me."

They turned, and the sun seemed to brighten over the ruins of the compound and the graveyard. Stephanie looked at the flowers and believed they were Chang's. He had risen to briefly bloom again; it was all any mortal man could do.

## CHAPTER SIX: MYSTERY

The wheels dug out of ruts and sent gravel pinging off rusty drums strewn on the weedy roadside. The pickup turned the corner and rattled on ahead, sounding like it might fly apart at any moment. Mr. Hopper knew the Ford would hold, but if it weren't for the new shocks, he would've been afraid to drive the ghost-town roads. He whooshed through a deep puddle, then the grade leveled, and he came to a deadwood branch blocking the road. It wasn't too big for him, so he stopped and got out.

A couple of years ago, a little exercise and summer heat would've been a good brace for him, but now everything was tiring. The noon sun beat down, and he moved like a hot turtle. He studied the branch and the rotted tree that had dropped it, then he slowly began dragging it to the ditch. The effort knocked up dust that turned to grime on his sweaty forehead. Pulling a checkered handkerchief from his stained shirt pocket, he wiped his brow.

Taking some asthmatic deep breaths, Mr. Hopper squinted and peered into the trees. This little band of forest was blighted; most of the trees were broken. The trunks were covered in lichens and rot like the stakes of some Dracula of nature. The ruins of Cloudy Corners were a dim picture beyond the trees, and they stirred up some of the memories buried in the slow quicksand that was his mind. His hand absently went to the scar tissue on his neck and brought his thoughts back to the disease and the man who had healed him. The healing had come a bit late, but he was still in debt to Chang. Chang had spared him, which was more than he'd done for the others. Mr. Hopper wasn't sorry for the others; they'd called down their own doom by conjuring the demon in the first place.

The truck bounced on a mile farther into dense forest, shaking its tailgate like it was a devil's rattle that was holding the sprites of the ghost town at bay. Finally, a sagging mansion appeared, and Mr. Hopper turned and drove up the gouge in the turf that served as a driveway. He parked the truck behind some birch trees, out of sight of the road, then got out and looked at the ruined building. His eyes went beady as they fixed on some bleached Gothic scrollwork, and for a moment, he was a zombie statue or a man hypnotized. When his synapses began to crackle again, he moved to unload the supplies.

The front of the mansion was boarded up, its doors sealed by wooden bars. In appearance, it was still stately, but in a way that spooked and saddened Hopper, like he was seeing the ghost of an old tycoon - one that'd been on the haunt so long his suit was getting threadbare.

His back bent by the weight of the bags, Mr. Hopper shuffled over to a path leading to the back. He disappeared in a jungle of fireweed, bushes, and vines and emerged near a capped well and the main rear door. The door was open a crack, and he went in and stopped, dropping his bags while his eyes adjusted to the gloom. Mr. Hopper's fear of tripping was understandable, given his physical condition. He also had scarred lungs, which made it difficult to breathe. The musty air turned his thoughts into a second dimension of gloom. Walking about as fast as a vine grows, he made his way to the kitchen. The room was painted bright yellow, there was a new freezer and a butcher block made of freshly cut hardwood. Unlike the exterior, a good portion of the interior had been repaired - mainly the ground floor and the basement. New wood and support beams were in the upper portion, but nearly all of the rooms had been left to dry rot.

Hopper was color sensitive; the yellow glow of the kitchen brought him to life. He even whistled a couple of notes as he finished shelving his supplies. In some ways, he felt more at home in the spooky mansion than he did at Blue Hills. He'd always wanted to own a mansion, so even a tumbled one was part of a dream come true. He turned to leave, wishing the house wasn't just old age come true. He thought of being young again and found that he was also old age come true. Then he heard a crash.

The noise echoed up from the basement, and it sent a brief ripple of alarm through his deadened nerves. Mr. Hopper's gun was a Star Firestar with laser-point sights. He'd borrowed it from his brother's shop. Now he drew it from his vest clip and checked it over. It was a weapon he valued immensely. Under normal conditions, he couldn't shoot well enough to hit the broad side of a barn door, but with the laser-point sights and a bit of shadow, he could hit a target.

Rats were the cause of the noise, that's what he figured, and one of the few pleasures he had was rat hunting around Cloudy Corners. As a sport, it wasn't taxing, and it was a whole lot of fun.

Shuffling out of the kitchen, he stopped and leaned against a moldered Louis XV chair. The door to the basement gained a hallucinatory aspect and fluttered before him like a curtain as he caught his breath. Pulling out an asthma puff, he cleared his lungs, then he moved to open the door. It swung silently on hinges he kept well oiled.

The smell of chemicals and rot was strong, and the stairs were dark. A faint flicker of fluorescent light came from the bottom. He figured he had left the light on the last time he went down. As always, he was worried about tripping, and he took the first step with exaggerated care, finding that the stairs didn't creak but his knees did. Moving like molasses into the darkness, he still had hopes of surprising some rats. A vision of a shot rat flying rag doll and splattering on the wall flashed in his head and put a taut grin on his face.

A couple more steps, and he realized that the noise wasn't rats at all - two men were down below. Two masked men, to be exact. They were dressed all in black, moving across the polished floor at the center of the cavernous basement. Their motion was like a graceful dance across the fluorescent gleam of the floor, and it took Mr. Hopper's slow eyes a few moments to register them as more than fast silhouettes playing some kind of deadly game.

There was a pause in the action, then silver flashed liquidly from the armbands of one of the men as he moved into a cat stance. The other man was the aggressor - he struck out with a samurai sword, and the rings clinked as the defender used them to block the blow. More blows followed, and silver flowed like a snake in the air as the defender dodged, moving in simple patterns that the swordsman was unable to anticipate. Mr. Hopper could now hear the labored breathing of the swordsman. The defender was tiring him out, beating him by endurance - repeatedly the swordsman swung, until finally he was blocked, caught by a foot sweep, and sent stumbling backward on the slippery floor. He fell with a loud crash into the piles of junk just off the edge of the inlaid floor.

Mr. Hopper knew the defender; the expert with the arm rings was Chang. The ring defense on a slippery floor was a game of skill he practiced - it lent him a perfect sense of balance. A secret of the martial arts was to take action while off balance. The other man was Hoover, a lackey. The scars the disease had left on Hoover's face gave him a good reason for wearing a mask.

Now that Mr. Hopper had clued in on the scene, he prepared to speak, and preparation it would take because his throat had gone completely dry. Chang had his back to him, and he was lifting his hands to his mask. A movement he didn't complete. Chang suddenly ducked, spun on his heel, and sent an object flying. It whooshed past Hopper's ear and planted itself in the post beside him. Hopper's eyes went to the gleaming object, but his head didn't move, as fright had frozen it. The projectile was a four-point shuriken star with a tiger image at its center. The sight of the razor-sharp edges made Hopper's lips quiver. His hand went limp, he dropped his gun, and as it thudded on the stairs, he seized the post, using it to brace his shaking legs.

Chang put his hands on his hips. "Don't take a heart attack, Hopper. I knew it was you. Otherwise, you'd be dead."

"Didn't expect you till tomorrow," Mr. Hopper said. "I thought the noise was rats."

"Leave the rats alone, Hopper. You'll shoot yourself in the foot and end up as their dinner."

"Maybe so, but I hate rats."

Chang slipped off his mask, revealing strong features polished by moisture and light. The effect of his hawkish nose was to make him look less Oriental. Hopper noted that his hair had grown to his shoulders.

"Come down, Hopper. I've got something to show you."

Hopper nodded, but it looked more like he had a tick in his neck. He took slow steps to the bottom of the stairs, the effort pinching his face to meanness, like he might be an old snapping turtle getting ready to strike. The light caught his face, and he had the eyes of a blind man. Yet he still saw well enough to stop at the edge of the polished floor.

A dragon's head was patterned in the inlaid tiles, and Chang was standing on the points of the teeth. Hopper thought it a genuine head of death; the floor terrified him - he knew he'd fall and break some bones or his neck if he tried to walk on it.

"You're amazing, Hopper. A man who has to watch his step to make sure he doesn't fall apart like a mummy."

"You'll get old, too," Mr. Hopper said.

"Ha! The grandmaster who taught me is an old man. He's made of steel, not parchment." Chang turned to Hoover. "Uncover that piece and bring it over," he barked.

Leaning his sword against the wall, Hoover obeyed. He gently lifted a cloth covering from a statuette sitting among the junk. Taking his time, he blew some dust off it. Picking it up, he carried it over to Chang.

Chang took it and held it out, more for his own pleasure than Hopper's. The piece was a demon that was part elephant. It had ruby eyes and a ferocious look in an odd way. It held a large star in its hands like elephant feet.

"Take a good look, Hopper. It's three thousand years old."

"Where'd you get it?" Hopper said.

"Let's just say I borrowed it from the museum," Chang said. "Not a museum. The Museum. I want you to use your brother. Have him fence it for us. Put the money in my Cult of the Black Night account. I have the details and history of the piece. Your cut is one percent."

"My brother might not do it. He's worried. The pieces you're bringing in are too rare. He wants to know who I get them from."

"He's worried," Chang said, mimicking Hopper's crusty voice. "You tell him you're more than worried. Tell him you're scared because the person you deal with is dangerous. He'll move the piece, or one of these nights he'll be seeing my ghost."

"There's a private detective around. A black man named Skip. The guy asked my brother some questions about you. My brother told him you're dead, mainly because he thinks you are. He hasn't figured out that you're dead in order to steal relics."

"You insult me, Hopper. I'm not dead in order to steal art. I'm dead, so I can rise again. So the myth will be complete. My Cult of the Black Night will not have a founder who is lacking."

"Didn't you hear him?" Hoover said. "A detective is asking questions about--"

"Shut up! I heard him. So what do you think, Hopper? Is this Skip a cop or just a routine guy investigating for some insurance company?"

"He's neither. He came here with your daughter and her new father."

"What? My daughter and her new father? Who is this guy?"

"Well, he's some sort of--"

"Hold it right there, Hopper. Talking about my daughter is a private matter. Hoover is not to hear about her. Go back up and wait for me in the back yard."

'From Here to Eternity' could've been filmed in the time it took Mr. Hopper to reach the back yard. But he still made it. He stood in the shadow of the house on a broken patio. Flowering wild carrot, four feet high, was directly in front of him. Other parts of the yard were overgrown with burdock plants, lilac bushes, and vines. An ancient willow towered over everything. The mansion looked haunted even in summer sunlight, but Mr. Hopper found that he no longer feared the shadows. He could feel that the demon was gone.

Chang emerged, light on his feet. He stopped to pick a wildflower. He inhaled the fragrance, walked over to Mr. Hopper, and placed the sack containing the statuette at his feet. He looked at Hopper, then began to toy with the flower, his smile idyllic, as if he were some new prince of peace.

"Tell me about this new father my daughter has. And what about her stepmother - is she with him?"

"There's no mother, and he's dating a local woman."

"Hum, something must've happened to Tiffany."

"This Julian is a nice fellow, but he's odd. A wizard of some sort, and he has unusual powers. A seer is what he's called. He's not the one investigating you, and he didn't know about it. He ordered the black fellow and your daughter to halt the investigation when he found out. He's also bought the graveyard so your daughter can visit your grave."

"Have you seen any real evidence of his power?"

"I can see it now. Cloudy Corners is at peace. Julian and your daughter banished the demon."

"I notice it has left. Are you sure it was them?"

"Yes, and Mindy is healed, too. This Skip fellow, he was over here, and the demon failed to hurt him. He must be swift, like you. The seer is different. He's not a fighter in the physical sense. His strength is mental. I think it's him who turned your daughter into a witch."

"A witch!" Chang crushed the flower in his hand. "He's corrupted her. Woe to him for what he's done. But it may not be too late. I'll take her and immerse her in the mysteries. I can bleed the corruption from her and absorb her powers."

"Taking her may not be wise. I thought your efforts were all in starting your new Cult of the Black Night?"

"Fate has intervened. What must be done must be done. My daughter now has value. If she can banish demons, she can also call them up."

Mr. Hopper turned to Chang and looked into his dark eyes. This whole thing had become a mystery he couldn't quite understand. He decided it was for younger men - they were the seers who could fathom it all. For him, there was only darkness at the end of the tunnel, and maybe Chang was that darkness. There had been lights at one time - hallucinations, he supposed. Now he wanted only peace and comfort, a measure of it to lead him quietly to the ground and the end.

Sunlight dappled the maple leaves, and they fluttered like a curtain in Chang's vision. He was strolling at the side of the mansion, and beyond the boughs, he could see Mr. Hopper pulling out on the road. He looked somewhat faded behind the wheel. If he were any less of a man, he'd be a ghost. Chang figured Hopper went well with the neighborhood. Soon, his foundation would crumble, and he'd be exactly like the rest of Cloudy Corners. It was the land that never collapsed. It was greater than men, and a new Cloudy Corners was on the way. It was there beneath the old, in the same way that green grass and shoots are sometimes there beneath the snow, ready to transform winter bleakness to spring in a single day. The new Cloudy Corners would be his land, and it would support a small population of his chosen ones. He was determined not to make the same mistake again. Only people who could pass his test would get

into the cult. His Cult of the Black Night wouldn't be for seekers; it would be for people who were already on the path.

A shadow fell, movement in the corner of his eye, and he knew it was Hoover coming up behind him, disobeying his order to stay in the basement. Moving with liquid speed, Chang caught him with a back fist strike, and then he spun and kicked him over. Hoover fell into some bur plants and gazed up at Chang - a pitiful look that was revolting. Hoover had rat-like features and fattened white scars on the left side of his face. In most ways, he was as stupid as a child. He likely didn't even know why he was being hit. And sometimes it was difficult to know. Chang beat him regularly, for no ordinary reasons. It was part of the discipline - a sudden blow, a quick kick was supposed to sharpen the senses and loosen the muscles. The man who never knows when he'll be struck eventually loosens up, as his defenses grow sharp and smooth.

"On your feet, Hoover! Be quick with it!" Chang barked. "Where's your German obedience? I think maybe you're a skulker who lacks the trait."

"Not so. Obedience, I have."

"Then you're an idiot who can't obey commands. Here's what you're to do. Return to your cave, strip naked, and sit in the darkness. You may take a crust of bread and some water. In your meditations, contemplate these few words of wisdom - TO FOLLOW THE PATH YOU MUST BECOME THE PATH. Once you understand, you must return and tell me a few words of your own new wisdom."

"I will go swiftly," Hoover said, rising and bowing. "I am greatly pleased to have the opportunity to learn this lesson."

"If you don't stop bowing to me, you'll learn another lesson. Now be pleased, and go," Chang said, pointing to the road.

Hoover jogged off, and Chang turned away, headed for the back yard. He was momentarily pleased with Hoover. Hoover was an ugly man with ugly traits, yet he'd been given some discipline and been made a good fighter. If he could do well with Hoover, then he'd do so much better with his chosen ones. Plans for the new cult were now laid out; it was only a matter of putting them in motion when the time was right. And it wasn't quite right yet. He had this matter concerning Stephanie to contemplate.

Crossing the broken patio in the back yard, he sat down and put a hand on his chin. Weeds rose over his head, the mansion towered crookedly behind him, and higher up, the sun threw beams through a passing cumulus cloud. Rather than look to the light for inspiration, he let his thoughts cool and drift with the shadow of the old mansion. The first thing he had to do was picture Stephanie as more than six years old. He did that with little difficulty, and with the new picture came certainty. She was now at the crucial age. If this seer were allowed full sway over her, she would be molded into something undesirable. Without a doubt, Julian was initiating her into some type of inferior witch cult. Soon it would be too late; she'd be ruined and immoral like the people of the old Cloudy Corners cult. At the very least, she had to be taken and initiated into the mysteries. Then she would have the strength to resist weak ways.

His thinking done, Chang popped to his feet. Part of the discipline was to end thinking and act when the time came. Since this act required some preparation, he decided to go back to the basement.

Chang's weapons and tools were stored in a special vault at the back of the basement, and it was the right place for preparations. Taking the key from a crack in the wall, he opened the heavy door and went inside. Walking in pitch darkness, he went to a bowl containing matches, struck one, and lit the candles and incense in a small home shrine he kept mounted on the wall.

As the light and incense calmed his mind, he looked to the weapons mounted on the walls. From his shuriken star case, he selected two throwing stars, one with a lion design and the other with

a dragon design. He found them suitable because the emblems of ferocity and spirituality combined well.

There were many mounted items he wouldn't need now and probably would never need. Yet he still kept them and admired them regularly. These were hand claws, smoke balls, a thumbnail saw, brass daggers, and fishtail darts. He also had a sectional staff, fighting chains, spiked headbands, a moon axe, and his ninja sword.

Tossing the stars on a stone table, he decided to take down all the weapons he might need. A blowgun would be useful, so he plucked one out of a case, and then his eyes fell on a dragon claw knife with a black skeleton handle. Foot spikes, a spike case, a gadget bag, a firebird throwing dart, a black mask, a jacket, and pants all went on the table.

He studied the objects carefully, and they seemed right. But was the time right? He could only act at the right moment. Turning back to the shrine, he decided to meditate until he had the right feelings and attitude for the mission. Before he sat down, he saw dragons moving in the smoke, a sign of success to come.

His curiosity getting the better of him, Skip turned from the others and looked across the grounds. He was standing on a patch of sand, and a sudden gust blew some in his eyes. Muttering some nasty words, he rubbed them and saw numerous spots of light and color flowing with the windy shadows of the willows. The colors belonged to the clothing worn by an army of guests visiting Blue Hills for the biannual Clue Convention, a charity event run by the Tionaga Chamber of Commerce and Mr. Hopper.

The angel halos faded from the people as his vision solidified, as it should, since they were celebrities, not angels. They were what people in Tionaga thought were celebrities - radio personalities, country singers, some local hockey stars, and others that Skip and Julian had never heard much of before today. The guests they'd met so far thought they were other celebrities, and Skip had been having fun introducing himself as a big-city comic turned detective, and Julian as a seer who would solve the Clue crime using psychic powers. Skip knew he was embarrassing Julian, but he still kept handing out his business card and making his introduction bigger. He liked to drop Julian's name using a tone that implied his powers were well known. Skip loved the famous feeling. He'd spent years on the stage trying to convince folks in the city that he was as important as these people in Tionaga believed him to be.

Skip tapped Julian on the shoulder, and he turned and looked across the grounds with him.

"You still sizing up the guests as suspects?" Julian said.

"Sure, Mr. Hopper said everyone is a suspect, even you. Right now, I'm checking out that big guy with the crew cut and light suit. Look at him up close, and you'll see that he's cross-eyed. It draws out your suspicions. I think he's another detective. Mr. Hopper could've used him to draw up this smuggler mystery."

Sandra had rejoined them, and she looked somewhat windblown. "He owns the local paper, and he probably did draw up the mystery."

"I see," Skip said. "I'd be cross-eyed too if I knew as much about this town as he likely does."

"Cross-eyed and bald," Julian said. "I'd never suspect him anyway. He looks too much like a suspect. The smugglers will turn out to be the people you'd least expect. Mindy or someone like that."

"It better not be Mindy," Skip said. "We'll be disqualified if it's her."

"How's that?" Julian said.

"Part of the rules. You can't win the trophy if you become a victim. Besides, Mindy is too weird to be the big cheese smuggler. If Stephanie and Alice were her mules, we'd be suckers who couldn't see past our own noses. Especially when we got Mindy watching the cottage for us and using powers of witchcraft to ward off villains."

"It couldn't be Stephanie or Alice," Sandra said. "Children aren't allowed to participate."

"That warding off villains thing is a joke anyway," Julian said. "Mindy is doing it to entertain the girls. They like pretending they're white witches."

"I think Alice wants to be more like a black witch," Skip said as he studied the people milling closer to Mr. Hopper. "Say, it looks like Mr. Hopper is going to release another clue. Let's go over."

A strengthening breeze was at their backs, turning the stroll through the shade into a brisk walk. Mr. Hopper had the crowd assembled by the time they stepped up to the fringe, and he was lifting a finger in a gesture for silence. His sheriff's costume suited him, but he was more like Sheriff Slowpoke. The bandits would ride in and out of town before he even got his gun belt on, and today, with a fresh scent of pines and lake breezes blowing in, he was at his fastest, which wasn't fast enough since he didn't get a chance to get a word out before an alarm began to whoop at the hotel.

At first, the startled celebrities did nothing but gasp; then the crowd broke into a running mob, with Joe Marsh, the local football hero, in the lead as they charged toward the main doors. By the time ten seconds had passed, Skip, Julian, and Sandra were standing alone with Mr. Hopper.

"What's going on?" Julian said.

"A break-in," Skip said. "A smuggler has gotten into someone's room. That person is now a victim and won't be able to win the trophy."

"Why aren't you running over?" Sandra said. "I thought you were supposed to be a detective?"

"I am, and detectives never follow the crowd. The smuggler can't remain inside, but he still won't try to escape by way of the front or back doors. He also doesn't want to be seen at all, or he'll be a prime suspect even if he isn't proven guilty. There's only one sure escape route, and that's the old fire escape at the end of the west wing. And that's where I'm going now."

Skip suddenly flashed off, running like a sprinter under the willows. A moment later, Julian and Sandra began to jog after him, and the gap between them grew as he raced along the building wall toward the west wing. It was an older wing, and thick bushes covered much of its peeling paint. The wing ended in the forest, and Skip dashed down a path in the pines and kicked up duff as he halted near the fire escape.

Coming out of the shadows, he saw nothing unusual, just sunlight beaming through to illumine the blistered paint on the old metal fire escape. The ringing of the alarm was only a faint sound here; it seemed like he had come to a complete dead end. He knew things were often not what they seemed; he decided to wait. Moments later, the escape door burst open, and a gorilla emerged, carrying a sack under its arm. Wasting no time, Skip ran to the escape and shook it, causing it to rock wildly. Caught off balance, the hurried gorilla lost his footing completely and tumbled to the bottom.

Skip moved quickly around, but the gorilla got up and line-plunged him, knocking him aside before he had a chance to get a lock on him. Rolling up, Skip continued with the pursuit, and luck was with him - the gorilla was having trouble with his bulky suit, and he slipped on fallen needles as he moved into the pines. Jumping him from behind, Skip got on his back and held him down with an arm lock.

"Let me go, you're breaking my arm," the gorilla said.

"You didn't care about breaking things when you knocked me down. Right now, I'm holding you until Mr. Hopper takes you into custody."

"Aren't you carrying this thing a bit too far?" Julian said, emerging from a screen of shrubs.

"He's assaulting me," the gorilla said.

"If I let him go, he'll escape. Go get the others."

"I'll go," Sandra said as she stepped up beside Julian.

"Wait," the gorilla said. "If you get them, everyone will share my clue. Let me get away unmasked and I'll give you the clue."

"You're lying," Skip said. "You'll give me a phony clue."

"No, I won't. It's written down on paper. I'll give it to you."

"Okay, it's a deal. Where's the paper?"

"It's in the sack."

"Check the sack," Skip said, tossing it over to Julian.

The string was drawn and knotted, but Julian was good with knots. He pulled it open and looked at the contents. "It contains a policeman's uniform," he said.

"The clue's in the front trouser pocket. I put it there," the gorilla said.

"Why did you steal a uniform?" Skip said.

"It belongs to the police chief. It was my job to disqualify him."

"I see," Skip said. He looked to Julian. "Got the clue?"

"Yeah, it's here, and it looks valid."

Releasing the gorilla's arm, Skip got to his feet. "All right, you can get out of here before someone else captures you."

The gorilla groaned and slowly got up, rubbing his stiff arm. He looked a mess, his fur matted with needles and duff.

"You better not get any ideas about disqualifying us," Skip said. "I've got traps set that can give you more than a sore arm."

"It won't be me," the gorilla said. "I've had enough of you." He shook his sore arm once more, then he jogged off into the pines.

Stephanie felt drawn to the window again. A breeze was blowing in, rippling the deep grass and the waters of the lake. The waves were sun-dappled gold, and gulls were wheeling over the strip of sand beach; it was a scene of summer energy and warmth that she was unable to appreciate. Something was blocking normal feelings. A dark shadow was rising in her mind, one never quite complete enough to see, and she felt watched, as if a monster were creeping somewhere in the grass.

A sudden shiver went up her spine, and she turned back to Alice and Mindy. "Maybe you really did call up something, Mindy. I keep getting a weird feeling, like a shadow of something evil is on me."

Mindy was spreading some herbs on her potion. Bent over her cauldron and wearing feathers, she looked like a large bird. "Of course, you see a shadow. It's the shadow of the protector we called up."

"You mean the protector is evil?" Alice said. "Evil like one of the powers of the black pit?"

"It's neither good nor evil. It's a spirit force that obeys the witch commanding it."

"What did we command it to do?" Stephanie said.

"Oh, nothing much," Mindy said. She took off her cloak and shook it before beginning to fold it carefully. "Our protector is supposed to sap the strength of anyone who trespasses."

"A blood curse would be better," Alice said. "One that causes trespassers to bleed to death."

"Skip won't allow me to curse anyone."

"That's too bad," Alice said. "Once the blood is gone, it's easy to make a shrunken head. If we got the smugglers, we could put their heads on a belt and take them to Mr. Hopper. It'd serve

him right for not letting us join the mystery hunt. He'd have to give us the trophy anyway."

"Yeah, we'd be trading one trophy for another," Stephanie said.

"You two are mean," Mindy said. "The smugglers aren't even real - they're just playing the part for the mystery. There are lots of things we could do to them without killing them."

"Like what?" Alice said.

"Many things. Let's take my book of spells into the kitchen. We can go through it after lunch."

"What's for lunch?" Stephanie said.

"Just strawberries and cream," Mindy said. "We don't want our bodies to be corrupted by meat or blood. It could displease the spirits."

"I'd rather have berries than meat and blood anyway," Alice said. "To please the spirits even more, I'm going to keep my voodoo doll with me while I eat."

"I'm leaving my rattle here," Stephanie said, "and I still think your voodoo doll is a fake. It's just a little girl doll. Voodoo dolls are wicked looking."

"She's a very nasty little girl," Alice said.

Stephanie checked the window again, but saw nothing. She was glad they were leaving the room as she was getting a tick in her neck. Alice punched her shoulder to wake her up. Shaking her head like she really was trying to wake up, she followed them to the kitchen. As she joined Alice at the table, she felt a little queasy and definitely not hungry. Watching Mindy take the berries from the fridge, she was glad they weren't eating more for lunch.

"Guess you're not getting on too well with Skip now," Alice said.

"He's the one who picks the fights," Mindy said.

"Witchcraft scares him," Alice said. "He's terrified that a woman might have power over him."

"I don't think Julian and Sandra like the witch stuff either," Mindy said.

"I heard them talking," Stephanie said. "They think we're just engaging in harmless fantasy. Skip wasn't convinced by their talk, though. He thinks we should get real."

"Maybe we should put a real spell on him," Alice said.

Stephanie nodded. "I'd like to put a spell on him that causes him to tell the truth wherever he goes."

"Then his detective work would collapse," Alice said. "He does everything by lying."

"Exactly," Stephanie said. "Then he'd go back to being a comedian, which is what he should be."

Mindy grinned as she flipped through the pages of her magic book. "You know what? There is no spell that makes you funny. Just one that one that makes you laugh yourself to death."

"Don't let Skip get that spell," Stephanie said. "He'll kill his whole audience with it."

Alice giggled, and Mindy laughed, then the back door slammed so hard it shook the cottage.

The three of them jumped. "It's only the wind," Mindy said. "It's pretty gusty out there. Wait here while I bolt the door."

Exiting the kitchen, Mindy made her way to the back door. It was unlocked, sighing open and shut with the wind, as she expected. She reached for the handle and missed; the wind sucked the door completely open. Outside, a maple bough was knocking against the porch, and fingers of wind were combing through the long grass. For a moment, she felt a dark shadow rising, like the one Stephanie had mentioned, then something hit her neck. She took it for an insect or a twig blown by the wind, but when she pulled it away, she saw that it had a feathered end. As she realized it was a dart, the dark shadow became a terror so powerful it knocked her to the floor.

Spittle came to the corners of her mouth, she clawed at the corner of the door for a moment, then she fell unconscious.

Mindy's hand convulsed, then fell still. The door banged, and wind entered the room like an angry poltergeist, sending objects tumbling. A lace curtain tore loose and began to whirl in the room. Stephanie and Alice dashed in and spotted Mindy. As they ran to her, the curtain pasted itself across Alice's face, and she tumbled on the rug. Stephanie got to Mindy and knelt beside her. Froth was on her mouth, and her lips had blued like she'd had an epileptic seizure. Touching Mindy's chest, Stephanie felt her heart beating. She grabbed her hand, found it warm, and then she looked up, gazing fearfully out the door.

Wind tore through the trees with the rushing sound of a river. Litter blown down from the beach was sailing over the field. Huge wind ripples hummed through the deep grass, and she was certain someone was hiding in it.

She stood up just as a fierce gust struck, and held onto the doorframe, then Alice tripped into her, and she was knocked over by Mindy's legs. She rolled down the step and heard Alice gasp as she landed on Mindy.

A cloud darkened the field, Stephanie ignored her skinned knee, and watched a red object sail high up in the shadowed sky. She thought of it as her protector vanishing under the wing of the darkening day - cast to oblivion by the breath of black magic. Suddenly, she was aware that a monster was coming and that the monster was her father. Yet she saw nothing, not even the tiny feather skipping lightly toward her on the wind. In her mind, the dark shadow had risen fully, taking shape as a memory. She saw herself crying on that day long ago when her father had told her he hadn't wanted her - he'd wanted a son.

A chorus of shouts echoed in the pines, and the boughs of a nearby fir tree bounced under the weight of fleeing squirrels. The mystery hunters were like bloodhounds that had smelled the clue, and the crowd of them showed as a splash of color near the screen of trees. They all fell silent and stared at the fire escape, and for some moments it enjoyed a last flexing of its rusty muscles

"The supports are bent. Someone's been on it!" a man yelled.

Skip looked to Julian and Sandra; he raised his eyebrows as if to say the hunters were about as bright as he expected. "Let me deal with them," he said. "Over this way!" he hollered, causing a stampede into the trees.

The first person to come clear of the branches was the police chief - a bear of a man with heavy gray hair like combed-back porcupine quills. He wore the outfit of a sloppy deer hunter. From the look in his eyes, the deer had gotten away, leaving him desperate. And it was the sort of desperation that causes hunters to shoot at anything that moves. The run through and around the hotel had been a bit too much for a cruiser cop - he halted, huffing and puffing, and let the rest of the people pour into the clearing before he spoke.

"What happened?" the Chief finally said, lifting a big paw to silence the others.

"I had a hunch and ran straight here," Skip said. "I caught a smuggler in a gorilla suit coming down the escape. When I seized him, he threw me down and fled through the trees. He's carrying a burlap sack. Sorry about that, Chief Woods, but I wasn't prepared for resistance."

"He wasn't supposed to resist," Chief Woods said. "I plan on getting him. Search party grouping!" he hollered. "I want my ten deputized men only. We'll do a fast fan west, and I'll radio a car to meet us at the other end near Don Wickens' farm."

"Wait a second!" said Steve Hammond, a gaunt, bearded man who was also Tionaga's town librarian. "You can't exclude the rest of us from the search party."

"The rest of you will get in the way. We'll be stumbling over each other. You people are to go back to Mr. Hopper and receive the next clue - then you can wait for us to return with a suspect.

We'll get that gorilla, believe me. In that heavy suit, he'll get tangled in the brush."

A line of geese appeared overhead, heading west like an ominous arrow and acting as a signal for the search party. Chief Woods said nothing more, and he waved the men forward. They fanned into the pines, leaving the silent crowd listening to the crackle and pop of sticks and twigs. Some discontented mumbling began, but most of the people looked to Skip for further instructions. By default, he'd been left in command. He was a person who used authority casually; he shrugged his shoulders, then spoke. "Mr. Hopper's the wizard," he said. "Guess we should go back and see what's up."

Skip saw sparks of curiosity appear in some eyes, and then the little gathering broke up. Half a minute later, what had started as a slow shuffle back to the front was rapidly turning into a horse race. That anyone could be inspired to hurry upon seeing Mr. Hopper was something Skip found amazing. But the people did hurry; it was almost like Mr. Hopper was a wizened genie at the end of the rainbow and not the dull old chap of yesterday. His dollar-store badge glittered in the sunlight, evoking memories of cowboys and Indians and toy-gun summer days in both Julian's and Skip's minds. The difference was that Julian saw Mr. Hopper's form as gloom behind the dazzle while Skip saw only a tired old man. An old man who was mismanaging the entire mystery outing. The way Skip saw it, Hopper should have known enough to put someone qualified in charge of the hunt instead of trying to run it himself. No doubt, he donated his hotel and grounds to the event because it gave him a way of getting into the spotlight he would otherwise never have.

The crowd gathered in a half-moon shape below Mr. Hopper's badge. On cue, the wind began to rush, turning the leaves into a carpet of sound, then there was a terrible cracking noise as a treetop snapped somewhere in the woods. "It's the devil we're after," said Sam Hicks, the local downhill skiing champion.

"I think he's after us," Mr. Hopper said, causing a few laughs.

"Nope, these gorillas have no genuine powers of evil," said Ann Stone, a policewoman.

"They have nincompoop powers," Skip said. "My arm still hurts from my tangle with that guy."

"Technically, the forces of evil have cheated," Mr. Hopper said. "They're supposed to surrender when caught. I'm going to radio them and warn them not to do any more bullying."

"You better radio Chief Woods, too," Skip said. "I think his enthusiasm has got the better of him. If he doesn't watch it, the gorillas will be laying brutality charges."

"Don't worry about the chief," Mr. Hopper said. "He always looks like that. He'll come to his senses in the end."

"Enough small talk," Joe Marsh said, "let's get going on this new clue. We can forget about waiting for Woodsy; he's out of the game now. It's best to leave him beating the bushes."

"He'll likely remain disqualified," Mr. Hopper said, scratching his head. He pulled a manila envelope from his shirt pocket and fumbled with the flap. A small gold-printed card was inside, and Hopper studied it as if it were as valuable as a diamond.

"Come on, Hopper, are you going to read it today or tomorrow?" Joe Marsh said.

"I want to get it right. Okay, people, here's the dope. THERE IS A HAUNTED WINDOW IN THE BRANCHES OF A TREE. IF YOU CAN SEE IT, THE CLUE IS BURIED WHERE YOU'RE STANDING."

The wind looped and gusted in the forest, and when it died a moment later, the people began to chatter about the new clue. Skip swore quietly under his breath, and he detected a twinkle of laughter in Julian's eyes. Mr. Hopper's new clue and the gorilla's clue were the same - Skip knew he'd been had.

From the beach band shell, they could see Joe Marsh and several of his friends jogging up the beach. They disappeared where the strip of sand curved into some trees. Obviously, they thought

they were on to something. Most likely, they were following a weak hunch. The new clue had scattered people in all directions with the litter and the wind. All of them were trying to catch sight of a solution that was beyond their powers of detection.

Sand blew up and rattled against the band shell. Skip shielded his face with his hands and turned back to Julian and Sandra. They were reposing like two lazy lovers on a bench in the empty shell. He wished they would show a little more enthusiasm for the hunt.

Ice rattled as Sandra's straw found the bottom of her Coke. "You look mean," she said to Skip. "You shouldn't let this thing get under your skin."

"I hate cheaters," Skip said. "That gorilla owed me more than a swindle. I think a fix is in the works."

Julian frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The winner or winners will be in the news. The charities could've set it up so the person they think looks best wins. The rest of us are just suckers chasing the wind."

"You're starting to sound paranoid," Julian said. "And who cares anyway? It's only a game."

"Sure, it's only a game," Skip said, "but games should be played the right way. We did this game the right way at my detective school, so I'm used to doing it the pro way."

"You mean your training was just a bunch of games?" Sandra said.

"The games were an extra. I went to a summer camp for detection students. It cost me two thousand dollars to register. We did all sorts of stuff there - learning teamwork methods mostly. There were many workshops dealing with proper attitudes and character. More than anything, the camp was a place to make friends and connections. Some large corporations recruited there, but it was never my intention to be a corporate dick."

"Suppose they did try to pick a winner in advance," Sandra said. "How could they be sure the winner would come forward first?"

"They'd make one of the clues impossible to solve so their winner could come forward at the time they wanted."

"I think this new clue of Hopper's is supposed to be the stopper," Sandra said. "If I didn't know this area so well, I would never have guessed where to look."

"You mean you know where the window is?" Skip said.

"Yes, I know."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

"Because I told her to wait," Julian said. "We had to look confused, or else the others would have tailed us."

"Yeah, that's right," Skip said. "Just about everyone waited to see where I was going."

"We've got to go up the beach past the cottage," Julian said. "The hidden window is on the small bluff running up from the old boathouse."

"Let's get to it," Skip said. "We've waited too long already. Joe Marsh is probably already there."

"He wouldn't find it," Sandra said. "It's really hard to see."

Whitecaps were washing in, throwing up spray onto rocks and driftwood. As they walked up the beach, the strip of sand narrowed, and the adjacent ground grew rugged. Small mounds became increasingly larger until finally the bluff was casting its shadow beside them. This section of the beach was neglected; heaps of driftwood, weeds, and gull-spotted boulders choked the sand ahead of them.

Sandra led the way through some tall grass and yellow weeds. A path was barely visible on the bluff side; it was angled and not too steep, so they made their way up it easily. At the top, the twisted boughs of a giant old oak blocked the sun. Skip and Julian looked at its lichen-stained bark and were certain it was the tree in the clue. They stepped over the grassy lip into the field and began to wonder - not a building was in sight. Sunlight made its holes and windows in the gnarled branches, but of real windows, there wasn't a sign. Jagged rocks and deadwood branches protruding from broad-bladed long grass, and the creaking of the wind in the trees, created an air of abandonment.

Sandra didn't stop under the tree; she kept moving over the field in the direction of a large boulder - a dark rock of carbon limestone. They halted beside it and looked back at the oak. Its boughs shivered and quivered like the tentacles of a monster, but it revealed no secrets. Spots of sunlight flashed like mocking eyes in the hollow spaces.

The walk up the bluff had been tiring; they were still catching some lost breath, yet that didn't stop Skip from becoming frustrated. "If I'm supposed to be seeing something, I'd like to know what it is," he said.

"You can't see it from here," Sandra said.

"Then what are we doing here?" Skip said.

"Get up on the boulder," Julian said. "You'll see it from there."

Skip looked doubtful; he hesitated, but could think of nothing to say. He turned to the rock, put his foot in a crack, and went to the top. He tried to shield his eyes from the flashes of sunlight, but he couldn't block them off completely. On the boulder, he could see the lake's waters and a better view of the forest on the far side. He looked for places where the branches could form a window, and at first, he saw nothing. Then, in the largest space, a pattern gained definition. A dark shape suddenly shot into vision, half hidden in the trees on the far side. It was an old, sagging mansion; he'd noticed it before when he was looking across the lake from Tionaga. One attic window wasn't boarded up; it gleamed like a gem. The baroque-twisted twigs and leaves of the old oak framed it, giving it a supernatural look.

"Amazing," Skip said. He jumped to the ground. "And it's even more amazing that Mr. Hopper expected anyone to find it. The clue must be here at the base. A little scratching around and we should have it."

"I've already got it," Julian said, holding up a green bottle containing a note.

Skip snatched the bottle and quickly pulled out the note. He read it quickly, then he read it again more slowly. His expression went from excited to confused to ugly. "I can't believe it," he said. "Something terrible has happened."

"What do you mean?" Sandra said.

"Brace yourself," Skip said. "The note isn't a clue. It's a letter from Stephanie, explaining why she's run away."

Julian digested the sentence for a moment, then he snatched the note.

DEAR MYSTERY HUNTERS,

TODAY I DECIDED TO FOLLOW MR. HOPPER AND REPLACE HIS CLUE WITH THIS LETTER. IT IS TO INFORM EVERYONE THAT I HAVE RUN AWAY. THE CURRENT SITUATION WITH MY NEW FATHER, JULIAN BRADDOCK, HAS BECOME UNBEARABLE. I FIND THE DETAILS TOO PAINFUL TO GO INTO NOW. PLEASE SAY GOODBYE TO ALICE FOR ME AND TELL SKIP NOT TO BOTHER LOOKING FOR ME. I WILL BE SAFE AND SOUND, AND NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO FIND ME. WHEN MY THOUGHTS ARE STRAIGHTENED OUT, I MAY RETURN - THEN AND ONLY THEN.

STEPHANIE

"Don't believe it," Skip said, putting a hand on Julian's shoulder. "Stephanie would never write such a note. It just doesn't sound like her. I'll investigate. Maybe it's just a bad joke."

Julian remained silent. His worst fears appeared to have come true, and the power of that fear made him believe in it. He saw mist over the lake, and it swirled and darkened, puffing up like dust from the heavy feet of elephants. The story of his life began to pass in his mind like a circus parade, and his hopes vanished into the sky faster than helium balloons in an updraft. The fun and dazzle of the circus were gone, and he saw himself as an old man, a loveless failure, a freak. There was nothing in the cards other than the grime of the midway and the yellowing of aging magazines. The laughter of the crowd had become mockery, and Stephanie was far away, with a new father who wouldn't let her down. Skip and Sandra's words sounded like more mockery; he couldn't make them out. He felt Skip squeezing his shoulder, but it didn't bring him back; instead, everything went gray-black, and he collapsed into the weeds.

## CHAPTER 7: THE WILD

The wind continued to blow, growing hot and dry under a sun like the fierce eye of some Indian shaman's god. At Cloudy Corners, it baked the land, lifted the dust, and became an ill wind in most places. Looking from the yard, Alice could see it hazing the lake. A thousand invisible horsemen were thundering up dust in the ghost town. Her mouth fell open; for a moment, she thought she saw Stephanie's face patterned in the dust cloud, like she'd become another apparition inhabiting the ruined town. Alice trembled in the heat; it was possible that she'd never see Stephanie again. A tear came to her eye. Stephanie was her only friend, and she was tired of things being taken away. Her father and her pet monster had been taken away. Her mother she had lost to museums, so she belonged to the dust, too. She really didn't have a home, and while she'd been with Stephanie, she'd at least been able to forget about it.

A short distance up the beach, cars were parked on the sand next to a screen of cedars. The vehicles belonged to some of the mystery hunters. A lot of them were still around, and many of them had tried to get involved in the new Stephanie twist that had ended the hunt. Some people disappear and are forgotten; quicksand covers their bodies and all memories of them, but Stephanie had disappeared in a way that made her famous in the area. Alice viewed the mystery hunters' interests as mostly negative. The whole investigation was negative. It was the reason she'd stepped outside. She had to get away from it for a moment. She needed to clear her head.

Yesterday, it had been obvious to her that Stephanie had been kidnapped, and by a person with magical powers who could only be her father, Chang. Today, after listening to hours of talk, she had some doubts. Skip said you had to get moving on an investigation before you talked yourself out of everything. Only this time, the police Chief wouldn't let him get moving. Skip's arrangement of the facts pointed to abduction, but not by Chang because he was dead. Someone had a motive that an investigation would bring to light.

Sandra was now saying that Stephanie became unbalanced when she discovered her father's grave. It disordered her emotions, and she decided to run away. Julian believed he was at fault, and the guilt feelings were like sand blinding his third eye. He had no idea where Stephanie had gone. Mindy was sure evil forces were behind it, perhaps members of a cult Julian had been connected to in the past. The motive would be to harness Stephanie's occult powers. The mystery hunters and all other outsiders believed in the note, thinking it most likely that Stephanie was an unhappy girl who had run away.

Whatever it was, it scared Alice. The possibilities were terrifying. If it was Chang, he was a frightening character with wicked motives. Stephanie's nightmares about him had probably been a warning. Alice believed, like a little girl, that Chang could have come back from the grave. She

didn't have a problem with that, unlike the others. She also believed in cultists, and if they were the snatchers, the situation was even worse. They might kill or torture Stephanie in some sort of ceremony designed to gain power.

It was all upsetting and very frustrating; the cottage was suffocating her, and she felt like running off and searching for Stephanie on her own. Only she couldn't because Chief Woods wouldn't allow anyone to search. He wanted everything done his weird way.

The tear in her eye turning bitter, Alice knocked the swing aside. She kicked up a puff of sand, imagining she was putting it in Chief Woods' face. It was like calling up the devil because when she looked up, she saw his cruiser coming up the beach road. He didn't park in the driveway as a normal person would. Instead, he pulled the cruiser right up on the lawn, stopping in the shade of a spruce.

Alice squinted against the sun, studying him as he got out. His big face was marred by a permanent frown, and it dripped with sweat. His greased hair was like a dust magnet, and Alice figured he would look better bald than he did with his full crop of yellowing gray hair. She was sure he was proud of his hair. He was a silly man, proud of foolish things, and not a likable person. He was one of those adults who found maturity only through the loss of the good traits of childhood. The playful spirit of youth had been replaced by a mean attitude and brooding seriousness. His mind was no longer open as his thoughts were jailed behind the assumptions of a bigot. Nasty senility and not a second childhood would probably come to him with old age.

A short man emerged from the passenger door, catching Alice by surprise. She hadn't seen him behind the glare of the windshield. He tried to carry his weight with importance, but his look came off as comic. He was out of place beside the dour-faced Chief Woods.

They exchanged no words; the Chief merely gave the man a couple of grim nods as they made their way to the door. Alice didn't know what the nods indicated, but she took them as her cue to go back inside. She knew the small man's identity; he was a handwriting specialist who was in Tionaga for the mystery hunt. Skip had asked for his services. He wanted a check done on Stephanie's note to see if it had been forged. Chief Woods had gone along with the idea reluctantly. The Chief believed the note, as if the words were the truth carved in stone. Skip and Julian, he didn't like, so the note suited his prejudices.

Skip appeared at the door, his mood somber and his greeting terse, as he hustled the expert inside without a handshake. Not noticing Alice, he banged the door shut in her face. Deciding it might be better to avoid the crowded kitchen, she went down to the second porch window, moved some tomatoes, opened the screen, and leaned in on the sill. Two kitchen tables had been placed together, and Mr. Hopper had supplied extra chairs. A strong smell of coffee was in the air, and it mingled with the odors of spruce. Sandra showed the Chief and the handwriting expert to two of the good chairs, but Chief Woods declined to sit. He remained standing, leaning heavily on the back of the chair.

The expert was already poring over the letters he had in a folder. His name was Donald Ormz, and he didn't need to be introduced. He knew everyone from the mystery hunt. "I've completed my analysis," he said. "But I'd still like to see one more sample of her handwriting."

"She has a scrapbook with some notes," Julian said, his face pale and showing the strain.

"That will be fine."

Julian went to Stephanie's room to get the book, and silence hung in the air with the humidity and the coffee vapors. Outside, hot wind rushed through the trees. Chief Woods wiped streamers of perspiration off his face with a checked handkerchief. His cheeks had become sweaty, almost swollen in the heat, making his eyes appear beady and conniving. The sourness of his mood showed at the corners of his mouth. "What a waste of time," he said.

"You can't do an investigation without getting a few facts straight first," Skip said. "You should know that."

Chief Woods frowned, and his forehead showed more lines than a corrugated box top. "The basics are that she ran away. We're off the track if we are trying to make the case more complicated than it basically is."

"I don't know what basically means," Skip said. "I think we should make sure we're on solid ground before we go further."

Julian returned with a dog-eared scrapbook in hand. He passed it to Donald, not seeming particularly enthusiastic about it. Julian's mood was about as negative as the Chief's. It was obvious that he thought his daughter had run away and that the fault lay with him.

The expert turned the pages of the scrapbook gently with his small hands, as if they were parchment that might crumble. He pulled a large magnifier and a small Loop from his case, then panned over some scribbling with the glass. He took a closer look at some words with the Loop. His eyebrows twitched, and after some moments, he looked up.

Chief Woods cleared gravel from his throat. "Go ahead," he said.

"In my opinion, the note is a forgery," the small man said. "It is such a clever forgery that another expert might think it authentic. I'll give you the details."

"Skip the details," the Chief said. "What you're saying is that you're not sure."

"No. I'm saying I'm sure, but my opinion is just that. Another expert might find reasons to disagree."

"Exactly, and I'm another expert. I mean from a law enforcement standpoint." The Chief hardened his face. "We have no suspect in this case who is capable of brilliant forgery. Only organized criminals can produce work like that. No one in Tionaga fits the description, so it means the note isn't forged. Her handwriting probably shows variance because of her emotional state."

"Hold on," Skip said, "let's not try to high-jump over the evidence. Our expert says the note is a forgery, and we should believe him."

"How?" the Chief said, his brow clouding with anger. "I just told you that no one in this area is a forger."

Skip's face grew as stubborn as the Chief's; he didn't intend to be cowed. "Think a little bit. There are possible forgers here. Some of the mystery hunt people have experience with handwriting. That and other things."

"What they don't have is a motive," the Chief said, like it was the punch line.

"One of them might have been paid. Either way, we should get started with a search party. Enough time has been wasted."

"There will be no search parties. My officers are doing the searching. The young woman might come to us. It's for sure she'll never show if she knows the people she's running away from are the search party. She could even become desperate and get hurt."

"She didn't run away," Mindy said. "I told you we were hit by darts - it was kidnapping."

The Chief pointed a fat finger at Mindy. "You were playing with magic, dolls, and foolishness. The poison darts are just something you dreamed. A hallucination caused by the potion you drank. I think it's clear that one of her reasons for running off was and is the drugs you people are on. I intend to question her on it when we find her."

"You can go ahead," Julian said. "She'll tell you we don't take drugs."

"What about Cloudy Corners?" Sandra said. "She was over there. Maybe she got the idea of hiding there."

"It's not likely that she'd go there. It's too difficult for a young girl. We'll probably find her somewhere on the main roads. That's where we always find runaways. This whole area is

dangerous, that's the main reason I don't want any search parties. You people will get caught in a mineshaft or something, and things will be worse than they already are. There's also the likely possibility that she knows something you folks are trying to hide. If that's the case, I have to find her first. My orders are for you people to stay put until my investigation is complete. Don't try to leave town or you'll be stopped."

"I find your attitude offensive," Julian said. "My daughter is in danger, and you're using prejudice instead of police work."

"You'd better get used to it. Because my attitude will be more than offensive if your daughter gives us information about you. I know she didn't run off for nothing. You could find yourself facing some serious charges." The Chief pointed a finger again. "I'm stationing a car down the road. I'll know if you people try to leave."

"Why, I'd like to—" Skip said.

The Chief interrupted, "You'd like to what?"

"Nothing, nothing at all."

"It had better be nothing, or you'll be in a jail cell," the Chief said. He took a last look around, then he turned to the door and slammed it as he went out.

In places along the shore, the water had turned brown from crumbling earth banks and blowing dust. A train of dust was blowing on the sand road, sometimes billowing up and sheeting in ghostly forms. Real ghosts, Skip thought - because these weren't illusions, but had substance. They were the land lifting, the powder of the dead sailing on an ill wind, working like a reaper's cloak to bring about a premature burial of the living.

A police car was parked on the sand road; Chief Woods' man was making sure they didn't leave. Each time the wind dropped, Skip could see the officer behind the wheel. Now he appeared to be sleeping. Likely, he had his dash alarm set and would mosey down the road in an hour or so to see if Julian was still at the cottage. Skip wasn't supposed to leave the cottage either, but since it was Julian that Chief Woods liked the least, he was the one he watched closest. Woodsy was one of those cops who still believed in the good old boys. Skip knew the type. There were some of them left in places, like dinosaurs still around in the odd backwater tar pit.

Skip rubbed his irritated eyes and headed left, going under the cover of some pines. The trees were dry enough to be rattling. They seemed to be actively shaking off the dust, showering it down so that more got in his eyes. The grit stung, and he hurried out the far side, a man in tears. And the tears didn't seem at all unusual. Recent events had lent weight to the idea that life was grit in your eye. If the dust didn't make you cry, everything else would.

Skip worked his way around the grounds, checking for a spot where he could get a good view of Mr. Hopper's little office. Some staghorn sumac growing by a shed out back of the office was the best option, so he headed over. Now the dust was a blessing; it made him invisible, as it wasn't likely that anyone could see out of the dust-coated hotel windows.

He halted suddenly; maybe it hadn't been a blessing after all. Two people were already in the sumac, and the dust had prevented him from seeing them. It was too late to duck back; a woman turned and saw him. The cat-green eyes and tanned face belonged to Mindy. He breathed a sigh of relief, and then he frowned when he saw that the other person was Alice.

"Mindy, I didn't recognize you with your hair tied back. What are you doing here?"

"We're watching Mr. Hopper, what else?"

"Guess you figured out that he put the note in the bottle."

"Stephanie's father, Chang, gave it to him to put in," Alice said. "We know Mr. Hopper didn't grab her. He's too old and slow for that."

The back door of the office opened, and they fell silent. Mr. Hopper emerged looking like a corpse, walking at slow-motion speed into the dusty wind. He didn't even bother to shield his eyes, like he was a dumb zombie. An old, dented cash box was under his arm, and the strain of carrying it planted a grimace on his face. Skip figured the box contained some petty cash and office slips.

The path to the shed was blocked by an old tire. It had thistles growing in its center, as if it had been there for months. Likely, Mr. Hopper was too weak or lazy to move it. Skip winced as he watched Mr. Hopper's slippered foot go down hard on a thistle, but Hopper himself didn't wince. He moved on ahead to the shed, his expression unchanged.

It was hard to believe that Hopper couldn't see them. He was practically standing beside them, and they weren't under good cover.

Mindy whispered in Skip's ear. "He's as blind as a bat."

Skip poked her stomach, as a warning for her to shut up, but it turned out that the wind had prevented Mr. Hopper from hearing anyway. He rattled his metal box as he unlocked the shed door, then went in and closed it behind him. The shed had no windows, and it was a minute before they saw a light shining faintly through cracks in the board wall.

The cracks at eye level were too small for Skip to see through, but Alice crouched down and peeked through a wider crack at the bottom. She looked back up to Skip and Mindy immediately. "He took a handful of red jewels out of the box," she said.

"Jewels," Skip said. "How could that be possible? He wouldn't get away with stealing from the guests."

"Jewels are possible," Mindy said, "but he doesn't take them from the guests. He has art objects in there that he could only have stolen from wealthy homes or museums. We saw him carry a sculpture of a devil earlier. Then he spent an hour loading his truck with food and other goods he stocks in there."

"I bet we'll find Stephanie if we find where he's delivering those goods," Alice said.

"Yeah," Skip nodded. "It fits the pattern. He's in on the kidnapping and connected to organized crime, too. If he fences jewels for criminals, planting a forged note for them wouldn't seem like much."

"Quiet, he's coming out," Mindy said.

They saw the door begin to open slowly; then the wind caught it, and it flew, banging like a loose shutter. Mr. Hopper tripped, and the cans of condensed orange juice from the box he was carrying spilled onto the path. Mindy and Alice followed Skip as he ducked deeper into the sumac, then watched as Mr. Hopper gathered his cans and fought to shut and lock the door.

Mr. Hopper didn't go back to the office this time. He paused to put on an old pair of boots by the door and then went around to the drive and his truck. He didn't look like a faded zombie anymore. Skip sensed some live sparks of evil in him, and his movement in the dusty wind was sinister.

"I'll follow him in my van," Skip said.

"You can forget that," Alice said, pointing to the road and the police cruiser crawling up it.

"Why do you always see things before I do?" Skip said.

"My vision is better than 20/20."

"You don't suppose he's coming for us?" Mindy said.

"I don't know," Skip said, "but he's sure making it difficult for us."

"How can we follow that creep now?" Alice said.

"He goes over by Cloudy Corners," Mindy said. "Other than the forest ranger, he was the only person over there regularly."

"Do you know where he went exactly?" Skip said.

"No. I never followed him. I know the direction."

"We need a boat. We could get over the lake and track him from there. Water's pretty choppy, but we should be able to get over easy enough."

"Guess we'd better get back to the cottage before that cop sounds the alarm," Mindy said. "We'll let him do a check, then we'll take off."

They ducked back through the sumac and used pine scrub and other bushes for a shield as they headed for the beach. The first dune hid them from the police car, and Skip looked back to see Mr. Hopper getting into his truck. The cop was now turning around. He hadn't seen them, or he would've pursued them on foot. No doubt, he was headed back to the cottage for a check.

Skip wondered if the cop was getting a cut of Mr. Hopper's action, and as wind and sand bit into his face, he decided that the local cops were likely too stupid to know what was going on. Maybe he was too stupid to know what was going on himself; the whole thing was getting sinister. He couldn't figure out what organized criminals could want with Stephanie. What did smuggling and the rest of this confusion have to do with a pre-teen girl?

Alice stumbled and snatched at his leg. Stopping, Skip picked her up and ran, carrying her around the side of the last dune.

Mindy was ahead, and she turned back. "Hold it," she said. "The cop's coming up the road. We won't get across to the cottage before him."

"Just take it easy," Skip said. "Walk out slow, and if he asks, we'll say we just went down to the water."

The wind gusted up and pushed them forward. They came out of the shadow of the dune just as the cop was passing. He stopped and stared as they made their way to the front yard, then he pulled in behind them.

Alice was the last one in, and she slammed the door on the approaching cop. A moment later, he was pounding on the door, and the wind was shaking the windows. Skip sent Mindy to the door; the cop had eyes and a kind mood for her. Usually, the big oaf was friendly until he saw Julian, then he would grow suspicious, like a hound dog that just smelled something funny.

Mindy let him in, and he stepped into the kitchen. He had his cap in his hand and was grinning like a schoolboy. The wind had left his face flushed, which gave him the look of a boozier. He nodded to Alice, then turned to Skip.

Skip was pouring a glass of milk. He decided to speak first. "Any reports come in on Stephanie yet?"

"No. I thought Mr. Braddock was keeping his radio on police band so you people would know?"

"He is, but we just came in. I think he's got the radio in the bedroom."

"What were you doing down on the beach? It's nearly a hurricane down there. You want the other girl to drown, too?"

"What do you mean by 'drown'? No one said anything about Stephanie drowning?"

"No one did. It's my personal theory. We haven't found her yet, so it's possible she jumped into the lake. Maybe leapt off the bluff. I thought you might be thinking that way and were down on the beach looking."

"We're definitely not thinking that way. We're just trying to keep active."

"Chief just radioed in. He wants me to check on Mr. Braddock. Can you get him?"

"He's not here," Alice said, stepping back in from the hall. "He was here a few minutes ago. I think he went for a walk on the beach."

"He did. Then you people stay here. I'm going out to get him."

He'd been sitting on the porch when he heard Stephanie's voice. Head in his hands, it felt like a vast empty space with only dust and howling wind. If his soul was a desert, then Stephanie was in it. He heard her calling to him; her voice appeared, but only to be quickly carried away on the wind. It wasn't a premonition; he knew what they were like. He supposed it was imagination and nothing more. Like when a widow sees her husband's ghost. He knew that no person could be completely isolated. Loved ones became part of the soul, and even when they were far away, they remained inside. Voices could be heard, or the person could be seen in visions. Nothing psychic about it, and if you knew what that person was thinking, it was because that person had touched you deeply enough to leave the patterns in your mind.

Skip, Sandra, and the others hadn't been around to consult, so now he was wandering in the blow. He headed up the bluff with eyes full of dust and a head full of worries. He heard Stephanie's voice from high above, then from far below. There was distress in the call, but the tone also told him that their bond, father to daughter, was still there. He'd been a fool to believe in the note, and then suffer until a handwriting expert jogged his head back to reality. Stephanie had always loved him. He could hear it in her voice, and he would have known it all along if he'd only looked inside at the part of her in him. Instead, he'd let his insecurity blind him, and now valuable time had been wasted.

Waiting for Chief Woods to find Stephanie was out of the question. But what else could he do when he was boxed in? He didn't know where to look anyway. He needed to meditate to get a picture, and it was hard with emotion blocking his powers of premonition.

The wind combed the long grass, and the sound was like the slithering of evil itself. It sent goosebumps all over his body and painted a larger picture. The weather itself was an omen; the heat and dust were an advance warning of some great evil event. He was beginning to see, and the signs were telling him that Stephanie's disappearance was no ordinary thing. No common criminals had taken her. There were reasons beyond the usual criminal ones.

The oak tree was ahead, its boughs shaking wildly like they might break and fly down to the water at any moment. He became sure it was more than chance that had brought him back here. Lowering his head, he fought the wind and returned to the boulder where they'd found the note. For some reason, he wanted another look at the old mansion.

Climbing the boulder was difficult in the wind, but he got up and shielded his eyes. With some concentration, he could make out the outline of the mansion on the far shore. He wouldn't have seen it if he hadn't known it was there. The hum of the grass, the rush of the wind in the boughs, and the crash of waves on the beach grew to sounds of fury in his head. His vision grew distorted, and the old tree became a rocking, black silhouette against the choppy water. Then the mansion suddenly grew; it became a giant and loomed like a dark monster. He saw something else - a truck pulling in on the drive below. It was Mr. Hopper's truck. He didn't sense Stephanie's presence there, but he knew it was the place to start looking. His thoughts spun as he tried to figure out a way to get across the water. Then the wind gusted, and he was thrown from the boulder into the grass.

Chang had a small shrine set in a recess in the rock so that the candles burned despite the wind. Stephanie watched the flickering flames and the blue-black shapes formed from their smoky shadows. The effects of the drug Chang had given her still lingered, outlining the tree and cliff with fiery haze and turning shadows into shifting forms. It was now clear that he wanted more than to see her again. This was a reckless sojourn he'd taken her on, and it was getting more than frightening. She could see him moving up at the top of the outcropping, dressed in black and camouflage, constructing a device of ropes and branches. He had to be half mad to climb a rock face with the wind howling the way it was, and if he expected her to climb up there with him, he was more than crazy.

The shrine, drugs, and meditation were supposed to be clearing her head of the false ideas the others had planted and readying her for release - whatever her father meant by that. It was foreign to her; Chang's motives and beliefs were something behind smoked glass and confusing to any ordinary person. Although she'd dreamed all along of a reunion with Chang, his strange ways made that impossible. He didn't seem to have any love, but only fierce emotions, moods as sharp as glass. The disappointment made her want to cry, but the drugs and the fact that she wanted to show him her anger made that impossible.

Chang's foot spikes dug into the rock as he climbed back down. The shadows about him moved like a stain on the rock. Even with a bright ember of red sun glaring through the haze at the top, his dark aura was apparent. It was as if the changes he'd undergone in his life were so deep they were spiritually visible. He'd become too somber to be likable at all, and it was children who would most dislike him, because there was nothing but cruelty in him. Gentleness, he had shed like a snake sheds its skin. Stephanie figured it was that trait that made him frightening. A man without weakness was a man like a wolf, his needs predatory, his visions simple, sharp, and cruel, and his decisions quick.

That meant her decisions would have to be as quick. Only that wasn't possible yet. She had to clear her head of the pumpkin powder he'd fed her first. To buy time, she'd have to pretend to cooperate. Cooperation, he understood, and he could be fooled by it. He'd be certain that she was starting to see things correctly and that her false ideas were vanishing in the face of his training.

Chang leaped from the rock, looking as smooth as a black cat as he landed in front of her. She studied him closely, finding him undeniably handsome. Perhaps his nose was a bit too sharp. Most girls would be happy to have such a handsome father. If only he weren't so cold and distant.

"You were sleeping instead of meditating, weren't you?" Chang said, his look disapproving.

"No, not sleeping. The pumpkin powder you gave me clouded my thoughts. I don't want any more."

"There won't be any more. The purpose of its intoxication was to show you the shallowness of the beliefs the seer has ingrained in you. Now that your mind has opened, you will be receptive to other ways. You are to fast now and drink only water. But I don't know if it will help. It may be that you are inferior and cannot attain much. Look at you - you don't even know how to sit. And you need to learn how to breathe."

"I have no training for meditation. Father didn't feel it was necessary."

"Stop calling that idiot your father. I'm your father."

"A father is a man who loves his daughter. So far, you haven't even given me a genuine hug."

"You are a weakling, and it's too late to change that. It was the same back in China, where people have also become emotional weaklings. So few of us are strong anymore. If you want a genuine hug, you should earn it. Make me proud. Learn the lesson I'm teaching you today, and then I'll give you a hug. I love no one blindly. You must be worthy of my affection. Being my daughter is not enough."

"If you want me to go up to that thing you built on the rock, I'll have to say no. Give me lessons I can do instead of ones that don't make sense."

"It will make sense, and there will be no saying no. I'll drag you up if I have to."

"Why?"

"You want an explanation for everything when there are others who are happy to do as I say without question. Very well, I will explain. Right now, you have no proper sense of perspective and balance. At a height, you will become aware of these things and govern them. The mild fear

will serve to fuse the lesson into your memory. After today, your balance and concentration for meditation will be vastly improved."

"Mild fear! I can't go up there. The wind is too strong. I'll be blown away."

"It only appears that way. I have some spikes and climbing gear here. You will prepare, and we will go up."

Stephanie remained silent as she put on her gear; she was aware that silence made Chang happy. It was talk and questions that he disliked. The rock face looked steep, and the wind was still strong, but perhaps it was what he said and looked more dangerous than it really was.

He put her on a rope and pushed her ahead of him to begin the climb. Tight to the rock, she couldn't feel much wind, but the sun bothered her. It glared red in the haze like an eye of blood. Just the sort of sun you'd expect to see on the day you fell to your death.

It was easy to get a foothold on the rock, but the handholds were troublesome. Her fingers began to sting, and because of it, she clutched all the harder, making it worse. Before long, she had to keep pausing while she waited for numbness to subside in her fingers. Fortunately, Chang waited patiently and didn't try to hurry her. Near the top, she began to feel the wind sucking at her, and she turned to take her first look down. The view overwhelmed her with fear, and her foot slipped, but Chang quickly caught it and pushed her back against the rock.

A sudden flow of adrenaline killed the numbness, and she gained the strength to move on. A little farther and a kick of wind nearly dislodged her; its effect was to spook her enough that she scrambled the rest of the way up and went over the top like she'd been climbing all her life.

"That's good," Chang said as he watched her pant. "Fear of death has given you strength. It's a myth that one always has to be brave. Sometimes a man who is running from the devil can do much more than a brave man can."

Despite her fear and dislike of the task, Stephanie couldn't help feeling that she'd accomplished something only a man could do. She wondered if she could please Chang some and be on reasonably good terms with him when she returned home. "So what now? We look at your contraption and then go back down."

"It's not quite that simple," Chang said. He took her hand in his and rubbed some of the numbness out of it. "Now you must be strong, as learning perspective and balance is the hardest part."

"What is it you want me to do? Look over the edge?"

"Yes. The mechanism of ropes and branches will support you if you slip. To learn balance, you must lie at the edge with only your belly touching a support."

Stephanie's hopes vanished, replaced by terror. Her father was obviously a lunatic who was going to kill her with his crazy lessons. To be on good terms with him was to be dead. She wanted to run, but there was nowhere to run. Crying was out of the question; up on a rock in the wind was no place to start crying. She'd have to save it for later; if there was a later. Chang took her hand and pulled her up gently, and to her surprise, she simply gave in and obeyed limply as he fastened her to the mechanism. A tear formed in her eye; she felt like a rape victim who had given in and was allowing the manipulation.

"You'll be fully fastened at first, then I'll loosen some of the ropes as your balance improves," Chang said as he carried her to the edge. He carefully placed her on the polished rock so that her hips were supported while her head and chest hung in empty air. She caught a glimpse of the drop, then the wind whipped at her hair so much she couldn't see. Chang pulled her back and took a moment to tie her hair. He pushed her back, and she took a last look back and saw that his eyes were as wide as hers. She looked down at the drop and felt like screaming.

The wind blew, rocking the mechanism, and her belly rubbed against the rock. Gusts were whipping through pockets in the stone, making sounds like alien screams. She saw a sudden

vision; she was looking down at a grave and a man being buried alive. Then another scream filled her ears, and it was her own scream.

Wind rushed in the leaves above, but only a few gusts reached down into the twisted trunks of the sumac. Hoover's wild red hair looked windblown despite his sheltered position. His face was leathery; it had more in common with a death mask than it did with human beings. The face didn't bother him now as it had in the beginning. Chang had pointed out its advantages; mainly, it was a face that inspired fear in an opponent and threw him off balance long enough to ensure victory.

Victory was something he felt he might need now. He was looking across the graveyard at Chief Woods, with it in mind that the Chief would soon know too much. If that became the case, then the day of the Chief's own burial had come. Hoover's lips twisted as he smiled; that the Chief was only getting a hunch about Chang now was funny. And even then, it was only because of Chang's daughter. If she hadn't come along, the Chief would never have caught on.

The Chief paused and leaned his weight on the shovel. He wiped his brow with a handkerchief and let go with a few cusses as he stared at the marker on Chang's grave. He'd come out alone, so Hoover took that to mean he had no legal order to dig up Chang's grave. He was doing it in secret, likely to satisfy his own curiosity. It would've been the seer who tipped him off; Chang had said it wouldn't take the seer long to catch on.

It was by chance and destiny that Hoover was in the graveyard. Chang had sent him into a dark cave to meditate on the saying TO FOLLOW THE PATH YOU MUST BECOME THE PATH. While meditating, Hoover had seen visions of the dead, and he returned with the idea that his home should be among the dead. Now he had a shelter in the sumac by the old graveyard, and he was satisfied with his lot in life. Satisfied, but not so satisfied that he was going to let a cop dig up his new property.

Thoughts of killing Chief Woods weren't unpalatable; he did look more like a grave robber than a police chief. He was digging deeper now, throwing up rich earth as he carefully worked the shovel. Only his gray head, checked hunting jacket, and massive shoulders showed above the lip. Tionaga was an area with soil so rich that you could really bury a man six feet under, which meant the Chief had a foot more earth to dig up. Hoover tried to think back and remember what they actually had put in the coffin. As he thought of the coffin, he saw visions of dead bodies writhing, but the dead were now his teachers, so the visions were pleasant. A severed hand came to mind, and he remembered Chang had cut a man's hand off in a sword fight and kept it in a sack until he put it in the casket they dropped in the fake grave. A hand certainly wouldn't be enough to satisfy Chief Woods; he'd want to see a full skeleton.

Hoover grabbed the dragon claw he kept fastened to his belt. The solid brass handle seemed made for his hand, and the blades were still razor sharp. It was one of a number of weapons Chang had given him, and to date, he still hadn't had the pleasure of killing an opponent with the claw. It was a situation that would change today; the voices of the dead, carried in a long howl of the wind, told him that was likely. He could hear glee in those voices, and it was his guess that if the dead weren't making their usual tormented cries, it meant that a new ghost was about to join their ranks.

Bursting from the bushes, he felt the wind tearing at his clothes. He dashed through the long grass, trampling flowers. As he leaped over a heap of vines, he released a battle cry. Chief Woods turned out to be a swifter opponent than Hoover had expected; he tossed the shovel, scrambled up out of the grave, and moved to draw the gun he was wearing. As fortune would have it, Hoover's horrible face did its job; the sight of the hideous visage caused the Chief to hesitate for a moment. It was a fatal moment, because it gave Hoover time to leap onto a stone and propel himself before the gun was out.

Hoover crashed into the Chief hard, hitting him with enough force to send him tumbling back into the grave. He had kept the claw low because in training, he'd been taught not to use it on the fly. Now he drew it up as he scrambled to his feet by the lip of the grave. He proved to be faster; the

Chief was just beginning to rise again in the grave. His head poked up, and as it did, Hoover stood up straight and let the wind propel him as he fell forward. Using both hands, he drove the claw straight into the top of the Chief's head, sinking it to the hilt, then he rolled aside. Chang had told him that an opponent would fall dead instantly if this were done, but the advice proved wrong. The Chief continued rising out of the grave for a moment, then his eyes popped wide, rolled, and his mouth opened, spilling forth a rasp and gushing blood.

Hoover watched the quivering corpse collapse and thump on top of the coffin below. It was another victory for the dead, and it made him grin. The wind died down for a moment of silence, and Hoover decided he liked the Chief now that he was a corpse. It was nice to be on the winning side, and the dead always won, sooner or later.

The county had turned hot as a dust bowl; the cop walked into a desert-like landscape, looking for Julian. Skip watched him fade to a dark speck moving here and there on the beach. Then the blow swallowed him completely. Chaos and hopelessness were in the swirling dust, a blur of dark emotion that made Skip feel as if he were lost himself. If he didn't act, he would go crazy. It made him wonder about Chief Woods. Surely he knew he couldn't keep them locked up like convicts; if he didn't, he was a fool. Just the thought of the Chief tensed him with anger; turning quickly from the window, he brushed against Alice and got a vicious static shock.

"Damn dryness," Skip said. "Know what? I think that cop got lost on the beach. Either that or he's looking for Julian under the rocks."

"Where do you suppose Julian is?" Mindy said.

"Don't know. He didn't go up to join Sandra at the hotel, or the cop would've seen him. He must've picked up on Stephanie's trail and headed off to look without waiting for us."

"So what do we do now?"

"We take off. Alice waits here for Sandra to get back. When the cop returns, she can tell him we heard Julian was at the hotel and went up to get him."

They went out the back door, looked about for the cop, and headed quickly through the grass to the pines. Mindy was wearing a scarf and a hooded sweater as a shield from the dust; Skip tasted the dry sand on his lips and wished he were covered himself. To the north, the sky was clear of dust. Huge white summer cumulus clouds were stationary on the northwest horizon. The dust was a local weather phenomenon, a shroud thrown up from Cloudy Corners.

Skip's idea was to circle around the first line of the bluffs to the second boathouse up, grab a boat, and cross. It was possible the cop had gotten that far, so they'd have to keep a sharp eye out for him. Dust was filtered away by the pine needles, and so was most of the wind. Going up the path was a pleasurable experience, a stark contrast to the gritty heat of the beach. Birds had retreated into the evergreens and were chattering with enthusiasm. Skip found himself giving Mindy some romantic glances. Now that he was getting to know her, she seemed like a completely different person. She wasn't a monster, weird cultist, or a dumb sexy blond as he'd thought at first. She was a woman pretty much like other women, except that she had some survival secrets. Otherwise, she wouldn't have lived on when the others died.

They came to the end of the path, and she smiled at him, her eyes twinkling as she pulled her hood back up. Her full red lips made Skip weak at the knees, but all too soon, dust blew in his eyes, and romantic thoughts died as they headed over the field to the beach.

The dusty grass was wind-flattened; it was like walking on a dry, spongy rug. Dozens of grasshoppers leaped, and Skip found them distracting. He was looking for the cop or Julian at the end of the bluff line, but he saw nothing; there wasn't even a gull. Mindy hopped off a small lip of turf to the beach and waved him on as she ran to the boathouse. Skip figured that she had better eyes than him if she was certain no one was there. It bothered him, first Alice and then Mindy; he was supposed to be the one with the trained eyes - these women were making him feel impotent.

The boathouse had fallen askew, and its torn body was mostly in the water. If it had been neglected, it was because Mr. Hopper only used it to keep a few rowboats on hand for hotel guests. A powerboat was what Skip wanted, but he couldn't get one because Mr. Hopper kept them by the beach band shell, where the police liked to park.

There was no door, and the interior was like a friendly cavern. Standing on a fallen beam, they studied the battered rowboats. The farthest boat was obviously the newest, so they edged along the side and took it. A wave hit hard and splashed Skip as he got in and steadied the boat. He had his back up like a cat as he took the oars. Mindy got settled, and he nudged the boat up to the opening.

A gust hit the boathouse and banged it like a kicked can. Then a retreating swell sucked them out into foam. Skip checked the shore to make sure no one was watching as he rowed out into the choppy waves.

"What spot should I head for?" he said, finding himself shouting against the wind.

Mindy hollered back. "See that rock face and heap of logs on the south point?"

Skip didn't see as his eyes were riveted to her dress, which the wind was blowing up. Her red bathing suit was suddenly revealed, and Skip looked south, feeling vaguely cheated. "What's there?" he said.

"We can follow a path through the graveyard and end up at my old place."

"Why go there?"

"Mr. Hopper always passed there on the road. I can get my bearings from there."

"Wait! I see someone on the shore! It's Julian. I'd better row back and get him."

He turned the boat, and it rocked wildly. "You're going to capsize us!" Mindy yelled. "Hey! That's not Julian, it's a cop!"

Skip ground his teeth and said nothing as he fought to steady the boat. It came around, and he rowed ahead hard. Water foamed in as the boat bobbed like a cork in the swells. On the beach, the cop was now running back toward the hotel. No doubt, he intended to get on the radio and report them.

Mindy pulled her hood over her face and ducked some of the spray as Skip settled in and picked up speed. Five minutes passed, and he cursed quietly as he felt his palms blister. Wind and dust whirled above, and gusts howled. The rippled water looked like the throat of a beast they were battling. Fortunately, it was a small lake. The logs and rock face were already close, looming like the bearded face of a giant.

Waves were leaping by the rock, so Skip rowed past and got to the calmer side of the point. Mindy pointed to some old steps cut into the stone, and he rowed up. The boat banged on the rock as Mindy leaped out. A moment later, Skip jumped and slipped. He caught hold of the step and dangled for a moment, up to his knees in water. The boat bounced out of reach on a wave, and he decided to abandon it as he pulled himself up.

They went up through scattered driftwood into evergreen scrub and followed a path into some red maples. The fence to the graveyard had tumbled at the north end, and dust had gathered in heaps like ash on the grass. Just inside the graveyard, they spotted some footprints in the dust. Skip looked ahead, seeing only windblown weeds, vines, and boughs. "Someone passed here not too long ago."

"Think it was Hopper?"

"No. It's someone with a strong stride. Someone in much better health than Hopper."

"What about Julian?"

"Look at the odd boot prints. It's not Julian, and it's not the Chief or one of his officers. It could be someone dangerous. Maybe it's the person who snatched Stephanie. I wish I had a weapon."

"I still have some daggers and throwing darts at the old place."

"Let's get them. They'll be better than nothing."

Dusty air grayed the scene; seed fluff, swirling like mist in the wind, added to the gloom. The fallen markers seemed to indicate that even the dead had abandoned this place.

"Stick to the path," Mindy said. "In places, the ground is hollow, and you can fall through to the cult's old tunnels."

"I know about that," Skip said.

Chang's grave came into view as they passed a crooked oak. They couldn't help noticing the fresh earth heaped beside it. It drew their attention, and they failed to notice the dark silhouette of a person watching from the stones on the far side of the oak.

"Someone has dug it up," Mindy said.

"At least partly. Maybe the digger is still around."

A cautious stroll up to the grave, and they found that someone had dug in deep and tossed the shovel aside.

"No one's parked on the road," Mindy said.

"Hey! I see something stuck in the dirt down there. This joint is getting spooky; maybe you should jog over and get those weapons now. I'm going to hop down and dig a little. Just holler or hide if you see someone on the way."

Something negative was in the air. Mindy could feel it as sudden bristles in her hair. She didn't feel good about going off alone or leaving Skip in the grave. Deciding it wouldn't take long, she said okay and hurried off through the stones.

Skip licked his dusty lips, took the shovel, and edged around the grave. He wanted to go in, but he didn't want to get dirty. The bottom looked soggy, and that meant he might sink and soil his shoes and socks. After half a minute's hesitation, he decided he couldn't spend all day looking like a dog that didn't know what to do. He'd just have to bill Alice's mother for new shoes and socks.

The shovel would soften his landing if it hit first, so he held it out and prepared to make a perfect drop to the bottom, then his heels slipped on the muddy lip, and he fell, his butt bouncing off the lip as he went into the grave. He instinctively threw the shovel aside and fell forward, landing knees and palms in the dirt. The fat handle of a knife almost poked him in the eye, and some of the dirt around it shook loose. It poured down, and he found himself staring at the tilted face of a corpse. Somehow, he knew it was Chief Woods even though it didn't look much like Chief Woods. The eyes were gone, sucked away by a mess of dirt and gore, and the cheeks were bruised and swollen. A bloody and blackened tongue protruded grossly, but it was the strange weapon embedded in the skull that was the most frightening thing.

Skip let out a crazy scream and went flying up out of the hole. He scrambled over the lip and found himself going headfirst into a man dashing up to the grave. Skip didn't have time to see the attacker clearly, but he heard his howl and felt the shock as they collided. His head rammed the man's thigh, causing him to tumble forward and go straight into the grave.

Dazed but unhurt, Skip popped to his feet. The shovel was by the grave, so he seized it. Looking down, he saw the man on his knees at the bottom. Chief Woods' gory skull was beside him in the dirt, and he was busy pulling the weapon out of it.

The man turned his head and looked up. His face and grin were hideous; he grabbed the dead man's skull and held it and the gore-soaked claw up for Skip to see.

Skip's scalp lifted, feeling like it had already been cut. He could feel the power of the morbid madness burning in this lunatic's eyes. Gripping the shovel tightly, he prepared to hit him when he came up.

Hoover came up from the grave like a tiger, and Skip laid a heavy blow on with the shovel and put him back down. On the second try, Hoover went up the other side, and Skip slammed him one in the back that failed to knock him back to the bottom.

Now they were facing each other across the grave, and Hoover held up the bloody claw. "You have invaded the home of the dead. Now you must join us."

"You're not dead, but you will be if you come any closer."

Hoover didn't heed the warning; he ran around the grave. Skip turned like he was about to flee, but he didn't - he let go with a back-fist strike that caught Hoover by surprise and sent him staggering back.

Now that he was stunned, Hoover forgot his training and held the claw high instead of low. He came in for the kill, and Skip came up with a rising block that knocked him down.

Hoover rolled up. Blood was on his lips, and cruel knowledge returned to his eyes. Lowering the claw, he moved in to try for the kill the proper way.

He was about to strike when something hit him in the shoulder. He spun about, and Skip saw that it was a throwing star. Mindy had let it fly from several feet away.

Hoover's arm was bleeding, and he was off guard; he ignored Skip and watched Mindy. "Drop the weapon, Hoover," Mindy said. "You know the rules."

Hoover seemed unhurt by the star piercing his shoulder. He was shaking as if he were afraid of Mindy for some other, unknown reason. His mouth moved, but no words came out. Then he stumbled forward and ran off through the graves.

Skip moved to pursue him, then he halted and watched as Hoover disappeared behind a tree. "Think he'll try to attack us again?"

"No, he's afraid of me. Chang told him I'm an evil witch and he believes it."

"He killed Chief Woods and left him in the grave. He's one crazy psychopath."

"Hoover is supposed to be dead. I saw Chang bury him. He must have buried him alive and then dug him back up."

"I see. Chang is alive, too. The Chief must've been digging up the grave to confirm it when he got killed."

"I remember Chang had a thing about rising from the dead. So now, he's faked it. What for, I don't know."

"He's taken Stephanie, obviously. I'm sure he has plenty of crazy reasons for doing it."

"I know some of the places he used to go. Tracking him is one thing, finding him is another. He's too dangerous for us to fight."

"We can cross that bridge when we get to it. We'll try to get a look and see if Stephanie is all right. It might be possible to snatch her back. I hope for her sake that Chang is in better mental health than that Hoover guy."

"Chang is crazy in a different, less obvious way."

Heavy waves washed in and smashed the rowboat against the rocks. Julian barely noticed the sound. It had all become a dull roar, and he was absorbed in himself. Temporary confusion and exhaustion had left him resting among some huge boulders. Looking through a wide crack, he could see a mass of green algae, feathers, driftwood, and foam rolling against the rock face. His

energy was returning slowly, and with it his sense of purpose. He decided it was the area; once you got over here, you felt lost, no matter how determined you'd been when you set out.

How Stephanie would feel, he wasn't sure. Kidnapped, she'd weaken fast. The upset, combined with the weather, could destroy her health. He could sense her presence but didn't know where to look. Wind whistled in the cracks, and he felt it was vital that he locate her quickly before she collapsed physically and emotionally.

Getting to his feet helped awaken him; the wind's sounds stirred his blood and brought on guilt. All along, he'd been concerned about himself and whether he was loved. A real father would've been concerned about Stephanie and not himself. If he had really cared, love would never have been a problem. It would have belonged to him. Love the people of the world, and they love you back. Get too absorbed in what you perceive as your personal failings, and you become isolated, lose the love of others, and fail. He needed to get his head out of the gloomy clouds and his feet moving on the ground of daily living.

Avoiding the open fields, he took a path at the edge of the forest. The scrub was thick, and everything grew big near Cloudy Corners. It made him feel small; he'd always been a touch frightened by the power of nature. In this area, being afraid was the way to survive. He could see how quickly he'd be lost if he went into the trees. The forest looked impenetrable. Moving through open fields was slow, and it was the only way.

Acres of old farmland appeared, scattered with young pines and boulders. Stopping, he looked across the hazy fields and caught sight of a heap of dented oil drums. Beyond them, a gable of the old mansion showed through some treetops. The sight made him grin. At least he knew his sense of direction was still on target. Getting on a rabbit trail, he began to walk swiftly, thinking he must feel like a Tionaga mystery hunter onto a clue. The old mansion looked eerie, but the general feeling was good. Either Stephanie was there, or something that would lead him to her would be there.

Huge ash trees were at the back, branches billowing in the wind, looking like green smoke in the haze. He went through a field of long grass and orange cardinal flowers to a gap in a rotted wood fence. An ancient well and an apple tree were just inside. Stopping by the well, he studied the weatherworn mansion. It had been constructed of good materials and was now dilapidated but holding up. Ugly and tough like an old man. It was an immense sight, and the weeds and bushes surrounding it were huge.

Two pigeons flew from the roof, catching his attention. It was a sign that said the place was inhabited. Walking across the yard, he looked down the south side and saw Mr. Hopper's truck parked near some birches. Tall ox-eye daisies were right in front of him; he went through them and into the shadow of the mansion as he walked up to the truck.

Carpentry tools, canned goods, and other supplies were in the back. Julian could tell that Mr. Hopper or someone else had already unloaded a lot of stuff. A path had been trampled in the grass. It went along the side to the back.

He followed the path and came to the back door. Nerves began to tingle, warning him to be cautious as he went inside. The first thing he saw was falling wallpaper and plaster, then he noticed that repairs were underway. A few steps up the hall, he found that everything had been repaired.

The house was creaking in the wind, the way old houses do. Julian knew better than to be fooled by the sounds. He heard what he thought were footsteps upstairs, then, after a moment, he decided it was the house shifting. He had been in an old mansion in Toronto and knew from experience that in such houses you could always hear people moving upstairs, even when no one was there. It didn't mean ghosts; it meant that large houses were always shifting, expanding, contracting, and groaning.

The next noise he heard was a scraping sound from below. His eyes went to a door he assumed led to the basement stairs. Since the basement wouldn't be shifting, he knew someone was

there. It was likely only Mr. Hopper, but he decided to be careful. Opening the door a crack, he peered down and saw a light shining on a portion of the polished floor.

No one was in sight, so he went in and closed the door gently. He went down the stairs silently and looked around. It was an amazing sight. The basement had been redecorated, and a huge mosaic floor had been put down to make some type of rich man's gymnasium. A fanged dragon image patterned in the floor attracted his attention, and when he looked up, he saw Mr. Hopper standing by a door opened in a wall at the back. Hopper had a gun pointed at him and looked like he might shoot.

"Don't move," Mr. Hopper said.

"It's me, Julian. You can put the gun down."

"I know who you are, and I still say don't move."

"What's going on here? You can't hold me at gunpoint."

"What's going on here is you found out about a place you shouldn't have. I'll have to hold you until Chang gets back. I want you to move slowly over to this door. I'll have to keep you in there for now."

"So Chang is alive, and you've been helping him. You don't have to lock me up; I'll wait here voluntarily. I want to talk to him anyway."

"I'm afraid I do have to lock you up," Mr. Hopper said, the gun shaking dangerously in his hand. "Now start moving this way slowly."

Julian obeyed; he didn't want to be shot by a fool. He took a few steps, then the contents of the room became visible. Swords, brass daggers, rings, darts, shields, and other weapons were mounted on the walls. The place was a martial arts treasury. A dark thought entered his mind. Hopper wouldn't hold him prisoner in a room full of weapons, and if that was so, then he intended to shoot him in the back once he stepped inside. It meant Hopper was so cruel and lazy that he hadn't shot him already because he didn't want to drag the body in for storage.

Mr. Hopper was just slow enough for Julian to take a chance. As he was coming up, even he dodged in and knocked Hopper's gun hand. The gun slipped, and so did Julian. He fell backward, and the gun clattered on the floor near him. As he was rolling up, he saw Mr. Hopper slip and fall as he tried to recover the gun. The slip actually helped Hopper as he fell on the gun.

Now they were both on their knees, and Mr. Hopper had the gun again. It was a scary situation; Hopper's face was purple, either from weakness or anger, and his hand was shaking like a leaf. His lips twisted like he was going to say something, but a sound on the stairs cut him off.

Someone had come in the door and was tumbling down the stairs. They watched as the man crashed down and rolled on the floor. The man got to his knees; his face was hideously disfigured, covered with dirt and blood, and his shirt was blood-soaked. A human skull was in his left hand.

It was all too much for Mr. Hopper; the gun fell to the floor, and his hand went to his heart, then his face contorted, and Julian watched as he died of a heart attack there on the floor. The disfigured man's eyes were blind; he didn't even see them. He crawled around on his hands and knees, then he collapsed face-first on the tiles.

Julian checked Mr. Hopper first and found no pulse. He was dead as an old mummy and stiffening up like one, too. Bile rose to Julian's tongue; he found the corpse repulsive. Mostly, he was sickened by the fact that Mr. Hopper would take part in a crime against a young girl at a time when he was dying. He must have had no conscience at all.

Mr. Hopper's clip holster had fallen to the floor, and Julian took both it and the gun before going over to Hoover. He was about to touch Hoover when he began to stir. Julian drew the gun, noting

that the wound in Hoover's shoulder wasn't that bad. The man had lost blood and was drained. It was likely that Hoover was healthier than he looked. He was dirty, more than anything else.

Hoover looked up, his eyes in a blind squint. Julian found he wasn't repulsed by Hoover and didn't feel like shooting him. Hoover looked the part of a bad guy; he wasn't the sort you'd ever expect to be decent - kidnapping and other ogres' work would be natural for him. His wounded state and ugliness aroused pity. He was in gross shape for sure, but Julian felt that trying to help him would be unsafe. It was a thought that turned out to be accurate; Hoover suddenly flew up like a marionette and slashed the air with a blade he pulled from nowhere. Julian stepped aside and kept his finger tight to the trigger as he watched Hoover collapse again. Hoover's vision was still impaired from blood loss; he struck at ghosts as he moved forward on his knees. He knew the basement well enough to move around while blinded, and his instincts led him to the weapons room. Julian watched with dismay as he reached a row of swords, then his expression turned to amazement as the opening suddenly swung shut against a wall.

The sky had cleared somewhat, and the sun was visible as a blurred eye. Its light turned the haze to gold. They were standing in the shadow of a cave mouth, looking at a rainbow in the mist beading a waterfall. The water tumbled from a hole in the rock face above, and its source was a tiny lake set in the higher rock. The Indians had believed this to be a place of magic and power in the old days; Chang believed, too - he saw magic and power in the flowing water every time he looked at it.

The water roared as it rushed over smooth boulders. Stephanie felt the cold spray on her face and shivered. She was still shivering from her meditations in the caves. Now that she was back out, the sun was comforting, but the waterfall was an unwelcome sight despite its beauty.

"This is our answer," Chang said. "Come and sit down."

He pulled her to a niche in the rock and had her sit facing him. She looked into his eyes, but found no warmth. They were as cold as the caves and the water. When he was finished with her, she supposed she would be just as cold and unfeeling. Instead of being in tune with his emotions, he'd thrown them away and become an alien. Perhaps he thought of himself as a warrior and a mystic, but she thought of him as something different. She remembered Julian saying he wasn't a mystic or a cultist because those he had known turned their lives into a holy mission and became monsters instead of humans. If Chang wasn't a monster yet, his goal was to become one.

"You say answer," Stephanie said, "but none of this training answers anything."

Chang took her hand, and as he looked into her eyes, he squeezed it so hard it was painful. "You say that now," he said, like a strange power had just possessed him. "You are like an ant trying to see God. You don't have the vision, so only a miracle can open your eyes. Think back, and you'll know why your meditations in the cave failed to give you the silver vision."

Stephanie thought back. The cave had been a terrifying experience. Sitting on wet stone in shifting darkness. Disorientation had made her forget why or how she was there. She'd thought the scratching and scraping she heard were hostile creatures or lizards crawling toward her. She now realized it had been Chang making the sounds for whatever reasons he had. As far as the silver vision went, she had no idea what it was or why she hadn't gained it.

"I couldn't concentrate on it in the cold," she said, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Yes, that's right. But not because of the cold. It was because your body was distracting you. A novice like you needs to be completely numb first before meditations."

"I fail to see what this silver vision is good for anyway. Maybe I don't really need it?"

"You need it. Most people are like robots or automatons. Creatures of habit. They do only what is programmed into them. Their actions aren't free. People used to try to get the silver vision with drugs, but you can't get it that way. It's a freeing of the mind. Once you've seen the world from its mystical perspective, your actions will never be the same. You'll reflect on your every

movement, see the truth in every word, and do what is right and not what is routine. You'll see when other people only follow habits and are blind. I've had the silver vision, that's why no laws can bind me, and no borders can contain me. I do what must be done and fear no judge. But the silver vision is only part of it - to gain the truth, you must surrender everything to me. Don't look frightened, by giving up everything, you'll gain everything. Once you're properly numb, you'll begin the surrender. The powers you have within you will be released. You'll command them to enter into me. In your channeling, everything must be let go. Every being and demon locked in this underworld you spoke of must be released into me so I can tame them and channel their powers into a new force of truth."

"I could never do that. The demons would destroy you. Nobody wise willingly channels demons; they force their own way out. Julian warned me not to listen to their voices or release them."

"Nonsense. I'll have no problem with demons. They'll be controlled, and if Julian uses his sight to find us and interfere, he will be destroyed. For now, this discussion has become pointless. Once you have the vision, you'll see things as I do. We're going to pick some berries for you to eat, then you'll be going into the water to gain numbness."

Cold foam splashed over the boulder and rushed onto her face and breasts. It was like being on the shore of a northern sea. She could perceive deeper waters and dark, slimy things moving in volcanic currents at the bottom. These monsters were rising to her, sensing her like she was both the light and food to be devoured on the surface.

Her legs were suspended in silver water, and the bubbles flowed over her like a beard. The numbness was almost complete. If this was the silver vision, it was a state of weakness and not a new awakening of consciousness. She felt trapped by her own physical flaws and found that the numbness didn't free her from the powers of the body. The truth this silver vision gave her was that Chang didn't care about vision. His goal was to gain power, and he was using every tool at his disposal to break her down so that the volcanic powers of the alien netherworld could flow through her to him.

In the cold, the only strong thing she could imagine herself as was a block of ice; heavy ice forming a wall to hold the monsters back. But she was having flashes - shark teeth and a feeling that she was a frail mermaid about to give birth to sea serpents. It made her teeth chatter; she was sure no one could give birth to a host of devils and live. She'd shatter like ice crystals, and Chang would be destroyed by the powers he wanted to swallow and command.

Feeling came to her through the numbness, warm blood flowing as she bit her lip. There was the sense that she could hold on for now. But the darkness of the cave was yet to come, and she could already see eyes glittering in the shadows - the eyes of Chang and the eyes of monsters.

Alice saw Sandra coming up the beach from the hotel and the policeman at the water's edge. When the cop spotted Sandra, he began to pace toward her. His face puckered up; it obviously meant that he'd been unable to find Julian. They met by a willow at the turf's edge, and an argument began; beyond Sandra's gesturing arm lay the red-tinted sky of the west, with clouds taking on the look of a storm eye. The clouds helped Alice picture bigger things. It seemed like people were turning Stephanie's disappearance into an excuse to extend their own pettiness and personality quirks. Since Alice had no narrow views to justify, her own outlook wasn't limited. First, she knew that Stephanie was her friend, and if she had to find something, it was a way to help her.

The problem was that her powers were limited. She was certain she could find her way to Stephanie if she ran off, but by the time she got to her, it might be too late. Julian would likely get there well ahead of her, and even he probably wouldn't be on time. Mindy would be of some help, but Skip would likely just get in the way.

She was bright enough to know that Stephanie hadn't been kidnapped for the usual reasons. It was about the occult and power. She had her own powers, but they were of no use unless she could somehow transfer them to Stephanie. Thinking about the whole thing made her feel

abandoned. No one wanted her to help, and except for her mother, no one even wanted to kidnap her. It made her realize that she really had nothing in life except her friend, and the emptiness strengthened her bond with Stephanie. Tears began to roll down her cheeks, but her thoughts were far enough away that she didn't notice she was crying. It wasn't only self-pity; it was also the frustration of being unable to help.

Sandra and the policeman were coming toward the house now. She didn't want to talk to them. That they had no news was obvious. They were just going to see if Julian had come back and then argue about it some more.

The wind knocked up a distorted dust devil, and she used the moment to slip inside unnoticed. The place felt as empty as an old closet. If everyone else could take off, she decided she could, too. She hurried through the house and went out the back door.

Turbulence caught the door and pulled her out. She saw puffs of wind comb through the grass like waves. Taking off was one thing, but where would she go? A couple of moments passed, and she realized she was wasting time. Dashing off through the grass, she headed for the pines, with it in mind that she would decide where to go once she was out of sight of the cop.

Just as she was entering the trees, she looked back and saw the police officer coming out the back door. He must've read her mind. He put a whistle to his lips and blew it. Then he began to run toward her. It made her think of the Saturday morning funnies and feel like one of the ridiculous characters the cops chased in them. She didn't feel like a criminal, that was for sure, but she didn't want to be caught either. If anything, the cop's whistle-and-run tactic had made her flight certain. She'd be his prisoner if he caught her, and no doubt she'd have to listen to a speech about running away. A weird shiver of fright hit her as she watched him run a few yards, then she ducked and raced off into the trees.

Bird song filled her ears as she ran; the pines were filled with birds that were escaping the dust. The noise was enough to cover her light footfalls, but not enough to cover the cop's heavy steps. She heard him crash into the trees behind her and stop. He took off a moment later, and she gathered his direction from the sound and headed the other way.

She got well away from him and looked for a break in the trees. Glancing up, she saw the reddening western sky and a circular gathering of light clouds that reminded her of a satellite picture of a hurricane she'd once seen. It put her on edge; at the back of her mind, it registered as the icon of some fury to come. She froze and listened to the wind rush. A twig snapped, and a squirrel appeared. It hopped into a patch of wildflowers growing in a clear area. Her eyes fell on a space in the pines beyond the flowers. In the gap, she could see some of the lawn ornaments belonging to the store out front of Blue Hills.

From the opening, Blue Hills and its grounds were visible. The hotel itself looked fuzzy in the dust, a rather nice effect like a painting done with the details blurred to add color and a classic feeling. No one was out on the grounds, and considering the lousy weather, it wasn't surprising.

A loud crackle of branches came from her right. The sound was carried on the wind, so she guessed that the cop wasn't quite on her yet. He would be in a minute, so she had no option other than to dash through the ornaments and find somewhere to hide near the hotel. Mr. Hopper's office was the closest place, so she decided to get behind it. If she could get inside his shed and hide, that would be ideal.

Wind at her back almost carried her across the lawn, and she barely dodged a birdbath and an elf ornament. Checking her rear as she reached the office, she saw that the cop wasn't yet out of the woods. Slipping around back, she went down the walk to the shed and checked the door. Mr. Hopper's lock was a sturdy one; only a burglar could pull it loose. She grabbed it, and a frustrated frown crossed her face as she studied it. After a moment, she banged it back against the wood and turned away. A faint click came to her ear, and she immediately turned back. The lock had slipped open; the old man wasn't so smart after all, he'd forgotten to close it tight.

Alice took the lock completely off and opened the door. She carried the lock inside with her, figuring that the cop would get suspicious if he noticed the open bolt on the outside. It was musty, and the air was foul; the place had Mr. Hopper's smell. It sweated like an old man. Huge dust moats had been shaken loose by the wind banging on the roof. They were visible in the dim beams shining through the cracks and heavy enough to tickle her nose.

She didn't want to start sneezing, so she put a finger to her nose and sat on a crate next to a wall of canned goods. Paintings hung askew on the far wall, and Alice was certain they were quite valuable. She couldn't see them well, but she had seen enough paintings with her mother to recognize valuable items at a glance. Hopper was somehow able to steal precious items. She remembered the gems, rubies, she thought they were. She looked for the box and saw it on a shelf.

Getting to the door, she peered out a crack and saw only wind blowing in the bushes. She hoped the cop was heading the wrong way fast. Turning back to the box, she noted the silly butterflies stamped on it. It was the sort of box an old lady would keep full of worthless jewelry, but Mr. Hopper had it full of rubies. She examined one of the gems, and it certainly looked genuine. It would be nice to give Stephanie one when they were reunited, and even nicer if she kept a couple for herself. Her eyes turning to greedy diamonds, she began to count them, but as she lifted the box, one of the small hinges broke, and the stones spilled out.

Most of the gems rattled into an open crate. She snatched up the few that had rolled on the floor and then looked in the crate. A statuette was inside, and some of the jewels were underneath it. The statuette wasn't big, but it was heavy enough that it took all of her strength to lift it.

It was a strange statuette, and she found herself forgetting its weight as she studied it. It was part elephant with ruby eyes and a ferocious look. It held a large star in its hands like elephant feet. The ruby eyes were almost like living stones. Stones that Hopper didn't deserve to own. Alice set the statuette on a higher crate and tried to pluck out one of the eyes. It seemed to be coming loose, then the whole statuette fell forward. It knocked her to the floor and bore down on her with incredible weight. The thing was crushing her like a quarry stone. Her air was gone, and she heard a high whining voice, "Pluck out my eye, I'll squeeze out your heart."

The weight increased, and she thought she was becoming a pancake, then mist swirled in her eyes, and she was free. She got up, gasping for air. A bright light was blinding her; her eyes adjusted, and she saw the statuette come to life. It radiated a fan of brilliant light, and its star was now white-hot silver.

The being was incongruous, a ferocious elephant creature, but it had a terrifying presence. Alice found it more frightening than any demon, so much so that she couldn't speak. The fear crawled inside; it was like she was about to be destroyed in a repulsive way, like being slowly devoured by a snake or reptile.

The being spoke, but the words came from the star it held and not from its lips. "You should have been crushed, tiny woman. What idol protects you? Tell me so I can destroy it."

"No idol protects me. I gained powers of immunity from a dragon demon."

"Demon. How wonderful. I thought demons were extinct."

"They are. Stephanie locked them in the fire world."

"Stephanie? If she is a goddess, then I must destroy her too."

"She's a young girl, not a goddess. She's my girlfriend, only she got kidnapped."

"I think I have slept too long. I've never heard of a world where little girls lock away demons but can't defeat kidnappers."

"What world are you from?"

"Mesopotamia. I was the god of all gods long ago. Only I grew bored of the pettiness and cruelty of gods, devils, and idols. I destroyed them and went to sleep. A new world was to come from the humans I spared. But that proved difficult, and from time to time, I awaken, and if I find gods or demons, I destroy them."

"You won't find any gods now. I mean, people believe in lots of them, but they're all fakes."

"Fakes. What has happened to the Earth? When I was young, a demon god had to destroy five cities before anyone believed. What about this Stephanie, she can find me some real gods, can't she?"

"If you help me find her, I'll have her release the demons. You'll have an army of them to fight with."

"I'll help, believe me. But when the battle begins, you'd better hide, little girl. You won't want to see the things I do."

The ice suddenly shattered, and Stephanie saw Chang's face break through. Her body and mind were numb, a blur, but her fears were crystalline and bright. She had seen visions of rescuers, Julian, and others, and she was worried about Chang and what he would do if confronted.

He dragged her from the cold stream and wrapped a heavy blanket around her. It hit her like a warm wave. Then it burned so much that she wasn't sure whether she'd been in icy water or in a fire. Chang's eyes said it was fire, but she knew they always lied.

"Now that your body has been subdued, you are in touch with your soul," Chang said. "You should be getting strong images of the fire world."

He stared into her eyes. For a moment, she feared he could read her thoughts and was discovering her visions of rescue. "Yes," she said, hoping the lie would keep him happy. "I saw many demons."

"Good. You are almost prepared. Next, you'll go into the cave, but will stay near the exit. I've decided that you should be near the line of light and darkness. It will be symbolic of the two worlds meeting. Our world is a dark one. The fire world of demons is the light and fire. You must meditate on your own death, and in this way, your body will be open to possession. It will quicken the transfer, and the demons will be channeled to me speedily. You should experience rich sound or color just before the state of death satori comes upon you."

"What if I refuse to channel? I mean for your own good. In case the demons are too dangerous?"

"I see, you think you must give me motherly protection. Keep in mind that it is destiny and it will be done. I need no protection."

"We should wait until the conditions are better."

"They'll never be better. You could have been better prepared, but time is short. We must complete the transfer now before the others find us. You'll do it this easy way or else in another emotionally painful way."

"What'll you do if they find us?"

"The best thing is to complete the transfer, then I'll use my powers and leave for a short period of time. You'll be left in the hands of the police, and eventually, I'll come to you wherever you are and take you. If the others try to interfere, I'll destroy them. Skip thinks he knows how to fight, but I could kill him in an instant. Just a quick blow to the bridge of the nose would do it."

"What about Julian? He doesn't fight. He'd want to reason with you."

"I'll give him reason," Chang said. Reaching to his side, he took some rods from his pack. He removed the twine and laid the pieces out. He began to screw them together. They made a sectional staff, which he held up for Stephanie to see. "Julian deserves to be punished. He corrupted your morals, so his punishment will be Biblical: a beating with rods. If he shows up, I'll beat him to death with this staff."

In the cave, Stephanie's mind drifted with the sound of the wind. First, it was a whisper, then a howl of murder. The dust of the dead was its voice, and it was a choking cloud. If Chang would beat someone to death with a staff, then he was a murderer at heart. He had rules he would kill for, or perhaps it was like Julian said - that all murderers need an excuse to kill and use politics, religion, or whatever as a means of practicing the vice. She hadn't wanted to channel anything into Chang for his own good. Now she feared what he'd do with the power. If he succeeded, he'd have awesome power that he would use recklessly. Anyone opposing him would be killed. Julian and the others would be killed later if not sooner, so the only option she had was to keep the forces at bay and not pass them to Chang.

Globes of color began to pass before her eyes, and she tried to fill her head with thoughts and memories to break the meditation. A trance state was overpowering her; Chang had prepared her well, and it was almost impossible for her to stay sane. Alien images were entering her thoughts, seeming to drift in with wisps of smoke blown in from the tiny shrine Chang had mounted on the wall. It was no longer a matter of what she wanted; she could feel the demons rising in the fire world. They knew the circumstances were right, like a pack of wolves and tigers trying to burst out to freedom. Chang, they planned on devouring as they made their escape, and in their hunger, they had no fears of being crushed or controlled by him.

Agony contorted Stephanie's face, and the voice of an alien devil hissed in her throat. She saw Chang drawing near, ringed by smoke and fire, then her mind passed into the dust clouds, and she saw visions through the eyes of others.

Julian had a vision of a white bird soaring high above the trees, then bursting into flames and falling to the ground. It was a vision of violent death, and it could be his own death if he didn't act to change circumstances. He contemplated the situation as he stood. He'd been sitting on a fallen tree, and perhaps it was another bad omen. Could the vision mean he had to give up his hunt for Stephanie, or he would die? It was the most sensible interpretation. Another interpretation was that Stephanie would be the one to perish if he didn't get to her quickly. The vision seemed pointless when there was nothing he could change. Standing in the woods like another petrified tree wasn't helping matters. He had no options but could only continue on the same path.

The area ahead was sprinkled with pines and boulders. Many of the trees were dead, and the long grass was dry and dusty. He moved up an incline, hoping to get a better view of the area from the top of the rise. It occurred to him that he'd been unable to pick up on Stephanie's thoughts or feelings. He'd had no close visions of her. It meant that someone or something had been acting as a block and didn't want the contact to be made. Possibly it was Chang, but most likely he had no such powers, which meant demonic forces were trying to keep Stephanie hidden.

Trying to guess what Chang was up to was giving him a headache. The man was playing with fire for sure. As he reached the top of the rise, Julian realized the vision meant that everyone involved might be about to perish.

He came to a drop that was almost sheer, and he could see a small valley below. It was a bowl of dust and rushing wind. Trees were rocking furiously, and he had to keep well back from the edge to avoid being blown over. To the south, the bank changed from earth and scraggly pines to striated rock. A small waterfall threw off a cloud of blowing mist and faint rainbows. A clear area and cave mouths were at the bottom. It would be the perfect place to hide; Chang would pick such a spot because it was well hidden, easy to defend, and had fresh water, berries, and food.

The wind was too strong for him to use the path on the rock face, and he couldn't risk being spotted. To get there, he'd have to take the long way around. For a moment, he thought he saw a giant demonic form take shape in the mist. He blinked, and it vanished. After shaking his head, he walked back along the rise to a spot where the earth bank wasn't so steep and began to descend.

Skip and Mindy came through a series of high boulders and found themselves facing a wide path cutting through the forest ahead. It had been used regularly, and since no one was in the area other than Hoover and Chang, it had to be their trail. Some high ferns were at the beginning of the trail. Skip spotted something red on one of the ferns and stopped to examine it. The red was blood. He looked to Mindy.

"Hoover must have come this way." He said.

"It might not be his blood. It could be Stephanie's blood."

Skip shivered. "I hope not. Where does this trail lead?"

"It goes to a waterfall and some caves. The cult members used to swim there sometimes, then Chang took over the caves, and no one went anymore."

"That's where he is then. We'd better hurry before it's too late."

They went down the path with as much speed as the eerie half-light allowed. Vines, thorns, and fallen branches blocked their way in places. Overhead, the wind was rocking the treetops so much it made Skip dizzy whenever he looked up. They heard the crack of a tree breaking nearby. There was too much dead wood in this forest to enter it in a windstorm, but they had little choice. An even bigger danger was the chance that Hoover or someone else was waiting to ambush them. An enemy could pop from behind a bush or tree and get them easily; that and other ideas of death lent cruel reality to a scene that was otherwise unreal.

The trees began to thin, boulders and outcroppings appeared, and finally, they reached a spot where the path was blocked by a rockfall. Skip eased around the fall, catching his breath as he checked for ambushers. They were dog-tired and needed strength in case they were unfortunate enough to end up in a confrontation. He decided to rest for a minute before going on. The sky was gray and menacing, making him think of how dangerous Chang would be. Chang wouldn't be tired; he'd likely be prepared for them.

"How much farther?" Skip said.

"Keep your voice down, we're almost there."

"What do you think we'll find?"

"Don't know. If he's hidden her in the caves and is guarding them, we'll have to go back for help. If he's left her outside and is in the caves himself, we might be able to snatch her and run. We should move up quietly and take a peek first."

They did just that, moving off the path to an area of soft duff, ferns, boulders, and tall hemlocks. The sound of rushing water mingled with the wind, and they could see the sparkle of falling water through the high branches. There was a giant crooked hemlock at the edge of the clearing, so they got behind it for cover before looking.

Cool mist touched their cheeks; the fall of water was distracting, and Skip ignored it and swept his gaze across the clearing. A wisp of smoke caught his eye. It was coming from a cave mouth, and he thought he could see the outline of a small figure just inside. It would be Stephanie. He jumped suddenly; a dark figure was sitting below the cave, dressed all in black, a hood over his head. His posture one of meditation or trance. Chang, Skip thought, and then he saw something else. Farther on in the clearing, a man was emerging from another trail. It was Julian. He was behind a bend in the cliff wall and couldn't see Chang. Neither could Chang see him. If Julian kept on straight ahead, he would walk right under Chang and be ambushed before he saw him.

From the cave mouth, Stephanie saw wind-whipped treetops; they were edged with fire and formed a background for other visions. A hideous face appeared, but this flash was of a man and not another of the fire-world demons. He was crooked, thirsty, wounded, and crawling on a high rock ledge. His eyes were blood and scales, and she suddenly saw from them; his mind was an agonized inferno of hate, and he was readying himself for the kill. Steadying his knife, he leaned over the edge and prepared to fall on the man passing below.

The wind blew hard on the rock face, and he let himself fall, his clothes billowing like he was about to fly, his knife sweeping down as he soared to Julian. Stephanie screamed and tried to blot out the vision, but it remained bright behind her closed eyes. The knife swept down, but it didn't connect; Julian had stepped back at the last moment. He'd known the ambusher was there. A sharp pain cut into Stephanie's throat, and she screamed again and saw a view from above. The pain was the cut of the knife. Hoover was rolling on the ground beside Julian. He came up on his knees, his face covered with dirt. The blade was in his throat up to the hilt, but he wasn't dead. He looked ahead with crazed eyes, then he seized the knife and pulled it out. Blood oozed from the wound. He let out a death rasp and fell dead in the dust.

Chang flew to his feet, marionette-fast. He spun around. There were no intruders entering the cave. Stephanie's screams were from a trance state, so he didn't have to worry about her running off. Turning back, he leaped off the ledge and landed in the clearing. He spotted Julian leaning over Hoover's corpse and became enraged. Then shock drained his face, and his cheeks whitened. He leaped back to the ledge to get his staff. Seizing it, he screwed the sections together hastily and jumped back down. He found Julian facing him calmly.

"It's over, Chang," Julian said. "You've gone far enough with this."

"Halfway is never far enough. You should've stayed home with your tarot cards. I suppose you couldn't because you knew you deserved discipline and had to come to get it."

"You're no judge and jury, Chang. If you were, you would have to convict yourself."

"Convict myself for what? I'm giving Stephanie the learning she needs. The right ideas to replace the carnival trash you taught her. When I was young, my parents filled my head full of nonsense. For half my life, I suffered because of them. I vowed that my daughter would never be a victim like I was."

"Strange, isn't it. I remember my own awkward youth and how I wanted to blame my parents and teachers for my failings and silly ideas. Then a day came when I realized that I was a victim of no one but myself. It was up to me to think and create some of my own world. No one could give it to me. Even then, I knew I would always be a victim of my own flawed nature to some extent. We are mortal and not super beings. There is no ultimate human truth to empower us, unless it is that we fail as often as we succeed in life. So we're happy and sad; we love others and hate others. If we're humble, it's because we know what we are. You're wrong because you want Stephanie to blame others for her problems. That way, she'll be crippled by hate when she should be letting wounds heal so she can grow and reclaim the life she lost. You promise to make her more than human, but she'll soon learn that people with no more tears are people who've forgotten their humanity. The truth is that I never asked her to blame you. I left her to grow through it on her own."

"Now I know why they call you a seer. You have the cleverness of a madman, but it'll take more than cleverness to help you now. I'm going to use this rod and give you the punishment you deserve."

Although Julian still had Hoover's gun, he didn't want to draw it. He supposed it was because he didn't want to hurt Stephanie. "Go ahead," he said. "You've already made yourself ugly in the eyes of your daughter. You might as well go all the way and become hideous."

Chang's face went from white to red. "I'll kill you!" he shouted as he swung the staff.

Julian ducked his head to the side, and the blow glanced off his shoulder. Then, Skip ran out and swept Chang's feet out from under him.

Skip didn't pause but took advantage of Chang's fall and moved in to kick the staff away. It flew from Chang's grip and slid in the grass. Julian snatched it up, and Chang flew to his feet at the same time.

Chang's eyes were popping with fury. After all of his training, he'd been caught by surprise. Boiling anger caused him to lose the control he needed for deadly moves. Instead of executing

the best move, he went in to try to get a naked stranglehold on Skip. And Skip responded with a front kick that hit him hard in the calf and forced a groan from his throat as he backed off.

Chang ducked his head, feigning pain and injury. Then he came up with a flying side kick that caught a piece of Skip and sent him whirling backward. A blow from the staff hit Chang's shoulder before he could charge in on Skip. He grimaced as he absorbed the crunch, then he turned, seized Julian, and hip-tossed him into the grass.

Ducking back, Chang pulled a climbing hook from his robe. Julian was getting up, and Skip had recovered from the kick. "So you want to use weapons," he said. "Let's see you stop this hook."

At the cave mouth, Stephanie was having a nightmare where she wanted to move but couldn't. The trance state and the pull of the fire-world powers were too powerful to overcome. Demonic images exploded across her mind with the force of erupting lava. It took all of her strength to hold them back. The demons were feeding on the violence below and using it as the channel that would take them through her and into Chang.

Chang couldn't have been better prepared. He was about to commit murder with a hook. When he swung the weapon, the demons would have their best opportunity for entry.

A blurred picture of Mindy holding Chang's arm from behind swam in Stephanie's vision, shimmied by the heat. Chang threw her off and moved to attack Skip, but Skip ducked back quickly.

Julian was getting to his feet, and Stephanie saw Chang turn his attention to him. She felt like releasing the demons to destroy Chang before he could strike, and she would have if there had been any guarantee that it would work. But there was no guarantee. The demons were deadly enough to destroy everyone. The only thing she could do was struggle against the burning pain and hope to hold them back. Julian had to fend for himself.

Wind sang in the cave mouth. The heat and dust were like an exhalation from the fire world. Her pain was molten, her eyes stinging and sizzling like sulfur. The image she saw was like soot scorched on stone; Chang's dark form swinging the hook down on Julian. The first blow went wide, and Stephanie choked and let go. Then the entire fire world exploded; an earthquake in her mind, and she felt smoke, lava, and fire erupt and rise. She was channeling the demons, channeling terror like a volcano channels terror. It flowed through her mind with a brightness that was blinding, as if she were channeling the sun. Gaping fanged maws, deformed snouts, wings of stone and leather, eyes of demon red, twisted horns and claws tore through her. Malformed monsters and sleek animals leaped with half-human beasts, all of them riding the energy of the channel to its end.

And the end was Chang; he froze with the hook raised as the air around him became veined with energy. The ghostly body of a giant appeared, and the hook became its horn as it wrapped itself around and shrank into him.

Thunder shook the ground; Chang now looked like the earthly end of a cosmic energy storm. He grew lightning bright; Julian, Mindy, and Skip backed away from the aura of fire he radiated. A moment later, his face turned to blisters, and his eyes erupted, sending out hot liquid and blood. Blue magma flew from the popping blisters, and steam and smoke hissed as his mouth was forced open. A long green tongue emerged from his fattened lips and took shape as a snake with a head of yellow fire. From the neck down, his body ghosted into molten, shifting shapes. A thousand monstrous forms fought for dominance, and finally, the form of a grotesque tiger with a leering face and blackened fangs won out. The tiger crouched, faced Julian, and roared. It was about to pounce when another form appeared between them; a small creature that had the look of an elephant and was holding a small radiant star. It flew up like a marionette on the wind and caught fire as it dropped and went straight down the beast's open mouth.

A fiery explosion consumed the tiger, and its body melted to rolling black smoke. Faces of animals and ogres flashed in the cloud as a struggle began in the boundaries of the fire world

and its hellish purgatory. A final face showed. It was Chang's; his expression one of total terror and shock, and not victory. He released a silent cry, then the smoke rolled toward Julian.

Julian tried to duck aside, but it came on him too fast. As the smoke rolled over him, he saw volcanoes and felt the torment of the damned. He gasped, and his distorted voice came out like the cry of a wounded dragon. Then the smoke was gone, rolling into the trees. It became liquid, condensing in the branches and shaping itself as a large star as it went to ground. Fangs and Chang's choking face flashed in radiance as they melted into a new visage. The creature was a man-beast, half mist. It looked back at the caves, both ferocity and alien sadness in its gaze, then it slipped out of sight as it fled in the underbrush.

Julian raised his scorched hands. He looked to Stephanie. She was by the cave mouth, a shocked expression on her sweat-soaked face. He didn't have to tell her she'd never see Chang again. He'd absorbed some of the demons, sure enough, but the ancient being Alice brought had interfered, and the result was unexpected. Now, Chang existed as a new life form. It was hard to say whether he was a demon, an animal, or a ghost. Whatever he was, he had new ways; alien ways that had little to do with Stephanie and mortals.

Knowing he remained as Stephanie's only father, Julian walked up the path cut in the rock face. Reaching her, he swept her into his arms and brought her down. His burned hands healed as Alice dashed out of the trees. He kissed Stephanie's cheek, then looked to the joyful faces of Skip and Mindy and released her. Alice pulled Stephanie aside, and they embraced. Dazed, Julian suddenly thought of Sandra. New dreams of summer days and kinder years settled in his mind like the sands marking the shoreline of a life.

. . . THE END . . .